She's got a heart like a sad song

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She's got a heart like a sad song

by thegir120, vellaky

Summary

"If she hadn't tried to hurt us so many times, I might be worried about her.” - What if Ruby had acted on her concern for Regina in Season 3B? Perhaps it would have led to a friendship between the two that neither knew they wanted or needed.

Notes

If the start of this fic feels familiar, it's because it's based on this tiny ficlet. But the rest of the 100,000-ish words to follow are new.
Chapter 1 - Ruby

They’ve been back home for two days. If the Enchanted Forest even still qualifies as home. Ruby muses over this as she carries buckets of water from the river to the makeshift campsite that’s being set up for the evening. The journey has been slower than Ruby would have liked. They’re too exposed out here; a large band of people with very mixed abilities could be easy pickings. Mary Margaret and Regina were nearly killed yesterday by some flying creatures. They need to get to safety, and quickly. Ruby catches sight of Granny standing by a large cooking pot over a fire. Fatigue is clear on the old woman’s face, and Ruby reminds herself to take account of the less able members of the group. She throws Granny a smile as she sets the buckets of water down. She turns to survey the rest of the camp; everyone is going about their business and completing their assigned tasks. Her eyes land on a lone figure standing at the perimeter of the camp. Regina’s attention is on the palace in the distance. Ruby watches her for a moment; this isn't the first time she’s seen the Queen standing by herself, lost in thought. It’s been quite an adjustment for everyone to come back here, but Regina’s lost more than most.

Mary Margaret had told Ruby that she caught Regina attempting to bury her heart the previous day. While it seems like an extreme action to take, Ruby can relate a little to the desire. After she killed Peter and found out she was the wolf who’d terrorised their village for so long, she’d have given anything to be able to take the ache in her chest away. Another figure catches her eye and she sees she’s not the only one watching Regina. Mary Margaret has also stopped whatever task she was doing to stare at the Queen’s back. Ruby approaches her friend.

“Seems like old times, doesn't it?” she comments once she’s in earshot. “Except, not running from Regina, but with her.”

Mary Margaret’s attention remains on Regina as she speaks. “She's changed,” she says, firmly, before meeting Ruby’s eyes. “I have to believe for the better.”

“I hope it sticks,” Ruby says, with a nod. And she means it. “But regardless, she doesn't look too good. If she hadn't tried to hurt us so many times, I might be worried about her.”

“I’ll talk to her.”

Ruby’s arm shoots out to catch Mary Margaret before she can take more than a step. The other woman looks back at her, brow creased in question.

“Maybe I should talk to her,” she suggests, her eyes flicking to the woman in question. “You’re pretty much the only person who’s spoken to her since we got here. Someone else should make
Mary Margaret beams like she’s just won the lottery. “I think that’d be really sweet, Ruby,” she says, squeezing Ruby’s hand where it rests on her elbow. Ruby returns her smile and sets off to speak to Regina, casting a final glance at Mary Margaret and earning another encouraging smile.

Ruby lengthens her strides, trying to portray an air of confidence that she's not sure she feels. Which is ridiculous. She exchanged pleasantries with this woman while she made her coffee every day for nearly thirty years; surely she can make smalltalk with her for a few minutes now. She makes sure that her approach is noisy enough that the other woman won't be surprised by her arrival. Sure enough, the Queen glances over her shoulder at the sound of twigs snapping and feet trampling through undergrowth. She heaves a sigh.

"If you're looking for someone to throw a stick for you, I'm not in the mood."

Ruby rolls her eyes. As dog jokes go, it's not even original. Regina really must be off her game.

"I'm fine, thanks. I'm getting plenty of exercise with all of this walking."

Regina looks her up and down. "Yes, I suppose you must be quite in your element living in the forest." She wrinkles her nose. "You should go play with the thief, he's also very at home here."

The ‘thief’ in question is Robin Hood. He and his band of Merry Men had joined them the day before. Ruby’s already heard Mary Margaret trying to foist Robin onto Regina as a romantic interest.

"Maybe I’ll play with him later," Ruby says, dismissively. "So...how are you doing?"

For the first time since she came over, Regina meets her eyes. She stares for a moment, then narrows her eyes. "Have you been sent to check on my wellbeing?" She clicks her tongue. “You can tell your little friend that I'm not having any homicidal feelings at the moment. Though that may change if she doesn't stop asking me how I'm doing."

"Nobody sent me," Ruby says. "I just thought you looked..." She trails off. Making assumptions about Regina's feelings is a dangerous business.
"Yes?" Regina presses, both eyebrows rising in challenge. "I hope, for your sake, that the word at the end of that sentence was going to be complimentary."

"Sad," Ruby finishes. "I thought you looked sad. I came to see if you were okay."

"And what concern is it of yours if I'm sad?" Regina asks, turning away once more. "I don't recall us ever exchanging much conversation beyond a coffee order."

"I don't know, really," Ruby confesses, examining Regina's profile as she looks out over the endless fields. "I just...I don't like it when people are sad. I wondered if I could do anything to help."

Regina laughs, but it's bitter and brittle and it makes Ruby want to cover her ears. "Unless you can somehow bring my son here, then no, there's nothing you can do."

Nodding, Ruby joins Regina in looking into the distance. "I can't imagine doing what you did," she says, almost in a whisper. "Giving up the person you love most in the world...giving him a life where he doesn't even remember who you are."

"I feel like you're not quite grasping the concept of 'helping', Ms Lucas," Regina says, her voice tight and thick. "I believe this is what's commonly known as rubbing salt in the wound."

"No, I know, I...I just meant," Ruby pauses, biting her lip. "I just mean that I really believe in judging a person by their actions. And you...well, you did the most selfless thing I've ever heard of."

"And now what?" Regina asks, glancing at Ruby from the side of her eye. "You want to be my best friend?"

"I'm trying to tell you that I admire what you did," Ruby tells her. "And if you could stop being a smartass for two minutes, maybe we could be friends." She lifts her eyebrows. "Stranger things have happened."

Regina frowns. "I've survived long enough without any friends, why on earth would I need one now?"
Shrugging again, Ruby says, “Maybe it’ll help. To know you’re not going through it alone.”

“I won’t be going through it at all,” Regina mutters. The words are quiet enough for most people to miss, but Ruby’s ears pick them up with no trouble.

“What do you mean?” she asks, her brow creased in confusion.

“Nothing,” Regina says, quickly. “I was just thinking—” She turns abruptly and starts to walk over to where David and Mary Margaret are talking amongst themselves. Ruby follows, still troubled by Regina’s words. Mary Margaret’s eyes light up as Regina approaches, actually initiating conversation for once. “—there are tunnels that run under the castle. They may run beneath the spell that’s protecting it.”

“Which means we can sneak an army inside,” David says with a nod, but Regina’s already shaking her head.

“No, an army would be detected.”

Mary Margaret frowns. “Then how do the tunnels help us?” she asks, vocalising what Ruby’s thinking.

“Because they can get me inside,” Regina says, as if she were speaking to a group of first-graders. “If I can get inside, then I can lower the shield. Then you can send in your arm-.”

An unholy screech interrupts Regina and in unison they look to the skies. A creature swoops down, flying just over their heads. David draws his sword out and Mary Margaret has an arrow at the ready, but Ruby’s best weapon is her body and her adrenaline is pumping. Instinctively, she looks around to assess the situation.

“Look out!” Leroy yells, running towards them. “They’re coming!” The monkey swoops again, pushing Leroy to the side. Ruby quickly determines that the monkey’s trajectory will mean that Robin’s son, Roland, is the next obstacle in its path.

“Papa!” The frightened plea spurs Ruby into action, even as she hears Robin respond in kind. She
sprints to the child and, as gently as she can, pushes him out of the way. She lifts her hands and braces herself for the impact of the creature, but it doesn’t come. Instead, a stuffed toy monkey falls to the ground at her feet. She turns in time to see Regina lower her hands.

“Thanks,” she breathes out as Regina bends to pick up the toy.

“I did it to save the child,” the Queen mutters as she makes her way over to where Robin is standing with Roland in his arms. Ruby watches as Regina’s face completely changes when she looks at Roland; a genuine smile appearing for perhaps the first time since they arrived back. She offers the toy monkey to the child. “See? Not so scary,” she tells him in a voice that Ruby’s heard her use a hundred times. Back before Henry became obsessed with Fairy Tales. “Now you have a new toy.”

“Thank you,” Robin says, his voice is still shaking. He turns to Ruby. “Both of you. Thank you.”

Regina nods at him, and moves away, back to where Mary Margaret and David are gathered with some of the others. Ruby grins at Roland and pinches his cheek with a wink.

“No problem,” she tells Robin. “I wasn’t gonna let that mean monkey get his hands on the Lord of the Dimples here.” Roland giggles and hides his face in his father’s shoulder.

“I shan’t forget what you did,” Robin tells her. “If there’s ever anything I can d-”

“I’m not keeping score,” Ruby says, ruffling Roland’s hair before stepping away. “We’re all in this together.” She heads over to what seems to be a very confused conversation.

“Actually, it is,” Belle is saying. “But not here. There’s only one land that has creatures like that. I’ve read about it. Oz.”

“Oz?” Ruby asks. “As in the yellow brick road and the wizard? That’s a real place?” Flying monkeys, Ruby realises a second too late. Duh.

“The bookworm's right,” Regina says. “It’s quite real. If our simian friend is any indication, then I think we know exactly who’s taken up residence in our castle. The Wicked Witch.”
Mary Margaret’s face lights up at the use of ‘our’.

“So, we talkin’ East or West?” Leroy asks.

“Does it matter? Neither one sounds good,” Mary Margaret puts in.

“One you drop a house on,” Leroy says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “The other one you toss a bucket of water at.”

“So, Regina,” David begins. “What exactly are we up against besides green skin and a pointy hat? What did you do to her?”

Ruby frowns at his assumption. Sure, Regina has a pretty chequered past, but surely she can’t have pissed off everyone.

“This time?” Regina asks, an acknowledgement of sorts. “Nothing. Never met her.”

“This isn’t a personal vendetta? Shocking.”

Sarcasm is clear in David’s voice and Ruby can’t help but be a little offended on Regina’s behalf. The woman gave up her son to bring them all to safety. “David,” she scolds, but he continues, paying her no attention.

“Okay then, Oz aside, we stick to the original plan,” he tells the group. “Arm up, then attack.” He looks to Regina. “Assuming you can get the shield down.”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Regina says. “As long as I can get through those tunnels, the shield will come down.”

“I’m coming with you,” Mary Margaret says.

“No, this is a one woman job,” Regina tells her, shaking her head.
“What? Against the Wicked Witch?” Mary Margaret gasps. “She has flying monkeys! Who knows what else!”

Ruby can’t help but agree. She’s already decided that she’ll accompany Regina to the castle, but she’s not going to announce it here only to have people reject the idea.

“I don’t care if the Lollipop Guild is protecting her,” Regina snits. “I can lower that shield on my own.”

For a moment, it looks like Mary Margaret will continue to argue, but she nods her head. “Then we’ll be waiting for you on the other side.”

Regina nods, and Ruby notices the same look in her eyes as was there when they were speaking earlier. Her words ring in Ruby’s ears. I won’t be going through it at all. Well, whatever that means, Ruby’s going to make sure she’s not going to go through it alone.

Dusk settles over the forest as the group finishes making camp. Ruby ensures that the basic shelter she’s rigged up for the older people in the group will hold steady before moving to sit with a small group by one of the fires. She holds out her hands, enjoying the heat, but her attention is drawn to where Regina is readying herself to go and reclaim the castle.

“Perhaps I should accompany the Queen?” Robin’s soft voice cuts into Ruby’s musings. She looks over at him, impressed that he’d put himself forward for such a task, having only just met Regina.

Mary Margaret shakes her head. “No, I don’t think she’d like that. She said it was a one person job.”

“I could be of assistance,” Robin presses. “After all, she did put herself at risk to help save Roland.”

“No,” Ruby says, and it’s not just Robin who looks surprised. “We don’t know what’s happening at that castle and your son needs a dad. I’m going.” She bumps him with her shoulder and he falls
off the log he was seated on, frowning up at her in surprise. She winks at him. “Besides, as you can see, I’m way stronger than you.”

“Yes, quite considerably,” he mumbles, standing to dust himself off, his eyes tracing over her form, as if looking for concealed muscles.

“You have a bow I could borrow?” she asks. A bow probably isn’t much use against a Wicked Witch, but she’s sure she could pick off a few flying monkeys with one if she had to. Even if she’s out of practise.

“Oh, she wouldn’t ask,” Mary Margaret says, shaking her head. “She’s too proud.”

Ruby frowns. “So, we let her go alone, and something happens to her, and then what? We become sitting ducks? Wait for this Wicked Witch to come to us?”

“You’d rather die along with her, is that what you’re saying?” Granny counters.

“Of course,” he says with a nod. “I’ll fetch one for you.” He retreats to where his men are gathered around another fire.

“Like hell you’re going,” Granny says firmly before Ruby can speak again.

“I agree,” Mary Margaret says, quickly. “Not quite as colourfully as Granny.” She puts a hand on Ruby’s knee. “Perhaps Regina said it was a one person job because it’s too risky for anyone else to go?”

“Whether you like it or not, Granny, we’re all on the same side. All of us,” Ruby argues. “Regina included. She’s probably only saying she needs to do this on her own because she thinks no-one would go with her if she asked.”

Ruby considers this. “All the more reason she needs someone to go with her.” She turns to look at everyone in turn. “I’m the strongest and fastest of all of us, I can track, I can use a bow. And I don’t have anyone who depends on me. I have to be the one to go.”
“Ruby…” Mary Margaret starts. She reaches out a hand to cover Ruby’s.

“I’m going,” Ruby repeats, squeezing Mary Margaret’s hand.

“If you die, you can damn well bet I’ll be saying I told you so,” Granny threatens.

She rolls her eyes as she starts to stand, pressing a quick kiss to her Grandmother’s hair as she does. “Well, I’ll be dead, so I won’t have to listen to you.”

Robin is approaching with the bow she asked for, along with a quiver of arrows. He holds them out to her.

“It’s a fine weapon,” he says, watching as she fastens the belt over her cape. “It will shoot true.”

Ruby takes the bow, testing the weight and the balance of it. She nods her approval. “Thank you. I hope I don’t have to use it.”

“I’m glad the Queen is in such good hands,” Robin tells her. Then he nods over her shoulder. “Though it does appear she has a head start on you.”

Ruby turns to see Regina’s back as she starts her trek to the castle. She gives Robin a last nod and a smile before setting off in pursuit. Her long legs make it easy for her to catch up.

“No,” Regina says simply.

“No what?” Ruby asks, falling into step by Regina’s side.

“You’re not coming.”

Ruby nods. “Yes I am,” she counters, her tone leaving no room for argument. “I can help you.”
Regina stops at that and turns to face Ruby, glaring. “I didn’t ask for help,” comes the indignant, though not unexpected, response.

“Doesn’t mean you won’t need it. That thing wasn’t after Robin Hood’s son today. It had you in its sights, and the kid just got in the way.”

Regina rolls her eyes and scoffs. “And how do you know that?”

“I know more than a thing or two about how monsters hunt. I a-” Ruby pauses, and swallows. “-was one. That thing was after you.”

“I fail to see your point, wolf,” Regina drawls, adopting a look of boredom.

“My point,” Ruby grits out. “Is that they’ve attacked you more than once. That witch wants you dead.”

Regina scoffs. “Tell me something I don’t know.” Her condescending tone makes the hair on Ruby’s neck bristle. “Do you actually think you can help me, or stop her if she tries to hurt me?”

“I’m strong, I’m fast, I’m a great shot. I can practically see in the dark and I can smell trouble coming from a mile off,” Ruby counts off on her fingers. “So yes. I think I can help you.”

Regina regards her for a moment, or maybe she’s glaring at her, Ruby can’t quite tell. When Regina sighs, though, Ruby knows she’s won. “Don’t get in my way.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Ruby murmurs, watching as Regina leads the way. She casts a final look back at her friends before catching up to Regina in a few long strides. Regina’s doesn’t appear keen to engage in conversation, so Ruby remains quiet. She’s secure in her own reasons for following Regina. She genuinely believes she can be of use, and she doesn’t think it’s fair that Regina has to take such a risk alone, not when she’s already given up so much. What’s not entirely clear to her is why Regina would volunteer to do this in the first place. While they’ve all seen the changes in the former Mayor over the past year or so, and she’s helped them on more than one occasion, this does appear to be a particularly selfless act. She closes her eyes to try to rid herself of such suspicious thoughts.

As they draw closer to the imposing fortress, Ruby decides it would be best if she has at least an
idea of what they’re supposed to do when they get there. She clears her throat, just to test the waters. When it doesn’t seem to startle the Queen, she presses on. “So…how do you plan to get in?” she asks conversationally.

Regina stops and whirls on the younger girl. “Why are you here? Did Snow put you up to this? To keep an eye on me?”

Ruby flinches slightly at the barrage of questions, and she waits until silence follows before she answers. “Snow tried to stop me, actually. So did Granny.”

Nodding, Regina huffs, “Yes, well of course they’d happily let me march off to almost certain death, but not their precious pup.”

“And that’s why I’m here. The ‘almost certain death’ part.” Ruby stands her ground, unwavering under Regina’s scrutiny. “If something goes wrong, you’ll need backup, and I’m not afraid.”

“Then you’re a fool,” Regina sneers.

“We’ll see,” Ruby mutters. She nods her head in the direction they were previously walking. “So. What’s the plan?”

Sending a glare towards Ruby, Regina continues along her path until she reaches the castle wall. A wave of her hand reveals an entryway built into the ground; the tunnels. Another gesture opens the doors and Regina steps inside without a word. Ruby follows just in time to watch the length of the corridor illuminate as torches are lit along its walls. Regina does enjoy doing things with a flourish. They walk in silence for a while until Ruby notes that they’ve started moving uphill; they must be nearing their destination. They arrive at a door and Regina pushes it open, revealing a room inside the castle.

“We need to get to the courtyard. The spell is being powered by a fire,” Regina explains, finally relenting and letting Ruby in on the plan. “As long as it burns, the shield will stay up.”

Ruby nods. “So we just need to put it out,” she concludes.

“I just need to put it out. You will stay out of my way.” She smirks. “Since you insisted on being my guard dog, you can keep watch.” Rolling her eyes, Ruby takes a step forward into the room but
is prevented in doing so when she feels Regina’s hand on her arm pulling her back. “Step in between.” Regina warns her with a nod to the floor, before demonstrating.

Ruby watches Regina’s movements and mimics them easily, avoiding whatever traps are lurking beneath their feet. “That’s twice in one day you’ve saved me,” she comments, eyes trained on Regina’s feet. She smirks. “My hero.”

“Call me that again and I’ll let you step on the next one,” Regina retorts, keeping up her steady pace through the traps.

“Now isn’t this friendly banter more fun than the stony silence?” Ruby asks.

“That was a direct threat, dear, not friendly banter,” Regina says.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ruby counters. “You saved me from one of your magical traps. You must enjoy my company on some level.”

“I just didn’t want your blood staining my floor, Ms Lucas. It’s such a bother to clean up.”

Ruby hides a smile. “You can call me Ruby, you know.” She’s practically dancing across the trap laden floor now; her natural grace a bonus in these situations. “We don’t have to be so formal. You called me Ruby for thirty years.”

“And you called me ‘Madam Mayor’,” Regina says, glancing over her shoulder. “Are you going to continue that?” She returns her gaze to the front.

“Your Majesty is more fitting in that outfit, don’t you think?” Ruby comments, taking in the elaborate gown and hair.

“Well, you’re very welcome to use that if you wish, Little Red,” Regina says, with a pointed look at Ruby’s cloak. She stops walking so abruptly that Ruby only narrowly avoids running into her back.

“What is it?” Ruby asks. They’ve arrived at what looks like a tomb or mausoleum. The door is slightly ajar and Regina seems confused.
“That’s impossible,” the Queen mutters, edging slowly towards the door.

“What’s impossible?” Ruby asks, the hair on the back of her neck standing up. Whatever’s inside that room is giving her a weird feeling and she doesn’t like it.

“That door...it...it shouldn’t be open,” Regina says. Her voice is soft, worried. It frightens Ruby a little to see her so rattled by something as simple as an open door.

“Maybe you left it unlocked?” Ruby suggests. “I mean, I guess when you left here your plan was to curse everybody to another land. You probably weren’t too concerned about intruders, right?”

This earns her an annoyed glance. “I sealed it with blood magic,” Regina states, her voice strong and sure again. “I’m the only one who can open it.”

“Oh, well, I hate to break it to you, Regina,” Ruby says. “But somebody else opened it.”

“Yes, thank you for your keen observations, Ms Lucas,” Regina snarls. “I’m so glad you came along.” Regina straightens her back and walks forward, pushing the door open. Ruby bites her lip, unsure that’s a good idea, and then follows anyway. The temperature inside the tomb is lower than outside and it makes Ruby shiver. She wraps her arms around herself, realising where she is.

“This is your mother’s crypt,” she whispers. That’s why it was sealed with blood magic. And with good reason. Cora was a formidable woman.

“Yes,” Regina confirms, looking around. “Not that it did a very good job of containing her, of course.”

Ruby nods. She knows what happened when Cora was in Storybrooke. Mary Margaret spent an evening weeping into her shoulder about it. And just because Cora was a horrible person, doesn’t mean Regina can’t feel sad that she’s really dead now. Ruby barely knew her own mother, and still she grieved for her.

“I buried my mother in the forest,” she finds herself saying. “Sometimes I’d visit her grave and say the things to her that I wished I could have said when she was alive.”
Regina looks over at her. For a moment, Ruby thinks she sees tears in the queen’s eyes, but they’re gone as soon as they appear.

“Yes, well, I have no time for such whimsical activities,” Regina says. “I have things to do.”

Ruby clears her throat and nods. “Of course,” she says. “This Wicked Witch must really be something if she can break through your magic, huh?”

“That’s not my problem,” Regina mutters, striding back out into the main chamber. Ruby follows, glad to be out of the cold, depressing crypt. She watches with interest as Regina moves to her dressing table, opening a small cabinet which houses several bottles and jars. She takes a few out, reading the labels and setting them down.

“Wh-what are you doing?” Ruby asks, coming closer. “Didn’t you say we needed to put out the fire in the courtyard?”

“All in good time, dear,” Regina says, intent on her task.

“What are you making?” Ruby asks again, her nose wrinkling as the ingredients mingle to produce a potion. “Regina, what is that?”

“Nothing that concerns you, I assure you,” Regina says.

Ruby takes another few steps. “I’m here to help you, but I can’t do that if you don’t tell me what we’re doing.”

“I neither asked for, nor wanted, your help,” Regina says, finally lifting her eyes to meet Ruby’s. “Now, do I need to conjure up a chew toy to keep you occupied or are you going to leave me be?”

“The dog jokes are getting old, Regina,” Ruby says. “I won’t ask again what that is.”

“Good, then I won’t have to turn you into something unpleasant,” Regina decides. “It’s a win-
Ruby closes the distance between them in less than a second, her hand grasping the vial Regina’s holding. The queen is clearly taken aback by the sudden presence of the younger woman by her side, but recovers quickly.

“Tell me what it is, or I’ll crush it,” Ruby says, calmly.

Regina’s eyes harden. “If you crush it, I’ll crush you,” she says, her voice low and threatening. “And then I’ll make more of it.” She stands up, whatever heels she’s wearing make her almost as tall as Ruby. “I take it that your offer of friendship is off the table?” Her lip curls in a sneer. “One tiny potion and you assume I have some diabolical plan. I can do without that kind of friendship.”

Ruby feels blood rush to her cheeks at how quickly she jumped to conclusions. The potion could be anything. It could be something to be used against the Wicked Witch. She lets go of Regina’s hand and steps away.

“What is it?” she asks, quietly.

She thinks Regina’s going to refuse to answer again, but some of the fire goes out of the queen’s eyes and she sits back down at the dresser. “It’s a sleeping curse.”

“Like you used on Snow?” Ruby asks. She closes her eyes as the terror of finding Snow that day washes over her anew. She fights down the nausea and directs her attention to Regina again.

“No, that was from Maleficent,” Regina explains. “This is one of my own making.”

Ruby catches herself before she asks if it’s the one she tried to use on Emma. The one that put Henry in a coma. But Regina’s eagerness to get to the castle is more understandable now.

“So you needed to get here to get the ingredients?” Ruby asks. “Are you going to use it to put the witch to sleep? How come you didn’t tell anyone your plan?”

“It’s not for the Wicked Witch,” Regina snaps. “I don’t care about her in the slightest.” She adds a drop of liquid to the potion and it shimmers, seemingly complete.
“Then who…” Ruby trails off, trying to figure out what Regina’s talking about.

“Don’t worry, your little band of friends are safe,” Regina assures her with a roll of her eyes. “It’s no-one you’ll miss. No-one anyone will miss.” She takes a pin from her hair and dips it into the vial, watching the shimmering liquid coat the surface. It all falls into place.

“Regina,” Ruby begins, not wanting to anger the other woman again. “Regina I’m not going to let you do this.”

For the first time since they arrived back in the Enchanted Forest, Regina genuinely laughs. “Well, it’s sweet that you think you could stop me, dear.” She stands and takes a few steps away. Ruby goes to follow, but Regina’s hand comes up and Ruby finds she can’t move her feet; she’s frozen to the floor.

Ruby struggles but soon realises that any attempt to escape is futile. “Why can’t I move?” She asks as calmly as she can.

“It’s just something simple to keep you in place. In case you get any ideas. It won’t stick, don’t worry.” Regina holds the vial up to her face, inspecting the liquid inside. “It’ll wear off once I do what needs to be done,” she assures.

“Regina! Stop!” Ruby yells. “I know how you feel, okay?” She tells her, desperately.

Regina chuckles disapprovingly. “I doubt that.”

“You feel alone; like part of you is literally missing. And you want to die.”

“Oh good. Here comes the pep talk.”

Ruby ignores her, determined to get her point across and to stop Regina from putting herself to sleep. “After I killed Peter, my-my childhood sweetheart, I honestly thought I couldn’t move on. I wouldn’t let myself -”
“My son is not dead!” Regina growls, drawing herself up to her full height and glaring at the younger woman. Clearly she’s hit a nerve.

“I know that,” Ruby says softly, hands raised in surrender. “I know. But what I’m saying is why wouldn’t you try to keep going? To find Henry? Make that a reason to go on; to get back to him.”

“Because I’ve already lost him,” Regina counters. “I see no need to go on. To continue in this…this hell on earth without him.”

Ruby glares, forgetting her confines for the moment, and tries to take a step forward in an effort to make a grab for the vial. She growls when she remains where she is. “So you just want to give up?” she snaps.

“No!” Regina yells. “But since your dear Snow White wouldn’t let me protect my heart so that I might actually be able to deal with this while awake, it seems I have no alternative but to…sleep it off. The curse can and will be broken by the only true love in my life, and the only reason I’d ever want to wake.”

Ruby shakes her head. “This is a mistake, Regina, you, of all people, know how quickly things can change.”

The woman in question sighs and rolls her eyes. “Don’t worry, Little Red,” she says with a smirk. “I am a woman of my word. I will lower the protection spell. Snow and Charming will be victorious, and I? I will go to sleep.” Regina doesn’t leave time for Ruby to argue with her before disappearing off into the courtyard.

As soon as Regina is out of her sights, Ruby puts all of her strength to use against her invisible restraints. It quickly becomes apparent that even werewolf strength is no match for Regina’s magic. She’s about to give up and sit on the floor to count the minutes being wasted when the hair on the back of her neck stands on edge and goosebumps rise on her arms. The smell of dark magic assaults Ruby’s nose, causing her eyes to turn amber. She’s familiar enough with Regina’s magic to know it’s not hers. Someone else is there. The Wicked Witch...

Even though her earlier attempts have proven to be futile, Ruby tries again to break free of Regina’s magic. She growls when it’s still no use. With nothing left to do, she throws her head back and howls in frustration.
It’s some time later when she hears footsteps approaching the door to the chamber she’s been confined to. Lifting her nose to sniff, she lets out a relieved sigh; it’s Regina. The doors fly open and the Queen almost appears startled to see her. “Oh. Right,” she says. “I’d forgotten you tagged along.” She waves a hand in the younger girl’s direction and removes the invisible shackles.

Ruby stumbles as the magic releases her, but manages to stay on her feet. She grins at Regina. “You’re alive,” she murmurs. “And awake!”

“Yes, well, frustratingly enough, you were right.” Regina raises the small vial. “This isn’t the answer. But I have found the reason to carry on you were talking about.”

Smile slowly dropping, Ruby’s brow creases. What the hell could have happened to change Regina’s mind so completely? Walking over to the other woman, Ruby reaches up to remove the vial from Regina’s hand and place it back on her vanity, in case she has second thoughts. “And what’s that?”

Regina lips twist into a sinister smile, a dangerous glint in her eyes. “I’ve found someone to destroy.”
She stands at the window in her bedchamber, staring out at the evening sky. The approaching darkness is comforting; it brings with it the end of another day in this land without Henry. The days last an eternity here, especially as she spends most of them locked away in her room, or out by herself on horseback. It’s self-inflicted solitude, she knows that. She’s very aware that if she wanted company, Mary Margaret Blanchard would provide it without hesitation. But, aside from their regular ‘War Council’ meetings, she tends to avoid the others.

Her thoughts turn to this ‘sister’ of hers. She’d informed Ruby that her desire to destroy Zelena was a reason to go on existing in this world. While that’s mostly true, she can’t help but wonder about the child that Cora chose to abandon. In that respect, Regina supposes she should think herself lucky. She was wanted. She was the baby Cora kept. While her childhood was horrific for the majority of the time, she can’t imagine not having grown up with her father’s love. Or not knowing where she came from. Or never meeting Daniel. Zelena is clearly insane, but Regina can’t help but wonder if they’re both the product of their mother’s choices. Zelena grew up not knowing her mother, but probably wondered why she wasn’t good enough. For Regina, Cora’s ideas about mothering influenced her life in so many negative ways she’s stopped trying to catalogue them all. If Cora had kept Zelena, Regina might never have been born. She can’t help but wonder if the world would be better off for that. Both worlds.

Lifting her head, she notices the stars have started to appear. She thinks of Henry. They used to sit on the porch and look up at the stars, huddled together under a blanket. They’d make up stories about the shapes they’d see and he’d eventually fall asleep on her shoulder, and she’d sit there for as long as she could, just listening to him breathe. She hopes that, wherever he is, he still looks at the sky. She swallows thickly, even if he does, he’ll have no memory of them doing it together. Perhaps he’ll even have memories of doing it with Emma. Tears blur her vision and she turns away from the window, walking to the fireplace with her arms wrapped around herself.

A knock at the door of her chamber startles her, although it’s not entirely unexpected. Since their return, she’s been unable to escape for any length of time without someone following to ‘check up’ on her. She assumes that means they want to check that she’s not hatching some evil plot along with her newfound sister.

“I’m not in the mood for company,” she calls out.

“It won’t take long.”

The voice is something of a surprise. While Ruby Lucas had insisted on trailing her to the palace as some pointless bodyguard, she hasn’t had any dealings with her since the rest of the party arrived once the barriers were lowered. She glances out of the window again, checking the
progress of the moon. Perhaps the girl is here with a question about her transformations now that they’re back home. She stalks to the door, adopting a bored expression and opens it, though not wide enough to allow Ruby in.

“Yes, Ms Lucas?” she asks, raising an eyebrow.

The younger woman doesn’t say anything for a moment, and Regina knows she’s looking her over.

“You were missing from dinner,” Ruby states softly but confidently. Her brows furrow. “You’ve been missing a lot of meals, actually. I just wanted to see if you were okay.”

“Well, as you can see I’m perfectly healthy and not about to collapse from starvation any time soon,” Regina says, her new sister’s recent jibe about her hips ringing in her ears. “So, if that was all, I’ll bid you a good evening.”

Ruby puts a hand on the door as Regina starts to close it, stopping its progress easily. “Actually, no. That’s not all. I wanted to see how you were… emotionally.” Ruby takes a deep breath and Regina steels herself for another pep talk. She’s not prepared for the next words that come out of Ruby’s mouth. “I-I miss him too.”

She’d been ready with a sarcastic retort, but the mention of Henry hits her like a physical blow and she takes a step backwards, now clinging to the door for support more than using it as a barrier. She struggles to regain her composure and her eyes grow hard. “And because you miss him you dare to presume to understand how I feel, is that it?”

The infernal woman doesn’t cower in fear as she should; instead she reaches out to steady Regina with a hand on her elbow. And she has the audacity to continue speaking. “It’s not a presumption, Regina.” Moving further into the doorway, she lets go of Regina. “Everyone can see it. I…” A slight blush colours her cheeks. “I can smell it.” Ruby makes a vague gesture in the direction of Regina’s eyes, presumably to indicate her tears. “I know you like to put on a brave face when you’re with everyone else, but Regina…” Ruby lets the sentence hang and she shakes her head, her hand coming to rest on Regina’s arm again. “You don’t have to face all of this alone.”

Recoiling from the touch and the sentiment behind it, Regina draws herself up to her full height and tilts her head back so she can look down at the girl. Damn werewolves and their supernatural abilities. What right do they have to go around picking up on things which should remain private?
“I am absolutely alone, Ms Lucas,” she sneers. “Which is how I prefer it. I did not ask for your opinion on my state of mind and, if in future you should happen to sniff out something which is none of your concern, I would politely request that you keep your nose out of it.”

“Your state of mind kinda is my concern, actually,” Ruby protests. “This Witch we’re up against seems pretty damn powerful. We need all of our leaders to be focussed. Or we will die. And Henry...” She trails off.

“And Henry will be safe with Emma,” Regina finishes for her, ignoring the pain in her chest. “It sounds to me, Little Red Riding Hood, that you’re more concerned with saving your own hide than you are about how I’m feeling.” She tilts her head to the side and smiles, though it’s far from friendly. “Emotionally,” she says, echoing Ruby’s earlier inflection.

“I followed you to this place, with no concern for my own safety,” Ruby points out.

“I didn’t a-” Regina begins, but Ruby interrupts her.

“I know you didn’t ask!” Ruby sounds annoyed now, her voice is bordering on a growl. “You didn’t need to ask. I wanted to do it. Nobody should have to walk into danger alone if it can be avoided.”

Presented with such a selfless point of view, Regina is unsure how to respond. She’s not used to people putting themselves at risk for her, willingly. She frowns, uncomfortable. Ruby sighs, adopting an expression that’s not dissimilar to one Regina’s seen Mary Margaret wearing whenever Regina rejects a suggestion or offer of help.

“Look, I came up here to see if you were okay and if you needed anything. That’s it. No ulterior motive.” She dips into a half-curtsey, though her eyes remain locked on Regina’s. “So, Your Majesty, if you feel up to it, there’s plenty of food downstairs. Good evening.”

Once again, Regina is left without a response, but she doesn’t want to leave this hanging with Ruby feeling like she has the upper hand. And if she wants to prove useful, she can serve as a distraction for a few hours. With a sweep of her hand, Regina closes the door before Ruby can reach it.

“Well now,” she begins, sauntering over to the younger woman, her smile a half-sneer. “There is something you could do to cheer me up...” She’s only half serious. While she’s not opposed to an uncomplicated romp with the wolf-girl, it could be equally as much fun just to see her reaction to the proposition.
Regina bites back a smile at the confusion and slight panic that flits across Ruby’s beautiful face. Regina advances, forcing the younger woman to walk backwards until there’s nowhere left to go, and she’s pressed up against the closed door.

Ruby laughs a little, but it’s shaky and uneven. “You, uh, want to play Monopoly?” she asks.

Not bothering to respond to the joke, Regina continues her journey towards Ruby, allowing her eyes to drift down her body as she does so. While the fitted bodice and full skirt suit her well, Regina is taken back to the first time she saw the girl in Storybrooke being chastised by Granny. Regina had never encountered a woman showing as much skin as that in her life before and it is an image that has stuck with her through the years. It’s a pity to have those legs hidden away under layers and layers of cloth. Her eyes finally make their way back up to meet Ruby’s and she’s pleased to see a mixture of arousal and fear there. Ruby’s no fool, and no stranger to flirtation, she clearly knows what Regina’s suggesting.

Just as she’s about to make a further suggestion, Ruby’s expression softens. She shakes her head. “It won’t work,” she says, softly.

Regina raises an eyebrow. “Really?” she asks. “How disappointing. I had high hopes that you’d be able to fuck me into oblivion for at least a few hours.”

For a second, Regina could swear Ruby’s eyes turn yellow. She blinks and they’re back to green. Ruby chuckles nervously. “Oh, I’m pretty sure we could have some fun,” she admits before her smile fades. “But it’s a quick fix, and you'll still miss Henry when it’s over.”

The mention of Henry again has her stepping back. Her libido successfully quelled, she fixes Ruby with the coldest stare she can muster. “Once again, Ms Lucas, I’ll politely ask you to refrain from inserting your nose where it is not wanted. I won’t be polite a third time.”

Once Regina steps away, Ruby turns and opens the door she’d been pressed against. She looks over her shoulder. “And I’ll politely ask you to not treat me like your whore,” she bites back. “Good night.” She leaves the room slamming the door behind her.

The use of the word *whore* unsettles Regina. As someone who was basically sold to an old man at a very young age, a man who was allowed to do anything he wanted to her, with her consent or without it, it bothers her that Ruby would feel that way about her advances. She frowns, since when does she care how these people *feel*? With a sigh, she lifts her hands and transports herself to
the hallway, appearing directly in front of Ruby.

Ruby stops violently and Regina takes a little pleasure in having surprised the woman.

“Decided you’re hungry after all, did you?” Ruby asks with a sickeningly sweet smile that doesn’t quite match the look in her eyes.

Regina glares at the sarcasm. “No,” she says, hands on hips. “I came to—uh, clarify the situation.” She had nearly said ‘apologise’. “It was not my intention to treat you like a whore, as you so eloquently put it.” Ruby only raises an eyebrow, waiting to see if more is coming. Clearing her throat, Regina’s eyes dip to the floor. “I merely thought we both might enjoy ourselves for a short while.” She lifts her gaze. “I would never have forced you.”

“Well maybe you need to work on your delivery,” Ruby advises. Her strong jaw works, as if she’s considering her next words, then she sighs. “Look, you’re right, I don’t wanna end up as flying monkey food or have a house land on me,” she allows. “But my concern for you was genuine.”

Regina shifts from foot to foot, clearly uncomfortable. “Well, perhaps I’m not used to dealing with that,” she admits, avoiding Ruby’s eyes.

“Perhaps not,” Ruby agrees. “Why don’t you come down and have something to eat?”

“No,” she responds immediately, shaking her head. “I’ve had enough of people for one day.” She pauses, feeling like she should perhaps accept Ruby’s offer of food as some kind of symbolic gesture. “But...if you wanted to put your little basket to good use...you could bring something up for me?” She offers a tentative smile. She half expects Ruby to scoff at the request, but she receives a nod in return.

“If it means you’ll eat something, then sure, I could do that for you.” She moves around Regina, heading for the stairs, but turns to speak over her shoulder. “We’re all on the same side now, Regina. They may not act like it all the time, but we all know what you sacrificed for us.”

She doesn’t wait for a reply. Regina stands where she is for a moment, wondering whether this is a good idea. The girl is Snow White’s best friend, after all. But she’s right, they’re all on the same side now. And the thought of having someone to talk to away from the rabble of the group is quite refreshing. She allows herself a little smile before turning and going back to her chambers.
It’s not long before there’s a soft knock on her door and Regina smiles. She had wondered if the
girl might reconsider once she got back down amongst her friends. Regina is used to
disappointment. She curls a finger and the door opens to reveal Ruby, with her basket. Regina’s
smile grows. “It loses some of the effect without the cloak and hood,” she says. “But I’ll take it.
Won’t you come in?”

Ruby smiles in return. “Cloak and hood might have been overkill, don’t you think?” She steps into
the room, almost cautiously. Regina can’t blame her, she supposes. Ruby offers it to Regina.
“There’s no special treatment. It’s what everyone else had,” she says with a hint of a challenging
smirk.

Taking the basket, Regina raises an eyebrow. “From these people, I’m just glad it’s not poisoned,
dear,” she says, lifting the cloth from the basket and seeing the simple fare within. She could have
anything she wanted to eat, really, but something about Ruby bringing this to her has struck a
chord, so she lifts it out and moves off to an antechamber where there’s a table and six chairs set
up.

“They spent a long time running from you,” Ruby reminds her, following Regina without
invitation, though she remains standing while Regina takes a seat. “They just need some time to
get used to...everything.”

Regina takes a spoonful of the soup and attempts not to grimace. “I miss your grandmother’s
cooking,” she admits, but takes a second spoonful nonetheless.

“Yeah, she’s had requests from a few people,” Ruby says. “Look, I know it’s not the best, but it’s
filling and nutritious, at least.”

Regina hums her agreement. “Thank you,” she says, between mouthfuls. “For bringing this to me.
You didn’t have to go to such trouble. So thank you.”

Ruby shrugs. “I know what it’s like to have people unsure of whether or not they can trust you.”
She offers Regina a smile that’s reminiscent of the ones she used to give her every morning in the
diner.

“And you trust me, do you?” Regina asks, finding herself curious about the answer.
Finally deciding to sit at the table with Regina, Ruby lifts one shoulder in a half shrug. “It’s probably a wolf thing. I usually get a bad feeling around bad people. I don’t get that from you. Not anymore.”

Regina places her spoon on the table. “You can sense bad in people?” she asks, her face clearly displaying her disbelief of this claim. “Please don’t tell me you have a ‘superpower’ too.” She doesn’t bother to mention a name; they both know who she’s talking about.

Ruby laughs and shakes her head. “No. Not like that. But you know how they say that… dogs-” She wrinkles her nose, clearly not happy about referring to herself as one, “-can, you know, sense good and bad in people.”

“Well, since we’re discussing the characteristics of dogs,” she says, emphasising the word in the same way Ruby had. “In my experience, I’ve found them to be blindly loyal to anyone who feeds them and rubs their belly.” She lifts a questioning eyebrow. “Does that apply to you too?”

Ruby meets Regina’s eyebrow raise with one of her own. “Are you planning on rubbing my belly to find out?”

Blood rushes to her cheeks and she fumbles for a response, but Ruby laughs again before she can find one.

“Not so cocky when you’re on the receiving end, huh?” Ruby teases with a wink.

“I’ve clearly not had as much practise as you have, Ms Lucas,” Regina says, dabbing at her mouth with a napkin. Not only is she uncomfortable being flirted with, she’s still a little taken aback by Ruby’s assertion about her apparent innate goodness.

“Maybe I’ll teach you one day,” Ruby says, standing up and pushing her chair back.

Regina smirks at the girl’s bravado. She quite admires it. A wave of her hand sends the used dishes back to the kitchen, leaving the table clear. She stands too, meeting Ruby’s eyes. “Well, I’m sure that will be an enlightening day for both of us,” she says, her voice holding something of a challenge.
“I’m sure it will be,” Ruby says, offering Regina a smile that shows off too many teeth. The younger woman nods and turns to leave. “Enjoy your evening, Your Majesty.”

“Ruby,” Regina calls out, waiting until Ruby stops before continuing. “Thank you for this evening. Your company was...a pleasant distraction.”

She’s being as genuine as she can be, and it seems to take Ruby a moment to decide that she’s not being sarcastic. She nods again. “Goodnight, Regina.” And she continues out of the room, leaving Regina with her thoughts. They’re far less negative than they had been earlier and Regina concedes that perhaps talking to people, sparingly, can be a good thing. Especially when they’re as pretty as Ruby Lucas.

The following morning Regina finds herself in one of the War Council meetings that Charming insists they hold every few days. As usual, there’s very little discussion that’s of any use because they are pretty much clueless on the topic of Zelena.

On more than one occasion, Regina finds her eyes drawn to Ruby, seated to Snow’s right. The young woman’s face is serious as she listens intently to whatever nonsense Leroy is spouting. Regina takes the opportunity to study Ruby’s face; her bone structure is absolutely exquisite. Her eyes trace along Ruby’s strong jaw, following the line until it merges into the ridge of her cheekbone. Lifting her eyes a fraction, she’s surprised to see amused green ones looking back at her. Quickly she averts her attention to what Charming is saying and pointedly refuses to look at Ruby for the rest of the meeting.

When the meeting finishes, Regina feels the need for fresh air. She’s not sure how the Charmings manage to pass nearly two hours discussing nothing, but they do. Mary Margaret had cornered her on her way out of the room, asking inane questions about how she’s feeling. Regina wishes she’d just come right out and ask if she’s considering burying her heart again, but instead they have to do this dance at least once a day.

Finally escaping, Regina makes her way to the courtyard, inhaling deeply with the cool outside air hits her face. Winter is nearly upon the land and the air here feels so much cleaner than in the other world. The benefit of no cars and factories, she supposes. Pulling her cloak more tightly around herself, she advances into the courtyard. She stops walking when she sees a lone figure
with a bow by the hastily assembled training arena David had set-up. It’s Ruby, because apparently she’s everywhere that Regina is. She’s rid herself of her cape and loosened her bodice to allow easier movement. Regina watches the tension in her arm as she pulls back the string of the bow, lining the arrow up with the target. She looses it and the arrow flies straight and true, embedding itself in the bullseye.

“Impressive,” Regina murmurs.

“I thought so,” Ruby speaks, without looking behind her. She reaches for another arrow and lines it up against the string of the bow, before pulling it back, taking aim and releasing it. Another bullseye. “Like riding a bike,” Ruby murmurs. She turns around to face Regina, a smirk in place. “Something I can help you with, Your Majesty?” she asks.

Regina moves from her position in the shadows out into the light of the yard, approaching Ruby. “No,” she says. “I just thought I’d take some air, clear my head after that delightful meeting.” She runs her fingers over the feathers of the arrows sticking out of the quiver on Ruby’s back.

Ruby nods, and pity flickers on her face. Regina bristles, waiting for a platitude; she imagines that it can’t have gone unnoticed that few people were civil to her during the meeting. Regina watches as Ruby licks her lips and catches her lower one between her teeth, but then shakes her head.

“Feel like shooting something?” Ruby asks, offering up her bow.

Regina chuckles, ignoring the weapon. She flicks two fingers and an arrow flies from Ruby’s quiver and comes to hover between the two of them. Another flick, in the general direction of the target, and her arrow splits Ruby’s in half, hitting the target dead centre. She shrugs. “I’ve never needed to use a bow.”

A small smile graces Ruby’s lips. “I guess not when you can do that.” She picks up another arrow, stretches and releases. Another bullseye. “I was glad to see you at breakfast this morning.”

She watches Ruby nock another arrow and lift the bow, drawing back until her right thumb is pressed against her cheek, just above her lips. Regina moves closer, so she’s standing by Ruby’s shoulder. “I was concerned you might barge into my chambers with more food if I hadn’t come down,” she confides, casually. “And I might not have been decent.”

Ruby clears her throat, her grip on the bow wavering. The tip of the arrow dips; seems that she’s
lost her aim. Sighing, she lowers the bow and re-aims while Regina beams at the side of her face. This time, when she lets the string go, the arrow sails through the air wildly, missing the target completely.

Regina clicks her tongue. “Not quite so impressive,” she says. “Am I distracting you, dear?”

Ruby narrows her eyes, but doesn’t respond. In a blur of motion, she removes another arrow from her quiver, nocks it, aims and releases. Bullseye. Ruby turns to her with a triumphant smile. “So, if I bring you breakfast in bed, there’s a chance I might catch you naked? Is that what you’re telling me?” She winks, mischief dancing in her eyes.

“You’d be incinerated before you even caught a glimpse, Ms Lucas.”

Ruby pouts. “Seriously? You wouldn’t let me get a little look before you fireballed me?”

Shaking her head, Regina finds herself fighting not to smile at the younger woman’s flirtatious nature. It’s surprisingly easy to speak to her like this, and it’s a pleasant distraction from the rest of life in the Enchanted Forest. “Don’t push your luck, wolf,” Regina says.

Smirking, Ruby keeps her eyes forward as she reaches for another arrow. “So…” she starts casually, and Regina can already tell that a smartass remark is going to follow. Ruby makes her wait until she sends the arrow flying towards the target, and then finally turns to Regina, wide grin in place. “Do you always sleep naked, Your Majesty?”

Her cheeks grow warm at the question, but she smiles, taking a step closer to Ruby and leaning in to whisper in her ear. “I’ll leave that to your imagination, Ms Lucas.” She doesn’t miss the sharp intake of breath from the other woman. Stepping back, Regina decides she’s bored of archery. She lifts her hand, removing all of Ruby’s ammunition from the quiver. The arrows hang in the air, primed and straining with potential energy. Regina plucks one out at random and runs a finger down the length of it, before hurling the remaining arrows at the target. They form a perfect heart shape.

Ruby lets out a low whistle. “Okay, now you’re just showing off,” she huffs.

“Perhaps,” Regina allows.
“Can you do a unicorn? That’d impress me.”

Regina rolls her eyes. “I don’t do requests, Ms Lucas. Be grateful I’m choosing to spend this time with you.”

“It’s not like you had a lotta options,” Ruby counters. “You don’t like anyone else. So it was either me, or the four walls of your bedroom. I’m a pretty good choice.”

“I don’t like you either. I like the horses. They don’t sass me.”

“No, but they do smell,” Ruby returns with a smile.

Regina raises an eyebrow. “No worse than you, dear.”

Ruby actually laughs at that, but presses her lips together to hold it in. She flutters her eyelashes in an exaggerated fashion. “But I’m far prettier than a horse,” she says, nudging Regina with her shoulder. “You gotta admit that.”

“I’ll admit no such thing,” Regina argues, keeping her face completely serious. “Horses are beautiful creatures, Ms Lucas. The stallion I’ve been favouring since we returned is particularly handsome.”

Ruby’s eyes are narrowed and her lips pursed, and it looks as if she’s primed to give a petulant reply. But her lips spread into a confident grin and she takes the few steps needed to close the distance between herself and Regina. Regina stands her ground, but knows the mood has changed. Ruby’s smile remains and she reaches out and takes the arrow that Regina’s still holding. Lifting her bow again, she nocks the arrow and takes aim before she meets Regina’s eyes again.

“I’m sure your pony’s pretty,” she says, with a smile that bares too many teeth. “But he’s got nothing on my wolf.” She lets the arrow fly, still holding Regina’s gaze. It’s a few seconds before Regina can tear her eyes away and finds that Ruby’s arrow has shattered the others that were embedded in the bullseye and now rests in the centre of the heart she’d created. Regina swallows, with difficulty, as she brings her eyes back to Ruby’s. There’s a shimmer of yellow in the green and Regina clears her throat, lowering her gaze. She frowns at herself. Since when does she back down?
Lifting her head, she looks down her nose at the taller woman. “Well, well, aren’t you full of yourself?” she observes.

Ruby’s only response is a shrug and a raise of her eyebrow. Regina nods, her eyes drifting down Ruby’s body. “Then again, I suppose you have reason to be,” she murmurs. “I’ll leave you in peace to practise, Ms Lucas.” She turns to leave, sweeping her cloak behind her.

“Well, you used up all my arrows for your display,” Ruby pipes up from behind her. She turns back to see the younger woman following her. Ruby gestures up at the castle walls. “Mary Margaret was supposed to show me around,” she begins, looking back to Regina. “But she and David have been so busy with stuff since we got back, and I was kinda looking forward to the tour…” She leaves the sentence hanging.

Regina lifts an eyebrow. “You want me to play tour guide for you?” she asks. She’s not opposed to the idea of spending more time with Ruby. The sharp pain in her heart from missing Henry seems somewhat dulled when in the other woman’s company.

Ruby mimics Regina’s eyebrow raise. “Unless you had plans to, you know, go be broody somewhere or whatever?”

“Very well,” Regina says, biting her cheek to prevent herself from smiling at the girl’s impudence. “But I fear my recollections of the place will not be as rose-tinted as Snow’s would be.” The castle was never a home for her. A prison, yes. And then a fortress. But never a home.

“Maybe I want to see it from your point of view.” Ruby seems surprised by her own words, and quickly averts her eyes and coughs. “Uh… I just need to make a quick stop to get rid of my bow.” She heads back towards the door, walking faster than necessary.

“That’s easily done, dear,” Regina says, a wave of her hand removing all traces of Ruby’s practise session. “And are you sure you’re ready for my point of view?” she questions, falling into step with Ruby as they enter the castle. “It’s a dark tale, full of anger and vengeance.” She’s smiling as she says it.

“I’m pretty familiar with the dark side. You won’t shock me,” Ruby counters, returning Regina’s smile. “Are you sure you’re ready to tell someone about it all?”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Ms Lucas,” Regina says, keeping her voice playful. “You’ll only hear what
I want you to hear.” While she’s been enjoying the other woman’s company, she’s still not entirely sure she can trust her not to run to Mary Margaret if Regina should say anything out of line. Ruby nods, seemingly unperturbed.

They make their way past the kitchens, through winding corridors until they reach the Great Hall. There are some footsoldiers milling around, but it is mostly deserted. “We should probably start here,” she says, walking a few steps ahead of Ruby, looking up at the ornate stonework adorning the walls. “This is where I was wed. To a man forty years my senior. A man I’d met twice before the wedding day.”

“Snow’s father,” Ruby concludes.

“Yes,” Regina says, finding that her chest is growing tight as she remembers that day and how scared and devastated she was. She doesn’t often allow herself to think about those times; too many ugly memories. “I was eighteen years old,” she whispers.

“Eighteen?” Ruby lets out and Regina allows herself a small smile.

“Did you think I was much older than you?” she asks. “I think I’m offended, Ms Lucas.”

Ruby frowns. “No, that’s not...I didn’t…” She stops and shakes her head. “I knew you were young when you married him, but I guess I never realised how young.”

Regina nods. People quickly forget things that make them uncomfortable. Shaking herself slightly. “Yes, but that’s commonplace in this land, isn’t it? Particularly amongst royalty. Daughters and sons are bartered and sold like any commodity.”

“I wouldn’t know about that,” Ruby says, walking over to a painting of a landscape. She looks back over her shoulder at Regina. “Think you’d have preferred life as a peasant, Your Majesty?”

She knows it’s meant as a throwaway joke, but it doesn’t soften the pang in her heart for what could have been. “I was willing to try,” she whispers, forgetting about Ruby’s hearing. The younger woman whirls around to face her, a hand covering her mouth.

“Daniel…” The girl’s eyes go wide and she bites her lip.
Regina’s eyes immediately meet Ruby’s, hard and questioning. Her jaw clenches as she reins in her instinct to lash out. What makes its way out is a harsh laugh that echoes around the cavernous room. “Why am I not surprised that you know this?”

Ruby raises her hands, almost in surrender. “I’m sorry. I didn’t…I’m sorry,” she repeats.

The girl seems genuinely distressed at the thought that she might have upset Regina. After a moment’s consideration, Regina sighs and shakes her head. “It’s hardly your fault that you were told details about my private life. I imagine half the kingdom knows my business.” Her voice softens. “Yes, Daniel.” She blinks to get rid of the tears that threaten to appear. “We planned to run away and wed. So, Ms Lucas, I could very well have been a peasant if not for...well, I assume you know the rest of the story.”

Ruby nods, approaching Regina tentatively, seemingly unwilling to upset her further. “I...I was going to run away with a boy too,” she confesses. “N-not because anyone was trying to marry me off or anything, but I--I felt like a prisoner. Granny kept me locked up, to protect me. And I wanted so badly to get away and Peter...he...he was going to leave everything to be with me.”

Clearly this tale is not going to have a happy ending. Ruby’s head is bowed and her eyes full of tears.

“He's the boy you killed? From your village?” she prompts, gently.

Lifting her head, Ruby swallows and meets Regina’s eyes. “I killed him. I ate him.”

While not unexpected, Regina still flinches at the words. She had watched Daniel die in front of her, saw her mother rip his heart out and crush it, but she hadn’t killed him.

“This was before you gained control of the wolf?” she asks.

“It was before I knew I was the wolf,” Ruby says, her brow furrowing in anger. “Because in all of her protectiveness, Granny never once thought to mention that I turned into a killing machine three nights a month.”
Regina nods. In essence, the Widow Lucas had condemned that boy to die, just as her own mother killed Daniel. They’re not so different, really. They’ve both experienced loss, both felt like they were monsters. Only one of them ended up trying to kill Snow White while the other became her fiercest protector.

“Perhaps a jaunt down memory lane wasn’t the best idea,” Regina muses. “For either of us.” She turns to the younger woman. “Do you want a drink?”

“Sounds good,” Ruby agrees immediately, sniffing and rubbing at her nose.

“Excellent,” Regina says. “So, do you want to take the stairs, or shall we travel by magic?” She raises an eyebrow in challenge.

Ruby smirks, resembling a naughty schoolchild. “Magic.”

“Good choice,” Regina says. She holds out a hand, the palm upturned. “It works without touch, but it’s...more reliable this way.”

Ruby reaches out, slipping her hand into Regina’s. “After you…”

“I hope you come with me, dear,” Regina says, with a smile. Ruby’s hand is slightly larger and her own feels small. “Okay, hold on. It can be quite jarring if you’re not used to it.” Without further ado, Regina raises her free hand, engulfing them both in a cloud of purple smoke. Less than a second later, they are deposited in Regina’s chambers, still holding hands. Regina looks to Ruby; she’s swaying a little and seems almost dazed. “Are you alright?”

Ruby plants her feet on the ground, shoulder-width apart as she tries to regain her balance. Her grip on Regina’s hand tightens. Pain shoots through Regina’s fingers as Ruby squeezes them; the girl forgets her own strength, it would seem. Regina uses her free hand to cover Ruby’s in an attempt to loosen her grip. “Ease up there, Wonder Woman.”

Ruby loosens her grip. She looks up at Regina with a sheepish smile. “Sorry. That was… Wow, you weren’t kidding. Wow.”

Regina smiles at the reaction. “Yes, it took me a few attempts to get used to it. I’d wondered if it might be different for you, since you’re used to transforming into another being. But apparently
not.” Reluctantly, she lets go of Ruby’s hand and stalks to the cabinet against the wall, opening it to reveal an array of bottles.

“Poofing from one place to another isn’t quite the same thing as changing into a wolf,” Ruby agrees. “Is your hand okay?”

Placing her chosen bottle on the table, Regina flexes her hand. It’s perfectly fine. “Nothing broken,” she confirms. “But that’s quite a grip you have. Even that must be a lot to keep under control, let alone a wolf.” She pours two generous measures of the spirit and offers one of the glasses to Ruby. Their fingers brush together as Ruby takes her drink, and the contact is not unpleasant. “It’s not a twelve year old single-malt, but it’ll do.” She holds up her glass. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Ruby echos, clinking her glass against Regina’s and taking a sip.

“This is all very formal,” Regina decides. They’re practically standing to attention. She inclines her head to a doorway. “Should we retire to my sitting room? Far more comfortable.”

“Lead the way.”

They head into the smaller, far more intimate room. Regina tosses a fireball into the fireplace, lighting a roaring fire. She sits down in one of the two chairs arranged in front of it. She takes another drink, enjoying the warmth sliding down her throat. “Do sit down,” she tells the younger woman.

Ruby does as instructed, smirking. "Never have I ever imagined sitting down and drinking with the Evil Queen," she muses, lightheartedly.

“No?” Regina asks, smiling. “You were never curious about the enemy you so loyally fought against for Snow White?”

“Oh, I was curious, absolutely,” Ruby admits. “I thought about you a lot, actually. How I’d capture you, how I’d get answers out of you.” Ruby smirks and takes a long sip from her glass. “I never pictured it happening over a glass of whiskey, though.”

“I dread to think how you pictured it…” Regina says, swirling the liquid around in her glass.
“What would you have asked? If you’d managed to capture me?”

“Does it really matter now?” Ruby counters.

“It depends on whether you’re still interested in the answers,” Regina says, watching Ruby’s face.

Ruby nods once. “Why?” Regina’s about to tell her that’s a little broad when she continues. “Why did you go after everyone else?”

“I didn’t go after anyone else,” Regina argues. “My quarrel was with Snow White. Anyone else who got involved on her behalf chose their own destiny. They came after me.” Regina sits back in her chair, cradling her glass and staring into the fire. “She has a way of attracting waifs and strays.” She smirks. “No offense.”

Ruby rolls her eyes. “None taken.” Silence settles between them again and they both sip their drinks. Regina’s a little surprised when Ruby speaks again. “She was just a child. She didn’t mean to hurt you.” Ruby’s tone is gentle, but the words don’t sit well with Regina.

“She ruined my life,” Regina snaps. “She took away any happiness I might have had. And she thought that getting to be her mother made up for that.” Regina shakes her head. “She was a spoiled princess with no consideration for anything or anyone but herself. She condemned me to a life I didn’t choose.”

Ruby’s clearly unhappy with this description of her friend. “Be careful,” she warns, enunciating the words.

“Be careful!” Regina repeats in disbelief. “You asked me a question and I answered. I wasn’t aware I had to make the answer suit what you wanted to hear.”

“You don’t, but watch your tone.” Ruby’s speaking through clenched teeth.

Regina’s eyes harden. She should’ve suspected this wouldn’t last long. A close ally of Snow White’s was always a risky choice as a companion of any sort. It’s good that it’s being nipped in the bud. “I am the Queen. This is my castle, I’ll use whichever damn tone I want to.” She turns back to the fire. “I think you should leave now, Ms Lucas.”
Ruby finishes the last of the spirit and puts the glass on the table between them before standing. “As you wish, Your Majesty.” And she turns on her heel and leaves.

Regina makes no move as the younger woman leaves, remaining focused on the fire. When the door closes, however, she rises to her feet and hurls the glass she’s holding into the flames.
Chapter 3 - Ruby

The first day of the full moon dawns, bringing with it a whole host of associations; both bad and good. This is the world where she’s a killer. In Storybrooke, even after the curse was broken and she started changing again, she never killed anyone. It’s over thirty years since she last took a life, and there’s a very real possibility that she’ll have to do so in this latest struggle against the Wicked Witch. Having someone to destroy may well have put the fire back in Regina’s eyes, but it’s not something that Ruby enjoys. She did what she had to back when she was protecting Snow, but she never took any pleasure in killing. She was always too afraid to embrace that dark part of herself she knows exists in case it took over.

With the arrival of wolfstime, Ruby can feel the call of the moon in her blood once more. It’s stronger here than in the other world; as if there’s less in the way of her link to the forest and its magic. Part of her can’t wait to run through the familiar territory and visit her old haunts. The freedom she feels as the wolf is unlike anything else she’s experienced. It’s liberating and exhilarating. But it also serves as a reminder that she doesn’t fit in. Both woman and wolf, and not wholly one or the other.

As the full moon was drawing nearer, she had tried to keep her thoughts positive, but she can’t keep the worries from creeping in. What if the pull is too strong here? In her youth she had no conscious memory of being the wolf and no control over it. In Storybrooke, when she changed for the first time, she felt that same loss of control. What if the magics in this world overwhelm her again?

And if those worries aren’t enough to contend with, following their heated conversation of the other day, Ruby finds herself avoiding Regina as much as possible. Having the former Queen play tour guide, in hindsight, was probably not the best of ideas. Especially when Ruby’s best friend is the person Regina blames for everything that’s wrong in her life. In the time that’s passed since the confrontation, Ruby’s mind has been a jumble of thoughts about the two women; questions of rights and wrongs, loyalties and betrayals.

Ruby’s never been a particularly judgemental person. She tries to see the best in people and, for a few brief moments since arriving back here, she thought she might actually be getting close to Regina. She meant what she was saying when she was begging Regina not to take the sleeping potion; she didn’t want the other woman to give up and go to sleep. While she may not know Regina all that well, her position in Storybrooke’s society probably gave her more of an insight into the intimidating woman than most. She saw her almost every morning for coffee. She saw her struggle to keep the town running, she saw the dark circles under her eyes when Henry’s first few months were plagued by colic, she saw the absolute agony on her face whenever Henry chose Emma over her. She knows there’s a woman with very real feelings hidden away under the royal finery and the crown. If only she’d let someone in enough to see it.
An elbow digs into her right side and she brings her attention back to yet another war council meeting. She gives Belle a small smile in thanks for the nudge. She looks to her left to see Granny is also staring at her, shaking her head, and Ruby guiltily averts her gaze to the head of the table. She’s surprised to find Regina’s brown eyes staring right back at her. The Queen quickly looks away, saying something in response to a question from Snow. Once again, her thoughts drift from the content of the meeting. Before she knows what’s happening, a gentle hand lands on her arm and she looks up into familiar grey eyes.

“The meeting’s over, Ruby,” Mary Margaret tells her, with a smile. Ruby looks around the room and sees it’s mostly empty. Granny and Leroy are involved in some hushed discussion, but the room is silent aside from them. She chances a glance back to the head of the table and is surprised by the disappointment she feels as she realises Regina has gone. She sighs, watching as Mary Margaret sits down on the chair Belle had previously occupied. “Are you okay?”

Ruby nods. “I’m fine. Why?”

Mary Margaret looks down at the table, tracing an imperfection in the wood with her finger. “I guess what I’m asking is, are we okay?” she asks, her voice soft.

Ruby frowns at the question, but she can’t help but feel a little guilty. Since having the details of Regina’s marriage confirmed to her, she has, perhaps, kept her distance from Mary Margaret. Not intentionally. Not really. But hearing Regina’s side of the story has given her pause. Still, she presses on. “Of course we are,” she assures her. “Why on earth would you think we weren’t?”

“Because I’ve hardly seen you since we got back,” Mary Margaret tells her, finally lifting her eyes to meet Ruby’s. “We used to be joined at the hip. I...guess I thought it would still be that way.”

Ruby is about to respond, but Leroy beats her to it, interrupting his conversation with Granny to make comment. “She's been too busy playing fetch for the Evil Queen.”

The impending full moon fuels Ruby’s anger at his words and she stands up, looming over the dwarf. "Excuse me?" Mary Margaret hurriedly stands and places a hand on Ruby’s forearm, holding her back.

The dwarf shrugs his shoulders. "You heard me.”

Ruby lets out an involuntary growl, startling Leroy and causing Mary Margaret’s grip to tighten on her arm. "Say it again, Leroy,” she challenges. "To my face."
“Just because you’re hard of hearing, doesn’t mean we’ve all gone blind.” Leroy puffs his chest out. “We’ve all seen you running around after her.”

Ruby frowns; the only time she’s really done anything for Regina is when she brought her dinner the other night. “Would you rather she starve to dea-”

“Starve, my ass,” Leroy interjects. “We’re all eating slop when that bitch could conjure us up a feast with a snap of her fingers.” Looking to Granny, he sighs. “I’d kill for one of your burgers right about now, Sister.”

Granny narrows her eyes at Leroy. “One more remark about my granddaughter and the only thing you’ll be tasting is my fist, got that?”

Ruby smirks at her grandmother’s comment, but suspects that her feelings don’t differ all that much from Leroy’s. Something else to deal with. One thing at a time.

“Seems like your problem is with the cooks, Leroy,” Ruby tells him. “Not Regina.”

He opens his mouth to respond, but Granny slaps him on the back of the head and shoves him ahead of her towards the door. She casts a look over her shoulder that Ruby can’t quite read, but knows it’s not good. Mary Margaret sighs.

“Ignore Leroy,” she says, her hand slipping down Ruby’s wrist to take hold of her hand. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

Allowing herself to be dragged, Ruby quirks an eyebrow. “And just where are we going?” she asks.

Her friend rolls her eyes as she continues to tug Ruby in the direction of the door. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe somewhere that you’re not going to get into a fight with a dwarf? I know things get a little...heightened for you around this time of the month.”

“I’m not sure that little episode was related to the phase of the moon,” Ruby mutters with a sigh. Mary Margaret links their arms together as they walk along the bustling hallway by the kitchens.
“Well, I happen to think that what you’re doing for Regina is nice,” Mary Margaret says, letting go of Ruby to fasten her cloak before they venture outside.

“And what is it that I’m supposed to be doing?” Ruby snaps, feeling guilty even as the words leave her mouth. She draws in a deep breath to calm down, unsure of why she feels the need to react this way to every mention of Regina. “I came with her to the castle, where I was absolutely no help whatsoever because she froze my legs to the floor, by the way. I brought her some food. Once. I thought that maybe we could—” Be friends, she finishes in her head. Sighing, she continues out loud. “I thought that having her on our side would be good for everyone. Regina included.” She shakes her head. “It didn’t work.”

“You sound disappointed,” Mary Margaret comments.

“Maybe I just don’t understand why someone would want to stay isolated at a time like this.”

“That’s something I’ve been wondering for a long time, Ruby,” Mary Margaret confides softly. Just as Ruby’s about to ask about the melancholy expression she’s wearing, it disappears and is replaced by a bright smile. “C’mon,” Mary Margaret urges, tugging on Ruby’s arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

They end up spending the day wandering the fields near the castle, talking and gossiping like old times and Ruby feels much of the tension she’s been carrying around slip away. She can’t remember a time when she’s laughed so hard, or so freely, leaning into Mary Margaret and wiping at the tears streaming down her face. They talk about everything and nothing and they only stop when Mary Margaret casts a look at the sky and suggests they return to the castle. The sun will be setting soon, and if it wasn’t for the time of the month, they might have continued their session well into the evening. Ruby heaves a sigh and links her arm with Mary Margaret’s as they begin the trek back to the castle.

They stop at the foot of the staircase that will take Ruby to her living quarters. Mary Margaret pulls her into a hug, and she lets out a surprised ‘oof’ as she’s squeezed.

“Be safe out there.” Mary Margaret smiles and shakes her head. “I mean, I’ll see you come in and out of the castle, I’m su-”
“I’m actually going to stay away until the full moon passes,” Ruby interjects. It’s not something she’s really given much thought to until their walk back. While the afternoon had been filled with laughter as they reminisced, not everything about her life back then had been fun. Some of it was downright traumatising. She wants to be sure that history has no intention of repeating itself while she’s here.

Mary Margaret cocks her head to the side and frowns, regarding Ruby. Ruby averts her gaze in an effort not to be easily read. “Why?” She asks, placing a hand on Ruby’s arm. “It’s not like you’re going to hurt anybody, Ruby.”

And Ruby sighs. “The magic is stronger here, Mary Margaret,” she tries to explain. “I can feel it calling to me. I just… I need to be sure I have a hold of it. I need to keep everyone safe.”

“You have control of it, Ruby. You don’t have to change if you don’t want to,” Mary Margaret counters.

“It’s not like at home, though, you know?”

“This is home, Ruby,” Mary Margaret reminds her, gently.

“Is it?” Ruby murmurs, almost to herself. Before giving her friend a chance to respond, she continues. “I can feel the wolf more here,” she tries to explain. “It’s right there, just beneath the surface. If...if I don’t let it out, I’m not sure what will happen.” Again, Mary Margaret looks set to protest but Ruby holds her hand up. “And I’d rather not risk anybody’s safety when I can quite easily take myself off into the woods for a few days.”


Ruby grins. “I’m the big, bad wolf, remember?” she says with a wink. “I can take care of myself.”

“Just make sure that you do,” Mary Margaret says, with round, worried eyes. “Besides, you have to get back here in once piece so I can give you that tour I promised.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Ruby says, ignoring the twinge of guilt at the back of her mind. While it’s no secret that she’s spoken to Regina a few times, she didn’t mention the failed attempt at a tour to
Lost in thought, Ruby rounds a corner and narrowly avoids running right into Regina. “Sorry,” she mumbles, trying to move around the other woman.

“As well you should be,” Regina says. “One would think with your doggy senses and your tendency to put your nose where it isn’t wanted, you’d be able to tell when someone else is coming around the corner.”

Ruby sighs and weighs up her options. She could stand here and argue with the other woman, or she can let it go and transform in peace. She opts for the latter. “Have a good night, Regina.” She doesn’t get very far before Regina’s voice stops her again.

“Oh yes. The full moon is tonight,” she drawls. “I do hope it goes smoothly for you. Remember, the thing that’s following you is only your tail, dear. Don’t chase it. You’ll just get dizzy.”

She growls low in the back of her throat but continues walking. The sun is sitting low in the sky, and while she’s getting more than a little tired of the dog jokes, there are more important things to take care of. She rounds the corner to her chambers and ignores the sound of a discontented sigh.

She steps out of the castle, hoisting her pack higher onto her back. A shiver runs through her as the cold evening air makes contact with her skin; the blood of the wolf raising her temperature above normal. With a final glance back at the castle, she breaks into a run, her powerful legs carrying her easily over the miles she wishes to put between herself and the rest of the group. She traverses the woods with no problem; her eyes are always strong, but tonight the forest could be bathed in sunlight for all the trouble she has making out obstacles. Finally slowing, she allows herself to take in her surroundings. She lifts her nose and sniffs; there are other wolves nearby. That’s a good sign, that means the area is safe for her and that she’ll have company.

Ruby picks out a tree with thick, sturdy branches that will do quite well to hide her belongings in until she can return for them in the morning. Letting her pack slip from her shoulders, she ignores the panic chilling her stomach as she unclasps her cloak. She swallows and lets it fall to the ground, closing her eyes as her blood surges at the heightened call from the moon. But she doesn’t transform. She’s still in control. She opens her eyes and turns her face to the moon, letting its power wash over her as she laughs in delight. Quickly wrapping her pack in her cloak, she deposits both in the tree before stepping into a clearing and into the moonlight.
The call is strong, but Ruby’s stronger and she holds her human form to show herself that she can, a smile on her face the whole time. A howl goes up from about half a mile away and Ruby’s head snaps towards it. Excitement builds in her chest at the thought of getting to run, really run. Storybrooke’s wood is fine, but it has nothing on this vast forest and she can’t wait to explore it again.

She takes off in the direction of the howl she’d heard. As she runs, she allows her wolf form to take over. Muscles thicken and bones bend, the momentary pain is quickly forgotten when her paws hit the ground. Immediately she feels a connection to the forest, to nature, to everything. Her blood pounds in time with the rhythm of the forest as her senses are assaulted by smells and sights that are new and familiar all at once. For the first time since their return, Ruby feels at home.

Coming to a halt at an outcrop of rock, her keen eyes pick out the pack of wolves below, looking up at her. While another wolf would generally be seen as an invader or challenger, the animals know that Ruby’s much larger, stronger frame is something else entirely and they defer to her supernatural power. They will be her packmates for the night.

She lifts her huge head and lets out a howl.

The following morning she wakes up in her human form, as the first tendrils of sunlight drift through the trees onto her face. She lifts her head and sees that she’s lying in a pile of wolves; all sleeping off the large meal of deer that Ruby had helped to hunt and catch. A slight metallic taste still lingers in her mouth, but it’s not unpleasant. The wolf closest to her shifts in his sleep, dropping his head onto her belly. She smiles and runs her hand through his thick fur, thinking back to the exhilaration she’d felt as the wolf. Her fears had been unfounded and she’d remained aware of everything she was doing. Ruby lets out a long breath and curls back into the furry bodies surrounding her. She’s safe and warm and sees no need to move for a while.

The next two nights pass much the same as the first, and she spends most of her days sleeping with the pack or trekking through the woods to get supplies from her backpack. It’s been a while since she’s been so utterly alone and it gives her a lot of time to think. Her thoughts flit from ways to defeat the Wicked Witch to strategies that might get them back to Storybrooke to Granny and Snow and...Regina.

If she’s honest, Regina is probably taking up more of her thoughts than she should. There’s
something about the woman that draws Ruby in; a kinship, almost. If not for the people around her, Ruby could quite easily have allowed the darkness to consume her. She remembers all too well what it was like to be that frightened young girl with a monster inside of her. Regina was a frightened young girl once, too. With nobody to tame the monster inside of her; only to feed it. But Ruby’s seen glimpses beneath the surface and there’s something so sad and broken about Regina that Ruby can’t help but want to be near her in some way; to make it better.

Her musings leave her with no conclusions and when the sun comes up on the third morning, she’s almost sad that she’ll have to leave the forest and go back to the castle where the source of her confusion awaits.

She eases herself out of the pile of sleeping wolves, disturbing one of the youngsters at the edge of the heap. He lifts his head and nips playfully at her leg as she passes. She grins and squats down to rub between his ears.

“Play nice,” she warns. “And behave. I’ll be back at the next full moon.”

Pushing herself up, Ruby retrieves her belongings and slips her cloak over her shoulders before starting the journey back to the castle. She doesn’t hurry; there’s no moon to lend a sense of urgency. Instead, she takes her time, as if out for a leisurely morning stroll. As she nears the edge of the forest, she picks up a familiar scent and smiles. She should have known. Finally stepping out of the trees, she catches sight of the expected figure looking into the forest intently.

“What are you doing up at this hour, Princess?” she calls out, lengthening her strides as she heads over to meet her friend. Mary Margaret turns at the sound of her voice, breaking into a grin when she sees Ruby in once piece.

“Ruby!” Mary Margaret exclaims before breaking into her adorably clumsy run and throwing her arms around Ruby, squeezing her tightly. She pulls back and looks up with a frown. “What do you mean?” she asks “It’s just like old times. I always used to come meet you after wolfstime.”

Ruby’s smile widens at the memories. She links her arm through her friend’s as they stroll back towards the castle. “You sure it has nothing to do with worrying about my safety?”

Mary Margaret shrugs, her demeanour changing. “No,” she says, then scrunches her nose. “Maybe?”
Ruby can sense her friend’s uneasiness and so she unlinks her arm from Mary Margaret’s to wrap it around her waist in a one-armed hug. “Well, you don’t need to worry. I’m fine. And we’re gonna get through this whole Wicked Witch thing too.”

“We need to get through this together,” Mary Margaret agrees. “All of us.”

“What other choice do we have?” Defeat, she thinks, but she soon shakes herself of the thought.

“What if we don’t?” Mary Margaret asks. “What if I never see Emma again? This is the second time I…” she falters, and Ruby wraps her arm tighter around her. “This is the second time I’ve let her go. I failed her once, I can’t do that again.”

Ruby stops walking, bringing Mary Margaret to a stop, and turns her so they’re face to face. “Listen to me,” she says firmly. “Even if we don’t find a way out of this, Emma found you once. She will find you again.” She shakes her head and pulls her into an embrace. “You never failed her Mary Margaret,” she whispers into her ear. “You did what you had to do to give Emma her best chance.” She pulls back enough in time to see Mary Margaret wiping away her tears, and she reaches up to cup her cheek. “Don’t cry,” she urges.

Mary Margaret draws in a deep breath and plasters on a smile. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I cannot afford to show weakness right now. I need to be strong.”

Brushing a thumb under her right eye, Ruby shakes her head. “No, no, it’s not that at all,” Ruby assures her with a smile. “You can talk to me about anything, without judgement. You know that. It’s just… I get sad when you’re sad. I don’t like to see you upset.”

Mary Margaret pulls Ruby in to another bone-crushing hug, and releases her before Ruby has a chance to reciprocate. “God I love you,” she says. “I’m not sure how I’d ever have survived without you.”

Ruby shrugs, and tries to hide her blush. “You’d have managed perfectly fine, Mary Margaret and you know it. Because you’re you. You’re brave, and fierce, and you have a heart of gold. You’d have managed.” Placing a kiss on Mary Margaret’s cheek, she pulls on her armand they continue their walk.

“You know very well I’d have starved that first month,” Mary Margaret protests. She bumps her shoulder against Ruby’s. “You taught me everything I know about surviving; how to track, how to
“I still haven’t quite recovered from you thinking rabbit tracks were wolf tracks,” Ruby teases, unsure why Mary Margaret’s kind words leave a hollow feeling in her chest.

“You saved my life, Ruby,” Mary Margaret continues, ignoring Ruby’s attempt to lighten the mood. “And not just that first time. So many times. You were always there for me. You still are.” She squeezes Ruby’s arm.

“You believed in me,” Ruby whispers. And that’s really what it comes down to. Mary Margaret was the first person to believe that Ruby could do anything she wanted to. She was the first person to look into Ruby’s eyes and tell her that she was in charge of her own destiny. Where others saw a monster, Mary Margaret only ever saw a friend. And for that she has Ruby’s undying loyalty and devotion.

They’ve stopped walking and Mary Margaret is looking up at her with those huge eyes of hers. “Of course I believe in you,” she says, as if she can’t believe anyone could think otherwise. “We’re a pair, me and you. Red and Snow. And we always will be.” She flashes a smile that makes Ruby’s heart ache from the sincerity of it.

A disturbing combination of emotions sweeps through Ruby. There’s the shameful resentment she always feels when Mary Margaret talks about their relationship as if it’s special and precious to her. It was special and precious until Charming came along. Friendship is no match for true love, after all. Those feelings aren’t new. But there’s a surprising splash of guilt mixed up in them this time. And it’s somehow related to Regina. Guilt for blindly accepting Snow’s side of the story? Guilt for not considering what made Regina into the person she was? Guilt for wishing Regina had been at the edge of the forest to greet her instead of Snow?

Ruby nods, forcing herself to smile. “Red and Snow,” she agrees. “Always.” Mary Margaret looks set to say something further, but Ruby cuts her off. “C’mon. I’m famished. I can smell breakfast from here.”

“I’d forgotten how much you’re ruled by your stomach after your nights running around in the woods,” Mary Margaret teases.

“And yet we’re still out here, and not inside where the food is.” Ruby starts dragging Mary Margaret along as her stomach lets out a particularly ferocious growl. But she is once again halted when Mary Margaret tugs her back into place when they’ve barely moved on twenty paces. “Mary Margaret!” she whines.
“Shhh!”

Ruby glares slightly, but looks in the direction that her friend is pointing to; they’ve happened past the stables on their way back from woods. Regina is standing in the yard, holding the bridle of a large horse and talking to someone. At first, Ruby thinks it’s the horse, but Regina’s attention is directed elsewhere. Robin Hood suddenly comes into view, and it becomes quite obvious who Regina is talking to.

“I wonder if they’re discussing the Wicked Witch,” Mary Margaret asks. Ruby assumes Mary Margaret is thinking aloud until she continues. “Should we go over and find out?” She starts walking without waiting for a response, but Ruby pulls her back.

“It looks far too-” Intimate, she thinks. “-personal to be talking strategy,” Ruby remarks, watching Regina’s lips turn up into a slight smile. “I’m sure if it was important, they’d call us to a meeting. Let’s just leave them be.”

The two start walking again in silence as Ruby tries hard not to focus on the niggle at the back of her mind. It shouldn’t bother her that Regina speaks to Robin. Or to anyone, for that matter. The more people who involve the Queen in day to day life, the better. Ruby should be all for it. And still the niggle remains. If she’d wanted to, she could have listened in quite easily. But she tries, where possible, not to let her supernatural abilities intrude into other people’s private business.

“Do you think they’re fond of each other?” Mary Margaret asks, breaking the silence. She looks back at the stables before raising her eyebrows at Ruby.

Ruby scoffs. “I don’t think it’s any of our business.” They finally reach the castle doors.

“I think it would be wonderful if they are,” Mary Margaret continues, as Ruby holds the door open for her to enter. “Out of any of us, I think Regina finally deserves some happiness. Don’t you?”

“Oh course,” Ruby agrees softly. “But...with him? She barely knows him.”

“Do you have someone else in mind?” Mary Margaret asks as she leads the way into the dining hall. It’s mostly empty, with a few individuals scattered around the tables, waiting for the usual breakfast of porridge and bread to be served. Mary Margaret takes her chair, beckoning Ruby to sit beside her. “I think you and Robin are the only souls brave enough to even speak to her.” She
smiles. “And me, of course.”

“Of course,” Ruby mumbles, once again feeling foolish for not wanting Regina to speak to other people. She casts a glance at her friend. “But just because you saw them talking one time doesn’t mean they’re getting married and living happily ever after.”

“I know that,” Mary Margaret says, nodding her thanks as bowls of steaming porridge are placed in front of them. Ruby picks up her spoon and digs into the largely tasteless mush. “But they could.”

Ruby sighs.

Feeling somewhat refreshed after a bath and a quick nap, Ruby dutifully heads back to the dining hall where she promised to meet Mary Margaret for the tour of the castle she’s owed. She doesn’t mention the fact, as she’s shown the hall where Regina had married Leopold, that she already knows what happened here. She does take note, however, that all of Mary Margaret’s memories of the castle are - as Regina put it - rose tinted.

After making their way around a good portion of the castle’s interior, Mary Margaret chattering away happily the whole time until they reach a door in the royal quarters. Mary Margaret pauses here, her hand faltering on the handle. “I’m almost afraid to look,” she confesses. “This is the entrance to my mother’s private chambers. My father left them completely as she did, he never changed a thing.” She turns to Ruby. “I’m not sure I could bear it if they’ve been… altered.”

Ruby frowns, sensing the change in her friend. She doesn’t want to look inside if it’s something so private for Mary Margaret. “You don’t have to show me,” she offers.

Mary Margaret shakes her head and gives Ruby a smile. “No, I’m glad you’re here with me,” she says, reaching out and grasping Ruby’s hand in her own. Ruby squeezes her hand reassuringly, watching as she takes a deep breath and pushes the door open, squeezing her eyes closed. The door creaks open and Mary Margaret opens her eyes. Ruby follows, but says nothing to intrude on the moment. Mary Margaret gasps. “It’s… everything is exactly as it was,” she lets out, tears glistening in her eyes. “Everything.” Mary Margaret lets out a short laugh, squeezing Ruby’s hand tighter.

Ruby returns her friend’s smile. “I’m glad for you Mary Margaret.”
Letting go of Ruby’s hand, Mary Margaret walks around the room, brushing her fingers over ornaments and other objects, almost in awe. “She left it alone,” she murmurs.

Ruby’s keen senses pick up on her words and they bring on a sudden desire to speak to Regina. She figures Mary Margaret could use some time alone to remember her mother anyway. Ruby approaches her and wraps her up into a hug, kissing her temple. “You should have some time alone,” she tells her gently. “Thank you for showing me this.”

Mary Margaret nods wordlessly, the movement causing a tear to fall from her eye. Ruby cups her face and wipes the tear with her thumb, offering an encouraging smile before leaving her friend alone in her mother’s chambers.

Quickly making her way through the castle, Ruby makes a few enquiries as to Regina’s whereabouts. It seems no-one has seen her since she left for the stables earlier that morning. Ruby tries to ignore the strange feeling in her chest as she remembers seeing Regina smile at Robin Hood. The man has done nothing to suggest he’s anything other than an ally, so she has no idea why she doesn’t want him around Regina. And when compared with some members of their ragtag group, a thief is not the worst suitor in the world.

Deciding that fresh air would be nice after the somewhat musty smell of the old rooms in the castle, Ruby finds that she’s on the way to the stables without actually making a conscious decision to head that way. Some stablehands are scattered around the yard, cleaning saddles and tending to the feeding and watering of the animals. While Regina is nowhere to be found, her scent is strong all around the stables; this must be where she spends her time, Ruby thinks. She nods to a boy she recognises as she heads inside one of the wooden structures, enjoying the fresh, earthy smell of the animals. Nothing smelled like this in Storybrooke, not even the stables themselves. Everything was just that bit more sanitised and fake. Some of the horses grow restless as she nears, eyeing her strangely; they know she’s not quite as she seems. She stops walking and keeps her distance from the majestic beasts, she doesn’t want to panic them unnecessarily.

She turns to leave, but her nose is filled with a familiar scent and it stops her. Regina’s here. Sure enough, the Queen’s voice rings out across the yard.

“No, no, it’s fine, I’ll stable him.”

Ruby’s eyes go wide. Having come here with the intention of finding Regina, she now has no idea
what she wants to say to her. And no reason to be loitering inside a stable. Before she can think of a valid excuse, Regina has already entered and spotted her. If she’s surprised to see Ruby in this place, she doesn’t show it. Her face doesn’t betray any emotion and she carries on leading the horse to the grooming area.

“I wasn’t aware you were a keen rider, Ms Lucas,” Regina says, not looking in Ruby’s direction as she picks up a grooming glove and slides it on. The ride has left Regina with rosy cheeks, streaked with sweat and dust. Ruby thinks it might be the most human she’s ever seen the other woman. When Ruby doesn’t respond, Regina finally meets her eyes. “Is there something you need?” she asks, clearly unhappy at being watched.

“I, uh…” Ruby begins, still unsure of what she wants to say. “No.”

Frowning, Regina sets about her task with vigour. “Then I suggest you go back to the castle,” she snaps. “You’re making the horses nervous.”

Ruby casts a glance at the animals in question. They’re not nervous so much as curious and she heads over to the closest one, keeping her body language open and obvious, shushing him when he starts to stamp his feet. Her hand makes contact with his nose, gentle and confident, and she rubs his muzzle in long strokes. Before long, he’s leaning into the contact, having decided that this odd girl means no harm. She turns to smile at Regina.

“I think they’re happy enough with my company,” she says.

Rolling her eyes, Regina carries on grooming her steed, mumbling softly to him as she does so. Ruby waits to see if she’s going to continue the conversation, but it doesn’t look like it. She clears her throat.

“I...uh….I came here looking for you, actually,” she admits.

This gets Regina’s attention and she pauses, looking over the horse’s back at Ruby. “Well, you found me,” she says. “So you can report back to your friends that I haven’t teamed up with my phosphorescent sibling.”

“No that’s-” Ruby takes a breath. “I wasn’t asked to check up on you.”

“And why on earth would you choose to seek out the company of someone who terrorised your
poor, innocent little Snow White?” Regina asks. Ruby nods; they’re still on that.

“Mary Margaret was giving me that tour she promised,” she says, casually, turning back to the horse who clearly wants more of her attention as he’s nudging her with his head.

“Well, I’m sure it was far lighter and fluffier than mine was,” Regina mutters. “I hope you both had a lovely trip down memory lane.”

Swallowing, Ruby gives the horse one last scratch under his chin before taking a few steps towards Regina. A hard glare tells Ruby that she’s close enough so she stops. “It differed from yours, yes.”

“Colour me shocked,” Regina mumbles sarcastically, paying even more attention to grooming her horse.

“The last room we came to was pretty eye-opening.”

Regina sighs and straightens up, taking off her grooming glove to place both hands on her hips. “I’m sorry, but at what point did it seem like I was interested in what you were saying?”

“Queen Eva’s chambers,” Ruby continues, ignoring Regina, and deciding to get straight to the point. “You left them as they were. Why?” It’s not an accusation, just genuine curiosity.

It doesn’t go unnoticed that Regina’s eyes immediately leave her own when Eva’s name is mentioned. “Do you think I had time for interior design, Ms Lucas? I had a kingdom to run, and a fugitive to find.” Regina starts to tidy away the grooming equipment. “I think Ms Blanchard will find that most of the rooms in her beloved castle are largely untouched.”

“I think it means a lot to her that that one, in particular, is as it was,” Ruby continues, moving to help Regina. The movement startles Regina’s horse and he lifts his head, rearing up in fright. Before Ruby can react, Regina is there, grasping his bridle and rubbing his neck, whispering soothing words to calm him down. As she had done with the other animal, Ruby approaches slowly, letting him get used to her until she can gently lay a hand on his neck, beside Regina’s. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs, unsure whether she’s talking to Regina or the horse.

Regina makes a huffing noise, but doesn’t ask her to move away, so she stays, patting the horse and not looking at Regina, who looks like she wants to say more on the topic of Snow’s mother. After
a few minutes where the only sound comes from the horses, Regina speaks.

“I took great pleasure in destroying the bedroom I had...*shared* with Leopold,” she says with a smile that’s not at all happy. “I set the bed on fire in the courtyard and watched it burn until the last ember died.” She shrugs. “That was cathartic enough. I had no quarrel with Eva, despite having spent many years being compared to her.” She glances at Ruby. “Unfavourably, I might add.”

Every story has two sides, Ruby thinks. She’s heard Snow talk about how wonderful both of her parents are many times, but never once did she think about how Regina must have felt in that family. A replacement wife, mother and queen. How could she possibly live up to a ghost? Ruby closes her eyes when the implication about the bed sinks in. It’s unlikely that a King who would marry an eighteen year old girl who was clearly not in love with him would bother to ask for her consent in the bedchamber. A hand on her shoulder startles her and she opens her eyes to see Regina looking at her with confusion, or concern, on her face.

“You’re growling, Ms Lucas,” she says, softly.

Ruby takes a step away, causing Regina’s hand to fall from her shoulder. “I...I’m sorry,” she says. “I just… I hadn’t really considered your perspective in all of this before.”

That earns her a genuine laugh. “I doubt many have, dear,” Regina says with a raise of her eyebrow. “It’s not customary to sympathise with the villain, is it?”

“Who decides who the villain is?” Ruby asks. “Henry says you’re not a villain, and he’s a pretty good judge of character.”

The smile on Regina’s face slowly fades and she blinks rapidly. She turns away, busying herself with removing her horse’s bridle. Ruby’s about to leave, feeling bad for having reminded Regina about Henry when the other woman starts speaking again.

“I’m the person who pursued your friend with the intention of killing her,” she says, candidly. “I’m the person who cursed all of you to live in Maine. I’m the *Evil Queen.*” She turns to face Ruby, meeting her eyes. “That’s not going to change. I’m that person.” She shrugs. “If that’s what you’re always going to see when you look at me, then so be it. But stop trying to be my friend if you’re going to constantly hark back to the past. We can continue to be civil to one another and leave it at that.”
Ruby’s head is shaking even before Regina stops speaking. “That’s...that’s not what I want,” she says, earnestly. “You are the person who did those things. But you’re also the person who gave up her son to bring us all here to safety.” She takes a step towards Regina. “People can change. And our past makes us who we are. We can’t change it, but we can learn from it and use it. And you’re doing that.”

The Queen looks at her for a long moment before rolling her eyes. “Snow White’s rubbing off on you,” she mutters, the edges of her mouth quirking slightly. “Are we done with the pep talk?”

“Yes,” Ruby says, smiling. “And I’d...I’d like to keep trying to be friends, if that’s okay with you.”

With a deep sigh, Regina moves back to the horse, starting to unbuckle the saddle. “Oh, I’m sure we’ll be braiding each other’s hair and painting each other’s nails before long,” she says, a hint of joviality hiding underneath the scorn in her voice.

“How about you come and have dinner with me in the dining hall for starters?” Ruby asks, before she can stop herself.

“My goodness, aren’t I popular?” Regina says, putting a hand to heart. “You’re the second person to invite me to dine today.”

This time, Ruby catches the growl before it makes its way out of her chest, but she can’t deny the nauseous feeling in her stomach. Suddenly eating is the last thing she wants to do. Again, she can’t find a reason why she’d care if Robin asked Regina to eat with him. She quickly realises she doesn’t even know it was Robin. It could have been Leroy for all she knows.

“Who...who else asked you?” she says, trying to keep her voice neutral.

“The thief,” Regina says, finally leading the horse into his stall and closing the gate. “He seems quite taken with me.”

Having her suspicions confirmed does not make Ruby feel better in the slightest. She tries to smile. “Well, it’s good that you’re gonna eat in the hall with us,” she says. “I won’t intrude if you already have plans.”

Regina nods, conjuring an apple and giving it to the horse. He eats it greedily.
“Perhaps another evening, then?” Ruby suggests, feeling awkward in the silence. She feels her heart speeding up every second the question goes unanswered, and she’s unsure of why this is happening.

Regina looks up at Ruby and stares for a long while. “Perhaps,” she echoes.

Happy enough to have received an answer, Ruby starts to take a few steps backwards out of the stable. She throws a thumb over her shoulder. “Okay. Well…maybe I’ll see you in the dining hall later.” The next words almost stick in her throat. “I hope you enjoy your evening…with Robin.” Regina opens her mouth to respond, but Ruby finds herself unable to listen to whatever is about to come out of her mouth. “So, I, uh, I gotta go,” she says, pointing over her shoulder with her thumb as she walks backwards. “I promised Granny I’d help her with…something. I’ll see you later.”

And with that, she turns and flees, despite the fact that Regina is calling her name.

In the end, she decides not to go to dinner that evening. Her stomach is unsettled, for some reason, which is very unusual. Granny always said she had a stomach made of iron. Instead, she’s in her bedchamber, lying in bed, trying not to think about Regina and Robin and what they might be doing. Okay, maybe she’s a little hurt that Regina is choosing to spend time with him when Ruby was the one making all the effort to get to know her and include her in the group. But still, she shouldn’t begrudge the other woman a friendship with the thief if she wants to pursue one.

He’s not that bad to look at, she supposes. If one likes tall, handsome, smiley men. She has no idea what kind of man Regina likes. Or, person. Or whatever. Getting out of bed, she moves to the window and looks out at the setting sun. Her body feels restless, like she needs to be doing something. It’s not unlike how she feels on the nights of the full moon, when the wolf inside her wants to come out and run. Maybe it’s the remnants of the last three nights, she ponders. Maybe she still has wolf energy.

Shaking her head, she turns and walks back to the bed, throwing herself face down and grabbing the horrible, lumpy pillow to cover her head. It’s gonna be a long night.

The following day, she purposefully goes out hunting early to work off the energy that’s still
buzzing around her body. She runs and climbs and stalks prey, but the persistent niggle remains. It’s early afternoon before she returns, laden with rabbits and pheasants and assorted woodland animals. She drops them off at the kitchen to profuse thanks, and goes to clean up. She knows there’s a war meeting about to start, but if she times it just right, she won’t have to make smalltalk with anyone beforehand.

After washing the smell of dead animal off her skin, she braces herself and heads to the war room. She’s a few minutes late, and she can already hear raised voices as she walks along the corridor. She pushes the door open slightly and slips inside, trying to be as quiet as possible. David is standing up, frowning as he speaks. Regina is shaking her head. Ruby takes her seat at the table, mumbling an apology for her lateness.

“What you’re proposing is madness,” Regina tells David. “You’re basically sending lambs to the slaughter.”

“I didn’t say we’d send out a bunch of defenseless villagers,” David counters. “We identify a group with the skills necessary to gather useful information and bring it back to us so that we at least have something to go on in our discussions.”

Ruby leans closer to Mary Margaret. “What’d I miss?” she whispers.

“David wants to send out a scouting party,” Mary Margaret tells her. “To see if we can find out any more about the Witch. Regina’s not in favour.”

“Yeah, I could te-”

“It’s rude to whisper, Ms Lucas.”

Regina’s voice cuts into their conversation and Ruby turns to find herself pinned by the Queen’s eyes. It’s not a friendly expression she’s wearing.

“I apologise for my peasantly manners, Your Majesty,” Ruby says, bobbing her head in an approximation of a bow. “I was merely trying to catch up on the topic that’s causing such debate.”

“Which you would not need to do, had you not been late,” Regina snits. Ruby rolls her eyes.
“Look, there’s no need to identify a scouting party,” Ruby tells the group. “I’ll go.”

“Alone?” Mary Margaret half-shouts. “No. Absolutely not.”

There’s a chorus of agreement from around the table. Granny shakes her head and glares at her.

“Ruby,” David begins. “We don’t want anyone out there alone. Safety in numbers.”

“Numbers draw attention,” Ruby tells them. “I’m faster than all of you, I can keep moving and they’ll never be able to keep track of me.” She shrugs. “And it’s not like the Wicked Witch is gonna notice me. It’s not like I matter to her one way or another, right?”

“Don’t be ludicrous,” Regina tells her. “Going out there alone is...it’s just not an option.”

“It is,” Ruby argues. “We need information, right?” She turns to Mary Margaret. “Who was the one you sent when you needed to know what Regina was up to back in the day?” Ruby ignores the elegant eyebrow that rises upon hearing this information.

Mary Margaret pouts. “You,” she mumbles, reluctantly.

“Yes, me,” Ruby says. “Because I’m the best tracker around and I know these woods better than all of you combined. I’ll cover more ground alone in a couple of days than a scouting party would in a month.” She turns to appeal to David’s sense of logic. “It has to be me.”

She knows that volunteering for this mission isn’t all about gathering intelligence or being altruistic. She knows she wants to get away from everything for a while. Being out alone in the forest sounds perfect right about now. She ignores the protests from Granny and the others, keeping her eyes on David. He works his jaw; obviously he knows what she’s saying is right.

“One week,” he says, eventually. “Then you come back here and tell us what you’ve found. If anything.”

Ruby nods, but Regina stands up, placing her hands flat on the table and leaning forwards. “That is your decision?” she demands of David. “Sending one person, alone, into the unknown?”
“You don’t know Ruby like we do,” David says, calmly. “She has many skills. She knows what she’s doing.”

“Which proves my point,” Regina says. “Sending someone so skilled out to probably get herself killed is a waste of our resources. Which are already severely lacking.”

“When you’re done talking about me as if I’m a crossbow or an axe, I think the decision has been made,” Ruby says, biting back the hurt at Regina’s words.

The Queen turns to meet her eyes and for a fraction of a second, Ruby sees something in them that looks like concern. It’s gone before she can decide, and Regina throws her hands up in the air, sitting back down. “Fine,” she says. “Do whatever you want.”

Robin leans over and puts a hand on Regina’s arm. His touch is immediately shaken off, a withering glare sent in his direction. And Ruby can’t deny that the reaction pleases her.

“So, it’s decided,” David says. “Ruby will go on a scouting expedition and we will meet back here in a week’s time.”

“Unless she doesn’t come back and we need to risk more resources going to find her,” Regina mutters.

At this, Ruby stands up, using her full height and what remains of her wolf magic to appear as intimidating as possible. “You didn’t want to send lambs to the slaughter, Your Majesty,” she says, her voice deep and commanding. “Well, I’m no lamb. I’m a wolf. And I will return when I say I will.” She turns to David. “And if I don’t, don’t send anyone looking for me.”

“You’ll come back,” Mary Margaret says, standing and pulling Ruby to her in a tight hug. “You always come back.”

She returns the hug, patting her friend on the back until she lets go and sits back down. Ruby also takes her seat.

“I’ll see about provisions in the kitchen and then pack a bag and I’ll be gone,” she says. “No point
in hanging around.”

“I shall ensure that you are well armed,” Robin pipes up. “I have an excellent fletcher amongst my men. He will provide you with all the arrows you need.”

“Thank you,” she says, trying not to grudge him the words.

“We won’t detain you further,” David says. “I call this meeting to an end.” He stands and walks around to where Ruby’s sitting and extends his hand. “Gods speed, Red.” She smiles. It’s what he used to say to her, many years ago, whenever she’d go on a mission. She stands and grasps his forearm with her hand. Their eyes lock as they shake. David smiles and pulls her forward into his arms and she laughs as she buries her face in his shoulder, holding him tightly for a moment before pulling back.

“I’ll see you in a week,” she says with a wink.

The others follow David’s lead, coming to shake her hand or clap her on the back and wish her luck. Regina, she notices, loiters at the back. Ruby watches her over Granny’s shoulder as the old woman hugs her and warns her not to do anything reckless. Soon it’s just Ruby and Regina left in the room.

“Are you going to wish me luck too?” Ruby asks, just to break the awkward silence between them.

“No,” Regina says. “Luck is far too close to chance for my liking.” Finally, she meets Ruby’s eyes. “Just use those skills you were so quick to boast about and keep yourself alive.”

“I wasn’t boasting,” Ruby protests. “Like I said, I kept tabs on you for years for Snow and I’m here to tell the tale.”

“Just be careful, Ms Lucas,” Regina says with a sigh. “Mary Margaret will be inconsolable if you don’t return. And I don’t want her crying into my shoulder for months on end.”

Ruby shakes her head. “She’d get over it,” she says. “She has David. And Emma and Henry to get back to. Another reason this has to be me. No-one would care if I-“
“People would care, Ruby,” Regina interrupts. “Don’t think they wouldn’t.” The Queen clears her throat, looking away for a moment. Ruby thinks she might be embarrassed. When she turns back, she’s all business. She holds out her right hand, a puff of purple smoke erupting and leaving behind a necklace when it dissipates. A ruby shaped like an apple dangles from the long, gold chain; it’s beautiful. Regina holds it out to her.

“Here, if you insist on this idiotic excursion at least take this,” she huffs.

Ruby reaches for the trinket, frowning in confusion. As soon as her fingers make contact with the jewel, she knows it’s magical. “W-what is it?” She slips the chain over her head, the ruby coming to rest on her bodice.

“Well, it’s not a friendship bracelet, Ms Lucas,” Regina snits. “If you get yourself into trouble, which you no doubt will, just squeeze the jewel in your fist and it will bring you back here.” She takes Ruby’s hand and lifts it to demonstrate, closing Ruby’s fingers around the pendant. A surge of electricity goes through Ruby’s arm and, at first she thinks it’s from the feel of Regina’s skin, but quickly determines that it’s the magic in the necklace. She keeps hold of the ruby even when Regina lets go.

“Thank you,” Ruby says, her voice soft. “You didn’t have t-”

“As I said,” Regina interrupts, and there’s a definite blush colouring her cheeks. “I don’t want your friend crying all over me because you’ve gone and got yourself killed.”

“I should go,” Ruby says with a nod, starting to move towards the door. “I’ll see you in a week, I guess.”

“Yes,” Regina agrees. “Perhaps then I’ll take you up on your offer of a meal.”

That stops Ruby in her tracks. She turns around, a tentative smile making its way across her lips. “S-sure,” she says. “That’d be…” Her grin fades a little. “But, uh…I kinda thought, maybe...since, you know…”

“Dear God, Ms Lucas, spit it out,” Regina says. “At this rate we’ll be here for a week.”

“I thought, since you ate with Robin last night that…that maybe you’d be eating with him, like,
from now on?” That was incredibly lame, Ruby thinks.

Regina’s brows rise and a smile tugs at the side of her mouth. “Who says I ate with Robin?” she asks.


“I said he asked me to dine with him,” Regina says, amusement clear on her face. She walks a few steps, leaning in to whisper to Ruby as she passes. “I didn’t say I accepted.” She keeps going, glancing back over her shoulder. “Take care, Ruby.”

“I will,” Ruby calls after her. She watches until the Queen disappears through the doors of the meeting room. She feels lighter, all of a sudden. She has a week of roaming the woods ahead of her and then she’s having dinner with Regina.

And, somehow, the prospect of the dinner is far more terrifying.
Chapter 4 - Regina

Time seems slower here than in Storybrooke. And that’s saying something, given that time stood still there for nearly thirty years. But this week appears to be moving even slower than the previous ones. Regina urges her horse to a slow canter as they approach the castle. Riding usually clears her head, but lately, her thoughts are just as jumbled after a good ride and today is no different. Ruby has been gone for four days and, as yet, has not used the magical amulet Regina gave her to come back. So that has to be a good sign, Regina thinks. Or a sign that she’s dead or captured, she tries not to think.

Shaking her head, she leans down to run her hand over her horse’s broad neck as they slow to a trot. There’s no reason she should spend an inordinate amount of time thinking about the Lucas girl. She probably wouldn’t if there were more to do around the castle. But there’s only so many times she can pore over magic books or talk strategy with Charming before she wants to poke her own eyes out. She brings the horse to a stop and dismounts just before they reach the stableyard, choosing to lead him instead of ride him. As expected, the young stable lad who has been tending to him jumps up and sprints towards her. She can’t help but smile at his exuberance and his cheeky grin, even if it causes an ache somewhere in her chest because it reminds her of Henry.

“Shall I take him, Your Majesty?” he offers, making no attempt to bow. The other stable boys tremble in her presence, but this one is seemingly happy to speak to the Evil Queen.

“Thank you,” Regina says, with a nod as she hands over the reins.

“I’ll give him a good rub down for you,” the boy says with a wink that Regina finds completely inappropriate, and totally charming.

“Didn’t anyone teach you that it’s rude to wink at a Queen?” Regina enquires as she pulls off her riding gloves and hooks them into her belt.

“No,” he responds with a shrug and a smile. “Never had no-one who was all that bothered to teach me about manners and such, to tell you the truth.”

Again, there’s a pang in Regina’s chest, but she narrows her eyes playfully. “Well, I suppose I’ll let it slide.” She raises an eyebrow. “Just this once.”

“Thank you kindly, Your Majesty,” the boy says. And winks at her again. Her mouth drops open
but he’s already gone and she shakes her head in amusement. Turning towards the castle, her eyes land upon a figure by the well. It’s Granny and she’s winding the crank to bring up a bucket of water. Regina frowns; surely they’re not asking old women to carry out manual labour? Unsure of how she’ll be received, she heads in the direction of the well and notices two full buckets of water by Granny’s feet.

“Isn’t there someone younger who could do this?” Regina asks.

Granny looks up at Regina, seemingly sizing her up. “You’re offering your services are you?”

Regina waves her hand over the buckets of water on the ground and they disappear. She fixes Granny with a blank face as she huffs. Clearly the older woman isn’t impressed. Or maybe she is. “It’s no trouble for me, dear.”

“I’m old,” Granny tells her. “Not infirm. I’ve been doing this longer than you’ve been alive, so you needn’t concern yourself with me.” She unhooks the bucket she had been bringing up and sets it on the ground before fixing Regina with a smirk. “Perhaps if you had been at the meeting in the Great Hall this morning, instead of traipsing through the countryside on horseback, you might have been given this task. Not someone old. Like me.”

“Well, as the Queen, I somehow doubt anyone would dare allocate me the task of drawing water from a well,” Regina tells her with a smirk. “But, had I been there, I would have made sure the tasks were assigned fairly.” She lifts a hand to send the bucket the same was as its predecessors, but Granny hefts it up with one hand, and very little effort.

“I may not turn into a wolf any longer, but I haven’t lost everything,” Granny tells her, raising a challenging eyebrow. “And you’d do well to remember that, Your Majesty.”

It feels like a thinly veiled threat, although the woman must know that she’s no match for Regina’s magic, even with the remnants of supernatural strength. Regina shrugs.

“Fine, the next time I see you carrying heavy objects, I shall leave you to it,” she snaps.

“Perhaps you should be putting your own skills to better use,” Granny suggests, starting to walk in the direction of the castle. “And find a way to defeat your long-lost sister. Instead of sending my granddaughter out on a foolhardy mission.”

Ah, so that’s where the aggression is coming from. Regina follows Granny, determined to put her
right. “You may not be infirm, but perhaps your memory is failing you, because I quite vehemently objected to your hard-headed granddaughter going on this mission, if you recall.”

“You didn’t object vehemently enough to go in her place, did you?” Granny challenges, stopping and turning to face Regina. “You’re here going on pony treks to keep yourself amused and Ruby’s out there risking her goddamn stupid neck.”

“I-...” Regina realises she has no defence. She didn’t offer to go in Ruby’s place. Nor should she have had to, really. But the old woman has a point. She bites her lip and Granny nods before continuing on her way. Regina frowns at her back. “I saw no purpose for the mission,” she calls after her. “There was no reason to send anyone out there. Ruby wanted to go.”

“And you let her,” Granny throws back. “So you can let me carry my own damn water buckets too.”

Granny disappears through the servants’ entrance and Regina finds that her jaw is so tightly clenched, it’s painful. She lifts a hand to rub at her cheek and mulls over the woman’s accusations. Could she have stopped Ruby from leaving? With magic, yes. But that would not have gone down well. The stupid girl seemed determined to throw herself into this mission for one reason or another. It’s not Regina’s job to keep idiots from getting themselves killed. She wonders, briefly, if Snow White has had the pleasure of enduring this conversation. She is, after all, the girl’s best friend. Then again, the woman is probably smart enough to avoid the Widow Lucas, or use her annoyingly cherubic face to escape her wrath.

Too late she realises that she could have told Granny about the necklace she’d given Ruby as protection, and then frowns at herself. She doesn’t need to explain her actions to some old woman. A small smile appears on her lips when she thinks back to the many, many arguments she witnessed in Storybrooke, with Ruby screaming something very similar at her grandmother. With any luck, she’ll be back and they’ll be arguing again in no time.

True to her word, Ruby arrives back one week later. She appears at the war meeting, safe and sound, and somewhat disappointed in the lack of information she managed to gather. Regina resists the urge to say ‘I told you this was a pointless risk’, because if she pointed out every time she had told them something, that’s literally all she’d say at these infernal meetings.

She listens to Ruby’s report, which consists mostly of evading flying monkeys and catching the scent of magic at various locations, which she has mapped out. It’s very little to go on, but it’s something, Regina supposes. The rest of the meeting is full of the same thing it always does;
speculation.

The meeting ends and they’re no further forward. People crowd around Ruby, welcoming her back and bombarding her with questions. Regina stays in her seat and watches as Granny gives Ruby a hug and then a cuff around the ear. The rabble slowly filters out of the room until only Ruby and Regina remain. Their eyes meet across the table and Ruby offers her a wide smile.

“So, looks like I made it back in one piece,” the girl says. “No need to waste resources coming to look for me after all, huh?”

Regina raises her eyebrows. “And what? Do you want a Scooby Snack for your efforts?”

This earns her a playful glare. “No. I was thinking we could maybe have that meal you promised me. You know, an actual proper meal, and not something I burned to a crisp over a fire. And some human company.”

“Human company?” Regina questions. “As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to the company of wolves,” Ruby says with a chuckle. “They’re good for snuggling with at night, but their conversational skills aren’t great.”

“Ah, so in comparison to a pack of wolves, my conversation will be dazzling?” Regina asks, hiding her smile.

“Absolutely,” Ruby agrees. “So, what do you say? Join me for some non-cremated food and conversation that doesn’t consist of howling and barking?”

Regina stands up, finally allowing herself to smile at the younger woman. “Well, with an invitation like that, how can I refuse?”

“Maybe not tonight,” Ruby says, stifling a yawn. “I don’t want to fall asleep in my dinner.”

“You really don’t hold out much hope for my company, do you?” Regina says.
Ruby barks a laugh and shakes her head. “A good night’s sleep and I’ll be ready and willing to be dazzled by you, I promise.”

“Tomorrow, then,” Regina suggests. “And I’ll do my utmost to keep you awake.”

A wide grin spreads across Ruby’s obviously tired face and Regina can’t stop herself from returning it.

“It’s a date,” Ruby says with a nod.

“It most definitely is not,” Regina counters, though her smile doesn’t dim.

“I’ll pick you up at seven,” Ruby continues, undeterred.

“I’ll meet you in the dining hall, Ms Lucas,” Regina says with a shake of her head as she makes her way out of the room. She pauses in the doorway and looks over her shoulder. “I’m...glad you didn’t get yourself killed.”

Ruby’s grin grows. “Awww, that was almost sweet.”

Rolling her eyes, Regina continues on her way. “Savour it, dear,” she calls out, without turning around. “It’s not likely to happen again.”

She’s eaten in the dining hall a few times. Generally when Snow drags her along after a War Council meeting. So the nervous fluttering in her stomach as she approaches the great wooden doors doesn’t really make any sense. She puts it down to hunger and straightens her back before she walks in.

The dining hall, as usual, is full of people bustling around with trays and the gentle hum of dozens of conversations taking place at once. It reminds her a little of Granny’s Diner. Searching the top table, she’s surprised to see that Ruby’s usual seat by Mary Margaret is occupied by Archie. She frowns and lets her eyes roam. Sure enough, Ruby is seated to the right of the chair reserved for Regina at the head of the table. She’s laughing at something Belle has said. Regina smiles. She
makes her way further into the hall and approaches her chair. Ruby looks up and catches her eye, breaking into a wide smile, which Regina returns.

Her appearance at mealtimes is still rare enough to cause a stir, and the conversations die away until the hall is left in near silence. Regina is used to such receptions; she used to revel in them. But right now the silence feels oppressive. Ruby stands up and moves towards her, ignoring everyone else.

“Hey,” Ruby says, gently. “You came.”

The clearly friendly greeting gets people talking once more, although Regina surmises that most of the conversations are now about her and Ruby.

“How observant,” Regina says. “Though the warm welcome I received could hardly go unnoticed, could it?”

Ruby makes a dismissive noise as she takes hold of Regina’s arm. “Ignore them,” she advises. “They’ll get used to you soon enough.”

They both sit down at the table and Regina resists the urge to sigh at Snow’s beaming smile and wave. Conversations have started up in earnest once again and Regina is relieved that all eyes are not on her. She looks at the food on offer and tries not to wrinkle her nose. “What’s for dinner?”

“Ah…I wanna say soup?” Ruby replies, dipping her spoon into the bowl and turning it over, watching as the lumpy liquid spills back into it. “I think? Could be porridge. Who knows?” She offers Regina a lopsided grin. “Apparently whoever they put on hunting duty isn’t all that good a shot.”

She’s not sure she can stomach the gruel that passes for nourishment around these parts. “I think we’ll need a little more sustenance than that if we’re to defeat my sister,” Regina muses. “An army marches on its stomach, after all.” She’s been avoiding doing this in case the cooks got offended or people accused her of showboating. But she really just wants something good to eat. “I think we can do a little better than this…” She twists her hand until it is palm up, and then blows gently across it. Dishes start appearing on the table; hunks of meat and bowls of steaming vegetables, rich gravies and sauces.

The table grows quiet once more, and a number of sets of wide eyes turn towards her.
“Well, that’s one way to make an impression,” she hears Ruby mutter.

“It’s about damn time,” Leroy grumbles, loud enough to be heard by most of the people at the table.

Regina casts a bored look in his direction, but is heartened to see Ruby glare at him.

“I think what you meant to say was ‘thank you’, Leroy,” Ruby snaps.

“It’s okay, Ruby,” Regina says, laying a hand on the other woman’s arm. “You’re all sitting at my table. The least I can do is be a gracious hostess.” She sees Mary Margaret roll her eyes and throw one of those overly affectionate smiles her way.

“Well thank you,” Mary Margaret says. “From all of us.” She gestures at the feast. “This looks absolutely wonderful.”

As everyone stares at the food in front of them, almost apprehensively, it’s Ruby who is the first to pick up a chicken leg from one of the platters and take a generous bite. When she doesn’t immediately fall into a coma, the rest of the table tentatively follows her lead.

“You’re welcome,” Regina mumbles in response to Mary Margaret’s thanks. She glances at Ruby and is amused to find her staring at the people opposite her before biting into the chicken with some ferocity. Regina is more affected by the sight of Ruby’s teeth tearing into the cooked flesh than she’d care to admit. It reminds her of the power harnessed inside her slight body and that, once a month, those long limbs bend and twist into another form altogether. The magic of hereditary shapeshifters is much sought after and little understood. She’s so caught up in her thoughts, she doesn’t realise that she’s been looking at Ruby for quite some time.

Ruby puts the leg down, now stripped to the bone, and wipes her hand and mouth on a napkin before turning to face Regina. “You’re staring,” she notes with a smirk.

Immediately Regina averts her eyes and looks at her own plate. “You had...something on your face,” she says in an attempt to cover up her error. "Probably from eating like a savage." She picks up her knife and fork and goes about eating her own meal in a much more refined way, though there’s still a strange fluttering in her stomach.
The rest of dinner goes by in a more civilised manner. Regina had made sure the cooks were supplied with their own meal, so they don’t grumble too much when they come by to collect the empty plates. Regina observes Ruby stretching before putting her hands on her belly, looking more like a contented cat than a fearsome wolf.

“Full?” Regina asks.

“I think I’m gonna burst,” Ruby admits, patting her still completely flat abdomen. “I might need to walk this off.” She tilts her head and smiles. “Care to join me for a stroll?”

“I’m relatively certain I was warned against walking in the woods after dark as a child,” Regina says with a smirk.

“Your parents were afraid you’d bump into the big bad wolf, huh?” Ruby asks, her smile showing off her teeth. She leans closer to Regina and lowers her voice. “Little did they know you’d end up having dinner with her.”

“It is quite an unexpected turn of events,” Regina admits. “But not entirely unpleasant.”

“Not entirely unpleasant,” Ruby repeats, mulling over the words before nodding. “It’s almost a compliment, I’ll take it.” She stands up, a hand moving once again to her stomach and she moans. “C’mon, let’s do this walk before I fall into a food coma.”

Regina also stands. “Please try not to, dear,” she says as they head out of the hall, no doubt causing more than a few whispers in their wake. “It would not do my image any good whatsoever.”

“I’ll try,” Ruby says. “Medical care here is a bit sketchy and I wouldn’t want to give Whale an excuse to paw at me.”

“No,” Regina agrees, through suddenly gritted teeth. “No-one wants that.”
Deciding that a lavish gown is impractical for outdoor pursuits, Regina excuses herself to change, opting for a pair of jodhpurs and a deep purple riding coat with boots. She comes back down and finds Ruby waiting for her at the foot of the main staircase. “Much better,” she proclaims.

“I have to say,” Ruby begins, her eyes taking their time as they roam over Regina’s new attire. “I do miss some of my clothes from Storybrooke. Much easier to get around in.” She’s donned her red cloak over her skirt and bodice, hood up to complete the ensemble.

“You certainly had some very…individual fashion choices,” Regina says, thinking back on some of the outfits Ruby had paraded around in. She tilts her head, considering what she’s currently wearing. “If you’d like, I could provide you with something a little more practical for walking?”

“Practical how?” Ruby counters with a raised brow.

Regina rolls her eyes. “I’m not going to put you in booty shorts, Ms Lucas.”

Ruby chuckles. “No? ‘Cause you did that before. And I saw you staring. Along with half the town.” Regina is about to protest, and Ruby cuts her off. “By all means, put me in some practical clothing.” She runs her hands down the side of her body as she speaks, showcasing herself.

Regina is not unaffected by the display, but forces herself to remain neutral as she waves a hand at Ruby, leaving her clad in dark red leather jodhpurs and a loose white shirt with a neckline that almost makes Regina blush. She leaves her with her own cloak and gives her boots to match her own. “Will that do?” she asks, running her gaze appreciatively down Ruby’s legs.

Ruby lets out a sigh and rolls her shoulders, stretching her back. “Much better. Those corsets are awful.” She lifts the hood of her cloak up over her head again. “Thank you. Shall we go?”

“Awful to wear,” Regina agrees. “But they do show off our assets well, don’t they?” She gestures to the open door. “After you.”

They walk side by side in a comfortable silence, enjoying the cool night air and stopping every now and then to take in what little of the sights they can see by the moonlight. Or what little Regina can see, at least. She assumes Ruby can see quite clearly. Regina looks over at the younger woman and catches her staring up at the moon.
“Do you feel drawn to the moon, even when it’s not full?” she asks, genuinely curious. Werewolves were not part of Rumplestiltskin’s approved magical syllabus, but they’ve always held a certain fascination for Regina.

“I...guess?” Ruby says, meeting Regina’s eyes. “It’s not like I strip naked and perform a ritual sacrifice to the moon every night. But I am...I don’t know...aware of it? Like, I feel stronger when I’m under the moon or something.” She laughs and looks down. “It’s silly.”

“No it’s not,” Regina is quick to say, and Ruby lifts her head once more. “It’s not silly at all.”

Ruby offers her a warm smile and they walk in silence for a few minutes.

“What does it feel like?” Regina asks. “When you’re the wolf?”

“It’s…” Ruby pauses, biting her lip as she contemplates the question. “I’m not sure I can describe it, really. I still feel like I’m me, but...also like I’m more than me, if that makes sense. At first, before I had control, I couldn’t remember anything about being the wolf and I hated it. I hated not knowing what I’d done, or if I’d...I’d killed.” Ruby shakes her head. “I hated the wolf and what it could do. What it made me do.”

“You think of it as a separate being?” Regina asks, intrigued by Ruby’s words.

“I did back then,” Ruby says. “I had to or I’d...well, I don’t know what I’d have done.” Before Regina can probe further on that point, Ruby rushes to continue. “But then I learned how to gain control over the wolf’s actions and I started to remember my changes. I started to feel like the wolf was maybe a part of me and...and not just a monster. When I change now, I’m aware of what I’m doing. It’s like the wolf is in my brain with me, but I’m in charge of what we do.” Ruby turns her face up to the moon again.

“Fascinating,” Regina murmurs, captivated by the look of concentration on Ruby’s face as she describes the experience. “Although it makes sense. You are the wolf and the wolf is you...there’s no separation.”

“I love being the wolf now,” Ruby admits with a shy smile. “I’ve never felt so free as when I’m running through the woods.” Regina nods in understanding. When she was younger, she associated freedom with being on the back of a horse, galloping as fast as she could make it go,
Ruby’s smile slowly fades and she shrugs one shoulder. “But I guess...there will always be a part of me that worries that the monster will come back and take over one day. And that I won’t be able to stop it.”

“I know what it’s like to be frightened by something inside yourself...something that feels like it’s too large to contain.” Her own power was something she never wanted to pursue. She had been innocent once. She hadn’t wanted to hurt anyone. She flexes a hand, watching as purple electricity crackles over the surface of it. Her magic feels deeper here, more tangible. She thinks it must be related to the fact that magic is almost an element in this land.

Ruby turns slowly so that she’s looking at Regina. “Yeah,” she says, softly. “I guess you do.”

Regina hesitates, unwilling to reveal too much of herself to this girl she barely knows, despite the fact that Ruby has been so open with her. “I just meant that all power comes with a price. You, unfortunately, had no choice whatsoever in the matter.” Though Regina had very little choice either. She has no doubt that, had she rebelled, her mother would have found some way to compel her to cooperate.

“No,” Ruby agrees. “No, I didn’t.” She sighs, and Regina worries that she’s going to pursue the topic further. “Dinner was great. I’m not sure I thanked you. So... thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Regina says, thankful for the change in topic. “Do you think it did anything to ingratiate me to the masses?”

“I think it may have broken the ice a little,” Ruby replies, then she smirks. “So were you really starving yourself locked away in your room for days at a time, or were you having banquets for one?” Her tone of voice makes it obvious she’s teasing. “Because, I mean, I stood up to Leroy for you.”

“My hero,” Regina deadpans. “Keeping me safe from verbal dwarf attacks.” She relents. “I haven’t been very hungry.” She doesn’t say that it’s because she misses Henry so much it’s like a physical ache in her stomach. “So, no. No banquets for one.” She regards Ruby for a second and holds up a hand. An ice-cream cone appears in it. “Here. For you. For defending me.”

Ruby laughs, and accepts the dessert. “Strawberry. How’d you know?”
Regina shrugs. “Lucky guess.” There’s not much that Regina doesn’t know about everyone in the town she created and ran for thirty years. “How’s your doggy treat?”

She narrows her eyes. “Oh, is that what this is?” She takes a long lick and then shrugs. “It’s okay.”

“Only ‘okay’?” Regina challenges, an eyebrow creeping up her forehead. “I don’t think that’s grateful enough for all the trouble I went to to make it for you.” A click of her fingers and the ice-cream leaves Ruby’s hand and reappears in her own. Keeping her eyes locked with Ruby’s she runs her tongue over the cool substance before closing her lips around the slightly peaked top.

“That’s just cruel,” Ruby whines, crossing her arms. “Maybe I won’t defend you anymore.”

Regina laughs at the expression on Ruby’s face. “Don’t pout, Ruby, it’s unbecoming” she murmurs. “And I’d hate to lose my guard dog.”

“Is that how you see me?” Ruby asks. “As your guard dog?”

Regina purses her lips in thought. “Admittedly, I didn’t see you as anything much beyond Snow White’s staunchest supporter,” she says. “But since we’ve arrived back, I...may have had my eyes opened.” She thinks about mentioning that her proposition of the night Ruby brought her dinner would be more than a little disturbing if she thought of Ruby as a dog, but decides against it.

Ruby seems pleased at this vague assessment, and starts walking again. “Enjoying my ice cream?”

Regina falls into step with Ruby as they near the edge of the forest that surrounds the castle. “It’s very sweet,” she says. A flutter of her fingers and the ice-cream turns light green. “Mint. I prefer something with an edge to it,” she explains, running the tip of her tongue up the length of the ice-cream swirl.

“Of course you do,” Ruby mumbles.

“Would you like a taste?” Regina offers. “Or do you want your own back?” She allows her shoulder to brush against Ruby’s as they walk.
“You keep it,” Ruby tells her. “You seem to be enjoying it.”

They’re a little deeper into the forest now. The moonlight falls in spears through the gaps in the trees and Regina has to pay close attention to where her feet are going, but she doesn’t want to suggest turning around and heading back to the castle just yet. This time Ruby’s the one to break the companionable silence.

“So, you were right about my reconnaissance mission,” she says. “It was pretty pointless.”

“And yet, you’ll notice that I refrained from saying ‘I told you so’.” Regina’s quite proud of herself for that one.

“I did,” Ruby confirms, holding aside a low hanging branch until Regina passes. They fall into step again and Ruby sighs. “I don’t know how the hell we’re gonna defeat your sister if we can’t even find her.”

Regina hasn’t spoken much with anyone about her encounters with her sister, but she knows power when she sees it and Zelena is powerful. The fact that she got through Regina’s blood magic alone is enough to worry her. She sighs. “Neither do I,” she admits.

Ruby stops walking and Regina turns to face her, surprised by the abrupt halt. “But we will,” Ruby says, sounding a lot surer than she did a moment ago. “I mean, yeah, it seems kinda hopeless right now, but we’ll figure it out and we’ll come up with a battle plan and-”

Regina shakes her head, blinking back tears suddenly. “Magic has a way of disregarding plans, dear.” She’s sure that Snow and Charming had plans to raise their daughter in peace until she came along with her curse and her vengeance.

“But we have you on our side,” Ruby says simply. “All of us together, combining our efforts, instead of fighting against each other...that’s got to be pretty formidable, right?”

Letting out a soft laugh, Regina shakes her head. “Normally I’d say yes, but...she’s powerful, Ruby.”

“Regina,” Ruby begins, “You know you cursed us into another realm for twenty-eight years, right? That’s some pretty powerful stuff. You had us running in terror, scared to cross your path.” Regina
can just about make out the wink in the darkness. “And I’m not just talking about when you were Queen. The Mayor was pretty damn scary too.”

Regina’s eyebrow creeps up. “You were afraid of me in Storybrooke?” she asks, amused.

Ruby smirks. “Well I wasn’t,” she amends. “You were always very nice to me.” She nudges Regina a little. “But not everybody got that treatment. But then again, not everybody knew exactly how to make your coffee.”

Laughing gently at Ruby’s joke, Regina soon sobered. “People are still watching me and waiting for me to do something...evil,” she says. “I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them expect me to team up with the Wicked Witch.” She inhales deeply through her nose. “It’s hard to fight for people when they don’t trust you.”

“Well, I don’t know if it counts for anything… but I do,” Ruby admits and then clears her throat. “I trust you,” she clarifies. “And the others will too. Just give them time.”

Regina fixes her with an appraising look. “Why?” she asks. “Why should they trust me? Why do you?” She has very little reason to.

“Look, not a lot of people know exactly what went on between you and Snow back in the day. Or...what you...went through.” Regina recalls the growling noise Ruby made when Regina was recounting the experience of her marriage. “But even those who think you’re still ‘the Evil Queen’ must be able to see that you’ve had ample opportunity to get your hands on Mary Margaret if you wanted to.”

Regina rolls her eyes. “It’s not through choice that I’ve been within arm’s reach of Mary Margaret since we got here. She seems to find me wherever I go.” She shakes her head with a smile. “She’s determined that we become best friends, it would seem. Foolish, insufferable girl.” The words have no bite to them, and are softly affectionate.

“She’s persistent, yes.” Ruby smiles at the other woman. “But you being around her can’t hurt when it comes to other people learning to trust you. Her opinion counts for a lot.”

“And you?” Regina pushes, keen to know what makes the young woman. “Is Mary Margaret’s opinion of me what changed your mind?”
Ruby looks away, her lips twisted in a half smile. If she had to guess, Regina might say she was blushing, though it’s impossible to tell in the darkness. She brings her eyes back to Regina’s. “I already told you, I can sense things in people.”

“And that’s enough for you to trust me?” Regina asks.

“I go with my gut a lot of the time,” Ruby says, with a little smile. “But that’s only part of it. Your actions speak for themselves, Regina. You sacrificed everything you hold dear to save us all and bring us here,” Ruby continues. “So that should be pretty big indicator even to normal people.”

Regina smiles. “You said people value Snow’s opinion. What about yours?”

Ruby appears to find that amusing. “Well, that depends,” she says, after she finishes laughing. “I’d like to think that they trust my opinion, but Leroy and Granny both seem to think you’ve got me under some kind of spell so…”

Regina frowns. That hadn’t crossed her mind. Though she can’t really complain, not with her history. “If being seen in my company in any way compromises your position or your reputation, Ruby, then… I wouldn’t expect you to do that.”

“Pffft,” Ruby scoffs. “I’ve never been one to care much about what people thought about me. I enjoy spending time with you, so I’ll continue to spend time with you.”

Regina’s cheeks grow warm, despite the cold evening. “Well, thank you. That’s nice to hear.”

“This is where you say you like spending time with me too,” Ruby mock whispers.

Regina makes a show of sighing. “Fine. I don’t hate the time I spend in your company,” she mutters, shoving Ruby gently when the younger woman gives her a round of applause. She looks at their surroundings and realises that they’re quite deep into the forest now. “We should probably go back…”

“Absolutely not,” Regina admits. “When one can travel by magic, it’s easy to grow lazy about directions. But I’m sure you can follow our trail back out, can’t you?”

“I’m sure I can,” Ruby tells her with a grin, starting the trek back.

Regina watches Ruby as she takes the lead, her movements fluid and easy, even in the near pitch black. Regina can barely see a thing. She’s about to conjure up a torch when her foot catches on the root of a tree and she stumbles forward. Before the cry of surprise can even make its way out of her mouth, Ruby is by her side and strong arms reaches out to keep Regina from falling. She rights them both, helping Regina to regain her balance. “Whoa there.”

Straightening out her coat, Regina huffs. “Thank you,” she manages. “I didn’t realise how dark it was.” Of course, if she’d kept her eyes on where she was going rather than on Ruby she might not have tripped.

Ruby raises an eyebrow and smirks, obviously amused. “Do I need to hold your hand, Your Majesty?”

“That won’t be necessary,” Regina says, embarrassed by her clumsiness. She throws a hand out and the forest is illuminated by hundreds of fireflies, bobbing and weaving around.

“Well sure, if you can do that! But I bet even in broad daylight you couldn’t find our way out of here,” Ruby says with a wink.

“Oh Ruby,” Regina says with a smile. “When will you learn?” Without warning, she places a hand on Ruby’s hip, fingers curling around the bone. In a puff of purple smoke they disappear and end up in Regina’s chambers. “There. Done.”

Ruby still hasn’t adjusted to the mode of transportation and she loses her balance. She reaches out, her hands landing on Regina’s shoulders as she stumbles forward, bringing them into very close proximity. “That’s cheating,” Ruby murmurs, and Regina doesn’t miss the way Ruby’s eyes are drawn to her lips. Neither of them move out of the loose embrace.

“You never said how I was to find my way out of the forest,” Regina says, her voice low. “So no cheating took place.”
“Yes, well…” Ruby licks her lips. “It was implied.”

“How about I promise that the next time we find ourselves in the woods at night, I get us out the old-fashioned way? Would that placate you?” Regina asks, adjusting her hold slightly so that both hands are resting on Ruby’s waist.

“Next time, huh?” Ruby raises an eyebrow. “Enjoyed my company that much?”

“As I said, it wasn’t completely unpleasant,” Regina says, her throat feeling tighter than it had a few seconds ago.

There’s no mistaking what’s going to happen here and Regina’s heart speeds up as Ruby leans in slowly, their noses brushing together. It would be so easy to let it happen. To let Ruby kiss her and touch her in a way she hasn’t been touched in a long time. It would be comforting to spend the night in Ruby’s strong arms, knowing that the other woman genuinely wanted to be in her company. In her bed.

Just before Ruby’s lips make contact with her own, she turns her face to the side and closes her eyes. “Ruby,” she whispers. “We...we can’t.”

Ruby is out of her arms quicker than a shot and halfway across the room, her eyes on the floor and a hand running compulsively through her hair. “I-I’m sorry,” Ruby stammers. “I thought...shit, I’m so sorry, I thought we were-” The young woman spins on her heel. “I’ll g-go. I’m so sorry.”

Though not as fast as Ruby, Regina has her own skills, and she appears in front of the door before Ruby reaches it, holding up her hands. “You have nothing to apologise for, Ruby,” Regina says, suddenly understanding the phrase ‘kicked puppy’ as Ruby’s huge green eyes find her own. “You didn’t do anything wrong and you didn’t read the situation wrongly.” She swallows. “I wanted you to kiss me.”

A relieved smile briefly blooms on Ruby’s lips, but it gives way to confusion almost right away. “So...if you wanted me to kiss you, then why-”

“Because as much as I wanted you to kiss me, I-...I’m-” She looks down, frustrated by her inability to express herself. “I’m not ready for this, Ruby,” she whispers. “With everything that’s going on. With...Henry and the Wicked Witch...it wouldn’t be fair for me to enter into something with you when I’m not in a place to-”
A gentle hand under her chin brings her eyes up to meet Ruby’s. And, to Regina’s surprise, she’s smiling. It’s not her usual easy smile, but it is a smile. “Hey,” the younger woman soothes. “It’s okay. I get it. It’s shitty timing.” She shrugs. “And it doesn’t mean we can’t still do the friend thing, right?”

Regina takes Ruby’s hand into her own and squeezes it. “No, of course not. I’d very much like to still be your friend. I’m so-”

“Shhh,” Ruby says, placing a finger over Regina’s lips. “You haven’t done anything wrong either. Actually, I appreciate you looking out for me.” She coughs and takes a step away, withdrawing her hand from Regina’s hold and putting both hands behind her back, like she’s standing to attention. She smiles again, though it’s still dimmer than it should be. “Friends is good. Let’s go with friends.”

Not trusting her voice to work properly, Regina nods.

“Okay then,” Ruby says, starting to back up towards the door before pausing. “Look, I don’t want us to say we’re gonna be friends and then avoid each other for a month because this—” She gestures between them. “—was pretty embarrassing. So how about we go for a ride tomorrow after breakfast?”

For all of her common sense approach of a few minutes previously, Regina wants to do nothing more right now than drag Ruby into a kiss for being brave enough to address the situation head on. Regina was planning on the avoidance option. She nods again and finds her voice.

“I’d like that,” she says. “Very much.”

“Good,” Ruby says with a short nod. “So, I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”


Ruby’s reached the door now and turns to look over her shoulder with a soft smile. “‘Night, Regina.”

And then she’s gone and Regina is left alone, unsure whether she’s disappointed or relieved that
she didn’t allow Ruby to kiss her. A little of both, perhaps.
Chapter 5 - Ruby

As sleep leaves her, Ruby is aware of a soft tickling between her eyebrows, trailing down her nose and back up again. She scrunches her nose and turns away, but the feeling is persistent. She swats at it, and comes into contact with flesh and she startles. “Regina?”

“Regina?” The surprised response is most definitely not Regina’s voice.

Ruby groans and turns over, burying her face in her pillow. “How the hell did you get in here?” she asks, her voice muffled.

“Broke in.” Ruby can hear the smug grin. “Bandit, remember?”

Only slightly annoyed at this, but more annoyed by the fact she slept right through it, Ruby takes a deep breath and turns over, squinting up at her friend who is reclining against the headboard. Mary Margaret giggles at her expression.

“I forgot about your sleep yipping,” she tells Ruby. “It’s cute.”

Ruby gasps. “I do not ‘yip’.”

“Oh, you do,” Mary Margaret says, nodding earnestly. “I guess no one’s been a position to tell you for a long time.”

Ruby shoves Mary Margaret, but she’s smiling. “Good thing you’re here then, huh?” She yawns. “And speaking of ‘here’, is there a reason you broke into my bedchamber at the crack of dawn?”

She nods. “I figured this is about the only time I’d have a chance of seeing you.”

“Huh?” Ruby asks through a yawn as she pulls herself into a seated position, rolling her shoulders.

“Just, you know, you’ve been spending an awful lot of time with the woman of your dreams this
Ruby glares at her friend and smacks her hand lightly. "I was not dreaming about her."

"Yeah right!" Mary Margaret scoffs. "'Regina'," she mimics Ruby's voice. "'Regina'."

Ruby narrows her eyes. "Ass. I don't know why I said her name. She was the last person I saw before bed last night..." She trails off and shrugs.

Mary Margaret picks up where she left off. "You're not helping your case, here, Ruby."

“Do you not have an elsewhere to be right now?” Ruby whines, pulling the covers up to her chin.

“Nope.” Mary Margaret grins and stretches out on the unoccupied side of Ruby’s bed. “I have nothing to do but be with you.”

“Well, it better be to sleep with me,” Ruby grumbles, shuffling until she’s lying snuggled against Mary Margaret’s side. She feels her inhale to respond and cuts her off. “Shut it, Snow White.”

A laugh jostles Ruby slightly and she smiles against Mary Margaret’s shoulder. The room is silent for far too short a period of time before her friend decides to carry on the conversation. “So, what were you up to with Regina last night?”

“Why are you so interested?” Ruby asks, propping her elbow on her pillow and placing her head in her hand. She’s resigned to the fact that she’s not getting back to sleep any time soon.

Mary Margaret mirrors Ruby’s position, facing her, and smiles a little. Ruby thinks it looks a little sad. “Because you’re pretty much the only person she speaks to outside of the War Room or the stables.” Her eyes drop to the blanket and she picks at some lint. “I just...I’m just interested. Concerned for her. I know what it’s like to leave your child in another realm.”

Shit. Ruby bites her lip. She hadn’t considered that’s where her friend’s nosiness was coming from. She reaches out and covers Mary Margaret’s hand with her own, squeezing gently and waiting until Mary Margaret meets her eyes.
“We just...hung out, I guess,” she says. “Went to the library and looked through some books. Well, mostly she looked at the books and I said encouraging things.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot. Hanging out,” Mary Margaret says. “Walks. Rides. Secret whispery mealtimes.”

“We don’t whisper,” Ruby scoffs, shoving Mary Margaret. “You make us sound like a pair of schoolgirls.”

But it’s true. She’s been spending more and more time in Regina’s company as the weeks have gone by. Ruby was determined, after the awkwardness caused by their near kiss, to be true to her word and keep trying to be Regina’s friend. So she forced herself to seek her out the following day to go for their arranged ride. While it had been a blow to her ego at the time, it was nice to be reassured she wasn’t the only one who wanted the kiss. And she would never want to push Regina into something she didn’t feel ready for. But there’s a little spark of hope still alive in her heart that the Queen might change her mind once everything has settled down and they have Henry back.

Since that day, she finds herself seeking Regina out, or gravitating towards her when they’re around other people. She enjoys the time they spend together. Underneath the cool exterior, Regina has a dry wit and a wicked sense of humour that Ruby adores. With Regina, not everything is black and white. They can talk all day long, and bicker for most of it, and still end the evening laughing together. Even thinking about her now has put a smile on Ruby’s face.

“Well, when you’ve got a dopey smile like that on, what am I supposed to think?” Mary Margaret’s voice cuts into her thoughts and she scowls.

“Worried she’s trying to lure me to the dark side?” Ruby asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Nope,” Mary Margaret answers immediately and Ruby finds herself touched. “I think it’s been a while since Regina was on the dark side.”

Ruby’s smile falls. “Oh. So it’s not that you think I’m incorruptible, then?”

Mary Margaret’s eyes grow round and she lets out a soft ‘oh’ before grabbing Ruby’s arm. “No, I mean, that goes without saying, Ruby.” She smiles. “I just...that’s not who Regina is anymore.”
Ruby shifts onto her back and puts her hands behind her head, staring at the ceiling. “Do you ever wonder…” She trails off. “I mean…I sometimes think about what my life could’ve been like if I hadn’t met you when I did.”

Frowning, Mary Margaret shifts closer to her, laying a hand on her belly and ticking lightly. “What do you mean?”

“Well…say you hadn’t tried to steal our eggs and you hadn’t been there when I discovered I was the monster killing the people of my village,” Ruby posits. “Say I’d had to run away on my own. Things could’ve…you know, been very different.”

“If you’d met Regina instead of me, you mean?” Mary Margaret asks, tilting her head.

Ruby turns to look up at her. “Yeah,” she whispers. “I…I needed support, I needed someone. If it hadn’t been you, I could so easily have gone to the dark side.”

Mary Margaret slides her arm across Ruby’s abdomen and settles her head on her shoulder as she contemplates her reply. “Well, if Regina had you on her side, I’d probably be dead, for one thing.”

“That is not the comforting response I was looking for, Snow,” Ruby whines.

“No,” Mary Margaret squeezes her. “I mean that you’re loyal and literally awesome in battle. So if you’d been the Queen’s Wolf instead of my friend, things would’ve been very different for me. Actually, I’d have probably frozen to death on a mountainside if I hadn’t come into your henhouse so…Regina would’ve gotten her wish.”

“I don’t think she wished you dead,” Ruby finds herself saying.

“She’d say different,” Mary Margaret argues.

“She says a lot of stuff, not all of it is actually to be believed,” Ruby says, thinking of the differences between Regina as she is in the War meetings and Regina as she is when they’re both on horseback. “If she’d wanted you dead, I think you’d have been dead.”

Mary Margaret lifts her head and frowns at Ruby. “Now who’s not being comforting?”
“Surely it’s nicer to think she didn’t actually wanna kill you? Instead of just thinking that she was really terrible at trying to kill you?” Ruby asks, bumping Mary Margaret’s chin with her forehead. Her nostrils flare as the first smells of breakfast start wafting through the castle. “Are we going to breakfast? Or are you planning on telling me more about how I bark in my sleep?” she deadpans.

“Yip. Not bark,” Mary Margaret corrects with a grin. “And I’m hungry. So we should go downstairs.”

Ruby nods. “Of course, Princess.”

Mary Margaret gets up off the bed, holding her nose in the air in an attempt to look haughty, Ruby imagines. “I expect you’ll meet me at my chamber. Properly dressed.”

“Yes m’lady,” Ruby replies, hopping out of the bed and curtseying, fighting the urge to burst into laughter. She smirks instead, then pushes Mary Margaret towards the door. “Get out of here. I gotta change. We’re not all up and dressed at the crack of dawn like you.”

“You act like I haven’t seen you naked on many occasions.” Mary Margaret protests, wiggling her eyebrows. “There were months I could hardly get you to put clothes on.”

Ruby shoves her in the direction of the door. “My blood runs hot in the summer,” she says. “And I like seeing you blush.”

“I only blushed the first ten times or so,” Mary Margaret says. “Then I was used to it. Seeing your lady parts has no effect on me these days.”

“Damn, I’m hurt,” Ruby says with an exaggerated pout, finally getting Mary Margaret out of the room. The shorter woman turns around with an impish smile.

“So...are you looking for someone who likes your lady parts?” she asks.

“That is the last thing on my mind right now,” Ruby tells her, hoping that Snow doesn’t notice she’s lying through her teeth. “I’m still coming to terms with not having a shower at my disposal, I’m sure as hell not looking to strike up a romance while the Wicked Witch is sending flying
“Well, if you change your mind, let me know,” Mary Margaret says. “I’m sure we can find one or two men who aren’t repulsed by your face.” She raises her eyebrows. “Or women.”

“I’m so very amused right now,” Ruby says, with a blank expression. “Go brush your hair. It looks like some of your feathered friends are nesting in there.”

At this, Mary Margaret frowns, running a hand through her long locks, her fingers getting stuck in a tangle of curls. “I forgot how much work this is,” she admits. “How on earth did we manage when we were living in the woods?”

“Some of us never grew up with servants to brush our hair for us,” Ruby says with a grin. “We had to learn personal grooming.” She leans in and wrinkles her nose as she sniffs Mary Margaret. “I see you’re still learning…”

Mary Margaret tilts her head and smiles. “I missed you.”

Ruby thinks about saying that she never went anywhere; that Mary Margaret could’ve seen her anytime she chose to. Instead she returns her smile. “I missed you too, Snow White.”

Then her arms are full and she’s being squeezed tightly. She returns the hug, lifting Mary Margaret slightly off the floor. “Go. Make yourself pretty,” she mumbles. “I’ll come get you for breakfast.”

Mary Margaret pulls away a little and looks up at Ruby, her face serious. “If Regina replaces me as your best friend, so help me…”

Ruby laughs and tickles Mary Margaret’s side. “No chance of that,” she tells her friend. “Get out of here.” She leans against the doorframe and watches Mary Margaret go. She considers her words. There is no way that anyone could ever take Mary Margaret’s place in Ruby’s heart, but Mary Margaret has her own family now; her husband and her daughter. It wouldn’t hurt Ruby to find other people she can open up to, but that’s never been easy for her. Which is why it surprises her how easy it feels to spend time with Regina. She shakes her head. It’s far too early to be thinking about all of this. She closes the door and goes to get dressed.
The masses have come and eaten, but Regina is nowhere to be seen. While the Queen has started taking more meals in the dining hall, she doesn’t always and Ruby is disappointed not to see her this morning. Though, as she looks at the simple bread and porridge, Ruby can understand why Regina would have missed this. She picks at the remaining piece of bread on her plate, feeling eyes on her. She looks up to find Granny pinning her with a curious stare. Ruby immediately averts her gaze and finds Mary Margaret’s kind eyes looking at her.

“Let’s go for a walk? We can take the bread and…” she shrugs. “Feed the horses.”

“Careful you don’t scare the horses, Ruby,” Granny warns. “Though you could probably do with a good kick up the backside,” she mumbles.

Ruby narrows her eyes playfully at her Grandmother. “For your information, Granny, the horses love me. We’re old pals.”

Granny raises an eyebrow. “Something interesting you at the stables these days?” Ruby’s smile falters a little.

“Not particularly,” she says, getting to her feet. “I just enjoy a good ride from time to time, that’s all.” She nods to Mary Margaret. “Let’s go.” She feels Granny’s eyes on her back the whole way out of the dining hall.

“I haven’t really had a chance to go riding much yet. I miss riding.” Mary Margaret notes, seemingly oblivious to any tension that cropped up when the stables were mentioned.

Ruby doesn’t answer, but picks up her pace, suddenly keen to be in the open air. She hears Mary Margaret’s skipping steps as she tries to keep up with her. As they round the last corner before the door that leads to the courtyard, Ruby almost runs into someone. And if she hadn’t been so preoccupied, she’d have known someone was coming. She finds herself staring into Regina’s deep brown eyes. The Queen herself seems taken aback.

“Sorry, I-” Ruby bites her lip. “I didn’t see you.” Mary Margaret has caught up and is standing by her shoulder, beaming at Regina.

“You’ve been riding!” Mary Margaret exclaims, taking in Regina’s rosy cheeks and dishevelled hair.
“Nothing gets past you, does it, Ms Blanchard?” Regina says, pulling off her riding gloves by the fingertips, her eyes straying to Ruby’s face. The discussion with Mary Margaret plays on her mind, and she looks away, as if Regina will be able to see that she’s been speaking about her behind her back.

“We’re headed to the stables ourselves,” Mary Margaret continues. “I don’t know if we’ll have time for a ride, but I miss the horses.”

Ruby watches as an affectionate smile briefly flashes across Regina’s face before being replaced by a bored expression. Talking about horses clearly lowers Regina’s barriers. “Well, there are some fine beasts,” Regina admits, before shifting her attention to Ruby. “You know which is my preferred steed. Don’t let her put beads in his mane or anything equally ridiculous.”

Ruby laughs. “I’ll make sure he’s not purple and glittery when we leave,” she says.

Nodding once, Regina starts to walk away. “It’s chilly out there this morning,” she says over her shoulder. “Ms Blanchard, you’ll need a heavier cloak.”

She only realises she’s staring at Regina’s retreating back when Mary Margaret nudges her arm and she looks over at her friend.

“That was thoughtful of her to tell me I’d need more clothes, right?” she asks, brightly.

“Yes,” Ruby says, her eyes flicking up to catch Regina disappearing around the corner. “Yes, very thoughtful.”

“You’re wearing less than I am,” Mary Margaret observes as they continue on their way. “She must think you’re tougher than me.”

Ruby allows herself a small smile. “Well, she knows that you’re a pampered princess and I’m a mere peasant, so I guess she thinks I can take the cold.”

“Yes, that must be it,” Mary Margaret says with a roll of her eyes. She picks up a heavier cloak from the rack by the door and throws it around her shoulders.
The horses take to Mary Margaret immediately. Ruby stands by the stable door and watches as the animals strain in their stalls to be patted and spoken to by her. The sugar lumps she’s slipping to them are only half the story. Just as with people, animals have always flocked to the young woman. Mary Margaret speaks to the horses as if they’re going to respond to her, and Ruby’s not all that convinced that they’re not communicating with her in some way. She knows the story, of course, of how Mary Margaret met Regina; Regina saved the young girl’s life when her horse was spooked. It was Regina who persuaded a terrified child to get right back on the horse and keep trying. In some ways, Regina made Mary Margaret the woman she is today.

“Ruby!” The loud cry catches her attention. Mary Margaret is looking at her expectantly.

“I’m sorry, did you say something?” she asks.

“I was just asking if you’re gonna come see the horses,” Mary Margaret asks, laughing as a grey stallion nudges her with his nose, looking for more sugar, or attention. “Or if you’re gonna lurk by the door the whole time.”

Pushing away from the doorframe, Ruby moves further into the stables. Not through any conscious decision, she ends up in front of Regina’s horse. He eyes her for a moment, sizing her up. She holds out a hand, letting him sniff her and finally he lowers his head to nuzzle her shoulder. She flattens her hand out over his neck, rubbing long strokes up and down.

“He likes you,” Mary Margaret says.

“I like him too,” Ruby says, softly, bringing her other hand up to rub from his muzzle to his forehead, laughing when he sneezes.

“That’s Regina’s horse, huh?” Mary Margaret asks. Ruby turns to her, her eyebrows drawn together.

“How’d you know?” she asks.

Mary Margaret’s smile turns sad, and a little wistful. She shrugs. “He looks like Ro-” She stops, biting her lip. “He, uh, looks like the horse Regina would pick, that’s all.” She turns back to the animal in front of her. “And he looks like he’s the best taken care of. The most loved.”
Her friend’s voice is a little hoarse and Ruby is unsure whether to give her time to get herself together, or let her open up. Curiosity wins.

“What was she like, back then?” she asks. She knows the basic story of the meeting, but Mary Margaret has never really discussed the specifics of her relationship with Regina. There’s silence for a long time, and Ruby thinks Mary Margaret might not respond.

“She was beautiful.” It’s not what she expected to hear, but Mary Margaret’s just getting started. “I mean, I know she’s beautiful now, but back then, before the...pain appeared in her eyes—” Mary Margaret leans her forehead against the horse she’s patting. “She was luminous.”

Ruby tries to picture that; a Regina without pain in her eyes. She can’t.

“Of course, I thought she was the most wonderful, sophisticated person I’d ever met,” Mary Margaret continues with a little laugh. “I thought she was so grown up. That’s how she seemed to me. But she was still a kid herself.” She lifts her head and shakes it. “When I think of what she must have gone through with Cora as a mother—” She turns and gives Ruby a sad smile. “I don’t think I ever really knew Regina, not as the person she was before she married my father,” she admits. “But I saw glimpses of her. Outside, on a horse, I believe she was happy at those times.”

Ruby nods. “That would make sense,” she agrees. “I’m sure you knew her on some level.”

“Maybe,” Mary Margaret says, stepping back and brushing horsehair from her cloak. “We’ll never really know, I guess.”

Giving Regina’s horse one last rub, she steps towards her friend and drapes an arm around her shoulders. “You’re getting to know her now.”

“I hope so,” Mary Margaret says, her smile is back. “Now come on. We can’t hang around here all day. There are things to be done. Plans to be made. Wicked Witches to be defeated.”

“All in a day’s work,” Ruby says as they make their way out of the stables, her arm still around Mary Margaret’s shoulders.
After attending another fruitless, though thankfully short, war council meeting, Ruby decides to get in a little archery practice. There’s something about shooting arrows that can help to clear her mind and focus her energy. When the world narrows to that single point and everything el-

“Ah, it appears we had the same idea.”

She grits her teeth and lowers her bow. She turns to look over her shoulder with a frown.

“You’re lucky I didn’t shoot you,” she admonishes the intruder. “You, of all people, should know better than to sneak up on someone with a bow at the ready.”

Robin holds up his hands in apology. “Forgive me,” he begins. “I had assumed, with your abilities, that you’d know I was approaching.”

“Well, you know what they say about assumptions,” she tells him with a glare.

Robin frowns. “Actually I… I don’t.”

“Oh.” She’d forgotten that Robin might not be aware of some of the more modern idioms. “Well… in Storybrooke we say that it makes an ass out of you and me.” She waits for him to figure it out. “It’s just better to not. Assume, that is.”

The thief starts to load his bow and take aim. “I see.” He releases the arrow, and Ruby follows its trail to the target. It’s an inch or so away from the bullseye, and Robin huffs at the miss. Ruby nocks another arrow and takes aim. “I feel there’s much to learn about this Storybrooke,” he continues. “And its inhabitants. I haven’t really been able to get to know many of them all that well.” Ruby releases the arrow and watches it go sailing wildly through the air, embedding itself in a tree. She growls, unsure if it’s because she missed, or if it’s because she knows Robin means Regina.

“I think everyone is focussing more on getting out of the Enchanted Forest alive, and less on making new friends,” Ruby finds herself saying.

“You seem to be friendly with most people,” Robin continues, loading another arrow. He takes aim
and releases; bullseye. He turns and looks at Ruby with a wide smile in place.

Ruby clears her throat, selecting another arrow. “I would do anything for these people.” She takes aim and releases, earning herself a bullseye and smiles in satisfaction.

“Anything?” Robin repeats with raised brows.

“Yeah. Anything.” Ruby nods back towards the castle. “These guys… they’re my family. They’re good people.”

“And what of your Queen?”

Ruby spins to look at him, surprised by the question. “My Queen? You mean Regina?”

Robin frowns, confused. “She’s the Queen, yes?”

“I…” Ruby pauses and clears her throat, smoothing out her bodice. “Oh, there are a half a dozen queens around these parts. It’s hard to keep track.”

“Right.” Robin says with a small nod. “One hears a lot of whispering. You and she seem... friendly,” Robin says, selecting another arrow. “She doesn’t appear to be that way with many people.”

“It sounds like you’re digging, Robin Hood.”

Robin chuckles, finally loading his bow, and releasing. He gets his bullseye. “Perhaps.” The utterance of that word causes Ruby to draw the string of her bow harder than intended and it snaps, the arrow falling to the ground. She holds the useless weapon up in disbelief. Robin seems to share her sentiment. “My word, you are strong.”

Dropping her bow to the ground, Ruby walks forward towards the target she was shooting at and pulls out the lone arrow. “It comes with the territory.”
He nods in understanding. “Of course. The beast.”

She can’t help the low growl that escapes at the use of the word. It’s taken her a long time to stop seeing herself in that way, and even now she finds it hard. But to hear the word thrown around so freely by someone who barely knows her, has Ruby’s blood boiling. It doesn’t help that he’s fishing for information about Regina, either. “I actually prefer the term ‘wolf’,” Ruby manages.

Robin is immediately apologetic. “I am sorry, m’lady. I meant no offence.”

“I believe you,” Ruby says through a sigh. And she does. She senses no malice about the man and she never has. His smile is always wide and genuine and his concern and love for his boy is admirable. She points to Robin’s bow, seeking permission to use it since hers is currently in an unusable state. The man smiles and passes it over happily. “So…” she tries casually. “You were saying?”

“You were going to tell me about the good people of Storybrooke,” he replies, watching Ruby take her shot. The arrowhead pierces the bullseye effortlessly and Robin nods his approval.

Ruby shrugs. “You’ve been with us for a while now. What do you make of us?”

“You seem a friendly bunch.”

“Uh huh. We are,” Ruby agrees and then tilts her head to the side. “Well, sort of. As long as you don’t go around calling people beasts.” She’s smirking as she speaks, taking away any sting to her words.

Robin grins, taking back his bow and loading up another arrow. “I do believe I apologised for my indiscretion.” He releases the arrow into a lob, watching it sail through the air and pierce the bullseye. He passes the bow back to Ruby with a grin. “You never told me much about your Queen.”

Ruby sighs, he’s clearly not giving up. “Well, I know she - Regina - doesn’t like being spoken about behind her back.” Perhaps she tells him this, not only because it’s true, but because she can feel her grip tightening on his bow and she wants him to shut up before she breaks it. It’s a really nice bow. “Anything you wanna know, you should find out by talking to her.” Ruby misses the bullseye terribly, and tries to redeem herself by loading another arrow and taking aim.
“Perhaps I shall.” Ruby lets the arrow go prematurely and still misses, but hits closer than the arrow previously. “I can’t help but notice your shooting is quite erratic, Miss Ruby. Can I offer you a few pointers?”

Her head snaps around to look at him, eyes blazing. “Pointers?”

“Yes,” he says, the sides of his mouth quirking and she thinks he might be laughing at her. “You’re clearly a skilled archer, but your aim wavers significantly depending on the topic of conversation.”

Without removing her eyes from his, she draws an arrow, nocks it and releases. She knows from his face that she hit the bullseye. She raises an eyebrow. “You were saying?”

“That’s all very well,” he says, smirking. “But can you make that shot under pressure?” Ruby rolls her eyes and draws another arrow, feeling Robin move behind her right shoulder. She anticipates some form of attack. What she doesn’t expect, as she nocks the arrow, is for him to lean in and whisper. “I’m thinking of asking Regina to dinner.”

The arrow sails high into the sky and they both watch its trajectory. Ruby prays there’s no-one beneath it as it starts to descend. Her face flushes as she realises that his tactic totally worked, and that he knew what would work. She turns to him, eyes narrowed, to find him grinning widely.

“That’s...that was really...” Ruby sputters for a response. “You’re mean.”

“Mean? Me? Not at all,” he protests, holding his hand out for his bow, which Ruby hands over. “What did I say?”

She shoves his shoulder, but can’t help returning his grin. “This isn’t funny,” she says. “Stop being a jerk.”

“A...jerk?” Robin asks, his face scrunched up in confusion.

“Making fun of me for...whatever,” Ruby explains, deciding against actually verbalising what he’s been hinting at.
“I wasn’t making fun!” he protests, his eyes wide but his smile far from innocent. “But I couldn’t help noticing that Her Majesty chose to dine with you after turning down my invitation. And to resist my abundant charms, she really must be quite taken with you.”

“Oh, sure,” Ruby says, playing along. “Why else would she have passed up the opportunity to dine with such a modest, humble guy?”

“Listen, you saved my boy’s life,” Robin says, growing serious for a moment. “I’m forever in your debt, and I most definitely don’t want to be a... jerk to you.” He smiles. “I just wanted you to know that I’m not. Well, I’m not your competition.”

Ruby barks out a laugh. “Well, it’s nice that you think you could’ve been,” she says, before shaking her head. “But...there’s nothing happening there.”

“Not yet,” Robin says, nudging her with his shoulder and drawing an arrow. He takes aim and releases, getting a bullseye. He turns and winks at her. “But I think that might change.”

“Robin-” Ruby begins.

“Say no more,” Robin says, holding his hands up as he walks away. “I shan’t interfere. But I shall be rooting for you, Miss Ruby.” Then he’s calling a jaunty farewell over his shoulder, leaving Ruby gaping after him, wondering what the hell just happened.

She moves towards the targets she and Robin were shooting at and pulls the arrows out with vigour, putting them back into her quiver and picking up her, now broken, bow. She snarls slightly as she sees the limp string; she’ll have to restring it when she gets back to the castle. Sighing, she throws the quiver over her shoulder and makes her way back towards the castle. She thinks back over her day, about how much she loved spending time with Mary Margaret, but can’t help thinking how Regina managed to find her way into every inch of every conversation she’s had today. Ruby shakes her head; the Wicked Witch is looming nearer and still, there’s no plan of attack, and she shouldn’t be spending all of her time thinking about how much she wants to kiss Regina again.

“I believe it’s common courtesy to acknowledge the person who is saying hello to you,” Regina’s voice cuts into her thoughts, and Ruby startles. “I know you’re a peasant, Ruby, but I thought you were a well mannered one, at least.”

Ruby shakes her head with a wry smile. “How is it that you’ve managed to sneak up on me twice today?” she asks, almost more to herself than to Regina.
“I have done no such thing,” Regina protests, with a frown. “Don’t blame your lack of observational skills on me.”

The tone and the expression might put others off, but Ruby knows that it’s actually pretty affectionate, coming from Regina. The uneasiness from her conversation with Robin lifts a little as Regina rolls her eyes and adjusts her gloves.

“I do apologise, Your Majesty,” Ruby says, curtseying, though she keeps her eyes locked on Regina’s, enjoying the annoyance that her gesture provokes. “In future I shall try to stand to attention as you approach.”

“Has someone told you that you’re amusing, Ms Lucas?” Regina asks, as Ruby stands up to her full height once more. “Because they were mistaken.”

“I’m hilarious,” Ruby says, feeling far more at ease in this conversation than she should. “Perhaps my humour is too peasantly for you?”

“Undoubtedly,” Regina says, though there’s a hint of a smile hiding on her lips. Her brow creases when her eyes drop to Ruby’s hand. “What happened to your bow?”

Ruby glances down at the weapon, the string dangling uselessly from the ornate wood. She blushes when she thinks back to how it happened.

“I, uh, was practising with Robin,” Ruby says. “Things got a little...competitive.”

A sculpted eyebrow creeps up Regina’s forehead. “Did they now?” she asks, and the tone of her voice makes the the hair on Ruby’s neck stand on end. She can’t quite read the expression on Regina’s face and that unnerves her. “And who won your little competition?”

“I guess he did,” Ruby concedes, thinking of her last, wild arrow, but hurries to qualify. “I mean, he didn’t end up with a broken bow, so I’d say that’s a win for him.”

Regina purses her lips. “Well, you’ll have to try harder next time.” She continues on her way, but briefly turns back and waves a hand in the direction of Ruby’s bow. The string knits itself back together until it’s taut once more. “I’ll bid you good day, Ruby.”
“Bye” Ruby calls after her, watching Regina walk down the long hallway until she disappears around a corner.

She lets out a sigh and turns to head back to her room. Despite Robin’s upbeat response to her relationship with Regina, she can’t say she shares his optimism. Not that it should matter. They’re friends and she should enjoy being Regina’s friend without hankering after something more. Then again, this strange fluttering in her stomach wasn’t there when she was speaking to Robin, or to Mary Margaret. She can tell herself that she’s ‘just friends’ with Regina as much as she likes, but she knows it’s not true.

When she reaches her bedchamber, she unclasps her cloak and lets it fall to the floor before throwing herself onto the large, uncomfortable, bed. She turns onto her back, staring up at the ceiling as she tries not to get caught up in morose thoughts about the events of the past few weeks.

Unconsciously, her hand moves to the necklace Regina had given her before her pointless mission. She lifts it up and lets the apple shaped jewel swing from the chain. She inhales deeply. The scent of Regina is embedded into the spell or enchantment or whatever she did to the necklace. All magic has a scent. Dark magic, in particular, should smell abhorrent to Ruby. But Regina’s doesn’t. It’s a comforting, familiar smell by now. She smiles and takes the pendant in her hand, careful not to squeeze it in case she ends up on the floor of the War Room. Her thoughts quieten for the first time all day, and before long she dozes off into a peaceful sleep.
Chapter 6 - Regina

Regina slows her horse to a gentle canter as they approach the castle. This morning, she decided to skip breakfast and go for a ride. She’s tried to put up with the inane conversation around the dining table, with Mary Margaret’s constant questions and ‘ideas’ about how to defeat her sister. But, for someone who has spent the majority of her life in solitude, this communal living can take its toll after a while. Riding is her escape here, as it always has been. But she can’t run forever and she knows she has to go back, if only to keep the idiots from killing themselves and everyone else.

She leans down to pat the horse’s broad neck, murmuring soft, encouraging words to him as they trot towards the stables. Her thoughts move to another of her new companions; Ruby Lucas. When Ruby had visited her chambers in those early days, Regina hadn’t seen much beyond Snow White’s rather attractive best friend come to check up on her. Through spending time with her, she’s come to know the funny, bright, intelligent woman that Ruby really is. And while it would be easy to give in to her desires and jump into bed with the younger woman, Regina genuinely does not want to risk what they have been building towards. It’s nice to have a friend. Someone to laugh with when things seem hopeless. Just yesterday, after Mary Margaret had said something particularly ridiculous, Regina had rolled her eyes, causing Ruby to let out a bark of laughter. The younger woman had attempted to disguise it as a cough, but no-one was convinced and she received a number of very strange looks. Regina took great pleasure in joining in with them.

As they draw closer to the castle, Regina’s eyes land on a lone figure in the courtyard, bow in hand. A red cloak is discarded on a nearby bench and Ruby stands tall and straight, pulling back the string of the bow and releasing. It’s not a good shot; it hits the target but is a long way from the centre. Regina raises an eyebrow at the uncharacteristic miss. Ruby is clearly upset too, as she lets out a growl. A real growl.

Regina’s horse startles at the unexpected noise. “Hey,” Regina soothes. “Easy boy.” She rubs his neck and uses the reins to get him back under control. “Ms Lucas,” she calls out. “Can you kindly refrain from growling around the horses? Particularly when I’m sitting on one.”

Ruby turns at the sound of her voice, her beautiful face marred by a scowl. Regina misses the smile she usually gets in greeting.

“Sorry,” Ruby mumbles. She loads up another arrow, only to miss her target again. This time she snarls.

The horse bucks again at the noise Ruby emits and Regina decides it’s wise to dismount for the moment, if Ruby’s intent on displaying her animalistic side. She throws her leg over the horse’s back-end and jumps down, landing solidly on both feet. Rubbing the horse’s muzzle, she calms
him down before locating an apple in her coat pocket and offering it to him on the flat of her hand. “There you go,” she mumbles. “Who’s a good boy, hmm?” A stable hand walks past and Regina calls him over, requesting that he take her horse back and give him a good brush down. With the animal attended to, she squares her shoulders and walks closer to Ruby. “A little off your game this morning,” she observes, noting the placement of the arrows. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Ruby says, too quickly. “Just....” This time when she releases, she misses the target completely. She bares her teeth at it.

“Well, I doubt that growling at the thing will mean you’ll hit it more accurately,” Regina says, appraising Ruby. It occurs to her that a few weeks have passed since Ruby last changed into the wolf. “Time of the month?”

A sigh is her only answer. Regina watches as Ruby shrugs off her quiver and drops it to the ground, the bow following suit. Then those green eyes are staring into her own. “You ever used magic on a sword before?”

Regina is taken by surprise by the sudden change of topic. “I...in what way?” she asks, wondering where this could possibly be going.

“Well, I can assume you don’t need to actually use one, since you have your fireballs and all. But if someone came at you with a sword, could you wield one? Or enchant it to do the fighting for you?” Ruby asks.

Regina smiles at the picture this brings to mind. “Dear, if someone came at me with a sword, they’d be impaled on it before they got anywhere close,” she says. “Why do you ask? Are you looking for someone to spar with?” She understands the urge. Sometimes her magic bubbles just underneath her skin, begging to be released. With Ruby’s transformation so close, perhaps she feels the same way and has no outlet but violence.

Ruby shrugs. “Granny pissed me off this morning,” she confesses. “Which doesn’t usually get to me. But the full moon is tonight, and I’m itching.” She nods towards the abandoned target. “Since my aim is off and the horses are terrified of me today, I don’t have many options for letting off steam.”

Frowning, Regina tilts her head in question. “What on earth did your grandmother say to cause such a reaction?” she asks, genuinely curious.
“She just...should mind her own business,” Ruby huffs. She raises her eyebrows hopefully. “So can you? Do the sword thing?”

“You think a swordfight would help you relax?” she clarifies, her mind buzzing with possibilities.

“I’d rather not go out tonight feeling this way,” Ruby replies. “The wolf tends to pick up on my feelings and I...just would rather not go out like this.”

Regina nods along as Ruby talks. “I can probably help you,” she says, tentatively. “I can conjure up some opponents for you to play with. They’ll feel real, but they won’t be. So you can unleash whatever you want on them.”

Ruby’s eyes glint with danger and it causes Regina’s stomach to dip. “That could be interesting,” Ruby muses. "Sure you don't wanna play?" Her voice has changed; become lower and grittier. Regina assumes it’s the alpha in her coming out.

“I think I’d rather watch,” Regina says, a frisson of excitement tickling the back of her neck as she thinks about Ruby in attack mode. A slow smile appears on Ruby’s lips at her choice of words and Regina rolls her eyes. She glances around the open courtyard. “Perhaps this isn’t the best place to do it. Seeing you fight attackers might cause a mass panic.”

Ruby pauses, then nods. “Well, you know this castle best,” she states. “Where can I go?”

“There’s an underground bunker of sorts, down by the dungeons,” Regina says, starting to walk in the right direction, knowing that Ruby will follow. “It’s big enough and private enough for you to work off your energy without alerting half the castle.”

Ruby falls into step with Regina. “Good,” she grinds out. “And don’t half ass my opponent.” She looks over to Regina and bares her teeth in somewhat manic grin. “Please,” she adds.

“Oh, don’t worry,” Regina says, fascinated by the changes in Ruby that can only be attributed to the full-moon. She’s noticed subtle differences on the approach to the last couple of full-moons. Her teeth seem sharper, her eyes shimmer with yellow and her gait has changed, it’s more like stalking than walking. “I plan to give you a run for your money.” They arrive at the room Regina had described. It’s large and empty and dark. A flick of Regina’s hand floods it with light as the torches on the walls illuminate.
Ruby scans the room and nods, once, seemingly happy with Regina’s choice. She walks further into the room rolling her head, cracking her neck, and swings her arms a few times, stretching out and loosening up. She turns to Regina and nods again. “This will do.”

Without asking if Ruby’s ready, Regina holds out both hands and two men appear, dressed in the regalia of her former guards. They charge at Ruby, swords raised and yelling. Regina retreats to the corner of the room, conjuring herself a chair, and sits down to enjoy the show.

Ruby charges at the men and leaps into a flying kick, that lands square on one guard’s chest before he has time to bring his sword down to strike her. He falls flat on his back, the sword falling from his hands, and Ruby wastes no time in picking it up, swinging it around in time to clash against the sword coming down to strike. They go back and forth a few times, Ruby losing the upper hand as she is forced to move backwards and finds herself cornered. Metal clashes as Ruby tries her best to defend herself, thrusting and turning with lightning speed. Regina watches with interest, surprised that Ruby is taking so long to overpower the guard. She bites her lip as the man raises the sword above his head to bring it down on Ruby, but Ruby plunges her sword deep into his gut and Regina nods her approval.

Ruby pulls the sword out, watching as the guard falls to the floor and disappears - a reminder that he was composed of nothing more than Regina’s magic. While Ruby is still staring at the remnants of the spell, the other guard takes his opportunity and swings at her, hitting her square on the jaw and knocking her on her ass. Regina almost laughs as Ruby shakes her head, looking like a stunned puppy for a second. But it is only a second, because before Regina can make any comment, Ruby’s leg shoots out and she delivers a sweeping kick, bringing the guard to the floor, his sword falling from his hand. Ruby’s on her feet, kicking the weapon aside and throwing her own after it. Regina rolls her eyes; these heroes and their morals.

“Get up!” she orders.

A raise of Regina’s finger brings the imaginary guard to his feet. And, sure enough, Ruby waits until he is standing before attacking. The wolf has honour. The guard launches himself at Ruby and there’s a brief wrestling match, during which Regina takes time to appreciate the taut muscles of Ruby’s shoulders and the suppleness of her legs as she uses them to push back off the wall when she is gripped from behind. The view is most enjoyable.

The guard stumbles with Ruby in his hands before tripping up and falling over, releasing his hold on the girl. She straddles him, pinning him to the floor. Her biceps are straining against the cloth of her blouse in a way that Regina’s sure they don’t on a normal day. Using her weight to keep the guard in place, she wraps a hand around his assailant’s neck, backhanding him with her free hand. His face is near purple before she finally releases him and stands up, kicking him in the ribs for good measure.
Regina grins. That was far too easy. A wave of her hand brings four more guards to life, with a couple of archers in the corners of the room for her amusement. She wants to see Ruby really work up a sweat. Regina herself is getting worked up in an entirely different way.

Ruby eyes the men surrounding her; sizing them up. She growls, low in the back of her throat, daring them to advance. And they do, all at once. Ruby is quick to dodge them, but they don’t leave her time to recover before coming at her again, resulting in something resembling a barroom brawl. Punches and kicks are traded and bodies fly as Ruby eliminates her assailants one by one.

Deciding it’s time to challenge Ruby a little more, Regina brings the archers into play. And, just for fun, she starts a fire near to where Ruby is engaged in battle. There’s a sheen of sweat on Ruby’s brow and dirt on one of her cheeks from rolling around on the floor. Regina can’t help but think it only accentuates her beauty.

The archers load up their bows and Ruby makes a run, leaping over the flames, tucking and rolling for the sword she had discarded in her previous fight. The archers release their arrows and Ruby swings her sword at just the right moment, slicing the arrows in half and causing them to drop to the floor. She uses the handle of her sword to knock one of the guards square between the eyes as he charges at her, knocking him to the ground unconscious. This leaves two of the guards and the two archers.

If Regina had seen this display of skill back when she was in pursuit of Snow White, she would have attempted to bring Red Riding Hood over to her side, she has no doubt of that. Such a pity; she’d have liked a pet wolf. Ruby doesn’t even look like she’s tired, despite having seen off half a dozen men larger than herself. A thought occurs to her and she smiles. A little peril should spice things up nicely. Bringing both of her hands together, she blows through them and ten guards appear. But this time, above the fire, Belle is suspended on a rope; her hands tied. And the rope is on fire. An illusion, of course, but Regina’s interested to see how Ruby will react.

“Ruby!” the false Belle shrieks in fright. “Ruby, help me!” Regina rolls her eyes. Even this fake version is annoying.

Ruby looks up and freezes as she sees Belle hanging precariously above the fire. “Regina?” Ruby yells out, her eyes still trained on the struggling librarian.

Tilting her head, Regina puts on her best innocent smile. “Yes, dear?”
She ducks under a swinging fist and delivers a sweeping kick to three of the men before rolling out of the way. “That’s not actually Belle, right?” She’s a little out of breath now.

“Ruby, please!” Belle begs. “I’m scared!” Regina blows gently and the fire beneath Belle’s feet rages harder.

“Only one way to find out,” Regina singsongs.

Ruby growls and Regina can almost feel it resonate in her chest from the echo it produces around the cavernous hall. Regina’s tongue wets her lips as she watches Ruby launch herself at the guards. While it wouldn’t have appeared she’d been holding back before, she’s certainly not now. She advances on the guards, taking them on two at a time as Belle’s screams can be heard from overhead. The soldiers are quickly and efficiently dispatched as Ruby plunges her sword into them or slashes their throats, eliminating them methodically. The archers strike again, and Ruby crouches and rolls out of the path of the arrows. Her manoeuvre takes her dangerously close to one of the archers, but she springs to her feet and stabs him before he can load his bow to take her out.

The other archer is the last man standing. Regina watches as Ruby stands up tall and launches her sword at him, sending it sailing through the air. It lodges in his throat, the arrow from his bow flies off haphazardly as he falls down dead. Regina watches Ruby sigh in relief, smiling because she’s forgotten something rather important. A blood curdling scream rings out. Ruby looks up, remembering that she still has to save Belle. The fire is raging harder, and the rope doesn’t look like it’s going to last much longer. Regina twists her finger around a few times and the rope frays even further. This appears to spur Ruby back into action as she’s off at a run, locating her sword which had fallen to the floor when the last archer disappeared. She turns and eyes her target, getting into position. She brings the sword back and launches it with all of her might, starting to run when it’s barely left her hand. The sword slices the rope that’s holding Belle above the flames, and Ruby leaps, just clearing the fire, and catching Belle as she falls. Regina’s been holding her breath for longer than she realises and she lets it out with an exclamation of delight as Ruby catches the apparition. They turn in mid-air so that Ruby lands first with an undignified ‘oof’. But there’s nothing in her arms, because Belle has already disappeared.

Regina walks forward, clapping her hands together slowly. “Brava,” she says, her grin wide and genuine. “Brava. That was the most impressive display I’ve seen in a very long time.” Perhaps ever, she admits to herself.

Ruby rolls over on to her back, stretching out in an effort to catch her breath. Her chest is heaving heavily, and her arms are splayed out.

Standing over the prone woman, Regina looks down at her; there’s a slight cut on her forehead and a graze on her chin, but she’s almost completely unscathed. Amazing, Regina thinks. “So,” she
begins, conversationally. “Did that work off your aggression adequately?”

“Oh yes,” Ruby pants. She rolls back and flips up onto her feet. “Jesus, Regina!” The younger woman puts a hand over her heart before bending at the waist with her hands on her hips. “I’m wrecked.”

Regina’s nerve-endings are tingling from watching Ruby. Her magic is also buzzing, sensing the magic that runs through Ruby’s veins. She’s practically vibrating with it. She licks her lips and swallows. Unable to resist the urge to touch the other woman, she runs a hand down her back. “Let me see your face,” she murmurs. Ruby stands up, her chest still heaving. Regina touches a finger to the graze on her chin. “You’re hurt.” She has no doubt that Ruby will be healed in under an hour.

Ruby closes her eyes at the touch. “M’okay,” she says, inhaling a shaky breath and letting it out slowly to control her breathing. Ruby’s brows furrow and she opens her eyes, looking at Regina. Her nostrils flare and she grins, still breathing heavily. “You enjoyed the show, huh?”

“Hmmm?” Regina asks, distracted by the sight of Ruby’s strong jaw and the softness of her skin. The implication then hits her and she backs away a little, flushing. “Well, I…” She squares her shoulders. “Yes.”

The wolf is definitely present when Ruby takes a step towards her. She’s so close, Regina has to tilt her head back to see her face, and what she sees steals her breath. Ruby’s eyes are almost completely golden, her smile is gone. She dips her head and brushes her nose against Regina’s, strong hands frame her hips, drawing her in closer. She’s mesmerised by Ruby’s sudden presence, invading every corner of her mind and clouding her reason. Regina brings a hand up to Ruby’s cheek.

“Ruby,” she murmurs. “We…we shouldn’t.”

A hum vibrates through Ruby’s chest and Regina can’t tell if it’s agreement or protest. She makes no move to let Regina go, shifting her nose to nuzzle against her cheek instead. “Then tell me to stop.”

Regina closes her eyes and lets out an embarrassing moan. Stopping is so far from what she wants to do right now. All she wants is to feel Ruby’s lips against her own, to be wrapped up in those powerful arms and be safe. It would be so easy. And so unfair to both of them.
“Stop,” she whispers.

Abruptly, she’s left cold when Ruby moves away. Regina blinks a few times to bring herself out of the stupor she’d been drifting into and realises Ruby’s babbling.

“-idiot. I’m so sorry. I just...the wolf sometimes....not that that’s any excuse and I can control myself I just...you looked...and you smelled...and I...God, I’m so sorry.”

“Ruby,” Regina says, moving closer to the other woman who’s almost cowering against the wall. She touches her shoulder and Ruby looks up, eyes now back to fully green. And filled with tears, Regina notes. “You’re not an idiot.”

“But you already told me that you didn’t want anything like that and I-”

“Shhhh,” Regina soothes, rubbing Ruby’s arm. “It’s not that I don’t want to, we’ve established that.” She sighs. “When you came to me, that first week, and I...made advances.” Her cheeks grow warm at the memory. “I was only looking for a distraction, something to make me forget.” Ruby nods and sniffs. “But that’s not what this would be now. And I don’t want to hurt you by doing something we’ll both regret and ruining what we have.”

“No, I know you’re right,” Ruby says, swiping at her face, the tears cleaning the dust from her cheeks in haphazard patterns. “You made it clear and I’m totally okay with not ruining our friendship. I should never have pushed.”

“It’s fine, Ruby,” Regina says. “It’s not like I was an unwilling participant.”

Ruby nods, biting her lip. “I argued with Granny because she caught me watching you leaving on your morning ride,” she admits. “And...she, uh, could tell I was enjoying that show.”

Regina winces. “Well. That must have been...”

“It was,” Ruby finishes.

Regina’s brow creases as she tries to figure out what the root of the problem is. “I’m assuming she
didn’t address this fact quite as tactfully as she might have?”

“Granny? Tactful? Not likely.” Ruby smiles, but it soon twists into a frown. “But there was no need for her to do it in front of an audience,” Ruby snaps, eyes glinting yellow. Clearly the conjured fight didn’t work out all of Ruby’s aggression. “Everyone talks as it is. Did she have to give them more of a reason to?”

Regina frowns even more. “So it sounds like you’re saying you’re ashamed of...” me, she thinks “-this,” is what she says.

Ruby’s face changes again and Regina sees a flash of the wolf in the stern line of her mouth and the strain in her jaw. “Is that what you think?” she asks, voice lower than usual. “That I’m ashamed? Of what? Spending time with you? Liking you?” She shakes her head with a rueful laugh. “Yeah, ‘cause I’ve been trying really hard to hide that, right?”

“No, that’s not-” Regina stops herself. That is what she meant. She sighs. “I’m sorry. You just said-...it sounded like you didn’t want people to think we were...”

“We’re not,” Ruby points out. “But I don’t give a shit if they think we are.”

“So why were you so bothered about about people gossiping?” Regina asks, confused now.

“Because I don’t want them gossiping about you!” Ruby yells, surprising them both. They stare at each other in shock for a moment, saying nothing. Ruby shakes her head and sighs. “Granny thinks this-” She gestures between them. “-us being friends, is some kind of ploy on your part.”

It’s not surprising, though Regina can’t deny that a stab of hurt goes through her chest. “And you don’t agree?” She’s pretty sure she knows the answer, but the part of her that’s never really had a friend needs to hear it.

“Of course I don’t agree,” Ruby says, shaking her head. “And I don’t want her going around saying it when it’s not true.”

“People have said many things about me over the years, dear,” Regina says, unable to keep the smile from her face at Ruby’s vehement belief in her. “It doesn’t bother me.”
“Well, it bothers me,” Ruby says, folding her arms over her chest. “You’ve done nothing to earn their suspicion.”

“Apart from an extended vendetta against their princess and a curse that stole their memories for thirty years,” Regina reminds her. “You’re right, I’m practically an angel.”

“Apart from those things, yeah,” Ruby says, finally breaking into a smile at Regina’s teasing tone. She nudges Regina gently. “I’m trying to defend you, here.”

“And I very much appreciate it,” Regina says. “But I’m not so naive that I think people will forgive and forget my past deeds.”

“I have,” Ruby says, quickly. “Snow has.”

“I meant normal people,” Regina stresses, earning another nudge.

“C’mon,” Ruby says with a roll of her eyes. “Let’s get out of here.”

Regina nods. “Yes. I need to...freshen up,” she clears her throat. “After my ride.” She leans closer to Ruby and sniffs, wrinkling her nose. “And so do you.”

Ruby shakes her head with a chuckle. “It’s your fault!” she proclaims. “You made me work up a sweat!”

“And you’ve done so remarkably well,” Regina tells her, turning and heading to the door. “I hope it was all worth it and that your transformation will pass without mishap.”

“Thank you,” Ruby says, and Regina can tell she really means it. “So do I.”

Regina holds the door open and Ruby follows her through and up the stairs. The fresh air is welcome after the musty, underground smell of the bunker and Regina closes her eyes as they emerge into the sunlight, the warmth spreading over her face.
“So, did you really need to dangle Belle over a fire?”

Shrugging, Regina smiles. “It made things more interesting,” she replies, turning to look at Ruby. “The look on your face when you asked if she was real or not was quite something.”

“Does using all that magic drain you?” Ruby asks, her eyes roaming over Regina’s body. “Physically?”

Regina scoffs. “That? That was child’s play,” she boasts. “I could do that in my sleep.” Some magic is draining to use. Magic designed to protect or heal is the most draining. Regina doesn’t have a lot of experience with that, though protecting Henry’s heart made her woozy. “So don’t worry, keeping you amused won’t have me keeling over.” She pauses. “Although most puppies make do with a ball or a stick.”

“I’m not just any old puppy,” Ruby counters with a smirk as they enter the castle through the servants entrance. “I’m the big bad wolf.”

“Of course, dear,” Regina placates her. Ruby sends a playful glare Regina’s way, which the Queen ignores. “Had this been any other day, I might’ve suggested dinner. I suppose that’s out of the question tonight though.”

“Oh sure,” Ruby says, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “I could drag a bloody carcass back to you and we can share it.”

“Such a lovely way with words you have,” Regina says, the visual helping to dispel any romantic notions she may have been entertaining. A comfortable silence settles between the two of them, and they walk until they reach the staircase where they’ll need to part to go to their respective rooms. “Well, I suppose you should go,” she says, with a wrinkle of her nose. “You’re getting riper by the moment.”

“Which is still your fault for giving me such a workout!” Ruby argues.

“Which you asked me to do,” Regina counters. “Next time I’ll send kittens and butterflies at you, shall I?”
Ruby screws her face up. “I don’t like cats.”

Regina laughs, a genuine laugh that takes her by surprise as she’s accosted by a vision of Ruby on all fours chasing after a cat, barking. “Of course you don’t,” she manages to get out. “I’ll bear that in mind.” There’s no reason for them to be standing here. “So…”

Ruby looks back down the hallway and turns back to face Regina with a small smile. “Let’s not drag this out.” She squares her shoulders and nods. “I’ll find you tomorrow morning when I get back.” She turns and begins to leave.

Regina’s about to respond when a thought occurs to her and she freezes, her smile immediately falling. What if her sister’s flying abominations have seen her with Ruby? That might make her a target. Having seen Ruby’s display of strength and skill earlier leaves her in no doubt that she can look after herself, but with such a powerful sorceress on the loose, she doesn’t think it’s worth taking a chance.

“I don’t think you should go out into the forest tonight,” she says abruptly, causing Ruby to stop and turn back. “When you’re the wolf, I mean. It could be dangerous.”

Ruby frowns in confusion. “…don’t I have much of a choice?”

“Of course you do,” Regina says. “Just because you’re a wolf doesn’t mean you have to go outside. Surely you can stay in the castle? Prowl the battlements?”

“But…” Ruby shakes her head. “Where did this sudden urge for me to stay inside come from? I’ve been out the last two full moons. Hell, I was gone for a week by myself.”

“Ruby,” Regina begins, more panicked by the thought of Ruby being captured, or worse, than she thought she would be. “My sister is out there somewhere. She has her spies everywhere. You and I have been spending a lot of time together and she’ll know that. I’d hate for...for something to happen to you because of me.”

Ruby’s scowl fades as Regina explains. “I can take care of myself. Especially in wolf mode,” Ruby tells her, offering a small smile. “I won’t be alone. I’ll be with the other wolves.” She moves forward, placing her hands on Regina’s shoulders and squeezing gently. “But I’m glad you care.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far,” Regina says, her smile clearly indicating her words are a lie. Ruby shakes her head and gives Regina’s shoulders another squeeze before letting go.
“Of course, my mistake,” she says.

“Fine. Go,” Regina says, although she’s still conflicted. “Howl at the moon. Chase rabbits. Do whatever it is you do. And then find me in the morning.”

Ruby starts walking backwards, still smiling. “Save me a seat at breakfast?”

Regina nods, earning another smile, before Ruby finally turns and heads off to her room. Regina watches her go, amused when Ruby casts another look over her shoulder and then blushes at being caught. She watches until Ruby turns the corner at the end of the hallway, her smile fading when the other woman moves out of sight.

Realising that Ruby might be at risk because of her association with Regina gives her pause. She really shouldn’t allow the friendship to continue, or deepen, and put Ruby in further danger. But Ruby is the one bright spot in this bleak landscape she finds herself trapped in. If she gives that up now, the darkness will close in again and envelope her as it did when they first arrived back. She can’t allow that to happen.

She has to stay strong. For Henry. And for these idiots she’s living with.

And for Ruby.
The first thing she’s aware of, before she opens her eyes, is pain. Her shoulder hurts, her leg hurts, everything hurts. Turning onto her back, she realises she’s lying on a stone floor rather than the much softer ground of the forest. Opening her eyes slowly, she finds herself staring at the ceiling instead of the sky. She’s inside the castle. Torches illuminate the dim walkway, but Ruby’s keen eyes easily pick out her location. She’s lying across the doorway of Regina’s bedchamber.

This startles her enough for her to sit up, forgetting momentarily about her aches and wincing as she is abruptly reminded of them. Gradually, the events of the night come back to her. Her transformation had begun as all the others had. The brief pain of the actual change had given way to the freedom of the wolf as the scents and sights of the forest came alive to her. She had quickly picked up the whereabouts of the pack of wolves she’d run with in previous months and followed the trail until she found them.

That’s when the night took a turn for the worse. The pack had not been welcoming and playful as they had been before. Immediately, Ruby had known something was wrong. The smell of magic was strong around the wolves; their eyes unnaturally green. She was still observing the situation when the attack came from behind. Claws embedded in her shoulder, ripping across her back and down by her ribs. Ruby had easily thrown her attacker off, but the smell of blood sent the pack into a frenzy, howling and pouncing and circling her. Even in wolf form, Ruby knew it wasn’t the fault of the animals that they were acting this way. Something was driving them, controlling them. Being much larger and stronger than any of them, Ruby wasn’t unduly concerned, though the sheer number of them had her at a disadvantage. She evaded the next few attempts by batting the wolves away with her paws or moving out of the way. But when the pack advanced almost as one, she found herself overpowered, battling right and left. A set of teeth latched onto her hind leg, ripping at the flesh there and causing Ruby to howl in pain. The pack, sensing victory, attacked again, but the adrenaline from the pain gave Ruby the burst of strength she needed to break away, using her longer, more powerful legs to outpace the wolves, running and running until her lungs were fit to burst.

When she could no longer hear the howls and yips of the pack, she finally allowed herself to slow down. And that’s when the pain kicked back in. Her hind leg was dragging and a quick glance told her her fur was matted with blood. The pain in her shoulder was worse, though. A deeper wound. With her tongue lolling out of her mouth, Ruby lifted her nose to orient herself, trying to pick out the way home.

Her memories are jumbled after that, blurry and unclear. But she remembers a particular scent, one that called to her and comforted her. She remembers collapsing and then nothing after that. Until she woke up, sprawled outside Regina’s door.

“Jesus, Lucas,” she murmurs to herself as she rubs a hand across her face. “Way to play hard to
Pushing to her feet, she presses her lips together to keep from crying out in pain. The last thing she needs right now is to wake Regina and have her find her in this state. Regina’s warning about her sister comes back to her; those wolves were definitely under some sort of spell or enchantment. So, not only did Ruby get hurt, but Regina was right. Ruby rolls her eyes as she imagines all the ways Regina will find to say ‘I told you so’. She makes her way, slowly, back to her own bedchamber. Her leg is hurting and throbbing, sending waves of pain coursing up her thigh, and her back isn’t much better. Part of her thinks she should get someone to look at the wounds, considering this world isn’t exactly advanced in terms of medicine. But she knows she’ll heal quicker than normal people and that it will practically be gone by tomorrow, so she decides she’ll just patch herself up as best she can, plaster on a smile and live with it.

She reaches her room and heads inside. The light from the window tells her it’s still early so she collapses onto the bed, the effort it took to walk the short distance has taken more energy than it should have, and she allows herself a few moments of respite before she has to get ready for the day.

There are smells wafting up through the castle, and this is what rouses Ruby from her light sleep. She curses herself for having fallen asleep in the first place and starts the laborious task of moving from her bed to the dresser, stripping off her blood soaked clothes as she goes, to clean her wounds. Having finished that, she moves to her wardrobe to dress. A full skirt will cover the injuries to her leg. The corset causes her a little trouble, but she does it up as best she can, choosing a full length blouse to go under her bodice.

She starts a slow walk from her chambers to the dining hall. The pain only really comes back with a vengeance when she hits the stairs, and it takes her three times as long to go down them than it usually would because of her leg. By the time she hits the landing, there is a light sheen of sweat covering her forehead, and she’s breathless. She presses on and continues until she reaches the doors of the dining hall which, thankfully, are closed. She stands behind them, composing herself until she’s caught her breath and pushes the doors open. Her shoulder protests the weight, but the pain is dulled as she’s greeted by the sight of Regina sitting at the head of the table, eyes trained on the entrance.

In spite of the pain, Ruby smiles, and makes her way across the hall, disguising her limp as best she can. “Been waiting long have you?” she asks, when she’s near enough.

Regina frowns and ignores the question. She pushes to her feet and heads towards Ruby, her eyes on Ruby’s legs. The younger woman dips her head to try and get Regina to look back up.
“What happened?” Regina questions.

“I’m fine,” Ruby tells her, though it’s apparent that isn’t enough of an answer for Regina, so she elaborates. “I had a scuffle last night with a wolf from another pack. These things happen. I’m fine.” She reaches out and places a hand on Regina’s forearm. “Honest.”

“I told you to be careful,” Regina scolds, though concern is etched in her features. She bends slightly and gathers up Ruby’s skirts. “Has someone taken a look at it?” she asks, while trying to fight her way through layers of fabric.

Ruby shakes her head. “You’re cute when you worry,” she says, and fights laughter as there’s a scowl cast in her direction. She gently catches Regina’s hands. “I woke up and came straight to look for you, just like I told you I would. It’s a scratch. It will heal. It’s not the first time I’ve had a fight, and it won’t be the last.”

“Are you telling me to get used to this?” Regina asks, grudgingly dropping Ruby’s skirts back to the floor.

“Probably,” she answers, flippantly. “Are you hungry?”

“Not particularly.”

Ruby can feel Regina’s eyes scanning over the rest of her body looking for more injuries, and she’s a little uncomfortable under the scrutiny. She pulls out the closest chair and sits down, regardless of the fact that Regina would have to choose a chair that wasn’t at the head of the table. “Well I’m famished.” She’s not, despite not having eaten a thing, but she knows she needs to eat in order to heal. She piles her plate with food, and starts picking, ignoring Regina’s questioning gaze as she sits down next to her.

“So, aside from this scuffle,” Regina begins, taking the chair beside Ruby. “How was your night?”

Ruby shrugs. “Howled at the moon a few times. Growled at some shadows. I woke up dizzy, so I possibly chased my own tail.” She’s teasing. “It was fun.” Because she’s sure that’s the answer Regina was looking for. While she may have felt like that a month ago, it most definitely did not feel like that last night.
“You made it back in once piece I see? Not that you thought to come and tell me, of course.”

Ruby’s head whips to her left to where her grandmother is fast approaching; immediately tense. She really is not in the mood to go for another round, and so she sighs. “With how we left things yesterday, I wasn’t sure you wanted to know.”

“Regardless of how we left things yesterday,” Granny says, “you’re still my kin.”

“Well, as you can see Granny, I’m perfectly okay; not a scratch on me.”

Granny’s eyes drop to Ruby’s thigh before coming back up to meet her gaze in a challenge. “Then why can I smell your blood?”

“It’s bleeding?” Regina lets out, scraping her chair back and moving for Ruby’s skirt again.

“It’s fine!” Ruby tells them, smacking Regina’s hand away. “Just one of the pack getting scrappy is all.”

“Some young pup stupid enough to challenge you?” Granny asks. Werewolves are larger and stronger than regular wolves and both species know it. Wolves generally defer to the supernatural creatures, but occasionally there will be an upstart who wants to show off.

Ruby smiles a little “Yeah. That’s exactly it.”

“Tell the next one who tries that its pelt will look lovely in front of my fire as a rug,” Regina mutters.

“I’m surprised you were injured at all,” Granny bristles. “You need to be more careful. This isn’t the woods of Storybrooke, girl.” She shakes her head a little before turning back to Ruby. “I’d wager your opponent came off worse, though, and that none of them will try that again in a hurry,” she surmises.
"I told you you should’ve stayed in the castle,” Regina says, frowning. “And I didn’t even think that other wolves would be something else I had to worry about.”

"Look, I don't need to be watched over and treated like some neophyte," she snaps. "I'm a big girl. Now, if that was all Granny?"

Regina looks down, chastened, and Ruby immediately feels guilty for her outburst. She doesn’t get a chance to apologise before Granny cuts in with a huff.

“Oh, I’m being dismissed, am I?” she asks. “Fine. I’ll leave you be.” She moves closer to Ruby, effectively shutting Regina out. She points a finger at her granddaughter. “But you would do well to remember where you come from, girl. If you’re not careful, you won’t have anyone to come crying to when things go wrong.” It’s clear she’s not just talking about the wolf thing.

Ruby narrows her eyes and glares at her grandmother, finally at the end of her tether. “And you can’t pick and choose when that’s suitable for you. You can’t chew me out one minute, and come back the next day playing the concerned grandmother!”

Granny holds her hands up. “Fine. I’m sorry I was worried about you. It won’t happen again.” She casts a final look at Regina. “She’s all yours. Good luck.” And she turns and sweeps away without another word. Regina looks at Ruby.

“Shouldn’t you...do you want to go after her?” she asks.

Ruby stares at her grandmother’s back, disheartened. When she heard the start of Granny saying she was sorry, she thought she was going to apologise for her harsh words the night before. Apparently not. Keeping her eyes fixed on her, Ruby shakes her head and swallows past the lump in her throat. “No.”

“Ruby,” Regina begins, drawing her name out. “Don’t let this come between you and your family.”

Ruby sighs. “I’m sick and tired of people dictating my life.” She shakes her head, breaking the trance and turning to look at Regina. “Granny is just being too stubborn to see past who you were.” Ruby turns away from Regina to look at the other occupants of the table who have started to come into the dining hall. Granny is nowhere to be seen. “She’s said worse things to me, and I’ve said worse things to her...”
“She loves you,” Regina states, simply. “Don’t underestimate how important that is. To have someone who loves you unconditionally.” Ruby notices tears in Regina’s eyes, but before she can comment, they’ve been blinked away.

She wants to argue the point, she’s definitely in the mood to, but seeing the unexpected emotion on Regina’s face prevents her from doing so. She has no idea what to say, so she reaches out and lays a hand on Regina’s leg in a gesture of comfort. The touch startles Regina and she looks down at Ruby’s hand. After a moment, she covers it with her own briefly, before threading their fingers together. She looks into Ruby’s eyes and smiles. Someone walks past them and mumbles ‘Traitor’.

Ruby growls, but reins it in as she realises that the move might actually make people believe she has been swayed to the dark side. She doesn’t move her hand away, though, and squeezes Regina’s hand harder. Regina winces a little, but returns the gesture with a small smile. It doesn’t last for too long before it slides into a frown and Ruby can practically hear Regina’s brain ticking over. She swallows.

“You told me that another pack attacked you, but that’s not what you said to Granny…you said your pack did. Which is it?”

“I- you must have misheard,” Ruby tries to backpeddle. “I told Granny it was another pack.”

Regina shakes her head. “No, you definitely said it was your pack…and Granny asked if it was another wolf challenging your position in the pack. You agreed.” Regina’s frown deepens. “What are you hiding?”

“It’s nothing,” Ruby tells her quietly. “I can handle it.” The last thing she wants or needs is for Regina to get involved.

“If you need to ‘handle’ it, then it’s not nothing,” Regina presses on. “Ruby...what really happened last night?”

“It was more than just a pup trying to challenge me for my status,” Ruby tells her, still deciding against telling the truth. “It was an older wolf, older than me, trying to challenge me. I doubt it’s the last of it.” The last part is definitely the truth.
“Even an older wolf wouldn’t match you in size or strength, Ruby,” Regina says, not letting it go. “You’re not giving me the whole story. Which concerns me.”

Ruby gives Regina’s hand one last squeeze before letting it go and offering a small smile to compensate. “You don’t have to worry about me, Regina,” she tells her gently.

“Somehow that doesn’t ease my concern even slightly,” Regina says.

Ruby’s smile slowly disappears. “We should eat,” she suggests. “Then maybe we can saddle up a horse or two?”

Regina sighs but gives Ruby a small smile. “I’d like that.”

Ruby lets out a breath, grateful for the reprieve. “Good.”

Having changed into more suitable riding attire, Ruby makes her way back down the stairs. The pain in her leg is already lessening, though her shoulder is still giving her a little trouble. Before she even reaches the foot of the stairs, she knows Granny’s waiting for her along the hallway. She considers heading the other way, but that would be childish. Steeling herself, she turns and faces her grandmother. She raises her eyebrows.

“Did you want to speak to me, or are you just loitering?” she asks.

“Don’t get lippy with me, girl,” Granny snaps, taking in Ruby’s change of clothes. “Going somewhere?”

“I’m going riding,” Ruby says, keen to hurry this conversation along.

“I don’t have to ask who you’re going with,” Granny says, her lips pursing in distaste.

“I’m going with Regina,” Ruby tells her with a sigh. “I don’t see why this is a problem for you.”
“Oh, no reason,” Granny says. “I suppose the fact that you’re spending every waking moment with our former enemy shouldn’t bother me at all, is that right?”

“The operative word in there is former, Granny,” Ruby points out. “She’s no longer our enemy. She saved all of our lives by bringing us here. She’s on our side.”

“So are any number of other people, but I don’t see you cozying up to them at every meal,” Granny presses.

“I’m not cozying up to anyone,” Ruby argues.

“Uh huh,” Granny says. “Then why do you reek of her and her magic?” She wrinkles her nose.

Ruby’s hand instinctively covers the pendant around her neck. “As you said, I’ve been spending a lot of time with her. Of course I’m going to pick up a little of her scent.”

Granny shakes her head with a sigh. “Just...be careful, Ruby,” she says. “I’m sure it’s flattering to have the Queen or the Mayor or whatever she thinks she is fawning all over you. But don’t be so quick to trust everything she does. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, and that woman can drip with honey when she wants to.”

“No one is fawning over anybody, and I’m not being charmed or flattered by anyone, especially Regina,” she whispers heatedly, making sure to emphasise Regina’s name. “I’m giving her the chance no one else seems to be giving her. I took the time to get to know her and I like her.”

“That’s very clear,” Granny says. “You follow her around like a lovesick puppy. Just like always, someone makes eyes at you and you roll over and wait to have your belly rubbed.”

Ruby snarls, her eyes yellow, baring her teeth.

Granny tilts her head. “You think you’re helping your case right now? Growling at your kin?” She fixes Ruby with a hard stare. “People will talk. Don’t give them cause to think your head has been turned. Do you really want to be cast out again?”
“I don’t know where this is coming from,” Ruby snaps. “People trust Regina. If they didn’t, why would she still be here with us? Eating and sleeping in the same castle as everyone else?”

Granny laughs. “She’s only here so we can keep an eye on her to make sure she doesn’t team up with her sister.”

“Is that so?”

Ruby jumps at the voice. She’d been so focused on Granny that she hadn’t noticed anyone else approaching. Regina is descending the stairs. Her face is neutral, but Ruby knows that Granny’s words must have hurt. Regina doesn’t speak again until she’s directly in front of the older woman.

“You’d do well to remember, old woman, that I saved all of you from oblivion by bringing us here. At great personal loss, I might add,” she says, her voice low and terrifying. “If I wanted to join my newfound sister in whatever scheme she’s cooking up, there’s not a damn thing any of you could do to stop me.” She pauses. “And then you really would be in trouble.”

“Not in as much trouble as you will be in if I smell anymore of your magic on my granddaughter,” Granny threatens. “You understand me, Your Majesty?”

“You need to go now,” Ruby tells her grandmother, upset that Regina has to hear this.

“Whether or not I work my magic on your granddaughter is up to her,” Regina says with a smirk. “And only her.”

Granny shakes her head. “You’re a disgrace, Ruby.” With that parting blow, Granny turns on her heel and walks back in the direction of the great hall.

Ruby glares at her grandmother’s back, determined not to let her emotions take over.

“Well,” Regina begins. “She certainly has very strong feelings.”
“Yes,” Ruby agrees, stony faced. “Yes, she does.” She blinks, snapping herself out of it. She whirls to face Regina. “I’m really sorry you had to witness that.”

Regina waves the concern away. “Don’t worry about that,” she says. “Are you...alright?”

“I’m fine,” Ruby lies, nodding her head. “She’ll get over it.” She’s not entirely sure that’s true, either. But she’s sick and tired of her trying to take over and dictate her life. She turns to Regina with as big a smile as she can muster. “Let’s ride.”

It feels nice to be out in the sun with Regina, and not have to question her thoughts and feelings about being in the other woman’s presence. With every passing mile, the weight of her confrontation with Granny lightens a little and she allows herself to relax and enjoy Regina’s company. The Queen is at her most free, her most radiant, when on the back of a galloping horse, and Ruby can’t get enough of it. She ignores the pain in her shoulder and leg and spurs her horse on, laughing as Regina grins at her before urging her own horse to go faster, unwilling to be beaten. They spend a very pleasant afternoon racing and playing and not thinking about Granny or the Wicked Witch or any other unpleasantness.

They make it back from their ride with plenty of time to spare before sunset and separate to freshen up. Ruby is just finishing getting dressed when she hears the knock on the door. The bath was painful against her healed over wounds, but she doesn’t feel as stiff as she did earlier that morning. Her senses tell her it’s Regina at the door and she can’t help the grin that makes its way to her face. It’s been a strange couple of months, and she’s still trying to work it all out, but she likes that her time spent with Regina makes her forget about everything else. She opens her chamber door. “Hi.”

Regina opens her mouth to respond, but her eyes are drawn to where Ruby’s bodice hangs loosely off one shoulder. Ruby follows her gaze to the deep laceration, surrounded by mottled bruising at the top of her arm. “What’s that?” Regina asks, reaching out to gently probe the damaged skin.

Ruby immediately steps back, not wanting Regina to touch the sensitive area. “It must have come from the guards you conjured up yesterday.”

Moving with the other woman, Regina gently pushes back the clothing to get a better look. “Ruby, it’s a claw mark.”

She stands there, vulnerable as Regina appraises her. She’s been busted, and Ruby’s not sure how
much longer she can keep up with lying. There’s no other way to explain away the fact that the mark is, indeed, a claw mark. “It was from last night,” she admits.

Regina is silent for a moment as she softly touches the very edges of the wound. “It’s deep,” she says, her voice low. “This and the limp...what else?”

Ruby swallows and turns her back to Regina, loosening the bodice even more, and letting it drop. She sweeps her hair to the side that doesn’t have the cut and hangs her head, showing Regina her bare back, which she can only assume is covered in bruises, cuts and the like, even if they’re probably mostly healed by now.

“Oh...Ruby,” Regina whispers. Ruby turns her head catching a glimpse of her back in the vanity mirror. It’s a patchwork of red and purple and yellow, criss crossed with gashes and darkened by bruising.

She feels gentle fingertips brush over her back, followed by the press of a soft kiss to her shoulder and Ruby gasps at the contact, not out of pain but out of surprise, and shivers. She doesn’t move, nor does she speak. She’s too ashamed of her lies. Of being attacked by wolves in her own pack and coming out worse for wear.

Regina rests her head on Ruby’s uninjured shoulder and lets her hands fall to Ruby’s hips. “Why?” Ruby bites her lip, unwilling to share the cause. Regina continues. “This is no scuffle for alpha status. This is a fight for survival.”

Ruby just shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter,” she finally whispers, bringing her arms up to cover her chest, feeling tiny under Regina’s gaze.

“It does matter.” Regina’s whisper is vehement and harsh and she feels scolded. Regina slips her arms further around Ruby’s waist, her hands meeting over her bare belly. She’s gentle in her movements, and Ruby is pulled back against Regina’s body. “You matter, Ruby,” she murmurs.

A single tear spills on to her cheek, and she sniffs a little. In Ruby’s entire life, she can think of perhaps two instances where she’s been made to feel like she matters, that she’s important. She’s never been much more than Snow’s sidekick, Granny’s troublesome granddaughter, and the girl with the smile who serves coffee. She doesn’t understand why Regina could think she matters. If those wolves had killed her last night, Snow would have been upset, Granny would have been sad, but everyone would’ve gone on with their lives. The fight with Zelena would have gone ahead as if nothing had changed. These thoughts bring on more silent tears.
Regina squeezes her, gently. “You’re not going back out there tonight.”

Ruby’s eyes harden, and she moves out of Regina’s arms and pulls her corset back into place, before turning to face Regina. “I’m not running from them,” she tells her, matter of factly.

“Ruby, by the look of you you barely made it out alive last night. What do you think will happen if you meet the same again tonight, only this time you’ll be weakened through injury?” She moves closer to the younger woman, standing in front of her. Regina’s face is contorted with anger. “They will kill you.”

“Do you think they won’t find a way into the castle?” she snaps. “That they won’t try and get to me just because you are protecting me? You’re -” Ruby stops, realising she’s about to reveal far more than she wants to, especially to Regina.

“I’m what?” Regina presses. “You think I’m not capable of protecting you? Of protecting everyone?” She shakes her head. “You’d rather go out there and risk your life, just to keep them away from everyone else. Do you not trust me?”

“I trust you!” Ruby grits out, heatedly, whirling around to face her, angrily. “That’s not the issue,” she finally reveals. “This wasn’t a scuffle for the top dog position. Those wolves attacked me as soon as they saw me. And they weren’t acting alone.”

“And?” Regina spits, throwing her hands up in the air. “What are you talking about?”

Well shit. Ruby’s eyes close in regret. She didn’t want to come clean to Regina about this. Now, with all the confusion, she obviously has no choice. “The wolves were...being controlled. They weren’t acting as they normally would. And I could...I could smell magic on them,” she tells Regina, seeing understanding beginning to dawn in the other woman’s eyes and hating that she needs to tell her this. “Their eyes were glowing green.” She leaves it at that, the implication clear. She knows this isn’t going to sit well.

Regina backs away, shaking her head. “So...you got hurt...you’re in that state,” she closes her eyes. “Because of me?” Her last words are barely a whisper.

Ruby shakes her head, even though she knows that any response that doesn’t agree with Regina isn’t going to be heard. She goes for it anyway. “No. Not because of you. Not because of you at
“Of course it’s because of me, Ruby!” Regina spits. “Do you know anyone else with a crazy sister who can control animal behaviour?” Her eyes have taken on a shade of purple and Ruby worries her bottom lip between her teeth. “This is why I asked you not to go out last night,” Regina says quietly. “I told you this was going to happen. This is what I was afraid of!” Her voice increases in volume on every word until it’s booming.

“I am not running,” Ruby states firmly. “Not from them.” She steps closer to Regina and slowly reaches out to place a gentle hand on the small of her back, coming to stand at Regina’s side. “And not from you,” she adds quietly.

Regina moves away from Ruby’s touch, wrapping her arms around herself. “So you’re going to willingly put yourself in harm’s way?” Regina asks, her voice thick. She laughs, but it contains no humour. “In fact, you already have. You’ve spent the whole day with me, knowing that my sister could be watching.” She turns to Ruby, her eyes flashing. “Are you stupid?”

“To want to spend time with you?” Ruby asks.

“Now you’re being purposefully obtuse,” Regina huffs, shaking her head.

“I’m not letting your crazy ass sister dictate my life,” Ruby argues. “And I will keep going out there to prove to her that she doesn’t get to tell us what to do or who to like.”

“Well, I’m sure that’ll make me feel a whole lot better when I’m standing over your grave,” Regina bites back.

“You don’t think I can take them?” Ruby asks. Was Regina in that building with her yesterday?

Shaking her head, Regina sighs. “This has nothing to do with your abilities, Ruby,” she says. “And everything to do with the fact that your association with me resulted in you being seriously injured by creatures who should have welcomed you without question.” She pauses, swallowing. “You shouldn’t be around me anymore. It’s too dangerous.”

Ruby frowns and shakes her own head in response. “I decide what’s good for me and what isn’t,” she tells Regina in a low voice. “You don’t get to decide that I can’t be ‘around’ you anymore.
And I didn’t go through last night for nothing.” Her voice raises with every sentence. Somehow in the time they’ve spent together, Ruby has realised that she and Regina have a lot more in common than she ever thought. She understands Regina, and she’s sure Regina understands her. There’s a connection. And something inside Ruby doesn’t want to throw that away. “I’m alive, and I’m here. With you, might I add.”

“I can’t do anything about what’s already happened,” Regina says. “But I can sure as hell make sure I don’t put you in any further jeopardy. And I’ll start by removing any trace of me that lingers on you.” She walks up to Ruby and holds a hand just in front of her necklace, absorbing whatever enchantment it contained. Purple sparks fly from the trinket back into Regina’s hand. When it stops, Regina lifts the jewel into her hand and squeezes; nothing happens. Keeping her eyes on the necklace, she speaks again. “Whatever this is between us, Ruby, it’s not worth your life.”

Glaring at the other woman, Ruby reaches up to cover Regina’s hand at her necklace and yanks, hard. The chain breaks, and it remains in the queen’s hand. Regina looks up into Ruby’s eyes, surprised by the move. Ruby knows that the hurt she feels must be showing on her face. For all their conversations leading up to this point about people dictating their lives, Regina is doing exactly that.

“So, Your Majesty, I should just run away and hide for the rest of my life, is that it?” She resorts to using Regina’s formal title.

Regina pushes the necklace against Ruby’s chest for her to take back. “Well, tell me your plan, Ms Lucas,” Regina says. “Go out every night and fight these animals in some twisted display of loyalty to me?” She moves forward, her face almost touching Ruby’s. “Stubborn stupidity does not win my favour.”

Ruby ignores the jewel at her chest. “Why don’t you tell me what I should do?” she challenges.

“Stay. Away. From. Me,” Regina growls. “Stay. Safe.” She lets go of the necklace, allowing it to fall to the floor. Instead, she grips Ruby’s bodice, pulling her closer. Her expression is one of anger, but Ruby doesn’t miss the shimmer of tears in her eyes. “Everyone around me gets hurt, Ruby. Don’t let yourself be one of them.”

“I’d rather be hurt defending you than be hurt by you.” She pulls herself out of Regina’s grip. “Get out.”

For a second, Ruby thinks Regina might argue. Part of her wants her to argue, to fight for this. But the Queen holds her head high and nods. “You’ll see it’s for the best, Ruby. I promise.” She
turns and heads back to the door. She pauses with her hand on the knob. “Please be careful if you insist on going out this evening.” She turns the handle and opens the door.

“Just like that, huh?” Ruby asks. “I never thought you were a coward.” Ruby finds it ironic that the first night she knocked on Regina’s door she had wanted to ignite a fire in the Queen’s belly. Turns out the fire was lit in her own.

Regina freezes when Ruby utters that word and Ruby can see the telltale signs of magic crackling over the doorknob. She turns, slowly, and meets Ruby’s eyes. “A coward?” she repeats, moving back into the room again, her presence larger, more imposing than it was a moment previously. She approaches Ruby, eyes steely and mouth set in a hard line. “How dare you,” she whispers. “How dare you.” Her eyes are practically purple flame at this point. “I am here, in this wretched place, without the person I love most in the world because I gave him up for all of you people.” She advances further, invading Ruby’s personal space. “And when I manage to find one person here who actually makes me feel something, I am willing to give her up for her own safety. And you have the audacity to call me a coward for it?”

“I’m not the one suggesting I run away. I’m not the one who wants to give up the ‘one person here who makes me feels something’,,” Ruby yells back at Regina. She’s unperturbed by the violet colour in her eyes, knowing that her own are probably glowing yellow in response. “You want to run from this, Regina? You want to give it up? Go ahead. I’m still going out there tonight.” She turns to look out the window, the sun is starting to set. She sends another glare in Regina’s direction before she makes for the door. She doesn’t say anything more.

Regina grabs her wrist as she passes, pulling until the younger woman is facing her. She shakes her head. Without speaking, she yanks her closer and presses their lips together in a heated, angry kiss. Ruby barely has time to react to the feel of Regina’s lips against her own, barely has time to kiss back before Regina pulls away, regarding Ruby with hard eyes.

“Just make sure you come back.”

Still angry from the argument, and shocked by the kiss, all Ruby can manage is a nod. She waits until the other woman lets her wrist go before continuing on her way out of the chambers, making it into the open air before changing into her wolf and running and running.
Chapter 8 - Regina

Regina presses two fingers to her lips, a purple glow transferring between them. She looks at it as it swirls around her fingers before turning and directing it at the mirror. Immediately an image of Ruby appears, running through the castle archway, headed for the woods. She watches with interest as Ruby’s long strides change, her body bending forward and turning into that of the wolf. Regina draws in a breath at the sight of the majestic creature. She moves to the vanity and takes a seat, planning to be here all night if necessary.

She notes the slight limp still noticeable in the wolf’s hind leg and shakes her head. “Stupid girl,” she murmurs, resting her elbow on the table and her head in her hand. She catches herself smiling a few times as Ruby’s wolf form gets distracted chasing rabbits or squirrels. She really is like a big puppy. But when a howl sounds and Ruby’s head snaps up, Regina sits up straight, immediately on alert.

A low growl comes from Ruby’s throat and her hackles rise, she crouches down low, ready to attack if necessary. Regina searches the darkness for any sign of an opponent. Slowly, several sets of glowing eyes become visible and Regina gasps. There must be at least twenty of the animals, and they’re closing in on Ruby. While clearly larger than the others, she’s severely outnumbered, and injured.

“Get out of there, Ruby,” Regina whispers. “Don’t be an idiot.”

One of the wolves moves out of the pack, prowling closer to Ruby. Ruby snaps her jaws and feints a pounce and the animal moves back to the safety of the others. A few others try their luck and are met with growls and gnashing of teeth. But then they get wise and four animals start to approach Ruby at the same time. She spins round, snapping at them, but they seem to realise she can’t take them all at once and they continue moving towards her. Regina’s heart is in her mouth when Ruby does pounce at the nearest wolf, her large paws slam into its ribs, pushing it out of the confrontation. She whips around in time to bat another aside, running her claws down its side and sending it whimpering away. The third jumps on her back and she shakes it loose, turning to attack the fourth.

Unfortunately, the fourth has been joined by a fifth and sixth and seventh. This time, they all go for her at once. She puts up an admirable fight, but the opponents keep coming and when one of them sinks its teeth into her neck, Regina can’t hold back any longer. In a puff of smoke, she appears in the forest, in the middle of the fight. A blast of energy from her hand takes out the wolf attached to Ruby’s neck, followed by a few more well-placed blasts, pushing back those nearest to the werewolf. She moves closer to Ruby, creating a dome shaped forcefield around the pair of them. She makes a quick appraisal of Ruby’s injuries, the bite on her neck is bleeding profusely and she’s holding up her front paw. Regina holds out a hand, unsure if the wolf will recognise her. She knows Ruby can control the wolf and that she doesn’t attack people, but she has no idea if
Ruby retains her knowledge of people while she’s in wolf form. “Ruby?” she says, keeping her voice even.

The animal’s ears prick up in what Regina hopes is recognition. It lets out a soft growl, bringing a paw down to try and bat her hand away, but the wolf is so weak, it just falls into her hand.

The large paw is heavy and she can see it has a gash across it. Secure that the forcefield will hold, she brings her other hand down and holds it out in front of the animal’s snout, letting it sniff her, which it does. She’s fascinated by the size of the wolf so calmly sniffing at her. Then it does something that surprises her; it hobbles forward and lowers its head, pressing it into Regina’s chest. She’s taken aback by the gesture, but smooths her hand along its neck and over its broad back, murmuring comfort by its ear. “Shhhh, Ruby, I know. We’ll fix you up.” She threads her fingers into the black fur on Ruby’s back and grips her, using her other hand to take them back to the castle where they reappear on the floor of Ruby’s chamber in the same position.

The change in location puts the wolf on alert and Regina finds herself looking into the angry yellow eyes of a snarling wolf. It tries to take a step towards her, to intimidate, but stumbles to the side and falls, letting out a yelp of pain.

Seeing the proud, strong animal tumble to the floor panics Regina and she bends to stroke its head. “Hang on, Ruby. I’ll be back soon...I promise.” She presses her face into Ruby’s fur for a second and then disappears in a puff of smoke. She lands in the kitchens where she quickly locates Granny, speaking to one of the cooks. Everyone in the room turns to look at her unexpected appearance, but she pays them no heed and heads straight for Granny. Not allowing her time to get in a snide remark, Regina speaks. “You have to come with me. Ruby’s hurt.”

Granny’s eyes narrow. “I thought I told you she was your problem, your majesty,” she responds, but Regina can see a flicker of concern across her face. “Where is the foolish girl?”

Not waiting for permission, Regina takes hold of Granny’s arm and poofs them both back to Ruby’s chambers where the wolf is still lying in the same position, panting. Regina lets go of the older woman and moves to kneel at Ruby’s side, stroking the fur on her head.

“Good lord,” Granny lets out, startled from the transportation, Regina assumes. Regina ignores her and concentrates on calming Ruby, stroking her neck and scratching at her head. She tries not to be too distracted by the red, matted fur on the side of her neck. Without warning, Granny swoops in, shooing Regina away for a closer look.
“Why am I surprised? You never did know what was best for yourself!” she whispers angrily. It earns her a half-hearted growl. “Oh hush now, Ruby.” Regina watches as Granny’s hands move over Ruby’s body, quickly and methodically.

She turns her attention to Regina. “Get me her cloak,” she orders. “We need to change her back.”

Looking around the room, Regina quickly locates the cloak and moves to get it. She brings it to Granny, unsure if she should lay it over Ruby herself or let her grandmother do it. She holds the garment out. “Here.”

Granny takes it out of Regina’s hands and lays it over the wolf, they both watch as Ruby transforms back to herself. She lets out a yelp of pain and Regina cringes at the sound. Granny seems unaffected as she continues her assessment of the injuries. There are obvious puncture wounds on Ruby’s neck from she was bitten. It’s still bleeding. There’s a gash on the back of her hand that looks particularly nasty, and there are fresh blood stains on the front of her bodice. Granny starts to loosen the garment to get a better look at what lies underneath, and Regina holds her breath.

Ruby lies still while her grandmother works her bodice off, whimpering as the cloth is peeled away from her abused skin. The only movement she makes is to hold the cloak over her chest as Granny urges her onto her side to get a look at her back. Regina can’t help the gasp that escapes her mouth. The injuries from the previous night are still there, though faded. But they’ve been joined by a host of new cuts and bruises. She’s amazed Ruby can remain conscious; her pain tolerance must be incredibly high. Regina drops to her knees by Ruby, running a hand through her hair as she’d done to the wolf, only for the younger woman to turn her head away from the touch.

“Well, she’ll live,” Granny says, gruffly. “What the hell happened out there?” When no response is forthcoming from Ruby, she turns to Regina for an answer.

Hurt by Ruby’s response to her touch - the wolf seemed to like it a whole lot more - Regina meets Granny’s eyes briefly before returning her attention to the younger woman. “Her pack attacked her. Again. As they did last night.” And here’s the part that tears at her. “It...it would appear that the Wicked Witch has enchanted the wolves of the forest and turned them against Ruby.”

“And you let her go back out there?” Granny yells.

Regina’s head whips around. “Do you think I would have knowingly endangered her?” she asks, her voice hard. “After I found out, I tried to make her see sense. But she’s so damn stubborn. A
family trait, it would seem.”

“You watch your tone,” Granny threatens.

A low growl is heard from behind them. “Shut up, both of you!”

They turn in unison to see Ruby drag herself into a seated position, pulling the cloak around herself. Regina automatically goes to help, but remembers the last rebuff and draws her hand back. “How do you feel?” she asks, instead, not entirely comforted by Granny’s medical assessment.

“Woozy,” she replies, her voice clipped. She pulls the cloak tighter around herself, pain evident on her face, though Regina’s sure she’s trying to mask it.

Ruby clearly isn’t in the mood for talking, so Regina tries Granny instead. “Shouldn’t you be tending to those wounds? Especially that one on her neck?” It’s not an arterial wound, thankfully, but it’s deep and still bleeding. “Should I get Whale?”

Granny looks between the two of them. “I’ll get Whale,” she decides. “There’s more of a chance of him following me up here than you.” Off Ruby’s glare, she adds, “Oh, it’s the truth and you know it. I’ll be back soon.” She turns and bustles out of Ruby’s chambers.

Left alone with Ruby, Regina feels awkward. She knows she probably overstepped the bounds of what Ruby deems appropriate tonight, but she has no regrets about doing it. She clears her throat. “We should get you into bed. You’ll be more comfortable.”

“How did you know I was in trouble?” Ruby asks, pinning Regina with her gaze, which is unwavering, despite the pain she must be in.

She expected the question, though perhaps not quite so soon. “I...was watching you.” She nods her head towards Ruby’s vanity table. “Through the mirror. I saw you being attacked.”

“Watching me?” Ruby echoes. “And what kind of magic did you have to use for that?”
“The same magic I use for everything, dear,” Regina says, her teeth clenching. “Dark magic.”

Ruby shakes her head. “No, I mean how. That’s not...I mean you can’t just watch anyone in the kingdom anytime you want, right? Otherwise you’d be able to find the Witch.”

Regina sighs, unsure what difference it makes. “Before you left...I...I kissed you. I used your essence from the kiss to track you.”

Ruby narrows her eyes at Regina. “So that kiss was so you could spy on me?” she asks carefully.

“That wasn’t the only motivation behind it,” Regina says, tightly. “And you know that.” She starts to get a little indignant herself. “And if I hadn’t spied on you, you would be dead right now. Would that have been preferable?”

“Don’t use your magic on me like that again,” Ruby tells Regina, the rebuke softened a little by her tone of voice. Still holding her cloak over her chest, she attempts to push to her feet, losing her balance a little as she does so. Regina moves forward quickly and steadies Ruby, catching her by the elbow and helping her to stand.

“I’m not promising that,” Regina says. “I’ll do it again if it means you stay alive. Even if it means you want nothing more to do with me.”

Ruby leans her weight more fully on Regina as they make their way slowly to the bed, Regina helps her to lay down, making sure the cloak remains wrapped around her. The fight seems to have gone out of the younger woman and that worries Regina. Brushing her hair out of her face, she notes that her skin is pale and clammy. The wound on her neck is still the most worrying one, and, without thinking, Regina lifts her hand to try to heal it. Ruby grabs her wrist, startling her and she looks up into blazing eyes.

“What did I just tell you?” Ruby snarls. “I don’t need your magic.”

“And I just told you that I’d do whatever it takes to keep you alive,” Regina snaps. “Which includes not letting you bleed to death when I can easily prevent it.”

“I’ll heal soon enough on my own,” Ruby says, though the grip on Regina’s wrist is weakening. “I don’t need you to drain yourself on my account.”
“Will you just shut up and accept help for once?” Regina growls. No reply comes because Ruby has passed out. Regina grits her teeth and lifts her hand again, letting her magic flow into the cut on Ruby’s neck, watching as the skin knits itself back together.

The door bursts open and Whale enters, carrying a bag. His eyes fall to the pool of blood on the floor before moving to the bed, taking in Ruby’s state. He lets out a low whistle.

“They really did a number on her, huh?” he says, moving to the side of the bed Regina isn’t occupying. She frowns at him.

“Is that your medical assessment?” she snits.

The doctor doesn’t waste any time once Regina moves away, checking Ruby’s pulse and listening to her chest before attending to her other, less pressing injuries. Granny comes into the room a short while later with a basin of steaming water and some washcloths. She places them on the dresser and comes over to stand by the bed. Regina watches as her brow creases in confusion.

“Her neck,” Granny begins, her eyes meeting Regina’s. “You healed it?”

“Yes,” Regina says, waiting to be lambasted for using magic. The rebuke doesn’t come. Instead, Granny just nods, her lips set in a firm line. They stand together in silence and watch as Whale carries out his assessment. Perhaps for the first time, they’re both on the same page.

A mangled cry startles Regina out of the light sleep she’d fallen into by Ruby’s bed. She sits up straighter in her chair, trying to get her bearings. Her eyes fall to Ruby, who is starting to wake up, a hand scratching at her neck. Regina gets to her feet and moves to sit on the bed, placing a gentle hand on Ruby’s wrist, pulling it away from the healed over wound. “It’s best if you don’t touch that,” she murmurs, causing Ruby to blink up at her in confusion.

“I miss modern medicine,” Ruby grumbles, allowing her hand to be pulled away. She tries to sit up, and hisses in pain, stopping her progress. “Your sister’s a bitch.” She shakes her head. “ Seriously.”
“I don’t disagree.” She reaches a hand out to help Ruby up and pauses. She doesn’t want to risk Ruby’s ire by doing anything to her against her will right now. “Do you need help to sit up?” she asks, wincing in sympathy as her eyes land upon the marks marring Ruby’s usually flawless skin. Her hand and neck are patched up, but there’s bruising on her chest and arms that the sleeping shift doesn’t hide. For a moment Regina thinks Ruby is going to reject her offer of help and struggle up on her own, probably hurting herself more in the process. But she gives a slight nod.

“How did I get back here?” Ruby asks as Regina eases her arm underneath her and gently helps her to sit up against the pillows.

“I brought you back, magically.” She sighs, that’s probably going to be another fault. Making sure that Ruby is settled, she moves away again, but stays sitting on the bed. There’s another long pause, during which Regina braces herself for the inevitable rant about using magic on Ruby without her consent.

“Thank you.”

A little surprised by the response, Regina nods. “You’re welcome.” She dips her eyes. “I...didn’t enjoy seeing you like that.”

Ruby nods her head. “I didn’t ask you to watch over me,” she tells Regina. “But I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“You may think me a coward, Ruby,” she says, frowning at the word and how hard it hit her when Ruby said it. “But I’m not going to allow you to throw your life away to prove a point.” She swallows through a painful throat when she thinks how easily Ruby could have died if she hadn’t cast that tracking spell.

"I shouldn’t have called you that," Ruby admits quietly. "I know what you gave up for this. I know how much you're hurting." She reaches out with her unbandaged hand and rests it on Regina's forearm. "I will stay in the castle tonight. It’d be suicide to go back out in this state. But I will be out next month. No one is scaring me away. Not the wolves. Not your weird relatives. And not you."

Relief fills Regina’s chest when Ruby says she’s not going out, but she decides she shouldn’t make a big deal out of it or the stubborn girl might change her mind. She covers Ruby’s hand where it rests on her arm with her other hand, gently stroking a thumb over the back of it. She’s sure that those wolves didn’t appreciate her intrusion last night, especially if they’re being driven by her
sister. She probably made the situation worse. She looks at Ruby and gives her a small smile. “Good,” is all she says in relation to Ruby staying indoors.

“And this hasn’t scared me away from you either,” Ruby says, raising an eyebrow. “So don’t think you’re getting rid of me.”

Regina sighs. “I’m clearly not very good at staying away from you, no matter what I might say.”

“I don’t want you to stay away from me,” Ruby tells her with a frown. “If I did, I wouldn’t have gotten to know you in the first place.”

“I don’t want to stay away, Ruby,” she says. “But I don’t want you to be in danger because of me. Those wolves…” She trails off as she remembers seeing Ruby’s neck torn open. She closes her eyes and shakes her head.

Ruby sighs, turning her hand over so that she can hold Regina’s. “I decide what’s good for me. Got it? I knew what I was walking into with whatever is happening between you and me. And I knew what I was going to get myself into last night. No-one is going to frighten me away from you.”

Unused to hearing such words directed at her, Regina looks away, embarrassed. She lets go of Ruby’s hand and stands up, smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress from sleeping in the uncomfortable chair. She walks to the window; the sun is still low in the sky, slowly warming up the hills in the distance.

“So, I met your wolf,” she says, changing the topic of conversation. She turns to look at Ruby over her shoulder. “She’s magnificent.”

“She was more than a little pissed off at your antics,” Ruby says with a raise of her eyebrow. “You’re lucky she didn’t bite your hand off.”

“Nonsense,” Regina says. “She took to me immediately. I have a way with animals, as well you know.”

Ruby lets out a laugh, and then clutches at her side, hissing. Immediately Regina is back by the bed, checking Ruby’s injuries, only to be batted away.
“I’m fine,” Ruby protests. “I just forgot it would hurt to laugh.”

“I don’t understand why you were laughing in the first place,” Regina huffs, sitting back down in the chair she’d slept in. “I don’t think I said anything amusing.”

“I was laughing at how terrible you are at all of this,” Ruby says, gesturing vaguely between the two of them.

Regina frowns. “At playing nurserymaid?” she asks. “I haven’t had much practice, dear. Beyond the odd scraped knee, Henry has managed to remain very healthy throughout his life.”

“No, not that,” Ruby says. “The other thing. The ‘something’s happening between us’ thing.”

On her feet with her hands on her hips, Regina is indignant. “What do you mean, I’m ‘terrible’ at it?” she demands. “I’m sitting by your sick bed, listening to you scold me for caring about you enough to throw myself into a pack of rabid wolves to save your stubborn backside!”

Ruby’s mirth only seems to increase while she’s speaking, and she’s grinning by the end of Regina’s speech. “Sure, and that’s lovely,” Ruby agrees. “But you just used the fact that I turn into an animal three times a month to flirt with me, and the first time you kissed me was so you could use your weird mojo to track my movements.” She raises an eyebrow. “Yep, you’re the queen of romance, alright.”

Regina opens her mouth to dispute this, but closes it again when she realises it’s actually true. If somewhat flippantly put. Crossing her arms over her chest, she moves back to the window. “Well, that’s another thing I haven’t had much practice with,” she mutters. “I apologise for my ineptness.”

“I think it’s kinda cute, personally.”

She glances back at the bed to see if Ruby’s joking, but she appears genuine.

“I’m not cute,” Regina protests.
“Well, I say you are,” Ruby tells her. “And I’m sure you’ll get better. Our second kiss can hardly be any worse than the first.”

“Thank you for that resounding vote of confidence, Ms Lucas,” Regina says, wondering how on earth she’s supposed to improve in the romance stakes without Ruby laughing at every attempt she makes. Then she frowns. “There won’t be a second kiss. We’ve talked about this.”

“Well, I didn’t mean this minute,” Ruby says. “Just, you know, when you’re ready.”

“Ruby,” Regina begins, reluctantly. “I—...I don’t want you to hang around wai—”

“Who did we just say makes my decisions for me?” Ruby challenges, with a smirk.

Regina rolls her eyes. “You.”

“Right.” Ruby nods. “And I am more than happy to wait to see what happens. No pressure. I just...I don’t want anyone else.”

Ruby’s smile slices into her heart and her throat tightens. She walks back to the bed, settling herself on the very edge of it. Ruby’s pointed glance at the amount of space between them makes her roll her eyes and shift closer. She lifts a hand to cup Ruby’s cheek, her heart is hammering in her chest and she just knows Ruby’s damn supernatural hearing will pick up on it.

“You, Ruby Lucas, are a stubborn idiot,” she says, trying to remain stern.

“But…” Ruby prompts, drawing the word out.

“But...in spite of your idiocy, it appears I’ve grown rather fond of you,” Regina admits. “And, if there is a second kiss, I’ll do my best to make it better than the first.”

“You better,” Ruby tells her, in a stage whisper. “Because you just know Snow’s gonna want all the details and I can’t tell her you kissed me while we were yelling at each other and I was in the process of storming out.”
“She can hardly complain, not when she thinks hitting people with rocks is a form of flirtation,” Regina points out.

“Well, now that’s all agreed,” Ruby begins, her expression turning serious. “There are a few things we still need to straighten out about last night.”

“Such as?” Regina prompts.

“No more spying,” Ruby tells her, gently. “And no more telling me what’s good for me. Don’t try to get into my head and tell me how I should be feeling or what I should be doing.”

Regina sighs and studies Ruby for a long moment. “Again, I’ll point out the part where if I hadn’t been watching you last night, you’d have died.” She sighs. This is clearly a matter of pride for the younger woman. “Will you let me watch over you if I ask permission first?”

“I don’t need anyone to watch over me,” Ruby says.

“Would you rather drive me mad with worry?” Regina presses, putting more of her emotions on display than she wants to.

Ruby stares her down for a long moment. “Are you going to stop trying to push me away?”

“You can see how effective that was,” Regina says, indicating how close they’re sitting.

Ruby shakes her head. “That’s not what I’m asking.”

Regina sighs, unused to having prolonged discussions about her feelings. Though God knows Snow White tries her best. “The only reason I tried to push you away was to keep you safe,” she says, her voice soft. “As I told you, people around me tend to get hurt and I don’t want that to happen to you. But you seem determined to put yourself in danger anyway.” She meets Ruby’s eyes again. “No. I’m not going to keep pushing you away.”
“Good,” Ruby says with a nod. “So. If we were doing the kissing thing...this would be a really
good time to-”

The sound of someone clearing their throat makes them both jump. Regina glances over her
shoulder and sure enough, Granny is standing in the doorway.

“Don’t let me interrupt,” she says, gruffly.

“Too late,” Regina mutters. She makes no attempt to move from her position on the bed, turning
slightly to keep her eyes on the imposing matriarch.

Ruby sighs and looks over to her grandmother. “Something you wanted Granny?”

Granny crosses her arms over her chest. “I wanted to see how you were doing. You seem to be just
fine.” She gives Regina a pointed look.

“You said yourself that she’d heal fast,” Regina says, turning to inspect Ruby’s visible injuries.
The bruising is fading already, yellowing around the edges, and the scratches are healing. Granny
and Regina had spent a tense few hours together while they assisted Whale in tending to Ruby’s
injuries. While they hadn’t spoken much, they had reached a quiet understanding that they both
had Ruby’s best interests at heart.

“I take it you’re not planning to go back out there tonight?” Granny questions. “Not while her
sister’s lackeys are still after your hide.” Granny jerks her head in Regina’s direction.

“I’m staying in tonight,” Ruby assures her. “I need to heal, and I’m not dumb enough to make the
same mistake three times.”

“Just twice?” Regina can’t resist pushing the point home.

“Hush, you,” Ruby tells her, with a light slap to her arm.

Granny clears her throat again, clearly annoyed at their interaction. “Well, that’s something,” she
“I expected to have to knock some sense into that thick head of yours.”

“Yeah, well,” Ruby begins, with a sigh. “I don’t have the energy to fight both of you on this.”

“Learn to listen to people who care about you,” Granny says. “Maybe even accept some help once in a while.”

Ruby’s eyes narrow. “Maybe it’s only people who refer to me as a ‘disgrace’ I have a problem with, Granny.”

The old woman tenses as the word is repeated back to her. “From what I walked in on, it doesn’t seem like my opinion matters much to you.”

Blood rushes to Regina’s cheeks as she realises what Granny must have overheard. Ruby doesn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

“When you base your opinion on what’s in front of you rather on someone’s past or what people will say,” Ruby tells her. “Then maybe I’ll start taking it into consideration.”

The older woman only shrugs. “I’ve seen a lot more of life than you,” she says. “I know when something’s too good to be true.”

“I happen to still be in the room, ladies,” Regina snaps. She turns to Granny. “I think what you meant to say to Ruby is that you love her and will be there for her, no matter what. Isn’t that right?”

Granny offers Regina a tight smile. “I don’t need to go around saying flowery words all the time, Your Majesty,” she says. “Ruby knows who’s been there for her from the moment she was born. And who’ll still be there when others decide to move on.”

“Granny!” Ruby barks. Regina can’t help but be a little impressed at the old woman’s courage.

“You need to rest,” Granny says, ignoring Ruby’s shout. “We should leave you in peace.”
“Oh,” Regina says. Leaving Ruby to rest hadn’t even crossed her mind. “Of course...we should give you some time to-”

“No,” Ruby is quick to say, grasping Regina’s arm. “I mean…you don’t have to leave.”

Granny shakes her head, scoffing as she walks out of the room. “Yeah, I’m sure you’ll get a lot of rest with her in here.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer to be alone to get some rest?” she asks, not mentioning that she’s had less than an hour’s sleep herself. The night was spent helping Whale tend to Ruby and then watching over her. Granny had stayed for a while, but her old bones didn’t cope well with sleeping in an uncomfortable chair, despite her protests to the contrary, and Regina had insisted she go to bed.

“I’m quite enjoying having a Queen attend to my every need,” Ruby says, with a smile that stretches into a yawn. It’s contagious and Regina finds herself following suit. She brings a hand up to cover her mouth. When the yawn subsides, Ruby’s looking at her. “I’m guessing you didn’t get much sleep last night, huh?”

“I slept on and off,” she says. She neglects to add it was only for five or ten minutes at a time. “I’m fine.”

Ruby looks down at her bed, shuffling over slightly. “You could sleep here. With me.”

The temptation is strong. Not only to be close to Ruby, but just to lie down on a comfortable surface. Now that she’s sure that Ruby is okay and reassured that she’s not going back out that evening, sleep is a very attractive prospect. “I was planning to buy you dinner first.” She smiles to show she’s joking and that this isn’t another ‘terrible’ attempt at seduction.

“Easy there, tiger,” Ruby says, pulling the blankets back and shuffling further over. Regina notices her movements are getting easier and she’s wincing less. Werewolf healing really is a thing of wonder.

“I should probably get Whale back up here,” Regina says, moving off the bed to let Ruby adjust the blanket. “To check your injuries. Or give you pain relief.”
Ruby’s already shaking her head. “No,” she says. “The last thing I want right now is to get naked in front of Wha-” Her eyes go wide. “How, uh, how did I get into this thing last night?” She plucks at the sleeping shift she’s wearing.

Suddenly very interested in her fingernails, Regina shrugs. “Well, Whale couldn’t very well see through your clothes, could he? So we had to...unclothe you for him to examine you. After that, I conjured that shift for you.”

“And you did all of this with your eyes closed, right?” Ruby asks, hopefully.

Regina lifts her gaze to meet Ruby’s with a smile. “To be fair, I’d already seen most of it in the diner in Storybroo-.” A pillow connects with her face with enough force to make her take a few steps back.


Regina shakes her head, bending to pick up the pillow. “It’s fine. It was unnerving to see you so weakened.” She walks back to the bed, replacing the pillow, plumping it a little, then stepping back, with her hands clasped in front of her.

“Are you getting in?” Ruby pats the empty side of the bed.

With a small nod, Regina changes her outfit into sleeping attire and Ruby frowns.

“That’s not fair,” she grumbles as Regina climbs into bed.

“Life isn’t fair, dear,” Regina says, letting out a sigh as her tired body makes contact with the pliant surface, letting herself sink into the welcoming mattress. Turning onto her side, she looks at Ruby. “How do you feel now?”

“Still sore. Just not as sore,” Ruby says with a yawn. They lie in silence for a few minutes before Ruby shakes her head. With a rustle of covers, she shifts closer to Regina and a long arm winds itself around Regina’s waist. Ruby’s head comes to rest on her chest, just above her heart, which
speeds up considerably at the unfamiliar touch. She tentatively brings an arm to encircle Ruby’s shoulders, holding her loosely.

“Good,” she says, though it turns into a yawn halfway through.

“You’re thinking too much,” Ruby whispers, she runs a hand down Regina’s side. “Sleep.”

And for once, Regina obeys a command without question.
“Ruby Lucas, you get your furry butt up out of that bed and talk to me!”

“What the fu-” Ruby’s indignant question is interrupted when she realises that Regina is awake, a fireball swirling in the palm of her hand, ready to blast the intruder. Her reflexes kick in and she grabs Regina’s wrist before she can hurl it.

Mary Margaret ducks down at the foot of the bed, her eyes appearing a few seconds later to assess the situation. “Not really a morning person, huh Regina?” she mumbles.

Regina turns over, hiding her face in the pillows and mumbling something that Ruby is pretty sure is profane. Standing up straight now that Regina’s lethal hands are back under the covers, Mary Margaret plants her hands on her hips and glares at Ruby. “Granny informed me about last night. And the night before,” she says.

Ruby groans and rubs her hands over her face. She peers out of the window; the sun is well and truly up over the castle. It must be mid-afternoon, at least, but she’s definitely not awake enough for this right now. “Mary Margaret -”

Ruby’s silenced by an index finger pointed at her. “I don’t want to hear it!”

“Then what are you doing in here?” Regina’s voice is muffled, but still sharp.

Ruby wonders whether Regina is fully aware of the situation yet. Mary Margaret must’ve found the two of them wrapped around each other in bed. Mary Margaret narrows her eyes at the question.

“Well, maybe I do want to hear some things,” she amends. “But not excuses about why you didn’t think it was necessary to inform me that possessed wolves attacked you two nights in a row.”

“Probably because I was incapacitated?” Ruby deadpans.

“You told Regina,” Mary Margaret counters, and Ruby tries very hard not to scoff at her friend’s
childish behaviour. She’s about to explain when Regina beats her to it, turning back over, wrestling with the covers when they tangle around her legs.

“She didn’t tell me anything,” Regina says, finally kicking herself free of the covers. “I saved her idiotic life!”

Ruby is about to protest at the use of the word ‘idiotic’, but Mary Margaret is on a roll.

“You knew enough to go after her,” she argues. “She must have told you something during your little breakfast date yesterday.” Mary Margaret turns her attention back to Ruby, who cringes under the accusation in her eyes. “I saw you were back safely and you looked happy so I thought nothing of it. But Granny says Zelena sent wolves after you two nights in a row. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Regina sits up suddenly, an arm across her chest, even though she’s wearing a sleeping shift. Yep, Ruby thinks, she’s just realised what Mary Margaret walked in on.

“Well, this sounds like a private conversation,” Regina says, getting out of bed. “So I’ll leave the two of you alone.”

Ruby grabs Regina’s wrist and pulls her back down. “No, she has that look in her eye. I may need a witness.” She’s joking, mostly. She really doesn’t want Regina to leave because she feels she has to. But when Regina offers a small smile and places a hand over Ruby’s, she knows that Regina is still leaving.

“If you’re not at dinner, I’ll send a search party.” Ruby sighs and lets Regina go. She gets up off the bed and nods her head once at Mary Margaret. “Ms Blanchard.” She brings her arms up, and just like that, she’s gone in a puff of a purple smoke.

Mary Margaret raises her eyebrows at Ruby. “Well, that’s certainly the first time I’ve walked in on my best friend and my stepmother in bed together.”

Ruby sighs. Sensing Mary Margaret is nowhere near finished, she falls back against the pillows and peels back the covers. “Get in. You may as well be comfortable while you say whatever it is you’re gonna say.”

“So this is a joke to you?” Mary Margaret asks, turning wet eyes on Ruby. Ruby doesn’t miss the
tremor in her friend’s voice. “I have to find out you’ve been seriously injured from your grandmother, because you’re too busy snuggling with Regina to stop in and let me know?”

“Well, I was actually too busy recovering from serious injuries to stop by for afternoon tea and gossip, Mary Margaret,” Ruby says, annoyed by the accusation. “And I wasn’t snuggling with Regina. I was…” There was definitely a little snuggling going on. “…recovering.”

“Yeah, it sure looked that way.”

“Mary Margaret, come on.” Ruby gets up; the pain from this morning significantly less than what it was, and allowing her to move more freely. She comes to a stop just by her best friend. “I can’t tell what you’re more upset about here.”

Mary Margaret turns to face her with a frown. “What do you mean?”

“Well, are you upset because I didn’t tell you I was injured? Or are you upset because of what you walked in on?” Ruby asks, feeling like it’s more the latter. “Which, by the way, wouldn’t have happened if you had just knocked on the door like a normal person.”

Mary Margaret scoffs, and then scoffs again. “Why would I be upset at walking in on you and Regina sleeping together?”

Ruby feels her defences rise at Mary Margaret’s tone and tries hard not to react. She guesses it’s probably a double blow to the chest for the other woman; finding out nobody thought to tell you that your best friend had nearly died, and then finding said best friend in bed with the woman who made it her mission in life to kill you for the last thirty years or so. She tries to think of how she’d respond in this position, and any remaining anger dissipates. Ruby gestures to the bed. “Can we sit? Please?”

Hesitating briefly, Mary Margaret moves to the bed and sits on the edge of it, her arms crossed. Ruby sits down next to her, one leg folded under her and one dangling over the edge of the bed, so that she can face her friend.

“How are you, anyway?” Mary Margaret asks, and despite her mood, Ruby knows it’s a genuine query.
“I’m fine,” she assures her friend. “I...I think it was pretty bad last night, but you know me.” She gives her friend a hopeful smile. “Nothing keeps me down for long.”

“Hmmph.” There’s a hint of a smile on Mary Margaret’s lips now, but it’s quickly covered up. “I suppose I can’t blame you for not telling me about the wolf attack last night. But you could’ve told me about the night before.”

Ruby thinks about arguing the point; she even opens her mouth to do so. “I should have told you,” is what she says. “But in my defence, I didn’t tell anyone. Regina knocked on my door, and I wasn’t properly dressed and she saw a clawmark I’d been trying to hide. It all went downhill from there.”

“So, even before today, you were parading around in your underwear in front of her?”

“Wow!” Ruby lets out, feeling her anger rocket right back up and she stands up. Mary Margaret has teased and taunted Ruby about such things, but only ever in jest. “I can’t believe I actually have to say this to you, of all people, but I was fully clothed. My shirt was not done up properly.”

Mary Margaret shakes her head. “Are you...are you together?”

“No,” Ruby tells her, immediately. “But...look, it’s complicated. We acknowledged some stuff that’s been going on between us and we’re -” she pauses. “Well, I’m not too sure what we’re doing. I think we’re just... going with it. Seeing what happens. But we’re not together.” Not that she feels like it’s Mary Margaret’s business.

Mary Margaret sits up straighter and looks at Ruby with a stony face. “And when were you planning on telling me about that?”

Ruby frowns. “I don’t know. Today? Tomorrow? When I felt like I was ready to talk about it? I guess we’ll never know because you decided to burst into my chamber and-”

“Find you in bed together?”

“Oh yeah, you found us sleeping, totally scandalous,” Ruby says. She tugs at the shift she’s wearing. “Do you think I’d be wearing this if we’d been doing anything remotely interesting? It’s like something out of Little House on the Prairie.”
“Charming likes them,” Mary Margaret mumbles and Ruby wants to cover her ears and wipe that from her brain.

“Well, believe me, if I ever sleep with Regina Mills, I will not be putting one of these back on afterwards,” Ruby says.

“Some of us like to maintain a little modesty,” Mary Margaret huffs, though her cheeks have taken on a pink tinge.

Ruby is left feeling hurt, yet again. “And I don’t,” she finishes for Mary Margaret. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all,” she responds with a frown.

Ruby sighs and rubs her hands over her face. “Look, I don’t want to fight with you.” She sighs again. “I get why you’re pissed about my not mentioning the fact that I was hurt. And I might even understand you being shocked at finding Regina in my bed. What I don’t understand is where this attitude is coming from. This isn’t you.” She comes back to the bed and sits down again. “So talk to me.”

“Oh, come on,” Mary Margaret says. “I’m processing. Cut me a little slack! Imagine if you had walked in and found me in bed with Rumpelstiltskin or something. Wouldn’t you have been shocked?”

“I don’t think I’d compare Regina to Rumpelstiltskin…and let’s face it, you slept with Frankenstein…” She preempts the indignant response she’s sure will come. “I also would’ve had the decency to knock first.” She pauses to search her friend’s face, frowning. “What’s the rest of the story, Snow?”

There’s a few moments of tense silence as Mary Margaret is either fighting against saying anything at all or coming up with something that’s not the truth. Ruby sighs. She’s not about to force her friend to tell her anything; but then again, she’s never had to before. The girl obviously wants her secrets and Ruby is in no mood for this game.

“I’m jealous.”
Surprised by the quiet admission, Ruby puts a hand on Mary Margaret’s leg and dips her head to try to catch her eye, brow furrowed in confusion. “Jealous?” she asks. What could Mary Margaret possibly have to be jealous about?

“Not jealous jealous,” Mary Margaret rushes to clarify. “Just...not even just now, either. I’ve been jealous since you first started talking to her,” she admits, looking down and playing with a piece of lace on her dress. “Regina’s always been someone I...looked up to, I guess?” She scrunches her face up. “I know that’s crazy, right?” Shaking her head, she lets out an embarrassed laugh. “Even when she was trying to kill me, I thought…’if only I could get her to love me we could fix all of this’.” She bumps her shoulder against Ruby’s. “And now you’ve won her over with no effort whatsoever.”

Her immediate reaction is to feel guilty that she found it so easy to befriend Regina. While they haven’t spoken about it much, Ruby’s always known that Mary Margaret held Regina in high esteem. She never really understood it before now. She bites her lip before an apology comes out of her mouth. Yes, it’s tragic that Mary Margaret never got the kind of affection she sought from Regina, but that is not Ruby’s fault. There’s nothing she can say that will make it better, but she feels she should say something after such an admission. Eventually she just pulls her friend into a tight hug, kissing the side of her head.

Mary Margaret shakes her head and lets out a shaky laugh. “I’m fine. I’m just being silly,” she whispers. “And hey, this might be my way in, right?” she jokes, hugging Ruby back.

“Maybe you should talk to her?” Ruby suggests after a few moments of silence.

Waving a dismissive hand, Mary Margaret shakes her head again, painting on a smile. “There will be plenty of time for that,” she says.

Ruby frowns. “So…” She draws the word out into a question. “Just to clarify, you’re not pissed about me and Regina, uh…” She has no idea how to finish that sentence.

“Ruby,” Mary Margaret interrupts. “Nothing comes between me and you. Okay? Especially not who you choose to date.”

There’s a grain of resentment festering at the back of Ruby’s mind that flares up when she hears those words. Of course, now that Ruby is potentially entering a relationship, that shouldn’t be allowed to interfere with her friendship with Mary Margaret. But Snow was quite happy to
completely forget her after she met Charming. And since Emma came into the picture in Storybrooke, Ruby’s barely spent any time with her friend. But God forbid she get to spend time with a significant other to the detriment of Mary Margaret.

“Of course not,” she says, with a tight smile. There’s no point in bringing that stuff out into the open right now. Mary Margaret will get upset and then Ruby will get upset and it won’t improve the situation. “But, for the record, I’m not dating Regina.”

“Yet,” Mary Margaret says, rushing to interrupt before Ruby can protest further. “And when you do, I won’t care. Because I love you.”

Ruby feels herself being enveloped into a hug that she is hesitant to return, but does so anyway. “Yeah, I love you too,” she says, because that is and always has been true. She holds the hug for a moment before withdrawing. Mary Margaret’s face grows mischievous.

“So...about the part where you were in bed with Regina…”

Ruby rolls her eyes. “I was injured. And I was tired. And she’d spent the whole night in that horrible armchair. She was exhausted.” She holds her hands up. “It was nothing more or less than that.”

“So you napped together? That’s sweet,” Mary Margaret says with a smile.

Ruby smiles back a little. “It was… nice.”

“Well, it’s nice that you let her care for you,” Mary Margaret says. “Sometimes you forget you need people too, Ruby. You’re always there for everyone when we need you.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ruby says, blushing. She’s the faithful friend, the sniffer dog, the babysitter. She’s nothing special.

“And you tell Regina that she better treat you right, or she’ll have me to answer to,” Mary Margaret blusters, with her best intimidating glower. Ruby laughs.

“Ummm, coming from someone who was cowering in fear at the foot of my bed twenty minutes
ago, I’m not sure that works as a threat,” she says. “And, again, we’re not dating. But I appreciate
the sentiment.”

“I have my own skills,” Mary Margaret pouts. “Anyway, are you up to the War Council meeting
today? If Zelena’s targeting you, we really need to come up with a strategy to counter her
methods.”

“Oh, a war meeting, joy,” Ruby sighs, flopping back down onto the bed. “Uh, no, I don’t think
I’m healed enough for that yet.”

Mary Margaret pokes her in the side, gently. “You’re healed fine,” she decides. “You’re coming.
We need all the information we can get on how Zelena operates and, aside from Regina, you’re the
only one she seems to have gone after specifically.”

“Lucky me,” Ruby murmurs, putting her hands over her eyes. She could do with another few
hours of sleep, but her injuries aren’t bothering her anymore. She really has no excuse for not
going to the meeting. And Mary Margaret is right, this is the first new information they’ve had for
a while. “Fine. I’ll be there.”

“Good,” Mary Margaret says, standing up and stepping between Ruby’s legs so she can look down
at her in her prone position. “And make sure to bring your girlfriend.”

“Mary Ma-”

“I’m sorry.” Her grin suggests she’s anything but. “Your kinda-weird-it’s-complicated-friend?”

“Regina is fine.”

“You’re so boring,” Mary Margaret grumbles. “Fine, bring Regina.” She wrinkles her nose.
“And have a bath first.”

Ruby kicks her friend’s ankle, careful to keep her strength under control. “Go away. Go do
whatever it is princesses do in fairytale castles.”

“I’ll see you in an hour,” Mary Margaret says, kicking Ruby’s ankle in return before tilting her
head and smiling at her. “I’m really glad you’re okay.”
“Me too,” Ruby admits, returning the smile. “Now go. I have to get ready”

The sound of her friend’s retreating footsteps punctuate Ruby’s thoughts as she stares at the ceiling. Although, as she pointed out repeatedly, she’s not in a relationship with Regina, in a way, she’s glad Mary Margaret knows about the way she feels. If anyone has a right to bear a grudge against Regina, it’s her. And she doesn’t seem to have any ill-will towards Ruby about the situation. Unlike Granny. She’s not even sure what Granny’s problem is. Like everybody else in Storybrooke, she saw Regina struggle with her path to redemption, eventually leading to her saving the whole damn town and losing her kid in the process. Surely that’s a pretty good indication that she’s on their side?

She sighs again. There’s little point in trying to second guess what Granny’s thinking. It’ll come out eventually. She pushes herself into a seated position, feeling her tired body protest at being removed from the soft surface of the bed again. She turns her head to the side and sniffs herself. Yeah, Mary Margaret was right, she needs a bath.

Freshly washed and wearing clean clothes, Ruby feels almost back to normal as she makes her way to the war room. Almost all trace of her injuries has disappeared. One could think the attacks never happened. She heads into the room and is immediately accosted as Belle grabs her arms.

“Are you okay?” the librarian asks, her eyes wide and worried. “People are saying you were attacked by wolves!”

“People should mind their own business,” Ruby says, glaring at Granny’s back before turning a smile on Belle. “I’m fine. Honestly. You don’t have to worry.”

Belle appears reassured, and squeezes Ruby’s arms once before letting go. “Good,” she says, leading the way to the round table where the discussions take place. Mary Margaret and David are already there, engaged in a conversation with Robin and Leroy. Ruby takes her usual seat and they look up. David immediately leaves his seat and comes around to put a hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, you look good!” he says, sounding surprised. “I heard you’d been practically ripped in half.”

“You know how these gossips like to make everything sound more dramatic than it actually is,”
Ruby says, waving him off. “I’m fine.” A faint scent catches her nose and immediately a smile appears on her face as she turns to the doorway. Sure enough, Regina appears a few seconds later, looking far more refined than she had when she left Ruby’s room earlier. She’s dressed in a blue velvet dress that looks like liquid midnight as it moves with Regina’s curves. Ruby’s eyes are glued to her as she approaches, until she notices the raised eyebrow and the smirk the Queen is wearing. She quickly averts her eyes and doesn’t look up until Regina has taken the seat opposite her at the table.

“You’re looking better,” Regina says, heedless of the table’s other occupants.


“I had a short nap,” Regina tells her. “It helped.”

Granny snorts, without looking up from her knitting. Mary Margaret clears her throat.

“I think that’s everyone here now,” she announces. “So, we should probably get started.” People shuffle to the table and take their seats. Ruby notices quite a few curious glances being thrown in her direction.

“As you all probably know by now, Ruby was attacked last night,” David begins. “She believes that Zelena somehow enchanted a pack of wolves to seek her out and attack her specifically.” He holds a hand out to Ruby. “Do you want to tell us what happened?”

Suddenly thrust into the spotlight, Ruby shifts in her seat, uncomfortable. “Uh, not much to tell, really,” she starts. “I went out like usual, was doing my wolf thing, and the wolves I ran with the last couple of months...just, turned on me, I guess.”

“How do you know Zelena sent them?” Leroy asks. “Seems to me wild animals are pretty unpredictable.”

“Their eyes were glowing green,” Ruby says, shivering as she remembers several pairs of them staring at her. “And dark magic has a very specific smell. Zelena’s magic was definitely at play.”

“Why is she targeting you?” Archie asks. “I mean, we know she’s gone after Regina a few times, but she has no quarrel with you.”
Ruby’s eyes snap to meet Regina’s, unsure of how much the other woman wants her to reveal.

“It’s Regina’s fault,” Granny pipes up, still concentrating on her knitting.

Ruby watches Regina’s face harden, but the Queen doesn’t dispute the claim. Ruby shakes her head.

“No, it’s not,” she says, already knowing more questions will be forthcoming.

“Why would it be Regina’s fault?” David asks, looking between the two women, and then at Granny.

“Because she and Ruby have been cavorting all over the place like a couple of teenagers,” Granny explains, plainly. “So Zelena’s obviously decided that Ruby is a prime target in whatever her little game is.” She turns her glare on Regina. “Because of her association with you.”

Regina’s gaze drops to the table and Ruby wants to physically hurt someone.

“Cav-” David begins, confusion clear on his face. “Huh?” Leroy’s mouth is hanging open and Robin is grinning like an idiot at her.

“I don’t think we’re trying to assign blame, here,” Mary Margaret cuts in. “We’re looking at what we can do to make sure Ruby is safe.”

“She’d be safe if she stayed away from her,” Granny says, with a nod towards Regina, and Ruby can’t stand it any longer. She stands up, knocking her chair over in the process. Leaning both hands on the table, she waits until her grandmother meets her eyes.

“I’m not staying away from her,” she says, her voice low and clear. “So that’s not a viable plan. Let’s move on.”

“So, the two of you are-” David makes a strange gesture between herself and Regina.
“No,” Ruby confirms. “We’re friends. And if you think Regina is somehow to blame for her psychotic sister sending a pack of wild animals after me, then you’re wrong. The moon is full again tonight, and I expect them to be after me again. I thought you wanted to help me, not judge me.”

“Nobody’s judging you, Ruby,” Mary Margaret soothes.

“I am,” Leroy says.

“Nobody except Leroy is judging you,” Mary Margaret amends. “Please, sit down and we can talk about this.”

“Talk about what? My non-existent love life?” Ruby snaps. She feels like she’s been cornered and she’s lashing out.

“Just like old times,” Leroy says, jumping when Granny’s knitting needle embeds itself into the table, very close to his hand. Ruby grits her teeth in annoyance. Granny can’t publicly ridicule her one second and then jump to her defense the next.

“Ruby,” Regina’s soft voice cuts into her mind and draws her attention back to the woman in question. “Please sit down. I’m sure we can all be adults about this very serious matter.”

Her breath is coming quick. Wolfstime always brings her emotions to the surface. She closes her eyes and takes a few deep breaths before turning to pick up her fallen chair, and then sitting in it. Leroy lets out a humourless laugh.

“Wow, didn’t take long for you to get pussy whi-”

“Leroy!” Mary Margaret screeches, and everyone at the table jumps. The shock is probably the only thing that prevents Ruby from jumping across the table and pounding Leroy’s leering face.

“One more remark like that and you will not be welcome at this table,” David tells the dwarf, and Ruby’s heart swells a little at the support.

Leroy grunts his agreement, but continues to glare at Ruby. David waits until the tension has lowered marginally before continuing.
“Regardless of the reason,” he begins, his eyes straying to Granny. “Ruby is a target for Zelena at the moment and we all know how powerful Zelena is, which means we need to do everything in our power to protect Ruby.”

“And how are we supposed to do that?” Leroy asks. “It’s not like we know how to defeat her today any more than we did yesterday. Just ‘cause Ruby’s gone and got herself into trouble, doesn’t mean we can do anything about it.”

“My men and I can add the wolves’ territory to our patrols,” Robin offers. Ruby shakes her head.

“No, I don’t want the wolves hurt, it’s not their fault.”

“Leroy’s correct,” Regina says, drawing some surprised looks. She shrugs. “It’s true, we know nothing more of the witch than we did previously. All we can do is ensure that Ruby is not left vulnerable at any time. As Mrs Lucas has already pointed out, her connection to me has made her a target and we have to mitigate that by not letting my darling sister get a clean shot.”

“I told you already, I’m not having her turn me into a prisoner,” Ruby protests, wondering if Regina has even been listening to her at all. “I will not run scared from her.”

“Then you’ll die, girl,” Granny interjects, looking Ruby directly in the eye. “I saw you last night. Another few minutes with those wolves and they’d have ripped you apart.” Briefly, she thinks she sees a shimmer of tears behind Granny’s glasses. Both Mary Margaret and Regina turn away at the words. Granny’s eyes turn hard once more. “Don’t be an idiot.”

“So that’s the big plan, huh?” Ruby asks, throwing her arms up in frustration. “I hide away for the rest of my life?”

“For now,” Regina confirms, her face neutral. “Until we can figure something else out.”

“While I agree with the plan we have,” Mary Margaret starts, “What’s to stop the wolves from coming directly to the castle under the Witch’s instruction, knowing that Ruby is here? Is she really safe?”
“She is still in the room,” Ruby snaps, narrowing her eyes at everyone who is gaping at her.

“My men and I shall take post outside the castle walls,” Robin interrupts. He looks at Ruby almost apologetically. “I know you don’t wish for any harm to come to the wolves, m’lady, but should they come near and appear to attack… Well I’m afraid we’ll be left with no choice.”

“There will be no need for that,” Regina says before Ruby can open her mouth to protest. “I can raise wards around the castle. Zelena may be able to break through my blood magic, but I doubt she imbued the wolves with the same ability. The forcefield will stun them, nothing more.”

Ruby looks at Regina and smiles. “Thank you.”

Regina smiles back, but it lacks warmth. “As you said, it’s not the wolves’ fault this is happening.”

“And it’s not yours either,” Ruby says softly.

“Yes, well I’m sure others, including myself would disagree with you.”

Leroy’s face has lit up. “Hey, here’s an idea. How’s about instead of working your magic, Regina, you just offer yourself up as a sacrifice and we can all be done with the Witch and with you?”

Ruby is up and out of her chair like a shot, but before she’s even reached the dwarf, she’s engulfed in purple smoke. When it clears, she’s back in her bedchamber. Regina’s there too, scowling.

“That was a foolish move, Ruby,” Regina says, and Ruby rounds on her.

“So I should’ve just let him speak about you that way?” she asks, still hyped up from the argument and the impending full moon.

“He’s not the only one thinking it,” Regina says, moving to the window, her eyes on the setting sun in the distance. “Maybe he’s not completely wrong.”

Ruby marches over and grabs Regina’s arm, turning her so they’re facing each other. “Don’t say
that,” she warns. “You don’t get to wrap me in cotton and then throw yourself to the wolves. That’s not how it works.”

“Isn’t it?” Regina questions with a raise of her eyebrow. “Isn’t that exactly how you people think? Do whatever brings the greatest good to the most people?”

“It won’t just end with you,” Ruby tells her. “And how do you think Henry would feel about that?”

Regina smiles, tears appearing in her eyes. “I’m sure he’d be proud that I’d died a hero,” she says. “Protecting people, rather than terrorising them.”

“You’re already a hero to him, Regina,” Ruby says, almost pleading with Regina to agree with her. “You need to give us more time to find out what Zelena’s plan is before you go and sacrifice yourself needlessly.”

“Oh, it’s needed,” Regina mumbles and Ruby growls in her face. Regina raises an eyebrow in response. “That doesn’t scare me, dear.” Her lips turn up at the edges. “Amusing though.”

“This isn’t a joke, Regina!”

“I don’t believe I’m laughing,” Regina counters.

Ruby fixes her with a glare. “I’m not going to have you commit suicide when it won’t change anything. With or without you, Zelena will keep coming. And if we ever get back to Storybrooke someone is going to have to look into your little boy’s eyes and tell him what happened. It is admirable, but it is also stupid.” And she doesn’t want to lose Regina.

“So then you understand why you cannot go out there tonight,” Regina says, quietly. “Or next month, or the month after until she’s defeated.”

“So this was all just to prove a point?” Ruby asks through a frown.

Regina is shaking her head even before Ruby is finished speaking. “No, it wasn’t. But how you feel about me going to seek my sister, is how I feel about you going out to fight the wolves. Only
you’ll be far more missed than I will.”

“So you want to hear how much you’ll be missed?” Ruby asks incredulously. “Is that it?”

“I know exactly how much I’d be missed, Ms Lucas,” Regina says, her face growing hard. “I’m not seeking your platitudes, merely pointing out facts.”

“You hardly know me, and yet you’re standing there spouting ‘facts’ about my life?” Ruby knows, somewhere in her head, that she’s not really angry at Regina. She’s angry at the whole situation. She’s angry at herself. But Regina’s the one in front of her and the moon will be up soon, which means Regina will bear the brunt of whatever Ruby has to throw. She points vaguely in the direction of the War Room. “They’d miss me approximately the same amount as they’d miss Pongo.”

Regina shakes her head. The disappointed look on her face takes a little of the wind out of Ruby’s sails.

“You have no idea how lucky you are, Ruby,” Regina says, quietly, turning and walking to the door. She pauses with her hand on the doorknob and Ruby thinks she might not leave. Regina looks over her shoulder, the hard look is back. “Now, be a good dog, and stay.”

She’s gone before Ruby can respond. She stands and stares at the door, growling. How dare Regina think she knows Ruby’s life after speaking to her for a few months. How fucking dare she. Turning to the window, she swipes a hand across the curtain, shredding it with the claws that have appeared. The moon is visible in the sky now and Ruby’s blood is singing with the need to run and howl. She turns away, closing her eyes tightly and wrapping her arms around herself.

It’s going to be a long night.
Chapter 10 - Regina

Following their heated conversation, Regina finds herself in the library, buried under a pile of books. Her frustration with the whole situation left her wanting to be alone, focussing her anger on something useful, rather than being in a roomful of people whose only solution is to sacrifice her. Frustrating as Ruby was, she was right; there has to be another way. She’s not necessarily willing to lose Henry permanently just to find a way to destroy her sister. However, Regina has come up blank so far and it’s only driving her anger. She slams her current book shut and lets loose a fireball that disappears as soon as it hits the stoney wall opposite, only feeling mild satisfaction at the release.

There’s a short, sharp scream that makes Regina jump. She’d thought she was alone. Clearly she was wrong. That seldom happens. “Show yourself,” she calls out.

Gradually, a head of brown hair appears around the end of one of the stacks before Belle’s face emerges and she doesn’t look pleased.

“Uh, fire and books aren’t a good mix,” she says, her voice a little shaky. “So, in future, kindly refrain from throwing fireballs around in here.”

Regina sighs, pulling another book out of the pile and opening it. “In future, kindly remember that this is my castle and my library. And if I want to torch the entire collection, then I shall.”

Belle’s face goes from mild fear to genuine horror, and she stalks over to the table Regina’s seated at.

“You wouldn’t!” she challenges. “It’s...this collection is amazing. You wouldn’t destroy all this knowledge, all this history, just for fun?”

“Probably not,” Regina admits. “But just keep in mind that I could if I chose to do so.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, Belle slumps into a chair at Regina’s table. Regina raises an eyebrow at the overly familiar behaviour, but lets it slide. Recovered from her shock, Belle leans her elbows on the table, tilting her head to read the titles on the books Regina has selected.

“Looking for a way to defeat Zelena?” she asks.
“Isn’t that what we’re all doing, constantly?” Regina asks, flicking through the pages of her book.

“Any luck?” Belle asks, hope clear on her face.

“Do I look like I’ve had a breakthrough?” Regina snaps. “No, there’s nothing. Nothing about omnipotent green people with a bizarre affection for monkeys.”

Nodding in understanding, Belle sits back in her chair and rubs her eyes. “I’ve been researching too.” She picks up the book Regina has just closed. “But I wouldn’t really expect you to find anything about Zelena in a book about lycanthropy.”

Regina grits her teeth, surprised, and a little impressed, at the bookworm’s courage. “She enchanted the wolves, did she not?” she challenges. “I was searching for anything relating to regular wolves and the supernatural.” She was searching for something to ensure Ruby didn’t have to stay inside.

“Nothing?” Belle guesses.

“No,” Regina confirms. “Nothing.”

“Was she okay?” Belle asks. “She was pretty mad when you poofed her out of the meeting earlier.”

“She was pretty mad when I left her,” Regina says, without thinking. She collects herself, straightening in her chair and glaring at Belle, as if the young woman somehow forced her to speak.

“She gets kinda feisty around the full moon,” Belle says, unperturbed. “You’ll get used to it.”

Regina takes a moment before replying. “You’re very forward, Ms French,” she settles on. “I’m not one to have heart-to-heart discussions about my private life with people I hardly know.”

“No? You prefer just taking hearts, then?” Belle asks, not flinching under Regina’s glare. “Well,
in the interests of getting to know each other better, let me tell you a couple of things about myself.” She doesn’t wait for Regina to agree. “First of all, I think you should drop the high and mighty routine around me, since, you know, you had me wrongfully imprisoned for thirty years or so and I’ve been pretty forgiving about that.” Regina has the good grace to look down, but Belle continues. “Secondly, I am very protective of my friends. And Ruby is a very good friend of mine.”

“And I’m sure you have an opinion on her friendship with me, dear,” Regina drawls, though she can’t deny the apprehension in her stomach.

“I do, as a matter of fact. I think I’ve never seen her smile at anyone the way she smiles at you,” Belle says, plainly. “I’ve seen the two of you around the castle, and I’ve never seen her look happier. And, you can describe it as ‘friendship’ all you like, but there’s something else going on between you. I know that because I know her.”

Belle’s words have caused a storm of emotion in Regina, but she clamps down on it and remains impassive.

“And now you’re going to warn me that if I ever hurt her, I’ll have you to answer to, is that right?” she asks.

Belle is silent for a long time before shaking her head. “No,” she says. “I think you know that if you ever hurt her, you’ll answer to yourself. And you’re a lot scarier than I am.” The insight of the comment stuns Regina and her mask slips enough for Belle to nod. “I thought so.” The librarian stands up. “It’s late,” she says, stretching. “I’m going to bed. You should too. Neither of us will be any good to anyone if we’re falling asleep at the war meetings.”

“Yes,” Regina says, though she’s not really listening.

“Goodnight, Regina,” Belle says as she heads for the door of the library. “I’ll see you tomorrow, no doubt.”

“Goodnight,” Regina says, automatically.

The heavy door slides into place behind Belle and Regina is left alone with her thoughts. She sighs, realising she’s been stuck on the same paragraph since Belle’s little speech. She closes the book and rubs her eyes. Perhaps the girl is right; maybe it is time to turn in for the evening. She
waves a hand over the stack of books that litter the table, and they are transported to her chamber. Chances of her actually sleeping, and sleeping well, are slim at best, and she would rather have something useful to do instead of thinking about Henry or counting sheep. Sighing again, Regina stands up and stretches, thinking back over Belle's words. You'll answer to yourself. She thinks back on the argument with Ruby and shakes her head. Ruby really doesn't know how good she has it. How many people would miss her, cry for her. Regina would be lucky if if anyone cried for her. Then she thinks they probably would - out of relief. Her thoughts turn to Henry. He might be the only one. But he would need to remember who she is first.

Hitting the top of the staircase, Regina decides to bypass her own chambers, taking an alternative route that takes her past Ruby's. The last words she had said to Ruby ring in her ears and she swallows down the guilt that rises. She can't imagine Ruby took it well, and Regina does genuinely feel bad for it. She starts to approach the chamber door, when it opens unexpectedly, and Ruby appears.

"Ruby," she breathes out. She's ready to apologise for how she had left things, but the girl's attire catches her attention. She's dressed as she would be if she were going for a ride. She frowns. “Are you...are you going out?” Regina frowns further. “Are you going to face those wolves again?”

Ruby closes her eyes. “I was.” She opens them again and looks Regina directly in the eyes. “I was,” she reiterates, putting emphasis on the past tense. She approaches Regina in a few quick strides, and sighs heavily. She avoids Regina's eyes. “I… I couldn’t.”

The admission takes the fight out of Regina and she places a hand on Ruby's back, leading her back into her chambers. This conversation would probably be better off behind closed doors, she thinks. Ruby immediately walks over to the window, leaning on the ledge and peering out into the woods. Regina comes up behind her, close, but not touching her.

“What do you mean you ‘couldn’t’?” she asks.

“I… I just couldn’t.”

Regina gently turns Ruby, looking into her eyes. She wants to push for more, but she understands the need to keep some things inside. She nods and inches closer, reaching for Ruby's hands and holding them in her own. “Well...I’m glad you didn’t.” A pause. “I would’ve come looking for you, you know.”

Ruby nods. “I know.” She smirks a little. “That may have had something to do with me not going out.” She sighs. “I made a promise to you that I wouldn’t. I didn’t want to break that promise. So I
was coming to look for you,” she adds, quietly.

Regina lifts her head to look at Ruby again, offering her a little smile. “The honourable wolf,” she says. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Are you mad?” Ruby asks, not returning her smile.

Regina shakes her head. “I’m not angry, Ruby,” she says, surprising herself because it’s true. “Even if you’d gone out, I wouldn’t have had a right to be angry.” She smiles up at Ruby. “As you’ve told me, repeatedly, your life is your own and you make your own decisions.” Her smile falls slowly. “I would have been...scared.”

Ruby makes a noise Regina can’t quite decipher, low in her throat. She lets go of Regina’s hands and moves to the window, looking up at the moon. Regina stays where she is, reluctant to invade Ruby’s space. After a moment, Ruby turns back to her, a curious expression on her face.

“Wait, why are you up and fully dressed?” she asks. “And at my door?” Her face changes. “Come to see if I’d slipped my leash?”

Shame floods Regina’s face with blood. “I was coming to apologise,” she says. “I shouldn’t have said that to you.” She meets Ruby’s gaze, steadily. “I’m sorry.”

Ruby huffs and turns away. “How else would you speak to your guard dog?” she asks.

“Ruby,” Regina begins, a hard edge creeping into her voice. “Stop acting like a child. You know very well that’s not how I think of you.”

Ruby’s shoulders slump and she brings her hands up to cover her face, shaking her head. Regina still doesn’t move towards her; unsure of how that would be received. The curtains are hanging in rags, which they weren’t when she left the room earlier, so she assumes Ruby’s emotions are in turmoil and she doesn’t want to aggravate her further. Suddenly, Ruby spins to look at her. Her eyes are flashing yellow. The wolf clearly wants to come out to play. And Regina can’t help but be a little excited at that prospect.

“I don’t know how to do this, Regina,” Ruby says, her lip trembling. “I don’t know how to…”
“How to what?” Regina prompts, taking a step closer.

“How to do this,” Ruby says, pointing between herself and Regina. “To be so…” She bites her lip and turns away again, stalking to the window and putting both her hands on the sill, leaning her forehead on the glass. Regina watches without speaking, wondering if the pull of the moon is really that strong.

“Do you want me to go?” she asks, finally.

“No.” The answer is quick and definite. She can see the rise and fall of Ruby’s shoulders as she breathes heavily. When she turns this time, her eyes are back to their usual warm green. “I don’t want you to go,” she repeats. “Every part of my body is screaming for me to be out there, to show those wolves that I’m the alpha of this forest.” She moves until she’s standing right in front of Regina. She lifts Regina’s hand and places it on her chest. Ruby’s heart is beating steady and strong. “Every part of me except this one.” She presses Regina’s hand harder to her chest. “This part is terrified of going out there and not coming back to—” Ruby closes her eyes. “Of not coming back.”

This admission feels more important than any other words that have been spoken between them. Regina brings a hand up to Ruby’s face, cupping her cheek and waiting until her eyes have opened.

“Why do you think I don’t want you to go out there?” she murmurs. “It’s the same reason.” It’s the fear of not knowing where this is going, of not getting the chance to explore this new and exciting chapter in her life. Guilt rises like bile in Regina’s throat. This is her fault. If not for her, Zelena would never have targeted Ruby, and she’d be out enjoying the moon right now. Her eyes drop to Ruby’s neck. The scars and bruises, healing and hidden but still there, are also Regina’s fault. The fear and pain in Ruby’s eyes right now are her fault. She shakes her head, closing her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry.”

“Stop blaming yourself,” Ruby says, resting her forehead against Regina’s, their noses touching. “It’s as much my fault as it is yours.

“That’s ridiculous,” Regina murmurs, finding it difficult to argue with Ruby so close, so gentle. “If you hadn’t been spending time with me, you would never have been attacked. You wouldn’t be scared right now.”

“Shit happens,” Ruby says, drawing an unexpected laugh from Regina at her bluntness. Ruby lifts
her head so they’re looking at each other. “Some things are worth the risk.”

This is what her mother was talking about, Regina thinks. Opening up, caring, being afraid for someone else. *Weakness.* She shakes her head to clear that thought.

“So,” she begins, her throat rough. “Where does that leave us?”

Ruby shrugs. “It leaves us here,” she says quietly, before pulling Regina closer, into a tight hug.

“Well, that’s not a terrible place to be,” Regina murmurs when they part. “How are you feeling?” she asks, effectively ending the discussion of blame. “Have you had Whale look at your back again?”

“You’re here.” Ruby starts to loosen her bodice, turning her back to Regina. “You’ve already seen it, so you’ll know what you’re looking at.” She sweeps her hair out of the way so that Regina can assess Ruby’s back without obstruction. “So…how does it look?”

While it’s still difficult to look at the scarring without an overwhelming feeling of guilt, Regina is taken aback by how much better the wounds look. She remembers seeing Ruby’s back when she and Granny first took off her bodice; a painting of reds, blues, blacks and purples. Now the skin is practically clear, even the worst cuts have healed over. She steps forward and traces her fingers down Ruby’s left side, following the silvery track of a claw mark, her hand coming to rest just above the swell of Ruby’s backside. “It’s-” *Exquisite,* is the word in her head. She clears her throat. “Better. Much better.”

Ruby nods, turning to try to look. “Is there much scarring?”

“Hard to tell…most look like they’ll disappear completely,” Regina says, her other hand coming into play as she gets lost in the sensations caused by touching Ruby’s skin. It’s not all that different to the thrill she gets from wielding magic.

Ruby’s leans her body back into Regina more fully. “That’s good,” she murmurs.

This isn’t about sex or attraction, Regina thinks as she slips her arms around Ruby, it’s about having Ruby in her arms, alive and breathing and real and vibrant. She presses her nose to Ruby’s pulse, just to feel the blood pumping reassuringly through her veins. Ruby covers Regina’s hands
with her own, and brings them further around, in a tighter embrace. Regina smiles against Ruby’s neck.

“Stay here with me again tonight,” Ruby says, quietly. “Please?”

The simple request makes Regina’s heart quicken. “Are you sure?” she asks. “People will talk.”

Ruby lets out a short laugh, and Regina feels it reverberate through her chest. It’s a pleasant sensation. “I’m pretty sure we gave them plenty to talk about already. Like I said, I don’t give a shit. We know what we are, right?”

The definition of ‘what they are’ is becoming blurrier by the moment, Regina thinks as she stands with Ruby in her arms, her bodice undone and hanging loose. She takes a step back and adjusts the garment so that it’s fastened again and in no danger of falling off.

“Yes,” she says, finally. “We know what we are.”

This earns her a wide smile. “Good,” Ruby says. “Let’s go to bed.”

Hearing those words coming from Ruby’s mouth does nothing to clarify Regina’s thoughts, but she nods and follows the younger woman to the bed. Ruby spins around to face her, brow creased.

“You know I meant to sleep, right? I mean, I know I was kidding around earlier about kissing and stuff, but I seriously don’t want you to think that I’m gonna, you know, jump your bones or whatever.”

“Ruby!” While it’s amusing to watch Ruby babble, Regina is tired. “It’s absolutely fine and I knew what you meant.”

She gives the younger woman a light shove towards the bed. They come to a halt beside it and Regina raises a hand, leaving them both in long, white nightdresses, with high necklines. Ruby pouts, but pulls back the covers and climbs in, arranging herself and beckoning Regina to join her. Regina slides across the sheets, settling against Ruby’s side. Laying her head on Ruby’s shoulder, she allows her body to relax.

“Is the door locked?” Regina asks, her eyes growing heavy. “God only knows who’ll decide to pop in uninvited tomorrow morning. Definitely Snow. Probably with Charming and at least three and a half dwarves in tow to save you from the Evil Queen.”
She feels Ruby’s laugh rumble beneath her ear and she decides she likes that sound very much. “How do you get half a dwarf?” Ruby asks.

Lifting her head, Regina grins wickedly. “Oh, I have some idea-” Ruby’s finger covers her lips before she can elaborate.

“Anyway,” Ruby continues as if Regina hadn’t answered. “There’s no Evil Queen here for them to rescue me from. Only you. And I don’t want to be rescued from you. So work your magic, Queenie, and lock the door.”

Regina wiggles the fingers of her right hand. The heavy bolt slides into place. “There. All done.”

“You’re pretty handy to have around,” Ruby murmurs, covering her mouth to hide a yawn. Regina lies back down beside her.

“I have my uses,” Regina agrees. They lie in comfortable silence for a few moments. Regina mulls over the events of the day, unable to switch off quite yet. A thought occurs to her. “What would you have done if you’d got your hands on Leroy today?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” Ruby admits. “I just...reacted. Like I said, the moon heightens my emotions. I wanted to rip him apart for saying that about you.”

Regina props herself up on an elbow, looking down at Ruby in the light of the moon. Not for the first time, she’s struck by just how beautiful she really is. And this beautiful creature wants to spend time with her, wants to be her friend, wanted to hurt someone for speaking badly about her. She can’t help the smile that appears on her face. Ruby frowns up at her.

“What?” she asks.

Regina shakes her head. “My hero,” she murmurs.

Ruby rolls her eyes, but she’s smiling. Her eyebrows quirk and Regina watches her eyes drop to Regina’s chest. “Why is your heart beating so fast?”
She hadn’t even realised it was, but now that Ruby’s mentioned it, she can feel the rapid fluttering in her chest. She flops back down and closes her eyes, throwing an arm over her face. “That’s your doing,” she mumbles, gracing the ceiling with an embarrassed smile.


Removing her arm from where it’s covering her eyes, Regina sees that Ruby’s cheeks match her own in colour. She covers Ruby’s hand with her own. “It’s not a bad thing. It’s been a while since it beat that way for anyone.”

“I’m glad it’s still there,” she murmurs in return.

Regina sighs. Of course Snow White wouldn’t be able to stop herself from blabbing that all over camp, she thinks. When will she ever learn? “It’s still there,” she confirms, stroking Ruby’s long hair. “It’s still beating.”

There’s no reason for her to wake up; it’s still dark outside and there’s no noise that she can discern. But something’s different. As awareness returns, it becomes clear exactly what is different when she realises that there’s a large furry head and two paws on her chest. Ruby must have transformed in her sleep. The wolf lets out a soft growl, followed by a whine. Regina can feel hot breath against her neck. She presses her lips together to keep from making a sound.

Weighing up her options, Regina decides to leave Ruby as she is. She’ll change back naturally when the sun rises anyhow, and perhaps the transition will aid with the healing process. And it’s not entirely unpleasant. She smiles as Ruby lets out a soft ‘yip’. Feeling daring, she brings a hand up and scratches the beast’s ears and it settles down again. Regina shakes her head. This is definitely a new experience for her, but one she hopes will continue. Closing her eyes again, she falls asleep to Ruby’s heavy breathing and the warmth radiating from her huge body.

It’s later still, but not yet quite daylight, when Regina awakens again. This time, there’s no question that something’s different. The weight is gone from her chest, but she knows that the wolf is still close. She cracks open an eye, and can’t stop the noise of surprise that escapes when
she sees the impressive animal standing over her, staring down at her. It leans down until its wet nose is pressed just under Regina’s ear, sniffing. Regina lies still, unsure of how to react. She knows the wolf could rip her throat out in an instant, but she’s not sensing aggression. Curiosity, perhaps. The wolf is most likely not used to waking up beside a human. She’s not even sure if the wolf will know her; Ruby had mentioned something about her memories becoming blurred in the transition at times.

The large head lifts and yellow eyes meet her own. Despite the odd colouring, Regina can still see remnants of Ruby in them. Steeling herself, Regina takes a chance.

“Ruby?” The wolf’s ears prickle up at the name, and her tail starts to wag from side to side, picking up speed. Regina is oddly charmed by the reaction. She lifts a hand up, slowly so the wolf knows she’s not a threat, and gently starts to stroke Ruby’s broad neck, sifts her fingers through the soft fur. The animal presses into her, looking for more contact. She slides her hand up to the large head and scratches behind Ruby’s ears, earning a soft growl of contentment. “You like that, don’t you?” she asks, speaking as she would to one of the horses.

The wolf, clearly unaware of her size, flops down on top of Regina. The Queen lets out an undignified ‘oof’ as the considerable bulk pins her to the bed. The wolf looks up at the noise, tongue hanging out and canine grin in place. Regina can’t help but smile back, even as she shoves at the wolf’s shoulder. “Get off me, you mutt. You weigh a ton!”

She gasps when a large tongue licks her cheek. Scrunching up her face, she pushes Ruby’s muzzle away, wiping the saliva from her cheek. “Stop that!” she commands. The wolf, once more taking this for playfulness, spins onto its feet once more and follows Regina, lapping at her hands where they attempt to cover her face.

“Ruby Lucas!” Regina scolds, trying to escape the onslaught. “Stop it! Stop it this instant!”

The large tongue continues to swipe at her, until there’s a shimmer of magic in the air and the tongue licking a stripe up her wrist is much smaller. She risks a peek between her fingers and catches sight of Ruby, fully human, her tongue still out of her mouth. Regina removes her hands from her face just as realisation dawns on Ruby and she scrambles backwards, getting caught in the blankets and her nightgown and ending up sitting on Regina’s thighs. She’s much lighter than the
“Wh-what happened?” she asks.

Regina sits up when Ruby moves back, quick to reassure her. “Nothing happened. You must have transformed during the night, that’s all.” She wipes her hands on the sheets and uses the arm of her nightgown to wipe her face. The action doesn’t go unnoticed and Ruby’s eyes widen.

“Oh shit,” she whispers. “I didn’t…”

Regina laughs as Ruby’s cheeks fill with colour. “Lick my face?” she teases. “Yes. Yes, you did. Quite thoroughly as it happens.”

“Oh my God,” Ruby whines. “No.” She shakes her head and awkwardly covers her face with a hand. “That is so not okay. I’m so sorry.”

Gently removing Ruby’s hand from her face, Regina dips her head to catch her eyes. “Ruby, it’s fine. Waking up in bed with a wolf was something of a shock, but she was perfectly friendly.”

“I’m so sorry,” Ruby repeats. “I didn’t think that would happen. It’s been a while since I didn’t go out on a full moon and with the injuries and stuff I...I must not have had as much control as I thought I did.” Regina feels her tense up. “Oh my God, I didn’t hurt you did I?”

“No,” Regina tells her firmly. “I’m not hurt. At all.” She makes a final swipe at her cheek. “Covered in drool, but completely unharmed.”

Ruby looks into Regina’s eyes, searching for any hint of a lie. “You’re sure?” she asks.

“I’m sure,” Regina says, rolling her eyes a little. “What good would it do me to lie about injuries?” She makes sure the point hits home and Ruby gives her an embarrassed smile.

“Yes, I noticed, dear,” Regina says. “She was quite open with her affection. And she broke our ‘no kissing’ rule, I’m afraid.”

Ruby slaps her arm gently. “Shut up.” She pouts and Regina thinks she might have been wrong in what she told the wolf. There’s not much she wouldn’t do when faced with Ruby’s puppydog eyes. Thankfully, Ruby turns to the window and gives her a reprieve before she says anything ridiculous. The younger woman lets out a sigh. “I guess we should get up.”

“Are you very keen to get started on a day of fruitless research and frustrating strategy discussions?” Regina asks, lying back down against the pillows, looking up at Ruby in the early morning light.

“Not really,” Ruby admits, wrinkling her nose.

“Then don’t get up yet,” Regina suggests, patting the space next to her. “It’s still early.” She’s not one for lounging in bed once she’s awake, but the alternative means leaving this room and seeing other people. After a moment, Ruby flops down next to her. Regina hides a smile as she allows her eyes to close, content to lie in silence.

The gentlest of touches traces up her arm and back down again. She keeps her eyes closed. The touch starts up again, this time making it to her shoulder before tickling her neck. She reflexively jerks away, turning to scowl at Ruby, who grins.

“I’m awake,” she says with a shrug. “Usually I would’ve been out running all night. I have a lot of excess energy.”

“And because you’re awake, I should be too, is that it?” Regina asks, turning onto her side to mirror Ruby’s position.

“You can sleep if you want to,” Ruby says, resuming her rhythmic stroking of Regina’s arm. “But then I’ll just be forced to watch you sleep. And that’s kinda creepy.”

“That is true. What are my other choices?” Regina asks, with an exaggerated sigh.

“We could go for a walk?” Ruby suggests.
“Fine,” Regina sighs again, closing her eyes briefly. “Go fetch your leash.”

“Oh, you’re so gonna pay for that one, Your Majesty,” Ruby warns.

At the first touch of Ruby’s fingers against her sides, Regina jerks, her eyes flying open. “No! Ruby!” She scrambles to move away, but Ruby advances on her, wiggling her fingers, gleeful menace dancing in her eyes. “No! I mean it”

Without warning, Ruby dives at her, pinning her to the bed and tickling her relentlessly. Regina gasps for air, pushing at Ruby’s hands and trying to twist out of her grip, laughing all the while. She could easily remove herself from the bed with magic. But she doesn’t want to. She wants to stay here, to forget, for a few precious moments, that she is the target of a maniacal witch and that her child is in another realm. Her world view narrows to this bed and this woman. And, for the first time since leaving Storybrooke, Regina feels genuinely happy.
Ruby’s been reading the same sentence for at least ten minutes and it’s beginning to make even less sense than it did the first time. She’s never been much of a reader and, though she plays her part in the research, it’s not her favourite way to spend her time. She lifts her eyes from her assigned book, looking across the table at Regina, who is poring over another ancient text and appears not to be having the same trouble with concentration that Ruby is. Ruby sighs.

As it turns out, friends only spend the night with each other following a near death experience. This became abundantly clear once Ruby was back to full-health and Regina stopped being quite so free with her touches. As the days have passed and put some distance between the memory of Ruby’s injuries and the present, Regina has withdrawn back into herself a little. They still spend time together, but it’s not quite as easy as it was, or as relaxed. Ruby’s noticed that Regina has stopped suggesting activities and that, if not for Ruby initiating research sessions or making sure they’re assigned to tasks together, they may not spend any time together at all. Their conversations tend to revolve around the Witch or the running of the castle.

Ruby blames herself for taking advantage of her injured state to come on stronger than she perhaps should have and it seems to have frightened the Queen off. A little part of Ruby also wonders if Regina’s sudden distance is part of her misguided attempt to keep Ruby safe from her sister. The horrified expression she wore when she realised Zelena had targeted Ruby specifically is etched in the girl’s memory and she’s not convinced that putting some space between them is to somehow demonstrate that Zelena shouldn’t waste her time with Ruby. Well, if that’s the case, Ruby will need to do something about it. Because she misses the Regina she was just getting to know.

“I’m bored,” Ruby announces. Regina lifts her head from her book and Ruby’s pleased to see an affectionate smile on her face, at least.

“Then go and entertain yourself,” Regina says, returning to her reading. “You’re under no obligation to sit here with me. Even though you suggested it.”

“Yeah, I did,” Ruby agrees. “Otherwise when would I get to see you?”

“Ruby,” Regina begins with a sigh. “Don’t-”

“Don’t what?” Ruby prompts. “Don’t mention the elephant in the room?”
“There’s a wolf in the room, dear, but no elephant as far as I can tell,” Regina says, without looking at Ruby.

“That’s because you’re avoiding looking at it,” Ruby presses on. “Ever since I got better, you’ve been acting weird. And I...I’m sorry if I, you know, did anything to make that happen.” She closes the book in front of her and pushes it aside, leaning forward with her elbows on the table. Regina’s still not meeting her eyes. “But I’d like it to stop and for us to go back to being friends.”

Regina shakes her head. “But we’re not friends,” she says, lifting her head finally. “Are we?”

“We’re not?” Ruby asks, a pang of hurt reverberating in her chest. “But we...I thought-”

“I may not have much experience with friendship, Ruby,” Regina interrupts. “But I’m fairly sure that what we’re doing is not friendship.”

So, she was right. She did push too hard. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I didn’t mean to- to come on so strong. I just-it was so nice having you there and-”

“That’s not the problem, Ruby,” Regina tells her. “The problem is that I want you to. And that is not a basis for a friendship.”

Ruby gets up from her seat and moves around the table, kneeling down by Regina’s seat, clinging to the arm of her chair. There are a few people milling around the library and she doesn’t particularly want them overhearing this discussion. “How is that a problem?” she asks, gently. “When it’s something we both want?”

“I’ve explained why,” Regina snaps.

“I know,” Ruby says. “But things change, feelings change. And I know you didn’t want to start anything because you miss Henry and we have a Wicked Witch to deal with. And I get that, I do.” She takes a breath and reaches out to place her hand on Regina’s arm, waiting until she looks at her. “But how is what we’re doing any better, huh? Ignoring what’s going on? Pretending it isn’t there?”

There’s a long pause and Ruby can hear Regina’s uneven breathing. She runs her thumb back and forth over Regina’s arm, trying to provide her with some small comfort, knowing that she finds it difficult to talk about such things.
“Yes, things do change,” Regina agrees. “The reasons I gave you for not pursuing a relationship are still valid.” She turns to meet Ruby’s eyes and Ruby’s heart sinks when she sees the blank expression Regina is wearing. “And, added to those reasons, is the fact that your association with me put you in very real danger. And I will not let that happen again.”

Standing up, Ruby turns her back to Regina and takes a few steps away, shaking her head as she tries to formulate an argument that won’t be dismissed immediately.

“We’re all in danger, Regina,” she begins. “She could decide to pick off any one of us at any time.”

“But she didn’t,” Regina counters. “She chose to target you, very specifically. The one person I have been spending time with. That is not a coincid-.”

“Attention! Attention!” Both women turn to glare at the interruption. It’s Doc. “Your presence is requested in the Great Hall by Princess Snow and Prince David.”

Regina rolls her eyes. “Aren’t we being awfully formal all of a sudden?” Despite the snark in her tone, she pushes her chair back and stands. Ruby reaches out and grasps her arm.

“Seriously?” she asks. “Since when do you jump when Snow snaps her fingers?”

Regina opens her mouth to respond, but Doc interrupts once more.

“I-I have instructions that everyone is to attend. No exceptions. E-everyone is being invited as we speak,” he tells them, his eyes bouncing between the two women. “You’ll have to hurry it along. They won’t wait.”

“Regina and I have some unfinished business,” she tells him, eyes trained on the woman in question, who still has not turned around, but she hasn’t removed her arm from Ruby’s grip either. “We will join you when we’re finished.”

“I-I think Snow really would prefer you to be there, Ruby,” Doc implores.
Regina shakes her arm free and continues on her way. The growl that erupts from Ruby’s chest is enough to make Doc physically jump, and even Regina stops walking. Ruby’s breath is coming fast and she’s grinding her teeth. Everything in her wants to continue this conversation, but Snow wouldn’t insist on everyone’s presence if it wasn’t important. Ruby shakes her head and storms past Doc, pausing by Regina. “We’re not done,” she warns. “After we hear whatever this is Snow has to say, you and I are going somewhere private and we are going to finish this conversation.”

“Oh, we’re done, dear.”

“No,” Ruby says, as Doc slinks by them and practically runs out of the room. “We’re not. And don’t think you can avoid me. I’ll track you down and—”

“And you’ll huff and puff and blow my door down?” Regina asks, in that disinterested tone of hers, with an infuriating smirk in place. “There’s nothing to discuss.”

“You know that’s not true,” Ruby tells her. “And if you don’t wanna talk, then you’ll listen to me, because I have plenty to say. Now come on, let’s get this announcement over with so that we can get back to this.”

She waits for Regina to start walking in front of her before following. The rest of the trip to the Great Hall is in silence. Regina pushes the doors to the hall open to reveal that it’s already full of people standing in front of the small raised platform at the front of the room. They join the back of the crowd and find themselves next to Belle who turns to greet them with a smile, which Ruby attempts to return.

“What do you suppose this is about?” Ruby asks. “It sounds serious.”

“Maybe they’ve come up with a plan to defeat Zelena?” Belle suggests with a shrug.


“Well, they managed to evade you for years,” Ruby points out. “Doesn’t say much for your own strategy, Your Majesty.”
Belle glances at Ruby before taking in Regina’s glare and shifts uncomfortably. She gives a false laugh to try to break the tension. “Well, I did say ‘maybe’.”

“I doubt that Tweedledumb and Tweedledumber have anything of use to say,” Regina says, bestowing an incredibly fake smile on Belle. “But it’s important that someone be here to make sure they’re not going to propose anything more ridiculous than usual.”

“At least they try,” Ruby puts in. “At least they’re willing to take risks.” She knows she’s poking Regina to try and get a reaction, but really, at this point, she just wants something from the other woman.

Belle clears her throat. “Oh, look, I think they’re about to say something.”

Ruby feels bad that her friend has landed in the middle of a situation she doesn’t know anything about and has been made to feel awkward because of it. She turns her attention to Mary Margaret and David who are whispering to each other on the raised platform. Mary Margaret looks happy, so it can’t be anything serious. David looks a little more worried, but he’s trying to cover it with a smile.

The hall is silenced as Mary Margaret comes forward. Something about the smile Mary Margaret is wearing, and the worry Charming is trying to hide, tells Ruby exactly what this announcement is going to be. “Ten gold coins says she’s pregnant,” she murmurs, to no-one in particular.

“Oh, God,” Regina groans. “That’s all we’d need. Another Charming offspring.”

Ruby is prevented from responding when Mary Margaret pulls David forward a little.

“Friends,” she begins. “I know we’re all busy in our preparations to face the Wicked Witch, and I thank you all for taking the time to come here upon our request.” She looks at David and smiles before turning back to the crowd. “We have some wonderful news to share with you all.” Her smile grows even brighter. “David and I are going to have a baby.”

Belle grabs Ruby’s arm in excitement and the hall erupts with cheers and chatter. “Told you,” Ruby says, with a grin. Her happiness for her friends is tempered somewhat by Regina’s words. While she knows the Queen was probably referring to Emma and all the strife she caused in Regina’s life, Ruby’s not entirely convinced that right now is the best time to bring a kid into the world. But what’s done is done, and they’ll all make the best of the situation. They always do.
“You’d think she’d invented the wheel,” Regina mutters, under her breath, turning to leave. “Give them my regards. Tell them that I fervently hope that it turns out better than the last one.”

“You’re not going to tell them yourself?” Ruby asks, turning to watch Regina leave.

“Some of us have work to do, dear,” Regina says, without turning around.

“I meant what I said,” Ruby calls after her. “We’re not done talking. I’ll come find you.” The Queen doesn’t respond and continues on her way.

“Everything okay?” Belle asks.

“Oh, peachy,” Ruby says, turning to her friend. “C’mon, let’s go congratulate them.”

They move further into the crowd, and although Ruby is the furthest away from Mary Margaret, she calls out to her anyway, and her friend immediately makes a beeline for them. “Snow!” Ruby lets out, and pulls her into a crushing hug. “Congratulations!”

Mary Margaret squeezes her friend tightly, her smile only growing in strength. “Thank you, Aunt Ruby,” she says before pulling back, keeping hold of Ruby’s arms.

“Aunt?” Ruby repeats, head tilting to the side.

Mary Margaret frowns. “Like I’d allow the child to call you anything else,” she scolds lightly. “We’re best friends. Sisters, practically. And it’s not like I actually have any brothers or sisters.”

Ruby finds herself smiling as Mary Margaret talks. She supposes, had things gone to plan and they weren’t separated, Emma may well have been running around calling Ruby ‘aunt’ too. She’s not sure why she finds it surprising, but to hear Mary Margaret call her a sister has her heart swelling just enough for her to almost forget what’s going on between her and Regina. While Mary Margaret chatters away and receives congratulations from people, Ruby locates David - chatting to a few of the dwarves - and sidles up to him, offering him a hug.

“Congratulations, daddy.”
David lets out a nervous laugh. “Yeah...I guess that’s what I’ll be.” He steps away from Ruby and rubs the back of his neck.

Ruby cocks her head to the side and looks at David, confused. “You okay?”

“Huh?” David freezes, his eyes wide, like he’s been caught. “Of course!” He laughs again, it sounds hollow. “I’m going to have a baby. Why wouldn’t I be okay?” Uncomfortable under Ruby’s scrutiny, he catches someone’s eye over her shoulder and raises his hand in a wave. “I...uh...should go talk to people with Mary Margaret.”

“I hope you try a lot harder than you just did with me,” she jokes with a raised brow. She leaves it be. Today, they celebrate. Tomorrow, they’ll talk about their concerns.

He looks down, ashamed. “Sorry, Ruby.” He meets her eyes again. “We’ll talk, okay? I just need to get my head around this. It’s...big, you know?”

Ruby nods. “It is,” she agrees. “And you’ll all be fine.” She nods towards the masses. “Go and mingle.”

He nods and squeezes her arm as he passes. He’s barely gone before his place is taken up by Granny. She joins Ruby in watching the happy couple as they chat to various subjects. “I noticed your Queen made a sharp exit. Not in a celebratory mood?”

Ruby frowns and takes a deep, steadying breath. “You’d have to ask her.”

“Trouble in paradise?” Granny asks. “Finally realised that your new best friend is the Evil Queen, huh?”

Ruby shakes her head and faces her grandmother. “This is supposed to be a joyous occasion, so I’m not going to get into this with you now. But believe me, I’m under no illusions about who Regina was or is. And you’re welcome to your opinion on her, but you need to stop trying to make it mine.”

She brushes past her grandmother, intent on following Regina and continuing their discussion.
She’s barely taken five strides when something small barrels into her legs, almost causing her to fall over. She stumbles, but catches herself and spins to see what she nearly tripped over. Roland Hood is standing there, gazing up at her with a huge smile on his face, dimples out in full force.

“Hey squirt,” she says, unable to stop herself from smiling back at him. “You can move pretty fast, I didn’t even see you there!”

“What’s a squirt?” Roland asks, his eyes big and curious. Ruby squats down so that she’s on his level. She takes a hand and holds it over his head, sizing him up before nodding seriously.

“A squirt is someone exactly your size,” she tells him and he laughs at the unusual sounding word.

“Are you really a wolf?” he asks, moving forward and touching Ruby’s hair. “My daddy said you’re a wolf, but you don’t look like a wolf.”

“Only sometimes,” Ruby explains, amused by his scrutiny of her, as if he’s looking for fur or teeth. “When the moon is a big bright circle in the sky, that’s when I’m a wolf.” His face lights up in delight.

“A real wolf?” he asks. “Like the wolves in the forest?”

“Yes,” Ruby confirms. “A real wolf.” She widens her eyes with a smile. “But I’m much bigger than the wolves in the forest.”

“Can I see you when you’re a wolf?” he asks. “I’d like a wolf to be my friend.”

Touched by his simple world view, Ruby smiles. “I’m sure we can arrange for you to meet the wolf. And I’m sure she’d like to be your friend too.”

“Real wolves eat people,” Roland tells her, wisely. “You don’t eat people, do you?”

_Not anymore_, she thinks.

“Roland!” Robin calls, arriving by his son’s side and crouching beside both of them. “What have I told you about running away in big crowds like this? I couldn’t find you!”
“I was with Miss Ruby,” Roland says, as if this should be a perfectly valid explanation for him running away. “I’m gonna meet the wolf when the moon’s big.”

Robin grins at the two of them. “Are you now?”

Sobering, Ruby stands up but she can’t help running a hand through the child’s hair. “Only if you’re okay with it, of course,” she tells him.

“I have complete trust and faith in your wolf, Miss Ruby. I just fear that my boy might exhaust you.”

“Never.” She can’t help but reach down to tickle the boy’s sides and she chuckles, watching as he hides behind his father’s legs. Robin bends to pick Roland up, hoisting him on his hip and she watches as the small boy flings his arms around his father and squeezes, burying his face into Robin’s neck. It fills Ruby with bittersweet memories. Watching this scene play out in front of her reminds her of a time not so long ago; of Regina and Henry when he was just Roland’s age, even younger.

“Miss Ruby?”

The woman in question shakes her head and fixes Robin with an easy smile. “Sorry. Zoned out for a minute there.”

“Zoned out?” Robin questions.

“Went somewhere else. I wasn’t really here, in the moment.”

A frown crosses Robin’s face, and Ruby can tell he’s still trying to figure out *this* turn of phrase. “But… you didn’t go anywhere.”

“In my head,” Ruby explains, tapping her temple. “I was just remembering something. That’s all.”

“From Storybrooke?” Robin questions.
“Yeah,” Ruby says, winking at Roland. “Another little boy with a cheeky grin who used to try to get me to sneak him ice-cream when his mom wasn’t looking.”

“What’s ice-cream?” Roland asks.

“Oh,” Ruby says, constantly surprised by how little people in the Enchanted Forest know about the world with no magic. “It’s wonderful stuff. It’s kinda like snow, but you can eat it. And it tastes of strawberries, or other nice things.”

“Can I have ice-cream, papa?” Roland asks.

“Uh, I...think you can only get it where Miss Ruby comes from,” he turns to Ruby for confirmation.

Ruby thinks back to the night she spent with Regina walking in the woods, where the Queen conjured up a cone with little more than a snap of her fingers. She leans in close to Roland, lowering her voice. “I’ll see what I can do, okay?”

His smile lights up the room and he reaches out and wraps his arms around her neck, awkwardly because Robin is still holding him. “Thank you!” he nearly yells in her ear.

“No problem,” Ruby tells him, laughing at his exuberance. Robin puts him back on his feet and taps his back.

“Why don’t you run over to Little John?” he suggests. “He’s got a piece of wood he told me he was going to carve into a boat for you.” The boy scurries off with a wave at Ruby. She watches him go with a smile on her face.

“So, a wolf and flavoured snow, eh?” Robin observes. “How am I possibly going to compete with that come his next birthday?”

“Oh, I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Ruby says with a sigh, the reality of her life settling back on her shoulders after the brief reprieve of Snow’s baby announcement and her conversation with Roland.
“Is something the matter?” Robin asks.

“Aside from the usual problems of a green maniac toying with us and being stuck in a place that’s not my home?” Ruby jokes. Her smile fades quickly. “No, nothing’s the matter.”

“Can I interest you in a drink?”

She glances over at him quickly, trying to pick out the meaning behind his invitation. “A drink...as in...” she trails off, apprehensively.

“A drink as in a beverage,” Robin explains, grinning at her. “I’m not trying to woo you, Ruby.” He winks. “I wish to remain alive for the foreseeable future, and any attempt at romancing you would result in my untimely death at the hands of your Queen, I have no doubt.”

“Right,” Ruby says, her cheeks flushing at her assumption. “Sure, a drink sounds great. Where are we gonna find one?” Her mind goes to the very pleasant liquor she’d shared with Regina.

“Well,” Robin begins, draping an arm around her shoulders and lowering his voice. “It may just be the case that some of my men have set up something of a makeshift tavern in one of the storage rooms on the far side of the castle.” He puts a finger to his lips. “But that’s not to go any further.”

“Oh man,” Ruby laughs. “You’ve set up a speakeasy in Regina’s castle?”

“If that’s what you want to call it, then I suppose so,” Robin says. “Just let me make arrangements for Roland to be taken care of for the evening and I shall be all yours.”

“Lucky me,” Ruby jokes as he walks away.

Turns out her description isn’t too far off the mark. She can smell the booze before they’re anywhere near the place and when Robin opens the door, she’s confronted with the sight of Knights and Merry Men all over the place, laughing and arguing over card games and swilling...
what smells like ale from large tankards. She wrinkles her nose; she’s never been much of a fan of beer, but it’ll do.

A shout goes up to greet Robin and he makes his way through the crowd, patting people on the shoulder and waving at others. Ruby’s not overly familiar with the Merry Men yet, so she follows Robin and smiles and nods at the few faces she recognises. Finally they reach, what she assumes is, the bar. It’s a table with some barrels behind it and an assortment of cups and glasses. Not all of which are very clean. Robin busies himself with pouring them both a drink from one of the barrels and Ruby looks around for a quiet-ish corner. They make their way to an empty table and pull up two chairs. Robin holds up his tankard.

“Cheers!”

Ruby bumps her own glass against it, nodding. “Cheers.” After a healthy swallow of some not very cold beer, Robin folds his hands on the table and smiles at Ruby.

“So,” he begins. “What do you think of our fine establishment?” He waves a hand around them. “Not bad, is it?”

“Yeah, it’s okay,” Ruby concedes. “It’s not as nice as the diner I work in, but it’ll do.” She pre- empts his question. “It’s like a place where you go to eat, and we also serve drinks.”

“I had gathered the eating part from the word itself,” Robin says. “So, it’s similar to a tavern, yes?”

“Kinda,” Ruby agrees. “Just with a juke box instead of a lute player.”

“I really am quite fascinated by this land you come from,” Robin tells her. “I was a tavern keeper myself for a time.” His smile grows sad. “My wife and I, we...well, I was attempting to leave my life of crime behind and start anew.” He chuckles. “I can’t say I always stayed on the straight and narrow, but I did very much enjoy being a tavern keeper.” He looks down into his ale. “I miss it sometimes. Well, I miss a lot of things.”

Ruby’s not really familiar with Robin’s history, but she has pieced together enough to know that his wife died in mysterious circumstances. He speaks of her fondly, and often, but Ruby recognises the sadness of lost love when she sees it.
“What was she like?” she asks. “Your wife?”

“Marian?” His smile grows wide once more. “Oh, she was...she was intelligent, beautiful, she made me laugh every day with her quick wit. She believed in justice and doing what was right.” He raises his eyebrows. “She was the one to help me realise the importance of being an honorable man, of having a code of honour.” His gaze drops to the table and he wraps his hands around his tankard. “And above all, she valued family. She loved Roland with all of her heart. I believe that she would have moved hell or high water to get back to him, to us, if she could.” He swallows and shrugs. “However, she died, I know her thoughts would have been of us.” Looking up at Ruby again, he smiles. “As my thoughts are of her, each and every day.”

Throughout his description of his wife, Ruby can’t help but think of her own experience with love. She loved Peter, as much as a sheltered teenage girl can understand what love is. She never had the chance to experience a life with him, or marry him, or build up a lifetime of memories with him. She mourned for what could have been, but Robin mourns what was. He lost his wife and the mother of his child, and yet he found a way to go on. He still smiles. Ruby reaches out and places a hand on his arm.

“She sounds like a wonderful woman,” she tells him.

“She was.” He nods. “She was indeed. And I loved her very much.” He sniffs and tilts his head. “Have you known love, Ruby?” She notices the sparkle coming back to his eye she and knows he’s about to tease her before he even opens his mouth. “I mean, aside from your current situation, of course.”

She hits his arm and sits back in her chair, crossing her arms and glaring as he laughs. “I don’t have a ‘situation’. And even if I did, it would definitely be too early to be talking about ‘love’.

“Would it?” Robin asks, his brow creased in confusion. “Is love so different in Storybrooke?”

“What do you mean?” Ruby asks, taking a long swallow of her ale and grimacing.

“When I met Marian, I knew within minutes that we shared something special,” he explains. “Before the day was out, I knew I was falling in love with her.”

“Not sure I believe in love at first sight,” Ruby mumbles. “You should talk to Snow though, I’d imagine she does.”
“Oh, I’m not saying that my love for Marian was as deep on that first day as it was on our wedding day, or on any of the days that followed,” Robin says, waving at someone to bring them more beer. “But that’s why they call it ‘falling’, Ruby. Because with every passing moment, you find something that makes you fall a little deeper in love.”

“Very poetic,” Ruby says, unable to hide her smile. “But how does that work if the first time I met Regina, I was under a curse? Cast by her?”

“And while you were under this curse, you had no feelings whatsoever towards her?” Robin presses. “And thank you for mentioning her by name, by the way, I assumed I’d have to do that, so bravo!”

“I have no idea why I’m spending time with an asshole like you,” Ruby says, laughing and accepting another beer. Robin clinks his own against hers, causing it to slosh over both their hands. “And no. I had no feelings for her.”

That’s not strictly true. Even under the curse, Ruby had been attracted to the Mayor. But, who wouldn’t be? She was the most sophisticated, glamorous, interesting person in the town. There wasn’t a whole lot of competition. And yeah, maybe Ruby used to look forward to seeing her smile every morning. But that was part of the curse, right? That doesn’t mean anything and it certainly doesn’t mean anything to do with love.

“What made you follow her to the castle that day?” Robin asks, looking at her over the rim of his glass. “You had no real reason to. No-one else did.”

She frowns. “I-I don’t know, really. She had no-one else and I-” She shakes her head. “I guess I didn’t want her to be alone. I don’t know.”

“See?” Robin says, with a grin. “Something was there. You can’t name it, but you know it was there.” He winks. “That’s love.”

“Will you quit it with the love stuff?” Ruby grumbles, finishing off her beer and gesturing for another. It’s not so bad tasting after a couple. “And anyway, it’s pointless talking about it because nothing is happening between Regina and I. We’re friends. Kinda. Sometimes. When we’re not fighting about how we’re friends.”
“Lo-ove,” Robin singsongs, ducking to avoid the slap she throws at the side of his head. He holds his hands up in surrender. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I shall stop teasing you now.”

“Good,” Ruby asserts. “We came here to drink. Not to talk about my lovelife. Or lack thereof.”

“Do you wish me to talk to her?” Robin asks kindly.

“Only if you wish yourself dead,” Ruby counters with a grin. “Because I’m fairly certain with the mood she’s in right now, she’s more likely to incinerate you than listen to you. Or me, for that matter,” she grumbles.

“You mentioned fighting about being friends,” Robin says. “I watched as the two of you walked into the Great Hall. Neither of you looked pleased. Has something happened?”

Sighing, Ruby looks down into her ale. She’s going to need something stronger if she’s going to get into this. "What else is on offer, Hood?"

Robin throws Ruby a boyish grin and stands up. “Wait right here. I think I have just the thing.” He disappears into the crowd.

Left alone, now, she sighs and looks around the place while trying not to succumb to her thoughts completely. She was supposed to find Regina. To finish that damn conversation Doc had interrupted. Though, she supposes, things were starting to get quite heated before they had been ushered out of the library. Ruby shudders to think exactly how heated things could have gotten had they had the chance to finish it. Maybe leaving it be for the moment is the best thing. Regina can calm down. Ruby can calm down. And then they can both discuss it more cal-

“Here you are.” Two shot glasses have been placed on the table, and Robin resumes his seat opposite. He brings up a bottle of dark amber liquid and pours into each glass. “This should do the trick.” Placing the bottle back on the table, he picks up the shot and Ruby does the same before clinking them together and swallowing it down in one gulp.

The liquid burns, and with her over sensitive tastebuds, it feels more like she’s swallowing fire from the depths of hell itself. She starts coughing immediately. “Jesus!” She lets out once she’s able to breathe. “The hell is that, Robin?”
“A secret stash that only myself and my Merry Men know about,” he replies easily, already pouring two more shots.

Ruby points to the small glass. “It needs to stay secret.” But she picks up the shot and drinks it nonetheless. Embarrassingly, she still has a coughing fit as she struggles to get used to the liquid. She glares at Robin who seems to be a pro at knocking them back, and tries to ignore the expectant look he’s bestowed on her. “Something you were after?”

The thief shakes his head, still smiling at Ruby. “Just wondering how many of those it will take before you tell me what’s happened between you and your Queen.”

Ruby rolls her eyes. “Enough with the my Queen. She’s just as much mine as she is everyone else’s.”

“And that’s bothering you, isn’t it?”

Ruby huffs and snatches the bottle from the table, filling both their glasses. “It’s the ‘trying to pretend the feelings don’t exist when they do’ thing that bothers me. She’s got it in her head that if we don’t associate with each other, the feelings will disappear and Zelena will stop coming after me.” She takes her shot, with Robin following suit. The coughing is less this time.

“And you disagree?”

“Of course I disagree!” Ruby shouts. She looks around the makeshift tavern as the occupants cast their glances towards them both and she groans. “Of course I disagree,” she repeats, softer this time. “Feelings don’t just change because you want them to.”

“That’s assuming Regina does want them to,” Robin counters.

“She doesn’t.” She fills up the glasses again. “But she keeps telling herself she does. Because feeling things is… I don’t know, stupid, according to Her Majesty.” They both down their drinks. “But what she fails to realise is that pretending not to feel a certain way doesn’t make us any less a target. If Zelena figured out there was something there, she’s not just gonna think it went away. But no, Regina thinks she knows best.”

“Hence the fighting,” Robin finishes for her, filling up their glasses. “I see why you took up my
“Yeah, well… she thinks there’s nothing more to be discussed. But there is. There’s a connection. I’m not going to throw it away just because she’s scared. I’m scared too, bu-”

“But that’s what happens when you’re in love,” Robin says, hiding his grin behind his glass.

Ruby glares, snarling softly at the man who seems to be having a lot of fun at her expense. “Yeah, keep poking the werewolf, Hood. See what happens. I dare you.”

He laughs at that. “I’ll take my chances,” he says. “As I said earlier, I’d trust you or your wolf with my boy’s life. I think it’s unlikely that you would hurt me for a little teasing. Or am I wrong, Hood?”

The alcohol is settling pleasantly in her bloodstream now. She knows it won’t last long because of her damn wolf metabolism so she enjoys the lightheadedness while she can. She narrows her eyes, playfully. “You’re an asshole, but you’re not wrong.”

“Good. Now that we’ve established that you’re not going to hurt me, we can get back to the matter at hand.” His speech is starting to slide together, slurring at the edges. “What’s your plan to get the Queen to see sense?”

“Besides telling her she’s an idiot?” Ruby deadpans.

“Yes. Besides that.”

Ruby shrugs, pouring another couple of shots. Instead of pushing one of the glasses towards Robin, she downs them both. One right after the other. “I can try to make her see sense all I want. I can argue until my voice is hoarse, but at the end of the day, it’s her choice and I can’t force her.” She sighs and rubs her temples. The buzz might wear off quickly with her superhuman abilities, but the headache that’s starting to form is likely to last all night. “If she chooses to believe that that’s what is safest, then…” She trails off and shrugs her shoulders. “I told her I’d wait. So that’s what I’m gonna do.”

He nods, his expression growing contemplative. “In itself, that is an admirable quality,” Robin says. “One I’m sure your Queen will appreciate, in time.”
“Yeah, in time. Maybe,” Ruby says, staring at the half-empty bottle, the light from the torches reflecting on its surface.

“Well, one thing I’m certain of,” Robin begins, leaning his elbows on the table and resting his head against one of his hands. “Is that faint heart never won fair lady. And you, Miss Ruby, are not faint of heart.”

“Just soft in head?” she jokes, but her smile fades and she pours two glasses of the strong spirit, shoving one to Robin this time. “Thank you.”

He lifts his glass and winks at her. “Cheers.”

It’s a while later when Ruby manages to convince Robin that they should probably call it a night. The thief is leaning heavily on her shoulder and she’s seriously contemplating carrying him the rest of the way.

“You must have hollow legs,” Robin decides as they stumble into the wall again. “You drank more’n me.”

“It doesn’t have much effect on me,” Ruby tells him, gritting her teeth as he veers off to the left. She arranges his arm more firmly around her shoulder and hefts most of his weight as they navigate the narrow hallways of the castle. “Can’t say the same for you, I see.”

“I can drink most men under th’table,” he insists. “Jus’...not you.” He laughs, at nothing. “Tell me about the fox again. He sounds marvellous.”

Ruby sighs. She’s sure Robin understood very little of her basic description of what a cartoon was, but he was very taken with the idea of himself as a fox and Little John as a bear. “I’ll tell you tomorrow,” she promises.

“Roland would be a fox cub!” Robin dissolves in laughter at this thought, and even Ruby cracks a smile at the image.
“He would,” she agrees. “He’d be a cute one.”

“I’m sure he’d rather be a wolf,” Robin says. “Little Red Roland Hood.” He grins sloppily at her. “Has quite the ring to it.”

Ruby chuckles at that. “Does that make you and I married, then?”

Robin stops in his tracks, causing Ruby to stop with him. He grins and waggles a finger in front of her face. “You… are funny Miss Ruby. I quite like you.”

“Yes, well I’m sure you won’t be saying that in the morning.” She hefts his weight and starts them both walking again. “You’re more likely to curse me while you deal with that hangover you’re bound to have.”

“I will deal with that in morning.”

“You can barely deal with it now,” Ruby tells him through a chuckle. “I thought you said you could drink, Hood.”

“With people. Not superhuman…. animal-type… werewolf-able hybrids.”

Glaring, Ruby continues. “I’m gonna take that as a compliment.”

“I meant it as nothing less,” he tells her through a grin. “With a face like yours Miss Ruby, how could I? We are married, after all.”

“Congratulations.”

If Ruby had any alcohol left in her system, that single word gets rid of it. Robin gasps dramatically. “It’s your Queen,” he whispers.
Ruby sighs and slowly turns them both around to face Regina. The sight of her breaks Ruby’s heart a little, because there’s not a trace of emotion on Regina’s face. The facade is back in full force and Ruby knows it’s gonna be a hard task getting through it.

“Your Majesty,” Robin greets, lurching forward with a smile. Ruby catches him before he can land on top of Regina, yanking him back. “Ruby was merely assis- helping me to find my quarters.”

“I’m sure she was,” Regina says, looking down her nose at him. “She’s very good at finding men’s bedrooms.”

“Wow,” Ruby says, shaking her head. “That’s…”

“Uncalled for,” Robin says, his smile gone. “Ruby doesn’t deserve to be spoken to like that.”

There’s a beat, barely a moment, when shame flickers across Regina’s face. But it’s soon replaced by a smirk. “Her tracking talents are well-known. I was merely commenting on her ability to find things, that’s all.”

“You’re the one who found your way to my bed, Your Majesty,” Ruby spits. “Two nights running. So I wouldn’t be so quick to throw accusations around.”

The smirk drops and Regina’s face hardens once more. She holds Ruby’s eyes for a long time, and Ruby can hear Regina’s heart hammering in her chest.

“A mistake I won’t be making again,” Regina tells her, calmly, before moving to pass the duo. “I’ll leave you to your honeymoon, Mr and Mrs Hood. Goodnight.” She sweeps away, down the corridor, leaving the two in her wake, stunned.

“That...probably wasn’t very helpful, was it?” Robin asks, seemingly more sober than a few minutes previously. “I’m sor-”

“Don’t,” Ruby tells him, her eyes still trained on the end of the corridor. “You have nothing to say sorry for.”
“She shouldn’t have spoken to you like that,” Robin says. “You’re a fine woman. And any number of people would be honoured to be with you.”

“Yeah, well, it’s a shame I don’t want any number of other people,” Ruby sighs. “C’mon. You need to get to bed. And I have a discussion to finish.”

They reach the door to Robin’s quarters without further incident and, after making sure he’s not going to fall down, Ruby takes a step back and nods at him.

“Thank you for tonight,” she says, and means it. “I think I needed it.”

“You’re most welcome,” Robin says, his easy grin back in place. “It was a very entertaining evening. And if you ever need it again, please come and find me. Mrs Hood.”

“Shut up,” Ruby tells him, with a roll of her eyes. But she leans in and brushes a kiss against his cheek. “Go to bed, Mr Hood.”

“I shall,” he agrees, finally opening the door. “And remember, faint heart never won fair lady. I bid you goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Robin,” Ruby says, laughing as he trips over something. He flashes her a grin and closes the door, leaving Ruby alone in the hallway. She rolls her shoulders and straightens her back, her jaw clenching almost painfully. Turning on her heel, she speeds through the winding corridors until she gets to Regina’s quarters.

She knows she should knock on the door; it’s only polite after all. But politeness went out the window the moment Regina made that crack about bedrooms. And really, there’s no chance of Regina letting her in. She reaches out for the handle of the door and turns, only to find it locked. Raising her eyebrows, Ruby hones in, unfairly, on her strength and twists the doorknob while pushing on the door. It comes free, swinging from the hinge and hitting the wall behind it loudly.

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“By all means,” Regina drawls, from her place by the dresser. “Do come in.”

“Okay, what the hell was that?” Ruby yells. “You don’t get t-” In her haste to get in, she hadn’t quite appreciated what was in front of her. Regina is dressed in a pantsuit Ruby has seen her wear many times in Storybrooke. It’s navy blue with a white trim. A tailored white shirt peeks out from
under the jacket. “What are you wearing?”

It seems as if Regina had forgotten about her attire, if her panicked glance down is anything to go by. She waves a hand and the pantsuit is replaced by her usual regal garb. “Nothing,” she says, quickly. “Now, kindly fix my door and leave.”

“No,” Ruby says, crossing her arms. “I told you were weren’t done.”

“You also told me you’d come and find me after speaking to Snow,” Regina replies. “But you found another playmate instead. So I’d say we’re done.”

“And I’d say you need to stop acting like a jealous girlfriend,” Ruby fires back. “Because you’re not. My girlfriend, that is. You’ve made that clear.”

“That’s right, I have,” Regina agrees. “And it didn’t take you long to get over me, did it? Despite your grand claims.”

“Jesus Christ, Regina!” Ruby throws up her hands. “I wasn’t doing anything with Robin except having a drink. But even if I was, you don’t get to push me away one minute and then guilt trip me for daring to have a male friend the next. What’s next? Are you gonna mark me as your territory? Piss on my leg?”

Regina recoils, her nose wrinkling in disgust. “Must you be so crude?”

“Oh, I’m sorry if my savage, uncouth language has offended your sensibilities,” Ruby snaps. “But my question still stands. What the hell are we doing? I can’t- I can’t keep up with you. I know you’ve said you don’t want us to be together, and I’m fine with that, but now you don’t even want us to be friends and I’m really not okay with that.”

The vein in Regina’s forehead is prominent and throbbing, a sign Ruby’s learned means that she’s holding back. The Queen’s jaw twitches and Ruby thinks she’s about to speak, but she turns away instead, and Ruby sighs in frustration.

“It’s for the best, Ruby,” Regina says, finally. Her voice is quiet and resigned and missing any of the fire that Ruby associates with the other woman.
“Making me miserable is for the best?” Ruby pushes, approaching Regina, but stopping a few steps away. “And for what? To fool your sister into thinking you don’t care about anyone here?”

“Yes,” Regina snaps, looking over her shoulder. “I’d rather you be miserable than dead.”

“Shouldn’t that be my decision? Didn’t we talk about this already? That I’m the only one who gets to make decisions about my life?”

Regina lets her head fall back so that she’s looking at the ceiling. “Reverse our positions,” she says, wearily. “Imagine Granny was some insane villainous witch intent on revenge...you probably won’t have to stretch your imagination too far.”

Ruby smiles a little at that, but nods for Regina to continue.

“And imagine she had decided that she wanted to do whatever she could to ruin your life. And part of that was a plan to hurt anyone you cared about. Snow. Charming. Me.” She turns to face Ruby. “Wouldn’t you do whatever you could to keep us safe?”

“Yes,” Ruby responds, without hesitation. “I would. But that wouldn’t include pushing you away or pretending I didn’t care.”

“That’s easy for you to say now,” Regina says. “In reality, you’d feel differently.”

“Regardless, I certainly wouldn’t consider throwing your past in your face. That was a low blow, Regina.”

Regina raises her arms and wiggles her fingers with a grin. “All part of the show dear.”

The facade drops almost immediately and she turns fully to face the younger woman. Crossing her arms over her chest, she adopts a bored expression. Ruby clenches her fists in an effort to give her hands something to do.

“I don’t want the show,” Ruby says, her throat growing thick at the thought of Regina building this elaborate scenario around herself. “You said you weren’t going to push me away. You promised.”
Briefly, Ruby thinks she might get an honest response, but Regina’s eyes change as her barriers go up. “Well Ms Lucas,” she begins, in her best regal voice. “It would appear that I lied.”

“You’re lying to yourself;” Ruby snarls, making Regina look over at her, at least. “Your plan appears to be to isolate yourself completely in case your sister thinks that you might possibly care about anyone a tiny bit.”

Crossing the room, eyes blazing, Regina jabs a finger into Ruby’s chest. “And your plan seems to involve us flaunting some grand love affair, regardless of the consequences.”

“My plan is to not allow psychotic witches to dictate my life,” Ruby says.

“You better be talking about my sister,” Regina says, her eyes narrowing in suspicion.

“My plan is to live my life and try to be happy,” Ruby continues, ignoring Regina’s interruption. “Because, God knows, there could be another curse or fucking swirling vortex of evil at any moment. And I’m damned if I’m not gonna grab hold of whatever happiness comes my way in the meantime.”

“But don’t you see, Ruby?” Regina implores. “I am the curse and the swirling vortex of evil. Your association with me is the danger you’re facing right now. And my...my weakness has allowed that to happen.” She turns away, her back facing Ruby.

“It’s not weak to want to be with somebody, Regina,” Ruby says, keeping her voice low and soft.

“It is,” Regina insists. “It is if it gets you hurt or- or worse.”

“As I said, your sister knows we’re close. She’s not stupid. She’s gonna see right through us both. Just because we stop spending time together doesn’t just make the… feelings disappear. No matter how much you try and convince yourself they have.” She takes a chance and places her hand on Regina’s back, feeling her tense and then relax. She steps around the other woman, her hand now resting gently on her waist, and waits for her to meet her eyes.

“If you can give me a single reason for us not to be friends other than to keep me safe, then I will
“Respect your wishes,” Ruby says, slowly. “I’m not pushing for anything other than that, Regina. I promise. You said you weren’t ready for anything else and I respect that completely. But, please, let me be your friend.”

Regina sighs, flattening her hand over Ruby’s chest, over her heart. “I can’t give you another reason,” she admits. “A-and I know I said I wasn’t ready for anything beyond friendship, but by God you make me forget why, sometimes.”

Ruby’s heart soars, but she bites her lip, waiting for what’s coming next. Regina’s fingertips are soft as they dance along her clavicle and the other woman seems lost in watching their progress. “Well, that’s good, right?” Ruby prompts, after a moment.

There’s still nothing forthcoming from the woman in her arms, although her hand does move back to its position resting over Ruby’s heart. Regina tilts her head back, seeking out Ruby’s eyes. “I’m not your happy ending, Ruby,” she finally says, her eyes shining. “Being with me will only bring you pain and suffering.”

“You don’t know that, Regina,” Ruby murmurs, her hands settling on the other woman’s hips. “I’m willing to find out.”

Slowly, Regina leans forward until her forehead is pressed against Ruby’s neck, her arms sliding around her waist. Ruby lets Regina settle against her before wrapping her own arms around her. She closes her eyes.

“Do you see?” Regina whispers, her breath tickling Ruby’s neck. “How weak I am? Not five minutes ago I was trying to cut you out of my life. And now I’m in your arms.”

“It’s not weak,” Ruby tells her again, turning her nose into Regina’s hair. “Pushing me away doesn’t make you strong. All it does is make us both miserable and lonely. So, stop doing it, please?” Regina makes a huffing noise against Ruby’s neck. “Is that you agreeing with me?”

Regina lifts her head to look up at Ruby. “You’re sure you want this?” she asks. “And all the risks that come with it?”

“Regina,” Ruby whispers. “You’re more than worth the risk.”
Regina ducks her head back into Ruby’s neck, but not before Ruby sees the smile that blooms as a result of her words. She tightens her arms around her, rubbing her back gently. They stand in silence for a few moments, Ruby’s cheek resting against Regina’s head.

“So,” she begins, to lighten the conversation a little. “Wanna tell me why you were wearing a sensible pantsuit when I got here?”

“You weren’t supposed to see that,” Regina mutters, not moving from her position. “The door was locked.”

“I told you I’d huff and puff,” Ruby says, craning her neck to try to see Regina, who acquiesces and lifts her head. “Seriously, why was Mayor Mills here?”

Regina shakes her head, avoiding Ruby’s eyes. She shrugs. “I was just...I suppose Snow’s announcement earlier brought back some memories, that’s all.” Ruby squeezes her waist, but remains quiet. Regina lifts her eyes, finally. “I wanted to feel like myself for a little while. And not...not the Evil Queen.”

“You’re not the Evil Queen,” Ruby tells her. “No matter what you’re wearing, you’re not the Evil Queen. You’re Regina.”

Regina huffs. “Yes, well. That may be how you see me, dear. But not everyone is like you.”

Ruby reaches up to smooth back the hair covering Regina’s face. “What matters is how you see yourself,” she says. “If I can help you see how awesome you are, then great.”

Shaking her head, Regina looks up at Ruby with a soft smile. “So, what now? Where do we go from here?”

“I think a date is traditional,” Ruby says. “So I guess I should take you on one.”

“You should probably check that your husband is okay with that,” Regina says, the quirk of her lips indicating her humour and Ruby laughs, glad to be free of the earlier animosity.
“Oh, believe me, he’ll be thrilled,” Ruby says. “He’s like my own personal cheerleader or something. He has an unhealthy interest in our relationship.”

“A date, then,” Regina agrees, with a nod. “When?”

“Tomorrow?” Ruby suggests, desperately trying to think of how she can possibly arrange anything resembling a date in the Enchanted Forest.

“Ruby?”

“Hmmm?”

“I think this is where you kiss me,” Regina says in a stage whisper.

She could come up with a witty response, or tease Regina. But instead, she dips her head, hand gently guiding Regina’s chin upwards.

And she kisses Regina Mills.
Chapter 12 - Regina

I should call this off.

That’s the thought that’s been running through her head since she got out of bed after a night of anxious tossing and turning. She had allowed herself to be swayed by Ruby’s nearness the previous evening. By her intoxicating belief that their feelings should take precedence over everything else that’s going on in their lives. By the touch of her lips.

Regina brings a hand up to touch her own lips, closing her eyes at the memory of Ruby’s kiss. It was nothing like their first kiss; borne out of anger and frustration. This was a soft thing, a coming together of two people who just wanted to be close. Unlike most of the kisses Regina’s had in her life, this one was not driven by power or manipulation. Ruby had kissed her because she wanted to kiss her. And that is a wonderful, terrifying prospect.

They had parted soon afterwards, with shy smiles and an arrangement to meet. But as soon as the door had closed after Ruby, the doubts had started to set back in. Despite Ruby’s protests to the contrary, Regina knows that this will put her in more danger. And the thought of Ruby being hurt again because of her is almost unbearable.

She comes to a halt in front of a mirror. Potential venues for ‘dates’ are severely limited, so she had dressed for outdoors, assuming a walk or a ride would be involved. She’s opted for black leather pants, and a deep wine coloured waistcoat cinched with a belt over a white shirt. Her hair is up, but the style not quite as severe as some of those she’s been sporting since their return.

It’s not like they haven’t gone out together before. They go riding often and for walks most days. But the kissing of the previous evening lends a degree of expectation to the proceedings, and Regina has very little experience with dating. Almost none, in fact. And Regina does not enjoy being in situations where she feels like she’s on the back foot. Yes, she should definitely call this off-

Three sharp raps at the door interrupt her thoughts and she puts a hand to her chest, trying to calm her heartbeat down. She swallows and straightens her clothing, mustering up as much dignity as she can as she opens the door.

Any notion she had of sending Ruby away flees when her eyes land on the other woman standing there, in an outfit not dissimilar to Regina’s. It’s amazing that someone so tall and strong can look so nervous. She’s visibly shaking and Regina’s immediate reaction is to comfort her. Ruby’s eyes roam her body and Regina relaxes considerably when she takes in the stark desire on her face.
“When you’re done ogling me, dear,” she begins, a smile warming her voice. “You might want to say hello.”

Ruby’s eyes snap up to meet hers and she smiles bashfully. “You look great,” she says, stepping in to give Regina a kiss on the cheek, which grows warm from the compliment and the attention.

“Honestly, dear, it’s just riding attire.”

“I still think you look great,” Ruby counters. Her eyebrows lift. “Oh! I forgot! I brought you this.”

She brings a hand out from behind her back and offers Regina a flower with deep purple petals; a crocus. She takes it from Ruby’s hand, their fingers brushing together briefly, starting the fluttering in Regina’s stomach up all over again. She brings the flower to her nose, inhaling deeply and closing her eyes.

“It, uh… reminded me of you.”

She considers asking why, but she knows that would just be fishing for compliments and Ruby’s already flustered enough. It doesn’t seem fair to tease her further.

“I grow these in my garden in Storybrooke,” she says, softly, meeting Ruby’s eyes. “It’s beautiful. Thank you.” A wave of her hand conjures up a long, slim vase, made for holding a single stem. Regina places the flower in it and takes a moment to look at it.

“You’re welcome,” Ruby says, coming to stand beside Regina and taking her hand. “So, shall we go on this date?”

“Let’s do that,” Regina says. “Now that you’ve stopped shaking.”

“I wasn’t shaking!” Ruby protests.
“Yes, you were,” Regina tells her. “It was quite endearing, though entirely unnecessary.” She nudges Ruby’s hip with their joined hands. “I don’t bite.”

A wicked grin spreads across Ruby’s face. “Well that’s a pity.” She turns so that her lips are next to Regina’s ear and whispers. “I do.” The shiver that runs through Regina’s body is impossible to miss and she sees Ruby trying to contain her laughter. “Still not used to being on the receiving end, I see.” She doesn’t give Regina an opportunity to respond, however, before tugging on her hand, pulling her towards the door. As they enter the hallway, Ruby stoops to pick up a covered basket she’d clearly deposited there earlier.

“My powers of deduction tell me that we’re going on a picnic,” Regina says as they continue on their way through the castle.

“Wow,” Ruby comments. “You could give Emma a run for her money as Sheriff.”

“That wouldn’t be difficult, dear,” Regina says, attempting to lift the cloth off the basket. Ruby pulls it out of her reach.

“Patience,” she murmurs. “It’s worth the wait, I promise.”

“I’m sure it is,” Regina says, smiling when Ruby blushes and ducks her head.

The rest of the walk to the stable is spent in comfortable silence, save for the odd comment about the weather. The early afternoon air is warm and fresh after the cold, stale feel of the castle. Regina lets go of Ruby’s hand when they enter the stable and heads towards her horse. As always, he greets her enthusiastically and she rubs his nose, whispering her own greetings. She turns to see Ruby leaning against the doorway, a soft smile on her lips.

Regina leads the horse out of his stall by the bridle. One of the stable boys who seems to practically live with the horses already has his saddle ready to be put on and Regina takes it from him to do it herself. He turns to Ruby as Regina busies herself with her task.

“Will you be needing a horse saddled today, Miss?” Regina can practically hear his cheeky grin. “Or will you be sharing with the Queen?”

“I-uh...Regina?” Ruby asks.
“We’ll be fine with one,” Regina confirms as she tightens the saddle straps and lets down the stirrups. “He’ll take us both easily.”

The boy nods, still with a grin on his face. “Enjoy your ride, Miss.” He turns to Regina and dips into a small bow. “Your Majesty.” As he stands, he has the audacity to wink at them, and he scampers off.

“Remind me to have him fired for insolence,” Regina mumbles, as she leads the horse out into the yard and mounts him. She stretches a hand down to help Ruby up.

Ruby hands Regina the basket to hold, and takes a hold of the offered hand. She puts a foot in the stirrup and hoists herself up and onto the horse. “You’re not gonna fire him,” Ruby says. She wraps her arms around Regina’s middle and settles against her, squeezing gently. “He’s just a kid and you like the way he takes care of your horse.”

Regina huffs as Ruby takes back the basket, leaving one arm wrapped around Regina. “Yes. Well. It’s just lucky for him that he does take care of my horse.” The horse trots through the courtyard out into the open fields. Regina would normally kick him into high gear right about now, but she keeps to the gentle pace, for the sake of the food in the basket.

“That’s my good boy,” she murmurs, patting the horse’s neck. “I know you want to run. Not today.”

“You sure you want me along on your little date with your horse?” Regina doesn’t have to turn to know Ruby’s smiling.

“We’re very happy you’re here,” she says. “Aren’t we, boy?”

“You should give him a name,” Ruby says.

Regina turns to look over her shoulder. She holds Ruby’s eyes for a moment before turning to the front again.

“Just...I mean, it’s up to you, of course,” Ruby continues, her voice a little less sure than before. “But we call him ‘the horse’ a lot and it would just be easier if he had a name.”
She brings a hand up to cover Ruby’s hand that’s resting on her waist, entwining their fingers. “I...I haven’t named a horse since I lost my childhood steed.”

“Oh, hey, I’m sorry,” Ruby says, immediately. She presses her cheek to Regina’s shoulder as they ride on in silence for a few minutes. “What was his name?”

“Rocinante,” Regina says. “He was beautiful and I loved him very much.” Part of her wants to tell Ruby more, but she assumes that discussing the murder of one’s pet isn’t great conversation for a first date.

“Ignore what I said. ‘Horse’ is fine. It suits him.” Ruby squeezes Regina’s hand and Regina leans back into her, grateful for the comfort.

“No, you’re right,” Regina decides. “He should have a name.” She turns slightly to nudge her forehead against Ruby’s. “You can name him.”

“What?” Ruby asks, almost headbutting Regina when she sits up straighter in the saddle. “Me? I can’t name him. He’s yours. And I’ve never named anything! I’ll...I’ll pick wrong.”

Regina finds Ruby’s sudden panic adorable. She laughs softly, shaking her head. “Just choose something you think suits him. He’s not going to mind what his name is.”

“No, but...” Ruby bites her lip. “I’m not good at that stuff. Being creative or original. My Granny has a restaurant called ‘Granny’s’! We’re not a creative family. And how am I going to live up to Rocinante? What even is that?”

“You were the one who wanted to name the horse,” Regina protests. “So name him.”

“I...he...”

“You don’t have to do it this very second,” Regina tells her, still trying to keep from laughing at the consternation in Ruby’s voice. “Just whenever inspiration strikes.”
“You might be waiting a while,” Ruby mumbles.

Regina shrugs and turns her head to smirk at her. “I can be surprisingly patient. It’s surprising how much patience one requires to be the Mayor of a small town. Especially a small town where magic doesn’t allow one to incinerate annoying citizens.”

Ruby laughs close to her ear, squeezing her gently. “Not all of the townsfolk were annoying though, right?”

“Not all,” Regina agrees. “Some were less annoying than others.”

“I won’t ask you who your favourite Storybrooke citizen was,” Ruby says. Her lips brush Regina’s ear as she turns to whisper. “But I think we both know.”

“Yes,” Regina agrees, trying to keep her body from reacting outwardly to Ruby’s touch. “Pongo.”

Ruby’s laugh is loud and musical and it draws out the smile Regina was attempting to hide. A light pinch to her side makes her flinch and she glances back to see Ruby glaring playfully at her. “You’re not funny, Your Majesty.”

“You laughed,” Regina points out. Instead of replying, Ruby presses a kiss to her jaw and then buries her nose against her neck. Regina’s eyes briefly drift closed at the contact.

“I love that we can do this now,” Ruby mumbles. “That we’ve stopped fighting it.”

“It’s...not unpleasant,” Regina agrees.

“Wow, calm down there,” Ruby says, lifting her head with a chuckle. “Don’t get all mushy on me!”

Slowing the horse down to a walk, Regina shrugs. “I think we’ve established that I’m not good at ‘mushy’, Ruby.”
The arm around her midsection loosens and she immediately misses the warmth and strength of Ruby’s embrace. A gentle hand on her chin urges her face to turn to the left and she finds herself looking into Ruby’s big, expressive eyes. Long fingers trace her cheek as Ruby smiles.

“Me neither,” she admits. “But that’s okay. I kinda like that we’re both assholes.”

Regina’s mouth falls open. “I am not an assh-mmmphh.” Her protest is cut off by Ruby’s lips and whatever argument she had in mind flees as her chest tightens and feels lighter all at once. Ruby pulls away all too soon and she finds herself trying to follow her to continue the kiss. A thumb swipes across her mouth, coming to rest on the scar that cuts into the right side of her top lip.

“Yes, you are,” Ruby whispers. “And that’s okay. And I’d really like to do more of the kissing stuff right now. But if we do I’m gonna fall off this horse, and I’m really trying to cultivate the whole ‘graceful and majestic wolf’ image. And I think that’d kinda ruin it.”

Grateful for the fact that Ruby knows when to keep things light, she smiles and nods. “I think that ship sailed when your wolf collapsed on top of me and insisted I rub her belly, but if you want to pretend otherwise, who am I to stop you?”

“See? Asshole!” Ruby says, but she presses a kiss to Regina’s cheek anyway.

Turning her attention back to their surroundings, Regina realises that they’ve come further than she’d planned. She brings the horse to a halt and Ruby dismounts first. Regina follows a moment later, idly wondering why she chose to bring Ruby here without really thinking.

She busies herself tethering the horse to a nearby tree, providing him with a juicy red apple and a rub to his nose. Coming back to Ruby, she takes her hand, linking their fingers together and urges her in the direction of a small hill. When they reach the top, it seems the whole kingdom is laid out before them. Green fields stretch for miles, villages are sprinkled around from place to place, with imposing mountains in the distance. Regina sits on the grass, pulling Ruby down with her.

“This is where I used to come when I was...married to Snow’s father,” she says, looking at the view. She hates that she still stumbles over the word ‘married’. “This is the castle boundary, the edge of my prison. I’d come here and sit for hours, thinking of ways I could escape, of where I could go, to whom I could run.” Her eyes search the horizon. “But it was no use and I always went back. But the time I spent up here was my own, imagining a different life. Imagining what could have been.”
She’s never brought anyone else to this place. She’s never admitted, out loud at least, that she spent her years as Queen alternating between fear and rage. Just trying to find a place that she fit into. Ruby moves to sit behind Regina, wrapping her arms around her waist and pulling her in tight. Regina tries not to get into ‘what ifs’, but she can’t help but wonder, sitting here now, what her life had been like if she had run away. Maybe she’d have met a girl in a red cloak. Maybe there would have been no curse. Maybe she’d have been happy.

Regina shakes her head. No curse means no Henry, and that is not a life she would ever choose. She covers Ruby’s arms with her own where they rest around her waist, and leans back into her, resting her head against the other woman’s.

“It must have been hard to find people to confide in,” Ruby murmurs, squeezing Regina tighter. “I guess a lot of people thought your life was perfect, huh?”

Regina laughs, but it’s hollow. “Pretty gowns. Pretty jewels.” She shrugs. “To complain seems ungrateful.”

“I’m listening.”

Again she marvels at Ruby’s ability to know exactly what she needs to hear. Ruby could so easily have launched into a speech about how she wished they’d known each other back then, or how she’d have saved Regina from her loneliness if she could have. But she doesn’t do that. Regina lifts one of Ruby’s hands, linking their fingers and watching how well they fit together. “Don’t worry, dear. There will be plenty of time for my deep dark secrets.”

“Well I’m not sure it counts for anything, but I’m here.”

“Yes.” Regina’s throat tightens with a sudden fear borne of a lifetime of being let down by people who claimed to care about her. She squeezes Ruby’s hand, her next words driven by her past. “For now.”

Her stomach clenches as she worries that Ruby will be insulted by her insinuation. Instead, Ruby’s hold tightens and she presses her cheek against Regina’s.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen, Regina,” she finally says. “So, for me, now is the only thing I can be sure of. And I’m here.”
It’s refreshing when someone doesn’t try to promise the world and Regina smiles, closing her eyes. “That’s good enough, dear.”

“Awwww, that’s so sweet!”

Her sister’s unwelcome and unexpected voice makes her eyes snap open. Ruby’s already on her feet, stepping in front of where Regina is still sitting on the ground. Zelena ignores her completely, focussing instead on Regina. “I must say, Regina, that I was quite surprised when I discovered that you were that way inclined. But I have to admit you do make quite a striking couple.”

Ruby lets out a distinct growl at the words and Regina quickly stands, putting a hand on Ruby’s arm, in case she gets any ideas. Zelena’s grin widens as she saunters closer. Her eyes drift up and down Ruby’s body.

“You know, I always wanted a puppy,” she says.

Ruby’s body tenses for attack and Regina tightens her grip, stepping in front of the taller woman, shielding her. She tries to adopt an air of boredom so that the green woman can’t tell how worried she is. “Not another story about your deprived childhood, Zelena, please.” She takes in her sister’s appearance. “Anyway, wouldn’t a black cat be a better match for your broomstick?”

“Cats are so aloof,” Zelena says with a wrinkle of her nose. “Dogs are far more loyal. And more fun.” She waves her hand a little, sending green smoke towards Ruby.

Regina quickly counteracts the magic with some of her own; purple smoke engulfs the green and neutralises it. “She’s not a dog,” Regina spits. “And you’d do well to stop calling her one.”

Zelena raises her eyebrows. “Or what? You’ll sic her on me?” She chuckles. “Sister dear, I could have her put down faster than you could give the command.” She grins again. “I can show you if you like.” She readies her hands.

“You’ll be the one going down, Witch,” Ruby snarls, straining against Regina’s hold on her. Regina knows she could break free if she wanted, and hopes she has enough sense to stay where she is.

Zelena shakes her head and clicks her tongue, looking to Regina. “She’s not very bright, is she?”
she asks in a stage whisper. Her eyes roam over Ruby’s face. “Pretty, but not very bright.” Regina’s jaw clenches, but she doesn’t respond. Verbal sparring right now will only anger either Ruby or Zelena, and she’s not sure which one would be worse.

The Wicked Witch takes a step closer, tapping a long finger on her chin in exaggerated thought. “Unless,” she draws the word out. “Unless, you have your little minions believing that you’re actually capable of defeating me?”

Regina feels her confidence falter, and knows that it shows on her face when Zelena lets out a cackle. “That’s it, isn’t it?” she asks in delight. “This rag-tag band of peasants you’ve assembled really think you’re powerful enough to overthrow me?” She takes another step and lifts her hand to Regina’s face. Regina can’t help the tiny flinch as the green fingers make contact with her skin. “Well, they’re in for quite a shock then, aren’t they?”

Just as Zelena’s fingers make contact with Regina’s face, Ruby uses Regina’s grip against her and yanks her away from her sister with a fierce growl, leaving Regina to stumble backwards. “Don’t touch her,” Ruby snarls, getting far too close to Zelena for Regina’s liking.

“Such a fierce little pup, protecting her mistress,” Zelena notes, snapping her teeth just shy of Ruby’s nose. She moves her hand to the younger girl’s chest and Regina is spurred into action, moving forward and lifting her hands to blast her sister, but Zelena is quicker and Regina finds herself behind a shimmering sheet of green, separated from Ruby and Zelena.

“Ruby! Get back!” she shouts, pounding her fists uselessly on the forcefield. She watches as Zelena traces the shape of a heart with her finger on Ruby’s chest before leaning forward and whispering something in Ruby’s ear. Whatever it is, it causes Ruby to launch herself at Zelena. Her feet have barely left the ground when Zelena’s magic catches her in its grip, freezing her in mid-air, unable to move. The green woman looks up as she struggles against the magical bonds. It takes Regina back to her childhood, when the same punishment was used by her mother for any form of disobedience, real or imagined.

“You don’t have her very well trained, Regina,” Zelena says, before turning to Ruby. “Didn’t you hear your Mistress tell you to stay?”

Ruby tries to fight the magic holding her, but Regina knows that only makes it bind tighter and, sure enough, Ruby starts to gasp for air, her eyes bulging as her chest constricts. Summoning every ounce of magic she has in her, Regina raises both hands and sends a blast of energy at the
green wall blocking her path. She vaguely registers that her magic feels different, somehow, but she doesn’t have time to examine it. The shield shimmers before disappearing. She directs her next blast at her sister. Zelena turns to deflect it, but it distracts her and attracts enough of her attention that Ruby’s bonds are loosened and she drops to the ground, freed.

Not waiting for Zelena to collect herself, Regina calls up another blast, heartened to see Zelena stumble backwards as she counters it, uncertainty flashing across her face. Another and another and she’s far enough away that Regina is able to conjure up her own shield in front of herself and Ruby, a purple hazy, jelly like substance. Zelena, though somewhat winded, is far from defeated. She approaches the forcefield and taps it with her finger, jumping back a step when it gives her a shock. She laughs.

“Nice trick, Regina,” she commends. “Of course, I could shatter it in seconds, but I’ll let you have your little victory this time.” She turns her gaze to Ruby, who is pulling herself to her feet. “I think I’m going to have a little more fun with you and your pet before I’m through with you.”

Regina is straining with the effort of holding the shield in place, not to mention the amount of magic she required to break Zelena’s own. In her peripheral vision she sees Ruby move to stand in front of her, attempting to shield Regina’s shaking body with her own.

“Watch your back, Fido,” Zelena warns. “I’m looking forward to the next full moon.”

She turns to look back at Regina and grins. “I’ll get you, my pretty… and your little dog too.” A wave of her hands and she’s gone in a puff of green smoke.

Regina lets the shield drop just before everything goes black.

It feels like there’s a thick fog inside her head and lead in her limbs. Something is clearly not right.

“Regina…Regina!”

Someone’s calling her name. They sound worried. Frightened even. Something touches her face and it takes a few seconds before she can identify it as a hand. It moves to her neck. She vaguely thinks she should fight it off; it could be someone trying to hurt her. It moves again and starts to
stroke her hair. Friendly, then.

“Regina…” The voice is back, a little rougher. “Regina you need to wake up. We have to get you back to the castle.”

“Mmmmm,” she manages to groan, though she’d been attempting to formulate a word, having finally identified the owner of the voice and the hand in her hair. “Ruby?” she manages to mumble. The ground is cold and hard against her back and every bone in her body is aching.

“Yeah, it’s me.” Ruby says. Regina forces her eyes to open and focus. Ruby’s worried face swims into view. Regina tries to smile. Ruby doesn’t even try to return it. Instead she gently starts to pull Regina into her arms. Regina lets out a whimper of protest at the movement, but allows her body to sink into Ruby’s embrace, long arms wrapping around her shoulders, holding her close to Ruby’s chest.

“I am so sorry. Are you okay?”

“Mmm’jus’tired,” Regina mumbles, turning her face into Ruby’s shoulder. Something in her brain tells her she should be asking why Ruby is sorry, but she doesn’t have the energy for it at the moment. She hopes she’ll remember to ask later.

“Regina…ca-can you stand?”

Even the thought of standing up right now is too much for her fatigued body to handle and Regina shakes her head. “Jus’…need to rest a little.” She burrows further into Ruby’s arms. “Just a little while.”

“Shit,” Ruby whispers and Regina wonders if she looks worse than she feels. That can’t be possible, she decides. A kiss is pressed to her forehead. “I’m sorry.”

Another apology. Regina tries in vain to think what Ruby could be apologising for, but before she can give it any consideration, her body is being moved again, hoisted into Ruby’s arms. She moans as her limbs are adjusted and her muscles cry out at the slightest movement, but Ruby is already moving, running. Running really fast.

Using the little strength she has, Regina grips the front of Ruby’s shirt for fear of falling. It soon
becomes apparent that she's safe in Ruby’s strong arms. Ruby's strides are long and smooth and she's hardly even jostling Regina. In fact, the rhythmic movements are lulling her to sleep.

This time when Regina awakens, clarity comes quicker and she feels less tired. Again, someone is pawing at her neck.

"Her pulse is strong." It’s Whale. Fabulous. When he starts to loosen her collar, she decides enough is enough. She lifts her hand and bats him away, albeit weakly.

"Don't get fresh," she mutters, forcing her eyes to open and fix Whale with a glare. "I'm your Queen."

Whale turns to the side to speak to someone. "She seems fine."

"She passed out after having a magic fight," Ruby’s voice comes into play. "How can you tell me she's fine after looking at her for two seconds?"

Regina tries to turn to see Ruby and picks her out just as Mary Margaret takes her hand. "Magic uses a lot of energy," her former stepdaughter explains, as if she knows a single thing about it. "It could just be that she needs to rest to gain her strength back."

Regina groans. There are far too many people around here, giving opinions about her. She shifts her attention back to Whale. "Why are you hovering over me?"

"I'm assessing you," he tells her. "Do you know where you are?"

"I'm on the floor," Regina mutters. "Get me off the floor."

Whale obliges immediately, reaching for her arm to support her as she struggles into a sitting position. Another arm goes about her waist and Ruby’s there, lending her support and helping Regina to stand. The arm stays around her waist even after she’s steady.
"Do you remember what happened?" David asks her.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m an imbecile,” Regina chides, pushing Whale away and leaning more heavily on Ruby. “Of course I remember what happened.”

Mary Margaret moves to take Whale’s place at Regina’s side, but thinks better of it when Regina glares at her. “What did Zelena want?” she asks, instead.

Regina sways slightly, as the effort of standing catches up with her, but steadies herself using Ruby as her anchor. She turns weary eyes to meet Mary Margaret’s. “I don’t know,” she admits, with a sigh. “She was toying with us. If she’d wanted us dead, we wouldn’t be here.” She shakes her head. “But I don’t know what she wants.”

"Your heart," Ruby answers, quietly.

Mary Margaret frowns, looking between the two. "Why would she want your heart?"

"Must run in the family," Granny puts in.

Regina ignores everyone but Ruby, she doesn’t have enough energy to come up with responses for everyone. “My heart? She told you this?”

"It was what she whispered to me."

“Ah,” Regina says, with a nod. She’d thought it was another dog comment that had set Ruby off. She frowns. “Attacking her was a foolish move, Ruby,” she scolds. “You heard what she was saying about her powers.”

"You attacked Zelena?" Mary Margaret asks in a gasp.

"Do you have a death wish, gir?" Granny puts in.

Ruby sighs. "I know," she snaps, then appears to catch herself. She looks into Regina’s eyes. "I
know,” she repeats, quietly.

There’s quite a crowd now, and they’re all chattering amongst themselves, offering opinions on Ruby or Zelena or Regina or all three. Regina really can’t face them right now, and she hates having an audience when she’s so weak and vulnerable. Summoning up what little strength she has left, she straightens up, pushing away from Ruby, and starts walking under her own steam. “I’ll leave you to your guesswork and supposition,” she announces, pleased that the crowd is parting to let her through. She needs to get out of here and away from them before she collapses again. Hurried footsteps behind her tell her that Ruby is following.

Regina has reached the stairs by the time Ruby catches up. Though she wouldn’t say it, she’s glad when the younger woman hooks an arm around her waist because her legs were getting pretty unsteady and each step feels higher than the last.

"I'm sorry." The words are quiet and Ruby’s head is bowed.

“For allowing half the castle to see me in this state?” Regina asks, even as she leans more of her weight on the other woman. “As you should be. That’s hardly going to be good for morale, is it? If they know she can reduce me to this.”

"They would have seen you anyway considering we need to pass the dining hall to get here. It would have looked a little strange to see me carrying you up the stairs like a honeymooning couple, wouldn’t it?” Ruby stops walking and turns Regina so they're facing each other. "Maybe they need to see that you're just like the rest of us."

Grasping Ruby’s forearms to keep herself upright, Regina shakes her head. “But I’m not,” she says, warily. “I’m their Queen. A leader. I’m the only one of you who stands a chance against our enemy.” She looks down. “If they see how easily she can bring me down, they’re not going to believe we can win against her.”

“But it was your magic that did this,” Ruby counters. “You essentially did this to yourself.”

Lifting her head slowly, Regina looks into Ruby’s eyes. “To protect you,” she says, her voice low. “She wasn’t even trying and still it took this much out of me to keep her back.” She shakes her head. “All I did today was show her my weaknesses and give her more ammunition.”

“She won’t succeed,” Ruby says, sounding far more confident than she should.
“No?” Regina asks with a bitter little laugh. “You saw her today. She laughed in my face.” She stumbles forward a little, her legs almost giving way. “Ruby...I...I need to lie down.”

Ruby wastes no time. She bends and puts her arm behind Regina’s legs, lifting her into her arms. “C’mon.” She starts up the stairs and Regina flashes to being carried all the way back to the castle this way. Ruby must be exhausted. Regina takes a moment to examine her face, feeling slightly guilty for the way she’s spoken to her. While pouncing at Zelena was a stupid move, she did it in defense of Regina’s heart. Regina’s not used to people defending her. She leans her forehead against Ruby’s temple in a silent thank you.

They arrive at Regina’s chambers and Ruby fumbles to get the door open with her elbow. Once inside, Regina is gently laid down on the bed. She immediately curls up, her bones and muscles singing in agony now that she’s not concentrating on staying upright. She hears Ruby moving around the room but can’t summon up the energy to even look over to see what she’s doing. After a short time, the bed dips with extra weight and a cool cloth wipes across her forehead and down her cheek. It’s soothing. A gentle hand on her shoulder urges her to roll over onto her back and she finds herself looking into concerned green eyes. She wants to reassure Ruby that she’s okay, but she’s so tired. So, so tired.

Ruby continues to dab at her face with the cool cloth. “We’ll find a way through this, Regina,” she says. Her voice is quiet, but firm.

Regina lifts a hand; it feels like it’s not even attached to her body, like it’s a foreign and very heavy object. She clumsily touches Ruby’s chin. “So beautiful…” she whispers. She shakes her head. Her mother was right. “’S’weakness.” Her head falls to the side, eyes closing and her hand falls back to the surface of the bed.
After a brief initial panic, Ruby decides that Regina is just sleeping soundly. She’s even snoring a little and she looks more at peace than she did earlier. Ruby takes a blanket from the foot of the bed, covering Regina with it, heedless that she’s still fully dressed, including her boots. She clears away the bowl of water and cloth she’d brought through and then settles herself in the chair by Regina’s bed.

In the quiet of the bedchamber, Ruby has no choice but to face her own feelings of guilt. If she hadn’t pounced at Zelena, if she hadn’t allowed herself to be goaded, then Regina might never have had to use up all this energy. Seeing the Queen so depleted was terrifying and definitely isn’t something Ruby wants to see again. On a more positive note, despite Regina’s claims to the contrary, Regina’s magic definitely had an effect on Zelena. From her vantage point, Ruby saw the doubt cross the green witch’s face when Regina first blasted her. She was surprised by the strength of Regina’s magic, Ruby’s sure of it.

A soft knock comes from the door and Ruby rises, glancing back to make sure it hasn’t disturbed Regina. She opens the door to find a very worried Mary Margaret waiting there. Ruby smiles at her friend and ushers her into the room.

“Is Regina okay?” Mary Margaret asks, grasping Ruby’s hand. Ruby knows that while others may view Regina as a means to an end; a way to defeat Zelena, Mary Margaret genuinely cares about Regina the person. Therefore, Mary Margaret genuinely cares about the answer.

“She’s… resting,” Ruby hesitates, swallowing. “I’m not too sure how she is just now.” Leading Mary Margaret further into the room, she pauses by Regina’s bedchamber and nods to the bed. Mary Margaret peeks her head in, a tentative smile spreading across her lips as she sees Regina. Tugging her friend’s hand gently, she nods towards the living quarters. “C’mon, we can talk through there.” She leaves the bedroom door open. Not that she’d need it to hear anything happening, but it gives her some degree of comfort.

They sit at the dining table, still holding hands. “How are you holding up?” Mary Margaret asks, squeezing Ruby’s fingers.

“Me?” Ruby asks, in surprise. “I’m fine. Nothing happened to me. I was-”

“Ruby,” Mary Margaret interrupts with a stern expression. “You watched someone you care about collapse. You listened to her sister threaten to take her heart. So, yes, something did happen to you.”
Letting out a shaky sigh, Ruby closes her eyes. “I’m fine,” she lies. She turns her head to the door. “Or I will be once I know she’s okay.”

“She will be,” Mary Margaret says with a firm nod. “She was very...Regina, downstairs. I think that’s got to be a good sign.”

Ruby pulls her hand free of Mary Margaret’s grip and covers her face. “It’s not so much that,” she admits, quietly. “It’s...I’m worried this whole thing will set her back to…” She bites her lip before she shares Regina’s confidences. “I’m just worried. Zelena wants her heart.”

“Well…” Mary Margaret begins. “Both Regina and Cora have a history with hearts...maybe it’s got something to do with that?” She casts an apologetic look at Ruby. “Sorry.”

Ruby dismisses the apology with a wave of her hand. “I don’t know,” she admits. “But she made it sound like it would be the sweetest treat to take it from her, and that doesn’t sit well with me.” She swallows, hesitant about what she’s about to say next. She’s supposed to be the positive one; the one who believes they can win in this fight. But having seen exactly how capable the witch is. “Zelena is strong.”

“So’s Regina,” Mary Margaret says, without hesitation, making Ruby feel guilty all over again. She should be the one with unwavering confidence, not the girl Regina tried to kill for years. “We will stand together, with Regina, to fight Zelena,” Mary Margaret continues. “And we will win. We’ve come this far, haven’t we? We’ve overcome curses and portals and losses...and we’re still standing.”

Ruby smiles at her friends, appreciative of their positivity when her own is at a low ebb. “Thank you,” she says quietly. “That means a lot to me.”

“Regina means a lot to you,” Mary Margaret amends, with a soft smile. “I’m guessing you’ve moved past the ‘it’s complicated’ stage?”

Ruby laughs and shakes her head. “Oh, it’s definitely still complicated,” she admits, lifting her eyes to meet her friend’s. “But, yeah, we, uh...yeah.”

The smile on Mary Margaret’s face is warm and genuine, and there’s a hint of tears in her eyes as she grasps Ruby’s hand again.
“Good,” she whispers. “You both deserve to be happy. And, when we’re done with all of this Wicked Witch stuff, I want all the details.”

“You’re not getting any details,” Ruby tells her, with an affectionate smile.

“I think you underestimate my detail getting skills, my friend,” Mary Margaret jokes, with a final squeeze to Ruby’s hand. “I’ll leave you to it. I doubt she’ll want an audience when she wakes up.”

They both stand and head back towards the door, but before Mary Margaret can reach out and open it, Ruby pulls her into a tight hug. “Thank you,” she whispers.

“Red and Snow, right?” Mary Margaret whispers in return. “Always.”

“Always.” She squeezes Mary Margaret one last time before releasing her and they part with a wave and a smile.

She can tell that Regina’s still asleep from her breathing, so she moves back into the bedroom quietly. From the door, Regina’s rest looks peaceful. But as Ruby gets closer to the other woman’s bed, she can see the frown and creases on her face, and the beads of sweat sitting on her forehead.

Ruby makes a quick trip to retrieve more water and a cloth. She sits on the edge of the bed, gently wiping Regina’s forehead. The Queen starts to whimper and it makes Ruby’s chest hurt. “Shhh, Regina,” she soothes “It’s okay. You’re okay…”

Regina seems to grow more agitated at the sound of her voice and Ruby reaches down with her free hand to cup Regina’s cheek, hoping to gently rouse her from her sleep. “Regina,” she coaxes. “Come on. Wake up.”

“No,” Regina murmurs, her arm flailing vaguely in Ruby’s direction, though she still seems to be asleep. “Leave me alone.”

Ruby draws back slowly on the command. She dips the cloth back into the water, squeezing it and dabbing it on Regina’s forehead. “Regina…” she tries again, a little louder, more urgently. “Regina, come on, you need to wake up now. It’s just a dream.”
Regina’s shaking her head, twisting, trying to evade some invisible attacker. Gradually, Ruby becomes aware of the presence of magic in the room and she looks down to Regina’s hands, where purple tendrils of electricity are forming. She moves off the bed quickly, sensing that Regina’s subconscious self is about to blast someone or something. She ducks and rolls to the foot of the bed, crouching down on the floor, as Regina releases a fireball. She lets out a yelp of surprise when it connects with the painting on the wall opposite the bed. Immediately the thing goes up in purple flame, the heat of the fire is enough that Ruby can feel it on her skin from her crouched position. Then it’s gone.

“Henry?” Regina’s voice calls, fearfully. There’s an intake of breath followed by her own name in the same tone. “Ruby?”

“I’m okay!” Ruby is quick to tell her. Her hands are up in the air and she gets up from the floor, slowly, so as not to startle Regina. “I’m okay,” she repeats. she moves towards the bed at the same measured pace. “I promise.”

Regina’s hand flies to cover her mouth. She looks like she might be sick. “I could’ve killed you,” she whispers. Ruby picks up her pace, wanting to reassure Regina that she’s very much alive, but Regina scrambles backwards, away from her. “Don’t…” she says. “Don’t come near me.”

Seeing Regina so panicked and frightened is an unsettling experience to say the least, but Ruby has to keep it together. Slowly, she moves forward, toward Regina. “Stop.” She rests her hands on the other woman’s leg. “Regina, stop,” she repeats as Regina continues to struggle to get away from her. “I’m okay. You were dreaming. I saw the warning signs, I moved out of the way. I’m fine.” She tries to pull Regina into her arms, to provide comfort and reassurance, but the Queen is having none of it. She pushes at Ruby and twists away from her.

"No! Let me go! Don't touch me!" Ruby tightens her embrace, refusing to let Regina break out of it. She’s unsure if Regina is fully woken, or if she’s still half in her dream, but she’s not giving in. “Let me go!”

Without warning, Ruby finds her arms moving of their own accord until they’re pinned behind her back. She tries to move them, but they’re frozen. Regina immediately scrabbles away, off the bed, and stands with her back to Ruby. She’s breathing heavily.

“Regina,” Ruby tries again, straining against the invisible hold. Regina finally turns to face her; eyes blazing with purple fury.
“Don’t ever hold me against my will again,” she whispers, vehemently.

“Like you’re doing to me right now?” Ruby asks, struggling with her bonds. “I only wanted to make you feel better. I wanted to-”

“You’ll enjoy it, Regina’, ‘It’ll make you feel better, Regina’,” Regina spits. “You think I haven’t heard that before?”

The conversation about burning Leopold’s bed comes back to Ruby and her face flushes with shame. “Oh, Regina, I-”

“Save it,” Regina says, lifting a hand to release Ruby. The hand is shaking, Ruby notes. Her arms fall to her sides as the magic lets them go, but Regina is already heading to her bathchamber, the heavy door closing behind her.

Ruby’s up and off the bed as the door clicks into place. She puts her hand on the doorknob, but decides against barging in without permission. Instead, she knocks softly. “Regina, I’m sorry,” she begins. “I didn’t think about... I just didn’t think. I wanted to show you I was okay, that you hadn’t hurt me. I’m sorry.”

“Leave,” comes the muffled instruction from behind the door.

Ruby feels a pang of hurt go through her chest, but quickly remind herself that this isn’t about her right now. Having already made Regina uncomfortable once, she’s not prepared to further that feeling by arguing with her while she is locked away in a separate room to distance herself. “Okay. I won’t be far. I’m gonna… I’m gonna wait until you’re ready.” She waits for a barrage of abuse, but nothing comes, so she assumes Regina thinks it’s an okay thing to do. So, slowly, Ruby turns and heads back to Regina’s bedroom. She sits on the stone floor, just under the window, drawing her knees up to her chest and hugging them, and waits. She’s not purposefully listening in, but she hears it anyway; a gasp followed by the noise of something falling. She’s on her feet right away and at the door of the bathchamber before she even is aware of moving.

“Regina?” she calls softly, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. “Are you okay? I heard a noise.”

“I’m fine.” The reply isn’t at all convincing, and Ruby presses her forehead against the wooden barrier, her hand on the doorknob once more. She clenches her teeth with the effort of not opening
“Would you tell me if you weren’t fine?” Ruby asks.

There’s a longer pause this time.

“Probably not,” Regina admits, and Ruby’s almost certain there’s a smile on her face as she says it.

“Right,” Ruby says. “Well, that’s not worrying at all.”

“I’m speaking to you, aren’t I?” Regina says. The humour is gone, replaced with annoyance. “So I’m not unconscious or dead. You needn’t concern yourself.”

“Right,” Ruby responds, rolling her eyes. “Well, I’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready to come out.”

Slowly, she heads back to her previous position, glancing back at the door a few times before sitting on the floor again. She counts one thousand, eight hundred and seven seconds before her ears detect a distinct click, and she’s up on her feet before Regina can make her presence known. She clasps her hands together just to give them something to do, and leans back against the wall just by the window. She casts a quick glance at the other woman. She’s trying to come across as composed, but she’s still unsettled. Ruby feels compelled to go to her but doesn’t want to upset Regina any further than she still clearly is.

“You stayed,” Regina murmurs.

Ruby nods, noting that Regina smells of her expensive bath oils and is wearing fresh clothes. “I said I would.”

“Yes, well, people say a lot of things,” Regina comments as she moves to an armchair, dropping heavily into it.

“I mean the things I say, Regina,” Ruby says, pushing away from the wall and standing up straight.
Instead of answering, Regina slumps in her seat, letting her head loll to the side, like her body has given up even trying to remain upright. Ruby is immediately moving towards Regina, but she stops short, catching herself. She’s unclear what’s okay and what’s not right now, so she chooses to keep her distance. She shuffles foot to foot, clasping her hands again.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” She was feisty before, strong even. Right now, Regina looks like she couldn’t stand even if she wanted to.

“Are you deaf?” Regina snaps. “Or blind?” She looks up at Ruby with a sneer. “Or maybe just stupid. I said I was -”

“I’m not deaf, blind or stupid,” Ruby interrupts. “And that’s why I know you’re not fine. And you can keep pushing me away because that’s what makes you feel better, but I’m not going anywhere.” She crosses the room in a few long strides, picks up a second armchair and brings it back in front of Regina. She places it on the floor heavily, minding her strength before coming around to sit on it and fixing Regina with a stern stare. “So the way I see it is, you can tell me why you’re like this or-”

“Don’t threaten me,” Regina warns.

“Or we can sit in silence. Because, like I said, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Silence it is, then,” Regina snaps, folding her arms and turning to stare at the fire. Ruby takes this as a victory, because if Regina was in any kind of fit state, Ruby would have arrived in her own chambers in a puff of smoke by now. Or somewhere less hospitable, she imagines. She takes a moment to look at Regina, and there are definite signs of fatigue evident in her face. Her eyelids are heavy and there are dark circles beneath her eyes. Her body is limp, like her muscles aren’t cooperating.

Arranging the cushion behind her, Ruby settles down for what she assumes will be a long wait. She’s not going to be the first one to speak; her attempts so far haven’t been in any way successful. And she knows how stubborn Regina can be when she doesn’t want to show weakness. So there’s a very real possibility that neither of them will speak for the rest of the evening.

The wait isn’t as long as Ruby expects. Regina’s stomach lets out a growl, startling them both. Regina scowls at it and Ruby has to hide her smile. She’s not quick enough, because Regina catches her and her scowl deepens.
“I don’t see what’s funny,” Regina says, tightening her arms around herself, as if to keep any further noises from escaping.

“Nothing about today has been funny,” Ruby responds.

“Welcome to my life,” Regina snits.

“Thanks. I kinda like it. I think I’ll stay,” Ruby says, without hesitation.

This appears to catch Regina off-guard, and Ruby doesn’t think she means to ask the question that comes out of her mouth.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Ruby asks, though she’s pretty sure she knows.

Regina sighs. “What are you getting out of this?” she asks, quietly. “Apart from a great deal of trouble and strife?” She looks over at Ruby. “Seriously?”

“A chance to get to know you,” Ruby says, honestly. “To see where it takes us.”

“And that’s worth all of this?” Regina asks.

“I’m still here, aren’t I?” Ruby says, with a tentative smile. “And so are you.”

Closing her eyes, Regina sighs again. “You’re infuriating, you know that?” she murmurs. “Infuriating, stubborn, idiotic.”

“You sound like Granny,” Ruby says, glad that the hostility between them seems to have dissipated a little.
“No, if I wanted to sound like Granny, I’d tell you to stay far, far away from me,” Regina says, and Ruby spots the first hint of a genuine smile since this whole ordeal with Zelena began.

“And I wouldn’t listen. Which...okay, kinda proves your point about the stubborn thing,” Ruby admits.

“Or the idiotic thing,” Regina says, finally meeting Ruby’s eyes. “Depending on your viewpoint.”

“A little of both, maybe,” Ruby says. “But I still wouldn’t listen.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Regina agrees with a shake of her head. Her smile falters. “I’m...I’m sorry. For how I reacted earlier. I...I know you weren’t trying to hurt me.”

Ruby’s up and out of her chair, coming to kneel in front of Regina. “No, I’m sorry. I should have realised- God, I should never have...” She looks down, angry at herself for her mistake. A gentle hand brushes through her hair.

“It’s not your fault, Ruby,” Regina tells her, softly, and she looks up into warm brown eyes. “I was barely awake, still exhausted and terrified at what I could have done to you. When you tried to hold me, I-I panicked.”

“I’m so-”

“I know you’re sorry,” Regina interjects, lifting a hand to cup Ruby’s cheek. “And that’s one of the many things that makes you so completely different from...from him.”

Ruby catches Regina’s hand, turning to press a soft kiss to her palm. “I don’t want you to ever feel that way again.” She looks up into Regina’s eyes and receives a sad smile.

“You can hold me now. If you want to.”

Ruby stands and holds out her hands for Regina to take, pulling her to her feet. She waits for Regina to move into her arms before wrapping them around her, holding her loosely as Regina’s arms tighten around her waist. Ruby closes her eyes and lets out a breath. They stand that way for many minutes, not speaking or moving.
“What happened in there?” Ruby eventually asks, nodding to the bathroom door. She knows she’s taking a chance by asking the question; she could anger Regina all over again. To soften it, she places a kiss on her nose.

Regina places her head on Ruby’s shoulder, leaning more of her weight into her. “I...had a slight mishap when I filled the bathtub.”

“A mishap?” Ruby asks, pressing her nose into Regina’s hair and swaying them both gently.

“I hadn’t quite appreciated how much magic I’d used on Zelena. My reserves were depleted. So, when I used magic to fill the tub I...found myself on my knees.” Ruby pulls back to see Regina’s face, but the Queen is already shaking her head. “I’m fine. I just wasn’t thinking clearly.”

Sighing, Ruby presses her lips to Regina’s forehead. “Don’t call me stubborn again.” Regina is becoming heavier against her, clearly still fatigued. “C’mon, let’s sit down.” She turns so that her arm is supporting Regina around her waist.

“I’m not going to fall down, Ruby,” Regina tells her, though she makes no attempt to pull away.

“You asked me to hold you,” Ruby remind her gently, “so that’s what I’m doing.”

“I don’t recall asking to be treated like an invalid.” Ruby side-glances Regina and sees a slight smirk on her lips.

“Show me that you can use your magic without ending up on your ass and then we’ll re-evaluate.” She hears the slight huff from her counterpart and smirks. Regina knows she’s right.

Ruby gets them both to the bed and sits Regina down on it, gently. The other woman shuffles back until she’s resting against the pillows, and Ruby sits on the edge of the bed by Regina’s side. She leans forward to push back some of Regina’s hair, but hesitates. Regina must see the doubt in Ruby’s eyes because she reaches out to take Ruby’s hand in her own, linking their fingers and squeezing.

“We are no match for Zelena,” Regina says, her eyes on their hands. “She easily stopped you
today. She's going to keep coming for you. And I...I can't protect you. Look at me..." She hangs her head. "I nearly killed you myself."

“But you didn’t,” Ruby is quick to counter. “Zelena only seems stronger because she has a strategy. We just need to come up with our own strategy and beat her at her own game.” She squeezes Regina’s hand and smiles at her. “You are strong, Regina. I’ve seen what your magic can do.”

"And I've seen what hers can do," Regina counters. "And I'm telling you I can't do it. I'm not strong enough...not good enough." A sob escapes and she clenches her teeth a second too late to catch it.

Despite the events of earlier, Ruby moves forward and gently folds Regina into her arms. She’s unused to seeing Regina, the Queen, so despondent. Regina has always had fighting spirit, even through the times when Henry chose Emma over her. “You may not think much of yourself right now, Regina… but I believe in you. And Mary Margaret believes in you. Everyone who is here knows exactly how capable you are. They know the kind of power you harness. Take that and run with it.”

"You believe in me because you don't have an alternative," Regina mutters, holding Ruby tight. "I'm the best hope any of you have against her." She laughs, mirthlessly. "And you got a front row seat for how effective I am." She shakes her head and pulls back just enough to look into Ruby’s eyes. "You said she wanted my heart..." She places her hand over her own chest. Ruby can hear it speeding up and beating harder. "Perhaps I should just give it to her."

Ruby takes the hand on Regina’s chest and grasps it in her own. “And what will that achieve?” she asks Regina softly. “She’ll be one step closer to whatever it is she has planned, and then what?” Regina does nothing but sigh and Ruby’s heart aches. “Why wouldn’t you fight?”

"Because I will lose." Regina tells her vehemently. "It's me she wants. If she gets what she wants, she'll leave the rest of you alone." She looks up to meet Ruby’s eyes. "At least, this way, no-one else will be hurt."

“I’ll be hurt,” Ruby says quietly. “Henry will be hurt.” Regina looks away at the mention of her son’s name, tears glimmering in her eyes. Ruby reaches over to gently turn her face back. “You’ve got to stop thinking you’re expendable, Regina. You matter just as much as anyone else does.”

Regina lets out a short laugh, she looks down and shakes her head. “You’re definitely the only one who thinks that way, dear,” she says, though she does give Ruby’s hand a squeeze.
“Giving her your heart isn’t going to stop her,” Ruby continues, her voice soft, but insistent. “You think she’s just gonna crush it to dust and then go live her life quietly in a little cottage somewhere, growing roses and sipping tea?”

“Well...no...but...” Regina begins, looking uncertain.

“No,” Ruby agrees. “She wants your heart because it’s part of whatever her plan is. So by giving it to her, you’re really just helping her along. And you don’t want to do that.”

“Of course I don’t,” Regina says, with a scowl.

“Right,” Ruby says. She taps Regina’s chest with a finger. “So this stays here, okay?” Feeling a little bit daring, she smiles. “I’m not gonna stand by and watch you give it to some other woman.”

The gamble pays off when Regina smiles and raises an eyebrow. “Are you staking a claim to it, Ms Lucas?”

“I might be,” Ruby says. “Guess you’ll have to stick around to find out.”

“It’s not exactly in good condition,” Regina says. “You’re sure you want it?”

“With a little mending, it could be good as new.” Ruby blushes. “I think that’s from a Dolly Parton song. Sorry.”

“And here I thought you were being incredibly poetic,” Regina teases.

“Next time I accidentally quote country lyrics, I won’t tell you,” Ruby says with a smile. She tilts her head at Regina. “No more suicide mission talk, okay? It scares me.”

Sighing, Regina nods. “No, you’re right. It would only play into her hands and leave the rest of you exposed to attack.”
“That’s not what scares me, Regina,” Ruby murmurs.

“I know,” Regina says, with a small smile. “Thank you.”

“So we fight her together, right?” Ruby encourages. “We come up with a strategy and we win. Together.”

“This sounds suspiciously like a Charming pep talk,” Regina grumbles and Ruby laughs.

“Maybe a little,” she admits. “But mine are better.”

“Is that so?” Regina challenges.

“Mine end with kisses,” Ruby says, leaning in to brush her lips over Regina’s before pulling back and grinning. “Better, right?”

Regina is clearly fighting not to smile before giving up and shoving Ruby’s shoulder gently. “I suppose so.”

Leaning her weight on her arms, Ruby bumps her forehead against Regina’s. “Are you better?”

“I won’t be better until she’s defeated.” Regina reaches for Ruby’s hand and plays with her fingers. “I...feel a little more positive about things, though.”

“That’s good.” Ruby’s smile is a little wider now. She reaches up and lays the back of her hand on Regina’s forehead. She seems better. Ruby ends up brushing hair back from her forehead, keeping her hand on the other woman’s cheek. “Can I get you anything?” she asks, her eyes dropping to Regina’s stomach. “We should probably feed you.”

“I...could eat,” Regina admits. “But I don’t want to face everyone right now. All their questions and looks. I don’t have the energy for it.”
“Then you don’t have to,” Ruby tells her, leaning in to press a soft kiss to her lips. “Your crazy sister may have interrupted our date earlier, but that doesn’t mean we can’t still finish it.”

“What are you-” Regina begins, but Ruby cuts her off with another kiss.

“Wait here,” she instructs, jumping to her feet and sprinting to the door, where she pauses and looks back at Regina. “I’ll be back as quickly as I can.”

True to her word, barely ten minutes later, Ruby returns with a basket not dissimilar to the one she’d brought earlier. She grins at Regina’s raised eyebrow, laying the basket down on a table and taking a blanket out with a flourish before laying it out, careful to place it on top of a rug and not on the stone floor. She holds a hand out to Regina.

“Your picnic, My Queen,” she says, with a deep bow.

Instead of replying, Regina steps towards her and guides her face down into a kiss, and Ruby can find no reason to protest. Her own hands move to Regina’s hips, pulling her closer and swallowing the moan that escapes the other woman. It spurs her to deepen the kiss, surrounding herself in the taste and scent of Regina. It’s as if she can’t get close enough. Her hands slip down to the backs of Regina’s thighs and she lifts the other woman easily, smiling when her legs wrap around her waist. Regina pulls back and looks down at Ruby from her new vantage point, breathing heavily. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes as dark as Ruby’s ever seen them.

“We should eat,” Ruby says, because if they continue to kiss and be this close, she’s going to forget all about the nice date she wanted to give Regina.

Regina nods, kissing Ruby’s nose. “Yes, we should,” she agrees. “But you’ll probably have to put me down first.”

“I guess,” Ruby says, making no move to do so. “Although I don’t really think I’m the only one holding on.” To prove her point, she lets go of Regina, holding her arms out to the side. Regina remains wrapped around her.

“Smartass,” Regina says, narrowing her eyes.
Relenting, Ruby places her hands on Regina’s waist and gently sets her back on the ground. She grabs a few pillows and cushions from the bed and scatters them on the blanket.

“After you,” she says, biting her lip. “I was gonna say ‘age before beauty’, but you beat me on both of those.”

Regina chuckles. “I don’t know whether to scold you for calling me old o-”

“Maybe just focus on the beauty part,” Ruby interrupts her with a wink. She takes both of Regina’s hands in her own and helps her to sit down, waiting for her to settle in comfortably before joining her.

“You know there’s a dining table in the next room, yes?” Regina asks, but the sparkle in her eyes tells Ruby she’s quite happy with this arrangement.

“Oh, be quiet and just enjoy the moment,” Ruby tells her, glaring playfully.

“That’s no way to talk to your Queen.”

“I’m not talking to my Queen. I’m talking to my girlfriend.” It’s out of her mouth before she has time to think about it. Neither she nor Regina have used any particular word to describe each other. And all of a sudden there are butterflies in her belly as she waits to see how Regina reacts.

“I’m almost certain I’ve never been called that before,” Regina says, eventually, and Ruby lets out a breath because she’d already imagined a dozen scenarios, most of which involved Regina running for the hills. The Queen quirks an eyebrow at Ruby. “Is that what I am?” she asks, softly.

Ruby flushes at the direct question, and ducks her eyes. But the vulnerability in Regina’s voice makes her steel herself and look back up. “Well, we’re on a date together. We kiss. A lot.” Regina laughs a little at that. Ruby reaches out and takes her hand. “I know it sounds kinda high school-ish, but I don’t know another word for it...you’re my girlfriend.”

Playing with Ruby’s fingers, Regina pauses, tilting her head. Ruby assumes she’s weighing up the implications of this title. Because Ruby is too.
“So,” Regina begins, seriously. “Are we going steady now?”

“Shut up,” Ruby exclaims, pulling her hand away and crossing her arms with a fake pout. “I was terrified that I’d frightened you off.”

Regina rolls her eyes. “So dramatic,” she mutters. “Ruby, whatever juvenile term you wish to apply to our relationship is fine.” She pinches Ruby’s thigh. “But did you really doubt that I felt the same way as you?”

Pursing her lips, Ruby shrugs. “Listen, Ms Queen, you’re not exactly an open book, okay? So, yeah, I knew we were pretty much on the same page, but it’s not like you’ve said it out loud.”

“Neither had you!” Regina protests, mimicking Ruby’s body language and crossing her arms. Ruby sighs and shakes her head.

“This is what we both need to get better at,” she decides, before launching herself onto the pillows next to Regina, so that they’re lying side by side on the blanket, looking at the ceiling. She reaches out takes Regina’s hand. “What’s your favourite colour?”

Regina’s brow creases. “Are you joking?”

Ruby sighs. “If we’re going steady, I need to know which colour of flowers to bring you next time,” she tells Regina plainly. “So, help me out.”

Rolling her eyes, Regina lets her head fall to the side so she’s facing Ruby. “Black,” she says. “Does that help with the flower situation?”

Ruby rolls her eyes. “Great. You tell me exactly where I may be able to find black flowers.”

“Why, here, dear,” Regina says, a perfect black rose appearing in her hand. She offers it to Ruby with an innocent smile.

Ruby can’t help but smile back at Regina. How she didn’t see that one coming, she’ll never know.
She leans in and presses a kiss to Regina’s lips, lingering for a moment before drawing back minutely. “You’re an ass,” she mumbles.

“So you keep telling me,” Regina says, and Ruby doesn’t miss how her eyes keep flicking to her lips. “I could quite easily develop a complex.”

Ruby reaches out to cradle Regina’s cheek. “Like you care what anyone else thinks about you,” she murmurs with a soft smile.

“Well, that’s just not true,” Regina says, with a slight smile. “I don’t care what people who don’t matter think of me.”

The sincerity of the words catches Ruby off-guard. She was just playing; had thrown the words out there without really thinking them through. But when she does go back over them, she’s surprised Regina contradicted her. While she’s spent enough time with the other woman to know that she has deeply hidden feelings and emotions, she really wouldn’t have thought Regina would care what others thought of her. But then, she’s seen her around Henry. She knows how much she’s tried to change to get that boy to see her as a hero, as his mother. She knows his opinion matters hugely to Regina. And now, to be counted alongside Henry...Ruby feels honoured. She continues to stroke Regina’s cheek, a wide smile appearing on her face.

“Well, for what it’s worth,” she begins. “I only think you’re an ass around ten percent of the time.”

Regina lets out a genuine laugh. These tiny moments are Ruby’s favourite of all the time she spends with Regina. The moments where she’s completely unguarded, where her face is free of tension and worry. Where she’s free and happy.

“Well, I suppose I can’t disagree with that,” Regina says, settling back down on the blanket, her shoulder now firmly pressing into Ruby’s as they look into each other’s eyes. “I don’t really need to ask what your favourite colour is, do I?”

“Fluorescent pink,” Ruby lets out with a wide grin.

Scunching up her face, Regina shakes her head. “Little Pink Riding Hood doesn’t have the same ring to it.”

Ruby chuckles softly. “No,” she agrees. No it does not.” She rolls onto her back, bringing Regina
with her so her head is resting on her chest. “I was Red long before I got my cloak, though.” She
runs her fingers through Regina’s hair again. “I suppose if my favourite colour were pink, I may
well have been known as Little Pink Riding Hood.”

“Red suits you,” Regina says, sliding an arm over Ruby’s abdomen. “It’s a fortuitous favourite.”

“Us peasants would just say it was lucky,” Ruby tells her, earning a gentle pinch to her side. “Hey!
No violence before dinner.”

“You keep mentioning this supposed dinner,” Regina says. “But I’m not convinced we’re ever
going to eat it.”

“Hush, we’re bonding,” Ruby tells her. “But since we’re on the topic, what’s your favourite
food?”

“Roast swan,” Regina says, without hesitation. “What’s yours?”

“That’s...is that even a thing?” Ruby asks, wrinkling her nose.

“Not amongst the peasants, I assume,” Regina says. “But yes, eating swan is common amongst
royalty. It’s quite the delicacy.”

Her mouth suddenly dry, Ruby swallows. “I, uh, really hope you’re talking about the bird.”

Regina sits up immediately, glaring down at her. “Don’t be disgusting, Ruby.”

“Oh come on!” Ruby lets out. “You’re talking about eating a swan, and I’m not supposed to go
there?”

Regina shakes her head, her lip curling. “I can assure you that I have never considered eating Ms
Swan. In any sense of the word.”

“Well...good. Because that’s an image I’m sure I could do without.”
“You’re not the only one,” Regina grumbles. She gets onto her knees and stretches over Ruby, snagging the nearby basket and bringing it closer. “Come on. Let’s have this food you brought.”

“No more snuggle time?” Ruby asks with a grin as she sits up as well. She leans back on her hands as Regina unpacks the food.

“If you behave yourself, perhaps there will be more of that later,” Regina says, unwrapping one of the packages.

“No swan, I’m afraid,” Ruby tells her, with a wink, not flinching even slightly at the glare she receives. “Bread, ham, cheese, apples. Simple fare.”

“It will do nicely.” Regina’s already cutting up the bread and laying the thick slices of ham over it.

“Granny’s mac and cheese,” Ruby says, from nowhere. Regina looks over at her quizzically. “You asked what my favourite food is. It’s Granny’s mac and cheese.” She closes her eyes. “Man, I miss it.” When she opens them again, there’s a steaming bowl of macaroni and cheese sitting in front of her. She looks over at Regina with wide eyes. Regina shrugs.

“It won’t be quite to your Grandmother’s standard,” she admits. “But it should be close enough.” She goes back to her task of dividing up the food, even though she’s just demonstrated she has no need to do so manually. Ruby puts a hand on Regina’s wrist to get her attention.

“Thank you,” she says, when Regina looks at her. “You shouldn’t be using your magic to give me frivolous things, but thank you.”

Shrugging again, Regina waves a hand dismissively. “It’s no trouble.”

“It doesn’t matter how easy or hard it is to do,” Ruby tells her. “The fact that you chose to do it is enough.”

“Careful, dear,” Regina says with her eyebrow raised. “We’re veering back towards mushy.”
Ruby laughs as Regina dusts her hands off and picks up a piece of bread. “Well, we can’t have that, can we? Not twice in one day.” She moves to sit cross legged across from Regina, with her bowl of mac and cheese.

“I should think not.” Regina takes a bite of her sandwich, her eyes on Ruby, clearly looking for her reaction to the dish she conjured up. Ruby obliges, picking up a fork and diving in. The first taste of the pasta is like heaven and she can’t hide the moan that erupts from her throat. Blushing she glances over to find Regina looking very pleased with herself.

“Okay,” she says around a mouthful of pasta. “You could give Granny a run for her money.”

“I’m glad you like it,” is all Regina says as she eats her own meal, far more daintily than Ruby’s shovelfuls.

“You’re the best girlfriend I’ve ever had,” Ruby says, happily.

“You’ve had others?” Regina asks, studying Ruby intently.

“Well...not...really,” she replies. “Just...you know. Nothing serious.”

Regina nods at the answer. “Good.” She goes back to her meal. Ruby’s surprised that there are no follow up questions.

“And you?” she prods. “Have you had many other girlfriends?”

Regina smiles and shakes her head. “Nothing serious,” she echoes. They both blush and resume eating.

The rest of the meal passes with easy conversation and it’s only when Regina covers a yawn with her hand that Ruby remembers that she really should be resting. Smiling, Ruby leans over and presses a kiss to Regina’s cheek, before standing up. “We should probably get you back to bed,” she tells Regina gently, extending her hands for the other woman to take.

“I’m fine, Ruby,” Regina tries, but she takes Ruby’s hands anyway and stands, pressing herself against the younger woman. Despite her claim, Ruby knows she’s lying because she’s bearing
most of Regina’s weight right now. She’s happy enough to hold her like this and she sways them both gently from side to side. “Unless you keep doing that,” Regina continues. “Then I’m likely to fall asleep right here.”

“I’ll manage,” Ruby hums, pressing a kiss to the side of Regina’s head. “C’mon.” With no effort whatsoever, Ruby bends and picks Regina up in her arms. There’s a slight squeak of surprise as the former Queen tightens her grip around Ruby’s neck while she’s carried to bed. Making sure she’s settled, Ruby turns to tend to the makeshift picnic but is surprised to find all traces of it gone. “Hey!” Ruby says, turning back around. “You’ve used enough magic today. You should’ve let me take care of that.”

“I’d rather you come here and take care of me.”

Ruby is quick to come back to the bed and she looks over Regina with a keen eye. “Are you okay?” She asks. “I told y-”

“I’m fine,” Regina cuts in with a roll of her eyes. “Just get into bed.”

“You’re so romantic,” Ruby deadpans, but does as she’s told. “C’mere.” Regina curls into her side, resting her head on Ruby’s chest. Ruby places a kiss on the top of the Queen’s head and takes a deep steadying breath as she wraps an arm around her shoulders, careful not to hold her too tightly. Regina yawns, turning her face into Ruby’s chest to smother it. The domesticity of the moment makes Ruby smile.

A moment later, Regina moves in Ruby’s arms, pushing herself up so that she’s hovering over her before leaning down to press a kiss against her lips. Ruby allows the kiss, and pulls Regina into her body as much as she can, resting one hand on her lower back, and her other hand cupping Regina’s cheek. She lets Regina set the pace and control the situation.

Regina deepens the kiss before biting Ruby’s lip gently. “She’s not getting you,” she murmurs. “I won’t let her.”

Ruby is about to respond when Regina kisses her again, but this time it’s with more urgency, and she struggles to keep up with the momentum no matter how much she tries. She pulls back to catch her breath, resting their foreheads together, looking into each other’s eyes. Happy that her breathing has returned to normal, she brings her lips to Regina’s once more, rubbing her hand up and down Regina’s back.
The kiss is unhurried, leisurely even, giving Ruby the opportunity to explore Regina’s mouth, to bump their noses together and smile against her lips. It’s not something she can ever remember doing; kissing just for fun, for the sake of it. With Peter, everything was laced with the fear of Granny finding out. With anyone else she’s kissed, there were other motives. But this is different.

Bringing a hand to Regina’s face, she gradually slows the kiss down, rolling them both over so that Regina is no longer on top of her, but they’re lying face to face on the bed. Regina gives her a questioning frown, breathing heavily. Ruby smiles, her eyes dipping to kiss-swollen lips. She can’t help it. She pokes her tongue out, swiping it over Regina’s bottom lip.

Regina pulls back a little with a smile. “I thought the licking thing was just the wolf.”

Ruby lets out a soft growl, but she’s also smiling. “There’s still a lot you don’t know about me, Your Majesty…” she murmurs.

“I didn’t say I didn’t like it,” Regina says, kissing Ruby’s chin, before moving down her jaw to her neck. Ruby closes her eyes, giving herself over to the feeling for just a moment. She turns her head, nudging Regina’s cheek with her nose until their lips meet again. She calls on some hidden reserve of self-control, and brings the kiss to an end. She keeps a hand on Regina’s cheek, mostly to keep some distance between them.

“Don’t you need to rest some more?” she asks, brushing her thumb just under Regina’s eye, where there are still pronounced dark circles.

“I am a little tired,” Regina admits, catching Ruby’s hand and bringing it to her lips, kissing the thumb softly. “But I also want to do this.” She leans in to kiss her lips again. “You see my dilemma?”

Ruby smiles and blushes. “I see the dilemma.” She kisses Regina back. “And as much as I would love to keep kissing you… I think you need the rest more.”

“Well, aren’t you terribly sensible?” Regina murmurs. But Ruby knows her assessment is correct, otherwise Regina would’ve fought her more on it. Sighing, Regina turns and drapes half her torso over Ruby’s, her head tucked under Ruby’s chin.

“Only sometimes,” Ruby tells her, shuffling around to get comfortable in the new position and
willing her heart to slow down. “Don’t get used to it.”

Regina lets out a little puff of air against Ruby’s chest as she laughs. She catches Ruby’s hand and tangles their fingers together, bringing them up to rest between them. “I’m very much looking forward to you not being sensible,” she murmurs.

Ruby smiles and shakes her head. “Me too,” she whispers, but Regina’s already asleep.
Chapter 14 - Regina

When Regina wakes, there is sunlight streaming into the room and a warmth at her back. Confusion sets in for a brief moment until she realises that the only person who could be behind her is Ruby. She’s not yet used to the feeling of another body in her bed. Graham rarely spent the whole night, and Henry has long since outgrown the need to sleep in his mother’s bed to save him from the monsters.

Regina’s sleep is generally light, her body always on alert, waiting for something unpleasant to happen. That’s what the night brought for the ten years of her marriage and somehow, even after more than thirty years, it still plagues her. The sensation of a body next to her own, in such close proximity, makes it feel like the walls are closing in. She adjusts herself in Ruby’s arms, trying not to fidget too much. While she clearly wanted to be held last night, this morning Ruby’s embrace feels slightly constricting, smothering.

She turns in Ruby’s arms, needing to see her face. She settles almost instantly when she catches sight of the strong cheekbones, the uncreased brow, the full lips. Regina lets out a breath, unable to resist the temptation to run a finger along Ruby’s eyebrow, down her jaw. It’s unusual to see Ruby so still. Her body is usually in some state of movement. Her face is always animated, her feelings clear to see. But in sleep, she’s still. Regina leans in and presses a kiss to the side of Ruby’s lips. Before she can move away, Ruby turns enough to kiss her back.

“You okay?” Ruby murmurs against her lips, rubbing a hand up and down Regina’s back.

Regina nods, allowing the soothing movement and moving in closer. The last of the tension seems to fade away as she’s coaxed back into the present. “Yes. I am.”

"How did you sleep?"

“I have no idea,” Regina says, realising the truth of it. “I was dead to the world.” The morning air has a chill to it and she snuggles further into Ruby’s warm body. Regina’s tiredness of the previous evening means they both fell asleep in their clothes.

“Sorry,” Ruby says, letting go of Regina to lean down and pull a blanket up and over both of them. She pulls Regina back against her. “I forget sometimes that not everybody’s blood runs as hot as mine.”
“S’fine,” Regina tells her, eyes closing again as the blanket and Ruby cocoon her. “I was perfectly warm.”

“Do you feel like facing the world today?” Ruby asks, stroking Regina’s hair.

“I should probably show them I’m not dead,” Regina concedes. “Not that they’d mind.”

“More people would mind than you think,” Ruby mumbles, pressing a kiss to her forehead, making her smile. “And didn’t we agree on no more negative talk?”

“I believe the deal was no further discussion of suicide missions,” Regina says, with a yawn. She reluctantly withdraws from Ruby’s arms and props herself up on an elbow. “I suppose we could breakfast with the rabble. I could put on a little show to assure them that the Wicked Witch didn’t get the better of me.”

Ruby rolls onto her back, stretching her arms above her head. Regina watches the muscles in her arms and shoulders work, placing a hand on her belly to feel the abdominals stretch.

“What kind of a show?” Ruby asks, tilting her head and linking her fingers with Regina’s.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll improvise,” Regina says. “I’ll throw a little magic around. Remind them that I’m the only one of you who has anything like enough power to go up against her.”

“Not too much magic, though, right?” Ruby asks. “Don’t wear yourself out again.”

“My energy was sapped because she was so strong,” Regina says. “This morning will be a breeze.”

Using their joined hands, Ruby tugs Regina down into a kiss. It’s short and sweet and when it ends, Ruby looks at her seriously. “It’s great that you want to show everybody you can take care of them, Regina,” she says. “But you’ve got to look after yourself too. Remember that.”

“Yes, dear,” Regina says with a small roll of her eyes. She’s surprised at how happy it makes her feel that someone has taken the time to think of her wellbeing. There’s a light smack to her hand.
“Don’t roll your eyes at me,” Ruby chides. “It was horrible to see you like that. I thought you- … I thought she had-…” Ruby bites her bottom lip and looks away.

Regina is immediately guiding her face gently to look up at her, and she realises that it doesn’t matter that nobody else would care if she were dead or not. It matters that Ruby cares. “I’m perfectly okay, Ruby,” she says when green eyes finally meet her own. It’s true; aside from feeling a little lethargic, she’s one hundred percent.

“Just… Don’t overdo it,” Ruby murmurs, leaning up to press a quick kiss to Regina’s lips. “That’s all I’m asking.”

Regina grins and there’s a sparkle in her eyes. “You’ve obviously never seen me put on a show before.”

Ruby’s lips thin into a stern line and she shakes her head. For the briefest of moments, Regina sees a flash of Granny in her. She thinks Ruby probably wouldn’t take that as a compliment, so she keeps it to herself.

“So, do you need any help for this show?” Ruby asks. “Is it like a magic show? Do you need a glamorous assistant? You’re welcome to cut me in half or make me disappear.”

“Where would be the enjoyment in that?” Regina asks, pushing herself into a seated position, feeling her bones protest a little. She looks back over her shoulder with a smirk. “I like to keep you around and in one piece.”

Ruby follows Regina’s movements, getting to her knees on the bed and slinking up behind her. She wraps her arms around Regina’s torso, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck. “The feeling’s mutual, Your Majesty,” she murmurs against it.

An unexpected shudder runs through Regina at the contact, arousal pooling in her abdomen from nowhere as she’s hyper aware of Ruby’s breasts pressed against her back, through their clothing. Their heated kissing session of the previous evening was cut woefully short, and Regina’s not sure she’s going to last much longer without kissing Ruby all over. She pats Ruby’s hands. “I don’t need an assistant,” she says. “But you are welcome to stand behind me and be glamorous if that would please you.” She leans back against Ruby.
Ruby shakes her head. “No.”

“No?” Regina frowns. That wasn’t the answer she was expecting.

“I’ll stand beside you and be glamorous,” Ruby corrects.

Regina bites her lip, her eyes stinging a little from tears that have suddenly appeared. “Even better,” she manages to say.

“Good.” Ruby presses a firm kiss against her cheek. “Now, we need to get changed. I’m guessing you’ll want to be in something a little more intimidating when you make your grand entrance?”

Regina looks down at her simple clothing. She plucks at the loose shirt. “Yes. I think the Evil Queen needs to make an appearance, don’t you?”

“Nope,” Ruby says.

“Are you just going to disagree with everything I say?” Regina huffs, playfully.

“You are going to make an appearance,” Ruby says. “You’ll just be borrowing a dress from the Evil Queen’s wardrobe.” She tugs on the collar of Regina’s shirt. “Something...terrifying yet sexy. You have stuff like that.”

“Yes,” Regina agrees with a soft chuckle. “I have ‘stuff’ like that.”

“Okay then,” Ruby bounces on the bed, launching herself to her feet. “I’ll go get dressed too and then we can go downstairs together.” She sighs. “We really need some kind of secret passage to my room or something. It sucks that my room is so far away from yours.”

“It does,” Regina laments. “I really am feeling fine,” she begins, carefully. “I can ‘poof’ you there, as you say.”
Ruby’s already shaking her head before Regina can finish with her offer. “It’s okay. I’m superfast, right? I was just whining.” She approaches Regina, still seated on the bed, and crouches down in front of her. “No unnecessary magic. Remember?” She places a hand on Regina’s knee. “I can handle the walk of shame,” she adds with a wink.

Regina raises an eyebrow. “We haven’t done anything to be ashamed of yet,” she says.

Laughing, Ruby stretches up and kisses Regina hard on the lips. “That’s not what everyone else will be thinking,” she murmurs against them. She kisses her again. “And, even when we do do stuff, there will be nothing to be ashamed of.”

Regina stands up, pulling Ruby with her and wrapping her arms around her waist, looking up into her eyes and seeing nothing but truth there. She smiles. “Good. I’m glad.” She lowers her eyes to the wrinkled fabric of Ruby’s shirt, bringing a hand up to smooth it over her chest. “Thank you,” she says, quietly. “For bringing me back yesterday. I...don’t think I was very grateful to you.” She flushes slightly when she thinks of chastising Ruby for letting everyone see her.

“Don’t mention it,” Ruby says, with a kiss to her forehead. “I’d do it again in a heartbeat. But try to make sure I don’t have to, okay?”

“I’ll try,” Regina promises. “But it’s good to know I have you there.” She tugs on Ruby’s collar, pulling her into a kiss. “Now go,” she mumbles against her lips. “Before I decide to forgo breakfast altogether and hold you prisoner here.”

“Tempting,” Ruby replies with a smirk, but steps away, keeping hold of Regina’s hand until she’s too far away and their fingers lose contact. “Maybe later.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Regina says with a smile.

Feeling powerful, if somewhat uncomfortable, in full ‘Evil Queen’ regalia, Regina makes the trip to Ruby’s room. She’s opted for black leather pants and a matching vest, and a tight red velvet coat. The ensemble is topped off with a wide brimmed hat, which is possibly overkill for breakfast, but she wants to make an impression. She’s adjusting her coat, thinking perhaps it’s a little tighter than the last time she wore it, when the door flies open before she’s had a chance to knock.
“Whoa…” Ruby breathes as she blatantly rakes her eyes over Regina’s body.

Raising an eyebrow, Regina steps into the room, and Ruby immediately takes a step back to let her in. “Oh good,” she says. “That’s the reaction I was hoping for.” Her eyes drift down Ruby’s body and back up. She’s back in her skirts and bodice, her cloak fastened around her neck. “You look nice.” Glancing down at her own outfit, she smirks. “We match.”

Ruby looks down at herself. “Should I lose the cloak?”

Regina shakes her head. “No,” she says. “The cloak stays...Red.” She tilts her head, a thought appearing in the back of her mind. “I’ve just realised I don’t know your real name.”

“Well, that’s weird. Your curse sure did,” Ruby says, smiling bashfully.

“Your name is Ruby?” Regina asks, eyebrows raised.


“Well, ‘Red’ is certainly an apt description of you at the moment,” Regina comments, brushing her knuckles over cheeks warmed by blood. She smiles. “Why did you hate it?”

Ruby returns Regina’s smile but it lacks the sparkle. It makes Regina frown a little in response. “I dunno. I was kind of a raggedy little kid. I was always covered in dirt and my knees never had any skin on them. A ruby is a jewel. It’s something fancy, something people with money have. I’m just a simple village girl.” She shrugs. “Red suited me. It’s not fancy or flashy. It’s just nice and simple.”

Shaking her head, Regina sighs. “Well, perhaps the curse found the Ruby in you. Because you shine brighter than any jewel I’ve ever seen.”

“Stop it,” Ruby says, pushing Regina away, though her smile has lost its sad edge. She bites her lip. “I like the name now. I learned a lot about myself when I was Ruby, so I decided to keep it.” She lifts an eyebrow. “Kinda spooky that your curse knew my name, though.”
“There were many odd facets to that curse,” Regina admits. “I wasn’t in control of what happened to people, despite what many may think.” She gestures to Ruby. “I have no idea, for example, why you ended up staying with your grandmother when other families were kept apart.”

“Maybe it knew that was a curse in itself,” Ruby says.

Regina allows a small chuckle. “Perhaps.” She reaches out to take Ruby’s hand with her own and plays with her fingers.

“Even though it took a curse for us to get there, I don’t think I’d have changed anything about my life in Storybrooke.”

Regina tilts her head in confusion. “Nothing?”

“Nothing,” she confirms. She pulls on Regina’s hand, tugging her closer. “Not all of us led ‘fairy tale princess’ lives here in the Enchanted Forest. Some of us had a lot of shit we’d rather forget. I liked being Ruby. Ruby had no baggage.”

Regina smiles ruefully. She doesn’t think she’s know anyone to be grateful for the curse. Knowing Ruby’s past, and what she went through though, she supposes she shouldn’t be too surprised. “While I’m sorry for taking away your memories, I’m...glad that you got to live without the bad ones for a while,” Regina says.

“You didn’t get that luxury, huh?” Ruby asks, linking her hands behind Regina’s back. “That must’ve been awful.”

“It was a very lonely existence,” Regina admits, looking down. She shrugs. “But I was used to that.”

Ruby tips her chin up. “Well, you better get unused to it,” the wolf girl says, resolutely.

Regina smiles. “We’re going to be late for breakfast,” she says, deciding that’s quite enough emotional talk for one morning.
Taking a minute to study Regina’s face, Ruby finally nods. “A fashionably late entrance always makes a statement.” She grins. “Of course, you’d know that better than most.”

“I assume you’re referring to your friend’s wedding,” Regina asks, allowing herself to be pulled along the hallway to the stairs. “That most certainly made a statement, wouldn’t you say?”

A few people pass them in the hallways. No comments are made but a few stop in their tracks and stare at the impressive spectacle they make.

“Oh yeah, definitely memorable,” Ruby agrees. “Kinda rude to threaten the bride on her wedding day, but, you know, whatever.”

“For all the good those threats did,” Regina complains. “She’s still here. Still practically attached to my hip.”

“Mhmmm,” Ruby says. “And one of these days, you’re gonna stop denying you like it that way.”

Regina opens her mouth to disagree, but they’ve arrived at the doors of the dining room and Ruby brings them both to a halt. She turns to Regina with a grin. “Ready to show ‘em what you’ve got?”

“Always, dear,” Regina says, returning the grin, her eyes flickering purple. “And, if I faint, please catch me and remove me from the room as subtly as possible,” she adds, with a wink.

Without waiting for Ruby to offer a reply, she holds up her hands and the doors fly open. Strutting in, she’s gratified to see that all activity in the hall has ground to a halt. She surveys the crowd with a bored expression. “What are you all looking at?” she asks. “Do I have something in my teeth?”

Mary Margaret rushes forward, as if to embrace her, but seemingly thinks better of it. She watches the other woman take in her outfit, her reaction similar to Ruby’s. “Regina! You’re looking...much better.”

Regina scoffs. “Did you expect otherwise?”
Mary Margaret looks to Ruby who, Regina is pleased to note, seems to be as awestruck as everybody else. “Well…it was a little worrying,” Mary Margaret admits. “To say the least.”

“For you, maybe,” a mumble is heard.

Regina’s eyes flick to the source of the voice. It’s one of the dwarves; she never bothered to learn to tell them apart. Leroy, she knows from his numerous trips to jail in Storybrooke. The others are interchangeable. Whichever one it is, he tries to hold her gaze, but very quickly falters and looks away, almost cowering. The edge of her mouth quirks; she’s still got it.

Returning her attention to the rest of the crowd, she allows them a moment to gape. “Listen up,” she commands, using her most regal tone. “We are facing an enemy of unprecedented power. Yesterday, Ruby and I got a taste of how that power can manifest itself. And we learned from it.” She lets her eyes move from person to person. “We will continue to learn and we will defeat her. Together.” She locks eyes with Mary Margaret, who looks like Regina just handed her a pot of gold.

Ruby steps up to stand beside Regina, as promised. “Does anyone have a problem with this?” she asks, her voice clear and strong as it echoes around the large room.

“Yeah. I do.” Leroy stands up. Regina notes that he addresses Ruby, rather than her. “We all saw her yesterday,” he says, flicking his thumb in Regina’s direction. “That other witch pretty much did her in. And since the green one got away and ain’t lying dead at our feet, I’m gonna guess she’s fine. How can we possibly believe that she has the power to save us all?”

“Because she’s not just facing Regina,” Ruby almost growls. “She’s facing all of us. One of her against dozens of us. I don’t know about you guys, but I like those odds.”

Regina smiles. “Precisely,” she says. “Together you eluded me for years. Now, with my power…” She points to Ruby. “...her strength…” She nods to Charming. “...his bravery…” She raises an eyebrow at Granny. “...her wisdom…” Her eyes land on Snow. “...her heart…” And finally she looks back at Leroy. “And your...whatever it is you do, we will take her on and we will win.”

Lifting a hand, a broomstick appears and flies between Leroy’s legs, lifting him into the air and flying him around the hall. He screeches and grips the wooden handle for dear life. Conjuring up a ball of fire, Regina gently blows it in his direction. His eyes close as it draws near, but all that happens is that the broom disintegrates, falling in brightly coloured droplets to the table below, where the droplets transform into platters of food. Leroy is gently deposited back on his feet.
Regina raises an eyebrow in challenge. “Now, eat, Leroy. And get ready to play your part.”

Ruby’s grin is so wide Regina can almost feel warmth radiating from it. Mary Margaret reaches for the nearest goblet and raises it into the air. “I’ll drink to that,” she announces.

Regina watches as others follow Mary Margaret’s lead, lifting their glasses. There are some dissenters, of course, but the majority of the crowd seem to be on board. Even Leroy reluctantly picks up his tankard, raises it slightly, and then gulps down its contents. Regina offers Mary Margaret a nod of thanks. “I’m famished,” she announces. “Let’s not have this feast get cold.” She takes her seat at the head of the table, glad to be off her feet; she should really have tried the magic thing in private before doing it in public. While it didn’t weaken her anything like it did the day before, she feels the effect and is glad of the rest.

Ruby and Mary Margaret take their seats as well; Ruby to the right of Regina, and Mary Margaret to the right of Ruby. The rest of the table starts to tuck into the food and chatter springs up again. Ruby leans closer to her, attempting to catch her eye. “Are you okay?” she asks in a murmur.

“Fine, dear,” she says, filling her plate with bacon and sausages. She takes a bite to avoid further questioning, sending a smile Ruby’s way for good measure.

“You didn’t come down to dinner last night,” Mary Margaret comments, filling her own plate. For once, Regina is glad of the inane interjection because it cuts off Ruby’s queries about her health. “I was going to come check on you but I thought you might be, uh...busy.” Her grin is wide and wicked.

Dear God, is this what she’s been reduced to? Fending off questions about her non-existent sex-life over breakfast with her ex-stepdaughter?

“Do I ask you about the stuff you get up to in your bedroom?” Ruby asks, looking mildly annoyed, but also amused.

“I tell you ev-”

“But do I ask?” Ruby interrupts.

Mary Margaret pouts before taking a large bite out of a sausage and chewing moodily. While it
could be diverting to tease her, there’s something that compels Regina to put the record straight.

“We weren’t doing whatever it is you’re insinuating,” she says, causing Mary Margaret’s eyes to widen.

“No?”

“Regina,” Ruby warns. “Don’t encourage her.”

“Hush, you,” Mary Margaret tells her friend, bumping their shoulders together.

“I’m not encouraging anyone,” Regina protests. “But if you don’t tell her there’s nothing to tell, she’ll continue to pester both of us for details. Best to nip it in the bud now.”

“Nothing to-” Mary Margaret frowns, looking between both women. “So...you haven’t…”

“This is none of your business,” Ruby tells her, before scowling at Regina. “See what you’ve started?”

“No, you’re right,” Mary Margaret says. “It’s none of my business what you do. Or don’t do.” The smile on her face, however, does not look like the smile of someone who has just been chastised. It looks like the smile of someone with a secret. Regina can’t help but feel slightly uncomfortable at that thought.

“So, anyway,” Ruby begins, and Regina breathes a sigh of relief at the signal that the subject is about to change. “I think it went well. Most people took a drink when Mary Margaret did, so that’s something, right?.

“Did your grandmother?” Regina asks, meeting Ruby’s eyes.

“I didn’t look,” Ruby says, glancing down the table to where Granny is seated with Marco. “She hasn’t said anything sarcastic yet, so that’s a good sign,” she concludes, turning back with a hopeful smile.
Mary Margaret hums. “Don’t count your chickens…”

Regina looks over in time to see Mary Margaret nod to where Granny is making her way over. She leans back in her chair, preparing for a confrontation. The Lucas matriarch stops between Ruby and Regina’s chairs, her gaze falling first on the Queen.

“Pretty impressive speech there, Regina.”

“Thank you,” Regina says, eyeing Granny, warily. “I’ve always had a way with words.”

Granny nods. “You may have everyone else believing it, but do you? We all saw you yesterday.”

“Granny!” Ruby scolds.

Regina puts a hand on Ruby’s arm. “It’s okay,” she tells her, quietly, before turning back to Granny. The old woman could have challenged her openly and discredited her in front of everyone, but she didn’t. She nods. “You’re right,” she says. “I did have doubts. Some rather large doubts, about my own abilities to defeat her.” She glances at Ruby. “But, after some persuasion, and the realisation that I’m not facing her alone...well, I’ve reassessed my opinion.”

“That doesn’t answer my question,” Granny counters, giving Regina a pointed stare that makes her feel about nine years old. “Do you believe we can defeat her?”

Regina lifts her head, meeting Granny’s stare. She nods. “I believe what I said,” she says. “That, as a group, we can defeat her. She has weaknesses, everyone has weaknesses.” Again, her eyes stray to Ruby for a brief glance. “Part of my problem was thinking I had none.”

Granny nods along at Regina’s words and reaches forward for a goblet. “Then I will drink to that.” She raises the goblet and drinks from it.

Regina stands up and picks up her own drink, holding it out and clinking it against Granny’s, taking a drink and watching the older woman over the rim. It does no harm to have a show of solidarity. She licks her lips. “We’re in agreement, then?” Perhaps they’ve found some common ground. They share a weakness, after all.
Granny shrugs. “For now.” And she saunters away.

“Well, that’s progress,” Mary Margaret says, as Regina takes her seat once more. “Right, Regina?”

“It’s something,” Regina agrees, watching Granny’s retreat. She has a lot of respect for the woman. While Leroy might make his little snide comments, and others might whisper and glare, Granny’s the only one who has the courage of her convictions. Not unlike another Lucas. She smiles as her eyes land on Ruby. “You’re definitely her granddaughter.”

Ruby pouts at the comparison. “What do you mean?”

“Well, your bravery, stubbornness and conviction didn’t come from nowhere, did they?” Regina asks, her eyes dipping to Ruby’s lips and her adorable pout.

Ruby cocks her head to the side and Regina bites her tongue to prevent a comment about a puppy escaping. “Oh,” Ruby says simply before picking at the food on her plate. Regina will take that as agreement.

“For now,” Mary Margaret begins, “It’s a small win. And the more people you can find some common ground with, Regina, the better.”

Regina’s smile fades. “You want me to actively speak to…” She takes in the room. “…them?” The thought is abhorrent. She’s not good at smalltalk with people who hate her. She’s more likely to turn someone into something if she’s forced to spend time with them against her will.

“Maybe just let yourself be seen,” Ruby suggests. “Sit with them, eat with them, drink with them…”

Regina sighs. “Fine,” she says, drawing the word out, like a petulant teenager. “You can parade me around like a showpony if you must. But I cannot promise to be sweetness and light all the time.” She spares Mary Margaret a glance. “It’s just not natural.”

Both women roll their eyes. “Maybe not to you… yet,” Mary Margaret returns.
“Baby steps.” Ruby points to Regina’s plate. “Eat up. You need your strength.”

“Bossy,” Regina says, under her breath.

Ruby snarls at Regina softly.

“You two are the cutest thing ever,” Mary Margaret exclaims.

Regina sends her best glare in her direction, but even she can tell it lacks bite. And as soon as her eyes shift to Ruby, the glare disappears altogether.

The rest of breakfast passes uneventfully and Regina feels relatively content by the time she’s walking into the hallway with Ruby by her side. The hearty breakfast provided the sustenance she needed to feel more like herself, and the fatigue from her earlier use of magic has given way to a buzz of energy under her skin. She grasps Ruby’s arm and pulls her to the side, smiling up at her. Ruby returns the grin, but with a question in her eyes.

“Everything okay?” she asks, quietly.

“Perfectly,” Regina tells her. “I was just thinking we should go upstairs.”

“Upst-” Regina doesn’t give her time to finish before she takes them both to her bedroom, accompanied by the usual puff of smoke.

Ruby’s eyes widen slightly, but she no longer loses her balance on these trips. Regina throws her hat onto the bed, and slips a hand behind Ruby’s neck pulling her into a firm kiss. Her other hand slides under Ruby’s cloak, pressing their bodies together. Ruby’s assessment of the situation was correct; it does feel wonderful not to have to fight against this desire any longer.

Far too soon, Ruby brings a hand up to cup her cheek, gently pushing her back. Frowning slightly, Regina, tries to move with her, but Ruby uses her superior height to her advantage and Regina can’t
“What is it?” Regina asks. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Ruby rushes to say. “Nothing’s wrong. It’s not...it’s just-” The younger woman lets out a frustrated sigh and shakes her head, her eyes dropping.

Regina’s stomach churns in apprehension; whatever this conversation is about it doesn’t look like it’s going to be pleasant. “Do you...do you not want to...” she trails off, unsure of how to continue.

“Yes!” Ruby says, immediately, her eyes meeting Regina’s and showing the truth in her words. “God, yes, I want to. I’ve wanted to for weeks. Months.” She offers Regina a lopsided smile. “Probably years.”

Regina smiles a little at the admission. “Well then,” she begins. “What’s stopping us?” Again, Ruby’s eyes dip, but Regina doesn’t allow it, tipping Ruby’s chin back up and holding it gently. “What is it?”

The muscle in Ruby’s jaw works and she assumes she’s trying to find the right words. When she finally speaks, it’s a whisper. “I scared you yesterday.”

“You what?” Regina shakes her head, trying to think what Ruby could be referring to. “No, Ruby, you-”

“I scared you,” Ruby repeats. “I was trying to comfort you, and I made you frightened. And I should have known that you...that your past-” Ruby’s voice hitches and Regina’s hand slides up to stroke her cheek.

“Shhhhh,” she soothes. “I explained why that happened. I was half-asleep and I-”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ruby says, shaking her head. The movement dislodges a tear that had been caught her in her eyelashes and it runs over Regina’s hand. “I never want you to feel that way again and I...I don’t want us to rush this. I want us to get to know each other, to know what we like, what we enjoy...I want you to be comfortable.”

As Ruby is speaking, Regina watches her face and the depth of feeling there renders her almost speechless. In her long life, nobody has ever taken the time to care how she feels in bed. Her
marriage bed carries nothing but painful, terrifying memories. Everything since has been about exerting power or manipulating co-operation. Sex has been a means to an end. And now, this precious girl is looking at her and telling her it can be another way. That it should be another way. She shakes her head and closes her eyes to try and stem the flow of tears she can feel building.

“Regina?” Ruby’s voice is cautious and soft. “I’m sorry. I know we’ve been flirting and kidding around with this and I shouldn’t ha-”

Regina presses a finger to Ruby’s lips, sniffing and shaking her head. “Don’t apologise,” she tells her. “No-one has ever…” The lump in her throat throbs painfully and she swallows, finally giving up on speech and leaning her head on Ruby’s shoulder, wrapping both arms around her waist as tightly as she can. She feels the sigh of relief that leaves Ruby’s chest a second before arms encircle her shoulders and lips press against her temple.

“So, let me romance you a little, huh?” Ruby murmurs.

Lifting her head from its resting place, Regina brings their lips together in a gentle kiss. “I think you’ve been lying to me,” she says. “I think you’re much better with ‘the mushy stuff’ than you’ve been letting on.”

Ruby laughs and kisses her again. “Yeah, you got me,” she says, bumping her nose against Regina’s. “I’m a closet expert at mushy stuff.”

“Maybe I’ll learn from you, oh wise one,” Regina says, running her thumb over Ruby’s lips before sobering. “Thank you.”

“For what?” Ruby asks, tilting her head to the side.

How does she even begin to find an answer to that question that captures everything she wants to say? She smiles. “For being you.”

“Awww, shucks,” Ruby says with a roll of her eyes, but the flush on her cheeks gives her away. “You’re learning already.”

“I’ve always been a quick study,” Regina agrees, pulling Ruby into another kiss.
They kiss for long, leisurely minutes. It’s not fuelled by passion, nor fear, nor relief. It’s simply a desire to be close, to breathe the same air and brush skin to skin and know that the other person wants the same thing. No hidden agendas. No power struggles. Just two equal partners who want to be together because they enjoy one another’s company.

The only other time in her life she can remember feeling this way was with Daniel. Where there were no expectations placed on her to be anything other than herself. Perhaps with Ruby, Regina’s been finding herself again. Not the Queen, or the Mayor, or the Mother or the Villain.

Just Regina.
“So…” Mary Margaret says, and Ruby bites back a grin. She’d wondered how long it would take for her friend to start talking.

They’re out hunting. At breakfast, Ruby had announced a craving for venison stew and decided to go and get herself a deer. Regina had curled her lip at the thought of trudging through the mud and shooting at things when she could very easily whip up a meal with her magic.

But Ruby misses the outdoors, especially since she didn’t get to go out and hunt as the wolf during the last full-moon. True to her word, she remained in the castle at all times, prowling the battlements and amusing herself by sneaking up on sentries and scaring them. Sleeping inside isn’t natural for the wolf, but the longing to escape would lessen when Ruby would pad into Regina’s bedroom and jump up beside the Queen. The desire to run and hunt were muted by the wolf’s protective nature and the need to be near to Regina; to keep her safe. The need to stay close to Regina was only emphasised by the incessant howling of the wolves on the first night. They were kept at bay by Regina’s protective barrier, but it didn’t stop them trying. Ruby was sure she heard a cackle mixed in with the howls too.

Ruby brings herself back to the present and lifts an eyebrow in question at her friend. She’d been surprised when Mary Margaret declared that she would accompany her on her hunt. As suspected, the former bandit has motives that have nothing to do with a hearty meal.

“How are things going between you and Regina?” Mary Margaret asks. Ruby notices that the other woman is slightly out of breath and she deliberately slows her pace as they make their way over the slightly hilly terrain behind the castle. Both had to issue firm promises not to move beyond the manned perimeter if they were going out.

“They’re, y’know, going.” She looks back again in time to see an eyeroll.

“Well yes, I had assumed. But how are they going?” Mary Margaret presses.

Things have been going really well, in truth. After the somewhat awkward conversation about Regina’s past, they’d put a lot of effort into getting to know each other better. Ruby had learned more about Regina’s childhood and her relationship with her mother; her heart aching for that frightened little girl who just wanted her mother to love her. Despite Granny’s faults, Ruby never once doubted that she was loved. They’ve spoken of their lost loves and the struggle to come to terms with their guilt. Late night drinks have given way to whispered conversations about darkness and fear. The more they’ve talked, the more Ruby has seen the similarities between
them. They really are like two sides of some great cosmic coin, flipped by a malevolent God to see which way things would go.

And there’s been more kissing. Quite a lot more kissing. And with every kiss, Ruby becomes surer of Regina’s reactions to her touch.

“Things are going pretty well,” Ruby admits through a chuckle, throwing her friend a bone. “It’s kind of a relief, actually. I feel like I can breathe around her now and not have to constantly watch what I’m saying. That I don’t have to fight it.”

“I bet!” Mary Margaret agrees. “Because, seriously, if you hadn’t done something about it, I was getting ready to bang your heads together.”

Ruby laughs at that imagine. “It’s nice,” she says. “It’s been a long time since I had something like this, and it’s nice.”

Ruby can see Mary Margaret from the corner of her eye, and she’s positively beaming. “It’s a wonderful feeling, Ruby. You deserve happiness and love. You both do—”

“Whoa, hey.” Ruby holds up her hands, shaking her head. “Snow, relax. It’s been, like, a couple of months. I’m not in love with her.”

“Not yet,” she singsongs with a grin.

Ruby sighs. “God, you sound like Robin.” She knows her feelings for the other woman are there and they’re strong. But she doesn’t want people to tell her what those feelings are before she’s had time to process them herself. Yes, she and Regina have finally let the barriers down, allowing themselves to grow closer over the past months. They’ve kissed. More than a few times. In fact, it’s getting increasingly difficult to stick to ‘just kissing’. But Ruby’s never been one to subscribe to all this ‘one true love’ stuff that everybody else is obsessed with. She doesn’t believe in soulmates and she’s really not sure that there’s a point where you go from thinking someone’s hot to being in true love with them. She’s enjoying herself with Regina. The Queen is a pleasure to be around; she’s intelligent, funny and can be unexpectedly sweet. But she doesn’t want it turned into something it’s not before either of them are ready to deal with that.

A movement to their left makes Ruby stop in her tracks, dragging Mary Margaret to a halt with her. She puts a finger to her lips to keep Mary Margaret from asking the question that’s making its way
out of her mouth. Ruby sniffs the air; there’s a deer nearby. With slow, confident movements, she removes her bow from where it’s slung across her back and loads an arrow. Ruby nods in the direction of the deer and they set off, moving soundlessly until they reach the top of a small hill. A young stag is bending to drink from a brook; he’s unaware of their presence. The part of her that’s still Ruby the smalltown waitress feels a pang of guilt as vague memories of watching Bambi as a child lurk in her head. But the part of her that grew up in this land, where the prospect of a long, cold winter with an empty belly supersedes any sentimentality, lets the arrow fly.

She watches its progress and nods to herself as it embeds itself into the centre of the stag’s skull. It’s a clean, merciful kill. She hears an intake of breath from the woman beside her and pretends she can’t see or feel Mary Margaret flinch. Animals are her friends too, after all. The stag drops where he stands and Ruby starts to head off towards it. She stops when she realises Mary Margaret isn’t moving with her. “You understood the part where I said we were going hunting, right?” she asks, gently.

“Yeah,” Mary Margaret says, with large, sad eyes trained on the dead animal. “But I forgot how brutal it is.”

Ruby sighs. “You’ve eaten meat pretty much every day since we got back here,” she reminds her friend. “Someone’s had to kill those animals too, you just haven’t had to watch.”

She leaps across the narrowest part of the brook and makes her way around to the animal, dropping her bow and pulling a length of twine from her satchel. Mary Margaret takes a rather longer route and by the time she joins Ruby, she’s extracting the arrow from the deer’s skull. She drops it to the ground to be cleaned and looks around for the rag she’s sure she brought. Her hands are covered in blood, it’s starting to harden and crack when she bends her fingers.

A hand touches her shoulder and then the rag is pressed into her hand. She takes it, smiling up at Mary Margaret.

“Need a hand?” Mary Margaret asks.

“Not in your condition,” Ruby says pointedly. “You just stay there and keep watch.” Locating a knife in her boot, she cuts the twine into two lengths. She starts to bind the deer’s front legs together for easier transportation. Deciding to ignore Ruby’s instruction, Mary Margaret picks up the other length of twine and does the same with its hind legs. “Hey!” Ruby smacks her friend’s hands away only to be shushed.

“My unborn baby and I are perfectly capable of tying a knot, Ruby.”
Ruby only rolls her eyes in response and hands her bow to Mary Margaret to carry. She stoops to hoist the deer until it rests across both of her shoulders, its legs providing something for her to hold onto. “Ready to head back?” Ruby asks.

Mary Margaret nods, and Ruby starts to move at an even slower pace with the added weight of the deer on her shoulders. “So who made the first move?”

Ruby laughs out loud. “Really?” As far as questions go, she has to admit this one sounds very high school. “That’s the question you’re asking?”

“You’d prefer me to ask you how the sex is?” Mary Margaret challenges.

“She did,” Ruby responds to the first question. She’s about to clarify the ‘sex’ situation when Mary Margaret cuts in before she’s able.

“Regina?”

“Is that not who we’re talking about?” Ruby counters. “Yes, Regina.”

Mary Margaret grins. “Details! What was it like? What did she say? What was the lead up? Where were you?”

Ruby’s not sure she caught all of the questions thrown at her, so she focuses on the last two. “We were in the middle of an argument in my bedroom.”

Mary Margaret stops mid-step to look at Ruby incredulously. “That’s not romantic at all.”

Ruby stops as well. “Not everything is sunshine and rainbows, Mary Margaret,” she tells her simply. “The kisses after that were much better though.” She starts walking again, expecting Mary Margaret to follow suit. “Also? About your other question; we’re not having sex.”

“Still?” Mary Margaret asks, following Ruby.
“Just kissing,” Ruby tells her with a roll of her eyes.

She’s not entirely hating the gossiping thing. Especially since she hasn’t really ever had the chance to it since she was a teenager. And even now, people have a lot going on and there’s not a whole lot of time for girly chats. Mary Margaret is busy with keeping the people informed and attempting to keep morale high. Belle spends most of her time in the library, though she does lend her support whenever Granny and Ruby get into an argument. That, in itself, has happened less frequently since Regina’s little magic show a few weeks prior.

“I think that’s really sweet, Ruby,” Mary Margaret says, finally, with that same enigmatic smile she’d worn the last time they discussed the topic of Ruby’s non-existent sex life. “Even if your first kiss wasn’t exactly conventional.”

“Conventional?” Ruby asks, hiking her load further onto her shoulders as they walk. “Mary Margaret, I’m dating the woman who cursed us all for thirty years. I don’t think anything about it is going to be conventional.” She bites her lip; that’s the elephant in the room. She’s dating the woman who pursued her best friend and tried to kill her for the best part of a decade, separated her from her daughter and stole her identity. “Listen, uh, don’t think that I don’t remember who she was and what she did,” she tells her. “But she’s...I’ve seen…” She struggles to find words to describe the woman she’s come to know. The woman behind the magic and the image.

“I know, Ruby,” Mary Margaret says, her voice soft. “I know. Spending time with her in Neverland...I saw changes in her that I…” She looks away. “Well, I saw a person that I never expected to see again.” She turns to Ruby quickly. “Oh, Ruby, please don’t think I even considered judging you for being with Regina. You deserve to be happy, and if she makes you happy, then that makes me happy.”

She’s unsure whether she should thank the other woman for her understanding. It’s not like she was going to stopseeing Regina if Mary Margaret had objected to it. It just would have made things awkward and difficult. “Again, I’ll remind you, we just started this...whatever it is. So don’t start planning a wedding in that head of yours.”

“As if I would,” Mary Margaret protests.

They’re nearing the castle now and Ruby’s tiring a little, she’s panting slightly and her shoulders are aching.
“So, is this the first time you’ve been with a woman?”

Ruby almost drops the deer. “Wh-what does that have to do with anything?”

“I’m just curious,” Mary Margaret tells her. “I hadn’t really thought about it before.”

“Does it matter that she’s a woman?” Ruby asks, relatively confident that the answer will be no, considering that Mary Margaret has overlooked the whole ‘she tried to kill me for a very long time’ thing.

(Of course not,” Mary Margaret tells her with a scowl. “I just didn’t realise that you...that you liked women that way.”

“It’s not something people talked about here, really, is it?” Ruby presses. “And Storybrooke didn’t exactly have a Pride Parade every year.”

“Well, when we get back there, I’m going to arrange one,” Mary Margaret tells her with a decisive nod. “I’m sure the Mayor will approve the proposal.”

Ruby groans. This is why she keeps her feelings to herself a lot of the time. “Mary Margaret, please don-”

“Speak of the devil.”

Ruby turns to look in the direction Mary Margaret is facing and, sure enough, Regina is galloping towards them astride her horse. Ruby stops walking and just watches, her mouth hanging open slightly. Mary Margaret nudges her.

“Oh yeah, you’ve got it bad.”

Frowning at the shorter woman, Ruby adjusts her hold on the stag as Regina draws near and slows to a trot and then a walk, bringing her horse to a complete halt just in front of where they’re standing. “Hey,” Ruby breathes out, grinding her teeth together when she hears how ridiculously dreamy it sounds.
“Hello,” Regina greets her, leaning down to pat her steed’s neck. “Ms Blanchard.” She focuses on Ruby. “I didn’t think you’d be back so soon. I was going to go for a ride. He’s not been getting much exercise these past few weeks.”

“I thought we’d be gone longer too,” Ruby admits. “I guess we both underestimated my awesome hunting skills.”

Mary Margaret is grinning like an idiot at their interaction and Ruby ignores her as best she can. “Indeed,” Regina agrees, her eyes following the contours of Ruby’s shoulders, down her arms. She licks her lips and suddenly Ruby wants to dump the stag and drag Regina off that horse and into her arms.

“I could, uh, get cleaned up and come with you?” Ruby suggests. “I just need to get rid of Bambi, here.” Mary Margaret lets out a whine of disapproval, but Regina grins and waves a hand in the air. The weight immediately lifts from Ruby’s shoulders and she rolls them in gratitude.

“I’ve sent it to the kitchens for preparation,” Regina explains. “There’s no need for you to walk all that way just to come back.”

Ruby points a thumb over her shoulder in the vague direction of the stables. “I need a horse, though,” she says. “And I kinda smell like deer.”

Regina’s lips quirk at the edges, but she hides her smile before it can become fully formed. “As alluring as that sounds,” Regina begins, with a long suffering sigh. “Perhaps it would be best to head back inside.” She holds a hand out to Mary Margaret. “Come on, you can ride back with me.”

“Really?” Mary Margaret asks, and Ruby can’t help but smile at her friend’s surprise.

“I won’t have anyone accuse me of having a pregnant woman walk behind my horse,” Regina says, wiggling her fingers. “Come on. Hurry up.”

“You’re sure he’ll take us both?” Mary Margaret asks, but she’s already taking Regina’s hand.

“You’ve not gained that much weight,” Regina says, hoisting Mary Margaret up behind her as
Ruby helps by giving her foot a boost.

“Gee, thanks,” Mary Margaret says, but she’s grinning as she places her hands on Regina’s waist.

“Hands where I can see ‘em, Snow White,” Ruby warns, playfully.

Regina urges the horse to move, but keeps him to a walking pace, with Ruby easily keeping up alongside. They make conversation about their surroundings and passers-by and the weather. Ruby watches Mary Margaret chatter away happily, oblivious to the fact that Regina is rolling her eyes at most of what she’s saying. She reaches out and lays a hand on Regina’s thigh briefly, offering her a smile when she looks down. It’s returned without hesitation and Regina covers her hand with her own, squeezing. Ruby’s heart feels like it might explode from that simple gesture and she shakes her head at herself.

They drop Mary Margaret off at the main entrance to the castle. Ruby helps her down from the horse and finds herself drawn into a tight hug. She returns it gladly.

“Ugh,” Mary Margaret mumbles against her shoulder. “You do smell like deer.”

“You complain when I kill things, you complain about how I smell. Remind me why you came along on this trip?” Ruby asks, shoving her away good-naturedly.

“Because of your scintillating conversation, of course,” Mary Margaret says with a grin. She lifts her eyes to where Regina still sits on her horse. “Thanks for the ride, Regina.”

She receives a nod in acknowledgement and leaves with a promise to see them at dinner. Ruby looks up at Regina with a smile.

“That was really nice of you,” she says.

“Don’t say that too loudly or you’ll damage my reputation as a fearsome tyrant,” Regina says with a smirk.

“Oh, I think you’ve been doing that all on your own,” Ruby says, taking a few steps backwards before launching herself onto the horse in Mary Margaret’s place. The horse harrumphs at the sudden extra weight and Regina shakes her head, but doesn’t protest when Ruby presses herself
against her back.

The horse starts moving again, and Regina turns her head slightly to the side, her nose wrinkled.

“She was right. You do smell like deer.”

After a very pleasant bath, Ruby stands in Regina’s bathroom, towel drying her hair. She really misses the luxury of standing under a hot shower, but Regina’s bath and fancy oils aren’t a terrible substitute. Satisfied that her hair is as dry as it’s going to get, she pulls on the loose blouse she’d brought in with her, tucking it haphazardly into her jodhpurs as she exits into the main chambers. Regina’s sitting by the fire, glass of wine one hand, book in the other.

Ruby just stands and looks at her for a moment, resplendent in the light of the fire, and she’s reminded of a thought she had earlier.

“Midnight,” she murmurs.

Brow wrinkled in question, Regina lifts her head from her book. “What happens at midnight? You’re not going to turn into a pumpkin, are you?”

“No, the horse…” Ruby tells her, feeling slightly exposed now that she’s said it “You should call him Midnight. He’s...really dark,” she explains. “And the flash on his nose looks like the moonlight...and I...oh God, this is so lame.”

Regina gets up out of her seat and walks over to stand in front of Ruby, resting her hands on Ruby’s hips. “Tell me,” the Queen says, her voice soft. Ruby sighs and leans her forehead against Regina’s.

“Midnight’s when the moon is highest,” she begins. “When I’m the wolf, it’s when I feel...strongest, most at home.” She swallows and pulls back a little so she can see Regina’s eyes. “That’s how I see you when you’re on him.”
For a moment, Regina doesn’t respond.

“I...it’s a stupid name, I’m so-” Her mouth is occupied by Regina’s lips in a quick kiss. She tastes of wine.

“It’s perfect,” Regina tells her, kissing her again, harder. “Midnight.”

And when Regina says it, it does sound perfect. Ruby returns the kiss, her arms sliding easily around Regina’s waist, pulling her close. Regina’s hands move to Ruby’s back, then lower, pressing their hips together and moaning against Ruby’s mouth. There’s an intent behind Regina’s movements that’s unmistakeable, and Ruby doesn’t even bother to deny that her heart speeds up at the thought of it.

Dredging up some control, she gently pushes Regina back, running her thumb over already kiss swollen lips. Their faces are still close, noses brushing, breath mingling.

“Are you sure?” Ruby whispers, eyes searching Regina’s for any signs of uncertainty.

“Ruby,” Regina begins, pecking Ruby’s lips. “While your concern for me is very touching, and I truly do appreciate how much you care...I am more than sure that I want you.” Another kiss, longer and deeper. “I want you now.”

Nodding along, Ruby clears her throat. “Before we...get started,” she fumbles. “Is there anything-” She trails off, this isn’t a conversation she’s ever had to have before.

“Is there anything what, dear?” Regina prompts, impatiently.

“Is there anything you don’t...want me to do? Anything you don’t like?” Ruby glances at Regina to find her staring back, wide-eyed. “What?”

“Nothing,” Regina says, with a small smile. “Just...you constantly amaze me. That’s all.” She stretches up to kiss Ruby’s lips before pulling back to look into her eyes. “I don’t...I don’t like to be restrained in any way,” she admits.

The hair on the back of Ruby’s neck stands on end, and a low growl starts up in her throat. Regina
strokes her face. “Shhhh,” she soothes. “That’s for another day. Right now I want your hands on me.”

Ruby obliges, her hands sliding down Regina’s back to rest just above the swell of her backside. She searches Regina’s eyes.

“Just tell me if there’s anything I do that you don’t like,” Ruby says.

Regina nods. She covers Ruby’s hands with her own and guides them down until they’re cupping her backside. “Don’t worry,” she murmurs as Ruby pulls her closer. “You’ll know if there’s anything I don’t like.” Her hands go to Ruby’s face, guiding her down into a heated kiss. It’s like many of the others they’ve shared; intimate and thrilling. But this time there’s an edge of excitement because they both know it’s going somewhere new.

Without breaking the kiss, Ruby bends her knees slightly, lifting Regina off the ground. The Queen lets out an undignified squawk of surprise. Ruby grins up at her. “I thought we might as well make use of that big bed of yours,” she explains as she carries Regina across the room with no obvious effort. She lays her down gently on top of the covers but Regina doesn’t let Ruby move away, pulling her down into another kiss and tugging her onto the bed.

Regina’s legs fall open wider to accommodate Ruby’s hips as she settles on top of her, their lips still fused. Regina pulls at Ruby’s shirt, whining when it doesn’t move very far. Ruby pushes herself up onto her elbows, giving Regina room to undo her buttons and push the garment off her shoulders.

“Up,” Regina urges, pushing Ruby back until she’s standing by the bed, with Regina seated on its edge, looking up at her. Ruby is breathing hard, and she watches Regina’s eyes trail down her torso. A hand soon follows, fingertips tracing down between Ruby’s breasts, over her abdomen, landing on the button of her riding pants, popping it open. Ruby’s breath hitches when Regina’s hands smooth over her hips and push the trousers down, along with her undergarments. She’s fully naked now, standing in front of a Queen. Regina leans in and presses a kiss near her belly button and Ruby’s eyes close at the feather like touch. She threads her fingers through Regina’s hair as she continues to pepper kisses over her abdomen, hands coming up to grasp the backs of her thighs.

When she feels Regina’s kisses moving lower, she gently pushes her back, taking her hands and urges her to stand. Both in bare feet, the difference in their heights is more noticeable, and she has to bend to press a kiss to the side of Regina’s neck, feeling the other woman melt into her immediately. Ruby’s hand moves up under Regina’s shirt, splaying over the expanse of skin on her back, inhaling sharply when her nipples come into contact with the fabric Regina’s still wearing. All at once, she wants to rip every shred of material from Regina’s body and feel every inch of her skin against her own. Instead, she brings shaking, clumsy hands to Regina’s buttons,
undoing them at what feels like a glacial pace while Regina kisses her jaw. Finally she gets the shirt undone, and Regina helps to push it off, letting it fall to the floor. Her pants go the same way and she steps into Ruby, winding her arms around her and giving Ruby what she wanted; skin everywhere. She can’t get enough of it and her hands can’t find a place to settle for long before they’re moving to some new marvel.

Regina hisses when Ruby’s hand skims along the underside of her breast, catching it and bringing it up, guiding Ruby’s fingers around her flesh to cup and squeeze. Ruby swallows the gasp Regina lets out, her other hand mirroring its twin at Regina’s unattended breast. With no warning, Ruby is turned around and they fall together onto the bed, Regina landing on top of Ruby. Having Regina’s weight press down on her, with no barrier between them, is delightful torture and Ruby cranes her neck for another kiss, but Regina lifts her head to avoid it, smiling at Ruby’s whine of protest.

“Shhhhh, I just want to look at you for a moment,” Regina murmurs. Her hands push Ruby’s hair back from her face. “You are beautiful.” Ruby’s automatic reaction is to blush and look away, but Regina’s fingers on her chin bring her back, eyes meeting Regina’s once more. “You are beautiful,” she repeats, leaning down to finally give Ruby the kiss she wants.

This is new for Ruby. Sex for her has always been hard and fast. No-one’s ever looked at her the way Regina just did. She slides her fingers into Regina’s hair, cradling her skull as their mouths move together. She wants to say something in return, something that lets Regina know how she feels, how Regina makes her feel. But the words feel clumsy and her voice won’t work so she closes her eyes and shivers when Regina starts to kiss down her neck, leaving fire in her wake.

Part of her wants to stop Regina, to be the one to lavish the other woman with kisses and caresses. But a bigger part of her wants to let Regina take control and set the pace. She slides her hands from Regina’s hips up to her back. These simple touches are electric and her hands tremble where they brush Regina’s skin.

“I’m not going to break, Ruby,” Regina murmurs, right next to her ear. “You can touch me. I need you to touch me.” Regina lifts her head to look into Ruby’s eyes. “And you can speak, if you like. I’ve never known you to be so quiet.”

The words draw a bashful laugh from Ruby and she shakes her head. “I don’t have the words,” she admits. “You’re...you make me feel-” She huffs in frustration as she comes up with nothing.

Regina offers her a soft smile. “Then show me,” she whispers, rolling off Ruby, leaving them both on their sides, facing each other. Regina lifts one of Ruby’s hands and kisses her knuckles. She places Ruby’s hand on her chest, above her heart, covering it with her own before moving it slowly downwards, between her breasts. “Touch me, Ruby. Please.”
That word, that plea, releases something in Ruby and she moves to Regina, kissing her soundly, a hand moving to Regina’s backside, pulling her in. She takes a moment to run her tongue up the scar on Regina’s lip before kissing over her cheek and down her jaw. Her hand, meanwhile, traces patterns from Regina’s hip to her belly. Gently urging Regina to turn onto her back, Ruby settles between her legs. Her lips continue their journey, brushing along Regina’s clavicle and pressing a wet kiss over her heart. Regina’s body is tense beneath her, straining up, seeking her out. Ruby turns her head and drops tiny kisses on Regina’s breast, around her nipple, causing the woman beneath her to groan and twist. Ruby grins against the soft flesh before finally running her tongue over a hardened nipple, eliciting a sharp gasp. She glances up to see Regina pressing her head back into the pillow, her hips pushing into Ruby’s.

Once again, words are elusive and her heart clenches at the sight. She lowers her head and kisses Regina’s breast, taking it into her mouth and sucking gently. Regina’s hands tangle in her hair and she hears a whispered ‘yes’. The permission reassures her and she spends time lavishing Regina’s chest with kisses. Her hand finds its way between their bodies, settling on Regina’s abdomen before gradually inching down until it makes contact with wet warmth. Regina’s hips tilt and her name comes out in a whine above her as she slides long fingers between Regina’s folds, but doesn’t move them again. She grins against Regina’s skin.

“Soon,” she promises.

“Now,” Regina protests. “Please, Ruby.”

The urgency in Regina’s voice tugs at the pit of Ruby’s stomach and she abandons her plan to tease her further. Leaving her chest, she moves down her stomach, trailing kisses as she does, before she arrives at her destination. She leans in and presses a kiss against Regina’s sex, not expecting her whole lower body to lift off the bed. She laughs, and brings her back down with a hand on her abdomen, feeling the muscles there twitch. She leans back in, the scent of Regina is almost overwhelming and she can’t resist swiping her tongue through the glistening wetness, moaning as her tongue is coated. She wants to lick every drop of Regina that she can, but there’s a more pressing need. She wants to be looking into Regina’s eyes the first time they do this.

Moving swiftly, she drapes herself over Regina once more, replacing her lips with her fingers before Regina can protest too much. She kisses the other woman, hard, before pulling back to watch her face as she finally slides two fingers inside. Regina’s eyes close briefly before locking on Ruby’s own. Her mouth falls open as Ruby starts thrusting slowly, going a little deeper on each thrust, her thumb playing with Regina’s clit.

“R-Ruby,” Regina manages, reaching up to pull Ruby in for a sloppy kiss.
“You’re beautiful,” Ruby murmurs against Regina’s cheek, speeding up her thrusts, Regina’s hips meeting her hand. “You’re wonderful. You make me so happy.”

A sound like a sob meets her ears and she lifts her head in time to see a tear escape Regina’s eye. She opens her mouth to ask if she’s okay, but before she can speak, she’s pulled back down into a searing kiss. She knows Regina’s close, so she pulls back and slips an arm under her head, watching her face. Nails dig into the flesh of her back as Regina’s grip tightens. Regina’s hips start to falter in their rhythm as her heels scrabble at the sheets, pushing up into Ruby. Ruby watches Regina’s head fall back, feels her body tense and her walls close around her hand as she lets out a deep moan. She presses gentle kisses to Regina’s chin as she strokes her. The tension goes out of Regina’s body all at once and she goes limp beneath Ruby, pulling her close and panting against her cheek.

Ruby closes her eyes, surprised by the emotions battling in her mind right now. She’s happy that she made Regina feel good, and proud that this woman would choose to be in her bed. But these feelings are dwarfed by the surge of protectiveness in her chest. She knows, without a doubt, that she would die rather than let anyone scare Regina or make her feel powerless again. She would fight to her last breath to keep Regina safe. She wants to curl around Regina and keep her away from the pain and cruelty of the world. She’s never felt like this about anyone, and vaguely wonders if it’s something to do with her wolf.

Regina’s laugh brings her out of her thoughts and she looks down to see a lazy smile directed at her. She returns it, though her eyes trace over Regina’s face. “Everything okay?” she asks, softly.

“Well, Your Majesty,” Ruby says, reassured by Regina’s reaction. “I’m sure you have at least ten fancy schmancy words you can use instead.”

“I could,” Regina agrees, biting her lower lip. “Or I could show you.”

Ruby nods, wordlessly, letting Regina guide her onto her back. The Queen pushes herself up onto her elbow, looking down at Ruby.

“You know, I used to sit in the diner and watch you…” Regina confesses, almost in a whisper. “Teetering around in those heels, apron longer than your skirt.”
“God bless the perv that put me in that outfit,” Ruby says with a grin. “Oh, wait, that was you.”

“Yes, it definitely had its perks, that curse,” Regina muses, walking two fingers along Ruby’s chest. “I must admit that I thought, once or twice, about what it would be like to bend you over one of the tables and put my hand up that tiny skirt…”

The words send a jolt of arousal through Ruby and she inhales sharply. Regina’s eyes flick up to meet her own immediately and her lips curl into a predatory smile. Ruby’s not used to feeling like prey, but right now, she’s not going to complain.

“Show me,” Ruby whispers.

Regina’s smile grows tender and she leans in to bring their lips together. Ruby’s sure there must be a word for what she’s feeling right now. She’s sure there must be words to describe how her hands fit around Regina’s hips and how Regina smells like home and tastes like possibility. But if there’s a word that sums up the way her heart seems to fill up with when Regina looks at her, so full it feels like it might burst, then Ruby doesn’t know it.
“Hurry Papa! Hurry! I wanna see!”

Regina doesn’t need supernatural hearing to pick up Roland’s plaintive cries from the hallway outside the Great Hall. She looks to Ruby and finds her smiling back.

“No backing out now, huh?” Ruby says.

“Don’t try to pretend you haven’t been looking forward to this for days,” Regina chides, bumping Ruby’s hip with her own.

Ruby doesn’t have time to deny the accusation before the doors burst open and Roland bounces in, dragging his father by the hand. His face lights up when he sees Ruby and he breaks away from Robin, running as fast as his little legs will carry him. He launches himself at Ruby, who stoops just in time to catch him, swinging him onto her hip and tickling his side.

“I do apologise for his exuberance,” Robin says, coming to stand with them. “He’s been chattering about it all day.”

“So has Ruby,” Regina says, earning a scowl from the woman in question. “Well, you have!”

“Turn into the wolf!” Roland yells.

Ruby barks a laugh at the child’s enthusiasm, while Regina chuckles in a much more refined manner. As it subsides, she notices a dull ache in her chest, as she is reminded of times when Henry would look at her with bright, round eyes and a big smile. Before his eyes held suspicion and accusation. She hopes she gets to see him smile again. Pushing the melancholy down, she brings her attention back the child in front of her, in time to see Ruby ruffle his hair and then bop his nose with her index finger.

“The moon is barely up,” Ruby tells him.
He nods his head. “You said when the moon is a bright big circle in the sky.” He worms his way out of Ruby’s arms and runs along the length of the hall to the nearest window. He sticks his head out and yells something incomprehensible into the night sky. Regina has to hide a laugh behind her hand as Robin looks at Ruby rather apologetically. Ruby doesn’t get a chance to respond as Roland comes barreling back towards the three of them, coming to a stop right in front of Ruby. “It’s very big, and very bright, Miss Ruby!”

Ruby raises an eyebrow, placing both hands on her hips. “Really?” Roland nods enthusiastically. “Are you sure?”

“Come!” He insists, taking her hand and tugging on it. “Come and see!”

“Roland!” Robin scolds. “Leave Miss Ruby be. She already said she’d show you the wolf.”

“It’s fine,” Ruby says over her shoulder as she allows the child to pull her up the hall.

“She has a lot of patience,” Robin comments as Ruby breaks into a run, challenging Roland to a race. Regina smiles as Ruby keeps her strides short enough to allow Roland to win, making a big show out of being a sore loser.

“She does,” Regina agrees. “Though your son is a lovely boy. She genuinely enjoys his company.”

“He’s fascinated by her,” Robin comments as they watch Ruby and Roland carry on an animated conversation that involves a lot of gesturing to the sky and nodding. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have told him about her abilities. She’ll never get a moment’s peace from him after he’s seen her change.”

“It is quite a sight,” Regina says. She still finds it quite thrilling to see Ruby change. They’re returning now, Ruby has Roland thrown over her shoulder like a sack and he’s laughing.

“He’s right,” Ruby says. “The moon is definitely a big, bright circle in the sky.” She turns him the right way round and places him on the ground, poking his sides. “Can’t argue with facts.”

“So, you’ll turn into the wolf now?”
Ruby laughs.

“He’s nothing if not persistent,” Robin says.

“I like it. He’s got spunk,” Ruby decides. Sobering a little, she squats to the child’s level looking at him seriously. “Before I turn into the wolf,” she starts. “You need to promise me some important things, okay?”

Roland looks up at his father who is already nodding his head, so Roland does the same.

“When the wolf is here, it’s very important that you wait until she comes to you, okay?” Ruby warns. Regina assumes that with Roland’s excitement, she doesn’t want him to startle the wolf. “And when she comes to you, you’re gonna hold your hand out so she can sniff it. And that’s gonna get her used to you. Then we can have some fun. Sound good?”

“Yeah!” Roland cries, clapping his hands.

Ruby stands back up and ruffles his hair, moving to Regina and pressing a quick kiss to her lips.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” she tells her. Regina nods, ignoring the part of her that knows she’s going to miss sleeping beside Ruby’s human form.

“Have fun,” she tells her, squeezing her elbow as she steps away.

Ruby moves a good distance away and flashes a grin at Roland. “Ready?”

“I’m ready,” Roland confirms, practically bouncing in place.

“Let’s do it then,” Ruby says.

Regina watches the change come over her before she actually turns into the wolf. She stands taller,
stronger, her eyes glow yellow and her face loses its warm smile. And then it happens, her spine curves and she falls to all fours, arms and legs stretching. Regina holds her breath as she does every time she watches this happen. Roland is rooted to the spot, his mouth open and eyes like saucers. A quick glance to her left confirms that Robin is in much the same state. The room shimmers with magic and it’s done. Ruby sits before them, black fur shining in the light from the lamps and torches around the room, eyes glinting. Regina lets out the breath she’d been holding and watches the wolf stand and approach Roland, slowly. The boy doesn’t move. Regina smiles and steps towards him, crouching down next to him and holding her hand out towards the wolf. Ruby comes closer and sniffs Regina’s hand.

“Remember what Miss Ruby told you?” Regina asks, gently. “She just needs to get used to how you smell and then she’ll know you’re you.” Ruby chooses this moment to lick Regina’s hand and Regina’s head whips around. If wolves could grin, she’s sure this one would be doing just that. Regina narrows her eyes, but Roland is holding his hand out towards the wolf.

Ruby obliges him by sniffing his fingers thoroughly. He laughs when she turns to the side and sneezes before licking his hand softly. He turns to Regina. “Can I pet her?”

“Of course,” Regina tells him, enjoying his absolute wonder. She reaches out and strokes Ruby’s head, scratching behind her ear. Ruby lowers her head and moves closer to Regina, pressing her nose into her shoulder. “See? She likes this.”

Roland’s rather more clumsy hand comes up to run over the smooth fur on Ruby’s side. “She’s really soft,” he whispers and Regina laughs.

“Yes, she is,” she agrees, pushing Ruby’s head back and stroking under her chin. Footsteps behind her make her turn to see Robin approaching.

“She’s…” He shakes his head.

“Magnificent,” Regina finishes for him.

“Yes,” Robin agrees. “I had no idea she’d be this large.”

Ruby lets out a low whine and Regina raises an eyebrow at Robin. “It’s impolite to call a lady ‘large’.”
Roland has clearly become comfortable around Ruby because he throws his arms around her neck and buries his face into her fur. Regina stands up and moves back to where Robin is, enjoying the sight before them. Ruby turns her huge head to rest it against the boy’s as he mumbles words Regina can’t make out against her coat.

“Oh Lord,” Robin laments. “He’s going to want a pet wolf.”

“Undoubtedly,” Regina agrees, knowing all too well how much young boys can whine about getting a puppy.

Roland pulls away from Ruby suddenly. “Lemme see your teeth, Miss Ruby!” He lifts his hands to the wolf’s mouth.

“Roland, no!” Robin says, moving to stop his son. Regina catches his elbow and shakes her head.

“She won’t hurt him,” she tells Robin, confidently. Sure enough, the great wolf is sitting with her teeth bared, letting the small boy tap on them with his fist.

“I know,” Robin says. “I’m rather more concerned that he’ll hurt her.”

“Oh, she’s pretty tough,” Regina says with a smile. “She’ll be fine.”

“Can I ride on Ruby like a pony, Papa?” Roland pipes up, with a hopeful smile.

“Roland, no, Ruby is not a pony,” Robin says, casting an apologetic glance at Regina.

Ruby whines and they all look at her. She lifts and lowers her head and Regina turns to Robin. “I think she’s saying he can.” Ruby lets out a yip that sounds like agreement and Regina closes her eyes. “Oh God, when did I start speaking Wolf?” A furry head bumps against her hand and she looks down into Ruby’s golden eyes, unable to keep from smiling. “Shhh, you.”

“Up, up!” Roland begs his father. Robin sighs and picks him up, gently placing him on Ruby’s broad back. Regina takes his hand and shows him how to grab a handful of Ruby’s fur.
“Hold on tight,” she instructs and he nods, leaning forward and grasping the fur on Ruby’s neck. Ruby takes an experimental couple of steps, and Roland laughs in delight.

“Faster, Ruby!” he commands. Ruby obeys, moving into a gentle walk down the hall.

“I think we may be here for a while,” Robin says. “Perhaps we should take a seat.” He gestures to the tables and chairs scattered around the edge of the room. Regina nods and takes the seat he pulls out for her. They sit and watch the antics of Roland and Ruby in silence for a while.

“You must miss your boy terribly,” Robin ventures.

Regina’s throat immediately tightens with emotion, and she turns her face away from Robin blinking back tears. She feels a gentle hand on her own and her head whips back around. “I meant not to upset you, Your Majesty,” he tells her softly, withdrawing his hand.

“Yes, I know,” Regina returns before clearing her throat. “And I do. I miss him so much, there’s like a hole in my chest,” she confesses, feeling vulnerable and exposed. There’s a high shriek, followed by loud laughter. Regina and Robin both turn towards the noise and Regina can’t help but smile at the scene in front of them.

“When I lost my wife,” Robin begins, still looking at Roland. “I thought I might never recover from it.”

“My son’s not dead,” Regina says, immediately.

“No, I know,” Robin says, nodding. “I just meant that...being parted from someone you love is...well, it’s the greatest pain I’ve ever known.” His eyes move to his son again, his smile growing soft. “And sometimes, it feels like it will never get better. But then you find things, people, who help you to heal. Little by little.” He turns his smile to her. “I’m glad you’ve found someone to help.”

Regina’s brow creases as he speaks. Is that what she’s been doing? Alleviating the pain of losing Henry by throwing herself into a relationship? Is she using Ruby as some sort of soothing balm for the ache in her heart? Is she allowing herself to forget about Henry? Here she is, laughing and joking around, when her son is in another realm with no memory of her. How is it possible for her to feel happiness when she’s so far from her little prince?
“I don’t...miss him any less than the day I left him,” Regina says.

“No, of course not,” Robin says. “I didn’t mean to imply otherwise.”

“Nor should you,” Regina tells him, standing up. “You know nothing of my life. My sacrifice.”

Something cold and wet nudges her hand and she looks down to see Ruby staring at her, her head tilted to the side. Regina runs her fingers through Ruby’s fur and attempts a smile.

“I’m quite tired,” she says, glancing at Robin. “I think I’ll retire to bed. You should continue with your fun.” Ruby lets out a low whine. “I’m fine, dear. Just...just tired.”

“Night night, Regina,” Roland says, waving his hand with a wide smile. It cuts into her heart and she just about manages to return it.

“Goodnight, Sir Roland,” she says, with a bow of her head. “I hope you and your noble steed enjoy your adventures.” She turns to leave, nodding at Robin. “Goodnight.”

“Regina, I-”

She doesn’t stay to listen to what he has to say, pushing through the doors into the hallway. Tears blur her vision and she blinks them away, barely recognising the person in front of her until she’s almost walked into them.

“Sorry,” she mumbles, lifting her eyes to find she’s looking into the cool, blue gaze of the Widow Lucas. She sighs, that’s all she needs right now. Expecting Granny to move aside, or offer some vaguely insulting comment, she’s surprised when the older woman’s eyes search her face.

“You look like hell,” she says, finally.

The bluntness draws a shocked laugh from Regina. “Well, thank you, Eugenia. You’re always a delight.”
She goes to move around Granny to continue on her way, but is stopped by a hand on her arm. She looks at the older woman in question.

“Seems you and I are well overdue for a little chat,” Granny says. “I was heading to the kitchens to make myself some tea. Care to join me?”

In her current mood, the last thing she wants to do is take tea with Granny and listen to her, no doubt colourful, threats about what she’ll do if Regina ever hurts Ruby. By the same token, she doesn’t want to hurt Ruby’s already fractured relationship with her only living relative. And Granny has been less hostile since the morning after Zelena’s attack. Granny raises an eyebrow at her hesitation.

“The offer of tea is going once...going twice…”

“Fine,” Regina says, with a sigh. Perhaps it will keep her mind off Henry. Granny gives her a brusque nod and gestures for her to lead the way.

The walk to the kitchens is silent, though Regina can feel Granny’s eyes on her at various points. The main kitchen is quiet and empty; the cooks have finished their dinner duties for the evening and will have retired to bed so as to get up in time to prepare the breakfast. Granny appears to know her way around the kitchen and Regina finds herself gently shoved into a chair at one of the simple tables. She raises an eyebrow at Granny’s back as the older woman bustles around, putting water on to boil and locating tea leaves and a strainer. Regina would have offered to conjure up some tea, but she appreciates the need for ritual and understands that making familiar things can be a soothing experience.

Finally they are seated together, tea brewing in a pot between them. And nothing to distract them from the silence. Granny sits back in her wooden chair, eyeing Regina over the top of her glasses.

“So,” she begins. “In my experience, people only look like you look right now when they have problems with money, with love, or with children.” She places the strainer on top of one of the cups she’d set out. “And I know it’s not money troubles. So which of the other two is it?”

Regina watches the deep red liquid flow into the cups. “And the fact that my sister is hatching some evil plan to kill us all isn’t enough of a problem for me to be concerned about?”
“Nope, that’s not it,” Granny asserts, pushing one of the cups towards Regina and picking up the other one, cradling it in her hands. “So, has my Granddaughter done something?”

“No,” Regina says, shaking her head before Granny’s even finished speaking. “No. She’s...it’s got nothing to do with Ruby. Ruby is-” She smiles. “Ruby is wonderful.” And that’s the problem, she thinks, her smile fading.

“Then it’s Henry,” Granny says, taking a sip of her tea. “What’s up?”

Regina lets out a sigh and shakes her head. “Nothing new,” she says. “He’s not with me. That’s the problem.”

“What’s changed, then?” Granny presses, and Regina scowls at the woman’s perceptiveness.

“Nothing,” she tries again. Granny doesn’t reply. Just looks at her like she can see into her soul. “Nothing.” Regina sits back and crosses her arms. “Look, you brought me here to tell me that if I ever hurt Ruby, I’ll be on the receiving end of your crossbow, so can we get that over with?”

“Seems you’ve got that part down,” Granny tells her, setting her cup down on the table. “So, we need another topic.”

“You’re very keen to speak to me, all of a sudden,” Regina snaps. “Finally decided I’m not keeping your granddaughter enslaved with magic, have you?”

“Oh, you’ve got her enslaved, alright. That girl would do anything for you,” Granny says. “But it’s not because of magic.”

Blood rushes to Regina’s cheeks and she looks away, blinking back tears again, frustrated at her reaction.

“What’s wrong, Regina?” Granny asks, far more gently than she’s ever spoken to Regina before.

Regina shakes her head, squeezing her eyes closed. “Nothing,” she whispers, again. “I just...Robin Hood said something to me that gave me pause, that’s all.”
“What’d he say?” Granny pushes. “Whatever it was, it got to you. So it can’t have been nothing.”

Picking up her cup once more, Regina looks into it rather than at the woman across the table. She sighs and shakes her head. “He was talking about losing his wife...and...and how he found things, people, that helped him through. And I-” She bites her lip, unable to verbalise her thoughts.

“My daughter ran away from home when she was seventeen years old,” Granny begins, surprising Regina enough for her to meet her eyes. The old woman smiles, sympathetically. “She’d fallen in with a group of werewolves who lived in the woods. I’d tried to teach her about her nature, and how to gain control, but those other wolves didn’t care about any of that. They thought they were a superior race that shouldn’t even attempt to fit in with ‘normal’ people. So she ran away with them.”

Regina keeps quiet, letting Granny tell her story, and more than a little curious to see where it’s going.

“No, I know what that feels like,” Regina admits, quietly.

“Yes, you do,” Granny says with a nod. “A couple of years went by, and I never saw hide nor hair of her. I heard things, of course. A pack of werewolves doesn’t move around without leaving stories in its wake. But it wasn’t till there was a knock on my door in the middle of the night one winter that I laid eyes on my child again.” Granny blinks here, and Regina looks away, giving her a moment. “She was standing there, shivering, looking as scared as I’d ever seen her. I could smell the fear rolling off her. And in her arms, there was a tiny thing, bundled up in a blanket.”

Regina looks over at Granny once more, finding a soft smile on her face.

“She shoved the child into my arms. And she said ‘Protect her, Mama. Please keep her safe.’” Granny clears her throat and shrugs. “And then she was gone back into the night. That was the last time I ever saw her, the last words I ever heard her say. I looked down at the baby and those huge green eyes were staring up at me.” Granny meets Regina’s eyes. “I knew, then and there, that I’d do anything to keep her safe. And I did my best to do that. Even when she drove me insane with her energy and questions, I loved every ounce of her.” She shakes her head. “But, for
all the love I had for Ruby, I never missed Anita any less. I never loved her any less.” Granny places a hand on Regina’s arm. “It’s okay to go on living, Regina. Even when you lose the one thing you think you can’t live without. It’s okay for it to get a little easier. It’ll never go away.”

A sob escapes Regina’s throat and she covers her mouth with a hand. Granny squeezes her arm with a smile and nods. Regina takes a moment to bring her emotions under control and nods in return. “Thank you,” she whispers.

Granny throws her arm out dismissively, before picking up her teacup. “It’s nothing.”

“That’s why you didn’t tell Ruby about the wolf,” Regina says, thinking out loud. “You wanted to keep her safe.”

“I suppose we have that in common, Your Majesty,” Granny notes. “We both lied to our children to protect them from the hard truth.”

“Indeed,” Regina agrees, grudgingly. She hates to think of that time in her life, when Henry was suspicious of everything she did. But Granny is speaking the truth and she can’t deny that she understands her motivations for lying to Ruby for all of those years. A mother’s love is a very powerful thing. “Until Snow White came along, of course.” She smiles to underscore any malice that might’ve come across in her words.

“Damn girl causes chaos wherever she goes,” Granny agrees. “But it usually works out for the best.”

“Occasionally,” Regina muses, sipping her tea.

“Ruby doesn’t ever need to know about this chat, Your Majesty,” Granny says.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Eugenia.”

They fall into a companionable silence, that’s broken only by the sound of rapid footsteps approaching along the corridor.
“I knew her nose would bother her,” Granny murmurs, a moment before Ruby opens the door, poking her head in. Regina notices a sigh of what looks like relief when her eyes land on the pair.

“Hey,” Ruby greets them, moving fully into the room and coming to stand behind Regina’s chair, pressing a kiss to her hair.

“Managed to escape, did you?” Regina asks, tilting her head back to see Ruby’s face.

“Barely,” Ruby says, with a smile. “Robin had to pretty much drag him off me. I had to promise we could do it again tomorrow.”

“He was very taken with you,” Regina says, with a smile. “You made a very handsome steed.”

“Giving pony rides now?” Granny asks, amused.

“Only to certain clientele,” Ruby tells her, looking between her grandmother and Regina. “Everything okay here?”

“Yes,” Regina tells her, catching her hand and squeezing. “Everything’s fine.”

“I was just telling the Queen how to make real lasagne,” Granny says.

“And I was pointing out that adding spices doesn’t make it any less real, just more flavourful,” Regina says, feeling Granny’s glare more than seeing it.

Ruby glances between them a couple of times and shakes her head. “You’re both full of shit,” she decides. “But there’s no blood been shed, so if you wanna have your little secret chats, then that’s fine.”

Granny stands up and pushes her chair in, leaning on the back of it. “Next time, I’ll tell you how to make meatloaf,” she tells Regina, with a wink.
“I look forward to it,” Regina says. “Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” Granny says, pushing herself up. “I’ll leave you to it. It’s about time this old lady was in bed.”

They exchange goodnights and Granny heads off, leaving them alone in the kitchen. Ruby starts to move towards Granny’s abandoned chair, but Regina keeps hold of her hand, tugging her down into her lap and wrapping her arms around her.

“Okay,” Ruby begins, rubbing a hand over Regina’s back. “Robin said you were upset, then I find you drinking tea with Granny, and now you’re all snuggly...what’s going on?”

Regina tilts her face up and presses her lips gently against Ruby’s. She smiles and touches Ruby’s lips with her fingertips.

“I miss Henry,” she says, tears stinging her eyes, even though she’s still smiling.

“Oh, Regina,” Ruby begins. “I know you do. I should’ve realised that seeing Rol-”

“No,” Regina interrupts, pressing another kiss to Ruby’s mouth. “I miss Henry all the time. Always. And I will until I’m with him again. And earlier tonight I...I thought that...” She pauses and sighs. “You make me happy, Ruby.”

Ruby’s worried expression gives way to a brilliant smile. “You make me happy too,” she says.

“Good,” Regina says. “I just...sometimes have trouble reconciling my happiness with missing Henry. Like I shouldn’t allow myself to feel happiness when I’m not with him.”

“Regina, that’s not-” Ruby begins, but once again, Regina cuts her off with a kiss.

“I know,” she assures the younger woman. “I know. I don’t miss him any less when I’m with you. I just don’t focus on it as much. Henry wouldn’t want me to sit around moping.”
“He definitely wouldn’t,” Ruby agrees. “He loves you. He’d want you to be happy.”

“And I am,” Regina confirms, with a smile.

“Is this what you were talking to my Granny about?” Ruby asks.

“Not exactly,” Regina says. “We just had a little chat, that’s all.”

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Ruby says with a roll of her eyes.

“Shouldn’t you be prowling the castle and howling at the moon by now?” Regina questions, rubbing her nose against Ruby’s. “With Roland pulling at the scruff of your neck?”

Ruby rubs at her neck, wincing. “Yeah, he had a pretty firm grip.” She bumps her forehead against Regina’s. “I wanted to make sure you were okay. Robin was worried he’d upset you. And then I could smell your scent mingled with Granny’s and that’s...not usually good.”

“Well, as you can see, I’m fine,” Regina says. “So go and be the wolf.”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t rather me be with you?”

“I would love nothing more,” Regina tells her with an easy smile. “But there’s a little boy that I’m sure will be sorely disappointed if you don’t go back to him.”

Ruby nudges Regina’s cheek with her nose. “You matter, and you’re important to me.”

“You also made a promise to Roland that you’d play with him. I’m fine. Now, go.”

Ruby stands up and holds out a hand, giving Regina a hopeful smile. “Come with me. We’ll go find them together. And you can reassure Robin that you don’t hate him.”

“Why would he care if I hated him?” Regina asks, allowing Ruby to pull her to her feet.
“Because he’s a decent guy,” Ruby explains with a roll of her eyes. “And he doesn’t like going around upsetting people.”

“That man is overly sensitive,” Regina decides.

Ruby nudges her shoulder as they head along the servants corridor and back into the main hallway. “You’re one to talk, you big softie,” she murmurs.

Regina turns to dispute this, but is met with Ruby’s soft lips and the protest dies.

The next day of the full-moon passes peacefully. Evening comes and Regina barely gets a moment with Ruby after her transition. The wolf appears to have gained a sidekick. Regina catches glimpses of her charging around the castle with Roland on her back at various stages. At one point, she encounters the pair of them walking along the corridor, a makeshift leash made from rope around Ruby’s neck with Roland leading her.

“We’re playing a game where Ruby’s my puppy.” Is the explanation she gets, along with a long-suffering gaze from golden eyes.

On the third evening, there’s a frantic knocking at the door of her chambers and she opens it to find a worried Robin. He hasn’t seen Roland for hours and wants to check if Regina has. Regina puts a finger to her lips and beckons for him to follow her. She leads him into the bedroom. On the bed, a huge black wolf is curled up in sleep, with a tiny boy sprawled across her back. A toy monkey is tucked securely under his arm and there’s a huge smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Part of the Roland and Wolf!Ruby scene was inspired by this drawing by konako.
Gradually, Regina’s chambers have become their chambers. It’s pointless to keep up any kind of pretence. While not wishing to seem presumptuous, Ruby had broached the subject one night as they lay in bed, suggesting perhaps that she ‘officially’ move to Regina’s quarters. ‘I thought you already had,’ was Regina’s sleepy response, making Ruby feel kinda silly about the nerves she’d felt before bringing it up.

There’s no pomp nor ceremony about the move, and they see no need to announce it. Ruby just gathers up the scant few possessions left in her own room and piles them into her basket. She hums as she makes her way along the winding corridors. It’s the first night of the full moon so she’s bouncing with energy. Letting the wolf out in the confines of the castle is all very well, but it doesn’t really allow her to work off that energy. But a promise is a promise, so she’ll spend another moon inside.

She’s contemplating how she might persuade Regina to let her off the leash just a little, this evening when she almost physically bumps into Granny in the hallway coming from the opposite direction. As ever, the old woman doesn’t miss a trick and her eyes immediately flick to the basket hooked over Ruby’s right arm.

“Moving in, are you?” she asks, gruffly.

Since her secret discussion with Regina, Granny has been much less hostile towards both of them. She hasn’t exactly welcomed Regina with open arms, but by Granny’s standards, she’s been almost friendly. Still, Ruby tenses, waiting for a snarky comment. “Yes,” she confirms. “Please don’t make any jokes about lesbians and U-Hauls.”

Granny looks thoroughly confused and Ruby remembers that their understanding of the other world’s pop culture is reflective of their generations. “What are you talking about, girl?”

“How...” Ruby says. “I just meant...please don’t say anything about this moving too quickly. You and I have been getting along really well lately and I-”

Granny shakes her head. “Ruby, if the last few months, hell, the last forty years, haven’t taught us that happiness is fleeting, then I don’t think we’ve been paying attention,” she says, wearily. “If your happiness happens to come in the form of the Evil Queen who terrorised us all-” Ruby is about to interject, but Granny shushes her with a look and continues. “-then you grab onto that and you hold on tight. You got it? Don’t wait.”
“Oh.” Ruby manages, tears welling in her eyes. She really hadn’t expected that to be where the conversation was going. “That’s...thank you, Granny.”

“Yes, yes,” Granny says, accepting the clumsy hug that Ruby inflicts upon her, patting her back gently. “Go on now, before your underwear spills out of that basket for everyone to see. I know they saw it in Storybrooke every time they came into the diner, but it’s different here.”

Ruby pulls back with a teary smile, shaking her head. “It’s different,” she agrees. “But some things will never change.” She drops a kiss on her grandmother’s cheek, and continues on her way to her new living quarters.

Regina looks up from a book as she enters, raising an eyebrow. “You look cheerful.”

Flashing her brightest grin, Ruby places her basket on the floor and practically bounces over to the table Regina is sitting at. “What’s not to be cheery about?” she asks, hopping up to sit herself next to the large tome Regina is flicking through, swinging her legs back and forth under her skirts. “I’m young, I’m healthy, I just moved in with this really hot chick-”

“Ruby, you’ve been sleeping here for months,” Regina says, though her lips twitch with amusement.

“And my Granny just told me to grab hold of my happiness with both hands and not let go,” Ruby continues, ignoring the interruption. She grins down at Regina, poking her in the side with the toe of her boot. “Life is pretty good, I’d say.”

“You conveniently forgot to mention the witch that’s pursuing us relentlessly, along with your friend’s rapidly advancing notion that everything must hinge on the birth of her child,” Regina sighs and slams the book closed. A plume of dust rises and a sneeze catches Ruby unawares; she only just manages to turn her face away from Regina. She shakes her head slightly and turns back to find Regina laughing.

“What?” She swipes hastily at her nose in case anything has escaped. Regina scrapes her chair back and stands, moving so that she’s between Ruby’s legs, their faces level.

“You were right. Life is pretty good.”
“One of these days you’ll learn that I’m always right,” Ruby says, watching Regina’s lips as she leans in closer. Their noses bump together playfully as Ruby moves just out of Regina’s reach, laughing softly at her scowl before allowing their lips to meet. The kiss is soft and sweet and Ruby revels in the familiarity of the situation.

Regina pulls back, but Ruby steals another kiss before she can move too far, eliciting another smile, which turns into a sigh.

“I have to go to the library,” Regina says, her eyes moving to the large, dusty book she’d been reading. “I told Belle I’d report back.”

“She’s giving you homework now?” Ruby teases, enjoying the way Regina’s eyes narrow at her.

“I am volunteering my time willingly for the common good,” she corrects.


“So you’re clearly not always right.” Regina’s eyes sparkle with victory and Ruby laughs and kisses her again.

“Will you be long?”

“Not if I can help it,” Regina says, stepping away a little. “Why? Did you want to do something?”

“I thought we might celebrate my official moving in day,” Ruby says, extending her leg so that her foot brushes Regina’s thigh.

“Again, I can’t remember the last time you didn’t sleep in this room,” Regina tells her, patiently. “But fine, we can celebrate the fact you brought the boots you never wear and the books you never read along to join the rest of your things.”

Pouting slightly, Ruby tilts her head. “You don’t seem very excited about me officially moving
in.” She’s kidding. Regina’s right; she’s barely been in her own room since the day of Regina’s confrontation with her sister.

Even though she clearly knows she’s being played, Regina relents, with only a very slight eyeroll. “Ruby, every morning, when I wake up and see you, I’m thrilled at the thought of another day with you.” Regina’s completely frank answer makes Ruby regret her teasing. The older woman moves back to stand between Ruby’s legs, her hands falling to rest on her thighs. “Every night when I fall asleep, I’m glad for the next day I get to spend with you. That’s not going to change because we have two hairbrushes here instead of one.”

Ruby slides off the table, her height advantage allowing her to envelope Regina in a tight hug. She closes her eyes and turns her nose into Regina’s hair. “I know,” she whispers. “Me too.” Regina’s arms tighten around her waist briefly before loosening, her hands pushing on Ruby’s hips.

“I have to go if we want to celebrate later,” she says with a smile in Ruby’s direction.

“Don’t let Belle keep you too long,” Ruby says as Regina hefts the book from the table and balances it against her hip. “You know how she gets when she’s thinks she’s onto a theory.”

“Yes,” Regina agrees as she heads to the door. “Yesterday I’m positive she spoke for a full two minutes without taking a breath. It was quite impressive.”

“Hurry back!” Ruby calls after her, the stupid grin on her face staying long after the door closes.

“How positively sickening the pair of you are.”

Ruby’s head whips around to find Zelena lounging in Regina’s favourite chair, examining her face in a mirror. Ruby opens her mouth to yell.

“Re-” Something claps itself over her mouth like a gag. She brings her hands up to try and remove it, but there’s nothing there; it’s magic. “Mmmmmmm.”

“Were you going to call for my little sis?” Zelena enquires, placing the mirror back on the table and shifting her gaze to Ruby. “Maybe I should let you bring her back…” she begins, tapping her chin as if weighing up her options. “After all, there is the little matter of her heart to be attended to.”
Ruby’s insides freeze at the mention of Regina’s heart and her body immediately goes into attack mode. Without thinking, she launches herself at the green woman, only to be deflected by a delicate wave of a hand, sending her crashing backwards into the table. Her whine of pain is muted by the magical gag, but she crumples to the floor, landing on her hands and knees, shaking her head to clear it.

“Poor little pup,” Zelena teases. “Still not very bright, are you?”

Ruby’s head whips around, eyes blazing and flecked with yellow. Zelena merely laughs. “Frustrated?” she asks, standing up and moving around the room, running her hands over Regina’s belongings. “Just imagine how you’ll feel the day I finally get my hands on my prize.” She turns to face Ruby, a fist pressed to her own chest. “When I reach into her chest and wrap my fingers around that useless organ and squeeze.” She draws the last word out, lengthening the ‘z’ sound as she demonstrates with her own hand. She smirks. “And there will be nothing you can do about it.”

Ruby’s hands are back at her face, trying to rid herself of the invisible barrier. “Oh, you want to say something?” Zelena raises an eyebrow. “Some pitiful threat, no doubt. Some warning about how you and your friends won’t let me win...because good always vanquishes evil? Am I close?” She holds up a hand. “Oh alright, amuse me.” The gag disappears.

Ruby feels the pressure from her mouth disappear, and she resists the urge to call Regina back, unwilling to put her directly into harm’s way. “You’re deluded,” she spits. “Completely insane!” She tests the water and takes a step closer to the witch. “You think you’re oh so powerful, but the thing is, you’ve never quite managed to inflict any real damage. So I’m starting to think you’re all talk. We will win,” Ruby promises. “Because, unlike you, we are an army.”

“Yes, it’s quite touching how you’ve rallied around my little sister,” Zelena comments. “A woman who killed your friend’s father, stole her kingdom and cursed all of you to live in another realm, just because she wasn’t as pretty as dear Snow White.” She reaches out and runs the back of her hand down Ruby’s cheek, tilting her head and opening her eyes wide. “She’s a clever one, that Regina. Perhaps if I bat my eyelashes at you, you’ll forget about my misdemeanours and invite me to join your little group too?”

Ruby is quick to move and pushes Zelena’s hand away from her cheek, placing her hands on her chest and shoving her away. The other woman stumbles a few steps, but that’s all. She’s so thrown by Zelena’s comment that she barely registers that her strength seemingly has very little effect on the woman.

“That’s...that’s not how it is. Regina’s...she’s changed.” She clamps her mouth closed. She
knows she shouldn’t be entering into this debate, she knows she’s just being provoked and that Zelena is using her words as weapons, very effectively.

“Yes, of course,” Zelena says, her words dripping with sarcasm. “She changed as soon as she needed the rest of you to protect her. That’s not suspicious at all, is it?”

Ruby shakes her head. “No,” she says, not allowing Zelena to plant doubts in her head. She knows Regina. “No,” she repeats, firmer this time. “She’s been working on her redemption long before this. And it isn’t just about saving herself. She cares about all of us.”

“Her redemption,” Zelena parrots. “Well, isn’t that just wonderful? Regina gets to murder, torture and wreak havoc for years...but now she says she’s sorry and you all fall at her feet?”

“Everyone deserves a second chance,” Ruby says. She looks the green woman up and down. “Even you.”

Zelena’s smirk drops and her eyes seem to burn with emerald fire. She advances on Ruby. “A second chance?” she spits. “What about people who never had a first chance?” Her skin tone seems to deepen in colour as she speaks. “Regina had everything, a mother, a father, a home, she married a King for Oz’s sake!” She has Ruby backed up against the wall. “And she threw that all away. She’s petty and spiteful and spent years chasing a helpless young girl...and you think she deserves a second chance?”

A smirk creeps on Ruby’s face. “This isn’t about first or second chances. You’re just jealous. That explains your complexion,” she adds as an afterthought. “You seriously want what Regina had? I’m pretty sure she wouldn’t recommend it. She’s stronger now than ever before, and she has all of us standing beside her.”

“You think I care about a bunch of peasants?” Zelena laughs. “Oh my dear, stupid mutt, you’ve seen what I can do to your precious Regina without even getting out of breath. You think I’ve been trying to kill you all? I’ve been playing with you.” She throws her hands out wide. “Here I am, in your fortress, in your sanctuary, with no trouble whatsoever.” She fixes her gaze on Ruby once more. “I have more power than she could even dream of. And I have the ambition she lacks. I’m going to use my power for more than a petty vendetta against a teenager. And when I do, I’ll not only have everything she had...” She’s close to Ruby again, almost whispering. “She won’t even exist.”

Ruby’s eyes narrow at Zelena’s words. “Wh-what do you mean? She won’t exist?”
Zelena lets out a musical giggle. “No, no,” she says, stroking Ruby’s hair. “I’m not going to tell you my plan and have you run back to your mistress like the good little bitch you are. I’ll just leave you to ponder our conversation today.” Zelena regards Ruby for a moment. “Do you know, I may just change my approach. Since you seem to believe my sister cares for you, it might be much more fun to have her watch me take your heart and crush it.” She pauses, her smile turning menacing. “That is, of course, provided that she does care. And if she doesn’t...then it’ll be most diverting to watch your heart break when you realise it. It’ll make your death just that little bit sweeter.”

Ruby pushes at Zelena again, harder this time. “You’d have done it by now if that was your plan,” she growls. “It’s not like you haven’t had plenty of chances to kill me. Come to think of it, are you sure you even have a plan?”

Without another word, Zelena plunges her hand into Ruby’s chest and wraps long fingers around her heart.

Excruciating pain is all Ruby is able to register as Zelena’s fingers tighten and squeeze. Gritting her teeth, she uses all of her energy to bring up her pain defences. Grasping Zelena’s wrist, she meets the witch’s eyes and holds her gaze, the only outward sign of her struggle is the sweat beginning to bead on her brow.

“Oh, I have a plan, dear,” Zelena snarls, mocking Regina’s own turn of phrase. “But I can be flexible.” She wrenches the heart from Ruby’s chest, holding it up in front of her. It’s pure red. “Well, she hasn’t corrupted you yet,” she comments, turning her hand to admire the organ from different angles. “I don’t see many of these.”

Ruby falls to her knees on the floor, gasping for breath, hand pressed against her chest in the spot where her heart should be, looking up at Zelena.

Zelena sighs and holds her free hand up, her broom appearing in it. “Well, this has been a lovely chat,” she says, climbing on. “Do give my best regards to my sister.” A smile slowly spreads over the witch’s face; a macabre slash of red amongst the green “I would have asked you to give her my love...but I’m not sure you’re capable of that any longer,” she says, holding up Ruby’s heart. “Goodbye, pup.” And with a cackle, she flies out of the window into the night sky.

Ruby watches Zelena fly out the window and her eyes close as her tears finally surface. Her hand closes into a fist at her chest and she howls for the loss. She has to find Regina.
Ruby is halfway down the corridor when she hears Regina’s voice calling out to her from the room she just left. She turns and hurries back into the chambers, running straight to Regina, almost stumbling into her arms, sobbing and shaking. Regina catches her and holds her up.

“We heard you howling from the library. What happened? What’s wrong?” she asks, her voice rising in panic. Ruby shakes her head, clinging to Regina. “Ruby? Ruby please, you’re scaring me.”

“Regina, I…” she falters. “I… what? What, exactly did she do, besides serve her own heart up on a plate for Zelena to take? “I did something incredibly stupid, and dangerous…” She swallows and takes one of Regina’s hands into her own, placing it on her chest. She can’t bring herself to say it.

“What do you mean y-?” Regina stops speaking abruptly and Ruby watches the realisation set in. Regina’s eyes close and she shakes her head. “No…” she whispers.

“I’m sorry,” Ruby tries, weakly. “I… she just… I’m sorry.”

“How could you let this happen?” Regina says, eyes flashing dangerously. “Do you know what this means?”

“It wasn’t like I told her she could take it!” Ruby argues. “Regina, I’m sorry. I-” Anything more she is about to say is cut off by an excruciating pain in her chest that she can only assume is Zelena squeezing her heart. It’s enough to steal the breath from her lungs and she falls to her knees, hands to her chest. She stifles a cry of pain, even though Zelena is no longer there to see her bravado.

Instantly, Regina is beside her, gathering her into her arms and rocking them back and forward. “No,” she murmurs. “No, no, no, no.”

Ruby cries out again as the pain creeps closer to the level of her tolerance. “Regina!” she grits out. “It hurts!” She grips on to whatever part of Regina she can reach, needing to feel grounded.

“I know,” Regina mutters, pressing her lips to Ruby’s temple, rocking her all the while. Ruby tries to take comfort in her presence, but the pain is masking everything else. “I know it does. Just… just hold on. It’ll pass. It’s a warning. That’s all.”

Sure enough, a few painful moments later, the pain does pass, and Ruby feels like she can breathe
again. Her grip on Regina remains strong, and she stays in her arms, feeling tears streaming down her cheeks, her chest heaves with pain. “She said...she’d... she’s gonna...”

“Shhhhh,” Regina soothes, kissing her forehead “Calm down...give yourself a few minutes before you try to talk.”

Ruby tries to do as she’s told, but when she manages to focus, she sees tears glistening on Regina’s cheeks and that hurts almost as much as having her heart squeezed. “It’s my fault,” Ruby whispers. “She threatened me and I provoked her,” she recounts. “She...she says she wants you to watch me die.”

She watches Regina’s face harden. “Then it’s not your fault,” she says, her voice thick. “It’s mine for ever putting you in this position.”

“Don’t,” Ruby says, shaking her head. With the pain in her chest gone, she feels a little stronger. She sits up, pushing to her feet. Regina stands along with her “Don’t start the blame game again.” She puts a hand over her empty chest. “We need to figure out a way to get it back. Before she really messes with us. Before she can find a way to use it to... to get to you.” She flicks her eyes up to Regina. “So, yes. I know what this means.”

The vein in Regina’s forehead is prominent, and her jaw tense. “We can’t do anything,” she says, quietly, and it scares Ruby more than if she’d yelled. “Any attack or attempt we make against her now is putting your life at risk. We can’t take that chance. And she knows it.”

“I’m at risk even if we don’t do anything,” Ruby protests, feeling very vulnerable all of a sudden. The thing that keeps her alive is literally in someone else’s hands right now.

Regina turns away and starts pacing the floor. “So we attack her? And she kills you. And then what?” She turns eyes bright with tears on Ruby. “I can’t watch you die, Ruby. I can’t survive that again. I won’t let you die because of me.”

“Stop saying that,” Ruby tells her.

“It is because of me,” Regina says, harshly. “If you weren’t involved with me, this wouldn’t be happening to you.”
Ruby growls in response.

Regina nods. “You tend to revert to your more primitive behaviours when you don’t have a comeback.”

Ruby advances on Regina. “She told me what she was going to do and I all but dared her to do it. How is that your fault?” she snaps.

“Because she wouldn’t have been anywhere near you if it wasn’t for me,” Regina almost shouts. “You mean nothing to her except a way to get to me. If not for me, you wouldn’t have been in a position to dare her to do anything.” She shakes her head. “Which, by the way, is just foolish, Ruby.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that now,” Ruby agrees, grudgingly. “So what do we do?”

Regina’s shoulders slump and she shakes her head. “I don’t know.” Pinching the bridge of her nose, she sighs. “I really don’t know.”

Ruby swallows and moves towards the bed, taking a seat on the edge of it. “Should… we let the others know what’s going on?”

She’s not so sure that’s a good idea. It could cause widespread panic to know that the Wicked Witch can easily enter the castle whenever she wishes. And Ruby’s hardly some defenceless maiden. If she can get the better of her, then very few other people stand a chance.

“I don’t know, Ruby,” Regina repeats. She continues to pace the floor. Ruby watches her for a moment. Her anger is palpable; Ruby can almost taste it.

“Please don’t be angry with me,” she pleads, quietly.

Finally stopping her frantic pacing, Regina turns to face Ruby. She sighs. “I’m not angry at you,” she says. “I’m angry at the whole situation. At myself for letting it get to this point.”

“To what point?” Ruby asks.
“To the point where she holds all the cards,” Regina says. “To the point where I am utterly powerless against her.” She turns and walks to the window, looking to the western sky where the sun has almost set. “To the point where I’m so weak that I have no idea what to do.”

“At… at least it’s my heart, and not yours right?” Ruby says, trying to look on the bright side. If she had Regina’s heart, she could complete whatever plan she’s been working on. And the fact that she didn’t go directly to Regina must show that she’s at least a little scared of her.

Regina shakes her head, turning to give Ruby a rueful smile. “She’s got my heart, Ruby,” she says, quietly.

Ruby waits for the euphoria that those words should cause. The butterflies in her stomach and the lightness in her chest. They don’t come. The words make her feel happy, but it’s muted and distant. Like she’s viewing her feelings through a foggy mirror. She needs her heart back so she can appreciate this moment. And so that she can reciprocate and mean it. Instead, she gets up from her place on the bed and crosses to where Regina is standing by the window, leaning her chin on her shoulder and wrapping her arms around her waist. “I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “I just...I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“Clearly,” Regina agrees, though her harsh tone is softened when she rests her head against Ruby’s and sighs. “Why did you goad her? I thought you might have learned your lesson after the last time.”

“I didn’t want her thinking we were sitting ducks; that we didn’t have a plan,” Ruby confesses, though it is weak, at best. The truth of the matter is that she couldn’t stand to hear her speak about Regina the way she did. Her anger got the best of her and she forgot, momentarily, exactly who she was dealing with.

“And now she thinks we have a plan?” Regina chides. “No. Now she knows she has the upper hand. Completely.”

“We can still defeat her,” Ruby argues, feebly.

“I fail to see how that can happen,” Regina says, sounding more and more morose as time passes.

“We just need a plan,” Ruby decides. “We need to let the people know. They’ll be able to help us.”
“Yes, because they’ve been so good at coming up with a strategy thus far,” Regina says. “And now that I’ve endangered one of their own, putting us at even more of a disadvantage, it’s hardly likely that they’re going to suddenly be hit by a bolt of inspiration, is it?”

“You and I have had a few encounters with her now. We need to get inside her head. Figure out what her weakn...” Ruby trails off, feeling a little strange. Her eyes flick to the window just as the sun sinks behind the horizon. She frowns. The moon has never made her feel like this before. Not even back when she couldn’t control her transitions. She lets go of Regina, stepping back. “R-Regina,” she stammers, not even really knowing what she’s asking for.

The woman frowns, moving with Ruby as she takes a step back. “Ruby?” She eyes the younger woman curiously and reaches out for her. “Ruby, what is it?”

“I don’t...” Her skin feels like it’s on fire, like something’s scratching beneath the surface. She can feel sweat forming on her forehead and on the back of her neck, her breath is coming faster. It’s like...it can’t be. “Regina, the wolf is...” Claws spring from the fingers on her right hand and she cries out in shock, forcing them back in.

It’s sick; the feeling of excitement Ruby gets as Regina’s eyes widen in shock. She grins, fangs glinting in the moonlight and she snaps them at the older woman.

“Ruby...” Regina’s voice cuts into her head and she snarls before it turns into a pitiful yip. Ruby turns away, squeezing her eyes closed and gripping her head with both hands. The wolf wants to come out, but it’s not her wolf. It’s something else, and whatever it is wants blood. Regina’s blood.

“Get out of here,” she growls, still facing away from Regina. She feels her face shift, her nose elongating and her mouth growing to accommodate extra teeth. She drops to her knees, using every ounce of willpower she has to keep the change at bay until Regina’s gone.

“Ru-”

“Go!” she snarls. “Now. Seal the door with magic.” She turns, knowing her face must still have changed by the way Regina steps back. The air is suddenly filled with fear and the animal inside her feeds on it. She lifts her nose to inhale more of the intoxicating scent, letting out a deep growl as something inside her screams for more. More fear. More blood.
“Ruby.” That voice again. Calling to her. Calming the beast momentarily. “Ruby you need to fight this…”

“I’m trying, Regina.” She stands up. Feeling taller, stronger, looming over the Queen, who is considerably paler than she was a moment ago. “Get out.”

“I’m not leaving you here at her mercy. Not again.” Regina reaches out a hand towards her. Ruby bats it away, her unnatural claws leaving thick red welts in their wake, oozing with blood. The noise of pain Regina makes is like music, filling the small room and bouncing off the walls, echoing in Ruby’s sensitive ears.

“Ruby!”

Ruby wants to answer, she wants to comfort Regina and apologise. But the wolf recedes and is replaced by another, equally unwelcome intruder in her body. Without telling it to, her head is thrown back and a cackle bursts forth. It’s coming from her mouth, but it’s not her. It’s like she’s trapped inside her head with this other presence, unable to do anything about it but watch. Regina’s cradling her injured arm, eyeing her warily.

“All in good time, sis,” Ruby’s voice says. “Right now it’s far too amusing to watch you cower in fear before the monster you’ve allowed into your bed.”

It’s an odd feeling, to smile someone else’s smile, but that’s what’s happening right now.

“All in good time, sis,” Ruby’s voice says. “Right now it’s far too amusing to watch you cower in fear before the monster you’ve allowed into your bed.”

Ruby wants to shout and scream and protest and tell Regina she shouldn’t be afraid.

“I’m not afraid of her,” Regina says, and Ruby actually believes it.

“No?” Zelena asks through Ruby. “Not afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?” She lifts her nose and sniffs. “I beg to differ, dear.”
“I’m not afraid of her,” Regina repeats, her voice growing stronger. “And I’m not leaving her here to do your bidding.”

“Then you’ll either die, or have to kill your beloved wolf,” Zelena says. “So, either way, it makes for good entertainment.”

In a burst of something, Ruby pushes past Zelena’s presence and takes control back. The scent of Regina’s blood stings the back of her nose and she feels sick, but ignores it to beg the other woman to leave. “Regina, please go. Please. I can’t...I can’t fight her much...please.” Regina shakes her head, stubborn as ever, and if Ruby still had her heart, it would be sinking. She tries one last ditch effort. “Regina, I lo-”

And then Zelena’s back. Or the wolf is. Maybe both. Whatever’s the case, Ruby’s not in control anymore and the call of the moon is undeniable now. She falls to her knees, trying with everything in her not to transform. But it’s no use. Her bones stretch and twist, her muscles bulge and her clothes are replaced by sleek black fur, leaving her crouched on the floor, snarling and growling, eyes trained on her prey. On Regina.

“Ruby,” Regina says, voice even. “You don’t want to do this. This isn’t you.”

If she had the capacity to weep right now, she would. Instead, she’s compelled to tense her muscles, readying her great hulk of a body for attack. Her eyes meet Regina’s and she sees no fear there. Sadness and resignation, yes, but not terror. The last shred of awareness she has registers that there’s something purple swirling in Regina’s hand, and when the wolf pounces, the purple light surrounds her and everything goes black.
The huge wolf falls to the floor, unconscious. Regina lowers her hand, immediately feeling guilty for using her magic to knock Ruby out. She moves quickly to the fallen wolf, sitting beside her large head and stroking her soft fur.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry she did that to you.” Tears land on the black fur and Regina hurriedly wipes her face. Now is no time for emotion. The warm fur under her hand disappears and she watches the wolf transform back into the woman. She’s still unconscious. Regina brushes the hair away from her face and smiles; it looks like she’s asleep.

Pushing to her feet, Regina uses magic to lift Ruby from her position on the floor and transports her to the bed, laying her down gently. She sits by her for a moment, watching the rise and fall of her chest. Pressing a hand against it, she closes her eyes as she feels nothing. No heartbeat.

She knows what she has to do. Leaning down and kissing the slumbering girl’s forehead, she stands up and stalks out of her chambers. She maneuvers her way through the corridors of the castle despite the rage that’s blinding her and blasts the doors of the meeting room wide open. Banging against the stone walls, the doors slam shut again from the force. A wave of her hands, and David, Mary Margaret, Granny and Belle are seated around the table, looking thoroughly confused.

“What on earth?” “Whoa!” “What the-”

“Regina!” David’s voice booms, startling everyone around the table into silence. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Ruby is in trouble,” Regina tells them as calmly as she can. “You’re all here because you’re all people I can rely on, and Ruby trusts you all implicitly.”

Mary Margaret is out of her seat and standing beside Regina. She places a hand on the Queen’s shoulder and Regina flinches, fighting the urge to send her flying at the touch.

“What’s going on?” Granny asks, leaning forward on the table, peering at Regina over the top of her glasses.
“Zelena has…” She pauses and swallows past a lump in her throat. There’s no real way to sugarcoat this. She can deal with whatever blame everyone wants to throw at her. She is to blame after all.

“Zelena what?” Mary Margaret prompts her softly.

“She was here. In this castle. In my chambers.” Silence. “She has Ruby’s heart.”

Everyone starts talking all at once and Regina brings a hand up to freeze them all but thinks better of it all; they can’t waste time. “Silence!” She yells. “There’s little point in asking how and why. We know how and why. On top of this, Zelena has been able to control Ruby’s actions and she…” Regina trails off. How the hell is she supposed to tell Ruby’s loved ones about what happened? What Regina did to her in order to subdue her?

“She what?” Granny prompts.

Regina swallows thickly. “She was able to tap into Ruby’s more primitive side. Ruby tried to fight it, but coupled with the full moon, she couldn’t and Zelena won through. She used Ruby’s wolf to attack me, and I… I had to subdue her.”

“How?” David demands.

“You’re bleeding,” Mary Margaret says, lifting Regina’s arm, examining the tattered cloth and bloody claw mark.

“I’m fine,” Regina says, pulling her arm away and looking at David. “I didn’t hurt her, if that’s what you mean. She’s unconscious.”

“And you left her alone?” Granny gasps. “When you know your sister could get in here at any time?” The old woman is up out of her seat. “I need my crossbow. The last thing we need is a rabid werewolf being controlled by a madwoman on the loose.”

Regina barely notices her feet moving, but she’s suddenly in front of the door, blocking Granny’s path. “You are not going to shoot her,” she fumes.
“You are not going to tell me how to subdue a wolf,” Granny snarls, and Regina idly wonders if the moon still affects her on some level. “I’ve forgotten more about wolves than you’ll ever know. And I’m going to protect my granddaughter.”

She shoves roughly past Regina, but Regina catches her arm. She lifts her other hand and a small purple ball appears in it. She holds it out to Granny.

“Here,” she says. “If she wakes up and it looks like she might be under Zelena’s control, throw this on the floor and it will put her back to sleep.” Her lips harden into a thin line. “Without the need to shoot her.”

Granny snatches the magic sphere and bustles off with a huff and Regina hears some not very pleasant threats being muttered.

“What do you need from us?” Belle finally speaks. “How can we help?”

“I need you to hit the books,” Regina instructs. “David and Mary Margaret, I need you to watch over Ruby and Granny.” She summons up two more purple spheres and offers one each to both of them. “One more should be enough for Ruby. Just in case.”

“So, what’s the other one for?” David asks, looking down into his hand.

“If Granny so much as thinks about using that crossbow on her, you blast her with the other ball,” Regina says, waiting for his nod.

Perhaps predictably, Mary Margaret looks like she might actually melt into a puddle at this statement and she takes it as permission to reach out again and grasp Regina’s arm.

“We’ll take good care of her for you,” she whispers, eyes brimming with tears. Regina considers making a sarcastic response, but can’t bring herself to do it. She nods.

“What are you going to do while we look after Ruby?” David asks, closing his hand around the sphere. She drags her eyes away from Mary Margaret’s and smiles at him. It’s not a friendly smile.
“I’m going to pay a visit to my big sister,” she tells him. “And I’m going to get Ruby’s heart back. And then I’m going to kill her.”

Mary Margaret’s fingers tighten on her arm. “W-while we’re absolutely in favour of the killing Zelena plan,” she begins, looking at David with what Regina has come to recognise as her ‘you will agree with whatever I say’ look. “Maybe you should, uh, calm down a little first. You’re practically shaking with anger right now.”

“And the longer I wait, the angrier I’ll become,” Regina says, frowning at her. “What’s your point?”

“I think Mary Margaret is saying that going in angry will put you at a disadvantage,” David interjects. “It’s best to approach this with a clear head. You know how powerful she is. She’ll exploit your anger. And you can’t go alone.”

“And you’d just sit idly by if she had your beloved Snow White’s heart, would you?” Regina snaps, ignoring the second part of his sentence; there’s not a damn thing any of them will be able to do to stop her. “Perhaps I should have a spa day and do some yoga?”

“Nobody is asking you to do yoga while she has your beloved’s heart, Regina,” Mary Margaret soothes and Regina freezes at the words. Her immediate reaction is to deny any similarity between them, but she was the one who made the comparison initially. And, at the end of the day, she does love Ruby. She hopes she gets the chance to tell her that.

“Then what are you suggesting?” Regina grits out.

“You need to get your head together,” Mary Margaret advises. “Get some focus..”

“I am perfectly focused on my task,” Regina argues. “My task is to kill her. See? Very little confusion there.”

“Your task is to get Ruby’s heart,” Mary Margaret counters. “Your task is to come back safe so that you can give Ruby’s heart back to her.” Grey eyes harden. “Because I am not going to give her heart back to her only to watch it break because you went and got yourself killed retrieving it.”

Regina finds herself surprised that Mary Margaret is correct. She is focussing on the wrong thing.
And she does want to get back here to Ruby. For the first time for as long as she can remember, someone other than Henry matters to her and she doesn’t want that to end. She wants to be the one that puts Ruby’s heart back where it belongs and see her face light up with that beautiful smile. She blinks away a few tears that have sprung from nowhere, her shoulders slumping. “So what do you suggest?” she asks, far more softly than before.

Mary Margaret holds out her hand to David, giving him the magical sleeping sphere to go with the other one. “Here, you go and make sure Granny doesn’t shoot Ruby,” she tells him. With her other hand, she gently takes Regina’s. “You, come with me.”

She allows Mary Margaret to lead her through the castle and they emerge into the area used mostly by archers for target practise. It’s illuminated by torchlight and a single figure is visible; it’s Robin Hood.

“Why are we here?” she asks Mary Margaret as she’s pulled closer to the thief.

“Because this is where you’re going to blow off some steam.”

Before Regina is able to respond, Robin is already approaching. “Your Majesty, Your Highness,” he greets. “Is something the matter? It’s not advisable to be out here after dark. The Witch is still on the loose.”

“What are you doing here?” Regina snarks. “Clearly you’re not protecting the castle, because the Witch you’re so worried about managed to breeze past your guards and enter my private chambers less than an hour ago.”

“Regina that’s not fa-”

He drops his bow and rushes towards them, reaching out to Regina. Off her look, he thinks better of actually touching her, but still comes too close for her liking.

“Your Maj-...are you...did she harm you?” he asks. “Where’s Ruby? Is Ruby alright?”
“No,” Regina admits, quietly. While she’s not close friends with Robin, she knows that he and Ruby get along well. If she’d been thinking more clearly, she’d have brought him to the meeting room with the others. “She...she hurt Ruby. She took her heart.” Mary Margaret squeezes her hand, reminding her that she’s still holding it. She withdraws it with a scowl, though Mary Margaret seems unaffected by it.

“Then we must fetch it back,” Robin says, resolutely. “I am at your disposal, Your Majesty. As are all of my men. Whatever needs to be done, we will do. Ruby is a brave and loyal soul, and a dear friend. We shall ensure she is not without her heart for any longer than necessary.”

Hearing Ruby described in such glowing terms makes Regina’s throat hurt. She nods briefly at him. “Thank you, but I will be going to retrieve Ruby’s heart. You can stay here and protect the others.”

“But you can’t go alone,” Robin protests. “It’s far too dangerous.”

“What’s dangerous is you presuming to tell me what I can and cannot do,” Regina bellows, loud enough that he takes a step back.

“Regina!” Mary Margaret scolds. “This isn’t helping you with your focus.” She turns to Robin. “Look, I know you’re kinda new, but I would really recommend not telling her what to do.”

He holds his hands up in surrender. “You are right, of course,” he concedes. “My concern for Ruby’s safety overrode my propriety. Forgive me.”

Regina rolls her eyes. “You’re forgiven,” she says.

“Where is Ruby?” Robin pushes. “Is she alright? Is there a task I can undertake?”

“You can gather your men and reinforce the perimeter guards. And make arrangements for more sentries on the battlements,” Regina tells him. He clearly needs something to occupy himself, to feel useful.

He dips his head. “It shall be done right away, Your Majesty,” he says.
Regina watches him leave. She shakes her head and turns to Mary Margaret. “Now what?”

“Now you pretend that—” She inclines her head towards one of the straw dummies used for training. “—is your sister, and you get rid of all the anger that’s blocking your common sense.”

Regina sighs. “I don’t think that’s going to work. It’s just wasting valuable time and magic.”

“Just try it,” Mary Margaret urges. “Remember, she needs you to come back.” She puts a hand on Regina’s elbow. “We all do.”

The reminder that Ruby is lying unconscious upstairs, by her own hand, is enough to turn her eyes violet. She channels the rage into her hand and hurls a fireball at the dummy. It explodes spectacularly, leaving nothing but a smouldering pile of straw. Mary Margaret raises her eyebrows.

“Uh, okay, that looked cathartic.”

Regina hurls another fireball, and another, incinerating two more of the targets. “I think we’re gonna need more dummies,” she murmurs, lifting her hand and readying her ammunition.

Ten minutes later and she’s destroyed every target they have.

“Feeling better?” Mary Margaret asks, from the safe distance she’d retreated to after the first explosion.

Hesitating, Regina glances over her shoulder briefly. “A little,” she admits. She feels slightly more centred and calm.

Mary Margaret beams and comes out from her position, approaching Regina. Her smile is blinding and Regina sighs. “See? I told you you’d feel be—”

“Hold your horses, Mary Sunshine,” Regina chides. “I said I felt a little better. Not that you’d
brought about world peace.”

“Regina,” Mary Margaret begins. “I underst-”

“No,” Regina interjects. “No, you don’t. Stop saying you do when you don’t. I...I...” She turns away, throwing another fireball at an already smouldering pile of straw. She looks up at the sky. “That girl is lying up there, without her heart, because of me.” Warm tears spill down her face and she shakes her head. “She is the warmest, friendliest, most caring person I’ve ever known, and right now her heart is in the hands of a psychopath...because of me.” She whirls around to look at Mary Margaret again, bringing a fist to her own chest. “She could die, because of me.”

“She’s not goi-”

“Just like Daniel,” Regina whispers. “Her only crime would be to...to-”

Mary Margaret takes a step towards her, reaching out to grasp her arms. “Loving you isn’t a crime, Regina. You can’t think that way.”

She can’t even conjure up the energy to push Mary Margaret away. She might be the only thing keeping her from collapsing right now. “I don’t even know if-”

“She loves you,” Mary Margaret insists, staring into Regina’s eyes. “And you love her. And we are gonna get her heart back and you’re gonna tell her that you love her, right? Because if you don’t, I’m gonna kick both your asses.”

This draws a choked laugh from Regina and she sniffs. “You can’t really do ‘menacing’, dear.”

“Oh yeah? Try me,” Mary Margaret says, trying hard to glare, before her expression softens. “We’ll fix this,” she whispers, pulling Regina against her.

The hug is awkward because of Mary Margaret’s belly, but Regina returns it anyway. She closes her eyes and wonders when this girl went from being the source of Regina’s greatest suffering, to her pillar of strength. “Thank you, Snow,” she whispers in return, before pulling away.
“Any time,” Mary Margaret says. “Now, throw a couple more fireballs and we’ll go see about getting Ruby’s heart back for her, okay?”

Regina nods, sweeping her arm out in front of her and a very real looking Zelena dummy materialises. Regina smirks, her eyes taking on a violent shade of purple, and Mary Margaret retreats back a few steps. Just as she draws an arm back to throw her first fireball, a voice from behind stops her.

“Regina!”

The fire dies in her hand as she turns to see Ruby sprinting towards her. She’s barely opened her mouth to greet the other woman when her arms are full and Ruby is sobbing and babbling in her ear.

“Oh, God, are you okay? I’m so, so sorry. I couldn’t stop it. It was like I was watching her hurt you and I couldn’t stop her. I’m so sorry.” Her voice dissolves into sobs.

Regina holds Ruby tightly, rubbing her back and making soothing noises. She glances up to see a very out of breath David appear from the same direction Ruby had come, followed closely by an even more out of breath Granny. So much for watching over her, she thinks.

“I’m fine,” she tells Ruby. “You didn’t hurt me.”

“I did,” Ruby protests, pulling back and lifting Regina’s injured arm into her hand. Seeing the lacerated skin causes a fresh wave of tears.

“It’s a scratch,” Regina tells her, waving a hand over the injury, healing it. She lifts her other hand to Ruby’s face, urging her to look up. She waits until their eyes meet. “It wasn’t you,” she tells her, knowing that control over her wolf is a concern for Ruby. She’s never seen her this distraught and can’t help but pull her close again. Ruby clings to her, hands fisting in her dress. She scowls over Ruby’s shoulder at the assembled crowd.

“I don’t think we require an audience, thank you,” she snaps, before biting her lip. They really are only trying to help. “Thank you all...for your help. But you can go about your business.”

Thankfully, Mary Margaret starts to herd them back inside, casting a last look at Regina and giving her a nod. Once they’re gone, she slides her fingers into Ruby’s hair, cupping the back of her head
and turning her face so that her nose is pressed to Ruby’s cheek.

“It wasn’t you,” she repeats.

“When I woke up and you we-weren’t there, and Granny and Da-David were looking at me weird,” Ruby says, hiccuping. She lifts her head and takes Regina’s face in her hands, examining her before closing her eyes and leaning their foreheads together. “Regina, I thought I’d killed you.”

“Not even close,” Regina assures her. “Fearsome as you may be, you’re no match for my magic. You don’t have to worry.”

“But I do,” Ruby says, huge green eyes opening to find Regina’s. “Regina, I ate my first boyfriend. How do you expect me not to worry about hurting you?”

“You did that back when you had no idea you were even a wolf,” Regina tells her. “When you had no-one to help you control your transformations. How could you possibly have prevented what happened?”

“I could have not chained him up?” Ruby suggests. “I could not have jumped to the conclusion that he was the killing machine terrorising the village.”

“But you did,” Regina says, harshly. “And you killed him. And you can’t change that. Just as I can’t change the things I’ve done.” She grasps Ruby’s elbows, pulling her in. “We can’t change the past, Ruby. We can only learn from it. And I’ve learned that you are a brave, wonderful person who wouldn’t hurt anyone given the choice. And you’re not going to hurt me now.”

“Well, what if I hurt someone else?” Ruby asks, her lip trembling. “You can maybe fend me off, but what if she makes me hurt Granny? Or David. Or, oh God, Mary Margaret’s pregnant! What if she makes me hurt her?”

“She won’t have the chance,” Regina assures her. “We’ll get your heart back and no-one will be able to control you.”

Ruby sighs, her eyes falling to Regina’s wounded arm. She runs her fingertips over the healed skin. “You’re sure you’re okay?”
“As you can see, I’m perfectly fine,” Regina says. She flicks a thumb over her shoulder at the pile of smouldering straw that used to be the training dummies. “I can’t say the same for them.”

Ruby makes a noise. “Yeah, that’s great,” she says, leaning her head on Regina’s shoulder and wrapping her arms around her waist. “But I’m guessing they didn’t put up much of a fight.”

“They didn’t,” Regina concedes, thinking that had anyone else said such a thing to her, she’d be livid. “But I don’t think my companions would be very pleased if I’d suggested using the Merry Men and the Dwarves for target practise.” It doesn’t even earn her a chuckle. Ruby’s arms tighten around her.

“Zelena’s not gonna go down without a fight,” Ruby mumbles, her eyes on the green dummy in the black conical hat. “Should you be using up your energy like this?”

“This?” Regina asks, frowning as she makes another fireball appear in her hand, purple fire dancing before their eyes. “I could do this all day and not even be winded.” She throws it at the Zelena effigy, which explodes, throwing the hat high into the air. “I’m a powerful sorceress in my own right, Ruby. I’m not going to faint from performing a card trick.”

“It’s just… you were pretty wiped that last time,” Ruby explains. “And we agreed on not using unnecessary magic. I don’t want to see you in that state again.” Her arms tighten even more around Regina’s middle, and the woman winces slightly, but understands Ruby’s concern.

“I’m not a delicate flower, Ruby,” Regina tells her softly. “I was only in that state because I was using protective magic.” Regina’s cheeks flush slightly and she looks down, avoiding Ruby’s gaze. “A kind of magic I’m not used to using, since it requires the spellcaster to act out of-” She catches herself and clears her throat. “-selflessness.”

Regina doesn’t miss the flicker of disappointment that passes on the younger woman’s face. Love isn’t something that comes naturally to Regina. For a long, long time she closed her heart off and didn’t let people in. It was far easier to do that than allow herself to be hurt again. Then Henry came along and her heart melted a little more each day. What she felt for that child was beyond anything she’d ever experienced and continues to be so to this day. While relationships other than Henry have never been a priority for her, it seems she’s allowed herself to fall in love again. It doesn’t frighten her as much as she thought it might. The love she feels for Ruby has grown gradually and naturally from a place of friendship first, which she’s never really had before.
Admitting to herself that she loves Ruby is one thing, but saying it out loud, with the possibility that the younger woman doesn’t feel the same way, that’s quite another. But something tells her that Ruby does feel the same. Which is, perhaps, even more frightening. Whatever the case, she wants Ruby’s heart back in her chest before any discussion of feelings can take place. When she tells Ruby she loves her, she wants her to feel it. And if she says it back, she wants her to mean it.

“Why’re you down here?” The softly spoken question pierces through Regina’s internal panic, and she blinks. “Didn’t you think of how scared I might’ve been when I woke to find you gone?”

Regina closes her eyes. She hadn’t thought of that. “No,” she tells her. “Honestly, after I… Well after I did what needed to be done, my first thought was to tell the others what had happened.”

“The last thing I remember is pouncing at you,” Ruby closes her eyes and Regina feels the shudder that runs through her at the memory. “When I woke up, that’s what was in my head and… and you weren’t there and I-”

“I’m sorry,” Regina says, finding those words falling from her lips easily. “I should have stayed with you.”

“I thought you were dead,” Ruby says, plainly. “Then they said you weren’t. And then I thought you were afraid to be around me.”

“Ruby, no…” Regina says, cupping Ruby’s face and shaking her head. “Never.”

For a few moments, Ruby says nothing, just searches Regina’s eyes. A tear runs down her cheek. “This is what scares me most, Regina,” she whispers. “Getting close to you and frightening you off. Or hurting you. Or worse.” She turns away, putting her back to Regina. “And I nearly did.”

“Under someone else’s control,” Regina tells her firmly, stepping up behind her.

“I couldn’t fight her off. I’m supposed to have control. I’m supposed to be able to turn it on and off and… and she won.”

When Regina gently turns Ruby around, she sees tears making their way down her cheeks, and suddenly it makes sense. “This is the first time you haven’t had control in a long time.”
“I hated it,” Ruby sobs, and Regina’s throat hurts from the lump that forms there. “I-I haven’t..fe-felt like a monster in a long ti-time. It all came ru-rushing back.” She closes her eyes. “I hate it.”

“You are not a monster.” Regina tells her vehemently. “You are the furthest thing from a monster I’ve ever met.” She shakes her head, lifting her hands to frame Ruby’s face. “If you were a monster, you wouldn’t hate it. You would enjoy being one.” Seeing Ruby so destroyed by behaviour that wasn’t even her own has Regina even more resolute than previously. She has to get her heart back as soon as possible so that she’s never put in that position again.

Ruby looks up into Regina’s eyes. “I wish we were home,” she whispers. “I wish we were in Storybrooke. Far away from Wicked Witches and draughty castles.” She smiles through her tears. “And you could be with Henry.”

Ignoring the comment about Henry, because she really will break down if she thinks about him now, she smiles. “You think of Storybrooke as home?” she asks.

“Yeah,” Ruby says, nodding. “Yeah, I do. Don’t you?”

“I do,” Regina says, without hesitation. “It’s my son’s home. So it’s mine too. I just hadn’t considered that other people might feel that way.”

“I was happy there,” Ruby says with a shrug. “I’d like an opportunity to be happy there again. With you.”

“You will,” Regina vows. “We will.” She’s not entirely sure that will happen, but God does she want it to. She promises herself that she will ensure Ruby makes it back to Storybrooke, no matter what. Regina brings her arms around to comfort the younger woman, unsure of what more she can say. Ruby leans her chin on Regina’s shoulder, holding her close, and Regina is sure to keep her breathing steady and even. They stay like that for a while, enjoying the closeness without needing to say anything.

“Are you done here?” Ruby asks, eventually.

Regina nods, letting go of some of the tension in her body and allowing herself to be comforted, her head falling to rest against Ruby’s. “Here? Yes. But not with the night.”
Ruby moves back and frowns. “What do you mean?”

“It means I have unfinished business with my sister,” Regina tells her, eyes flashing violet briefly. She notices Ruby’s grip tighten on her clothing as she speaks and braces herself for the objection.

“We all have unfinished business with your sister,” Ruby begins, carefully. “I’m at the front of the line for wanting to deal with your sister. What does that have to do with tonight?”

“I’m not letting you go without your heart a second longer than you need to,” Regina says. “I’m getting it back tonight.”

Ruby steps away from her, frowning. “How?” she challenges. “You said it yourself; we’re not ready. We don’t know how to defeat her. How the hell do you think you’re gonna get my heart back?”

“I have something she wants, she has something I want,” Regina says, trying to remain neutral. “A simple trade is in order.”

“What?” Ruby barks. “You’re gonna give her your heart?”

“That’s the plan,” Regina says.

“Well it’s the dumbest plan I’ve ever heard,” Ruby tells her.

Regina’s mouth falls open at the impertinence. “I...realise it’s not ideal,” she begins, only for Ruby to throw her hands up.

“Not ideal?” she mocks. “No, it’s just plain stupid.”

“Stop calling me stupid,” Regina growls. “Believe me, if I thought we had an alternative, I would choose that.”
Ruby’s shaking her head vehemently. “No. You’re not doing this. She will kill you.”

“Better me than you,” Regina tells her. “And I’m sure everyone would agree with me on that point.”

“We talked about this already,” Ruby says, turning huge pleading eyes on Regina. It’s almost enough to make her resolve waver. Almost. “You promised me no suicide missions. There’s got to be another way. We will find another way.”

“When you find one, let me know,” Regina says, crossing her arms and looking away. “Until then, we go with my plan.”

Ruby appears back in her field of vision, gripping her arms. “I’m not letting you go to your death. I won’t lose you. There has to be...” Ruby shakes her head, looking frantic now. “We’ll go to the others. Find some other way.”

“There’s no time,” Regina says, more gently than before. “Every minute she has your heart is a risk.”

“Then we take that risk,” Ruby decides, not budging. “I may not have my heart in my chest, Regina, but I know that I...” Part of Regina wants her to say it. To get it out in the open. “I know how devastated I will be if anything happens to you. I know it.”

Regina moves closer to the other woman, cupping her cheek and searching her eyes. “So you understand the position I’m in right now,” she says, needing Ruby to understand. “Only, if she kills me, it’ll be because I’m her sister and she perceives that I’ve done her some terrible wrong. If she kills you, it’ll be because of me...and I cannot let that happen.”

“We’ll find another way,” Ruby whispers fiercely.

Regina smiles, sadly, stroking her thumb back and forth under Ruby’s eye. “I’d love it if we could...because I don’t want to leave you,” she whispers, her voice choked with emotion. “And I don’t want to leave Henry. But I’d rather die than let you or anyone else get hurt.”

Ruby closes her eyes, leaning her face into Regina’s hand, and sighing. “Who’s to say she won’t crush both our hearts the second she has them?”
“There are far more inventive ways of killing someone than removing their heart,” Regina says, trying to memorise every feature of Ruby’s face. “She has a plan for mine, one that must be worth more to her than your heart is...I’ll have to use that reasoning.” She uses her hand to pull Ruby into a kiss. “Don’t forget me.” And with a final kiss, she casts a spell to send Ruby to sleep. The younger woman starts to fall before Regina catches her, her body heavy and boneless. She looks down at her through eyes blurred with tears and waves a hand, sending Ruby off to their shared quarters, to sleep on their bed while Regina does what needs to be done. “Sleep well, my darling.” And in a puff of smoke, she’s gone.

Approaching her sister’s stronghold, Regina tries to project more confidence than she feels. She knows Zelena is more powerful than she is, so she has to rely on being able to push the right buttons to throw her off, rather than relying simply on her magic to get her through. Thirty years in Storybrooke without any powers did result in her using words to fight more than once, so that’s something in her favour.

She takes a deep breath as she looks at the imposing fortress. Then, just for show, she blasts the door open and saunters through the smoking wreckage. The flying monkeys, which have thus far kept their distance, start to shriek and flap their wings. A wave of her hand and they slam into walls and pillars, crumpling to the floor, neutralised for the moment.

“Is this how you greet your only sister?” Regina calls out to the empty, cavernous hallway. “I didn’t expect a parade, but you could at least offer me a cup of tea.”

From out of nowhere a cup of tea appears on a table by Regina, and confetti flutters from above her.

Letting out a small laugh, Regina catches some of the strands of paper and crushes them into a ball in her hand. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t drink it,” she says, nodding to the cup. “I prefer to take my poisoned beverages in the morning. Good for the digestion.” Her smile fades. “We both know why I’m here. Come out and face me.”

She steps out from the shadows, with Ruby’s heart in her hands, turning it over and looking at it as though it was the strangest thing. “It’s so… red,” she comments. “And bright. So fragile.” Zelena squeezes it a little too hard, grinning at Regina. “Can I show you?”

Regina’s bravado falters as she watches Zelena’s fingers tighten around the organ. She takes a
couple of steps forward, holding out a hand. “Just...just...” She stops, holding both hands up, in surrender. “Just be careful with it.”

Zelena’s grin grows wider. “Look at you,” she spits. “So feeble.” She shakes her head. “You could have had it all, Regina. You did have it all! What a waste.” Her green fingers tighten around the organ again, and release. And tighten. And release. She throws the heart up into the air. Regina gasps as the heart rises up, holding her breath until it’s back in Zelena’s hand. She grits her teeth.

“I never wanted ‘it all’,” she says, quietly. “And whatever it is you think I had, you’re wrong.” She points to Ruby’s heart. “That right there? That’s all I ever wanted...and I went so long without it...” Her treacherous lower lip trembles and she swallows down her emotions; a skill she has almost perfected. “So, whatever it is you have planned, let me tell you that ‘having it all’ isn’t what it’s cracked up to be.”

Zelena shakes her head. “Pitiful.” She grins, taking a step towards Regina. “But listen, it’s not too late to join me. Think of what we could do together. Oh, the possibilities would be endless!”

Regina lifts her chin. “We could join our forces. It’s not too late. If you just give me Ruby’s heart and surren- ”

Zelena throws her head back and cackles. “Oh, Regina. You’re a waste of ability. Poor little rich girl just couldn’t seem to handle it. I could have. I could have been great; far greater than you. This only proves it. You’re weak!” She squeezes Ruby’s heart until it looks set to burst.

“Stop!” Regina cries, moving towards her sister, hands outstretched as if to snatch Ruby’s heart away. Off Zelena’s raised eyebrow, she halts and holds her hands up. “Just...stop. Please.”

“You’re pathetic,” Zelena says, moving so that she’s speaking directly into Regina’s ear, her voice dripping with disgust. She holds the heart up in front of Regina’s face. “This? Is weakness. Love is weakness.” She lifts a hand and Regina is blown off her feet, landing in a heap a little distance away. Zelena shakes her head. “Look what it’s done to you.” She closes her hand around the heart and hurtles it towards the wall behind Regina. Before the Queen can scramble to get it into her hands, Zelena summons it back into her own.

Regina pushes to her feet and marches up to her sister, puffing her chest out. “So take my heart. Take my weakness,” she spits. “Make me strong...like you...like our mother.” The scorn is clear in her tone and she realises it’s a risk, but she’s not thinking straight. She just needs Ruby’s heart safe; she needs Zelena’s attention on her.
Zelena shakes her head and scrunches her face. “Too easy.” She looks at the heart in her hands. “Besides… I’m pretty sure I have your heart right here.” She closes her fist tight around the organ; squeezing, squeezing… until there is nothing left, and dust is falling from her hand. “Oops,” she giggles.

It’s as if she’s watching the scene from outside her body, unable to move or breathe or speak as what remains of Ruby’s heart falls to the floor. After a moment, her brain kicks back in and she launches herself at her sister, blasting her with everything she has; magic fuelled by emotion is always that much stronger. “No!” she screams, blasting her again until Zelena’s knocked off her feet. Regina falls to her knees, her hands clawing at the stone floor, trying to gather up the dust.

Giggling maniacally, Zelena levitates back to her feet, flying towards the other woman with her toes dragging across the floor. She gets down to her knees and gathers a bunch of Regina’s hair in her hand, pulling roughly and bringing her head back up to meet her own. “Poor, poor Ruby,” she coos. She tsks. “Would you like to join her?” she asks, tracing a fingertip over Regina’s chest. Without waiting for a response, Zelena’s hand plunges into Regina’s chest, her fingers gripping her heart.

With tears dripping from her chin, Regina forces herself to meet her sister’s eyes. “At least I have someone to join,” she pants, blocking out the pain as much as she can. “You’ll die as you’ve lived; alone.” She grits her teeth. “Do it.”
Chapter 19 - Ruby

Chapter Notes

This chapter takes place at the same time as the previous chapter.

Ruby slowly becomes aware of a dull ache in her head as consciousness sets in. She turns to her side to reach out for Regina, realising, a second too late, that she won’t be there. Everything comes flooding back, and she sits bolt upright on the bed. She had to have been put under a spell. Looking out the window and seeing the position of the moon, Ruby knows she’s been out for a while, but is unsure exactly how much time she has left. She needs to let everyone know of what’s happened, and they need to formulate a plan before Regina is killed.

She moves down the hall as fast as her legs will carry her, down the stairs and into the dining hall, where only few people are sitting. She locates Mary Margaret and David, sitting with Granny at one of the tables. “We’re in trouble,” she says as she approaches them.

Mary Margaret’s hands immediately move to her growing bump, cradling it as she looks from David to Ruby. David, on instinct, steps in front of his wife, his forehead wrinkled in confusion. “What do you mean? You were just outside with Regina.”

Mary Margaret looks around Ruby. “Where is she?”

“She’s gone to get my heart back.” She swallows past the lump in her throat and tries to blink back her tears. “She’s going to trade her heart for mine.”

“Alone?” Granny asks. “Well, that’s just stupid. She must know she can’t defeat her alone.”

Mary Margaret’s fingers are gripping David’s arm. “W-why didn’t she wait for us?” Mary Margaret asks, a tremble in her voice. “She’s going to get herself killed.” Realising what she’s saying, she moves away from David and towards Ruby. “Oh, Ruby...are you okay?”

“I can’t focus on me right now, Mary Margaret,” Ruby tells her. Because if she does focus on how she’s feeling, she’s going to break, and she can’t afford to break down right now. She needs to find a way to get to Regina and help her, or save her, or both.
Mary Margaret wraps her arms around her friend and looks to David. “We have to go after her.”

“You’re going nowhere,” David tells her, indicating her swollen belly. “You’re staying here and staying safe.”

Mary Margaret frowns. “I’d be an excellent diversion,” she argues.

“No, you’d be an excellent catch,” Granny tells her.

“I agree,” Ruby says. “You need to stay here.” Her eyes move to her Grandmother. She won’t be able to concentrate if Granny comes along on the rescue mission. “Granny will protect you.”

“The two of you and Regina against Zelena is not good odds,” Mary Margaret complains. “You need everyone.”

“We’ll take the dwarves and the fairies,” David assures her. “We can probably use that plan we were working on last week and then discarded as too risky.”

Mary Margaret bites her lip, and Ruby can guess what she’s thinking. That it’s still too risky. But Regina is with the Witch right now, alone, so they have to take the risk. For the first time since she lost her heart, she’s glad she doesn’t have it. She’s convinced it’s the only thing stopping her from completely breaking down right now.

David must also notice Mary Margaret’s conflict because he smiles at her and pulls her close, placing a kiss on her lips. When they part, Mary Margaret nods, trying to smile. Ruby reaches out and squeezes her arm and finds herself pulled into a hug. Ruby hugs her as tightly as she dares.

“You’ll get her back,” Mary Margaret whispers. “I know it.” Ruby closes her eyes and nods, unable to form words. She swallows and squeezes Mary Margaret a final time before drawing back and looking to David.

“Okay then. David, assemble the dwarves,” she instructs. “I’ll speak to the fairies and we’ll set off.” She stops, a thought occurring to her. “And I’ll get Robin.”
“You think we should bring the Merry Men with us?” David asks. “I was going to leave them to protect the castle.” His eyes stray to Mary Margaret when he says ‘the castle’.

Catching David’s drift, she nods her head. “Maybe just Robin, then. The Merry Men can stay behind and keep watch?” Either way, they need to decide now. They’re running out of time - Regina could already be dead.

“He’s very brave,” Mary Margaret agrees. “He’d be good to have with you.”

“Fine,” David says. “If he’s willing, we’ll take him.”

“He will be,” Ruby says, with a firm nod. “Let’s go.” Granny catches her arm before she can move away and she turns to look into the stormy blue eyes she’s so familiar with.

“Take care, girl,” Granny says, softly. “Bring her back safely.” Ruby nods, her throat tightening. After a second’s thought, she tugs Granny close and hugs her tightly.

“Thank you, Granny,” she whispers. “I know you’ve had trouble with me and Reg-”

“She’s gone to exchange her heart for yours, Ruby,” Granny says, pulling back and looking at Ruby. “I think she’s proved herself. Go get her.”

Offering Granny a final nod and a watery smile, she turns her attention to David. “Get the dwarves,” she tells him again, already heading out of the room. “I’ll meet you by the stables.”

“Good luck,” Mary Margaret calls after her. She gives her the brightest smile she can muster.

“We’ll be back soon,” she promises.

She turns and breaks into a run, tears blurring her vision.
“So that’s the plan,” Ruby finishes explaining the situation to the fairies. She notices worried
glances being exchanged by a few of them but she focuses on Blue. She knows they’ll do
whatever Blue says. The former mother superior gives a single nod.

“We’ll do as you ask,” she tells Ruby. “But, even combined, our magic won’t contain her for long.
We’ll be relying heavily on the element of surprise. Our timing has to be precise for us to block
her powers for even a few minutes.”

“I know,” Ruby says. “We have a limited window of opportunity and we’ll make the most of it.”

“Yes,” Blue agrees. “This is not an insignificant risk you’re asking us to take, Red Riding Hood.”
Her tone of voice makes Ruby’s skin crawl and she’s not sure why.

“I know it’s not,” Ruby says. “But Regina has risked everything, more than once, to save all of us.
She deserves at least the same treatment.”

“Very well,” Blue says. “We shall transport everyone to the fortress by magic, otherwise more
time will be lost.”

She hadn’t even thought of that. With Regina gone, she’s not thinking straight. “Thank you,”
Ruby says, quietly. “We’ll meet David and the others by the stables shortly.” She sweeps her gaze
over the rest of the fairies. “Thank you, all of you, for doing this.”

A nervous chattering is the response and Ruby leaves them to it, turning and jogging out of the
castle to the stables. She’s the first to get there and the animals have all been put away for the
night. After a moment’s consideration, she pushes through the door and enters. The moon has
heightened her already superior eyesight so she has no trouble seeing in the dark building. A few
of the animals startle; her wolf must be close to the surface. She ignores them and heads straight to
Regina’s horse. He’s familiar enough with her that he doesn’t have the same wariness that the
others do and he walks forward in his stall, straining towards her.

“Hey Midnight,” she says, softly, running her hand up his muzzle and back down. “How you
doing?”

He snorts an answer and she smiles. She leans in, resting her forehead against his. The animal
seems to sense her need for comfort and stays still.
“You’re probably wondering where she is, huh?” she asks. “Well, she’s an idiot and she’s gone off on a suicide mission to save me. Isn’t that crazy?” Midnight whinnies gently by her ear. “Yeah, I know boy.” She sighs and stands up straight, looking into his eyes. “I’ll bring her back safely. I know you’d miss her if she weren’t around.” She smiles a little. “I’m okay, but I can’t conjure up apples for you, right?” Tears spring to her eyes as she thinks of Regina on horseback, smiling and free. She wipes at her face, angrily. Tears won’t do anyone any good right now. Looking up at Midnight, she nods. “I love her.” It feels good to say it out loud, even if it’s to a horse. “I know you do too. So I’m gonna get her and bring her back to us, okay?”

A noise behind her makes her spin around, snarling, eyes flashing yellow. Robin Hood immediately lifts his arms in surrender.

“I-I apologise, Ruby,” he stammers. “I didn’t mean to intrude on the moment. I-I just heard a voice and knew we were to meet here. I assumed we were saddling the horses.”

She’s more annoyed at herself for not hearing his approach than she is at him. She shakes her head. “It’s fine,” she says, gruffly. “I was here first, so I…” So I came to confess my love to Regina’s horse?

“No need to explain,” Robin tells her, placing a hand on her shoulder. “I can imagine how you must be feeling. Any solace at a time like this is welcome.”

She nods her thanks, knowing he must be thinking of his wife. She covers his hand with her own and squeezes. “M-maybe you shouldn’t come with us. You have Roland to think of. It’s not fair of us to ask you to-”

“I won’t hear of it!” Robin tells her. “You and Regina have both risked your lives for Roland, for all of us. I couldn’t sit idly by while either of you are in danger and do nothing to help.” He smiles. “I’ll be right by your side.”

She blinks rapidly, and nods, trying to return his smile. He pulls her into his arms and holds her close, letting her cry. She shakes her head. “I can’t even cry properly,” she whines. “I know I should be feeling something...feeling more, but I can’t.”

“Because the Witch has your heart?” Robin asks, gently. “Don’t worry. We’ll have it back where it belongs in no time.”
She pulls away from him, nodding and swiping at her face with her sleeve. “I’ll be out in a minute,” she tells him. “The others will be here shortly. We don’t need horses. The fairies are gonna take us.”

He nods, recognising that he’s being dismissed. For a second, she thinks he’s going to say something further, but he thinks better of it and withdraws, leaving her alone with the horses again. She turns back to Midnight when he nuzzles the side of her head. She strokes down his long neck. “Okay, I gotta go,” she whispers, her eyes growing wet again. “But we’ll come by and see you tomorrow. I promise.” He lifts his large head and brings it down again, and Ruby decides to believe he’s nodding at her. Impulsively, she presses a kiss to his warm cheek before turning to leave, her throat too thick to say anything more.

She finds Robin and the fairies waiting in the stableyard. Fairies are flitting around like fireflies, illuminating the night. No-one tries to speak to her, for which she’s grateful. “Where the hell is David?” she mutters, as she begins to pace, like a caged tiger. She tries not to focus on much time they’re wasting by waiting around, which means that’s all she can think about.

She feels a hand on her shoulder and she stops. It’s Robin, with his big eyes and sympathetic face. She moves out of his grasp. “If you tell me not to worry again, I’ll hurt you. And we need you. Regina needs you. So don’t make me hurt you.”

“I was merely going to alert you to Prince David and the dwarves’ approach,” he says, nodding over Ruby’s right shoulder.

Turning, she’s heartened to see all of the dwarves accompanying David. Even Leroy, although he doesn’t look too pleased about it. But he’s there, and that’s what counts. A few long strides take her to David’s side.

“Blue’s gonna take us all to Zelena’s fortress,” she tells him. “So we didn’t saddle any horses.”

“Good,” David says, nodding to Blue. “Then we shouldn’t waste any more time. Everyone’s been appraised of the plan?”

“Yep,” Ruby confirms. “We know what we need to do.”

“I hope you appreciate this, sister,” Leroy pipes up. “I was in my pyjamas.”

“Gather closer, everyone,” Blue commands. “I don’t want to leave any stragglers behind.”

They all move towards Blue. Robin takes Ruby’s hand and squeezes it, holding on as Blue waves her wand, shrouding them all in a shimmering blue light.

They reappear in some woods close to Zelena’s palace. Some of the dwarves stumble at the suddenness of their arrival. Even Ruby is a little off balance; it feels different to when she lets Regina poof them places. Light magic, she assumes.

“Okay,” David says, keeping his voice low. “We go in fast and hard. Robin and the dwarves will deal with any monkey guards while the fairies do their thing. Ruby and I will locate Regina.”

He turns to Ruby. “Are you going to transform before we go in?”

Bile rises in her throat as she remembers pouncing at Regina, struggling to tear back control. She shakes her head. “No. I’m not.”

He accepts this answer without argument, drawing his sword. “Right. It’s time. We move now.”

Like a well rehearsed dance, the dwarves and Robin move to the front of the group, readying their weapons. The fairies hover just behind them, lighting the way. David and Ruby bring up the rear, David has his sword at the ready and Ruby’s bow is loaded. Glancing up at the sky, Ruby can feel the moon call to her, but she resists its pull and shifts her focus to the front as they approach the palace. The doors are nothing more than a smouldering pile of wood.

“She always did like to make an entrance,” David says, and Ruby can hear the smile in his voice.

“Yeah,” she agrees.
A terrible shrieking starts up, indicating that they’ve been spotted by Zelena’s little monkeys. As quickly as they launch themselves, Robin picks the first two off with well placed arrows. The next two fall victim to Leroy’s pickaxe and, by the sound of the shrieks, there are more coming. From the corner of her eye, Ruby notices a flash of movement heading towards Robin’s back and she whips her bow up, noting the monkey’s speed and trajectory before releasing her arrow. Robin spins around in time to see his assailant impaled and he flashes a grateful grin at Ruby.

“You *can* make a shot when it’s needed,” he calls out and she manages a half-hearted glare.

“Move! Now!” David yells and the whole party takes off at a run, bursting through the following set of doors. Sure enough, there are more monkeys attacking them. But Ruby barely registers them because of the sight before her.

Regina is on her knees, the scent of her tears is so strong it almost makes Ruby’s stomach heave. And Zelena’s hand is inside Regina’s chest. Any thoughts Ruby had about not transforming are gone as pure rage takes over her body. She launches herself in the direction of the two sisters, her body changing as she moves. The roar that she lets out seems to make the building shake and she knocks Zelena away from Regina, landing on her chest. She watches as, perhaps for the first time, Zelena’s face shows fear.

“N-now now, pup,” Zelena manages, pinned under Ruby’s bulk. “Do you n-need another behaviour lesson?”

Ruby rears back to strike, when she feels something move through her, something magical. The shock is enough to make her transform back into a human and she finally realises that the fairies have done their job and restrained Zelena under some kind of magical net. The green woman is struggling, but it seems to be holding fast.

“Ruby…” It’s so softly spoken, but Ruby catches it easily. The scuffle with Zelena happened so fast that Ruby has failed to see if Regina was even okay. Her stomach lurches as she turns around to see Regina; face ashen and eyes wide and wet. Streaks of tears stain her face and she’s looking at Ruby as if she were a ghost. Regina stumbles forward and Ruby is quick to cross to her to keep her upright. Regina stiffens at the touch as her face goes through a series of emotions before finally seeming to settle on a mix of relief and confusion. “Ruby!” She flings her arms around the younger woman and Ruby can’t hold back her tears anymore, enveloping Regina in a tight embrace.

After a long moment of just holding each other, Ruby withdraws, though stays close. “Did she hurt you?” She asks calmly.
“Sh-she crushed your heart,” Regina says, still dazed from the whole encounter. “Right in front of me...she turned it into dust...h-how...”

“It was a horse’s heart, you idiot!” Zelena spits from her temporary prison, fighting with the magical bonds. “You think I would’ve missed the chance to throw your lifeless body at the feet of your brave wolf?”

The reality of the situation seems to catch up with Regina and she gathers herself, pushing away from Ruby and stalking towards her sister, towering over the prone woman. She kneels down by Zelena’s head. And punches her face as hard as she can.

Zelena yelps in pain, and cackles. “Is that the best you’ve got?” She sneers. Then she looks at those around her. “You think this little parlour trick is going to hold me for long?”

“No,” Regina confesses. “But I think you’re gonna have to come up with another plan.” She taps her own chest with a finger, leaning closer to whisper. “Because it doesn’t look like this is going anywhere any time soon.”

She giggles again. “You think that was my only plan?” She taunts. “There’s always plan B.” She disappears from her confines in a puff of green smoke. “See you soon, my pretties,” her voice echoes.

Ruby comes to stand by Regina, watching as the magical net shimmers and disappears as it is no longer required. She turns to address David, still amazed by how easily the dwarves and Robin, as well as the fairies came to Regina’s aid. Even Leroy. Robin and David approach them, both looking concerned.

“Your Majesty,” Robin begins. “You look...tired. You should sit down.”

Regina waves off his concern, shaking her head. “I’m fine,” she says. “Just a little shaken.”

“I can understand why,” David says, placing his hand on Regina’s lower back, tentatively, in a gesture of support.

“You’re sure you’re okay?” Ruby asks Regina quietly. She places her hand on Regina’s chest, relieved that her heart is beating under it, albeit rapidly.
Regina looks up at her with a smile brighter than any other she’s seen. “I am now.”

Ruby lets out a sigh of relief, her hand sliding to the back of Regina’s head as she pulls her into a kiss. The clearing of a throat forces them to part and Ruby frowns up at the fairy hovering by their heads.

“We should leave, quickly,” Blue says, looking around the cavernous room. “She could be anywhere.”

“You’re right,” Ruby says, her arm still around Regina’s shoulders. A hand lands on her chest and she looks down to find Regina shaking her head.

“We need to find your heart,” she protests. “We’re not leaving this place without it.”

Part of Ruby wants to tell Regina that it doesn’t matter. That even without her heart, she loves her beyond anything she ever imagined. But she doesn’t want Regina’s sacrifice here today to have been for nothing. “Okay,” she concedes, with a small smile. She turns to Blue.

“You get everyone out of here,” she instructs. “I’ll sniff my heart out and joi-”

“And I’m not leaving this place without you,” Regina interrupts, glaring at Ruby.

“Okay,” Ruby says easily. “Blue, get everyone back to the castle and Regina will bring us both home once I’ve located my heart.”

She hears an intake of breath from behind her and turns around, a finger held up in warning before Robin can even make whatever offer he was about to. “And yes, I’m sure.” Her eyes soften when his mouth snaps shut. “But thank you,” she adds.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” David says, touching Regina’s arm.

“Thank you,” Regina says, her face flushing slightly at this genuine display of concern.
“Stand aside,” Blue says, ushering Regina and Ruby out of the way before working her magic once more and poofing the rest of the group to safety.

“We need to move fast,” Regina tells her. “The fairy was right; she could be lurking.”

Ruby nods, taking Regina’s hand and squeezing softly. “I can sniff it out, and we’ll be out of here quicksmart. I don’t think she’ll be back too soon.”

“I’m not willing to bet on that.” Regina looks around the palace and Ruby can still sense her uneasiness. She doesn’t want Regina to have to stay here any longer than necessary to relive what she went through, so Ruby smells the air to gain her heart’s scent. “Anything?”

Eyes still closed and allowing the scent to guide her, Ruby nods her head and tugs on Regina’s hand. “This way.”

They make their way through winding corridors and up narrow staircases until they come to a door. It looks innocent enough, but Ruby knows from the various scents that there’s more than just her heart inside.

“It’s in there,” she says, about to open the door. Regina beats her to it, blasting the door from its hinges and marching in. She really doesn’t want to waste time, it appears. Ruby follows close behind and stops short when confronted by a cabinet full of drawers. There must be dozens of hearts in here, if not hundreds.

“Jesus,” Ruby murmurs. “How the hell are we going to find it?” Her nose is sensitive, but the conflicting scents are clouding her senses and she’s finding it difficult to focus. Regina doesn’t answer. She takes Ruby’s hand once more, and lifts her other one, holding it up in front of the drawers. Something happens inside Ruby’s body. The only way she can make sense of it is to assume that part of her is moving into Regina. Briefly, she starts to panic, feeling that loss of control come over her. But almost immediately the panic is replaced by a sensation of comfort and safety. Regina’s hand starts to glow and one of the drawers pops out. Regina smiles, letting go of Ruby’s hand. The sensation leaves her and she misses it.

She watches as Regina gently scoops up her heart into her hand and turns back to face her. It’s red, bright, still beating. Regina cradles it against her own chest and they both watch in fascination as the rhythmic beat changes. It gets faster. Regina looks at her in wonder.
“It’s beating in time with mine,” she whispers.

The laugh that escapes Ruby surprises them both, but the relief of having both Regina and her heart back prevents her from holding it in. She shakes her head, sobering, and takes a step closer to the Queen.

“It belongs to you,” she says, seriously. “Regina I—” Before she can finish, Regina plunges her hand into her chest, putting her heart where it should be. Everything falls into place. Her body feels alive again, the world feels like it’s back in colour, and her feelings for Regina explode in a single heartbeat. “I love you,” she breathes, looking into Regina’s eyes.

Tears spill down the other woman’s cheeks, but she’s smiling. “And I love you,” she says, her voice roughened by emotion. “I love you.” She pulls Ruby into a firm kiss and it feels like she’s being consumed by fire. The situation, the moon and her heart is quite a combination and it’s all she can do to stop herself from taking Regina right there in Zelena’s creepy heart closet. She bends her knees, wrapping her arms around Regina’s thighs and lifting her up, keeping their lips fused the whole time. Regina gasps into her mouth as she’s lifted, pulling back to look down at her, stroking her face and smiling.

“Take us home,” Ruby says.

“As you wish.” As the familiar purple smoke engulfs them, their lips meet again.
Chapter 20 - Regina

Up... down... up... down. In... out... in... out.

She’s not sure how long she’s been watching Ruby sleep. Resting on her side, elbow on her pillow and her head propped up in her hand, she watches. God knows she needs sleep too, after the ordeal of the previous day and the long night spent trading kisses and caresses and reassurances. But the memory of Zelena crushing that heart to dust, of thinking that Ruby had died, is too strong and too fresh for her to close her eyes.

She can’t help herself. She places her hand over Ruby’s chest gently, on top of the sheet that’s draped over her naked body. There it is. That steady beating. It calms her own rapidly beating heart until both are beating in unison. The constancy of the rhythm calms Regina and the last of the tension that has been coiled in her gut since Ruby’s heart was taken leaves her body.

Regina finally allows herself to settle and considers giving in to the pull of sleep. Carefully, she lays back down, fitting her body against Ruby’s and laying her head on the younger woman’s chest, ear over her heart. Ruby lets out a little snort and Regina smiles. She presses a kiss to the skin she finds and brings an arm around Ruby’s waist, thinking back over the events of the previous evening.

They reappeared in the great hall, foreheads pressed together and holding onto each other, smiling. They barely had time to separate when a body rammed into them. Regina didn’t need to look to know it was Mary Margaret.

“Oh thank God!” Mary Margaret cried. “You’re safe!” After spending a few moments in their arms, she disentangled herself and moved back to David, encasing him in a hug as well. “You’re all safe.” David put a hand on Mary Margaret’s bump, and kissed her. “So, what happened?” she asked, her eyes flitting from one to the other and back to David. “David filled me in as much as he could about what happened when you all arrived. But not before. Regina are you- did she hurt you?”

“Regina?” Ruby asked, looking at her.

Regina shook her head, and pulled Ruby close again. “She...she was holding a heart. I thought it was yours,” Regina recounted, eyes closed, shaking her head. “She kept squeezing it, playing with
it…” She shuddered. “She crushed it.” Tears started spilling from her eyes.

Ruby tightened her embrace. “I’m here.”

“She had her hand in your chest when we got to you,” David reminded her.

Regina nodded and opened her eyes, taking in Mary Margaret’s horrified expression. “Yes,” she confirmed. “But…” She paused and looked to Ruby, almost seeking permission to continue. She took Ruby’s slight nod as encouragement and, so, continued. “She couldn’t take my heart.”

“Like...she had a fit of conscience?” Mary Margaret asked and Regina had to roll her eyes at how quick she was to think the best of the Wicked Witch.

“No,” Regina said. “It was...stuck.”

That caught Ruby’s attention. “What do you mean ‘stuck’?” she asked.

“Did you cast a spell on it?” David asked.

That earned him a swift smack across his chest by his wife.

“I mean it was stuck,” Regina repeated. “She had it in her hand, she was pulling on it, but it wouldn’t budge. I’ve never seen anything like it before. And nor had she.”

Mary Margaret’s eyes grew wide and round. “I have!” she said, moving out of David’s arms, coming to grasp Regina’s hands. “I saw it once before!”

Regina didn’t bother to hide her scepticism. “Really? You’ve seen it?”

“Yes!” Mary Margaret almost yelled, nodding her head vigorously. “When your mother tried to take Emma’s heart, it did exactly the same thing!”
Regina frowned, looking around the room at everyone. “I’m still failing to see exactly what it did, dear.”

“Regina!” Mary Margaret exclaimed. “Do you know what this means?”

“I’m sure you’re about to tell me,” Regina said.

“Well, Cora was about to take my heart, but Emma pushed me aside and took my place...and your mother told her love was weakness,” Mary Margaret’s eyes shimmered with tears at the memory. “But Emma told her that love was strength. So, don’t you see? Your love for Ruby was stronger than Zelena’s magic...because there’s no greater magic than love.”

Regina struggled to keep up with the rate of her former stepdaughter’s speech. She turned to look at Ruby who seemed as though she was having the same difficulty.

“Wait,” Ruby said, finally breaking the silence. “So does this mean your heart is safe?” She looked at Regina, waiting for a response.

Regina turned to Ruby, slowly, still trying to pick her way through Mary Margaret’s explanation. “I...I...don’t know,” she admitted. “I’ve never heard of this before.”

“Does it only work when someone’s sacrificing themself for someone else? Or is it a constant?” David asked.

Regina scowled. “Didn’t you just hear me say ‘I don’t know’?”

“You guys!” Mary Margaret let out. “This is so great!”

“It’s certainly quite something.” Granny’s voice interrupted the scene and they all turned to find her standing with a small smile on her face. Regina couldn’t help but to return it.

“Thank you everyone, for coming with me tonight,” Ruby began, trying to draw this all to a close, and Regina was grateful.
David picked up on the tone, and gracefully pulled his wife away from the couple. “Of course,” he said. “We’re all in this together, right?” There’s a murmur of half-hearted agreement from the assembled group.

“Yes, thank you,” Regina echoed, her cheeks and neck colouring slightly. “I’m very...grateful to you all.”

“Yeah, well it’s just your luck we happen to like Ruby,” said Leroy. “But, you’re welcome.”

“Well what do you know, Leroy,” Regina said, hiding a smile. “We have something in common.”

Leroy almost choked and Ruby rolled her eyes, causing Regina to chuckle. “I’m sure we’re all exhausted, and with good reason,” Ruby tried again, “so we’re going to turn in, and we can all talk about what all of this means tomorrow.”

Regina leaned further into Ruby’s arms as they watched the crowd dissipate, with David practically having to drag Mary Margaret away. Regina squeezed Ruby gently and looked up at her. “Wanna take the express route to our bedroom?” she asked. Ruby’s smile brightened on the word ‘our’ and she nodded her head. Regina kissed Ruby’s smile as they poofed out.

Regina smiles. Not many words were spoken after that. Ruby shifts underneath her and lets out a soft sigh. Regina lifts her head to examine her face. It’s still early, and she should let her sleep longer. But she really wants to see her eyes. So she leans up and presses her lips against Ruby’s, feeling them turn up into a smile under her own.

“Mmmmorning,” Ruby murmurs, eyes still closed.

“Morning,” Regina says, pulling back and watching Ruby’s eyes flutter open. Ruby cups her cheek, stroking a thumb under her eye.

“You okay?” she croaks, her voice still rough from sleep.
“Yes,” Regina says, turning to kiss Ruby’s wrist. “I am very okay.” As she says it, her voice chokes up and she closes her eyes.

“Hey,” Ruby says, gently turning her face back around. “What’s wrong?”

Regina opens her eyes, tears spilling over her lashes, and looks into Ruby’s concerned ones. “Nothing,” she says, quickly wiping her face and laughing at herself.

“Regina,” Ruby presses, turning onto her side and facing Regina, ducking her head to see her face. “Regina, what is it?”

Taking a shuddering breath to calm herself, Regina reaches out and places a hand on Ruby’s chest. “I thought you’d died.” She rubs her thumb back and forth against smooth skin. “I thought you’d died and I—” Her breath catches. “When she had her hand in my chest...without you, without Henry...I just didn’t see the point any longer...”

She’s gathered into Ruby’s strong embrace, held securely against Ruby’s body. “Shhhhh,” Ruby whispers against her hair. “I’m here. We’re both here. You don’t need to think like that.” Regina nods against Ruby’s neck, taking solace from her warm, steadying presence. A kiss is pressed against the side of her face. “When I saw her hand in your chest...I just- I couldn’t think, I couldn’t breathe. All I could focus on was getting her away from you.”

Turning her head, Regina smiles against Ruby’s cheek. “My hero,” she whispers.

“Shut up,” Ruby says, tickling Regina’s side before rolling her onto her back, looking down at her with a smile. “So… that was a neat little spell you put me under.”

She’d forgotten all about that. She sighs. “Yes, about that,” Regina says. “I know I promised to never use magic on you without your permission and I’m sorry for breaking that promise. But I’m not sorry for trying to protect you.”

Ruby shakes her head and leans down to kiss Regina’s lips. “I get it,” she whispers. “I’m not angry. I’m just happy you weren’t hurt.” She moves to press a kiss to Regina’s chest, over her heart. “When you very easily could’ve been.”

“Not quite as easily as we thought,” Regina says, linking her fingers with Ruby’s and tapping her
chest. Her heart rate quickens as she remembers Snow’s explanation for why her heart wouldn’t budge. “Do...uh...do we need to speak about this?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” Ruby replies easily.

“I don’t know what to say that your little friend hasn’t already said,” Regina says.

Ruby’s smile grows. “Oh. You mean that thing about how your love for me is stronger than Zelena’s magic?”


“You love me,” Ruby says with a shrug. “And I love you. It’s pretty simple.”

“That about covers it,” Regina agrees. “I’m happy to leave it at that if you are.”

“Oh, well, not quite” Ruby says shaking her head. “There’s still the wedding to discuss.”

Regina’s eyes widen. “The wed...what?”

Ruby continues, ignoring her. “I don’t want a big wedding, only our closest friends... well my closest friends.” She waves a hand. “My friends are your friends. I think I want a full moon wedding. I won’t transform, obviously. It’ll be great! And if we’re going to stay in the Enchanted Forest forever, then I really would like a castle of our own. However, if we go back to Storybrooke, which I’d love it if we could, I can just move into the mansion, because let’s face it, why would you want to move in with me and Granny?”

Regina’s frown grows as Ruby speaks, but then she catches the twinkle in her eye and blushes. “You’re joking,” she deduces.

Ruby chuckles softly. “I am,” she confirms, pecking Regina’s lips. “Let’s just focus on defeating your sister first, then we can look to the future, huh?”
“Agreed,” Regina says with a smile.

Before either of them can say anything else, there’s a loud and annoying knock on the chamber door. Ruby frowns at it. “Who the hell is that?” She starts to sit up, but Regina uses her movement to turn them over, leaving Ruby on her back.

“Shh,” Regina coos, stroking some hair away from Ruby’s eyes. “I’ll take care of it.”

A rumble of agreement moves through Ruby’s chest. “Fine,” she allows. “But then come back here and I’ll take care of you.”

“Again?” Regina laughs, pressing a kiss to Ruby’s shoulder before forcing herself up from the bed. “After last night, I’m not sure I have the energy.”

“I’ll be gentle,” Ruby promises, stretching her arms above her head, causing the sheet to fall below her chest.

“Cover yourself up, darling,” Regina says as she picks up a robe from the back of a chair and slips it on. “We don’t want to give whoever this is a heart attack.”

Ruby huffs a little, but does as she’s told, wriggling further down the bed until the covers are up to her chin. “Better?”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that,” Regina says, finally making it to the door. Satisfied that they’re both sufficiently covered up, she opens it. David stands on the other side, and the look on his face makes Regina tense up all over again.

“Regina,” he begins. His eyes fall to take in her attire and his cheeks take on a rosy tinge. “I’m sorry to disturb you both after the day you had yesterday, but I...I think you should come to the stables. Something’s happened and I’m willing to bet your sister had a hand in it.”

Ruby’s by her side before David has finished speaking, the sheet wrapped around her body and a hand at Regina’s back.
“What is it, David? What’s happened?” Ruby asks. He looks at her and Regina watches as something passes between them. Ruby’s arm moves to encircle Regina’s waist, tightening as David’s attention shifts back to her.

“It’s your horse, Regina,” he says, holding her eyes. “He was found dead this morning.”

Her hand flies to cover her mouth, but it doesn’t catch the gasp of shock. Her eyes immediately fill with tears and she turns and walks away a few steps.

“Regina,” Ruby says. “I’m so sorry.” She hears the younger woman approach but she holds up a hand to halt her progress. She knows it’s stupid to be this upset over an animal, and she doesn’t want spectators.

“I’m fine,” she says, her back still turned. “David, I’ll meet you at the stables shortly.”

Some hushed words are exchanged by Ruby and David but Regina is too busy trying to get her emotions under control to listen to what they are. The door closes and footsteps indicate Ruby is coming closer to her again. She wants to say no. She wants to push her away. It’s how she’s always dealt with pain and sorrow; to retreat into herself and close herself off. But when a warm hand touches her shoulder, it’s like it releases something in her chest and she turns and presses her face into Ruby’s neck, sobbing. Strong arms wrap around her, holding her steady, anchoring her to the ground; to the world.

“I’m so sorry,” Ruby whispers again, her breath on Regina’s forehead. “I’m so sorry.”

“It was his heart,” Regina manages to say. “The one she said was yours. It was Midnight’s.”

“She wanted to make sure it would hurt either way,” Ruby says and Regina feels the younger woman’s muscles tighten, as if she’s readying herself for an attack. Regina clings to her, as if afraid that she’ll run away at any second.

“This hurts,” she admits, speaking into Ruby’s neck. “But it’s nothing compared to how I felt when I thought you were dead.” She pulls back enough to look up at Ruby. “So please rid yourself of any notions of seeking vengeance on Zelena for this.”

It’s still wolfstime and Regina sees the struggle in Ruby’s eyes as she wars with her more primal
instincts. Finally she nods. “Okay.” Regina sags against her in relief, drinking in the comfort just being close to Ruby brings. “God, I went to see him last night. I told him I’d bring you back safe and that we’d go see him this morning.”

Regina lets out a breath. She swallows and moves away from Ruby to one of the many mirrors in the room. She presses the puffiness under her eyes and sniffs. “I want to see him.”

She senses Ruby’s hesitation even before she speaks. “A-are you sure? He’s...gone, Regina.”

“I know that.” She stands up straight, waving a hand, dressing herself in an opulent gown, fixing her hair and make-up. She turns to face Ruby. “I want to see him. I feel I owe him that much.”

To her credit, Ruby just nods and starts to get herself ready.

They opt to walk to the stables, rather than ‘poof’ there as Ruby calls it. Regina needs the time to get herself under control. They walk in silence, though Regina can tell Ruby is having trouble keeping quiet. It’s in her nature to want to comfort, to make things better. Regina is thankful that she’s beginning to be able to see when Regina doesn’t want that. When she needs to be hard. It’s a balancing act, of course, and one that they’re both still learning. But for now, she doesn’t want to be coddled or her hand held.

David stands in the courtyard, his hand on the shoulder of the young stableboy. The child is clearly distraught; his dirty face streaked with tears and his shoulders jumping erratically in an effort to contain his sobs. She looks at him as she approaches; he can’t be more than twelve or thirteen. Henry’s age. Her heart clenches as she thinks of her son in some other world, unaware of her existence. In his world, she was never the one to comfort him when upset. She grits her teeth and swallows down the pain just as the young lad looks up.

“You-Your Majesty,” he hiccups. “I’m so-sorry. He was fine when I left him las-last night. I swear it.”

David pats his back in a fatherly gesture. Regina steps closer to the boy, her resolve softening when confronted with his large watery eyes.

“I know he was. You took excellent care of him,” she manages to say through a tight throat. She
smiles, willing her tears not to fall. “None of this was your fault…” She’s ashamed to realise she doesn’t know the child’s name. “What’s your name?”

“Ned, Your Majesty,” the boy sniffs.

“Well, Ned,” she begins. “I think your work here should be rewarded with a promotion. I hereby pronounce you my Royal Groom.”

Ned’s eyes grow wide and round. “Really, M’lady?” he asks, and Regina lets the title slip. “I promise I won’t let you down. I love them horses!”

“I know you do,” Regina says with a nod. “Which is why you got the job. Now run along to the Royal Tailor and have him make you some clothes befitting your new position.”

“Don’t think he’ll believe me,” Ned says, with a hint of his usual cheeky smile. “Sounds like a tall tale I might’ve made up.”

Regina raises an eyebrow at him. She has no doubt he’s told more than a few tall tales in his time. She holds out a hand and a scroll appears in it. “Then give him this. A royal decree bearing my signature. He’ll have no reason to doubt you then.”

He reaches for it, tentatively, like he thinks she might pull it away at any second. She supposes his life hasn’t been easy and he’s used to disappointment. It pains her to think of children growing up like that. His grubby hand closes around the scroll and he takes it, bobbing his head in an attempt at a bow, even as his other arm wipes his nose.

“I won’t let you down,” he says again, his face serious.

She nods at him and he scampers off. She can feel Ruby and David’s smiles from behind and right now it’s stifling; patronising. Look how far the Evil Queen has come. She straightens her back and doesn’t look behind her.

“I’m going in alone,” she announces, sweeping her cloak to the side and heading to the stable door.
“Are you s-”

“Yes, Ruby, I’m sure,” she says, pushing into the stable and trying valiantly not to picture the hurt on Ruby’s face at her rejection.

The stable is empty. Its earthy, sweet smell is usually a comforting one, but today all she can focus on is the sheet hung from the ceiling in front of Midnight’s stall, shielding what’s inside from view. Steeling herself, she walks over and yanks the sheet down. She bites her lip to keep from reacting. Her big, strong horse is sprawled on the floor, lifeless eyes staring at nothing.

Opening the door, she enters the stall and sits on the straw covered floor by Midnight’s head. She strokes his mane away from his forehead, tears spilling down her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry. You had nothing to do with this. You were innocent. And she killed you. For nothing.” As the words spill out, she realises she’s speaking to Rocinante as much as she is to Midnight. She shakes her head, wiping at her eyes. “It ends here.”

She sits in silence, stroking Midnight’s neck, for a long time. She inhales through her nose and lets the breath out again, slowly, through her mouth. Lifting a hand, she conjures an apple and lays it by Midnight’s head. “Sleep well, my good boy,” she whispers, allowing herself one last look at him as she stands, then she turns and breathes in and out once more, centering herself. She needs to focus. She needs to be the leader, the Queen.

The Evil Queen.

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Despite everything that’s happened, there’s no time to spend licking their wounds and recovering. That afternoon, Regina finds herself once again sitting in a war council meeting, discussing strategies to defeat her sister.

“Leroy, tell me, you found something,” David asks.

The dwarf huffs and shakes his head. “I’ve been to Blue, Tink, all the fairies. After our little encounter last night, when they got a real sense of her power, they’ve been scouring the forest for enchanted items to destroy her, but they got zilch. They say, she’s just too powerful.”
“It’s happening again,” Mary Margaret says, reaching for David’s hand. “I’m about to give birth and an evil sorceress is threatening the future of my child.”

Regina sighs. “To be fair, the first time, I was threatening you. Everyone else just became collateral damage.”

“Remind me again why we forgave her?” Leroy addresses his question to the rest of the table. Regina is about to lambast him when Ruby steps in.

“Because she saved your life by bringing you here, Leroy,” Ruby tells him, raising her eyebrows. “And don’t forget who’s been filling your belly almost every night.”

“Yeah, well, you would say that,” Leroy snits. “Because we all know she’s been filling more than your bel-mmph!” He grasps at the invisible gag covering his mouth.

“There’s no use pulling at it,” Regina tells him. “It will remain there until you can keep a civil tongue in your head.” Leroy slumps in his seat, but continues to send a murderous glare in Regina’s direction. She ignores him and focuses on her former stepdaughter. “Frustrating as it is for me to remember, you had a head start to defeat me last time. How?”

“We were warned,” David responds.

“By Rumplestiltskin,” Mary Margaret finishes. Regina barely stops herself from rolling her eyes. They can’t even manage a sentence without the other one chipping in. While she’s less than enthusiastic about consulting her former mentor, he may be their only hope against Zelena.

“Maybe he can warn you again.”

Leroy is trying valiantly to object to this, but Regina’s gag is holding fast, meaning that all he’s doing is making vague mumbling noises. Ruby’s hand comes to cover her own and she looks over at the younger woman.

“Isn’t that kinda risky? Trusting the word of a known villain to defeat another?” Regina shifts uncomfortably at the choice of words, but Ruby’s green eyes immediately shift to her right. “Sorry, Belle.”
The librarian nods. “It’s okay.”

“It worked before!” Mary Margaret says. “Emma fulfilled her destiny and saved us all.”

“Yay for Emma,” Regina mutters, earning a frown from David and Mary Margaret.

“Well, unless we have another magic tree to put this kid in, I’m guessing the plan we used to defeat the last evil sorceress won’t work,” Granny puts in, her knitting needles clicking away. “And anyway, I’m not sure my old feet could take another thirty years of running that diner.”

“Granny,” Ruby scolds, but Regina sees the humour shining in the old woman’s eyes and her lips twitch in response. Ruby continues, her eyebrows drawn together in worry. “So going to see Rumplestiltskin is our only option? I don’t like it.”

“None of us like it, Ruby,” David agrees.

“But for our child—” Mary Margaret says, squeezing David’s hand. He nods at her.

“We’ll do whatever it takes.”

Regina feels like she might vomit if she has to listen to anymore of this. “Heartwarming,” she comments. “Zelena has Rumple trapped in his own castle. Belle, you were prisoner there?”

“Regina...” Ruby says, a gentle warning. Regina ignores her. They’re running out of time and can’t afford luxuries such as tact.

Belle appears genuinely taken aback. “Well...yes. But breaking in? I would have no idea how.”

“Luckily, I do,” Robin’s soft voice breaks into the conversation. “I broke in there once before.”

“You broke into the castle of a powerful wizard?” Regina scoffs. “Look, we know you’re very good at shooting at things with arrows, but aside from that, I’m not sure why you have a seat at this
“Regina,” Ruby admonishes.

“What?” Regina asks, turning to Ruby.

“He didn’t even hesitate yesterday when we asked him to—”

“It’s quite alright, Miss Ruby,” Robin says, flashing a smile at her before addressing Regina once more. “What I’m doing here, is saving your arse. The castle has traps and deadly ones.”

Lifting a hand, Regina lets purple tendrils of magic creep across her palm, licking just shy of his chin. “Not more deadly than my magic.”

“They are, if you don’t see them coming,” Robin counters.

“I’m perfectly fine with taking my chances,” Regina deadpans.

Scowling, Mary Margaret cuts in before Robin can. “Okay, you might be, but we’re not.” She points to the thief. “He’s coming.”

“Well,” Regina exclaims, throwing her hands in the air. “Of course no-one should listen to me. I’m only the Queen, after all.”

“And if you wish to continue being so, you’ll accept our help,” Robin says, now grinning boyishly since discovering he has the support of the rest of the group.

“I don’t nee—”

“Yes. You do.” Had the voice belonged to anyone else, they’d have received a scorching response. But it’s Ruby. Regina sighs at turns to look at the younger woman. Ruby has that face on. The one that says I am an alpha wolf and you will submit to my will. Occasionally Regina will fight that look, because she’s not one to submit easily. But a quick glance around the table confirms that
she’s severely outnumbered and that these idiotic ‘heroes’ are going to accompany her no matter what she says.

“Fine,” she snaps, crossing her arms. “Put out an announcement. Invite everyone. Might as well make a daytrip of it. Bring a damn picnic.”

Ruby laughs and reaches over to squeeze her arm as the others cast amused looks in her direction. She shakes her head. These people used to cower in fear before her. Or, at least, they used to run away from her. Now they’re treating her like the eccentric aunt at the Thanksgiving dinner table. She turns her head, narrowing her eyes at Ruby. It’s all her fault. Ruby crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue and Regina can’t hold her frown for longer than a few seconds. She turns away to hide her smile.

That girl will be the death of her. Or the rest of the idiots will. Either way, she’s doomed.

Lagging behind the group on the trek to the castle, and muttering under her breath, Regina pushes through to the front as it looms into view. She’ll be damned if she’s going to get the blame for something happening to this band of misfits.

She blasts through the doors of the castle and strides inside. She knows this castle well and leads the way through winding corridors and down staircases until they reach the dungeons. Raising her hands to blast the door that no doubt has Rumplestiltskin imprisoned behind it, there’s a strange noise and a sudden wind that brushes past her right ear as an arrow embeds itself into the door. Regina gasps and spins on her heel. Robin Hood is lowering his bow, and Regina glowers at him. “That arrow almost took off my head!”

Robin gestures behind her. “Well that door almost took off your arm. Where I come from, a simple thank you would suffice.”

“Where you come from, people bathe in the river and use pine cones for money,” Regina snaps. They have no time for this. She hears a sigh.

“Regina.” Damn it. It’s Ruby. “Just thank the man.”

“Let’s just go,” Mary Margaret cuts in. Clearly she shares Regina’s sense of urgency. At least
Regina sends one last annoyed glance at both Robin and Ruby and then leads the way into the other room. Or, rather, cell. Rumplestiltskin is seated at a spinning wheel, spinning straw into gold, inside a cage.

“Rumplestiltskin?” Mary Margaret whispers.

Regina sighs. When will people learn not to say the imp’s name? Ruby seems very agitated since they entered the room, shifting from foot to foot, hands twisting and wringing. Regina grips her upper arm gently and pulls her close, shaking her head almost imperceptibly. It doesn’t do to show weakness around The Dark One. Ruby calms a little at her touch, but is still practically vibrating. A high pitched giggle interrupts her thoughts.

“Rumple Bumple isn’t here. Rumple Bumple gone, my dear.”

“He really is back from the dead,” Regina mumbles, taking in Rumple’s manic, jerky movements.

“Dead. Dead. So much better. Dead.”

“He’s lost his mind,” David mutters. Regina knows that’s wishful thinking.

“On the contrary,” Rumple confirms it for her. “Now I have two. Two minds. Mining time. Digging deeper in the grime.”

“What is she doing to him?” Belle asks, near tears. Ruby moves towards her, placing a comforting hand on her back. Regina watches. She wonders if Ruby feels an affinity to Belle. They both fell in love with villains.

“Nothing that can’t be undone.” That indomitable Snow White spirit shines through once more. “Rumplestiltskin, we need your help. How do we stop Zelena?”

“Round and round, the circle of time, racing towards the finish line.”
More riddles. “This is pointless,” Regina tells them. Rumple is obviously not in the mood for helping. If only he’d felt that way the first time they came to him to stop a cur-. She shakes her head. If he hadn’t told them how to break the first curse, Regina would never have had Henry. She wouldn’t have Ruby now.

“Let me try,” Belle says, approaching the cage. “Hey. Hey Rumple.” She reaches through the bars, touching his shoulder. He jumps and spins to face her. Almost everyone in the room jumps with him. Belle continues. “Hey. Hey. I know you’re in there. I know you can hear me. How do we stop Zelena?”

For a moment, Regina thinks he’s not going to reply. Or that he’s going to grab Belle. But then he whispers a single word. “Light.”

“What?” Belle asks.


“The one with the bubble?” Ruby whispers. No-one responds.


Great. Another trip to a forest.

“How do we find her?” Mary Margaret asks. “Rumplestiltskin. In the Dark Forest, how do we find her?”

“Through the door step inside, if pure of heart, then she won’t hide.” He giggles maniacally, as if he’s just told a fantastic joke. Then he returns to his spinning, mumbling to himself.

“To the Dark Forest, then?” Robin asks.
“I will go to the Dark Forest,” Regina tells them. “Alone.”

“Regina,” Mary Margaret begins, with a long-suffering sigh. “We just did all this back at the castle. You’re not going alone, so let’s save ourselves some time and just go.”

“Perhaps, a couple of us should go back and let people know what’s happening,” David suggests, inclining his head to where Belle has withdrawn into herself after their encounter with Rumplestiltskin. “Robin and Leroy, perhaps you could accompany Belle back to update the others?”

“But—” Robin begins, but his eyes land on Belle and he nods. “Of course. We shall make sure everyone is appraised of the situation.”

Regina watches as Ruby moves to Belle and hugs her.

“You should go with them, Ruby,” she says, before she can reconsider.

Ruby’s eyes find hers over Belle’s shoulder and she knows what the answer is going to be. Squeezing Belle one last time, Ruby moves back and gives her friend a smile before letting her go completely. She walks to where Regina is standing and takes her hand, without saying anything. And Regina can’t deny the warmth in her chest at the gesture.

After bidding their companions farewell, Regina uses magic to take the foursome to the north of the Dark Forest. She has no idea where they’ll specifically find Glinda, but they need to start somewhere. David and Mary Margaret are walking ahead of them, swinging their joined hands back and forth, looking as carefree as any other expectant couple.

Ruby’s fingers link with her own and she leans closer as they walk. “So, is this like a double date?” she whispers.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Regina warns, frowning as David stoops to pick something up. He stands and gives Mary Margaret a shy smile and a flower.
“For luck,” he says. When he notices Regina’s scowl, he seems surprised. “What?”

“We’re at the edge of the Dark Forest, trying to find the one person who can stop our imminent doom and save your unborn child,” Regina rants. “And you two stop to smell the roses?”

“Snowbells,” Mary Margaret says, as if that should explain everything.

“I don’t care if they are dancing daffodils,” Regina exclaims. “I need to destroy my sister. And so do you.” She carries on walking, secure that the others will follow her. “And if that babbling madman sent us on a wild goose chase, I swear I’ll-” She stops short. There’s a door in the middle of the forest. “What’s that supposed to be?”

“Looks like a door to me,” Ruby says, appearing at her side. “But, I’m just a peasant, so I could be wrong.”

Regina rolls her eyes and doesn’t bother to dignify that with a response.

“Through the door step inside. If pure of heart, then she won’t hide,” Mary Margaret intones, like it’s a children’s rhyme. “It’s Rumple’s riddle. It’s Glinda!” Without further elaboration, she walks to the door and steps through, disappearing completely.

“Mary Margaret!” David yells, following immediately. He is also swallowed up by the door.

“A portal with a cheap cloaking spell.” Any hack could do that. Regina follows David through the door. And ends up on the other side of the door. She narrows her eyes. Clearly she’s not invited into Glinda’s stupid secret hiding place. She marches back through the door and slams it closed. Ruby’s lips are pressed together, her eyes bright with the laughter she’s holding in. Regina narrows her eyes.

“Yes, yes, laugh at the one with the dark heart.” She sweeps an arm to indicate the door. “Go on, I’m sure you’ll have no trouble whatsoever passing through.”

“I dunno,” Ruby says, coming closer, her hands behind her back. “I’ve shed more than my fair share of blood over the years.”
“Your heart is as pure as they come, Ruby. We both saw that very recently.”

“Oh, yeah. I forgot.” She flashes a grin. “Well, I’ll stay here anyway. I prefer the company on this side of the magic door.” She reveals what was behind her back. It’s a purple crocus. “For you.”

Regina fights a smile and loses, rolling her eyes even as she reaches out to take the flower. “Thank you. Much prettier than a Snowbell.”

“The fairest of them all, one might say,” Ruby says with a wink. She takes Regina’s hand and squeezes. “You can stop with the act, by the way.”

“What act?” Regina asks, frowning.

“The ‘I’m a hardass bitch who doesn’t give a shit’ act.”

“I have no idea what you are talk-”

“Yes you do,” Ruby persists. “It started this morning. After you found out about Midnight. I don’t know what’s going on in that head of yours, but pretending not to care doesn’t actually make it true. I thought you’d remember that from the whole ‘let’s pretend not to be attracted to each other’ dance we did a while back.”

Regina sighs, tugging her hand free and walking away a few steps. She twirls the flower in her hand and shakes her head. “I absolutely hate it when your annoying observations are…”

“Right?”

“Not entirely wrong,” Regina corrects.

Ruby approaches her from behind and arms wrap around her waist and props her chin up on her shoulder. “I know it hurt when you thought I’d died. I know it hurts that she killed Midnight.
And I know that it maybe feels like not caring about people makes the possibility of Zelena winning a little bit easier.” A kiss is pressed just below her ear. “But it won’t. Because you are just pretending. You care about those ‘idiots’ who just went through that door. You care about Robin and his kid. You care about that stableboy. Hell, I’m willing to bet you ever care about Leroy a teeny bit.”

“Don’t push it,” Regina warns, but she doesn’t deny what Ruby’s saying.

“You care about people, Regina,” Ruby continues. “And they care about you. Nobody forced anyone to come and save you yesterday. They came of their own free will and they knew the risks.”

“I’ve always said they’re not the sharpest tools in the box,” Regina murmurs. The arms at her waist disappear and she’s being turned around to face Ruby.

“Make all the snarky comments you want,” Ruby tells her. “It won’t make it less true. And yeah, caring about things means you’re opening yourself up to losing them. And that’s fucking scary as hell.”

Regina nods wordlessly, caught up in Ruby’s passion. She’s not sure what Ruby’s going to say next, but she knows she needs to hear it. Ruby looks down, shaking her head. She picks up Regina’s right hand and places it on her chest. She mirrors the action, placing her own hand on Regina’s chest. Regina feels her heartbeat quicken to match the one under her hand. She meets Ruby’s eyes.

“It’s scary,” Ruby repeats. “But it is worth it.” She presses her forehead to Regina’s. “I could have died yesterday-”

“Don’t say that!” Regina whispers.

“I could have died,” Ruby continues, undeterred. “And so could you. And that thought scares me more than I thought possible. But it doesn’t mean I’d change the way I feel about you. I’m not going to stop loving you just so it will hurt less to lose you.”

Regina can’t find any words that would mean anything at this moment. So she leans in and captures Ruby’s lips. Regina smiles into the kiss, despite the salty tang of tears on her lips. She pulls back to find she’s not the only one who’s crying.
“So, like I said,” Ruby says, sniffing. “Enough with the hardass bitch routine, okay? It’s not a bad thing to care about the people you’re helping.”


“Ecstatic,” Ruby murmurs, leaning in and bringing their lips together again.

“We’re at the edge of the Dark Forest, just back from speaking to the one person who can stop our imminent doom and save my unborn child. And you two are making out?”

Regina closes her eyes at the intrusive voice before looking up at Ruby. “Aren’t you supposed to have super-hearing? Couldn’t you have warned me they were there?”

“In my defense, they appeared through a magic door,” Ruby says.

“Excuses, excuses,” Regina mutters before turning to greet their companions. Mary Margaret is still smiling about catching them in a compromising position. But David looks decidedly less happy. “What did she say?”

Mary Margaret’s smile fades and she looks to David. “To defeat Zelena, we need to separate her from her amulet,” he explains. “Only the purest of light magic can do that. Which means we need to get to Emma.” He takes a deep breath. “We have to cast the Dark Curse.”

“What?” Ruby gasps as Regina feels a chill go through her.

“Aren’t you out of your minds?” Regina snaps. “Even if I believe this Glinda, which I don’t, to cast the Dark Curse I’d have to destroy the heart of the thing I love most, which, for me, is Henry.” Ruby places a hand on her back, rubbing gently.

“There has to be another way to enact it,” Mary Margaret says.

Regina scoffs. “If there were, do you think I would have killed my own father?”
“What about a magic bean? If we had one, we could open a portal. Or Jefferson’s hat?” David tries.

“There are no more portals,” Regina tells them. “Not for us. Not for anyone the curse brought back. When I undid the first curse to escape Pan to bring us here, it divided our realms. It placed a wall between them.”

“The Dark Curse is the only way,” David says, quietly.

“Haven’t you been listening?” Regina thunders. “I can’t cast it.”

“But someone else can,” David suggests.

“Who?” Mary Margaret asks.

David turns to face his wife, and it’s obvious what the answer is going to be. “You.” Mary Margaret immediately recoils, but David holds her, looking into her eyes and smiling. “It’s the only way. You can use my heart to cast the curse. We have to think of our child.”

“Our child needs you,” Mary Margaret protests, tears brimming. “I need you. We’ll find another way. We always find another way.”

“David, no,” Ruby says, moving towards them. “She’s right, we’ll find another way.”

Regina stays where she is and only half listens to the arguments going back and forth about whether or not David should allow his heart to be crushed. She smiles a little. Thirty years ago, this would have been a victory. She would have revelled in the fact that Snow White would have to be the one to kill her true love. But it’s no longer triumph that she feels; only injustice. David shouldn’t miss out on another of his children. Snow shouldn’t suffer the loss of her husband again.

But there is one heart that could be used to save everyone else.
“There is another way,” she says, quietly. The other three turn to look at her, expectantly. She swallows. She’s about to crush that hopeful look on at least one of their faces. “Ruby...do you think...” This is an awkward question to ask, but she has to know. “If you were to use my heart, would the curse work?”

Ruby’s brow creases in confusion. “Me? But I’m not a-” The implication sinks in and her eyes widen and she starts to walk backwards, shaking her head. “No.”

“No, it wouldn’t work?” Regina presses, but she knows that’s not what Ruby means. Perversely, it floods her with happiness.

“Of course it would work,” Ruby spits. “But I’m not doing it.”

“Regina...that’s-” Mary Margaret looks between them, also having caught on.

“Yes, Ruby can cast the curse and send you all back to find Emma.” Regina says. It makes perfect sense. It’s the only thing that does make sense.

“Regina, you can’t ask me to do this,” Ruby says, darting forward and grasping Regina’s arms. “I will not kill you.”

“But you’ll stand by and watch Mary Margaret kill David?” Regina asks her, knowing that’s not a fair question but asking it anyway. Tears spill from Ruby’s eyes in fat drops, running all the way to her chin. Regina shakes her head and moves closer, cupping Ruby’s face and using her thumbs to wipe her tears. “It has to be me,” she whispers. “Don’t you see? I’m the reason you were all cursed there in the first place. I’m the reason they never got to raise their first child. It’s my crazy sister who’s trying to kill everyone. It has to be me.”

“Regina,” David says, stepping close to the two, but keeping a respectful distance. “It’s okay, you don’t have to do this. I’ve made my peace with it.”

If her mind wasn’t made up already, the absolute terror that flashes across Mary Margaret’s face when David makes this offer would be enough to do it. She can’t make them suffer again. She raises an eyebrow at David.

“Look, I put you in a coma for twenty-eight years and then married you off to your ex-fiancée. I
believe ‘I owe you one’ doesn’t even begin to cover this situation.” She smirks. “Come on, let someone else play the dashing hero for once.”

A pitiful sob draws her attention back to Ruby and her resolve is shaken by the distress she sees in the younger woman. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “This is the right thing to do.” Removing one of her hands from Ruby’s face, she places it on the other woman’s chest. “You know it is, deep down.”

Apparently incapable of speech, Ruby shakes her head and mirrors the action, placing her own hand on Regina’s chest briefly before gathering her into her arms and sobbing into her shoulder.

“I can’t lose you,” she whimpers, and Regina’s eyes grow hot, her throat painful. “I don’t want to go back to Storybrooke without you. You said you’d take me out on a date. Remember? You owe me a date. I’ll...I’ll be all alone…”

“You won’t be,” Regina promises. “You’ll have Mary Margaret and David. And your new little niece or nephew.” She closes her eyes, holding Ruby tighter. “You’ll have Granny and Belle and you’ll-”

Ruby lifts her head. “I won’t have you,” she says. “And that’s all I care about.”

“You just feel that way now,” Regina tries to soothe her. “But you’ll get through it. You have the biggest heart of anyone I know. You’ll...you’ll find someone to-”

“No. I won’t,” Ruby says, shaking her head violently. “I won’t. I don’t want anyone else.”

A sob from behind her reminds Regina that they’re not alone. She turns slightly and sees Mary Margaret in David’s arms, crying. She sighs.

“I think we’re all in agreement that this is the best option open to us,” she begins, pulling Ruby closer to head off any protest. “Rather than draw it out, I suggest we make our way back to the castle and enact the curse as soon as possible.”

“No,” Ruby murmurs into her neck. “No.”
“Yes,” Regina tells her. “The longer we leave it, the more chance Zelena has to discover our plan.” She places a soft kiss on Ruby’s cheek. “And the harder it will be for you.”

Mary Margaret pulls away from David and approaches them. “Regina,” she begins, her voice roughened. “This is—..I can’t begin to tell you how much this means to me. To all of us.” She reaches out and squeezes Regina’s arm. “Thank you.”

Ruby pulls out of Regina’s arms roughly, a growl erupting from her chest. She turns and walks away a little, wrapping her arms around herself. Regina watches her for a moment, then returns her attention to Mary Margaret. She covers the hand on her arm with her own.

“Perhaps this will go some way to evening the sco-” She doesn’t get to finish the sentence before Mary Margaret has thrown her arms around her. She allows the embrace and returns it, thinking of that little girl on the runaway horse all those years ago.

Over Mary Margaret’s shoulder, she watches as David puts a hand on Ruby’s back, only to be shrugged off. Regina sighs, stepping out of Mary Margaret’s arms.

“I’ll take us back to the castle by magic,” she tells them. “I’ll deposit you in your own chambers.” She tells David and Mary Margaret. “I’d—I’d like some time alone with Ruby before we commence.”

“Of course,” David tells her.

“Why bother?” Ruby huffs, still facing the opposite direction. “You’re still gonna make me kill you.”

Mary Margaret squeezes Regina’s arm in sympathy, but Regina can’t blame Ruby for her attitude. It’s a terrible, terrible thing to ask of anyone. She addresses David. “Have the people told that we’ll be returning to Storybrooke. There’s no need to elaborate on the details.” No-one will protest anyway. “I’ll send for you when we’re ready.” She doesn’t need them to be there at the casting of the curse, but she doesn’t want Ruby to be by herself once she’s gone.

“We’ll make sure everyone’s informed,” Mary Margaret says with a nod. David comes over and takes her hand. “Ruby...I...”

“Don’t talk to me, Snow,” Ruby says, holding up a hand. “I...I can’t talk right now.”
Mary Margaret presses her lips together and nods. Regina lifts her hands and engulfs all of them in purple smoke. When it clears, she and Ruby and standing in their bedchamber. It feels like days ago they were lying in bed this morning; warm and safe and loved.

“Ruby,” Regina says, quietly. “Please look at me.”

“I don’t think I can, Regina,” she replies, sounding utterly broken. “When I look at you, all I can see is what’s to come. You, lying dead at my feet and my life stretching out ahead of me...empty.”

Closing the distance between them, Regina takes a chance and places her hands on Ruby’s waist. When she’s not immediately shrugged off, she moves closer and rests her forehead between Ruby’s shoulderblades. “I hate that I have to ask you to do this,” Regina whispers. “But this is the only way for you to be safe. For you all to be safe. She won’t be able to hurt you.”

“She won’t need to hurt me,” Ruby huffs. “I’ll already be hurting.” Regina feels a sob move through Ruby before she hears it. “I can’t do this, Regina.”

Unwilling to cajole any longer, Regina steps in front of Ruby, firmly taking hold of her chin so that she’s forced to look at her. “Yes,” she states. “You can. You are my brave wolf and you can do anything.”

“Not this,” Ruby moans. “I can’t. There—there has to be some other way.”

“There isn’t,” Regina says. “You know if there were I’d have gone back to Henry by now. This is it.”

“Oh God,” Ruby says, her hands flying to cover her mouth. “Henry. How am I going to tell Henry?”

For the first time, Regina’s lip trembles. She’s been trying not to think about that. After sweeping some of Ruby’s hair away from her face, she wraps her arms around her. “As things stand, Henry has no memory of me, so you may never need to tell him anything,” she says, pained by each and every word. “But if he does recover his memories, then—” Her voice falters, and she clears her throat, trying to smile. “Then you tell him that his mother loves him more than anything. And that she thought of him every minute of every day.” She’s not going to be able to hold the tears at bay much longer. “And you tell him that...that you made his mother feel things that she thought she
could never feel again.” Ruby’s sobbing, but Regina forces herself to carry on, gently guiding Ruby’s face up so they’re looking into each other’s eyes. “And that your love is the only reason his mother was strong enough to do this. Because you showed her how to care.”

This completely undoes Ruby and she collapses against her. They cling to each other and Regina finally allows herself to give in to her emotions and cry. Ruby’s nose brushes her own and then they’re kissing, desperately.

“I love you,” Ruby says against her lips.

“And I you,” Regina replies. She holds Ruby as tightly as she can for as long as she can allow herself. Loosening her grip, she moves back and tries to smile. “Come now. It’s time.”

She adds the last of the ingredients to the bubbling cauldron. The room is silent save for the occasional sob or sniffle from Ruby, sitting to the side with Mary Margaret’s arms around her. Swallowing, Regina steels herself for what’s to come. She’s not afraid of death; she hasn’t been for a long time. But, for the first time in years, she has people who will mourn her. And that sits heavily on her conscience. Willing herself to be strong, she turns and walks to Ruby and Mary Margaret.

“It’s ready,” she says, quietly. Ruby lets out a whine, like a wounded animal and Mary Margaret kisses the side of her head. Regina holds out a hand for Ruby to take. “Come on.”

Taking the hand, Ruby pushes to her feet and allows Regina to tug her closer to the bubbling cauldron. Looking into Ruby’s eyes, Regina thrusts her hand into her own chest, gasping at the pain, and pulls out her heart. To her surprise, it’s changed since the last time she saw it. While there’s still darkness swirling through it, it’s a much more vibrant red than it was when she offered it to Tinkerbell in Neverland. Turning it this way and that, examining it from different angles, a smile appears on her lips. She looks up at Ruby, pointing at her heart.

“See this? See how red it is?” Ruby nods, still sniffing. “You did this,” Regina tells her. “You and Henry.”

“No,” Ruby manages to say, with difficulty. “Y-you did it. We j-just helped.”
Tears spill over Regina’s lashes as she pulls Ruby in for one final kiss. Her heart quickens in her hand as she tries to imprint the touch of Ruby’s lips on hers into her mind, to remember how Ruby’s arms feel around her. All too soon, she has to end it. She pulls back and holds her heart out to Ruby. Ruby’s hand is shaking as she takes the organ.

Regina turns to their companions. Predictably, Mary Margaret is crying. “Now, now,” she begins, in her most mayorly tone. “I need you to be strong. For Ruby. And for Henry.” Her eyes drop to Mary Margaret’s swollen belly. “And for the latest little Charming.”

Mary Margaret nods, and manages a lopsided smile in return. “Thank you,” she whispers. Regina answers with a nod, which David returns. Inhaling deeply, she turns to Ruby.

“I can’t,” Ruby says, shaking her head, her lower lip trembling. “Regina, I can’t say goodbye to you.”

“Then don’t,” Regina tells her, softly. “But you have to crush it.” Ruby shakes her head and Regina goes to her, covering the hand that’s holding her heart with her own. She squeezes gently, ignoring the pain in her chest as she looks into Ruby’s eyes. “You have to be brave. You have to save everyone.” She squeezes a little harder, wincing at the increased pressure. Keeping their eyes locked, she guides Ruby’s hand until it’s over the cauldron. She squeezes again, harder this time, gritting her teeth. “I love you,” she says. “Do it now.”

“I’ll l-love you f-forever,” Ruby says, brokenly. After a few interminable seconds, Ruby squeezes her heart.

The agony is indescribable, but she’s no stranger to pain and she keeps her eyes locked on Ruby’s as long as she can. Her vision starts to fade as dust falls from Ruby’s hand.

The last thing she hears before everything goes black is a mournful howl.
Epilogue

Ruby falls to her knees, gathering Regina into her arms and burying her face in her chest. It takes her a moment to realise that the howls echoing around the room are coming from her. She rocks back and forth, cradling Regina’s limp body. A hand touches her shoulder and she flinches, letting out a growl.

“Ruby…” Mary Margaret begins, her voice choked. “We won’t let this be in vain, I promise. We—we’ll get back to Storybrooke, just like she wanted us to. And we will defeat—”

A demented cackling fills the air and Ruby whips her head around to see the Wicked Witch enter through the window on her broomstick. Instinctively, she pulls Regina closer, protecting her. Zelena pours something green into the cauldron before landing, leaning her broom against it.

“Zelena,” David yells, drawing his sword and charging at the witch. She holds up a hand and freezes his feet in place.

“Not now, handsome,” she says, her attention on the women. “Did you really think you could enact Rumple’s Dark Curse and I wouldn't know about it?”

“It doesn't matter,” Mary Margaret tells her, moving to David as he struggles to move his legs, but they’re stuck fast. “It’s done now and you can’t stop it.”

“No, but I ca-” Zelena stops talking, her eyes landing on her sister’s prone body. “Is she…” Her eyes light up with green fire. “Oh, you idiots!”

Ruby smiles through her tears. “You won’t ever get her heart now, Zelena,” she grits out. “It belongs to me.”

The Witch seems to collect herself, and she returns Ruby’s smile. “Is that so? We’ll see about that.” And before Ruby can react, Zelena strides forward and plunges her hand into Ruby’s chest, wrenching her heart out.

“Ruby!” Mary Margaret screams, but Zelena doesn’t even look in her direction, merely freezes her to the spot the same as David.
“Crush it,” Ruby says, hugging Regina closer. “See if I care. We’ve won. You’ve lost. Killing me won’t change anything.”

“On the contrary, dear,” Zelena spits, glancing uneasily at the billowing purple cloud starting to creep out of the cauldron. “I’m not planning to take a trip to your quaint little town without my baby sis. She might be a weak, sentimental fool, but she’s the most interesting of all of you.”

Ruby’s brow creases. “Then wh-what are you…”

Zelena holds up Ruby’s heart, red and vibrant and beating. Ruby frowns; there’s a crack running right through the middle of her heart that wasn’t there previously.

“Oh my,” Zelena says, with a smile. “Looks like you’re heartbroken, darling. Let’s see what we can do about that, shall we?” Placing both hands on Ruby’s heart, using the weakness caused by the crack, she breaks it in half. Ruby jerks forward at the pain, landing half on top of Regina. She pushes back up onto her knees, a hand covering her chest.

“Just crush it,” she grinds out. The cloud is spilling over the side of the cauldron now. But instead of the blinding pain she expects from her heart disintegrating, Zelena does something she never expected. She puts her heart back in. Or, half of it, at least. The other half she plunges into Regina’s chest. Ruby inhales deeply as Zelena’s hand withdraws; her heart is beating wildly. She scrambles over to Regina and places a shaking hand on her chest...there’s a beat!

She looks up at Zelena, who is getting back on her broom. “Wh-why would you…”

“Like I said, Storybrooke would be no fun without my little sis. And she’s rather crucial to a few of my plans.” She lifts into the air. “Enjoy the forgetting potion I added to your curse, by the way. Good luck stopping me when you have no idea who I am! Goodbye my pretties!” And she’s gone. Mary Margaret and David stumble forward, released from her spell and come to kneel by Ruby.

“Is she…” Mary Margaret asks, placing her hand on Regina’s cheek.

“I don’t know,” Ruby says, watching Regina’s face for any sign of life. “She has a heartbeat.”
“She has half of your heart,” David says. “Is that even possible?”

“Love makes anything possible,” Mary Margaret whispers.

They all jump in fright when Regina inhales sharply. Ruby lets out a sob of relief and Mary Margaret covers her mouth as Regina’s eyes flutter open. The Queen frowns.

“Ruby? Wh-what’s happening?” she asks. “Did it not work?”

David and Ruby help Regina to sit up and Ruby nods at the purple smoke now flowing across the stone floor. “Oh, it worked alright,” she says, grinning through her tears. “And you’re okay. We’re all okay. We’re going home.”

“But...h-how?” Regina asks, leaning into Ruby’s arms as the smoke creeps closer. Mary Margaret and David embrace before being swallowed up. Ruby turns and closes her eyes, placing a kiss on Regina’s forehead.

“Shhhhh,” she soothes. “Stop by the diner for a coffee and I’ll tell you everything.”

The purple cloud surrounds them.

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**Storybrooke, Maine**

Something’s wrong. That’s been her overriding feeling since she woke up this morning. Well, obviously something is wrong, because the last clear memory she has is of watching Emma and Henry drive away, and then Regina casting a spell. And yet, she woke up in her own bed at the B&B, even if it felt wrong to be there.

She wipes a cloth across the counter in the diner and sighs; the spell must have gone wrong and that’s why they’re still in Storybrooke. It’s the only answer. The few patrons who’ve come by for coffee, or just to be with people, have expressed similar experiences. Storybrooke was supposed to have been wiped off the map. And yet, here she is, with an apron on and a coffee pot in her hand. Just like usual. While everything seems pretty normal in the small town, Ruby can’t rule out a
The bell above the door signals a new arrival and she looks over to greet whoever it is. She frowns. It’s a man she doesn’t know. He’s tall and handsome, though his face is lined with worry. Her eyes drop to the small boy he’s leading by the hand. The munchkin appears unaffected by his father’s worry, and is smiling from ear to ear. Ruby can’t help but smile too; the kid is pretty much fifty percent dimples.

“Can I help you?” Ruby asks. “I haven’t seen you in here before.”

“No,” the man confirms, bending to hoist the boy into his arms. “I have never frequented your...establishment before now. In fact...I’m not sure where I am.”

Ruby places her rag on the counter and smiles. “You’re in Storybrooke,” she tells the newcomer. “Where do you come from?”

“Nottingham,” the man tells her, openly. “The last thing I remember is bedding down for the night with my boy in Sherwood Forest. When we awoke, we were in unfamiliar woods. I left my men there while I scouted ahead.”

“Wait, Sherwood Forest?” Ruby asks. “Like Robin Hood?”

“Ah, I see my reputation has preceded me,” Robin says with a bashful smile. He holds out a hand. “Robin of Locksley. Or, as you say, Robin Hood.”

She takes his offered hand and shakes it. “Ruby,” she says. “Well, Red. Riding Hood. In the other world, that was my name.”

“Perhaps we are related?” Robin suggests with a wink. His smile fades. “What do you mean, ‘the other world’?”

Ruby sighs. “It’s a long story,” she says. “Why don’t you sit at a table and I’ll bring you some food and we’ll talk?” Most likely Mary Margaret and David will want to speak to him as well. And the Mayor.
“Miss Ruby, I have no money to pay you,” Robin tells her, with a glance at his son. She waves away his concern.

“Don’t worry about it,” she tells him. “I’ll bet you didn’t eat in the woods, and this little one looks like he could do with some pancakes.”

The boy lifts his head from where it rests against his father’s. “What’s a pancake?” he asks, his eyes round with wonder.

“Oh boy, are you in for a treat!” Ruby exclaims with a wide smile. “What’s your name?”

“Roland,” the boy tells her, grinning in response.

“Well, Roland,” Ruby says. “Why don’t you and your daddy go sit down and I’ll bring you some of these mysterious pancakes, huh?”

“Come on, Papa!” Roland urges, wriggling to be put down. Robin smiles and places his son back on his feet, allowing him to tug him away from the counter.

“Thank you, Miss Ruby,” he says, earnestly. “I won’t forget your hospitality.”

“No problem,” Ruby says. “I’ll come talk to you in a little while.”

She scribbles down an order for pancakes, and adds on some bacon and eggs for Robin, along with a coffee. As she’s sliding the order through to the kitchen, the bell sounds again and she turns around. Her heart leaps into her throat at the sight of Mary Margaret and David walking in. Her friend is very pregnant, and looks like she’s about to give birth at any second. Yep, something definitely went screwy with that spell.

“Something’s wrong,” Mary Margaret murmurs urgently once she reaches the counter.

“You’re not kidding,” Ruby agrees, eyes focussed on her very swollen belly.
“Not that I’m not thrilled that I’m apparently having a baby,” Mary Margaret says, hands straying to her stomach and cradling the protruding bump. “But I’d like to know how I got pregnant?”

Ruby can’t help herself. “Well, see, what usually happens is that, when a man and a woman love each other very mu-”

“Ruby!” David snaps, rubbing his face with his hands; he look incredibly tense. “Now is not the time for jokes. We have no memories. Again.”

“And I suppose you’ll find a way to place the blame on me for this one, too, correct?” Regina’s dulcet tones interrupt their conversation.

Ruby looks up as the Mayor approaches, dressed impeccably in a pantsuit as usual. For some reason, Ruby’s heart starts to speed up. She frowns. It’s been a while since Regina’s presence had that effect on her.

“If the shoe fits,” David mutters.

Regina sends a glare in his direction and then glances down at Mary Margaret’s belly. “When did you get fat?”

Mary Margaret rolls her eyes before turning to look at her former stepmother, somewhat disapprovingly. “I’m pregnant.”

“Well, I hope it turns out better than the last one,” Regina says, dismissively.

There’s a twitch of a smirk on Regina’s lips, and Ruby’s protectiveness of her friends flares up. She leans on the counter, shifting Regina’s attention to her. “Can I get you something Madam Mayor?”

Regina appraises Ruby and raises a brow. “Honestly, Ms Lucas, I’ve been coming here for quite some time, do you really need me to repeat my coffee order day after day?”

Ruby doesn’t react to the condescension in the other woman’s voice, even if it makes her bristle internally.

When Ruby doesn’t move quick enough for her liking, Regina straightens, drawing herself up to her full height and looking down her nose at Ruby. “Are you waiting for the beans to be imported from Kenya? *Do* make it quick, dear. I have a town to run after all.”

Someone clearing their throat interrupts their stand-off, and all four of them turn to look at Robin.

“I do apologise for interrupting,” he begins. “But I’m afraid Roland has made quite a mess of your table. He has discovered your little bags of sweet crystals and has spilt a number of them in his haste to eat their contents.”

Ruby glances over at the table to see Roland ripping into their sugar sachets and devouring the contents. “Oh, wow,” she whistles. “I don’t envy you. He’s gonna be bouncing off the ceiling in a little while.”

Robin’s eyes widen. “They are magic?” he asks. “They give one powers of levitation?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Ruby says, with a grin. She picks up the rag she’d been wiping the counter with and holds it out to him. “Here. Use this.”

Reaching for it, he smiles. “Thank you.”

A sharp gasp draws all their gazes back to the Mayor. Regina’s eyes are locked on Robin’s arm. Ruby glances at it. There’s a distinctive tattoo of a lion on the inside of his forearm, but nothing out of the ordinary. Robin nods awkwardly at Ruby and heads back to join his son at their table.

“Regina,” Mary Margaret prompts. “Is everything okay?”

Brought out of her stupor, Regina blinks. “What? Of course everything isn’t okay,” she hisses. “We’re not supposed to even *be* here, and now Ms Lucas is feeding people we’ve never even seen before. How can it be *okay*?”
“He’s Robin Hood,” Ruby explains. “He woke up in the woods today. No memory of how he got there. Like us.”

“He’s an outsider, Ms Lucas,” Regina snaps. “And we don’t know if we can trust him.”

“I like to give people the benefit of the doubt, Madam Mayor,” Ruby says, getting more annoyed at Regina’s attitude. She turns to her friends. “Maybe you guys could have breakfast with him? He has no clue where he is.”

“Oh! Of course!” Mary Margaret says. “We’ll talk to him. And then we can all talk later...at the Town Hall. We need a town meeting.”

“I’m the Mayor,” Regina puts in. “I decide when and if there will be a town meeting.”

Mary Margaret rolls her eyes. “Then just let us know when you decide to hold one. I’d suggest sooner rather than later. People are worried.” She turns on her heel and heads over to join Robin, sliding into the booth next to Roland and introducing herself.

David sighs. “Just bring over our usuals, will you, Ruby?” And he trudges after his wife.

Ruby starts to make Regina’s coffee. She glances at the Mayor, who’s looking at Robin strangely.

“Do you know him?” Ruby asks, suddenly. “It kinda seemed like you recognised him or something.”

“Of course I don’t know him,” Regina replies, though Ruby notices a slight flush on her cheeks as she says the words. “How would I know someone who sleeps in the woods?”

“Sorry, I forgot you don’t associate with us mere peasants,” Ruby snits, pouring the coffee into a to-go cup. She turns and places it on the counter. “Seventy-five cents, thank you,” she says stiffly.

Regina goes into her wallet and pulls out a dollar bill, slapping it on the counter and picking up her cup. “Keep the change,” she says. “I’m all out of doggy treats.”
“Wow, that’s original,” Ruby says, scooping up the money. Regina turns to leave, but hesitates and slowly pivots back to face Ruby. She moves to the counter and lowers her voice.

“I’d be careful about trusting people so easily, Ms Lucas,” she says. “We are in a vulnerable position at the moment and you cannot just open your doors to the first handsome man who smiles at you.”

Ruby clenches her jaw at the accusation, but remains calm. “Well, I’m a pretty good judge of character, Madam Mayor. And my gut tells me that he’s no threat.”

Regina shakes her head. “Fine. Continue to listen to your intestines. See how far that gets you in life. I cannot afford that luxury. I have to make judgements based on sound evidence. And right now, all we know is that he is the only stranger in town. Which means we don’t trust him.”

Sighing, Ruby shrugs. “That’s up to you, Regina. But I can’t see a kid go hungry. So if I inadvertently cause an apocalypse with my pancakes, then I’m sorry.”

For a second, she thinks Regina’s going to smile, but almost immediately the softness of her mouth disappears into a firm line. “That heart of yours is going to get you into trouble one day, Ms Lucas. Mark my words.” She starts to walk away.

“Probably,” Ruby calls after her. “But I’ll take my chances.”

“Yes, I imagine you will,” Regina says, and with a shake of her head, she leaves. Ruby stands still for a moment, looking at the door. She lifts a hand to her chest, absentmindedly. Her heart is slowing down. Was it beating that way the whole time Regina was in? She frowns.

“Order’s up!” The yell from the kitchen distracts her from her reverie and she sighs as she moves to pick up Robin and Roland’s plates.

Life in Storybrooke goes on.
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