**The Secret's in the Telling**

by pyrophoric

**Summary**

"It's the sixth of October. A pivotal moment in Storybrooke's history and the turning point in Regina Mills' life. And it all began with a spell, a Sheriff, and a thief."
"If you leave, you can never come back. Do you understand that? Do you understand what that means?"

"I do."

"Do you really?"

"I'm here, aren't I? I know what I'm getting myself into."

"And you're... you're prepared to make that sacrifice?"

"Yes."

"..."

"This is for the best. It has to happen. It needs to."

"Why?"

"She has to live."

"At the cost of your own life?"

"This is my choice."

"You have some balls, I'll give you that, but you're also out of your damn mind..."

"Someone I admire once told me that every act of bravery requires a smidgen of crazy, so I'll take that as a compliment."

"Is there anything I can do to make you reconsider?"

"No, I'm sorry."

"You'll lose everything if you do this."

"I will lose everything if I don't."

"Love is not finding someone you can live with; it's finding someone you can't live without."

– Rafael Ortiz

It is the sixth of October.

A typical Saturday in sleepy Storybrooke, Maine; a day that should've been insignificant in the greater scheme of things. But it isn't. Far from it, actually.
Today is no ordinary day, but nobody will realize just how important the sixth of October is until it is too late. A year down the road, people will begin to see it in a different light. And they will come to appreciate the blessing, the sacrifice, the devotion that would forever change a broken woman's life. They will know, but will not fully comprehend, the essence of one soul's sacrifice in order to save another.

No one will, until it's too late.

It is the sixth of October. A pivotal moment in Storybrooke's history and the turning point in Regina Mills' life.

And it all began with a spell, a Sheriff, and a thief.

Regina starts her day with coffee. Black, hardly any sugar; simple and nearly down to its purest form. She enjoys how the liquid burns down her throat, how the flavor dances in her tastebuds, and how its scent lingers in the air around her like a fragrant perfume. She had developed quite a taste for it since arriving in this world and making it her new home. In the old land, she was raised to deprive herself of such a simple pleasure. Coffee, her mother had said, was for peasants, servants and soldiers. A proper lady only drinks tea.

Regina sneers at that idea now. Excluding the time she held Rumpelstiltskin's precious Chip hostage, not once has she touched a teacup in all her twenty-eight years in Storybrooke. Tea and teatime evoked unpleasant memories that she'd rather stay buried in the charred remains of the Enchanted Forest. Breaking her spirit and everything she loved was about the only consistent parenting skill that Cora had possessed. And somehow, in a warped way, Regina had come to associate tea with it.

The sound of water running down the pipes inside the walls, and movement from the floors above and below, pulls Regina out of her thoughts. She palms her coffee mug with both hands and holds it by her nose, inhaling the aroma with deep, even breaths. Glancing at the numbers flashing on the microwave, she notes with mild surprise that both her housemates had somehow managed to extricate themselves from their warm beds before their respective alarms were set to blare. That is a miracle in and out of itself.

Regina takes a healthy sip and wonders who the unfortunate victim of the day would be; it's always a toss up – the two appear to share the same habit of lingering in the shower far longer than necessary. Henry would sometimes fall asleep in the middle of rinsing, and Regina suspects that his birth mother does the same when Emma's grating voice suddenly stops butchering a song, even though she can still hear the water running from inside the bathroom. Hot water had never been a problem in the Mills household in the past, but now that there were three bodies forced to share it every morning, the consistency and reliability of her water heater had been duly compromised. Regina, having learned her lesson from the very first day that Emma Swan had invaded her home, took it upon herself to wake up before everyone else did and bathe first. Never again would she be the one screaming and jumping out of the shower with soap suds all over her body and shampoo in her eyes.

Twenty long minutes later, she finally gets her answer. Regina smiles as she hears the faint sound of Henry's footsteps padding upstairs. Her smile further widens into what could only be described as a sinister grin at the muffled yodeling coming from the floor below. It looks like the monster living in the basement would be the one at the receiving end of an arctic blast today. Perfect. Inexplicably delighted at the thought of Emma Swan's discomfort, she finishes the rest of her coffee and begins to wait, anticipating the shriek that is bound to break the silence of her home.

Unfortunately, she never gets to hear it.
The moment Regina sets the empty mug down to grab a piece of strawberry, something very peculiar happens. A shift in energy. It's like the earth tilted off its axis for a moment, and she has to hold on to the sides of the table just to keep herself upright. It knocks the air out of her and makes her nauseous. And like all things that leave a lasting impression, it's gone as quickly as it came. Shaken, Regina gulps in a generous amount of oxygen into her lungs and takes a few moments to get her bearings back. She knows what had just occurred. She felt it; that undeniable tingling at the base of her neck that spreads and sweeps across her skin whenever powerful magic is at play. It didn't come from her, she is certain of it.

Someone, somewhere, is playing with fire.

Trust the imbeciles in this town to ruin a perfectly nice Saturday morning.

Regina gives out a low hum of disapproval before standing up and depositing her mug on the sink. Being at the mercy of Snow White and that excruciatingly dense prince of hers, means that whatever magical conundrum happens in this town is Regina's job to figure out and fix. It isn't enough that they forced their precious little princess into her home as some sort of spy-slash-warden-slash-guardian, they also had the nerve to make Regina work as Storybrooke's resident "magical defense expert" – a ridiculous consultancy position that's under the jurisdiction of the Sheriff, no less.

It is absurd – being downgraded from almighty Queen to powerful small-town mayor to Emma Swan's magical lackey. The Evil Queen in her had wanted to turn everyone into toads, skewer them with a stick, overcook them in a stone pit and feed their rubbery hides to the trolls lurking underneath Toll bridge. But, alas, the mother in her overpowered her desire for vengeance. In the end, having Henry in her life again is enough incentive to play nice.

Regina goes through the list of possible suspects in her head while she readies Henry's breakfast; her body moving seamlessly inside the kitchen as if on auto-pilot. She places her son's cereal of choice and a carton of milk on the table and grabs a bowl and spoon from the dishwasher. Without thinking, she also puts a banana and a dark green mug beside the pot of coffee she had brewed earlier. Emma, ever the audacious interloper, had laid claim on that mug from her very first morning in the Mills home three months ago. It used to grate at Regina's nerves how comfortable the blonde is in her own house. She suspects that Emma acts that way on purpose just to get a rise out of her. And boy, does she.

But, to Regina's chagrin, the overwhelming urge to throttle Snow White's precious princess didn't seem to have that much staying power. Although she'd tried her very best to hold on to it, her annoyance slowly ebbed away when Emma made herself useful and started doing chores around the house without Regina's prompting. The old lady that used to clean for her didn't want to come anymore since the curse broke. Emma stepped up the plate and took up all the tasks that Regina hated – vacuuming, dusting, weeding, you name it. And, much to her surprise, Emma hadn't broken anything yet – not that she knows of, anyway. It is oddly... pleasant... how Regina didn't have to do every single thing anymore. Having someone to depend on felt nice, if not a little odd. Not that she'd ever admit that to anyone, let alone Emma Swan. As far as Regina is concerned, she now has a live-in maid in her home. That arrangement, she can handle.

Still bothered by what had happened a few moments ago, Regina taps her fingers absentmindedly on the granite countertop and stares outside the window overlooking the garden, her brown eyes distant and unfocused. This isn't a matter that she can easily brush off. Magic is unpredictable in this world; and, as she discovered a while back, it has considerable consequences.

Regina mulls over what she knows so far: a) what she felt earlier was definitely some sort of shockwave from a powerful spell; b) it was, much to her surprise, white magic; and c) the force was
enough to push her body sideways to the right – which basically meant that the magic had originated from the west.

The forest, Regina's eyes narrow at the thought. If the epicenter is there, and she felt it all the way here, then the implications were troublesome indeed. Potent magic – no matter if it were dark or light – could trigger another fissure to open.

And, if it is anything like the last time, they now have a big problem in their hands.

"Regina!"

She hears someone call from the floor below, startling her out of her worrisome thoughts. It only takes a second for the basement door to bang open, rattling the expensive china in the cupboard and almost throwing a painting off the wall. Regina winces at the noise and turns towards the doorway with a murderous gleam in her eyes, intent on giving the caveman of a sheriff a piece of her mind.

"Miss Swan, I d–"

The former Mayor of Storybrooke never gets to finish that sentence.

Of all the things she is expecting to see, the sight of Emma Swan wrapped in nothing but a towel is certainly not one of them. The blonde is clearly out of sorts, distress radiating off her body so intensely that Regina feels a wee bit nauseous from all the nervous energy.

She lifts an eyebrow at the harassed-looking sheriff, but her look of confusion immediately gives way to a glare as her eyes spot the puddle of water that's beginning to pool by the blonde's feet. The woman is dripping wet. Regina lets out a vexed huff. Trust her uncivilized housemate to throw her completely out of kilter by barging into her kitchen practically naked and making a mess of her immaculate floors.

Emma sees the look on Regina's face and promptly gets the hint. She moves back and stands on the top step of the stairs leading down to the basement.

"I'll mop that, I promise."

"You had better," Regina's jaws set.

She slips back into her usual all-business and no-nonsense mask, willing her cheeks not to flush. She forces her eyes to focus on Emma's face. This is embarrassing enough for the both of them; she didn't – wouldn't – be caught dead gawking.

"Miss Swan, I know you have an unfortunate predilection for prancing around in your underwear during the morning, but can't you keep this exhibitionist behavior of yours confined in your cubby-hole downstairs? My son could go down any minute and–"

"I don't have any clothes," Emma blurts out.

"That much is obvious, my dear."

"No, I mean, I don't have any clothes," Emma stresses, shuffling from one foot to another. "There's nothing in my dresser. Nada. All I have left is a pair of old jeans that I've been meaning to throw away."

"Miss Swan, let's not kid ourselves here. Most of your clothes belong to the trash anyhow," Regina says in a bored tone. "And, before you blame me for this fortunate mishap, let me just say that I didn't
have anything to do with it. Check the washing machine; Henry might've taken pity on your filthy clothes and did your laundry for you. I, on the other hand, wouldn't touch your clothes without a Hazmat suit on and a tub of disinfectant."

Emma rolls her eyes but brushes away her insults easily enough.

"Noted, Regina. And, for the record, I didn't think it was you either," she says, absolving Regina of a crime she didn't do. Emma meets her gaze dead on, her voice grim. "I think somebody broke into our house."

That gets Regina's attention. Her magic has been erratic as of late, but it's still powerful enough to be feared. Apart from the angry mob that demanded her head when the curse broke, nobody's dared to set foot near her mansion for months. And, though she would never say it out loud, the fact that the Sheriff now resided in her home also deterred potential troublemakers. Before she can stew on it, a thought strikes and Regina tenses.

If somebody had broken in then... "Henry!"

"He's fine. I just talked to him on our walkie-talkies. He's checking to see if any of his things are missing too," Emma is quick to reassure, lifting her hands up in a placating gesture.

Her towel almost slips away and Regina averts her gaze in a snap. She's certain her face had instantaneously turned red with worry for her son, and she doesn't need Emma to see it turn purple at the mere sight of the sheriff in her birthday suit. That would be mortifying to say the least.

"I'm positive my things were still there before I went in the shower. When I stepped out of the bathroom, I felt a draft and I saw the hatch that led outside wide open. The lock was hacked off. Did you see anyone in the garden?"

"I... no. I was a little preoccupied."

"Did anyone go through this door?" Emma questions, leaning her hands against the doorframe. Regina wishes she'd stop doing that. The towel's barely hanging on as is.

"Just you," she says stiffly, nailing her gaze on the light above Emma's head.

"Do you think any of your things are missing?"

"I don't know, I'm not sure," Regina murmurs, pursing her lips. She'd have to go around the mansion and take a quick inventory of her belongings. Anything of real value to her, she keeps in her safe. Regina makes a mental note to check that first.

"Okay, tell me if any of your stuff got stolen. The thief might've never made it past the basement but it doesn't hurt to be sure. I'll call the station and ask Ruby to get her ass over here and dust for fingerprints."

"Yes, well, you might want to throw on some clothes first before your deputy arrives," Regina suggests in a dry tone, casting a wary glance at the doorway leading to the living room and foyer.

Henry might come down any minute now, and, well, it's getting increasingly difficult for Regina to find something else to look at without appearing like she has some sort of attention-deficit disorder.

"Um, funny you should mention that--" Emma forces a chuckle out of her lips, a hand unconsciously scratching the back of her neck in a sheepish manner. Regina marvels at how tiny she sounds all of a sudden, and, before she knows it, her eyes go back to look at the blonde. "I kinda wasn't
exaggerating when I said that *all* of my clothes got stolen," Emma mutters, unable to meet the brunette's gaze.

"What about the clothes you wore last night?"

"I slept in the nude."

"Oh." Regina definitely didn't need to know that. Now she's got that mental image flashing in her head— "Remind me to wash your sheets three times in scalding hot water when I do the laundry," she says too quickly.

"Yeah, yeah," Emma mumbles, still incapable of making eye contact.

Regina tilts her head, looking at the other woman curiously. And then, it sinks in. *Oh. Well, that is just precious.*

"You don't have any underwear," Regina states plainly, her eyes twinkling with amusement. The red tint that explodes on Emma's face and neck says everything.

"I suppose I can lend you a blouse, but that's it," Regina says with an evil smirk, thoroughly enjoying turning the tables on the other woman. The sight of Emma being thrown out of her comfort zone for a change gives Regina a pleasant buzz.

"You just have to settle for wearing that one pair of jeans you have left. I'm not lending you any of my trousers knowing that you have to go without panties today — the last thing I need is to get infected with your germs and get a rash. And no, before you ask, I don't have any new, unused underwear to spare," she continues, effectively killing whatever Emma is about to say.

"I'm already forced to share my son and my home with you, Miss Swan, I draw the line on underwear."

Emma's mouth flaps open and close like a fish, completely at a loss for words. After a moment, she drops her head and just sighs in defeat.

"Okay, I get it. No panties, no pants, no rash. Thanks for the blouse," she mumbles half-heartedly.

"I gather the blue one my son had oh-so-generously loaned you in the past is sufficient enough, Sheriff Swan?"

Emma manages a weak nod before turning on her heels and trudging down the stairs to the basement. Regina lets out the breath she didn't know she was holding in.

*Thank goodness.*

That poor towel had been hanging on for dear life. She's no prude, but just the thought of seeing one of her greatest adversaries *that* exposed makes her feel extremely discomfited. Emma Swan is already a thorn in her side, Regina didn't need her to be the (naked) nightmare haunting her dreams too.

Still, it had been rewarding to witness the normally outspoken Sheriff so flabbergasted.

Regina indulges in a few moments of gloating before heading to her room to fetch the said blouse. She'll take her victories, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant they were. With the Charmings taking over her town, they were few and far in between.
Emma suspects the universe is conspiring against her when she tries to slip on her pants. It's bad enough that she has to go commando, but now she finds herself jumping up and down like a loon and clenching in her butt cheeks just to get it over her hips. Skintight does not even begin to describe this ratty pair of Levi's. Not only are her faded moth-eaten jeans a couple of years old – she had outgrown them significantly since moving to Storybrooke. Work as a bail bondsman often meant long hours without sleep and meals. Life as a small town Sheriff, and overall White Knight, is the exact opposite – well, not that the sleeping part had improved significantly, but the quality and quantity of meals certainly did. And now, she's paying for it.

Maybe through sheer force of will, she manages to squeeze herself into it; but, to add insult to injury, it also takes her an absurd amount of time to button it up. It takes another minute or two to pop it in the hole, but as soon as it goes in, she plops down on her bed, sweaty and topless, chest heaving from the effort.

"Jesus effin' Christ," Emma breathes out, utterly exhausted.

She stares at the ceiling fan hanging over her bed, letting herself get hypnotized by the rotating blades. It's the start of October and the weather's starting to get too cool for fans, but she keeps it on anyway. Living in Regina's mansion means that she can enjoy the perks of centralized heating. She just likes the sound the fan makes; she enjoys a bit of background noise.

The basement can get too quiet sometimes.

Whenever anyone aside from her immediate family and closest friends bother to ask her about her peculiar living arrangements, Emma just shrugs and tells them that she's living in Regina's guest room. Technically, it's not really a lie. Emma is a guest and she's living in a room. Case closed. Other people don't need to know that said room is in the basement, that it's the tiny extra bedroom where Henry and Regina used to store old toys and holiday decorations, and that on occasion, Regina would refer to it as her dungeon. She's joking, of course, but that didn't stop Emma from scouring every corner of the basement for blood spatters and torture devices during her first night at the mansion (for the record, she didn't find any).

Emma can't really complain about it though. She actually loves her room – sparse and isolated as it may be. She has her privacy. Her own bathroom. Her own TV. Her own computer (even if it's one of Regina's mammoth models from the early 90's). And best of all, she lives under the same roof as her son. Oh, Regina isn't bad company either. She's great fun if you enjoy a good pissing contest now and again. That, and she's a delightful cook (when she holds the poison).

Speaking of Regina...

Emma reaches out a hand and blindly feels for the shirt that Regina had earlier tossed down at her shivering, towel-clad self. She was half-expecting the brunette to throw in another snarky 'enjoy my shirt, Miss Swan' for old times sake, but Regina just cackled at how pathetic she looked and sauntered away from the basement door. Emma swears she can still hear that diabolic laugh ringing in her ears. Clearly, despite being on her best behavior for the past months, somewhere deep inside the enigma that is Regina Mills still resides the Evil Queen.

Emma finds the shirt on top of her pillow, and it takes a great deal of effort just to force herself to sit upright in order to slip it on. The silky garment is nice and cool on her skin. It kinda feels a little weird without a bra on, and she could actually see her nipples protruding through the fabric; but, nevertheless, she marvels at the material like she did the first time she wore the shirt. Emma can fault Regina for a lot of things, but the woman clearly has an excellent taste in clothes (and everything else, if she's being honest).
The thought of clothes slams Emma back into reality. Being used to a nomadic existence, every article of clothing she owned could fit perfectly inside a duffel bag. If one would look up 'flight risk' in a dictionary, her name would be under it. She didn't have much in terms of clothes; she didn't really need it. Her style is more practical than fashionable; hence, all the tight jeans and tanktops and every other piece of clothing that Regina mocked on a daily basis. Her jackets – all four of them – were about the only pieces she spent a great deal of money on (and, even then, Regina still found them offensive to look at). Emma didn't have many clothes to begin with, and now, she had nothing at all. Aside from the all-too-small jeans she's wearing, not a damn thing. No shirts, no tanktops, no pants, no jackets, no socks, no panties, no bras. Thank God she stopped hiding her money in socks or else she'd be royally screwed.

Emma's eyes widen comically. "Crap!"

She jumps off the bed and almost trips on her own feet, her legs scrambling towards the shoe rack by the dresser. Two pairs of shoes are missing, but three were thankfully left alone. On her knees, she sticks both hands inside her beat-up Doc Martens and pales when she feels nothing but the scratchy in-step of her boots.

*It's gone.*

*Her rainy day stash is gone.*

A nice chunk of the payments she'd received for her last five successful assignments as a bail bond agent, all gone.

Yeah, most of her money is safely stashed in the bank, but still. Three grand is still three *fucking* grand. Whoever the perp is, Emma has half the mind to set his face on fire, put the flames out with a fork and stomp on it with Regina's three-inch Jimmy Choo's. She's the Sheriff and she needs to uphold the law, but damn does retribution seem like such a sweet idea right now. That bastard had targeted her specifically; only her things got stolen. Henry and Regina's stuff was left untouched.

This is personal.

Her legs like jelly, Emma lumbers back to her bed, drops face down on the sheets and muffles a scream into her mattress. This day couldn't possibly get any worse.

But, like Mary Margaret always says, it's always darkest before dawn. And, if this isn't the darkest point yet, then she's in for quite a ride.

Though, someone up there takes pity on her and decides to throw her a bone.

Emma smells it before she even sees it.

Her perfume. A little bit of sweat. A whole lot of leather.

She almost gets whiplash from the way her neck snaps towards her pillow. Something's peeking underneath. The color of blood and apples. Without a second thought, she grabs the said pillow and flings it behind her. It knocks a few DVD's and magazines off her desk, but Emma couldn't care less about the mess.

Emma stares at the piece of clothing before her and almost weeps.

She's lost a whole lot today, but at least she still has this. Maybe that's enough. For now, at least.
Regina knows she should've been doing this inside her study, but when she sees Henry sitting all alone for breakfast, she takes her maps and her tools and lays everything across from him on the kitchen table. It may seem pathetic, but lately, she'll jump at any excuse to be in his company. Their interactions are no longer as stilted and awkward as they had been in the past, but they're still a far cry from the way he acts around Emma.

Regina envies how easily her son gives affection to the other woman and she finds herself craving for the same treatment more and more with each passing day. It's a bitter pill to swallow; but, what else can she do but take it silently and hope that she won't choke on her jealousy any time soon? It's hard, and sometimes heartbreaking, but she's trying. She hopes he sees that at least.

"You don't have to rush, he won't be here to pick you up for another hour," Regina tells Henry when she notices the hurried way he's shoveling food inside his mouth.

He seems to relax at her words; slumping against the back of his chair and chewing at a slower pace.

Regina offers him a small smile before returning her attention to the map spread before her.

Henry would normally sleep in until nine during weekends; but, for the past few Saturdays now, her son has been learning the ways of the sword with his grandfather. Henry is not a morning person and he probably never will be, but wooden swords, it would seem, have enough power to draw her precious young boy from the temptation of a few extra hours in bed. Regina wishes she knew that five years ago, when she would pull every muscle in her body and test the very limits of her patience when she'd get him ready for school by bathing, dressing and spoon-feeding him herself because he was practically catatonic in the morning.

Regina can't help the wistful smile that tugs at her lips at the memory. Henry looks at her peculiarly from across the table but doesn't say anything.

No matter how trying those moments had been, Regina had enjoyed every minute of it. Sometimes she wishes that they could just go back to the time when she was the center of Henry's world. When he would give the sweetest kisses and the tightest of hugs as freely as he would say 'I love you' to her every single night before he went to bed. Days she was everything he idolized and she was every bit his hero – not the villain that he would come to fear since he came into possession of that book. Regina just wishes, hell, desperately wants, to go back to those precious years when Henry would crawl beside her in bed and play with her earlobe until he fell asleep. It wasn't perfect, but it was as close to it as they ever got. And, she had taken it all for granted.

The road to redemption is long, lonely and hard. Regina knows this now; yet still, she is willing to go through hell and back for even the smallest morsel of affection from her son. Their relationship is still not how it used to be, but they are getting somewhere at least. She knows deep inside he loves her still, but too many lies and secrets and betrayals compounded all the hurt, and, whatever love he had for her is buried so deep that her little boy is having trouble seeing it – let alone remember that it exists in the first place. Bringing Emma Swan and Snow White back to Storybrooke had helped in restoring a tiny bit of his trust, but it's still not enough. Mending fences is a slow and arduous process that requires patience and understanding, and Regina's pouring all her strength into repairing the bridge that she herself had burned down so carelessly because of her foolish desire to uphold a curse that did nothing but gnaw at her soul in the first place.

She wants to earn his trust. Gain his respect. Deserve his love.

Henry is her world, and if she does things right, maybe in time he'll let her fully back into his.

"Mom?"
"Hm?"

"I felt something earlier," Henry shares in a quiet tone, playing with the cereal in his bowl with a spoon. "I'm not sure, but I think it was magic."

A burst of pride fills Regina's chest. He truly is a gifted and extremely perceptive boy. Not a lot of people would pick up on that.

"It was. I felt it too."

"It wasn't you?"

"No," Regina shakes her head. "But I'm going to figure out who."

Henry nods and returns his attention to his breakfast.

"What are those for?" he asks over a mouthful of cereal, looking at the assortment of objects spread before her.

"I'm trying to find concentrated energy spots," Regina explains in a patient tone. She lifts her hand and shows him the dull white crystal that she had been dangling over the map of Storybrooke with a string. "This crystal was given to me by Maleficientan old friend of mine. It has special properties, one being that it's drawn to magical energy. Think of it as some sort of compass. I'm trying to pinpoint the origin of the magic we felt earlier. When the crystal finds the spot on the map, it will glow bright blue."

Henry seems to absorb this information like a sponge, and from that moment on, he begins to watch her work with an eager set of eyes.

"Will that help you figure out if another fissure opened?" he asks after some time.

"That's what I'm hoping for," Regina answers softly, eyes flitting from the map to the face of her son. Henry is trying to be the brave young prince, but she can tell that he's getting antsy. Those tiny creases between his brows spoke volumes. She can't blame him; the last time a fissure appeared in the forest – the day Rumpelstiltskin mysteriously disappeared from Storybrooke, no less – goblins came out of it and wreaked havoc around town. It took the Sheriff's Department two days to wrangle the goblins together and put them down for good. Regina came out of that experience with a nasty gash on her right shoulder while Emma survived with an assortment of cuts and bruises on her arms and legs. The other deputies suffered minor burns and everyone looked like hell for days. Henry couldn't sleep for two straight nights, worrying about them, stressing over the fact that they almost died. Regina doesn't want him to go through that ordeal again, so she is quick to offer some reassurance to her son.

"If there's a fissure, I'll find it right away and seal it before anything comes out. Don't worry, everything's going to be fine."

Henry smiles weakly and nods, shoveling another spoonful of cereal into his mouth.

"Mom?" he speaks up again after a moment.

"Yes?"

"When you find it, take Emma with you. Don't go off on your own again like last time."
Regina smiles softly, and she feels her heart clench and expand, touched by his concern. The words claw out of her throat. "O-of course."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"She's the White Knight, it's her job to protect the weak," he continues.

Regina wants to argue that she's far from being a weakling and needing protection – least of all from Emma Swan – but she decides to bite her tongue and let her son continue to share his mind. Brushing away his opinions never did their relationship any good.

As if reading her thoughts, Henry backtracks a bit and clarifies, "Mom, I know you're not weak. But monsters are scary and dangerous and you need your magic to defeat them. And, without Emma there to hold your hand, your magic gets... weird."

"No, it doesn't," Regina is quick to deny. "Magic is different here, you know that. The rules are not the same. In the old world, one plus one is two. In here, one plus one equals three. It will take some getting used to. Besides, it's been twenty-eight years without practice, I've just been a little rusty. My magic is working just fine."

Henry floors her with a knowing look. "You turned our car into a pony."

"That was an accident."

"He's still in the petting zoo. It's been three weeks."

"The spell will wear off," Regina dismisses with a wave of a hand. Henry lifts an eyebrow. "—eventually," Regina finishes lamely.

Unfortunately, Henry isn't done. "When Emma fell in the lake, the wind spell you used to dry her clothes gave her gas instead."

"Maybe I did that on purpose."

You turned our apples purple," Henry narrows his eyes.

Regina shrugs, faking nonchalance. "It's my favorite color."

"You gave Leroy boobs."

"Everyone has... breasts, even men. It's human anatomy," Regina mumbles feebly, her cheeks coloring.

She was trying to heal the man after the goblin attack, but well. Her intentions were good, that's all she can say. At least the dwarf had shrunk back from a D-cup to his normal chest size after a week (which is probably a modest B).

"Mom," Henry sighs wearily, sounding so unlike the ten-year-old boy that he is. "The chicken you were cooking in the oven was running around the garden yesterday."

Regina bristles in her seat. "You saw that?"

"Why did you think I didn't eat dinner last night?" Henry makes a face. Despite his obvious disgust at seeing a headless, skinless half-baked chicken frolicking in their backyard, Henry looks at her and
grins cheekily. "It's kinda mean that you fed it all to Emma though."

"She liked it," Regina shrugs and before she knows it, she's sharing a rare quiet laugh with her son. Warmth spreads across her body. It feels... nice.

Regina's more receptive to his words after that brief bonding moment, so she doesn't offer any more excuses when he starts to speak his mind again.

"Emma kinda makes your magic work okay. She thinks she's your magical savior or something. So, please mom, let her protect you," Henry pleads, his expression deathly serious. "And, when your magic isn't acting weird because she's there, you can use that to protect Emma as well. Gramps told me that she's not pretty good with a sword – and, that I'm actually better at it than her."

Regina can't help but snort at the truth in Henry's words. Emma being bad with a sword is the understatement of the century. The White Knight does not swing swords; she flings them at her enemies. That's about her one and only go-to move. If sword fighting is in any way like throwing a javelin, maybe Emma Swan might actually be decent at it.

"Mom? Promise?" Henry prods, looking at her with expectant eyes.

Regina exhales slowly and gives him a sincere smile. As if she could say no to this boy and that face. "You have my word," she murmurs.

That sets his mind at ease. He smiles shyly at her before going back to finish the remaining bits of soggy cornflakes in his bowl. Regina thinks she knows where this is coming from. Henry has always been a very loving child, always concerned with the welfare of the people he held dear. The simple truth is that he simply doesn't want both of his mothers hurt; and, if that means that she and Emma would have to work together and have each other's backs despite their differences, Henry's prepared to make at least one of them swear on it for his own peace of mind. Her son is both caring and cunning – a perfect combination of the White Knight in his blood and the Evil Queen in his upbringing. Regina can respect that. And damn if it didn't make her eyes water a little.

"We have some good news and some bad news," Emma declares as soon as she enters the kitchen with Ruby in tow. "Which one do you guys wanna hear first?"

"Bad," Mother and son chorus, much to Emma's amusement. Regina and Henry always did seem to want to get the bad stuff out of the way before hearing something good.

Emma looks at Ruby and motions her forward with a hand, giving her deputy the floor.

"So, I just finished dusting Emma's room as well as the hatch the perp used to enter the basement. The hatch and the hacked off padlock were totally clean, which would suggest that the thief wore gloves or wiped his prints before he left," Ruby explains while removing the latex gloves she had on and stuffing them inside her crime kit. "I got prints in Em's room but they're more likely hers than--"

"He?" Henry interrupts. "You said 'he', so the thief is a guy?"

"We're not a hundred percent sure, but it's very likely that our suspect is a man," Emma speaks up, leaning against the island counter with her arms folded on her chest. "Or a boy. Or boys. Rufio and his gang of juvenile delinquents have been busy with pranking just about everyone in town recently. They've never been so bold as to target me directly though."

"The Lost Boys?" Henry grins, his eyes lighting up like stars. Emma and Regina share a knowing
look. Of all the people their son could hero worship, Henry has to fanboy all over those immature brats. They hope it's a phase that will soon run its course; he needs better role models.


"I don't think it's them. They're jokers, not thieves."

Emma fights the urge to sigh at the kid's words – he's always quick to defend his idols whenever those pranksters come up in a discussion.

"Either way, we're not ruling them out until we find something concrete," she tells Henry, earning a disappointed pout from the boy. "Storybrooke is a small town; a lead will turn up eventually. And, it's not like anyone can leave this place. We'll find that bas-bad guy soon and throw his butt in jail."

"Why are the two of you so sure it's a man? Isn't it too early to jump to conclusions?" Regina probes, finally joining the conversation. Her voice carries the same authoritative tone that is often used by a certain Mayor, and without noticing, Emma and Ruby stand a little straighter. Judging from the way she's looking at them, Regina is clearly unimpressed. "Like you've said, you barely have any proof in your hands," she finishes.

"It's more of a gut feeling," Emma averts her eyes, not really in the mood to go into details.

"Emma's underwear," Ruby admits without preamble, much to her friend's annoyance. Ruby ignores the murderous look Emma throws her way and explains, "Stealing pieces of clothing like jackets, pants and shirts is understandable. The thief could use those things, maybe even sell them. But, another person's underwear? Far too intimate to reuse. So this could only mean one thing: the perp's a perv. Yeah, we know a panty perv can also be a woman, but in most cases, it's a man."

"What's a perv?" Henry inquires.

"Something you shouldn't aspire to be," Regina answers easily.

"God, that perv is probably doing you-know-what to your undies, Em," Ruby leans closer to her and says in a low voice. But of course, her son and his super sensitive hearing catch it anyway.

"What's he doing with it?" Henry asks, the face of purity and innocence.

"Rubes," Emma warns through gritted teeth.

"He's doing what?" Henry repeats.

"Uh, burning them," Ruby lies smoothly.

"Well that's something he and I can both agree on," Regina mutters under her breath, earning a pointed look from a red-faced Emma.

"Anyway, I better head out," Ruby inclines her head towards the doorway and gives Emma's shoulder a squeeze. "I'll run the prints through the database and see if there's a match. See you at the station?"

"Yeah, but I'll uh, be a bit late. Have to swing by someplace for a few minutes to buy... you know." Emma gives her deputy a loaded look, hoping she'd get the hint.

She's planning to spend her lunch break replenishing her depleted wardrobe over at one of only three clothing stores in town; but, right now, there is one article of clothing she can't do without any
minute longer. Emma is getting chafed in places where one isn't meant to be chafed. Whoever said that going commando is sexy should try doing it while wearing skin tight jeans. Just the simple act of walking makes her feel like she's getting rubbed by a blunt saw down in her nether regions and damn if it doesn't make her fear for the integrity of her lady bits.

"Sorry, you're going where?" Ruby asks and Emma fights the urge to groan. Trust her bestfriend to pry.

"Little Miss Muffet's," Emma mumbles, finding the floor interesting all of a sudden.

Ruby's eyes light up like a Christmas tree.

"Ooh, I was just there the other day! They have these super sexy lace ones that just came in. They come in a lot of colors," Ruby presses her body to Emma's side and whispers in her ear, making sure that Henry won't overhear them this time around.

Emma doesn't see it, but she thinks she feels a pair of eyes burning a hole through her skull. She's sure it isn't Henry. But, then that would imply... no. Nope, not possible.

"Buy a couple, I bet you'd look hot in them – might even make you feel sexy enough to finally make the moves on someone in this town. God knows you need to get laid," Ruby finishes off with a salacious wink.

Emma just rolls her eyes and chuckles, gently nudging her friend towards the doorway.

"Okay, go do your job, I'll meet you there soon."

"Yes, Ma'am! I'll see myself out," Ruby salutes the Sheriff and waves Henry goodbye. She merely inclines her head in Regina's direction before turning on her heels and taking her leave.

"What's the good news?" Henry turns to look at Emma, his fingers playing with the straps on the backpack sitting on his lap.

"Huh?"

"You said you also had some good news to tell us," Henry reminds her.

"Oh, that. Yeah, almost forgot."

"So, what is it?"

"You're looking at it," Emma smiles from ear to ear, puffing out her chest.

Henry and Regina both look positively clueless. Emma exhales in disappointment, feeling her bubble burst.

"I still have my jacket," she states the obvious, motioning to the red leather jacket she's donned with a flourish of a hand.

"How unfortunate," Regina sighs, going back to whatever sorcery she's doing with a crystal and a map. "The thief wasn't very thorough."

Emma bites her tongue and settles for glaring at Regina instead. As can be expected, she is ignored.

"Emma," Henry tugs at the end of her sleeve, drawing her attention back to him. "How come it's easy for police on TV to find criminals? Sometimes they just find a piece of hair and then they'd
catch the bad guy right away."

"They have a whole lot more resources at their disposal, Henry. Labs, tech, whatnot."

"Why don't you have any of those?"

"With the budget I'm working with?" Emma snorts, fighting the urge to laugh out loud. "I don't know kid, maybe we'd have better tools if a certain someone didn't cut my budget and deny every single one of my requisition orders."

"The annual budget was approved at a time when the only thing your department was doing on a daily basis was rescuing cats from big bad trees and arresting Leroy for drunk and disorderly behavior at Granny's," Regina says in a tone so professional it gave Emma flashes of her favorite demanding Mayor.

She kinda misses Mayor Mills a bit. Not much. Just a bit. She can be a pain in the ass. A hot one, yes, but still a pain.

"Clearly, during my tenure as Mayor, my office did not foresee that you would break my curse and we'd have trolls and goblins running amok in Storybrooke. If I did, maybe I would've considered your request for flashbang grenades and a rocket launcher."

"You asked for a rocket launcher?" Henry's eyes widen in awe.

"I, uh, kinda had a beer when I filled out that requisition form," Emma admits in the tiniest of tones.

Henry and Regina both give her identical looks of disbelief, clearly not buying her story.

"Okay, maybe four. Five. Seven beers," she amends just as quietly.

Regina rolls her eyes at her revelation. "I suspected as much."

"You did?"

"Miss Swan, you drew a stick figure of yourself firing a rocket to my face."

"I did?" Emma's voice rises up to a squeak. She honestly cannot remember much of that night aside from being drunk and pissed off at some inane thing Regina did.

"Yes, and, you were kind enough to put a caption underneath just to make sure I understood your message."

"What did you write?" Henry asks her. When Emma couldn't answer, he turns to Regina. "What did she write, mom?"

Regina, smirking oh-so deviously, is more than happy to indulge in her son's curiosity. "Well, Henry, to quote Miss Swan: just in case you were wondering what I needed it for – here's a rocket, from the goodness of my heart to the lifeless black void that is yours."

Henry gapes at her and Emma wants nothing more than to turtle up and crawl inside her skin and hide. She can't believe Regina even took the time to memorize that. She really must've left an impression – however bad it may have been.

"She also drew herself lobbying flashbang grenades at me to 'brighten up my day'," Regina goes on, much to Emma's horror. "If she hadn't drawn it in crayon, I would've taken her threats seriously and had her deputy throw her in jail."
"Emma," Henry says in reproach, shaking his head at her. He sounds so much like Mary Margaret then when she caught her playing poker and gambling with her deputies during a slow day at the station. Only this time, the disappointed edge in Henry's voice cut worse.

"I do believe I still have the form in my study. Do you want me to frame it for you?" Regina smiles dazzlingly, clearly enjoying her discomfort.

More than embarrassment, overwhelming shame floods Emma's system. It makes her head start throbbing. What an example to set to the kid, huh?

"I'm sorry," Emma murmurs softly and tentatively meets Regina's surprised gaze, lacing her voice with as much sincerity as she can muster.

It isn't that hard, considering she truly does regret acting so childishly. The look of disappointment in Henry's eyes flashes in her head. She's the White Knight, of pure heart and noble intentions; he expected more from her and it shows on his face.

"I shouldn't have done that, it was wrong. No matter what you did to me that day, you didn't deserve that kind of immature behavior from me. Plus, it was a waste of the town's requisition papers and Mary Margaret's crayons."

Regina, ever the tormentor, lets her stew in silence for a full minute before letting her off the hook with a simple: "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Apology accepted."

Emma smiles and Regina responds with the tiniest, barely perceptible upward quirk of her lips. Henry observes the two of them with a curious tilt of his head before the sound of David's truck pulling up the driveway sends him running towards the front door, backpack swinging wildly in his arms. He's gone before his mothers could even call him back for a hug or a kiss farewell.

"Not even a simple goodbye," Emma clicks her tongue in disapproval.

She steals a glance at Regina and immediately feels bad at the quiet resignation on the other woman's face. Her expression is that of someone who has seen this thing happen one too many times. It sucks to think that Regina must've gotten pretty used to having her son constantly leaving her without a word or even a backward glance. And, somehow, without warning, Emma's heart goes out to the other woman. Regina might be a lot of things, but she's not a bad mother. Emma makes a mental note to have a talk with Henry about it soon. He's a good kid, it's just that sometimes he doesn't realize what he's doing is wrong until someone points it out to him. He'll listen, she knows he will.

Emma walks over to the pot of coffee on the counter and pours herself a cup. She palms her green mug with both hands and holds it near her nose, giving the liquid inside a good whiff. A contented sigh escapes her lips.

"So, what are you working on?" she looks in Regina's direction and takes a tentative sip from her cup, her eyes fluttering briefly as the hot liquid goes down her throat.

Regina, concentrating hard from the looks of it, doesn't even look up from today's important task.

"Finding magical energy," she simply says.

Emma leans her weight against the counter and tilts her head to the side, studying the frown on
Regina's face. Poor woman looks exhausted. Also, more than a tad frustrated. Over and over again, Regina dangles a piece of crystal tied to a string and lets it hover above every inch of the Storybrooke map she has spread before her. Emma has no clue what's supposed to happen, but it's apparent that it hasn't – or probably wouldn't – be happening anytime soon. It seems Regina's magic is acting wonky as usual.

After a while of watching Regina drive herself further and further into frustration, Emma decides to lend a helping hand – in the most literal sense. Leaving the now empty mug beside Regina's own one on the sink, she grabs the banana that Regina was nice enough to set aside for her and goes around the kitchen table to stand beside the brunette's chair.

Quietly, Emma extends her free hand towards the former Mayor and waits to see if Regina will take the bait. Emma watches Regina's face for a reaction and fights the grin that's just begging to break out on her lips. Judging from the 'I-just-sucked-on-a-lemon' expression that she has on, it's abundantly clear that Regina would rather be maimed and disemboweled by a werewolf than accept her help. But, if her slightest hand twitch is any indication, Emma knows that the brunette is at least tempted.

"Need help?" she asks softly, this time vocalizing her offer of assistance, throwing the ball in Regina's court.

It takes a few moments for Emma to get an answer.

"No, thank you," Regina says stiffly, her pride winning over.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Are you really? Cause you look like you could really use some help."

"I'm fine."

"You're struggling."

"I am one of, if not the, most powerful witch of my time. I don't struggle, especially not when it concerns magic."

"Okay, not struggling. Miserably failing, then."

"I have not failed."

"Yet."

"This takes time, I almost have it. I'm getting there."

"If your plan is to get nowhere, then yeah, you're getting there alright."

A menacing growl comes out of Regina's throat. "Sheriff Swan, don't you have better things to do, like I don't know, catch a thief?"

"Yes, I do. Which is why you have to let me help you so I can leave the house already and start hunting that bastard down. It won't be very knightly of me to leave a helpless soul in her time of distress. Now, let me help so I can go."

"I'm hardly helpless," Regina scoffs.
"One could argue that you hardly have a soul either, but that's not the point," Emma cheekily fires back with a mischievous glint in her eyes. "Now stop being stubborn and take my hand."

"I'm not asking for it."

"Well, you're getting it anyway."

"I don't want to hold your hand, Miss Swan."

"Your twitchy fingers say otherwise."

Regina balls her free hand into a fist, glaring at it as if it had betrayed her. And yeah, maybe it did. Emma exhales deeply at the conflicted expression that crosses the other woman's face. Regina's probably so used to demanding and threatening people to do her bidding, that when help is offered freely and without any strings attached, she has no clue how to acknowledge - let alone accept - it.

"C'mon Regina, think of it this way: your magic is like a shot battery and my touch is your jumper cables. I'm your walking, talking, breathing power source. Whether you like it or not, you need me," Emma continues in an utterly unapologetic tone. She practically shoves her hand in front of Regina's face. "Touch me, use me. You know you want to."

The look Regina gives her is one of surprise, disgust, curiosity and something else all rolled into one wide-eyed and open-mouthed package. Emma doesn't mean for that last statement to sound tawdry, but it did, much to Regina's horror and Emma's amusement. Gathering her wits, Regina slaps her hand away as if Emma's holding a turd and letting her sniff it. Knowing she just got gloriously rebuffed, Emma chuckles to herself and goes around the table, plopping down on the seat that Henry was occupying before he left.

"Go to work, Sheriff. Why are you still here?" Regina sighs, sounding very much annoyed and exasperated by her continued presence.

"Breakfast," Emma answers simply, peeling the banana in her hands and taking a huge, unladylike bite. "Why are you trying to find some 'magical energy' crap anyway? Did something happen?"

The crease between Regina's brows deepens at her query. Emma observes the way her jaw tightens with interest. After a tense moment, Regina tears her gaze from the crystal and looks at the blonde, her expression grave.

"Henry and I felt something earlier."

Emma stops mid-chew. She swallows hard and almost chokes on the chunks, but she forces it down her throat.

"When?" she asks gruffly.

"When you were in the shower."

"Magic?" Emma questions, her voice going quiet.

"Yes."

"Strong enough to open a fissure?"

Regina nods weakly and Emma feels her stomach drop.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Emma frowns, unable to keep out the accusatory tone in her voice.
Of course, Regina is quick to go on the defensive, obviously not liking her tone one bit. She fixes Emma with a hard stare.

"I wanted to figure out where it originated from before going to you with my findings. I didn't want to hand over information that is grossly incomplete, that is not how I do things. I may not enjoy working under you as a consultant, Sheriff Swan, but when I'm tasked with important matters, I never give them any less of the attention that they deserve."

The two women stare each other down for a moment, both too strong-willed and stubborn for their own good. Unsurprisingly, Emma's the first to relent.

"Yeah, you're right. I know about your work and how thorough it is. And, I appreciate that. I'm sorry."

Emma's apology takes Regina aback and completely disarms the brunette. She means it too, which is even more surprising, but Emma probably wouldn't have said it if she hadn't felt so disquieted by the threat of another fissure appearing in town.

"Do you think Gold's behind it? Is he even back in Storybrooke?"

Regina answers her question with a quick shake of her head. "No. And it's definitely not him."

Emma's eyes narrow with suspicion. She's never one to be easily convinced. "How can you be so sure?"

"Magic always leaves a certain... residue. I guess you could think of it as some kind of mark. It's unique to the one who possesses it, like a fingerprint, if you may. It's difficult to pick up on; it's mostly a distinct feeling, and one must be extremely well-versed in the magical arts to catch it. I've known Rumpelstiltskin long enough to become familiar with his brand of magic. Believe me, Miss Swan, it wasn't him," Regina says, matter-of-factly. "What Henry and I experienced earlier lacked the feeling of emptiness and desperation that I've come to associate with that imp. What we felt was powerful and... pure. White magic."

Emma takes a moment to absorb the information. If it's white magic, it can only mean one thing.

"The fairy nuns, then," Emma deduces.

Regina nods in agreement. "That would be the most logical conclusion."

"Oh God, fucking celibate fairies," Emma moans, rubbing her face with her hands in annoyance and fatigue. "Sorry, language. I know, my bad," she mumbles quickly when she sees the disapproving look on Regina's face. Emma sighs and runs her fingers through her hair. "Jesus, find a bit of fairy dust at the mines and already they're going to town with it – literally."

"What did you expect, Sheriff Swan? Were you really so naïve as to believe that the Blue Fairy would be able to stop herself from doing magic now that she's in possession of her precious dust?"

"They only found a small pouch worth of that fairy crack. I thought she was wise enough to save it for a rainy day," Emma shrugs weakly, feeling annoyed at her own naivety.

She should've made the Blue Fairy swear an oath or something equally binding. Small spells she could ignore, but powerful ones that may open magical crevices? Emma cannot, and will not, turn a blind eye on that. Not after last time.

"I'll swing by the convent and get to the bottom of things," she says, sounding older than her years.
This day is just getting better and better, isn't it? "I don't care if we don't have a law against magic use in this town, but if a fissure does appear and the fairies had something to do with it, I'm going to haul their asses in jail and slap them with a fine so big they'd be selling candles forever. I don't give a damn if I look like the town's biggest villain for locking up nuns."

"You go and embrace your dark side then," Regina says with a devilish little smirk before turning her attention back to her all-too-important task. "I'll call you when I locate the spell's point of origin. I have a feeling it's somewhere west of here. Maybe the patch of forest near Camden road."

Emma nods and pulls out her cellphone from her pocket, planning to give the station a call to fill her deputies in on the latest developments. Underwear shopping and thief chasing will have to wait. They have more important matters at hand. Emma's just about to push her seat back from the table and take her leave when a chill runs down her spine. Regina's last words wash over her and anchor her on the chair. What if...

"Regina," she says timidly. "Camden road is just a block from here. You said that I was in the shower when you and Henry felt powerful magic, and I'm pretty sure I was still taking a bath when my stuff got stolen. Do you... do you think what happened is somehow connected to the break-in?"

Regina's hand freezes and the crystal dangles limply from the string. It's clear that she hasn't considered that possibility until now. Brown eyes meet her own green ones, and, Emma's sure the same worry that's evident in Regina's eyes is also flashing in hers.

They need to get to the bottom of this.

"Regina," Emma leans forward on the table and extends a hand out to the brunette, and in a soft, pleading tone, she murmurs: "Please."

And, that is all it took.

Emma doesn't have the same power that Gold used to lord over Regina, but nevertheless, that one simple word is enough to prompt the former Queen to let go of her pride, reach over and take her hand. Maybe they are right; maybe please really is the magic word. As soon as their palms meet and their fingers intertwine, they feel it. That tingling sensation that pricks their skins from the soles of their feet to the tops of their head. It's like getting struck by lightning; that feeling of electricity flowing freely between their bodies making them both shiver in their seats. Both of them have to suck in a huge breath, feeling overwhelmed and disoriented. The air seems to crackle and spark, and before they know it, the crystal starts spinning wildly over the faded map.

Regina gasps and Emma gawks. Both of them turn white as a sheet when the crystal turns bright blue and stops over a spot that they know all too well.

Regina had been right about one thing. The magic had originated from the west.

But it isn't the forest near Camden road.

It's the clearing in the small patch of woods behind their house.
A giant earthworm lies in the middle of the muddy path and Emma feels the irresistible urge to flick it towards Regina with a stick. No matter how tempting that idea is, however, she quickly nips it in the bud. Regina would probably conjure a snake to scare the living crap out of her as form of retribution. Emma might not enjoy it, but she could live with that punishment. But, seeing as how Regina's magic is as unpredictable as an unhinged crack addict, that snake would probably turn into ten-foot hydra and kill them both. So... no.

Sometimes, her ubiquitous desire to get a rise out of Regina every moment of every day reminds Emma of pigtail-pulling in playgrounds. Everyone knows what the motivation behind that seemingly innocent antagonistic act means; the implications of which - though disturbing on so many levels - would actually explain a lot. However, Emma has no desire to psychoanalyze herself or reflect on her behavior towards Regina and what it implies any time soon. So, she just tells herself that she likes to annoy the Evil Queen for kicks. It's entertaining because of how easy it is to provoke her majesty's legendary temper. It's nothing; just harmless fun. Besides, convincing herself that she's doing it for shits and giggles is easier than admitting that there is something deeper, something infinitely scarier, and something far more meaningful than juvenile intentions driving her actions.

"You stepped on a worm," a voice cuts through Emma's reverie and brings her crashing back to reality.

Ah, crap. Karma, meet your bitch.

Emma scrapes the poor, disgusting fish bait from the sole of her boot with a fallen twig. She tries not to look at Regina and the smug little smirk that's sure to be playing on her lips. They continue the rest of the very short journey in silence, stopping every so often to swat away insects and fight their way through bushes and all sorts of shrubbery.

Her father's sword would've come in handy just about now, but Emma, much to her shame, had surrendered the blade to David after she nearly skewered Pongo with it when she was trying to save the dog from goblins. For a second then, she thought Pongo would shit bricks and shed all his spots in fright when her sword whizzed past his head and impaled the wooden fence behind him. Her throwing arm was off that night, much to Archie's relief.

Oh well, people will just have to settle on her being the White Knight with a gun, as opposed to a sword and shield. Everyone's safer without a sword at her hip – not until she learns how to properly wield one, anyway.

Emma almost loses her footing when her jacket gets snagged on a thorny bush, but a warm hand catches her elbow and steadies her.

"Thanks," she says over her shoulder.

Regina's face remains painfully passive, but Emma feels the slightest pressure of a hand squeezing her elbow before Regina pulls it away.

They're nearing their destination when Regina decides to speak.

"Remember, when we get to the clearing, don't touch anything."
"Alright."

"When we see it, don't go near it. Don't take a closer look at it. Don't even breathe on it. Do you get me?"

"Yeah, yeah."

"Miss Swan."

"Yes, your majesty, I get you."


"I'm not a kid, Regina. You don't have to tell me twice."

"You're absolutely right. Twice is not enough. Someone with your attention span needs constant reminding."

"..."

"Rolling your eyes at me doesn't make it less true, princess."

"I'm the Sheriff, your highness. I think I know a thing or two about behaving in a crime scene. Stop treating me like a brainless child."

"That's tricky, since you have the tendency of acting like one."

"..."

"Miss Swan?"

"What?"

"Don't touch anything."

Emma lets go of the small branch she's pushing out of their way and is instantly rewarded with the sound of it thwacking against Regina's face. She stifles a laugh at the indignant little rant that immediately follows. Emma kinda admires how Regina's vocabulary (where flowery meets fiery) can make the act of cursing her to damnation sound elegant and refined. It's a gift not everyone possesses; which is okay, since cursing is meant to sound crass anyway.

"You did that on purpose," Regina accuses, extending a hand and giving Emma's back a shove. It isn't forceful enough to send the blonde toppling to the ground, but it does cause Emma to lurch forward and almost disappear into a tall shrub.

Emma thinks about retaliating, but one look at Regina's red nose makes her think twice. They'd never make it to the clearing in one piece if they keep on with their usual game of one-up-manship. As a way of calling a truce, she gallantly extends a hand and helps Regina up a slippery incline. Regina grips her hand a little too hard, but nevertheless, she doesn't let go. It takes Emma clearing her throat thrice for Regina to drop her hold when they reach the top. They don't talk about it - or about anything else really - until they're standing side by side at the edge of the clearing.

Regina turns to her and starts, "Remember--"

"Don't touch anything," Emma finishes with a tired breath. "I'll stand here and do absolutely nothing."
"Yes, you're quite adept at that," Regina snarks and Emma finds herself rolling her eyes for the nth time.

"Well, your majesty, let's get this over with. If you plan to do some magic, touch me already, we don't have all day."

Regina gives her a scathing look before slowly, and very reluctantly, moving her hand towards the blonde. She doesn't fully grasp Emma's hand like she did earlier in the kitchen, when she siphoned off whatever magical energy is inside the Sheriff to power up her own magic. This time, Regina's touch is tentative and ever so light that if Emma hadn't looked down, she wouldn't have known that they are touching at all. The backs of their hands brush intimately against each other and after a moment's hesitation, Regina gingerly hooks her index finger with Emma's and holds on for dear life. Emma thinks that on a different occasion, she might have enjoyed the rare and somewhat pleasing quality of this gentle touch, had she not basically felt like dry heaving when the electricity thing happened again. She suspects, rightfully so, that she's looking very much like vertigo's bitch at this very moment. Regina, on the other hand, is looking positively unfazed and far from being undone.

It takes a minute or two for Emma to clamp down her nausea, but as soon as she feels herself reaching equilibrium, she turns her head and chances a glance at the woman beside her. Regina's eyes are shut closed but her lips are moving unnaturally fast, chanting words in an exotic tongue. Against her better judgment, Emma finds herself staring, completely enthralled by what she's seeing. Despite saying words that sounded gibberish, fiendish and positively unholy in her ears, Regina's looking absolutely radiant. Glowing, even. There is something so infinitely captivating about someone completely in their element; confident, thriving and compelling. Emma can't tear her eyes away.

"What did you do?" Emma asks, ever so quietly, when Regina finally opens her eyes and breaks their contact. The feeling of loss that washes over her clenches at her chest and makes her fingers twitch, but she stomps it down and ignores it.

"Locator spell," Regina murmurs, a little breathless but also slightly energized. "It will reveal the exact spot where the spell was performed."

"Why didn't you just use the glowing crystal thingy again?"

"It only works on a map."

"I've got Google Maps on my phone," she says helpfully.

"Google what?"

"Google maps."

Regina blinks slowly, looking at her blankly.

"Seriously?" Emma pulls a face. To her credit, Regina doesn't look like she's pulling her leg.

"You've been here for twenty-eight years, surely you've heard of the internet? Oh, wait. You still have a betamax player at home. Nevermind."

Regina lets out an exasperated huff and levels her with a look.

"Miss Swan, I know perfectly well what Google is, I am not some ignorant technophobe like some of the ancient crones in Storybrooke. I have not, however, used this 'google maps' contraption you're talking about. Why should I? I already know this town inside out and it's not like I can leave this
place anyway."

"Alright, point taken..." Emma lifts her hands in surrender.

"And, just so you know, that betamax player is a collector's item," Regina says stiffly, sticking her nose in the air. "Now, can we go and do what we came out here to do? I, for one, have no intention of spending the whole day with bugs trying to crawl up my legs."

"Maybe you should've worn pants then," Emma mutters under her breath, side-eyeing Regina's poor choice of outfit.

Who wears a pencil skirt on a frickin' trek to the woods? Granted, it's right outside their house, but still. Underdressed, much? That skirt is just like a flashing neon sign for mosquitoes and other creepy crawlies, inviting them to feast on the all-you-can-eat buffet that is Regina Mills' legs. Emma lets out a sigh. She can never understand fashionable women and their tendency to forego practicality for vanity. At least Regina had the common sense to wear flats and not her usual high heels.

"You said something, Sheriff?"

Emma quickly shakes her head in the negative. She's no idiot – and neither is she suicidal. Questioning Regina's clothing choices is hazardous to one's health. Her majesty is uber sensitive about it, hilariously enough.

Regina studies her with a look that drips with pure suspicion, but then looks away and gazes at the clearing instead.

Emma follows her lead and does the same, sweeping the open space with her eyes. Nothing seems different, it still looks pretty much the same as it did before all the creepy chanting and the kinda erotic finger hooking they did earlier.

"Did your spell work?" she turns to the brunette.

"We'll know soon enough. The spell is designed to release purple smoke at the magic's point of origin. It won't appear until you're very close to it though, so I have to comb through this clearing very, very carefully," Regina supplies before flooring Emma with a stern look. "Now do you understand why I don't want you touching anything? One wrong move and you might accidentally stumble upon whatever residue was left behind. I won't be able to find out anything about the spell if that happens."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry, I get it. Keep away from the clearing. Outside, good. Inside, bad." Emma recites and tentatively takes a step back from the open space. Regina gives her a rare, approving look – like she was a child who finally learned how to pee in the john – before setting off to do her thing.

Ever so carefully, Regina stalks forward and studies their surroundings in an almost clinical way, minding her every step and calculating her every move. Emma leans against a nearby tree, crosses her ankles together, stuffs her hands inside the back pocket of her jeans, and just quietly observes. This is Regina's area of expertise; it would be wise not to go against her instructions. Even if every cell in Emma's body wants nothing more than to jump in and offer assistance. She's not used to standing idly by and letting others take the reigns. She's a take-charge kind of girl. Act first, think later. Never failed to get her in a shitload of trouble though.

Thankfully, her cellphone saves her from doing something incredibly idiotic.

Emma feels, rather than hears, her phone vibrating in her pocket. Still keeping an eye out for Regina, she pulls her phone out and glances at the caller ID before picking up. It's the station.
"Tell me you've got some good news for me, Rubes."

"It's me," Leroy's gruff voice comes from the other end. "And no, sister, she doesn't have any news to give you – whether it's the good or the shitty kind. Red's still trying to get that blasted computer of yours to boot up."

"Tell her to give it a good smack, that usually helps. Is that why you called?"

"No," Leroy says, quickly, before relaying Emma's advice to Ruby. Emma hears the sound of banging and Ruby's colorful vocabulary in the background, and decides then and there to allocate some of her budget to upgrade the station's hardware. After a second, Leroy's talking again. "We just got a report about some kind of disturbance over at Sheppard Lane. You're the closest one there so I called you."

"What's happening?"

"The amnesiac is giving Meeks the smackdown."

"Meeks?"

"Simon Meeks, the barber. Though, I heard he calls himself Smee now."

Emma purses her lips in thought. "I don't think I've met him."

"Consider yourself lucky; the little shit smells like an unwashed jockstrap. But, tough luck, sister, you'll meet him soon enough. 'Cause right now, he's getting assaulted with beer cans and concerned townsfolk are calling for you to intervene."

"Who's doing all the assaulting?"

"Just this moron of a pirate who tried to sail away from Storybrooke when the curse broke. Stupid bastard lost his memories all over again."

Emma cranes her neck and checks to see if Regina has made any progress. The queen's still hard at work. Seeing no purple smoke anywhere, Emma goes back to her call. "Ah, well, I'm in the middle of something important right now, Leroy. Tell August to go there in my place and break the fight up."

"Woody won't be in till after lunch, he had the night shift yesterday. I'll go instead."

"No, no. I need you to do something else for me. Tell Ruby she can run up the prints through the database later. Have her head over to Sheppard Lane to sort out the mess in the meantime."

"What do you need me to do?"

Emma steels herself. Leroy isn't going to like this one bit. For a man his age, he's a bit of a fairy fanboy.

"Go to the convent and bring the Blue Fairy in for questioning."

"Huh? Why? The hell did she do?" Leroy's voice thunders through the earpiece and Emma has to pull her phone away with a wince.

"Somebody performed a spell at the clearing behind the mansion. According to Regina, the magic was very strong and it may or may not trigger another fissure to open within the next forty-eight hours. We all need to be on the lookout for it. I'll divide us into teams and we'll all scout the woods..."
"Alright, but why the heck do you think Blue had anything to do with it?" Leroy asks, and Emma can clearly hear the suspicious edge in his voice.

Ever since that unfortunate man-boob incident, which was both hilarious and profoundly disturbing, his mistrust of anything and everything Regina does and says had quadrupled. She can't really blame him though; poor guy had to wear a bra for a week.

"It was white magic," Emma answers simply, pushing herself away from the tree she's leaning on. Regina's still trawling through the clearing, searching for the elusive magical spot, scouring the ground like she's hunting for head lice.

"When did it happen?"

"A little more than an hour ago, maybe a few minutes before somebody broke into the house and stole my stuff," she shares with a weary sigh.

Fatigue overwhelms her then, and she just has to sit down. Emma trudges toward the giant oak tree a couple of meters away and gracelessly plops herself down on one of its massive roots. She hisses in a breath, regretting her carelessness immediately. Never again will she take panties for granted. Her crotch is burning like a bitch.

"An hour ago..?"

"Yes."

"Then it couldn't have been the fairies. I'm a hundred percent sure it wasn't them."

"How would you know?"

"They were attending morning mass," Leroy says, matter-of-fact. "All of them, present and accounted for."

"And you would know this, how?"

"I was attending the service too."

Emma groans. Why is she not surprised? "Leroy, you're Jewish."

"So?"

"You do know that there's a special place in hell for grown ass men who actively hit on innocent nuns, right?"

"Nova's not a nun," Leroy says gruffly.

"No, but Sister Astrid is," Emma counters. "She's as much part of Nova as Ruby is to Red and you are to Grumpy."

"She's still a fairy..."

"Yeah, who just happens to go around town in her nun clothes, crucifix and chastity belt. Good luck trying to get that one to break her vows," Emma says, before flicking away a centipede with the tip of her boot. The child in her watches its flight with dastardly glee. "Look, all I'm saying is that, whether you prefer your old life to the new one, both are still your lives. Sister Astrid seems to like
being a nun or else she wouldn't have remained one. You gotta respect her life choices, buddy."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Leroy grunts, sounding like he'd rather have his wisdom tooth pulled than have this conversation right now. "Anyway, I'll go and break up the fight over at Sheppard. Red can keep on doing whatever it is she needs to do here at the station."

"Alright, alright. Tell her to call me if she's got any news."

Emma ends the call and stuffs her phone back in her pocket with a sigh. So it isn't the fairy nuns then. But who? No one else besides Regina, Gold and the fairies know how to perform magic. At least, that's what she knows. The only upside to this whole mess is that whoever it is has used white magic. This town didn't really need another practitioner of the dark arts; especially since they had just been able to convert one of the most powerful dark witches into their ranks with the help of her son.

Regina's turning out to be a formidable ally. And Emma's thanking her lucky stars that she's on their side. Wonky magic or not, the former Evil Queen is still a force to be reckoned with.

Though, she sure is taking her sweet time today.

"Regina?" Emma calls out, watching the woman move through the clearing one careful step at a time. "We can rule out the fairy nuns. Leroy was with them at the convent. They were having mass."

Regina doesn't look at her or answer back, but nevertheless, she acknowledges her words with a quick wave of a hand.

Emma lets out an exhausted breath, pulls her legs together and lets her head rest on her knees.

She closes her eyes for a few moments, deciding to kill time with a good ol' power nap. God knows she needs it after the morning from hell that just won't end. But, of course, the second she's about to drift asleep, the eerie feeling of sensing something moving in her general direction pulls her out of the clutches of near slumber.

"Did you find i--" she starts, but the words die on her lips as soon as she turns her head and sees a wee little forest mouse looking up at her with its cute beady eyes. Emma discovers something new about herself at that very moment. She can laugh in the face of a vicious dragon and stare down a nasty blind ogre... but to come face-to-face with a mouse?

Fuck this shit, she's getting out of here.

In another life, Emma Swan might've been an olympian. Her body's seamless transition from sitting down to standing up to jumping the hell away in a matter of seconds is truly a sight to behold. Her landing is also a thing of beauty, and she would've marveled at her ability for landing on her feet, and not her butt, had she not realized just where she had landed.

Oh... crap.

Yes, she's standing in the very place she's forbidden to step foot on.

And, if that isn't enough, a purple cloud soon erupts from the ground beneath her and envelops her like a fog.

Oh... holy... fucking... crap.

Emma looks down at her feet and wishes for the ground to open up and swallow her whole. She thinks about getting a Sharpie and marking herself on the forehead with a huge X.
X marks the spot, right? And right now, she's standing right on it.

Why do these things always happen to her?

The remnants of the purple smoke swirl around her body until it all disappears into the atmosphere, carried by a light breeze.

"Fuck me," she mutters under her breath.

Regina will skin her alive. And then kill her. And then resurrect her into a zombie. And then fire a shotgun at her decomposing face. And then feed her liquified brains to a pack of mice. And then kill those critters too just for the heck of it.

"Regina?" Emma chokes out, "I-I think I found it."

Regina's head pops out from a bush. "What?! How? Where is it?"

Emma weakly points to her feet and winces at the look of fury that immediately crosses Regina's face. They are basically at both ends of the clearing, but even from a distance, Emma can see the veins on Regina's forehead and neck becoming increasingly prominent. Her blazing eyes are zoned in on her like twin nuclear missiles about to go off. It isn't an unattractive sight at the very least, but it's truly a chilling one to behold.

"Miss Swan!" Regina's sharp voice cuts through the air, scaring a couple of birds from their perch high up the oak tree. Emma envies the little ones as she watches their tiny wings flutter in flight, wishing she could do the same and fly out of here.

"There was a mouse." Emma mutters lamely, a sheepish hand scratching the side of her face. She remains rooted to the same spot, completely immobilized by fear and guilt.

And, as the brunette bridges the distance between them with large strides, Regina's anger begins to manifest itself in a way that both fascinates and petrifies Emma. The closer Regina gets, the more her entire body begins to glow brighter and brighter with purple energy. The woman is literally radiating magic. Emma feels the raw power pulsing off of Regina, slapping against her like waves in the ocean. Only this doesn't feel like a simple wave; it's a frickin' magical tsunami and it's going to swallow her alive.

Emma just pissed off the Evil Queen.

Oh, God. She's gonna die.

And dammit, she hasn't even bought new underwear yet.

Shamefully, that just might be Emma Swan's unfinished business number one. And, number two? Well, that would be the woman who's about to chop her up in a million and one pieces.

Just her lucky day.

She's going to kill her.

Regina's going to stick her arm down Emma Swan's throat, yank out her innards, wrap it around her neck and choke the infuriating woman until she keels over.

"What the hell did I tell you?!" Regina roars, instinctively balling her hand into a fist.
She would have lobbed a fireball onto the trees, but her blasted magic decides the clearing's severely lacking in the aesthetic department and needs a bit of color instead. The staggering amount of pretty little butterflies that explodes from her hand is surprising, if not humiliating. Momentarily blindsided, Regina blinks at the colorful sight for a moment – and a somewhat perplexed and terror-stricken Emma does the same – before recovering her bearings and marching on to her prey.

Regina is vaguely aware of the fact that she's literally glowing with magic. Purple light is enveloping her body like second skin. This only happened once in the past – when she had found out that Prince Charming had broken Snow White's curse with True Love's Kiss. Overwhelmed with rage at having her vengeance thwarted, she had incinerated the forest near her castle with a simple flick of a wrist; she has a feeling that she would have done the same thing now if her self-control had not improved significantly over the past few years spent as Mayor in Storybrooke. Of course, with her current track record, she might have also just conjured up a couple of more butterflies instead.

Trust that nitwitted Charming to produce an offspring as equally obtuse. Clearly, following simple instructions is too much for that little blonde head to take in.

Regina's hands are itching to throttle the insolent idiot before her; but then, she makes the fatal mistake of looking closely at Emma's face, and just like that, Regina finds herself faltering.

The blonde is just standing there, eyes downcast and shoulders slumped, resigned to her fate. The pathetic woman is looking like a kicked puppy. And, the expression on her face is not unlike the one Henry dons when he would accidentally break one of Regina's priceless works of art.

The visual reminder of her son in this woman is all it takes for the red in her eyes to dissipate. Slowly, Regina lets her hands fall limply at her sides, allowing her anger to ebb away until she could breathe normally again. Just like a police officer holstering his gun, her magic recedes back into her skin.

She closes her eyes for a brief moment and grits her teeth, centering herself.

"Miss Swan," she begins, her voice steady yet dangerous. "What did I tell you?"

"You said not to touch anything..." Emma's feeble mumbling is difficult to pick up, but Regina catches most of it anyway. Instead of leaving it at that, the bumbling cretin prattles on anyway, "Technically, I haven't. Not really. I didn't really touch anything. Not with my hands, at least."

"Yes, I can clearly see that it was your feet that did all the touching," Regina snaps, finding her annoyance spike up another degree.

She hates it when fools made excuses for their shortcomings when a simple apology and acknowledgment will do. Regina plants her hands on her hips, and even though the blonde has two inches on her, she feels taller than the cowering woman before her.

"What happened to all that big talk about knowing your way around a crime scene? Sheriff Swan, you didn't just tamper with the evidence, you trampled it."

"There was a mouse..." Emma repeats, and ironically enough, the poor woman sounds incredibly mousy too. "I'm sorry, Regina. I messed up. It was an accident, I swear."

"You better be sorry! What you just did was akin to throwing up on the victim's corpse and rubbing the murder weapon all over your body. You just contaminated the evidence, Sheriff. Your 'prints' will be all over the magic left behind – what little of it was even left in the first place – and I'll get nothing but your nasty, imbecilic self when I do my trace spell!"
Emma hangs her head in shame. "I'm really sorry..." she says, probably knowing that there's nothing else she can do but apologize. And she's right.

Regina inhales deeply and closes her eyes, feeling the start of a migraine coming on. Without warning, she snatches Emma's arm, yanks up the sleeve of her hideous jacket, and wraps her fingers around the blonde's wrist. Regina's annoyance makes sure that she holds it in a vice-like grip, that even her own hand trembles at the tightness of her grasp. Emma winces in pain but doesn't utter a word of complaint – she probably knows she deserves no gentleness after that foul-up. Regina draws from whatever magical energy is pooled inside Emma and charges up her own. The blonde wobbles slightly on her feet but catches herself and remains upright. Feeling re-energized, Regina starts chanting a spell.

Since Rumpelstiltskin brought magic to Storybrooke, Regina's powers had felt wild and disorganized, as if her magic was everywhere and nowhere all at once. Yet somehow, Emma's touch made sense of all that chaos and brought order and Regina can once again harness her abilities without fear of her spells backfiring and blowing up on her face.

Regina loathes the fact that she needs the Savior to make sure her magic works properly; that any spell she wants to do right will require her touching Snow White's daughter. It's yet another reminder that she's tethered to her greatest nemesis and her foolish offspring. But what choice does she have? If she wants to protect Henry to the best of her abilities, she needs magic. And, in order for her magic to be at its best, she needs Emma Swan.

If that doesn't prove that the universe has a wicked sense of humor, she doesn't know what will.

Regina finishes the spell and opens her eyes. Before her, Emma's looking unsteady and queasy, green eyes unfocused and beads of perspiration pooling on her forehead. On instinct, Regina loosens her grip on the blonde before letting go completely, cutting off the energy transference that's happening between their bodies. That seems to help Emma find her center, and Regina breathes in relief. Touching the blonde's warm skin is torture enough, she doesn't need Emma's breakfast all over her face too.

It takes another moment for her incantation to work. Regina takes a step back as purple mist breaks through the ground underneath Emma and fills up the air surrounding both of their bodies. Her eyelids droop closed as she takes in a huge breath, inhaling the particles through her nose and letting the magical mist permeate her senses.

"Any luck?" Emma murmurs tentatively when she finally opens her eyes.

The scathing glare Regina shoots her way is enough to make Emma clamp her lips shut.

"As expected, it was all you. Every drop of that mist I inhaled was filled with your, well, everything, it was like I was taken over by the damned spirit of Emma Swan."

The queer look Emma gives her is enough to make Regina pause.

"What?" she snaps.

"So, like... I was inside of you?"

"Miss Swan," Regina warns.

"Oh, no, it's just that... well... I dunno..." Emma smiles for the first time since her screw up, looking a little more like her usual self. The small eyebrow quirk she gives Regina is that of amusement mixed with a tinge of mockery. "I was inside the Evil Queen. Wait till I tell my mo–Mary Margaret about
this, she'll pop an aneurysm."

And, just like that, the tense moment between them evaporates. It's typical Emma Swan behavior, worming her way out of difficult situations with levity, sometimes sarcasm, most of the time both.

Regina scoffs and folds her arms. "Don't look so proud of yourself, my dear. It wasn't a particularly pleasant experience."

"That's not what other people have said over the past few years," Emma mutters under her breath and looks away, grinning in a smart-ass manner. Yes, she's definitely back to the old crass jackass that Regina has had the misfortune to get to know.

Her surprise at the blonde's nerve must've been evident on her face because Emma's grin promptly turns into a smug smirk when their gazes meet once more.

"Don't look so surprised, your majesty, you're not the first person I've had the pleasure of filling up."

Regina's cheeks heat up. Annoyance and... *something* else... fills up her chest at the blonde's cocky words.

"Miss Swan," she warns for the second time, lacing her voice with as much venom as she can muster.

"Alright, I'm sorry, I was just yanking your chain, please don't unleash any killer butterflies on me." Emma lifts up her hands to her sides in mock surrender. "A person can die from an overdose of pretty colors, you know."

Regina feels her nostrils flare and she fights the urge to throttle the infuriating blonde before her. Before she can do anything she might come to regret - though thoroughly enjoy - she whips her hair back and stomps away in the direction of her house. Of course, Emma follows after her like a puppy.

"Since we can't identify the caster, nor the kind of spell that was cast, let's just focus on finding out if another fissure has appeared."

"Yeah, that's what I had in mind too," Emma nods, catching up to match her stride. "Come with me to the station; I'm gonna divide us into groups so we can search the forest in zones and cover more ground. If you don't want to partner up with me, I can have August or Ruby accompany you. Leroy might just bash your head in with a flashlight and bury you in the woods."

"I'd like to see him try," Regina sneers.

Without thinking, she accepts Emma's outstretched hand and allows the blonde to guide her down a slippery slope. Her flats don't have the same traction as Emma's boots. She doesn't realize that they are no longer walking on uneven ground until she feels a thumb brush against the back of her hand. She stiffens and promptly yanks her hand back.

"Anyway," Regina clears her throat. "As much as I would loathe searching the forest up and down with only you as company, I made a promise to Henry that I would watch your back, so I will."

Regina says it in a tone that's practically daring Emma to react in the negative. The reaction that she received is not the one that she's expecting though.

Apparently, the blonde finds it amusing.

Emma Swan is actually chuckling. Green eyes are crinkling at the sides when the blonde turns to
"He made me promise the same thing when you got hurt during the whole goblin mess."

"He did?" Regina almost trips over a fallen branch, but Emma's quick enough to grab her steady.

"Yeah," Emma's voice softens considerably, the small smile on her face earnest. "He didn't like it when he found out that I had ordered you to go on ahead and try to close the fissure on your own. Wouldn't talk to me for a whole day. You're his mother, Regina. Despite what you may believe, he doesn't like to see you get hurt."

Henry has pretty much implied the same thing during their talk this morning, but still, it's different to hear it from somebody else. Somehow, it feels more... real.

The sunlight that's filtering through the branches of the trees danced across her face, but it doesn't warm her heart the way Emma's words does.

Beside her, she feels Emma studying her expression. Regina turns away before the blonde can see what she's feeling. Tears are prickling at the sides of her eyes, but she blinks them away and wills them not to fall. Crying in front of Emma Swan is the last thing she wants to do at this very moment – even if they are happy tears. She's not always this overly dramatic and quick to tears, but recently, she finds herself getting emotional when Henry shows even the tiniest bit of affection towards her. It's not much, but it's still something. And that's more than enough to bring on the waterworks.

Thankfully, she's able to keep it at bay.

When she manages to get a grip on her emotions, Regina sucks in a shaky breath and turns to the woman walking quietly beside her. A frown makes its way to her face as she watches the peculiar expression painted on Emma's features. The blonde looks to be in some sort of pain.

"What's wrong with you?" Regina asks before she can stop herself.

"Nothing," Emma clenches her jaw so tight it pretty much tells Regina it's not 'nothing' at all.

Regina watches the stilted way the blonde is walking, and suddenly, everything clicks into place. She doesn't have to be a rocket scientist to guess what's going on with the other woman. Regina clears her throat and gives Emma a judging look.

"Miss Swan, you're a grown woman, maybe it's about time you stop buying pants in the kids section. Those jeans of yours would probably fit my son. Actually, they might be too small for Henry."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know," Emma grumbles, lifting one of her legs to the side – the same way a dog does when it's about to pee on a wall – and tugs the material down a little bit, away from her crotch, no doubt.

"It's chafing, isn't it?" Regina smiles devilishly.

Emma grunts and sort of nods.

"Do you mind if I pass by Little Miss Muffet's before we go to the station? I'll be quick, I promise."

"It's that painful, hm?"

"Imagine getting a thousand papercuts down... there. 'Painful' doesn't even begin to cover it."

"Very well," Regina acquiesces. "I suppose I can wait a few minutes. Can't have the Sheriff trailing
behind me during our little fissure hunt just because a petty thief stole all her underwear and she can't walk straight."

"Thanks, I think," Emma mumbles, tugging at her jeans once more. "I guess I'll just call Mary Margaret and ask her if she can buy the rest of my wardrobe for me. If we're going to spend all afternoon in the forest, I won't have time to do any clothes shopping later. And, I doubt you'd want to lend me your clothes for the rest of the week."

"You're going to ask that fashion-backward mother of yours to pick out your clothes for you?" Regina wrinkles her nose in distaste. "My dear, she may currently have the personality of Snow White, but she still dresses like the old celibate school marm that is Mary Margaret Blanchard. Even the nuns show more cleavage than her, which is frankly, both laughable and sad."

"You're making it sound like she dresses like a vestal virgin. She does not," Emma's protest probably sounds weak even to her own ears and so the blonde grimaces accordingly.

Regina rolls her eyes. Charming family, hopeless as ever.

"What time are you planning for us to begin searching the woods?"

"After lunch, I guess. I don't want to cause unnecessary panic by announcing the threat to the whole town, so I'll probably ask a select few to help us look. Depending on how fast I can gather everyone, I would say around one in the afternoon."

Regina studies the time on her wristwatch and purses her lips in thought. Oh, she's going to have a little fun. And also, a bit of retribution.

"Okay, that will give me three hours. I suppose I can work with that. Give me your card."

"My card?"

"Your credit card."

Emma's look is dripping with suspicion. "What for?"

"Am I needed at the station at this very moment?" Regina asks, ignoring the blonde's query.

"Not really..."

"Then you can drop me off at Sebastian's Boutique before you head over to the lingerie store. You can pick me up when it's time to go to the woods."

"You're going shopping with my credit card?!" Emma's voice hitches up unnaturally, and both of them flinch.

"Actually, Miss Swan, I am going shopping for you with your credit card."

The way Emma's eyes widen like a deer caught in headlights almost makes Regina's day.

"Y-you... you're w-what...?" Emma sputters, looking absolutely lost. "I–I don't understand..."

"What's so difficult to understand about me buying clothes for you?" Regina asks innocently.

Emma's mouth flaps uselessly before her. "Wha–why?"

It's comical how easy it is to rattle Emma Swan and turn her into an incoherent mess with something
as simple as kindness. Poor thing is looking positively befuddled... and quite possibly scared. She has every right to be. Regina is the Evil Queen, after all.

"Community service," Regina says simply, shrugging her shoulders and leading the way out of the forest and back to the small rocky path that led to her garden.

It takes a full minute for Emma to shake herself from her stupor and amble after her retreating form. Regina stops by the wrought iron gate to her mansion and gracefully pivots in place, facing the blonde jogging up to her.

"Community service?" Emma questions as soon as she gets to where she stands waiting.

"Yes. I am still being punished, am I not? Your mother made it abundantly clear that I would need to serve this town if I wanted to continue seeing my own son," Regina says flatly, if not a little spitefully. "And, what better way to serve this community than to make sure that the people of Storybrooke be saved from the visual torture of seeing their Sheriff running around town in all her thrift-store finery?"

Emma frowns, her face flushing in offense.

"I don't buy my clothes at thrift stores... not that there's anything wrong with that," she says, standing tall and matching her gait somewhat. "I'm a smart shopper, your highness; most of the time I buy my stuff at Walmart."

"I rest my case." Regina pushes open the gate and walks in. "Maybe, with my help, you can cross out 'fashion victim' from your resume," she quips over her shoulder.

As she makes her way through her immaculately maintained garden, Regina glances at the side of her house – at the hatch that led to the basement – the thief’s alleged point of entry. Gone is the red padlock that had been there for years. A blue one has now taken its place.

"You got a new lock?"

"Nah, that's from my car, was using it to chain my spare tire to the bug. I'll replace it with a new heavy duty one tomorrow."

"That would be wise," Regina offers a slight nod, throwing a condescending glance at the cheap-looking replacement before marching on.

They both stop outside the backdoor of her mansion, their shoulders almost touching as they stand side by side. As a precaution, they had locked the door before they left. Regina has the key. She doesn't slide it in the lock though, instead, she looks at the blonde through the corner of her eyes and fights the urge to smirk.

"Miss Swan?"

"Yeah?"

Regina lifts a hand, her palms facing up. "Your credit card, if you may."

Emma groans and runs her fingers through her blonde mane. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack. Now, give me your card."

The look of reluctance that's playing on Emma's features almost makes her laugh, but Regina forces
her face to remain impassive as ever. Ever so slowly, the blonde fishes out her clip wallet from the hidden pocket inside her hideous leather jacket.

"I just lost a shitload of money today, Regina," Emma sighs deeply, clutching on to her wallet so tightly it turned her knuckles white. "I can't afford to lose another grand. So, give me one good reason why I should trust you with my money."

"You shouldn't," Regina says, matter-of-fact. "But you're going to anyway."

"Why?"

"You owe me one."

"For what?"


Emma falls silent, words of protest dying on her lips. With a weary breath, the blonde hands over a card without further arguments.

Regina studies the plastic in her hand in confusion. "Debit?"

"I don't trust you not to go overboard with my credit card. At least my debit's daily spending limit won't set me back five years and bury me neck-deep in debt."

"Very well," Regina smirks, pocketing the small plastic card. "Oh, I would need your pin number then."

"My pin?" Emma squeaks.

"Yes. You can change it to another one tomorrow if you so desire, seeing as you don't trust me that much."

Emma scratches the underside of her chin and averts her gaze, obviously stalling.

"Miss Swan, your pin?" Regina's impatience makes itself known through her cutting tone and a tapping foot, clearly not impressed with such blatant delaying tactics.

Emma turns a nice shade of pink, before muttering a quick and quiet... "1234."

Regina lifts an eyebrow. Well, that's hardly surprising.

"I have to say, that pin number is completely you."

"Simple?"

"Unimaginative," Regina deadpans.

Emma shrugs feebly. "It's easy to remember."

"It's easy to guess," Regina points out in an even tone. "No wonder crooks target you. You're an easy mark."

The blonde opens her mouth to argue, but decides against it at the last moment. Emma shuts her lips into a tight line and frowns deeply, looking as if Regina's words had hit a nerve. Of course they do,
the truth stings.

Emma's sullen and quiet and, much to Regina's amusement, sulking like a child the entire short drive to Main Street. Sebastian's Boutique, the only clothing store in Storybrooke that is worthy of earning Regina's continued business, is their first stop. Emma pulls up at the curb outside the fancy shop and puts the car in park, her gaze planted firmly on the road ahead. Regina shrugs off the obvious silent treatment with a look of pure indifference and slings her purse over her shoulder, prepared to take her leave. Before she can step out of the bug, Regina feels a hand grabbing hold of her elbow and tugging her gently back inside the vehicle.

She turns back to the blonde and lifts an eyebrow in question.

"Regina, please, don't go crazy with my money," Emma practically begs, her face dark with desperation.

The brunette scoffs and rolls her eyes in a haughty fashion. "Miss Swan, I doubt there are enough funds in your account to go crazy with in the first place."

"Tanktops, jeans, socks, sweaters. I don't need a lot, just a few of each," Emma says, lifting a finger with each item said. "Keep it simple – and in solid colors, please. No frilly blouses, no billowing dresses, no pencil skirts, and for the love of God, no animal prints."

"Is that all?" Regina says dryly.

"No florals either," Emma adds. "Or feathers."

"Feathers?"

"Don't ask."

Regina rolls her eyes. "Pick me up in two and half hours. Don't be late, I don't like to be kept waiting. Bring me a chicken salad and a bottle of water from Granny's as well, shopping always makes me hungry."

"Is that all, your majesty?"

Regina ignores Emma's mocking tone and takes a good look inside the vehicle, her face scrunching in disgust. "You should also have this cleaned. Not only is it a death trap, princess, it's also a health hazard."

Emma rolls her eyes and lets out an indignant huff.

"Sheriff, we're wasting precious time. I should go."

Emma runs her free hand down her face and groans. "I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

"Not as much as I'm going to enjoy it," Regina beams, flashing one of her most evil grins.

This is too easy, torturing Emma Swan. Of course she has an agenda. Regina hadn't offered to shop for the woman out of the goodness of heart, that much is obvious. But it's not like Emma has a choice in the matter. Regina can be very persuasive. And well, the blonde is easy to guilt-trip - she always did seem to have the overwhelming need to please.

Seemingly resigned to her fate, Emma just sighs and waves her out of the car.

"Miss Swan?"
"What?"

"I want my arm back."

It's hilarious how quickly the blonde drops her elbow as if she had been touching a hot potato.

"Sorry," Emma mumbles, flushing slightly.

"No harm done; thankfully, whatever disease you may carry is not communicable by skin contact. Oh, and Sheriff? Do let me know when you find out the identity of our little thief," Regina says, a charming smile playing on her lips. "I want to send that person a thank you basket for doing Storybrooke a great service. I've been itching to burn your clothes for a while now, it's nice that someone has finally taken initiative and rid you of your ridiculous wardrobe."

"Okay... so, basically, you want to thank some petty thief for stealing all my clothes and forcing me down to my birthday suit..." Emma slowly points out, eyebrows raised. "I'm surprised, Regina, I didn't know you'd be that happy that someone finally got me naked."

Regina, in one of the rarest moments in her life, can't think of anything to say. Her sharp mind draws a blank. Absolutely speechless. Feeling incredibly humiliated at her inability to dish out a clever comeback, she quickly ambles out of the bug and slams the door with much gusto. She does not dare look back in fear of seeing the gloating face she just knows she'll find staring at her. She does, however, hear the loud victorious laugh that comes out of the opened windows of the car.

Regina stomps over to the boutique and pushes open the door a little rougher than necessary. It bangs against the wall and makes the storekeeper jump behind the till.

Emma's mocking laugh rings inside Regina's ears. She clenches her jaw and grits her teeth. Emma Swan's a moron. Only fools celebrate victories prematurely. Regina feels the small rectangular plastic goldmine inside her pocket and smiles an evil grin.

Oh, payback is a bitch.

Jackson Peters only has room in his heart for two things in this entire world: his Yamaha TRX 850 street bike and, well, himself. It's something he never bothered to deny to the litany of exes that had come and gone in this wonderful life of promiscuity that he leads. He's a selfish man, arrogant and vain, and he owns up to his flaws with no shame. He doesn't care how shoddy his reputation has become in this town. Why would he? No matter how small and insular Storybrooke is, he never had a shortage of women willing to warm his bed. There's always someone out there in need of a good lay – be it a bored housewife, an ex-girlfriend, or if he's extremely lucky that night, some fresh meat. Life is good to Jackson.

At least, it used to be.

Cause now, well, life's being a pain in the ass.

He still remembers a furious Ruby warning him about something called karma a few months ago. He also remembers laughing at her then, as she was haphazardly throwing on the clothes that he had peeled off of her body the night before. When she was just about to slam the bedroom door off its hinges, he called out to her and said: "If karma's really a bitch, tell her to bring it on. If she's in heat, you know I'm always up for a good fuck." He wagged his eyebrows and began to thrust his pelvis suggestively, grinning like a wolf. The last thing he saw of Ruby was her middle finger saying goodbye to his smug face.
Well, karma did come alright. Just not in the way that's anything remotely close to pleasant or mind-blowing.

And, just as he does every day since fate's vengeance came knocking on his door four months ago, Jackson sits slumped against the foldable chair that's perennially parked on his front lawn, drowning his sorrows in cheap beer. It's too early for alcohol, and he knows better, but now that his mornings and evenings seem to blur together in a haze, he finds that he lacks the capacity to give a damn.

It's after his eighth beer - or tenth? he'd lost count by now - that he begins feeling a familiar prickle behind his neck. He's being watched. From the corner of his eyes, he makes out a figure leaning casually against his mailbox, testing the already unstable object with his weight. Jackson's in no mood for visitors, let alone creepy ass stalkers. Sighing loudly, he dumps the empty can on the growing pile of rubbish by his feet before lifting his chin and meeting the gaze of his unwelcome guest. If he can even meet the stranger's gaze, that is. Even with alcohol impairing his vision, he can clearly see that the person's face is being obscured by a hockey mask.

A frickin' hockey mask. Jason from Friday the 13th is standing right before him.

Jackson's eyebrows quirks at the sight. How... random. And weird.

But, hey, this is Storybrooke, and, apparently, weird is the new norm in this town. Why, just an hour ago, the guy who used to work at the barber shop came by his house for the thirteenth consecutive time this month, practically groveling on his knees, begging him to remember. 'It's me, Smee!', the delusional idiot kept repeating, as if those words could help him recall what he allegedly forgot after his accident. And what exactly did he forget? Well, apparently, he's Killian Jones, the leader of a big band of infamous pirates. Yeah. Pirates. Crazy. And well, kinda absurd.

Just because he likes to swear like one doesn't make him a swashbuckling sailor with a rum addiction (he's more into beer). And, he's an amnesiac pirate? Really.

The moment that Smee fellow called him Captain Hook, Jackson just about lost it. There is only so much crazy a person can take. He hurled several beer cans at the man – empty ones, unfortunately – until the neighbors called the cops. That chump Leroy came waddling in a few minutes later and gave him a thorough talking to. Instead of hauling his ass to the station, Emma Swan's deputy issued him a warning. Jackson had grudgingly promised not to cause any more trouble – provided that delusional Smee guy never set foot on his property again. He's lucky he got off that easily. Being unemployed and almost bankrupt, he really can't afford to bail himself out of jail right now.

Jackson didn't realize that he got lost in his own thoughts until his neighbor's dog started barking at the squirrels. He clears his head with a shake and sighs.

The Jason impersonator's still staring. Jackson feels annoyance start trickling in his skin. Staring is rude. And, quite frankly, it's giving him the creeps.

"The heck are you looking at?" he snaps. Not surprisingly, all he got in return is silence.

Jackson doesn't have the vaguest idea who this guy is, but he thinks he knows just who sent him here. That son-of-a-bitch landlord of his is nothing if not predictable when it comes to fiscal matters – never mind that nobody's seen that bastard around town for months.

"Get on with it," Jackson plasters one of his smarmiest grins and spreads his arms to his sides, welcoming his guest. "Here I am, do what you fucking came to do."

The stranger's head tilts a fraction, as if in question.
"If he sent you here to beat me up, can you make it quick? I have a couple of beers to down so I can get absolutely hammered before lunch. I wanna pass out just in time for my nap."

Still, the Masked Mysterio – yeah, Jackson decides the weirdo needs a name – regards him in silence, not budging an inch.

"Oh for fuck's sake, tell Gold he'll have his money by the end of the week."

Jackson flicks open the lid of his cooler and helps himself to another can of beer. Jesus, miss his rent by a day and already the greedy bastard's sending one of his thugs to collect.

It turns out, mentioning Mr. Gold is the trick.

"Why don't you tell him yourself when he comes back from whatever hole he disappeared into? I'm not his lackey," Mysterio finally speaks, answering in a voice so gruff it reminds Jackson of that awful gravely voice that Bruce Wayne likes to use when he's masquerading as Batman. It sounded contrived somehow – unnatural and forced.

Jackson eyes Mysterio suspiciously. "So, you're not here to collect?"

"No."

"You're not one of Gold's thugs?" He just has to make sure. Better safe than sorry.

"I already said I was not."

"Well, you could've fooled me. You certainly look the part, asshole."

Jackson studies the stranger's all-black attire. The ridiculous-looking mask, the scuffed motorcycle boots, the baggy trousers, the gloves, the abundant layer of dark clothing – a sweater with its hood pulled over his head, bulky leather jacket. All the guy needs are some heavy chains and brass knuckles and he would've looked like a bonafide member of Hells Angels (only crazier).

"If you're not one of Gold's men, who the fuck are you?"

"Your brother's friend."

"I don't have a brother," Jackson sneers and takes a heavy swig of beer.

Jethro – no, Rufio – is dead to him as far as he's concerned. That dick hightailed it out of their house and abandoned him after his accident, dishing out some lame excuse about how they're adversaries and never blood-related in the first place. That somehow, their unorthodox family is just because of some stupid curse. Asshole.

"And, even if I had one, I'm damn sure he wouldn't be friends with someone who won't even show his fucking face. What the hell is up with that get-up? Isn't it too early for Halloween?"

The mailbox tilts slightly to the right as Mysterio's weight bears down against it. Jackson's disgruntled expression must've been enough to tip the stranger off and he promptly steps away. Instead of removing the stupid mask, Mysterio keeps it on.

"You think you're the only one with something to hide?" he asks, looking pointedly at the blanket on Jackson's lap.

Jackson bristles, but nevertheless, he keeps his left hand hidden underneath the thick cloth.
"Besides, you're one to give fashion advice. If you're not willing to lay off on all that manliner, at least learn how to apply it properly. You look like you put make-up on with a paintball gun," the masked man snarks.

Jackson feels his nostrils flare in offense. If it wasn't for the warning he got earlier from Leroy, he would've bashed this guy's head in with a rock.

"Are you here for something, you jerk, or did you just come here to insult me?"

"Both. But mainly, for this," Mysterio straightens up and sticks a hand inside his pant pocket. Taking out a folded piece of yellow paper, he opens it and shows it to Jackson. It's a flyer. A flyer that Jackson is very familiar with, seeing that he's the one who posted it around town a few weeks ago.

"Ah. That," Jackson exhales loudly through his nose, feeling his mood plummet a bit more, if that is even possible.

His gaze flickers to the love of his life. His blood red motorbike is standing lonely on the driveway, desolate from months of none use. His gut clenches at the sight. Just another reminder of how much he hated what his life had now been reduced to. He can't ride anymore and he probably never will.

"You're still selling?" the stranger asks, following Jackson's gaze.

Jackson feels his throat constrict. He forces himself to breathe harder just to fight the weight that seems to crush his chest. If only he didn't need the money. If only he'd stayed home that fateful afternoon. If only, if only, if only. His life is filled with a lot of that nowadays.

"Y-yeah, I guess I am," he murmurs dejectedly, dragging his eyes away from his precious bike.

"How much?"

"Three grand."

"For a second-hand bike? That's pretty steep."

"For a beautiful bike? That's pretty cheap," Jackson retorts. "Besides, those wheels are new. Just upgraded them a couple of months back, cost me an arm and a leg."

He winces at his poor choice of words. Well, that stings. Talk about shooting yourself in the foot.

The stranger takes another good look at the motorbike. It's in perfect condition. Jackson takes pride in that; he made sure his precious baby was serviced within an inch of its life.

"How many miles does it have on it?"

"Nineteen thousand, give or take."

Jackson watches with a wary eye as the prospective buyer takes it all in. He takes a healthy sip from his can of beer and burrows deeper into the chair. A part of him wishes that Mysterio will decide that his baby is too overpriced and just leave him be. The rational part of his brain – the one that, incredibly, can still function despite drowning in alcohol on a regular basis – knows that selling the bike is the wisest decision he can make. His emotional attachments aside, it's for the best. He still has hospital bills to pay, and Gold, well, that bastard will probably enjoy sending him to the ER for the second time if he can't pay rent.

"Twenty-one hundred," Mysterio finally speaks up, shaking Jackson from his thoughts.
"Three grand, take it or leave it."

"No one in this town would be crazy enough to pay that much for your bike. Twenty-one hundred."

"Three grand," Jackson stands his ground.

The stranger regards Jackson for a moment, arms folded and head cocked to the side. After a second or two, a gloved hand reaches behind to grab something from the back pocket of his dark jeans.

Considering that he's pretty much already drunk at ten in the morning, it isn't that surprising that Jackson fails miserably in catching the envelope that's suddenly thrown his way. He scowls when it hits his head. Setting down the half-empty can of beer by his feet, he tears the tape that holds the envelope closed and takes a tentative peek inside. His eyebrows shoot up to his hairline at what's lying within.

"Twenty-one hundred, cash. Count it, it's all there," the stranger says, sounding awfully cocky.
"That's my offer, take it or leave it."

Jackson clamps his lips together, slightly miffed at having his words thrown back at him. Despite his annoyance, his eyes never leave the alluring wad of cash staring back at him. He bites the insides of his mouth. Good God, if only.. if only.. if only.

"Do we have a deal?"

Jackson shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath. *Fuck.*

"Y-yeah," he chokes out, the word clawing at his throat. Necessity. It's for the best.

"Great."

Inside the mask, the stranger is probably smiling in triumph. Jackson can just about hear the gloating in that gruff voice.

"I can hand over the papers the day after tomorrow," Jackson says. He narrows his eyes at his guest. "I don't suppose you can give me a name?"

From the other side of the fence, the neighbor's Pit Bull fights against the leash holding him tied to a tree and growls at a jogging man. The stranger takes a good look at the animal before turning back to a waiting Jackson.

"Argos."

Jackson pulls a face. Weird guy, weird name. It fits, *kinda.*

"Well, Argos, congrats on your purchase. Take care of my bike or I'll hunt you down and beat the living crap out of you," Jackson warns, not entirely joking.

He reaches over to the side and grabs the motorcycle keys resting atop his empty pack of smokes and throws it at Argos. The movement unwittingly allows the blanket on his lap to slide down and expose his left hand. A grimace mars Jackson's handsome features and he fumbles as he struggles to pull the cloth back up. Unfortunately, it's too late. The mysterious Argos sees it anyway.

"I know about your accident, I'm sorry."

"Yeah, well, shit happens," Jackson grumbles, unable to hide the bitterness in his tone.
He doesn't even like the ocean. No one is more prone to nausea than he is. What's worse is that, after all this time, he still cannot remember what possessed him to get on that dingy boat in the first place. He was partying at the local pub and must've been drunk off his mind. All he knows – and this is from what people have told him – was that the frickin' boat capsized when he passed the buoy that marked the line between the waters of Storybrooke and the neighboring town.

"Do you need anything else?" Jackson asks with a sigh, wanting nothing more than to be alone again.

"Nope, I got what I came here for. Pleasure doing business with you, Cap'n."

Jackson flinches.

"Don't you fucking call me that," he growls in warning.

"Sorry, I thought everybody called you that."

"They do, but it doesn't mean those fuckers should," Jackson snaps.

Gee, have an accident in a boat and everybody and their mother calls you Captain all of a sudden. As if the fact that he lost a part of him doesn't matter much. Trust the loonies in this town to gang up on him when he's at his lowest.

"The first and last time I set foot inside a boat, this fucking happened--" he lifts the hand he's been hiding underneath the blanket and waves it in the air. Or at least, there used to be a hand there. Now there's just a stump. "--so please, drop the Cap'n crap. You already got my bike, take it and leave me the fuck alone."

"Alright, I'm sorry," Argos lifts his hands to the sides, clearly a placating gesture.

Jackson watches the weird fellow intently as Argos walks over to the driveway, noticing for the first time, that a sheathed sword is strapped to his back.

"Fucking loony..." Jackson pulls a face.

But then, a pang of sadness suddenly washes over him as Argos hops on his bike. He looks away and sucks in a pained breath. The sound of his baby starting up creates a lump in his throat.

"You know," he hears above the sound of his bike revving.

Jackson reluctantly looks back at the masked one and follows Argos' gaze to the antique brass cannon that's decorating his lawn.

"I heard Mr. Gold likes to collect war memorabilia. I bet he'd pay a hefty sum for that cannon of yours. Might even give you extra if you throw in those cannonballs and the rest of your paraphernalia too."

Jackson shrugs noncommittally. "That jerkface hasn't been seen in town for months."

"His girlfriend's been taking care of the pawnshop. She might even give you a better price. Think about it," Argos says, giving the bike a couple of nice revs before pulling out of the driveway. He's gone in a heartbeat, leaving nothing but a cloud of smoke in his wake.

Jackson watches the tire marks left behind and sighs. Next to his motorcycle, his second most prized possession is that old cannon. He would rather cut off his other hand than part with it.
But... he still needs more money. There are bills to pay... an unemployed mouth to feed... and a pricey addiction to booze and nicotine that needs to be supported.

If only... if only... if only.

His right hand shakes as he grips the brown envelope tight, bitter tears prickling at the sides of his eyes.

Ruby was wrong. Karma isn't the bitch. He is.

Chapter End Notes

I borrowed Rufio (Rufi-oh!) from the movie Hook and the title of this fic from a Dashboard Confessional song.
It's past her bedtime.

Regina has always been a stickler for routine; nine o'clock was lights out for Henry and half an hour past ten was hers. It should be said, however, that she didn't always sleep so early. During her first twenty-eight years in town, Regina had the habit of staying up until midnight to read a book or enjoy a glass of wine in her study. Much to her annoyance, she had been forced to alter her sleeping schedule when a certain blonde interloper rolled into town in that ugly yellow bug of hers and jumpstarted the passage of time. Now, more than ever, Regina began to appreciate the importance of getting enough beauty sleep every night. Her body's slowly diminishing capacity to keep wrinkles and other unwelcome effects of aging from her face is becoming quite worrisome.

And it's all because of one woman.

A woman who, ironically enough, is also the reason why she isn't currently curled up underneath her covers and sleeping soundly in her bed.

They had returned from scouting the woods about four hours ago, their search cut short after it became too dark to continue their hunt. Despite being utterly spent and aching all over, Regina had somehow managed to throw together a decent meal for her hungry son and his equally famished mothers. Soon after that, Emma left the house after doing the dishes, having been summoned by Snow to their old apartment, no doubt to discuss the spell in the clearing and the subsequent fissure threat.

Having her son all to herself, Regina had monopoly of tucking Henry into bed; and, much to her delight, was also given her son's permission to stay beside him until he fell asleep. Henry's always had trouble drifting off whenever he was afraid – and though he would never admit it, he seemed pretty unsettled about the thought of creatures coming out of a still undiscovered fissure and having both his mothers stick their necks out to look for it. So, when he asked his mother to stay with him under the guise of wanting to chat about their sojourn in the woods, Regina was quick to indulge in his request and made sure to throw in a couple of whispered reassurances his way from time to time. They had spent a few minutes talking about Regina's theory on fissures and why they come about, and a couple of agonizing ones discussing Emma and her "injury" too, much to Regina's discomfort. The blonde had been walking around the house with a barely noticeable limp; but, of course, Henry and his perceptive little eyes still noticed. The boy thought Emma got injured during their courageous trek through the forest. He thought wrong, naturally, but Regina didn't know how to explain to her son that his precious White Knight was just feeling the after-effects of spending half the day getting chafed in places Regina didn't even want to mention. So, she just kept her silence and let Henry believe that Emma pulled a muscle during the hunt. It was a white lie told for the greater good. Sure, Emma would be the hero yet again, but that was fine if it meant that Regina didn't have to discuss the sorry state of the blonde's vagina with her son. It's a trade-off she can live with.

The gurgling noise from Emma's sorry excuse for a car cuts through the silence of her home, and immediately, Regina straightens up in her seat and springs into action. She refills her glass of wine and promptly spreads the faded map of Storybrooke's forest before her, careful not to tear the fragile object. With that done, Regina leans forward on the table, holding a marker in one hand and cradling her chin on the other, pretending as if she's seriously poring over the map. Props and alibi in place, she lies in wait.

"Oh, hey—you waited up for me?" Emma says in surprise when she spots her at the kitchen table a few moments later.
"No," Regina lies smoothly. She lets her upper lip curl in disgust. "Don't flatter yourself, Miss Swan."

The blonde merely smirks before walking over to the fridge and pulling out a carton of milk. The not-so-subtle throat clearing that Regina does is enough to deter Emma from drinking directly from the container and, like an obedient puppy, the blonde heads over to the cupboard, takes out a small glass and pours herself a drink like a human being with actual breeding. Emma downs it in one go before turning to look at her.

"Why are you still awake?"

Regina doesn't bother to look up from her supposed task.

"I'm trying to determine which areas we still need to cover."

"Ah," Emma purses her lips and nods, green eyes taking it all in. "You should get some rest though; it's been a long day and we're gonna be up early again tomorrow."

"I know, but I'm not yet tired."

"Like hell you're not," Emma snorts. "Seriously, Regina, go up and get some sleep. You look like shit."

"Miss Swan," Regina floors the incredibly crass woman with a murderous look. "While I appreciate your concern, I will not take insulting remarks about my appearance from a person who has been walking all day looking like a freshly circumcised boy."

Emma's lips quickly form into a childish-looking pout.

"One of these days, your majesty, I just might hide all of your clothes and leave you with nothing else but a pair of skintight jeans. Let's see how you'd like that."

Regina can't help the cocky smirk that appears on her face.

"Well, it's just too bad that I don't own a pair of jeans like that then. Unlike you, my dear, I prefer not cutting off blood circulation in my legs," she says, matter-of-fact. "Oh, and speaking of clothing, I've taken the liberty of laying out your new clothes for you on your bed."

Emma's sour mood evaporates quickly at her words.

"Really?"

"Yes. I've also matched certain pieces that go well together so you might get an idea of what looks good with what," Regina continues in a bored tone, nailing her eyes on the map before her. She waves a dismissive hand in the air. "So run along now, Miss Swan. Your new clothes await."

A look of fear, trepidation, curiosity and anxiety washes over Emma's face. Regina would have laughed if she weren't so intent on keeping up with her charade.

"Thanks. I, uh, I'll go and have a look then. Good night, Regina," Emma says in the littlest of tones, taking her leave and walking almost robotically towards the basement door.

As soon as the blonde is out of the kitchen, Regina drops the act and exhales a breath. She reaches for her glass of wine and takes a nice, long sip.

This is the moment she's been waiting for all night. She sacrificed an hour of beauty sleep for this;
Emma Swan better not disappoint.

And so, with nothing left to do, Regina leans casually on the back of her chair and waits. A few agonizing minutes tick by, yet she sits unmoving, senses heightened in anticipation.

The second she hears Emma’s heavy footsteps trudging up the stairs, Regina clamps down her grin and straightens up in her seat, putting on her usual mask of complete and utter indifference.

*Here we go.*

Without preamble, the basement door swings wide open, revealing the ashen face of Snow White's offspring.

Emma's voice is but a mere whisper.

"Regina? I'm confused."

"Is that supposed to be news?" Regina asks evenly.

Emma trudges over and slumps down into the chair opposite hers. The haunted look on her face is more than enough to make up for all the precious minutes of sleep Regina had to give up tonight.

"Did you buy clothes or Halloween costumes?" Emma asks, green eyes boring into brown ones.

Regina grins patronizingly.

"If I'm not mistaken, I believe costumes are also clothes, my dear."

"I can't wear those in public!" Emma screeches, losing it for a moment. Regina won't be surprised if Henry comes bounding down the stairs any second now, having been awakened by his birth mother's grating voice. At Regina's reproachful look, the blonde promptly tones it down and sighs.

"Regina, please tell me that I didn't just spend that much money to look like the Lone Ranger."

"Would you rather be Tonto? If memory serves me right, I think I also saw a fringe dress in the boutique," Regina says, keeping a straight face.

"I'm serious!" Emma sputters, her neck and face flushing red. "Jesus Christ, I can't go to work looking like a cowboy, a 70's swinger, Cindy Lauper, a clown, or hell, Britney Spears circa Baby One More Time!"

"Britney Spears?" Regina lifts an eyebrow.

"The nasty Catholic school girl outfit. White blouse, cardigan, plaid skirt," Emma recounts. She narrows her eyes at Regina. "I told you no skirts."

"You said no pencil skirts," Regina points out.

"Yeah, but I didn't want mini-skirts either!"

"Well, you should've been more specific then."

Emma groans, running a tired hand through her face, suddenly looking older than her years.
"I can't go out in that outfit, I'll look like jailbait."

"Perfect," Regina smiles dazzlingly. "I dare say it will make your job infinitely easier. What better way to lure criminals out in the open, right Sheriff?"

The contemptuous look the blonde gives her almost makes Regina break character and laugh out loud. The brunette clears her throat and offers the blonde an insincere smile.

"I bought you tanktops," she points out, as if in consolation.

"Yes, yes, you did," Emma huffs indignantly, folding her arms on her chest. "And most of them happen to be in the one color that I wouldn't ever want to be caught dead in. I mean, how many pink tanktops can one person have? And, to top it all off, they're all neon."

"Some are pastel," Regina corrects. "Baby pink."

Emma wrinkles her nose in distaste.

"I got you sweaters."

"Yellow ones," Emma snorts. "Which is another color I don't usually wear, because coupled with my hair, I almost always end up looking like a walking, talking cob of corn."

"Imagine that," Regina mocks in a serious tone, eyes dancing with amusement.

Emma glares at her for a good couple of minutes, mouth opening and closing every so often as if she wants to say something scathing, but nothing ever comes out of her lips. Her shoulders slump down in resignation soon enough, and in the end, Emma leaves the kitchen table in a huff and stomps over to her cubby hole in the basement, not bothering with a backward glance.

Regina pats herself on the back for a job well done. She packs up her things and cleans up after herself, smiling the whole time. Chalk one up for the Evil Queen.

Oh, but, Regina isn't entirely heartless. She did buy the blonde a bunch of really nice, very elegant and professional-looking suits. They're currently tucked away inside her walk-in closet, hidden behind a couple of pieces of her own power suits. She'll give them to Emma in a week or two. Maybe three. Oh, who is she kidding? She'll give them in a month. Or, next year.

Five days after the robbery and the incident involving magic at the clearing, things are starting to go back to normal at the station.

They still hadn't caught the thief nor the one who cast the spell, but at least, not a single fissure is found after two whole days of trekking up and down the woods of Storybrooke. Everyone can breathe a little easier.

Well, except if your name is Emma Swan.

Since her lovely make-over, courtesy of Regina of course, things have been a little bit tense at the workplace. Not that there is any trouble between her deputies, since the only one feeling any sort of tension is the Sheriff herself. Regina did not disappoint with her purchases at Sebastian's Boutique. She met Emma's expectations – and actually exceeded them. That would've been a good thing, had Emma not expected that she'd end up regretting her decision in the first place.
The boutique suddenly has a 'no return, no exchange' policy set up exclusively for her, a questionable turn of events that she suspects Regina had something to do with. So, Emma's stuck with her new clothes – and since she had nothing else to wear and won't be able to buy anything new until her next paycheck, she decides to suck it up, wear the least humiliating pieces in her new wardrobe and just roll with the punches. She's a big girl, she can take it. Though, enjoying it is another matter entirely.

Clearly, Regina Mills has a wicked sense of humor; and now, Emma's wearing evidence of it.

So, naturally, it's now open season for Emma Swan at the office.

"Who the hell styled you? Your enemies?" Leroy had said the first time she made an appearance in her new clothes.

"I didn't know neon was back in fashion. What's next, shoulder pads?" August had wondered out loud.

"Oh, Em..." was all a speechless Ruby could say.

Today, of course, is no different.

"Morning, people," Emma grunts in greeting as she shuffles inside the station, balancing a cup of coffee and some folders sent from Town Hall in her arms. She places them gingerly on her desk with a sigh. Spending the past few days combing the woods for magical one-way portals definitely took its toll on her productivity at the office. The staggering amount of paperwork on her to-do pile is glaring evidence of this. So immersed is she with trying to figure out which documents she'll attack first that she fails to notice the two pairs of eyes watching her every move with rapt attention. It doesn't help that the partitions separating her office from the bullpen are made entirely of glass, giving her no respite from prying eyes.

"Here we go..." Ruby says as soon as Emma makes her way to the back of her desk.

August, whose own table is directly in front of Ruby's, leans forward and cracks his knuckles in anticipation, eyes zoned in on the Sheriff.

The moment Emma zips open her jacket and shrugs it off her shoulders, Ruby pumps a fist in the air and hollers a triumphant whoop. August groans and reluctantly reaches inside his jacket, pulling out a twenty dollar bill and handing it over to a smug-looking Ruby.

"Let me guess, you won today's wager?" Emma glares at her grinning deputy, hanging her jacket at the back of her chair before plopping down on her seat.

"Got the color right," Ruby shrugs nonchalantly, pocketing her winnings and then sauntering over to Emma's office. She lifts an eyebrow at the blonde's tanktop and smirks. "Pink?"

"There's nothing wrong with pink," Emma mumbles, refusing to meet her friend's eyes. When she told Regina to buy only solid colors, she should've been more specific. Yesterday, it was uber bright yellow-green. It looked like neon snot.

"Yeah, but hot pink?" Ruby chuckles.

"At least it's not the color of electrified phlegm," Emma deadpans. "It's either this or a shirt with a high collar made of ruffles."

"What's wrong with ruffles?"
"The only ruffles I like are the junk food ones that I can eat and down with beer. Besides, the shirt also has red dots all over it. Ruffles and polka dots? No, thank you."

"I think I remember seeing that shirt at Sebastian's. It's actually pretty nice, Em. Stylish."

"And frickin' expensive," Emma huffs. For someone who claims to hate her old clothes, Regina had somehow managed to replenish her wardrobe with uglier ones. Well, they're not really ugly, but they just aren't her style (though there is no excuse for the neon tank tops – she thinks Regina got those just to spite her). "The material's heaven on the skin, don't get me wrong, but I couldn't take myself seriously in front of the mirror. I looked like a clown with chicken pox."

"Or Henry the VIII," August supplies all the way from his desk.

"That too. Whoever he is," Emma mutters, studying the pile of paperwork before her. She decides on starting the day with August's reports before tackling any of the stuff from Mary Margaret's office. Those files tend to be long, boring and ultimately draining to go over. She swivels her seat to face her deputy, deciding on a short chat before she delves right into work. "Any news about our thief?"

"Nothing concrete, but I may have a lead," Ruby shares, leaning against the side of Emma's desk. "Do you remember that one time when I was kinda depressed and you and MM took me out dancing?"

"Yeah, you were hung up over some insensitive jerk who was taking you for granted. Why?"

"Remember the mess at Sheppard that Leroy had to sort out the other day? The one where an amnesiac pirate was assaulting Meeks?" Ruby continues, her fingers tracing patterns on the faded wood.

"Same guy?" Emma arches an eyebrow. Her friend does have the unfortunate habit for falling for those damaged bad boy types.

"Yup," Ruby nods, purposely ignoring the disapproving look the blonde is giving her. "He doesn't remember his old life, he still thinks he's Jackson Peters. His real name is Killian Jones, though."

Emma makes a blank face. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"Captain Hook," Ruby supplies.

"No shit!" Emma gapes at her deputy. "Peter Pan's my favorite fairytale."

"What, no love for Little Red Riding Hood?"

"Rubes, as much as I love you, you turn into a frickin' werewolf once a month. That puts you squarely in Twilight territory in my eyes. I'm sorry, but I just can't. Those books ruined werewolves for me. No offense."

"None taken," Ruby chuckles, brushing her words away with a wave of a hand. "Anyway, back to what I was saying. I heard from a very reliable source that Jackson sold his motorcycle to some suspicious-looking guy in a hockey mask the day of the robbery. Paid the full amount in cash. And, get this, the masked man had a sword strapped to his back."

Emma's back stiffens immediately. "You think it's our thief?"

"Maybe," Ruby gives a slight shrug. "Or, he could just be a lunatic with a sword. Either way, I think we should keep an eye out."
"Who's your source?"

"Ashley. She lives next door to Jackson," Ruby shares in a low voice.

Emma suspects, and rightfully so, that Ruby was able to glean this tidbit from her regular phone chats with the girl. Those two gossip like old hags.

"I'm gonna drop by Jackson's place after lunch and see if I can get a name."

"Why not go now?"

"He's still out cold. Been drinking himself to death since he lost his hand."

"Oh," Emma nods. She quietly takes it all in before giving her friend a small approving smile. At last, they're making progress in their investigation, even if it's small. "Alright, later then. Keep me updated."

"Will do," Ruby smiles and pats her shoulder before walking back to her own desk. "Oh hey, almost forgot. Someone dropped a package for you this morning. I put it over there, on top of the cabinet."

Emma looks at the small filing cabinet behind her desk, her curiosity piqued. She reaches over and takes the square box in her hands. It's plain white; no ribbons, no wrapping. She shakes the box tentatively beside her ear, trying to guess what lies inside. She doesn't want to risk opening it and getting sprayed with something disgusting (that's one of the signature pranks of the Lost Boys). Hearing nothing clinking inside, she takes a deep breath and just flips the lid open.

It isn't a prank.

Just a weird — though beautiful — gift.

Lying inside is a single purple flower, a lilac. She's not one to be familiar with the different kinds of flora in the world, but she recognizes it nonetheless because she sees it every day in Regina's garden. And, well, Henry had told her in passing that it's his mom's favorite flower.

Carefully, she takes it out of the box and puts it by the picture of Henry on her desk. The kid probably dropped it off on his way to school. He does the sweetest, most thoughtful things sometimes.

Emma chucks away the box in the recycling bin behind her. As soon as it leaves her hand, a small white card falls out and lands on her lap. A smile graces her lips; Emma wonders what Henry's messy scribbles are going to say this time.

Only, the words within weren't scribbled at all. They were typewritten. That rules out her son as the sender then.

_I hope you enjoyed your make-over. I know I did._

-A

Emma rolls her eyes at the man writing a report out in the bullpen.

"Itching to be fired, A?" she frowns at August. The man gives her a queer look, looking utterly puzzled.

"Did you say something, Em?"
"Nothing. Get back to work," Emma huffs, throwing the card in the waste bin.

Left with nothing else but a humongous pile of paperwork, Emma puffs out a breath, flexes her fingers and digs in.

After going through the sixth folder on her to-do pile, Emma's just about had enough. With a frustrated growl, she gives up on the report in her hands and fights the overwhelming urge to ball up the paper and throw it in the waste bin. She clenches her jaw and glares at the man working diligently at one of the desks out in the bullpen. She had hired him for his brains; God knows they need that to balance out the energies in the station. Leroy, Ruby and Emma are the muscles in this operation. Not that they are stupid – it's just that they don't have the patience to think before acting the way he does. He's a good deputy; hardworking, honest, diligent, and generally good-natured. It's just unfortunate that he sucks at following orders.

"August?" Emma calls out through gritted teeth.

"Yes, Sheriff?" he asks with a bright smile – a nice contrast to the scowl on her face.

Sometimes, Emma hates how much of a cheery person he is.

"About your report on last week's traffic violations–"

"I left it on your desk," August is quick to point out.

"I know, I'm reading it right now. Or, at least I tried."

"Is there a problem with it?"

Emma exhales slowly, pinching the bridge of her nose. "You remember what I told you last week, and heck, also the week before that?"

"I dunno, you tend to say a lot of things boss," August says with a lopsided grin. He's smart enough to wipe it off when Emma's eyes turn dangerous. "Uh, about my reports specifically? You said that they were a bit too wordy..."

"'A bit too wordy' is a gross understatement," Emma snorts. "What did I tell you to do?"

"You told me to leave my writer's hat at home, and also, to keep my urge to write novels instead of police reports in check."

"That's a nice way of putting it. But, what were my exact words August?"

August scratches the back of his head, looking mighty sheepish. "Uh... 'hold back the word vomit, or so help me God, I'm gonna shove my fist down your throat and choke you with it..." he mumbles lamely.

"Yes," Emma lifts her brows slowly, her mouth a thin line. "So, should I call an exorcist then? Cause clearly you're still possessed by Shakespeare's ghost."

"Aw, c'mon Emma, traffic violation reports are tedious to write because they're so dull. There's nothing wrong about wanting to spicen things up a bit."

For a brief moment, Emma closes her eyes, thanking the powers that be that Regina is no longer working at Town Hall. Mayor Mills had the tendency of poking her nose where it doesn't belong; the woman makes it a point to be up in everyone's business – in Emma's, to be precise. That includes
everything and anything that happens in the Sheriff's Department. If Mayor Mills ever read one of August's reports, well, Regina would probably pop a hernia. "August," Emma starts, her voice calm yet dripping with warning. "Unless they slapped you in the face with their license and shoved their registration up your ass, you don't have to write down how they reacted when you wrote them a ticket. Do you understand me?"

"Got it, boss," August nods sullenly, probably mentally counting how many reports he had to scrap and start over again.

"You don't have to describe what they were wearing either," Emma adds after a beat, another one of his reports in hand. Her green eyes, bloodshot as they are, skim over the parts where his Deputy describes old Mrs. Mitten's clothes in disturbing detail. Talk about too much information. She really doesn't have to know that the old lady doesn't like to wear a bra when she drives.

"We're out of pepper spray."

Emma glances up to find Ruby standing by her desk. Her second-in-command is waving an empty container of said pepper spray, emphasizing her point.

"File a requisition order, Rubes. You know the drill."

"I do know, that's why I'm telling you about it. If I file a req form, it will take days to process."

"Well, that's bureaucracy for you."

"Em, we need one now," Ruby perches herself at the edge of Emma's desk, her long legs kicking at the air. "Tomorrow's the parade."

"So?"

"We'll need pepper spray."

"No, we won't," Emma turns her attention to another stack of files that she had dutifully neglected for the better part of a week. The words swim before her eyes, reminding her once more why she absolutely loathes doing paperwork. She just doesn't have the proper attention span for it.

"But, Em--"

"Seriously Rubes, I highly doubt that anyone in Storybrooke will cause a riot over parade floats overflowing with pumpkins and apples and dried leaves. That will be just sad."

Ever the persistent one, Ruby stands her ground, refusing to let the matter go. "Emma, Granny gives away free beer during the festival, and, for the past twenty-eight years, someone always gets pepper-sprayed during the parade."

"I know, and, going by Graham's old files, that certain someone is sitting right over there."

The blonde inclines her head towards the man slumped against his desk a few feet away, drooling on the budget report that she had asked him to file an hour ago. He's literally sleeping on the job – in full view of his superiors too. Leroy has some balls, she'll give him that.

"And, since our dear ol' Grumps is part of the team now, I'm pretty sure he'll lay off the sauce this year."

"Are you sure about that? Leroy had a few beers with the dwarves yesterday. He's probably sleeping
off a hangover right now. A lot of people are going to be walking around pissed drunk, it's going to be torture for him.” Ruby levels her with a knowing look. Old habits die hard. Even if he wasn't one in his old life, Leroy did spend the past two decades as Storybrooke's resident drunk. Ruby knows firsthand, being the one serving him booze all these years. "What assignment did you give him?"

"Security. He'll be in charge of watching over the tail-end of the parade with August. We'll be at the front."

Ruby hums at that, probably letting the knowledge stew inside her head. After a beat, realization seems to set in. She arches an eyebrow at Emma. "The nuns are on the last float."

Emma smirks, looking mighty pleased with herself. And, she truly is.

"Precisely. I don't think he'll be tempted to go near the free beer at Granny's booth when I basically just gave him permission to ogle Sister Astrid's ass all day."

"Bravo, Sheriff Swan. Ten points for craftiness," Ruby offers a slow clap for Emma's benefit. Pushing herself away from the table, she saunters out of her boss' office, but not before muttering a low, "I still think we could use some pepper spray though, tradition and all that jazz, you know?" over her shoulder.

Emma laughs at that. "Trust me Rubes, we're gonna break Leroy's twenty-eight-year standing record tomorrow. Just you wait."

"You're not worried about anyone else causing problems?"

"Nah, it's a parade organized by fairy nuns and the kids at the orphanage; only the soulless would try to cause trouble." Emma waves a flippant hand.

Maybe it's bad practice for a Sheriff to be so blasé about such matters (considering that they just had a fissure scare and pranksters like Rufio and his Lost Boys are still running around), but Emma's brain is too fried from poring through all sorts of forms and reports that, right now, she doesn't really give a damn.

"I assure you, nothing's gonna go wrong."

Famous last words, indeed.

Turns out they weren't as thorough with their search as they thought they were.

A fissure did open up in the woods after the powerful spell was cast, but it took six whole days for a creature from the ruins of the Enchanted Forest to stumble upon it and enter their world.

You see, fissures are one-way portals – a bridge of sorts connecting fairytale land to Storybrooke. Now that magic has come to their new home, the fabric between both of their worlds has thinned, allowing for a powerful enough spell to cause tears that may be used as doorways to transcend the new world from the old. Those tears are fissures. And, unfortunately for those few souls in town who desired to return to the Enchanted Forest, fissures can only bring beings from fairytale land to Storybrooke, not the other way around. They're stuck in Maine, just like everyone else.

Michael Tillman is camping in the woods with his children on this fateful morning when Storybrooke is once again beset by a visitor from the other side. The fissure had appeared near where they had pitched their tents, small enough not to notice at first, and they go about their day blissfully unaware that all hell is about to break loose. As soon as he feels the earth shake and sees the crevice
splitting open like a bad wound, Michael hoists his two grown children over his shoulders and runs as fast as his legs will allow, overcome with a sudden rush of adrenaline. Menacing roars echo through the forest, prompting him to move quicker, his pace almost inhuman. In his fright and hurry to leave, he leaves behind their belongings at the campsite – among them, the cellphone in his backpack.

He's unable to call and warn anyone during the short, frantic drive back to town.

The blocked-off roads that welcome them at the town proper send a chill down his spine. Overcome with panic, he had forgotten. Today is Storybrooke's annual fall festival. And, from the looks of it, the partying and merrymaking is already in full swing. The parade is about to begin.

The deafening roar that had plagued him in the forest cuts through the air and makes the metal of his truck shudder. White as a sheet, he stumbles out of the door, faces the throng of people milling about, and at the top of his lungs, he screams:

"CYCLOPS!"

If somebody had told Emma Swan four months ago that she would be fighting a one-eyed giant – this time in the middle of Main Street and smack dab at the beginning of the Autumn Festival parade too – she would have rolled her eyes and laughed her pretty little ass off.

Well, she's not laughing now, that's for sure.

"Fucking hell...!" she yelps, managing a less than graceful dive to the pavement, tasting asphalt in the process.

A giant wooden pumpkin sails past her frame and misses her head by a measly inch. The orange projectile hits the lamp post behind her and splinters off into several pieces. Emma winces at the sight. Marco had been working on that for a week, and, damn, if he weren't so busy running for his life, she's sure he would've been pissed.

Leroy, it seems, is more than happy to be pissed on his behalf. "Hey! Over here you ugly piece of shit!"

Crawling on all fours to find cover behind one of the abandoned parade floats, Emma chances a glance at the stocky man pelting rocks at the monstrosity wreaking havoc nearby. She doesn't know whether to be impressed by his courage or be annoyed by his recklessness. Well, crazy or not, Leroy's a brave son of a bitch. She has to give him props for that, at the very least.

After all, not a lot of people have the guts to face down a thirteen-foot-tall cyclops (apparently, it's one of the tiny ones too).

And, if she weren't so fearful for her own life and those of the people she had sworn to protect, she would've found humor in the curious – yet slightly badass – sight of a dwarf standing tall against the beanstalk giant's infinitely uglier cousin. It's something like David and Goliath; except, her foul-mouthed deputy's stones do not seem to do enough damage to faze or even topple the one-eyed freakshow. If anything else, Leroy only succeeds in further provoking the cyclops' temper.

Mary Margaret's freshly dismantled parade float can attest to that.

"Aim for the eye!" Emma suggests helpfully. Maybe they can kill a cyclops the way one is supposed to slay an ogre.
"That's what I've been doing!" Leroy yells back, throwing his stock of rocks with a not-so-surprising lack of accuracy. The cyclops, being a big target, is easy enough to hit. But, to actually strike that huge, bloodshot eye when it keeps on moving is proving to be a nearly impossible task.

"Emma!" she hears a familiar voice calling out from the alley across the street.

"Over here!"

A few seconds later, a breathless Ruby hunkers down beside her, face flushed from all the running she had to do.

"Everyone made it to the hospital. Whale is patching up the injured, nothing serious, just superficial wounds. I left when Snow and Charming arrived."

"Henry?"

"He's fine. A little bit shook, but he's alright."

Emma lets out a ragged breath, feeling a little bit of tension leaving her body. He's safe, that's the important thing.

"Regina?"

"Henry said he'd call her right away and let her know what's happening."

Emma nods and takes in a huge breath, unexpectedly finding comfort in the knowledge that Regina's most certainly on her way here. She'll feel more confident about their chances of surviving this ordeal with Regina and her magic by her side.

A loud roar fills the air and both women wince at the noise. A scooter flies overhead and crashes into a parked van. Ruby and Emma, who are watching the carnage with wide eyes, flinch at the sound of Leroy's agonized howl. That's his scooter. And the parked van? That belongs to the nuns.

This day is just getting better and better.

Ruby takes a quick peek at their one-eyed foe, nudges Emma with an elbow, and says in a flat tone: "Check out the humongous eye on that thing. Now don't you wish we had some pepper spray?"

If not for the fact that they were in a life or death situation, Emma would have laughed.

"Next council meeting, remind me to ask the town to spring for a firetruck that sprays mace."

"Roger that, Sheriff."

With a brief pat on her shoulder, Ruby sets off again towards the other side of the street, eyeing the revolver Leroy had accidentally dropped near the barricade after a particularly agile pavement swan dive a while back.

Mary Margaret and David – whom Emma still has trouble calling by their real names since the curse broke and restored everyone's memories – had gone earlier to escort the Blue Fairy to the place where Michael had set up camp, ensuring that no more creatures spring out of the fissure by closing it with fairy magic. They had promised to come back as soon as they can to help fight the giant, but Emma refused their help and insisted that they go and protect the people holed up at the hospital instead. They'll try to hold their ground here, but if for some reason, God forbid, that they cannot keep the cyclops from leaving Main Street, she needs her parents to be their last line of defense.
can handle themselves. All of them can. David has his sword, Mary Margaret has her bow and arrows, and Emma, well, she has her trusty little gun and her ol' merry band of deputies.

"I'm out of rocks!" Leroy jumps to the side, just in time to avoid being hit by an oak barrel. For a second, the sight of it reminds Emma of Donkey Kong, but she shakes the thought away when she sees him nearly getting his head chopped off by a manhole cover. Leroy growls at her. "Hurry up and do something, sister!"

"I only know about the eye thing and it's not working! You don't happen to know what a cyclops' other weaknesses are, do ya?" Emma shouts back, braving a peek around the corner. She scampers back when she catches sight of the cyclops angling to throw a bench their way.

"If I did, I wouldn't be playing dodgeball with it, now would I?" Leroy grunts and rolls to the side, showing much dexterity for someone whose only exercise consists of lifting beer to his lips only a few months back.

"Just awesome.." Emma mumbles to herself.

She unholsters her pistol and takes a deep breath, her eyes flitting in all odd directions, trying to assess her next move. Her hands feel clammy, and even as her grip tightens around her weapon, she feels useless here with her gun.

It's exactly how she felt during her brief trip to Fairytale Land, when an ogre had easily mangled her old revolver into an oddly shaped ball of metal.

Guns are pretty much useless against supernatural creatures. She knows that now.

Unfortunately, another soul in her team discovers this the hard way when August jumps out of cover and shoots the cyclops point blank with his shotgun. He hits the bastard squarely on its left leg and succeeds in staggering it backward for a bit, and, although the wound bleeds a little, the cyclops brushes the injury off as if it's nothing more than a teeny weeny papercut. Not surprisingly, it retaliates by swatting August away like a fly, and the last thing Emma sees of her deputy is him sailing through the air like a rag doll and crashing into the display window of Mr. Gold's pawnshop.

Ruby jumps in after him, agile like a wolf, and her relieved scream of 'he's alive!' manages to untwist the ball of worry that's coiling inside Emma's gut. No one is going to die under her watch, not if she can help it.

Leroy's still doing his acrobatic rolling, diving and sliding routine at the middle of the street; purposely trying to draw the cyclops' attention to himself to buy his colleagues some time to formulate a plan of attack.

And, by colleagues, that can only mean a busy Ruby, an injured August and, of course, a clueless Emma.

The said blonde steels her resolve. Seeing that her deputies are either incapacitated or preoccupied with other important matters, it's up to her, the Sheriff, to come up with the perfect solution to their little giant problem.

Hey, no pressure there, whatsoever.

Emma closes her eyes for a brief moment and steadies herself. Sure, the odds are not in her favor. But, then again, when are they ever?

At that moment, as if by divine intervention, she casts a worried glance towards the broken window
of Gold's shop and sees salvation. She's only hoping to catch a glimpse of the two deputies still inside, but what she sees instead causes a ripple of excitement to slither across her body, tingling her skin like electricity.

She remembers one of her old foster parents then, the one who always liked to polish his guns by the fireplace after Sunday dinner. "Kid," he called to her once, when he caught her observing his ritual from behind the sofa. He took a healthy gulp from his glass of bourbon before picking up a rag and running it through the length of his 9mm pistol. "Believe me, there's no problem in this world that you can't face if you have a gun in one hand and a glass of good alcohol in another."

Emma was eight then, so she could barely understand what the hell he was talking about. She did know he was kinda crazy though; so, she never really paid any attention to the mindless drivel he spewed out on a daily basis. That said, she liked to humor him from time to time. "What if my problem's too big?"

He smiled then, a glorious one that showcased a few missing teeth. "That's easy, little one. You just have to find a bigger gun."

And that, she does.

Breathing a little easier since this whole mess began, she takes a quick look at the cyclops – making sure that Leroy still had its attention – before sprinting towards Gold's wrecked shop. No doubt he'd be demanding payment from Town Hall for the damage to his store when he comes back to Storybrooke, but that's the least of her worries. Broken glass crunches under her boots as she bounds right into the pawnshop, the sound of the bell chiming above the door a stark contrast to the chaotic noise emanating from outside. Ruby and August are on the floor, the former tending to the latter's war wounds.

Emma kneels down before the two. "August? You alright?"

"My father carved m-me out of Rosewood, it's one of the h-hardest, he said. I-I think I'll live," the injured man tries to joke but fails miserably, wincing slightly and hissing in pain as Ruby presses a cloth to his thigh to put pressure on his wound and stop the bleeding.

"Hang in there, buddy. We'll get you to the hospital soon. Just need to get rid of our one-eyed friend," Emma says in a gentle, soothing tone, giving his arm a reassuring squeeze.

She feels something hot and wet on her hand; she doesn't need to look at her fingers to know that they are now tinged crimson. His arm isn't as mutilated as his leg, but he's still sporting nasty cuts on his biceps. The sight of blood petrifies her and seeing it flowing freely from her deputy's leg wound only compounds her fear, but she stamps down her discomfort and wills herself to focus. If she wants to save August, she needs to act now.

"Ruby? I know now's not the best time, but can you give me a hand?"

A look of hesitation washes over Ruby's pale face and, for a second, Emma thinks she might actually say no. But then, August grasps Ruby's shaking hand with his own trembling one and gives her a weak nod, silently giving her permission to leave his side. The worst of the bleeding has stopped, but he's lost a lot of blood. He can hang on for now, but if they don't get out of here within the hour, he'll probably lose a leg... or worse, his life.

"You've got a plan?" Ruby turns to Emma, her expression as serious as the amount of blood dripping from her hands.
"Rocks and bullets aren't enough to topple that bastard. We need a bigger gun," Emma's eyes blaze with intent, and slowly, she moves her gaze towards the display window that August had crashed into.

Ruby follows her gaze and her eyebrows lift to her hairline instantaneously. "A bigger gun..." she mutters quietly.

"Think it'll work?"

"Let's go find out," Ruby says, a low growl vibrating in her throat, eyes flashing dangerously.

The cannon is a brilliant, inspired idea, Emma has to admit. If they can't hit his eye, they'll just have to settle for his face. Or his body. Any part of him, really. As long as they make a hole in the creature, it's fine. They're not picky.

"This is one of the small ones?"

"Yeah, I've seen bigger."

"So, like, compared to other cannons, this is a baby?"

"Mhmm."

"Heaviest fucking baby I've ever seen."

"Em."

"Sorry."

Carefully, they keep low and roll the cannon out of the shop as quickly and discreetly as they can. It's heavy as hell, and the wheels can use a bit of grease, but they manage to move it with the help of all the fear and nervous energy pumping through their veins. They place the cannon near the entrance of an alley, careful not to draw much attention to it by choosing a spot that's chock full of debris. Luckily, the cyclops has moved a bit down the street and is too preoccupied to notice them running to the pawnshop and back out again, bringing with them all the items that had been sitting on display with the cannon. Leroy still had the cyclops distracted, and the mere fact that he isn't lying flat on the pavement like a pancake is not only proof of his resilience, but his remarkable ability to duck. He's a slippery bastard, that Leroy. If they manage to get out of this mess alive, Emma believes he deserves nothing less than a commendation. Hell, she'll probably give all her deputies one. They all deserve a medal.

They spread the items before them and arrange them near the cannon – a filthy sponge attached to a rod, a couple of rags, a wooden box full of black powder, two cannonballs, a steel stick, some tin foil, a matchbox, and a piece of cannon fuse.

Firing a gun is easy. Point and shoot. Anyone can pick up a gun and fire it (whether or not they hit their target is another matter). However, a cannon is a whole different ballgame. Looking positively befuddled at the assortment of materials by her feet, Emma turns to Ruby and utters the only words running through her brain: "Now what?"

Fortunately, Ruby doesn't seem to be as ignorant as she is about the mechanics of firing cannons and just promptly gets to work. Emma watches, a little mystified, the way Ruby's nimble fingers quickly form a small container for the black powder out of tin foil.
"This is Jackson's cannon..." Ruby says, her voice deathly quiet, eyes still focused on the task at hand. Her fingers briefly trace the carved initials on the wooden box of gunpowder before closing the lid with a snap. "He must be really strapped for cash if he pawned this thing and sold his bike."

"What?"

"Nothing," Ruby shakes her head and expels a slow, sad breath. She motions to the object that looks like a giant cotton swab with her chin. "The barrel should be clean, grab the rod and swab the bore."

"He taught you how to fire it?" Emma asks, doing as she's told and cleaning the insides of the cannon. She inserts the rod twice and twists it in, making sure the sponge got everything.

Ruby's silent for a moment, lost in her own head, before biting her lower lip and giving her a slight nod.

"Swab, powder, wadding, shot."

Emma lifts an eyebrow in question.

Ruby shrugs, taking the steel stick and very carefully inserting the foil of black powder into the cannon's fuse hole with it. She applies the same amount of care when she puts in the fuse.

"During our second date, Jackson brought it to the beach and fired a shot into the ocean to impress me. He's always been a bit of a show-off. Got in a lot of trouble for it though; Regina had him locked up for two days. I had to bail him out myself."

Emma doesn't miss the slight sigh from Ruby's lips, but decides not to pry any further. Clearly, there are still some unresolved feelings there. But this isn't the time nor the place to have a heart-to-heart talk about Ruby's ex-boyfriend. They have a one-eyed freak to kill.

For the next agonizing moments, Emma's attention flies between Ruby and Leroy; keeping an eye out - no pun intended - for the cyclops as well. She's hyper-aware of her surroundings, which is why she almost knocks the wadding out of Ruby's hands when the cyclops punches a hole right through the window of Sebastian's Boutique and sends shards of glass flying everywhere.

"Careful, Em. Don't want the gunpowder inside to spill," Ruby gives her a reproachful look while making sure the wadding's packed tightly up against said powder.

"Sorry," Emma mumbles, keeping her antsy hands to herself.

"I'm pretty sure that's everything..." Ruby says after a moment, wiping her hands on her tight leather pants. "Only thing left to do is load the shot and fire."

The cannonball weighs like a ton; Emma finds her own arms shaking when she picks one up. If she hadn't been diligent about hitting the gym three times a week, she's sure she would've dropped it on her toes. Ruby jumps in to assist, and together, they slip it in the barrel as gently as they can.

"Alright, let's do this.." Emma flexes her fingers and exhales through her lips. They only have one chance to get this right. If they miss, they probably won't have the time to reload before the freakshow goes after their heads. "How many seconds do we have after we light the fuse?"

"Three seconds, tops."

"Okay, I'll get Leroy to lure the big fella to the middle of the intersection. As soon as the cyclops is a step away from the traffic light, we'll ignite the fuse."
"Uh, Em.."

"What?"

"You don't happen to have a lighter with you, do ya?" Ruby asks, showing her the empty matchbox.

"Leroy!" Emma shouts into the walkie-talkie clipped to her Sheriff jacket's shoulder strap. "You hear me?"

The radio crackles for a second before a familiar gruff voice replies with a breathless grunt.

"Great, listen well. Ruby and I are near the alley beside the shoe shop. We have a cannon armed and ready. I need you to lead the bastard right in the middle of the intersection. Do you copy?"

"Loud and clear, sister."

"Alright, but as soon as you pass us by, throw your lighter our way."

"I don't have one!"

"Why the hell not?!" Ruby screeches right into the radio, and Emma flinches accordingly.

"I quit smoking!"

"Since when?!" the two women chorus.

"Nova."

Both Emma and Ruby roll their eyes.

"Okay, hold off on our plan for a moment till we find a lighter. I'll radio you again when we're ready."

"Roger that."

"Stay alive, Leroy."

"Yeah? Hurry the hell up then."

"Watch over the cannon, I'll try to look for a lighter in Gold's shop."

"Okay, make it fast," Emma nods at a leaving Ruby, drawing her pistol and crouching low beside the antique artillery.

Beads of sweat pools on her forehead as tension takes over her body once again. If the cyclops sees her here, she's dead meat. What good will a tiny little pistol do against a one-eyed giant?

After an agonizing minute, a bit of that tension rolls off her shoulders as soon as she notices a head of dark hair in her periphery, making its way towards her.

"Oh my God..." Emma exhales in relief.

"Regina is just fine, my dear."

"Took you long enough to get here," Emma glances at Regina and smiles – her first genuine one since the cyclops, literally, rained on their parade.
"I figured you and your deputies would be able to handle a little cyclops," Regina says dryly, a wry little grin on her lips. She sweeps the street with her eyes and makes a face at the carnage. "Clearly, I thought wrong."

"We'll hit back soon enough," Emma pats the cannon beside her and lets her fingers drag down the barrel, unwittingly leaving behind a nice imprint of her hand on the metal – courtesy of the dirt on the cannonball and August's blood.

Regina bristles at the sight. "You're hurt."

"Huh?"

Before Emma can react, Regina takes her right hand and inspect her bloody fingers and palm, a frown so deep marring her usually stoic face. "Where's your wound?"

"I'm... I'm fine..." Emma mumbles, finding it hard to speak all of a sudden. "August got hurt."

Regina lets go of her hand—ina very gentle, un-Regina-like way too—and Emma immediately feels the loss tug at her chest. She clears her throat and regroups, focusing instead on the very important task before them.

"Regina? I need you to touch me."

"What?"

Emma ignores the comical way Regina's looking at her, and instead tilts her head at the cannon. "Leroy's gonna lure the cyclops over there. I need you to use your magic to ignite the fuse when it's time to fire."

"Okay, that I can do," Regina nods.

"Rubes," Emma speaks into her walkie-talkie. "Take the squad car, it's parked by the curb at the corner of the pawnshop, bring August to the hospital."

"What about--"

"Regina's here," Emma interjects. "Everything's going to be fine now."

Emma feels, but does not see, the serious look that Regina shoots her way upon hearing her words and how confident she sounds when saying them. She means it though. In a big way, having Regina here, armed with her magic and her quiet confidence and everything that makes her so formidable, is enough reassurance that somehow, they'll make it out of here alive.

"Leroy?" Emma radioes her other deputy.

"Y-yeah?"

He's sounding severely out of breath now. "We're all set. Any time you're ready, bring him in."

"Bout t-time, sister."

Emma stands to her full height and glances far down the road to where Leroy and the cyclops are playing a warped game of hide-and-seek. Leroy will hide behind a car and the cyclops will then seek to end his life by crushing the vehicle with his fists. They are basically going up the street doing this whole weird dance, leaving wrecked cars in their wake. Insurance companies are going to have a lot on their plates when this is all done.
"We have two minutes," Emma estimates, turning to Regina and extending a helping hand.

She pulls the woman to her feet and they both position themselves at the back of the cannon – careful not to stand too close to the weapon; it's bound to recoil when fired.

"Are you sure we'll be able to hit that thing, Sheriff?"

Emma shrugs helplessly. "He's huge, if we miss his face or his chest, hopefully we'd get his crotch. If that doesn't get him on his knees, I don't know what will."

Regina lifts an eyebrow but leaves it at that.

Emma offers her hand once more, but instead of touching her, Regina flexes her own fingers and decides to test her powers without Emma's assistance. Regina has the presence of mind to aim in the opposite direction, much to Emma's relief.

One flick of her wrist and the air explodes... with fireflies.

Emma chokes on a laugh. "Great effort, your majesty, but I don't really think fireflies can cause actual fires."

Regina flushes all the way down to her neck and rolls her eyes at the blonde. "One of these days I just might conjure a dragon instead of a dragonfly. Let's see how you'd like that."

"I already slew a dragon, Regina. I think I can do it again," Emma says with a haughty smirk, earning another eyeroll from the brunette.

A succession of tremors makes them look in Leroy's direction. Poor man is drenched in sweat, face so red it's almost purple. He's running as fast as his legs can take him, the cyclops hot on his trail.

"One minute," Emma murmurs. This time, she takes the initiative and grabs hold of Regina's hand.

She feels the familiar surge of energy transferring from her body to Regina's, but unlike before, it doesn't make her lightheaded anymore. It's possibly due to all the adrenaline in her veins, or maybe, she's just getting used to it.

This time, when Regina flicks her wrist, a fireball appears on her free hand.

"Four months ago, would you have ever thought that we'd make heat together?"

The fireball flickers a wee bit brighter at her words. Emma suppresses a smirk and pretends not to notice.

"Miss Swan," Regina warns.

"Just saying, when we touch, fires start. Doesn't get more heated than that," Emma says all too innocently.

Regina glares at her through the corner of her eyes. "Your impropriety during life and death situations is duly noted, Sheriff Swan. Now, if you can only stop with the double entendres, I believe we have a cyclops to kill."

Emma grins from ear to ear before returning all her attention to their one-eyed friend.

"He's all yours!" Leroy yells as he runs through the middle of the intersection, the cyclops a few good meters away.
"On my mark..." Emma tells Regina. "Ready... and... f-oh shit!"

All of their fears about the cannon missing its target become a moot point, because the cyclops suddenly catches glimpse of the fireball in Regina's hand, decides to abandon his pursuit of Leroy, and guns straight in their direction. He's so close it's damn near impossible to miss.

"Fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fire fireeeeeeeeee!" Emma shrieks in complete and utter panic.

Regina, regal as ever, is the face of calm. With a casual wave of a hand, she sends the tiny fireball hurtling towards the cannon and ignites the fuse.

The cyclops is so close that when it roars, their hair whips back and they both pull a face at his horrid breath.

Ruby is a little off-base. It isn't three seconds. It's just two. Without warning, the cannon fires and leaps backward a few solid inches. Clouds of white smoke billowing around them, making Emma cough and Regina crinkle her nose in distaste.

Their ears are ringing and they are having a hard time breathing.

But, all of that doesn't matter.

The explosion that happens upon impact buckles and thunders through the street like a nuke going off.

The cannonball goes straight through the giant's chest, directly at the cyclops' heart and, as soon as it hits the organ, the monster explodes into tiny chunks. It rains blood on Main Street. Pieces of the cyclops goes flying everywhere. On treetops, store fronts, cars, and yes, even a poor winded Leroy. Emma has a nice – albeit, inner – laugh about that. She doesn't know her deputy can pull off a giant intestine scarf, but he does. He deserves two medals now.

Thank God Regina has the wherewithal to put up a barrier spell the second the giant explodes. A piece or two went through the barrier, but at least, they are saved from a literal blood bath. Leroy's still spitting out cyclops blood and gagging in the middle of the street. Emma grimaces. Yeah, better make it three medals.

"Well, that's enough excitement for one day. I would've said it was fun, but that would've been a lie," Regina says in a bored tone, taking her hand back from Emma's grasp. Without as much as a glance, she turns on her heels and walks away.

"Goodbye, Miss Swan. Have a nice time cleaning up."

It takes a second for Emma to react. She stumbles after the brunette and almost slips at the crimson-colored street. "H-hey! Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"Aren't you gonna help out?"

"I just did."
"C'mon," Emma jogs in front of Regina, turns around to face the Evil Queen, and starts walking backwards. "Don't you wanna help us sort out your beloved town? As former Mayor, isn't it only appropriate for you to stick around and help your old constituents clean up?"

"I was forced out of my office," Regina sniffs, sticking her nose in the air. "This is your mother's problem now."

"Henry will probably want to help us clean up too..." Emma wags her brows, not one to play fair herself.

Regina glares at her, probably knowing what game she's playing, and trudges on.

"Oh, c'mon, are you kidding? We need your magic to hasten the cleanup. Plus, you're doing community service right? Give me one good reason why I should let you go..." Emma dares, arching a brow.

"I have cyclops in my hair."

That's an answer she definitely isn't expecting.

Emma watches Regina's upper lip curl in disgust as she holds the drenched lock of brown hair away from her face.

"Actually," Emma grins lopsidedly. "You have some on your cleavage too."

Regina's step falters. Emma's grin broadens.

"I would've done the knightly thing and offer to get it out for you, but that's gonna entail touching your boobs," Emma says as seriously as possible, trying extra hard not to laugh. "And I don't know, your majesty; if touching your hand caused a fire, and touching your arm opened a portal to another world, me touching your breasts might actually destroy this town. After my two weeks forced sabbatical with Mary Margaret, I found that I kinda prefer this place to fairytale land."

The glare Regina shoots her way would've melted iron.

Emma shrugs. "Just saying, I'm the White Knight, not the Harbinger of Death."

"No, you're not, Miss Swan, but I might just be yours."

"My knight?"

"Your death."

"Oh," Emma clamps her lips shut. She looks at Regina with her most pathetic face and murmurs a desperate: "Please stay."

Regina rolls her eyes and lengthens her stride, bumping the blonde's shoulder as she pushes past.

Emma sighs in defeat and stops following after the brunette. Looks like they'd be sorting out this mess without the help of Regina's magic today.

"I won't stay."

"Hm?" Emma turns around to face Regina. The Evil Queen's still walking away, doesn't even give her a backward glance.
"I won't stay," Regina repeats. "But I'll be back."

A smile breaks out on Emma's face. Of course Regina would opt to clean herself first before cleaning up the town. No other person values orderliness and cleanliness than Regina Mills. Couple that with a healthy dose of vanity, and well, you get the most put together woman in Storybrooke.

"I'll be waiting," Emma mutters, staring at Regina's retreating form until she's almost out of view.

The moment she turns around, the blonde spots something that elicits a smirk from her face. Emma walks over to Granny's abandoned stall at the side of the street, shaking her head in amazement at the fact that it had been untouched, before helping herself to a cold bottle of beer. She grabs two more, carries them by their necks with one hand, and proceeds to walk over to the blood-soaked man sitting slumped in the middle of the street.

Emma hands the bottles over to Leroy with a grin before plopping down beside him in a careless fashion. She nudges his shoulder with hers, unwittingly coating her jacket with cyclops blood, but thinking none of it.

"There are a few more over there if you want some more," she inclines her head towards Granny's free beer stall.

"I don't drink on the job, sister," Leroy mutters. "I'll have a beer after I clock out."

"Make an exception this time," Emma shrugs. "You earned it."

Leroy looks at her and smirks. "No pepper spray this year?"

"We're out of it," Emma grins. They clink their bottles together, take a long swig, and just... laugh.

Killing a cyclops, powering up Regina's magic and cleaning up the town takes its toll.

After two whole days of being constantly on her feet, Emma's exhausted body just about had enough. She's sleeping off a fever in her bedroom when Henry bounds in, a glass of water in hand and a familiar looking white box tucked under his arm.

He climbs into bed with her and takes out a pill from the nightstand, careful not to spill water all over her sick frame. He places the box beside the blonde's head on the pillow.

"Emma?" he says gently, nudging her shoulder.

Emma groans and burrows deeper into the covers.

"Mom says it's time for your meds," Henry persists, kicking off the covers with his feet.

"Kid, gimme a break.." Emma slurs, her voice thick with sleep.

Henry places the pill by her lips. "If you don't take this, she's gonna go down and make you take it herself. She won't be as nice about it as me. C'mon, Emma, take it and I'll let you rest, okay?"

She doesn't bother opening her eyes as she parts her lips and lets the kid chuck a pill inside her mouth.

"Water," Henry says.

Emma lifts her head a bit and drinks from the glass Henry's holding for her.
"Great job, Emma," Henry humors her and places the glass on the nightstand.

Emma gives him a small, lazy smile before unceremoniously dropping her head back on the pillow and conking out again.

She wakes up four hours later, dried drool at the sides of her lips and a weird sensation on one side of her face. Her right cheek is numb. When she reaches up to touch it, her fingers find something else instead. She had slept on a box, and the numbness she's feeling is most probably because it had left indentations on her face. How the box got on top of her pillow, she doesn't know. Probably Henry, though.

Emma sighs and opens it over her head, naturally, gravity does its thing and pulls the contents right out to her face.

Another lilac.

How August found the time to send her a flower while he's still recuperating in the hospital is a mystery.

Emma takes out the white card that had fallen to her neck and flips it open. Typewritten again. Green, fever-addled, eyes go over the typed words. Once. Twice. Thrice. A confused frown makes its way across her features.

"Who the hell is Argos?" Emma's hoarse voice says to an empty room.

*Nice job against the cyclops. My favorite part was when you screamed like a bitch.*

-Argos

*PS. Thanks for the three grand. You'll get it back eventually. Consider this my IOU.*
The Masked Swordsman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The flashing lights on the microwave tell her that it's a little past nine in the evening. Maybe eight. Or heck, possible ten. Unless she shuffles over to the appliance and stares directly at the numbers, she'll never be a hundred percent sure. Emma doesn't really trust her red-rimmed eyes at this particular moment in time. She's been in and out of consciousness (mostly out) for the past seventeen or so hours, so it's no surprise that right now, Emma's eyesight is sketchy at best.

She should probably get some more rest. The fever she's been trying to sleep off is still hounding her exhausted and utterly spent frame. The way her limbs feels like dead weight tells her as much. Still, being incredibly bullheaded does have its perks. After all, she did drag herself up the basement stairs and easily—albeit, a bit clumsily—navigated through the darkened mansion through sheer force of will.

It is by accident that Emma manages to catch a glimpse of her reflection in one of Regina's many hallway mirrors. She has to do a double-take. And then another. If she weren't so weakened by fever, she probably would have jumped out of her skin in fright. Jesus Christ, she's a hot mess. And not in a good way too. Her cheeks are gaunt and her blonde mane is in absolute shambles. The hair on the left part of her head is so flat it looks like it was steamrolled, while the other side looks like it was subjected to a wind machine and then teased relentlessly. The sight would have been comical if it weren't so incredibly depressing as well. Some people can make being absolutely disheveled look positively sexy. Alas, she's not one of them.

It isn't difficult to get herself to look away from the trainwreck that is her face and trudge on. The light peeking underneath the door to Regina's study is a welcome sight. Emma is determined to have a word with the brunette even if it means dragging her frail body through the house and crawling up the long ass staircase heading to the bedrooms above. The fact that Regina is still awake—and downstairs, to boot—saves her a lot of time, effort and trouble. And well, keeps her dignity intact too.

The door swings open before she can manage to lift one of her hands to knock.

Regina, who was probably on her way up, wasn't expecting to see her standing there. That, she's certain of. It's pretty much obvious from the way the other woman sucks in a harsh breath and starts in place, one hand clutching the door handle so tight her knuckles turn white.

The older woman actually stays frozen for a solid few seconds, and Emma is severely tempted to reach over and poke her on the face with a finger. The only thing that stops her is the violent slap she'd probably receive once Regina snaps out of her fear-induced stupor. Emma's already feeling sluggish and feverish, she doesn't need a swollen face on top of that, too.

Apparently, even Evil Queens get spooked. Of course, when they do, Evil Queens then get angry, too.

"Miss Swan!" Regina hisses, a furious red tint coming back to her ashen face.

Briefly, Emma wonders what had actually scared Regina: was it her sudden appearance or the fact the she currently resembles Frankenstein's bride? The blonde's lips manage a ghost of a smile. It's
probably both.

"What are you doing out of bed? You look like death!"

"Why, thank you, your majesty, I've been told on occasion that I carry the sickly, nearly-dead glow fairly well," Emma rasps out, her scratchy voice drowning out what bit of sarcasm she tried to infuse in her words.

She winces at what she hears. Dear God, she sounds like an ancient chain-smoking hooker with saggy tits and pruney skin.

"You shouldn't be here. You should be resting, you're sick..." Regina says, doing pretty much a good job of stating the obvious.

Her brown eyes take in Emma's appearance, judging tonight's choice of clothing – specifically her general lack of trousers. Based on the look of annoyance that crosses her face, it seems that Regina doesn't approve of what she sees.

"...and half-naked as usual. Miss Swan, are you so unsatisfied with having just a fever that you now feel compelled to give yourself a cold too?"

"I'll be fine, your house is warm," Emma points out with a flippant shrug, stubborn as a mule.

"Of course it is, but you, clearly, are not."

"I'm not feeling cold."

"Yes, you are."

"No, I'm really not."

"Go back to bed."

"I can't, I'm on an important mission."

"To annoy me?"

"Usually, yes. But not tonight."

Regina levels her with a look.

"Not too much, at least," Emma admits with a mumble, crooked grin in place.

"A worn sigh escapes Regina's lips. "Miss Swan, do us both a favor and get some sleep."

"I told you, I can't."

"You can and you will."

"I can't and I won't," Emma stands her ground, keeping her voice firm. "I--"

Regina growls, an honest to goodness growl that scares the blonde silent for a second. The exasperated brunette runs a hand through her hair and exhales a weary breath. "Miss Swan, this is absurd. Must you always be so cantankerous?"

"Cantanka-what? I don't even know what that means."
"Difficult. Uncooperative."

"Oh." Emma purses her lips thoughtfully, letting the meaning of the word sink in. "Then, I guess... yeah, pretty much. Sorry."

Regina's eyes narrow with skepticism. "Are you truly?"

"If I say yes, would you stop badgering me about me being cold and needing more rest?"

Regina lets out a rather undignified snort.

"Okay... then, no, I'm not really sorry." Emma shrugs unapologetically.

"Miss Swan."

"Seriously, Regina, I feel fine. I'm not even the least bit cold," Emma lies. She feels, rather than hears, the slight tremor in her voice. Emma winces internally. \textit{Shit}. She probably sounded like she had just swallowed a vibrator.

Regina doesn't catch it, thankfully, but she does manage to spot something else. "You're not cold?" she baits, lifting a perfectly sculpted brow.

"Nope."

The grin that spreads on Regina's lips is nothing short of evil. "Sheriff, your constant shivering makes a compelling argument to the contrary."

Emma wills her body to stop betraying her for a change and just cooperate for once.

"I'm fine," she grits out, even though her skin breaks out in goosebumps when she feels a draft hit her bare legs. At Regina's unbelieving look, Emma knows that there's only one thing that can save her now: \textit{deflection}. "Besides, Regina, what do you care if I get even sicker? Careful, your majesty, some people might think you're actually concerned about my well-being."

That does it alright.

Naturally, it puts Regina on the defensive. Can't have the Savior thinking that the Evil Queen is capable of something called caring, now can we?

"Miss Swan, I don't care about you, nor will I ever. However, the fact that Henry likes to spend a lot of time in your company is a cause for worry – especially if you insist on behaving like a Neanderthal with a complete disregard for personal health. So please, my dear, don't confuse my interest for my son's well-being as concern for you," Regina sneers, arrogantly jutting her chin in the air, looking mightily offended by the mere suggestion that she actually gives a damn about Emma Swan.

If you ask her, however, Emma thinks the lady doth protest too much. Regina isn't yet done with her excuses though, and continues with a derisive: "I can't have you spreading disease in my home like vermin. Henry already has the misfortune of having your genes, you don't have to give him your germs too."

"You're right, maybe I'll just give them to you," Emma grumbles beneath her breath, feeling a tinge offended.

Regina gives her a look that basically says 'bring it on', and for a second, Emma is severely tempted
to sneeze on her face, but she keeps that impulse in check. Regina and her wonky magic might just decide to have a cloud hover above her head and follow her every move, raining down snot and saliva with every step she takes. That disgusting thought alone sends another shiver rippling down her spine and, once again, Regina takes this as proof that she's freezing her ass off. Which she isn't. At least, not that much.

Regina shakes her head in disapproval and sighs, eyeing her tanktop and undies ensemble in disdain.

"Miss Swan, I didn't buy you a couple of perfectly nice silk pajamas just so you could leave them inside your closet to get eaten by moths. Would it really kill you to wear a pair when you sleep?"

"You're lucky I even put on clothes in the first place," Emma mutters, shifting her weight from one foot to the other for a wee bit of warmth.

Okay, maybe she is more than a little bit cold. It doesn't help that she's still standing out in the hallway, feeling draft after draft hitting her bare thighs. Somewhere in this house there is a window that needs closing.

"Old habits die hard, I guess. I've never really given a damn about what I wore in bed, even when I stayed at my Mo- Mary Margaret's place. Guess I've just gotten used to living on my own for so long."

"Well, you're not on your own anymore so be more considerate. You better reign in your exhibitionist tendencies, Sheriff, or so help me, I swear I will nail your clothes to your body with magic."

"Yeah? Well, good luck with that," Emma snorts in mockery. "With your hilariously unpredictable powers, you just might poof away all of my clothes... or heck, maybe even yours. And then where would we be?"

Emma can see that the mental image she painted rattles Regina a little bit, and she fights the urge to gloat. It's barely noticeable, but she does catch how the brunette's pupils widen and the way her shoulders stiffen. Score one for Swan.

"All I am saying is," Regina begins once again, tone a bit subdued this time around. "Put yourself in my shoes. This is not the first time I've caught you prowling the halls half-naked. How would you feel if I constantly disregarded all sense of propriety by carelessly walking around the house in my underwear?"

Aroused is the first word that pops in Emma's treacherous mind. "Disturbed," is what she says instead, her lips smart enough to lie.

For a strange moment, Regina actually looks a bit displeased by her reply, but she gives out a nod nonetheless. "Precisely."

The mere fact that something like arousal even crossed her brain is a sobering moment for the blonde. Is she really so deprived of intimacy and sexual contact that she has to think that way of Regina Mills, of all people? And, for the first time this evening, Emma feels discomfort trickling in her skin. Even when she still had enough clothing on to not be completely in the nude, she'd never felt so... exposed.

Emma shuffles on her feet and self-consciously tugs down the edge of her tanktop to cover her red girl briefs, giving herself a little bit of modesty. But just like always, she fails spectacularly. For a second, she wonders why Regina's eyes suddenly snap up and nail themselves to the top of the
doorway. But then, Emma notices that she basically almost flashed the Evil Queen because she had yanked down her top a little bit too much. *Whoops.*

In the end, Emma decides that her reason for rolling out of bed, and forcing herself to expend precious energy when she's sick, is more important than the fact that she's severely underdressed for Regina's taste (and now hers, as well). So Emma takes a deep breath, sucks it up and tells the other woman: "I know who broke into the house."

That's enough to get Regina's full attention. The former Mayor moves her gaze to meet hers, curiosity flashing in her eyes.

"Who is he?" Regina asks. "Or she?" she adds as an afterthought.

"Probably a 'he'," Emma intones. "Unless 'Argos' is a girl's name."

"Argos?" Regina frowns.

"Know him?"

"No, I don't believe I do," Regina says slowly, her voice quiet and thoughtful.

"Are you sure?" Emma presses. There was a time Regina denied knowing Jefferson. The woman is full of secrets; Emma just has to make sure.

"Miss Swan, why would I lie?"

Emma’s eyebrows slowly ascend to her hairline, *'are you kidding me?’* flashing like neon lights on her face.

"Why would I lie now?" Regina amends, a bit stiffly. "I gain nothing by lying. It's not like the thief did anything that was of consequence to me. The way I see it, Sheriff, this Argos is one of Storybrooke's unsung heroes. I believe I've already stated the reason why I think that way."

"Yes, you did. And if I remember correctly, you stormed out of my car after I pointed out the flaws in your thinking, your majesty," Emma recounts, a smug smirk playing on her lips. She ignores the withering glare that is sent her way and continues. "Besides, that hero of yours might have also been the one responsible for triggering the fissure and the cyclops that came out of it, so I don't think we should be rolling out the red carpet for him any time soon," she points out in a dry tone. For a second, black dots pepper her vision, and she promptly lifts a fist to rub them away.

Before she knows what is happening, Emma feels Regina grabbing her by the elbow and not-so-gently pulling her into the study. Her mouth drops open in protest, but nevertheless, she lets Regina guide her towards the couch. As soon as her shaky legs hit the cushion, the brunette drops her elbow and promptly gives her a light shove on the shoulder. Emma lands unceremoniously on the sofa with a soft oomph.

"Jesus, the heck are you doing, Regina?"

"Saving myself from nausea," Regina replies curtly, primly sitting herself down on the couch opposite Emma’s.

She flicks off some nonexistent lint on her skirt and smoothes the material down with her palms.

"You could've told me about this Argos in the morning, Sheriff. You really should be resting in your cubbyhole. You were swaying on your feet; it was making me dizzy."

"I was swaying?" Emma frowns. She's been feeling a bit lightheaded, but she's pretty sure she can still see straight. "I thought you were swaying."

"Why on earth would I sway?"

"I dunno, some people like to sway during conversations. Ruby does that sometimes."

Regina exhales deeply through her lips, fatigue evident on her face. "Miss Swan, do I look like the swaying type to you?"

"Not really. You're flashy, so you seem more like the strutting kind."

Her royal majesty levels her with an unamused look.

"That was a joke," Emma says lamely.

"Yes, well, clearly, your brain's been addled by the fever worse than I thought."

Regina had pushed her down on the couch near the fireplace. Although the fire had already been put out, Emma could still feel the heat radiating to where she sat. She lets the warmth seep into her freezing skin for a few moments before gathering her wits and speaking again. Regina just watches her, arms folded on her chest, a hint of a disapproving frown on her face. For someone who claims to not give a single damn about her, the brunette does look fairly concerned about her current state of unwell. Yeah... Emma sighs, the fever is probably getting to her head, alright.

"Argos," Emma begins, voice still gruff and scratchy. "He sent me this weird, kinda freaky and flirty note about him enjoying my makeover the other day. I thought it was August at first, cause he just signed off with a simple 'A'. But then, just a while ago, he sent me another note, complimenting me about how I did a good job against the cyclops and—"

Regina interrupts by letting out a rather derisive breath through her nostrils.

Emma sighs and rolls her eyes. "If it makes you any happier, your majesty, it was a backhanded compliment cause he also made fun of the fact that I screamed like a little girl when the cyclops was about to cut our heads off."

Regina's lips actually quirk upwards a teensy bit in approval. Emma ignores this and continues on.

"So anyway, he actually wrote his whole name this time around, and basically, owned up to stealing from me too."

"So, he only sends you notes?" Regina probes deeper.

Emma shakes her head. "He's also taunting me with your flower."

Regina starts at this.

"Even in sickness, must you be so inappropriate?" Regina asks, a red tint on her cheeks, her face looking positively scandalized.

"What?" Emma's forehead crinkles in utter confusion. What the heck did she say wrong this time? And then it dawns on her. "Oh! Not that flower. Jesus Christ, Regina. I'm talking about this one," she finally opens her left fist and shows the other woman the flower in her hand. Or, at least, what little is left of it. In her anger and panic and rush, Emma had crushed the poor thing and now it lay in shambles on her palm.
"Is that...?" Regina asks, sitting forward on the sofa and curiously studying the petals in her hand, her head tilted to the side. It takes a moment for everything to register in her mind, but when it does, Regina's face contorts in both wrath and fright. "My lilacs!"

The woman is up on her feet and rushing over to the window of her study in a heartbeat. A strangled gasp escapes her lips, and for the second time ever, Emma witnesses the scary, yet infinitely fascinating, sight of Regina glowing with pure, unadulterated magic. At least the Evil Queen's anger isn't directed at her tonight. She can breathe a little easier, at least.

Apparently, not only did Argos steal her clothes and her cash, the bastard had also managed to swipe a good chunk of Regina's favorite flowers from the garden. Just when he found the time to do that without them even noticing is a mystery. Admittedly, Emma has been neglecting her weeding duties since the incident at the clearing, so she's generally unaware of any changes that happened outside. Still, the fact that the flowers are still in good condition when they were sent is indicative of being re-planted somewhere else and kept alive. That was nice of the thief, if not kinda odd.

Allowing herself a moment to stew on the matter at hand, Emma barely sees the slight movement of Regina's glowing wrist flicking in her periphery. If she weren't feeling so parched and dehydrated, Emma would have peed her pants in fright. Towards her right, and without warning, the horse-head statue on the mantle over the fireplace suddenly comes into life and neighs, scaring the living daylights out of the White Knight. If not for the rather undignified (and utterly humiliating) shriek that she makes, Regina wouldn't have noticed what she had done. Gathering her wits, Regina wills her magic to recede back into her skin. The marble horse quiets down and becomes inanimate once more. Emma swallows hard and forces her heart to jump back down from her throat.

Jesus effin' Christ.

Regina Mills is an enigma.

Angry mob after her head? No biggie, just sass her way through the blood-thirsty crowd and taunt them continuously with an uber smug smile. Have a one and only friend in this whole entire world? Whatever, make sure that she keeps that person with her forever by locking her up in a basement as a scaly, fire-breathing dragon and then have the biological mother of her son slay the beast a few years later. Break into her home and steal her housemate's clothes? Pffft... as long as it wasn't her unmentionables, who gives a damn?

But... pick flowers from her garden?

Watch out, flower thief, it's the Evil Queen on steroids.

"Regina?" Emma calls out tentatively, watching the other woman with wary eyes.

"Sheriff Swan," Regina's voice is deathly quiet, and it actually scares the blonde a bit more than hearing Regina actually scream. The former Mayor tears herself away from the window and turns to look at her, her face an expressionless mask. The protruding vein on her forehead, though, is telling. "This... Argos..." Regina says with much difficulty, as if the words were clawing out of her throat.

"...yes?"

"He sent you notes..."

"Uh-huh."

"Flirtatious notes?"
"Yeah, uh, I guess, kinda, maybe, in a mocking way? I dunno..." Emma scratches the side of her face, flushing a bit in embarrassment.

"He has your underwear."

Now a full on blush erupts on Emma's cheeks. "Y-yeah, I believe so."

Regina's jaws clench so tight that Emma wouldn't be surprised if she started hearing the brunette's teeth cracking inside.

"So, from what I gather, this Argos," the way his name spills out of Regina's lips with full-on spite is not lost on the blonde. "Is a perverted little thief with an unfortunate taste in women. His misguided obsession with you seems to indicate as much."

Emma fights the urge to roll her eyes.

"And the worst part," Regina continues evenly. "Is that he has the nerve... the audacity... to try and woo someone like you with my flowers."

"Actually, I think he's trying to stalk me with them," Emma puts up a finger to interrupt. "But hey, wooing sounds better... and, you know, kinda less sinister."

Regina floors her with a look and Emma promptly shuts her mouth.

"This Argos, your precious stalker," Regina seethes, eyebrows furrowed deep. "For his sake, you better find him first, Sheriff Swan. Cause when I get my hands on him, I'll–" Regina, of course, is more than happy to demonstrate.

The brunette trudges over to where Emma is sat, takes the mutilated piece of flower from her hand and holds on to it so tight that her fist shakes. For a moment, an image of the Evil Queen crushing hearts into dust from Henry's book flashes in Emma's mind. It takes everything inside of her not to flinch.

Emma watches the unfortunate little petals falling out of Regina's hand with a slight grimace.

"You'll try to crush his flower?" The blonde forces a chuckle, trying to make light of the situation. Honestly, this version of angry Regina was creeping her out. "Hate to break it to you, your highness, but I don't think he has one of those. Not unless you decide to use your wonky ass magic on him, like you did with Leroy, and give him lady parts down there."

The moment the smart-ass quip leaves her lips, Emma starts regretting it immediately.

Regina's nostrils flare like a raging bull. She should've known better than to provoke a sleeping giant– especially one who's already pissed for having her favorite flowers stolen, and sensitive about her uncooperative magical skills to boot.

"It's tacky to hurt the sick, you know," Emma mumbles weakly, but before she can amble away with her shaky, unstable legs, the brunette's hand is already on her forearm, gripping tight.

Whatever little energy Emma was running on is sucked out of her in an instant. Purple smoke billows around their bodies, and then they are gone.

In a blink of an eye, Emma finds herself lying down on her bed, tucked safely—and securely—underneath her covers. She's trapped by an unknown force, unable to move, unable to speak. And much to her dismay, and Regina's pleasure, she's fully clothed.
In winter gear.

Layers upon layers of clothing encasing her in.

She sweats and sweats until her fever breaks; and then she just conks out, utterly spent. The last thing she sees is Regina standing over her bed, keeping watch. Emma wakes up all alone the next day, temperature back down to normal, silk pajamas enveloping her frame.

Greatly invigorated, she stretches languidly on the bed, feeling like a woman born again.

Who knew that the best way to cure a fever was to piss off an Evil Queen?

Speaking of her majesty...

The sound of Regina's footsteps padding in the kitchen above elicits a mischievous smirk on Emma's lips. She knows she shouldn't, but hey, what the heck? It's not like she's known for thinking things through anyway. Re-energized, she rolls out of bed, slips out of her silky garments, leaves on her girl briefs, and throws on one of her nasty pastel-colored tanktops. She doesn't bother with pants.

Payback time.

Overflowing with impish confidence, Emma swaggers up the basement stairs, throws open the doors to the kitchen and stands by the doorway in all her half-naked glory.

All her bravado deflates in a nano-second.

"Ew, Emma!" A traumatized little boy cries out in horror.

The beet-red Sheriff hightails it out of the kitchen as fast as her bare legs could take her and hides back down in her cubbyhole in shame. Regina's evil cackle echoes from above and pounds on her ears.

Needless to say, that was the last of her days as a bonafide pant-less exhibitionist.

"ACHOOOOOO!" Emma sneezes, spraying the room with tiny droplets of her saliva.

Ah, crap.

Pants, it is.

They're in a hurry.

The shop's outdated alarm system was hacked to keep quiet for only ten minutes. Grab and go was their plan for this evening. That said, when Rufio catches his reflection in one of the round security mirrors attached to the ceiling, he just has to stop for a few seconds.

A few spiky strands are out of place.

The red and black mohawk is a nightmare to maintain. It isn't even really a mohawk. A tri-hawk would have been more apt, since his hairstyle looks more like a triceratops' head than anything else. It takes approximately forty-five minutes every single day to spike up his long black hair and arrange the streaks that are dyed bright red into three separate partitions on his head. The amount of care that goes into styling his hair would've bored a significant hole in his wallet had he not stolen almost a year's supply worth of products from the Dark Star pharmacy. The kid who did the inventories is in on the take. That snot-faced pharmacist wouldn't have known any better, but then Argos decides to
be a killjoy and leaves money near the till.

They always did their shopping at the dead of the night. Rufio and his Lost Boys were known miscreants, so, naturally, shopkeepers have been more than a little hesitant to do business with their lot. He's lost count of all the times they've been shooed out of stores and chased away with brooms before they can even go through the door. So you can't really fault them for breaking in after midnight. Reprobates or not, they still had material needs.

Rufio, being the eldest and also the leader, was always in charge of all the procurement.

Tonight's shopping trip is the first time in a month that he actually pays for their purchases. When his saved cash had run out, so did his payments. Argos' arrival had changed all of that.

"The cops leave you alone because all you ever do is prank people in town," Argos says as they sneak out the backdoor of the pharmacy, giving the back of Rufio's head a light reproachful slap. "The moment you add 'stealing' to your repertoire, you're done. Do you really want your ass in juvie for something as stupid as hair gel?"

"You're one to talk," Rufio bites back, voice hushed.

They scale the chain-link fence in the darkened alley with expert ease, barely making a noise. As soon as they drop to the other side, Argos looks at him long and hard through his hockey mask, but doesn't say a word. Rufio grins in triumph. Seriously, after swiping the Sheriff's clothes and money, Argos just about lost any credibility to lecture him about stealing.

They continue the rest of their journey through the back alleys of Storybrooke in silence, pausing every so often to hide in the shadows when a squad car would drive past. That grumpy bastard Leroy is doing the rounds tonight, it seems. Shame, Rufio's been hoping to catch a glimpse of a certain Sheriff this evening.

Rufio smiles inwardly and lets out an amused breath at the thought that only four months ago, his life's ambition was to enter law enforcement and work under Sheriff Swan. Since visiting their high school for a short (and kinda awkward) talk about drugs and the like, he's been harboring a crush on the woman. He always did have a thing for blondes. The fact that she was kind of a badass was a definite plus. Rufio's been meaning to get his hands on a pair of Emma Swan's stolen panties for his daily dates with his right hand, but Argos, the greedy son-of-a-bitch, wouldn't even part with one.

They've been having the same conversation for days now.

"Can I have a thong, at least?" Rufio whispers to his older companion while they hide behind a dumpster at the back of Granny's bed and breakfast. They can't cross the street until a small group of drunken men ambles out of sight.

"No."

"Does she have a g-string?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Oh, c'mon, you have a shitload of her panties, can't you at least share?" Rufio whines. Unfortunately, his friend is not the least bit moved with sympathy.

"Nope."

"I'll pay you for it."
Argos chuckles at this. "Kid, you're broke."

"Give a guy a break, man. Look, I'll even take one of her granny panties if she has one."

"A granny panty?" Argos snorts in amusement.

As soon as the voices at the end of the alley die down, he picks up a metal rod, jumps up the top of the closed dumpster and pokes a piece of clothing from the B&B's clothesline. The humongous cotton garment falls right on top of Rufio's head.

"Granny's panty," Argos says, jumping back down to the pavement. "Wank away, little man."

Rufio casts off the disgusting pair of underpants from his head with an incensed scowl. He stomps at it petulantly with his boot before following Argos' lead and gunning for the alley at the other side of the street. No one sees them, of course.

A piece of paper attached loosely on a lamp post flaps carelessly in the night wind, catching his eye as he runs past. A pang of regret hits his chest then, but Rufio squashes it as quickly as it came. It's an ad looking for musicians for this year's junior prom. He's been meaning to ask Leila—no, Tiger Lily—to be his date for months. Sadly, that's not possible any longer.

Before the White Knight had rolled into town and destroyed the Evil Queen's precious curse, Rufio had been a consistent honor student at Storybrooke's public high school. He was a straight-laced kid: part of the debate team, no disciplinary records, always the teacher's pet. He went by the name Jethro Peters, the younger half-brother of the infamous Jackson Peters – the town's resident heartthrob and Storybrooke's promiscuous manwhore. They were brothers, but more than that, they were best friends. Jethro had big dreams, for himself and for his family and he couldn't wait to grow up.

But then... the curse broke.

And the rebel child that had been lying dormant inside of him decided to beat the living crap out of Jethro until the boyscout was an unrecognizable pulpy mess, and he, Rufio, the leader of the Lost Boys, was reborn. His first order of business was to spread word that Jethro Peters was dead and insist that everyone refer to him as Rufio. He then moved out of the home that he'd shared with his brot—mortal enemy, dropped out of school, brought his old gang back together, and made up for the twenty-eight years they've been neutered by pranking just about everyone in Storybrooke.

Their ultimate goal is to return to Neverland. Their home. A place where they would never have to grow up. But since they were stuck here, they resorted to annoying every single soul in town with hopes that the fairies, or someone else with magic, would tire of their mischief and just send them back home.

The clock is ticking. Time is running out. Every second, every minute, every hour spent in this place brought them closer and closer to the cusp of adulthood. It scared all of them shitless, but none more so than Rufio.

They arrive at their destination soon enough. The back of Michael Tillman's garage is the perfect hiding place. The mechanic is notorious for being lazy with regards to tidying his place of business; there's always an abundance of junk piled at the back. Taking a moment to make sure that the coast is clear, Rufio and Argos move in tandem and quickly work on removing the pieces of carton that they had earlier stacked together to give their ride some cover.

The blood-red motorbike is freed from its boxy prison soon enough.

Rufio tightens up the straps of the backpack filled with their purchases and makes sure the bag is...
firmly attached to his frame. They don't bother with helmets. Rufio wouldn't dare let anything flatten up his hair, and Argos, well, the guy already has enough going on with his head – the hoodie and the hockey mask look constricting as is.

All set; the only thing left to do is hop on.

Unfortunately, for Rufio, therein lies the problem.

And just like earlier in the night, when his friend had called him over to ride on the back, Rufio finds himself hesitating.

He isn't scared of riding motorcycles, far from it actually, it's just that he has a bit of history with this particular bike.

It's Jackson's. No, Hook's.

At least, it used to be.

Rufio had ridden at the back of this bike a thousand times. Jac-Hook was notoriously anal for not letting just about anyone ride his motorcycle. The man was too attached to the machine, obsessed to the point of absurdity – not unlike the way he fawned over a certain ship in his other life. He treated his motorcycle like a wife, and only gave riding privileges to a select few. So far, only two souls had ever been bestowed the honor.

Jethro and Ruby.

The emptiness that fills Rufio's chest then is almost enough to make him claw at his throat and retch. Rufio is a carefree badass; Jethro is a sentimental fool. The warring personalities in his head clash every so often; but tonight, it seems loveable little Jethro has the edge. Rufio isn't enjoying this one bit.

Argos, much to Rufio's dismay, notices the look on his face, and as if reading his thoughts, his friend reaches over and gives his shoulder a consoling pat.

"You know, it's okay to admit that you miss him," are the hoarse words whispered through the mask.

Rufio forces out an incredulous breath from his lips, roughly shrugging away the hand on his shoulder. "The heck are you talking about, man? I don't miss anyone, let alone him."

"He's your brother."

"He's not. It was just the curse at play. I don't give a damn about him."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes."

Argos snorts unbelievingly and then proceeds to chuckle. "Kid, you just pinged my bullshit meter so hard I think you broke it," he says.

If Rufio weren't under strict orders not to remove that stupid hockey mask and reveal the guy's identity, he would have snapped it from his friend's face and socked Argos straight on the nose.

"He's nothing to me," Rufio insists stubbornly, but even the words sound hollow to his ears. Dammit.
"He's been your only family for twenty-eight years," Argos points out, rather unhelpfully.

"The Lost Boys are my family."

"They're your lackeys. Underlings."

"They're my little brothers. I protect them."

"That's well and good, but who's going to protect you?" Argos asks, his gravelly voice going quiet.

That used to be Jackson's job. But...

"You are," Rufio responds in all seriousness.

This effectively shuts Argos up. Swallowing his discomfort and putting on his mask of nonchalance, Rufio jumps at the back of the bike and settles in place.

"So, are we leaving or not?"

Argos shakes his head at him and sighs. He zips the thick leather jacket all the way up to his neck before swinging his left leg around the bike and putting the keys into the ignition. The sound of the bike's powerful engine cuts through the night air, and before Rufio can drown himself in the memories it evokes, they speed off into the nearly empty streets of Storybrooke.

They've studied Leroy's nightly routine for days; they have a pretty good idea which places to avoid. So far, everything's going off without a hitch.

"You want ice cream?" he hears Argos ask as they round a curb.

Rufio wants to say no. Jackson had always taken him out for ice cream when he was having a crappy day. It was their comfort food and, even though it always made Jethro feel like a child, he could never say no when an offer was made. The teenager grits his teeth and closes his eyes for a moment.

No, his mind says.

"Yes," his heart replies.

Argos nods, and takes the bike east instead of heading back to their hideout up north. Looks like they'll have one more store to break into tonight.

Rufio closes his eyes and wishes the wind doesn't mess up his hair too much. How can he ever grow up? In many ways, he's still a kid. He just wants to go home to Neverland, where he can remain a child forever.

No cares. No responsibilities. No worries.

Rufio sighs and inadvertently tightens his hold on Argos' waist. He gazes sadly at a familiar-looking house as they ride past Sheppard Lane.

And no family.

Emma's first day back at work since being incapacitated by sickness starts with the usual smart-ass banter between her and her deputies. It isn't quite the same without August and his quick wit, so after spending the whole morning discussing the mysterious Argos at the station, they drop by Marco's
house during their lunch break, intent on giving a recuperating August a respite from boredom. And well, keep him up to date too.

That is the official statement.

Truth be told, Emma just also wants to make absolutely sure that her deputy hasn't been masquerading as a panty-thief in his spare time. After all, he was the first one she had suspected when the first package had come in. It would be nice to cross the man firmly off of the suspect list on their crime board before he comes back to work in a few days. They know it wasn't him, but it never hurts to be completely sure.

August, for his part, swears up and down that he had nothing to do with it. Emma's built-in lie detector doesn't catch anything, so she musses his dark crop of hair playfully, plops down on the armchair by his bed, and digs into her lunch with a relieved breath.

"So, Em," Ruby says over a mouthful of hotdog, lying stretched out on the bed beside August. "Your first stalker, how does it feel?"

Emma pops a fry into her mouth and shrugs. "About as exciting as getting mugged in a dark alley, then having your limbs chopped into pieces, and then spoon-fed into your gaping mouth. Morbidly awesome, I would say."

"Awesome?" August smirks.

"Morbid," Emma lifts an eyebrow. "You're focusing on the wrong thing, as usual."

"How 'bout you Rubes?" August turns to Ruby.

Emma notes, with mild amusement, how he has the presence of mind not to let his eyes linger down their friend's low-cut top. Quite a marvelous feat, considering that Ruby is wearing one of the new lace push-up bras from Little Miss Muffet's. Emma, feeling bold, also bought herself a pair. She hasn't regretted the purchase. That push-up bra really does do a wonderful job of pushing things to the limit and making her assets look damn good.

"Ever had a stalker?" August asks the former waitress, eyes nailed to Ruby's face.

Ruby ponders the question for a second. "Me? I gu--"

She never gets to finish because from his seat by the computer table, Leroy lets out a loud snort. "She's probably the one who does all the stalking," he mutters beneath his breath, a nasty teasing grin in place.

Ruby rolls her eyes at the grumpy old dwarf. "You're one to talk about stalkers, Leroy, considering that you've been stalking the nuns for months now."

"Watch your mouth, I don't stalk nuns," Leroy gruffly denies, his face reddening.

"Not nuns," Emma comes to his defense. "A nun."

"Nova," August and Ruby chorus, their tones monotonous and tired.

"Admiring is not stalking," Leroy grumbles, taking a huge bite out of his own quarter pounder.

August chuckles heartily, adjusting the pillow that's keeping him propped up. "Buddy, let's not kid ourselves here; I'd say you're way past the admiration stage and neck-deep into creeper territory
now."

"Word," Ruby agrees.

Leroy flips his laughing colleagues the bird and busies himself with his lunch instead.

"So," August begins anew, stealing a sip from Ruby's iced tea. "What else do we know about the mysterious Argos aside from the fact that he's a stalking pervert with a penchant for kleptomania?"

"He's into dressing up, believe it or not," Emma shares. "Tell him Rubes."

Ruby straightens up in place, face brimming with excitement, looking more than a little proud of her detective skills. She should be. The woman is a damn good deputy.

"Okay, this is what happened. So yesterday, after camping outside Jackson's house all morning—"

"Nothing stalkerish about that," Leroy mutters bitterly.

Ruby rolls her eyes and continues, "I finally managed to catch him while he was still sober. Remember when I told you a few days ago that I got a tip that a masked stranger with a sword bought Jackson's bike on the day of the robbery?"

"Argos?"

"Yup," Ruby nods, confirming August's guess.

She takes another bite from her lunch before continuing. Since the curse broke, she's been wolfing down food like there's no tomorrow. Emma envies her friend's remarkable metabolism; but then she remembers it's all because of the werewolf in her veins, so she's not as jealous anymore. Ruby washes down her food with a large gulp of iced tea and resumes speaking.

"I know you normally do the sketches Augs, but since you weren't there, I took the liberty of drawing our perp based on Jackson's description of the guy."

"Show him your masterpiece, Rubes," Emma encourages, biting on the tip of her thumb to stop herself from grinning like a loon. She pretends to lick off some ketchup from the digit before wagging her eyebrows at August behind Ruby's back. "It's glorious," she mouths at her bedridden deputy.

None the wiser, Ruby reaches inside her purse and pulls out a folded piece of paper from within, careful not to put any grease stains on it. She hands it over to a waiting August with a proud little smile before leaning back against the headboard and resuming her meal.

Being the only one in the room, aside from Ruby, who has seen the drawing, Emma relaxes into her chair and just watches things unfold. This should be good.

"Move over, I wanna see too," Leroy waddles over to the bed and carelessly plops down beside August, almost spilling food and drinks all over the sheets, and also forcing the recuperating man to sandwich himself between his two colleagues. The sight of her three grown-ass deputies trying to fit inside a tiny twin-sized bed elicits an amused snort from the Sheriff. The fact that the one who looks most uncomfortable is also the person who is supposed to be resting isn't lost on her too.

They don't seem to mind that much, though.

The two men, silent and serious, study the drawing for a minute or two.
Emma watches the way their eyebrows slowly inch closer and closer to each other until they are almost touching in the middle of their puzzled faces. She tries to tamper down her amusement by taking a huge bite of her burger. Sadly, the act of chewing barely hides her grin.

"So he's... uh... is this...?" August frowns in confusion, flipping the drawing from side to side, studying it from different angles. "I don't get it... is this a potato?"

"Nah, Woody, that's definitely a piece of ginger," Leroy chimes in, head tilted to the side.

Emma chokes on a laugh. "I thought it was a pineapple."

"That's Argos!" an affronted Ruby huffs indignantly, flushing all the way down to her neck.

Leroy narrows his eyes at the drawing. "Is that his schlong?"

"That's his sword!" Ruby exclaims in horror.

"Oh, so it's his penis alright," August shrugs.

"No! Jeez, you immature assholes." Ruby violently snatches back her sketch from August and glowers at her three chuckling friends. "That is not a potato or ginger or any kind of fruit or vegetable... that's a man wearing a leather jacket, a hoodie and a hockey mask."

"Don't forget the penile sword," Emma tries to add with a straight face, but of course, she fails miserably. She smiles sweetly at Ruby's unamused glare.

"Wait... hockey mask?" August sobers up and frowns, turning to look at Emma. "He likes to dress up as Jason from Friday the 13th?"

"Apparently." The Sheriff shrugs, washing down a mouthful of burger with her soda. Fairytale connection or not, there really isn't a shortage of crazies in this town. "Oh, and one more thing," Emma puts up a finger, wiping her mouth clean with a napkin. "He likes to use children to do his bidding."

Always quick on the pick-up, August gets what she was trying to imply in an instant. "The Lost Boys," he deduces.

Emma nods in the affirmative.

"Rufio?"

"Maybe. Possibly," Emma says. "Not sure if his influence goes that high up the chain of command, but what we do know for sure is that at least three members of our favorite group of pranksters are involved with our masked swordsman."

"How did you find out?"

"Henry," Ruby supplies.

"He fessed up over breakfast," Emma shares. A picture of her son's fidgeting form at the kitchen table flashes in her mind, eliciting a fond smirk on her lips. "Wasn't that hard to get the kid to admit who dropped off Argos' package at the house after I threatened to give him another eyeful."

"Eyeful of what?" August probes.

"Don't ask."
"Her butt," Ruby spills with a grin, earning a glare from a slightly blushing Emma.

"You flashed your kid?"

"God, no!" Emma recoils.

August's face is ripe with confusion but he wisely lets it go. Good, Emma really doesn't want to go into details about how she practically traumatized her kid and scarred him for life.

"Who're the three boys?" he asks the Sheriff instead.

"The Bacon Brothers."

The queer look that washes over her deputy's face would've been funny had Emma not sported the same look earlier when Henry had confessed.

"Bacon, like Kevin Bacon?" August asks. "That's their last name?"

"Yeah," Ruby nods. "You haven't heard of the terrible three?"

"No... I don't think I have," August shakes his head.

"They're triplets. Jan, John, and Johnny. Did I get that right?" Emma turns to Ruby for confirmation and promptly gets a nod in the affirmative.

"I've seen those pudgy brats at the orphanage that Nova runs at the convent," Leroy joins in, his beard overflowing with crumbs and sesame seeds from his hamburger bun. August makes a face at the staggering amount that falls on his covers, but otherwise remains mum and lets the other man talk. Emma kinda admires his leniency. She's no neat freak, but if that was her bed, she wouldn't have been as gracious.

"Filthy-looking bastards always looked like they spent the whole day rolling in the mud," Leroy finishes, licking his fingers clean of ketchup with much gusto.

"They're the ones who threw mudpies at Doc during the Summer Fest," Ruby adds in.

"Oh! Them." August's eyes widen in recognition. "Have you guys tracked them down for questioning?"

"Yeah, but we haven't talked to them yet," Emma answers, stuffing her mouth with a handful of french fries in a very unladylike manner. If Regina were here, she'd be getting a thorough talking to about breeding and etiquette. But she isn't here, so what the hell. "They still have classes, and since they actually bothered to go to school today, the principal asked us to hold off on our chat with the brothers until dismissal time. When they get out, Ruby and I will be right there waiting."

"Wait," Ruby straightens up immediately, looking at Emma in alarm. "I'm coming with you?"

"Yeah."

"No."

"No?" Emma looks at her friend in concern. "Rubes, is there a problem?"

"I can't go," Ruby shakes her head vehemently. "I really, really can't go with you."

"Why not?"
"Em, trust me, you don't want me there when you talk to those boys."

"Why?" Emma presses, finding herself intrigued.

"They don't like me that much," Ruby says in the tiniest of voices, sounding so much unlike herself.

"Well that's the understatement of the century," Leroy snorts into his can of Coke. The fact that Ruby doesn't even attempt to throw a nasty glance his way is worrisome indeed. Emma's curiosity spikes up another degree.

"They don't like you?" Emma slowly repeats, earning a weak nod from her friend. "That's impossible, Rubes, everyone in town loves you."

"Not them," Ruby says, the expression on her face going dark. "Believe me, Em. Not them."

Emma looks at the brunette with narrowed eyes, trying to figure out what had gotten her deputy so frazzled. She's never seen Ruby looking so on edge. It's disconcerting, to say the least.

"Those brats are sorta like Red in a way," Leroy says before letting out a loud belch. He grins at the disgusted look that he garners from the two women and the approving grunt that he gets from August. Men, Emma rolls her eyes.

They're werewolves?

"No," Ruby shakes her head at Emma. "But we're all dual-natured. They shift into a specific kind of animal too — but unlike me, they can do it at will."

"Ah, I see..." Emma purses her lips and nods, slowly taking that in. In fairness to her, it only takes her pretty blonde head two whole minutes to piece everything together.

Three brothers... cute, pudgy... penchant for getting dirty... shape-shifting into a specific kind of animal...

The Bacon Brothers.

Emma starts abruptly, green eyes widening as realization dawns in. She looks at Ruby, her voice dropping to an awed whisper, "The three little pigs."

Ruby winces.

Emma gives herself a pat on the back.

Ruby looks weakly at her and mumbles in a sheepish manner. "Actually, they were five."

"Five?" August repeats, donning the same frown that Emma now had on. Leroy chortles knowingly but says nothing.

"I kinda, um... trimmed their numbers down a bit, if you know what I mean..." Ruby says in a tone so tiny that Emma had to strain her ears to hear.

"Trimmed their numbers?"

Ruby sighs at Emma's slow pick-up and points to herself. "Big bad wolf, remember?"

Emma blinks.
"You ate them?!

"The wolf did," Ruby answers lamely. "I, uh, the wolf ate their parents."

"You turned the three little pigs into orphans?" Emma sputters. Oh this is just getting better and better. If that didn't destroy her ever-voracious appetite for everything pork and artery clogging, she didn't know what will.

Ruby grimaces and then lets out a long sigh. "If it makes you feel any better, I swore off pork after it happened."

Emma raises an eyebrow, looking pointedly at Ruby's lunch. "You just wolfed down—pardon the pun—two footlong sausages."

"I know, and now I feel kinda bad."

"You're still eating though..." August points out, watching Ruby chew.

"Might want to stick to just vegetables now, Red," Leroy says unhelpfully, grinning from ear to ear.

"This isn't Twilight; carnivorous predators can't just turn vegan," Ruby huffs at the dwarf, earning hearty chuckles from the two men.

If it weren't for the fact that their hour-long lunch break was nearing its end, Emma would have given herself a few moments to mull over the sad truth that her bestfriend had a hand (or a mouth?) in the orphaning of three little pi—boys. Sadly, they have jobs to do, a town to protect, and a thief to catch. So, Emma decides to file away this piece of information for another day and focus on the present.

"Alright," Emma says, cleaning up after herself and stuffing all her trash into the paper bag from Granny's. "Break time's over, back to work people."

"Em, I—" Ruby starts.

"I'll handle the Bacon boys, you go see if you can track down Argos," Emma cuts her off, earning a relieved smile from her deputy. "And Leroy, can you go to Sister Astrid and ask her if she's seen the masked one anywhere near the orphanage? A handful of the Lost Boys are orphans in their care; they might know something."

Leroy brightens up almost immediately and actually bounds off the bed, positively electrified. She's not going to hear any complaints from that one, that much is certain.

"August?" Emma turns to the recovering man. "Rest up and come back to work soon. We'll need all the help we can get."

"Will do, boss," August gives a salute. "Thanks for visiting, guys."

A series of mumbled 'you're welcome' (and a gruff grunt from Leroy) echoes around the tiny bedroom as the three busy themselves with tidying up.

"Oh, Em," Ruby nudges her side as they make their way out of August's room a few minutes later.
"Ashley and I are watching a movie this evening at the Cineplex. They're finally showing something out of the 90's instead of the 80's. Wanna come with?"

"Can't, sorry," Emma shoots her friend an apologetic look. "I have night duty. Plus, I have to pick up
Regina at the stables tonight."

"Her car's still in its pony form?"

"Afraid so."

"So you're her glorified chauffeur now?" Leroy scoffs behind them as they trudge down the rickety flight of stairs, the wooden steps groaning at their weight.

Emma throws a glance at the stocky man and shrugs. "She doesn't have a ride. What else can I do?"

"Let her walk?" Leroy smirks devilishly.

"Ten whole miles? That's inhumane."

"So? She's probably wearing riding boots. She'll be fine."

"She's in heels, and she's also wearing a skirt."

Leroy makes a face as they cross the threshold and step outside Marco's home. "Why would she wear a skirt to go horseback riding?"

"She's not riding today. Henry's horse is sick. She's supervising the vet."

"Okay, sister, then have her hail a cab home," Leroy says, further reinforcing the truth that he isn't Regina's number one fan. Obviously, he's still bitter about those magical mammaries that were accidentally given to him for a week. The fact that he keeps on running a hand over his chest whenever they talk about the Evil Queen says as much.

A long-suffering sigh leaves Emma's lips. "Leroy, I won't let her ride a taxi when I am more than capable of picking her up myself. She's Henry's mother."

"No, you're his mom."

"I'm his birth mother. Regina is Henry's mom in every sense of the word," Emma says with a look ripe with warning, basically ordering Leroy to drop the issue. Thankfully, he gets the hint and finally leaves it at that.

Before Emma can sigh in relief, she feels a pair of eyes watching her curiously. "What?" Emma turns to Ruby.

"Nothing," the brunette shakes her head all too innocently.

Her Mona Lisa smile, however, says a million and one things. Emma tears her gaze away and lengthens her stride, leaving her two deputies trailing behind. Emma knows that look on Ruby's face. She's become increasingly familiar with it. And curiously enough, she's been seeing it whenever she comes to Regina's defense. Which, well, she's been doing with increasing frequency since she moved into the Mills home.

Unwilling to mull over what it means, Emma shakes her head clear and just trudges on in the direction of their squad car.

They have work to do.

Personal reflections and soul-searching can wait.
Cleaning up the cabin is not his idea of a fun chore, especially since there are five messy souls sharing the cramped space, but on this evening, Rufio is more than happy to pick up a broom and a couple of rags. It's either this mundane task or being stuck in cooking duty with Thud Butt and Ace, and with those two and their penchant for bickering like cats and dogs, Rufio wisely decides that cleaning is the safer and stress-free option. At least Pockets is cleaning the bathroom tonight. That's a load off his back.

Argos is outside like always, tending to his garden. Rufio will never understand his masked buddy's fascination with lilacs; he just can't wrap his mind around the thought of a grown-ass man pouring so much time and energy into caring for some dainty little flowers. But, whatever; to each his own, Rufio shrugs.

He's half-expecting to find Argos weeding, or maybe even writing on the small leather-bound notebook that he always carries with him, but when Rufio steps outside the cabin to air out the living room rug, he freezes at the sight of his friend standing at the middle of the clearing, looking up at the night sky in silence. The sheathed sword is strapped to his back, and Argos is just standing there motionless, gloved hands stuck inside the pockets of his baggy trousers. His posture is a tad defeated, if not a bit dramatic.

"Yo, you alright, man?" Rufio calls out tentatively, dropping the rug carelessly to the ground and making a small cloud of dust billow by his feet.

He gets nothing but silence from his friend.

Alarm bells sound in Rufio's head.

"There a problem, buddy?" he prods, carefully inching his way to the quiet man.

"It's almost time..." Argos murmurs, gruff voice ripe with fear? Rufio frowns, nah... can't be.

"Time for what?"

Argos shakes his head weakly, eyes still glued to the clear, moonlit sky.

In an instant, lightning flashes and thunder rolls, and Rufio almost pees his pants in surprise.

A deafening shriek echoes through the forest, making the hair at the back of his neck stand on end. As if that's his cue to move, the masked one regains control of his limbs and begins walking to his bike.

"Argos?" Rufio swallows hard. "What the fuck?"

"Get inside," Argos orders roughly, voice dripping with authority. "Stay with the boys. Protect everyone. Make sure no one leaves this cabin until I come back."

Fear and anxiety overwhelm Rufio, but despite everything, he follows Argos to his parked motorcycle. "W-where are you going? Why can't I come with?"

"F-fight? W-what the heck do you mean? Are y-you in trouble?" Rufio presses, his voice quaking.

Before he can get any answers, a black shadow flies overhead, rustling trees and leaving the different animals that live in the forest howling and scurrying away in fear. It's like a scene straight out of a horror movie. An all-encompassing sense of dread fills up his body and chills him to the bone.
"W-what... what the hell was that thing?" Rufio breathes out, his face pale as a ghost.

"An old acquaintance..." Argos whispers, his voice nothing short of ominous. "Now, go!"

He shoves Rufio in the direction of the cabin before speeding off, leaving nothing but a trail of dust in his wake.

Rufio, petrified beyond belief, stands rooted in place, completely immobilized by fear. It's only after another blood-curdling shriek ripples through the forest that he scurries back to the cabin as if his ass has been lit on fire. He bolts the door behind him before leaning his back against the faded wood, his heart threatening to beat right out of his chest.

His top lieutenants are peering out the window, eyes wide in fright. "Is that what I think it is?" Ace whispers.

Beside him, Thud Butt nods weakly, looking positively ill. "It's back..."

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The smell of horse manure never appealed much to Emma. She's always had a weak stomach for certain odors. And horse shit? Well, definitely high up on her list of sickening smells. So, despite her father's insistence that she learn how to ride a horse like a proper princess, she vehemently, and not-so-politely, nipped the idea right in the bud. Who were they kidding, anyway? She can't even handle an inanimate object such as a sword, and they expect her to try and take on something with a mind of its own? No, thank you. She likes herself the way she is right now. Alive.

White Knight on a horse? Bah. She's the White Knight in a Bug.

Everyone will just have to learn to live with that.

Henry and Regina, on the other hand, are suckers for horses. Their mutual adoration for the tall and powerful (and kinda smelly) animals is about the only reason that Emma allows herself to be dragged to the stables once or twice a week.

She'll do the perfunctory cheer every time Henry makes his horse gallop without falling on his ass, and well, will unknowingly put on her dumbstruck face whenever Regina does a successful jump. Emma only catches herself gaping at the brunette when flies buzz by her open mouth. Regina will flash her a haughty smirk now and again, but otherwise, she ignores her completely. Henry, though, always likes to wave at her like a geeky goofball when he rides past her usual spot on the fence. Emma, for her part, returns the gesture in kind.

They weren't scheduled to be back at the stables until the weekend, but since Henry's steed had fallen ill, Regina took it upon herself to head on down to watch the vet do his work. Their son had been texting all day, asking for updates, worried out of his mind. He probably didn't get a lot of work done in school, and if it weren't for Regina promising to watch over his horse, Emma's sure that he would have found a way to cut class and head on over to the stables.

He's at Granny's now, having dinner with his grandparents. He had put up a fight when Emma had dropped him off earlier, wanting to come with her to pick up Regina and check on his horse. She didn't think that was such a good idea so she stood her ground and left him there despite his teary protests. Animals can sense when a person is stressed, and Henry's anxiety was potent enough for Emma to feel dizzy just by talking to him, so it was only natural to think that it wouldn't do the sick horse any good to have his master freaking out in its presence.

So, now here she is, holding court at the parking lot, yawning in exhaustion every now and again.
Emma is leaning against the driver's door of her Bug when Regina finally steps out of the stables and heads in her general direction. Poor woman looks more tired than she does. And after the day she'd had, that was saying something.

The grin that breaks out on Emma's face is something that cannot be helped. Until this very moment, not once in all her months here in Storybrooke has she ever felt that she looked better than Regina Mills. The woman is a freak of nature. It might be mean, but the fact that she's a tad bit less rumpled-looking than the Evil Queen gives Emma a somewhat twisted sense of pleasure.

"Do I dare ask what you're finding so amusing, Sheriff?"

"At the risk of being called crass, may I just say, your majesty, that you look like absolute shit this evening," Emma's shit-eating grin broadens into painful proportions. She makes a show of sniffing the air around Regina. "And no offense, you kinda smell like it too."

"Miss Swan," Regina exhales a tired breath. "Just for future reference, I'd like to let you know that I don't take criticism about my appearance from women who wear table runners very seriously. So next time, my dear, don't bother wasting your breath."

Emma's smile dwindles down into a frown as she glances at her embroidered lace top. "Hey, you bought me this..."

"And yet you chose to wear it," Regina smirks wickedly. "Now who feels like an idiot?"

Emma clamps her lips shut and exhales through her nose. Regina got her there.

"How's Duke?" Emma changes the topic to neutral grounds, awkwardly stuffing her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

"Still under observation. I suspect it's just the flu, but that quack thinks it's viral arthritis." Regina sighs, closing her weary eyes and massaging her temples.

"Think he'll be okay?"

"With luck, he should be a little better tomorrow. I have to go back early to check."

"I'll drive you," Emma says quickly, earning a small tired smile from Regina. Giving smiles of gratitude freely? Yeah, Regina must be feeling drained, alright.

"Coffee." Emma reaches behind her and grabs the cup that was sitting on the hood of her car.

"Black?"

"As black as your heart," Emma grins crookedly.

Regina rolls her eyes but takes her offering anyway.

"How's your cold?"

"I don't have one," Emma plays dumb.

"Miss Swan, you have snot on your nose."

Emma quickly wipes it away with the back of her hand, earning a disgusted groan from the brunette.

"Hopeless," Regina sighs, pulling out a piece of facial tissue from inside her purse and handing it
"Thanks," Emma mumbles in shame, wiping away traces of the icky fluid from her nose and hand. She pockets the half-soiled tissue and grins at Regina's exasperated eyeroll.

"Were you able to make any progress with your investigation?" the brunette inquires, taking a dainty sip from her cup and letting a small sigh escape from her lips as the hot liquid burns down her throat.

"The Bacons were no help," Emma shares with a tired breath, running a hand through her blonde locks in frustration.

"Let me guess, Sheriff, they tried to give you the slip?"

Emma snorts at the absurdity of that thought. "They wish. I bet Granny can run faster than those pudgy boys. The only way they could give me the slip was if they literally slipped on the pavement. Which, funny enough, one of them did."

"They weren't forthcoming about their ties with our thief?"

"Nope," Emma shakes her head. "I couldn't get the three little pigs to squeal."

She chuckles at her own attempt at levity. Unfortunately, the expression on Regina's face is nothing short of unamused. Emma's laughter dwindles down to a sad little whimper.

"If you wanted them to squeal so badly, maybe you should have had Miss Lucas interrogate them on your behalf."

Emma flinches accordingly. "You know about that?"

"My dear, their relentless squealing and weeping would have woken the dead," Regina says in a bored tone, sounding not unlike the queen that she was. "They lived near Jefferson. Why did you think that lunatic offered to take them to Neverland in the first place? He surely didn't do it out of the kindness of his heart."

"Oh, do you th–shit!" Emma jumps a step away in fright as a long streak of lightning strikes overhead.

What the hell? The skies were clear just a second ago. A fierce wind howls from the west, sending their hair whipping all over their faces. In the distance, a pack of wolves began howling. From inside the stables, the sound of horses neighing in panic reaches their ears and fills Emma up with fear.

Something is off.

On full alert, Emma reaches over and yanks an equally alarmed-looking Regina behind her, sandwiching the woman between her car and her back.

"Regina..." Emma says urgently, running her left hand down the length of Regina's forearm until she reaches the brunette's hand. Regina links their fingers together without further provocation. The transference of energy is immediate, and Emma takes comfort and draws confidence in the feeling of Regina's skin tingling with magic.

They look warily around their surroundings, conscious of every sound and movement, Regina's magic armed and ready for an attack.

After a moment, Emma's anxiety intensifies when she feels Regina tensing behind her. The back of
her hand burns at the touch of Regina's palm. Emma hisses in a breath. The woman's skin is smoldering hot.

Something is wrong.

"Regina?" Emma says tentatively, looking over her shoulder and meeting the other woman's gaze. The unadulterated fear that she sees in those expressive brown eyes sends Emma's stomach plummeting to the ground. "What's wrong?"

"My hand... it burns..."

Emma pulls out of Regina's weak grasp and takes the brunette's left hand in her own. She lifts it up and examines it under the dim lights of the parking lot. A horrified gasp escapes both of their lips.

*The mark of the wraith.*

"This... this is impossible... how... we've gotten rid of it..." Emma splutters, feeling herself unable to breathe.

Regina is utterly speechless, looking faint behind her. Her legs would've probably given way had she not been leaning on the car and holding on to the blonde for dear life.

Out in the street, a lightning bolt hits a transformer, causing it to explode. Sparks fly everywhere like a firecracker going off.

Emergency lights begin flickering off and on.

And then, like a never-ending nightmare, a deafening shriek permeates their surroundings and sends shivers down their spines.

*The wraith is back in Storybrooke.*

And, judging from the black shadow heading their way, it's coming straight for Regina.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my beta Alezabee!
Thy Faithful

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One... two... three...

On and on, she goes.

Seven... eight... nine...

Right wrist in constant motion, flicking... flicking... flicking... hurling fireballs into the night sky, bombarding the air around her target with jaw-dropping precision.

Thirteen... fourteen... fifteen...

Emma's hold is firm and unyielding, latching on to her left hand with a vice-like grip. The woman's hand is clammy and shaking, but the strength of her grasp remains steady despite the mounting pressure. The threat of imminent death lingers around them like a suffocating fog, coiling around their throats until it becomes increasingly hard to even breathe. Energy surges between their bodies at a steadfast rate. The air around them is thick with potent magic, intoxicating and overwhelming.

Nineteen... twenty... twenty-one...

A shudder.

And then a strained gasp.

Emma's breath hitches, and for a fraction of a second, Regina tears her gaze away from the soul-sucker and catches a glimpse of the red liquid trickling down the blonde's nose. She's starting to draw blood, not just power. Regina eases up significantly on the magnitude of energy she's absorbing from the Sheriff. If the White Knight is anything less than the stubborn mule that she is, Regina doubts the blonde would still be standing.

Twenty-five... twenty-six... twenty-seven...

The wraith appears to be discombobulated by the relentless assault. Its movements are erratic, flying all over the place, seemingly without direction. The insistent flames are succeeding in pushing it further and further back from its goal – her.

Thirty-one... thirty-two...

The thirty-third fireball finally does the trick.

It flies directly into the soul-sucker's hooded face and hits its mark so perfectly, it is almost poetic. The wraith clutches at its head and shrieks in pain, filling its surroundings with its high-pitched and grating screech of agony. Before Regina can hurl another fireball and inflict further damage, the wraith flies away; the shrill, menacing sound it makes during its escape like a chilling promise to inflict the same amount of hurt upon its return.

Emma sags against her, pinning Regina further against the door of the bug, the woman breathing loudly and deeply through her gaping mouth. In an odd, yet somewhat familiar way, they are each other's crutch, keeping the other upright. Both are standing on trembling legs; both weakened by
exhaustion coupled with the potent mixture of fear and trepidation.

Regina's gaze drifts upwards and glues itself to the dark, starless sky. Another ominous bolt of lightning flashes overhead, illuminating a shadow fleeing in the near distance. Despite succeeding in driving the creature away, she cannot get herself to sigh in relief as the wraith disappears into the night.

There is no relief from this. There never will be. Once you've been marked, you'll be hounded for the rest of your brief existence. Truly, Rumpelstiltskin's cruelty is only matched by his cunning ways.

"Y-you did it... it's g-gone..." Emma's breathless words reach her ears, but they do nothing to lift the damming weight bearing down onto her shoulders. Regina's gut is too tightly wound up with tension, constricting to the point of discomfort. She's finding it increasingly difficult to speak, let alone think.

"R-Regina...?" The blonde turns her head to look at her, weary green eyes shining with concern.

"It'll... it'll be back," Regina murmurs silently, her voice hollow.

She feels the blonde's fearful grip on her hand tightening at her words. For a moment, she feels less alone, but ultimately, it's not enough to assuage the growing anxiety and feeling of desperation, gnawing at her insides.

Emma swallows thickly, steadying her breathing and wiping away the blood on her nose with the back of her right hand. "How much time do we have?"

"Not nearly enough," Regina replies, taking in a shuddery breath.

It will regenerate in less than no time. At most, they've bought themselves fifteen—maybe twenty—minutes tops. Wraiths, being undead and virtually unvanquishable, are resilient creatures. They always return to finish their job and devour their prey. And its prey, for the second unfortunate time, is no one else but her.

"What do we do? What's our plan?"

A lump lodges itself in Regina's throat. What can they do?

"Nothing."

"What?"

Regina blatantly ignores the look of incredulity that washes over Emma's face, letting her gaze drop to the pavement instead.

"We do nothing," she repeats, slumping deeper against the car in defeat.

They have managed to thwart the wraith's attempt to steal her soul. It's a tiny victory. Yet... there's still a single, sobering thought resonating inside her brain:

*I'm going to die tonight.*

There is no way of escaping it.

The fates have never been kind to her. Why should they start being merciful now?

Despite being meticulous enough to always have a contingency plan in place for whatever need may arise, Regina finds herself at a complete loss. No matter which way she looks at it, she cannot foresee
any possible means of evading the inescapable for the second time in a year. One can only be so lucky. And, if she knows something about herself, it's that the only kind of luck that has never left her side is the bad, life-ruining kind.

Once again, she can try to lob fireball upon fireball at the wraith when it returns, but what good will that do but merely delay the inevitable?

So, tragic as it may be, there is no way around it.

Regina Mills will lose her soul in a few moments.

Jefferson's hat is in tatters, Rumpelstiltskin is missing, and she, the almighty Evil Queen, doesn't have the magical capability to send the wraith into oblivion.

There is nothing left to do but surrender herself to the clutches of death.

It's not like she didn't see her demise coming, anyway.

One cannot curse an entire land and not expect some kind of fatal karmic retribution to befall oneself. Only delusional fools would believe otherwise.

Regina is not afraid to die. What is death, but an escape from all the pain, suffering and the many injustices that she has had the misfortune of facing in this lifetime? No, she does not fear it. What she is petrified of, however, is that dying would ultimately mean leaving her son behind. The thought alone makes her tremble and sends goosebumps rippling through her skin.

Emma's panicked voice pulls her out of her depressing thoughts.

"What do you mean we do nothing?"

Regina flinches as the blonde's hold tightens around her hand. Her crushed fingers ache for release, but Regina doesn't ask or demand it from the other woman. Somehow, it makes her feel like she's still tethered to this world. She can forgive the Sheriff's brutish action, because if the desperation and helplessness painted on her face are any indications, Emma doesn't even realize what she's doing anymore.

"What do you mean we do nothing?" Emma persists. When she doesn't reply, the blonde proceeds to squeeze the brunette's already squashed hand even more. "Regina!"

"There's no way we can stop it," Regina finally answers, keeping her tone painfully monotonous.

"What do you mean? We just did!"

"Miss Swan, you know very well that it will be back soon enough."

"So? Then we'll just figure out something else to rid ourselves of it," the blonde says in all seriousness, brows furrowing deep, unwilling to give up and admit defeat.

Regina sighs at the woman's naivety. If only things are that easy.

"We'll find another way," Emma nods and mutters this a few times like a chant; sounding very much like she's trying extra hard to convince herself that everything will be alright in the end.

The woman's resolve is both laughable, and, well, infinitely bittersweet.

"There is no other way, Sheriff," Regina chuckles mirthlessly in spite of herself. "Can't you see?
Unlike before, we have absolutely no means of banishing the creature to another land. Not a damn thing. No spells, no portals, no nothing. The only thing we can do to get it to leave this world and keep everyone – especially Henry – safe, is to allow it to come and get what it came here for... me."

In a snap, Emma lets go of the brunette's hand and whirls around to face Regina. Her green eyes have lost their fatigued glaze and are now alight with sheer frustration. For a second, Regina actually thinks the other woman will grab her by the shoulders and try to shake her senseless. Or, maybe, go as far as throttle her neck. The fact that Emma goes and grabs hold of both of her arms in a firm, yet remarkably gentle, touch comes as a disarming, if not a bit bizarrely pleasant, shock.

"Jesus, stop talking like that! We will find a way. Do you hear me? There is always another way," Emma grinds out through clenched teeth.

Regina can't help but scoff. "Oh please, let's not kid ourselves. There is nothing as damning in this world as blind hope, Miss Swan. It will serve you good to know that. The only way this will end is through my de–"

Emma doesn't even give her the courtesy to finish that statement. "Don't you even say it!" the blonde snarls, voice shaking in anger and... fear? Regina's head snaps up at this. Emma, for her part, pushes on. "Why are you being such a frickin' defeatist? Snap out of it, Regina! It's not you."

The Evil Queen lets out a mocking laugh.

"And why are you uncharacteristically optimistic?" Regina returns derisively. "It's not you either, Miss Swan."

Emma sticks her chin up in the air. "I've always been optimistic, I just hide it well with pessimism."

Regina snaps her jaw shut, thoroughly unamused.

A hush falls between them for a brief moment. Both women eye each other in a quiet battle of wills. Curiously enough, it is Regina who fills the pregnant silence. "You're truly impossible to live with," she sighs at the blonde, allowing the tension to evaporate.

"I've been told that I'm even more impossible to live without, so if I were you, I won't even attempt it," Emma quips wryly, her implied 'so don't die' not lost on the brunette.

Regina rolls her eyes, feigning exasperation. "Must you always be so full of yourself?"

"Pot, kettle, much?" Emma scoffs haughtily. "Besides, I can't help it, it comes with being the savior."

"Actually, it comes with being a Charming," Regina corrects.

"That too, I guess," Emma acquiesces with a slight shrug.

With a tired breath, the blonde lets her hands drop down and go slack at her sides and, almost immediately, Regina feels the loss. It is reminiscent of electricity suddenly fizzling out, throwing everything into darkness. Emma must've felt it too, judging from the sudden way she reaches out and hooks Regina's index finger with her own, holding tight.

"Just in case the wraith comes back," Emma quickly murmurs, cheeks coloring slightly.

"Of course," Regina nods, swallowing visibly.

Emma pinches the bridge of her nose. "What do we do now, Regina?"
"I have no clue..." Regina admits just as silently.

"Stasis spell?"

The brunette shakes her head at Emma's suggestion. "I've tried that with the goblins, don't you recall? The spell doesn't work quite the same in this world; they were only immobilized for a minute, maybe two."

Emma shuffles on her feet, most probably remembering how one of the goblins had latched on to her leg and tried to gnaw her thigh when the spell unexpectedly wore off. If not for Regina's intervention, Emma would have fired at the goblin with her gun and, consequently, shot herself in the foot as well.

"Alright, no stasis spells then," Emma says weakly. After a brief lull, the Sheriff perks up all of a sudden. "Hey, what if--" she starts, her face brightening with hope, "--you do a spell that will make our bodies immune to flames then you set us both on fire?"

"Like a human effigy?" Regina makes a face.

"Yes."

"I haven't tried that before, Sheriff, but feel free to be my guinea pig."

Emma bristles, before mumbling a dejected, "Nevermind, then."

They bounce around ideas during the next handful of minutes. Unfortunately, not a single one of them seems plausible or even remotely doable. That said, Emma's brilliantly inspired, though grossly moronic, 'let's cut off your marked hand, chuck it away, and then hope the wraith doesn't know any better' idea, takes the cake.

"You want to cut off my hand?" Regina arches an eyebrow, face twisting in horror and disbelief.

"Why don't I cut off yours?"

"If the wraith marks me too, then go right ahead," Emma shrugs nonchalantly, as if it's truly that simple. "I can live without a hand. I can't live if I'm, uh, you know, dead."

"Be more ineloquent, I dare you," Regina deadpans.

"Look, all I'm saying is, it's better to lose a part of yourself than, I dunno, lose your whole self, you know?"

"Just when I thought you couldn't be more inarticulate, you had to open your mouth and prove me wrong," Regina exhales sadly.

"Regina, I'm being serious," Emma huffs, frowning mightily.

"So am I," Regina fires back.

Emma puckers her lips sourly. "Okay, compromise, how 'bout we peel the marked skin off your hand instead?"

"..."

"I'll take that as a no then."

Another cloud of silence settles between the two. They both avert their gaze to the ground, losing
themselves in their own heads. Judging from the deep creases on her forehead, Emma is straining the teeny little organ inside that thick skull of hers, pondering a way to solve their current conundrum. Regina, on the other hand, is feeling more resigned than ever. As far as she's concerned, there is only one thing left to do.

Regina closes her eyes and exhales a deep, even breath. "Miss Swan?" she says, forcing herself to sound as unaffected as she possibly can.

"Hm?"

"Henry has a dentist appointment this coming Friday."

"What?" Emma turns to look at her, confusion etched on her face.

"It's at four o'clock. You need to take him there. I know you tend to be lax about your schedule, Miss Swan, but it is imperative that he gets his cavity filled; it's been bothering him since Monday. He has a bit of an aversion to dentists; so expect him to put up a fight. Just promise to bring him to the comic store right after and he'll behave."

"Reg–" Emma starts. Regina doesn't give her the chance to interrupt. Time is of the essence.

"He loves to draw. He's a very talented boy and he's pretty good at it, but he gets frustrated with himself from time to time. Encourage him. Smother him with praises. Don't allow him to put down his pencil just because he feels insecure that his drawings aren't good enough. I've compiled every sketch by month and year; so please, try not to be your usual scatterbrained self, and don't forget to place his drawings inside the proper binder. They're all lined up in the bookcase inside my study."

Emma opens her mouth and puts up a finger, intending to cut in.

Again, Regina doesn't allow her to.

"I keep a notebook of my own recipes inside the leftmost drawer near the cabinet that I use to store all the expensive china. All of Henry's favorite dishes are flagged blue. Miss Swan, I know your cooking skills are simply atrocious, so I must insist that you practice first before attempting anything. Try not to poison my son."

"Regina, just sto–" Emma tries again.

"I've also set up a college fund for him since he was a baby. All the de–"

"Regina, shut up! Shut the hell up!" Emma raises her voice in frustration, finally succeeding in cutting her off.

The woman is flushed all the way down to her neck, breathing hard through her nostrils, her green eyes ablaze. The brunette, despite wanting to say more, allows her mouth to snap closed. Emma's voice cracks a little as she continues, "Just... just stop. Don't talk like you're... you're... just... don't. Okay? Don't talk. Don't say anything."

She isn't known for giving in to other people's demands, but Regina gives way for a change. There is something in the blonde's eyes that effectively kills all the arguments that were fighting their way out of her mouth.

"I can't... I won't... go home and tell Henry that I allowed a wraith to kill his mother. So, no matter how resigned you are to your fate, you're not dying tonight," Emma proclaims with conviction, her expression going dark.
"Miss Swan, I–"

Emma raises a hand, effectively shushing her. "I made a promise to him that I would protect you, and that's not something I take lightly, Regina. So, I don't care if I have to douse myself with gasoline and light my ass on fire; if I have to stand between you and that soul-sucker, then so be it."

Regina feels a lump form in her throat.

This woman is crazy, that much is certain.

"Listen," Emma begins anew, a quiet determination in her eyes. "The Blue Fairy might know how to get r–"

She never gets to finish that sentence. Much to Emma's dismay, and Regina's surprise, a plastic drum blindsides them both and hits the blonde squarely off her feet, breaking the contact between the two women.

The wraith is back. And with a vengeance too.

Regina lets out a horrified gasp as Emma goes sailing through the air like a ragdoll. The blonde crashes hard against the wall of the stables, before sliding down and slumping face first on the ground with a loud moan, obviously winded by the attack.

A bone-chilling shriek cuts through the air, and without waiting for the creature to show itself, Regina wills her legs to move and run towards Emma.

Unfortunately, she's not fast enough. The wraith swoops in from high above and beats her to the fallen woman. The fact that it's going after Emma, and not Regina, probably means that the creature knows that the easiest way to get what it wants is to get rid of its victim's magical power source. The moment it raises one of its bony arms, Regina unwittingly lets out a very uncharacteristic, terror-stricken scream. Her mask of control has slipped; she would've been embarrassed if she weren't so distressed.

As if in slow motion, she watches the wraith's sharp fingernails cut deeply through Emma's back and slice right through the woman's hideous red jacket, leaving significant gashes on the leather – as well as Emma's skin. The White Knight cries out in pain and curls to her side, blood oozing freely from her wounds and coating the pavement beneath her with crimson.

Regina is not a queasy person. Taking out hearts and slaying more than a handful of souls in the old world has left her rather desensitized to blood and gore. That said, at the sight of Emma bleeding profusely before her, Regina finds her knees wobbling nonetheless.

The wraith raises its arm to attack again, but this time, Regina is quick to flick her wrist and hit back with her magic. She lets out a growl and feels herself beset with annoyance towards her powers when a slew of crows erupt from her hand in lieu of the intended fireball. But, much to her relief, instead of flying away, the magical birds start pecking at the soul-sucker's hooded face. She might not have succeeded in hurting the wraith, but Regina does manage to distract it long enough to get to the injured blonde. Emma, ever the resilient buffoon, is already half-way up to her feet when Regina finally gets to her.

"I'm alright," the blonde declares with a lopsided smile, though her eyes – glazed and unfocused – say something different altogether, "just a scratch. Or scratches. No biggie. Stupid wraith needs a good manicure though, those tacky hooker nails need filing."

The fact that Emma's trying really hard to make light of the situation sounds more alarms in Regina's
head. If her recent bout with fever is any indication, Snow White's offspring has the annoying predisposition to use humor and other forms of deflection to mask away whatever hurt or discomfort she is currently experiencing. It used to drive Regina insane, but now, even if she won't admit it to herself, it just makes her worry.

*Concern for Emma Swan?* It is a strange feeling that she does not enjoy one bit.

Regina wraps an arm around Emma's waist – careful not to touch the gaping wounds on her back – and makes quick work of guiding both of them back to where the bug is parked.

"I'm fine, really," Emma repeats unnecessarily, even though Regina does not prod.

The brunette doesn't fail to notice the blonde trying to hide away a wince by pretending to look behind them at the preoccupied wraith. The poor birds are getting massacred, but their actions did buy the women a moment or two to catch their breaths.

Regina makes Emma sit on the fallen plastic barrel that had slammed into her just a few moments prior. The irony isn't lost on Emma and they both share a wary look as the blonde plants herself down on the object with a barely concealed groan. Emma swallows hard and clenches her teeth, looking like a person fighting extremely hard to hold back a grimace that's just itching to break out on her face. Taking in a breath of air, Emma reaches out and grabs Regina's hand, intertwining their fingers together and holding on tight.

"Go do your thing," Emma encourages softly, beads of sweat peppering her brow.

"Miss Swan, you're hurt," Regina points out. How could she possibly draw energy from someone who was already looking half-dead as is?

"I'll live," Emma says in false cheerfulness, putting on a brave face despite the fierce pain she must be experiencing. "You, on the other hand, may not. Don't worry about me; I'm a big girl, I can take it. Now, do us both a favor and make that bastard go away with another fireball to the face. As soon as it leaves to regenerate, we'll go to the convent and ask the fairies for help."

Regina wants to argue with the blonde, but at that moment the wraith finally rids itself of its avian tormentors and comes flying straight in their direction. Although she is hesitant to do so, Regina draws power from Emma and charges up her own magic.

She must've hurled four dozen fireballs at the wraith before the creature decides to flee towards the forest for the second time and regroup.

"For... a... bastard... from... hell... he... sure... is...'fraid... of... fire..."

Regina whips her head to the side and instantly recoils at what she sees. As if holding hot coals, she drops Emma's hand immediately. It's a pointless thing to do, seeing that she isn't pulling energy out of the blonde any longer; nevertheless, Regina balls her hands into fists and keeps them by her side.

Not only is Emma bleeding copiously through the scratch marks on her back, but blood is also trickling down the blonde's nose and ears as well. To make matters worse, when the White Knight smiles drunkenly at her, the red-stained teeth that greet her brown eyes are enough to make Regina feel sick to her stomach. Emma coughs, and, not surprisingly, more blood comes spilling out from her lips and starts dribbling down her chin.

Regina has often joked about killing Emma Swan (and sometimes, she is actually half-serious).

Tonight, it seems, she is on the verge of *actually* murdering the exasperating woman. Despite their
contemptuous relationship, the thought doesn't sit too well with Regina, which is a surprise in and out of itself.

"Let's... go..." Emma chokes out, every word a struggle. She inclines her head weakly towards the yellow bug behind them. "Keys... ignition... you... drive... 'kay?"

Despite looking like death, Emma idiotically tries to get on her feet without assistance, proving once again that the Savior has a propensity for acting without thinking it through. It isn't the least bit surprising when her knees buckle and Emma drops down to the pavement like a sack of potatoes.

"I'm... alright..." she slurs, flashing another lazy grin.

Regina stands behind Emma and wraps her arms around the injured woman, trying to pull her upright. The act itself feels like a mighty struggle; the blonde's body is practically lying limp and Regina doesn't feel particularly steady herself. Still, she manages to get the woman up to her feet and moving a few steps backwards. Holding Emma flush against her body, Regina tries to catch her breath by leaning against the door of the bug; their current position not unlike the one they were in when the wraith first appeared. The only significant difference this time is the wetness she feels on her torso. The thin fabric of her blouse is getting soaked with warm crimson liquid. The smell of iron permeates her senses, and Regina swears she can taste the metallic flavor of the blonde's blood in her mouth.

In the distance, another ear-splitting shriek is heard. Regina pales instantaneously. She wasn't able to hit the wraith directly on the face like last time, which only means a faster recovery time for the dark creature. The soul-sucker will be back in a matter of moments. There is no time to escape. The convent is a good twenty-minute drive from the stables. The wraith will probably kill them in the middle of the road if they attempt to travel by car.

In front of her, Emma's body gives a violent shudder. Another cough escapes from her parted lips; more blood spills out.

Regina clenches her jaws tight and strengthens her resolve.

The wraith is after her. Henry is going to lose a mother tonight, that much is certain.

He doesn't need to lose both.

With every ounce of strength remaining in her body, Regina keeps Emma upright with one arm and opens the car door with the other. She reaches inside and grabs Emma's walkie-talkie from the dashboard. She speaks right into the radio, willing her voice to remain as calm and controlled as possible. She needs to get her message out, loud and clear.

"If anyone can hear me, this is Regina. I am at the stables with Em—Miss Swan. The Sheriff has been attacked by a wraith and is in dire need of medical attention. Send help immediately. I repeat, send help immediately."

With that out of the way, Regina carelessly casts off the radio into the bug, hoping against hope that one of Emma's incompetent deputies is in range to hear her message. Her phone would have been a better option, but it's inside her purse— which just happens to be lying out of reach a couple of feet away. Before she can go about with her plan to chuck Emma inside the car and lock the blonde in, Regina suddenly finds herself pushed against the vehicle by the injured woman. Emma had turned in her arms, and they are now standing face to face.

"What're... you... doing...?" Emma questions through hooded eyes, her breathing a little labored.
Where the blonde found the strength to pin her against the car, Regina doesn't know. It's as if the woman's emergency power supply had kicked in when Emma had sensed something amiss.

"Saving your life," Regina proclaims, keeping her tone even, despite her voice suddenly going hoarse. "You're not the only one who made a promise to our son."

"But... we... should... go..."

"No," Regina shakes her head, "I should go."

A frown makes its way to Emma's bloodied face.

"Miss Swan, get inside the car, wait for help to arrive, save yourself," Regina orders, lacing her voice with as much authority as she can muster. Years of being queen and mayor make it relatively easy to accomplish. "It's after me. I'll lure it out to the fields, I'll keep the wraith away from you."

Emma's head, which had been lolling from side to side, actually snaps in place; green eyes looking at her steadily. A myriad of emotions flashes across the blonde's face; confusion, disbelief and defiance play out all at once.

"No," Emma grits out. Even in the face of impending doom, the woman is being difficult as ever. "Out... of... your... damn... mind..." she continues with a strangled breath, "not... leaving... you... alone..." Emma swallows tightly. "Not... dying..."

Another shriek echoes in the night air.

Panic seizes Regina's chest. They are running out of time. The wraith will be back any minute now.

If she could manhandle the Sheriff into the vehicle, Regina would have done it in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, despite being a drained and mangled mess, Emma digs her heels into the pavement, refusing to budge. Truly, the woman's bullheadedness knows no bounds.

"Stop being so hardheaded, Miss Swan. You know this is for the best. Now, get in the car!" Regina snarls, starting to lose her composure even more.

She tries to tug and push Emma into the driver's seat, but the blonde stands her ground and practically bear hugs Regina to the point of immobility.

"Let go of me!" she says sharply, wriggling herself free from the blonde's hold. If Emma weren't injured, Regina is sure she wouldn't have been as successful. "Miss Swan, you will sit inside that ugly piece of garbage that you call a car, or so help me, I will grab you by the scruff of your neck and throw you right in."

"No... you... can't..." Emma calls her bluff. She lifts a trembling hand and gives Regina's arm a light squeeze. "Too... scrawny..."

"Get in the damn car!" Regina snaps.

"Can't."

"Yes, you can!"

Emma shakes her head. "White... Knight..."

If she weren't already hurt, Regina would have tried to slap some sense into the infuriating woman. "Will you stop with all of this White Knight nonsense! You don't have to save everyone, least of all
an Evil Queen. This isn't our old land; in this world, chivalry is dead!"

"Chivalry... isn't... dead."

"No, but you will be if you don't listen to me," Regina growls. Emma, annoyingly enough, remains unfazed.

Another shriek sounds out in the near distance. Regina finds herself tearing up in frustration. She needs to try a different approach, perhaps a gentler one.

Taking a deep, steadying breath, Regina stares right into a pair of unfocused green eyes, and, in a tone that is ripe with pleading, she murmurs softly: "Miss Swan, one of us needs to take care of Henry. And, as difficult as this is, I am loathed to admit that it's not going to be me. I'm burdened with the mark; you're not. So, stop fighting, and just let me save you."

Emma, maddening as ever, levels her with the most defiant look that Regina has ever come across and replies with a simple, "No."

This time, Regina is severely tempted to knock the blonde out cold just to get Emma safely ensconced inside the car. The blonde's stubbornness only proves that there is truly no bigger idiot than a Charming.

And, well, no braver fool either.

The woman insists on staying with her. Despite everything that has happened between them: the fights, the near-poisoning, the curse; the savior actually chooses to stay with the one person who made her life a living hell. The White Knight, her supposed nemesis, is sticking around when everyone else in Regina's life has either abandoned or disappointed her during times of need.

For the first time in what feels like forever, Regina Mills is not alone.

And, although she wants nothing more than to scream at the stubborn woman and push her away, Regina finds herself choking on a sob instead. She is going to die tonight, and Emma Swan, the valiant fool, actually wants to die with her.

"You're an idiot," she whispers to the blonde, clutching on to a fistful of the woman's tattered jacket.

"That... supposed... to... be... news?" Emma smiles lopsidedly, lips gleaming with blood. She points to herself with a shaking finger. "Princess... Charming."

And then, the wraith attacks.

She's flying again.

It's a glorious feeling, soaring through the air like a bird.

The landing, though, leaves nothing to be desired.

"Oof..." is what Emma's mouth says, when what she really wanted to get out were colorful phrases that would have made one of the fairy nuns blush. Instead of hitting another wall and landing on the pavement like she did the first time, Emma finds her body unceremoniously crashing onto the roof of an empty horse trailer. She leaves a rather remarkable Swan-sized dent on the metal.

Instead of using another plastic barrel to send her flying, the wraith had actually plucked her out of Regina's arms, and easily chucked her away as if she were weightless.
"Oh... God..." she groans in pain, gulping a huge amount of air into her lungs. Emma clutches at her stomach and flinches at the tenderness she feels. She must have broken a rib or two. Heck, maybe three. At least she didn't land on her back. Her scratch wounds would have probably started bleeding like crazy again if that were the case (seriously, someone should get that wraith a scratching post). Her boobs are hurting like a bitch though.

Unfortunately, Emma doesn't have the time to catch her breath or recover her bearings. The moment she lifts her heavy head and sees the wraith swooping in towards Regina, Emma decides to suck it up and get herself over to where the action is.

Running on nothing but pure Swan-resilience (some would say stubbornness), she gracelessly rolls off the roof and lands on the pavement with a rather undignified oomph, her hands and knees breaking her fall. Emma hisses in a breath. She just may have dislocated a wrist and skinned both of her knees. And, hell, make that four broken ribs now.

That stupid wraith sure did a number on her. Maybe it's time to pay the bastard back. Just how she'll manage to do that when her legs feel like jelly, and she is constantly seeing stars everywhere she looks, still remains a mystery. It doesn't matter though; she's the White Knight. She'll find a way. She has to. Regina had already given up, and Emma can't find it in herself to do the same. Henry would be devastated if the woman died. And, though Emma is reluctant to admit, so would she. Where would she be without her greatest source of annoyance, frustration and amusement? Life just wouldn't be the same without Regina Mills antagonizing her every minute of every day.

Having gotten rid of Emma, the wraith wastes no time in attempting to add the Evil Queen's soul to its collection.

Over by her Bug, Regina is swaying on her feet; her soul getting sucked out of her body by the damned creature.

There is something very wrong about seeing one of the people with the strongest personality she's ever come across, basically rolling over and admitting defeat. This isn't like Regina at all, and Emma is nothing if not driven to snap the woman out of her funk and get her to fight back. Regina's regal and quiet confidence has always made Emma feel safe and secure even in the most hopeless situations; and now, without it, she feels powerless and lost.

But, despite the bleakness of it all, Emma just can't stand by and do nothing. Regina is literally dying; what kind of savior would she be if she were to allow it to happen?

Unfortunately, no matter how determined she is, her battered body simply lacks the strength to cooperate and follow through with her plan. Her legs wobble once... twice... until they just give way and Emma falls flat on her face yet again. She's not sure just how much punishment her body can take, but she knows she needs to get moving. Running – heck, walking – is no longer an option; so, with no other choice, Emma pools her dwindling strength in her arms and just crawls.

The roughness of the gravel cuts at the skin of her hand, but Emma perseveres. What are measly cuts compared to the stinging scratch marks running the length of her back?

Although... she actually finds herself choking on a sob with every inch she comes closer to Regina and the wraith. Hot tears are prickling at the sides of her eyes, and one or two actually drop down to her cheeks and mix along with the dirt and blood on her face. They are not tears of pain, no. Emma has never felt this helpless in her entire life; and after years of being bounced from one foster home to another, and hell, being pregnant in jail, that is saying something. Regina is standing at the precipice of death, and here she is, the savior, crawling like a worthless worm towards the dying woman. She's powerless to stop the wraith. The brunette will probably be dead by the time Emma manages to get
to Regina.

The moment Regina falls to her knees is the exact same time that Emma lets out a silent scream. It is only a matter of seconds before the wraith sucks out Regina's soul in its entirety.

Emma's bottom lip quivers uncontrollably. She's a failure, and she will never, ever, be able to forgive herself for this. Her own frail body has betrayed her after all, and it probably cost her Regina's life.

She's a failure of a knight.

And she's no savior.

How will she ever face Henry now?

"Hey, mother sucker! Mind if I cut in?"

A disembodied voice rumbles through the parking lot.

Emma Swan is in no way deeply religious.

She may not be an atheist, or an agnostic, but you won't see her saying her prayers at night, either.

She's not a big believer in heaven or divine intervention, but when she catches sight of a motorcycle bursting out of nowhere and practically mowing down the wraith, Emma thinks she just might start believing in angels.

The creature is thrown all the way over to the other end of the parking lot upon impact. With its soul-sucking interrupted, Regina passes out and faceplants on the pavement. From her current location, Emma can't tell whether or not the woman is still alive. Putting more urgency in her movements, Emma drags her beat-up body with her arms and commando crawls towards the brunette as fast as her weary limbs can manage. Not surprisingly, and despite her increased efforts, she's still moving at a snail's pace. Emma isn't sure how much time has elapsed, but she finally gets to the unconscious woman; lying close enough to reach out and grab hold of Regina's limp hand. Emma squeezes it and lets out a shaky breath, finding comfort in the warmth radiating from Regina's skin. Warm is good. Warm is synonymous with being alive. Emma can breathe a little easier, at least.

"Regina..." she calls out with a raspy voice, tugging on the brunette's hand.

There is no response; but, much to her relief, Emma does feel Regina's finger twitch. That's enough for now.

An incensed shriek draws her attention towards the far side of the lot, and Emma lies momentarily paralyzed as she watches the peculiar turn of events that is happening right before her half-lidded eyes. Her vision is starting to blur, but she struggles through the haze and wills herself not to pass out.

The daredevil driver of the motorcycle is currently standing right before the big bad wraith; a hockey mask in place and an impressive-looking sword in hand. Emma's eyebrows fly up to her hairline in an instant. Her brain is more than a bit rattled from all the flying, crashing and bleeding that she has been subjected to, but despite it all, recognition still sets in.

Motorcycle... hoodie... leather jacket... baggy trousers... hockey mask... sword...

Add them all up and you get:
Her stalker is coming to their rescue. Emma doesn't know whether to be creeped out or moved by the insane gesture. Though, if she still has any doubts that the thief is a bit unhinged and more than a little cuckoo, the fact that the masked one is on the verge of attempting to kill an undead creature with a measly sword just about erases them all.

Clearly, the man is deranged.

The wraith probably thinks so too, because with total disrespect for the masked one's capabilities, the soul-sucker lunges in and tries to claw Argos' head right off his body. The masked one isn't having it. As casually as if he's just lumbering out of bed, Argos drops to the ground and rolls in a quick and agile way, dodging the attack with utmost ease. The two carry on with their strange claw-and-roll dance routine for a while longer, until they're practically a few steps away from where Emma lies slumped beside Regina.

The wraith is right in the middle of the three; facing Argos, with its back towards the two practically incapacitated women. Probably feeling cornered, the wraith goes back to its old tricks and uses its freaky telekinetic powers to send a couple of blocks of hay tumbling in their direction. Argos sidesteps the flying projectiles easily enough. Regina is spared from the onslaught. Emma, predictably, isn't so lucky.

"Fucking... hell..." she cries out through clenched teeth.

A damn block of hay had landed squarely on her back, pressing down onto her wounds, the itchy straw irritating the heck out of the deep gashes on her skin. Now, black dots join the litany of stars littering Emma's vision. Just awesome.

The wraith lets out another blood-curdling shriek and, although her eyes are trying to roll to the back of her head, Emma manages to get them to focus long enough to witness probably one of, if not the, most surreal moments of her life.

The soul-sucker, just as it had done a few times already, carelessly lunges towards the masked man, sharp bony fingers poised to claw away. Instead of rolling sideways like he had before, Argos actually rolls forward this time, right in the direction of the attacking wraith. Emma flinches accordingly. Idiot. Her stalker is probably as good as dead.

Of course, Emma finds herself jumping to the wrong conclusions, as usual.

As soon as he gets on his knees, Storybrooke's resident panty thief does his thing. In one smooth move, Argos hurls his sword towards the creature, at the exact same moment that the wraith lifts up its arm, ready to strike.

Emma feels something whizz right by her head, and for a split second, she thinks the asshole had tried to finish the wraith's job and kill her himself. The blade actually impales itself on the block of hay resting on her back, the impact sending violent vibrations rippling down to her skin.

Annoyance crosses her features, but then, Emma hears the bone-chilling shriek coming from in front of her, and every ounce of her irritation fades away. With her last remaining ounce of strength, Emma lifts her head and looks at the wraith.

Or, what's left of it.

The masked one's sword had passed right through the ghost-like being, but instead of inflicting no damage to the undead creature, the sword with the golden hilt had managed to do the impossible. It
may be because she's on the verge of passing out, but Emma actually thinks that she sees the wraith disintegrating into black smoke – a thick, heavy cloud which is then sucked right into the weapon hovering above her head like a vacuum. It is as if the sword is absorbing the very essence of the wraith. Like the portal made by Jefferson's hat, only this time, it completely disintegrated the creature first.

It's... peculiar.

Before Emma can mull on the strangeness of it all, she feels a nagging, tingling sensation spread across her body, and in a matter of seconds, she goes absolutely numb.

The last thing she sees is the masked one kneel before Regina, a gloved hand reaching for the brunette's wrist, probably checking for a pulse. Emma wants to bark at him and tell the kleptomaniac pervert to shove off, but all her strength finally deserts her body.

"Despite what you might believe, you did good today," she thinks she hears, but it might just be a figment of her imagination.

Her eyes roll inside her head and, before she knows it, she's pulled into the inky blackness and her world goes dark. Regina... Argos... the stables... everything disappears into the void.

Emma curls inside herself.

Now, she can rest.

The steady beeping from the machine is like music to her ears.

She even finds herself humming along to it while she sits on the visitor's chair by the bed, reading a paperback novel that she had picked up at the gift shop downstairs. The sound might be grating to some, maybe even drive a few people antsy (case in point, her own husband); but to Snow White, the continuous beeps are nothing but a soothing balm to a mother's soul. It is proof that Emma is still with them. A marvelous indicant that their daughter is still alive.

Therefore, she can never find it in herself to be annoyed at what Leroy had grumpily called a "pesky racket."

Snow can't count the number of times her offspring has almost gotten herself killed in the past couple of months. The staggering amount of Emma's near-death experiences is simply absurd. It had come to a point where Snow had almost threatened to use her new position as Mayor to force her daughter out of her job as Sheriff, just to make sure Emma would stop laying her life on the line at every given opportunity. No parent should have to endure living with the threat of losing his or her child at an almost regular interval. That said, she couldn't fault Emma for insisting to keep her extremely high-risk job. Snow did give birth to the White Knight, after all. And, truth be told, the blonde's stubbornness is becoming quite legendary. It is as bad, if not worse, than her own mulish tendencies. Truly: like mother, like daughter.

Still, it won't hurt if this lionhearted product of her and Charming's love would try to be extra mindful of her own safety from time to time. Snow doesn't know how many frantic trips to the hospital her heart can take. One more incident and she just might keel over and die.

"I'm proud of you, I always will be, but, sometimes, I wish you weren't the White Knight and everyone's savior," Snow murmurs wearily, turning to the next page of her novel.

"You and me both."
Snow snaps into attention and drops the book to her lap. A dazzling smile breaks out on her face, her eyes quickly shining with unshed tears. She sits up and grabs hold of Emma's index finger, careful not to dislodge the IV line or touch the multitude of cuts on her daughter's hand.

"Hey," she whispers softly, giving the digit an affectionate squeeze. "Welcome back."

Emma moistens her lips with her tongue and flashes her a sleepy grin. "How long was I out?" she asks, voice still hoarse from days of nonuse.

Immediately, Snow reaches over the bedside table, takes a glass of water, and positions the straw near her daughter's lips. She lets the blonde take a long sip before answering Emma's query.

"Three days."

"That long?"

Snow nods, swallowing thickly.

"Henry?"

"At school. He'll be here later, along with your father."

"Alright," Emma smiles softly. A pained grimace suddenly mars her beautiful face. "How bad was it this time?"

Snow feels a painful stab at her gut as she recounts her daughter's injuries. She reminds herself that it could have been worse, but that doesn't really help.

"Two broken ribs, a fractured wrist, deep lacerations on your back, significant blood loss, and an assortment of big and small scratches and bruises all over your body."

"Quite a collection of battle wounds, huh?" Emma grins crookedly, the simple action drawing attention to the cut on her lower lip. "A couple more and I'll be able to accumulate as many combat scars as David. Most people think scars are sexy, right?"

For the life of her, Snow can't get herself to return her daughter's smile. "Emma," she says somberly, a bit chastising. "You almost died."

One raised eyebrow is enough to answer Emma's query.

"Sorry," her daughter mutters quietly.

Snow reaches over and tucks a few stray strands of blonde hair behind Emma's ears. "How are you feeling?"

"Like I've just been run over by a ten-wheeler truck, then backed up again a couple of times, and then flattened by a steamroller. Just peachy, actually," Emma shrugs, grinning wryly.

Snow fights the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes at her daughter. Emma is just as bad as Charming is when he gets hurt. "Regina told me that you were very reckless that night," she chides instead.

Emma perks up almost immediately, as if she had just remembered something important; concern
shining in her green eyes like beacons. "Regina's alright?"

"She is," Snow reassures quick enough, setting Emma at ease. She notes the way the blonde's shoulders visibly sag down in relief; Snow promptly stamps down the curiosity that spikes up in her gut. There is something that still needs to be addressed. Snow raises an eyebrow at her child. "You. Reckless. Again, Emma?"

"The wraith was going to kill her." Emma reasons out, averting her gaze.

"That's the second time you've risked your life to save Regina from a soul-sucker. Please don't tell me you're making a habit out of it..."

"White Knight. Couldn't help myself, it's sorta like a knee-jerk reaction," Emma mumbles faintly, eyes still refusing to meet her own.

"Knee-jerk reaction?" Snow repeats incredulously, eyebrows rising up to her hairline. "Emma Swan, are you telling me that laying your life on the line – on a fairly consistent basis too – in order to save your biggest tormentor, is some kind of involuntary impulse?"

"I might be a bit of a masochist," Emma shrugs weakly.

"An honorable masochist; the worst kind yet," Snow sighs, cupping her forehead with a hand. Her daughter is going to be the death of her, that much is certain. "Emma, you promised me you'd stop actively putting yourself in harm's way. You were already hurt; she told you to go and save yourself."

"Yeah, but at the expense of her own life," Emma frowns, her piercing gaze finally snapping towards her. "I couldn't leave her there to die. Could you?"

Snow clamps her lips shut. Now, it's her turn to look away. She has a long and complicated history with Regina; theirs is a relationship fraught with betrayal and heartache and misery. Still, despite all the horrors that she was subjected to by the Evil Queen's thirst for vengeance, Snow is hesitant to admit that she may not have chosen to act differently as Emma. So, despite her daughter's questioning stare, Snow elects to remain silent.

"Who found us?" Emma prods after a moment, changing the topic.

Snow lets out a relieved breath. That question, she can handle. "Leroy did. He heard Regina's message."

"And the wraith?"

"Gone."

Emma nods and looks down at her finger — the one Snow is holding onto tightly — before launching off into another round of questions. "Was there a fissure? Did you trace where that bastard came out of? Or who summoned it?"

"There wasn't a fissure," Snow shares. "The wraith didn't come out of one, and although its arrival did trigger a fissure to appear near Toll Bridge, the fairies were able to close it right away."

"So, where did it come from then?"

"We've determined the exact location it sprang out of, but we still haven't figured out just who was responsible for bringing it to town. The investigation is still ongoing," Snow admits.
Her office, as well as the Sheriff's Department, had been busy looking into the matter while Emma lay unconscious in the hospital. They've uncovered some clues and gotten answers, but then those also just led to bigger questions.

"Initially, we suspected that Rumpelstiltskin may be back in town, but Belle was adamant that he wasn't. Then yesterday, Blue drops a bomb and says that she is certain that it was white magic that brought the wraith back to Storybrooke."

"Seriously?" Emma's eyebrows jump up in surprise.

"Yes. So, obviously, that rules out Gold," Snow intones, her tone grave. "That's not the end of it, though."

"Of course it isn't," Emma mutters, running a tired hand down her face.

"It gets even more complicated. According to Regina, it was the same kind of magic that was done at the clearing behind her house during--"

"--the day of the break-in," Emma finishes for her. Snow nods in the affirmative.

Emma worries on her bottom lip, brows furrowing deep. "Did Leroy see Argos at the stables?" Emma inquires after a beat.

Snow tilts her head. The name sounds vaguely familiar. She thinks she may have heard Ruby and Leroy talking about it in passing yesterday, but she's not certain. "Argos?"

"Haven't I told you about him?"

She gives Emma a blank look. "I don't believe you have," Snow mutters thoughtfully.

"Out of curiosity, did you ever hear about anyone named Argos back in Fairytale Land?"

"No," Snow shakes her head. She furrows her brow and places a finger to her lips in deep thought, racking her brains. She comes up with nothing. "Although," she starts. "One of my favorite works of fiction mentioned an Argos."

"Really?" Emma sits up abruptly, electrified with excitement. It doesn't surprise Snow when she sees Emma slamming back down onto the bed after only a fraction of a second, clutching her stomach and inhaling sharply.

"Ribs," Snow says in reminder.

"No shit," Emma grits out, fighting back a moan. "Jesus effin' Christ, that hurts..."

"Language," Snow reprimands.

"Oh c'mon, you've heard worse when we used to live together."

"Yes, I did. And, even then, I was tempted to wash your mouth with soap," Snow lifts a brow. She gives the potty-mouthed blonde a disapproving look. "I've never met anyone with a filthier mouth."

"Leroy," Emma coughs.

"I've only met one other soul with an equally filthy mouth," Snow amends with a sigh.

Emma shrugs. "Cursing can be fun."
"Not for me, I've had a lifetime's fill of curses," Snow mutters dryly.

"Of course you have," Emma gives her a small smile of understanding. She sovers up soon enough. "So," she begins anew, "Argos? You've read about him?"

"Yes," Snow nods. "From this world, actually."

"Yeah?"

"I'm actually pretty confident that Argos is considered one of the most famous dogs in ancient literature."

"A dog?" Emma crinkles her nose.

"The Odyssey? Have you read it?"

Emma blinks.

"No? But surely you must've heard of Homer?"

Looking utterly lost, her daughter scratches the side of her face sheepishly, a blush creeping on her cheeks. "Hate to disappoint the English teacher in you, MM, but the only Homer I know is a bald dude with an unhealthy addiction to beer and donuts. I don't think that guy is capable of reading a book, let alone writing one."

Snow sighs and gives her daughter a fond little smile. "You really ought to cut down on all the cartoons you watch, you're getting too old for them, Em."

"Hey, I only watch the ones for adults. They're perfectly crass and offensive, tailor-made for mature audiences like me, thank you very much," Emma pouts, a bit childishly.

Even when they were just roommates, Emma was always a bit defensive about her unfortunate taste in TV shows. This time, Snow can't help but roll her eyes.

"I'm just saying, it wouldn't hurt to pick up a book from time to time."

"A book?" Emma makes a face reminiscent of a kid who has just been ordered to eat a whole bowl of vegetables. "Like what, one of those raunchy harlequin romance novels that you have stashed underneath the sofa cushions?"

A red tint explodes on Snow's cheeks, and she actually feels her entire face heating up. To say that she is mortified is selling her embarrassment short. "H-how...?"

"I was looking for spare change," Emma explains. The smirk that appears on her lips is nothing short of devilish. "I found a bushload of erotica instead."

"You weren't supposed to see those!" Snow blurts out, ears bright red.

"Believe me, I'd give everything to unsee them," Emma remarks, grimacing slightly. "The one with the shepherd and the milkmaid was particularly disturbing."

"You read that?!" Snow's jaw drops down in horror.

Emma shrugs flippantly, nonchalant as ever. "I just skipped to the smutty parts. I honestly didn't even know that squeezing a cow's teats for milk is considered foreplay by some people; goes to show that you can learn new things every day."
Snow runs a hand through her face, wanting nothing more than to bury her head in shame. Reading trashy novels is one of her biggest guilty pleasures. After spending twenty-eight lonely years as Storybrooke's resident spinster, they had become her salvation from boredom and loneliness. For decades, she lived vicariously through fictional oversexed heroines; how sad is that?

"I'm kinda surprised that you like that sorta thing," Emma quips unabashedly. "But, well, whatever floats your boat, I guess. Which reminds me, 'The Philandering Pirate and his Woody Peg'? Really, Mary Margaret?"

Snow puts up a hand to shush the blonde. "Alright, stop. I'm your mother, we shouldn't be talking about this."

"Well, I'm your daughter, and kinda my job to stumble on my parents' hidden stash of porn," Emma returns with an impish grin.

"Those novels aren't porn," Snow argues.

"Literary porn is still porn," Emma counters. "MM, the shepherd wanked off while watching the milkmaid tug at a cow's nipples. Your argument is invalid."

The pixie-haired woman doesn't have anything to parry that. "Typically, parents embarrass their children, not the other way around," Snow complains instead.

"Believe me, there's a whole lot of second-hand embarrassment going on on my end too," Emma retorts.

Wanting her face to lose the bright red hue that she has been donning for the past uncomfortable minutes, Snow decides to change the topic to something less humiliating.

"Argos," Snow reminds, giving her daughter a stern look. Emma is merciful enough to take the bait.

"Oh, yes, you were saying?"

"Have you heard of the Trojan War?" Snow questions.

"Trojan?" Emma tilts her head to the side. "The condoms?"

"No," Snow pinches the bridge of her nose. "Have you seen the movie Troy?" she tries again, switching tactics.

Having Charming's genes, Snow suspects that the best way to explain things to her daughter is to give the blonde the Cliff Notes version of things. Keep it simple. Emma's just like her father in that regard (it's endearing, but sometimes it frustrates her to no apparent end).

"That Brad Pitt movie? Yeah."

"Okay, good. So, do you remember the wooden horse the Greeks used to breach the walls of Troy?"

Emma nods in the affirmative.

"Well, the one who masterminded the whole rouse is a man called Odysseus, a king from a place called Ithaca."

"Okay..." Emma slowly takes that in, a slight frown marring her features. "So what does he have to do with Argos?"
"Argos is his dog."

"Oh."

"Anyway, it takes Odysseus ten whole years to get home from the war. Most people presumed him dead, but his faithful pet still waited for his return. When he finally gets back to Ithaca, Odysseus disguises himself as a beggar to try and see what is going on in his absence undercover. No one recognizes him except for his old and frail dog, Argos. The moment he finally sees his master, Argos lets out a last whimper and then dies."

"The dog drops dead?"

"Yes."

Emma wrinkles her nose in distaste. "Morbid, much?"

"It's sad, I know." Snow agrees. "But Argos' story is also an enduring symbol of fidelity and love. The dog waited a decade for his master to return, and when he sees that Odysseus is safely at home, Argos finally allows himself to die in peace."

Emma's expression shows that she is clearly unimpressed. "That's neat," she says monotonously, as if Snow had just given a soliloquy on the weather. "Funny enough, the Argos here in Storybrooke is also a dog, but he's not of the faithful, four-legged variety."

"Who is he?" Snow questions.

"The panty thief, which, frankly, makes him a horndog," Emma quips. "He likes to go around town in a hockey mask, but more importantly, he's also the perv who's kinda been, I dunno, stalking me," she confides, flushing slightly.

"Stalking?"

"I wasn't kidding when I told you that I tend to attract the wrong people. My pheromones must be kinda whacked," Emma mumbles feebly, a slight pout on her lips.

"There's nothing wrong with your pheromones." Snow gives Emma a reassuring pat on the arm, though her gaze is far away, head deep in thought.

Her daughter has a stalker. Emma's first suitor since moving to Storybrooke is a perverted panty thief with a dog's name. Charming won't be too happy to hear about this; not that she's handling this piece of information any better. Snow already feels herself going on full-on mamma bear mode.

Emma clears her throat, pulling Snow's attention back to the blonde. "Anyway, Argos was there the other day. During the wraith attack, I mean."

"He was?"

"Yup."

"What was he doing at the stables?"

Her daughter exhales a deep breath, looking like it pained her to admit that: "He was the one who saved us from the wraith."

"Did he open a portal?"
Emma shakes her head. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I don't think he did."

The deep crease that appears between Snow's brows must have been a worrisome sight, since Emma reaches up and playfully smoothes it away with a thumb. "I don't understand," Snow murmurs. "How could he have gotten rid of a wraith without opening a portal?"

"With a vacuum sword, believe it or not." Emma pulls a face, looking equally as confused. "I don't know, MM, I don't get it either. I kinda want to talk to Regina about it; she might know what's up. Do you know where she is?"

Snow lets out a worn sigh. Of course she knows where Regina is. She just had the usual stilted (and snarky) exchange with the woman an hour prior.

"Where's Regina?" Emma prods, looking at her expectantly.

"I believe she's somewhere in the hospital,"

Emma stiffens at this bit of news. "Is she confined like me?"

"No," Snow shakes her head.

"I thought you said she's alright?"

"She is."

"Then what is she doing here?"

"Same thing she's been doing for the past few days," Snow sighs. At the questioning look on Emma's face, Snow elaborates. "Hovering."

"Hovering?" her daughter repeats, frowning in confusion. Emma looks so much like Charming at this moment that Snow feels her chest clench a little bit. "Hovering where?"

Snow's throat constricts around the words, but she manages to force them out of her lips. "Around you."

It's a little funny how Emma's eyebrows suddenly nail themselves to her forehead. That, and for a brief moment, her outspoken daughter is rendered completely and utterly speechless. She can't really blame the blonde; if the whole thing felt weird to her, what more for Emma?

"Regina's probably grabbing a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. She makes herself scarce whenever your father and I come to visit," Snow continues, watching Emma taking stock of their surroundings for the first time. The blonde openly gapes at the expensive-looking overnight bag by the window. "Regina's been staying here?" Emma's eyes widen, voice hitching up in absolute disbelief. "In my room?"

Snow nods in the affirmative. "Henry, too."

"Is that even allowed?"

"Of course not," Snow lets out an exhausted breath, letting her gaze fall towards the empty cots positioned side by side at the far end of Emma's private hospital room. "But you know those two can be very persuasive, Regina especially..." she trails off, casting a wary glance at the closed door, half-expecting it to burst open at any second. Speak of the devil and he doth appear, as the old saying goes. Snow turns back to Emma and sighs. "At least Dr. Whale's hair will grow back eventually."
"Whale's bald?"

"Like a baby," Snow confirms. She tilts her head to the side in thought. "Or, more like Howie Mandel, actually. The resemblance is quite disturbing."

Emma takes a second to let that sink in. "So... Regina chopped his hair off?" she asks slowly, clarifying.

Snow can't help but shudder at the memory of that particularly stressful encounter a few days ago. She had been mortified, and Charming, well, despite saying otherwise, she knows her husband had thoroughly enjoyed Whale's misfortune.

"Mary Margaret?" Emma prods.

Snow shakes her head clear. "Regina wasn't really aiming to cut his hair," she shares finally.

"You mean..." Emma's eyes widen comically.

"Mhmm," Snow nods weakly, knowing just what Emma was trying to imply. "She had threatened to chop something else off, but you know how her magic is when you're not around."

Emma winces accordingly.

Snow shifts in her chair and shuts her eyes tight, her mind's eye suddenly seeing an image that she wants to bleach out of her brain. Mary Margaret had been up-close and personal with that something else once upon a time. She was cursed, end of story (no matter how much Charming wants to pout and moan about it).

Emma pulls her back out of her thoughts with yet another query. "Why was Regina pissed off at Whale in the first place?"

"He wanted her to go home and get some rest."

Emma's brows hitch up in disbelief. "I know she's got a bit of a temper, but Regina wouldn't threaten to castrate a man just for that..."

"Oh, there's more behind it. Got something to do about a promise Regina made to Henry, I think." Snow shrugs. "She clearly got a bit rattled when she saw him crying at the ER."

"Henry was at the ER?" Emma frowns. "Did he see us all messed up?"

Snow nods weakly. "I'm sorry..."

"Mary Margaret," Emma says in reproach, her tone extremely disapproving.

Snow feels like a child getting reprimanded by a parent, and honestly, she knows she deserves it. She and her husband got the same amount of grief, and a whole lot more, from Regina the other day.

Overwrought with fear and panic, and unable to think straight, Snow and Charming had made the fatal mistake of bringing Henry along with them after Leroy called on that fateful night. It was a gross oversight that probably traumatized the child for life. The poor boy had witnessed the pandemonium that ensued when the ambulance bearing the bodies of his two mothers arrived at the hospital. Henry, absolutely petrified, threw up on the emergency room floor when the doctors wheeled in Emma's bloody body and Regina's weakened one. Snapping to his senses, Charming had carried the ashen boy out of the ER and away from all the chaos, but it was too late. Regina, who
had regained consciousness by then, chanced upon her son's tearful face before they ushered her inside an exam room.

The look of shame that washed over Regina's features upon seeing Henry so distraught had startled Snow. That, and the haunted look that flashed in those brown eyes when the doctors were fussing over a battered and beaten Emma, managed to throw her off. She doesn't think she'd ever seen such genuine remorse on Regina's face, ever. It perturbed Snow more than she would ever admit. It was surreal, and, frankly, disconcerting. For so long, she's been used to painting Regina as a villain; it had shaken her to the very core to witness the formidable woman actually appear painfully... *human*.

At that moment, Snow was reminded of the beautiful young woman who had rescued her from a runaway horse. And, until a nurse closed the door to the exam room, she found that she couldn't tear her eyes away from this new, yet oh-so-familiar, incarnation of Regina Mills.

Snow still heard everything though. Regina, delirious with exhaustion and shock, was going on and on about how she had disappointed her son by not making good with her promise to protect the village idiot (Snow, at that moment, had hoped that Regina wasn't talking about her daughter, because she's not above hitting the sick). Regina only quieted down when they finally sedated her.

Another brief head shake pulls Snow out of her reverie, and she decides to give Emma the full story.

"Regina was discharged after the first night. She was supposed to go home, but Henry didn't want to leave you all alone. I think he was worried that you wouldn't wake up, or, knock on wood, die overnight. He kept on insisting that he and his mom should stay and watch over you."

Emma just sits there quietly, listening to her speak.

"Actually, he drew up a plan. It's pretty adorable," Snow smiles wistfully, casting a glance at the piece of paper the boy had taped on the headboard of Emma's bed. "Dr. Whale had told him that it would probably take a few days for your body to regain most of the energy that Regina had siphoned out so Henry made an 'Operation Swan-Wake' countdown. His plan was to get Regina to touch you after five days," Snow continues, not noticing the faint blush that spreads on Emma's cheeks at her poor choice of words.

"W-why five days?" Emma coughs, wondering out loud.

Snow shrugs. "Henry thought you'd be well-rested by then and you'd be able to survive a small energy transfer. He's confident Regina's magic would wake you up."

"I see," Emma mutters, drawing lazy patterns on the sheets with her finger.

"You should thank your lucky stars that your son suggested a wake-up spell, and, you know, not a kiss."

Emma starts at this, her head quickly snapping towards Snow, blushing furiously.

"Yeah, I didn't think you'd enjoy getting a kiss from Regina either," Snow chuckles softly.

In an instant, her daughter shuts her mouth and looks away, refusing to meet Snow's gaze.

Snow's eyes narrow in suspicion, but she lets the matter slide.

"So," she clears her throat, deciding to continue telling her story instead of dwelling on her daughter's queer behavior, "Henry kept on badgering his mom that they should sleep in the hospital with you and, to everyone's surprise, Regina actually said yes. Charming thinks it's because she's
been indulging his every whim since the curse broke, but, if you ask me, it's probably because of that promise thing she kept on yammering about when she was delirious," she surmises almost silently.

Emma is looking down at her lap, green eyes unfocused, unusually quiet. Snow tries to catch her daughter's eyes, but to no avail. The blonde doesn't even acknowledge the hand that her mother waves in front of her face. Snow sighs and gives up, opting to resume talking instead.

"Of course, Dr. Whale flat out refused because it's against hospital policy. When he threatened to call security, well, you know what happened," she finishes wearily, motioning to her hair with a hand and doing chopping motions. "So, that's basically the reason why Regina's been hovering around you lately. I still can't wrap my head around it; I'm half-expecting to walk in on her trying to smother you with a pillow."

The fact that her normally opinionated daughter still has not said a word elicits a look of concern from Snow. Emma is staring down at her lap so hard that one might think she's actually counting the number of threads on the sheets.

"Emma?" Snow gives her daughter's arm a gentle shake. "Are you okay?"

Startled from her thoughts, Emma clears her throat and swallows visibly. "Y-yeah, of course." she smiles, though it looks a tad forced.

"Something bothering you?"

"Nope. No. Nothing," Emma mumbles, still refusing to meet her eyes.

She might not possess her daughter's superpower, but after spending twenty-eight years teaching kids and hearing just about every homework-related excuse in existence, Snow has developed a rather remarkable ability to spot lies. Nevertheless, she fights the urge to pry and doesn't call out Emma on her fib.

A soft knock comes from the door, interrupting the awkward moment between mother and daughter.

"Come in," Snow calls out, turning her head.

The door opens a fraction before John – Dopey – pops his head in, his face displaying the ever-present lopsided grin. "Good morning, your majesties," he greets cheerfully, before pushing the door open all the way and stepping inside the room, carrying a breathtaking bouquet in his arms. Looks like he finally found a job at Game of Thorns, good for him. "I have a special delivery for the Sheriff."

"That's beautiful," Snow gushes, standing up to receive the flowers from the dwarf. She thanks him profusely, and he gives her and Emma a small bow, before slipping out of the room and taking his leave.

"I'll put this over here for the meantime," Snow places the bouquet on the food tray beside Emma's bed. "I'll go and ask your nurse if they have a vase we could borrow. They usually keep one at the nurses station."

Snow is on her way out when she notices the look on Emma's face and stops. "What's wrong? Don't you like it?"

"It's chock full of lilacs," Emma frowns, eyeing the flowers with utmost suspicion.

"You don't like lilacs?"
"I do, it's just..." Emma's eyes narrow down into slits, zeroing in on the small white envelope clipped onto the bouquet. "Mind if I take a look at that card?"

Snow walks back to the bed and plucks the envelope from the flower arrangement. She pulls out the small white card from within and hands it over to her daughter.

Emma takes a few moments to read the note. An exasperated sigh leaves Emma's lips, and without another word, she hands over the card for Snow to read.

_Selfishly speaking, you don't know how relieved I am that you didn't die._

_Rest well, heal those nasty wounds, and pretty yourself up for our first official face-to-mask meeting._

_I'll be seeing you soon._

– _Argos_

Snow feels her jaws tightening. Silently, she places the card on top of the bouquet before taking a few moments to gather up her belongings. She places a loving kiss on Emma's forehead, lingering a few seconds longer than necessary, before pulling away and giving the blonde's arm a comforting squeeze.

"I'll find Regina and tell her that you're awake," she tells Emma.

"Thanks." Emma smiles tiredly.

Snow can't help but throw the newly delivered bouquet a withering glance. Pity, it's so beautiful too. "You two have a lot to talk about and figure out."

"That we do," Emma sighs, following her gaze as well.

"Emma, I have a bad feeling about this Argos."

"You and I both."

"Be careful."

"I'm always careful."

Snow arches an eyebrow at the ball of bandages that is shaped like her daughter.

"Except when I'm being careless," Emma grins sheepishly.

"Stop taking unnecessary risks."

"Okay."

"Promise me."

"Yeah, alright."

"Emma."

"I promise."
"I'll hold you to that," Snow warns. "Now, I'll go and have a chat with your father and see what we can dig up about this stalker of yours. Charming will want to know that you're awake too. We'll drop by again later, alright? I'll also get Whale and tell him you're up." Snow smiles, handing Emma's ringing cellphone to the blonde. She takes a peek at the caller ID and sighs. George McDonald, yet again. He's been calling since she arrived two hours ago. "He probably hasn't heard that you're in the hospital," she murmurs.

Despite being on a break from her duties as Sheriff, Emma still takes the call.

Snow leans in and plants another kiss goodbye at the side of Emma's head. With one last glare at the flowers, she finally takes her leave.

She doesn't care if that man saved Emma's life from a wraith. He's a thief, a pervert and a stalker. To bestow her parental blessings on an asshole of that magnitude is just laughable, if not downright impossible. And, now that she's in full-blown protective mama mode, Argos better stop harassing her daughter, lest he wants to end up a eunuch.

Snow strides through the halls of the hospital, blazing with silent fury.

Charming has always alluded to the urge to scare off Emma's potential suitors. Snow is more lenient when it comes to her daughter's dating life (or lack thereof); she's the level-headed one, the voice of reason. But now? Hell, she'll probably be breaking out her bow alongside Charming's blade.

Meek little Mary Margaret be damned, Snow White takes no prisoners.

Argos better watch his back.

And his crotch.

"Thanks, George. I'll make sure to let her know. Uh-huh. Alright. Will do. Thanks again. Goodb—"

The muttered 'goodbye' has barely left her lips when the door to her room is blown wide open. Emma's not exaggerating about the 'blown' part; considering that there is now a big gaping hole where a door used to be.

A small cloud of dust swirls around the doorway before settling on the once pristine floor.

Emma's eyes are as wide as Regina's own pair, their mouths both dangling uselessly open. They stare at one another in shocked silence; Emma on her bed, Regina in the doorway. The brunette's right hand is hovering mid-air in front of her, and judging from its height and positioning, Regina was just about to use it to turn the doorknob. Not that there's a doorknob left to turn, anyway.

Clearly, the Evil Queen didn't expect her magic to go off and blow the door right off its hinges. If Emma's bed wasn't positioned a little farther from the door, she would have been subjected to a splinter shower.

Emma sighs deeply. Regina Mills and her penchant for grand entrances.

"You know you have to pay for that, right?"

"I can afford it," Regina says stiffly, finally snapping out of her stupor.

"Good, 'cause I sure can't," Emma mumbles, snapping her cellphone shut and laying it on top of her lap.
She watches as Regina sidesteps the broken pieces of wood and gingerly makes her way inside the room. Instead of occupying the seat that Mary Margaret had just vacated, Regina chooses to sit down on one of the cots at the corner. Regal as ever, she sits primly and crosses her legs, sitting like a queen on a throne.

"Bill it to Regina Mills, please," Emma smiles brightly at the slack-jawed nurse hovering right outside the door. The middle-aged woman takes a brave peek inside the room and instantly scurries away upon seeing the sharp, intimidating look on Regina's face. The blonde takes in the staggering amount of wooden splinters on the floor and pulls a face. "That excited to see me, huh?" Emma teases wryly.

Regina responds by letting out a rather derisive scoff. "Miss Swan, the only thing I am excited about is the thought that I can finally go home and sleep in my own bed. Now that you're awake, Sheriff, I'm sure my son will finally agree to go back to the house with me."

"Oh, yeah, I heard the kid roped you into sleeping with me. You must've enjoyed the whole experience cause I also heard you've been hovering a lot," Emma grins mockingly, wagging her brows.

The moment she realizes just what she had said, and heck, just what it implied, it's already too late. Judging from the stunned: 'I-think-I-just-popped-an-aneurysm' look that Regina has on, the brunette is feeling equally as horrified as she is.

"I-I mean," Emma stammers, quickly backtracking. "Sleeping in the same room as me. Not with. God, not with. Why would I say with? That's just crazy... and stupid... and disturbing... and did I say crazy?"

The word vomit does nothing but compound the awkwardness of the whole situation, so Emma promptly slams her rambling mouth shut. Regina might be blushing (Emma knows she, herself, definitely is), but Emma cannot tell from the distance between them. The Sheriff wants to sink deeper into the bed and disappear into the mattress. One of these days she's going to accidentally choke herself to death from constantly having her foot in her mouth.

"Sorry, it's the morphine talking," Emma mutters lamely, filling the pregnant silence.

"Of course it is," Regina coughs daintily into a fist.

Emma notes, a bit enviously, that the brunette manages to compose herself faster than Emma can ever dream of doing. Regina might be blushing (Emma knows she, herself, definitely is), but Emma cannot tell from the distance between them. The Sheriff wants to sink deeper into the bed and disappear into the mattress. One of these days she's going to accidentally choke herself to death from constantly having her foot in her mouth.

"Yes, your majesty," Emma mock salutes. She winces almost immediately; of course, she just had to use the hand with a fractured wrist.

"This chair is more comfortable than that flimsy cot," she says haughtily, sticking her nose in the air.
"Right." Emma narrows her eyes, not buying that one bit.

Her built-in lie detector pings, but she doesn't call out Regina on her bullshit. Seeing the brunette up close momentarily distracts the Sheriff from uttering the snarky comment at the tip of her tongue. Despite appearing as flawless and immaculately put together as usual, Emma can't help but notice how haggard Regina looks. It just goes to show that no matter how expensive they might be, the brunette's collection of pricey beauty products can only do so much. Not only are there dark circles under her eyes, but there's also an exhausted aura surrounding Regina that no amount of make-up can hide. Truth be told, it unsettles Emma a bit. For someone who came out of a wraith attack with broken ribs and a slew of disfiguring injuries, why does Emma have a nagging feeling that she sort of fared better than Regina?

"Stop that," Regina scolds after a moment, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Stop what?"

"Fidgeting with your bandages."

"But it's itchy..." Emma whines.

"Well, you just have to suck it up and deal with it, princess," Regina says in an awfully bored, condescending tone. "That's what you get for being an idiot."

"Itchy skin?"

"Yes."


Regina stiffens.

"What, speechless, your majesty?"

"Don't be absurd," Regina says, rather quickly, sounding uber-defensive. Emma watches how Regina's brown eyes take in every inch of her cut and bruised face; despite not giving much of a damn about her appearance, she finds herself feeling uncomfortable under the intense scrutiny.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Emma fidgets, extremely discomfited. "Do I really look that hideous?"

"None more so than usual," Regina snarks. Her voice, though, doesn't have the same bite that it usually does. She exhales loudly and levels Emma with another inscrutable look. "You're an idiot."

Emma rolls her eyes. "Yes, I believe we've established that a couple of times already."

"It bears repeating." Regina intones, frowning mightily. "Out of all the things you can inherit from your father, you just had to get his stupidity gene – but I suppose that is his dominant trait. Thank goodness my son was spared from being burdened by the Charming family IQ."

"Trying to do the right thing does not make a person stupid, Regina," Emma reasons with a frown, feeling a bit slighted.

"It does when it gets that person killed."

"I didn't die," Emma is quick to point out.
Regina huffs, not a little mockingly. "You almost did."

"The operative word being *almost*."

"Well, then, Henry was *almost* completely orphaned too."

"But he wasn't. We're both alive."

"No, I am. You're barely half-alive as is."

"Oh c'mon, now you're just exaggerating. I'm perfectly fine."

"You're fine?" Regina repeats, slowly arching a perfectly sculpted eyebrow. Without warning, she jabs Emma's side with a finger. *Hard.*

"Ow! Holy mother fucking hell!" Emma howls in agony; a hand flying up to clutch her ribs, willing the pulsating pain to fade away.

"Tell me, Miss Swan, do you feel perfectly fine now?" Regina probes, a saccharine smile plastered on her face.

Emma is pretty damn sure her whole face is flushed red. "Evil," she grits out, breathing deeply through her nostrils. From that point on, Emma makes a conscious effort to keep an eye out for the woman's quick fingers. Broken ribs and Evil Queens do not mix.

"That will teach you not to argue with me; you know very well that I'm right," Regina sniffs arrogantly, giving her the side-eye.

Emma snorts indignantly. "You think you're right?"

"Of course," Regina answers stiffly, flicking a lock of hair away from her face.

"Uh, hate to break it to you, your highness, but you're really not," Emma intones. "Yes, we both might have died, *but we didn't*. Henry might have lost both his mothers, *but he didn't*. So, why don't we just appreciate the fact that we both get to live another day, and just leave it at that?"

"Your ability to be so blasé about matters of life and death is truly astounding," Regina says warily, leveling her with a glare. "An idiot, through and through."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Emma dismisses with a wave of a hand.

"Miss Swan," Regina warns, clearly unamused with her attitude.

Emma exhales a tired breath. "Don't 'Miss Swan' me, Regina. You may have a point, but so do I. And, right now, I'm making a better argument than you."

"According to whom?"

"Me," Emma says simply.

"You're a maddening piece of work," Regina growls, not a bit spitefully.

"Funny, so are you."

Judging from her flexing fingers, Emma can tell that Regina is fighting the urge to wring her neck. Thankfully, she keeps her murderous intentions in check.
"You almost made me break my promise to Henry," Regina mutters darkly, a frown marring her face. "Regardless if I had died or survived that evening, if you had been killed, he would've resented me all his life."

"Excuse me? You're one to talk! You tried to make me leave and break my promise too. The kid got pissed at me when you got hurt by goblins. If I had allowed you to die, he probably would've hated me as well," Emma counters just as stubbornly. If it didn't hurt her wrist to do so, she would've crossed her arms on her chest in a petulant manner. So, she settles for a glare and a pout instead. "Besides, it's not as if you made it easy for me to keep my word. Why didn't you fight back? Why did you just roll over and let the wraith try and suck out your frickin' soul?"

"I did it for Henry. He asked me to protect you," Regina snaps, voice suddenly rough. "And, what about you. Why did you have to insist on staying behind, knowing that the wraith would have killed you too?"

"I did it for Henry. He asked me to protect you," Emma returns the brunette's words in kind. "In any case, I'm not only the White Knight, I'm the Sheriff. It comes with the job."

"Dying for an Evil Queen?"

Emma stops at the question. It's a simple query – but it's a loaded one, with so much lying underneath the surface – and it would have been easier to fall into old habits and just deflect; dish out a vague non-answer. Emma thinks about it, but she doesn't do it.

"If need be, yes," Emma murmurs quietly, genuinely, holding the brunette's gaze unflinchingly.

Regina's whole body tenses at her words. Unable to handle the intensity of Emma's stare, she averts her eyes.

An awkward silence fills the room. Blunt honesty always has a way of killing heated conversations.

It feels like hours had past when the tension finally breaks.

The brunette exhales deeply before shooting Emma an exasperated glance. "Miss Swan, you're quite possibly the most stubborn person that I have ever had the misfortune of knowing."

"Being stubborn has served me well so far, your majesty, so I'll take that as a compliment."

Regina makes a disgruntled sound in her throat. "Served you well? How many times have you almost gotten yourself killed because of your pigheadedness?"

"About as many times as I've survived because I was too stubborn to die. See, it's all a matter of differing perspectives," Emma shrugs, smiling faintly.

"Make as many excuses and flimsy arguments as you want, Miss Swan, but you're still an idiot in my eyes," Regina grounds out stubbornly, folding her arms on her chest. She looks away, chin sticking up in the air. "A brave idiot," she concedes after a beat, in a tone that was barely audible, "But an idiot nonetheless."

Emma fights the overwhelming urge to smack her forehead with a palm. Jeez. This proud woman and her inability to express something as simple as gratitude. Simply infuriating. "If you're trying to thank me in a roundabout way, let me save you the trouble of doing so by saying that: no, I wasn't responsible for saving our collective asses from the wraith."

"It wasn't you?"
"Nope," Emma confirms with a head shake. "You can thank my stalker for that."

Regina's face darkens immediately.

"Let me guess," she says tightly. "He's the one who sent you those flowers?"

"That is correct, your highness," Emma nods.

She studies the expression on Regina's face with barely concealed curiosity. Even before she told Regina about the identity of the sender, she had seen the older woman glancing surreptitiously at the floral arrangement every so often ever since Regina had entered the room. Emma has never seen anyone look at a bouquet of their favorite flowers with such disdain. It's hilarious, if not a bit strange. One might think Regina is actually jealou—no. Not even remotely within the realm of possibility.

"How sweet of your stalker," Regina says dryly, lips forming a thin line. "Saving your life and sending flowers? You must be so touched."

"Oh, please. It will take more than that to win me over," Emma retorts, puffing up her chest. "I'm a hard woman to please."

"I find that highly unbelievable, but we all have our delusions," Regina says, not a little condescendingly. "Now, why don't you make yourself useful and tell me just how your precious little suitor managed to save us from the wraith."

Emma's upper lip curls in annoyance, but she starts speaking anyway.

"My memory's a bit hazy, but from what I can remember, he ran over the wraith with his motorcycle and they fought for a while," Emma recounts, straining her brain to remember. Everything went by like a blur. "I thought he was a goner for sure, but then he throws his sword at the wraith and then the monster, I dunno, disappears into the blade. Kinda like it was sucked into a vacuum."

"So, you're saying that his sword absorbed the soul-sucker?" Regina clarifies, her tone carrying a tinge of skepticism.

"Yeah, like it slurped in the creature entirely."

"Are you sure you weren't just hallucinating?"

"I might've been," Emma shrugs. "But what if I weren't?"

Regina takes a moment to take that in. "What did his sword look like?" she finally asks.

"Maybe an inch or two longer than my dad's sword. The hilt was pretty badass, I must admit," Emma mutters pensively, feeling a little envious. She did get a pretty nice view of it when the blade impaled itself on the block of hay that had her pinned down. "It was pure gold, and it had these entwined serpents coiled around the grip, and their heads formed the pommel."

Regina's eyes widen a fraction, as if in recognition. "Serpents?"

"Yeah. Do you know anything about it?"

"Maybe, I'm not entirely certain," Regina murmurs softly. "I may have heard of a magical sword that fits that description once, but I'll have to pore through my old books just to make sure."

"I'll help," Emma volunteers.
Regina makes a show of looking pointedly at her bed-ridden body and the assortment of bandages on her frame.

"I'll help as soon as I get better," Emma amends. "Will you heal me?"

"Why should I?" Regina's upper lip curls, arrogant as ever, even though Emma knows better.

As soon as she gathers more strength, Regina will do her thing and make her brand new again. She's done it countless times in the past four months. Regina just likes to put up a fight for appearances' sake, and well, also for the heck of it. Practically forced to play nice by Mary Margaret (who is shrewd enough to use Henry as leverage), Regina nowadays finds her kicks by torturing Emma and making her life a living hell. Emma doesn't mind as much, their snarky rivalry keeps her on her toes.

"I don't want to go through a long recovery period," Emma humors the other woman and plays right along. "Think of it, Regina, I have to live at your place. You don't want to be saddled with caring for me twenty-four-seven, right? I can be a very demanding patient."

"That, I don't doubt," Regina rolls her eyes. And, then, with a weary sigh, she finally acquiesces with a bored: "Fine, I'll heal you on Sunday."

"Why Sunday?"

"Your fifth day," Regina answers simply.

Emma glances up at the piece of paper taped to the frame of her bed. Henry's Operation Swan-Wake countdown. "Oh. Right. Sunday." Emma nods.

The sound of her cellphone chiming with a message sends Emma scrambling for the gadget. It takes a few seconds for her brain to remember that she had placed it on her lap. She rolls her eyes at herself before flipping the phone open and reading the new message.

A glorious smile threatens to split her face in two. Looks like her mother had sent word to Henry about her return to the state of consciousness. She shows the message overflowing with smilies and exclamation points to an intrigued Regina (who makes an awful job of pretending to be uninterested).

"Tell him to stop texting in class," Regina orders in her strict, disciplinarian voice.

"Will do," Emma promises. Of course, she sends him a text message ripe with smilies and exclamation points instead. The second she finishes typing her reply, a thought strikes and she instantly straightens. "Oh, hey! I almost forgot. I've got some news for you," she tells Regina. She was meaning to tell the brunette earlier, but had gotten sidetracked when Regina had, quite literally, burst through the door.

"What is it?" Regina asks in a tone ripe with indifference, not the least bit interested in what she has to say. Well, that's bound to change soon enough.

"I got a call from George McDonald before you came in."

As Emma expected, Regina perks up almost immediately. "And...?" the brunette prods.

"He wanted me to tell you that the spell finally wore off; and that Benzo just transformed into your Mercedes this morning. Congratulations, your majesty, you just got your car back."

The relieved smile that breaks out on Regina's face is almost blinding.
"But, there's a hiccup," Emma continues, effectively bursting Regina's bubble. She hates to be the bearer of bad news, but, well, what choice did she have?

"What happened?" Regina questions intently, eyes shining with concern.

"The spell wore off when Benzo was in the middle of--" Emma glances in the direction of the opened doorway, making sure no one is within earshot, "--doing the nasty, if you know what I mean. Needless to say, you owe the petting zoo another pony."

Regina makes a face, looking wary. "And what of my car?"

"No significant damage, but I think you have to call someone to scrape off Rainbow Sprinkles from under your Mercedes. Poor thing was flattened like a pancake."

The sight of Regina looking white as a sheet sends Emma choking on a chuckle. If it didn't hurt her ribs to laugh, she would have guffawed.

"Want me to call Michael to do it?" she asks the ashen brunette.

Regina gives her the evil side-eye.

"Oh, right! He hates your guts," Emma mutters with a slight grimace.

The owner of the town's one and only garage would probably rather have his liver removed than do anything remotely nice for Regina – even if he was going to get paid handsomely for it. Without Michael and his mechanics as a viable option, Emma purses her lips and racks her brain for someone else. She needs to think of someone in town who doesn't hate or fear Regina, well, at least not enough, to be able to stomach cleaning off icky pony carcass from underneath the Evil Queen's ride. Also, said person shouldn't be easily nauseated by blood and guts (that quickly rules out an easily queasy Archie, unfortunately).

Predictably, Emma's mind draws a blank.

And, judging from the troubled crease between the brunette's brows, Regina is equally clueless.

It might have gone unnoticed by someone else, but Emma catches the way Regina's whole demeanor deflates in quiet resignation.

Sympathy gnaws at Emma's chest.

Despite being the one confined to a hospital bed, she can't help but feel infinitely bad for the brunette. Regina, despite being on her best behavior for months, really doesn't have anyone in her corner beside Henry, and, well, her.

So, with a rather worn sigh, Emma gingerly places her I.V. laden hand over Regina's limp one on the mattress. Without thinking much into it, Emma gives the brunette's hand a light squeeze and a consoling pat. Regina's whole body tenses at the touch. Strangely enough, the brunette's shoulders stiffen even more when Emma pulls back and cuts their physical contact.

"Don't worry, your highness," Emma murmurs, a small smile in place, "I'll clean your car for you after you heal me on Sunday."

Obviously blindsided by the gesture, Regina's eyebrows shoot up to her forehead; her normally stoic mask slipping a bit. "You would?" she asks, incredulous. Regina narrows her eyes at the blonde in disbelief. "You?"
"Yeah, me." Emma smiles faintly.

"You're willing to scrape off--" Regina stops abruptly, looking a bit lost.

"Rainbow Sprinkles," Emma supplies helpfully.

"–Rainbow Sprinkles," the brunette repeats with a slight grimace. "From underneath my car?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Emma shrugs. "Why not?"

"Miss Swan, tell me, what's the catch?" Regina asks warily, suspicious as usual.

"There's none."

"Why are you being nice?"

"I'm always nice," Emma points out. "You, on the other hand..." she trails off.

Regina scowls, looking a bit affronted, when honestly, she didn't really have the right to be. After all, one does not earn the moniker "Evil Queen" without doing something even a wee bit evil to deserve it. "There's always a catch," Regina insists, narrowed eyes studying Emma intently – as if staring at a person hard enough can make one see into another's soul and read their intentions.

"Sorry to disappoint, your highness, but not this time."

"Then what do you want in return?" Regina persists, always hard to trust. "You must be after something..."

"Jeez, I'm not some jerkwad who's going to ask for sexual favors; if that's what you're so worried about," Emma rolls her eyes in exasperation.

Regina's eyes widen a fraction, looking mighty uncomfortable at the unexpected turn in their conversation. Emma, for her part, trudges on. "First of all, that's not who I am. And, second of all, ew;" she pulls a disgusted face. "Look, Regina, I'm not asking for any kind of payment. But, if you really feel the need to thank me, I could never say no to one of your homemade chocolate cakes," Emma shrugs. "Provided that you hold the poison, of course," she adds as an afterthought. Better safe than sorry.

"Miss Swan, I--" Regina begins anew. This time, Emma cuts her off with an exhausted groan.

"Look, just take it for what it is. Why is it so hard for you to believe that there's actually someone out there willing to do something nice for you?" Emma lets out a tired breath. "Despite you being a major pain in the ass, of course."

Regina's upper lip curls into a sneer.

"Well, pardon me for being cautious," Regina mutters stiffly. "I can't help but be leery of your supposed act of kindness, princess. I don't believe ridding my car of chunks of crushed pony is part of your job description as Sheriff, Miss Swan," Regina says matter-of-fact, a slight mistrusting frown still lingering on her features. "Why, it's not even something a White Knight would do."

"You're right, but hey, guess what? I'll do it anyway," Emma declares, wearing a proud little smirk
on her face. "You know why?"

"Cause you're an idiot," Regina states with a hopeless sigh.

"Precisely," Emma's lopsided grin broadens into a dazzling smile. "I'm your idiot."

Regina sits up abruptly. "What?!"

"What?!" Emma starts at the same time, eyes wide.

The biggest, bravest, most honorable idiot of them all.

"Miss Swan..."

*Oh, crap.*

"It's the drugs talking... I swear..."

*Right.*

*The drugs.*

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my beta Alezabee!
Everyone's a Dog

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The urge to break out in song and perform a little happy jig is a bit overwhelming. It's more than a little disconcerting too; seeing that she rarely ever sings (being tone deaf took care of that), and, almost all the times she's danced and let loose, she experienced a wicked and head-splitting hangover the day after. That being said, Emma Swan is this close to turning into a stereotypical Disney princess – with their penchant for impromptu song-and-dance numbers at the most inopportune times. Thank goodness for the smidgen of self-control that still lingers in her system. Really, the number of times she's subjected her own self to moments of extreme mortification is simply absurd.

So, with a deep, calming breath, Emma reels in the unexpected (and thoroughly unwanted) impulse to showcase her mediocre abilities, and, just, smiles.

Yes, in lieu of singing and dancing, she's settling for something as simple as a grin. It might not be a flashy – and campy – way of doing it, but it does showcase her happiness to a considerable degree. Happy. She's truly happy. Who can blame her? After two straight unforgiving hours of slaving underneath a floating car (courtesy of Regina's magic – and, well, a freshly healed and revitalized White Knight's power stabilizing abilities), Emma Swan can finally say:

It's done.

"You missed a spot..."

It's nearly done.

Emma's shoulders deflate instantaneously, her blinding smile washed away by a disgruntled pout. Truly, there's truth behind those old and overly used sayings that warn against celebrating prematurely.

"There, right by that wheel, see?" A helpful young boy indicates for her benefit.

Following the direction being pointed to by Henry's finger, Emma releases a long, worn sigh. She doesn't even attempt to go near the tiny piece of pony – is that... holy crap... a frickin' eyeball?! – beside the car's left front wheel. Emma recoils at the sight, a violent shiver rippling from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. From all the way over at the back end of the Mercedes, Emma lifts a shaky hand and sprays the gooey orb off with her hose. At least, she tries to. Stubborn thing seems to be stuck in place, probably glued to the spot by the animal's sticky innards. Ick.

After Regina's wayward spell finally wore off the other day, George McDonald, the manager of Storybrooke's petting zoo, had been kind enough to drag out poor Rainbow Sprinkles' flattened carcass from underneath the Mercedes. The Sheriff couldn't be more thankful. It made her task this afternoon a wee bit easier; the only thing left to do is scrub out all the dried blood and scrape off bits and pieces of the pony's light brown hide from underneath the car.

Aside from the stomach-turning stench, Emma had been spared from seeing anything grossly off-putting – until now, that is.

That's a frickin' pony eyeball over there. She might be hallucinating – probably a residual effect of all the morphine that her brain had been swimming in for days – but Emma thinks it's actually staring back at her. It's creepy, if not downright yucky.
"Hey, kid..." Emma clears her throat, forcing her facial expression to smooth down from absolute disgust to something more neutral. Emma had given birth to a smart, extremely perceptive boy; he'd see right through her ploy, if she, in any way, projected her revulsion on her features.

"Yeah?" Henry looks up at her, his face a picture of purity and innocence.

Emma swallows visibly. Shame floods her system for what she is about to do, but the feeling is quickly overpowered by the bile that suddenly rises up her throat. She's not the queasy type, but it seems there are certain exceptions to what Storybrooke's fearless Sheriff can stomach. A slimy eyeball, unfortunately, is not one of them. There is something about things that stare right back that rub her the wrong way.

"Emma?" Henry prods impatiently.

"Um, yeah, uh..." The blonde stammers and licks her lips, trying to psyche herself up. Emma's literally going to ask her kid to do her dirty work. It's not a very knightly thing to do; heck, it's not even good parenting, but what's the harm in trying? It's not like it will put his life in danger. Besides, it might be a good teaching moment for the kid (as for what exactly today's lesson is, Emma doesn't know yet). "Grab some gardening gloves, you can find a pair inside the toolshed. Pluck out that eyeball for me, please. I have to, uh, clean this pretty huge blood splatter by the, um, muffler."

Henry, predictably, knows just what she's up to with just one look at her face – specifically, at the telling flop sweat on her forehead. The kid takes a cautious step back from the floating car – and from her shameless, conniving self. "Sorry, Emma." Henry makes a face, not sounding apologetic at all. "Not touching that – not even with gloves on."

"I thought you came out here to help?"

"Nope." Henry shakes his head. "I'm here to give you moral support."

Emma's lie detector pings. Naturally, she narrows her eyes at the kid. They stare each other down for a moment or two before one of them finally gives way.

"Okay, fine," Henry relents with a sigh, kicking away a pebble with the tip of his sneakers, "I'm here to supervise."

"Supervise?" Emma repeats, furrowing her brows.

"Mom," Henry states simply, explaining everything with just one word.

"Right. Of course." The blonde exhales a breath. Trust the Evil Queen to send a spy. Seriously, she only gave the car tiny, insignificant scratches with her overzealous scrubbing once or twice. Besides, it's not as if anyone would be looking underneath the car, anyway. Regina need not worry her paranoid self. Speaking of the woman... "Is she still researching about Argos' sword in her study?"

"Nope. She's in the kitchen."

A brief glance at her wristwatch elicits a confused frown on the blonde's face. It's only a quarter past three in the afternoon. "Isn't it a little early to start cooking dinner?"

"Oh, she's baking a cake." Henry elaborates.

Unable to help her gluttonous self, Emma instantly perks up at this piece of information. "Chocolate?"
"Yup."

"For me?"

Henry gives a noncommittal shrug. "Probably."

"Think it's my reward?" Emma's pupils dilate at the thought, her eyes practically twinkling with excitement.

"Reward?" Henry crinkles his nose, looking slightly perplexed. "If it's for you, shouldn't it be a welcome home present or something?"

Emma can't help but snort, giving the boy her best 'yeah, right' expression. As if Regina would ever do such a thing. "I told her the other day that if she felt the need to thank me for cleaning her car, a chocolate cake would do."

"Oh, okay."

"But, you know, I didn't think your mom would actually do it," Emma adds in a thoughtful tone. Guess the Evil Queen didn't like feeling beholden to the White Knight; Regina just had to repay her in one way or another. The woman didn't really have to, but, Emma surmises, years of having practically no one doing anything nice for Regina out of their own volition, probably made the brunette leery of such genuine acts of kindness. Ah, well, unnecessary reward or not, at least she's getting some cake.

If it weren't for the icky orb taunting her nearby, Emma would have allowed her mouth to water in anticipation. She throws a wary glance at the pony's disembodied eyeball. "In case I, uh, forget to remove that thing, think she'll notice?"

Henry follows her gaze and grimaces accordingly. "Yup."

"Really?"

"She's pretty observant." Henry shares conspiratorially, as if it was a big secret and not something that Emma – and basically anyone who's ever met Regina – already knows. Regina's nit-picky attitude and extreme attention to detail (which, quite honestly, is a polite way of saying anal retentive) are as legendary as Emma's stubbornness. "I mean, if I saw it from all the way over here, I'm pretty sure that mom will spot it right away." Henry imparts with a sympathetic look.

Of course she will. Emma lets out a gloomy sigh. "Think she'll still give me the cake regardless?"

"Nope."

"No?"

"Not a chance."

"Not even a slice?"

Henry shakes his head, dashing the blonde's already dwindling hopes. "Sorry, Emma."

Despite his sympathetic words, Emma narrows her eyes at the kid – and the Mona Lisa smile he has going on his face. "You know, for someone supposedly feeling sorry for me, you kinda look particularly happy..."

"More cake for me." Henry shamelessly admits with a shrug, grinning impishly.
Emma's eyebrows slowly make their ascent up her forehead. Clearly, she isn't the only one in love with Regina's chocolate cake. She's only had it once before and it almost gave her an orgasm. "Gluttony is a sin." she reminds the boy.

"I heard so is sloth."

"Excuse me? I'm not being lazy..." Emma immediately denies, feeling a bit insulted. One should never confuse a brief bout of revulsion with laziness. That's just rude.

Henry places his hands on his hips and cocks his head to the side, judging her with his eyes. He looks so much like Regina at that moment that Emma unconsciously shuffles in place. "Emma," he begins, letting out a sigh, "if you want to have cake so bad, why don't you just go over there and get that eyeball off the car?"

Instead of answering his very valid question, Emma just huffs and rolls her eyes in feigned annoyance. Dragging her eyes back towards the front wheel of the Mercedes, she stares warily at the damned eyeball. Another wave of nausea makes her sway briefly on her feet; she quickly stamps it down with a vengeance. Dammit. She had been deprived of sweets during her whole stint at the hospital, and, now, the only thing standing between her and a scrumptious helping of Regina's famous chocolate cake is that revolting piece of pony right there. Clearly, something has to be done – and soon. Steeling her resolve, Emma clears her throat. "Hey, kid..."

"Yeah?"

"Isn't the new Iron Man comic coming out next week?" Emma asks in a casual tone, trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. She knows she's not fooling anyone, least of all her son, but being absurdly tenacious, she tries anyway. "How would you like to get your hands on a copy? I can call the comic store and have them reserve one for you." Emma entices with a sly smile, wagging her brows.

Judging from the unimpressed look on his face, Henry isn't buying into her poorly executed attempt at bribery.

"Still not getting that eyeball for you, Emma," Henry says in a tired voice, sounding more than a little exasperated. Emma's smile falls immediately.

"Not even for Iron Man?"

"Nope."

"Tony Stark would be devastated."

"He'll get over it." Henry shrugs. "Besides, he's not even real."

"Oh, so now you believe fictional characters are just, uh, *fictional*?" she asks lamely. Emma kicks herself mentally for being so inarticulate. Thank goodness Regina isn't here; she'd never hear the end of it.

"But I was right before." Henry points out in an even tone, flooring the blonde with a serious look. "About the curse, about you, about everything."

"Yes." Emma sighs. "Yes, you were." she concedes with a slight pout, letting her shoulders sag down a bit. After a quiet moment, she nudges the tip of Henry's sneakers with her boot. Bribery didn't work; maybe she can appeal to his better nature. "C'mon, kid, help me out here. All you have to do is pluck it off and chuck it to the trash. Do it for me. *Please?*"
"Sorry, Emma." He says for the nth time. The Sheriff's not one to give up that easily, though.

"But I thought you liked ponies?"

"I do. But I like them alive – and, you know, in one piece." Henry says, shooting their current object of contention a disgusted glance.

"But, see, technically, that's just one piece of Rainbow Sprinkles right there."

"Yeah, her eye. I can see that." Henry shudders involuntarily.

"It can probably see you too..." Emma mutters.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Silently, the blonde watches as the kid takes another wary look at the eyeball.

Emma's lips form into a mischievous little smirk at Henry's barely concealed retch. "Ooh... don't tell me you're scared of a little eyeball..."

"I'm not!" Henry bristles in place, looking absolutely ill at ease. "It's just... it's gross, Emma."

"Oh, don't be such a sissy." Emma taunts, placing her hands on her hips and inadvertently leaving wet handprints on her already filthy jeans. She narrows her eyes at the fidgeting boy. Time to play dirty (well, dirtier). Absolutely no shame. She might just go to hell for this. "Kid, you're a prince, you're supposed to be tough."

"And you're a knight, you're not supposed to be a coward." Henry is quick to counter.

The blonde's eyebrows crawl up to her hairline at his retort. Despite her underhanded tactics, Emma has the gall to look affronted. "I'm no coward."

"Prove it." Henry dares, a roguish gleam in his eyes. "Get that eyeball yourself."

Emma's lips flatten into a thin line. Okay, manipulating a child into doing one's bidding may be a little harder than it looks. She floors Henry with a look. "Kid, not only have I killed a dragon and a cyclops, I've also just faced down a soul-sucking wraith the other day. So, I don't think it's fair that my bravery be in question here," she scoffs, trying to sound as indignant as she could possibly can. Emma makes a show of looking the young boy up and down. "On the other hand, I believe I rescued you from a teensy weensy spider last week. As far as I'm concerned, your courage, kid, is the one that's still a bit questionable."

As expected, this effectively elicits a pout from the boy. "Not fair, Emma. You know I don't like spiders," he whines, not a little petulantly, "besides, I'm just a kid."

"Pfft..." Emma waves a dismissive hand. "You may be a kid, but you're also a Charming."

"So?"

"Apparently, being a Charming equates to having higher and loftier expectations set on you – at least, that's what David tells me." Emma shrugs. Reflexively, she squares her shoulders, straightens up her spine, and puffs out her chest. "You know what they say about us Charmings. Bravery is in our blood, it runs through our veins. It's our one defining characteristic."
"Really, now? Why, I was under the impression that it was *stupidity.*" A voice snidely cuts in from behind the pair, interrupting their conversation. The two Charmings turn in place at the same time, their eyes greeted by a haughty-looking Regina and her omnipresent smirk.

"Oh, don't look so worried, my dear," Regina cups Henry's chin affectionately, giving it a light, gentle squeeze before letting go, "I do believe the infamous Charming idiocy gene skipped a generation. Thankfully, you were spared the indignity of inheriting your grandfather's mental prowess – or lack, thereof."

Henry sighs deeply, casting his mother an admonishing glance. "C'mon, mom, Emma and Gramps aren't *that* stupid."

Emma fights the urge to groan. Regina's tiny smirk broadens into a full-on grin. Henry, bless his naiveté, remains painfully oblivious.

It's amazing – and, also kinda *sad* – how one simple word can make all the difference in the world.

"Not *that* stupid? *Really*, kid?" Emma murmurs under her breath, giving the boy a little nudge. "Way to rub salt on the wound..."

"But I was defending you..." Henry whispers right back, frowning deeply.

"Not really, no." Emma's lips form into a sour pout. "You actually agreed with your mom, in a sorta, I dunno, unintentional way."

"I did?"

"Yes."

"Sorry." Henry scratches the back of his neck in a sheepish fashion, a bit shamefaced.

"Miss Swan, children don't lie." Regina sneers, giving her the evil eye. "And you should never apologize for telling the truth, Henry." Regina tells the boy, her tone going all soft and motherly as she speaks to their son. With a fond little smile on her lips, Regina takes a moment to smooth down the unruly lock of hair that's sticking up on Henry's head. Like any pre-pubescent boy, he makes a cranky face at the gesture – clearly feeling that he's too old to be fussed over by a parent – but despite his annoyance, Henry allows his mother to do so anyway. Emma thinks that he secretly enjoys it. Regina probably suspects the same, going by the way the brunette's smile turns practically blinding with unbridled glee. Emma doesn't even bat an eyelash at Regina's overt display of tenderness anymore; since the curse broke, the uppity brunette had made a conscious effort to show more affection towards Henry. It may have been a bit disconcerting at first, but Emma eventually got used to seeing glimpses of the warm and gentle side of the Evil Queen whenever Regina would interact with the kid. Weird as it may be at times, it's a bit... comforting. Who knew that underneath the frigid exterior lies an actual human being?

"Because, my dear, if there is something to be said about Miss Swan and her father, it's that their dimwitted tendencies cannot be rivaled by man or beast – this is true in both this world and in the old land. Truly, the *dimmest* of them all."

A *precious* human being with sharp claws, a sharper tongue, and an even sharper wit.

Rather than take offense at the dig on her intelligence, Emma just rolls her eyes, sighs, and smiles inwardly. Snarky, bitchy and an asshole. Now *that's* the Regina she knows."I see your snarkiness is in fine form this afternoon, your majesty."
"It always is, princess." Regina returns in an awfully condescending tone.

"Had a bowl of bitchy for breakfast?"

"Of course, I did, Miss Swan." Regina's indulgent smile is perfectly saccharine – if not completely mocking. Surprisingly, the woman plays right along; Regina does seem to be in one of her rare pleasant moods – but you'll never really know from the biting way she talks.

"And a nice helping of sarcasm on the side?"

"It was scrumptious."

"How about a plateful of sass?"

"It is only proper to have a complete meal at the start of the day," Regina answers lazily, examining her nails.

"Yes, good for you, your majesty. And, did you wash them all down with the bitter tears of the untold millions that you cursed?"

"I had the satisfaction, yes."

"Yummy."

"It's an acquired taste." Regina retorts with a bored drawl. "And, I see they fed you your usual serving of passive aggressiveness before they let you out of the hospital. How nice."

"Breakfast of dysfunctional champions." The blonde flashes a smarmy grin, stuffing her hands inside the back pocket of her jeans and rocking back on her heels; secretly enjoying the banter. "So, what's next in your agenda for today, your majesty? Offering up one of the Bacon Brothers as a ritualistic sacrifice in your quest for immortality?"

"No, Miss Swan, that's for next week." Regina sounds out, flicking away a fleck of lint from her blouse. "One must start small. Eternal youth is the first on my list."

"Vanity first, huh? Noted. Just don't start bathing in the blood of virgins, your highness. I might have to arrest you."

"I'd like to see you try, Sheriff." Regina taunts, arching an eyebrow in challenge. The cocky brunette turns her head away from Henry, intending her next muttered words for Emma's ears alone. "Besides, as I'm sure you very well know, Miss Swan, there aren't enough virgins in this town to fill a bucket with blood, let alone a bathtub."

Emma bites the insides of her cheeks to stifle a chuckle. True, every week, her department catches a handful of high school kids in various states of undress at several parking lots in town. Definitely nothing wholesome about those teenaged fairytale characters.

"Are you done here?" Regina questions, taking stock of her precious car.

"Yup, yeah, yes." Emma lies, stepping right in front of the brunette to obstruct Regina's line of sight.

"No more lingering traces of Rainbow Sprinkles?"

"Nope, no, absolutely not." Emma shakes her head vehemently. Shit, she's a horrific liar.

Henry gives her a weird look, but thankfully, remains mum. She'd just have to find a stick and poke
that eyeball out later. Knowing Regina, if she sees it now, the brunette is just wicked enough to let Emma scoop it out with her bare hands. So, yeah, it's a white lie told for the greater good (her own good, actually). "Hey, I heard you baked me a cake..." Emma brings up, evening out her voice to avoid sounding like she's just changing the subject – which, she is.

"Well, you heard wrong." Regina is quick to deny. "It's not for you."

Emma arches an unbelieving eyebrow.

"It's not entirely for you." Regina amends stiffly, as if it pained her to admit so. "It's also for Henry."

The blonde shoots a devilish glance at the beaming boy. "Are you sure you want to do that? I thought you were trying to cut down on his sugar intake?"

"Emma!" Henry huffs indignantly, unable to see that she's just yanking his chain for shits and giggles. "If there's someone who shouldn't have mom's cake, it's you."

"Me?"

"Aren't you trying to lose weight?"

"No, I'm not." Emma denies, slightly relieved that he didn't rat her out. For a moment there, she thought he would.

"You should." The boy says simply, giving her a toothy grin.

Emma glowers at the kid. Rude little hellion.

"He does have a point, Sheriff." Regina smoothly interjects, a devilish gleam in her eyes; jumping at any chance to give her a good ribbing. "You do look more than a little rotund in the middle. Obviously, having three deputies at your beck and call has done nothing but encourage your tendency to be lazy and complacent – and, my dear, it shows in the most unfortunate of areas."

Emma fights the urge to roll her eyes at the pair. "Okay, just because I wasn't able to hit the gym at all this week – because I was stuck in a hospital, mind you – doesn't mean that my abs have suddenly become non-existent."

Regina lets out a rather undignified snort. "Abs? Miss Swan, you have an ab. Singular." The infuriating woman makes a show of sizing her up with her eyes, focusing particularly on Emma's belly region. "And it's huge." Regina finishes with a snarky sneer.

Henry, the little traitor, actually chuckles in agreement.

A bit slighted and more than a little humiliated, the Sheriff does something she never would have done if she were thinking straight (which, she rarely ever does, anyway).

Despite her better judgment, Emma tugs her ratty shirt out of her jeans and lifts it high enough to show the two Mills her alleged belly. She has not been slaving in the town's seedy gym three times a week for nothing. Her abs may not be as spectacular as a bodybuilder's, but they're decent enough to feel a little smug about. With her free hand, Emma traces the semi-defined lines on her taut stomach with a finger. "One... two... three... four. Abs. Plural. Count 'em and weep."

Regina snaps her jaws shut with an audible click.

Henry looks mildly impressed – if not a bit embarrassed that she's basically rubbing her stomach in
Satisfied with getting her point across, Emma lets go of the hem of her shirt, allowing the fabric to drop down and give her stomach some cover. The two Mills are flushing slightly – the older one, more so, than the other.

Gathering her bearings, Regina's lips pucker up in distaste. "Was that display truly necessary, Miss Swan? Your utter lack of breeding is both profoundly disturbing and astonishing. What will the neighbors say?"

"I dunno, that the Sheriff has a wicked set of abs and a banging body?" Emma, in her usual devil-may-care attitude, replies with a flippant shrug. "Who the heck cares, anyway? Mr. Patterson is as blind as a bat."

"That's not the point."

"Pfft," Emma brushes off. "How else would I be able to defend myself against the two of you? Besides, I kept it PG-13."

"I'm ten." Henry reminds.

"Close enough. But, hey, it's not like I flashed you guys my boobs or anything."

The redness on Regina's cheeks quickly spreads to the woman's ears. "Miss Swan, I know I've said this a million times, but must you always be so crass?" she intones with a disapproving frown, shooting a poignant glance towards Henry and his young, impressionable self.

*Whoops.* "Sorry, kid." Emma apologizes in a feeble tone, possessing just enough sense of decency to feel somewhat ashamed. She's never been really good at censoring her words. "It slips out sometimes. I know I can be a bit–"

"Uncouth." Regina mutters snidely.

"–tactless." Emma gives the brunette the evil side-eye.

"That, too, yes." Regina agrees.

Emma rolls her eyes. "Prude," she coughs on a fist.

"Exhibitionist."

The blonde lifts up a finger in protest. "Confident in my own skin." she amends.

"Pervert." Regina scoffs.

"Tight-ass."

"Depraved."

They stare each other down for a moment, neither one willing to back down.

"Wicked witch." Emma jabs.

"Stubborn mule."

"Crazy queen."
"Inept savior." Regina snipes.

"Sick psychopath."

"Pesky do-gooder."

Emma pouts. "Wonky magic."

"Hopeless swordsman."

"Ousted mayor."

"Ex-convict." Regina sniffs.

Like a spectator at a tennis match, Henry's eyes bounce between his mothers, silently following their peculiar exchange with wary eyes. Poor kid has always served as the buffer between the two, jumping in to diffuse any tension between the pair before things escalated out of control. Although, judging from the slight bewilderment on Henry's face, the boy is obviously baffled about whether his two mothers were actually getting along in an odd way, or, as usual, sharpening their claws to tear each other limb from limb.

"Clumsy oaf."

"Royal mess." Emma returns.

"Graceless brute."

"Cartoonish Disney villain."

"Imbecilic, slow princess."

Emma's mouth dangles open in shock. Did she just say...? "I'm no pillow princess!" she cries out without preamble, absolutely scandalized. Really. She's more of a giver than a receiver. Emma Swan is no lazy bum under the sheets. And, for Regina to label her as one without first-hand knowledge, well, is just plain offensive.

"What?" Regina frowns, looking utterly mystified by her outrage.

"I said, I'm not a pillow princess."

The look of pure condescending amusement that Regina levels her with is enough to chop Emma's pride to bits.

"Imbecilic. Slow. Princess." Regina enunciates carefully, as if speaking to a child.

"Oh."

_Crap._

If the earth were to split open at this very moment in time, Emma would be more than willing to jump right into the crevice and allow the ground to swallow her whole.

"Miss Swan, I know your filthy mind lives perennially in a gutter, but, can you please strive harder to elevate your way of thinking when my son is within hearing distance? Your unfortunate propensity for vulgarity is getting a bit tedious."
"What's a pillow princess?" Henry asks, digging Emma's grave deeper.

"Someone I hope you don't get the misfortune of marrying, my dear," Regina answers simply, leaving it at that. The brunette levels Emma with a look oozing with rebuke.

"I, uh... it's just... I... uh..." Emma stammers like a fool. Seriously, it's like her mind and her mouth have an unspoken agreement to embarrass her at least once every day. Exhaling deeply, Emma just points uselessly at her right ear. "I heard wrong. Shitty hearing, sorry."

The brunette shoots her another reproachful glare.

"Language, I know. My bad." Emma mumbles sheepishly, properly chastened. Maybe her mouth truly enjoyed the feel of her foot jammed in there; there's no other logical explanation for it.

Regina shakes her head in exasperation. "Idiot," she mutters under her breath.

As soon as that seemingly insignificant insult left the brunette's lips, both women start in place. Regina had made a conscious effort not to call her that since that awkward moment at the hospital the other day. Feeling all sorts of uncomfortable, Emma quickly averts her gaze and nails it someplace other than Regina's slightly flushed face. She's pretty sure the other woman does the same.

For a moment, no one dares to speak.

"Are you guys fighting?" The kid finally blurts out, unable to help himself.

"No," Emma and Regina quickly chorus, both still looking away.

The confused frown on Henry's face deepens considerably. "So... the two of you are getting along?"

"No," Regina answers.

"Yes," Emma replies.

The boy makes a face at the discrepancy in their responses.

Reluctantly, the two women face each other and share a quiet look. With a tortured breath, they reach an unspoken compromise.

Despite not being the eloquent one, Emma takes point this time. "Look, kid, we may still annoy and give each other hell sometimes--"

Regina clears her throat.

"-most of the time," the blonde amends, suppressing an eyeroll, "but your mom and I are, well, good now."

"Good?" Henry tilts his head to the side.

"Civil." Regina grounds out, almost choking on the word. "Amicable."

"Right. Amicable rivals." Emma nods. "If there's even such a thing," she adds as an afterthought.

"So, like, you're friends now?" Henry pushes, his eyes flitting between his two uncomfortable-looking mothers.

Emma scratches the side of her neck. "W-well," she stammers, "I wouldn't go that far.
But... *maybe... well... I dunno...*

She feels Regina's heated stare boring right through her head, but Emma doesn't dare meet the brunette's gaze. They're no longer enemies, but they're not truly "friends" either; well, not like how Emma is on friendly terms with Ruby, or, heck, even Ashley, Leroy and August. Her thing with Regina is something a little far off the realm of a typical platonic relationship. Emma can't even describe it, let alone define whatever it is they have going on between them. And, honestly, she didn't think Regina knew what it is either.

Unfortunately, Henry – true to his inquisitive nature – just won't let go. "Not friends... not yet."

Henry says slowly, "But you like each other?" he asks, oh-so-innocently.

The sight of Emma and Regina both flushing a deep shade of crimson would have been comical, had it not been equally mortifying.

"Uh... define 'like'?" Emma asks lamely, shuffling from one foot to the other like she had to pee. If there's one thing she can't handle well, it's being flustered. "There are all types of 'like', you know. I mean, there's like... like... super like... and then, I dunno... psycho like *like*. At least one of those involves a restraining order."

Henry blinks at Emma.

Regina rolls her eyes at the blonde's cringe-inducing verbal diarrhea. "Henry," she begins, reaching over to gently flick away an errant lock of hair away from his eyes, "I like Miss Swan–"

"You do?" Emma interjects.

Regina purposefully ignores her gaping self and continues. "As I was saying before I was rudely interrupted by our ill-mannered houseguest," she shoots Emma a quick, dirty look. "I like Miss Swan well enough not to let my extreme dislike for her cloud my better judgment, and, to put it bluntly, do things like murder the Sheriff in her sleep." Regina says in a casual tone, smiling sweetly at the boy. Always the level-headed one, Regina at least dishes out a coherent response to their son's loaded question. Emma's grateful, even though the brunette's answer carried a nasty dig at her, per usual.

Regina's reply, though biting, is ultimately intriguing.

"So, you've been tempted to off me while I was sleeping?" Emma tries to clarify, cocking her head to the side in question.

"Admittedly, yes." Regina answers dryly, like she doesn't give a damn – which, she obviously doesn't.

Emma, despite everything, actually smirks. Mary Margaret had brought it up when she regained consciousness the other day; and, funnily enough, her nurse did tell her something interesting when she was discharged this morning. "Tell me, your majesty. Is that why you were constantly hovering near my hospital bed at night?"

Regina snaps her mouth shut.

"Oh, you saw her doing that too?" Henry pipes in, much to Regina's chagrin. "But, I didn't think mom wanted to kill you, Emma. She was just stretching her legs; the cots that they gave us to sleep in weren't that great."

The blonde's smile broadens into painful proportions. "Stretching her legs, huh? Is that what she told you?"
"Yup."

"How many times did you catch her doing it?" Emma fishes. Regina, amazingly, actually looks like she wants to disappear in a puff of smoke. If her magic weren't so unpredictable, Emma has no doubts that Regina would have teleported herself out of the driveway by now.

"I dunno, I guess every night we stayed with you at the hospital." Henry shrugs.

To Regina's dismay, Emma actually chuckles. Oh, this is just golden. Like manna from heaven, Emma had just been handed some pretty potent ammo to annoy Regina with. "Kid," the blonde grins, whispering conspiratorially, "I think your mom likes me more than she lets on."

"Miss Swan." Regina warns darkly, finally finding her voice.

"Oh, you can't deny it, your majesty. You know what they say, children don't lie." Emma quips with a brilliant smile, returning Regina's earlier words in kind. "You like me. Your hovering says as much."

"Miss Swan."

"You like me."

"Don't flatter yourself." Regina scoffs.

"You watched me sleep, Henry just said so."

"I might've." Regina bristles. "But with the intention of ending your life."

"Yeah, right. I'm still alive – pick another excuse."

Regina growls. "I despise you."

"No, you don't." Emma smirks. "You. Like. Me."

The sight of the vein on Regina's forehead gaining prominence should've raised a red flag in Emma's head. Unfortunately, so preoccupied is she with basking in her glory (she rarely ever gets Regina out of her comfort zone), that Emma fails to notice the purplish glow that suddenly envelops Regina's hand.

Naturally, disaster ensues.

Without meaning to, Regina flicks her wrist and sets her magic off. A burst of deep purple sparks hurtles towards the man walking his dog on the sidewalk. To everyone's horror, Regina actually poofs away an unsuspecting Archie's clothes right off his body.

Like a douse of ice-cold water, it effectively diffuses the playful tension between the two women.

The poor guy's flabby stomach goes on in full display; his abundant collection of body hair billowing in the light breeze. Even Pongo barks in fright.

Mercifully, the man's boxers stay in place – having been spared from the indignity caused by Regina's magic. Emma silently thanks the powers that be for having saved her from seeing Archie's manhood – which, judging from the barely-there bulge, might still be stuck in cricket-size.

For a full second, everybody just gapes uselessly at each other; their faces in varying shades of red.
Emma's the first to break free from her stupor. Without waiting for Regina's consent, she reaches down and grabs hold of the brunette's hand. Emma squeezes it gently before leaning in closer and whispering in Regina's ear. "Do your thing before Archie catches a cold – and, you know, before we pop a blood vessel in our eyes or something."

In an instant, a puff of purple smoke envelops the blushing man. When it clears, Archie is clothed again (in a baby pink tee and tight-fitting trousers, but beggars can't be choosers).

Emma gives Regina's hand another squeeze before letting go. Beside her, the Evil Queen is silent – rendered mute by the embarrassing display of her wonky ass magic. Despite it being almost a common occurrence, Regina is still pretty darn sensitive about the whole thing – especially now that, aside from Henry and Emma, there is another witness to her magical shortcomings. It's a pride thing, Emma muses.

"Sorry about that," Emma apologizes on Regina's behalf, knowing the woman won't be speaking anytime soon.

"Not as sorry as I am that you guys had to see that." Archie chuckles self-consciously, a sheepish hand rubbing the back of his neck. Emma is in awe of his ability to be so zen about something as humiliating as what had happened; it really must be the conscience thing at play. She wouldn't be as forgiving if somebody had poofed away all her clothes in the middle of the frickin' street. Surprisingly, Archie also doesn't seem to mind his gaudy new clothes that much – anything's better than being stripped down to one's underwear, really. "Did I traumatize any of you?" the therapist asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

Emma suspects, rightfully so, that Henry is on the verge of uttering a loud, whopping 'yes'; so, she does the polite thing and beats him to the punch. "I sure hope not," Emma forces a smile, nudging Henry discretely with her hip. "It's gonna be a pretty awkward therapy session on your couch, if ever."

"Right, right." Archie grins shyly, pulling a hyperactive Pongo back towards him with his leash. For some reason, the dog's just itching to run over to where Emma stands. It's peculiar, considering that Pongo had become quite leery of Emma after she nearly skewered him with her father's sword during the whole goblin mess. The Dalmatian struggles against his leash and barks incessantly, gazing up at the blonde as if he wanted to gobble her up. "Easy, boy." Archie tells his pet, reeling him back.

"He's not in heat, is he?" Emma asks in false cheerfulness, more than a little wary of the agitated dog and his weird fixation on her.

"I don't think he is..." Archie responds thoughtfully, though the slight questioning lilt in his voice is in no way reassuring. "He's been a bit–" he continues but then trails off, as he looks over their heads and notices the floating Mercedes behind them for the first time. Archie's pupils dilate in astonishment. Just how he didn't see a levitating car beforehand, Emma doesn't know. His eyesight must be really shitty without his glasses (yet another casualty of Regina's unpredictable and utterly temperamental powers). "Is that... is that Benzo?" Archie breathes in absolute wonderment.

"Yup," Henry answers, glancing behind his shoulder at said vehicle. "He transformed back the other day. We're just cleaning him off because--mmfff"

Standing behind the kid, Emma flashes a distracted Archie one of her winning grins as she covers Henry's mouth with a hand. "He was all muddy," she tells Archie, before promptly setting Henry's lips free. Emma bends down, places an apologetic kiss on top of Henry's head, and murmurs quietly against his hair, "He has an extremely queasy stomach; unless you want to see what he ate for lunch,
he doesn't need to know all the gory details, kid."

Henry, mercifully, doesn't push the subject.

"Well, I'm glad that you got your car back, Regina. I know you've been waiting weeks for the spell to wear off." Archie's soft voice is undeniably sincere, the man well meaning as ever.

"Thank you," Regina says stiffly, regaining her ability to speak.

The second Emma hears the familiar sputtering of Leroy's scooter – and sees the look on his deputy's face as he rides past the mansion – she knows no good will come out of the man's grinning lips. "Hey Hopper, nice shirt! Wear a bra, brother, I can see your nipples!" Leroy catcalls, his loud chortles bouncing around the street as he disappears out of sight.

At Leroy's playful jibe, an abashed Archie makes the fatal mistake of letting his guard down and allowing his hand to slacken its hold on Pongo's leash. Naturally, the hyperactive dog takes advantage of this and uses the opportunity to dart away from his master. Thinking the mutt's going to jump her bones, Emma leaps behind Regina, grabs hold of the woman's shoulders, and uses the Evil Queen as a human shield. It's not very knightly of her; so, of course, Regina makes a point of getting her displeasure across by elbowing Emma solidly on the stomach. The blonde mumbles a quick apology but stays in place anyway.

To everyone's surprise, Pongo actually ignores Emma – and by default, Regina – and heads on straight behind the pair. Pongo makes his way underneath Regina's floating Mercedes and sticks his snout in the air, sniffing all corners of the once-bloody, but now gleaming, under chassis.

To Emma's shock, Henry's disgust – and both their mutual horror – the energetic Dalmatian suddenly stands on its hind legs, leaps in the air and chomps down on the one remaining piece of pony that's been dangling by the front wheel.

Emma and Henry both grimace, their faces scrunching in revulsion.

"Ewww..." Henry shudders.

"Jesus Christ..." Emma fights back a retch.

"Why, what is he eating?" Archie asks, sidling up between the pair.

"Rainbow Sprinkles..." The two mumble in unison, their voices weary and bleak.

"Huh?" Archie wrinkles his nose, puzzled, his polite smile barely hiding his bewilderment.

Always quick to think on her feet, Regina puts two and two together and dishes out a save. "There's cake," she smoothly cuts in, her patented Mayoral smile in place. "I just baked a chocolate cake, Dr. Hopper. You're free to have a slice, if you so wish."

"Don't worry, it's not poisoned." Emma offers a weak smile, noticing the slight apprehension that had flickered in the man's eyes. "You might just grow gills though, or a nice pair of D-cups."

Archie blushes furiously.

Regina shoots Emma an icy glare; the blonde merely responds with an innocent shrug. "Henry," Regina's face softens considerably as she turns towards the boy, "be a dear and take Dr. Hopper to the kitchen. I've already set aside some plates and utensils by the cake. I'll follow soon, I just need to perform a gravity spell and set the car back down."
"I'll watch over Pongo," Emma reassures Archie with a wry smile.

"You're not going to have some cake?" The mild-mannered man probes.

Emma casts a quick glance towards Pongo and feels her stomach doing another flip. Done with his snack, the dog is now lying sprawled on the lawn; happily licking its paws. "Nope, not now anyway." Emma turns to Archie, answering his question. "I don't think he will either," she inclines her head towards a green-looking Henry.

Archie gives her a peculiar look, but says nothing, before following after the silent boy towards the mansion.

As soon as the front door closes behind the two, Emma slowly pivots in place, head bowed and hands stuffed inside her front pant pockets, ready for the verbal smackdown that's bound to ensue.

Instead of cutting Emma into pieces right away, Regina reaches over and touches the blonde's forearm. A quick incantation later, the car slowly floats down like a feather in the wind and lands on the driveway with a gentle thump. With that out of the way, Regina breaks their physical connection and turns towards the sullen blonde.

"Miss Swan," Regina begins in a calm, controlled voice – sounding very much like Emma's favorite ousted politician.

Emma fights the urge to sigh. Nothing good ever comes out when Regina takes on that tone.

"Did you or did you not tell me that you were finished with your task this afternoon? A task, may I remind, that you, yourself had so cockily volunteered to do in the first place?" Regina lifts an eyebrow, hands planted firmly on her hips. Naturally, Emma suddenly develops a fascination with her ratty old boots.

"If memory serves me right, you even emphatically declared there is nary a trace of Rainbow Sprinkles' bloody carcass underneath my car." Regina sneers. Sensing that she wouldn't be able to draw out a coherent reply from the blonde, Regina trudges on. "Tell me, Sheriff, did my eyes deceive me, or did that four-legged beast just snack on a stray morsel of flattened pony by the wheel? What, were you waiting for Rainbow Sprinkle's ghost to appear and take that... that..."

Emma exhales long and deep. "Eyeball." she mutters faintly.

"What?"

"It was an eyeball," Emma comes clean, meeting Regina's eyes. "You know, big, round, squishy, freaky, stares right back like it can see through your soul?"

"An eyeball." Regina states, her expression going blank.

"Yes."

"That creature just ate an eyeball."

"Yeah." Emma nods weakly.

The look of pure revulsion that suddenly washes over Regina's face is surprising – if not a little ironic. After hearing about the Evil Queen's tendency to snatch out human hearts, Emma doesn't think an icky eyeball would gross Regina out as much. But, apparently, it does. Maybe spending twenty-eight years gore-free softened the woman a little bit.
"I ought to slit it out of that dog's stomach and stuff it inside your lying mouth."

*Or not.*

Emma recoils. "Alright, I'm sorry for hiding the truth. But, in all fairness, I was planning to find a stick and poke it out later," she says in her defense.

"Well, then, I believe you owe that mutt a debt of gratitude for finishing your task for you, Sheriff. Maybe you should let him kiss you on the mouth as a way of thanks."

After seeing just where that dog's mouth has been, there is no way in hell Pongo is coming anywhere near her face. "I'd rather die." Emma fights back another retch.

"That can be arranged," Regina snarks.

"What, you're going to watch me while I sleep again? What did you call it, *stretching your legs*?"

If glares could cause physical harm, Emma's face would be a bloody, pulpy mess right now.

"I'd watch my words carefully if I were you, Miss Swan."

"If you were me, you'd find that damn near impossible to do." Emma wryly points out in spite of herself.

"I... well, I suppose so." Regina acquiesces with an exhausted sigh, finally sobering up and calming down.

Nearby, Pongo lets out a hearty yawn and curls up into a ball, ready for his afternoon nap. Emma watches the animal with a slight grimace. The dog's cute, but she'll probably never look at Pongo the same way again. Although, Emma's a big enough person to admit that Regina did have a valid point: that dog did get rid of her problem for her. Pongo and his horrid taste in snacks saved her from performing a task she loathed to do.

Basically, a dog just saved her ass.

"Hm," Emma hums in amazement as realization strikes. *Interesting.* Third instance this week alone.

The former Mayor, of course, despite pretending otherwise, is watching Emma through the corner of her eyes. "What is it this time?" Regina sighs wearily, unable to squash her curiosity.

"Nothing. It's just... three times now..."

"Three times, what?"

"It's the third time this week that I've been saved by a dog." Emma elaborates with an awed smile. "First, Argos from the wraith, and then--"

"Argos?" Regina cuts her off with a hand, looking at her like she had just spoken gibberish. "Miss Swan, what on earth are you talking about?"

"Oh, I didn't tell you? The perv's a dog – or is maybe named after one, according to Mary Margaret. Apparently, there's an old classic book by this Homer guy that had a faithful dog named Argos in it, but the mutt croaks or something happens that's equally morbid, can't remember."

 Regina's lips actually curl up into a grin – albeit, a mocking one. "So, basically, Sheriff, you're saying that you're being stalked by a filthy mongrel?"
"A horndog, yes." Emma confirms with a feeble shrug.

"Now it all makes sense." Regina scoffs, sticking her nose in the air. "Filth attracts filth."

"Wait," Emma lifts up a finger in protest; and, without meaning to, she motions between the both of them with the said finger, "I thought opposites attract?"

"False." Regina bristles and looks away, breaking eye contact.

Emma narrows her eyes at the brunette, still not realizing just what she had done (and what it had implied). "Right." she intones, dropping the matter. "Anyway, so Argos is the first. Pongo is the third."

"And the second dog?" Regina asks in a patronizing tone, humoring her.

"You."

Emma won't be surprised if Regina gets whiplash from the way her neck twists towards her. "Excuse me?" Regina snarls, looking grossly offended.

"You healed me this morning. I had broken ribs, a fractured wrist, gashes on my back, and a million and one bruises and cuts all over – but now I'm all brand new. You saved me."

If looks could kill, Emma would be lying in a pool of her own blood. Of course, instead of appreciating the underlying feelings of gratitude in her words, Regina dwells on something else.

"Miss Swan," Regina inches closer to her, brown eyes dark and dangerous, "did you just refer to me as a dog?"

"I sure did."

"You truly are audacious..."

"I sure am."

"...and stupid." Regina follows up unrepentantly.

"I sure... wait. Maybe, but not entirely, I guess." Emma shrugs. Audacity and stupidity sometimes do go hand-in-hand, so there's that.

"I was an all-powerful Queen." Regina sniffs arrogantly.

Emma nods. "An evil one."

"I was an influential Mayor."

"Also an evil one."

Regina's upper lip curls up into a sneer. "I am no lowly mongrel, and I refuse to be labeled as such. Take it back."

"Nope."

At her insolence, Regina entire face hardens. Emma fights the impulse to laugh; it's a bit humorous how such a strong and compelling woman is badass enough to curse an entire world, and, at the same time, possess the shortest fuse with regards the littlest, insignificant things. Ah, well, that's
Regina Mills for you. "Retract your slanderous statement, Miss Swan." Regina orders through gritted teeth, genuinely insulted.

"Jeez, easy there, your majesty. It's not as if I issued a press release or something. There's nothing to retract."

The brunette lets out a deep growl – an act that is kinda contradictory to her next words: "I'm not a dog."

"You're a bitch." Emma deadpans, practically signing her own death warrant. "Same thing."

Of course, her joke doesn't go down too well. Regina is not known for having a sense of humor, after all.

Needless to say, Emma does not get to eat dessert that afternoon (though she does manage to sneak a couple of slices down the basement during the night).

It's already too late when she discovers that Regina had placed a protection spell on the cake to keep Emma's grubby hands away from it. The Evil Queen had intended the chocolatey goodness to fly away from Emma's mouth the moment the blonde comes anywhere near a forkful. But, as expected, wonky magic and all, the spell backfires. It flies away alright. Out of Emma's rear end.

Naturally, Emma spends the next few hours moaning and groaning atop a porcelain throne.

The cake is scrumptious though. The best she's ever had in her whole life.

So, sore ass or not, it's damn well worth it.

"Emma?" Henry visits her sleepless self the following day, bearing unusual gifts. "Mom wants me to give you these..."

Emma sits up groggily on her bed, dried drool on her chin and blonde hair sticking out in all odd directions. She blinks away the sleep from her bleary eyes and yawns heartily before gazing at the boy. It takes Emma's sleep-deprived brain a solid two minutes to register the multitude of items her son had in his tiny arms.

Two rolls of toilet paper, a bottle of Pedialyte, and of course, a good ol' toilet bowl cleaner and a brush.

"We heard you had water-butt last night."

Emma flushes all the way down to her neck, sleepiness gone in an instant. "F-from whom?"

"Emma," Henry says gravelly, "we heard."

"Oh."

If dehydration from diarrhea won't do her in, maybe extreme humiliation will.

Ignoring his birth mother's beet red face, Henry places Regina's thoughtful gifts on Emma's desk.
before trudging over to the blonde's closet. Too overcome with embarrassment, Emma doesn't even bother to ask just what the heck the boy's doing in there. Henry rummages inside for a few moments before emerging with a big white box.

"From mom and I," Henry shares with a boyish grin, not a little bashfully. Gingerly, he places the box on Emma's lap before bounding up and giving her a shy kiss on the cheek. "It's not much, but we hope you like it, Emma." he murmurs softly, before taking his leave and running up the basement stairs.

Touched, and more than slightly intrigued, Emma slowly opens her present and unwittingly lets out a shaky sigh upon the big reveal. If she weren't so dehydrated, she would've wept.

Inside is a brand new leather jacket to replace the one the wraith had torn to shreds. It's not an exact replica of her beloved red jacket, but it's close – and dare say, better. This one's from her housemates; no, scratch that, her newfound family – dysfunctional as it may be.

To the biggest idiot in all of the known lands, the card inside read in Regina's neat script, congratulations for getting the chance to live another day of your mediocre existence.

We're glad you didn't die, Henry had scribbled underneath.

Correction: Henry's glad, I'm obscenely disappointed, Regina had followed up.

Mom's lying – she's happy too, Henry wrote with a smiley face, and in the teensiest script (which probably meant that it was added without Regina's knowledge), he had scrawled: I'm glad she didn't get her soul sucked and die – that would suck. Thank you, Emma. Welcome home.

Emma smiles and bites her trembling lip.

Home.

Yes.

Welcome home, indeed.

Twenty-eight years.

That's how long Paul O'Hara has been going to this park. Every Tuesday, at precisely four in the afternoon, he'd put on his finely pressed Oxford shirt (always white, no other color would do), slip into his freshly polished loafers, don his beloved porkpie hat, and shuffle out of his modest bungalow home. Sherwood Park is just right across the street, and since it lacks a decent playground and a well-maintained jogging trail, the only souls who dare frequent the place are old timers like him and pet owners who lived nearby.

His usual spot is a tiny stone table underneath a willow tree by the park's one and only pond. It's a perfect location – the sloping, dome-shaped branches allow just the ideal amount of sunlight to filter in for warmth, and, at the same time, provide enough shade for him to avoid feeling like he's baking underneath the late afternoon sun.

He's not as young and spry as he used to be, so it takes him a good twenty minutes to walk from his home to his special spot. He doesn't mind; short strolls are good for his heart. Just what the doctor ordered. Once underneath the safety of his beloved tree, Paul would take out the worn mahogany box that he kept hidden inside a crevice on the willow's trunk. He kept his precious chess set sequestered inside the tree for as long as he can remember; sometime within these unforgiving
decades in Storybrooke, he had grown weary of carrying it from his home to the park and back again.

For so long, Paul had been resigned to living a solitary existence. He would spend an hour every Tuesday, exercising his brain, playing matches against himself. No one ever bothered to challenge him. No one cared enough to keep a lonely old man company.

For twenty-eight long years, he played chess all by his lonesome.

But, all that changed a few weeks ago.

"Tuesdays with Paulie."

"Hm?" Paul murmurs, his full attention pulled away from silently perusing the pieces on the board. Trust his opponent to distract him just when the game's becoming intense.

"Tuesdays with Paulie." His companion repeats, casually leaning back against the creaky wooden seat. "Has a nice ring to it, don't ya think?"

Paul exhales loudly.

"What, you don't like to be called 'Paulie'?

The deep creases on Paul's face become more pronounced as he frowns in distaste. "'Paul' will be just fine, lad."

"I dunno, old man, I need it to rhyme with Morrie."

"Ah, that book. I should've known." Paul murmurs in recognition, readjusting his glasses. Deciding on his move, he carefully reaches over and brings one of his bishops out of harm's way.

"Yeah, Tuesdays with Morrie. Have you read it?"

"I have." Paul nods. He studies his masked companion for a moment, head tilted to the side. "Have you?" he probes.

"Nope."

That answer doesn't even surprise Paul. Why, just a week ago, he had asked Argos to read an article on the Daily Mirror for him because he had forgotten his glasses at home. The guy grew bored after only three paragraphs. "How do you know about the book if you hadn't read it?" Paul inquires, watching his opponent quietly studying the board.

"I know someone who did. Kept pester ing me to do the same. Said I could learn a thing or two from it."

"You should have listened."

Argos shrugs noncommittally.

"What do you know about it?" Paul asks after a moment, smiling inwardly at the predictable move that Argos decides to do. The lad always seems to favor moving his queen all over the place. The game's practically in the bag, three more moves and Paul will be able to call checkmate.

"Nothing much, just that the Morrie guy is old and wise."
Paul grins and chuckles in spite of himself. "So, are you saying that you think I'm like Morrie, lad?"

"Well, you've got the 'old' part down pat," Argos says, lifting his hands behind his head and using them as some sort of cushion. "As for the wise part? I dunno. Instead of overflowing with wisdom, you're mostly just full of shit."

The barking laugh that comes out of Paul's lips has ceased from sounding foreign in his ears. He's gotten used to hearing it coming out of his own mouth ever since this rude imbecile came barging into his life. "One of these days, I'm gonna call the cops and tell them that I play chess with a wanted felon every Tuesday," he half-threatens, wagging his finger at the masked man.

"Yeah, right," Argos snorts, calling his bluff. "I doubt you'd find anyone else in Storybrooke who'd have the patience to play chess with a dotty old man who smells like mothballs every week."

Paul smiles faintly. That unfortunate truth, he knows for certain. It's probably the reason he befriended a masked thief whose friends consist mainly of young miscreants. Ever since Argos approached him on that fateful afternoon a couple of weeks back, every shred of common sense in his system has told Paul to call the Sheriff and report the man. Of course, Paul just can't get himself to do it. He's been lonely for decades, and this ill-bred bastard made him feel less so. Is it truly wrong to enjoy Argos' company while it lasts? After all, it is only a matter of time before the law catches up to his new friend and throws Argos behind bars.

Just the thought of it makes Paul's chest clench in sadness.

"Hey, what's with the long face?"

"Oh, nothing," Paul sighs, unconsciously running a hand up and down his chest to soothe the slight ache that suddenly overwhelms him. "Old ticker's not working as well as it used to," he shares with a weary sigh.

Argos straightens up abruptly. "Do you need to go to the hospital?"

"No, no. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, don't worry, lad."

"You're not dying anytime soon, are you?" Argos asks. If he isn't mistaken, Paul thinks he hears a tinge of fear in that rough voice. It's surprising, and more than a little touching.

"Not if I can help it," Paul chuckles wryly. "Don't worry, I think I still have a few years left in me."

"Good, cause you still owe me twelve bucks for the whiskey I got you the other day."

"I thought that was a gift?"

Argos actually has the nerve to snort. "No, it ain't."

"You're a cheapskate." Paul shakes his head sadly, making his move on the board.

"I'm frugal, there's a difference."

Paul exhales a deep breath, giving his companion a judging glance through his glasses. "Lad, how can you be so cheap when it's not even your money to begin with? I feel bad for Sheriff Swan, she seems like a nice young lady."
"She'll get her money back." Argos waves a hand dismissively. "Every single dime. Don't worry about it."

"I'll never understand you and the way you think," Paul starts with another sigh, resting his chin on his hand. "You claim to like the Sheriff, but then you steal from her. Isn't that counterproductive to your goal?"

"Nope, not at all."

"How come?" Paul pushes. "Enlighten an old man."


Paul rolls his eyes. That is about the most idiotic thing he has ever heard. Bah. The youth of today.

"You'll never get her to love you that way," he imparts with a reproachful look.

"Actually," Argos lifts up a finger. "She already loves me. I know it for a fact."

"Lad, you're delusional."

"Aren't we all?" Argos chuckles before standing up and stretching his limbs.

"What are you doing?"

"Leaving."


"Actually, it is." Argos declares cockily. Making a show of himself, the thief ever-so-slowly lifts his queen and moves it a couple of blocks near Paul's white king. "Checkmate."

"What...?" Paul leans forward on the table, gray eyes wide open in shock. Impossible. He adjusts the thick-rimmed glasses that are sliding down his nose and gapes at the board. "How...?"

"I didn't cheat if that's what you're thinking," Argos says, zipping up his leather jacket. "You're just easily distracted, and, well, a bit predictable."

Paul feels his entire face redden. "That is simply preposterous!" he splutters, indignant. He can accept the fact that he's easy to distract, but predictable? Absolutely not.

"Paulie, whenever you open with the Queen's Gambit, you always try to corner me with your bishop and then finish me off with either your queen or your knight after seven moves," Argos points out. Paul finds himself bristling in place. That sounded like his go-to tactic, alright. Is his game becoming that easy to read?

But, wait...

"Queen's Gambit?" Paul narrows his eyes at his friend. "Since when did you get so knowledgeable about chess?"

"Since I got sick and tired of getting my ass handed to me by an old geezer every week." Argos shrugs, bending down to tie the shoelaces of his scuffed motorcycle boots.

"Did you read a book about it?"
"Shit no. Who the hell reads books nowadays?" Argos snorts. "I had Rufio teach me a couple of things. Kid's a genius."

"There's a working brain underneath that hideous beehive he calls hair?!" Paul asks, feigning shock. "My, now that's Storybrooke's most well-kept secret right there."

"C'mon, he's a smart kid. Used to be top of his class."

"If your sidekick's as bright as you say, then he shouldn't have dropped out of school. It just calls into question the existence of this superior intellect of his," Paul sneers, not one to hold back in expressing his disapproval of Rufio's regrettable life choices. "And, he's running around with you, of all people. That's not indicative of having a sound mind. No offense."

"None taken." Argos shrugs, straightening up and putting on his motorcycle gloves. "Speaking of Rufio, he's meeting me here in a few. Feel free to knock some sense into the kid. Have to say... good luck, though. You're going to need it, gramps."

"If his head is thicker than yours, I might need a mallet to get through it," Paul sighs wearily. Carefully, he pulls out his antiquated pocket watch and takes a moment to study the time. "Are you really leaving? We still have a couple of minutes until five-thirty."

"I'd really love to stay, but I gotta go."

He knows he's too old to be clingy; Paul tries hard to keep his disappointment from showing, but his face falls anyway. "You win against me for the first time ever, and then you decide you're leaving? Lad, at least give me a chance to get even."

"I've been doing nothing but lose against you for the past few weeks. I'd say I've earned a moment to bask in my victory, old man." Argos chuckles softly, giving Paul's shoulder a light pat. "Have to tell you, though, I don't think I can make it next Tuesday."

Paul must've looked as pathetic as he felt, because Argos suddenly gives his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "Don't worry, I'll send someone else in my place. You'll have someone to play with, I promise."

"Is he any good?"

"She," Argos corrects, "is a pretty decent player."

"You're lying."

"I am," Argos chuckles. "How did you know?"

"I might not see your face, but I can hear your voice. You don't get to my age without picking up a few things. I know bullshit when I hear it."

"Good to know," Argos says, and Paul can just imagine the smirk playing out on his young friend's face. "Take it easy on her, alright? She's not a genius like Rufio, but she's not exactly the brightest tool in the shed either."

"Just who are you sending my way, lad?" Paul questions, his curiosity piqued.

"You'll know by next week," Argos mutters cryptically. He leans down and whispers conspiratorially near Paul's ear. "Make sure to put in a good word for me, alright?"
Before Paul can attempt to pry more information out of the secretive outlaw, something in his periphery grabs his attention. Red, lots and lots of bright red. Paul exhales a weary breath. There is only one person with a shocking amount of tacky red streaks in this town.

"Rufio," Paul greets, tipping his hat at the newly arrived teen.

"Old fart." The brat salutes, returning his greeting.

Paul shakes his head and fights the urge to slap the rude little punk behind the head. Argos, thank goodness, is more than happy to discipline his young friend on his behalf.

"Show some respect to the senile." The masked one chides, giving Rufio a playful nudge towards Paul.

"Good afternoon, old fart sir." Rufio bows with a flourish, a hand on his chest.

"Better?" Argos turns to Paul.

"It'll do, I suppose," he sighs in reply.

With that out of the way, Argos returns his attention to Rufio. "Well?" he asks expectantly.

"He took the bait, exactly as you predicted."

"Very good," Argos says, giving Rufio a congratulatory pat on the back.

"Though, we cut through old man Taka's property in the woods – and the bastard actually stepped on one of the geezer's animal traps. Might've done some damage..."

"How is he?"

"He'll live. His pride, on the other hand..." Rufio trails off, chuckling sinisterly.

"And the package?"

"Secure." Rufio grins, standing a bit straighter, looking mighty proud of himself. "He dropped it near the creek. I got it and placed it inside the bike's compartment – along with you know what."

"Excellent," Argos murmurs, shuffling from one foot to the other, practically buzzing with excitement.

"Now do I get a pair of her thongs?" Rufio grins from ear to ear, looking at Argos like a dog begging for scraps.

"Nope."

The pathetic whine that immediately follows sounds remarkably dog-like as well.

"Aw, c'mon, man! I did everything right, I deserve a reward." Rufio frowns, stomping his foot on the ground like the petulant child that he is.

Paul shakes his head at the perverted pair. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out whose underwear they were talking about. Even if he hadn't heard the story from the thief himself, Paul would have known about it otherwise. The break-in and subsequent robbery at the Mills mansion have become common knowledge in this small, sleepy town. Emma Swan and her missing panties had become fodder for gossip-starved souls in Storybrooke.
"Tell you what," Argos lifts a hand, putting an end to Rufio's childish huffing. "I'll give you something better than Emma Swan's thong."

"Her g-string?" Rufio perks up.

Paul rolls his eyes.

"No." Argos sighs. Rufio deflates instantaneously.

"What is it then?" The horny little punk asks.

"It's a secret."

"Great," Rufio mumbles sarcastically, utterly dejected.

"He's going to be insufferable all day. Throw the poor bastard a bone," Paul advises his friend in a knowing tone, building Rufio's hopes up in the process.

"Alright, fine," the masked one relents with a weary sigh.

"So, what is it?" Rufio goads.

If Argos says the word 'bra', Paul has half a mind to stand up and whack the two with his cane. Thankfully, that's not what comes out of the masked one's lips.

"I can track her down." Argos murmurs in an awfully sincere tone.

For a moment, the leader of the Lost Boys goes absolutely mute.

"Her... you mean...?" Rufio chokes out, his voice thick.

"Yes." Argos nods, answering the unspoken question.

Paul watches the exchange with an intrigued little frown, his eyes zoning in particularly on the peculiar expression on Rufio's face. The boy, always so proud and cocksure, appears to be close to tears.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, old man, I have to go and prepare." Argos turns back towards Paul. Without warning, the masked one nudges a teary-eyed Rufio towards his vacant chair and forces the kid to sit down. "This one will be more than happy to play a game with you, right Rufio?"

The teen nods dumbly, probably not even hearing what his friend had just said.

"Where are you off to anyway?" Paul inquires, calling out to the man who's already on the verge of walking away.

Argos stops, turns his head, and despite the mask covering his face, Paul knows that he's smiling. "I have a date tonight."

"With your right hand, lad?" Paul jokes.

"Nah," Argos laughs. "With the law."

"Oh, I guess I'll be visiting you in jail then." Paul quips with a teasing smile, waving at the departing man goodbye. He watches Argos walk away until his friend is but a speck in the distance, before turning his attention to the pensive boy sitting before him. Strange, silence is never something he
associated with a loud-mouthed punk like Rufio. "So," Paul begins in a casual tone, trying not to sound unduly curious, "who's the girl he's going to find for you? Your girlfriend?"

Rufio shakes his head in the negative, his mind seemingly far away.

"Who is she?" Paul gently pushes, mildly intrigued.

The leader of the Lost Boys, with his glazed eyes staring blankly at the chessboard, murmurs so softly that Paul begins to wish that he wore his hearing aids today. He's not entirely certain – his lip reading skills need a bit of polishing – but he did think he got what the kid had shakily replied:

*Our way home.*

---

It's six in the evening on a cold Tuesday night.

Typically, on a day like today, only one officer can be found working in the station at this hour. That unlucky soul is usually tasked with manning the phones and serving as the station's dispatch officer. It's such a thankless job – boring, tedious and irksome – that Emma's three deputies have resorted to drawing sticks every Sunday to determine who'd get saddled with the task for the following week.

To Ruby and August's delight, this week's unlucky chump is none other than the big ol' grump himself.

Of course, Leroy is none too happy with being the station's glorified telephone operator. To get his displeasure across, the sadistic bastard makes it a point to send his fellow deputies climbing after every single cat that finds themselves stuck atop a tree. It always did amuse – and *frustrate* – Emma to no apparent end how many calls they received of that nature on a daily basis. Turns out the number of cat lovers grossly outnumbers dog owners in this town; plausible, since a lot of old crones call Storybrooke their home.

Anyway, crappy assignments or otherwise, basically everyone has their own jobs to do – Emma, too, much to her relief.

Having been out of commission for nearly a week, the Sheriff is more than happy to jump right back into the thick of things. So much so, that she voluntarily gave herself night duty for five straight days – an assignment second only to the dispatch job in terms of undesirability.

Her shift won't officially begin until nine in the evening, but, hearing about the mountainous pile of paperwork on her desk from Ruby (and generally having nothing better to do), Emma decides to drop by the station early and see the monstrosity for herself.

That's precisely why she's here at a little past six in the evening – standing frozen by the doors of the station, able but unwilling to go in. Ruby's by her side – having bumped into each other at the parking lot – her friend similarly motionless and rooted in place.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh... fuuuuuucccccck..."

The two women straighten instinctively, a little disquieted (Emma) and mildly titillated (Ruby) by the loud groan that's filtering through the closed doors of their office. The eerie sound bounces around the darkened hallway, echoing through the building like a ghoulish moan. It's enough to make the hair on the blonde's neck stand on end.

"Rubes," A completely stone-faced Emma mumbles, nudging Ruby's side with an elbow.
"Yeah?"

"Just what have you guys been up to since I was gone?"

"We've been keeping it professional, Em," Ruby swears. "Nothing obscene so far, I promise."

"Just so you know, that 'so far' you threw in troubles me a bit."

"Not very reassuring?"

"Not at all."

"Ohhh god... ohhhh god... fuck...fuck...fuuuuuuuck... ohhhh god..."

"And... judging from the abundant use of expletives, I'm guessing that's not a prayer meeting happening in there, huh?" Emma continues in a quiet tone, cupping the side of her face with a clammy hand.

"If it is, it's not very wholesome," Ruby agrees.

"Could be a cult."

"Or a quirky sex club. We do have a lot of handcuffs and nightsticks in there." Ruby whispers right back, the sides of her lips quirking at the thought. "I mean, can you imagine?"

"I'm trying really, really hard not to." Emma's stoic expression finally gives way to a grimace, her body shuddering instinctively. Leroy is inside the office, manning the phones. August, judging from the squad car parked in front, is back from his patrol, meaning, he's inside the station too. The two men are together in the office... but, just how together they were, Emma is unsure.

Another guttural moan echoes from within – raw, powerful, and utterly animalistic.

Both women freeze.

"Sounds like a bear getting stabbed..." Ruby observes with a slightly tantalized whisper.

At the mental image that pops in her head, another shiver runs down Emma's spine. Well, Leroy is round and hairy; so, there's that. Plus, August is kinda scruffy too, she supposes, like a skinny ass bear cub. "This is frickin' surreal..." Emma intones, cupping her forehead with a hand, feeling her body riddled with beads of cold sweat.

"I know, it's--" Ruby trails off and starts abruptly, giving Emma a nice scare. "Sssshhh..." her friend hushes quickly, placing a finger upon Emma's parted lips – and obediently, the blonde swallows back the question that's just clawing up at the base of her throat. Obviously, Ruby's ultra-sharp wolf hearing is picking up even more interesting sounds from inside. Ever so discretely, Ruby presses her ear against the wood – and, after only a fraction of a second, her eyes widen like saucers. "Em, listen," Ruby barks in a low tone, more of a command than an invitation.

Needing no further provocation, Emma inches closer to the door, mimics her deputy's actions, and begins eavesdropping.

Their jaws both dangle open uselessly in unison.

*Jesus effin' Christ...*
"Oh God... ohhh... fuck... ohhh shit..."

"Wait... I... how should I..."

"Ouch!"

"Sorry... sorry... sorry...! H-holy crap, man, I'm so sorry!"

"Mother fucking hell... the fuck Woody?!"

"I'm sorry..."

"Pull it out!"

"A-are you sure?"

"Do I look like I'm fucking kidding?!"

"Shit... uh... alright..."

"Ouch!"

"Sorry!"

"Stop wiggling it!"

"It's... it's kinda stuck..."

"Stop playing and just pull it out!"

"But... it might hurt..."

"It already fucking hurts!"

"But..."

"Grow some motherfucking balls and just pull it the fuck out!"

"O-okay... alright... okay... ready?"

"Y-yeah..."

"Here goes..."

"Just do it... just do it..."

"Take a deep breath..."

"Wait! Wait... wait a fucking minute..."

"You alright...?"

"Fuck..."

"Want me to go again..."

"My... ass... fucking... sore..."
There is only so much loud moaning and innuendoes that her dirty mind can try to process before her bountiful imagination ends up scarring her for life. Surely, reality won't be as bad as her fantasy (at least, she hopes not). Curiosity killed the cat; hopefully, it will spare the swan. So, despite her initial reservations, Emma straightens up, twists the doorknob, and pushes the door open with enough force to make both men inside jump.

The sight that greets her and Ruby is, quite frankly, the most awkward and hilariously cringe-worthy thing that Emma has ever witnessed (and she's seen a lot).

It's a little bit of what she had imagined, really.

Leroy is bent over his desk, his slashed and torn pants – and underwear – pooling by his ankles (off-white briefs, Emma notes with mild amusement – he always looked like a boxers type of guy). An extremely flushed August is standing behind Leroy, covering his gaping mouth with one hand and clutching on to something long and pointy with the other. The two men look like they are in varying degrees of pain – though the nature of Leroy's discomfort is obviously more of the physical kind. August just looks like someone who wants to disappear into thin air.

Emma is doing everything remotely possible – short of plucking her eyeballs out – to avert her gaze. Shameless and carefree as ever, Ruby actually laughs – which, though embarrassing for the two men, effectively breaks the cocoon of silence that had enveloped that room since they barged in.

Gathering her bearings, Emma lets out the breath that she's unconsciously holding in. "Seriously... only in Storybrooke. The Sheriff pinches the bridge of her nose and floors her deputies with a wary look. "Do I dare ask?"

"It's not what it looks like, I swear." August lifts his hands up to his sides, and in doing so, carelessly lets go of the long wooden stick that he had been holding in his right hand. To Emma and Ruby's astonishment, instead of falling to the floor, the stick stays in place. And wiggles.

Leroy hisses in a breath.

Emma goes completely slack-jawed – as does Ruby.

Alright, they've always joked about the grumpy ol' bastard having a stick up his ass, but this is just plain ridiculous. "Is that... holy crap... is that what I think it is?" Emma splutters, gaping at the object that's jammed right into Leroy's left butt cheek.

"Don't even say it, sister." The dwarf growls in warning, flinching in pain.

"Really? An arrow in the ass?" Ruby says it anyway, brazen as ever. "Kinky."

Emma bites the insides of her cheeks.

"Talk about taking one for the team." Ruby continues unabashedly, murmuring beneath her breath.

Leroy shoots the girl a dirty glare.

Taking a moment to regroup, Emma sighs deeply and rubs her temples with her fingers. Whacked situation or not, they were all officers of the law here. Maybe it's about time she set an example and acted like one. She's the Sheriff, the head of this department; it's her job to get to the bottom of things – no pun intended.
"Okay, what the hell happened?" Emma straightens her shoulders and questions in her best authoritarian voice, looking back and forth at the two men expectantly.

Instead of answering her query, Leroy just groans and thumps his head against the desk, burying his face in his hands – whether because of pain, embarrassment, or both; Emma doesn’t know.

Suspecting that she wouldn’t get anything out of her mother’s favorite dwarf, Emma turns all her attention towards August instead. "Talk," she orders roughly, making no room for arguments. "What happened here?"

August scratches the side of his scruffy face, looking a bit torn. Watching him go through some sort of inner turmoil, Emma surmises that she probably just asked August to break some sort of man code, but, honestly, she doesn’t give a damn. She had a department to run, and, well, a literally butt-hurt deputy to look after.

"Deputy Booth," Emma grits out, green eyes narrowed like slits. "I believe I just asked you a question."

"Yes, Sheriff." August sighs, straightening up in reflex. With an apologetic glance at his bent over colleague, August reluctantly spills the beans. "Rufio and the Lost Boys TP’d the convent this afternoon," he starts in a solemn tone, "Blue called in and reported the incident–"

"The convent?" Ruby cuts in with a frown, arching a questioning eyebrow at the two men. "I was the one on patrol near that area. Why wasn't I informed?"

"I... uh... um..." August grapples for words, his eyes darting quickly towards Leroy and back to Ruby again – obviously covering up for the injured man.

"Alright, shit. To be fair to Woody, I didn't tell him about it either." Leroy grunts, finally speaking up; and, coming to August's defense to boot – something that rarely ever happens. "I went solo."

"And why would you do that? That wasn't your job, you were on dispatch." Emma lifts an eyebrow, thoroughly unimpressed.

"Nova," August sighs, explaining everything perfectly in one word – much to Leroy's chagrin. From the annoyed look of betrayal that flashes in Leroy's eyes, Emma's guessing Grumps won't be coming to August's defense again any time soon.

"Nova, Nova, Nova." Ruby chants in a tired breath, rolling her eyes in exasperation. "Why am I not even surprised?" she asks, heading towards the supply closet, mumbling something about getting the first aid kit.

The Sheriff, feeling equally frustrated, finds herself agreeing with her friend.

It's always the same old story when it comes to Leroy, isn't it? It's not difficult to put two-and-two together whenever the nuns get involved in the equation. Emma can be more than a bit careless too, yes, but Leroy turns positively reckless and tunnel-visioned when it concerns Nova. There is truly none more devoted than a dwarf with a crush. It's sweet, yes, but it's also becoming quite tedious to manage.

Emma runs a hand through her hair and levels her injured deputy with a disapproving look. "So, Grumps, I'm gonna go out on a limb here and try to piece together what happened. Stop me if I'm saying something wrong, alright?" she begins, leaning casually against one of the file cabinets, arms crossed on her chest. "Let's see... Rufio and his gang of juvenile delinquents decided to prank the nuns this afternoon. It's nothing that hasn't happened before – and Ruby or August could've handled
it with no problems: take some statements, write up a report, and give the boys a lecture, done. But, instead of sending one of your fellow officers to respond to Blue's call – as is our standard protocol – you decided to abandon your duties as dispatch officer and go to the convent yourself. I dunno, to be Nova's hero or something?"

Emma hits a nerve. Leroy sharply turns his head away, the color of his face going from bright red to deep purple.

"So, tell me one thing," Emma continues, taking no prisoners, "how the hell did it go from responding to a simple prank to having a frickin' arrow jammed right into your butt?"

"He, um," August begins, only to be interrupted by a groaning Leroy.

"Alright, fine, you fucking win. I tried to impress Nova by chasing after those shitty bastards," Leroy gruffly grounds out, gritting his teeth to suck in a pained breath. "The brats cut through the woods. I almost got Rufio but the slippery fucker got away because I stepped on one of those shitty rabbit traps that fucking Bill Taka left lying around. You can guess the rest, sister."

Yes, she can. Emma glances at the arrow and pulls a face.

"Now, are you satisfied? Can someone get this fucking arrow out of my ass now?"

"Ruby?" Emma calls over her shoulder. "Did you find the first aid kit?"

"Still looking!" A disembodied voice replies from inside the supply closet, followed closely by the sound of things falling out of shelves. Of course, some pretty inventive curse words also follow.

Emma grimaces at the ruckus. She lets out another sigh and stamps down a groan. "And you," sheinclines her chin towards August, "how did you get involved in the whole thing?"

"I found him hobbling at the side of the road on my way back to the station." August answers, looking and sounding worse for wear.

"You walked out of the forest on your own?" Emma turns to Leroy. "Why didn't you radio for help as soon as you got hit?"

"I left my radio here."

"Then why didn't you use your cellphone?"

"I lost it in the woods," Leroy grumbles, frowning mightily.

"Oh, for fuck's sake--" Emma rolls her eyes, feeling the intense urge to smack Leroy at the back of the head.

"Take it easy on him, Em." August jumps right in, trying to placate the Sheriff. "He might've acted on impulse, but he had good intentions, and--"

"He has an arrow sticking out of his ass!" Emma interrupts, raising her voice. "He abandoned his post; he didn't inform you or Ruby about the situation. In his rush to play hero, he left his radio and dropped his cellphone. He could've died in the woods! You don't get to defend him, August, not this time."

August shuts his trap and sags down against his own desk in quiet resignation.

"That was a stupid move, Leroy." Emma turns back to the dwarf. "What if you got hit on the head?
What then?"

"I appreciate the concern, but for fuck's sake, get off your high horse." Leroy grits out, not a little spitefully. "You acted as bad as I did when the wraith tried to kill what's-her-face! This may be the most humiliating moment in my life, but at least I got off with just an arrow in my butt. You almost died."

Emma stiffens immediately, feeling the start of outrage bubbling up her chest. "Don't you dare compare what I did to save my son's mother with your misguided attempt to impress a nun, Casanova. It's in an entirely different league."

Leroy scoffs. "No, it's not."

"Yes, it is."

"It might seem that way, sister, but if you really stop and think about it, it's the same damn thing."

"Yeah, right." Emma lets out a mocking laugh. "For one thing, I'm not head over heels in love with Regina--"

Leroy snorts loudly.

August chews on his bottom lip and looks away.

Emma blushes profusely and snaps her jaws shut. They could have laughed at her face and it would've had the same disquieting effect.

An awkward silence fills the room.

"Em!" Ruby calls out from inside the supply closet, interrupting the tense moment. "We're out of antiseptic!"

Crap. Emma runs a weary hand down her reddened face. She had been thinking of doing the inventory last week, but, well, a certain soul-sucker derailed her plans. Exhaling deeply, she turns to her injured deputy. "Leroy, go to the hospital."

"I'd rather die," Leroy growls indignantly, his face turning an even darker shade of purple.

"Well, better to die from embarrassment than from an infection." Emma cocks an eyebrow, making no room for debate. She inclines her head towards the door. "Go have yourself checked out. August will go with you. I'll call ahead and tell Whale to let you in through the back door--" Ruby snickers from inside the supply closet; Emma bites her tongue for a second. "--and have your ass treated in a private room."

"Look--"

Emma stops the man's protests with a pointed look. "I'm the Sheriff, you're my deputy. That wasn't a request Leroy, I gave you an order."

"But..."

"You might have lost your cellphone, but I have mine right here," Emma says, pulling out said gadget from her jeans. "If you don't want to go to the hospital with August, I can call Nova right now and have her accompany you there."

"No!" Leroy shouts in horror, panic settling in his eyes. "You can't do that!"
"Yes, I can. Watch me," Emma dares, scrolling down her contact list until she lands on Nova's name. She shows the screen to an ashen Leroy.

"C'mon, I don't want her to see me like this..." Leroy mutters weakly, almost pleading.

"That makes all of us." Emma deadpans. "But here we are anyway. So, should I give your girlfriend a call?"

Her little threat works marvelously. A little too marvelously, actually.

Even with an arrow still sticking out of his backside, a bodacious Leroy straightens up and hobbles towards the door, not bothering to pull up his torn draws. It happens so quickly that Emma and August barely had the time to snap their gazes to the ceiling and save themselves from being subjected to the trauma of seeing Leroy in all his full-frontal glory. Never again will Emma make the mistake of judging a book by its cover – or more specifically, a dwarf by his height – or shoe size. Turns out, if Grumpy is angry, so is mini-Grumpy. Goes to show that intense pain can be a turn-on for some people, and, well, some dwarves too.

"August?" Emma calls out before the man can follow a waddling Leroy out of the station.

"Yes, boss?"

"Here," The blonde grabs August's motorcycle helmet from atop the file cabinet and tosses it at the man, "let him cover his junk with that."

"But..."

"No, no 'but's' – I've had enough of those for a day, so just do it."

Her deputy's whole demeanor slackens, as if Emma had just ordered him to chuck his precious helmet into a fiery inferno.

"C'mon, Booth, be a team player. The last thing I want to do right now is drag Leroy's bare ass back here and arrest him for public indecency." Emma slumps against Ruby's chair, feeling drained all of a sudden. "Now, go, before he scars somebody else for life."

August nods weakly and lets out a healthy amount of air from his lungs, and, with a tortured glance at his helmet, he jogs after a moaning Leroy.

"What did I miss?" Ruby asks a second later, finally emerging from the closet, shaking off a few cobwebs that were clinging to her tight-fitting blouse.

"A whole lotta dwarf," Emma says simply.

"Decent?"

"Indecent."

"I meant the size."

"I know."

Ruby smirks in amusement, making up her own conclusions in her head. "Except for some bandages, our first aid kit contains zilch. I'm going to swing by the pharmacy to replace all the missing stuff before I head home. Do you need anything?"
"An aspirin," Emma mumbles, rubbing soothing circles on her throbbing temples.

"Got it. Anything else?"

"Stock up on a few bottles of brain bleach too, please. I'm probably going to need some after my shift ends."

Ruby's eyebrow quirks. "Brain bleach? I don't think Tom has that in his store..."

"He does. It's on aisle five," Emma sighs, reaching over the desk to grab the phone and give Dr. Whale a heads-up. "It's called liquor."

The digital clock on the dash reads 11:14 PM.

She's been staring at the glowing numbers for a while now, counting down the minutes while she nurses a cup of coffee from Granny's in her hands. At precisely midnight, Emma is going to pull out of her parking spot beside an abandoned house on a quiet residential street and drive all over town for an hour. Then, she's going to find another inconspicuous place to park her squad car and stay there until another sixty minutes has elapsed. Like an endless cycle, she'll leave again and start patrolling the sleepy streets of Storybrooke once more. This routine of park and patrol will continue until her shift ends at five in the morning. Emma's very particular about changing it up and not favoring certain parking locations whenever she's on night duty. It keeps her from being bored, and, well, will hopefully make it difficult for bad elements to predict just where she might be found at any given hour.

So, now, she's here, safely ensconced in what Henry had lovingly dubbed her "Swan-mobile" – thanking her lucky stars that she didn't have to patrol the town in her clunky yellow bug. It's the first week of November, and it's damn too chilly out to be freezing her ass off in a car without a working heater. Regina might have been a tight-ass Mayor, but at least the woman didn't cut back on expenses when her office gave Graham a vehicle with built-in seat warmers to patrol the town in. Don't get her wrong, Emma likes the easy-going way that Mary Margaret runs Town Hall – but the two “new” police cruisers her stingy mother had given her department for her deputies to use were downright deathtraps. Emma feels safer in her beloved bug than in those second-hand monstrosities – and that's saying something.

With one long gulp, Emma downs what's left of her coffee and carelessly chucks the empty container at the empty passenger seat. She'll clean that up later – if she remembers to, that is. Another Christmas song plays on the radio and Emma bites back a long-suffering sigh. Thanksgiving is still a few weeks away and Halloween was just last week (she dressed up as an Egyptian mummy – not that she had a choice in the matter; she was wrapped up in bandages at the hospital at the time); but the people manning the town's one and only radio station seem to be way overzealous about spreading the holiday cheer a month in advance.

Not feeling like listening to yet another tween wannabe butcher "Santa Baby", Emma switches off the radio and fills the car with silence. Taking a moment to enjoy the quiet, she burrows deeper into her seat and allows herself to get as comfortable as she can without falling asleep. The Sheriff barely has a full minute of peace when her cellphone lights up and starts ringing on the dashboard.

Emma takes one look at her caller ID and sighs. It's way past the woman's bedtime; Emma's surprised – and more than slightly intrigued – that she even calls. "Miss me already?" Emma teases the second she accepts the call.

"Don't flatter yourself, Miss Swan." Regina's curt reply comes in from the other end of the line, the
woman's tone biting as ever.

"It's late, Regina, is something wrong?"

"Of course there is."

Emma sits up in attention. "What happened?"

"The usual. You did something wrong."

Emma rolls her eyes, willing her body to relax again. "Alright, what the heck did I do this time?"

"You bought the wrong kind of butter," Regina gripes, saying it with such malice that one would think Regina had just caught Emma urinating on her father's grave.

The blonde yawns long and loud, used to Regina's tendency to overreact. "Why, is there another kind of butter?" she asks, smacking her lips sleepily together.

"Yes. The unsalted one. The one on my list. The one I needed to bake apple tart with tomorrow morning – the very same tart that Henry needs to bring for school."

"Okay. Okay."

"Okay?" Regina repeats, incredulous. "That's all you can say for your incompetence, Miss Swan? Okay?"

"Fine, I'm sorry. It was an honest mistake." Emma apologizes, meaning it too. But, of course, she foils her own attempt to appease the irate woman by following up with: "Don't get your panties in a bunch, Regina. Nobody can tell the difference, anyway."

"I can." Regina hisses. "It's saltier."

"I would hope so, considering that it's salted butter." The smart-ass little jerk in Emma snarks.

Regina growls – and before Emma can put another clever word in, the line goes dead. Furious, Regina had hung up on her.

Crap.

Emma exhales deeply and pinches her eyes shut. After a beat, she hits speed dial and calls Regina's cell back. "Fine," she grits out as soon as Regina picks up. "I'll swing by the grocery store before it closes."

"It's past eleven, Miss Swan. It's already closed."

"Then I'll wait until it opens at seven and buy some before I go home."

"Your shift ends at five."

"I know."

"That's two hours of idling, Sheriff."

"I can sleep in the car."

Regina scoffs in mockery. "Yet another prime example of Charming idiocy. Now, why would you
subject yourself to such an indignity when you have a perfectly decent bed in your cubby-hole? The store is five minutes away from home, Sheriff. I know you can't help it, Miss Swan, but don't be a brainless dolt and just set your alarm for seven."

"Love to, but I can't," Emma mumbles, stifling a yawn. "If you get me in bed, I'm never going to get out of it."

"..."

Emma bites back a groan. "I'll have you know, that sounded more appropriate and totally unripe with innuendo in my head."

"I'm sure it did," Regina says dryly; but, weirdly enough, Emma thinks she can detect a slight tremor in the woman's velvety voice. Must be cold at home, Emma muses. After a beat, Regina lets out an audible sigh. "I suppose if there's anyone used to being idle and sleeping in cramped vehicles, it'd be you."

"Thanks, I think."

"Just so you know, that wasn't a compliment."

"Of course it wasn't. Either way, I'm grateful for the clarification, your majesty."

"Duly noted, princess."

Emma rolls her eyes and allows herself a lazy, resigned smile.

"So, you'll truly wait two hours in that filthy little cruiser of yours, Sheriff?"

"I screwed up." Emma shrugs, tracing idle patterns on the steering wheel. "I can wait as long as it takes to make it right."

"Ah, yes, the White Knight thing," Regina sasses.

"No," Emma murmurs softly, smiling in spite of herself, "it's an idiot thing."

"..."

"Hey, um... speaking of being an idiot..." Emma fidgets in place, scratching the side of her neck in unease. "I, uh... you know, I never did get to apologize for calling you a bitch the other day. It was a joke – granted, a really bad one. But, uh, I'm sorry anyway."

Regina, wicked as ever, lets her stew in silence for a good, uncomfortable minute before muttering a low: "Apology accepted."

Emma smirks, allowing herself to breathe again. "Thank you," she murmurs, "and if it makes you feel any better, if there's truly a dog in your house, it'd be me. I think everyone in town – including my own deputies, apparently – think I'm yours and Henry's lapdog or something."

Regina, probably in a fit of insanity, actually chuckles without malice; and, Emma, despite it all, finds herself laughing quietly along.

"Crazy, I know."

"Crazy, I know."

The brunette lets out a loud snort. "Don't kid yourself, Miss Swan. You're a chihuahua. Loud,
"yappy, annoying, funny-looking." Regina fires off unapologetically, leaving no room for debate.

"Fine," Emma rolls her eyes for the nth time. "What about you though? If you were a dog, what kind would you be?"

"I'm not a dog, Miss Swan. I thought we'd established that?"

"Humor me," Emma goads.

"If I must really choose," Regina drawls, sounding tired and not a little patronizing, "a Dobermann would suffice. Intelligent, strong, regal."

"Really? A Dobermann?" Emma wrinkles her nose, disagreeing. "I don't think so. In my eyes, Regina, you'll always be a Pit Bull."

"A Pit Bull?"

"Yeah."

"Hostile, fearsome, vicious?" Regina exhales, her tone bleak; and to Emma's ears, the quiet resignation in her voice almost sounded tragic.

"Well, you can say that," Emma chuckles softly, "but I was thinking more along the lines of, I dunno... misunderstood," she says, her voice dropping down to a mere whisper.

The line goes completely quiet.

Emma clamps her mouth shut, not even daring to speak. *Crap.* For a moment there it seems like they were actually bantering good-naturedly instead of sniping spitefully at each other. Did she just kill the mood? Should she clarify that she actually likes Pit Bulls? That, during her two-year stint at one of many foster homes, she had grown attached to one? Moe, the guard dog, had been feared by the neighbors – some even thought he should be put down – but a young Emma could never understand why. He protected her more than the people who were supposed to care for her in that home ever did. She adored him as fiercely as he seemed to love her. Pit Bulls are burdened with having an unfortunate reputation for violence and aggression; but they're also capable of so much more – love, loyalty, bravery, faithfulness. Emma knows this firsthand. So, should she tell this to the other woman? Will Regina even appreciate the sentiment? Or, will Emma just get ridiculed for even mentioning it?

Emma sighs, grappling with indecision, helpless and clueless as ever. In the end, she chooses the safe, cowardly route and opts to bite her tongue.

The pregnant pause grows into a long stretch of silence, and, for a few moments, Emma just listens to Regina breathe. It's not entirely awkward, but it doesn't feel too comfortable either.

Emma screws her eyes tightly shut and swallows hard. Alright, fine, screw being safe. Safety's totally overrated anyway. So what if she gets laughed at? It's not as if she's not used to it. Making up her mind, Emma clears her throat, takes a deep breath, and just... talks. "Hey, uh, I, um, you know, I didn't mean that in a bad way. I, uh, actually like P-"

"Miss Swan?" the brunette finally speaks, cutting off her nonsensical mumbling. Emma's grateful – if not a little disappointed.

"Y-yeah?"
"I suppose salted butter would do," Regina says, quietly, like she's a million miles away. "It would be a shame to let it all go to waste just because you were too dim to follow a simple grocery list."

"Are you sure? I mean, I really don't mind waiting a couple of hours in the car..."

"I'm sure..." Regina murmurs, her voice thick and inscrutable. "Now, go about with doing whatever menial task that you like to fool yourself into thinking is actual police work before I change my mind..."

Emma knows deflection when she hears it. Doing it so often herself, she practically made it into an art. So, being the White Knight, Emma does the chivalrous thing and gives the brunette an out. "Go to sleep, Regina. Seems to me like your royal bitchiness needs her rest."

"That I do, pillow princess." The woman snarks, but the relief behind Regina's words is not lost on the blonde. And, before Emma can say her goodbyes, a dial tone chimes in her ears.

"Rude." she sighs, smiling slightly to herself.

Before Emma can fully relax back into her seat, the rumbling sound of a powerful engine cuts through the night air – disrupting the tranquility of the sleeping neighborhood. At the other end of the block, the source of all the ruckus parks by the side of the curb, away from the flickering street lamp – cloaked in darkness. Propelled by a sudden foreboding spike in her gut, Emma leans forward against the steering wheel and squints her eyes, trying to make out the figure sitting on the motorbike. From where she's parked, Emma can only see the outline of a man, unmoving and barely visible. He kills the engine of his bike; but, instead of getting off, he remains rooted in his seat. Whoever the mysterious rider is, he seems to be staring right back at her. A cold chill runs down the blonde's spine. Her cellphone rings after a few seconds, startling the Sheriff out of her fixation on the stranger and scaring her out of her wits. A rattled Emma, her heart racing in her chest, still accepts the call.

"Uh, can I call you back, Regina? Creepy motorcycle guy nearby."

"Creepy?" A deep, gruff voice replies. "Ouch. You're hurting my feelings, Sheriff."

No, unless she had a sudden sex change, that doesn't sound like Regina at all.

Emma quickly pulls the phone away from her ear and takes a baffled glance at the screen. 

Leroy, it reads.

Emma's blood runs cold.

Impossible. Her deputy is sleeping soundly in his apartment – courtesy of a potent cocktail of exhaustion, embarrassment, and painkillers. That, and his phone had been lost in the woods – or so they thought.

"Who the hell is this?" Emma questions grimly, looking right through the windshield – green eyes transfixed on the motionless man on the motorcycle. Deep in her gut she thinks she already knows the answer; instinctively, she reaches for her gun.
"I think you know exactly who I am." The caller answers playfully, taunting her with his crypticness. "After all, I heard you've been looking for me, following my every move, practically *stalking* me. Just so you know, *that's* creepy."

"*You.*" Emma snarls malevolently, venom burning down her throat.

"Good evening, Sheriff Swan," Argos says, undaunted by her display of aggression, his simple greeting sounding both ominous and menacing by the deceptively calm way he talks. "I believe it's time for our long overdue date. I sure hope you're wearing something nice..."

Emma unholsters her pistol and places it on her lap.

"And I hope you brought flowers," Emma coos, smiling threateningly. "If you come any closer and try anything, you perv, I'll make sure to put them on your damn grave."

"Ooh, touchy." Argos mocks. "Relax, Sheriff. We're just going to have a nice heart-to-heart talk, that's all."

"Really, now? Then why don't we do it at a more comfortable location? I actually know of a place that has a bed with your name on it..."

"I'm not coming with you to the station," Argos intones huskily, sounding pretty darn sure of himself, "and you're not going anywhere either."

Emma's grip tightens around her cellphone until her knuckles turn white. "The hell do you mean?"

"For a cop out on patrol, you're not very observant, are you? I snuck up and slashed your rear tires when you were busy flirting with your *girlfriend.*"

"She's *not* my girlfriend." Emma snarls, quick to correct.

Argos utters a low, amused hum. "Interesting how you focused on *that,* instead of, you know, the *slashed tires* bit. Priorities, Sheriff – you don't seem to have 'em," he chides playfully. "Or, you *do.* Just not in the order you like to delude yourself into believing you have."

"Shut the fuck up." A reddened Emma snaps, a ferocious growl sounding at the base of her throat.

"Make me."

"Is that a dare?" The blonde lifts an eyebrow.

"It's an invitation." Argos' voice drops down to an even sleazier timbre. "Now, see, I have something special planned for us for our first face-to-mask meeting. Clock's ticking, Sheriff Swan. So, shall we begin our evening?"

Emma clamps her jaws shut. Alright, time to put a muzzle on this damn dog and lock him up in a frickin' cage.

"Just out of curiosity, what kind of underwear are you wearing?"

*Annnnd...* probably have him neutered too.

" Fucking pervert."

It's going to be a damn long night.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my beta Alezabee!
Her car is a pigsty.

It's something that would've been somewhat acceptable – though, still frowned upon by most – if the car she's talking about is her beat-up yellow Bug. Unfortunately, it's the police cruiser. Making it, therefore, town property – a fact that would serve her well to remind herself of on a regular basis. She's the frickin' Sheriff, for goodness sake, and this is her official vehicle. She's its bonafide caretaker and, as Regina often points out, it really wouldn't hurt to act the part instead of treating the car like it's a motorized extension of the town's garbage dump.

Emma has utilized the passenger side floor, in particular, as a handy hybrid of a trash receptacle and a mobile armory. It's badass and, well, it kinda smells like one too. Piled together with her shotgun, nightstick and heavy-duty boots are empty coffee cups, food wrappers, and all sorts of unmentionable filth that would make the Bacon Brothers proud. The mess that piles up every day never really bothers her; maybe because she always cleans up after every shift – well, if she remembers to, that is. Tonight's different, though. The clutter doesn't just annoy her, it completely rankles her ass. As proof that there is some sort of karmic power at work in the universe, somewhere underneath all of her police gear and rubbish, now lies her trusty walkie-talkie. It had fallen in from its spot on the dashboard after she took a particularly sharp turn at the corner of Main and Remington. That happened over an hour ago. Emma told herself she'd fish it out, but naturally, forgot about the whole thing the moment she stopped by Granny's for her caffeine fix.

It's no damn surprise that she's now kicking herself for it.

She needs that damn walkie-talkie.

Argos, infamous panty thief and stalker extraordinaire, is sitting on his motorbike at the far end of the block, about four houses away from Emma's parked cruiser (and its slashed rear tires, courtesy of the sneaky bastard). Arresting a wanted felon is difficult enough; attempting to arrest said crook when he's armed with some type of powerful wraith-sucking sword is a whole different ballgame altogether. The wisest thing Emma can do is to have at least one of her deputies backing her up before she tries anything. She knows this, but the predominant part of her – the one that's rash, careless and prone to horrible decisions – is just itching to jump out of the car with guns blazing, consequences be damned.

Yeah... not a smart move. So, she keeps that impulse in check and anchors her ass firmly on the driver's seat. What kind of savior would she be if she can't even save herself from making one of the worst decisions ever?

She's not in any way less brave for holding back and refusing to engage; it's not cowardice to play one's cards right. She can always catch him another day. Without Ruby or August — heck, even an injured Leroy and his bleeding butt – watching her back, Emma has no safety net. So, if everything goes south – as things in her line of work often do — then she's basically screwed.

So, if she truly wants to haul Argos' ass in jail, she needs backup; and, if she wants some back-up, she needs her walkie-talkie.

Just... perfect.
Through the dim light cast by a nearby lamp post, Emma thinks she can see an antenna sticking out of all the mess. The bad thing is, in order to even get the tip of her finger to graze said antenna, she'd have to bend sidewards and disappear from a certain someone's line of sight. And that, well, is proving to be a bit tricky and kinda damaging to her own cause. Argos is watching her like a hawk; she can't really reach for the walkie-talkie without alerting the pervert of her intentions.

Still, it won't hurt to try.

It's just too bad that discretion was never her strong suit.

"Don't even think about it," Argos warns in that gruff voice of his, halting her right hand's movements and thwarting her pathetic attempt at stealth.

"I wasn't doing anything," Emma drawls all–too–innocently, earning an unbelieving snort from the man.

"I'm warning you, Sheriff. The second you try to pull a fast one on me, I'm outta here. You can attempt to run after me — everyone knows you're stubborn enough to try — but you can't chase a motorcycle on foot. You may be pretty, but you're also kinda slow."

"Oh, shut the hell up," Emma huffs, more than slightly offended. She can read between the lines. Slow, huh? That wasn't just a dig at her less–than–spectacular running abilities. "Listen, you prick. There's only person who can call me stupid — and that ain't you."

The sound of Argos' throaty chuckle does nothing but test her already thin patience.

"Is that so? Well, that's interesting. May I guess who this lucky person is?"

Emma flexes her jaw, green eyes smoldering in annoyance — both at Argos and, well, at herself. Dammit, the things that slip out of her big fat mouth.

"May I, Sheriff?" Argos pushes, sly as heck.

"Hell no," Emma snarls, roughly switching her phone to her other ear. "And it's none of your fucking business."

"Okay, okay, no need to get all angry and defensive," the Masked One coos patronizingly, furthering Emma's ire. To the blonde's surprise – and relief – he drops the subject, but not before letting out another low, mocking laugh. After a terse moment of Emma just listening to his pathetic chortling, his mirth finally dies on his lips and the line fills up with silence. From the safety of their respective vehicles, they stare each other down, hands holding their cellphones, listening to each other's steady breaths. In case he's trying to play a game – perhaps a battle of wills – Emma makes sure not to give her stalker the satisfaction of speaking first. She wins, of course, cause after a beat, Argos decides to clear his throat and talk.

"So..." he leads, dragging the word out with his mouth.

"So...?" Emma repeats dryly, putting up a front of complete and utter disinterest.

"Since it's our first date—"

"This isn't a date," she's quick to interrupt.

"Uh, yes, it is."
"Keep dreaming, perv," Emma scoffs, sneering at the bastard. "A proper date involves dinner, dancing and conversation," she points out in an even tone. "Or so they say," she adds lamely, thinking of a naive, pre–curse breaking Mary Margaret and her overly romanticized views on, well, romance.

"Alright, fair enough. But tell me something, Sheriff Swan. Have you ever been on a proper date before?" Argos fishes. At the awkward silence from Emma's end, he lets out an amused grunt. "Well, neither have I. So, what do you say we skip the dinner and dancing parts and just head straight on to the conversation? It's not as if we're not having one right now, anyway."

Emma lets out a derisive snort – which the jerk mistakingly takes as a sign that she wants to be wooed or something else equally laughable.

"...or, if you really want to do this the old–fashioned way, I suppose I can grab you a donut. Yeah, I know it's terribly cliché of me to buy a cop one, but I've watched you wolf down so many that, in my eyes, you're sorta a living, breathing police stereotype. As for the dancing thing, fine, give me a few minutes. I'll bust out my dancing shoes so we can dance in the middle of the street. Fair warning though, I have two left feet, so I sure hope you're wearing steel–toed boots."

"And I hope you're wearing a groin protector," Emma smiles menacingly, staring daggers at the man on the motorcycle. "Come anywhere near me and I'm going to kick your crotch so hard, your balls will fly up your throat and choke you to death."

"Oooh... feisty," Argos comments huskily. "I dig it. I've always found spunky women hot."

The blonde rolls her eyes and fights the urge to blanch. Bastard's insufferable, she'll give him that. "I'm hanging up," she threatens, tightening her grip on her cellphone.

"No, you won't."

"Yes, I will."

Argos chuckles. "You really won't."

"Oh? What makes you so sure?"

"Cause you're still on the line," the Masked One calmly states, not even the least bit fazed or worried that she'd actually go through with it. "You're impulsive. If you wanted to hang up, you wouldn't have threatened. I'd just be sitting here listening to a dial tone."

Emma blows out a disgruntled breath from her lips, annoyed at having her bluff called. As much as talking to the slimy jerk makes her want to bang her head on the steering wheel, she can't — and won't — end the call. If she were to waste this golden opportunity to gather intel on the man she's been hunting down for weeks, then Regina's absolutely right — Emma truly is the biggest idiot in all the known lands. So far, the things her department know about her stalker can be counted on just one crummy hand; and they're pretty much useless. That's why the slippery bastard's always a step ahead. What Emma knows about Argos is probably grossly disproportional to what he knows about her. Well, it's about time she remedies that. If she can somehow get him to divulge something more substantial than the fact that he likes to dress up like every day's Halloween, then sitting through his endless mocking and annoying innuendoes will somehow be worth it. At least, she hopes so. Otherwise, this'll be all torture with no payoff — which will suck to the nth degree.

Luckily (or unluckily, depending on how one looks at it), their minds seem to operate on the same wavelength. Without prompting, Argos gives Emma an opening.
"C'mon, humor me on this first date thing. Screw dinner and dancing. Let's just have a nice, pleasant conversation. Please?" he murmurs, coming as close to begging as he could possibly get without sounding too desperate. Before the blonde could get a word in, a clueless Argos practically offers himself up on a silver platter. "Listen, how bad could it be? Just think of it as a perfect opportunity for us to get to know each other..."

"You have my underwear, you dick. You already know more about me than I want to," Emma complains, making sure to inject venom into her words – which wasn't that hard, all things considered. It's gloriously perfect how her plan seems to fall right into place, but she still needs to play hard to get. No harm in making the prick work for it.

"Still," Argos intones. "Speaking for myself, I think it'll be nice to learn new things about you... other than the fact that you seem to own more white cotton panties than an old maid."

She's said it once, and she'll say it again: this guy's a sleazy dick. In her defense, they weren't all white. There were reds and blacks thrown in there too — granted, not a lot of them, but still.

"You know, if you didn't have a couple of thongs and g–strings in the mix, I would've thought that you were some sad, celibate lady with ten cats or something else equally depressing. I mean, no one could have that many unattractive underwear and still have an active sex life. Honestly, Sheriff, when was the last time you got laid?"

Emma's jaws shut with a click, her teeth gnashing against each other the same way Argos' teasing grates at her nerves. "You really got a death wish, don't you?" she bites out, shooting the shadowy figure in the distance a murderous glare.

"Aw, lighten up, I'm just messing with you. No need to get your hopefully–not–so–ugly–panties in a twist," Argos quips impishly, just about pushing it in Emma's opinion. "So... hideous underwear aside, how about it? Wanna play a little get–to–know–each–other game? It'll be fun, I promise. Might be enlightening, too."

Despite her burgeoning curiosity and her own info–digging agenda, Emma lets out a haughty snort and sticks her nose in the air. "I don't play with thieves."

"Oh, so you don't play with yourself? After going through your drawers, I find that difficult to believe."

"You're a sick fucking bastard, you know that?" Emma rolls her eyes. "And watch your damn mouth; I'm not a thief."

"Not anymore, you're not," Argos agrees. "But you were once like me. I read the story they ran about you in the Mirror. You've done time for the possession of stolen goods, right? Like it or not, you've got some street cred, Sheriff. Must admit, that's pretty badass."

"You like that, huh?" Emma says tartly, before leveling her tone and continuing with a curt: "Don't worry, you thieving perv, I'll damn well make sure you'll get some jail time, too. I did my homework. You can get up to five years in Maine for the crap you pulled. I sure hope my clothes were worth it."

"Ah, well, I just stole those for kicks," Argos admits readily, as if leaving her with just a single article of clothing (her crotch still chafes at the memory of those skintight pants) had only been a slight inconvenience for her. It wasn't. Far from it. Her poor, traumatized lady bits are still clamoring for justice. "Though I'll have to say, the three grand was definitely worth all the trouble..." he confesses with an obnoxious little chuckle.
A dark cloud washes over Emma's face. Asshole. As if she needed a reminder that she's three thousand dollars poorer.

"I want my money back," she hisses in contempt.

"And you will, down to the last dollar. You have my word."

"Please, what good is a criminal's word?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Argos remarks, low and quiet. "I never make a promise that I can't keep, Sheriff. I always follow through. Have a little faith, will you?"

"Well, that's just rich, coming from a shady perv with a penchant for stalking and kleptomania."

"Just saying... it won't hurt to be a bit more trusting. Think whatever you want of me, but despite what I had done, I do have your best interests at heart."

Damn, the guy's good. The manipulative jerk actually sounds sincere enough. Too bad for him, Emma just won't bite. In Henry's hurtful--but--still--kinda--truthful words: she's not that stupid.

"Trust you, huh? You stole my frickin' panties, you ass. The only people in town who'd be crazy enough to trust you are registered sex offenders and nasty old pervs with a sick fetish for sexy underwear."

"Uh, with all due respect, Sheriff," Argos smoothly pipes in. "I believe I have in my possession a staggering amount of your cotton monstrosities. In what world are they even considered sexy?"

"In my world."

"Oh, right, the world where you don't have sex," Argos snarks.

Emma flushes all the way down to her neck, a potent mixture of both anger and embarrassment bubbling in her gut. Before she can cut the dick with a few choice words, Argos beats her to the punch.

"Piece of advice, you should really consider branching out to satin and lace. Now that's sexy," he practically growls, tacky as ever.

She already did, actually. Little Miss Muffet's keeps a shockingly low amount of cotton underwear in stock — so it wasn't like she had much of a choice. But, of course, there's no way in hell Emma's telling him that. Why give the nasty fool something to store in his wank bank?

So, in an effort to steer the conversation to a topic that's somewhat less degrading, Emma decides to bring back a subject that they've already touched, but she felt warrants further discussion: "My money."

"What about it?"

"Say you really do keep your word — which I highly doubt, just so we're clear — when will I get my money back?"

"In due time."

"That wasn't an answer."

"Well, that's all you're gonna get," the infuriating jerk replies. Emma exhales through her nose. And
he has the gall to ask her to trust him? Dick.

"You've used up all my cash to buy that stupid bike, didn't you?" Emma frowns, casting a baleful look at the said motorcycle. She can barely see it, but nevertheless, she can make out just enough in the darkness to level it with a glare that's just radiating with full-on scorn.

"First of all, it's not stupid, it's awesome," Argos corrects in a snippy tone. "Second of all, I didn't use up all your cash, just some of it. Cause you know, for the longest time, I've always wanted to own a motorcycle," he shares, being all wistful all of a sudden. "So... thank you, I guess. I'm telling you, it's worth every single penny. She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"She?" Emma lifts an eyebrow. "You named it?"

"Of course I did. I call her Scarlet," Argos reveals, sounding much like a proud parent of a mechanized baby girl. "Cause she's red."

"You should've named it after me."

"Why?"

"Cause it's mine," Emma deadpans, unable — and unwilling — to hide her bitterness. "Technically, that's my motorcycle — seeing as how I paid for it and all."

"Then I'm sure you'd be happy to know that I got Scarlet at a steal price."

"Yes, always so nice to hear that my hard owned cash got wasted on something that I won't even get to enjoy," Emma mutters flatly, unimpressed.

"Oh, I wouldn't say that, Sheriff."

"What, cause I..." Emma starts but trails off as a thought hits. Huh. "Yeah... I guess you're right..." she leans back into her seat and drums her fingers on the steering wheel, a victorious smirk tugging at the corner of her lips. "I'd be able to get my hands on that thing as soon as I throw your thieving ass in jail..."

At this, Argos lets out a loud snort.

"Yeah, keep dreaming. The only time you'll manage to catch me is if I wanted to be caught — and believe me, I don't," the cocky bastard brags, so sure of himself and his ability to evade the law. She finds his confidence cute — in a sort of 'ooh, how deliciously naive' kind of way. "But don't you worry that pretty little head of yours, Sheriff. I'll make certain arrangements to make sure you get the bike when I'm, you know, dead."

"Uh–huh. Right. Of course. And just when will that momentous occasion be?"

"Who knows? Life is short. Might come sooner than you think..." he mutters darkly. And for an uncomfortable moment, the line goes quiet. It almost feels ominous, and Emma doesn't really understand why. Thankfully, the silence doesn't drag on for far too long.

"Sheriff Swan," Argos starts anew, letting out a quiet little breath. "Enough depressing talk. Play a game with me."

"Why should I?"

"Honestly? What choice do you have?"
"Lots, actually," Emma says cockily, brimming with bravado. "I have a pistol and a shotgun, what do you have?"

"A sword."

"Guns trump swords. I win," the blonde declares almost childishly.

"No, I win," he disagrees, earning a mocking snort from her.

"Oh yeah? What's stopping me from rolling down my window and shooting you dead?"

"The law," Argos intones. "You know, the one you're sworn to enforce? That, and, well, the fact that I can swing my sword from all the way over here and create a powerful enough blast that can cleave your car in half."

Oh. Good lord.

"Well, when you put it that way..." Emma mutters dryly, her glorious smile wiped off her lips. Even if he's just an almost imperceptible speck in the distance, she thinks she can see a cocky little smirk behind that obnoxious mask of his. Emma puckers her lips in annoyance. Damn braggart.

"So, shall we play?"

"Fine..." Emma finally relents, albeit grudgingly. Alright, she's played hard to get long enough — time to put on her detective hat and mine for info. "What's the game?"

"I'm not going to ask you to strip naked if that's what you're worried about. Although... there's a different kind of dressing down involved," he says salaciously, eliciting a long-suffering groan from the blonde. She can just hear the smile in the sleazeball's voice at her reaction. "Just a fun little Q&A, Sheriff. No holds barred. We get to ask each other five questions each, turn by turn."

"And...?" Emma prompts, urging the guy to continue.

"And that's it."

The blonde pulls a face. "Seriously?"

"Yup."

"Well that's just... lame," Emma can't help but comment, admittedly a bit let down. Frankly, she had expected more. She'd been hoping he'd propose a game so horrendously vulgar, that way, she can say no and antagonize the annoying bastard a little bit more before they delved right into it. Emma sighs. Opportunity gone. "So... a question and answer game?"

"Yes."

"We're already talking. What's the point in turning it into a game?"

"Because the questions I want to ask you, Sheriff, I'm not so sure you'll answer them if you weren't playing for a prize."

Her eyebrow lifts. "A prize?"

"Yes," Argos confirms. And for the first time since he rolled into the street on his noisy motorbike,
he swings a leg over to one side and gets off his ride. He may be leaning on it now instead of sitting on it, but not for one second does he look away from her. "Answer all of my five questions truthfully and you'll get a prize."

"Cash?"

"No."

There goes a bit of hope that she'll get a small percentage of her money back tonight. "Then what is it?" Emma sighs, extremely but not overly curious.

"My name."

Emma's face drops even further, thoroughly unimpressed. "I already know your name."

"My real name."

_Oh._

Of course.

Clearly, her brain is in dire need of more caffeine.

Taking a page out of Regina's book, she's just feels compelled to ask: "What's the catch?"

It never hurts to be suspicious with criminals. Better safe than sorry.

"There isn't any." Argos is quick to reassure. "As I've said, just answer my questions truthfully and you'll get your reward. After that, I'll leave. Date over. No harm will come to you, I promise."

"And if I lie?"

"Then I'll leave without you knowing my name."

"How will you even know if I'm being honest?" Emma inquires, unable to stop herself from asking that pertinent question. As far as she's concerned, her superpower is hers and hers alone. Which, well, thinking about it now, will work in her advantage. "What if I'm telling the truth and you think I'm lying?"

"That won't happen. I have good instincts."

"Debatable at best," Emma sniffs. "Someone with good instincts should know better than to steal from a Sheriff."

"Uh, I didn't get caught — and I still haven't been caught. So, you're absolutely right, I don't have good instincts. I have great ones."

The blonde rolls her eyes. Bastard's an even bigger smart–ass than she is — and that's saying something.

"Does it go both ways? This honesty thing? Cause you're a sly son–of–a–bitch, what assurance do I have that you'll answer any question I throw at you without lying?" she questions, tapping a finger on the steering wheel.

"Well, aside from the built–in lie detector that I heard you've been bragging about all over town, you also have my word."
"Right. Your word — again," Emma acknowledges, all dry and sarcastic. "Just so you know: not reassuring in the least."

"I told you, have faith," Argos chides. "I don't lie."

**Ping!** Emma snorts. **Stupid ass.** "You just did."

"I won't lie," Argos amends with a slight sigh, walking towards the flickering street lamp nearby and finally bathing himself in light, stark-white hockey mask a visibly haunting sight. The cocky bastard leans against the lamppost, legs crossed by the ankles and a hand tucked inside his front pocket, looking like he's posing for the front page of Creeper Weekly. "So, shall we?" he asks.

Emma lets out a breath from her lungs. **Game time.** "Fine. Let's get this over with..."

"Remember, choose your questions wisely. You only get five," Argos advises, lifting up his free hand and splaying all five fingers to emphasize his statement. "You can go first, Sheriff."

Alright. Moment of truth. **Literally.**

"Who are you really?"

"Simple enough..."

Emma holds her breath.

"I am me," Argos replies smoothly, getting out of that one with practiced ease.

**Shit.** Emma mentally kicks herself. That gamble blew right at her face. Alright, maybe trying to outsmart a slippery criminal at his own game isn't the best way to go about things. If Regina were here, she'd be cackling her ass off at Emma's blunder. Maybe — just **maybe** — there is a smidgen of truth behind the whole Charming idiocy thing.

"Ah, Sheriff," Argos sighs and clicks his tongue in reproach. "Question number one, utterly wasted. I told you, you'll get my name at the end of our game if you just be honest with yours truly. No need for underhanded tactics, it's cute and all, but it won't work. Now, ask better questions, okay? Start with my top five bands or something. Just saying, I'm sure you'll find the answer to things like who I think is the fairest in all of Storybrooke pretty darn enlightening. Who knows, it might even blow your mind..."

Well, she's definitely not wasting her four remaining questions on **that** inane query. She's learned her lesson. Emma clears her throat and starts again. "Alright, what is—"

"Uh—uh. My turn," Argos interrupts, wagging a gloved finger at her. And in a voice tailor–made for low–rent pornography, he murmurs gruffly: "What kind of underwear are you wearing? Specify the material, please."

"I'm not going to answer that," Emma glowers at the masked man. She expected no less from him, but still... ugh, **fucking pervert.**

"Really? Then the game's over. No prize for you."

A pair of exhausted green eyes look up to the roof of the cruiser in despair, wishing somebody — **anybody** — would wake her up from this damn nightmare. **God,** the indignities she has to suffer for this thankless job of hers. It feels like a personal betrayal, but she decides to go with it anyway. Emma pinches the bridge of her nose, inhales a deep breath, and weakly mumbles: "Thong. Cotton
"Nice," Argos hums in approval. Emma shudders appropriately, her skin crawling in disgust.

She might not like it, but if he wants to keep his questions on the side of filth, then that's entirely up to him. At least on her end, Emma's determined to keep this moronic game strictly professional. In her head: she's the Sheriff, doing her job and interrogating a crafty thief who just happens to have an unfortunate obsession with her. Thinking of it like it's all business definitely helps with the nausea. Once again, Emma clears her throat.

"On the day of the break–in, there was a spell cast at the clearing behind the mansion — as I'm sure you know, it caused a fissure to break out in the forest. Was that you?"

"Yes," Argos answers. "And no."

"Answer properly."

"I did."

"You didn't."

"I swear, I did."

"Listen, asshole. No riddles, no mind–fucks," Emma growls, feeling her forehead throbbing in irritation. "Give me a straight answer."

To add to her growing frustration, Argos responds with a throaty chuckle. Apparently, her annoyance is amusing. Well, he won't find it as hilarious when she fires her shotgun and blows his balls right off his crotch when her patience finally runs out. Thankfully, his laughter dies down after a moment; as soon as silence fills the line, the exasperating man does the smart thing and finally comes clean.

"Yes, I was at the clearing," he admits quietly. "But no, I didn't cast that spell."

"Then who did?"

"That's another question, Sheriff," the man points out. "You should have been more specific with your question. Though, for what it's worth, I'm sorry for all the trouble we indirectly caused — you know, cyclops and all. Now, your thong, what color is it?"

"Seriously?" Emma groans, increasingly put–off — if that's even possible at this point in time. "Purple," she grumbles.

"Bold choice," Argos lauds, giving her a thumbs up. She fights the urge to barf. "Now, aren't you glad we got rid of all the virginal white ones? They were ugly."

"They were comfy," Emma snaps. "Besides, I didn't get rid of them. You did that by stealing them, you perv."

"I know, you're welcome, by the way."

Emma rolls her eyes. Bastard. "Who cast the spell at the clearing and was he or she also responsible for bringing the wraith back to Storybrooke?"

"Sheriff, a bit overzealous, are we? Those are two questions..."
"But asked in one breath," Emma smartly points out, donning a proud little smirk. "So, forget the technicalities and answer the damn question."

"Questions. With an 's'," Argos stresses. "Not fair."

"Oh, now you're a stickler for rules?" she mocks. "You pride yourself on being an outlaw, so stop being a tight-ASS and just answer the frickin' question."

"Questions," Argos corrects yet again. "But fine, since you're being so bossy, a furry friend of mine cast the spell at the clearing," he indulges, answering the question but still remaining cryptic as hell. "As for the wraith... well, in my friend's defense, he didn't bring the mother-sucker to this world. He was actually trying to get rid of it."

Huh. Well, that certainly raised more questions (and she only had two left). Emma chews on her bottom lip, her mind racing, trying to absorb that crucial piece of information. Furry friend? Probably a dual-natured shifter. Or, you know, a hairy dude. Capable of performing magic? She'd have to ask Regina and the fairy nuns about that. But, if Argos is to be believed, his "friend" didn't summon the wraith back to Storybrooke — so who did?

"Sheriff?" Argos calls out, waving an arm out to catch her attention. Emma shakes her head and pulls out of her own thoughts. How long had she zoned out?

"You didn't answer my question..."

"I didn't hear it," Emma admits, running a tired hand down her face. "My right ear's bullshit filter finally seems to be working..." she mutters beneath her breath, switching her phone to her left ear. "You said something?"

"Yes," Emma smiles wanly. "Not my fault you weren't listening. Now, why don't you just hit me with another one of your stupid questions so I can get to asking mine?"

"Alright," Argos grounds out, sounding more amused by her huffy attitude than anything else. And to continue with his nasty line of questioning, he doles out another winner (which, ironically enough, doesn't bother her as much — probably cause her mind's still trying to wrap itself around his recent revelation): "That blue dildo I saw in your dresser, the next time you use it, who are you going to fantasize about?"

Oh, that's easy, she thinks absentmindedly, even though it feels like months since she last pleasured herself. Her fantasy lover? It's almost usually the hot, insanely attractive person that she last laid eyes on; so, during her next wank night, she's guessing that the last one she'll probably see before going down to her room in the basement is—

Uh... oh...

Her brain fizzles out.

"Who?"

A furious red tint erupts on Emma's cheeks; she doesn't have to look at the rearview mirror to know that her face is the color of Reg—uh... someone's apples.

"Sheriff?" the relentless bastard prods. "Who?"

"A, uh, a, um... a friend," she coughs out, the word sticking to her throat like icky phlegm. He's not
the only who’s clever enough to evade a query while managing to still say the truth.

"Friend?"

"Frenemy," Emma corrects after a beat, in a voice so tiny she practically just says it to herself. But of course, Argos and his superhuman hearing catch it anyway.

"I don't suppose you can give me the name of this frenemy of yours?" the sneaky bastard tries to fish. "Starts with an 'A', ends with an 'S'?", he guesses hopefully, earning the loudest scoff in Emma's arsenal. Undeterred, the annoying clown tries again. "Or... does it start with an 'Evil' and end with a 'Queen'?"

Emma's lips form a tight line. "Those are three questions, perv. Maybe you should've been more specific with your question," she lets out through gritted teeth, giving him a dose of his own medicine. "My turn," she says curtly, ready to fire off a query of her own — and change the topic too. But, before she can do so, a peculiar sight grabs her attention — knocking the words out of her mouth and rendering her mute with curiosity.

In a blink of an eye, Argos had unsheathed his sword.

Not the teensy one in his pants, thank God, but the one that's strapped to his back ninja-style. Yeah, it's the very same sword that slurped a wraith into oblivion, and, allegedly also has the power to cut her car in half. Emma tilts her head to the side and studies the newly unveiled weapon with squinted eyes. The blade, glinting under the light from the faulty lamppost, doesn't really seem that threatening from a distance. It looks just like a regular sword — much like her father's. Argos was probably just pulling her leg a while ago, she muses. Heck, even lightsabers don't have energy shockwave-producing capabilities — and Jedi swords are the ultimate in badass weaponry.

Moving with a strange urgency, Argos haphazardly tucks Leroy's cellphone inside the breast pocket of his leather jacket, and, like a batter on a baseball field, grips the hilt of his sword with both hands and takes a quick swing.

And from that one swing, a green light erupts and a mass of energy hurtles across the street like a frickin' tidal wave.

Emma lets out a mousy little yelp and almost jumps out of her skin in surprise.

The green mass hits the rose bush on Mrs. Walter's front lawn and immediately incinerates it. In a nanosecond, there's nothing left but smoldering ash.

Jesus effin' Christ.

Now that was a burning bush.

Emma gapes at the carnage, her unhinged jaw dangling uselessly on her lap.

As if he hadn't just butchered a beautiful — and utterly defenseless — rose bush, Argos ever so casually replaces the sword back in its sheath and pulls the cellphone out from his pocket.

"Sorry 'bout that," he apologizes, walking back to the lamppost and leaning lazily against it. He offers a careless shrug. "There was a rat."

It takes a moment or two for Emma to finally snap her mouth shut and shake herself free from her daze. "Overkill, much?" she mutters disapprovingly, looking at the smoky remnants in the distance with a scandalized grimace.
"You didn't see how huge it was; I thought it was a fucking cat. If you were in my shoes, Sheriff, you probably would've done the exact same thing."

"Oh, hell no," Emma emphatically denies, finding her entire body shuddering involuntarily — a shiver running from the top of her head to the tips of her toes. Kill a rat? *Please.* She'd probably just piss herself and run away in fright. Not that she would ever admit to that, of course.

"Ah, whatever. One less rat in the world," Argos gives out another flippant shrug, as if his extreme knee-jerk reaction didn't just betray the hilarious truth that he seems to be frightened of rats as much as she is — perhaps even more so. Even Henry wouldn't have reacted that way, and the kid was deathly scared of rodents and spiders. Emma wants to laugh at Argos' face, but he speaks up before she can even open her mouth.

"Your question, Sheriff?" he asks, moving things along.

Emma falls silent. After that disquieting display of anti–vermin aggression — which she suspects is mostly due to Argos being a sissy, but also partly to show–off — she knows she has no choice but to file away her original question about the identity of the man's furry friend in favor of something else. Namely, that bush–burning, wraith–sucking, vermin–exterminating sword. The mere presence of it in her town is troubling; the fact that an unpredictable and utterly crafty criminal is wielding it is even more alarming. Difficult as it is to admit, turns out the tiny voice in her head was right about staying inside the car. It would have been foolish to engage the man in any sort of physical confrontation tonight — with or without backup. Even with her deputies here, there's a huge chance they'd all end up like Mrs. Walter's rose bush — smoking, ashen, and totally *nonexistent.*

Cold sweat peppers the back of Emma's neck as she acknowledges one sad, harsh truth. The only way to get anywhere near the mysterious thief is to find a way to neutralize that sword. Which is, frankly, easier said than done.

She thumps the back of her head on the headrest, biting back an aggravated growl. Why does it always have to be so complicated? Why can't things ever be easy? Not only does she have to find a way to outwit a cunning criminal, now, she has to contend with his powerful, magical sword as well.

Emma bites her lower lip, eyes glazing in deep thought. *Powerful, magical sword...*

And, as if a light had just been switched on in her head, something Regina had said to her the other night starts resonating in Emma's mind. According to her royal majesty, in places like the Enchanted Forest and Wonderland, it was common practice to bestow the most extraordinary of weapons with a name for which it will forever be known in either fame or infamy. Only the most powerful swords in existence were given the privilege — prime examples of which are the legendary Excalibur and the Vorpal sword. Regina, with Emma's help, had been scouring the old books in her study for information about Argos' sword — after all, the more they knew about the enemy, the better prepared they'd be. However, they only had Emma's description of its hilt — and the fact that the blade sucked in a wraith — to go by, which honestly, wasn't much. They haven't had any breakthroughs; discovered nothing of substance. But... if they knew its name, then...

"That sword of yours," Emma sits up abruptly, green eyes zeroing in on weapon sticking out of the man's back. "What's it called? I want its name."

"This old thing?" Argos asks, clutching the hilt and running his hand slowly up and down its length like he's stroking his—*no.* Just no. "Interesting that you should ask. Why do you want to know?"

"I'm the one asking questions here. Stop deflecting and just give me a damn answer."
"A bit impatient, aren't we?" Argos teases, drawing out the sword one more time. Ever so carefully, he lowers the weapon until its blade is pointing in Emma's direction; unconsciously, she places a hand over the pistol on her lap. "Not sure if you can see it from all the way over there, but there are twin serpents forming the sword's hilt. So, I call it Goldie — after the biggest snake I've come across in my entire life. That said, I believe it's famously, well, infamously known in another world as the 'Sword of Ashe'."

"Ash? Like all that's left of Mrs. Walter's bush?"

Argos snorts in amusement. As if talking to a child, he spells it out for her benefit: "A–S–H–E," he says, not even bothering to hide the condescension in his tone. "Let me guess, you're going to do some research about it with your girlfriend?" he taunts, allowing the blonde one last opportunity to take a good look at the sword before putting it back in its scabbard.

"You sound worried..." Emma coos, taunting right back, pointedly ignoring the baiting girlfriend remark. "Afraid we'd find a way to destroy your precious little sword?"

"Not at all," he snorts loudly, acting all undaunted and cocksure. Whether it's just a front or the real deal, Emma can't tell. "I want you to read as much as you can about it so you'd know for yourself how powerful it is. There is nothing in this town, heck, in this world, that can best this sword of mine. It's that special; it's one of a kind," he boasts.

"Uh–huh. We'll see about that," she answers back, always up for a challenge.

"Yeah? Well, I wish you luck, Sheriff. You're going to need it, believe me."

"I don't need luck," Emma scoffs. "I have guns, deputies and an Evil Queen. The latter, alone, is worth ten frickin' Goldies. I'll find a way to beat you, just wait and see."

"Forgive me if I don't hold my breath," Argos yawns, feigning boredom. "Now, I believe it's my turn. Are you a top or a bottom?"

"Both. I'm versatile," she answers quickly, not even giving it much thought. Without waiting to hear his predictably lewd reaction, she fires off her last question. The one that's been eating at her for days on end; the one that kept her awake more than she would like to admit: "Why did you come and save me from the wraith?"

And just like that, the mood of the conversation turns from crass and snarky to broody and dark. The wonky street lamp continues to flicker atop Argos' head, giving the man an eerie, almost–sinister glow. The visual is haunting, but his voice even more so. "What are you talking about? I didn't come to save you," he mutters, deep and dangerous; his tone losing the playful quality it had possessed just a few seconds ago.

"Bullshit, I may have been sputtering out blood like a human fountain that night, but I know what I saw. You were there," Emma insists, ignoring the cold chill that suddenly runs down her spine. And for the first time since the attack, Emma second guesses herself. No, she clenches her jaws tight. She hadn't been hallucinating, she's damn sure of it. "I saw you."

"I know you did."

"Your sword sucked in the wraith."

"It might've..." he plays coy.
"It did," she asserts. "So, stop playing dumb and answer my question."

"I already did."

"No, you didn't. Why did you save me?" Emma pushes, not willing to let the bastard off the hook that easily.

He doesn't answer right away. Instead, he pushes himself off the lamppost and starts rocking back and forth on the heel of his boots, one hand holding Leroy's stolen cellphone and the other tucked inside the pocket of his trousers. Emma doesn't push, and in spite of her growing impatience, she waits.

"I got rid of the wraith for reasons that are currently beyond your comprehension," he admits after a moment. "So, turn on that lie-detector of yours and listen closely, Sheriff," Argos murmurs, his calm voice chillingly foreboding, and ever so slowly, he enunciates his next words, "I. Didn't. Come. To. Save. You."

No alarm bells go off. No telling pings. No lies. Just the truth.

_Huh._ Emma leans back into her seat, trying to soak that in.

She's so wrapped up in her own thoughts that she barely sees Argos walking back to his bike. It's only when he settles into his seat that she finally notices that he's once again cloaked in darkness and shrouded in shadows; ironically enough, his barely perceptible outline is far less sinister than actually seeing him illuminated. Emma takes a deep breath and forces herself to focus on the present, she'll have time to mull over things later — granted that he actually keeps his word and leaves her alone when their little game is done.

"You know, I have to mention," Argos starts, sounding somewhat contemplative. He leans forward and rests his arms on the handlebars of his ride. "For a cop, you're not really good at interrogating people, are you? Just saying, you didn't even ask me where my super secret hideout is..."

Emma scoffs. She's not _that_ much of a moron, there's a reason why she didn't ask. "Would you have answered that question?"

"Of course."

"But would you have given me a straight answer?"

Argos hums. "Define 'straight'..."

"Your _exact_ address."

"Oh. Then... yes."

"Uh–huh. But, let me guess, you're going to move to a new place before I make a raid?"

The man has the balls to laugh.

"Thought so," Emma snorts, unimpressed. She's been sidetracked by a lot of things these past few weeks, but starting tomorrow, she'll put her years of bounty hunting to good use and track the fucker down. She's going to find out where he lives, and she'll do it on her own terms. That's the only way she'll manage to get him by surprise.

"Date's almost over," he says sadly, letting out an exaggerated sigh. "One question left..."
"Thank God."

"Don't drop the ball, Sheriff. Remember, be honest."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever," Emma waves a hand and swats away his advice like it's a pesky bug, wanting the guy to hurry along. "Get on with it..."

She's expecting to get a question about her favorite sexual position... maybe her kinks in the bedroom... or heck, how many lovers she's had (for the record, she stopped counting after that drunken mess of an orgy she had when she was twenty, and she could never remember if there were four girls or five — or if she had just hallucinated the whole damn thing). She's prepared for the dirtiest, most offensive question he could possibly lobby at her; frankly, she just wants to get this over with so she can claim her "prize" and get the bastard's name.

So, whatever he can come up with, she's ready for it.

"Since we were on the topic of saving people, last week, why did you risk your life to try and save her?"

It takes a few seconds for his words to register in her brain, but when they did, Emma's eyebrows immediately lift. Alright, she wasn't ready for that. There's nothing remotely lewd about it at all. His question is missing its key components — mainly: gross, vulgar, rude and crude. Still, it's a somewhat pleasant surprise — if not more than a little perplexing. "That's your question?" she clarifies.

"Yes," he affirms almost silently. "She's the Evil Queen, the town pariah. Some would even say that you would've done Storybrooke a huge favor by letting her die. So... why did you do it?"

"Easy enough. "Because I promised my son that I'd always protect his mother," she says simply, leaving it at that. Well, she was planning on ending it on that note, but Emma just couldn't help herself and adds, "Just so we're clear, this town wouldn't be better off without her. I mean, just ask the goblins, the trolls and that effin' cyclops — oh wait, you can't, cause they're all dead. You can thank Regina and her wonky ass magic for that, you jerk."

Argos goes deathly quiet.

And with that, their weird little game finally comes to an end.

"Alright, we're done," Emma expels a relieved breath. Finally. Good thing too, since her cellphone just gave out a beep, warning her that its battery is almost running out of juice. "Now tell me your name," she demands.

"I'm sorry..." he murmurs. "But, no."

"No?" Emma frowns, going absolutely still.

"No."

"No?"

"No."

It takes another second for it to sink in. And when it does, anger kicks in.

"No!" she cries out in disbelief, feeling her entire body shaking and pulsating with outrage. It
wouldn't be surprising if her cellphone suddenly breaks in half from her grip. "What the hell?! Tell me your fucking name, you asshole. I endured your shitty, annoying questions. I answered all of them honestly."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I fucking did!"

Argos shakes his head. "Not the last one."

The line between her brows deepens to an almost painful degree. "Bullshit," she snarls. "I tried to save Regina because I promised Henry I'd watch his mom's back. That wasn't a fucking lie!"

"Maybe not," Argos concedes, all calm and zen–like, as if she hadn't just been screeching in his ears and dropping the f–bomb on his ass. "But that wasn't the truth, either."

The asswipe is not making a lick of sense, and Emma is just tired of his bullshit, tired of his cockiness, tired of his creepy behavior — and just plain tired, in general — that she runs her fingers through her blonde tresses and almost yanks out a fistful of her hair in frustration. "That wasn't the truth?" she grits out, bursting with spite.

"It wasn't."

"And just how the hell would you know?!"

"Told you, I have a great gut instinct."

"Gut instinct?" Emma repeats, letting out an incredulous little laugh. That's just precious, she thinks, before promptly sobering up and spitting out a scathing: "Well, then, allow me to rip your gut out to show you how much it frickin' stinks!"

Argos lets out a long-suffering sigh — as if he's the aggravated party and not her. "You may not have lied," he says slowly, talking in such a way that reminds Emma of the patronizing guidance teachers who used to lecture her back in high school. "But like I've said, you weren't being truly honest either."

"And you're still not making any effin' sense!" she growls, her fingers just itching to throttle his neck. "You know what I think? I think you're just nitpicking and finding fault in nothing because you don't really want to tell me who the hell you are. You're a coward and you want an out. What, you scared to be unmasked?"

"No," he says roughly, sounding nearly as exasperated with her as she is with him. "More than anything, I want to tell you — hell, show you — who I am behind this mask. But, you need to earn it. So, answer me this: did you tell me the truth? Or, did you only just tell me the part of the truth that you want yourself to see? Cause those are two very different things."

"What the hell are you even talking about?" Emma finds herself sputtering, utterly lost. She was being honest. His question had been simple enough that she felt no need to lie or perform a clever bit of wordplay to conceal anything. He demanded honesty and she complied. So, what the hell? "I earned that frickin' prize. So do me a solid and stop being a pompous dick and just give me a name."

"And you'll have it, I promise, if you just answer that last question honestly. The moment you do, you'll know who I am. You have my word."
"Your word is worth shit."

"Better worth shit than nothing at all," he declares, unrepentant as sin.

"I earned it," Emma insists. "Pay up."

"No, you didn't," Argos begs to differ. "So, I won't."

Emma breathes long and deep through her nose, trying to get a grip on her emotions. Despite her efforts, she still ends up seething anyway. "I don't know what else you want from me. You wanted the truth, I gave it to you. Pay the hell up."

"I told you, no. You know what? Think of the truth as some sort of pizza. When you order a whole pie, will you pay for it if they deliver a box containing only two fucking slices? No. You won't. Cause you asked for the whole damn thing, not a portion of it. My gut told me that you didn't even give me a tiny slice of that pizza — you just threw a piece of topping my way. Unacceptable."

"Seriously, what the fuck are you even saying?" Emma cuts in, puzzled as hell. "And why are we talking about pizza?"

"I'm just saying, I want my pizza, Sheriff, not a crummy piece of pepperoni."

Emma screws her eyes shut and pinches the bridge of her nose, counting to ten in her head. She's going to lose it in a moment.

"Look, I don't care that, in your head, one piece of pepperoni is the whole damn pie. I asked for something, you failed to deliver. Plain and simple," he continues talking gibberish; which accomplishes absolutely nothing but confuses Emma even more. Without preamble, he kickstarts his motorcycle and lets it roar to life. Compensating for the ruckus made by the rumbling engine, he raises his voice (and breaks her eardrums) as he says, "I get my pie, you get your payment. So, for now, good night, Sheriff Swan. I had fun, I hope you did too. I'll be seeing you around, alright? Have a safe walk home, be careful, lots of seedy characters lurking in the shadows."

"Wha...? W–wait–" Emma splutters. "We're not done here. Don't you dare leave me hanging, you ass!"

Naturally, Emma's protests go unnoticed — because her phone chooses that moment to die on her. The masked man revs his loud–ass motorcycle enough times to warrant a noise complaint from one of the houses on the street. He switches on his headlights, chucks Leroy's poor cellphone to the wayside, and finally, after much fanfare, makes his grand exit. Of course, he has the audacity to give a gaping Emma an exaggerated salute when he rides past her car and disappears into the night.

Emma just sits motionless in her cruiser, a dead phone pressed to her ear, looking like a fool — and feeling like a humongous one too.

She's just been duped. The Sheriff of Storybrooke, the White Knight, the Savior of all fairytale folk, has just been bested by a panty thief. Truly, not one of her proudest moments.

Her cellphone is burning so hot that it's almost a big relief when she finally lets it drop to her lap. Her throbbing forehead feels like it's on fire too. Emma blames the asshole for the fact that she's now developing a migraine. And, also, a sudden craving for pepperoni pizza.

Crap.

Emma rubs her face with her hands and groans, wrestling down the temptation to thump her head
repeatedly on the steering wheel. It's now a quarter past twelve. She won't be able to call Michael
and have him change the tires on the cruiser until his garage opens at nine. The only thing Emma can
do right now is head to the station and get her Bug. Like it or not, she still has a town to patrol. A
run–in with the town perv is not a good enough excuse to cut her shift short. However, the station is
a good forty–minute walk from where she is, and not only is it freezing out, she'd have to trek it with
her guns in tow (the pistol is fine, but the shotgun will be a pain to lug around). Her leg muscles
spasm at the thought. Emma sighs. She can always radio August to pick her up on his motorcycle —
but she hesitates, briefly, cause the thought of appearing like a damsel in distress has always chafed
at her ass. Of course, after a few moments of deliberation, practicality wins over pride. Even a White
Knight needs assistance from time to time.

With a resigned breath, Emma reaches for her walkie–talkie, grabs it by the antenna and pulls the
gadget from under the pile of junk. A frown instantly mars her face. Odd, her radio is feeling three
times lighter in her grasp. Emma flips it around, and, surprise surprise, finds its batteries missing. Her
jaws tighten in reflex, throat constricting at the sight. Inside the compartment where the battery pack
used to be, now lies a tiny lilac and a hastily scribbled note the size of those found in fortune cookies.
The penmanship is so illegible that it was either written by a toddler or a crafty bastard using his
non–dominant hand. It takes a while, but she finally makes out what it says...

>You really should lock your car. Wouldn't hurt to clean it, too. Just saying.

And, just like that, all she can see is red. Argos got the better of her — again. Sure, she got the name
of his sword and survived the encounter with all of her limbs still attached, but it's easier to gloss over
such small victories when her failings feel more significant and infinitely disheartening. Failure
gnaws at her insides until all she can see is her glaring ineptitude; and after months of playing Sheriff,
she's reminded of how helpless and inadequate she still feels.

"Fuck!" Emma howls, balling her hands into fists and taking her frustration out on the steering wheel
— over and over and over again. The ferocious nine–punch combo she delivers sends violent
vibrations rippling across her arms, flowing down her body till even the car seems to be shaking
along with her. It might've been an ill–advised thing to do, but it feels good to let it out, to vent her
anger. On the flip side, the crunching sound that accompanies her last punch is not nearly as
therapeutic as she might've hoped.

Oh... shit.

"Ouch..." she whimpers, holding her right hand close to her chest. Carefully, and almost fearfully,
Emma runs a trembling finger over her quickly reddening knuckles. She hisses in a breath. Yep...
broken, alright. Now she's got something that matches well with her shattered pride. Just... perfect.

Argos escaped without giving her his name. The rear tires of her cruiser are slashed. Her Bug is
parked two miles away. She can't radio or call any of her deputies. And, to top it all off, her hand is
hurting like a bitch.

Truly, when it rains, it pours.

Expletives, too, that is.

"Fuck fuck fuck fuck fucking fuck fuck fuck fuck shit fuck fucking fuck shit fucking fuck shit fucking fuck!

Argos – 2, Emma – 0.

"Fuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu
At the end of it all, personal suffering trumps police duty.

At least, tonight it does.

Thanks to her impromptu — and, admittedly, misguided — attempt at blowing off steam, her right hand is all messed up. Not only has Emma's skin turned a furious shade of crimson, but her poor knuckles are also swelling worse than Leroy's bladder after happy hour at Granny's. She's barely walked two whole blocks when the stabbing ache gets a little too unbearable for her taste. Sure, Emma's experienced worse—last week's wraith attack had tested and bested her threshold for pain like no other—but without adrenaline and fear pumping through her veins, she had nothing to distract her from feeling, well, everything. All she can think about is how much her hand frickin' hurts. So, it's not surprising that when she reaches the intersection of Church and Main, she opts to head north instead of east where the Sheriff's Department is located. The mansion is closer than the station. It's a no brainer, she's going home. She needs an Advil and an ice pack — and if the ogre-sized hand she's sporting is any indication, she needs them stat.

It must've been quite a sight — Emma Swan, the famed White Knight, freezing her ass off as she drags her heavy feet back home, armed to the teeth with a pistol, a shotgun, a nightstick and a kick-ass switchblade. If not for the fact that she's clutching her swollen hand close to her heart like a wounded child—and pouting like one to boot—one might think she's on her way to a battle and gearing up for a fight.

The house is pitch black when she finally lets herself in through the hatch that leads to the basement. Knowing her beloved cubbyhole like the back of her hand, she doesn't bother switching on the lights, confident in her ability to maneuver through the dark. Of course, because she's her and clumsiness is embedded in her core programming the same way stubbornness is, Emma ends up bumping into a few boxes of Henry's old toys anyway. They're properly sealed, so nothing spills out when they tumble to the floor, but that doesn't stop the toys from clattering inside. Emma flinches and freezes in place for a few moments, listening for tell-tale signs of movement from upstairs. She hears none. Thank goodness. She doesn't break anything — or injure herself some more — but she does succeed in making enough noise to wake the dead (and by dead, she means herself — cause that's what she's going to be if her lumbering disturbs Regina's slumber).

After a breathy exhale, Emma heads on over to her room and starts divesting herself of her many weapons — careful not to use, or hit, her wrecked hand. Despite her best efforts, the shotgun's strap hits her disfigured knuckles anyway, and she may or may not have let out a string of very imaginative words that would've made even a pirate blush. It takes a moment for Emma to center herself, and when she finally succeeds, she grabs her cellphone charger and guns straight up the stairs leading to the kitchen — anxious to give her hand the care it deserves (and currently demands).

Even in the dark, the bottle of Advil is easy enough to find. Regina, ever the sly — and, sorta, considerate — witch, makes it a point to keep an assortment of painkillers on the shelf beside Emma's fun time buddies — Jack, Jim, and Johnny. Emma wastes no time, popping in two tablets at once and sticking her mouth under the faucet, gulping water straight from the tap. It may not be an elegant way to go about it, but hey, it gets the job done, so, whatever.

Next on her agenda: cold compress.

If black dots weren't peppering her vision because of the pins and needles sensation in her hand, Emma swears that she would've taken the time to rummage through the drawers in search of the elusive ice pack. Emma doesn't have the luxury of time to go hunting — well, she does, but propriety doesn't take precedence over injury, in her opinion — so she settles for the next best thing and pulls out a big ol' piece of raw steak from the freezer. It's disgusting, but at least it won't thaw as easily as
Her fingers go painfully numb just from carrying the frozen meat to the table where she left her phone charging, but Emma sucks in a breath and braves through the icy torture. She parks herself on her usual seat, and, ever so slowly, places the steak over her trembling hand. The guttural sound that leaves her throat doesn't sound human at all — nor does the succeeding moans that immediately follow. It kinda feels like heaven and hell are merging together on her skin — the constant interchange between pain and relief toying with her senses and making her feel lightheaded. It's soothing, if not a little tormenting.

"Oh God..." she lets out a shuddery breath, falling forward and resting her head against the wooden table.

The surface feels cool against her face, and she gives out another low moan of approval. Emma doesn't know how much of a ruckus she makes during the next few minutes, but it must've been quite a remarkable display of groaning, moaning and heavy breathing, cause the next thing she knows, the pin light above her head flicks on and Emma's head shoots up, her throat constricting mid–moan.

A sleep–rumpled Regina — hair all tousled and looking mighty ho–uh... fi–um... crap, she looks alright — is standing by the doorway, one hand over the light switch, gaping at her as if she's just caught Emma eating her not–so–secret stash of chocolate eclairs. For a moment, nobody moves or even dares to breathe.

It's the brunette who gathers her bearings first. With the briefest of head shakes, Regina's nimble fingers work quickly on tying her silk robe around her body, concealing tonight's skimpy black nightie from a pair of dilated pupils. Pulled out of her stupor, a blushing Emma snaps her gaze to Regina's face and nails it there.

"What on earth are you doing home?" Regina frowns, voice rough with the remnants of sleep. Her eyes narrow as they find their way down to Emma's hand. "And what are you doing with that sirloin?"

"Um, tenderizing it?"

Regina's nostrils flare, clearly unamused by her pathetic attempt at levity. She rewards Emma's sheepish little smile with an eyebrow raise. "Miss Swan, that piece of meat you've just debauched is supposed to be tomorrow's dinner."

The said meat shifts a little over to the side, scraping against her inflamed skin.

"Oh, awesome, we're having steak?" Emma says airily, swallowing back a pained wince.

"After you've fornicated with it? I would think not."

"Huh? I wasn't fornicating with anything."

"Your cacophonous moaning, my dear, points to the contrary."

The blonde flushes accordingly. "I swear, I wasn't—"

"Quiet, Miss Swan," Regina cuts her off, bossy and intimidating as ever. "I know what I heard."

"I told you, I wasn't screwing your steak. I was..."
Emma exhales wearily and closes her mouth. Sometimes, it's better to show than tell. Her bruised knuckles protest painfully when she moves away her beefy ice pack, but she lifts her hand up anyway. The lightning–fast transition from irritation to almost–indiscernible concern on Regina's face is quite remarkable, and, ultimately, *intriguing*. To Emma's astonishment, Regina bridges the distance between them in just a few strides, and before Emma can open her mouth to say *ouch*, her hand is already being held and inspected by the other woman.

Caught off–guard, Emma bites the insides of her cheeks, pooling her dwindling strength into keeping her expression completely stoic. It's not an easy feat. Regina's not manhandling her injured extremity, thank goodness, but her all–too–gentle treatment of it is almost as disconcerting, to say the least.

So, she sits there quietly, trying not to stare too much at the pronounced line between Regina's brows. When her mangled hand quakes, Emma blames it on her reddened skin's sensitivity, and not the soft fingers lightly brushing against her swollen knuckles.

"Flex your fingers," Regina orders in a tone that brokered no argument. Like an obedient puppy, Emma complies — and, promptly, sucks in a breath through her teeth. The frown on Regina's face deepens at the sight of the blonde's unmoving middle finger. Emma, too, makes a face at said digit — *crap*, did her finger always bend that way?

"I'm not fingering you, honest," Emma kids, grinning lopsidedly. Her eyes widen instantaneously. "I–I mean," she splutters. "I'm not giving you the finger. The bird. The whatever. I'm just, I'm uh, I'm *not*. Okay?"

Regina gives her an inscrutable look but says nothing. Mortified, Emma clamps her lips shut and shrivels in her seat. Why does she always seem to say the most inappropriate things in front of this woman? Her foot–in–mouth disease never manifests itself this badly — and *consistently* — with other people. Emma bites back a sigh. Whatever it is, there's something about Regina that seems to draw out the verbally clumsy (well, *clumsier*) oaf in her — and, frankly, it sucks.

Emma swallows visibly, fidgeting in her seat, feeling more than slightly awkward. Regina, however, is still the face of calm. "So, uh, why are you up at this hour? Can't sleep?"

"I *was* asleep, Miss Swan. Blissfully resting, I might add. But I was rudely woken up by the sound of, what I initially suspected was, a wild animal breaking into my home and engaging in obscene masturbatory practices in *my* kitchen. I went down to investigate and, you can just imagine my surprise, Sheriff, when I switched on the lights and discovered that I was *right*." Now, that's just rude.

"An animal?" Emma lifts a brow.

"Yes."

"You're just pulling my leg..." she accuses. "I'm sure I didn't sound like one."

"I beg to differ," Regina looks down her nose at the blonde. "I may have been drowsy, Miss Swan, but I'm not deaf."

"Wait, are you *really* serious?" Emma sits up, genuinely concerned. "Which animal are we talking about here? Like, an angry gorilla or a hungry cat? Cause those two are *very*, very different things. I mean, mad gorillas sound possessed and mewling cats can be grating to the ears, and–"

"Shush."
Emma shuts her mouth.

It takes another moment before Regina finishes her silent scrutiny. Despite taking her sweet time, Regina doesn't do her magic thing and heal the damage — a telling sign that Emma's about to get an earful. But, maybe sleepiness is really clouding the woman's head, because instead of carelessly dropping Emma's hand and letting it fall where it may, Regina takes Emma by surprise once again by setting it down gently. The brunette makes her way around the table, and with all the grace that Emma seems to lack, primly sits herself across the blonde. True to form, Regina takes a moment to adjust her robe and primp herself, and, with a careless flick at an errant lock of hair, the brunette shoots her an indescribable look. "For the record, you sounded like a dying wildebeest."

Emma sighs and places the steak back on her hand. That's better than a laughing hyena, she supposes.

"Three broken knuckles and a dislocated finger..." Regina says, a tinge of disapproval — and something else Emma couldn't place — in her tone. "Nicely done, princess. You've somehow managed to last two whole days before, inevitably, injuring yourself once again. Tell me, Miss Swan, do you really feel a perverse sense of satisfaction whenever you experience pain? The way I perceive it, you must either be the town's biggest masochist or its biggest idiot. As you may very well know, I am leaning towards the latter."

"In my defense," Emma confidently pipes in, raising a finger.

"What?"

Her mind draws a blank. Crap. "...I have no defense." Emma finishes lamely, deflating.

Regina rolls her eyes.

"Sheriff, whose face should be exalted for having the pleasure of breaking your fist?"

"Nobody's," Emma mutters, refusing to meet Regina's questioning gaze.

"You're lying."

"I'm really not," she sighs sourly, feeling the pathetic urge to laugh and cry at the same time. Ah, the irony of it all. "God, I wish I was, but I'm not, I swear."

"Then, enlighten me, how did you manage to mangle that hand of yours?"

"I'm sorry, your highness, but a lady never kisses and tells..."

"A lady?" Regina lets out a rather loud, undignified snort. Emma would've been insulted if she hadn't found it absurd as well. "Pick another excuse, Miss Swan. This time, aim for something remotely believable."

"Uh... it's a secret? Official police business and all," she smiles hopefully, willing Regina to leave the matter be.

Yeah, no such luck. As if Regina Mills, with her obsessive personality, can ever let anything go. "Maybe I should leave you to your suffering to teach you a lesson? I'm not healing you until you confess, princess."

That's the kicker; the magic word: healing. The thought of getting an instant reprieve from the numbing pain is just too enticing so, even if the truth is utterly humiliating, Emma decides to swallow
her pride and spill the beans. It's not like she still has an ounce of pride left after the evening she's had, anyway.

"I had a, uh, I guess, a run–in with a cunning jackass tonight, it didn't end well and I may have taken out my frustration on the cruiser..." is the mumbled confession. Still unable to make eye–contact, she adds in a mousy, "I, um, went all Million Dollar Baby on the steering wheel. Got a bit carried away, that's all."

She chances a quick look at the quiet brunette. Arms folded on her chest, Regina looks unimpressed, her expression painfully passive as ever. "And just what did this quote–unquote jackass do to elicit such a violent — and, unsurprisingly, moronic — reaction from a neanderthal like you?"

Emma blows out a puff of air from her lips, feeling the stress of the evening bearing down onto her shoulders. "Let's see," she starts, lifting her good hand so she can use her fingers to count each of her stalker's many personal slights. "One, he stole Leroy's phone and used it to harass me... two, he kinda threatened to cleave the patrol car in half with his sword — while I was in it, I might add... three, he slashed the tires on said patrol car so I had no choice but to walk about a mile and a half home in the cold... four, he broke into the car and stole the frickin' batteries of my walkie–talkie so I couldn't radio my deputies for help... and, lastly, he promised me something and then duped me and left me hanging like an idiot," she finishes, waving the five fingers she now had up, looking and feeling weary as hell. "Oh, by the way, for future reference, that jackass goes by the name of Argos."

This grabs Regina's full attention. The blankness on the brunette's expression disappears instantaneously, and when her eyes flit to Emma's disfigured hand, there's a poignant look on her face that has the blonde stymied for a moment. Emma can't figure out if it's sympathy, fear, anger, concern, or all four; cause before she can put a finger on it, the Evil Queen makes her move. Without warning, Regina flicks her wrist. The steak flies upward and sideways and nails itself to the wall.

"Uhh..." a stupefied Emma says dumbly, eyeing the sirloin, mouth agape.

Despite her puritanical approach to cleanliness, Regina doesn't even bat an eyelash. Instead, the woman reaches for Emma's impaire hand, touches it, and, in a heartbeat, a warm, tingling sensation spreads across Emma's skin until the persistent ache that's been bothering her disappears completely. Regina's soft hand lingers for a second before pulling back, giving the blonde a moment to examine her handiwork.

"Huh." Emma flexes her fingers and touches her knuckles. Good as new. Regina's magic has healed her goodness knows how many times already, but the awe–factor hasn't diminished in the very least. Emma's lips break out into a crooked grin. "Thank you..." she says softly.

Regina doesn't acknowledge her words — actually, Emma thinks they didn't even register in her head — cause before she can even blink, Regina starts unloading a barrage of questions her way, starting with: "Sheriff Swan, how can you be so unbelievably careless as to let a wanted felon break into your car and puncture your tires?"

For a moment, she sees flashes of her eighteen–year old self in court, sitting on the stand, gearing up to answer questions about herself and those damn stolen watches. At least this time, the one doing the questioning is more pleasing to the eyes — even if Regina is infinitely scarier and intimidating than that balding prosecutor ever was.

"The break–in thing happened when I was at Granny's buying coffee," Emma says in her defense, purposely letting out the fact that she had forgotten to lock the car in the first place. "As for the tire–slashing bit, well, I was kinda distracted when it happened..."
"Distracted by what?" Regina lifts a brow.

"By whom," Emma murmurs. And although she's finding it a little hard to maintain eye contact with the brunette, she admits softly. "You."

"Me?"

"We were talking 'bout butter and Chihuahuas and Pit Bulls..." she recounts, not a little wistfully. Seeing the telling little line forming between Regina's brows, Emma quickly raises her hands, "Not that I'm blaming you or anything. It's all on me. I'm responsible. I should've been more aware of my surroundings. I mean, I was on patrol for fuck's sake. Being observant is kinda a big part of the job."

A frowning Regina glosses over Emma's little f–bomb, but out of habit, Emma mumbles an apology all the same.

"You really ought to be more careful, Miss Swan," Regina chastises, and for a second, Emma thinks the woman's referring to her potty mouth (and she's about to apologize for it again), but then Regina continues with a crisp: "Such an oversight can mean the difference between life and death. You should consider yourself lucky that his actions—though, bothersome—only managed to serve as a small inconvenience for you."

Emma just nods her head in agreement — which is about the smartest thing she can do, going by the scowl on Regina's face.

"And speaking of being inconvenienced, why on earth did you choose to walk?"

"I had no choice."

"You had a choice. You just didn't use your head and employ common sense, per usual," Regina continues with an exasperated sigh. "Miss Swan, you should've called home."

"My cellphone died," Emma tries to explain, pointing to said gadget. "I left my char–" She stops. And blinks. "Wait... you mean, you would've picked me up?"

"No."

"Oh."

"I would've done a summoning spell and teleported you back home," Regina says, matter–of–fact, as if teleporting people is about as natural as breathing air. "I couldn't very well leave my sleeping son all alone in the house when a wanted felon is running loose around town, now, could I?"

"Nope," Emma agrees. "And I would've ended up being teleported between the walls if you did do said summoning spell, now, wouldn't I?"

"It's probable."

"Try 'highly damn likely','" Emma interjects.

Regina sniffs. "Well, then, it's a consequence we can all live with."

"Maybe you can. I'd be stuck."

"But at least you'd be safe home."

"That's kinda mean," Emma pouts. "You're kinda mean."
"Mean? How utterly demeaning. My dear, I'm evil," Regina sasses, rolling her eyes.

"You've healed me twice in the last few days, maybe it's time you got knocked down a peg and demoted to 'mean' from 'evil'," Emma cheekily retorts. "Careful, your royal bitchiness, one more good deed and you might even level down to just plain 'grouchy'."

Regina shoots her a glare, and then, as if remembering that they had more important things to talk about, promptly drags them back on topic with a curt: "Where did you meet that tasteless little stalker of yours?"

"Over at Tulgey Wood. I was parked outside the abandoned house, he was about, I dunno, four houses away."

"And what time did this meeting take place?"

"After you called, so, around eleven–thirty–ish, I guess. Bastard called it a date."

Regina's jaws set, her entire face tightening so hard it kinda looks like she's just been overdosed with botox. If Emma doesn't know any better, she might actually think her majesty's jealous — which is not only laughable but downright impossible. "Did you confront him face–to–face?"

"Face–to–mask," Emma corrects. "And, no, I didn't. We just talked on the phone."

"A phone date. How droll," Regina says flatly, a sneer tugging at her upper lip. "And just what did the two of you talk about? I'd venture a guess that no stimulating conversations took place? We're talking about you and a small–time thief, after all."

Emma fights the urge to roll her eyes. Can't a girl ever get some credit? She may not be a big intellectual like Regina, but she can damn well carry her weight in conversations. She's capable of talking smart too. It's just too bad that her next few words won't lend some credence to this argument of hers, but, oh well. Emma clears her throat, "We talked about a lot of things: my panties... my stolen cash... his bike, which is also technically mine... his sword... the wraith... my non–existent sex life... my panties... etcetera etcetera. But, yeah, mostly my panties."

"Your panties."

"My panties."

A heavy cloud descends between the pair, smothering them in a blanket of awkwardness.

"What about your... panties?" Regina probes after a beat, almost choking on the word.

The blonde blushes profusely. "Uh, you know, stuff."

"Stuff?"

"He, um, teased me about the ones he stole, and he, uh... um... he..."

"Will it kill you to talk in complete, coherent sentences? He what, Miss Swan?"

The blonde sighs. "He wanted me to describe the thong I'm wearing tonight..."

"And did you?" Regina lifts a brow.

Emma nods miserably, drawing circles on the table with a finger.
It might just be her eyes playing tricks on her, but Emma thinks she sees the side of Regina's face twitching. "You described your underwear to a pervert?" the brunette asks slowly, a hint of danger in her tone. Emma shifts in her seat.

"Uh... yes?"

"Willingly?"

The Sheriff flinches, looking—and feeling—mighty sheepish. "No. Yes. Kinda?"

Regina leans back into her chair, her expression going dark. "I see," she says tightly, folding her arms across her chest. "Miss Swan, I stand corrected. You did have a stimulating conversation with your stalker after all. It is, however, rather unfortunate that the only thing stimulated was that tiny organ in his pants. Well done, my dear, you've done a wondrous job elevating something this evening — too bad it wasn't the level of conversation."

Okay, maybe she deserved that. "I did get something out of it, though."

"Other than feelings of overwhelming shame?"

Emma ignores that dig and leans forward on the table, meeting a displeased–looking Regina's gaze dead on. "I got him to admit that he was at the clearing during the day of the break–in..."

Regina sobers up just a teeny bit, her curiosity piqued. "He was the one who cast the spell?"

"No. He said that a furry friend of his was responsible for that."

"Furry friend?"

Emma shrugs. "His words, not mine."

"White magic was performed at the clearing," Regina murmurs after a moment, brows furrowed deep in thought. Emma can almost see the cogs turning inside that complicated head of hers. "And according to that insufferable little fairy that your mother adores, white magic was also accountable for bringing the wraith back to Storybrooke. I don't know about you, Sheriff, but I don't believe that's just a mere coincidence."

"I had the same thought too, so I asked him about it. He claimed that his furry friend was trying to get rid of the soul–sucker, not summon it back to town."

"Miss Swan, he's a low–bred criminal. You, of all people, should know that it's not that improbable that he might've been lying."

Emma runs a hand through her hair and lets out a tired sigh. "I don't think he was, Regina. I was using my superpower the entire time, the annoying jerk sounded honest enough. I'd been thinking about it on my walk home, trying to make sense of everything. He might've hidden the whole story, yes, but to me, he wasn't lying. I dunno, Regina, it's all so confusing."

"Careful not to pull a muscle in your head, princess. Your puny brain might not survive the strain," Regina snarks, unable to help herself. "Does this furry friend of his have a name?"

"Most probably. But I didn't get it," Emma admits in a feeble tone. The look she gives Regina is nothing short of helpless. "You don't happen to know any furry magical practitioners in Storybrooke, do you? Or should I pop by the convent and check out which fairy nun doesn't shave her legs?"
Regina might be keeping her expression as neutral as possible because of some residual annoyance at the blonde, but Emma still catches the slight quirk at the side of her lips.

"Well, Miss Swan, the handful of witches and warlocks in town that I know of, personally, only prefer dabbling in the dark arts. All of them are shriveling crones and balding fossils — the exact opposite of what one might describe as furry," Regina intones wryly. "Your stalker's friend might be a shape–shifter, but aside from Maleficent, I don't recall anyone capable of doing magic among the dual–natured that was brought to this land by the curse."

"How 'bout the Bacon Brothers?"

"My dear, making a table full of food vanish in a blink of an eye is not magic, it's gluttony," Regina deadpans. "And the last time I checked, pigs are not furry."

"As long as we're talking about the animal ones, I agree."

This time, Regina couldn't fight it off any longer and actually smirks. Of course, she tries to hide it by ducking her head and coughing on a fist, but the blonde sees it anyway. Emma would be lying if she said that she doesn't find it more than a little entertaining (and, yeah, maybe a bit endearing, too).

"I'll ask Ruby about it in the morning, maybe she knows something... or someone," Emma says after a moment, chewing on her bottom lip. "I'll probably give the fairy nuns a call as well."

"Yes, you do all those," Regina yawns, covering her mouth with the back of her hand. Proving that yawning is a contagious thing, Emma does the same — but, unlike the brunette, she doesn't bother covering her gaping mouth. Of course, Regina's lips curve in distaste but she continues speaking all the same, "Meanwhile, I'll continue to pore through my books in search of that infernal sword. Just a fair warning, Sheriff, expect a call from Gold's precious little girlfriend soon. Frankly, running into dead ends is getting a bit too tedious for my taste, so I'll be bullying my way to Gold's private library in a day or two."

There's something in what Regina had just said that gives the blonde pause.

Emma tilts her head and scratches the side of her neck. She's forgetting something important. There's a persistent stirring in her belly, and she's pretty darn sure it's not gas (at least she hopes it isn't). Maybe it's—

"Mrs. Walter's bush!" she suddenly exclaims, scaring the living daylights out of an unsuspecting Regina.

"Miss Swan!"

"Sorry," Emma mutters, smiling all dopey–like. "I remembered something important."

"What the hell is so important about that ancient spinster's—" Regina pauses, lips puckering sourly. "—bush?"

"I watched it get ravaged by Argos' sword."

"..."

"Actually, the asshole was aiming for the rat hiding inside. The poor bush had just been collateral damage. Mrs. W's gonna be pissed tomorrow, I always see her trimming it."

"Her... 'bush'?"
"Yeah, her rose bush."

"A rose bush," Regina lifts an eyebrow.

"That's what I said."

"No, Miss Swan, it's not." The brunette sighs, rubbing her temples. "Tell me, is there a point to your story? Or did I just suffer your prattling over bushes, ravaging and swords for naught? Honestly, Sheriff, this is not the time to be listening to badly placed, inappropriate, and I hope for both of our sanities, unintentional puns."

"Inappropriate? Puns?" Emma wrinkles her nose in confusion. "Jesus, you have a dirty mind, you know?"

The sharp look Regina throws in her direction would've cut a lesser being into shreds.

"Anyway, the point I wanted to make is that Argos' sword is really powerful — like, scary powerful. I'm telling you, Regina, he just swung it and a frickin' wave of energy came out of the blade and burned the shi—smack out of that big ol' bush. If it can do that and kill wraiths, we've got our work cut out for us."

Regina exhales loudly and pulls her robe tighter against her body, resignation washing over her face. "I suppose we do."

"That's not all I wanted to talk to you about, though. I also have a surprise for you..." Emma says, doing her best imitation of Mona Lisa's smile.

"Miss Swan, I hate surprises," the cranky one states, leery as usual.

"Trust me, your majesty, you'll like this one."

"And what makes you say that?"

"Cause it's from me."

Regina gives her a queer look. Emma's smile just broadens in reflex.

"If you think that's in any way convincing, Sheriff, think again."

"Aw, c'mon, humor me. I promise this surprise will make your life a whole lot easier."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then feel free to make mine a living hell — you're quite good at that."

The brunette still looks more than a little wary but ends up indulging her anyway. "Fine. Go on, then." Regina waves a hand, sounding completely unenthused. That's bound to change in a second, Emma smiles inwardly.

"I know the name of the sword."

The reaction Emma gets is exactly what she had imagined. Like a firecracker had just been lit up her butt, Regina sits up in attention. "What is it?"

"Care to guess? Clue: it's probably the color your face will turn into if you ever walk in on me in my birthday suit."
"Crimson?"

"Nope," Emma shakes her head. She stares at the brunette for a full second before her eyes widen in realization. "Wait... you'll blush? Ha! Well, that's—"

"Miss Swan," Regina tersely interrupts, letting out a frustrated growl, an angry red tint exploding on her cheeks. "I'll be more receptive to inane puzzles and suspenseful reveals when it's done at a more appropriate hour. It's almost two in the morning, and unless you want to come face-to-face with an Evil Queen during breakfast, I need my rest."

"Fine," Emma mutters dejectedly at the brown-haired spoilsport. Without fanfare, she dishes out a half-hearted, "It's the Sword of Ashe. Ash with an 'e'. A–S–H–E. Want me to write it down for you?"

"Ashe."

"With an 'e'."

The sight of Regina's face draining in color and turning white as a sheet is not encouraging in the least bit. To be quite frank, it scares the living daylights out of Emma. Regina Mills is the most confident, dauntless and formidable person she knows, and if there's something out there that can make the woman look like she'd be shitting bricks any minute now, then it's not something to be taken lightly.

Emma wrangles her own growing anxiety just enough to ask, almost fearfully, "Have you heard of it?"

Regina nods weakly, eyes glazed, like she's a million miles away. "I thought... when you mentioned twin serpents... I thought it was another, but then... I never imagined it would be..." she mutters to herself, voice hoarse, barely making any sense. "That would explain the wraith..." she adds after a beat, looking as troubled as she did when the said creature attacked last week.

"Explain the what...? Regina?" Emma prods, leaning in closer, grossly intrigued. "What about the wraith?"

Regina doesn't answer right away. The blonde's just about to fall off the edge of her seat in anticipation, but nevertheless, Emma doesn't push. The slow blinking and the intense staring into nothingness is probably indicative of intense brooding, so she tries to be patient. Regina will talk once she's ready. It takes a couple of suspenseful, nail-biting minutes for the brunette to finally pull out of her thoughts, and when she does, she runs a hand shakily through her hair and says, "I've heard stories about that sword, a long, long time ago..."

"From whom?"

Regina hesitates briefly, before sighing and meeting her gaze. "Rumpelstiltskin."

"Is it his sword?"

"No," Regina shakes her head, swallowing thickly. "But he wanted it. Jefferson nearly died trying to procure it for him from another land — it's one of the reasons why Jefferson decided to retire, the job was getting too risky for his taste."

"Did Gold ever get his hands on it?"

"No, but he never stopped trying," the brunette confides, a deep frown marring her face. "Who
knows how many portal jumpers he'd sent to their deaths just to steal that sword from the Emperor of Asheneamon? He was too much of a coward to do it himself."

"Wait... Ashey–what?"

"Ashe–nea–mon. It's one of many magical realms, like Oz and Wonderland."

"Jesus, how many are there?" Emma pulls a face. It's not like the mere existence of fairytale land isn't crazy enough, but just the thought of even more worlds existing is nothing short of daunting.

"Enough to make your head spin, Miss Swan. And then some."

The poor, overwhelmed Sheriff sags down against her chair, trying to wrap her mind around that. *Yeah...* no such luck. "Why did Gold want it so much?"

"For the same reason that twisted imp ever did anything: *power*. According to him, the Sword of Ashe is the most powerful sword in all the known realms."

Emma's blood turns ice cold. *Holy effin' shit*... the perverted bastard hadn't been pulling her leg.

"More powerful than you?"

"I'm not a sword," Regina scoffs.

"Yeah, but you can cut deeper than one."

"What?"

"You know, with your tongue?"

"..."

"Sharp words and all?"

An unamused Regina gives her the stink–eye.

"Miss Swan," Regina warns, mouth twisting in a frown. "I'm not sure you understand the gravity of the situation. This is not a time for your inanity."

"I know, I'm sorry," Emma flashes the woman a shaky, nervous grin. "I get inappropriately jokey when I'm freaking out."

"That, you do," Regina acknowledges with a sigh.

"But, I'm serious though, can't you beat it with your magic? Don't let it get to your head, but you're the most powerful witch in this world, wonky ass magic and all. I'm sure you can perform a spell that'll poof the sword away or, I dunno, turn it into dust or something..."

"While your confidence in my magical prowess is both surprising and nauseatingly touching, Miss Swan, it's also grossly misguided. I just can't 'poof it away', that sword is what you would call the real deal, Sheriff. That blade has the power to absorb the energy—the so–called, *life force*—of any being it wounds. It may have gotten its name, Ashe, from the greatest hero who wielded it, but according to Gold, the demigod who forged it in the netherworlds simply called the sword, Gray. Do you know why?"

Seeing as she's only heard about it tonight, naturally, Emma shakes her head.
"The blade is impressive enough on its own, but when its true power is activated, it is said to possess enough energy to destroy whole continents. The reason it was called Gray, Miss Swan, is because in order to activate the sword, the blade should absorb the essence of two beings — one made of pure darkness and the other of pure light."

Emma swallows visibly, feeling her stomach clench. Now she understands why Regina is looking so damn worried. "The wraith," she whispers hoarsely, meeting the brunette's gaze.

"A being of pure darkness," Regina nods curtly. "Your stalker now has one of the crucial components for activation, Miss Swan; he just needs the other."

That doesn't sound good at all. In fact, it might just be the single most frightening piece of news she's heard since one of her ex–lovers told her he had syphilis and crabs (for the record, she didn't catch either one, the vindictive bastard was just pulling her leg). So, if Regina is correct and Argos is now on the prowl for creatures belonging to the lighter side of the spectrum, there is only a single set of possible candidates that come to mind.

"Hey, uh, do you think I should give the fairy nuns a heads up that one of them is in danger of having their lives sucked right out of their chastity belts? You know, just to power up an a–hole's stupid sword?"

"No."

"Huh? Why not?"

A grave–looking Regina, with her mouth set in a thin line, gives her a meaningful, almost haunted, look.

Emma blinks. Oh crap. "No."

"..."

"Holy shit–"

In all fairness to Regina, the woman looks almost as helpless as Emma feels. Of course, to the untrained eye, the former mayor appears no different from normal — poised and regal as ever. But, as the blonde has come to know, when it comes to Regina Mills, everything is in the eyes. Those deep, expressive pools of brown tell her things that Regina would never dare to speak aloud. And right now, they are telling her that Regina doesn't just feel powerless, she's frickin' terrified. However, whether Regina's scared for her, or at the sword, Emma doesn't know.

"How the hell can it be me?" Emma rubs her hands over her heated face, feeling her throat constrict to the point of discomfort. She can't be a being of pure light—gray, perhaps—but immaculately white? Just no. "I'm not even that nice! I mean, I swear a fu–frickin' lot. I don't go to church—the last time I went to one, I was so young that I thought you could help yourself to the offertory money—and I did. I'm also pretty sure that I've punched more people than I've hugged. I talk during movies. I leave globs of toothpaste on the sink. I drink milk out of the effin' container... and I don't give a damn if it's unsanitary! Who the hell does all those things? Only monsters, Regina, that's who. I'm a frickin' monster."

She's freaking out, that much is clear.

Regina lets out a long, almost sympathetic–sounding, sigh. "While I might wholeheartedly agree with your very accurate self–assessment, Miss Swan, there is no denying the fact that you're the product of true love. You, the biggest idiot in Storybrooke, are the embodiment of the greatest form
of light magic in existence. *That is why you're the White Knight, the Savior.*" 

There are times, like today, when Emma wishes that her parents were just random fairytale schmucks who got pregnant after a drunken one–night stand. It might be terribly unromantic, but at least, she wouldn't be burdened with this White Knight, holy Emma child–of–light crap. Being the product of true love is sweet and all, but it's just too darn hazardous to her health. 

Emma knows the situation is really bad when Regina Mills, of all people, is the one who tries to break the tension with a light quip. 

"You still drink milk out of the carton?"

In spite of the bleakness of it all, the blonde couldn't help but crack a faint smile. "Uh... not when you're around?"

"I thought I'd lectured that unfortunate proclivity out of your system?"

"Old habits die hard, I guess." Emma shrugs weakly. "Sorry?"

Regina rolls her eyes, but the blonde can actually tell she's just feigning annoyance from the absence of the usual bite in her tone. "I suppose I can always buy another container just for you. Your germs are probably the reason why our milk gets spoiled too quickly."

"Oh, c'mon, I'm not *that* bad. It's not as if I stick my tongue down the hole and wiggle it around."

"..."

"...the milk carton."

"..."

"I, uh, I probably should've rephrased that, huh?"

"Don't even bother, Miss Swan," Regina lets out a worn sigh. "Your mouth has always had the tendency of making a bad thing sound infinitely worse — it's one of your many, *unfortunate* talents, princess."

"You don't think it's endearing?"

Regina scoffs, not even bothering to dignify her question with a response. 

"I think you think it's endearing," Emma mumbles wryly. An exasperated huff is all she gets, and with that, the teasing comes to an end. Despite the momentary distraction—which she's grateful for, she has to admit—Emma doesn't really feel any less unsettled. This is all turning out to be some sort of warped nightmare — and she just happens to be the clueless idiot running around, about to get her head chopped off. "Regina," she says quietly. "Do you think that's the reason why he's stalking me? So he can kill me and harvest my *essence* to power up his stupid sword?"

"Yes," is Regina's blunt reply, never one for sugarcoating the truth. 

"But... if that's his intention, why didn't he kill me tonight? Or last week? He could've gotten me and the wraith in one sitting. I was practically bleeding out of my mouth, he could've finished me off right then and there," she points out, feeling confused as hell.

"I... I don't know," Regina admits with a frustrated sigh. "Sheriff, the only one who can give us a straight answer is that stalker of yours. We can only just assume. He could be waiting for the right
time, perhaps the perfect opportunity. Or, he just might be procrastinating, preferring to enact whatever it is he's planning at a leisurely pace."

"That's just effed up," Emma groans. Everything is fucked up. "I don't get it. If his goal is to kill me, why bother pulling all those annoying stunts? Why steal my stuff? Why send all those flowers and notes?"

"It's fairly obvious that he finds pleasure in tormenting you, Miss Swan."

Emma bites her tongue. Sounds like someone else she knows.

"Think of it as a predator playing with its prey before devouring it. He probably believes he's already won, so there's no harm in having a little fun. Torturing the beaten makes the victory all the more sweet." A dark cloud seems to wash over Regina's face at that moment, and in a quiet tone, she murmurs, "In the old land... in my old life... I'd have done the same."

"Well, it's a good thing you're not that person anymore."

"Who says I'm not?" Regina intones, somewhat bitterly.

"I do. Henry does too."

The scoff that comes out of the brunette's lips is filled to the brim with spite. "I'm fairly certain that a lot of people in town would disagree with the two of you. Your precious mother being one of them."

If one stops to think about it, Emma should be the one being consoled at this moment — her life's the one being threatened by a lunatic with a magical sword, after all. But that's not what happens. Regina just looks so... sad. Which, in turn, makes Emma feel like crap (and she doesn't even know why). Maybe acting the part of the chivalrous White Knight has made her more emphatic — or, maybe, she's just a sucker for queens with sad eyes. Either way, the blonde ends up doing the knightly—well, decent—thing to do, and pushes her own misery aside for the time being. Without even thinking, Emma's hand darts forward and covers Regina's limp one on the table, giving it a reassuring pat. Stunned by the intimacy of the gesture, the brunette tenses up, before slowly, and almost reluctantly, relaxing into her touch.

They've done it so often, this touching thing. Though a part of it still feels a bit weird, the feeling of their skin brushing against each other has become a familiar, and dare say, comforting thing.

"I told you, you're not the Evil Queen anymore," Emma murmurs, giving Regina's hand a light squeeze.

"Why? Because, as you've so kindly mentioned, I've just suffered the indignity of being downgraded to the Mean Queen?"

"Well, you have been pretty nice lately — general bitchiness, aside. But, I dunno, I guess in my eyes, even from the very beginning, you've always been just Regina, you know?" Emma shrugs lightly, feeling herself flush. "You're just crabby, snarky, bitchy Regina. Not evil. Not mean. Well, maybe a bit mean. And psychotic. But not a lot, just a tinge."

"..."

"You do get what I'm trying to say, right?"

She tries to catch Regina's eyes to no avail. It's kinda funny how — for a person who never shied away from invading her personal space — Regina seems to be doing everything remotely possible to
avoid looking in her direction.

Emma sighs.

"Look, unlike most of the people in town, I don't have memories of the Evil Queen. But, even if I didn't know her personally, I think I've heard enough stories — from Mary Margaret, from the book, from everyone — to figure out what kind of person she is. And I can tell you, she sounds nothing like the Regina Mills that I've come to know here in Storybrooke."

Regina bristles in place, still unable to meet her gaze, before ever so gently, pulling her hand back from Emma's grasp.

Emma bites back another sigh.

"Well, for one, the woman wore kick-ass corsets that made her boobs go all the way up to her neck. While you, well, your sense of style is more, uh... conservative, I guess? I was gonna say 'fashionably matron-ish' but I didn't feel like getting my hand broken again."

Aside from a quick eyebrow twitch, she gets no reaction from the stoic brunette.

"I also heard she ate babies—"

"I did no such thing!"

And that does it. She finally succeeds in getting Regina to look at her, well, glare at her, actually.

Emma bites back a smile. "Oh right, that was the blind witch," she mutters playfully, before sobering up once again and continuing in a more serious tone — making sure she holds on to those brown eyes, too. "All jokes aside, I guess what I'm trying to say, is that you're not her anymore, Regina. I think the only thing the two of you have left in common, is that you're both a major pain in the ass."

A poker-faced Regina scoffs indignantly, mildly affronted — but, in the blonde's opinion, also greatly touched (even if she did a darn good job hiding it).

"You're Storybrooke's Pit Bull," Emma smiles crookedly. "Not a lot of people will see you for who you really are, will care to look beyond your past, or heck, your scary ass reputation to get to know you better, or acknowledge that you've changed. Just take comfort in knowing that the people who matter in your life do. Henry and I see you."

At these whispered words, Regina's walls go up so high that Emma swears she could see them making a hole right through the ceiling.

"Oh, I'm sorry, you think you matter to me?" Regina grits out, thickly, defensively.

"Don't I?" Emma challenges silently, lifting a brow.

"You don't," Regina closes her mouth and averts her eyes, raking a hand through her brown locks.

Emma smiles inwardly. She doesn't need to have a superpower to know that was a lie. And, judging from her fidgety behavior, neither does Regina.

They both take a moment to themselves. While a pensive Regina absentmindedly toys with the hem of her robe, Emma just leans back and breathes deeply — trying to get a grip on the anxiety that's bubbling up and down her stomach every time her mind wanders back to that damn sword. How the hell did a common thief get his grubby hands on a weapon that even the so-called "Dark One"
couldn't steal? It just doesn't make sense. Maybe she'll just have to accept that, despite his petty panty-stealing ways, Argos is not as common a thief as she had pegged him to be. Which begs the question: who the hell is he really? No matter what he says, the bastard still owes her a name. By hook or by crook, Emma's going to find out what it is. Pepperoni pizzas be damned.

Lost in their own little worlds, it feels like an eternity before someone finally decides to put an end to all the gloomy brooding and cut through the thick silence that permeated the room.

"Willan's Incantamentum."

"Hm?" Emma looks up, blinking her worrisome thoughts away.

"It's a spell..."

It was murmured so softly that her ears, despite the strain, weren't able to pick up a single word. "I'm sorry, what?" Emma asks, leaning in closer.

"A spell," Regina repeats, just a bit audible this time, her brown eyes losing the unfocused glaze that they had just a moment ago. "Willan's Incantamentum. Supposedly, a special kind of protection spell. It's meant to grant a person immunity from the Gray sword, so that even if he or she is wounded by it, their essence would not be absorbed into the blade. It was said to be created by a two-bit witch for her husband, Willan, and, he, apparently, is the only one to have ever survived an encounter with Ashe and his sword."

Hope is a potent thing. Even with just a tiny glimmer of it, Emma finds herself straightening up, her skin tingling as if she'd just been poked with an electric cattle prod. The sudden shift in her mood must've been fairly obvious, because with just one look at her face, Regina shoots her a pointed glance.

"Don't keep your hopes up just yet, Miss Swan," the brunette warns with a weary sigh, effectively bursting her bubble. "Rumpelstiltskin attempted to recreate that spell and performed it on all the imbeciles he'd sent to obtain the sword."

"And?"

"It failed every single time."

Emma's whole demeanor deflates like a balloon. "If it failed every single time, how come Jefferson is still alive?" she can't help but wonder out loud, grappling for something—anything—to hold on to.

"The incompetent fool wasn't able to get too close to the sword to be able to test the spell's efficacy," Regina shares with a sneer; obviously, there's no love lost between her majesty and the Hatter. "If memory serves me right, he got attacked by patrolmen the second he stepped out of the portal. He made it back to the Enchanted Forest by the skin of his teeth."

"Oh."

She truly is in a dismal mood when the thought of that lunatic getting his ass whooped doesn't give her a sick sense of pleasure that it normally would've. Emma feels the urge to just slump down against the table, bury her head in her hands, and mope her ass off. She stops herself. That would be too defeatist. And she's just stubborn enough not to fall prey to that kind of behavior, no matter how tempting.

"Rumpelstiltskin was none too pleased with his string of failures," Regina continues in a flat, condescending tone, pulling Emma's focus back to her. "For months, I had to sit through and listen to
“...that spineless imp blather on and on about missing a crucial ingredient of Willan’s spell — a key component that he could not seem to put his finger on despite his best efforts.”

"Did he ever find out what it was?"

Regina shakes her head. "He didn't, as far as I know."

"So, I guess it's back to the old drawing board for us, huh?" Emma expels a breath of air from her lungs, looking worse for wear.

"Not quite."

Emma frowns. Well, that certainly wasn't the answer she was expecting to hear. She glances up to find Regina staring at her, wearing a fierce look on her face that had been absent just a few moments prior. It's a quick and total transformation that has Emma blinking in confusion for a few seconds. Hasn't it only been just a few minutes ago that the brunette looked lost and unsure? Now, Regina is back to her old self, just oozing with calm confidence. It's enough to give anyone whiplash.

"I'm going to find it," Regina declares, brown eyes burning with quiet determination.

"Find what?"

The other woman doesn't roll her eyes at Emma's cluelessness, but she does let out a worn sigh.

"The missing ingredient," the brunette supplies. "I'm going to find out what it is."

Emma tilts her head in question, brows furrowed deep. "How?"

"I don't know," Regina readily admits. "But I will. Mark my words, Miss Swan. You're going to get your immunity, I'm going to have my revenge on that thief for butchering my garden and stealing my flowers, and we're going to accomplish what Gold has failed at countless times and obtain that sword for ourselves. Everything is going to be fine, Sheriff. So, my dear, you can start shedding off that pitiable expression on your face. The hapless, damsel–in–distress look doesn't suit a lumbering oaf like you, pillow princess."

The haughty little tilt of Regina's chin amuses Emma more than she would care to admit — and, ultimately, despite lacking any certainty that Regina's efforts will bear any fruit — Emma finds herself feeling significantly reassured. The woman's staggering confidence is — and always has been — greatly empowering (and daunting, too, just to be honest). She's gonna be okay. Everything's gonna be okay. Despite how bleak things appear right now, she can believe this, oddly enough, because... because Regina says so. Isn't that just ironic?

"Why?" she asks softly after a moment, green eyes boring into deep brown ones. "Why do this for me? Why help me out?"

"I already told you, Miss Swan, I am getting my revenge. Other than that, frankly, my dear, I don't even know why else I'd be willing to aid an idiot like you — perhaps I am developing masochistic tendencies, myself."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"I thought you were gonna say it's because of the whole 'promise to Henry' thing again." Emma shrugs, idly tugging at the sleeves of her jacket, playing with the hem.
The mention of the kid's name elicits a strange reaction from the brunette. Regina's eyes widen a fraction, like it's only just now that her promise to their son had crossed her mind — a thought that is kinda ridiculous to the blonde, considering how often she's been reminded of it by the brunette. Well, whatever the reason for Regina's momentary pause, the woman's able to recover from it quickly enough. Regina clears her throat, but her voice is still a bit hoarse when she says, "Yes, of course, Henry. That's also a given, I suppose."

Emma manages a small, knowing smile, but doesn't say much else. Since the wraith attack, the kid's sly machination has become their default, go—to excuse—no, not excuse—explanation, for doing things that may very well be interpreted as concern for the other's well—being. It's easier, not to mention, safer, than admitting that maybe, just maybe, they've reached a level in their highly antagonistic relationship, where genuinely caring for the other may not be as absurd a notion as it had been in the past. That said, acknowledging it in their heads is one thing, saying it out loud is another.

So... Emma doesn't push.

Instead, she drums her fingers on the table, lets out a fond breath and says, "Have to say, your highness, you sure raised one hell of a manipulator. Getting the both of us to be each other's glorified bodyguard? The kid's a master."

The only thing the blonde gets in response is a quick, wry smile.

A quiet moment passes between the pair, comfortable and not fraught with tension for a nice change. Emma takes the opportunity to roll out the kinks in her neck. Regina, with her bleary eyes betraying her fatigue, covers her lips and lets out another long, hearty yawn.

Poor woman needs her sleep, Emma thinks with a sympathetic sigh.

She glances at her wristwatch and chews on her lip. 2:14 AM. Despite everything else going on inside her head, it doesn't take long for Emma to make up her mind. And so, she reaches behind her and yanks out the charger from the wall socket. It might not have full bars, but she thinks her cellphone has enough juice in it to last for at least another three hours. That'll do, she supposes, before pushing back against the table. The feet of her chair scrapes against the floor like nails on a chalkboard. Emma winches accordingly and gives a frowning Regina a sheepish, apologetic smile.

"Sorry," she mumbles, standing up and stuffing her phone inside her jean pocket. "It's pretty late. Go get some sleep, Regina. I, uh... um, thanks... alright? For everything. I guess I'll see you at breakfast?" she smiles tiredly, zipping up her leather jacket all the way up to her neck.

"Sit."

That simple word is said with enough bite that Emma immediately parks her ass back on the chair.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Uh... at the station?"

Regina lifts a well—manicured eyebrow. "And why?"

"I have to get the Bug?" Emma smiles wanly, feebly scratching the side of her face. For some reason, she can't help but feel like she'd just been warped back in time. The Sheriff once again explaining herself to her favorite Madame Mayor. "And, uh... I guess, now that my hand is okay, I might as well finish my patrol, right? I mean, I still have a job to do. My shift ends at five, remember?"
"Miss Swan, you have a stalker. Generally, when people are being stalked, they make it a point to stay indoors where it's safe — especially when it's dark," Regina says shortly, looking like she wants to roll up yesterday's newspaper and use it to beat some sense into her thick blonde head. "You're being hounded by a man who has, as you so crudely put, a powerful sword. I know it might be too much to ask from a Charming, but for once, will you try to prove me wrong and employ some common sense, Miss Swan?"

"But..." Emma meekly pipes in. "...what about my job?"

"That is precisely why you have deputies, princess. Those overpaid, incompetent buffoons are, to put it bluntly, just slaves with badges — so, I would suggest you start delegating. You're the Sheriff, do what you always do and just pass your responsibilities onto somebody else. You're quite adept at that, aren't you?"

"But..."

Regina's eyes flash with murder.

_Oh jeez._ Emma darts a tentative glance at the gleaming badge on her hip, and then at a stern–looking Regina, feeling torn as hell. Talk about being sandwiched between a rock and a hard place.

She thinks she's being discrete, but her indecision doesn't go unnoticed, and, neither do the longing looks she keeps on shooting at the door. Emma knows she's screwed the moment she returns her gaze to Regina and finds the brunette slowly arching that damn perfect eyebrow of hers.

"Will your inherent stubbornness be a problem, Miss Swan?"

"Course not."

"..."

"No?"

"..."

"Uh... maybe?" a sheepish Emma admits in a tiny voice.

And that, ladies and gents, seals her fate.

"Well, then, Miss Swan, it's decided. From now on, and until I find the spell's missing component, you are forbidden to step out of the house without either my permission or accompaniment. Is that clear?"

Yeah... about as clear as her head during a horrendous hangover.

"Am I under frickin' house arrest?" she sputters, eyes wide and unbelieving.

"No."

Emma's brows slowly make their ascent up her forehead.

"Not entirely," Regina amends stiffly. "As I've said, you can still leave — provided that I grant you my blessing, or, if I'm in a generous mood, allow you the pleasure of my company as you go about town."

"You're kidding..."
"Look at my face, Miss Swan. Do I look like I'm kidding?"

Well, she's certainly not capable of it, that's for sure. A powerless Emma gapes at the other woman. Her majesty would be, quite literally, taking away her freedom. "Don't I even get to have a say in this?"

"No."

"But... you're practically going to turn me into a prisoner in my own home... well, technically, your home, but still. I thought I was the Sheriff here?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Sheriff Swan, do you have a way to make yourself immune to your stalker's magical sword?"

The blonde pouts. "No."

"Then, shush."

Emma grumbles but ends up shutting her mouth all the same. She doesn't know why she even bothers to put up a fight — she always ends up losing and looking like a fool. Thinking back on all those months of bickering and endless one-upmanship during Regina's mayoral days, just about cement this sad truth in her head. There really is no winning against Regina Mills—especially when the brunette sets her mind to something—and damn if it doesn't rankle her ass and frustrate her to the high heavens.

"Miss Swan?"

"What?"

"Give me your hand."

"Why?"

"I wouldn't have asked if it wasn't important, now, would I?"

"Excuse me, you didn't ask, you demanded," Emma points out evenly. "And I didn't even hear you say 'please.'" She sticks her nose in the air and puckers her lips, preferring to express her displeasure with petulance.

Regina's mouth sets in a thin line, unhappy with her snippy tone. "Give me your hand."

"No."

"Give me your hand, princess. Or, so help me, Miss Swan, I will chop it off and slap you with it," the brunette grits out, before throwing in a saccharine, "Please?"

Glancing at the closest knife within the brunette's reach, Emma lets out a belittling snort. "How will you possibly slice off a hand with a bread knife?"

"Easy, my dear," Regina's lips break out into a menacing grin. "Slowly. Very, very slowly."

Oh.

"Now, your hand, if you may?"

Grudgingly, Emma folds and gives in with a sigh. Really, she never stood a chance.
It's perhaps a small kindness on Regina's part, that the woman doesn't gloat when Emma extends her left hand, reluctantly putting herself at the mercy of Regina and whatever nefarious scheme she has in mind. The brunette, lacking Emma's hesitation, quickly reaches forward and covers her hand with her own. Emma shivers. She feels it acutely, her own energy swirling in her chest and flowing outward to her limbs, powering the brunette's magic. Eyes closed and body all rigid, Regina chants a litany of words that sounded positively gibberish in Emma's ears, and, in a matter of moments, a bright purple light envelops both their bodies, swallowing them whole. The air crackles with the potency of Regina's magic; the hair at the back of the blonde's neck stands on end. When the glow finally fades, Regina slowly pulls away, leaving a doe-eyed Emma staring dumbly at her hand — specifically, at the new trinket adorning her ring finger.

She's worn rings in the past, but never one that looks this fancy. The expensive-looking piece of jewelry she's now sporting has a small emerald set in the middle of a gold band. It's pretty—no, beautiful—and it kinda reminds Emma of Regina's—

Oh, hell no.

"Matching rings? Really?" Emma makes a face, looking at the identical ring on Regina's finger. "It's bad enough that the whole town already thinks we're secretly shacking up, now they'll start saying we got hitched too."

Regina lets out a rather derisive snort. "Miss Swan, the nature of gossip, especially in small towns, is that people will believe in anything — regardless of its absurdity — as long as it's salacious. So, suck it up, princess. If anyone has the right to be insulted, it should be me. I believe I got the raw end of the deal here. To be associated with you, of all people, in a platonic sense is humiliating enough. But romantically? Absolutely degrading. Miss Swan, you should consider yourself lucky that I'm kind enough to willingly have my own reputation sullied just to ensure your safety."

Emma bites back a sigh. Suck it up, huh? Story of her life. Her parents are going to raise an eyebrow or two; her smart-ass deputies will never let her live this down. But... Regina's looking at her like that again, so what choice does she have? Resigned to her fate, Emma holds her hand up to her face, examining the glinting stone on her finger with a critical set of eyes. The way it reflects light is kinda mesmerizing, she has to admit. It truly is pretty. "What's this thing for, anyway? You know, aside from making me look like your little bitch."

Regina scoffs.

"Well, Sheriff, it punishes bad behavior, which will, hopefully, do wonders to curb your mulishness and reckless tendencies. I enchanted that ring specifically to electrocute you the moment you disobey my orders and step out of the house without me in tow — or, at the very least, obtain my permission to do so."

"..."

"Now, I would be very careful if I were you, princess. It might be small, but that ring packs a significantly greater punch than your standard police taser."

Emma's mouth dangles open in abject horror. If she could grow another eyebrow, she would. Just so she could raise it too. Holy fucking hell... "What the heck, Regina? Isn't this just a little too extreme?"

"As it very well should be, Sheriff. It is, after all, for your own safety."

"Safety?" Emma's voice hitches up so high it breaks at the end. "This thing's gonna kill me!"
"Don't be absurd, Miss Swan. It's painful, yes, but not fatal."

"It's barbaric!"

"It's necessary."

"It's inhumane!"

"It's effective."

She must be resembling a fish out of water, with her mouth pathetically opening and closing like one. Finding no words to appropriately express her indignation, she settles for snapping her mouth shut and jutting out her lower lip instead. "When she said 'put a ring on it', I'm pretty sure this isn't what Beyoncé had in mind," she bemoans, folding her arms over her chest like a petulant child.

Regina's face is as blank as a porcelain doll. "Beyoncé?"

"Nevermind."

For the next few moments, they stare each other down, engaging in a silent battle of wills, neither one willing to give way. It's not just a pride thing, it's a matter of principle — for Emma, at least.

Regina, to a pouting Emma's surprise, is the first one to cave and break the silence. "Stop looking at me like I did you a great disservice, Sheriff. I merely did what was necessary in order to save you from yourself. Your stubbornness, along with your intrinsic stupidity, will prove to be your downfall if your dimwitted actions are left unchecked. So, be more appreciative, I did it for your own good."

"Yeah? Well, I'm sorry if I'm finding that really hard to believe right now," Emma retorts, not a little bitterly. "This," she lifts her hand and motions at the ring, "is a torture device."

"Oh, stop being so dramatic, Miss Swan," Regina rolls her eyes in exasperation, voice ripe with warning. "Desperate times call for desperate measures. I believe that my actions, whilst bordering on severe in your short-sighted eyes, are duly warranted. You came this close to dying this evening."

"But I didn't," she grounds out, bullheaded as ever. With a defiant frown, Emma grabs a firm hold of the ring and pulls, pooling all her energy into yanking it out. She fails miserably. Damned thing won't budge, practically welded around her finger by magic. Emma lets out a disgruntled breath. "Take it out," she huffs. "...please?" she adds in for good measure. Sometimes politeness goes a long way.

"No."

And sometimes it doesn't.

Emma pinches the bridge of her nose. "Regina, c'mon..." she whines, not above begging at this point. "I promise I won't do anything stupid."

The loud mocking sound that comes out of Regina's throat is a swift punch to her gut.

Alright, maybe she should've made a promise that she can actually keep. "I promise I'll try not to die when I go outside?" she tries again.

"..."

"I promise not to die, period?"
"I'll promise anything you want me to promise just as long as you take this frickin' ring off and let me out of the house?"

Emma can actually feel Regina's growing irritation radiating towards her, slapping against her frame like violent waves in the ocean. The brunette is clearly one smart-ass remark away from losing it completely. The niggling voice at the back of her head tells her to pick her battles wisely and just shut up, but, unfortunately, Emma and her big mouth just can't help themselves.

"Look, I really don't think Argos' sword will suck me dry tonight — the jerk's probably back in his hideout, plotting new ways to annoy me before he stops being an ass and just offs me completely. So, your majesty, if you won't allow me to finish my shift, at least let me go and get my Bug from the station. I'll be back in a jiffy. This White Knight just needs her ride. I won't die on you tonight, I promise."

Taunt the tiger and you'll get the claws. Like a fiery volcano, Regina's volatile temper explodes in a remarkable display of pent up frustration and annoyance. The brunette's chair flies backward and crashes against the floor as Regina abruptly stands up, slamming her palms down on the table and getting right on Emma's face.

"Miss Swan, if you persist on courting death, one of these days, it's going to stop playing hard to get, say yes and make you its bitch!"

Emma blinks.

Holy shit... did she...? Did Regina just use the b–word?

Emma's hanging jaw clicks shut. If that doesn't tell her how deathly serious the woman is, probably nothing will. Regina, with her extensive vocabulary and uppity behavior, never resorts to profanity unless, well, she just never does.

"Now, stand up!"

Emma scrambles up to her feet.

"Go down to your cubbyhole, get in bed and stay there!"

Spooked as hell, she does as she's told without a single peep.

Like a jail warden (which, honestly, she kinda is), Regina marches behind her while she makes her way down to her basement abode, her tail tucked firmly between her legs. The fuming woman doesn't leave her side until she's safely underneath the covers, and even after she's all tucked in, Regina lingers for a moment—and gives her the most potent of glares—before turning on her heels and violently stomping towards the stairs. Storming out in a pair of purple fuzzy slippers ought to have lessened the impact of such a dramatic exit, but it doesn't, not when someone like Regina Mills is doing it.

With the remnants of her pride utterly decimated, Emma can only sigh as she gazes at Regina's retreating form. "I guess that's a 'no' on picking up the Bug, then?"

The only answer she gets is a flick of a wrist and a slew of centipedes falling from the ceiling and landing on her bed.

Yeah, that's definitely a no.
"Shit."

Sleep eludes her completely.

Turns out, impending doom by way of a life–sucking sword is enough incentive to stay the hell awake. She must look like a moron — lying flat on her back, eyes–wide open, clutching the sheets all the way up to her neck, jumping at any sound that she hears.

By seven in the morning, Emma, with eyes bloodshot, is far beyond cursing Argos and his stupid sword to eternal damnation.

Giving up on trying to fall asleep, Emma takes in a deep breath and, inadvertently, inhales the mouth–watering aroma of the apple tart baking upstairs. Looks like Regina did settle on salted butter after all, Emma thinks wryly. Dragging her sluggish self out of bed and up the basement stairs isn’t an easy feat, but she manages with the help of her brain's persistent craving for caffeine. She finds Henry in the kitchen, standing by the island table, the kid already dressed and ready for school.

"Hey, Emma," he greets distractedly, head tilted to the side, his attention focused on the kitchen wall. "Do you know what that is?"

Standing by the coffeemaker, Emma follows the boy's line of sight. She pours herself a cup, shrugs her shoulders, and just mumbles, "Dinner."

"Oh."

"Not in the mood for steak, I take it?"

Henry wrinkles his nose in disgust. "What's it doing there?"

"Defrosting, by the looks of it."

"Gross."

Emma takes a rather large gulp of coffee and just grunts in agreement. The red streaks on the wall do make a pretty grisly sight — like something straight up a really bad slasher flick. Regina's probably waiting for her to get out of bed before cleaning the mess up with magic. Good thing, too. Cause if she tried to poof it away on her own, her royal majesty's unpredictable powers might just end up nailing the rest of the freezer's contents on the wall. It ain't gonna be pretty, that's for sure.

"Where's your mom?" Emma yawns, leaning against the counter, idly watching Henry pour milk on his cereal.

"Upstairs."

"Bathing?"

"Nope."

"Pooping?"

Henry chuckles. "Putting on make–up."

"This early?"

"She's bringing me to school today."
"Why?"

Henry inclines his head at the dessert baking inside the oven — the one he had been tasked to bring to class this morning. "It's not yet done baking. Mom thinks I might miss the bus so she's gonna drop me off at school."

"Ah," Emma breathes, rubbing her bleary eyes with a fist. "Think she'll let me hitch a ride too?"

"Why? Where's your car?"

"At the station," she says simply, not willing to go into details and scare the hell out of the poor kid.

"Why'd you leave it there? Did Zombug die on you again?"

"Zombug?" her brows lift in question.

"Your Bug," Henry shrugs. "Cause it dies and dies and dies... then comes back to life again. Like a zombie."

"Wow," Emma whistles. "Way to insult my mechanical steed, kid. What's wrong with the Bug?"

"What isn't wrong with it?"

"Fair point," she concedes with a sigh.

The impish boy flashes her a toothy grin before shoveling a spoonful of cereal in his mouth. Emma just shakes her head and goes back to enjoying her steaming cup of joe.

The doorbell chimes a few minutes later, interrupting the quiet moment in the kitchen. The two exchange loaded looks, both mentally willing the other to get the door. If it's a battle of stubbornness, Emma would win, but since it's turning out to be some sort of staring contest (and she can barely keep her eyes open), Henry has the advantage.

In the end, and as predicted, the kid emerges victorious.

With a lazy groan, Emma downs the rest of her drink and deposits the empty mug in the sink. "Finish your breakfast. Your mom will be down soon," she mumbles, giving Henry's shoulder an affectionate nudge before making her way out the hallway and to the foyer. Before unlocking the front door, she does the smart thing and checks the peephole. She thinks she caught a glimpse of a kid pedaling away on a bike, but she's not entirely certain. Must be the boy delivering the paper. Not really thinking anything of it, Emma mentally shrugs and opens the door.

Instead of a copy of today's Daily Mirror, there's a package lying on the walkway leading up to the house.

Another plain white box.

Emma rolls her eyes. Doesn't take a genius to know who ordered that unknown boy to leave that there. She sticks her neck out the doorway and gives the area around the mansion a good sweep. Clear. Not one soul around. At least, she hopes so. She's exhausted, cranky and sleep–deprived; she doesn't really feel like having her life sucked out of her body today.

Emma chews on her lip, contemplating her next move. The package is sitting right there, taunting her with its presence. And truth be told, its contents intrigue her more than she'd like it to. It's quite possibly the biggest box she's received from Argos, thus far. So, despite feeling extremely uneasy,
morbid curiosity eventually wins out, and with a frustrated sigh, she steps out of the house to fetch today's mysterious package. As soon as her right leg crosses the threshold, her skin starts to tingle. Emma quickly brushes it off, chalking it up to stress. It must be—

_Crap._

Green eyes widen in fear.

The emerald on her finger is glowing.

Oh... _shit._

The first jolt feels like a lightning bolt straight up the ass.

"Gggghhh..."

_Fuck._ She'd completely forgotten about—

"Nnnnnnnnnggggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhnnnnnnng gggggghhhhhhhhh..."

Henry has seen a lot of weird things in his young life. Stuff like goblins, a cyclops, trolls, cars turning into ponies, Leroy growing boobs, dogs eating eyeballs, to name a few. The thing he's watching right now, however, is probably high up his list of totally weird sights. It's kinda hilarious too, the more he thinks of it. At first, he thought she was having a seizure, but then she did this funny-looking twitchy back roll, and all he could do right after is clap and whoop. He didn't know she could do _that_, that's for sure.

"Mom?" he calls out when he hears the sound of heels clicking down the stairs, though he keeps his eyes fixed on the show outside.

"Yes, Henry?"

"Where's the camera?"

"It's in my study," his mother supplies helpfully. "Why? Do you need it for something?"

"Can I borrow it for a while? I want to take a video of Emma."

"She's probably still asleep, my dear."

"Nope, she's not." Henry shakes his head, jutting his chin towards the front lawn. "She's outside."

"..."

"Mom?" he frowns, gazing up and noticing his mom's reaction for the first time. She had frozen mid-step down the stairs, her right foot dangling in the air, a hand clutching the railings so tight her knuckles had turned white.

"Outside?" she repeats, eyes wide.

"Yup. She's right there, see? Flopping like a fish. It's really kinda funny. A while ago she was doing that worm move thing. Now, I think she's trying to breakdance."

"..."
"Mom?"

"That idiot!" his mother cries out, much to Henry's surprise.

Poise out the window, she hurries down the last remaining flight of stairs and flies right past him. Head tilted in confusion, he can only look on dumbly as his mother almost trips over her own two feet as she rushes towards Emma (who, for some reason, had stopped dancing as soon as his mom stepped out of the house). Henry doesn't know what's going on, but he does catch the words that a breathless Emma says while his mom helps the blonde up to her feet and into the house.

"All the electricity was focused down there?! Really, R–Regina?"

Henry frowns. Electricity? Huh? And down where?

"Miss Swan," his mom warns, eyes flashing dangerously, looking pointedly at his direction.

"M–my ass stings!"

Oh. Down there.

"Language, Sheriff."

"Gaaah nggghhhhh..."

"What?"

"Ugh, feels like my vagi–uh... my lady bits are 'bout to fall off..."

.

.

.

"Oh G–God, will they, R–Regina?"

"No."

Lady... bits?

Henry's eyes widen like saucers.

Despite his curiosity, he takes a step back... and then another... and like a bat out of hell, he twists in place and runs back to the safety of the kitchen. He's only ten, for crying out loud. There are things that he doesn't need to know... or hear.

"You could have zinged my pubes right off of my crotch!"

Annnd... that's one of 'em.

"Miss Swan!"
My dear Sheriff Swan,

I slept awesome knowing you were probably thinking about me the whole night. Don’t bother denying it. I’ve been told I leave quite an impression on women.

Anyway, I hope you like my little gift. Wear it next time we meet?

Tuesday. 16:30. Sherwood Park.

– Argos

P.S. Bring snacks :)

Chapter End Notes

Woot! 24,360 words. A new personal record. Special thanks to Jai and Alezabee! Happy holidays everyone! Sorry for the late update. Been pretty busy recently. Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter. :)
"Have you heard from August?"

"Nope."

*

"Is he going to call or is he sending a text?"

"Text."

"And has he?"

"Nope."

*

"Emma?"

"Hm?"

"What time did he say he's going to text?"

"Um... half an hour before go-time. So, uh, in about thirty minutes, I guess."

"I see."

*

"Why do you think he hasn't texted yet?"

"Cause it hasn't been thirty minutes, MM."

"Oh, yes. Yes. Of course, you're right."

*

"How much time is left?"

"Twenty-nine minutes and three seconds."

"Oh."

*

"Check your phone again."

"Why?"
"He might've texted already."

"Jesus, it's barely been a minute since you last asked..."

"I know, but—"

"Mary Margaret, listen. My phone's on vibrate, it's volume is on the loudest setting, and I have the most obnoxious message alert tone in town. Believe me, when he texts, you'll know."

*

"Oh! Emma, I feel something vibrating! Check it, quick!"

"I don't have to. It's not my phone."

"It's vibrating—"

"It isn't. You're just sitting on my Clit-Flex 2000."

"..."

"Jeez, relax, I'm kidding."

"Oh. Oh. Yes, yes, of course you were."

"That's actually my Pocket Rocket."

"Emma!"

*

"Stop looking at me like that. I was just messing with you."

"..."

"And please stop going through my drawers... I'm not hiding any—h-hey!"

"..."

"...those aren't mine. I swear."

*

"Have you heard from Aug—"

"No."

"Check your ph—"

"No."

"How much time le—"

"No."

"Emma Swan."
"Sigh. "Nineteen."

"Seconds?"

"Minutes."

"No..."

"Yes."

"No."

"Yes. God, this is never going to end, is it?"

"Not until August texts, no."

"Fuck."

"Mind your tongue."

"Cover your ears."

"Emma."

"...sorry."

*

"Mail motherfucker!"

"That's your message tone?"

"I told you it's obnoxious."

"It's crass."

"That too. But that's what makes it so hilarious."

"Oh, Emma."

"I know, 'kay? Wait... it's from--" 

"August?"

"...Ruby."

"Damn."

"Mind your tongue."

"Oh shush."

\*

*Nervous?* is the only thing that Ruby's message contains.

*Nope* is what she types in response. With a thumb hovering over the send button, Emma stares at that
one little word for a moment, before deciding to let loose and adding a smilie right beside it. There's no harm in emphasizing a short statement with a cocky-looking, yellow-faced emoticon with its tongue sticking out, right? Besides, it's not like she's lying or anything.

She's not nervous.

Emma knows she should be, given what's about to take place this afternoon; but, right now, she can honestly say that she's far from being the jittery mess that everyone told her she'd be. She's not nervous. Really. Her fingers didn't even tremble and hit the wrong keys when she typed in a reply, and, now, as she pushes herself off the bed and runs her hands down the front of her jacket, her palms aren't sweaty enough to stick and leave patches of moisture onto the leather. Small things, yes, but sweaty and shaky hands are her usual tells.

She's alright; calm, composed, and... steady. That's right, steady. Which is, unfortunately, the complete antithesis of her parents on this fateful day.

"Emma, has August texted yet?"

"Nope."

It's like clockwork. Mary Margaret's repetitive questions. David isn't any better, even if he is noticeably quieter than his wife. The antsy man, clad in his heavy boots, is on the verge of completely scuffing out the room's beige carpeting and exposing the floorboards underneath with his tireless pacing.

They've only been here for half an hour, but, already, they've managed to fill up her bedroom with enough nervous energy to choke a frickin' rhino. This entire exercise is really trying her patience; to say that their jittery behavior isn't getting to her would be a massive lie. Anxiety is contagious. Another thirty minutes in their company and she just might start climbing the walls.

"Has August...?"

"Nope."

"Are you sure?"

"Yup."

It's like a bad dream where time is on a loop and she's the only one who's conscious of it; except, she's wide-awake and this is about as real as real life can get.

For a brief moment, Emma entertains the idea of hiding inside her bathroom until that elusive text from August comes in — a text that would tell her it's time to head over to Sherwood Park and begin Operation Frost. Isolating herself from certain stressors (and, by that, she means her parents) would be a wise move, considering the pivotal role she's playing in less than an hour. Making up her mind, Emma's just about to cross the short distance between her bed and the bathroom, when she makes the grave mistake of glancing at the worried creases on the faces of her two visitors. Just like that, guilt gnaws at her insides and shames her into nipping the tempting thought in the bud.

Emma may be new to the whole concept of being someone's daughter, but, she supposes, a good one wouldn't just abandon her parents when they're clearly under a lot of stress. Besides, they're this edgy because of her; the least she could do is keep them company. So, with a resigned little sigh, she parks her ass back down on the bed, rests her elbows on top of her legs, hangs her head down low, and just tries to tough it out...
"Can you check your phone again? I think I just heard that rude message tone of yours."

...which, considering the current state of her companions, is about as painless as pulling out one's own teeth.

Even if she knows Mary Margaret's probably just hearing stuff due to an all-encompassing desire to receive word from her deputy, Emma still makes a show of glancing at her cellphone. "Nope. Zero messages," she indulges, flashing her former roommate a worn smile.

From her perch at the edge of the blonde's desk, Mary Margaret nods, exhales loudly, and then, much to Emma's delight, begins jiggling her right leg. That neurotic action, coupled with David's incessant back and forth, is enough to make the back of anyone's skull itch — Emma's skull, more to the point.

"Emma?"

*Here we go again*, she thinks wryly, fighting the urge to groan. "Yeah?"

"What did Ruby want earlier?"

The way her head snaps towards her mother almost gives her whiplash. Mary Margaret's asking about Ruby, not August. It's not only new... it's progress. "Um, nothing, really. She just asked if I'm feeling nervous."

"Are you?" Mary Margaret pries, in a tone that's both quiet and subdued — a stark contrast to the blatant way her anxiety is seeping out of her bouncing leg.

"No."

"Really?"

"Really."

"How come?" she follows up, pulling at the loose thread at the hem of her cardigan. "Your father and I are about to crawl out of our skins here — and all we're doing in this whole operation is taking Henry out to dinner. *You're* going to be *out* there, playing as *bait* to a madman who wants to take *your* life to power up a legendary sword. Tell me how, here we are about to lose our minds, while here you are, *so calm*?"

"I dunno, I kinda just *am*," Emma murmurs with a slight shrug, looking down at her left hand and absentmindedly toying with the emerald ring on her finger.

If she doubted her strange zen-like state in any way, Mary Margaret doesn't let it show. Instead, her mom just sighs wearily, rubs her temples with her fingers, and moves her attention somewhere else.

"You know, Emma, I've been meaning to ask," she says after a few moments. "What's inside that box?"

Emma follows Mary Margaret's line of sight; her gaze led to the white box lying beside her on the bed. "It's—remember the thing that our annoying little thief sent me last week?"

"The one that you got yourself electrocuted for?"

"Yeah. That one," she confirms with a good old fashioned eye-roll; flicking the lid off the box and tilting the back of the carton upwards to show its contents. Oddly enough, the frown that Argos' gift elicits from Mary Margaret is identical to the murderous scowl on Regina's face after they had
opened the package for the first time. His "gift" is just tacky — and he expects her to wear it this afternoon? *Please.* As if she'd ever be caught dead wearing it in public. "I had it dusted for prints the other day," she shares off-handedly, almost as an afterthought.

"And?"

"Clean as a whistle."

"Even the box?"

"Yeah. Not even a single fingerprint from the kid he bossed around to deliver it."

"He's very thorough," Mary Margaret remarks.

"Well, that's a polite way of putting it. He's just *anal.*"

"True, but he also strikes me as a smart, calculating man."

Emma scoffs.

"Yes, it's a laughable notion, but I really think he is."

"You sound like you kinda admire him..." Emma observes with a slight frown, picking at the pieces of lint on her midnight blue duvet and thoughtlessly flicking it at a pacing David.

"I *don't.* But, if there's one thing I've learned from all the months of warring against King George and Regina in our old land, is that you should *never* make the fatal mistake of underestimating your enemies. Dismissing their strengths is going to end up being your downfall. You don't have to like him, Emma; but, at least be mindful that he may be capable of making intelligent, well-thought-out moves too."

"Oh, c'mon, you're giving him too much credit. At the end of the day, he's just a crafty son-of-a-bitch and a complete pain in the ass who just got lucky because he somehow got his grubby hands on a powerful sword," Emma grumbles, swiping the box off the edge of the mattress and kicking it under the bed with the heel of her boot. "He's cocky and overconfident — and those traits are going to be his downfall, you'll see. If Operation Frost goes off without a hitch, I'll—"

"Emma."

The aforementioned blonde stills. It's the first time she's heard that booming voice since her parents got here. David, having snapped out of his almost-trance, literally cuts into the conversation by grinding to a halt between the two women.

"I'm sorry for interrupting, I just... I need to know something..." David begins, his eyes boring down on her with such intensity that, in some absurd way, she's half-expecting one of life's fundamental questions to come barreling out of his mouth — something akin to 'does God really exist?', or, the ever-mystifying *why is it that when you put two socks in a washing machine, only one comes out?'

Of course, his question should be infinitely less ridiculous than the latter.

"On a scale of one to ten, how sure are you that Blue's stasis spell will hold?"

Emma blinks. Correction: only slightly less ridiculous. Not to be mean, but it's a pretty pointless question. Magic is different here. Unpredictable. There are no assurances and he knows it. *Still*... he asked, so...
"Um... fiv--wait," she holds up a finger. "Just to clarify: one being that I have no idea whatsoever, and ten being that I'm absolutely, positively frickin' sure, or is it the other way around?"

"One, unsure. Ten, sure."

"Okay," Emma nods. If that's the case, then... "Five."

David's entire face falls in a rather dramatic fashion. She could've answered 'one' and probably would've achieved the same devastating effect.

From her perch at the desk, Mary Margaret pops her head around her sullen husband and shoots Emma a pointed look. Getting the message, the blonde clears her throat and tries again. "Uh... six?"

"..."

"Seven?"

"..."

"Eight?" she smiles wanly, scratching the side of her neck. She's just grasping at straws here. "Eight and a half?"

"You're just counting up," David points out, rather unhappily.

Emma shrugs, all feeble-like. "Well, it's better than counting down."

"But you're just guessing."

"I'm estimating."

"That's the same thing."

"Maybe," she agrees. "But estimating just sounds, I dunno, fancier."

The sigh that leaves David's lips is heavy and laden with worry, but at least she got him to smile just a teeny bit. It's not enough, but it's something.

"Will it immobilize anyone who tries to come near you? Or just him?"

"Anyone can go in and out of the stasis field that the Blue Fairy will be putting up — provided they're not carrying guns or knives or, more importantly, swords," she explains in a very patient tone. They've been over this last night — and, also, the other nights prior. Nerves seem to have affected David's memory — well, it's either that or Regina's right and her dad's listening skills are just a bit suspect. "So, if Argos brings that Ashe thing with him—which is highly darn likely—as soon as he comes within ten feet of me, he'll be trapped right on the spot. He'll only be immobilized for a minute or two, so within that span of time, the others will come out of hiding and do their thing. Blue will try to blast his sword away and my deputies will swoop right in and haul his frozen ass in jail."

It sounds so uncomplicated when she says it now—as all Cliff Notes versions go—but she knows it's not going to be that simple. Nothing ever is.

"But what if he breaks through the enchantment? What then?" David follows up, expression grave, and even without reaching for his wife, Mary Margaret is instantly at his side and rubbing small circles on his back. "Emma, you still don't have any kind of protection against his sword. And with Blue's enchantment in place, you won't be able to carry weapons yourself. You'll be a sitting duck. Completely defenseless."
"Nah, I won't be totally unprotected. I'll be alright, don't worry. I've got an ace up my sleeve."

"What do you mean?"

"Regina," she says simply.

"Regina?" David arches an eyebrow. "An ace?"

"Yeah."

"Isn't she more of a wild card?"

The smile that tugs at the corner of her lips is one that cannot be suppressed. "Maybe. But she'll keep me safe. She promised."

"She did?" A poker-faced Mary Margaret chimes in, only the slight widening of her pupils betraying her surprise.

With a small smile in place, Emma gives a slight nod in confirmation.

"But, didn't she...? I—I don't get it," David frowns, calloused hands clutching the back of his neck, looking utterly lost. "I thought she said she wanted nothing to do with Operation Frost?"

"Oh, she says a lot of things — most of them she doesn't even mean," says Emma, waving a flippant hand. Actually, she's pretty darned sure Regina meant it when she said something along the lines of: 'I will not be used as an accessory to that wooden fool's ill-advised attempt at getting his own superior officer killed, Miss Swan.' Not her exact words, of course, but it's basically the gist of her many, many arguments against August's brainchild, Operation Frost. Regina changed her mind eventually, that's the important thing. "And, besides, you know her, that was just her royal bitchiness playing hard to get."

"Hard to get?" Mary Margaret parrots, voice ripe with disbelief. "Emma, Leroy told us that Regina threw a fireball at them when they went here to pitch August's plan for the first time. That really doesn't sound like someone playing hard to get. That's a flat out no if I've ever heard one."

Emma fights the urge to roll her eyes. Trust the old grumps to come blabbering to her parents when she told him specifically not to. "Look, to be completely fair, Regina didn't throw that fireball on purpose. She just got a little annoyed when August began insisting that it's okay for me to play bait even if I don't have immunity against Argos' sword yet. I promise, Regina only meant to smack August with a water whip or, I dunno, something equally painless; her way of 'slapping' some sense into him, I guess. It should have been harmless, considering he was only supposed to end up drenched, and y'know, not burned."

David's eyebrows slowly crawl up his forehead; Mary Margaret just stares.

"...but, uh, that's not the point," Emma follows up, grimacing slightly. "It's just—shit happens when she's pissed, you know? It's really not her fault; she can't help it if her powers are about as unhinged as a door after a crack raid."

"We know her magic can be extremely erratic," Mary Margaret acknowledges with a sigh. "But, Emma, she almost set people's faces on fire."

"The operative word being almost," she grounds out stubbornly. "And, also, Leroy's exaggerating. Trust me, the fireball didn't even come remotely close to their heads."
"Why? You stopped her?"

Emma manages not to snort. Stop Regina? Yeah right. "She missed," is what she wanted to say. Or better yet, "Her magic's not the only thing that's wonky, so is her aim." Instead, what comes out of her mouth is a very innocent (and truthful): "She threw it out the window."

"Anyway," she says, quickly, before her parents have the chance to react. "Bottom-line is, Regina's fully on-board with the plan. Yeah, it might've taken a few days of convincing... and bribing... and arguing... and, well, a whole lot of begging... for her to even agree to let me out of the house without this ring electrocuting my butt off; but, I can assure you, she's a hundred percent committed to saving my ass if things get hairy at the park."

"And just how will she be able to do that?" David asks, dubious as hell. "For her magic to work, she needs to be able to touch you."

"Charming's right," Mary Margaret jumps right in. "And isn't the whole point of Operation Frost to get Argos to drop his guard and come close enough for you to trap him in a stasis field? If he sees that you're not alone-and you're with Regina, of all people-he probably won't go anywhere near you. He'll play it safe and attack from a distance."

"We know that, that's why Regina will be inv—"

David cuts in before she can even finish speaking. "If Regina has to hide behind bushes or high up a tree like August and the rest, what makes you so sure that she won't blame her unbalanced powers when she 'accidentally' misfires and hits you instead of that maniac? As I see it, this operation gives her the perfect opportunity to finally let you die — either by her own hands or Argos' sword."

"What?!!" Emma startles, gaping at the guy. "Seriously, what the hell are you even talking about? Regina would never hurt me."

"That stupid ring on your finger says otherwise," David counters, frowning mightily at the rock she's sporting on her left hand. "Emma, I know you might think differently, but she doesn't give a damn about you. Regina just tolerates you because of Henry, and, I'm sure if given an opening, she'll take advantage of it. She may have changed a little, but there's still a part of her that's selfish and pure evil."

Mother frickin' hell... how the heck did a conversation about Argos morph into another anti-Regina rant? It completely boggles her mind.

Even Mary Margaret—with her tumultuous relationship and complicated history with her former stepmother—arches an eyebrow at her husband's poor choice of words. "Charming," she says, voice low and full of warning; something akin to 'quit it' flashing in her eyes.

Unfortunately, the man is as tactless as he is sometimes-well, oftentimes-clueless, and so, he ignorantly rambles on. "Stop and think about it, Emma, with you out of the picture, she'll get Henry all to herself, and I bet she'd rather see you get killed than—Ouch!"

Mother and daughter start in surprise.

A beet-red David, with his face now contorted with pain, doubles over and furiously starts massaging his left calf. "Ouch!" And, now, his left foot.

Mary Margaret tilts her head, a puzzled little frown playing on her features. "Cramps?"

"Must be from all the walking back and forth," Emma mutters, somewhat snidely, unable to help
herself. Rising up to her feet and pushing past her parents, she stombs over to her desk and reaches for the badge resting on top of her old CDs. She slips it on her belt with such haste that she almost catches her finger on the metal clip.

"Look," she says, evenly, whipping around and flooring a still bent-over David with an exasperated glare. "I appreciate the concern, I do. And I get that you're worried, and that sometimes, fear makes us say stupid things, but can you just--" she pauses and licks her lip, trying to get a grip on the annoyance bubbling inside her stomach, "—you know, remember that Argos is the enemy here, not Regina? I mean, even though she thinks the whole plan is stupid and suicidal and completely insane, she still put aside her own reservations just to make sure that I'll get to keep my soul for another day. That's not something a pure evil or selfish person would do for someone they just tolerate. Everything Regina's done lately—from researching day and night about the protection spell, to strengthening the wards all over the house, and hell, even giving me this 'stupid' ring—she's done to keep me alive. Maybe you should think about that the next time you decide to badmouth her and say she wants me dead."

David, at least, has the decency to look ashamed.

"Emma, I—"

Mail motherfucker!

As fate would have it, her cellphone decides to make its presence felt.

Predictably, Mary Margaret's face scrunches in disapproval before immediately tensing in anticipation.

"It's August," Emma says after a beat, her green eyes skimming over the short text. "Everybody's ready and in position."

Mary Margaret nods weakly, sucking in a shallow breath. Beside her, David straightens up, face still crinkled, shaking off his left leg.

"Henry should be back from school in a few. Remember, he doesn't know about Operation Frost or the Sword of Ashe. He only thinks his mom and I are out doing errands, that's why you guys are taking him out to dinner," Emma mutters, tone kinda flat, tucking her phone inside her jean pocket after sending a short, and to the point, 'K' to her deputy. "There's coffee in the pot and some of Regina's pineapple upside down cake in the fridge — and, no, it's not poisoned. You two can go on ahead and wait for him in the kitchen, I just need some time alone before I leave."

A chastened David heads over to the stairs, unable to look Emma in the eyes. Head bowed, he goes as far as the landing before hesitating, and then, quickly retracing his steps and pulling her into an awkward, one-armed hug. "Stay safe, alright?" he whispers in her ear. "I'm sorry about... you know. I'll try not to run my mouth off again."

"It's not me you have to apologize to," Emma pulls away, offering him a small smile that probably looks more like a grimace than anything else. "She's really trying, you know? And you're not making things any easier by constantly throwing shade at her. Yes, we still fight like cats and dogs, but it's more... playful, I guess, than malicious. We've saved each other too many times. I guess we've formed some sort of strange camaraderie. To me, she's family. And, honestly, I'm getting really tired of having to defend her to almost everyone in town when all she's been doing these past few months is help protect Storybrooke — as per Mary Margaret's orders. So, please, do me a solid and give Regina a chance — a real one this time. She deserves it. If not for me, at least do it for Henry."
"Emma, I... it's... I—okay," David murmurs, swallowing thickly. Emma can tell there's an argument just itching to crawl out of his mouth, but he has enough common sense not to go there — at least, not today. So, with an affectionate squeeze on her shoulder, he turns on his heel, spares his wife a weak smile and makes his way up the stairs — favoring his right leg, she notes wryly.

"It's not too late, you know..."

"Not too late for what?" Emma exhales, exhausted, turning to Mary Margaret.

"To call the whole thing off," Mary Margaret finishes somberly, rubbing her arms through the thick material of her cardigan despite the temperature in Emma's room rivaling that of the tropics. "Everyone will understand if you decide to back out. Maybe... maybe Regina has a point. It's too dangerous. I know August has a way with words, but do you really want to go through with this plan of his?"

"Yes."

"Emma, are you sure?"

"Yes," she repeats, keeping her tone firm yet gentle at the same time. "I'm the Sheriff. Keeping the town safe is my job. Argos is not only a threat to me, he's a danger to us all and he needs to be locked up. I'm not taking him on alone, you know that. I have my deputies and a fairy nun watching my back. And if that's not enough to make you feel better, I also got something like a guardian angel watching over me. I'll be fine."

"Guardian angel," Mary Margaret repeats. "Who, Regina?"

Emma smirks.

"You would really trust her with your life?"

"Without a doubt."

Her mother nods quietly, taking a moment to let that sink in. "Then, I suppose, in a huge way, my life is also in her hands," she sighs, a wry smile forming on her lips. "Ironic, isn't it? How things seem to come full circle?"

"Life's full of surprises," Emma shrugs, reaching out and giving Mary Margaret's hand a soft squeeze — pouring as much assurance as she can into that one simple gesture. Despite her efforts, fairytale land's bad-ass Snow White is still looking at her as though she'd rather cuff her to a chair than let her leave the house. So, it isn't the least bit surprising that, like David, her former roommate pulls her into the tightest of hugs that leaves her absolutely winded.

"Be careful, okay? You do what you have to do, but just make sure you come home in one piece. I've lost you once twenty-eight years ago; and, well, your career path isn't exactly doing anything to ease my worries — maybe, after today, you'll consider early retirement?"

Emma chuckles softly. "No promises, but I'll think about it."

"Please do," Mary Margaret places the softest of kisses on her cheek before pulling away and reluctantly taking her leave.

Left on her lonesome, Emma takes a moment to regroup and center herself, psyching herself up for the task ahead. You'll be fine, she tells herself, inhaling deeply into her lungs. To her surprise, doing so causes her nose to wrinkle, and, in a snap, her whole body stiffens.
"Regina," she leans back into her desk and tucks her hands inside the pockets of her jeans. "If you're planning to scare the living crap out of me, it's not going to work."

"How did you know I was here?" a disembodied voice replies from somewhere inside her bedroom, confirming Emma's suspicions.

"I smelled you."

"And, how? I'm deliberately not wearing any perfume."

"Your shampoo."

"Miss Swan, how on earth do you even know what my shampoo smells like?"

Emma shrugs and rakes a hand through her tousled locks. "I just do."

A low hum is all she gets in response.

"So..."

"So...?" she echoes.

"Guardian angel, hm?"

"Uh, well, you're invisible and you're going to be watching over me. Doesn't get more guardian angel-y than that," she murmurs feebly, cheeks coloring and matching her red leather jacket.

"Besides, the devil was an angel once."

It's a testament to their growing relationship that innocent jabs like that no longer cause claws to break out. Instead of an affronted growl, she just hears Regina's sniffy little scoff. Emma fights back a grin. She feels kinda foolish, talking to an empty room. She doesn't even know where to look; but, since invisibility is the key to allowing Regina to stay by her side while letting Argos think that she's all alone and vulnerable, Emma makes no complaints.

"I didn't hear anyone go down the stairs. How long have you been down here?"

"Long enough to suffer through your mother's suffocating presence and another one of your father's asinine diatribes. Truly, Miss Swan, for someone who came from such humble beginnings, your dear Prince Charming is quite the pompous bastard, isn't he?"

*That's kinda true*, Emma guiltily thinks, but... "Lemme guess, you had something to do with his 'cramps'?"

"Considering how slanderous his statements were, he should consider himself lucky that all he got was a swift kick and a little stomp," Regina says stiffly, venom lacing that silky voice. Clearly, there's no love lost between her father and her housemate. "You and I both know he deserved it — don't even bother denying it, Miss Swan. I saw the look on your face when he was doubled over in pain. Though I must say, princess, that was quite an impassioned speech you gave on my behalf."
"Impressed?"

"Astounded."

"That I said something nice about you?"

"That you were somewhat coherent."

Emma smirks. *Bitchy little jerk.* "Did my *somewhat coherent* defense meet your approval at least, your royal pain in the ass?"

"That depends, *pillow princess.*"

"On what?"

"Did you mean it?"

"Every word," she answers without hesitation.

"..."

"Touched?"

"Speechless."

"In a good way?"

"Perhaps."

"Ooh... are you getting soft on me, your majesty?" Emma teases, smiling roguishly.

"*Me?* Miss Swan, I wasn't the one who put her own *father* in his place for maligning his mortal enemy."

"*Pfft...* he was out of line."

"And here I was thinking that we'd never agree on anything."

"Well, stranger things have happened."

"Indeed. Still, your actions—though unnecessary since I am more than capable of defending myself against that buffoon—are... *appreciated.* Thank you."

"..."

"Touched?" Regina mimics.

"Speechless," Emma returns, trying to bite back another smile to no avail.

An invisible Regina lets out another hum but says no more.

"Anyway," Emma breathes out, stealing a quick glance at her wristwatch. "We better head out. Clock's ticking."

"If we must; though, I still believe this exercise is a pointless—and, potentially *lethal*-waste of time."

"I know... you've said that."
"In this land, a stasis spell is unpredictable and unreliable..." the brunette continues. "...and, later, even more so, because that insufferable fairy will be the one casting it."

"I know, you've said that too – lots of times, actually."

"With good reason," Regina huffs. "Remember, Miss Swan, if that thief so much as blinks while in supposed stasis-and, in spite of any protests from your incompetent deputies and that vile little fairy-I'm going to teleport us out of there and back home. So, under no circumstances should you ever let go of my hand when your stalker appears. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal."

"Good. Then let's go. Grab hold of me."

"Uh... where the heck are you?" Emma dumbly asks, feeling the air around her with her hands, searching for the brunette. It isn't long before her palms hit something solid, and, well, incredibly soft. Emma flinches. Shit. "Please don't tell me I just grabbed your boob..."

"Miss Swan," she hears Regina's weary sigh. "Take a moment to look at how high your hand is. Unless you think my breasts have somehow flown up to my head and magically nailed themselves there, you didn't grab anything that will most likely end up with you getting slapped. Lucky for you, you just touched my cheek, princess."

"Oh-" Better that cheek than her butt cheek — or any other damning body part, Emma thinks, unconsciously scratching the side of her face where she would've most likely been smacked. Her ears pick up another breathy exhale from the brunette, before the familiar feeling of Regina's fingers slipping between her own and engulfing her hand with warmth causes a tiny shiver to slither down her spine.

"Nervous, Sheriff?"

"No. I'm good... I'm alright," Emma murmurs, holding tighter and giving Regina's hand a small squeeze. "I'm ready."

Mary Margaret had asked her a while ago about the secret to her calmness; Emma replied that she didn't know. That was a lie.

The reason why she isn't nervous? She's high on the confidence a potent dose of the human stress pill, Regina Mills, brings — that's why.

"Hey, um, FYI, I didn't write a will."

"You didn't deem it necessary?"

"Nope, cause I'm not dying today, right?"

"Regrettably, not on my watch, princess."

"Just checking," she cheekily replies.

"Remember, don't ever let go of me."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

"Good."
And in a puff of purple smoke, they disappear into thin air.

It's meant to make him look unique and completely out-of-this-world, but this is getting absurd.

"Hey... what do you know about hair?"

"That some people have it, some don't? And it gets thicker, shorter and kinkier as you get closer to the crotch."

"Not exactly what I was asking, man. But I guess I should've phrased it better," Rufio sighs, gazing at his faint reflection on the windowpane and fussing with the tips of his red streaks. "Shit, do you see this? Split-fucking-ends, dude. I haven't had a good trim in months and it shows."

"So? Go to a barber shop, what's the big deal? Hand me the crowbar."

After one last preen, Rufio reaches behind him and pulls out the tool from his backpack, handing it wordlessly to a waiting Argos. "I can't exactly go and visit my old barber, you know. I mean, I still can't get over living in the same house as Ja–Hook for twenty-eight fucking years, let alone accept that I've been letting that bastard Smee touch my hair for more than two decades. This is sacred, man." He motions at the unruly beehive on his head, serious as hell. "Only people I trust can come near this work of art. So... uh... that's why I was asking if you knew anything about hair. Maybe you can cut mine?"

"Can't Thud Butt do it?" Argos grunts, ramming the crowbar underneath the window and using the tool to pry it open, careful not to apply too much force to break the glass. "The last hair I trimmed was my own; I was eleven and a moron and I ended up looking like I ran my head through a shredder. Believe me, buddy, you don't want me anywhere near that tri-hawk of yours."

"Well, I don't trust Thud Butt with a pair of scissors, either. He has heavy hands and is about as gentle as a butcher. That fat-ass knows how to hack stuff, not cut hair."

"Who used to cut your hair back in Neverland, anyway?"

"Latchboy," he supplies, leaning casually against the brick wall and watching Argos do his thing — feeling more than slightly fascinated by the ease and deftness of his friend's movements; clearly, this is someone who's already broken into a lot of buildings in his life. It isn't long before Rufio finds himself hoisted up and thrown unceremoniously inside an empty washroom, tumbling in head first and falling flat on his back. Argos follows suit; jumping right in and gracefully landing on his feet with the softest of thumps. Rufio looks up and frowns. "Bastard."

"Why don't you ask Latchboy?"

"Cause Latchboy's dead," he mutters, accepting the gloved hand that Argos thrusts near his face and allowing his masked friend to yank him up. "He said as much when he refused to go back to the group because he has a family now. Tsh. Those chumps aren't even his real parents, that dumbass."

"Oh, c'mon. Can you really blame the kid? Twenty-eight years is a long time not to grow attachments, Rufio. You, of all people, should know that."

"And what's that supposed to mean?" he hisses, glowering at Argos' back even as he follows the guy to the door and out of the men's room.

"That bracelet of yours? I saw your brother wearing the exact same thing when I bought his bike."
"For the last time, he's not my brother. And, besides, so what? It's just a fucking accessory, man. It doesn't mean shit—mmph"

"Shhh."

Rufio stills, listens, and, soon enough, picks up on the sound of squeaky wheels in the near distance — forcing him to file back his indignation to a later time. With Argos' hand still covering his mouth, they flatten themselves against the nearby wall; a comical attempt to blend into their drab surroundings even though he's pretty sure they stick out like sore thumbs. Not a moment later, a scruffy man appears at the far end of the corridor, pushing an old rickety cleaning cart that needs a good deal of scrubbing itself. Earphones in place and whistling grossly off-key, the guy disappears into the janitor's closet, none the wiser. Argos drops his hand and Rufio lets out a quiet breath.

"I thought you made sure this place would be deserted this afternoon?"

"I forgot about him. Honest mistake," Argos whispers right back, motioning at him to follow with a quick wave of a hand. They make their way through the sparsely-lit hallway, conscious to keep their footsteps as light as they possibly could. The janitor's probably going to take a nap, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

They arrive at their destination soon enough, thankfully undetected.

"Have I ever told you that I wanted to work here before?"

"You did?" Argos chuckles quietly, striding into the office and letting his hand brush across the edge of a cluttered desk — Leroy's, from the looks of it. "You wanted to become a cop?"

"Uh-huh. Jet did. Once upon a frickin' time."

"Deputy Jethro Peters. Has a nice ring to it, I have to say."

Rufio snorts, self-consciously massaging the back of his neck at the absurdity of that particular pipe dream.

"So, you don't want to pursue a career in law enforcement, anymore?"

"Nope."

"Why? What changed?"

What didn't change? Rufio sighs inwardly, fingerling the two-coil leather bracelet on his wrist. "Who changed," he murmurs, quiet, pensive and just... sad; pressing his thumb against the J.P. embossed near the clasp. "I did."

The park's deserted.

A thorough visual sweep from the lone wooden bench by the pond tells her as much. It's been more than thirty minutes since she teleported here alongside Regina and joined her deputies-and the Blue Fairy—for Operation Frost; in that span of time, not one soul has been spotted inside the small neighborhood park. Argos' note had specifically said to meet here at exactly four-thirty this afternoon. It's now eight minutes past that designated time, and still, no sign from that thieving pain in the ass.

After taking another surreptitious glance at her surroundings, Emma sits forward and brings her right
wrist by her lips – under the guise of resting her chin on her palm — and murmurs into the tiny mic hidden inside her sleeve. It kinda feels very Secret Service-esque with a dash of James Bond; and it should, considering the huge hole purchasing the said tech left in her department's budget. "August?"

The fitted earpiece, hidden underneath strategically-placed locks of blonde hair, comes to life in a heartbeat. "Yes, boss?"

"Any changes on your end?"

"Negative. Still no sign of anyone entering or leaving from the east."

"Copy that. Ruby?"

"Same here, Em. North side's clear."

"Alright. Leroy?"

For a moment, muffled movement is all Emma hears, until... "Hey Red!" Leroy's voice booms out, nearly shattering her eardrum and eliciting pained groans from just about everyone with an earpiece. "Do you happen to know any man-ducks in town? Or, did you, I dunno, wolf them all down like you did with the Bacons back home? 'Cause there's a gaggle of ducks waddling underneath my tree, conga-lining their way to the pond. Just wanted to make sure they're not some shitty shifters trying to sneak past me to get to the Sheriff."

"I don't know any so-called man-ducks," is Ruby's huffy reply. "And no, I didn't — wouldn't - and will never — eat one."

"Not a fan, huh? I prefer chicken, myself." August chimes in.

"Me too," Leroy seconds. "But not over turkey."

"Jesus," Emma sighs. "Focus, people. Leroy, aside from those stupid ducks, do you see anyone else on your end?"

"Nah, all clear, Sheriff."

"Ten-four. And for the hundredth time, stop shouting into the mic, you're as loud as a frickin' bullhorn."

"If not louder," Regina drawls in agreement, exasperation in her voice. "Need I remind you that this is a covert operation, dwarf? Not karaoke night at Granny's."

"Yeah, yeah. Whatever. Won't happen again."

"It better not," Emma grouses, still discomfited by the slight ringing in her right ear. "Blue? How're things down south?"

"I'm afraid the situation here is no different from the rest, Sheriff. I don't see anyone — human, duck or otherwise."

"Noted. Alright, everybody, lay low and stay in cover. Keep your eyes peeled and radio for any sign of activity," Emma orders in her best Sheriff voice. After listening to a slew of affirmative responses from her team, she drops her hand back down to her lap and casually leans back into the bench, putting up a front of complete and utter nonchalance. She barely has a moment to take a breath when she feels the slightest pressure on her left hand. "Problem, Regina?" she asks under her breath,
throwing a cursory glance at the empty spot next to her.

"Twelve minutes late. Clearly, your stalker's not one for punctuality. Or manners."

"And you're surprised?"

"Absolutely not."

"Me neither."

"Well, unsurprising as his utter disregard of common courtesies may be, it most certainly is still annoying."

"True. Think he's doing it on purpose to rile me up?"

"That might be a logical conclusion, yes, but I still maintain that his general lack of breeding is to blame. Keep in mind, Miss Swan, there is no excuse for tardiness. One should never keep people waiting... unless you're a queen, of course. Then it becomes obligatory."

"Huh." Emma purses her lips. "So, are you saying that being tardy is, like, my birthright?"

"My dear, you're not a queen."

"I'm a princess. Close enough."

"Oh, so, now you don't have a problem calling yourself one? Why, Miss Swan, I was always under the impression that you more than slightly abhor your royal lineage..."

"Not if it gives me a convenient excuse whenever I'm late, I don't."

"Hopeless," Regina sighs.

"Smart," Emma corrects, smirking at her veiled companion. "You have to admit, it's kinda handy and--"

The sound of static interrupts the casual banter. "Sheriff. I need to pee," Leroy declares out of the blue, completely unabashed.

"So? Go pee."

"Where?"

"Pond's over there. Bushes are everywhere. Take your pick." Emma rolls her eyes.

"Neanderthals," Regina says in disgust.

"Better hold it in, grumps," August cuts in. "I'm seeing movement from the east."

Like a splash of cold water, this sobers Emma up immediately. "Is it our guy?"

"I... I'm not sure. There's a couple of big ass boulders blocking my visual. As soon as he passes them, I'll know."

That does it. Instead of waiting a few more moments, her impatience propels her into action. Overcome with the nagging urge to know, Emma jumps up to her feet. Cool facade out the window, she stands on her tiptoes and cranes her neck, trying to see past the aforementioned big ass boulders.
Not a second later, she finds her butt unceremoniously crashing back down on the bench, a consequence of having her arm yanked hard by an invisible force.

"Be more obvious, I dare you," she hears Regina hiss in her ear. "We've been over this, princess. Let your prey come to you; over-eagerness will only tip him off and scare him away."

"But–" she mutters, casting a longing glance towards the east.

"Miss Swan."

*That tone.* Emma bites her lower lip. She knows it too damn well. It's the no-nonsense one that she's been finding herself deferring to for weeks – no, months. Today, it seems, is no different. "I—*sorry,*" she mumbles, properly chastened. "You're right."

"Uh... Sheriff?"

"Can you see him now?" Emma asks, purposely facing westward, stamping down the strong impulse to rise up once more.

"Yeah..."

"Is it him?"

"No... not unless he's aged fifty years since you had that encounter with him last week."

Emma exhales loudly and slumps against the bench, letting go of some of the tension on her muscles. Casting a furtive glance at the boulders, she catches glimpse of a well-dressed old man in a gray porkpie hat, slowly making his way towards the pond, cane in hand.

"Do you know the old timer?" she directs at a ghost-like Regina.

"No... I—I don't believe I do."

*The Queen not recognizing one of the thousands she's cursed? That's new.*

"Does anyone recognize our newly arrived guest?" Emma throws the question at the others, speaking discreetly into her wrist.

"I dunno... the old geezer kinda looks familiar..." Leroy intones, thoughtful and quiet (for a nice change). Both August and Ruby answer in the negative.

As it turns out, it's the Mother Superior of all fairy nuns who gives Emma the answer she's been looking for.

"That's Paul. Paul O'Hara," Blue's voice crackles through the comm-link. "He's a retired History professor from Oxford — well, at least, that's his backstory as set by the curse. He goes and celebrates mass with us every Sunday at the convent."

"Ha! I knew I recognized him from somewhere!" Leroy exclaims, sounding way too proud of himself. "He ain't stingy, that one. He's the guy who always gives fifty bucks when I collect cash during the offertory."

Despite all that's happening, Emma can't help but roll her eyes at the old grumps. "Leroy, one of these days, I'm gonna rat you out to your rabbi and tell him the reason why you're now a non-practicing jew is because you've been itching for a taste of catholicism — Nova's catholicism, more to the point."
"H-hey!" Leroy cries out in protest, amidst the sound of Ruby and August's quiet chuckles and Regina's derisive snort. Blue, for her part, elects to remain mum. "The heck did I ever do to you, sister?"

"Fireball, Deputy Blabbermouth. Ring a bell?"

"I... uh... I... shit... I'm sorry, alright? We were having drinks and it kinda slipped. I didn't mean to break our little code of silence or whatever. Won't happen again."

"See that it doesn't." is her even reply, not bothering to hide her displeasure at his tiny foul-up. "I—fuck."

"You... fuck?"

She ignores Leroy completely.

"Regina," Emma snaps her head to the side, voice low and urgent. "Look at the old dude's chest pocket; what do you see sticking out?"

It takes a moment for her to get a response, but when she finally does, Regina sounds equally perturbed when she mumbles: "...a lilac."

Emma worries on her bottom lip.

What now?

Whoever does the filing in this joint should be chained to a wall and flogged.

After combing through the files in the third drawer—the one labeled K-P, but was filled with so many stray folders from all the other letters of the alphabet—Rufio's just about ready to dump all the misplaced files inside a bin and set them on fire. He's pretty sure the Sheriff isn't doing menial tasks like filing documents—so, the culprit's probably one of her deputies. Leroy, he surmises. That jerkwad looks like somebody who needs to brush up on their ABC's.

"Any luck?"

"No," he huffs, moving on to the next filing cabinet under the parking and traffic violations section. "When the hell are you going to finish up and help me look? You're the one who promised me we'd find her today."

"Yeah, yeah. In a sec," Argos mumbles, not even glancing up from the all-too-important task of picking the lock on the Sheriff's desk. From his spot in the bullpen, Rufio hears a tiny click, followed closely by a victorious little grunt. He turns his head in time to catch Argos slipping a thick, brown envelop inside the newly-opened drawer before shutting it closed, quick and quiet.

"Love letter?"

"Nah," is the response he gets. "Just following up on a promise."

"Was that the money you stole?" Rufio lifts a brow, moving towards the side to give Argos some elbow room. "You get the bottom drawers. We're looking for a white Dodge Omni."

"Alright," Argos nods, getting on his knees and delving right into work. "And no, it wasn't. She'll get her cash when she gets it. That letter was just me tying loose ends."
"Uh-huh. Right." Rufio shrugs but says no more.

They mostly do their search in silence, only throwing a random comment when a certain file catches their eye. The incident report about dowdy Mr. Gosling—that's Mother fucking Goose's husband, for the uninitiated—getting caught speeding near his mistress' house while wearing nothing but red rubber boots, was the cause of a one-minute chuckle-fest.

"Holy shit... take a look at this stuff..." Rufio marvels not a moment later, skimming over the files inside cabinet number four.

"Hm?"

"Dude, they're all reports about people hooking up at Pride Rock Point. And... ha! Most of them I know from school..." he shares, pupils dilating with excitement, completely enthralled by the goldmine of salacious information in his hands. This is potent blackmail material, right here. The more Rufio reads the bigger his eyes get. Holy crap. "These reports are fucking detailed, man. Like, super explicit. Who wrote this shit?"

Argos snorts in amusement, not even sparing him a glance as he peruses the bottommost drawer. "Probably that August guy. Heard he used to be a writer."

"Of what, harlequin novels? These things read like a bad porno."

"Focus, Rufio," Argos chides, slapping his shin with a rolled up file. "We're on a mission here, remember?"

"Spoilsport," he pouts childishly but ends up listening to Argos all the same.

And so, back to work they go.

When the time on the wall clock hits 4:45 in the afternoon, Rufio pauses momentarily to give his companion a light nudge with the tip of his tattered Converse. "So, you're really standing her up, huh? What a shitty date you are."

"Correction: standing them up," Argos mutters distractedly, still concentrating on the task at hand. "Take a good look around you, buddy. Everyone's gone. They didn't even leave a person behind to man the phones."

"They wanted to turn it into some kind of group date? Fun," he intones, smirking devilishly. "Have to admit, I'm pretty fucking amazed at how easily they fell for your little gimmick. Master manipulator, huh?"

"Pfft... all I did was give them a time and a place, the rest was all their doing," Argos waves off, brimming with false humility. "Oldest trick in the book, kid. Let your enemies believe they're two steps ahead, when all they're really doing is walking along the path that you've paved for them. They probably think they're going to play me today, little do they know that they're the ones getting played."

"Bravo." Rufio gives his friend a well-deserved slow clap — a gesture that Argos gamely receives by dipping his hoodie-covered head and giving a tiny bow. After that sideshow, they return their attention back to their merry little search.

"Hey... I have a blue Omni, right here," Argos says after a few minutes, holding up a dusty old folder.
"That's not it. I told you, we're looking for a white one."

"How are you even sure it's white? Didn't you see her only once? And it was two frickin' years ago to boot?"

"Yeah, but believe me, once is enough to leave an impression."

"Was she that beautiful?"

"Meh, she's alright; her car, though, was pretty unforgettable just for being so butt-fucking-ugly. I'm telling you, man, that car is a piece of shit — and I mean that in the most literal sense of the word. I remember it, especially, cause she parked it beside the fire hydrant near my house, and that dude who died—the one Sheriff Swan replaced?—gave her a ticket for it. Since she didn't have any money to pay for the fine, my dick of a fake brother tried to get in her pants by lending her some of my cash."

"Lemme guess, she didn't pay you back?"

Rufio's face hardens. "No. She didn't."

"Even under a curse, she still finds a way to stick it to you, huh?" Argos teases, chuckling evilly. A light shove from Rufio is enough to make the guy shut his trap. "Seriously, though," his older companion starts anew. "From all your stories, she comes across as somewhat of a selfish bitch. What makes you so sure she'll agree to help you out?"

"I won't give her a choice. I know her secret and I'm going to lord it over her head," he says, smiling ominously, eyes going dark with thoughts of a vengeance that's just dying to be enacted. "The Lost Boys aren't the only ones she screwed over. If I expose her to all the people she betrayed, they'd want retribution. The Piccaninny Tribe would call for her head, the fucking pirates too. Hell, so would the mermaids."

"The heck did she do? Sell your souls to the devil?"

"Close. She struck a deal with the Dark One."

"What kind of deal?"

"The kind that she had no right making in the first place," Rufio grounds out. "She was unhappy; she kept saying that she wanted a chance at a new beginning, at a new life. So, Rumplestiltskin gave her what she wanted."

"What did that bastard ask for in return?"

"Our land," he murmurs, gritting his teeth, the file he's going over accidentally crumpling in his hands. "Neverland wouldn't have been touched by the curse if it weren't for her. Because of her, we're stuck here, a whole frickin' world away from home."

"So, she—wait... uh... Rufio?"

At the angry thoughts screaming inside his head, everything else becomes background noise. Frowning deeply, he replaces a folder with a little too much force and roughly pulls out the next one. "She's the reason why I spent the last twenty-eight years playing happy families with my mortal enemy."

"Rufio..."
"The reason the majority of my brothers, my Lost Boys, don't want to come back home — because they have 'parents' now, 'real' families they can't leave behind."

"Rufio."

"Worst of all, she's the fucking reason why I'm feeling crappy and crabby and frickin' sad all the time. I'm growing up, man. I'm fucking... aging," he says, shuddering at that vile, blasphemous word.

"Rufio!"

"What?!"

"Is this it?"

The Masked One's waving a file in his hands. That's enough to reel Rufio back in from the deep end. Centering himself, he clears his throat and bends down beside his companion, accepting the folder that Argos quietly hands over.

The file contains a short report about an impounded 1981 Dodge Omni. White. It seems Sheriff Humbert had it towed a couple of months ago for parking beside yet another fire hydrant — this time, on Main Street. It doesn't mention if the car was claimed at the pound, but it does say that it's registered under one Julia Campanilla of #315 Ashby Street.

"Did we find her?"

The sinister grin that breaks out on Rufio's lips almost splits his face in half.

"We did."

Time to collect a longstanding debt. And no, he's not talking about an eighty dollar fine.

Theories, theories, and more theories. Crazy theories, to be precise.

That's what you get when people are left to their own imaginations: crazy, bat-shit theories.

See, when Mr. O'Hara stuck his hand inside a crevice on the willow's massive trunk, looking to pull out a hidden object from within, every person's mind started going on hyperdrive: talking over each other on their comm-links, throwing around their own take on what the old man might be collecting.

Emma, speaking all stealthily into her wrist mic, believes he's going to pull out some sort of gun, or heck, a frickin' machete, for all she knows. Regina, calm and regal as ever, is thinking more along the lines of a magical thingamajig, and suggests a preemptive strike with a fireball to the face. A paranoid August worries that it's somehow going to be a crude, make-shift bomb and starts rambling about blast radiuses. Ruby suspects that it's just a novel or perhaps a notebook. Blue defends the old man and says it's most likely a sentimental keepsake of sorts. And Leroy, well, just snorts and mumbles that it's probably grandpa's secret stash of booze.

Needless to say, all their guesses are way off-base. If they had set up a wager beforehand, nobody would have won.

Because, as it turns out, it's a chess set. A beautiful, antiquated chess set with intricate carvings and inlaid with tiny, glittering gems at the edges. Predictably, those who overreacted-sans an unapologetic Regina, of course-are now feeling all kinds of stupid.
Tucking the said item under his arm, Paul shuffles back to the stone table nearby and places the chess set gingerly on top of it. Setting his cane aside, he makes himself comfortable on one of the wooden seats, and takes a rather inordinate amount of time straightening out the nonexistent creases on his white oxford shirt.

"Should I approach him?" Emma murmurs, mic’d hand cradling her chin, careful not to move her lips too much and give herself away.

"I'm not sure that's a good idea, boss," August replies, putting his two cents in. "We don't really know him."

"That lilac makes him suspicious," Ruby seconds, sounding mildly concerned.

"Exactly. Em, he looks harmless enough, but I think it's unwise to approach someone that shady on your own."

"On her own?" Regina voices out, her tone clipped. "Deputy Booth, has it truly slipped your puny mind that I'm right here, and, as you've reiterated countless of times, my only purpose in this ill-conceived operation of yours is to serve as Miss Swan's unseen guardian? I know I'm blending in quite nicely to my surroundings, man-puppet, but do make an effort to remember the intricacies of your own plan, would you, dear?"

"Man-puppet," Leroy snorts.

August mumbles a half-hearted 'sorry' at her royal bitchiness before silencing a snickering Leroy with a cruel reminder of arrows in butts.

"Sheriff," Blue speaks up, talking over the childish grumbling of the two men. "If Paul's armed-and I very much doubt he is-he should be immobilized by my stasis spell once you get close enough. I've known that man for years. He's a good person. I don't believe for a second that he is consorting with a wanted criminal."

"And that is why good and naivety always go hand-in-hand," is Regina's snide remark to the nun's well-meaning defense of the old man. "Frankly, I find such foolish optimism irksome and offensive to my intellect."

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, did I hit a nerve? Why, I was merely stating facts. Blind faith, after all, is the mark of fools and fairies — not that those two are mutually exclusive."

"Cynicism is the sign of a corrupt soul, Regina."

"Better a corrupt soul than a starry-eyed cretin, fairy nun."

"Ladies," Emma whispers sharply, deciding to cut in before things turned ugly. "Now's really not the time for this. Play nice."

Blue, thank goodness, concedes with the smallest of sighs. "I apologize, Sheriff."

"Regina?"

The only answer she gets is a noncommittal grunt.

Emma bites back a long-suffering groan. If Argos doesn't succeed in killing her today, maybe the
looming magical smack-down between Regina and the Blue Fairy would. Deciding it easier and less trying on her patience, she just shifts her attention back to the old gentleman.

After Mr. O'Hara is done primping himself, he moves on to the delicate task of arranging the ivory chess pieces on the board. Afterwards, he folds his hands neatly on his lap, lets out a happy little sigh, turns his head to the side, and, to Emma's surprise, meets her gaze dead-on. And smiles. A warm, inviting smile that totally disarms her for a good—and also, kind of uncomfortable—number of seconds. Paul's not leering at her like a pervert; and there's a genuine sense of kindness in his eyes that makes her question all the macabre scenarios that she's already painted in her head after seeing that lilac in his pocket (the one where he's beating her to a pulp with his cane is particularly gruesome... and, also, disturbingly hilarious).

Emma finds herself freezing for a moment, before slowly, and hesitantly, returning his smile.

"What do I do?" she asks, hiding the words behind her frozen grin like some kind of ventriloquist.

"Times like these, I would say do what you will, princess."

"Really?"

"No. But does my opinion truly matter when you're going to end up doing what you want to do, regardless of what I say?"

_The woman has a valid point._ Emma swallows visibly, still grinning at the man like an idiot even though he's no longer looking at her. His head's bent down; brows knit and lips pursed as he focuses intently on the solitary game of chess that he's now playing.

"So, what do you want to do, Miss Swan?"

"Talk to him," Emma admits, shifting in place. "Bad idea?"

"Have you ever had a good one, Sheriff?"

" Lots, actually."

"That was a rhetorical question."

"Figured I'd answer it anyway."

"Then I also figure that you might be interested to know that I'm rolling my eyes at you right now."

"Zero visibility, less impact. But, good to know, I guess. Anyway... uh, it's just... um, you'll be with me, right? I mean, I'm pretty sure I can handle myself in a fist fight with a geriatric person — but, you know, just in case he can do magic? I don't want to go up in flames, or, I dunno, grow a third boob or something."

The scoff she hears is haughty as hell, a hundred-percent Regina Mills. "I can counteract any spell he can cast with just a twitch of a finger."

"Only with my help, your majesty. So, you better be touching me when you do, clear?"

"Demanding, aren't we?" her royal bitchiness snarks. "Don't you worry, princess. I'll be holding your hand. Or wringing your neck. Either way, I'll keep in touch."

"Was that a pun?"
"I don't do jokes, my dear."

*Of course you don't,* Emma thinks wryly. "Uh-huh. Right. So... uh... don't let me go, okay? Please?"

"Only because you beg so well."

Emma fights the urge to roll her eyes.

"I'm going in, everyone," she speaks into her wrist. "Eyes peeled, guard up. Unless it's really important, try not to talk while I'm speaking with him. I don't want to answer you guys accidentally and give ourselves away."

As soon as Emma stands to her feet, she feels the all-encompassing heat from Regina's touch envelop her left wrist, keeping her close like a tether. When she bridges the distance between her bench and the man's table, Regina's hold only tightens. It doesn't hurt, it's not uncomfortable; if anything else, it's *reassuring*. Empowering. The smile that's still plastered on Emma's face broadens a tiny fraction, and somehow, it no longer feels contrived.

The stasis spell doesn't kick in. The geezer's unarmed.

Emma releases a breath.

*Here we go.*

"Hello, sir," she greets the retired *professor*, emboldened by the sudden burst of confidence that fills up her chest. "I'm Sheriff Swan. I'm sorry to intrude, but I just couldn't help but notice the beautiful chess set you have right there..."

The road forks straight ahead. The street at the right leads to Sherwood Park. Instead of going in that direction, Argos maneuvers the motorbike to the left. They're heading for Crescent Hills.

After several glances at the desolate stretch of road behind them, Rufio raps his friend's side with his bare knuckles. "Won't they arrest the old fart?"

"Nah," is the breezy response he gets. "He'll be fine. He did nothing wrong."

"But you gave him an effin' lilac. They'll think he's working for you..."

"I wouldn't worry about it, buddy."

"I'm not worried," he says, all too quickly.

"Course you ain't," the Masked One mutters, patronizing as shit. "Look, playing chess with a wanted thief once a week ain't illegal. My only real crime in town is stealing from the Sheriff. He wasn't an accomplice to that, they'll leave him alone."

"Are you sure?"

"They'll ask him a few questions and maybe start keeping an eye on him, but, otherwise, yeah, they'd leave him alone."

"Aren't you afraid he'd rat you out?"

"Nah, Paul's not a rat. And it's not like he knows a lot of stuff about me to begin with," Argos mutters, revving the bike and accelerating into a deserted forest road. "Besides, I *want* him to talk to
the Sheriff. Maybe they'll hit it off or something."

"Are you serious?"

"Like a frickin' heart attack."

"Why?"

"I don't want him to be alone. Especially since, y'know, I'm not gonna be here next week."

"If you're secretly hoping that geezer's going to be your wingman, then you're fucking kidding yourself. He's not gonna put in a good word for you, man."

"So? I don't need him to. She already loves me," Argos says, turning his head and shouting over the wind whipping against their faces (and, well, mask). "She just doesn't know it yet."

"Yeah fucking right," Rufio snorts at the delusional fool. "And pigs can fly."

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So... chess.

She hasn't played it in years. Actually, she's never really 'played' it, per se. One of her foster brothers tried to teach her once, a long, long time ago; she got bored after five minutes and quit. Checkers and card games were more her thing.

She told Paul as much before they began, so, he can't really blame her for royally sucking at it.

"Queens can move vertically, diagonally and horizontally. They're the most powerful pieces in chess."

"If that's the case, then what's the problem with what I did?"

"It's an illegal move."

"Why?"

"Sheriff, you can't just make your queen jump beside my king when he's well hidden behind my pawns and bishops."

"But, see, it didn't jump, it teleported."

Paul blinks. "Your queen can teleport?"

"Why, can't yours?"

The old man breaks out into laughter so loud and genuine, the whole table shakes. When his mirth finally subsides, he has to remove his glasses in order to wipe away the happy tears at the corner of his eyes. "Just because you have the black ones, Sheriff, doesn't mean your queen's the Evil Queen, herself. Chess pieces can't do magic."

"If you say so," she acquiesces with a bored sigh, putting her queen back in its old position and moving a pawn instead. "I guess it's not like your chess pieces have any happiness that my queen can destroy, anyway."

That sly little dig earns her a reproachful flick behind the ear from a certain real-life queen. Emma swallows back a wince and says no more. Three moves later, Paul calls checkmate. As it stands, it's
now 0-2 in favor of the old man.

"Would you like to take a five-minute break?" he asks, studying the time on his golden pocket watch.

"Yeah, sure," the blonde nods, moving slightly towards the side — half of her butt now sticking out of the wooden chair to give a demanding someone more room to sit. Within seconds, she feels the side of Regina's body pressing even closer to her own. The brunette gives her wrist the lightest of squeezes. Her way of saying thanks, Emma surmises... until Regina almost hip-bumps her off the chair, and then Emma realizes that her majesty had just been telling her to give up more space.

Unable to help herself, Emma retaliates with a hip-check of her own. Bad move. "Ouch!" she yelps; a grimace on her features as she curls the toes that her highness had just smushed with her invisible foot.

"Are you feeling alright, Sheriff?" Paul asks, concern etched on his kind old face.

"I—I'm okay..."

"Muscle cramps?"

"My foot fell asleep," she fakes a smile. "Actually, it was knocked unconscious, but whatever," she adds under her breath, earning a smug little harrumph in her left ear.

Paul, who seems to be a little hard of hearing, gives her a peculiar look but decides to pry no further.

"So..." Emma clears her throat, shifting in a position that would hopefully allow her and her highness to co-exist peacefully on the chair. "...back to what we're talking about earlier, do you, uh, happen to know what he looks like behind that hockey mask of his?"

"I'm sorry," Paul shakes his head, pushing his thick-rimmed glasses up his nose. "I believe no one does. Not even—" he stops abruptly, catching himself.

"The Lost Boys?" Emma supplies, arching a brow. "It's okay, you don't need to cover for those brats. We know Argos is running around town with Rufio and his gang."

"They're good kids..." he murmurs, somewhat protectively. "Da—one of them had been my neighbor for years. They've just lost their way — quite befitting of the monicker 'Lost Boys', I suppose. All they need is to be pointed in the right direction."

"I agree, but that won't happen as long as that thieving jerk is with them. That monster shouldn't be around children."

"He's..." Paul pauses. "This is going to sound absurd, but... all the stealing and stalking aside, I think he's actually a nice lad. A smart-ass, yes, and more than a bit of a bad influence on the kids, but I don't think he's a monster. There's good in him, I reckon."

"Well, what do you know, another blind fool..." Regina whispers superciliously, tickling Emma's ear with her heated breath. "Now I can see why that pesky fairy likes this man so much. Such misguided optimism."

Emma can't find it in herself to disagree.

Right off the bat, Paul had been upfront about his friendship with Argos. He even apologized for 'the lad's sticky fingers' and his own reluctance to report their weekly chess sessions to the police. When
he vowed that he had no knowledge, nor part in any, of Argos' schemes, Emma believed him —
even though it's fairly obvious that the old man carries a soft spot in his heart for the thief. The way
she sees it, Paul's only crime is having faith in the wrong people. If anything, he's a victim of his own
loneliness.

Twirling her fallen king around her fingers, Emma knits her brows and lets out a weary sigh. Twenty
minutes in Paul's company is enough for her to realize one thing about the old man, and also, herself:
they are both pawns in a psychopathic asshole's twisted little game.

This is a very lonely soul sitting right in front of her, that much is clear. She can see it from the way
the side of his eyes crinkle every time he looks at her, and how his lips twitch with an earnest smile
every now and again. He's gazing at her with the giddiness of somebody electrified at the mere
thought of being in another's company. It's reminiscent of how she used to look like, way back
middle school, during days when a random classmate would take pity on her and sit beside her
during lunch. She'd always looked like she'd won the lottery on those days. It was sad and desperate;
and Paul reeks of exactly that — a fact that Argos most likely took advantage of. It makes Emma's
stomach retch in disgust just thinking about it.

"You know, I must confess," Paul murmurs, pulling her out of her thoughts, while he slowly
arranges the pieces on the board for game number three. "When he promised that I'd have somebody
to play chess with this afternoon, I truly wasn't expecting my opponent to be you. Oh... don't get me
wrong, I'm glad and grateful that you're here — even though you might just possibly be the worst
chess player I've ever faced. No offense, Sheriff."

"None taken. But... wait... he promised you? When?"

"Last Tuesday."

Emma stiffens at that.

"He said that he wouldn't be able to make it today, but he's going to send somebody in his place,"
Paul continues, reaching for the black king in her hand, completely oblivious to the way her entire
face had hardened at his words. "I saw you sitting over there at the bench, but it never crossed my
mind that it'd be you. He told me that this lilac will serve as a signal, that his replacement will
approach me when she sees it. And then, you did. Color me surprised."

"So, wait, you're saying that he knew, even back then, that he wouldn't be showing up this
afternoon?"

Paul nods affirmatively.

A furious red tint explodes on Emma's cheeks. If there's still any doubt left in her mind, it's been
totally obliterated now: she's been played and played good.

"That sly son-of-a-bitch," she snarls, pounding on the table with a fist. Her right one. Emma winces,
remembering the mic hidden inside her sleeve. As expected, her deputies bombard her with a
cacophony of pained moans. An unseen Regina does one better and gives her ear another good flick.
"Sorry," she coughs on the same fist, apologizing to both a startled Paul and her grumbling team.

"Don't worry about it, Sheriff," Paul waves off, shooting her a sympathetic smile while he straightens
up the pieces that had gone out of position due to her outburst. "If it's any consolation, when he sent
me the lilac this morning, he said in his note that he would try to come if my opponent follows his
instructions and brings him a snack."
"A snack?"

"I believe he mentioned something about a pepperoni pizza."

Emma's nostrils flare in annoyance. *That frickin' dipshit.*

"He says you owe him a pie."

"He's a liar," she grits out. "He's the one who owes me."

"Junk food?"

"The truth," Emma corrects. "His real name."

"I thought Argos was his real name?"

"I thought so too."

Paul purses his lips and takes that in with a quiet hum. "He's full of secrets."

"He's full of shit, actually."

Paul hides a smile behind the act of rubbing his nose with a hand and elects not to respond to her jab. "Ready for round three, Sheriff?" he asks instead. At Emma's tortured little nod, he rubs his hands together and takes a moment to decide on his first move. Fifteen minutes into the game, he's a knight and three pawns down while Emma still has all her pieces on the board. Needless to say, the old man's scratching his head in both confusion and disbelief.

"You're getting better at this..."

"I am?" Emma asks, face all innocent and cherubic, even as she lets Regina guide her hand and dictate her next move. Her bishop takes another one of his knights; the side of Paul's face twitches. When Emma calls checkmate after four more moves, the poor guy looks like he's about to pop an aneurysm trying to figure out how she's gotten so good all of a sudden. She doesn't have the nerve to tell him that it's because her invisible *friend* had probably gotten tired of watching her make a mockery out of chess and, literally, took matters in her own hands.

"I haven't lost this badly since Argos beat me last week..." Paul sighs, flicking down his king in surrender.

"You know, you strike me as a perfectly nice, level-headed person. You should really quit hanging out and playing chess with wanted felons."

"He's really not too bad..." he reiterates softly, gazing down at the chessboard, unable to meet her eyes. Emma holds back an exasperated huff. Why does she get the feeling that she's talking to someone suffering from something similar to Stockholm Syndrome without the whole kidnapping bit?

"Paul, he's a psychopath," she says gravely. "I'd ask for your help to entrap him, but I'm afraid he might go after you too. He's dangerous."

"He's just another lost soul. Yes, he's mischievous, but the lad's not out to hurt anyone. He's harmless."

"Harmless? He wants me dead."
"Argos saved you from the wraith..."

"He didn't. He got rid of that soul-sucker for his own selfish reasons, he told me as much."

"But--"

"Look, I'm telling you, he's not stalking me because he likes me, he's stalking me because he wants to kill me."

"But... that's simply preposterous!" The old man shakes his head vehemently, neck-deep in denial. "Why would he want to kill you? It doesn't make any sense. Sheriff, I agree that the lad is a tad obsessive, and he shows affection in all the wrong ways, but I could tell that he sincerely likes you."

Emma makes a mocking sound in her throat. Jesus. That thieving asshole doesn't deserve an ounce of this man's loyalty. "Paul, the only thing he likes about me is my ability to power up that stupid, life-absorbing sword that he's lugging around wherever he goes. That's it."

"Life-absorbing sword...?"

"Yeah. He's coming after me, but you better be careful too," Emma warns. "That Ashe thing is an old and very powerful weapon. Just a tiny nick from it and you're dead."

Paul stills, and, in a heartbeat, all the blood seems to drain out of his face. For a long moment, he stares unblinkingly at the chessboard, neither moving nor speaking. She could have told him that he had contracted a rare, deadly disease and she'd probably still get the same reaction. Emma leaves him be, thinking it best to let him process things without interruption. When he finally opens his mouth, the next words that tumble out of his pale lips are enough to drive Regina to tighten her hold around Emma's wrist. "That was the Sword of Ashe?" he murmurs quietly, talking to himself, looking both troubled and discomposed. "Twin serpents... that pommel... of course..."

The blonde's eyebrows meet at the middle of her face, green eyes narrowing into slits. "So... you know about the sword?"

Paul takes in a deep, shuddery breath and nods feebly. "I am—I was the Grand Historiographer at the royal palace of Celestia, Sheriff Swan. It was my job to know about it."

"Your friend's been flaunting it in your face for weeks. Why didn't you recognize it, then?"

"Because no one's laid eyes on it for decades; I've only seen crude illustrations of it myself. Only His Sovereignty's allowed to enter the sacred vault where it's enshrined – or had been enshrined."

"His Sovereignty?"

"Maduin the II," Paul provides, wiping his brow and the top of his lip with a handkerchief, his hand quivering slightly. "The Emperor of Asheneamon."

Emma's eyes widen like saucers; Regina's fingers dig deeper into her skin. Holy fuck. "Are you saying you're from there?"

Paul nods weakly; a small, melancholic smile appearing on his wrinkly face.

"But if you're from that place, why the heck are you stuck here?"

"I--" he pauses. "Not by choice," he says instead, swallowing thickly. "It was a rather unfortunate case of being at the wrong place at the wrong time. I had just stepped out of the portal into the
Enchanted Forest when the curse began to ravage the land."

"But why did you go there in the first place?"

"I was–" he stops abruptly. He looks at her straight in the eyes, and, with a sigh, decides to ask a question of his own. "What do you know about the Sword of Ashe?"

"That it's powerful as hell... has the ability to destroy frickin' continents when activated... was named after a guy named Ashe... and all but one survived being wounded by it."

"Willan," Paul mutters, his lips forming a thin line. "It's ironic, considering present circumstances, but my sojourn to the Enchanted Forest had something to do with that man."

"He sent you there?"

"Oh, dear, no," Paul shakes his head. "Willan's been dead for more than a century."

"Then what did your trip have to do with him?"

"There had been a theft in the Forbidden Archives. I was in charge of the palace atheneum, all the scrolls kept within were my responsibility. I hadn't noticed anything was missing until two entire years after the crime was committed. The Emperor would've had my head cut off if he knew — those scrolls contain delicate information, if they fall into the wrong hands, the balance of power in the Empire could shift dramatically. So... I went on a secret quest to find the scrolls myself. My search led me to the Enchanted Forest."

"Okay... so, again, what's that got to do with Willan?"

"The stolen scrolls were about him. About how he survived. About the spell that could undermine my Emperor's sword."

Regina has now officially cut off circulation in her left hand. "Ask him about Willan's Incantamentum," the woman breathes beside her ear.

Oblivious to the brunette's whispering-as well as the slight grimace on Emma's face-Paul rambles on. "It is said that whoever wields the Sword of Ashe, holds the true power in Asheneamon. Willan's spell made a mockery of the blade. So, naturally, it's highly forbidden to speak of it in my land — let alone possess any writings of it. Those scrolls were meant for my Emperor's eyes only. He, alone, knows what's written in them."

Regina squeezes her wrist again, goading her to ask about the spell. Despite the numbness in her hand, Emma ignores the brunette. Instead, she squints her eyes at a slumping and shifty-eyed Paul, and studies the man's demeanor for a moment. "That's not necessarily true, is it? What you just said," she says, giving him a knowing look. "Cause you've read them, didn't you? When no one was there?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I did no such thing..."

"Don't lie to me, Paul," Emma warns. "I have a good ear for bullshit."

"I didn't lie," he says, meeting her eyes unflinchingly. "I've never snuck around the archives to read
them, Sheriff. I didn't need to."

"Why? Because you're the Grand Histor—uh... pooh-bah or whatever?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Because I wrote them."

Emma's eyebrows jump up to her hairline. Well, now, that changes everything.

With her mind running a hundred miles per hour, thinking about what this could mean for her mission to defeat Argos, Emma doesn't even notice that Regina had finally loosened her grip on her wrist and had set it free. But, keeping true to her word, the brunette doesn't let go completely. Without thinking much of it, Emma squeezes the hand that's now clasped tightly in her own.

"Ask him about the spell," Regina tells her again. This time, she listens.

"Paul," Emma murmurs, dropping the smart-ass attitude and leaning in so close to the table that her golden locks brush against the chessboard. "I need you to tell me everything you know about Willan's spell."

The way he's now looking at her—with his drooping brows and wide-eyes—it's as if she just asked him to hand over his liver. Clearly, this is a man torn between loyalties — to Argos, to his Emperor, hell, maybe even to himself and his duties in his old life. "Sheriff, I—I don't—"

Emma raises a hand, stopping him from saying any more. "Paul, listen to me," she implores, holding his gaze so intently that he begins to fidget in his seat. "You're not in Asheneamon anymore. You're in this world. There's no Emperor here that would punish you if you talk about the spell."

Paul's eyes drop down to the chess pieces lying in disarray on the board, the lines on his face deepening so severely he looks like he aged ten years in the span of a few seconds.

"Look, Argos has the sword. I don't know how the hell he got his hands on it, or what exactly he plans to do with it; but he's just a petty little thief — he has no right wielding a weapon that destructive. The guy's no different from a kid playing with a loaded gun. And I'm not kidding when I say that he wants to kill me — I'm the product of true effin' love, and, somehow that translates into having a white soul. Which, really, is just stupid if you ask me. The wraith? He got rid of it because he needed to absorb a being of pure darkness into the blade. I believe I don't have to tell you what can and will happen if he activates that sword. So, please, help me. The only way I can stop him is if I level the playing field in some way. I need you to tell me everything you know about the spell."

"Sheriff... it's a bit complicated and I—"

"Wolfsbane, bloodroot, amaranth, fairy dust, asafoetida, and comfrey. Pulverize. Mix. Sprinkle on the floor. Light a candle. Chant 'dark and light, protect thy knight, powers that be, tie thy soul to thee.'" she recites off the top of her head. "It's not that complicated."

Paul's jaw comes unhinged. "H-how...?"

"A little birdie whispered in my ear," Emma plays coy. Really... she didn't spend six days of house arrest doing nothing. She did pick up a lot of things following Regina around the mansion while her majesty did her research. And, speaking of her highness...

"I'm impressed, Miss Swan," Regina commends, patting the back of her hand in a way that's a little too patronizing, in Emma's opinion. "You've finally managed to pronounce asafoetida correctly."
She tried. She really did. There's just no stopping it. Thank goodness Paul was distracted with wiping away the beads of sweat peppering his face to notice the remarkable eye-roll that she directs at her sassy magical bodyguard.

"Paul," Emma begins anew, looking back at the ashen man. "Tell me, what did I miss?"

"What do you mean?"

"I know for a fact that there's something missing in what I had just said. Something crucial in making the spell work."

Paul tilts his head and furrows his brows, working his jaw.

Emma sighs. "You wanna know who stole your scrolls? Cause I have a pretty good idea who the culprit is."

"There's no need," the old man murmurs. "I know of his identity. It's precisely why I traveled to the Enchanted Forest."

"Then you should also know that he wanted the Sword of Ashe and a lot of people were killed trying to steal it for him. He probably followed the instructions on your scrolls to a tee. But... Willan's spell never worked for any of the idiots he used it on. There was a missing ingredient. Paul, please, I need to know what it is. Look at me, do you really believe that I need to die just to satisfy a psychotic bastard's thirst for power? Do I deserve that fate?"

"N-no... no, you don't," he says after a long moment, his voice a mixture of sadness, shame and disappointment — whether at Argos or himself, Emma has no clue.

"Then, tell me, what's the missing ingredient?"

"There are no missing ingredients, Sheriff Swan," Paul murmurs, letting out a resigned sigh and looking every bit like somebody who has finally decided to give up the fight. It's amazing how many years can be tapered off just by relaxing one's face. "No herbs you need to add. No other enchanted items you need to combine."

"Then why didn't the spell work for Gold?"

"Because the secret lies in how it is cast. The spell doesn't end with the chant. There's something else that needs to be done in order to make it work. When I wrote the scrolls, I made sure not to write that integral part down."

"Why?"

"Insurance, Sheriff. A fail-safe. Because, in every realm, there are always going to be people like Rumplestiltskin..." he trails off, and, with a heartbreaking sigh, he adds in the softest of tones: "...and Argos."

What a joke.

She wanted a new life. A new beginning. So, that selfish little bitch traded a comfortable existence in Neverland for this... a run-down shack that makes the Lost Boys' secret cabin in the woods look like the fucking Mayoral mansion.

Rufio scoffs and shakes his head.
"You weren't kidding about her car..." Argos mutters behind him, gaze locked on the Omni parked by the curb. It's not even really white any longer — more like rust with patches of off-white paint. "Shit, I'm not getting near that thing without a tetanus shot."

"If you think that's bad, take a look at the interior," Rufio chews on the toothpick hanging at the side of his mouth and rocks back on his heels, studying the short wooden gate in front of him. Testing the waters, he slowly inches his finger forward. As soon as it comes within a millimeter of the gate, electricity zaps the digit, making him pull his hand back with a hiss. **Wards**, his upper lip curls in mockery, *predictable as always.*

*"Jesus Christ."

Rufio smirks, shaking off the tingling on his index finger. "Told ya."

"Is she planning to turn this piece of junk into an extension of her garden? There's *mold* all over the frickin' seats."

"Cause she probably just cleans once a year, man. We treated her like a princess in Neverland. Barely lifted a finger. Not really that surprised that she carried her dislike for chores in Storybrooke."

A disgusted sound comes out of Argos' throat. "Disliking chores is one thing, being a complete *slob* is another."

"You're one to talk, you leave your shit everywhere," Rufio gives his friend the side-eye, his lips twisting upward in amusement.

"At least I clean up after myself."

"Yeah, after what, three or four days?"

"Two. And shut up." Argos nudges his shoulder with a gloved fist before standing right beside him. "So, what do we have here?"

"Ward-lock," Rufio says, jutting his chin towards the black, square-shaped padlock on the gate's latch.

"She can afford a ward-lock but won't even spring for a fifteen-dollar car wash?"

"Go figure," he snorts, taking out the toothpick from his mouth and flicking it away.

"Is this one of Baba Yaga's wards?"

Rufio nods.

"She's still selling them for fifty bucks a piece?"

"Seventy-five now."

Argos whistles in amazement. "Crafty shrew."

"I know, the old witch's making a killing," he murmurs in agreement. "I should really ask her for a small cut of her profits. I mean, if it weren't for the Lost Boys and all our awesome pranks, no one would be buying over-priced enchantments to keep people out of their houses, right?"
"She'll turn you into a toad."

"Not if you're standing behind me with that sword of yours, she won't," Rufio is smart to point out, wagging his brows.

"Yeah... I don't know about that, buddy. Anyway, let's just get this over with. Stand back..." Argos says, reaching behind him and pulling out his fancy schmancy sword from its sheath.

Taking a few tentative steps backward, Rufio folds his arms on his chest and just watches. Without much fanfare, Argos lifts the blade high above his head and swings down. The sword slices right through the enchanted padlock like a hot knife through butter.

The wards surrounding the house fizzle out like a dud firecracker.

With the slightest of kicks, the gate swings wide open. Moving to the left, Argos motions inside with a flourish of a hand. "After you, buddy."

"Time to collect a debt," he mumbles.

Donning an almost child-like grin, Rufio moves past his friend and practically skips all the way to the front door, a tiny bounce in his step. He doesn't bother ringing the doorbell. A momentous occasion like this deserves a grand entrance. Taking a page out of Argos' book, he lifts his leg and gives the rickety door a good ol' kick. It gives way easily enough and bangs hard against the wall.

An unsuspecting blonde jumps out of a bedraggled sofa, letting out an ear-splitting shriek. The color drains from the woman's delicate heart-shaped face as soon as she whips around and catches glimpse of a smirking Rufio and his masked companion.

"Fancy seeing you again, Ms. Campanilla," Rufio greets in an awfully sincere tone, a mischievous twinkle in his chocolate brown eyes. "Or, should I say, Tinker Bell?"

It's almost six in the evening, yet, the sun hasn't set. That's extremely peculiar at this time of the year. Today's temperature, too, is a little out of the norm. Considering that normal temperatures in this part of Maine typically range from forty-eight to thirty nearing Thanksgiving, fifty degrees is rare, but also, pretty darn nice.

With the tip of his cane clicking loudly against the uneven pavement, Paul turns his head and smiles wryly at the little brown duck waddling after him, accompanying him in his walk out of the park. "It's a beautiful day, hm? Weather's just right."

The cute animal quacks in response, and, in an instant, becomes engulfed in a wisp of blue smoke; when it clears, the duck is no more. A grinning Davy Smith takes its place, donning a lopsided baseball cap that looks two sizes too big for his little head.

"How'd y'know t'was me?" the boy asks innocently, rubbing his runny nose with a fist.

"I had a hunch."

"Really?"

"Let's just say I have a knack for recognizing those of dual natures. I have a good nose for kin." He winks conspiratorially, tapping at his nose. "Also, I had a strong feeling I'd be seeing you today."

"Are ya mad that I was spying?" his ex-neighbor asks softly, unable to meet his gaze.
"Of course not, lad. Did he send you to spy on me?"

"Nope," Davy mumbles, tracing imaginary lines on the path with the tip of his rubber shoes. "Everyone was out. Got nothin’ to do. I was bored and I wanted to swim."

Paul lets out a quiet little hum; his gray eyes taking in the disheveled appearance of the youngest member of the Lost Boys. Wet and muddy clothes aside, Davy looks healthy enough. At least Rufio and Argos are feeding their gang of miscreants well, Paul sighs inwardly. "Did you also come to visit your parents? It's your mom's birthday, isn't it?"

The boy bristles on the spot, and, instead of answering his query, Davy deflects with a quick: "'sit true?"

"Hm? Is what true?"

"The thing ya said to the Sheriff," Davy elaborates, head tilted to the side in question. "'bout that thing she has to do? To make the spell work?"

"Oh," A weary Paul acknowledges with a quiet sigh. "You've picked that up too, Davy?"

"Pockets," the boy is quick to correct, not at all dissimilar to Rufio whenever Paul deliberately calls him Jethro. "Will doing that really beat Argy's sword?"

"I... I don't know, lad."

"Ya lied?"

"I didn't. I'm just not a hundred percent sure it'll work for her. The spell is largely dependent on the caster and their target. Hopefully, it will all turn out alright for the Sheriff."

Davy–no, Pockets, blinks in confusion, the light in his brown eyes dimming. "But I thought you 'n Argos are friends?"

"We are."

"Then why are ya helping them kill him?"

Paul swallows thickly, a lump forming in his throat. "Quite the contrary, lad. I'm saving him."

"From the Sheriff?"

"From himself," Paul murmurs, adjusting the hat on his head before resuming his trek back to his modest bungalow. That sword, with its complicated history, has already destroyed and corrupted countless of souls. Argos need not be one of them; not if he could help it.

Her brain had short-circuited at the park. Twenty minutes after declaring Operation Frost a bust and teleporting back home, Emma's brain is still rebooting.

Apparently, Regina's too.

They're both sitting at the kitchen table, face-to-face, eyes wide-open but unseeing. Regina exhales a breath; Emma does too. The brunette cups her forehead with a hand; the blonde rubs her face with hers.

The air is riddled with tension; Emma's body, even more so. Despite this, it's she who snaps out of it
first; inhaling deeply into her lungs, Emma decides to shatter the mind-numbing silence with a very eloquent, "So..."

Even with her extensive vocabulary, Regina's no better. "So..." she mimics, voice hoarse.

They stare at each other for a moment, clear their throats, and awkwardly look away.

For a few agonizing minutes, they let their eyes wander to every nook and cranny of the gleaming kitchen, stealing glances at each other every so often.

Emma sighs. This is ***absurd***. But oh-so-fucking ***awkward*** as well.

*Jesus.*

To **hell** with it, she decides after another torturous minute passes, running a hand through her blonde locks. Growing a pair, she throws caution to the wind and blurts out: "So... a **kiss**."

Regina's head snaps up.

"A kiss," Emma says once again, a little more forcefully than she intended.

"A... **kiss**."

"Yeah," she swallows hard, brimming with false bravado. Her sanity might just be hanging by a thread, but she bravely trudges on. "I think... I think one of us just needs to go and say it out loud. Get this over with."

"Say what out loud?"

"The question in both our heads, you know? Or... **well**... at least it's in mine."

Regina looks at her blankly. "What question...?"

"Do we--" Emma pauses, licking her lips. "Do we, I dunno, use **tongue**?"

Brown eyes widen, positively scandalized. "**Miss Swan!**"

"**What?** It's a legitimate question!" Emma argues, flushing all the way down to her neck. "I mean, is it just going to be a simple peck? Or, do we go all torrid? **What?** I don't like this either, Regina, but I don't want to end up dead with my soul trapped inside an idiot's sword just because I didn't stick my **tongue** inside your **mouth**."

"**Crass.**"

"**Realistic.**"

"**Uncouth.**"

"**Whatever.**"

Regina rolls her eyes. "**Infantile.**"

"You're not the picture of maturity, either." Emma's lips twist into a frown. "I didn't ask if we should tongue-kiss just for the heck of it. It's a valid question and you know it."

"Well, I don't want your tongue anywhere near my mouth, **princess**."
"Me neither, your highness." Emma sticks her nose in the air. "I'd rather have my appendix taken out than swap saliva with you."

"And a full-frontal lobotomy sounds more appealing than the idea of getting infected with any of your Charming germs."

"Why, afraid they'd get you to be all nice like me?"

"Unlikely, my dear. It's highly probable that they cause mental retardation."

Now it's Emma's turn to roll her eyes. "Seriously, your royal pain the ass, if we're really doing the spell tomorrow, we should decide right now. Tongue or no tongue?"

The other woman bristles in place. "Must we really talk about this, Miss Swan? It's late."

"Uh, excuse me, it's six-thirty."

"I'm exhausted."

"So am I! That invisibility spell of yours drained me of three coffee cups worth of energy."

"Then you should go down to your cubbyhole and get some rest."

"No."

"Stubborn."

"For a good reason," she grounds out.

"Kissing?"

"Surviving."

"Is it truly necessary to have such a superfluous discussion at this very moment, Miss Swan?" Regina asks, more than a little terse. "Won't it be more prudent to wait until tomorrow when we're actually about to do the spell? I don't see the point in stressing about it right now, especially after the day we've had."

The blonde pinches the bridge of her nose. Regina's doing all the deflecting and Emma's the one who's doing the pushing; hell, has most certainly, frozen over.

"Alright, why do you keep on avoiding the question? What are you so scared of? Are you that bad of a kisser?"

Regina starts, grossly put-off. "No, I gather you are."

"How would you know? You've never tried me."

"Why would I even want to 'try' you?"

"I'm a good kisser," Emma declares, chin held high. "Scratch that, I'm a great kisser."

"Miss Swan, if your kissing is any bit similar to how you normally operate, then I would assume that it would be nothing more than sloppy."

Now that's just rude. Emma's brows meet in the middle. "And if your kissing is any way like your
personality, then I'd bet good money that you've never tongue-kissed anyone in your life, cause tongue-kissing is messy and exciting and fun."

They stare each other down for a moment, eyes blazing at each other in quiet defiance.

"You're out of line."

"No, you are," the blonde counters. "This isn't any easy for me either, Regina. But I want to talk about it. You know why? Cause I'm--"

"Shameless?"

Emma glowers. "A dead woman walking. And I don't want to be one anymore."

That's more than enough to sober up a recalcitrant Regina; the slight fluttering of her eyelids the closest thing to shame that Emma's ever seen from the brunette in a long while.

"So, answer me, please," she tries again, quiet and serious as hell. "Tongue or no tongue?"

Regina's mouth works furiously for a few moments, and then she lets out a long breath and murmurs a timid: "Tongue. Just to be on the safe side."

Despite the butterflies fluttering inside her stomach, Emma finally relaxes into her seat. "Now, was that really so hard?"

The brunette shoots her an evil look.

Mail motherfucker!

Emma flips open her cellphone, spares a quick glance at Regina's face, and mutters a dry, "I like it. Deal with it," to the disapproving woman.

"I thought you've changed that?"

"I did. I changed it back."

"May I ask why?"

"Turns out your standard 'you've got mail' chime ain't funny at all."

"And that one is?"

"It's hilarious."

"It's crude."

"It's... Henry."

"What?" Regina frowns.

"The text," Emma clarifies, eyes glossing over the message that's severely loaded with smilies and exclamation points. "He wants to let us both know that they're having dinner at Pizza Planet. So far, he's downed a chocolate milkshake, lots of garlic bread, and three slices of-- " pepperoni pizza. He had them put some anchovies and green peppers on it so he hopes you won't be too mad at David and Mary Margaret for feeding him junk for dinner. Oh... he's also bringing you home a chicken salad, and, me, a dozen buffalo wings."
"Tell him, thank you," Regina says with a touched little smile. The blonde bites back a grin at the sight. Obviously, the kid's thoughtful gesture does the impossible and offsets Regina's annoyance. *Clever boy*, Emma thinks.

Pressing send, she sets her phone aside and just allows herself to slump down against the table, letting the stress of the day roll off her body with every successive deep breath.

"Miss Swan?"

"Hm?" she mumbles, keeping her eyes shut.

"What do you have against pepperoni pizzas?"

Emerald eyes open with a snap. "Why are you asking?"

"Mere curiosity, I suppose. I've noticed that, lately, you've been making an unsavoury face every time someone so much as mentions it."

"You've been watching me?" Emma arches a brow.

"Don't be absurd, my dear. Unlike you, I am generally just a very observant person."

"Huh." The blonde squints her eyes at the former Mayor and the haughty expression painted on the woman's face. "What color was my shirt last Wednesday?"

"Why? Am I being tested?"

"Humor me. What color?"

Regina sighs but gives in all the same. "Black."

"And, Friday?"

"Blue."

"How many servings of lasagna did I have last night?"

"Three."

Emma smirks. "Two."

"Three," Regina insists. "You got half of Henry's leftovers and half of mine. That makes it three."

The blonde shuts her trap. *Dammit.* "Okay, Miss Observant, last question," she tries again. "What color was Leroy's beanie this afternoon?"

Regina freezes, looking at her like a deer caught in headlights. *Huh.* Emma's eyebrows slowly inch up to her forehead. Her majesty's stumped. And she's not faking it.

"Seriously?" Emma pulls a face. "You insulted his hat three times at the park..."

"Purple," the brunette grits out.

"Maroon." Emma corrects.

"Close enough."
"No, it ain't."

"Yes, it is. And this sideshow's over," a blushing Regina says sharply, making no room for arguments. "Miss Swan, you haven't answered my question."

Taking her sweet time, Emma straightens up and stretches her arms languidly above her head, letting out a satisfied moan at the sound of her joints popping in place. Regina lifts an expectant eyebrow, watching her every move with impatient eyes.

"It's a metaphor," she finally says, when she feels like she's tortured her highness long enough. "And it reminds me of Argos, that's why I kinda hate it."

"Pepperoni pizza? A metaphor?"

"Yeah," Emma nods. "For the so-called 'truth' that I supposedly owe that jerk. Remember the game that I was telling you about? The one where he tricked me into answering all those obscene questions by promising me that I'd get his real name if I do?"

A dark cloud passes across Regina's face.

"Anyway, apparently, I dropped the ball on the last question." Emma upper lip curls up into a sneer. "He told me I just gave him a 'portion' of the truth, whatever the hell that means, and that, he wants the whole pepperoni pizza and not just a crummy slice. And when I deliver, that's when I'll know who he really is. Well, whatever, he's a lying scumbag."

"What was his question?"

"Why I tried to save you from the wraith," she says simply.

Regina stops toying with the ring on her finger and lifts her head, steadily meeting her gaze. "And...?"

"As I said, I told him the truth but he thinks I wasn't being entirely honest." Emma shrugs, nonchalant as ever. "A slice, not the whole pie."

"And was he right?"

"Course not."

A deep frown appears on the brunette's face. "Is there a reason why he would think that way?"

"Apart from the fact that he's full of shit? I dunno."

Regina stares at her long and hard, as if she's searching Emma's face for answers to questions that she doesn't even have or those she can't even begin to comprehend.

Emma tugs at the end of her sleeves and plays with a lock of blonde hair, feeling self-conscious under the intense scrutiny. "What? Is there something on my face?"

Her question is promptly ignored.

"Miss Swan," Regina speaks after a moment, in a voice uncharacteristically hesitant and unsure. "Why did you try and save me?"

"Because I promised Henry. You know that."
With brows knit, the brunette breaks eye contact, preferring instead to gaze blankly at her own clasped hands.

"How 'bout you... why did you change your mind?" Emma returns in kind. "I mean, after all those days of saying no, why did you finally agree to watch over me today?"

"Because I--" Regina pauses, blinks, and then closes her mouth. "I—I'm tired."

"Huh?"

With the tiniest of sighs, Regina pushes her chair away from the table and gets up to her feet. "It's been a long day, Miss Swan. I'm going to my room to get some rest — I suggest you do the same. If you're hungry, there's still some leftover lasagna in the freezer."

"Wha--"

Like a fool, she finds herself staring at Regina's back, an outstretched hand frozen mid-air. Without as much as a backward glance, the woman saunters towards the doorway and switches off the light on her way out.

Alone in the dark, Emma sits dumbly, mouth agape, thinking about the curious — and utterly brain-stumping — turn of events.

*What the hell just happened?*

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for all the reviews and follows! I hope you enjoyed the chapter. I'm sorry if took a long time for me to update. Past few weeks have been crazy. Special thanks to J!
Red and Blue, Me and You

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A kiss.

The crucial component of Willan's Incantamentum. An intimate act that topped off a rather simple, yet remarkably effective, spell that gave a lowly knight immunity against a famed hero's legendary sword.

According to Paul O'Hara, instead of exchanging blood – as is the custom in his realm – Willan's wife, a formidable witch in her own right, had sealed the powerful spell with passion's kiss. It's no wonder then why it never worked for Rumplestiltskin and all the poor fools he had sent to their untimely deaths in his quest to steal the Sword of Ashe. The Dark One didn't seem like the type to give his hapless thralls a kiss goodbye, much less "passion's kiss", before sending them off to do his bidding.

Willan's spell.

With this enchantment, Emma Swan is going to be one step closer to apprehending Argos and ridding the thief of his soul-sucking sword once and for all. Storybrooke will be safe again, and the Sheriff will have the satisfaction of throwing her stalker behind bars and letting the whole sordid affair die a quick and painful death.

But first... the kiss.

Simple enough, right?

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If only.

The dropping temperature is yet another harsh reminder that winter is just around the bend. It's especially cold in their neck of the woods; cold enough to make his lips chap and his skin dry out and itch. Despite that, like clockwork, Rufio rolls out of his lumpy futon at eight in the morning, wolfs down a piece of stale bread, throws on a pair of jeans, a wrinkled shirt, a punk-ass leather vest, his favorite Converse, and proceeds to lumber out of the cabin with only his stubbornness to keep him warm.

Stretching his arms high above his head, he passes by a bundled-up Thud Butt – who's balancing a bunch of firewood in his arms – and flashes his lieutenant a lazy, sleepy grin. To his surprise, and slight offense, he gets a disapproving tongue-click and a breezy comment questioning his sanity in return; not one to take such insubordination lying down, Rufio flashes his housemate the bird. Crazy or not, if he wants to freeze his fucking balls off, it's well within his rights.

"I'm just sayin', dude, put a stupid jacket on." Thud Butt rolls his eyes, opening the front door with a hip bump. "One of these days, you're gonna catch a cold, and, worse, infect us all with your crummy
"Pfft... like I give a shit." Rufio smirks roguishly, massaging the kinks out of his neck with a hand. "Vanity over practicality, dude. Can't leave the house looking anything less than this," he says, motioning at his attire with a flourish. "You know how it is, these babies – plus the hair – are my trademark."

"What, scrawny arms and shaved armpits?"

"Sleeveless shirts and leather vests. And just for that, smart-ass, you're on kitchen duty for a week," he declares in retaliation. "Where's Argos?"

"Where else would he be?" The pudgy teen grumbles over his shoulder, before kicking the door shut with the heel of his boot.

True enough, Rufio finds Argos sitting on the fallen log by his beloved makeshift garden, slouched over with his head bent low; but, instead of writing on his journal like he usually does, the masked man is hard at work, carving at a small chunk of wood with a switchblade.

"G'morning," Rufio greets with a hearty yawn, and, with all the grace of an elephant in a tutu, plops down beside his friend and almost tips the log forward in the process. "We're meeting the piggy trio in an hour. You all set?"

Argos grunts distractedly, not even bothering to spare him a sideways glance.

"They said the windows in the boys' locker room are always open, but I'll bring the crowbar just in case," he continues, digging the tip of his shoes into the soft dirt surrounding the lilac shrub. "The principal and the nuns have them on such a short frickin' leash. Johnny told me that they can only sneak out of class for about, give or take, eight to ten minutes. You think that's enough time to fill them in on the plan?"

A noncommittal shrug is all he gets in reply.

"Argos," Rufio prods, in a tone so uncharacteristically serious, giving the older guy a slight nudge with an elbow. "This is important, man. You heard what Tink said, fairy dust is the key. We can't screw this up."

"I know," Argos murmurs quietly, still focused on whatever shit he's doing. "Don't sweat it."

"But the plan—"

"—is simple. Won't take too long to explain. We'll be in and out of the school in five minutes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Think the Bacons will get it though?"

"They're pigs, not morons."

Rufio snorts. "That's questionable."

"Look, all they have to do on Friday is prop open a window at the convent so I can get in. It's not rocket science."
"I—okay. I guess." Rufio blows out a breath from his lips, deciding to ease up on his anxieties and just trust Argos on this one. In all fairness to the guy, he has proven time and again that he gets shit done. So, tilting his face upwards, he just closes his eyes and lets the streaks of morning sun give warmth to his frozen cheeks. And when he thinks his face has sufficiently thawed out, he pops an eye open and comments, "I've noticed that you've been awfully quiet since last night..."

"I'm not quiet, you're just loud."

"Bull," Rufio huffs out, giving his friend the side-eye. "Are you worried about what Pockets said, about the old fart selling you out? Is that it?"

"No."

"You can always come to Neverland with us, y'know? Beautiful place. Eternal youth. Plus, they'll never catch you there."

"Thanks, buddy, really, but no thanks."

Rufio bites down on the insides of his cheeks, an attempt to keep his disappointment from showing. Putting on an unaffected front, he just shrugs and downplays the sting of rejection with a casual: "Well, if you change your mind, the offer still stands. Whether you like it or not, man, you're part of the family now. Won't feel right to leave you alone in this fucking place with the cops practically hounding your ass. The wards we got from Jafar and Baba Yaga won't hide this cabin forever. If that stupid "protection" spell of the Sheriff works, you're screwed."

"Told you a hundred times, don't worry about me," Argos mumbles, brushing away splinters with the back of his gloved hand, nonchalant as ever. "When push comes to shove, you know I'd sooner be dead than stuck inside a jail cell."

Now that isn't going to make him worry at all. "C'mon, dude, I know you're planning to leave and go somewhere next week, but—"

"Rufio," Argos interrupts in a tone that brokered no argument. "I won't get caught. Trust me."

"But—"

"Trust me," Argos reiterates.

"Tch... fine." Rufio lets out a weary sigh and runs a hand through his sleep-rumpled hair—something he plans to remedy as soon as possible with a lot of hair gel—and gives the wannabe wood carver a light slap on the knee before standing up to his feet, angling to head indoors. "I'm gonna go back in, gotta work on the hair before we leave."

Argos simply absentmindedly grunts in acknowledgement.

"The heck are you working on, anyway?" he stays in place and probes, his curiosity piqued.

"Nothing."

"Doesn't look like nothing to me. Is that another gift for the Sheriff?"

"Nope."

"What is it then, a paperweight or something?" he persists, cocking his head to the side and studying the lines—no, numbers—being carved meticulously by his masked friend. "And what does that
mean? What's..." he pauses, squinting his eyes, brows meeting at the middle in puzzlement, "...one one one four one two?"

"Eleven fourteen twelve," Argos clarifies, deepening the curve on the number two with the incessant back and forth of his blade.

Wrinkling his nose, Rufio turns the numbers inside his head. It takes a while, but when things finally click into place, he's a tad more confused than before. "November 14, 2012? Today's date?"

Ever the cryptic jackass, Argos just lets out a quiet hum.

"Wait, is it your birthday today?"

"No."

"Is it someone's birthday?"

"No."

"Then what's so special about today?"

Rufio doesn't even get an answer. All he sees is Argos in front of him, staring blankly at his handiwork, knife mid-sweep, his thoughts obviously elsewhere. Going against his usual prying nature, Rufio lets out a resigned breath and decides to just let the man be. Obviously, this is another one of the million things that Argos wants to keep to himself – like what he's hiding underneath that mask or what's really up with that sword, just to name a few. *Whatever*, Rufio thinks as he lumbers back to the cabin, rubbing the sides of his bare arms for warmth; he doesn't need to know *that* badly.

Everyone's entitled to their own secrets... even if his friend *does* seem to have a fucking buttload of 'em.

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Today's the day.

She's ready.

She's got on her mask of confidence and her armor of brass and bravado. After spending a good part of the morning mentally preparing herself for the task ahead, she's finally all set.

And then all it took was one quick, passing glance at the mirror outside Regina's study, and *bam!*, it's as if she's back to square one again. And now, here she is, wiping furiously at her lips with the back of her hand. *Shit*. Emma winces, she's pretty darn sure the nuns had noticed how shiny her lips were when she popped by the convent to ask Blue for a teensy amount of fairy dust because Regina's personal stock had run out. August, her escort, because she's still not allowed outside the house without one, mercifully didn't say anything if ever he noticed as well.

*What the hell were you thinking?* Emma groans inwardly, staring at her reflection. She looks like she had just suckled on a grease trap.

Her intentions were good, that's all she can say. Even if kissing Regina is something she's not particularly looking forward to doing, she figured the polite and considerate thing to do was perform her usual after-shower routine and then some. The only real difference was that, instead of her favorite Chapstick, she slathered on some fancy schmancy glittery gloss on her lips. But, of course, she just had to go a tad overboard. Jesus *effin'* Christ, she just wanted to look presentable, not appear like some kind of giddy, overly excited pre-teen just itching to get her mack on.
"Miss Swan?"

"H-here..." she calls back, hastily rubbing off the sticky, strawberry-flavored residue on her hand on the back of her jeans. Centering herself, she inhales a deep, steadying breath, takes a brave step forward, crosses the threshold, and enters Regina's study.

Or, at least, what was Regina's study. Cause now, it's looking more like something out of the Twilight Zone.

The door shuts behind her with an audible click, and it takes a moment for her eyes to adjust to the darkness that greets her inside. The curtains are drawn, and save for a few candles here and there, the room is almost pitch black. The side table and one of the armchairs had been moved against the bookcase, and a sizable portion of the fancy carpet had been rolled to give way to the creepy ass symbols—no, mystical circles, as Regina insists on calling them—now occupying a good chunk of the study's floorspace. The strange, intricate shapes were probably drawn on the hardwood floor with some kind of magical chalk, Emma reckons, judging from the way the lines seem to shimmer in the faint candlelight. It's mesmerizing, she thinks, how they sparkle like tiny diamonds.

"Are you just going to stand there or are you going to make yourself useful and hand me the dust that I've asked you to fetch a thousand years ago?"

"I was gone for fifteen minutes, Regina; stop exaggerating," Emma says, fighting back an eyeroll. As carefully as possible, she walks around the drawings on the floor, hops over a candle or two, and makes her way to the demanding woman.

"Did that insufferable do-gooder give you any trouble?"

"Nope," she shakes her head, handing over the small velvet pouch in her possession, "she said I'm more than welcome to their dust whenever I need some. See, you two might not get along, but she likes me."

"I wouldn't be so proud of that if I were you." Regina's upper lip curls in disgust – as it always does whenever the Blue Fairy is concerned. "Liking you as a person and liking you because you can be of some use are two different things, princess. It would be wise to be mindful of such when you deal with fairies. They're no better than Gold, their help always comes with a price."

"So, you're saying they're like wolves in sheep's clothing?"

"They are wolves in sheep's clothing."

Taking her majesty's warning in stride, Emma just hums noncommittally, earning a huffy little eyeroll from her cynical housemate.

Moving with purpose, Regina then gets to work and adds a pinch of dust into a small beaker containing some sort of dark, powdered mixture. The reaction is instantaneous; and, like everything else tainted with fairy magic, tooth-achingly colorful and downright tacky. Though, instead of ogling at the pink, yellow and purple sparkles that erupt from the concoction, she finds her eyes zeroing in on Regina and the deathly serious, no-nonsense expression that her highness is sporting. Even under the soft candlelight, or perhaps even more so because of it, her majesty is looking even more imposing than usual.

Imposing enough to breathe life to those darn butterflies in her stomach – the same annoying fiends that she thought a good, internalized pep talk had squashed hours before. This is stupid. Emma clenches her jaws tight, her fingers unconsciously clutching her flip-flopping tummy. It's just a stupid
kiss, there's no need to be so frickin' jittery. She's a big girl; she just needs to buck up and bear with it, really. After all, she's done things much, much worse than tongue-kissing someone like Regina Mills.

"Something the matter, Miss Swan?"

Emma's head snaps up. "Huh?"

"Nervous, princess?" Regina archs a brow, her brown eyes flitting to the hand on Emma's stomach.

"Gassy, your majesty."

"Disgusting as usual."

"Humorless as always," Emma returns in kind. "I was obviously kidding."

"Then I suppose I was right. You are nervous." A devilish smirk appears on Regina's lips, her eyes shining in both mockery and amusement. "How... droll."

"Please." she lets out a loud scoff, though her gaze somehow falls to the side. "I'm not nervous."

"It's not a very knightly thing to do, is it? Lying?" Regina goads, setting the beaker down and walking around her desk to store the velvet pouch inside her wall safe.

"And it's not a very queenly thing to do, is it? Assuming."

"I'm not 'assuming' anything, Miss Swan. I believe I'm merely stating the obvious. For someone constantly overflowing with such galling bravado, you're looking awfully anxious."

"And for someone planning to stay in the house all day long, you're looking awfully overdressed," she throws right back, not-so-subtly eyeing the sophisticated, and understated, ensemble that Regina's wearing this morning. If it seems familiar, it's because it's the gray number that Regina wore when they first met. "You didn't dress up for me, did you, your highness?"

"Don't flatter yourself, princess." Regina harrumphs, bristling in place, and, with an almost embarrassed glare at the blonde, her majesty turns on her heels and saunters back to the desk in her fashionably hot, but terribly uncomfortable-looking, Louboutin pumps. Emma bites back a victorious grin. See, overdressed.

"So... where do you want me?" she asks after a moment, standing right at the edge of the sparkly, magical floor graffiti.

"Inside the innermost circle, right beside the unlit candle. Do keep your clumsiness in check and try not to step on the lines, Miss Swan, the patterns must not be distorted."

"Why? Would the spell go crazy and kill me or something?"

"No, princess. But I would."

"Go crazy?"

"Kill you."

Emma raises an eyebrow. "Violent, much?"

"For good reason."
Emma thinks. **Well... Regina did** spend a good chunk of the morning on her hands and knees, ruining her study's perfectly polished, hardwood floor by drawing strange-as-fuck doodles on it – *doodles* that would surely be an even bigger bitch to clean off (and it doesn't take a genius to know just *who'll* get saddled with *that* thankless job). Emma sighs. "Okay, fine, you're right," she admits quietly. "I'm sorry."

"Then, be careful."

Brows furrowed in concentration, Emma just grunts in acknowledgment. A moment later, after deciding on a viable course of action, she puffs out a breath, steadies her resolve, and makes her first move.

It's a bit like playing hopscotch in the dark – cautiously hopping and tip-toeing from one small space to another – but, incredibly, through sheer force of will (and a great deal of dumb luck), Emma reaches her destination without an accident. Wearing a triumphant, shit-eating grin, she pivots in place and faces her silent companion, ready to gloat her ass off.

Taking half the time, half the effort, yet, somehow, double the poise, Regina bridges the distance between them with an ease and grace that would put a prima ballerina to shame. Even in heels, the woman doesn't step on a single line. How the hell she managed to pull that off, Emma has no frickin' clue. And just like *that*, her ego deflates in a rather pathetic fashion.

"Close your mouth, my dear. It's rather unbecoming of a princess to have her jaw hanging open like a halfwit."

The eyeroll she makes is one for the record books. Still, Emma snaps her mouth shut and pointedly ignores the self-satisfied smirk on Regina's face. "Let's just get this over with," she says.

"Well, then, your hand, if you may," Regina responds, sobering up completely, offering her free hand whilst holding the beaker with the other.

As discreetly as she possibly could, Emma wipes her palm dry on the side of her jeans before taking Regina's hand and entwining their fingers. They're standing so damn close; there's only so much room to maneuver inside this stupid circle, and that, coupled with the muted lighting and the mere thought of the intimacy of the act they're about to do, just makes the whole thing infinitely more awkward than it already is.

"A friendly reminder before we begin, Miss Swan. I've already granted you permission to *stick* your repulsive tongue inside my mouth, *please* refrain from *shoving* it down my throat."

Well, *that* didn't really alleviate any of the awkwardness.

"Now, *who's* being crass?"

"Shush."

She does, and, so, the spell casting finally begins.

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The faint buzz of electricity tingles across her skin like pinpricks the moment Regina begins drawing out energy and powering up her magic. Eyelids drooping, the vein on her forehead growing prominence, Regina empties the beaker's contents onto the space surrounding their bodies, scattering them like ashes in the wind. Similar to a lighted match dropping on a trail of gasoline, the lines on the floor come to life and start to glow with purple incandescent light. In a blink of an eye, the empty container disappears from Regina's hand and re-appears on the mahogany desk, giving her majesty...
the freedom to flick her wrist and ignite the wick of the red candle by their feet.

Sensory overload, it truly is. Head whipping from side to side, struggling to take everything in, a wide-eyed Emma kind of takes on the role of a hapless bystander as the air in the room starts to crackle and thrum.

Always her complete antithesis, an unruffled Regina parts her lips and begins to recite the incantation that they've both come to know by heart. "Dark and light, protect thy knight..." she chants, in a voice both commanding and calm, while Emma echoes the words in her head, "...powers that be, tie thy soul to thee."

Looking a lot like gaudy disco lights, the lines on the floor change from purple to almost blinding white.

Knowing fully well what's coming next, Emma unconsciously licks her lips and swallows visibly.

*Here it is.*

Regina lifts her head and locks on to her gaze.

*The moment of truth.*

The tub-thumping of her heart crescendos to a point where she practically hears it thundering in her ears, and Emma has to remind herself to breathe as Regina squeezes her hand and looks at her under those long, dark lashes.

This is necessary for her survival. Doing this will, quite literally, save her life.

Keeping that in mind, she steels her resolve and gives in.

Leaning forward, eyelids drifting low, feeling her majesty's hot breath against hers, they kiss.

Regina tastes like peppermint toothpaste, dark coffee and apple cinnamon, Emma thinks absently as her fingers somehow find their way up Regina's slender neck and tangle themselves in her locks of brown hair; their lips brushing against each other, moving in tandem. There's a hand wrapped around her waist, and another at her nape, pulling her in closer, deeper. It's a good thing she lacks August's propensity for colorful metaphors or Mary Margaret's love of flowery words, cause when *(when and not *if*) Ruby asks her about the kiss, she can just shrug her shoulders and say it wasn't anything mind-blowing.

And that would be the honest-to-goodness truth.

*Really.*

Because there are no fireworks going off. No tolling bells. The earth isn't tilting off its axis. Stars aren't falling from the sky. The heavens haven't parted and angels haven't cried.

See, there are no overused metaphors, no similes, no hyperboles, no poetic words, no *nothing*, that can begin to describe this kiss. Anything overly dramatic would just be a lie.

If anything, it just feels like all the butterflies in her tummy just up and decided to spontaneously combust.

Okay, fine, maybe even *that* was a *little* dramatic.
But, you see, apart from that, there really is nothing extraordinary about this kiss.


It's very Regina. It's very Emma.

It's just so, totally, them.

And for some odd, disturbing, and Jesus-Christ-what-the-fuck-am-I-doing? reason, Emma couldn't seem to stop kissing Regina. And even more frightening? Regina couldn't seem to stop kissing her, either.

But, of course, they do manage to. Stop, that is. An unspecified amount of time later, yes, but they do manage to stop.

Chests heaving, faces flushed, both pairs of eyes glazed and unseeing, they slowly part lips.

And then, the unthinkable happens.

Perhaps it's the lack of oxygen in their brains, or the intoxicating influence of the magic flowing in and around their bodies, but like magnets being drawn in, they unconsciously move forward, on the cusp of capturing the other's lips for one more kiss.

Mere millimeters apart, they catch themselves.

Emma blinks. Regina does too.

And like ice water had just been dumped over their heads, they jump out of each other's arms, out of the other's personal space, breathless and bright red. Their clothes are rumpled; their hair a mess.

Oh... crap, is the first coherent, but not-so-eloquent, thought that pops in Emma's head. And judging from the horrified look on Regina's face, her majesty's train of thought isn't so far off.

"T-that was... it was... that was..." Emma says uselessly, like a complete, utter moron.

"An unfortunate side-effect of the spell."

"Y-yeah. Side-effect. I mean, why would we even want to kiss each other again?"

"My sentiments exactly. Miss Swan, because as far as kisses go," A flustered Regina swallows thickly, more articulate than Emma'll ever be, even in moments of distress, "that was simply horrendous."

"Horrible," she agrees.
"Vile."

Emma nods profusely. "Disgusting."

"I don't think I've had worse."

"And I'm so frickin' sure I've had better."

"Your hands were wet," Regina complains.

"So was that kiss."

"It was, quite simply, revolting," her majesty adds.

"Absolutely gross," she makes a face.

"Dreadful."

"Nasty."

"Atrocious."

"Yucky."

Running out of things to say, of hollow words to ramble out, they stare at one another, eyes to lips, lips to eyes.

Turning an even darker shade of crimson, they quickly avert their gaze, bristling in place.

And in their shared state of disquiet, it takes a minute or two for them to finally notice that all the candles had been blown out, and that the magic circles had ceased glowing like a bad, 70's disco floor. The room should've been completely dark and devoid of light. But it isn't. There are tiny balls of light scattered all over the study, floating around them like fireflies, illuminating their bodies and giving their skin an almost otherworldly glow.

It's absolutely spellbinding. Completely magical. And for a moment, lost in wonderment, they forget themselves. Or, what they had just done. And how good it fucking felt.

But, of course, it all comes crashing back soon enough.

Shyly, hesitantly, and oh-so-awkwardly, their gazes meet once more.

Emma lets out a shuddery breath, not really ready, nor willing, to dwell on, hell, anything. "Uh... do you, um, do you think it worked?" she asks instead, quiet, fearful and unsure.

"I... I'm quite certain it did," Regina murmurs, dark eyes flickering at the ball of light that's floating near Emma's face. "I've never seen these wisps in any of Rumplestiltskin's attempts at the spell."

"Paul did say something about an explosion of light, right?"

"I believe he did, yes."

Sighing in relief, Emma closes her eyes and balls her trembling hands into fists.

*Thank God.*

"What do you feel?"
Green eyes snap open in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"It's a very straightforward question, Miss Swan," Regina intones, almost silently, the expression on her face inscrutable. "What do you feel?"

"I..." Emma licks her lips, fidgeting, "I don't understand the question..."

Regina lets out an exasperated breath. "Do you feel any different? Stronger? Weaker?"

"Oh."

"Why, what on earth did you think I was asking?"

"Nothing..." she mumbles weakly, feeling sheepish.

Regina stares at her, frowning mightily, as if looking at somebody hard enough will enable one to decipher another's thoughts. "Do you feel any different?" she asks again.

"No."

"Truly?"

"Yeah. I don't feel any different at all."

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Except... she kinda does.

And she's not sure if it's a side-effect of the spell... or stress... or, well, something else. Either way, it just feels like she's just been hit on the head with a mallet and poked on the chest with a cattle prod. Her forehead's throbbing, her heart's beating out of her chest. And while she doesn't know whether that's good or bad, she has a strong inkling that Regina's feeling something similar. There's a persistent tug in her gut that just tells her so.

Perhaps it really is a side-effect of the spell, then. Who knows?

But, instead of bringing it up and talking about it like mature adults, the frustrating coward in her just forces a blank look towards Regina and murmurs ever so softly: "Why, what am I supposed to feel?"

"I don't know, Miss Swan," Regina exhales, sounding exhausted... and just, oddly, dispirited. "You tell me."

And with those words hanging in the air, Regina walks out the door and departs the room, leaving Emma once again looking like an idiot – and feeling like a massive one too.

Reminiscent of what happened the previous night, when she was left all alone in a dark kitchen, the moment the door closes behind Regina, all the sparkly wisps of light disappear, plunging the study in complete and utter darkness.

Seriously, what's up with that woman and dramatic exits?

Bringing a hand to her face, she slowly traces her tingling lips with a finger and sighs.
The nightlife in Storybrooke is very limited.

Despite the shortage of fun options, Rufio can still think of better ways of spending his Friday night than sneaking into a frickin' convent and hiding in its garden. But this is okay too, he thinks, even as he flicks a bug off his pants and another one from his bare arm. A few sacrifices are necessary to get what you want. And since what he wants involves something as complicated as coming home to Neverland, he can hide atop an elm tree and allow all sorts of creepy-crawly insects to scale up his body, no problem. That is, if it meant he'll get his hands on some fairy dust. Rufio can be patient when need be. He just wishes Argos would hurry the fuck up, though.

The jackass said eight-thirty. It's closer to eight-forty now.

He's kinda getting worried.

The hallways are deserted, yeah, but it won't be that way for too long. From his vantage point, he could tell that the fairy nuns are still holed up in the chapel, engaged in evening prayer. The orphans under their care are stuck in there too; as if living with magical, bible-thumping puritans isn't enough suffering for the poor kids. According to the Bacons, evening prayer usually ends at around nine, or, at the latest, nine-fifteen. So, if Argos lingers inside for a few more minutes, the guy would be at risk of running into one, if not all, of the Sisters. Kick-ass sword or not, if his masked friend somehow gets caught, swarmed and blasted by Storybrooke's wand-wielding, religious mafia, the bastard will probably end up farting glitters and confetti on his way to jail.

And, no, he couldn't have that. It would screw everything up.

"No biggie, I'll be out in fifteen minutes' he says... well, clock's fucking ticking, you frickin' turtle..." he talks to himself in Argos' gruff voice, peering through the old binoculars that he had "borrowed" from some idiot camper who had pitched his tent near their part of the woods.

Finding no sign of Argos from any of the first-floor windows, and getting more antsy by the second, Rufio clicks his tongue and lets the binoculars dangle loosely around his neck. No sooner had he done this, when a flash of blue in his periphery catches his attention and draws his gaze to the large window towards the left – the one that gave a nice view of the main hallway. Moving quick, he lifts the binoculars to his eyes...

...and almost falls out of the tree at what he sees.

"Oh... shit."

That blue thing is someone's leather jacket. And that someone is none other than Emma fucking Swan.

His anxiety level spikes up a notch. Or two. Or ten.

Word on the streets is that the Sheriff, and her bumbling minions, have begun intensifying the manhunt since getting the protection spell. The manhunt for Argos, and, by extension, certain members of the Lost Boys... but this is just insane. Did she know they'd be here tonight? Only five people were in on their plan to steal some fairy dust this evening – him, Argos and the Bacon Brothers – and Rufio's damn sure that while the Bacons might be pigs, they don't squeal. They knew how high the stakes were. They wanted to go back home too.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he murmurs in panic, tracking the Sheriff's movements window-to-window, following the woman until she disappeared into the door that led to the chapel. A few moments later, she comes out of it again, only this time, with the Blue Fairy in tow. Walking and
talking, the expression on their faces gravely serious, they enter one of the convent's many rooms and vanish out of sight.

Beads of sweat form on Rufio's brow and trickle down his heated face, his heart hammering inside his chest.

After what seemed like an eternity of waiting with bated breath, the two women re-emerge; however, they're weirdly a little less solemn and a bit more—*smiley*? he pulls a confused face—than before. They exchange a couple of words; mindless small-talk, Rufio guesses, before the grinning fairy nun proceeds to escort the Sheriff to the front door. And, as suddenly as she had appeared, Emma Swan leaves. The Blue Fairy, too, goes back inside the chapel.

Rufio's shoulders slump down, a puff of air leaving his lips. The feeling of relief that ripples across his body almost makes his eyes roll to the back of his head.

*Fucking hell, that was stressful.*

But, as much as he would like to relax completely and let his guard down, they're not out of the woods yet. Or, in their case, Argos isn't out of the convent.

"C'mon, man... where the fuck are you?"

He gets his answer ten minutes later.

"**Rufi-oh.**" He hears a low voice say in sing-song, coming from somewhere down his tree. "I've got it. Get your ass down here, time to scram."

"You fucking asshole," he hisses to his masked friend as he hurriedly climbs down the tree. "If I have to re-dye my hair cause you turned it all white, you're paying for it."

"Aw, you were worried about me?"

"**Shut up,**" he snaps, feeling his cheeks heat up. "Dude, **Sheriff Swan** dropped by! Do you know how close you were to getting caught? What the hell took you so long?"

"Relax, will ya? Their wards aren't like the crappy ones Baba Yaga's hocking around town. I thought that if I disabled one, some kind of alarm would kick in – and we don't want that. So, I decided to ditch the original plan and switch to Plan B," Argos tells him, handing over a pouch made out of some icky velvety material. "Careful with that, don't spill the dust."

They've already scaled the stone fence that separated the convent from the forest when a thought strikes him.

"Wait..." Rufio frowns, glancing at the guy running in front, "...we have a Plan B?"

"Of course we do. Jeez, buddy, every great heist needs to have a contingency in place. Why the heck do you think I'm lugging your backpack around?"

"I thought it was for storing the dust in."

"Tinker Bell only needs a *pinch,* not a whole frickin' bag of fairy juju."

"Alright, alright... point taken," Rufio acknowledges, flicking on a flashlight and slowing down to a brisk walk when they reach Mulberry creek. The moment they cross the invisible, scent-scrambling barrier that they had set up weeks prior, he lets out an eased sigh. From here, it's an hour's trek back
to the cabin. After a companionable stretch of silence, he turns to Argos, "So, what's inside the bag?"

"Nothing important," the secretive guy says evasively, adjusting the sword and the said bag on his back. "What's important is that we got what we came for."

"And just how did you manage to pull that off, exactly?"

Argos just shrugs, nonchalant as ever. "I just said the magic word."

"Shazzam?"

"Please."

Rufio smirks. "Abracadabra?"

"Please."

"No, seriously. How?"

"I told you, I said 'please'."

"Shut the fuck up."

"It's the truth."

"Yeah right."

"Well... alright, fine, I might have also batted my eyelashes and poured on the charm."

Rufio rolls his eyes. He's never going to get a straight answer from this asshole. "You're a dick."

"A successful one."

"A dick."

"Who got you fairy dust."

"Still a dick," he grounds out. Ever so carefully, he touches his right pant pocket and feels the small pouch hidden inside, and smiles. "But... thank you."

They've got the gas, now to find a ride. They're almost there. And soon, Neverland, here they come.

It's been five days.

"The trail's gone cold. Again. I'm not sure how many dead-ends we've come across today alone..."

This—whatever it is—that's happening to her has officially passed the point of absurdity. Pathetic is too kind a word to describe her now.

"They know we're looking for them, boss. No pranks, no mischief. They're lying low..."

She'd hoped it would pass. That this thing would just be a phase. A passing fancy. But it hadn't been. And it didn't—wouldn't—go away. Annoyingly, things just got progressively worse with each passing day.

"Rubes and I have tried searching the woods again. But, for some reason, she always loses their
scent when we hit Mulberry creek. It's weird, her nose clogs up, and she gets all snotty. We've tried again and again, still the same result..."

She's been clocking in obscene hours at the office, trying to distract herself with work. Of course, catching up on more than a week’s worth of paperwork and pounding the pavement in search of a slippery bastard, and his equally slippery friends, could only provide so much distraction, she found out the hard way.

"It's possible they're using either Baba Yaga's or Jafar's wards to cover their tracks and hide their base. The old witch's ward-locks are practically useless, but Jafar's ward-offs and invis-locks are crazy expensive for a reason. They're pretty darn effective..."

Because every time she finishes reading a report, every time she drives around town to patrol and look for traces of Argos and the Lost Boys, every time she so much as stops to take a breather... her thoughts stray back to that fateful morning five days ago.

"Uh... Sheriff?" ... "Emma?"

And then, as usual, her brain short-circuits and she becomes this big zoned-out, unproductive mess.

"Are you even listening to me?"

She hates herself for it. It's not supposed to be this way, you see. She's supposed to kiss Regina once – all for the sake of survival – and come out of the whole experience a little traumatized, but relatively, unscathed.

But that's not what happened, is it?

"Earth to Emma Swan? Hello?"

Paying no mind to a concerned-looking August—hell, she doesn't even know what the heck her deputy's rambling on about anymore—she slumps down against her desk, presses her hot cheek against the cool wood, closes her eyes, and just sighs.

This is all wrong; so... very... very... very wrong.

Because, ultimately, it's not the fact that she had kissed Regina that still bothers her.  

No, it's the fact that she wants to do it again that does.

__________________________________________________________________________

Maybe this is just her body subconsciously telling her that she's been neglecting certain needs.

It has been months since the last time, after all.

__________________________________________________________________________

Except... whenever she thinks about being intimate with someone, her mind somehow drifts back to Re—no.

Just no.
Then, of course, the little red devil on her shoulder just has to whisper: why the hell not? and, like always, her stomach twists into knots and the inner meltdown begins anew. 'It's complicated' doesn't even begin to cover it. Cause the persistent tugging in her belly? It's still there. And it's telling her that maybe... maybe there's more to it than just lust. And that, well, that's fucking scary.

On the sixth day post-kiss, Emma decides she's going to name the little red devil 'Ruby'.

"Baba Yaga won't talk. She doesn't want to confirm or deny that she sold wards to either Argos or Rufio. She says it's bad for business. I told her it'd be even worse if we bring her in for impeding a police investigation, but she wants to see a warrant before she shows us any receipts. Which is just stupid if you ask me since I doubt that hag keeps any records. Jafar, on the other hand—"

In one ear, out the other. Emma nods blankly, green eyes glazed.

After a while, her second-in-command stops speaking, stares at her unblinkingly, and then shakes her head. "There you go again, off to your own little world," Ruby sighs, giving up and dropping the folder in her hand on the table. "Really, Emma?"

"What?" she blinks, mind snapping back to the present.

"You're thinking about the kiss again."

A statement, not a query. Emma stills. "How did you know?"

"I didn't," Ruby admits. "But now I do."

Damn clever girl.

"Oldest trick in the book, Sheriff," her deputy intones, and Emma almost gives in to the urge to groan and cover her face in shame. "Can't believe you didn't see that one coming."

"I was--"

"Distracted?" Ruby supplies. "Yeah, I could see that. Em, it's been almost a week..." she remarks, parking herself at the edge of Emma's desk, eyebrow arched high. "You know, for something that wasn't all that, you've been obsessing about that kiss a lot..."

"What?" A token protest. "No, I haven't."

"You've been out of it for days."

"That's a load of bull."

"Can't deny it; everyone's saying so."

"Everyone?"

"August, Leroy, me. We've all noticed."

"I—I'm just tired, that's all."

Ruby gives her that look. The one that says she's much more inclined to believe that Leroy can sing opera than accept the flimsy explanation that just came out of her mouth. "Has anything changed between you and Regina after last Wednesday?"
"No," Emma shakes her head, and that's the truth. "Why the heck would anything change? We kissed because it was *needed*, not because it was something we both *wanted*."

Ruby snorts.

"I'm serious. That kiss was simply a means to an end."

"*Uh-huh. Right.*"

"Stop looking at me like that," she frowns, twisting the now electricity-free, plain emerald ring on her finger. "Regina and I are both adults. We kissed, yeah, but it was all business. It's over, it happened, we don't talk about it."

"Maybe that's the problem."

"What do you mean?"

"You guys bicker a lot, but you don't really *talk*, do you?"

"Yes, we do..." she counters, stubborn as ever. "We talk about everything."

"Everything *but* the important stuff, obviously."

"C'mon, Ruby, *really*? What's there to talk about? The spell's success is what's important. Seriously, I don't know what you're trying to imply, but Regina and I are just friends."

"*Friends,*" Ruby echoes, brows slowly rising up to her hairline. "Even after...?" she trails off, and then sighs.

"Even after what...?"

"*Everything!*"

"*Everything?*"

"Why did you throw yourself in between Regina and a wraith again?"

"You're kidding me," Emma groans. "Seriously? You too, Rubes?"

"C'mon, answer my question."

"It's not your question. It's his," she points out. "So, stop it. You know why I did what I did. I'm not going to explain myself again."

An uncomfortable lull appears in the conversation – due in large part to Ruby's preoccupation with looking at her like her head's some kind of frustrating Rubik's cube that she's just itching to drive a hammer into.

"What?" Emma asks after a moment, fidgeting under the intense scrutiny.

"Tell me something about the kiss," Ruby prompts, head tilted to the side, tapping her fingers on the desk. "Like, how long did it last?"

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

"Why not?"
Emma shrugs helplessly.

"Lost track of time?"

"No," she says quickly. At Ruby's unbelieving look, she grudgingly relents with a mumbled, "Maybe?"

Her feeble admission elicits a pitying sigh from her friend's lips.

"Okay... fine... lay it on me. I can tell there's something you need to get off your chest."

"Em, it's just," Ruby pauses and licks her lips, threading oh-so carefully. "No matter how I look at it, there's nothing remotely friendly about that kiss. Especially since you don't even know how long it went on for. I just know that if I had to kiss someone out of necessity, I'd be counting the seconds – not getting lost in it."

"Damn right," a gruff voice jumps in the fray, taking the both of them by surprise. From all the way over the jail cells, a rumpled-looking Leroy sits up on one of the beds (his old one, ironically) and yawns. "Weeks ago you were only swimming in it, now you're just drowning in denial, sister. Everyone and their mothers can see that you're, I dunno, in lesbians with the Evil Queen. Even Dopey can tell – and you know Dopey."

"Just wait a sec... I'm in what and with who?!"

Ruby rolls her eyes. "Please don't make him repeat it."

"Not planning to," Leroy grunts, fluffing his pillow before lying back down. Propping himself up with his elbows, he trudges on. "Look, I know it ain't my business, but somebody's gotta say it. Red's beating around the bush as usual, hoping you'll figure it out yourself, but we both know that style ain't gonna work on you. When it comes to these things, you're even more dense than your old man."

"..."

"Don't tell him I said that."

It's not as if she can tell anyone anything, anyway. It's one thing to be slapped with the so-called "truth", but this just feels like a brutal sucker punch. Slack-jawed, speechless, and flushed all the way down to her neck, the only thing that comes out of her lips is the wind that's been knocked out of her lungs.

"You like the Evil Queen," the dwarf reiterates, dealing another blow, blunt and unapologetic as sin. "So, do us all a favor and accept it for what it is... or, you know what, just forget about it. Either way, just fucking deal with it already."

"Leroy," Ruby warns, shooting him a look.

Naturally, the stubborn fool doesn't listen. "Look, I don't even give a damn about winning the pool anymore. At first it was frickin' funny, now it's just annoying."

Pool? Emma casts a questioning glance at Ruby. Her friend doesn't have to say anything; the guilty look on her face says it all.

"But, y'know, If you ask me," Leroy continues, on a roll now. "You can do better than some crazy witch with a stick up her ass."
For whatever reason, _that_ wakes her up.

"But I wasn't asking you, now, was I?" she blurts out without thought, face darkening in reflex. "Technically, she _is_ a witch, but Regina's _not_ crazy... and _you're_ one to talk about stick up asses, _arrow-butt._"

Ruby and Leroy exchange knowing looks.

"And shouldn't one of you be out patrolling? What the hell are the both of you doing here?"

"August's out on patrol," Ruby volunteers. "I'm on dispatch."

"And you?" Emma turns to the old grumps. "What's your excuse?"

"I'm on nights this week."

"Then what the heck are you doing here?"

"He's been living in the office for days," Ruby interjects. "You know dwarves love to work like dogs."

"That's racist!" Leroy objects.

"And offensive to dogs," Emma mutters.

"It was a form of speech." Ruby rolls her eyes.

"Yeah right. I'm here cause I'm being 'proactive'... or whatever it is Woody called it," Leroy mutters grumpily, shifting to his side and looking for a more comfortable position to sleep in. "Sheriff, _you're_ the one who said that if I'm late for my shift one more time, I'd get nights for a whole damn month."

"So, you figured you'd sleep at the office?"

Leroy yawns. "The heck am I supposed to do?"

"Wake up on time?"

"Easier said than done."

"You're _Grumpy_, not _Sleepy._"

"And you're _Noisy_. Lemme sleep."

Emma's eyes flash with murder. "You're on nights for _two_ weeks."

"Aw, c'mon! Night duty's a pain in the ass!"

"That's funny, so are _you_."

Amidst the sound of Leroy's grumbling, Emma massages her temples, screws her eyes shut and sighs. Why does it always feel like she's running a daycare instead of a serious, law enforcement agency? To make matters worse, the tactless brats under her supervision just had to gang up on her about Regina too. _Fuck_. As if she isn't stressing about it enough on her own already. It's one thing to suspect something about yourself, it's another thing to hear those suspicions said out loud by your subordinates.
Times like these, she understands the appeal of carrying around a hip flask. *Jesus.* A nice, long swig of whiskey would be perfect just about now.

Recognizing the telltale signs of a migraine starting to develop, and knowing that she needs to get some air and clear her head before she loses it in here, Emma pushes her chair back and stands up.

"Where're you going?" Ruby asks.

"Out."

"Where?"

"I dunno, wherever."

"Are you going back here?"

"No."

"But I still haven't finished giving you my report..."

"I'll read it in the car. If something comes up, radio me," she instructs, clipping on her badge and stuffing her car keys in her pocket. "I'm going to Sherwood Park later at four and then I'm clocking out and going home."

Ruby's brows furrow in question. "Sherwood? What's happening there?"

"It's Tuesday."

"So?"

"I promised Paul I'd start playing chess with him from now on, remember?"

"Oh. Right," Ruby nods, and then, slowly, almost hesitantly, murmurs, "Hey... um, you're not mad, are you, Em?"

"No."

That would've been more believable if she hadn't supplemented it with a rather petulant frown. Ruby, at least, has the decency to look somewhat sheepish. "Sorry?"

"Yeah. Whatever." Slipping on her red jacket, she stops mid-way, one arm partially inside one sleeve. "Where'd I leave my gun?"

"Don't know," Ruby shrugs, jumping off her desk to go back to her own table. "But you were rummaging inside the supply closet when I came in this morning, right? You might've left it there."

"Thanks," she mumbles, and goes off in search of her sidearm. If Argos defies expectations, comes out of hiding and turns up at the park, she wants to be packing heat, at least. No sooner had she entered the cramped closet when she hears one of the radios crackling to life in the bullpen.

"Dispatch?" August's voice sounds out, loud and distinct. "Rubes?"

"Yeah?"

"Where's the Sheriff?"
"In the closet."

Leroy snorts.

"No, really. Where is she?"

Emma rolls her eyes, gritting her teeth. "You know I can hear you guys, right?" she calls out, spotting her gun holster on top of the stacks of copy paper and reaching for it. "What does he want?"

"Do you need something from her?" Ruby asks on her behalf.

"Just thought she'd like to know that Gold's been spotted back in town."

"Where?" Emma asks, popping back out to the bullpen, strapping her gun to her hip. Like before, Ruby relays her question.

"At his house. I've got witnesses telling me that some kind of portal appeared in the middle of the street, and after a moment, he came hobbling out of it. A crevice opened up on his front lawn too, but he closed it right away. Oh, and the portal? When it closed it transformed into a hat – one of Jefferson's, I would guess."

Handing over the radio to her, Ruby steps back, crosses her arms and just listens in. "Is he still at home?" Emma follows up.

"No, they said he left. He's probably at his shop. Want me to check?"

"Yeah... please. And give Mary Margaret and David a heads up while you're at it. They'd probably want to talk to Gold, try to see what the hell he's been up to all these months. I'll poke around his shop too. Don't worry about telling Regina, I'll be the one to give her a call."

"Of course, you will," Leroy rasps out, sassing even when half-asleep.

Her nostrils flare in annoyance, patience running paper thin, and before she could stop herself, she looks over her shoulder and grits out, "Congratulations, grumps. You've just earned yourself a whole frickin' month of night duty. One more wisecrack and you'll spend the next one stuck on dispatch."

It's petty, nor is it very ethical, and while the tortured groan she receives in response is unable to match all the aggravation he's caused, in the end, it was pretty damn worth it.

Argos doesn't have much in terms of personal belongings.

It seems like it was only yesterday that the strange, masked bastard came rolling into his life – on his fake brother's motorcycle, no less – and the only things Argos had with him were his sword, a messenger's bag, the clothes on his back, and a duffel bag full of all the ones he had stolen from the Sheriff. A testament to how little he had in way of material possessions, the guy literally lived inside the cabin's one and only walk-in closet and had enough room to spare for another kid-sized human.

So, when Argos managed to pack all his stuff in under ten minutes, and loaded them on his bike in less than three, Rufio was hardly surprised.

That doesn't mean he wasn't torn up about it, though.

He knew this day would come; Argos had told him and the other boys about his plans to leave as early as two weeks ago. Still, knowing about it in advance doesn't make the whole thing any less difficult. Rufio had every intention to appear all calm and unaffected, like the badass leader that he
saw himself to be, but in the end, the needy kid inside of him was too much to hold back. Latchboy, Tootles, Nibs, Slightly, Cubby, Marmaduke, Binky, No Nap, Don't Ask, Too Small, and now, Argos. He's been losing brothers left and right.

"This is dumb, why do you have to go?" he whines rather pathetically as he follows Argos to the makeshift garden like a lost puppy. Thud Butt, Pockets and the others have already said their goodbyes, Rufio still hasn't. More like can't, if you ask him. "If you have to leave, why not leave with us? As soon as I find a portal jumper's heirloom, it's bye-bye hell and hello paradise."

Argos crouches down by the lilac shrub and just sighs. "Rufio, c'mon, we talked about this. I mean, yeah, paradise sounds really, really tempting and all, but there's just something I have to do."

"Can't you do it without moving out?"

When Argos shakes his head, Rufio's stomach drops even further.

"Then at least tell me where the fuck you're going, or what the heck you're planning to do. You've got a frickin' bullseye on your back, man, it's not safe for you to be seen out and about."

"I'm sorry, buddy, I can't."

"Why not?"

"Look, I want to tell you, believe me, I know I owe you as much. But the less you know, the safer you kids are gonna be," Argos says, and predictably, he finishes with the usual: "Trust me."

Rufio exhales through his nose. If he hears those words one more time, he'd have half the mind to smack his friend behind the head. It's getting frustrating how every damn question he throws is met with a dodgy reply and a stupid reminder to trust. For once, can he just get a straight answer?

Gingerly, almost reverently, Argos plucks out two tiny lilacs from his precious shrub. One, he places in his jacket's chest pocket; the other, he stuffs inside a white envelope. "One last favor?" he murmurs, straightening up and standing to full height. "Have that birdbrain drop this at the mansion tonight?"

Even if he's still a bit miffed, Rufio accepts the envelope and the twenty dollar bill that Argos hands over without question. Ace, and at times, the Bacons, used to deliver all of the packages, but since the cops started applying the heat, they had to outsource that job to Jafar's right-hand man-bird, and part-time courier, Iago.

"You know, I never asked," he begins anew, his brown eyes flitting to the flower sticking out of Argos' pocket. "What is it with you and lilacs? Are they the Sheriff's favorite?"

Argos shrugs noncommittally. "I dunno, maybe."

"Maybe? So, you don't even know for sure? Then why not just send red roses like a normal stalker?"

"Normal?" Argos repeats, chuckling lowly. "Rufio, I wear a hockey mask 24/7 and I have a sword practically welded to my back, do you really think there's anything normal about me? I may be a lot of things, but 'normal' ain't one of them."

"Alright, you're weird, I admit," he acknowledges with a laugh. "You haven’t answered my question, though. Why the pansy lilacs?"

"Nothing. I like 'em, that's all."
"Why?"

"They remind me of home."

"The Enchanted Forest?"

"That's not my home," Argos says in a tone that Rufio regards as mild exasperation. "And who says it has to be a place?"

"Dude, if you're going to quote a sappy greeting card, save it."

Except for an amused grunt, Argos remains mum.

"So... will we see you again?" Rufio asks tentatively as they walk back to the clearing in front of their safehouse.

"...yes?"

He looks at Argos through the corner of his eyes. "You're not sure?"

"I am. I'm just—"

"Just what?" he urges.

"Nothing," Argos shakes his head. Exhaling, he redoes his previous answer and declares in a much more confident tone, "You'll see me again."

"Better," Rufio lauds, stopping at where the motorbike's parked. "Will you be there to see us off when we finally open a portal to Neverland?"

"I—" A pregnant pause. Argos looks down at his feet for a second, and then nods, "I'll be there – one way or another."

"Sure?"

"Pretty damn sure," Argos mutters, a tinge of irony and weariness in his voice.

Feeling as though they're being watched, Rufio throws a cursory glance towards the cabin and gives his masked friend a weak nudge. A teary-eyed Pockets is watching them from one of the windows. The second Argos lifts his hand to wave goodbye, the poor kid ducks his head and hides out of sight.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Argos sighs.

"He'll be fine," Rufio waves off, even though deep down he knows that's a lie. Pockets, the baby of the group, has always been the most sensitive one. "He doesn't say it, but he still misses his fake parents. You've sorta been standing in for them for a few weeks now, so I'm sure he'll miss you, too. But, he'll get over it, don't worry."

"Hung up over 'fake' family members, huh?" Argos hums. "Sounds a lot like someone I know."

"Shut up."

"Oh, I'm sorry, did that hit a nerve?"

"You're a dick."
"Careful, Rufio," Argos says sagely. "You know what they say, birds of the same feather are the same birds."

"A stupid dick," Rufio amends, giving the dumbass the side-eye. The worst part? Argos wasn't even joking. "You do know that I just lost fifty respect points for you, right?"

"Why, did I get it wrong?"

"What do you think?"

"Whatever, you get the gist," Argos chuckles lowly, flippant as fuck. Swinging a leg over the bike, he settles into the seat, turns the key in the ignition, and kick-starts the motorcycle into life. Turning to Rufio, he extends a hand, and over the sound of the rumbling engine, shouts in parting, "Bangarang, Rufio."

Gritting his teeth, keeping the annoying tears prickling at the sides of his eyes at bay, Rufio takes the proffered hand and shakes it. "Bangarang," he smiles bravely, lips quivering. "I'll see you around."

And with that, Argos maneuvers into the dirt road and rides out of sight, leaving in his wake a cloud of dust and smoke, and four sad-eyed Lost Boys.

He shouldn't have read it.

Nicholas was just being mean. Real friends protect each other from hurtful things. Nicholas knows Hound Edge is one of his favorite superheroes, why else would he let him read something as horrible as that except to be unnecessarily cruel? What did he ever do to him?

Sour-faced and fuming, Henry pokes a couple of roma tomatoes off the perfect pyramidal stack they were in, channeling his frustrations on the defenseless produce. Piling up vegetables across from where he's standing, Ana – one of Ashley's evil stepsisters and full-time grocery worker – shoots him a dirty look.

"Little shit," the woman grumbles, reaching over and picking up the tomatoes that had rolled into the pile of cucumbers, putting them back in place so roughly it wouldn't surprise him if they exploded.

"Sorry..." Henry mumbles feebly and makes a hasty exit, pushing the shopping cart away, tail tucked between his legs.

He stops by the stacked boxes of mandarin oranges, far away and hidden from Ana's cutting looks, opting to wait for his mom in this location instead. She's still by the poultry section, waiting for the frozen turkey that she had pre-ordered weeks before. It's Thanksgiving in a few days, and as per tradition, they're doing their pre-holiday grocery shopping together. It's always just been the two of them, but now that Emma had moved in, he was hoping she'd be part of it too. Unfortunately, Emma had to work.

Or so he thought.

Before he knew what was happening, someone's grabbed him from behind in a light choke hold, peppering his head with loud, tiny kisses. He didn't even have to look up to see just who the culprit is, the strands of blonde hair that had fallen over his face is answer enough.

"Emmmmmma..." Henry whines, turning bright red and struggling against his birth mother's arm. One of the girls from school looks at them and smirks. Henry's cheeks turn a darker shade of crimson.

"C'mon, stop it, you're embarrassing me!"
"What?" she says innocently, finally setting him free. "I missed you. I haven't seen you in a while."

"We just saw each other this morning."

"Really?" Emma quirks a brow, grabbing a piece of orange and tossing it inside the cart without so
much as turning it over in her hands and examining it – the exact opposite of what his mom would
usually do. "Kinda feels longer than that."

"What are you doing here? I thought you had a lot of paperwork to do?"

"Who said that?"

"You did."

"Yeah... I did, didn't I?"

"Yeah."

She chucks another orange in the cart.

Eyebrows meeting at the middle of his face, Henry tilts his head, studying the woman in the blue
leather jacket. "Emma, are you alright?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"You seem kinda off."

"What do you mean?"

"You just do," Henry maintains.

"Had a pretty busy day, I'm kinda tired. Maybe that's it." Emma intones with a long sigh, leaning
back against the cart. Glancing around their surroundings, she stuffs her hands inside the pockets of
her jeans and asks, "Where's your mom?"

"Getting the turkey. She told me to wait for her here."

"Oh, okay. So, how was school today?"

"It was alright."

"They held auditions for the school play yesterday, right? How did your audition go?"

"How did you know about that?" he asks, mouth dropping open, his brows knitting together in a
horrified frown. He's sure he's never told his two moms about the auditions – largely because they
probably would have insisted on coming to school to watch him make a fool of himself – or pressure
Mrs. Brighton to give him the part he wanted.

"I... uh... I heard some kids talking about it," Emma mutters, kinda lamely, and then clears her throat.
"King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, huh?"

Henry shrugs, cheeks reddening. "They're gonna put a couple of cool fight scenes in it. I wanted to
be one of the knights and fight with a sword, I dunno, to show everyone what Gramps has been
teaching me," he shares in a meek tone. Actually, he just wants Paige to see – not that he'd tell
anyone that, especially one of his moms. "But it doesn't matter, I probably won't get the part."
"You will," Emma declares.

"How do you know?"

"I just do. You'll get a part in it – a major one. Trust me," she smiles, a mysterious gleam in her eyes. Looking over his head, she inclines her chin slightly, motioning to some people by the checkout counter. "Hey, there's Ava and Nicholas. Do you wanna say hi?"

"No," he grumbles, his anger flaring once more as his mind drifts back to that incident during lunch – when Nicholas ruined his day by letting him read the newest Arachno comic without so much as a head's up about what it contained.

All it took was one look at his frowning face for Emma to get right on his case. "Spill, kid. Something bothering you?"

"No."

The eyebrow raise she gives him is almost as intimidating as the one his mom dons when he lies. Right, he sighs inwardly, the lie detector thing. "It's stupid," he admits with a worn breath. "Nicholas just made me read the latest issue of Arachno."

"That's one of your favorites, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, what's the problem?"

"Hound Edge got hit by a train," he exhales, and then winces. Just saying it out loud makes his stomach do flips.

"Ah," Emma hums. "Did he die?"

"He got hit by a train, Emma."

"Hey, Meteor Man got hit by a frickin' meteorite and he still lived."

"But I don't care about him, I care about Hound Edge," Henry pouts. "And they killed him, Emma. Why would they do that? He can't die, he's not allowed to, he's a superhero."

"You know what, every superhero dies at least once. It's practically a rite of passage," she imparts, shrugging lightly. "Besides, think about it, if you have to wear spandex all the time, a part of you pretty much dies out of principle. Shame kills, you know."

"But... he's dead. Like, in several pieces, dead."

"So? It's a comic book. He'll get resurrected... or cloned... or sewn back together... or something else equally ridiculous. Don't sweat it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," she says simply, proceeding to pick up a pear. She sniffs it, puckers her lips in silent approval, and then throws it inside the cart. "Why did he get hit by a train, anyway? For someone with super speed, that seems like the lamest way to go."

"He was saving the Baroness."
"Oh."

"And, yeah, it's lame. Arachno defeated the Baroness and left her to die on the train tracks. Doesn't seem very superhero-like but she did kill Sonic Boom. Anyway, just when the train's coming, Hound Edge came and shoved her out of the way... and he got hit by the train instead," he shares with a pitiful head shake. "I don't get it, why would he do that? She's mean and she's evil and she's not even his girlfriend. It doesn't make any sense."

"Well, I think it does," Emma says, turning serious all of a sudden. "You see it every day on TV, Henry. People do it all the time."

"Die?"

"Make sacrifices," she corrects with a sad smile. "They take a bullet – or, in this case, a train – for the people they love."

"Love?" he snorts. Now that's just silly. "They do nothing but fight!"

"Not everything in this world is black and white, kid. Who knows, maybe one of the reasons they fight a lot is because they're both proud, stubborn people who just don't know how to express their feelings or say 'I love you'?"

"That's... sad. And also kinda corny," Henry immediately adds, wrinkling his nose.

"It is," Emma mumbles in agreement, staring blankly at the crate of honeycrisp apples nearby. "But, you know, I think the most beautiful love stories are the ones about people who are clearly crazy for each other, but just can't get their sh--act together until it's too late. And just when they're finally ready to set their fears aside and give in to what they feel, a bad thing happens and one of them ends up dying to save the other."

So we have one dead person and another probably left in tears. Henry pulls a face and shoots Emma an unbelieving look. "You think that's beautiful?"

"In a tragic way, yeah."

"You're weird."

"So I've been told," Emma says wryly, ruffling his hair.

Groaning in protest, Henry ducks his head and steps away from his birth mom's reach. Sticking out his tongue at a grinning Emma, he makes quick work of flattening the locks of brown hair that her playful actions had displaced. Looking at the blonde's smiling face, and the kinda intense way she's staring at him – as if she's memorizing everything about his face – it finally dawns on Henry. "I know what's different about you," he declares, eyes lighting up.

"Yeah? What?"

"You're not spacey anymore."

"Spacey? Me?" Emma points to herself, incredulous, and then snorts.

"Spacey," he stresses. "You poured coffee on my cereal yesterday."

"I did?" she frowns, looking genuinely lost.

"You did."
"Coffee?"

"Yeah, instead of milk."

"Oh!" Emma exclaims, her eyes widening. "That's right... I did!" she finally acknowledges, and with a kinda nostalgic smile on her lips, she gives him a nudge and says, "Sorry, I remember you were yawning a lot."

Of course he'd be yawning... "I'd just woken up."

"Yeah, so figured you could use a caffeine boost."

"I'm ten."

"Then let's just pretend that I gave you decaf."

If his mom were here, she'd be rolling her eyes, but since she wasn't, Henry did it on her behalf. "Is it true?" he asks after a moment.

"Is what true?"

"What mom said. That the reason why you've been walking around like a zombie is because you've been gassy since last week."

Emma chokes on a laugh. Before she can answer him, something interrupts them – or, more specifically, the sound of clicking heels does.

Recognizing those click-clacky footsteps and just who they belonged to, he and Emma turn around at the same time, moving in perfect sync. True enough, his mom's walking up to them, a huge bag of frozen turkey in her hands, her eyes trained on Emma like a pair of homing missiles.

"What are you doing here?" she asks, voice tinge in surprise and something else he couldn't place, allowing a chivalrous Emma to relieve her of her burden. "Sheriff Swan, are you wasting the taxpayers' money by neglecting your duties again?"

"Perks of being the boss, your majesty."

"Getting paid for being lazy?"

"Delegating tasks so I could spend time with my family."

Henry observes the way his mom's eyebrows rocket up at Emma's seemingly innocent comment, and the way her brown eyes seem to glaze over when the blonde turns around to deposit the turkey inside their cart. She may be better at hiding it, but Henry's noticed that Emma's not the only one who's been acting a little spacey as of late. Things at the house have been... well... weird.

The second Emma faces them again, his mom shakes her head, clears her throat and stands a little straighter. "Well, if you truly have to be here, Miss Swan, then best make yourself useful and get the ingredients for the stuffing," she sniffs, handing over the grocery list and a pen.

"You know, I don't have to be here, I want to be here," Emma corrects, scanning the items written down on his mom's fancy stationary before deciding to lead them back to the row of vegetables.

"And may I ask why, princess?"

Emma shrugs, looks over her shoulder, and quips, "Who knows, your majesty, maybe I just wanted
to see you."

"Why?"

"Maybe I just missed you."

His mom almost drives the cart straight into a crate of cabbages; luckily, his reflexes are good enough to push it out of the way in the nick of time.

"Don't play coy, Miss Swan. It doesn't suit you," she harrumphs, face tinted red, stroking Henry's cheek absentmindedly as a way of saying thanks. "Did you come here just to annoy me?"

"I'm not playing coy. And you know annoying you has always been the highlight of my day."

"And putting you in your place has always been mine," his mom retorts, walking after Emma, wheeling the cart along – carefully this time. Henry, still observing the interaction with curious eyes, just follows silently after them. "Why are you really here?"

"Told you, I wanted to spend time with you and Henry. Why all the questions?"

"Because you just called me up less than fifteen minutes ago, telling me you were on your way to see Gold. And now you're here."

It might be just his imagination, but as he catches a glimpse of Emma's face on the huge anti-theft mirror on the ceiling, Henry thinks he saw her expression darkening at the mention of Mr. Gold's name. Or, well, maybe it's just the ugly lighting in this store.

"I'll go and see him in a bit," Emma mutters, her voice lacking the playfulness it had a few seconds ago. When she looks back at them, it's like a mask slips back in place and she's all smiley again. "Look, I've had a long day, and I really just want to spend some time with you guys before I go and deal with that snake. Is that okay?"

And then, without waiting for a response, she's off, grabbing a bag of onions, sweet potatoes, and all sorts of different vegetables. She puts them in the cart, and with the tip of her tongue sticking out the side of her lips, she happily crosses the items off the list.

Discreetly, Henry sidles up beside his mom, gives her hand a small squeeze, and whispers conspiratorially, "She's still acting a bit weird, but I don't think she's gassy anymore."

"No, sweetheart," she murmurs, silent, thoughtful, and a bit bewildered, "I don't believe she is, either."

Frustrating, that's what she is.

Just when Regina thinks she's got Snow White's offspring all figured out, she'll say something, do something, that'll make her question all of her foregone conclusions and assumptions all over again. If Emma Swan were a book, she'd be one of those choose-your-own-adventure novels that Henry loved – childish, unpredictable, cheap, exciting, vexing, and, just utterly confounding. Not to mention, horribly written.

See, for a person she'd signed off long ago as someone incredibly obtuse, forgetful and inattentive, the princess does a complete 180 and proves that she does pay attention by turning to her while their groceries were being scanned at the checkout counter, pointing at the selection of lip gloss on display, putting on a maddeningly goofy grin, and saying: "That's the kind you use, right? Apple}
cinnamon. I like it, it tastes really good."

Standing at the end of the counter, bagging their purchases, Henry looks at the both of them, continuing to observe their interaction with more than a passing interest.

Caught off-guard, Regina doesn't give a response – aside from dropping a jaw, donning a mild frown, and flushing to the tips of her ears. Since it happened, they've never discussed the kiss or even alluded to it – until now, that is. And just when they have a very attentive and inquisitive boy and a shifty-eyed cashier in their midst, too.

Conscious of their audience, Regina snaps her mouth shut, clears her throat, and steers the conversation to a safer, less telling topic. "When did you go and visit a thrift store?" she directs at the blonde.

"Huh?"

"Because I'm assuming that's where you got that..." she says, eyeing Emma's leather jacket in contempt. "Really, Miss Swan? My son and I already bought you a better, less tacky version of your red jacket, so tell me, was it truly necessary for you to go and buy an exact replica of the blue one?"

"Why, what's wrong with this?"

"If you don't know the answer to that question, my dear, you really are as hopeless as you are dense," she sighs. "It's hideous. How anyone could pay good money for something that would only make them look like a tasteless vagrant is beyond me."

"Would it please you if I take it off, your majesty?" Emma lifts a brow, clearly humoring her.

"I much rather you burn it, princess."

"Aw, but I can't, your highness. You see, there's an anti-burning ordinance in town – you would know, you're the one who pushed for it months ago," the infuriating woman retorts, smiling that disarming smile that just grates at her nerves... because as she's come to realize more and more with each passing day, it makes her forget things. Forget why she's mad. Forget why she's annoyed. Forget what she's about to do. Forget that there are actually people watching their every move and listening to their every word.

"Mom?" Henry – one of those people – cuts in, nodding his head at the cashier.

"Total's $79.86," the teenage boy behind the till says in a painfully monotonous tone. "Cash, credit or debit?"

"I'll get it," Emma offers, placing a hand over her own, preventing her from pulling out her wallet from her purse.

Instead of expressing gratitude, or feigning annoyance at the generous gesture, her eyes zone in on the hand covering hers, specifically on Emma's bare fingers. Before she could stop herself, the question in her head comes rolling off her tongue, "Where's your ring?"

"Hm?" Emma looks at her, handing some rolled-up twenties to the cashier.

"Your ring."

"Oh. It's here..." Breaking their physical contact, Emma pulls out a chain from underneath her shirt – showing her the emerald ring hanging from it like a charm. "Worried I got rid of it?"
"Why would I be?" she lies between her teeth, keeping her face devoid of emotion. "With the spell in place, and that ring disenchanted, that piece of jewelry has lost its purpose. You're free to rid yourself of it, Miss Swan. After all, I know you've never cared much for it."

"Could you blame me? I mean, it's kinda difficult to like something when it's electrocuting your butt off," Emma intones, pocketing the change and gathering up the heavier bags while she and Henry carried the lighter ones. "But... that was before. Now, I just... I love it. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to keep it."

"It's yours, so do what you will."

"Thanks."

Minutes later, after they've loaded the groceries in the Mercedes and Henry had settled himself on the passenger's seat, Emma shuts the trunk closed and leans against the back of the car, absentmindedly toying with the ring dangling from her necklace. Green eyes catch Regina's brown ones staring at the emerald, and immediately, Emma tilts her head in a questioning fashion.

"Do you want me to put it back on my finger?"

"Where and how you choose to wear that ring is none of my concern, my dear," Regina claims, looking away; and then, after a beat, she murmurs, "But... if you want my opinion, I think that perhaps it's better to keep it on that chain."

"Closer to the heart?" is the response she gets, supplemented by an arched brow and a roguish grin.

"Wrapped around your neck like a noose," she deadpans.

Emma smirks. And then laughs – in a very carefree, infectious way that even Henry twists around in his seat, looks at them in confusion, and then smiles. Unable to help herself, and against the dictates of her pride and the constant need to maintain an unaffected front, Regina joins in. She's less gregarious and more demure than her blonde counterpart, of course, but she still laughs. It sounds foreign to her ears, laughing without malice, but it feels... good. Freeing.

When their mirth subsides, the awkwardness settles in – for her, at least. Because while she's busy preening herself – arranging non-displaced locks of hair and flattening nonexistent creases on her blouse – Emma just stares at her, green eyes tracing her face, following every curve, every line, every wrinkle, as if taking a mental photograph. Needless to say, it doesn't help with the awkwardness at all.

"Has anyone ever told you that it's rude to stare, princess?" she chides.

"Sorry," Emma says, but the apology is empty, and she doesn't even look away. Instead, she reaches inside the inner pocket of her jacket and pulls out something. A lilac. The poor flower is practically flattened; and, to her utter surprise, Emma extends her hand and offers it up for her to take.

"What's that?"

"A flower."

Regina rolls her eyes. "I know it's a flower, Miss Swan. I'm asking what is it for?"

"Who is it for," Emma corrects. "It's for you."

"Me?"
"You."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

Regina studies the purple flower for a second, and then shifts her focus to the woman holding it. Her eyes narrow down in suspicion. "Did that come from my garden?"

"No."

Regina lifts a brow.

"Not technically?" Emma amends, smiling innocently. *Too* innocently.

"Where did you get that?"

"Best if you don't know. Trust me."

The arms folding on her chest is almost automatic – as well as the eyebrow arching up her forehead. "Miss Swan, are you trying to hand me a flower that was given to you by your thieving stalker? A flower that he stole from *me*, no less?"

"No?"

"You're a horrific liar."

"Better a horrible liar than an excellent one."

"So you *do* admit that it's from him?" she huffs, glaring at the lilac.

"You know what... it's the thought that counts," Emma sighs, looking at her with the most pathetic expression on her face. "So, how about we not focus on silly details like where and who this pretty, and, uh, kinda pressed—sorry 'bout that—flower came from, and just... just take it, Regina."

"Why?" she persists.

"Because it's not from Argos. It's from *me,*" Emma asserts. "And I'm saying *please.*"

Regina tries holding her ground, she really does. But in the end, she gives in quite easily. Without much fanfare, she plucks the lilac out of Emma's hand – and horror upon horrors, she actually forgets herself and brings it near her nose. It's rather mortifying, the mere thought of what she's doing, so, she puts on a frown and pulls the sweet-smelling flower away from her face, slowly, calmly, trying to maintain a semblance of normalcy and a front of nonchalance.

"Now, will you please tell me what this is for?" she clears her throat, twirling the tiny flower in between her thumb and forefinger.

"It's, y'know, a 'thank you' gift..."

"A thank you gift? A stolen, pressed flower that's at the clutches of death? *Princess,* do yourself a favor and *never* tell strangers that you're royalty," she snarks, letting out a derisive sound at the back of her throat, "And what on earth are you thanking me for?"

"I guess... it's just... I..." Emma pauses, and licks her lips, grappling for words. After a moment, she sighs. "Today's... not a good day for me," she tries again, slowly, somberly. "But being with you and
Henry, even for just a short while, it... helped. I feel better. Lighter. I'm... ready."

"Ready?" Regina frowns. "For what?"

"Anything."

"What?"


The woman's just asking for an eyeroll; Regina's more than happy to oblige. "Miss Swan, you're just paying Gold a quick visit, and then you're playing chess at the park with your stalker's friend. Belle would keep her pet snake in line and Paul is a harmless fossil of a man. So, I highly doubt those two would give you any grief. I fail to see the need for such dramatics."

Glancing down at her feet, looking oddly pensive, Emma lets out a quiet breath, and then nods. "You're right."

"Are you okay, Miss Swan?"

"I'm fine. Just... dead tired," she says, and then snorts. "Dead tired," she mutters to herself.

"I see the manhunt is finally taking its toll."

"I... guess so."

"So, how's it going so far? Have you and your band of bumbling buffoons made any progress?"

"They've..." The Sheriff stops, and then clears her throat, gaze still rooted to the ground. "I don't think Argos will be a problem for much longer."

"That's well and good, then. When you do manage to apprehend that thieving low-life, Sheriff, I'd very much like to have the honor of wringing his neck and ending his miserable existence."

Head snapping up, Emma stares at her, green eyes dark and inscrutable.

"Mom?" Henry's head pops out of the window, breaking the moment, impatience etched on his face. "Aren't we leaving yet?"

"In a bit, Henry. We're just--"

"No, it's okay. Sorry for making you wait, kid. Guess I better get going, too," Emma drawls out, pushing herself off of the Mercedes and stepping back onto the sidewalk. "Don't stress about Hound Edge anymore, okay? He'll be fine, you'll see."

Wearing an expression best fitted for a geriatric man with a lamentable digestive system, Henry mumbles something about not wanting to talk about Hound Edge anymore and disappears back inside the car.

"Hound Edge?" Regina lifts a brow.

"He died."

"How?"

"Hit by a train trying to save the Baroness."
Of course, she sighs inwardly. What else could be expected from that pathetic excuse for a superhero and his blind devotion to that similarly blindly devoted evil villain?

"He's an idiot," she rolls her eyes.

A grin slowly spreads across Emma's lips. "Her idiot," she agrees, whispering softly.

Regina's eyes flicker to the green ones staring at her intently. A moment of understanding passes between them, a meaningful memory remembered with just one look. Usually, this is the time when one or both of them avert their eyes, dish out a flippant quip and try to out-banter each other. Today, however, Emma holds her gaze. Steadily, intensely. It's... intimidating. Confounding. Yet, Regina finds herself unable to look away.

"It was really good spending time with you and Henry today."

"I believe you've mentioned that already, princess."

"I know, your highness. Just wanted to say it again."

Another long pause.

"What time will you be coming home?" Regina speaks up, just to ease some of the tension in the air. "Henry insists on having baked chicken tonight, and you know he refuses to eat unless we're all present at the table."

Swallowing thickly, green eyes dimming, Emma shrugs and finally breaks eye contact – a peculiar response to such a simple query.

The woman must truly be exhausted. "Miss Swan?" Regina prods.

"Mom?" Henry calls from inside the car. "I thought we were leaving?"

"You'll... you'll see me at around six," Emma finally answers, going around the car and opening the driver's door for her.

Tucking the flattened lilac inside her coat's breast pocket, Regina follows suit and gingerly climbs inside her vehicle and settles into her seat.

After a quick glance to check for any body part that might accidentally get caught on the door, and seeing none, Emma closes it gently and then proceeds to peer in through the opened window. "Drive safe," she says.

"Our house is a three-minute drive away, Sheriff."

"Drive safe, anyway."

Regina rolls her eyes.

"Bye, kid." The blonde waves at their son. "Bye, your royal pain in the ass."

She rolls her eyes again.

"Bye, Emma," Henry mumbles, too engrossed in playing a game on her phone to look up.

"Love you."
Missing the ignition slot, Regina almost stabs herself on the thigh with her car keys.

_Frustrating_, that's truly what the woman is.

Because after dropping that bomb, in a vague way too, Emma just straightens up and walks away, leaving her rattled and guessing if those words had been meant for her son, for her, or for them both.

_That idiot._

Starting the engine, she pulls out of the curb and drives away. Reaching the intersection, Regina stops at a red light, knuckles turning white on the steering wheel. She peers at the rearview mirror, and the last thing she sees of the maddening blonde is a flash of blue disappearing into an alley next to the grocery store.

And then she lets out the breath she didn't even realize she was holding.

---

He shouldn't be here.

He knows better.

But when he met Iago at their usual rendezvous point at Mulberry creek half an hour ago – ironically, so that he could hand over Argos' letter for delivery – and the loudmouthed man-bird told him that on his flight over, he saw the masked one sitting by his lonesome near Toll Bridge, Rufio just knew he had to follow.

Jethro, Rufio’s inner nerd, kept telling him something along the lines of 'curiosity killing the cat', but of course, he didn't listen. If Jethro is his cerebral counterpart, always going with his head, Rufio is the exact opposite. He always goes with his gut.

And his gut told him to give in to the temptation and go spy on his friend. Hell, he even did the unthinkable and wore a beanie over his head so that his hair won't stand out. Whether he'll come to regret this decision of his remains to be seen. For now, hidden behind a thick yew bush, he crouches down and quietly observes.

A couple of feet away, perched on a boulder, Argos is staring at the calm waters of the river, clutching what looks like a pendant around his neck, seemingly lost in thought.

Rufio glances at his watch. 5:25 PM. He's been sitting here like an idiot for ten minutes now, and still, he's seen nothing but Argos mooning at the river as if he's acting in a bad music video.

Rufio sighs. _The heck are you up to, man?_

He gets his answer soon enough.

A few minutes later, cane in hand, the devil himself comes limping into view. Eyes widening, Rufio instinctively curls into himself, making himself smaller... but perks up his ears all the same.

"Hockey mask and depressive, black clothing. _You_, my friend, must be the one that's been wreaking havoc around town while I was away," Gold volunteers, stopping a respectable distance from Argos, giving the rocky ground a solid tap with his cane. "I got your note. What's it that you want?"

"You're late," Argos remarks, pushing himself up and off the boulder, facing the Dark One.

"Well, forgive me if I didn't find it necessary to rush myself just because a wanted felon demanded my presence. I am not at your beck and call, _thief_," Gold spits out, putting Argos in his place. "Now,
"you spoke of repayment for a certain debt. I suggest you not waste my time and get on with it."

"Straight to business, then," Argos sighs. "Doesn't matter. Let's just get this over with."

Afraid of being spotted, Rufio dares not move a single muscle. Silently, he watches as Argos bends down and pulls out an item hidden from view by the boulder he was sitting on just moments before. His sword. And something in the air changes as soon as he pulls it out of the sheath.

"The Sword of Ashe," Gold murmurs, and even though Rufio could only see half of the man's face, his awe is evident in his voice alone. "You have it. Which means—"

"Yes."

"You're from..."

Argos nods.

"Did it work?"

"It did."

Something that looks like relief washes across Gold's face. After a moment, his expression levels out and he's all business again. "Has it been activated?" he asks, motioning at the sword.

"Only partially."

"With what?"

"A dark soul," Argos shares. "A wraith. The one you had summoned here months ago."

"Ah, so it came back, I see," Gold murmurs, nodding slowly, taking that in. "And what of the being of light? I would've thought that you wouldn't have had any difficulty finding one that's best suited to power up that sword in this town. At the top of my head, I can think of three perfect candidates: Emma Swan, Alexandra Herman, Davy Smith. All products of True Love. I trust you were told about them?"

"I was."

"Then enlighten me, thief, why isn't that sword fully powered?"

"Because I'm no murderer," Argos grits out.

"That's a shame, then," Gold sneers, and, pointing the tip of his cane at Argos, he continues, "Do you know the consequences of that poor decision?"

"I do."

"And you're at peace with it?"

"I am," Argos says, chin held high. "I've accepted my fate. I'm fine with it. I'm... ready."

"Brave." Gold commends. "But foolish. Partially activated, that sword is no more powerful than my dagger. The outcome when the two blades meet would be catastrophic. For you, especially. If you had only imbibed it with a light soul, you would have spared your own life."

"No, I would've damned it."
"An honorable thief. Will wonders never cease?" The imp mocks, grinning deviously like the foul snake that he is.

"Whatever, enough beating around the bush. I do this for you, I fulfill my end of the deal," Argos says, taking a tentative step closer to Gold. "You know what's at stake, you know what the hell I'm giving up. So, before we do this, I just... I need you to give me something in return..."

"Do speak, thief. What is it that you want?"

"Your word. I want you to promise that no harm will come to my family. That you will stay away from them."

"If you want something, best not be obscure about it," Gold mutters evenly. "So, be less vague and tell me just who might your family be?"

Slowly, Argos peels off the hoodie from his head and whips off his mask, letting it fall to the wayside.

Rufio's heart skips a beat, all the blood drains from his face, and he falls backwards on his ass, his knees weakening at what he's seeing.

\textit{No...}

"You," Gold breathes, and only the slight widening of his eyes betray his surprise.

"Your word, Gold. Do I have it?"

"Yes, you do, dearie," the Dark One replies. And then, with a flourish, he flicks his wrist and conjures up a dagger from thin air. Holding it up with the blade parallel to the ground, he tilts his head and says, "Fitting that it should be you that's doing this for me. It is said, after all, that only a virtuous soul could truly wield that sword. And, who's more virtuous than a \textit{White Knight}?"

Ten minutes to six, Emma maneuvers the Bug into the driveway and parks it behind Regina's Mercedes. Killing the engine, she stays inside the car for a few moments, just catching her breath and letting some of the accumulated stress of the afternoon roll off her tense muscles.

It's been a long day.

After leaving the station, she dropped by Gold's pawnshop. Unable to find the slimy imp there, she drove aimlessly around town until it was time to head to Sherwood Park... where she then got her ass handed to her time and again by Paul. Chess is only half the fun without an invisible queen bossing her around. Cause with every chess piece she lost to the smart old geezer, the greater she missed the feeling of Regina's unseen hand guiding her to victory. And, well, if she were truly honest with herself, that's not the only thing she really missed about her majesty...

\textit{Bah.} Everything about her is a mess today.

All in all, it had been an interesting, mind-numbing, emotionally-tolling afternoon.

Right now, she just wants a hot meal and an even hotter shower.

Stepping out of the car, she shivers all the way to the tips of her toes as a cool gust of wind hits her squarely on the face. Inhaling sharply through her teeth, she zips up her red jacket and quickly makes her way to the front door. Fumbling with her keys, she stops short by the welcome mat... where lying
in wait is a white envelope with her name typewritten on the back.

Anger courses through her veins. Annoyance bubbles inside her gut.

*When will it ever fucking end?*

Snatching up the envelope, she opens the flap and yanks out the folded paper from within. A lilac falls out and lands by her feet. Exhaling through her nose, she stomps on the flower and crushes it with her boot. Opening the letter, her eyes skim across the words, her brows moving closer and closer to each other with each successive line.

_Sheriff Swan,_

*This will be the last you'll ever hear from me.*

_Sucks, right? I know I'll be missed._

_Okay... I know I'm not good with words, but bear with me a bit. Lemme just say this:_

*I know you._

*You're a fucked up mess._

_Sorta like me. We're very similar, you and I._

*Which means that you probably don't find yourself worthy of being loved. Hell, I bet you don't even love yourself._

_Well... I love you._

*You're strong, faithful, kind and loyal._

*Kinda like a dog._

_You've really blossomed in Storybrooke, you know? I'm proud of the woman you've become._

Anyway, I'm sorry if I've made a mess out of your life. I'm even sorrier that I don't regret all the shit I've done. Things happen for a reason, remember that.

*Enjoy life, Emma. It's frickin' short. Make yours mean something._

- Argos

*P.S. I promised you'd get your money back. You will. Just be patient._

*P.P.S. I left something inside your drawer at the station. Don't ever tell me I don't keep my word._

*P.P.P.S. Treat yourself to a huge slice of Pepperoni pizza. Actually, make it a whole damn pie. You know what I mean. You owe yourself that, at least. Your life's too fucking short to be such a wuss. Accept the truth. Embrace it. You'll be happier. And in the end, you'll have no regrets. Trust me._
At the end, she's just about ready to tear her hair out in both frustration and confusion. But before she can even begin to absorb everything and contemplate on what this all meant, a loud boom sounds out in the distance and the earth shakes.

And a cold chill runs down her spine.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thank you so much for reading! I'm sorry for the wait. This chapter's a belated birthday present for feather-of-maat/Trubie (I'll work on that prompt, I promise). Thank you for all who've left reviews, followed the fic and favorited it too. Much love. Special thanks to J!
Dead and Gone

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Far away.

That's what he thinks. Lying face down on the ground, cheek scrapping against dried leaves and twigs and dirt. He needs to get far away.

Jet was right. He shouldn't have come here. Curiosity and tragedy often go hand-in-hand; and now, Rufio's learning that lesson the hard way.

Disjointed images are flashing through his glassy eyes, like reels of old film, but they're all blurred and hazy, and his mind can barely keep up with the pictures. The memories.

It all happened so damn fast.

Twin serpents coming to life; uncoiling from a pommel and sinking their golden fangs into a leather-covered wrist. A tormented howl of pain. Knees almost giving way. The steel burning bright green. An imp grinning in anticipation. The unmasked thief, drained and spent, lifting the blazing sword high, arms shaking, then swinging it down, striking the Dark One's dagger with a sharp cry. Both blades breaking upon impact, fragments flying everywhere, one large chunk impaling the thief right on the chest, perhaps even straight through the heart. Then, a deafening boom accompanies an explosion of light. And from it, a blast of pure, unadulterated energy comes barreling in all odd directions, hitting everything within its path with a force so powerful the earth rumbles.

It finds his frozen form, hits him square on the chest, and throws him back. Throws all of them back. Swept off his feet, like a pathetic little rag doll, he flies and comes crashing into a tree. He might've hit his head. And also bitten off his tongue. He's not sure. He doesn't know.

Everything is a jumble.

And it hurts every-fucking-where. It hurts to breathe. It hurts to think. It hurts to stay awake.

Oh God, he just wants to go home. Where it's warm, where the air doesn't reek of death, where he won't be alone.

He wants to get there; he needs to go there.

But... how?

There's something pinning him down, trapping him in place. He can't stand up. He can't even feel his legs. He can't feel anything... except weak and heavy and lightheaded. There's a metallic taste in his mouth, a slight tingling at the base of his spine. And there's something warm and sticky at the back of his head, soaking right through his beanie and trickling down his neck, making his eyelids flutter, his lips open and close in a wordless stupor.

His vision's starting to blur.

Gasping for air, coughing out his own blood, Rufio chokes on a sob.

He's scared. He's fucking scared.
Mercifully, his mind takes pity on him. Unguarded, unchecked, it provides an escape, bringing him back to where he desperately wants to go.

Home.
.
.
.

Home? But this isn't home... this isn't Neverland. It's not even the cramped little cabin tucked in the middle of the woods, where his little brothers are busy preparing dinner, oblivious to his fate.

No, in the darkness, through the fog, he sees that old house in Sheppard Lane. The house that smells like wet socks, beer, and musk. The one where a lazy, womanizing asshole is currently sprawled out on his—no, Jet's—favorite armchair, nursing a bottle of beer and a missing hand.

"G-Get... off... m-my... d-damn... c-chair... J-Jackson..." Rufio slurs, the words useless and garbled in his cottony mouth. Lost in delirium, teeth glistening crimson, he smiles faintly, drunkenly, before his whole body goes slack and everything melts into oblivion.

If he's gonna die, at least he's gonna die at home.

The toughest days are usually the ones that just won't end.

Take this one for example.

All Emma wanted was a hot meal, a warm bath, a few relaxing minutes at the sofa with Regina's electric back massager, and then, eight whole hours of uninterrupted sleep. That wasn't asking for a lot, was it? Too bad, that just like always, life had to be a bitch and ruin every single one of her much anticipated—and very much needed—plans for the evening.

"Em, the station's getting bombarded with calls. It's chaos out there."

"Any casualties? Injuries?"

"No reports of casualties as of yet. Minor injuries, yes, but right now, it's mostly property damage."

"Keep me on the loop, but whatever the hell it was, Regina says it was definitely magic," she tells Ruby over the two-way radio. Steering the car with her other hand, she reverses the Bug out of the driveway and pulls over by the side of the curb. "Problem is, the crystal thing didn't work. It lit up and went spinning like crazy, but it was just all over the map. It won't give us a specific location and—"

"Toll Bridge."

"What?"

"That's our epicenter."

Emma frowns. "That place?"

"Yes."
"How would you know?"

"I've got two reports confirming it, Em. Granny swears she saw a bright flash when she was sweeping the attic. Doc saw the same thing on his way out of the mines. Whatever it was that caused that loud boom and earthquake, they're a hundred percent positive it happened near the bridge."

"I... alright. Got it."

No point in arguing. It's their one and only lead. Toll Bridge it is, then.

Rolling down her window, Emma sticks her head out and waves, catching the attention of the mother-and-son pair hurriedly making their way to the black Mercedes. "Toll Bridge!" Emma announces, more for Regina's benefit than their worried-looking son's. "I'll go on ahead, okay?"

"I'll take Henry to Dr. Hopper's office for safety and follow as soon as I can," Regina tells her, unlocking the car and pulling open the driver's door. Unlike the kid, who just climbs right into the passenger seat, Regina stops abruptly and looks in her direction, a deep crease materializing between her brows. "Miss Swan?" Regina calls out, stopping Emma before she had the chance to drive away. "I... you..." she pauses, struggling with words that just won't come out, and then, she just sighs and says, "For once, work against your father's genes and try not to do anything rash and stupid. If you see a twenty-foot cyclops, or even just a tiny gremlin, you will not—under any circumstances—engage it in a fight on your own. You will wait for me. Do I make myself clear?"

"Crystal, your majesty."

"You better not be dead when I get there, princess."

In spite of everything going on, and amidst the things Leroy and Ruby told her that are still lingering at the back of her mind, the small grin that spreads across Emma's lips is something that just couldn't be helped. "Why? You'll miss me too much?"

Regina rolls her eyes.

"I'll be careful," Emma promises, sobering up a little bit. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Who says I'm worried?"

"Your face."

"Oh, don't be delusional, my dear," Regina denies, though those expressive pools of brown are still telling her something different all the same. "I just believe that it would be foolish, not to mention impossible, for me to draw magical energy from a corpse."

"Right."

Holding each other's gaze for the briefest of moments, Emma offers the other woman the best reassuring smile that she could muster, before putting the car in gear and releasing the handbrake. Lifting a hand in goodbye, she pounds on the gas and drives out of their street.

"I'm en route. I'll be at the bridge in eight... maybe less," she informs her deputy, talking into the radio once more as she maneuvers the car into Main Street — where she almost runs over a screaming civilian. "Shit!" she swerves to the other lane, missing the woman by a hairsbreadth. Thank God there wasn't oncoming traffic, or else she'd be looking at a squashed Bug and a few injuries that would send Regina clicking her tongue and glaring at her till kingdom come.
Heart pounding out of her chest, Emma expels a breath from her lips and shakes the jitters off her shoulders, letting the car pick up speed once again — only, she's infinitely more alert this time around, mindful of panicking pedestrians like Mrs. Woodberry back there.

Ruby wasn't kidding when she said that the whole town was in chaos. It's all-around pandemonium in here. Going out of their damn minds, people are running around like chickens with their heads cut off. And for good reason.

"Rubes, there's a frickin' fissure right in front of the bakery..." she shares, glancing at the hole through the rearview mirror as she continues to drive away. The large crack on the pavement is like a gaping wound, but instead of blood, a faint wisp of red smoke is oozing out, looking ominous as hell.

"We just got a call about that. There's also another one behind the library."

"Dammit... how many have broken out?"

"From all the reports that've been pouring in? Six and counting. But that's just in the town proper alone. There could be more in the forest."

Crap.

Feeling the all-too-familiar sensation of anxiety spiking up inside her gut and swirling in her belly, Emma clenches her jaws and breathes hard through her nose, trying to get a grip on her frayed nerves. No matter how exhausted and tense she feels, she needs to stay calm and keep a level head. She's the Sheriff, and more than her parents, people in this town seem to actually look to her for leadership. "Okay... we need to act fast. Is Leroy still with you at the station?"

"Yes."

"Good, I want him to go to the convent. Have him organize the fairy nuns into groups — Blue, Nova, and maybe four more, are enough to take care of the fissures all over town. I want the rest of the fairies to start searching the forest ASAP. Also, tell Leroy to get as many people as he can to help in the hunt. We need all hands on deck."

"Copy that, Sheriff."

"I want everyone on high alert. If even one creature from the Enchanted Forest stumbles into a fissure and makes their way into town, we're in deep shit. Rubes, I'm leaving you in charge of herding civilians indoors, the fewer people out and about, the better. Re-direct all of the station's calls to your cell — anything really important, radio me."

"Ten-four. And what about August?"

"Have him follow me to the bridge. I don't know what the heck I'd find in there. Regina and I might need some back-up."

"Roger that."

"Alright, keep me posted. Sheriff, over and out."

Dropping the radio to her lap, Emma exhales loudly, grips the wheel until her knuckles turn white, and floors the gas. The Bug's ancient engine protests loudly at the extra effort she's trying to squeeze out of it, but she pays its whirring no mind.
Time to get to the bottom of this mess.

Whatever sorcery happened near her parents' favorite date spot, it was strong enough to open not one, or two, or three, but six fissures — hell, probably even more.

What kind of magic would do such damage? And, more importantly, who could have caused it?

More often than not, the most obvious of answers are the ones staring at you in the face. And, right now, that happens to be the backside of a black, 80's-circa Cadillac.

Emma bites back a sigh.

That car.

She should've known.

Of course it'd be him.

Who else—besides Regina and her Swan-sized energy source—had the magical abilities (and cojones) substantial enough to cause an effin' earthquake but the Dark One, himself? Yes, maybe the fairies could do it too—but probably not without wasting a whole barrel of their precious dust—and unless you're the Savior asking for a favor, those nuns are pretty stingy when it comes to their limited stash of juju.

Emma's got to hand it to Gold though; barely a day back in Storybrooke, and already, that nasty snake has managed to cause enough trouble to make up for his many months of absence. Talk about making his presence felt; after all, what better way to announce to the whole populace that you're back from god-knows-where than by causing a good ol' massive shit-storm?

"Asshole..." she grumbles, pulling up right behind the Cadillac that's parked at the side of the road, just at the end of the bridge. Holstering her gun, grabbing a flashlight, and clipping her walkie-talkie to the shoulder strap of the black Sheriff jacket that she replaced the red one with, she leaves her Bug and makes her way to the bridge. It's deserted, and the whole structure looks untouched, so whatever happened probably occurred below. Stopping by the railing, Emma takes a peek at the scenery down by the riverside and groans loudly at what she sees.

The good news, there seems to be no sign of a cyclops, gremlins, goblins, or trolls. No fire from an explosion and no smoking fissures, either — as far as she can tell.

But... this is the spot alright.

Uprooted trees... debris... and... holy shit...

The sun's beginning to set, making her surroundings look aglow with dark orange light. Visibility hasn't been fully compromised, yet still, she flicks on her flashlight and shines it down below. Yeah, Emma winces at the sight; her eyes aren't playing tricks on her.

"Ruby?" she talks into the radio, hand quivering slightly as she runs to the end of the bridge, purposely ignoring the safer and longer dirt path to the river, and practically slides down a slippery slope to get to the riverbank fast and quick. The back of her jeans gets covered in disgusting moss, her boots get caked in mud, and she might have landed a little too hard on her left foot, but she brushes off the slight discomfort she feels and ambles on towards the bloody man that she had spotted from up above. "Ruby?" she tries again, jumping over fallen trees and barely managing not to slip on the rocky ground. "Ruby, do you copy?"
Static, and then nothing. There's something in this place that's messing with the transmission between their radios. Maybe it's the remnants of the magic that she can acutely feel still lingering in the area, who knows, but it's definitely causing problems. A few seconds later, she finally gets a garbled "Sher...iff?" from her deputy. Emma sighs in relief.

"I'm near the foot of the bridge. Send an ambulance quick. I repeat, send an ambulance quick."

"Is every...thing al...right? What hap...pened?"

"I—I'm not sure yet... but I think I just found our culprit and he's pretty messed up..." Emma divulges, bending down on her knees and staring wide-eyed at the unconscious man lying before her. She's not the overly squeamish type, but Jesus effin' Christ... and just when she thought nothing could possibly match the icky factor of Rainbow Sprinkles' eyeball, too. Because while she can handle the nasty-looking gash on his forehead, or his right leg lying at an extremely weird-looking angle, she has to fight the urge to crawl out of her skin when she sees his arm — because she's pretty damn sure that it's a frickin' bone sticking right out of it.

Carefully, she presses two fingers to his neck and checks for a pulse. It's faint, but it's there.

"Ambul...ance's on its w...ay. ETA, five mi...nutes."

"Ten-four," she acknowledges, biting back her gag reflex when her eyes drift down to the exposed bone, like magnets attracted to gore.

"Who... is... it? A Lo...st... boy? Ar...gos?"

"No," she murmurs, studying the man's bloody face. "Gold."

And he's barely alive; so, whatever it was that this snake did, it looks like it also bit him in the ass. Karma, and all that jazz.

Regina, August, and the paramedics arrive within moments of each other.

It's a good thing too—for Gold, that is—because judging from the look on Regina's face when she sees the sorry state that he's in, it seems like her majesty would rather have her own bones protruding out of her skin than give the Dark One even the tiniest taste of her healing magic. He's never been her favorite person, yes, but after sending a wraith to hound her ass all those months ago, on top of robbing a dying Henry of True Love's potion, Gold pretty much solidified himself at the top of her majesty's shit list (right alongside Mary Margaret — and that's saying something).

Stepping back to give the paramedics room to do their thing, Emma sidles up next to a stoic Regina and gives the woman a slight nudge on the arm with her elbow. "Really?" she mumbles, "Not even a quick spell to fix his arm?"

"He's immortal, Miss Swan. Don't you think that healing him would only be a rather meaningless exercise in contrived do-goodery?" Her highness scoffs, eyeing Gold with barely concealed contempt. "In the next foreseeable hours—perhaps even days—we're going to get our hands full trying to sort out the mess he created. So, excuse me if I see no point in expending energy—your energy, I might add—to aid a pathetic imp who neither deserves nor needs our help."

The side of 'good' would argue otherwise, but since she doesn't see herself as being remotely saintly and completely righteous (and this, despite being the White Knight), Emma shrugs inwardly, agreeing with the brunette. This is the very same man who jeopardized Henry's life just to bring magic to this world and sent a soul-sucker to kill the mother of her son. Is it wrong that there's a part
of her that feels a perverse sense of satisfaction at seeing him suffer, even for just a little bit? Perhaps so, but right now, she's not stressing over the whole thing. Regina's right, he is immortal, after all.

"You know, I gotta ask," Emma murmurs, watching as the paramedics carefully fit an oxygen mask to Gold's face. "Being immortal and all, why aren't his wounds closing up and fixing themselves?"

"He's unconscious, Miss Swan."

"I know, I can see that, Regina. But shouldn't these things—stuff like healing, I mean—be automatic for someone like him?"

"Again, my dear, he's unconscious."

"Yeah, so?"

"I think you've been misled by all the mindless drivel you watch on films, princess. The healing comes from Gold's magic, not simply because he's immortal."

"So, he won't heal until he wakes up and does it himself?"

"That's precisely what I've been trying to tell you all along," Regina exhales in mild exasperation.

"I just thought—" Emma starts, and then stops, making a face when she catches another glimpse of the broken bone. Jeez, if even fictional vampires have quick-heal abilities, why can't the actual Dark One? "I guess they make immortality look cooler in movies, huh?"

"Quite similar to the way they make idiocy seem endearing in those horrid cartoons you like to watch. Now, if only real life imitated art—if one could even call those tasteless shows art—maybe I'd find conversing with you less tedious than it usually is."

"Oh, c'mon, you enjoy our little chats."

"And what on earth gave you that impression?"

"You're still talking to me."

For that simple statement, she receives one of her majesty's patented eyebrow raises.

"What? I'm just saying," Emma shrugs. "I think as much as I annoy you, you find yourself amused by our conversations, too."

"My dear, if amusement is synonymous with torture, and if I were obscenely masochistic, maybe I would, in fact, enjoy them. Unfortunately, neither one is even remotely true."

Looking at the other woman through the corner of her eyes, Emma lets out a quiet little snort, smiling softly. "You know, for someone extremely blunt, you have the tendency of being super defensive when confronted with the truth."

Pot. Kettle. Black. A voice in Emma's head taunts, forcing her to remember the conversation with Leroy and Ruby at the station earlier in the afternoon. And before her mind could stray to the kiss that's been tormenting her for days, she forces her eyes to take in the bloody mess in front of her, and like a cold shower, it's enough to make the threat of any damning thoughts vanish in a snap of a finger.

Meanwhile, beside her, Regina parts her lips, looking all prepared to bite back with a snippy rebuttal, but somebody else beats her to the punch.
"Uh... excuse me, Sheriff?" August interrupts, walking up to them, only sparing the macabre sight by their feet a fleeting glance. "Sorry, I just wanted to let you know that I finished cordoning off the path down to this place and I also did a quick sweep of that area," he thumbs behind him at the general vicinity of some boulders, "and I didn't see anything except empty beer cans and, uh, some used... things... that I'd rather not mention. So... I'm gonna go ahead and check by those trees over there and see if I can find things other than trash."

"Alright, shout if you spot anything worth mentioning. Keep your eyes peeled and turn off the safety on your gun, I want you to be prepared just in case there's a fissure somewhere near."

"Yes, boss," August gives her a small salute and does as he's told, flicking a switch on his sidearm. Dipping his chin towards Regina in acknowledgment, he ambles away.

"For the record, Miss Swan," Regina begins as soon as August is out of earshot, always the one to have the last word, "I may be blunt, but at least I'm not tactless and inconsiderate and frustratingly vague — unlike somebody I have the misfortune of knowing."

"Huh?"

"Because, at any rate, you won't see me channeling a person with Tourette's and thoughtlessly blurring out loaded declarations—outside a grocery store, no less—and then just walking away as if what I'd just said was nothing of importance and utterly inconsequential."

Emma wrinkles her nose in confusion. "Tourette's? Loaded declarations? Grocery store? "Sorry... I'm a little lost here. What're you talking about?"

"And I don't feign ignorance at every given opportunity, either."

"What?"

Her cluelessness—not at all faked, thank you very much—is met with a rather loud scoff and a nice visual of a huffy Regina turning away after frowning at the emerald ring on her finger, and also at the swan-pendant hanging around her neck.

"Uh... okay...?" Emma mumbles helplessly, watching the brunette pick up the golden handle of Gold's broken cane and begin to examine it with a critical set of eyes, giving her the cold shoulder. What the heck did she do wrong this time? "Seriously, I really have no idea what you're talking about. I'm not 'feigning' anything, you know..."

"I suppose not, since you're ignorant by default, after all."

"Wait, I'm confused..." she holds up a finger, "...are you pissed at me?"

"No."

"You sound like you're lying."

"And you sound like an idiot."

"Really? Your majesty? Now you're just being mean."

"Sheriff Swan," Regina exhales, looking a little frustrated with Emma and herself, which is kind of fascinating in and out of itself. "We're in the middle of yet another town calamity; we have much to do, and even more to figure out. So, why don't we just let the matter go, and just focus on our
work?"
"But—"
"Let it go, Miss Swan."

Despite the persistent voice at the back of her head that's nagging her to pry some more, Emma wrangles her own curiosity and nods stiffly. Regina's right, as usual. There's a lot to be done. Shifting back to professional mode, Emma takes a few moments to survey the carnage all around them, her green eyes alight with the wariness that months of being Sheriff of a magical town had instilled.

From the looks of it, and judging by the direction the trees on both sides of the river had fallen, the bright flash that Granny and Doc saw possibly created some kind of shockwave that uprooted the trees clean off the earth. Considering Gold's injuries, he was probably blasted off his feet as well. From quite a distance too, she notes, chewing on her bottom lip in thought. The origin of the magic, if her theory is correct, is the small, circular patch of whitened rocks about a good sixty feet away from where the imp is now lying. The tiny hairs on her arms, and those at the back of her neck, stood on end when she passed by that spot a while ago, just like they did when she stepped inside Regina's magical circles a few days back; and though it's not much to go by, it does make her theory all the more plausible in her mind.

"What the hell do you think Gold was up to in here?" she turns to a quiet Regina.

"Well, Sheriff, if you go by the earthquake that he induced, and all the fissures that have erupted all over town because of it, I'd say: nothing good, as per usual," Regina remarks, throwing the golden handle away and shooting the injured snake another disdainful glare.

"Yeah, I'd also say that's pretty darn obvious," Emma sighs. Without much thought, she kicks the bottom half of Gold's cane — and does it hard enough to send the object splashing into the river. Regina gives her a look; Emma just shrugs. It's not like Gold would have much use for a broken cane. "It'll be a while before we can get answers from this slimeball though. You think he'll spill?"

"Best not keep your hopes up, Sheriff. Gold has an affinity for disappointing people."

"True," she concurs with a weary nod.

"And what's more, even if you get him to talk, I highly doubt that he would divulge his true intentions. His deviousness knows no bounds, and his entire existence is built on secrets, half-truths, mind games, and manipulations. With Rumplestiltskin, the only thing that I know with absolute certainty, is that every single thing he does—all his actions, all his deals, no matter how small or insignificant—is all for his own personal gain," Regina shares, her face darkening. "He has his own agenda, he always has. Whatever happened here, happened because he wanted it to."

"He wanted to get hurt?"

"My dear, this is a man who willingly let himself be incarcerated and humiliated for months just so he could be where he needs to be when I cast his curse. There are no coincidences when it comes to Rumplestiltskin, I would think you'd know that by now."

"I... you're right," Emma acquiesces, running a tired hand through her hair. The more she's come to know about him, the more she's certain that Gold's some kind of sick puppeteer, pulling the strings behind the scenes while people like her unknowingly do his bidding. It's frightening, but it's the truth. "But can't you, I dunno, guess what he was trying to do here?"
"I'm afraid I'm about as clueless as you are in that regard — loathe as I am to admit," Regina says quietly, tucking her hands inside the pockets of her coat. Glancing at the destruction in their surroundings, she furrows her brows, looking mildly concerned. "But whatever it was, I think we should consider ourselves rather fortunate that his actions only precipitated a minor earthquake."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me, Miss Swan, can you feel the residual traces of magic still lingering in this area?"

"Yeah..." Emma nods. Hell, even her walkie-talkie's feeling it — if the constant static it's spewing out is anything to go by. "It's kinda making the back of my skull itch."

"Then you can agree that it feels exceedingly powerful, doesn't it? I've never felt magic this overwhelming and strong since the dark curse. And I can't help but think that something as potent as this could've easily leveled the entire town."

"Then why didn't it?"

"That I don't know," Regina admits in frustration, mouth setting into a thin line.

Emma would have followed up with another question—there's more just begging to be asked—had she not been distracted by the sound of a dull clank when the paramedics lift up the stretcher and carry Gold away. Brows furrowed in question, Emma gingerly picks up the metallic object that had slipped out of Gold's grasp. Weighing it in her hand, she studies it for a moment before showing it to a curious Regina. She doesn't even have to prod, cause with just one look, her majesty's face shines with recognition.

"His dagger..." Regina breathes out, eyes widening like saucers, looking a little troubled, if not a bit awed.

"Or, what's left of it, anyway," Emma mumbles. The blade's all but gone; it's just the hilt that remains. Still, it does look like the illustration of the Dark One's dagger that she saw in Henry's book.

"That... that would explain everything, then."

"It would? How?"

Regina's eyes flick towards her, and then slowly travel down to the dagger's hilt. "In essence, that weapon is the source of the Dark One's magic, of all of his power. Therefore, it's only logical that its destruction would've had considerable repercussions. The earthquake, the devastation we're seeing here, they make sense if you take into account how formidable that dagger is... or was."

"So... if Gold's powerless now, that means..." Emma glances at the path leading up to the bridge, watching the paramedics maneuver through the mass of uprooted trees and disappear into the winding road. "Shouldn't you—"

"No."

"Even if...?"

"Yes."

"But he can't heal himself anymore..."

When their gazes lock together, Regina slowly arches a brow in challenge. "Tell me the truth, Miss
Swan, do you really care if he lives or dies?"

"I—" she starts, but after a moment of just opening and closing her lips like a fish out of water, she just gives up and shuts her mouth. To say 'yes' would be a lie; to say 'no' would be worse from a moral standpoint. Nothing is ever black and white, especially in this town.

"That's what I thought," Regina says, frank and unrepentant as ever. "Let modern medicine do its job. If you believe in the saying that bad men live long lives, then you need not trouble yourself; since this world—or any world, for that matter—has the tendency of being unfair, I've no doubt that his survival is all but guaranteed. We'll get our answers when he wakes up."

Gazing at the object lying at the palm of her hand, and turning it over again and again, Emma finally nods. "Fine, but you—wait a sec..." she says quickly, brows meeting in a frown. Yes, she has the tendency of letting her mind wander a lot, but she does pay attention at times. And right now, an important detail about the dagger crops up in mind — something Regina had told her a couple of days after the wraith attack, when they were researching about legendary swords and other enchanted weapons. "I thought you said this dagger's indestructible?"

"I was under the impression that it was so. Clearly, I was mistaken." "Then what the heck could've destroyed this thing? A super powerful spell?"

"Perha—" Regina stops. And then blinks. "No... not a spell," she murmurs slowly, pensive. And the way her entire face just freezes, as if she'd just been struck by an epiphany, leaves Emma holding her breath, anticipating what Regina has to say.

When the silence stretches for a few torturous seconds, her anxiety drives her to pry. "Thought of something?"

"You..."

"Me?"

"Your dog..."

"My what?"

"Your stalker," Regina clarifies, shaking her head free from her daze. "His sword."

"Argos? You think he had something to do with—"

"Sheriff!"

There is something in the urgency dripping in August's voice that sends both of them in high alert; whipping around, hands instantly finding each other, they quickly position themselves in the defensive-slash-offensive stance they've perfected since the wraith attack — with Emma at the front, acting as Regina's human shield, while the brunette has her other hand up, poised to do magic. With eyes sharp, they look around until they spot August waving frantically from the patch of woods nearby, past the multitude of fallen trees and all sorts of debris.

He doesn't seem to be under attack or injured...

"C'mere, quick! I found someone!"

...but it sure sounds like another person is.
That 'someone' August stumbled upon turns out to be a certain Jethro Peters, aka Rufio, leader of the Lost Boys: prankster extraordinaire, the Sheriff Department's major headache, and known accomplice of Storybrooke's most wanted masked thief.

And just like the Dark One's dagger, if there's still any doubt in Emma's mind that Argos was involved in what happened today, it has now been completely obliterated.

It's more than a little ironic, how metal studs on punk leather vests apparently serve another purpose other than making a person look tacky and tasteless as hell.

Turns out, gaudy embellishments on clothing save lives. Rufio’s life, as is the case today. See, if not for the way the silver studs glinted when August was shining his flashlight around, searching the area for clues and fissures, it would've been safe to assume that the Lost Boys would be without a leader before the day ended.

Lying flat on his stomach, knocked out cold, the beanie on his head matted with blood, the infamous troublemaker is trapped under a fallen spruce tree, his legs trapped—hell, crushed—by its massive trunk.

"I've got a pulse," a kneeling Emma tells the two hovering before her, fingers pressed against Rufio's neck. "But it's weak. We need to get him out of here and to the hospital, fast."

"Hold on..." August crouches down on all fours, trying to take a peek of the teen's legs. "Sheriff... as soon as we remove this thing, there a strong possibility that he might bleed out."

"Crap... then we have to do it right," Emma sighs. There's only one—one!—working ambulance in Storybrooke right now (the other one's been out of commission since the cyclops dropped a parade float on it last month), and it just pulled away a couple of moments ago with Gold inside. It's a darn good thing there are other ways to travel in this town. Magical ways, she glances up at Regina. "Could you poof the trunk away, heal his legs quickly before he starts bleeding all over the place, and then teleport us to the hospital?"

"I could levitate the tree, cast it off, and give immediate healing to his legs," Regina nods. "But I'm afraid teleporting is out of the question."

"Why?"

"Because, frankly, Sheriff, you look horrendous."

"What?" Emma makes a face, more than a little confused, and also, slightly offended. "The heck does that got to do with teleporting?"

"Teleporting two people—much less, three—would require me to draw a substantial amount of energy from you. The day's hardly over, Miss Swan; we still have fissures to close, and, if experience is any indicator, also creatures to kill. We need to conserve your strength."

"Regina, I can handle it..."

"I don't doubt that you're stubborn enough to think so, but you look like you're running on fumes, princess."

"Trust me, I feel perfectly fine," she declares emphatically, bullheaded as ever despite feeling extremely dog-tired.
"Uh, boss, with all due respect, you do kinda look a bit haggard..." August murmurs, all quiet-like, putting his two cents in.

"My sentiments exactly. For once, this man-puppet and I have something to agree on," Regina continues, condescending as ever. "So, as far as I'm concerned, Sheriff, you've just been outvoted two to one."

Feeling the sting of betrayal, Emma shoots her deputy a pointed glare — something a sheepish August pretends not to notice by keeping his eyes locked on Rufio.

Regina, on the other hand, presses on. "Now, here's what's going to happen: I will levitate the tree away, heal this miscreant's legs, and Deputy Booth will take him to the hospital in his squad car."

"But—"

"End of discussion."

"Look, I can—"

"Do you truly want to save his life?" Regina challenges, lifting a brow.

"Of course I do."

"Then do him a favor and stop arguing," her royal pain in the ass commands. And, without waiting for her to offer up her hand, Regina places her left hand atop Emma's head, like a priest blessing a child, and begins the thankless task of siphoning energy from her body.

She always gets that faint buzzing—almost ticklish—feeling when they hold hands and Regina draws power from her arm and down her fingertips. But this... this feels way more different than that. Her majesty's pulling energy straight from her head, and, well, intense is too mild a word to describe the sensation. Like the mother of all brain freezes, Emma could've downed a huge Slurpee in a single gulp and feel the exact same way she's feeling now.

"Ouch," she complains, looking up at Regina, lips puckering in a petulant manner.

"Problem, Miss Swan?"

"That hurts."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Regina coos patronizingly, not sounding apologetic in the least. "Considering how hardheaded you are, I was under the impression that you wouldn't have felt a thing."

"Well, I did." Emma grumbles, frowning slightly, "your royal sadist."

A devilish, upward quirk of lips is all she gets in response, before her majesty flicks her right wrist and sends the offending tree flying up and away from the Sheriff Department's favorite juvenile delinquent. Before anyone could blink, another quick flick fixes the damage on Rufio's mangled legs.

With that done, Regina lets go of her head, but not before giving it a light, almost imperceptible, pat. Fighting the urge to roll her eyes, Emma shoots the brunette a huffy look before turning her attention to her deputy. "August, can you—"

"Sheriff," he cuts in, inclining his chin at Rufio.

The boy's stirring.
Eyelids fluttering, a deep, guttural groan sounds from the back of the teen's throat.

"Rufio?" Emma calls out gently, quiet and subdued, mindful of his current condition. "Hey, can you hear me buddy?"

At the sound of her voice, the disoriented young man weakly looks up, glazed, half-lidded eyes searching her face. She can't even tell if he's really seeing her. "Ar...gos..." he slurs almost incoherently, teeth stained red, blood dribbling at the side of his lips.

That answers her question.

"No, kid, it's Sheriff Swan," Emma tells him, in a soothing tone of voice that she'd never thought she'd use on a boy, who, just hours before, she was trying to hunt down. "Don't try to move. You got banged up pretty bad, but you're gonna be alright. Deputy Booth here's taking you to the hospital. Is anyone else with you?"

"Nnnghh..."

She'll take that as a tentative 'yes'.

"Is Argos here too?"

Rufio's entire face contorts in pain, and then something that looks a lot like anguish overwhelms his features, before his eyes roll to the back of his head and his body goes limp once more.

"August," Emma says quickly.

"On it." He takes his cue and springs right into action. Grunting softly, he hefts Rufio into his arms and gets up to his feet. Noticing her attempt to reach out and assist him, August shakes his head and starts scurrying away. "Save your strength, Sheriff. I can handle this."

"Are you sure?"

"Yup. I've got this."

"Okay, be careful on your way up," Emma calls out. "We'll stay here for a while and see if his friend's anywhere nearby. After you bring the kid to the hospital, go and meet up with Leroy. We'll follow in a bit and join in the fissure hunt."

Already more than a few feet away from them, a hustling August mutters a distracted "Yes, Sheriff" and ambles on, focused on watching where he's going, conscious not to drop the boy in his arms.

Glancing at the brunette standing over her crouched form, Emma extends a hand, silently imploring Regina to help her up. Of course, ever the snooty one, her majesty plays hard to get, folding her arms and arching a haughty eyebrow instead.

Unimpressed, Emma hooks her finger into one of the belt loops on Regina's ultra-fancy trousers—which are perfect in a boardroom, but are totally impractical for traipsing in the woods—and uses it as an anchoring point to pull herself upright. Biting back a self-satisfied smirk, she ignores her majesty's displeased "Miss Swan!" while a scowling Regina holds on to her pants for dear life. It didn't fall to the brunette's knees, but it did go down an inch, maybe two.

Standing at full height, trying to keep her face devoid of expression, Emma looks at an unamused Regina, appearing as innocent as a kid caught holding an empty cookie jar, crumbs all over her face. "What?"
"Must you be so immature?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," Emma smiles saccharinely, mimicking Regina's earlier half-assed apology. "Considering how much of a tight-ass you are, I thought your pants wouldn't have budged an inch."

Before the former Evil Queen could set her on fire with that incendiary glare of hers, Ruby's garbled voice crackles from her walkie-talkie, the magical residue from Gold's little accident still jamming the signal between their radios.

"Sher...iff?"

"Yeah? Come in, Rubes."

"We have a sit...uation."

Surprise, surprise.

"We've just g...ot our fir...st visitor from the oth...er side," her second-in-command reports. "There's a chi...mera near the do...cks. Rep...eat, chimera near t...he docks. I need back-up."

Shit.

"The docks are too close to Main Street—to Dr. Hopper's office," Regina intones, hand flying up, fingers gripping the sleeves of Emma's jacket. "My son... our son is there."

Double shit.

"Regina and I will be there as soon as possible," Emma responds to her deputy, sobering up completely, sharing a troubled look with the brunette. "Rubes, listen, don't play hero. Wait for us and we'll figure out a plan of attack. Do you copy?"

"Yes, Sher...iff."

"Hang in there, we'll be with you soon."

Spurred by the inevitable rush of adrenaline, and also their mutual concern for their kid, they begin their hurried journey to the man-made path that leads up to where their cars are parked. The trek would've been easier—and accomplished in half the time—if a certain someone had just worn sensible shoes. After the second almost-slip, and despite her own growing fatigue, Emma reaches for Regina's hand and helps the other woman up and over a couple of fallen trees, making sure the brunette retains her footing. Surprisingly, her majesty doesn't spurn the gesture; actually, Emma thinks Regina might've even held on tighter.

"You know, with all the trips we had to make to the woods since the curse broke, I thought you'd have bought hiking shoes by now..." she comments after passing a particularly slippery patch of earth, side-eyeing the brunette's flats. "Those things have zero traction."

"My dear, most hiking shoes are unfashionable and unsightly; a pointless waste of money," Regina remarks, a little breathless, allowing Emma to hold her by the waist and practically carry her up a tricky incline. "And why should I buy a pair when I have a White Knight at hand to assist my every step?"

"What, you think I'm your glorified walking stick?"

"Why, do you prefer that I refer to you as my sorry little slave?"
"You think I'm your lackey?" Emma snorts. "What makes you so sure I won't leave you on your own and just let you crawl your way up the bridge?"

"You see yourself as far too honorable for that sort of behavior, my dear. And, oh, I don't know, Miss Swan, perhaps the fact that you haven't let me go even though we're no longer on uneven ground?"

She's got her there. Speechless, and more than slightly embarrassed, Emma clicks her jaws shut.

"So, why are you still holding my hand, princess?"

"Why are you holding me back, your highness?" she retorts.

"Let me go, then."

"You let go."

In the end, no one lets go.

When they finally catch up to August at the top of the bridge, the guy doesn't even bat an eyelash at their joined hands; instead, he rolls down his window and tilts his head in question, looking a little confused at the sudden change of plans.

"Didn't you listen to your radio? There's a chimera at the docks," Emma supplies, answering his unvoiced query.

"What if Argos is nearby and also hurt?" August shouts out while doing a quick, three-point turn; a bleeding Rufio still down for the count at the backseat of the cruiser.

"I say good riddance, let that lowlife bleed to death," Regina pipes in, rushing past Gold's Cadillac and the yellow Bug — and with their hands still joined, she unwittingly tugs Emma along with her. "Miss Swan, we're taking my car," she declares, not open to any sort of debate.

"Fine, but—"

"And I'm driving," Her majesty immediately follows up, knowing what Emma was about to propose.

"But I drive faster..."

"My dear, it only seems that way because you drive recklessly," Regina says, letting her go and getting behind the wheel of the Mercedes, barely looking up as August zooms past, sirens blaring.

"Excuse me? I'm the Sheriff, and I happen to be a very cautious driver."

"Our son might be in danger. And cautious driver? Tell that to the sign you destroyed on your first night in town and the hysterical woman you almost ran over today, Sheriff," the brunette snarks, starting the car and gunning the engine as soon as Emma closes the passenger side door.

"Almost being the operative word, your highness. If I weren't cautious, she'd be roadkill by now. And that sign wasn't my fault — it was yours and your curse's," she stubbornly points out, before she stops and her face scrunches in puzzlement. "Wait... just how the heck did you know about Mrs. Woodberry?"

"That ridiculous woman ran by Dr. Hopper's office when I was dropping off Henry, and had the gall to scream at our son that his mother just tried to run her over. And since, I believe, my only crime against that hag is that I cursed her for twenty-eight years, I assumed that she was referring to you."
"Oh," she breathes, feebly scratching the side of her neck. Damn, now she really has to send that woman some flowers if she wants to buy donuts or a bearclaw from Mrs. Woodberry's bakery ever again. "Hey... you didn't try to throw a fireball at her or something, did you?"

"Of course not."

Emma arches an eyebrow.

"I didn't lobby anything at that ill-bred woman," Regina grits out, avoiding her eyes. When Emma persists on staring at the woman, her majesty caves. "If you really must know, let's just say that, at least now, both of Henry's mothers are guilty of almost running her over."

What does it say about her that she's both horrified and amused by that? So much for being the pure-hearted, incorruptible White Knight. Clearing her throat, Emma just puts on her best poker face and retorts, "Now, who's reckless?"

Regina harrumphs.

Catching a glimpse of the clock tower in the distance, Emma presses the button on the walkie-talkie clipped on her shoulder. "Ruby? ETA, ten minutes," she informs her deputy. "How're you holding up?"

"I... I got a little careless and got knocked around a bit, but I'm alright. I'm bunkered up by the bait shop. This place is a mess, Em. The cannery's wrecked."

"Any casualties?"

"None. But that Smee guy got thrown in the water. Apart from a nasty cut on his leg, he's okay."

"Ten-four. We'll be there soon, don't worry," she reassures, though she's not exactly feeling confident herself. Not only does it feel like she's running on reserve energy, but Emma has absolutely no clue on how to slay a chimera. Yeah, she may have eaten one of those part-lion, part-goat, part-serpent monstrosities during that disastrous trip to Fairytale Land a few months back, but she hadn't actually killed it herself.

Pulling out her sidearm and checking the amount of ammo in her clip, Emma sighs, long and loud.

"What?" Regina quietly prods, her eyes never leaving the road.

"Nothing. I just..." she trails off, snapping the clip back inside the gun. "Before we jump into the fire, do you have any tips on dealing with a chimera?"

"I could think of just one."

"What?"

"Try your hardest not to die."

"Wow."

"Helpful, as always," Emma snorts. "Seriously, Regina, do you have any that I can actually use? Something less obvious than 'don't die'? I really dunno much about those monsters aside from how they're kinda like turducken."

"Turducken?"
"Turkey-duck-chicken."

Regina's eyebrows slowly climb up to her forehead in incredulity. "Miss Swan, chimeras are deadly beasts, and you associate them with poultry?"

"Don't judge, it was the only way I could get my stomach to hold it down," she shrugs, mentally blanching at the memory of that sordid meal. "So, do they fight as nasty as they taste?"

"They do, as a matter of fact. And they also breathe fire." Regina warns. Stealing a quick glance at the pistol in her hand, the brunette manages a pitiful headshake. "So, I wouldn't waste bullets if I were you, my dear. That gun of yours is too puny to deal significant damage to a creature of that sort."

Well, that's just awesome.

Returning her pretty useless gun in its holster, Emma exhales a weary breath and slumps back into her seat. "Now do you regret turning down most of my old requisition orders, Madame Mayor? A missile launcher would've come in handy at a time like this."

Regina hums noncommittally, an almost-imperceptible smile curling her lips upward. "If we survive this day, Sheriff, I might just donate one to your department."

"Seriously?" she perks up, positively electrified.

"Of course not."

Emma's face falls in disappointment. "Tease."

"Gullible."

"What if I sent you a really nice solicitation letter, would you reconsider?"

"Your mother's the new Mayor, Sheriff. Go bother her for one."

Easier said than done.

"I dunno," she mumbles feebly, looking out the window, "Mary Margaret's kinda... uh... strict... when it comes to managing the town's emergency funds."

"My dear, I think the word you were looking for was stingy."

"She's not stingy, she's economical."

"Miss Swan, economical is getting your department reasonably-priced, dependable vehicles for patrolling. Stingy is buying your department low-cost, second-hand lemons that spend more time in repair than out in the streets."

"Fine, she's cheap," she finally admits, letting out a defeated sigh. It'd be easier to squeeze blood out of a rock than get a thrifty Mary Margaret to release funds for some hardcore munitions. "I'm never gonna get my hands on a decent weapon in this town, am I?"

"That would be the safe assumption, yes," Regina tells her, blunt as heck. "Which is for the best. My dear, you're laughable with a sword and marginally passable with a gun. You're bound to be outrageously inept at handling complicated weaponry."

"Wow..." Emma whistles in disbelief, sarcasm coating her tongue. "Thank you, your highness."
Your faith in my abilities just warms my heart."

"You're welcome, princess.""

Emma scoffs in indignation, but then, unable to help herself, she gives her companion a sideways glance and grins wryly. "You're really kinda an asshole, huh?"

"Watch your language."

"You're really kind of an asshole, huh?"

Regina rolls her eyes, and, proving that crudeness does rub off on even the most refined people sometimes, the uppity woman mutters a snide, "Smart-ass."

"Smart?" Emma smiles.

"Ass."

"Watch your language, your highness."

"Idiot."

Okay, fine, she's big enough to admit that her sword-fighting skills are simply ridiculous, and, yes, deserving to be mocked on a continuous basis.

However, her sword-throwing abilities? A thing of beauty and legend. And people actually acknowledge this, embarrassing or not.

Playing to their strengths, Regina uses this knowledge to their advantage.

Conjuring up a spear with her magic, Regina lets her do what she does best, which is to throw that damn thing like nobody's business. Remarkably, the spear hits its target, impaling itself at the base of the lion's throat just when the creature's opening its jaws, poised to breathe fire. Hurt and taken by surprise, the chimera staggers backwards, giving Ruby the chance to jump out of hiding and get close enough to hack the serpent's head off with an axe. Gravely wounded, it falls to its side, and all the goat can do is bleat helplessly, waiting for death to come and put it out of its misery.

Under the dull light from one of the docks' lamppost, the dying creature is an even sorrier sight up close. Gazing down at it, Emma feels no pity, nor remorse, for the wailing beast. Kicking the chopped serpent head into the water, she lets out a relieved, shuddery breath. Aside from the small lock of blonde hair that got zinged by flames, and a couple of small cuts on Ruby's arm, they all got out of that fight relatively unscathed. Feeling a light squeeze on her hand, Emma looks at the woman beside her, and squeezes right back. Here's to their victories — small or otherwise.

"That was an impressive throw, Sheriff," Regina compliments, voice quiet, eyeing the spear sticking out of the lion's throat with silent approval.

Normally, as any functioning human should know, the polite response to praise is a generic, yet gracious, 'thank you', but instead, when the silence between them stretches for a few seconds, Emma tilts her head in bewilderment and blurts out a confused, "And...?"

"And?"

"That's it? That's all you have to say?"
The look Regina gives her might be ripe with amusement, but her low, velvety voice is dripping with reproach. "My dear, you might have just slain your first chimera, but it's tacky and very unbecoming of a self-proclaimed knight to fish for compliments."

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment," Emma clears up. "I was expecting, I dunno, a kicker."

"A kicker?"

"An insult."

Regina starts. "You wanted me to insult you?"

"Not really, but it's what you do," she shrugs. "Y'know... bring me up nice and high, and then smack me down?"

Beside her, their hands still intertwined despite the battle being over (because it's always better to be ready and primed for attack in case another creature appears, a vigilant Regina had said), Emma acutely feels and sees Regina stiffening at her words.

"I don't mind, to be honest. I know it's harmless," she adds quickly, smiling lopsidedly. She doesn't have the high ground here, it's not as if she's incapable of hurling back playful insults too.

Regina stares at her, long and hard, an inscrutable look in those chocolate brown eyes.

"What?" Emma asks, tentative.

"Miss Swan, you jumped in front of me when this beast kicked a flaming bench in our direction..."

"Yeah, I did," she nods slowly, unsure as to where the conversation's headed, "So...?"

"So, what I'm trying to say is, foolish though it was, I believe you've earned yourself a short reprieve from any disparaging remarks — deserved as they are most of the time."

Emma clears her throat and looks away for a moment, hiding an amused grin. Trust Regina to find a convoluted, and kinda backhanded, way to say that she just wants to play nice for a change. Seriously... this woman? One-of-a-frickin-kind.

"You know, the way I remember it, you deflected the attack with your magic. You saved us both," Emma points out, looking at Regina through the corner of her eyes. "So, if you really think about, I didn't 'earn' anything. I just stood there, and you did most of the work. I should be the one rewarding you. But, I dunno your majesty, since I'm always nice to you, rewarding you with kindness is kinda pointless, dontcha think?"

Brown eyes narrow down into slits. "Are you mocking me, princess?"

"Of course not," she denies with a grin, finding the other woman's innate defensiveness amusing, and in a way, also scarily endearing. "But we're a team, Regina. You don't have to 'reward' me or anything, cause those things... they're kinda what we do."

"What we do?" Regina repeats, averting her gaze and scoffing. "Jumping in front of burning benches?"

"Among other things."

"And those 'other things' being...?"
"Oh, you know, bickering every minute of the day... annoying the other for kicks... saving each other from a wraith... cleaning ponies off a car... wearing electric rings..." she says with a wry smile, and then, almost inaudibly, she murmurs: "tongue-kissing for protection..."

Regina's eyes snap back to meet hers, brown eyes alight with a look so intense that Emma mentally kicks herself for bringing that thing up — after they've both made a conscious effort not to talk about the kiss since it happened, too. Though, before more can be said, the sound of footsteps coming closer towards them sends both women looking towards the side — at the stressed-looking deputy heading their way, cellphone pressed to her ear.

"Ladies?" Ruby ends the call, eyes flickering to their joined hands and then quickly back up to their faces once again. Mercifully, she doesn't comment on it — even if deep down, Emma knows she's dying to. "I have some bad news."

"Is there any other kind?" she sighs. "What's it this time? Goblins? Imps?"

"Worse. Harpies."

"Herpes?"

Regina rolls her eyes.

"Harpies," Ruby deadpans. "Focus, Sheriff."

"Sorry. I'm a little tired," Emma laughs weakly, green eyes snapping back up from Ruby's pants to her face when Regina gives her hand a not-so-delicate squeeze. "So... harpies?"

"Bird-women, Miss Swan," Regina supplies, just in case she's mixing her not-so-mythical-since-they're-cropping-up-everywhere creatures in her head again.

"Where are they?"

"Flying over the convent," Ruby says. "That was David who just called."

At the mention of the fairy nuns' home and her father, Emma's not all that surprised when she hears a derisive sound coming from the back of Regina's throat.

"Are you sure he didn't just mistake one of the nuns for a harpy? It is, after all, a common mistake."

"Regina, c'mon," Emma murmurs, giving the haughty woman a reproachful look before turning to her deputy with a sigh. "The orphans?"

"Safe. The chapel has powerful wards, it's keeping the harpies out. Snow's out in the forest, and David's good with a sword but not with a bow and arrow, so he's asking for help."

"Alright. Tell the firemen the chimera's dead and it's safe to enter the docks. When they're done putting out the small fires, have them follow us to the convent. I want them on hand in case those harpies decide to start lighting up the place, too. Can they spew out fire?" she turns to Regina.

"No."

"Have the firemen follow us, anyway," she tells Ruby.

"Will do, Sheriff," Ruby nods, turning on her heels and jogging away to the docks' parking lot, where the aforementioned firemen are lying in wait.
"I just wanted a quiet night in for a change," Emma shares with a weary breath, tugging Regina's hand and leading the way back to where they left the Mercedes. "Is that really too much to ask?"

"In this town, Miss Swan? Apparently so."

"Just my luck, huh?" she grumbles, picking up the pace. "You up for another round of fighting?"

"It's not as if we have a choice in the matter, do we?"

"Nah, not really."

"Yes, so I believe the more prudent question now is: are you up for it?"

Emma smiles faintly, squaring her shoulders, feeling the stress of everything bearing down on her like deadweight. "We may need to swing by the convenience store on our way to the convent. I think I need a Red Bull or two... or you know what, probably four. You, uh, were right. I kinda feel like shit."

"A fitting symmetry to your current appearance."

"I thought you're gonna ease up on the insults?" she raises an eyebrow, letting Regina go when they reach the car and clamber into their respective seats.

"That wasn't an insult, princess. That was merely an observation."

"Right," she mutters, giving Regina the side-eye while she buckles herself into the passenger seat. "Okay, just like last time, do you have any advice on fighting harpies?"

Between starting the vehicle and maneuvering it into the street, Regina takes a few moments to consider her reply. "When they swoop in, I suggest that you duck and roll away — unless you want to be swept off your feet by those hideous half-breeds and dropped on your head from thirty feet in the air."

"Duck and roll, sure. And...?"

"Avoid their talons at all costs. If you think the wraith's nails were bad, Miss Swan, you'd be in for a rude awakening if you act carelessly."

The scars on her back are gone—thanks to Regina—but there are times when memories of that night are so vivid, that she thinks she can actually feel the wraith's razor-sharp nails digging into her flesh. That experience is something she never wants to re-live ever again. But, of course, if her crappy luck holds, there's a strong possibility that she just might. Running a hand down her face, Emma lets out a tortured little groan.

"What?" The brunette beside her prods.

"If something had to stumble into a fissure and make its way here, why can't it ever be just bunnies or unicorns?"

Regina smirks. "If it's any consolation, Sheriff, your little gun may not be as useless this time around — provided your aim is half as decent as your throwing arm."

Emma sighs. She's not the best, but she's a fairly decent shot, so there's that. Those Thursday nights spent training with her deputies at the shooting range did pay off somehow. Eyebrows meeting in determination, she instinctively reaches down for her pistol and flicks off the safety switch,
"Anything else?"

"Just the usual, my dear. Try not to get maimed or killed because—"

"—it's tricky to draw magical energy from a corpse," she finishes with the smallest of smiles.

They share a quick look, and Regina lets out a quiet little hum. The unspoken 'so don't you dare die on me' not lost on either one.

Five days, a staggering sixteen closed fissures, four incinerated imps, two beheaded trolls, three bullet-ridden harpies, and one speared and chopped up chimera later, Storybrooke's finally back to normal. Or, at least, back to the nearest definition of normal that can be possibly applied to a town cursed—cursed, and not blessed—with magic. Thanksgiving might have already come and gone, with no one in a real position to celebrate the holiday, but it's the sentiment, the grateful 'thank goodness we survived another magically-induced catastrophe' that rings true for everyone. Far too accustomed to such tragedies, and no longer encouraged to confine themselves in the safety of their own homes, most of the resilient denizens of Storybrooke have begun rebuilding their damaged properties and continuing on with their mundane lives.

The same holds true for the people running the town — specifically, the bone-weary members of the Sheriff's Department. Since the earthquake last Tuesday, and all the madness that came in its coattails, today marks the first time in what feels like forever that Ruby's been able to take a real breather. But, refreshing though it is, it doesn't mean her job's over. Life goes on. And the work never stops. Even now, at six in the evening on a chilly Sunday night, when she's supposed to be at home, recovering from a debilitating injury, it feels like her day's only just begun.

Standing outside the front door of 108 Mifflin Street, Ruby looks at a sleep-deprived Leroy and tilts her chin at the doorbell, wordlessly urging her companion to ring it for them. Not surprisingly, the uncooperative man doesn't move an inch.

"It ain't like you can't press it yourself," Leroy mutters grudgingly, scratching the angry red welt running diagonally from his forehead to the bridge of his nose — courtesy of a sneaky harpy and its sharp talons.

"Such a gentleman," she smiles saccharinely, rolling her eyes. Leaning her weight on the crutch that's tucked under her arm, Ruby jams a manicured finger into the button and directs a pointed look at her colleague. "I know you're tired, but you don't always have to live up to your name, Grumpy."

"What? It's your foot that's broken, not your damn finger."

Before she had the chance to bite back at her crabby comrade, the door swings open, revealing an equally crabby, well, crabbiest-looking Regina. Immaculately put together in a crisp white blouse and pressed black trousers, the former mayor would've looked every bit as distinguished and formidable as always, had it not been for the frilly little apron tied around her waist. It kinda offsets and softens the woman's naturally intimidating presence—in a way that putting a bear in a tutu does—and throws off both deputies for a moment. Catching herself, Ruby clears her throat.

"Good evening, Madam—Regina. May we—"

"She's resting," Regina says in way of greeting, blocking them from entering—or even peeking—inside the mansion with her svelte frame.

"She's been resting since Friday," Leroy grumbles beside her, his own lack of rest making him bitter. "The heck did you feed her, one of your turnovers?"
With Regina being the town's magical consultant, a position under the purview of the Sheriff's Department, no less, they've had several months to get used to the woman's frosty demeanor; that being said, and cute apron or not, the withering glare Regina directs at Leroy is enough to make the hairs at the back of Ruby's neck stand on end.

Possessing enough foresight, and just plain common sense, she wisely steps in before a fireball gets thrown in the mix. "Sorry, please don't mind Leroy. He's been a pain all day, fatigue's making him cranky," she says. "Crankier," she immediately corrects, forcing a smile. When she suspects her fellow deputy about to object, she shuts him up with a sharp stab to the toes with the tip of her crutch. "Anyway, we're here cause we have—"

"Refresh my memory, Deputy Lucas," Regina cuts in sharply, blazing brown eyes shifting from Leroy to her. "Did we not have a brief chat on the phone yesterday evening?"

"We did, and I know we—"

"And did you not agree with me that it would be for the best, given how the Sheriff collapsed after assisting me with the last fissure, that she stay in bed until she has fully recuperated?"

"I did, but—"

"No 'buts', dear. I believe I made myself quite clear when I told you that Miss Swan will be having no visitors until such time. And unless you came here to see me, which I sincerely doubt is the case, I suggest you tuck your tail between your legs and scamper away from my home. Oh, and please, grab the rude little dwarf by the scuff of his neck and take him with you."

The rude little dwarf harrumphs in indignation.

It's difficult to put in a word edgewise when Regina's in one of her pissy moods, but Ruby's nothing if not persistent. "Regina, I know Emma needs to recharge, but we have—"

She finds herself shushing up with just one sharp, dismissive wave of Regina's hand. "What part of no visitors do you find so difficult to comprehend, Deputy? It's bad enough that I have to look after a stubborn buffoon, who insists on getting out of bed and going to work tomorrow despite running a fever all day, I don't have the time, nor the patience, to deal with a pair of imbeciles who cannot even grasp the simple concept of uninterrupted rest."

If there's still a question in her head about whether or not Emma's obvious affection for Regina is reciprocated, it's been completely annihilated by the level of protectiveness she's witnessing at this very moment. Ruby shares a quick, surreptitious look with Leroy, their minds running on the same wavelength. Looks like their boss isn't the only one swimming in denial.

"Now, get off my porch," Regina continues, poised to slam the door on their faces.

Ruby gets where Regina's coming from, she really does. For a while last Friday, it really did seem like a thoroughly drained Emma just dropped dead. So, any other time, Ruby would have accepted defeat, complied with Regina's demand and walked away; but... not today. Because this can't wait. Sick or not, if she knows her Sheriff, Emma will want to know as soon as possible. "We have some good news," she says bravely, keeping her ground. Without waiting for that inevitable fireball to come and smack them on the face, she lifts the flap on her messenger bag and shows its contents to Regina.

That's all it takes, apparently.

"Is that...?"
"Yes," she confirms with a confident nod.

*The infamous Sword of Ashe.*

Golden hilt. Twin serpents twisting around the pommel, slit-like eyes inlaid with jewels, and intricate patterns carved at their heads.

"Did you find him?" Regina asks, quiet and serious, her voice losing the murderous edge it possessed not a few seconds ago.

"No," she shakes her head. "This was just turned in by Mr. Robbin at the station. He found it near his house, washed up by the riverbank."

The man's house just so happens to be miles away from Toll Bridge. Though, if put in the proper perspective, it's not the place where it turned up that's most important, it's the state the object was found in that's vital.

*The sword is missing its blade.*

It's broken, just like Gold's dagger, and it no longer poses any danger to the town... to its people... and, more importantly, to Emma.

Ruby's no mind reader, but she's guessing that Regina's probably thinking along similar lines, because something that looks a lot like relief washes across the woman's face, relaxing her features, and eliciting a ghost of a smile from her lips. She looks like an entirely different person; younger, unguarded, softer around the edges — and for a moment, Ruby wonders if this is what Emma sees in her head whenever she'd go into one of her impassioned defenses of the reformed Evil Queen.

It's... disquieting. And if she's being honest, also a bit fascinating.

But then, as if remembering herself—and the people standing before her, watching and judging every facial tic and reaction—Regina straightens up abruptly and lets her unaffected mask slip in place. The walls are back up again, as high as ever. Taking a step to the side, she nudges the door with her hip, opening it wider, a nonverbal cue that Ruby and Leroy have just gained permission to enter her home.

"You have ten minutes," Regina grounds out, turning on her heels and heading for the kitchen.

Mumbling a quiet thank you, Ruby limps right in with Leroy in tow.

"You couldn't have just started with that from the get-go?" he mutters, eyeing her bag and the special item within.

"I tried. And it's not like you helped in any way. Seriously, did you have to bring up the turnover?" she hisses under her breath, then zips her lips shut when they enter the kitchen on their way to Emma's underground lair, conscious of the pair of eyes following their every move. Regina's slaving by the stove, cooking chicken soup by the smell of it.

The second they close the basement door behind them and make their way down the stairs, Leroy nudges her lightly on the shoulder.

"Did you see the look she gave me?"

She didn't, but even if that glare wasn't directed at her, she still felt its heat prickling at her skin.
"Can you blame her?" Ruby sighs, hopping down the last few steps. "You were being an ass."

"Yeah, so what? Not like that's anything new," Leroy mumbles. "And why the heck are you defending her? She could've set us both on fire, y'know? Or, worse, poofed me into one of those shitty-looking lawn ornaments with the red, pointy hats and put me on display. Like what Baba Yaga did to Dopey when he forgot to pay for his crappy ward-lock."

"I wouldn't worry 'bout that if I were you..." A lump that resembles a certain Emma Swan coughs from underneath a thick comforter, a mess of tousled blonde hair, pale skin, and sunken, red-rimmed eyes. "Regina'd never put you on our lawn. You'd make a damn ugly garden gnome."

Leroy harrumphs.

Chuckling at the pair, Ruby limps into the sparsely lit bedroom with the help of her crutch; moving as well as she could manage with the bulky cast on her left foot. "Hey, Sheriff."

Following her stilted movements with bleary eyes, Emma responds with a sleepy wave.

"Sorry to barge in on you like this, boss lady. We won't stay long, I promise," she smiles. Cause Regina will probably chase them out with a broom if they overstayed their welcome.

"S'okay. I'm getting sick of sleeping."

"Huh. Wanna switch problems?" Leroy grunts, plopping down on the armchair by the dresser, the dark circles around his eyes growing more noticeable under the muted lighting in Emma's cozy quarters.

Pivoting on her one good foot, Ruby turns in place and carefully parks herself beside her sick friend, leaning the crutch against the side of the bed. "How're you feeling?"

Emma smiles weakly. "You tell me. How do I look?"

Never one to sugarcoat—or practice politeness, for that matter—Leroy says it like it is. "Like death chewed you up for lunch and then puked you out right after."

"Graphic, but yeah, pretty much sums up how I feel," Emma rasps out, sounding like she just chain-smoked a whole pack of cigarettes and then some. "Regina let you guys in?"

Ruby hums in the positive.

"I'm guessing this isn't a social visit, then."

"How'd you know?"

"Because she wouldn't have allowed you guys to see me otherwise," Emma says matter-of-fact. "Did you know that she turned away Mary Margaret and David at the door this morning?"

Ruby's eyebrows fly up in surprise. "She did?" she asks, unable to bite back an amused smirk. Ballsy, but that's Regina for you. Kinda explains why the Charmings were in quite a mood when she chanced upon them at the diner during lunch. If she weren't on her way out, she probably would've gotten an earful of yet another Regina-centric rant.

"Yeah, so if Regina let you in, you guys must be here for something important. Did something bad happen?" Emma sits up — or, at least, she tries to. The poor woman barely has her head up an inch above the pillow, before she plunks back down again with a groan.
"Nothing bad, don't worry," Ruby puts the blonde at ease, giving Emma's shoulder a gentle pat. "But something great did."

"Lemme guess... magic is gone, and Storybrooke's back to being a normal, boring town?"

Leroy snorts. "Yeah... that's the fever talking, ain't it?"

"Whatever, a girl can dream."

"There's a fine frickin' line between dreams and delusions, sister."

"Yeah, yeah," Emma lets out an exaggerated sigh, shifting to her side and tucking the comforter under her chin, shivering slightly. "So, what is it anyway? What happened?"

"It's over," Ruby says softly, smiling. "The whole 'stealing your soul to power up a sword' drama, at least. You can breathe easier now."

"What do you mean?"

The easiest, and best, way to go about the big reveal is, well, to just reveal it. So, like she did with Regina, Ruby opens her bag and shows a sniffling Emma what's inside. And for the second time since they got here, the stubborn woman tries to sit up. Predictably, Emma falls back down with a miserable moan. Taking pity on her poor boss, Ruby reaches for one of the pillows at the end of the bed and carefully tucks it under Emma's head, giving her friend some extra leverage. She puts the broken sword on Emma's lap, too. "No one really got to celebrate it this year, but belated happy thanksgiving, Em."

"Thanks," Emma murmurs quietly, letting her fingers trace the contours of the serpentine hilt. "Does Regina know?"

"Yeah. It's why she let us in."

"Where'd you find this?"

"I didn't. You remember Chris? The guy who works part-time at the petting zoo? He found that washed up near his house when he was out fishing this morning," she shares, watching Emma examine the broken weapon — wariness and fascination fighting for dominance on her friend's face. She can't say she blames the blonde for being torn; broken or not, it is a beautiful weapon, frighteningly powerful though it was. "So... I guess that kinda gives weight to Regina's theory, huh? Argos' sword did destroy Gold's dagger."

"Too bad for the dumbass, his sword got broken too," Leroy yawns. "Talk about hitting two birds with one stone. Those assholes did our jobs for us."

Ruby nods in agreement.

A pair of bloodshot eyes snap up to meet hers. "Any trace of Argos?" Emma asks.

"No," Ruby shakes her head, a sigh laden with frustration passing through her lips. For days, she's been trying to sniff out Argos to no avail. The magic that's still swirling around the bridge had pretty much overpowered her sense of smell. She couldn't pick up his scent — or anyone else's, for that matter. It's like someone had dropped a megaton of the world's most putrid perfume in that place. "You know what... if Gold and Rufio got thrown back, maybe Argos got blasted into the river," she guesses, shrugging. "Explains why that hilt turned up near Chris' place."
"And if his injuries are anything like Gold's, or that punk's, hell, even if he just got knocked out, bastard's probably dead — y'know, drowned and shit," Leroy chimes in. "Wait it out, his body's bound to wash up somewhere... just like that sword of his did."

Emma lets out a quiet hum, staring unblinkingly at the object on her lap.

"This is a good thing... right?"

"Huh?" Emma looks up at her and blinks. "Uh... yeah, 'course it is."

"Then why don't you look happy?"

"I am. I just—" Emma pauses, and then sighs. "Don't get me wrong, I'm glad this thing's broken and all. It's a load off my chest, but..."

"But...?" Ruby presses.

"I dunno, Rubes. We can speculate till we turn blue about all the how's and the what's of what happened near the bridge... but what I really want to know are the answers to the why's," Emma admits, letting out a worn sigh. "Why did those two snakes even meet up in the first place? Why would a power-hungry bastard like Gold jeopardize his own dagger? And why the hell would Argos do the same with his stupid sword? Those two weapons are the biggest things they have going for them. So, why risk it all? I don't get it. I don't get anything."

Ruby sighs, neither does she. Sometimes, oftentimes, it feels like they're only just playing catch-up with the bad guys. So, in that regard, she can understand her friend's frustration.

"Gold has always wanted to get his grubby hands on that Ashe sword, right?" Leroy pipes in. "Maybe he tried to get it from that masked moron and the two decided to duke it out?"

"Right, so don't stress about it too much," Ruby follows up, giving Emma her best approximation of a comforting smile. "Argos might be missing in action, hopefully dead and rotting underwater, but at least Gold's not going anywhere. He doesn't have magic, he's handcuffed to his bed, and August is watching over him like a hawk. He'll give you the answers to your why's, don't worry."

"Yeah... that's if we could get even him to talk," Emma mutters in her sandpapery voice, frowning mightily. "Speaking of that imp, is he awake already?"

"Not really."

"What do you mean? How so?"

"Mostly, he's up one moment, out the next. Magic-related injuries are always tricky."

"Yeah, and plus, that asshole's having the time of his life with his morphine drip," Leroy adds, the envy in his tone not lost on Ruby. As punishment for being a smart-ass, Emma had put him on nights for a month; but Ruby'll probably cut the cranky dwarf some slack and let him go home and rest after they leave the mansion. Despite how many times he's gotten on her nerves today, he's earned some R'n'R. Poor man's been running on coffee and less than four hours of sleep every day since the quake.

"What about Rufio?" Emma continues, pulling her out of her thoughts.

That's... another story.
Sobering up completely, Ruby shakes her head in the negative. If Gold has been in and out of consciousness, Rufio has just been out. His head trauma had been more serious than Emma, and the others who found him, had initially thought. It didn't help that his situation was probably worsened when August jostled him around when he carried him up the bridge. The boy ran into complications, suffering from a brain bleed and swelling, and had to go under the knife. It's a pity, what happened to him, but more than that, it's heartbreaking. The leader of the Lost Boys might be a hellion with an abundant rebellious streak, but to Ruby, a big part of her will always see him as Jet; her ex's sweet and soft-spoken brother.

"Dr. Whale's keeping optimistic that he'll wake up in the coming days," she says in a somber tone. "Hopefully, he'll come out of it with no long-lasting damage. Dr. Whale said there's a chance his motor functions, or his memory, might've been affected by the accident and the surgery."

"Can't we get the Blue Fairy to heal the kid?"

"Nah," Leroy mutters, "the fairies have run out of dust. It'll take a month, probably two, for my brothers to restock their stash."

"Besides, even if we can get the nuns to heal him, pulling it off will be a bit tricky..." Ruby follows up, absentmindedly picking at the lint on Emma's navy blue comforter. At her friend's questioning gaze, she decides to explain further, ignoring the slight pinching in her chest when she murmurs: "Jackson won't leave his side."

"So?"

"So that amnesiac's been unstable since he lost his hand. Turned into of those headcases, y'know?" Leroy yawns, apathetic as ever. The pinching in Ruby's chest morphs into a full-on stab as he continues with an unrepentant: "He's one little push away from a nervous breakdown. Bet you a hundred bucks he'll freak out and lose his shit completely if he sees magic up-close."

Emma puts up a finger. "Wait... so Cap'n Hook still hasn't gotten his memories back?"

"No," she and Leroy chorus.

"Seriously? Didn't he see all those trolls and imps running around, wrecking everything?"

"That guy has been drunk off his ass all day, every day, up until that no-good brother of his ended up in a coma," Leroy mutters. And, probably thinking back on all the years he used to do the same, he lets out a low, ironic chuckle and adds, "Wouldn't be surprised if he didn't notice a damn thing. I know I wouldn't have."

Emma sighs and shuts her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose. "So, basically, one of our suspects is see-sawing between consciousness, the other is most probably dead, and our would-be accomplice and only witness is in a coma."

"Pretty much," Ruby shrugs weakly. "We have—" she stops, ears perking up. Exchanging a loaded look with Leroy, Ruby nods, and they both move to stand up. She doesn't even need to use her ultra-sharp wolf hearing to pick up the footsteps heading down the stairs. The way Regina's feet hit every step, it seems like the woman's deliberately making sure they know she's coming.

"Where're you guys going?" Emma frowns.

"Sorry, Sheriff. Our time's up," Ruby explains, tilting her head subtly in the direction of the person who'd just entered the room. Ever the experienced multi-tasker, Regina's balancing three things at once — a small food tray in one hand, a basin with ice water in the other, and the act of shooing her
and Leroy away with one of her infamous, metal-will-melt glares.

"But you guys just got here..." The woman on the bed says pathetically, raspy voice bordering on a whine.

Regina clears her throat. Ruby gets the hint.

"You need your rest," she tells her boss, standing unsteadily on her good foot. "We'll see you when you're back on your feet, 'kay?"

"Expect me at the station as early as tomorrow, then."

The sharp, clanging sound of cutlery hitting dishes startles everyone out of their skin. Well, everyone except Regina, that is — since she's the one who endangered her own china by slamming the tray onto the side-table.

"...or when I'm all better," Emma amends lamely, sinking deep into her propped-up pillows, avoiding Regina's laser beam stare. "Whenever the heck that is."

"That might as well be never, if you persist on being so stubborn," Regina says in a terse manner, sitting primly at the edge of the bed, and mixing the soup a little too roughly that some of the hot liquid sloshes out of the bowl and onto the tray.

"Oh c'mon, I wouldn't have to be so 'stubborn' if you weren't so darn strict."

"That goes both ways, Miss Swan. I wouldn't be so strict if you weren't so stubborn."

"Stop treating me like I'm a child, your majesty."

"Then I suggest you stop acting like one, princess."

With their attention focused solely on each other, it doesn't even surprise Ruby that the fact that she and Leroy haven't left goes unnoticed by the bickering pair. Opting to make a quiet escape before awkwardness starts creeping in, like it always does when those two go off into their own little world, she slowly backs away, Leroy following her lead.

"Know what, things would be easier if you just let me do something. Hell, anything," A petulant Emma grouses. "I'm losing my mind here..."

"What's there to lose?" Regina scoffs.

"I'm bored."

"Then sleep."

"I'm tired of sleeping."

"Then eat," Regina snarls, jamming a spoonful of soup inside Emma's mouth.

Pulling out said spoon from her lips, the blonde swallows the piping hot liquid with a wince. "Can I at least watch TV, your royal hard-ass?"

"No."

"Why not?"
"You can't even hold your own thick head upright without a pillow supporting it. And you just expect me to allow you to watch television?"

"Yes?"

"No. And stow away the attitude, Miss Swan. You're fortunate I haven't smothered you with a pillow. You're more trouble than you're worth," an exasperated Regina grits out in a tightly subdued tone that suggests that she's counting to ten in her head. "If you want to watch television, then get yourself healthy enough to do so. You look like you're at death's door."

"That's cause I'm dying of boredom."

"You'll be dying of something else if you don't quiet down and just eat," Regina snaps.

Already at the foot of the stairs, Leroy standing behind her to assist her up, Ruby bites the inside of her cheeks to stifle a laugh. Regina's well known for having a short fuse, but she's got to admire the degree of patience the woman's exhibiting at this moment — curt replies aside. Cause if Emma was her patient, and she was saddled with the task of caring for the blonde like Regina was, Ruby might've already dumped that bowl of soup over her boss' head.

"It's kinda tacky to threaten the sick, you know," Emma murmurs, low and quiet.

"Miss Swan!"

"What? I'm just saying..."

Ruby stops abruptly, her broken foot hovering uselessly over a step. Ignoring Leroy's gruff "move it, Red," she unbucks one of the small flaps on her bag and sticks her hand inside the compartment. "Em?" she calls out, nudging Leroy to the side so she can hop back down the stairs. "I forgot something..."

"Hm? What?"

"Here. The thing you asked me to get from your desk the other day." Ruby waves an envelope in the air. "Sorry it took a while, got side-tracked by all the craziness. Found this stuck in the bottom drawer, wedged in between some folders and a bunch of old receipts. Wouldn't have noticed it if it didn't kinda smell like lilacs," she shares, gracelessly hobbling back to the bed and handing it over.

"Thanks..." Emma murmurs, tearing open the envelope's flap. "I forgot about this..."

"Argos," Ruby volunteers, answering the question painted on Leroy's face — and even Regina's, even if the woman is clearly trying to fake disinterest.

"I thought that weird goodbye note he sent the other day was the last one?" Leroy wonders out loud. "Jackass gave you another love letter?"

"No... not a letter..." Emma murmurs in confusion, a deep crease forming between her brows. After a few suspenseful seconds of skimming through the document, the blonde looks at their expectant faces, flips the paper in her hands, and shows it to them.

Certificate of Title, the heading read.

"...the jerk gave me his bike."
"Don't you worry that pretty little head of yours, Sheriff. I'll make certain arrangements to make sure you'd get the bike when I'm, you know, dead."

"Uh-huh. Right. Of course. And just when will that momentous occasion be?"

"Who knows? Life is short. Might come sooner than you think..."

And it certainly did.

Wasn't it only just a few weeks ago that they had that awkward, but mostly infuriating, phone conversation at Tulgey Wood? He gave her his word, when they were discussing the motorcycle that he had bought with her money, that in the event of his untimely demise, he would leave her his bike.

Emma had scoffed at him then. And who could blame her? As far as she's concerned, a criminal's word is worth nil.

Just goes to show, right?

Who'd have ever thought that someone like Argos would defy expectations and actually make good on his promise? And confounding as the whole thing might be, it does bode well for Leroy and Ruby's theory that the man kicked the bucket and is currently getting devoured by fishes in the Aris River. And although Emma's not all that convinced, like her deputies are, that her stalker didn't survive the events at Toll Bridge, there's a degree of foreboding about the whole thing that gives her a moment's pause. Maybe Argos did know that Gold would go after his sword as soon as that imp got back to Storybrooke? Maybe he was trying to leave town but Gold caught up with him? Maybe he anticipated that things would go south on that fateful afternoon? It would certainly explain a lot of things — even that strange goodbye letter he sent her the same day as the earthquake. But at this point in time, who really knows? Because, till they find a body or Gold decides to wake up and talk, everything is just mere conjecture.

Still, dead or not, or even if he had an inkling beforehand of what's about to become of him, Argos just had to make life difficult for her one last time, didn't he? He left her his motorcycle, yes, but at the same time, not quite.

The title's now with her, but the bike itself? Of course not. That would be too easy. And nothing's ever easy with that man, is it?

To say that he's going to be the death of her? Understatement of the century.

Your deductive skills need brushing up.

\[4(4x11)15(3x3)L+2  \ 67(6x5)3(3x3)Y-2\]

The rabbit holds the key.

Find it and it's yours.

That's what the tiny, typewritten note that was clipped to the bike's title had said.

During the rare, fleeting moments when the potent cocktail of fever, fatigue, and meds didn't conk
her out, Emma spends a good chunk of those minutes—minutes that should've been spent relaxing—frowning at the ceiling, all the while turning the contents of the note over and over in her head. What do the numbers mean? What's the deal with the rabbit? And why the hell does everything have to be a puzzle with that guy? Thinking about those things stresses her out just enough—to pull a muscle in her brain, an annoyed Regina sasses—to affect her recovery and prolong her bed rest for another torturous day.

Yet, despite all the energy she expended, she still hasn't cracked the code, so to speak.

So, it's no surprise that now, on this cold Wednesday morning, when she's finally gotten her majesty's blessing to go back to work, Emma's almost at her wits end. And damn if this whole thing didn't make her feel grossly incompetent.

"Still can't figure it out?" Henry asks over a mouthful of cereal, watching her brooding over the note while her own soggy bowl of Cheerios sits neglected in front of her.

"No," she admits.

"Maybe it's a code," he tries to help, his face shining with the kid's usual eagerness, while his next words showcase the overactive imagination of a ten-year-old boy. "You know, to unlock the entrance of his super secret hidden lair."

"Yeah... maybe." Though she highly doubts that's the case, seeing that the only one who owns a legitimate, but-no-longer-so-secret, bat-cave sneered at the idea that someone else has a hidden lair in the town she built with magic. Still, Emma decides to humor her son. "Know anyone who's good at cracking codes?"

"Nah, just Hound Edge," Henry shrugs. In a blink of an eye, his youthful face darkens ominously. "But he's dead now."

"He is?"

Her ignorance earns her a peculiar look from the kid. And instead of answering her query, Henry just lets out a deep sigh and shovels more cereal into his mouth.

Weird... but whatever, Emma shrugs inwardly, thinking nothing of the boy's behavior. Glancing around the dining room, and noticing the absence of the woman who'd normally be enjoying a cup of coffee and a bowl of mixed fruits at this time, she looks at Henry and lifts a brow. "Where's your mom?"

"Upstairs. Getting ready," he says after swallowing, wiping his mouth with a napkin. "She has a meeting with my teacher later."

"Why? Are you in trouble?"

"Nope. Mom just wants to make sure she'd get to make my costume herself. She says she doesn't trust Mrs. Petersen with it."

"Costume?"

"Oh, yeah..." Henry's eyes widen a fraction, a spoonful of his breakfast hovering by his lips. "I haven't told you yet..."

"Told me what?"
"You were right," he beams, and if his boyish grin were any bigger, his face would've split in half. She was right? Well, that's new. Instinctively, Emma finds herself straightening in her seat, a proud little smirk gracing her lips."I was?"

"Yeah."

"About what?"

"I'm playing Sir Gawain."

"Where?"

"In the school play."

"There's a school play?" she wrinkles her nose. And, as quickly as it hit her, her confusion gives way to incredulity. "And you auditioned for it?"

"Emma," Henry huffs, rolling his eyes in mild exasperation — and he couldn't have looked more like Regina even if he tried. It's uncanny. "Are you gassy again?"

"Huh?"

"Nevermind," he shakes his head and pushes his chair back, gathering up his now empty bowl and disappearing into the kitchen.

"Want me to drop you off at school?" she calls out.

"No, thanks," Henry says as soon as he re-emerges from the other room, moving a little too sprightly for someone who has never been the biggest morning person in the house. "I'm not a kid anymore, I can go to school on my own," he declares with all the cockiness of a real mini-Mills, gathering up his backpack and making a beeline for the front door.

"Hey, are you—"

"Gotta go, I'm gonna be late. Bye Emma! Bye mom!" he shouts on his way out, not even bothering with a wave or a backward glance.

"Be careful!" she shouts at his scurrying form, "And don't slam the—" Too late, she winces. Of course, the door shuts behind the kid with a loud bang. Boys and their painfully obvious crushes, she shakes her head. As if she didn't know that his independent streak, and his newfound eagerness to get to school on time, are directly proportional to his desire to walk to the bus stop with Paige.

Left on her lonesome, Emma runs her hands up and down her face, exhales long and loud, and re-focuses all her attention to the paper lying right before her, taunting her with its crypticness. Barely a minute into the excruciating task, a disembodied voice interrupts her mulling.

"Is our front door still attached to its hinges or do I need to give that Marco a call?" Regina inquires from upstairs, sounding slightly peeved, and understandably so.

Emma smiles wryly. "Don't worry, it's still hanging in there."

"For how much longer? I could never get that boy to get over his proclivity for slamming doors," Regina grumbles in frustration; and, even when her back's to the staircase, the sharp clicking of heels on wood tells Emma that her housemate's making her way down the stairs. "Another charming habit of his that I'm assuming he inherited from you."
"Uh, no. I may have a knack for busting appliances, your majesty, but I'm not in the habit of breaking doors," Emma proclaims in her defense. "The kid's fondness for dramatic exits? That's all you."

It's the truth, and Regina knows it. If they're gonna have another 'nature versus nurture' debate today, nurture would definitely win.

Taking the brunette's silence as a small victory, Emma lets out a self-satisfied hum. But, just when she thinks Regina's gone off to retreat into her study, she hears those click-clacky footsteps heading in her direction. "Need something?" she asks, resting her cheek idly on her hand, eyes still glued to Argos' note.

"You have a lunch meeting with your mother and Doug Worthington today, am I correct?"

"Ugh, don't remind me," Emma groans. She's met a lot of insufferable bastards in her life, and that particular councilman, the head of the town's Budget Advisory Committee? Definitely high up on her list. "With everything that happened last week, I can't believe I still have to grovel and kiss his ass just to make sure my department gets a proper cut of next year's budget. If I were in the council, I would give the police more than fif—uh..." she trails off, finally noticing Regina standing to her left, a garment bag hanging from the woman's index finger. And, judging by the look on her face, Regina wants her to take it. "What's that?" Emma asks, tentative, eyeing the dark gray suit and the blue button-down shirt suspiciously.

"I believe these are called clothes, my dear. You seem to have the most unfortunate taste in them."

The urge to roll her eyes is strong, but she fights it, nevertheless. "I have a full day, Regina. I can't take those to the cleaners for you."

"I'm not asking you to. These are clean."

"Then why the heck are you giving them to me?"

"I seem to remember you asking for them last night, Miss Swan."

*Huh.* "I did?"

"You wanted my advice on how to effectively bargain with Councilor Worthington," Regina reminds her. She shakes the garment bag. "This is how."

Emma's eyebrows nail themselves to her forehead. "And how is a suit supposed to help me deal with that guy?"

"Oh you'd be surprised," Her majesty says sagely, smirking in that smug, all-knowing way of hers. "Now, do yourself and your department a favor, Sheriff. Rather than that uninspired ensemble that you always insist on wearing to work, wear this to your meeting instead," Regina commands, handing over the garment bag — well, more like dumping it on her, actually. "Do you know why that councilor always gives you a hard time?"

"He's a joyless d-bag who gets his kicks by making others miserable?" she ventures a guess.

"Well, be that as it may, the truth is that he just doesn't respect you," Regina tells her. "He believes you're uncouth."

No kidding, Emma snorts. "Tell me something I don't know."
"Miss Swan, even before the curse broke, when Graham offered you a job, Douglas thought you'd make a lousy Deputy."

"Uh, you thought that way, too," she points out.

"That is neither here nor there," Regina brushes off, waving a flippant hand. "Regardless of what I used to think of you, it's your mother and the councilor that you have to beg for money, my dear, not me."

"I know..." Emma exhales, placing the garment bag on the empty chair beside her. More funding equals better equipment. Her mother should be sympathetic to her cause, but Worthington? Not at all. "But I still don't see how wearing this thing will help me out..."

"You want that man to start taking you seriously, Sheriff? Show him that you hold your own office in high regard. Wear something that would give you the air of professionalism for a change," Regina advises, all-knowing. "Douglas has always been a difficult man to deal with, but he's also fairly simple and easy to manipulate. He responds well to—"

"—threats?" she supplies, grinning.

Regina quirks a brow. "Power. Authority."

"I'm the Sheriff. Doesn't that make me pretty powerful and authoritative enough already?"

"Owning a title is reasonably different from owning up to it, princess. Not only do you have to act the part, oftentimes, you have to look it too. You may act like a Sheriff, but you look like a feckless thug."

Now, that's just rude. Skinny jeans and leather jackets are her trademarks. Though, that said, it also doesn’t change the fact that whenever they've crossed paths at Town Hall, that stuck-up Worthington guy (who Henry calls Cogsworth behind his back) never failed to look her up and down and sneer at her choice of attire. So, even if she's not really feeling a wardrobe change, Emma begrudgingly gives in. It's just for a day, anyway. "Fine," she sighs, scrutinizing the fancy-looking suit sitting beside her with wary eyes. "So, you're letting me borrow your clothes again?"

"On the contrary, my dear, those are yours."

"What?"


"I don't even remember buying them..."

"I wouldn't think so. I bought them, Miss Swan. But you paid for them."

Emma snaps her hanging jaw shut. Now she's just getting annoying flashbacks of how Argos procured her bike. "Lemme guess, you got the suit at Sebastian's last month? Along with the rest of my new wardrobe?"

"Very astute of you, Sheriff," Regina commends, smiling one of her patented mayoral grins and giving her shoulder a patronizing pat.

"Why keep it from me?"

"I kept it for you."
"Why?"

"I have more closet space," Regina answers simply.

"Right," Emma purses her lips, giving her majesty a knowing look. That's an obvious cop-out, if she'd ever heard one. "I bet you just wanted to see me in a suit."

Regina harrumphs and sticks her nose in the air, but otherwise, the woman doesn't dignify her statement with a response.

Emma squints her eyes and lets out a low hum. Tapping Argos' note on the dining table, she slips out of her seat and grabs hold of the garment bag, slinging it over her shoulder. "Whatever. I guess I'll get changed and head on out, have to swing by the hospital and check if our troublemakers are up."

"Very well," Regina clears her throat, and angles towards her home office. "What time should we expect you home for dinner?"

"Uh... not sure. Depends on how many police reports I have to write up for all the post-quake insurance claims, heard they're all piled up at my desk. I'll know when I get to the station."

"Call home as soon as you do."

"Yes, your highness," she exaggerates a curtsy.

Stopping outside the door to her study, Regina turns around and faces her. "Oh, and Miss Swan?"

"Hm?"

"Did he tell you the news already? Henry is going to be starring in the school play."

"Sir Gawain, yeah. He just told me a while ago," she shares, switching directions and stepping closer to the brunette instead of heading into the powder room. Catching the strange look that passes across Regina's face, Emma tilts her head in question. "You don't approve?"

"Of course I do."

"Then why do you look like that?"

"Why do I look like what?"

"Like you're constipated."

Regina frowns.

"Glaring at me is not making you look any less so, just so you know."

The brunette works her mouth for a second, torn by indecision, before letting out a breath and finally coming clean. "Henry's teacher is incompetent," Regina spits out. "Why she was put in charge of a production like that is beyond me. Our son should've been given the lead role."

Emma bites her tongue. She loves the kid, she really does. But she's seen him play Benjamin Franklin during a short skit about the Declaration of Independence a few months ago... and, well, let's just say that his acting's so wooden, he might as well have been August's son. "Uh, in all fairness, Gawain's a pretty big role," she hedges.

"King Arthur is bigger."
True, but seriously, it's for the best. The—wait. Ever so slowly, her green eyes narrow down into slits. "Regina, are you really going to Henry's school to talk costumes with Mrs. Petersen? Or, are you going there to bully her into giving our kid the main part?"

Silence is all she receives in reply. However, the unrepentant look on Regina's face says enough.

Emma sighs. "Don't even think about it."

"And why not? Don't you think he deserves the lead role?"

_Hell no._ "The kid deserves a lot of things, but not _that._"

Regina raises an eyebrow.

"I—I mean," Emma clears her throat, "he _earned_ the role of Sir Gawain on his own. He seems happy enough about it, so let's not ruin it for the kid."

"A supporting role is beneath him."

"And meddling is beneath _you,_" Emma says softly, catching Regina's brown eyes and reaching out to give her forearm the gentlest of squeezes. "Listen, you're already a great mother. You don't have to prove it to him, or anyone else, by turning into one of those crazy stage moms."

Regina looks away, posture rigid. But Emma knows she's got her when she sees the vein on the other woman's forehead growing less and less prominent.

After a while, her majesty finally gives way and sighs. "I suppose it's better to play a simple knight than a cuckolded king or his adulterer of a best friend."

"Exactly," she finds herself grinning. "Though, I don't think they'll show the adultery parts in a children's play. Not unless they want to keep me awake through most of it."

Regina gives her a disapproving look, but the tiny, upward quirk of her lips betrays her anyway. "They'll start rehearsing next week. The hours coincide with some of my sessions with Dr. Hopper, so we need to start coordinating our schedules to figure out who would pick up Henry on certain days. I trust this won't be an issue? Rehearsals are every Monday-Wednesday-Friday, from three until six in the evening."

Emma stills. And blinks. "What did you say?"

"Rehearsals will be from three to six, MWF."

"No, no... before that."

"I trust this won't be an issue."

"Rewind a bit more."

Regina exhales impatiently. "We need to coordinate our schedules."

Bingo.

_Coordinate._

"Holy frickin' hell..." Emma breathes out in awe, an imaginary light bulb going off in her head.
That crafty little jackass.

"Something the matter, princess?"

"You might want to step away from me, your majesty," she warns the other woman, a roguish grin slowly spreading across her lips.

Head tilted to the side, a bewildered Regina keeps her ground. "And why should I do that?"

"Because I'm so happy I could kiss you on the mouth."

"What?!"

She's treading on dangerous territory, but you know what? To hell with it. Laughing heartily, Emma bounces on the balls of her feet. "Coordinates!"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"The numbers, Regina," she waves Argos' note in front of the flushed brunette, a glorious smile on her face. "They're coordinates."

That gets the ball rolling, alright.

After that epiphany of hers, it was just a matter of finding a map, a ruler, and doing some sort of tricky, high school-level geography exercise. Well, watching Regina do some sort of tricky, high school-level geography exercise. And what about her? Well, Emma helps in the best way she knows how, of course.

She sits down, behaves, zips her lips and keeps quiet.

Or, at least, she tries to.

"Are you sure that's right?"

"Yes."

"I mean, shouldn't this line be a centimeter higher?"

"No."

"But that's—"

"Miss Swan."

"Hm?"

"Whatever happened to giving moral support through silence?"

"It's harder than it looks."

"Of course it is."
"I just... can I say something?"

"What is it now?"

"You didn't back away..."

"What?"

"When I warned you. You didn't back away."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"What, like, did you want me to kiss you on the mouth, your majesty?"

"Do you want me to slap you in the face, princess?"

"..."

"...you could've stepped away. All I'm saying."

"..."

"Okay... cheering you on with silence. Got it."

Half an hour later, she's standing by the curb outside the town's one and only supermarket, leaning against the passenger's side of her Bug, tugging at the hem of her sleeves every so often. Since arriving a few minutes ago, decked in all her powerful and authoritative glory, Emma finds herself the unwitting recipient of a handful of double-takes, some approving smiles, one or two creepy leers, and a well-meaning, but slightly awkward, "looking good, Sheriff" from a winking Archie. Flattering, yes, but she can't say she enjoys the attention that much. Well-dressed or not, she feels so darn out of place in this outfit as lice is on a bald man's head.

Catching a glimpse of a familiar set of blue and red blinkers in her periphery, she pushes herself off her car and looks in the direction of the cruiser pulling up behind the Bug, hands planting themselves on her hips.

"What happened to being here in two minutes? Fix your watch, August," she admonishes the guy behind the wheel, and with a sheepish "sorry, boss," he kills the engine.

"Did you lose a bet?" Unsurprisingly, is the first thing that comes barreling out of Ruby's lips when she clambers out of the passenger's seat. "What's with the get-up?"

"I have a lunch meeting."

"And you have to wear a suit for it?"
"Yeah, 'cause I'm gonna be groveling for more funding. Allegedly, it helps if I look less thuggish than usual."

"Worthington?" August guesses. Looking, and feeling, older than her years, Emma nods miserably.

"Well, that meeting's bound to be... fun," Ruby pulls a face, adjusting her crutch under her arm. "Good luck?"

"Don't need luck. I need a miracle," Emma mumbles, self-consciously tugging at her sleeves for the umpteenth time. Catching her deputies still blatantly gawking at her outfit, she lets out an audible sigh. "Do I really look that ridiculous?"

"Of course not," Ruby reassures. "I'm just not used to seeing you out of your jeans and leather jackets. I mean, I didn't even know you owned a suit."

"Trust me, I didn't either," she mumbles beneath her breath.

"Well, I think that outfit looks good on you," August chimes in. "You look like a real cop."

Giving backhanded compliments is Regina's area of expertise, and having been accustomed to hearing them directed at her, Emma looks at her deputy and raises an eyebrow. "Real cop? The heck did I look like before, a fake one?"

"No, no, no," he's quick to deny. "That's not what I meant. It's just... you look respectable now."

"Like that's any better," Ruby snorts.

Looking up from the proverbial hole he's digging himself into, August lets out a feeble sigh. "You look like one of those TV detectives," he amends, raising his hands in mock surrender. "That's all I'm trying to say."

"Right. Whatever. Anyway, follow me." Emma leads the way. The alley between the supermarket and the hardware store is where she takes her two deputies. If Regina's correct, the bike's somewhere in this general vicinity.

"How'd you figure it out?" Ruby inquires, putting her weight on her good foot, taking in the array of dumpsters, piled up cartons, and general filth lying before them.

"Dumb luck, plus Henry's school play."

"Huh?"

"Long story," she waves off. Pulling out a folded printout from the hidden pocket in her blazer, she double-checks the part of it that's been marked with a red pen. Good, they're standing right at the edge of the huge circle that Regina had drawn on the map.

Peering over her shoulder, a curious August prods. "Where'd you learn to map out coordinates?"

"The internet," she says simply. "And, you know, Regina helped me out a little bit."

The two insubordinate jerks flanking her on both sides give her a doubting look.

"Oh, fine," Emma rolls her eyes. "She did some of the work."

"..."
"Most of it," she quietly amends, avoiding their gaze. "All of it."

Barring some barely concealed looks of amusement, her deputies, mercifully, bite their tongues and keep mum.

When everyone's general mood returns back to a more serious one, Emma chances a glance at Ruby and prompts her deputy into action with a slight nod.

And with that, the Sheriff Department's very own bomb-sniffing werewolf gets right on it. Closing her eyes, focusing on the task she was asked to come here to do, Ruby inhales a deep breath, and then several more. A moment later, she looks at Emma and gives her the all-clear. "I don't smell any explosives."

"Alright, fan out. Shout when you spot the bike," Emma orders, taking the first brave step into the alley.

Let the scavenger hunt begin...

Not surprisingly, it's Ruby, with the help of her super keen senses, who finds the motorcycle first.

Hidden under a mountainous pile of flattened cartons, the sleek-red bike is a sight for sore eyes. It's a remarkable set of wheels, signs of a little wear and tear in some parts, but, relatively, still in excellent condition.

Grinning broadly, she's just itching to reach out and touch it, but before Emma can examine it up close, her deputy takes initiative and beats her to the act. Without much thought, or a smidgen of shame, Ruby practically smushes her face onto the bike's leather seat, taking a couple of sniffs.

Behind the woman, Emma shuffles from one foot to the other, waiting awkwardly for her deputy to finish. "So... what does his butt smell like?"

"Like you," Ruby jokes. Straightening up, she exhales a generous puff of air from her lungs, before chewing on her bottom lip in thought. "I picked up Rufio's scent, and even the faintest trace of Jackson, but..." she looks at Emma, face contorting in bafflement, "...no Argos."

Well... that's just awesome. And mind-boggling. "How's that even possible?"

"I have no idea," Ruby admits, running a hand through her brown locks. "But... you know, come to think of it, I don't think I've ever caught that guy's scent. It's like he doesn't even exist."

"What, like a ghost?" August murmurs.

"Exactly," Ruby confirms.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Emma inhales a deep, cleansing breath, and wills herself to just file this mystery away and stress about it some other day. Straining her brain trying to make sense of these perplexing things are bound to just make herself sick again.

So, for now, she goes to her happy place and just thanks her lucky stars that she's managed to solve at least one mystery today. The bike's location is secret no more, and once again, she'll take her victories, big or small.

And, although she knew beforehand that she'd be happy, and relieved, to finally get her hands on the
thief's motorcycle, Emma's definitely not expecting to feel this giddy about it. A shit-eating grin won't leave her face, and the fact that she can't seem to stop running her fingers across every plane and curve on it is so absurd, it's embarrassing. She's not the only one making a fool of herself with excitement, though. An unabashed motorcycle-enthusiast, August is practically creaming his pants. Of course, being familiar with the said bike—having dated its original owner—a bored Ruby stands at the sidelines, giving them time to get all the gushing out of their system, looking fairly unimpressed.

"I can drive this to your house, if you want," a very helpful August offers a while later, no ulterior motives whatsoever, imploring her to say yes with his eager eyes.

"No, it's alright. I'll do it."

"But this thing doesn't come with training wheels..."

Emma's face hardens into stone. Now that's just offensive. "I don't need some, you jerk."

"You know how to ride a motorcycle?"

"I do." She leaves it at that, keeping her answer short and vague. He doesn't need to know that her experience with motorcycles come from a six-month stint delivering pizzas part-time in Tallahassee; she's not ashamed of it, but riding a sports bike is different from driving a scooter. And, honestly, she just wants dibs on her motorcycle.

"But," August says uselessly, not willing to give up, "you're wearing a suit."

"So?"

"It might get wrinkled..."

"I could iron it when I get home."

"You don't have a helmet..."

"I bet you'd let your Sheriff borrow yours, right, Deputy Booth?"

"Uh, guys?" Ruby taps their respective shoulders, cutting in. "Before we decide who gets to ride this thing back to Regina's house, I think we need to find the keys first."

Right.

Unfortunately, short of scrounging inside the trashcans and diving in the dumpsters, they find nothing.

"Where the heck is it?" Emma gripes, kicking at a wall and taking out her frustration on a rusty old drainpipe.

Leaning against the motorcycle, Ruby frowns at their surroundings and states the obvious: "Definitely not here."

"Did you ladies check the bike's compartment?" August asks, brushing away the dust clinging to his hands from going through all the boxes strewn all over the alley.

Compartment?

Both she and Ruby look at each other at the same time. And sigh. "No," they admit feebly.
"Scoot, please," Emma tells Ruby, waving her friend away. Tugging on a hidden latch underneath the leather seat, she lifts it up and peers within. *No keys,* sadly, but she does find herself staring at a few items she never thought she'd see inside her new bike.

Her brown leather jacket. The blue one, too. Both rolled up and jammed right in.

And, oh, also a wad of twenty dollar bills and a 'thank you' card from the thrift store. Not that Argos bought anything. More like...

"He gave away your clothes..." Ruby murmurs, putting two and two together after catching glimpse of the generic card that the thrift store gives out whenever you drop clothes in their donation bin. "I knew that ugly sweater Ashley was wearing yesterday sorta looked familiar!"

Emma side-eyes the brunette. "Ugly?"

"It was the gray one with ducks in front."

*Oh.* Yeah, that sweater's hideous. "Mary Margaret gave that to me."

"As a practical joke?"

"If only," she sighs.

"Well, if he donated your stuff, I sure hope he burned your underwear," August blurts out. Now, it's his turn to get her laser-like glare. "What?" he shrugs. "It's unsanitary."

*True.* Can't really argue with that.

Pocketing about a hundred bucks worth of cash, she grabs the two jackets and hands them over to August. "Here. Drop these off at the thrift store. Might as well donate them, too."

"Are you serious?"

"I am."

"You don't want to keep them?" Ruby asks, sharing August's surprise.

"Nah," Emma wrinkles her nose and shakes her head. Who the hell knows what Argos did with them? If he put some kind of charm on the jackets, she's not willing to risk it and suddenly develop feelings for her *missing*-but-hopefully-*dead* stalker. Besides, the brown one gives her unfortunate flashbacks of her time in *Fairytale Land,* and as for the other one, she still remembers Regina telling her once, that out of all her jackets, she finds the blue one the ugliest. So, yeah... no thanks.

"Are you *really* sure?" August checks.

"Yeah," Emma nods, and then shrugs casually. "It's not like I need them. I have my red jacket, the black one we use for town emergencies, and, plus, Regina gave me free access to her closet of winter coats. I'm good."

Absolutely unsubtle, her two deputies exchange loaded looks. And while August hides a smile by coughing on a fist, a brazen Ruby grins from ear to ear, looking sly as heck.

Oh... shit. Emma smothers a groan, realizing what she'd just revealed. She just set herself up for that one, didn't she?

"Don't even say it," she warns.
"Don't say what?" Ruby asks, the picture of pure innocence. "That it's interesting that you and Regina seem to share an awful lot with each other? First, a son. Then, shirts."

"Also, matching rings," August adds.

"Yes. A kiss, too. And now, coats." Ruby's wolfish smile broadens. "So, what are you two sharing next, the keys to your place? Oh wait, you guys already live together."

The two assholes chuckle evilly.

Emma rolls her eyes.

Still, despite the juvenile display from her deputies, Ruby's teasing did trigger her mind to remember a certain pressing matter.

*Keys.*

She doesn't have them.

Where could they be? Or, whom could they be with?

And then, it hits her like a ton of bricks.

"The rabbit..." Emma breathes out. Instantly, her companions sober up, laughter dying from their lips like a deflating balloon.

"Rabbit?" Ruby questions.

Better call Michael Tillman and have him tow the bike back to the mansion. Even if they turn this alley upside-down, they won't find the keys here. Why? Because...

"The rabbit holds the key," she murmurs, reciting the words that have been etched in her brain from days and days of reading them.

Looks like she has another mystery to solve, another puzzle to stress over.

Vexed, and just exhausted, Emma buries her face in her hands and stifles a frustrated groan.

*Jesus Christ...* it's never going to end, is it?

"Ruby..."

"Yeah?"

"Seen any rabbits lately?"

"Just the ones at the petting zoo."

. . .

"Know any man-rabbits in town?"
"Nope, sorry, Em."

"Knew any man-rabbits in town?"

"..."

"Rubes?"

"...are you implying...?"

"Yes?"

"Then, no."

"Really?"

"Emma, seriously."

"What? It's a valid question."

"Look, I don't gobble up every defenseless animal that comes my way. Besides, as a human or wolf, I don't even like eating rabbits."

"Too cute?"

"Too small."

"You mean, they're precious?"

"I mean, they're not filling."

"Oh."

And, so, the great rabbit search begins.

Lo and behold, two days later, she makes history.

Emma Swan, the Sheriff, the White Knight, the Savior of all Fairytale Land, is the first person in the entire town to ever get kicked out and banned from the Storybrooke petting zoo. Not even the Lost Boys have earned that honor, that's how bad it is from a PR standpoint.

It's all been blown out of proportion, really. And Mr. McDonald overreacted. It's also amazing how, given that all sorts of weird, ugly creatures were running amok in the streets just last week, the grossly exaggerated story of how, and why, she got evicted from the zoo is being passed around like
So, now, hours after getting kicked out of the petting zoo, and getting an awkward talking to from Granny about animal rights, Emma finds herself sandwiched between Regina and Henry on the living room couch. It's Friday night, and for the past few months since she moved in, they've made it a habit to watch movies together when she's not working evening shifts. However, unlike all the previous ones, this evening's movie night is a quiet affair. When in the past, Emma'd be getting on the two Mills' nerves by talking before, during, and after the movie, tonight, she hugs a throw pillow close to her chest and keeps to herself. The embarrassment caused by her banishment? Hasn't abated in the least.

They're watching their second King Arthur-themed movie, the one with Keira Knightly as Guinevere (for research, Henry had said), or, at least, they're trying to. Because instead of focusing on the film, she can feel two sets of eyes stealing glances at her from time to time, gauging her surly mood.

It's distracting, and after more than an hour of it, Emma just sighs and says, "For the record, I didn't 'manhandle' any rabbits — I didn't try to gut them and check their innards for motorcycle keys. I stepped on poop and I was trying to scrape it off my boot. That's why I was holding my switchblade."

"But is it true that a bunny died?" Henry looks at her.

"Well, yeah, but it wasn't my fault," she says in her defense. And when he persists to look at her with those skeptical eyes of his, she stuffs a handful of popcorn in her mouth, and in-between unladylike chews, she adds a feeble, "At least, not directly."

"So, you were an accomplice to murder then," Regina deduces.

"You murdered a rabbit?" Henry asks.

"I didn't murder anything! It was an accident."

"Accidental murder is still murder. You would know that the best, Sheriff," Regina tsks, the light from the flatscreen illuminating her face — and the teasing little smirk playing on her lips. "Does the victim have a name?"

"Why?"

"So we'd know who we're addressing the flowers to."

"Stop it," Emma pouts, throwing a piece of popcorn at the woman. It hits Regina square on the face before falling to her lap. Without second thought, Emma's hand darts out, snatches the kernel, and pops it in her mouth. "What?" she asks innocently.

Brushing off the salt from her nose, Regina glares at her for a moment, before her expression evens out, and a sly "What's in tomorrow's nefarious agenda, Miss Swan? Choking hamsters? Drowning ducks?" comes out of her lips.

"Ha-ha. Funny," Emma huffs. She pauses for a second, and then looks at Regina in puzzlement.

"Can ducks even drown?"

"I don't know, my dear. Why, are you going to try and find out?"

"Of course I—"
"You're gonna drown a duck?" Henry interrupts, eyes bulging.

"What? No! C'mon, stop it, you two."

Regina hums noncommittally, obviously taking a copious amount of delight in her discomfort, while Henry, bless the kid, just bites back a smile, scoots closer and burrows against her side.

Barely a couple of minutes later, Emma unintentionally disrupts the evening once again. Well, not her exactly. But an extension of her. Her cellphone, in particular. Grudgingly, she reaches for the ringing gadget on the coffee table, pauses the movie without permission from her family (earning a disapproving look from Regina and a loud "heeeey!" from Henry), and proceeds to answer the call.

Which, frustratingly enough, is the nineteenth one she's received since getting the boot at the zoo. Not that she's keeping count or anything.

"For the last time, I didn't kill any rabbits," she says in lieu of a greeting, not bothering to check the caller ID. "Nibbles died from natural causes. He had a heart attack because Mr. McDonald shrieked like a little girl when he saw me with a knife. So, the way I see it, it's as much his fault as it is mine," she grits out. "And it's just a one-year ban, not a lifetime one."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," a familiar voice dismisses, low and gruff. Leroy, of course. "Not why I called, sister."

"Then whaddya want? I'm busy."

"Just thought you'd like to know that he's awake."

That sobers her up significantly. "Gold?"

"Who else?"

"Rufio," she reminds.

"Oh, right. Well, that one's still out."

Poor brat, she sighs inwardly. "Anyway, the imp?"

"Yeah. Woke up a couple of minutes ago. Didn't conk back out immediately, so yeah, this time, we think it'll stick."

"Gold's awake. For real this time," she tells Regina, covering the mouthpiece. "Can I see him now?" she asks Leroy.

"Nah, Whale wants us to wait till tomorrow. He's still kinda groggy and disoriented. Belle's in there, trying to talk with the bastard, but he's barely making a lick of sense."

"Tomorrow morning, then." Emma exhales loudly, one part relief, the other part dread.

She hasn't found Argos' rabbit, but at least tomorrow, she'll be able to wrangle a snake. Or, try to, at least.

"Hey, 'sit true that PETA will picket the station tomorrow?"

"What?"

"Heard they wanted justice for the rabbit you offed."
"Sheriff?"

"PETA has members in Storybrooke?"

"Yeah."

"Are you kidding me?"

At the other end of the line, Leroy drops the act and snickers in her ear. And in the background, Emma distinctly hears Ruby chuckling too.

Oh, for crying out loud—!

"Assholes," Emma rolls her eyes, and then shoots Henry—and Regina, who admonishes her with a low "Miss Swan."—an apologetic look. "Alright, you jokers. You've had your fun. Now, if there's nothing else, leave me alone."

"Hey, boss lady," she hears her right-hand woman say, loud and crisp, which means Leroy had put her on speaker. "Was that Regina's voice I heard? Leroy and I interrupting anything?"

"Obviously."

"Something kinky?"

"Shut up."

"That's a yes, then."

"The kid's right here."

"Okay, disturbing. But, like I said, kinky," they laugh.

Emma groans. And, like she said, assholes.

She hates hospitals.

They never really smell right, do they? It's like someone concocted a stink bomb out of people's pain and misery, mixed in a shit-load of foul-smelling antiseptic, and detonated it inside an overly sterilized building.

Leroy's never been a fan of hospitals, either. But for the sake of duty, not to mention a paycheck, the hardworking dwarf's sitting guard outside the double-doors of the Trinity Ward, found at the hospital's eerily quiet third floor. And as Emma passes him by on her way in, she reaches a hand out and flicks his forehead, snapping the man out of his nap.

"Sleeping on the job. Really, Leroy?"

"What? I'm off the clock," he grumbles, swallowing back a yawn. "My shift's been over ten minutes ago. Woody's just getting coffee at the cafeteria, he asked me to stay put."

"Then go home. I'll be in here anyway," she says over her shoulder, and before the doors close behind her, she edges in a quick: "And if you pass by August on your way out, tell him to grab me a cup, too."
"Sheriff," the stern-looking nurse—whose name she could never remember—greets her ever so blandly from behind her desk, barely glancing up from her crossword puzzle.

"Nurse Ratched," Emma almost says, but catches herself at the last second and just mutters a polite, "G'morning."

Looking around the almost empty space, which contains a total of eight beds separated by glass panels and curtains, her eyes zone in on the one at the far end of the room. A comatose Rufio is there, a bandage wrapped around his shaved head, tubes coming out of his mouth, and by his side, sleeping in a very uncomfortable angle on the visitor's chair, is a man with an over-abundance of eyeliner and a missing hand. Technically, Cap'n Amnesia isn't allowed to be here outside visiting hours, but they had to bend the rules to accommodate his very polite 'request' to keep an eye out for his baby brother. The potty-mouthed man is a bit off-kilter, and Whale thinks it's best to let him stay here so they'd be able to keep an eye on him, too.

Switching the heavy wooden box she's carrying from her left hand to the other, Emma turns to the nurse. "Any improvements in the kid's condition?" she asks quietly.

The woman shakes her head. "Vitals are still good, though," the nurse drones out. "Give it a few more days."

Emma nods.

Rufio may be a Lost Boy, but she doesn't believe that he's a lost cause. When he wakes up—when, and not if—she's just hoping that this experience will push him to re-evaluate his life.

Speaking of someone in dire need of re-evaluating his life and all of his bad choices...

"Come to pay me a visit, dearie?" she hears from the bed nearest the nurse's desk. "I'm deeply flattered."

"Well, you shouldn't be," Emma snorts. "This isn't exactly what you would call a friendly visit."

Feigning disappointment, Gold exaggerates a sigh.

*It's amazing,* she thinks, how even while clad in the most harmless-looking hospital gown, and practically mummified by the obscene amount of bandage and plaster wrapped around his now magic-less body, the man still strikes her as the most dangerous being she'd ever laid eyes on. And that's after going against a dragon, a cyclops, and a badass chimera. Probably because Gold's the very definition of sinister and devious, and well, the man's just generally *evil* (even though she's not one to box people so easily into that label, like her parents are keen to do).

"Either way, Miss Swan, I heard you were the one who found me. I suppose a 'thank you' is in order?" he tells her, following her slow approach to his corner of the ward with his eyes. "I would shake your hand, unfortunately, I seem to find myself unable to do so."

At this point, he makes a show of tugging at his restraints — one, on his right wrist, and the other, on his left ankle; basically, the parts of him that aren't covered in a cast, bandages and gauze.

"Am I under arrest?"

"No."

"Are you pressing any sort of charges against me?"
"Nope."

"Then if that's the case, would you care to explain why I've been chained to my bed, Sheriff?"

"Only if you'd care to explain what you were doing at the Toll Bridge, Gold," she returns evenly, stopping by the side of his bed, fixing the ball of bandages lying on it with a hard glare.

Naturally, the man doesn't rise up to the challenge. Instead of talking, he meets her gaze dead-on, arrogant and defiant.

Emma's pretty sure she can win a staring contest, her innate stubbornness does have its uses; but, doing so against someone as creepy as Gold? Well...

"What?" she finds herself folding after a moment, when the silence between them stretches far longer than she's comfortable with.

"For what it's worth," he finally says, "I appreciate what... you did for me."

"I just called an ambulance. Thank Whale and that other surgeon."

"I wasn't referring to what happened near the bridge, dearie. Oh... but maybe I am," he says immediately, being all nonsensical and obscure.

"I see your brain's still swimming in morphine..."

He just smiles at her dig, and then, eyes trailing down to the huge wooden box in her hand, he asks, "A present for me?"

"More like something to get you off my back."

"So, I gather that's—"

"Yeah, the favor you asked for in exchange for leaving Ashley and her baby alone," she says with a grunt, hefting the heavy box onto the table by the bed.

"I must say, I'm impressed you were able to pull it off," he commends, smiling in approval when she unclasps the lid and flips the box open, showing him its contents: some kind of weird, translucent globe with a sharp, pointy needle on top. "How did you manage to get around Regina's wards and break inside her vault?"

Emma snorts. *Break inside Regina's vault?* Yeah... no. "I don't know. I never did."

"What do you mean?"

"She let me in," she says simply.

The look he gives her is nothing but peculiar. "You didn't steal that globe?"

"Nope." Because, regardless of what some might say, Emma doesn't have a death wish. "Why the heck would I do that when I could just ask for it?"

"Are you telling me that Regina just gave that to you?" Gold frowns, dubious.

"Pretty much, yeah," she shrugs, pulling up a chair near his bed. "Why do you look so surprised?"

"Her majesty isn't known for her generosity. Regina doesn't share."
"Not with you, maybe."

"And she does with you?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

"Oh... yes, because you're different, you're family," he leers.

He's obviously trying to get a rise out of her, and though it's tempting to engage, Emma doesn't bite. "I got you what you wanted," she says tightly, parking herself down on the seat. "So, as far as I'm concerned, I've fulfilled my part of the deal. I owe you no more favors."

Staring at the blank globe, a magical object apparently used to locate people, Gold doesn't bother to acknowledge her.

"Done deal?" Emma prompts.

He looks at her, lets her stew in suspense for a moment, before nodding. "Done deal," he confirms.

_Finally_, Emma lets out a quiet breath. That's a load off her chest.

But, like always, when it comes to her, relief is a fleeting feeling.

Because half an hour later, she's back to her default emotion when interacting with the enigmatic Mr. Gold: _frustration._

Thanks to the snake, Emma discovers that there is about a hundred variations to the answer 'no comment.'

Short of just saying 'kiss my ass', the imp manages to weasel his way out of every earthquake and Argos-related question she throws at him.

It's no surprise, really. Gold being all sarcastic, obscure, and just plain uncooperative is hardly an unexpected development. Still, that doesn't mean she hasn't thought of slamming a fist down his busted leg and karate chopping the hell out of his broken arm.

"Your dagger," she brings up sometime later, twiddling with her thumbs as she leans back on the chair, drained by all his unsatisfying non-answers.

"What about it?"

"It's broken."

He gives a little nod, looking strangely indifferent for someone who has lost such a vital part of his existence. "Your point being?"

"You're powerless."

"I suppose I am."

"So you finally acknowledge that your magic's gone?"

"I never denied it, dearie."
"Then why the hell are you so calm?"

A blank look is all that question gets.

"You're mortal now," she makes her point. "You can be killed."

"I can say the same thing about you," he throws back easily enough. "But I don't see you distressing over your own mortality, now, do I? So, why expect any less from me?"

"You don't care? Really?" she lifts an eyebrow. "You don't give a damn that you wouldn't be able to fight back or heal yourself against the thousands who hate your guts? Anyone can now just sneak up at you while you're sleeping and stick a knife right through your chest."

"No," he replies, nonchalant as ever. "I don't believe I do."

"And why not?"

"Because I was told that only you, and a handful of people who answer to you, know the current state of my dagger, Sheriff Swan. And so, as far as the rest of the town is concerned, I'm still the Dark One," he states with an air of superiority and arrogance that he no longer has the right to possess. "People fear me, dearie. And that fear is more than enough to keep me from harm."

The snake might have a point. The man's a manipulative bully who ran roughshod over a lot of people in Storybrooke, and not just during the curse, but before and after it as well. And even though he's widely despised, the truth is, he's mostly just feared.

"You're a lucky bastard." Emma leans forward on her seat, looking at Gold straight in the eyes. "And you really should be grateful that someone like Belle found a way to love a monster like you. You wanna know the reason why we kept your little predicament under wraps? It's because your girlfriend has earned enough goodwill in this town to warrant a favor or two. And she practically begged us to keep your secret, to protect you from being lynched by all the people you've screwed over," she grits out. "So don't be so smug, cause the way I see it, fear isn't the thing that's keeping you alive, Gold. Belle is."

That, at least, finally elicits a reaction from the man. Swallowing thickly, exhibiting that tiny, little chink in his armor, Gold looks away for a moment, glancing at the vase of red roses beside the wooden box on the table.

Taking advantage of this rare display of vulnerability, Emma pushes on, "Look, you tried to take Argos' sword, he put up a fight, and somehow, you two idiots ended up destroying each other's blades and almost damning the whole town in the process. Your dagger's broken. Argos' sword is broken. You're both powerless, and not to mention, screwed," she grounds out, holding his gaze unflinchingly. "But you're here, tied to a bed, and for all we know, he's still out there somewhere. You don't want to tell me the circumstances that lead up the quake, fine. But at least, tell me this: what the hell happened to Argos?"

He stares at her, long and hard, the expression on his face incomprehensible. And just when she thinks he's about to push the button on his morphine drip, to knock himself out and give himself an escape, he ends up surprising her. "Gone, I would say," he finally answers.

"Gone? Gone where?"

"The Sword of Ashe is the perfect murder weapon, don't you think?" Gold asks instead, derailing the conversation again, infuriating as ever. "It leaves no evidence behind."
"Yeah, I know, because it absorbs its victims," Emma says impatiently. "Now, where did Argos go? Tell me."

"I just did, dearie."

"What?"

"The last I've seen of your thief, there was a fragment of his sword lodged in his chest," he tells her, his face devoid of emotion, and, surprisingly enough, his words devoid of lies (as far as her abilities can telling). "Put two and two together, Sheriff Swan. And take from that what you will."

Emma works her jaw and slowly melts back into her seat.

Nicked once, gone forever... Regina had once said.

Okay...

Okay.

Killed by his own sword?

Talk about poetic justice.

"Do you know who he is?"

Scratching at the stubbles on his chin, Gold spares her another look, but not an answer.

"You do, don't you?"

"As much as I enjoy your incessant nattering, dearie, I believe this patient needs his rest."

"You've been asleep for more than a week. You've had your rest."

"Dr. Whale thinks otherwise."

"Well, Dr. Whale isn't here right now. And even if he is, I think he'll give me a few more minutes with you. So, indulge me. Who is he?"

"I believe he goes by the name Argos."

The thought of picking at the stitches on his forehead is horribly tempting. "Don't be a smart-ass. Who the hell is he?"

"Why do you want to know so badly? He's of no more consequence to you. The man is dead and gone."

"And, so? I just want some frickin' peace of mind. A name to go with the stupid mask."

The last thing she's expecting to get from Gold is an obnoxious little laugh.

"Peace of mind?" he repeats with an ironic headshake when his mirth dwindles down. "You think that knowing the truth about this Argos would give you peace of mind?"

"Why wouldn't it?"
"Cause there are things better left unknown," he intones, his expression going dark. "Believe me, Miss Swan, the truth always has a way of coming out. And it will, in due time. I advise that, for now, best not stress yourself with it. Christmas is in a few weeks, I recommend enjoying the holidays. Relax; spend time with your family. You will get your answer sooner than you think... but no, it won't come from me."

And then... he presses the button on his morphine drip. Talk about taking the coward's way out.

Most of their talks usually end with Emma wanting to punch Gold in the face, but this time, she just wants to grab the beeping monitor by her side and just smash it over his head. If there isn't a thing called the law, and she isn't sworn by duty to uphold it, the son of a bitch would've been hollering in pain right now, instead of looking sleepily at her in that smarmy way of his that just makes her skin crawl.

Looks like losing his powers, and almost dying, didn't change the snake at all.

"Coffee's cold."

The only time she'd ever find cold coffee acceptable is if it was one of those fancy iced drinks. Still, in place of drinking nothing at all, or hell, even downing a shot of alcohol, Emma reaches for the cup August hands over and downs it in one go. It's horrid, but it does the job. Talking with Gold left a bitter taste in her mouth, she just needed to wash it away.

"That bad, huh?" Her deputy gives her a sympathetic smile, slumped lazily against his chair as if he isn't working sentry by the door. "How's Gold?"

"The usual. Unhelpful, evasive, annoying."

"Did he tell you anything useful, at least?"

"Sort of," she nods, leaning against the adjacent wall, gently thumping the back of her head against it—one, two, three, four times—until it feels like a modicum of what Gold had said has finally sunken in. At August's questioning gaze, and, as casually as commenting on the weather, she murmurs quietly, "Argos is dead."

"Dead?" August suddenly sits up, and if he hadn't just emptied his own cup of joe, he would've had a little accident on his trousers. "For real?"

"Seems like it," Emma smiles weakly. She's relieved, definitely, and happy too, but there's also something that feels strangely off about the whole thing, and she just can't put a finger on it. Maybe she just needs more time to process stuff; or, maybe, she's just pissed off that she couldn't squeeze a name out of Gold. Whatever, she thinks; it'll pass soon enough.

"How?"

"Absorbed by a piece of his own sword."

"A piece?" August's brows meet in the middle of his face.

She shrugs. "Gold said a 'fragment' impaled the bastard."

"And you don't think he was pulling your leg?" August asks slowly, squinting. "I mean, how can a broken piece still have the power to absorb a person?"
"I dunno, but Regina seems to think it can," she sighs, and even if that isn't enough to convince her deputy, it's more than enough for her. If it was just Gold saying it, she would've questioned things; but Regina, she trusts implicitly. "That's why she sealed the hilt in her vault, you know? She was worried Henry would play with it and accidentally nick his hand on this teeny tiny piece of the blade that's left in there."

"Well... if you say so..." August murmurs, though still looking a bit dubious.

"Anyway," she says, glancing at her wristwatch and pushing herself off the wall. "I better head to the station. I'll fill Ruby in about the new development."

"Careful," he warns seriously.

"Why?"

"I heard PETA's coming for you."

"Shut up," Emma rolls her eyes, walking away. Clearly, there are wannabe comedians under her employ. "If they're gonna go after someone in our department, tell 'em it should be the one who orphaned three little pigs," she quips over her shoulder.

Behind her, August chuckles.

Her thoughts elsewhere, she's halfway along the deserted hallway when she notices that she's still clutching an empty coffee cup in her hand. Crushing the styrofoam, she throws it in the direction of a nearby trashcan as she ambles past. It misses its mark and lands behind a bench with a soft quack.

Quack?

Emma freezes mid-stride.

Backing up, she goes down on all fours, peers underneath the bench, and comes face-to-face with a most peculiar sight. Staring back at her, equally wide-eyed, is the cutest little brown duck. And, oh, also a big ol' fluffy rabbit.

What...?

Emma blinks.

Taking advantage of her momentary pause, the two animals make a run for it (well, waddle and hop for it).

"August!" she yells, coming to her senses and scrambling to her feet, and her hurried "Grab the duck! I'll go after the rabbit!" might just be the most absurd order she's ever given out during her entire stint as Sheriff. It's a testament to the overall weirdness of the town they're living in that August doesn't even think twice about following her command.

The adorable duck is easy enough to catch. Her deputy manages to snatch up the waddling animal—it's webbed feet kicking helplessly in the air—just seconds after jumping out of his chair and sprinting after it.

The bunny, however, is a bit trickier to snag. Quick as a rabbit, as the saying goes.

But in this morning's battle of Swan versus Rabbit, the larger of the two comes out on top. Literally. Because in Emma's haste to catch her swift-footed prey, the infamous Charming
clumsy gene makes its presence felt, and as she's about to lunge at the animal, her right foot catches against her left one and she trips on her own two feet. Arms flailing uselessly on her sides, green eyes bulging out, a horrified gasp escapes her lips as her shadow looms menacingly over the fleeing animal.

Oh shit... as usual, is the first thing that pops in mind. Not-so-eloquent, but oh-so-damn apt. She's 0.05 seconds away from turning a defenseless rabbit into an icky splatter on the hospital's pristine floor. As if indirectly murdering Nibbles wasn't bad enough, this thing would truly cement her rep as Storybrooke's serial rabbit-killer.

Bracing for impact, a loud cruuuuunch is what she's expecting to hear, maybe even a disgusting splat! But, when her body finally touches down and makes contact with the bunny's delicate frame, blue smoke explodes all over her face and a muffled ooomph! reaches her ears instead.

What the...?

"Ouch."

That voice.

"Paul?!" she exclaims, scurrying back and away from the old man lying flat beneath her, pressed to the floor like a pancake.

"Sheriff Swan," Paul O'Hara greets with a pained groan, clutching at his lower back. "I've heard rumors that you have it out for my kind, but I didn't think it was true... until now."

"I tripped..." she mutters faintly, before she remembers herself, and what just happened, and promptly returns to being all flabbergasted. "What the hell, old man? You're a shifter?"

Grimacing in discomfort, Paul nods weakly and sits up, punching out an arm to pop a joint back in place. Taking a moment to catch his breath, he sighs and says, "Not that it's worth anything now, but I happen to come from a very long line of proud, dual-natured people whose history predates the foundation of the Empire of Asheneamon."

Oh... okay. Well... she comes from a very long line of heroic idiots whose history of in-breeding predates all sense of human decency (if one would ask a sassy Regina that is, Emma thinks), so there's that. Awkward, and inelegantly, Emma clambers to her feet, helping a shaky Paul up as well.

"You never told me you could turn into a rabbit..."

"You never asked," he says, looking apologetic, before proceeding to arch his back and roll his neck with a moan.

"You alright? Need me to take you to see Whale?"

"It's okay, I'll be fine," Paul tries to keep a brave face, biting back a wince. After checking if his golden pocket watch got damaged by the fall, and letting out a breath when he sees that it hadn't been, he looks at her, and playfully ribs, "But thank you for breaking my back."

"And thank you for breaking my fall," Emma responds wryly, straightening her clothes. "Hold on, if you're a shifter, then who's—"

"Lemme go!"
"Ow!" August yelps. "Hold still, kid! Ouch!"

"Huh," she exhales, dumbfounded, watching the commotion a few feet away.

Adorable duck now gone, a beet red August is now struggling to keep hold of a jerking little boy. Wait, not just a boy. A Lost Boy, the youngest member, too, from the looks of it. Picket, something. Parquet? Packet? Pocket? Yes, Pockets!

"I said, lemme go!" Pockets cries out, kicking his legs back and forth, trying to fight his way out of August's bear hug.

"Davy, Davy, it's alright, lad," Paul soothes, shuffling over to the two and reaching a hand out to squeeze the kid's ankle to pacify the boy, before shooting Emma an imploring look. "Sheriff, I apologize about before. We won't try to run again, I promise you."

The 'we' in his statement pertains more to the child, since Emma's pretty sure her chess buddy is in no position to make a break for it in his slow human legs. But, although she trusts the man to keep his word, she doesn't quite have the same faith in the boy. All Lost Boys are runners.

"Please..." Paul pleads.

Emma glances at Pockets. The expression on his pouting face is nothing if not defiant, but it's painfully obvious that the kid is close to tears.

"Please, Sheriff," the old man appeals.

And now she just feels like a bully.

Sighing, and even though she still has her reservations, Emma decides to take a risk. Looking at her deputy, she gives a harassed August the slightest of nods. And with her permission, he sets the boy down and lets him go. Quicker in rubber shoes than with webbed feet, Pockets scampers away and hides himself behind Paul's legs, peering at them from around the old geezer's hip.

"Thank you," Paul smiles at her in a mixture of gratitude and relief, reaching back and affectionately mussing the boy's head. "I'm sorry for causing trouble. Believe me, we meant no harm."

"Yeah... about that," Emma folds her arms over her chest. "This part of the hospital is a restricted area. What the heck are the two of you doing here? And why the animal forms?"

"The lad just—"

"I wanna see Rufio!" Pockets cuts in, lower lip quivering, fierce determination shining in his chocolate brown eyes. Glaring daggers at August, he tattles, "He and the dwarf wouldn't lemme in."

"He's, uh, been trying to see Rufio since last week," August murmurs in her ear.

"Why wasn't I told about this?" she whispers back.

"We didn't think it was important."

Of course. Emma grabs the back of her neck and puffs out a breath. She turns to Paul. "You know, gotta hand it to you, when I had this place off-limits to people, I didn't factor in that some would try to slip in as animals."

"It was a... silly idea, I have to admit," the old man sighs, glancing down at the boy hugging his leg. "But when he told me what he wanted to do, I just couldn't let him go on his own."
"I get that, but you didn't have to sneak around behind our backs," Emma says in reproach. "You have my number, Paul. You could've just called and asked me directly for permission. I wouldn't have turned you down. I still owe you one, remember?"

"I... I know, and I apologize, Sheriff," he murmurs shamefully, averting his gaze to the floor.

"Can I see Rufio now?" Pockets pipes in again, looking up at her, his eyes boring deep into her own.

"He's, um, he's still sleeping, kid."

"Don't care. I just wanna see him." Stubborn as he might be, the boy has heart, she'll give him that.

Sharing a brief look with her deputy, Emma nods at the boy. And just like that, his hardened expression softens considerably and a beatific grin spreads across his young face.

"Take him in," she instructs August.

Her deputy extends a hand towards Pockets, and instead of manhandling him like he did a few minutes ago, August gently leads the boy back to where the doors of Trinity Ward are located. Paul moves to follow the pair, but Emma's quick enough to stick an arm out and keep the geezer in place.

"Not you," she tells him.

"Sheriff?"

"Not yet, at least," Emma clarifies. "I'd like a word with you first."

"Okay..." Paul agrees easily enough, though his expression is wary and a bit guarded. "Is something wrong?"

"I think you better sit down..."

"Why?" he's looking at her with open curiosity and fear now, but nevertheless, he allows himself to be led to the bench nearby.

"Paul," Emma begins, sitting down beside the man. She doesn't care much about Argos, but he does. "There's something you should know..."

His face is now the same color as his stark white shirt.

Since breaking the news of the masked one's death, the only thing Emma gets out of Paul is a breathless, and heavyhearted, "Oh, no."

Balled up in fists, his hands are shaking on his lap, and despite feeling inept at consoling other people in times of grief (especially since she's quite, well, happy that Argos is no more), Emma puts her own hand over one of Paul's and gives it a comforting squeeze.

It takes quite a few moments for the distressed man to gather his bearings. And when he finally composes himself enough to string together a few words, he turns to her, voice all quiet, and shares, "I got a note from him a few days ago, you know?"

"Oh?"

He nods, swallowing thinly. "It was dated the day of the earthquake. I didn't think anything of it until now."
"What did he say?"

"Nothing, just a simple... Play on, Paulie. Thank you for everything," he recounts with a soft sigh. "The lad left me something, too. Told me to hold onto it for someone."

She feels like a humongous tool, because in spite of her companion's sorrow, Emma finds herself trying to bite back a smirk. "I know," she clears her throat.

Paul's eyes snap up and lock on to her in surprise. "You do?"

Oh, she's pretty sure she does. "A motorcycle key," she states confidently.

The old man stiffens, his eyes widening briefly before he breathes out an astonished, "How did you know that?"

Her lips curve into a small, enigmatic smile.

"I had a hunch."

Since the woman got her hands on her dead stalker's bike keys, it's been a long two days of alternating between three emotions for Regina Mills: annoyance, exasperation, and if she's truly honest with herself, a vexing kind of concern, that makes her fingers just itch to strangle the blonde with the noisy, and utterly dangerous, motorcycle.

"But motorbikes are the opposite of cars," the infuriating blonde tells her over the sound of running water, the two of them standing shoulder-to-shoulder by the kitchen sink. "You see, the louder the engine, the more badass it is." Emma rinses a plate, and, as is their post-dinner routine, hands it over to her to load in the dishwasher.

"I don't care if they're meant to be that way, your motorcycle and the cacophony it makes is a nuisance," Regina grinds out, loading the dish a little too brusquely that it clatters against another plate. "And if you have any shame in your body, or just any sense of propriety, Sheriff, you ought to have arrested yourself for noise pollution already."

"Oh, c'mon, Regina..."

"Don't 'Regina' me," she warns, shooting Emma a pointed look. "I assisted you in locating that motorcycle with the understanding that you would sell it the moment you found it. It's been days, Miss Swan, and I haven't seen a 'for sale' sign anywhere near that pile of rubbish."

"It's not a pile of rubbish," Emma counters stubbornly, handing her a bowl, "and I never promised to sell it. I said I'll think about selling it, and I have. I've thought about it and I'm keeping it."

"What?"

"I'm keeping it?" The woman says in a mousy tone, donning a hopeful smile. Seeing the disapproving look on her face, Emma clears her throat, switches tactics, and repeats her statement in a more forceful tone: "I'm keeping it."

"No."

"All due respect, your majesty, but it's mine, and I get to decide what to do with it."

"Well, you live in my home, princess, and we get to decide together. And I'm saying that bike needs to go."
"What do you have against my motorcycle anyway? Aside from the obvious noise thing."

"It's unsafe."

Emma stares at her blatantly, dirty glass in her hand all but forgotten. "I thought you never cared much for my safety?"

"I never cared much, yes," she says levelly, reaching out and grabbing the glassware from the blonde, and with a grumble, she hesitantly admits, "but I may care a little bit."

"A little bit?"

"For Henry's sake," she skirts around the truth.

The eyebrow quirk she gets in response is deliberate, a telling sign that her companion knows there's something more beneath the surface, but Regina promptly ignores this by fixing her gaze elsewhere. "Miss Swan, the plates, if you may," she reminds impatiently.

Letting out a quiet little hum, the blonde lets her eyes linger on her for another moment, before returning to rinsing. "I'll reconsider selling the bike," Emma murmurs sometime later, when the last of the soiled dishes are already in the dishwasher, "on one condition."

"And what may that be?" Regina exhaled warily, wiping the granite counter dry with a rag.

"Tomorrow afternoon when I go to Sherwood Park to play chess with Paul, you're coming with me. We're taking my motorcycle."

The woman couldn't have sounded crazier if she had spouted gibberish. "Are you out of your mind?!"

"Maybe," Emma shrugs, nonchalant. "But if I remember correctly, you once told me about the importance of making informed decisions. And you know what, nothing will give you more info about my bike than riding it for yourself. So, if you want to have a say about what I should do with it, I dare you to ride it with me."

"No," she grounds out. "Absolutely not."

"Why? You scared? I never pegged you for a coward, Regina."

"Don't mistake caution for cowardice, Miss Swan."

"Traffic's always light in this town. What's the worse that can happen?"

"Oh, I don't know. You drive us straight into a wall, and, inadvertently, finish the job that the wraith and Argos failed to accomplish?"

"Don't worry, if we're gonna be riding together tomorrow, we'll be smart about it. We'll both wear protection."

In spite of herself, Regina arches an eyebrow.

"Mind out of the gutter, your majesty," Emma smirks in reproach, as if reading her mind. "I was talking about helmets."

"Of course. But you don't need a helmet, my dear," she intones, recovering quickly. "I'm fairly
certain that whatever you have for brains is impervious to trauma; with your thick skull and all."

"Uh-huh," Emma purses her lips. "But I still have to find one that will hopefully fit your swollen head, though."

"Don't bother," Regina waves off, hanging the wiping rag on its hook. "You can buy as much as you want, but a helmet won't convince me to ride with you. I don't believe they give adequate protection."

"Hm."

"Hm?"

Eyes squinted, forehead crinkled, Snow White's maddening offspring chews on her bottom lip in thought. And then, without warning, Emma grabs her hand and places it over her own, their matching emerald rings brushing intimately against each other.

"What on earth are you doing now?" Regina frowns, trying to tug her hand back to no avail.

"For thirty bucks a pop, Baba Yaga enchants stuff for protection. She did it on Leroy's helmet and he hasn't fallen off his scooter since," Emma tells her, unconsciously moving a thumb up and down the back of Regina's hand. It's unnerving, but more than that, it's... distracting. "If that two-bit witch can do it, then it'd be a piece of cake for you. I know you still don't want to draw energy from me, but this is just a small spell, right? So... enchant our rings, make them glue our butts to the bike or something, so we don't fall off or crash or fly away."

Unimpressed by this proposal, Regina gives the woman a blank look.

On the other hand, thrilled by her own brilliance, Emma beams at her and gives her hand a light squeeze. "Do it... c'mon..." she urges.

"No." Like always, Regina is quick to dampen the blonde's fun. "I won't."

"Why not?"

"It's foolish."

"Protecting ourselves is foolish?"

"No, but indulging you is."

"Listen," Emma exhales, obstinate as ever, "ride with me tomorrow, and if you still don't like the bike when we get home, I promise, I'll make a big old 'for sale' sign and stick it right on it. But," she holds up a finger, "if you choose not to, then I'm taking it as a sign that you're basically forfeiting all rights to say what I may, or may not, decide to do with my bike. Okay?"

When she refuses to answer, the blonde continues on.

"Look, it's just a short ride from here to Sherwood. Trust me, it'll be fun. When was the last time you let loose and did something crazy?"

Twenty-eight years ago when I opted to curse an entire world, she thinks to herself, but doesn't say it out loud.

"It won't hurt to let your hair down sometimes, Regina."
"My hair is down, princess."

Emma sighs, mildly exasperated. "You know what I mean, your majesty."

The other woman's hand is still lying over hers, and the thumb that's still tracing patterns on her skin continues to make it harder for her to concentrate, but still, Regina finds it in herself to continue resisting the blonde. "I won't ride that two-wheeled death bike with you."

"I think you will," Emma quirks a brow, looking so sure of herself, refusing to let her hand go. 
"'cause I know you, you don't like to lose. And saying 'no' is basically just lying down and admitting defeat. And you can't have that, can you?"

No... she really can't.

"And you'd never pass up the chance to win and lord it over my head, right?"

No... she'd never.

"Plus, you love challenges. You can never back down from one."

No... she truly can't seem to.

Exhaling hard through her nose, Regina snaps her jaws shut with an audible click.

Knowing she had pushed the right buttons, Emma watches her and smiles a Mona Lisa grin.

The stubborn buffoon. Regina sighs inwardly.

"You really ought to have kept that ring around your neck, Miss Swan," she says in an even tone, eyeing the said band. "I would've loved the opportunity to choke you with it — especially now."

A queer look is all she receives in response, before triumph overwhelms the blonde's face when Emma feels her begin the process of siphoning energy from her body. The incantation is simple enough, and Regina doesn't have to stretch her memory for it, since it's the one she used on Henry's saddle a few months ago to make sure her son didn't fall off his horse. It takes half a minute after she finishes her chant for the purple glow between their bodies to abate, and when it fully disappears, Regina takes advantage of the blonde's unguarded state and slowly takes her hand back.

Looking at their respective rings, they both take a moment to admire her handiwork. The golden bands seem unchanged, but the stones appear to have turned a brighter shade of green.

Sighing softly, brown eyes flit from her finger to the blonde's face. "For someone who's about to put her precious bike on the market, you seem awfully happy," Regina notes dryly.

"Well... I got you, of all people, to agree to ride a motorcycle with me. It's a big frickin' deal, practically unheard of," Emma mutters, looking all-too-pleased with herself. "So, in my head, I kinda already won. So, yeah, you bet I'm happy. Ecstatic."

Regina scoffs, bristling in place.

"Anyway, you better head on up and get your outfit ready for tomorrow, your royal pain in the ass," the insufferable woman advises, grinning from ear to ear, prancing towards her cubbyhole with a proud little swagger. "Remember," she says over her shoulder, stopping by the door, "unless you want to moon the cars behind us, don't wear one of your skirts. I don't want to have to book you for public indecency or anything."
The basement door closes behind the blonde before Regina's able to get over her indignation and formulate a coherent response. Gritting her teeth, she heads over to her decanter and pours herself a glass of cider. Taking a generous gulp of her favorite drink, she presses the glass to her cheek and lets out a deep sigh.

*An afternoon bike ride, hm?*

The indignities she has to endure for her idiot.

"..."

*That idiot.*

*That.*

---

Regina knows something is amiss when Emma walks in through the front door the following day at *exactly* three in the afternoon.

The woman is right on time for their ill-advised joyride around town. *Right on time.* That seldom happens, and during the rare moments when they do, they're usually because the blonde just had her hours mixed, or, is trying to make a good impression, attempting to make up for a certain misdeed.

Regina guesses the latter.

True enough, Emma sidles up before her at the foyer, obviously hiding something behind her back, and before Regina can question her intentions, the flushed woman gracelessly thrusts a bouquet of flowers near her face, and mutters a quick and cumbersome: "Here. For you. From me. Hope you like it."

It's a spectacular mix of lilacs, hydrangeas, white roses, lilies and carnations. The bouquet is stunning enough to warrant being lifted to her nose and sniffed, but since Regina's, well, *her*, and the flowers are from Emma Swan, she fights the strong compulsion to do so and just holds them by her waist.

"What did you do?" she says in place of a 'thank you'.

"Huh? Nothing."

That would've been believable if the blonde isn't avoiding her eyes, or shuffling from one foot to the other like a quick trip to the washroom is in order.

"Then what are these flowers for, hm?"

"They're a belated thank you gift," Emma mumbles, clutching the side of her neck, looking like she's trying really hard to keep her eyes on Regina's face — and not the tight, all-black ensemble she spent the good part of an hour putting together. "You know, for giving me the globe... taking care of me when I wasn't exactly the easiest patient to look after... keeping me alive against all sorts of monsters last, last week... finding the bike on a map... giving me good advice when I had my lunch meeting with Worthington... and, um, the whole Willan Incantamentum thing..."

Regina stares at her housemate long and hard, scrutinizing every inch of Emma's face. If only shyness and gratitude are the one things that she can see painted on the woman's face.

"Miss Swan," Regina says, stalking closer to the guilty-looking Sheriff, and, ever so slowly, she repeats her earlier query, "*what* did you do?"
"Have you been out of the house today?" Emma asks instead, meek and quiet for a nice change. "Or, I dunno, looked out a window?"

"No. Why?"

Looking obscenely contrite, the blonde takes a deep breath, and comes clean. "I miscalculated a turn when I left the house this morning," Emma murmurs weakly, sheepish. "I accidentally mowed down a hedge when I rode the bike out of the driveway."

"...

"I already called a landscaping company, they'll fix it tomorrow."

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Regina counts to ten in her head.

"Just so we're clear, Miss Swan," Regina sighs, turning on her heels and heading for the kitchen, "if you're still hoping to convince me to let you keep your motorcycle before the day is over, you're off to a horrendous start."

"Even with the bouquet?"

"Even more so because of the bouquet," she lies between her teeth, grabbing a vase and putting the flowers in water. With the blonde still standing in the foyer and out of view, Regina runs a finger across a lilac's silky smooth petal, lets out a low hum, and then, catching herself, she quickly smoothes away the tiniest hint of a smile from her face, and saunters back to the front door, all stoic and regal.

"Did you like the flowers, at least?"

"They're... passable."

"Passable?"

Beautiful.

But she's never going to admit that.

"For appearances' sake," Emma explains a couple of minutes later, as they're standing by the motorbike parked by the curb, and the blonde hands her a black helmet. Nothing tacky or too constricting, just something simple to put over their heads. "I know we have our rings, but we don't want people to think we're being reckless, right?"

"You think the two of us riding a motorcycle together isn't reckless enough already, princess?" she lifts a brow, fumbling with the helmet's chin clasp.

Helping her fit the buckle in place, Emma just shrugs. "Only if we go past seventy near Town Hall, your majesty. Mary Margaret's having a press conference out in the front courtyard, something to do 'bout public safety."

"...

"...

"...

"..."
"You want to do it, don't you?" Emma smirks, extending a hand.

Regina lets out a low hum, allowing herself to be helped onto the seat. "Let's just say... I wouldn't be entirely opposed to it."

Then maybe this joyride wouldn't be so joyless, after all.

The cool December air whipping at their faces. The rush of adrenaline in her veins after a particularly sharp turn. The crippling fear of being so close to the open road... so exposed... so vulnerable.

It's... exhilarating.

And while this is all insane, ill-advised, and just terribly reckless, it's also the most fun Regina's ever had in a long while. A very long while.

Because the look on Snow White and her Prince Charming's faces when they drive past Capitol Avenue? Priceless. And, honestly, infinitely more satisfying than all the twenty-eight years of her so-called 'happy ending' combined, when she used to parade David Nolan's comatose self to a cursed Mary Margaret Blanchard.

"I'm gonna get in so much frickin' trouble!" Emma shouts over her shoulder, when they're nearing the first intersection past Town Hall. Nevertheless, after just a beat, the brazen woman grins and says, "So... you wanna drive by them again?"

"No, I don't."

Once is enough.

At the stoplight, the Sheriff turns her head and raises her eyebrows in a way that painfully reminds Regina of how much in-tune they've become with each other. And how Emma Swan seems to be able to read her thoughts at the most inopportune of times. Like now. It grates at her nerves, but...

"Yes, I do," she finally admits with a grumbling sigh, her fingers clutching tight on red leather, knowing it's futile to lie.

Emma flashes her that lopsided, disarming grin of hers that she's just come to despise, and proceeds to turn the bike around for another go at driving her own parents to tears.

"I told you you'd be enjoying this!"

"Don't presume things. I never said I'm enjoying myself!"

"You didn't have to!"

"You can't even see my face!"

"Who says I can't?" Emma laughs, moving her head slightly to the side, letting Regina see over her shoulder.

Immediately, she irons her smiling lips into a flat, thin line.

The blonde laughs heartily at her now frowning face.

Damn this idiot. And damn those side-view mirrors.
After spending an hour and a half at Sherwood Park, Emma feels like Storybrooke's biggest loser. And she is.

The feeling of crushing defeat every time she has her ass handed to her in chess? It's something that she doesn't think she'll ever get used to. But, with her loses slowly, but surely, piling up, Emma might as well try and get acquainted with the feeling.

It's pathetic, really. Especially on a day like today.

Because even though his heart's clearly not into it, a mourning Paul—who's decked in a black shirt instead of his usual white one—still manages to kick her ass to kingdom come. At the end of their grueling set of matches, the score's a pathetic 5-0 in favor of the old geezer.

And the woman who should've been in her corner, cheering her on? Kept laughing at her face. Typical. But that's Regina for you.

"I don't get it," Emma sighs wearily, slumping back against a wooden bench after her geriatric opponent calls it a day and takes his leave, "why do I always lose?"

All that her whiny lamenting gets in response is silence.

"Hey," she prods, nudging the woman sitting beside her, watching the ripples of water on the pond. "I asked you a question..."

"I was under the impression that it was a rhetorical one."

"It wasn't," Emma pouts, stretching a foot out and kicking a pebble into the water. "Why do I always lose? What am I doing wrong?"

"For one," Regina exhales, pulling her coat tighter against her body, sparing her a sideways glance, "you never learn from your mistakes."

Well... because she seems to be making so damn many of them.

Emma sighs.

"And you're quite incompetent at observing your opponent's habits and anticipating his moves. You don't think before you act and your game is atrocious," Her majesty continues, unapologetic and unforgiving as ever. "Paul may be a good player, but he's largely predictable. He always begins with the Queen's Gambit, and in seven moves or less, he tries to go for your king — and more often than not, you allow him to."

"Uh... what the heck's a Queen's Gambit?"

The infamous queenly eyeroll finally makes an appearance. "It's an opening move," Regina informs, before proceeding to chide her with a pointed: "If your intent is to win, you should do your research, princess."

"No."

"No?"

"No research. I suck at that." Plus, she's got the attention span of a toddler when it comes to reading books and whatnot. And, reading something about chess? Good luck with that. "I learn better with a more hands-on approach. So, I'm gonna practice. And you're gonna do it with me."
"Am I, now?"

"Yeah. Play with me until I get better at this," Emma says, getting up to her feet and making her way to the willow tree nearby. Taking out Paul's chess set from its hiding place, she brushes off the wooden splinters with her hand, and makes her way back to Regina. "Go easy on me, alright?"

Nose in the air, her majesty makes no such promises.

"What color do you usually play?"

"Black."

No surprise there. "Let's switch, then. Change things up a bit," Emma proposes, setting down the board between them on the bench. "You can play with the White Knight, I can have the Black Queen."

A pair of brown eyes snap up and look at her, dark and inscrutable.

Arranging the pieces on the board, Emma focuses on the task instead of meeting Regina's heated gaze.

"You do know that your mother considers herself to be the White Queen, and your father the White King, don't you, Miss Swan?"

"Well, yeah. 'Course," Emma shrugs casually. That's a given. And, with a roguish grin, she looks up through her lashes and slyly admits, "But it kinda gives you an incentive to lose to me, right? Let the Black Queen destroy their happiness. Let me win."

"..."

"Ingenious?"

"Delusional."

"Smart."

"Moronic."

"Whatever, you'll let me win."

"And like I said, delusional."

Yeah.

Delusional.

It seems that as much as Regina hates her parents, it doesn't compare to how much the woman despises losing. Cause at the end of the first two rounds, Regina beats her so horribly, Emma might as well be black and blue and bleeding profusely from the mouth.

"Whatever happened to going easy on me?"

"I never said I would," her majesty sniffs. "And you'd never learn that way, my dear."

"Tough love, then?"
"Tough love." Regina confirms.

"Love?"

"Oh, shush."

In the middle of the fourth game, and already down half of her pieces, Emma practically gives up. Knowing defeat is imminent, and just waiting for Regina to go in for the kill and finish her off, she cradles her chin on her hand, and decides to distract her opponent with a bored: "Hey, want to hear a joke about Rumplestiltskin? I got it from Leroy."

"Miss Swan, I'm trying to concentrate," Regina says in reproach, but she tears her gaze from the board and glances up at her anyway.

Emma smiles. "What do you call an ass who caused a massive earthquake in Storybrooke?"

"What?"

"Rump-shaker."

Regina goes back to studying the board. "That was an awful joke, princess."

"Then why are you smiling, your highness?"

"My dear, don't misinterpret a wince for a smile."

"That was a wince?"

"Yes."

"It looked more like an upside-down frown to me."

"Well, it surely wasn't," Regina scoffs. "As usual, your observational skills need a bit of work. Now, stop distracting me with your inanity and let me think in peace."

"Rump-shaker," she whispers a minute later.

"..."

"Ha! I made you 'wince' again."

Teasing Regina? Fun.
"You know... speaking of Rumplestiltskin, when I gave him the globe the other day, Gold was kinda shocked that I didn't steal it from you."

"If I were him, I'd be more astonished if you did manage to steal it from me," Regina scoffs, and, as if it's no big deal (and it probably isn't for the woman), she takes down Emma's queen with just a measly pawn.

"He said you're not one for sharing your stuff."

"I'm not," Her majesty admits easily enough, unashamed.

"I noticed the globe was hidden in the deepest part of your vault though..."

"It was."

"It must've been really valuable to you..."

"...yes." Regina says shortly, keeping it at that.

Without actually giving it much thought, or giving a damn about the game's outcome, Emma moves her rook away from her desolate king, leaving it defenseless. "Then why give it to Gold?" she continues to pry.

"I didn't give it to Gold, I gave it to you."

"But I gave it to him..."

"And now you're no longer beholden to that imp. It's... an exchange I can live with, I suppose."

"Why?" she persists, genuinely curious. "What do you care about the deal I made with him?"

Regina frowns, looking annoyed at Emma, and, strangely enough, also at herself. "I don't. Now, will you please cease your yammering and just play?"

"But..."

"Quiet."

Two moves later, Regina calls checkmate. And Emma's too busy staring at her to even notice.

Because the sun's beginning to set behind Regina's head. And it's giving the woman some kind of halo, and she almost looks ethereal, it's mesmerizing.

Talk about literally seeing someone in a new light.

"Didn't your parents ever teach you that it's rude to stare, Miss Swan?" her majesty huffs when she catches her shamelessly gawking, "Oh... right, of course they didn't."

Ethereal look or not, one thing's for certain, though. Regina Mills is no angel that fell from heaven. If anything else, the woman's a she-devil that shot out of the deepest bowels of hell.

Not that that's a bad thing, cause most of the time, even if it twists her insides to admit so, she seems
After arranging the board for their fifth and last game, a pair of brown eyes flick up and finally takes notice of the frown lines on her face. Regina sighs. "What is it?"

"Hm?"

"What's bothering you now?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

An eyeroll is all her attempt at playing dumb earns. "You obviously have something to say, otherwise, you wouldn't be looking like you tasted something bitter in your mouth. Out with it, Miss Swan," Her majesty commands, having no patience for her usual hedging.

"I—it's just..." Emma pauses. And then sighs. "Yes or no. Henry aside, do you hate everyone in Storybrooke?"

"Yes."

"Me, included?"

Avoiding her gaze, Regina keeps her eyes firmly on the chessboard. Opting to start the game, she moves one of her pawns two blocks forward. "Yes."

That's a lie.

"Do you share things with people you hate?"

"No."

"Then... why do you share a lot of things with me? Clothes, a house, a son, and heck, even that globe," Emma challenges, proceeding to mimic Regina's strategy by moving a pawn too.

Fingers tracing the contours of one of her knights, Regina exhales loudly, working her jaw. Moments later, just when Emma's beginning to think that the woman would evade the question, a visibly torn Regina surprises her by murmuring, "Henry aside?"

"Henry aside." She nods in confirmation.

"I hate everyone in Storybrooke, yes," Regina begins, silent and pensive; and then, with her brown eyes flickering up to meet hers, the brunette admits, almost hesitantly, "I simply hate you the least."

That's probably the closest thing to a declaration of... fondness... that she could ever get from someone as guarded as Regina.

Call her crazy, but it's... touching.

And it lowers her inhibitions down so much so, that Emma opens her big, fat mouth, ignores her brain's filter, and blurts out:
"You know, funny you should say that, cause I like a lot of people in this town, and excluding our kid, I like you the most."

Regina stills.

So does a wide-eyed Emma.

And awkwardness descends between them like a dense fog, paralyzing all coherent thoughts, and stilting all interactions.

It becomes a real quiet game of chess after that. And an even quieter bike ride home.

A fazed and disquieted Regina did end up letting her win the last game, though. But Emma's so damn out of it too, that she didn't even gloat and rub her victory in the brunette's face.

________________________________________

But... she's said it.

It's out there. There are no take-backs.

If they knew, her deputies would probably laugh at her face and tell her that it's a long time coming. And, you know what, maybe that's true.

So... what happens now?

________________________________________

Eight hundred fifty bucks.

It's... sad.

Even after selling his beloved bike, and his antique cannon, that's all the money Jackson Peters has left in his bank account.

The only effective bargaining chip with a greedy guy like Gold is money; Jackson knows that. And while he doesn't have much left (thereby weakening his chances of brokering a good deal), he steels his resolve, gives his baby brother's limp hand a squeeze, and crosses the room to head over to the only other patient inside the quiet ward.

The last thing he wants to do is lower himself to the bastard, but really, what choice does he have? Sometimes you have to suck it up. This is just one hell of a bitter pill that he has no choice but to swallow.

"Hey," Jackson says quietly as he stops by the foot of his landlord's bed, "got a moment to talk?"

"Mr. Peters," a freshly woken up Gold acknowledges him with a sigh, his gaze leaving a snoozing Belle on the visitor's chair, "what do you want?"

No small talk, then. Good.

"I just had a chat with Dr. Whale. He told me you offered to pay for all of my brother's hospital bills?"

"Ah, yes. Come to say your thanks, then?"

"No. Yes. I mean," he sighs, screwing his eyes tight and taking a deep breath. Shit, he shouldn't have downed everything inside his flask in the washroom. Rum's making his head swim. "I'm not gonna
"Look, I don't know what Jet was doing with you near the bridge, the cops won't say anything. All I know is that he's been running around with the wrong crowd for the past few months now, and it's all my fault. I haven't been the best brother and I've kinda neglected him because of my own issues, but," he licks his lips, "if Jet's in trouble, and he owes you some cash, I have eight hundred bucks. If that's not enough, gimme a few weeks. I'll try and scrounge up some more. I'll pay his debt, just... just leave him alone. He's a good kid. Whatever shit he's in, let me take care of it..."

He's a mess and he's making an ass of himself, and Gold just stares at his sweaty form, lapping it up. And though it pains him to do so, Jackson grits out a quiet, "Please."

Silence stretches for a moment, before...

"Your brother doesn't owe me anything," Gold finally says, letting him off the hook.

"He doesn't?"

"On the contrary, I think I'm going to owe him."

"Going to?" he frowns, confused.

"I think that brother of yours has an interesting... future ahead of him. It is in my best interest to help him on his way," the man intones, making little to no sense. Must be all the drugs they're pumping into him. "I'm paying for all of his hospital expenses as a sign of goodwill. All I ask for in return, is that you give him something on my behalf when he wakes up."

"What thing?" Jackson asks, dubious as hell.

Gold inclines his chin at the circular box by his slumbering girlfriend's feet. The very same one Jackson saw Belle lugging into the ward when she arrived two hours ago. Hobbling towards the leather container, he flips it open and peers at its contents.

The hell...

"A hat?" he scrunches his face in bewilderment. "A ratty, old top hat? What the hell would Jet need this for?"

Creepy as fuck, Gold just smiles, a scary glint in his eyes.

"Oh, you'd be surprised, Mr. Peters. You'd be surprised."

Chapter End Notes

Yay! After more than a month of getting my ass handed to me by this chapter, it's finally out. Thank you for reading and I apologize for the wait. Special thanks to everyone who has left kudos, bookmarked and reviewed the story. Huge huge huge props to Petri and J, awesome betas and just plain awesome people. Two chapters left (and one long-ass epilogue) and then we're done. Thank you again for reading everyone!
Standing at the base of the metal scaffolding, the morning sun beating down on his face, Rufio looks up and squints at the billboard along Forest Road, his brown eyes drinking in the advertisement plastered high above. A violent shudder ripples down his body, stemming from the top of his head to the tips of his toes, eliciting the nastiest of frowns to crinkle his young face.

He hadn't thought it possible, but the ad is *even more* cringe-worthy up close.

Seriously.

*Eyesore* doesn't even begin to cover it.

To blatantly display his lack of shame, kooky old Sebastian Bishop—boutique owner and self-proclaimed designer extraordinaire—decided to be the face of his newly launched line of men's underwear. As if that's not horrifying enough, the guy's marketing campaign is turning out to be quite an aggressive promotional undertaking; with ads ranging from full-page newspaper spreads to bus stop posters to radio plugs, and, now, even frickin' *billboards*. So, there's Sebastian right there, all seventeen-feet of him, posing suggestively on a chaise lounge — wearing nothing but a skimpy pair of tight-fitting boxer briefs (stuffed with a sock, obviously), sucking in his ginormous gut, and donning his trademark *I-will-touch-you-in-inappropriate-places* pedophiliac-looking smile. It's enough to give Rufio—-*well*, anyone with a pair of eyes, actually—*a bad case of the heebie-jeebies.*

Frickin' *disturbing.*

He's been thinking—and *saying*—that since he first laid eyes on it two days ago.

*Heck,* he's got it on good authority that most of the people in this godforsaken town are saying it, too. But, of course, none of them have the cajones to do something about it; like always, only the Lost Boys have the balls to act.

"Think one spray can will do?" a wheezy-sounding voice interrupts his gawking, drawing Rufio's eyes away from Sebastian's stuffed junk. Johnny, the eldest of the Bacon triplets, waddles up next to him, his too-small shirt riding up and exposing his not-so-insignificant potbelly. "Jan and John think they saw another one 'side the tool shed back home. Want one of 'em to bike back to the convent and steal it?"

"Nah, this is all we need," Rufio says, patting the can of red spray paint sticking out of his front pocket. "I'm just gonna draw the usual things anyway," he continues, looking up at the ad and surveying his canvas. "Dicks, boobs, hairy balls... y'know, the works."

"And those are 'nuff to get rid of this shitty billboard?"

"The new mayor's a frickin' prude, man. Believe me, paint a bunch of penises on this thing and I bet that Snow White would tear it down herself."

"Alright... if ya say so," Johnny acquiesces easily, never one to question Rufio's authority, not like...
"Have you guys read this?" Thud Butt joins in the fray. Wedging himself between Rufio and Johnny, Rufio's lieutenant unfurls the latest issue of the Daily Mirror.

**THE LOST BOYS EGGS BENEDICT**, the headline screams.

Rufio snorts.

Doing a good, old-fashioned 'drive-by' on their bicycles and throwing eggs at Councilor Benedict —*Humpty Dumpty*, for the uninitiated—outside of Town Hall after he publicly denounced the group on local TV and called them a bunch of bratty scoundrels? Immature, sure, and it probably only served to validate Benedict's opinion of them, but it was damn well worth it, if only for the amount of entertainment it brought the boys.

"That's an awesome shot," Johnny hums in approval, gazing at the picture that accompanied the story. "Kinda looks like he's crying..."

"That's cause he is," Rufio smirks. "You and your brothers should've been there with us, man. It was epic."

"I bet it was," Johnny agrees. "Count us in at the next big egging, though. Got a new target yet?"

"No, but—"

"Sidney Glass," Thud Butt volunteers. "Cause this is bullshit."

"What is?" Johnny asks.

"This!" A frowning Thud Butt smacks the article with the back of his hand, pointing at the part where all the members of the group had been name-checked by the journalist. "Are they kidding me?! Seriously, *Turd Butt*?"

Rufio sniggers. Johnny does, too.

"It's not funny," Thud Butt grits out, crumpling the paper into a ball and chucking it towards the trees nearby. "This is the *fourth* effin' time they got my name wrong. I'm telling you, Glass and the jerks at the Mirror are doing it on purpose!"

"Whatever, dude," Johnny sniffles. Disgusting as ever, the eldest little pig wipes the snot flowing down his round, upturned nose onto the sleeve of his shirt. "It's not like *Thud Butt* isn't ugly 'nuff to begin with," he adds with a shrug.

"Yeah," Rufio seconds, much to his second-in-command's annoyance. "Besides, just be happy they didn't print your curse name, cause that would've been way worse. I dunno 'bout you, but I'd rather be called a turd than *Norberto.*"

Thud Butt's nostrils flare.

Those are fighting words, and Rufio knows it. *Hate* is too mild a word to describe how the kid feels about that name, but... since answering back is synonymous to insubordination—*and* because Thud Butt had only recently recovered from one of Rufio's punishments because of his big mouth—the boy snaps his jaws shut, bottling his anger in, crimson heat washing over his face.

"Okay, enough dilly-dallying. Everybody, gather up!" Rufio claps his hands together, addressing his Lost Boys. In a heartbeat, the young ones are in place and standing at attention, and like a drill sergeant, he marches before them and starts barking out orders. "Ace and Pockets, you two take east.
Bacons, go west. Norberto, come with me and watch from above. You boys know the drill; signal me when you spot anyone coming near. Ready?"

"Aye!"

"Alright, get in position."

"Bangarang!" they crow.

And just like that, the five boys—sans a quiet and sour-faced Thud Butt—scurry towards their respective lookout spots, eager to get their little act of vandalism underway.

"You all set?" Rufio turns to his lieutenant. Unsurprisingly, all he receives in reply is a noncommittal grunt.

_Whatever._

Tugging at the ends of his fingerless gloves, Rufio heads to the metal ladder positioned at the side of the billboard's scaffolding, primed to climb up and begin the intricate task of tagging the ad with graffiti. Brown eyes shine with purpose, his right hand just mere millimeters away from a rung, he—

"I wouldn't do that if I were you..."

_Shit!_

Thud Butt lets out a mousy squeal. And if he were any less the badass he thinks himself to be, Rufio would've peed his pants. Whipping around simultaneously, they come face-to-face with a figure decked in all-black; leaning against a nearby oak tree, watching them openly with his arms crossed on his chest.

Thick leather jacket... hoodie... baggy motorcycle pants... weird-ass 'Friday the 13th' hockey mask... _What the hell...?_ Rufio makes a face.

Beside him, spooked to the core, Thud Butt springs into action. Taking initiative, the kid lets out a loud rooster's crow—a signal to the other Lost Boys to flee since the operation has been compromised. Eager to protect his own ass, Thud Butt scrambles away, and in his haste, accidentally hip-checks Rufio as he makes his escape. Distracted by the stranger's peculiar getup, Rufio hits the ground before his mind can even register that he's falling.

"Sorry, dude!" Thud Butt shouts over his shoulder—not sounding apologetic in the least—and hightails it out of there, without even offering a helping hand.

_Bastard...!_

"Hey, hey, relax... relax. I'm not here to cause trouble," the masked man ever so calmly proclaims, lifting up his hands in a placating gesture as Rufio grumbles, clambering up to his feet. "I just wanna talk to you..."

Being prone to doing stupid pranks does not make one stupid, no matter what anyone says. Smart enough to keep his guard up, Rufio takes a cautious step backwards, consciously maintaining a safe distance from the stranger. Unfortunately, he's not all _that_ smart, though, cause even when Jethro's screaming in his head, telling him to make a run for it, Rufio ends up indulging his curiosity.

"Whaddya want from me? You a cop?"
"Kid, seriously?" the mysterious man snorts. "Do I look like a cop?"

"Nah, but you sure look like a weirdo."

"Says the one whose hair looks like electrified roadkill."

"It's called punk," Rufio harrumphs, mildly offended. Returning the favor, he makes a show of eyeing the smart-ass's Jason-mask and scoffs, "What's yours called, ghetto-serial-killer? What's with the mask?"

"What's with the hair?"

Rufio lifts his chin. "It's my trademark."

"Same here."

They leave it at that.

As subtle as he can, Rufio lets his right hand glide over his back pocket, just enough to get the reassuring feel of the butterfly knife hidden within. "Who the fuck are you, anyway?"

"The guy who just saved your life. You're welcome, by the way."

Huh?

"The hell are you talking about?"

He doesn't get an answer. Not a verbal one, at least. Piquing Rufio's curiosity even further, the cryptic oddball in the mask bends down and picks up a stick lying near his feet, twirling it in his gloved hand for a few beats. And then, without warning, the weirdo chucks it in Rufio's direction.

He doesn't even have to duck to evade the incoming projectile; the stick simply sails over his signature 'do and hits the ladder behind him with a dull clank. To Rufio's astonishment, however, the moment wood hits metal, the stick bursts into purple flame. And within a matter of seconds, it's reduced to nothing but black ash.

Jaw hanging open like an idiot, he blinks dumbly at the plume of smoke swirling up into the air.

What the...?

"Jafar's newest ward," Hockey-mask enlightens, answering the question that's probably flashing on Rufio's face like gaudy neon lights. "It's still a prototype, though. And that's one of the defective ones. I guess flames are his way of setting himself apart from the crap Baba Yaga's hocking around town."

Well... shit. It's bad enough that the old witch's electric wards are popping up everywhere and putting a damper on their fun, now they have to worry about flaming ones too?

Staring at the smoking ashes by his feet, the extremely straight-laced part of Rufio—the part that's mindful of things like consequences, the part that's all Jethro—comes raging out to the surface. "Are these wards even legal? People could get hurt!" But more importantly... "I could've gotten hurt!"

"Yeah, I know, so like I've said, buddy, you're welcome," the man intones in a deep, gravelly voice. Rufio is so distracted that he fails to notice the strange guy take a tentative step forward, followed by another, inching closer and closer to where he's standing. "And now, on that note, I just have to ask... how grateful are you that I saved your ass from literally becoming toast?"
"Hm?"

"How much does your life mean to you?"

His words take a moment to sink in. And when they do, Rufio frowns in confusion before finally tearing his gaze away from the powdery remains of the wooden stick. *That's* when he realizes that he just unwittingly let himself be cornered between the guy and the enchanted scaffold.

Oh... *shit*.

Calm as hell, the masked man stops right in front of him, hands tucked inside his pockets. "Tell me, kid, is saving your ass worth doing me a favor in return?"

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**PRESENT DAY.**

Up and down, the boy's chest rises and falls. Up and down, up and down, and on and on it goes.

It's in perfect sync with the rhythmic beeping coming from the machine the boy's hooked up to, like an orchestral suite playing in the background of a silent film.

"I see you're hovering again..."

Caught unawares, August's hand flies up and grabs hold of the glass partition, anchoring himself to disguise the fact that he practically jumped out of his skin.

Over at the armchair near the bed, a figure stirs under a thick, woolly blanket. It's half past four in the morning, and in the semi-darkness of the quiet ward, August sees a hand reaching out and hitting a switch. A tiny lamp flickers to life and an unkempt Jackson Peters comes into full view. The amnesiac—whose bleary eyes are less striking without all the ridiculous manliner—fixes him in place with a piercing gaze. "From one grown-ass man to another, I just gotta say," Jackson begins, his voice thick and heavy with slumber. "Watching a teenaged boy sleep? Nothing remotely pedo about that, at all."

*Okay...* maybe that wasn't completely undeserved.

"I was ordered by the Sheriff to keep a close watch on Mr. Gold and your brother," August says simply, adopting the professional tone he trained himself to use while on the job. "I'm sorry if I woke you up, Mr. Peters, I was just doing my job. Speaking of which, I had better head back out and watch the door."

And with that, he turns to leave.

...  

...  

...  

"You feel guilty, don't you?"

He stops dead in his tracks.

Shoulders stiffening, walls coming up so high he can almost picture them punching a hole through the ceiling, August calmly turns around and meets Jackson's gaze. "Excuse me?"
"Guilty," the other man enunciates, wetting his chapped lips with his tongue. "You know, I may not be the smart one in my family, and more than half the time I ain't even lucid, but even I know that when someone knocks their head bad, you ain't supposed to move them. But... you bounced Jet around when you carried him up the bridge, didn't you? You probably should've been more careful, but you weren't. So, now, you're thinking you made the bleeding in his brain worse, and that's why he won't wake up," Jackson murmurs, hitting the nail right on the head, so to speak. "You feel guilty."

Unable to maintain eye contact, August works his jaw and scratches at the side of his beard.

And just when he's beginning to wonder if drowning the human brain in booze, day in and day out, will somehow open it up into developing telepathic abilities, Ruby's alcoholic ex-boyfriend admits: "I heard you asking Dr. Whale about it the other day."

"Ah," he breathes out.

That would explain it, then.

Still... the man did bring up an interesting point.

Maybe he does feel slightly culpable; maybe guilt is the reason why visiting the kid for a few minutes during the start of his watch has now become part of his daily routine. Out of all of Emma's deputies, he's always prided himself to be the by-the-book one, and, generally, he knows a sentry should be standing guard outside the ward, not observing the patients within. But, well, here he is, anyway. So, yes, maybe he does feel a tad responsible? It would definitely account for the dark, heavy cloud that's been hounding him since the day of the earthquake.

"You shouldn't, though."

"Hm?"

"Feel guilty," Jackson supplies. "Look, you saved his life. If you hadn't found the little bastard, I probably would have buried my brother already. I... I don't think I ever got to say it, but... thanks."

August stills.

He's the type of person who's always valued his own interests above everything else. At least, he used to. Most people are prone to curse him to damnation than to actually thank him for anything; so, to hear such a genuine expression of gratitude—no matter how simple and awkwardly expressed—is enough to render him momentarily speechless.

An uncomfortable couple of seconds pass before August clears his throat, and finally manages a gruff, "You're welcome." And although he could've easily left it at that, he chooses not to. "For what it's worth," he says quietly, taking a few steps closer so that he's standing at the end Rufio's bed, "I'm sorry, too. You were right; I should've been more careful with him."

"And I should've been doing a better job of looking after him," Jackson says in a perpetually tired tone, propping his legs up on the edge of the bed with a pained wince. "But there's no sense in beating myself up over it, is there? Hell, all this stupid, self-pitying bullshit is what got me in this mess in the first place. So, take my advice: just suck it up and be done with it. My brother's alive, that's the important thing. No one's blaming you, you hear?"

Sometimes, you don't even know that you needed to hear something until somebody finally says it.

"You hear?" Jackson repeats.
Clutching at the side of his neck, August gives the expectant man a weak nod.

"Good," Jackson says flatly, and just like that, the empathy on his face dissolves into complete and utter apathy. "Maybe now that we got that out of the way, you can quit watching me and my brother while we're asleep? This is the third time I've seen you here in the middle of the night, man, and you're creeping me the fuck out."

"All due respect, I wasn't watching you. And technically, it's not the middle of the night, it's morning already," Sheepish or not, August just can't help but point that out. He glances at his wristwatch. "It's ten to five, actually."

"It can be seven for all I care, and I'll still consider it the middle of the damn night," Jackson mumbles, pulling his blanket up to his neck, his eyelids drifting low. "So long as the sun isn't out, it ain't morning."

"Right."

Practically unhinging his jaw, the other man yawns. "Good night, Officer Booth."

"Good morning, Mr. Peters." August returns oh-so stubbornly. And in a remarkable case of history repeating itself, the moment he angles to leave, his ears pick up something that stops him cold in his tracks.

Anyone else would have missed it. It's almost imperceptible, but having been attuned to the noise the machine makes, he's about ninety-percent certain that the beeps coming from it just got a little bit faster.

Though, before he can truly ascertain the small change, he hears something else that makes him whip around in place.

"Th...a... dh...pnn..." Someone rasps out in a voice so rough, it makes sandpaper seem as smooth as a baby's butt. "Whh... khhh... faa... we... tahhh... ab...mmmm..."

Jackson's eyes fly open.

For a beat, they freeze in place.

And they both look towards the bed with wide eyes, gaping at the kid who appears to be stirring from his weeks-long slumber, finally looking to rejoin the land of the living.

"I... I'll go get a doctor..." August backs away, and then runs out.

And he's not entirely sure, but before he gets out of earshot, he thinks he hears a shaky voice say, "Hey, little bro, good morning..."

He snorts.

"About time you woke up, you little bastard."

And only now does the cloud finally lift and melt away.

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**OCTOBER 6, 2012.**

"That depends," Rufio squares his shoulders, putting up a confident, unaffected front. There's no way in hell he'd ever allow himself to be intimidated by anyone, least of all a weirdo in a Halloween
"What kinda favor are we talking about here?"

"Nothing shady, if that's what you're worried about," the guy clarifies. "I just need a place to stay in for about a month and a half. I heard the Lost Boys have a safehouse; got any room in there for one more?"

They do... but only if you consider a cramped walk-in closet a room. "Look, man, if you need a place to crash, go to Granny's." Rufio huffs. "What do you think I am, a frickin' innkeeper?"

"Sorry, lemme rephrase that then," Masked man waves a hand, undeterred. "I need a place to hide in. Help me out?"

**PRESENT DAY.**

Spending most of his years as a freelance writer, sitting by his lonesome at coffee shops just observing people, August isn't all that unaccustomed to blending into the background and just watching from the sidelines; so, that's exactly what he does while Whale and Jackson fuss over a disoriented Rufio.

And over at the opposite corner of the ward, he catches glimpse of a freshly woken Gold doing the same. Through the many glass partitions, their eyes meet, and a slow, lazy grin spreads across the imp's lips. Unimpressed, August tugs a curtain along the length of the glass, obstructing Gold's view of the hubbub surrounding the boy.

And with that, he returns to watching Whale trying to converse with the teen.

"—you tell me your name?"

For a moment, a befuddled Rufio looks around in a panic, his gaze flitting everywhere — from Whale to Jackson to him.

"Can you tell me your name?" Whale asks again in a gentle, soothing tone of voice, proving that his *allegedly* sleazy, personal bedside manners don't affect his professional ones.

"Hhn—" Rufio tries to come up with a coherent reply but fails spectacularly. Recognizing the problem, Whale pours water into a plastic cup and places a straw near Rufio's lips, letting his patient drink and moisten up his desert of a mouth. "Ruhh..." Rufio tries again after nearly emptying the cup, but then stops abruptly, his wide gaze straying to the strange, tattered hat sitting beside the water pitcher.

"Tell the doctor your name," Jackson speaks up, drawing his brother's attention to him. "C'mon, man, you can do it," he encourages, trying—but ultimately failing—in hiding his anxiety from showing on his face.

"It's okay, don't force yourself," Whale pipes in, his tone a much calmer one than Jackson's. "There's no rush, take your time."

If Rufio's feeling a bit pressured, it couldn't have been more obvious from the daunted expression on his face. Inhaling a shaky breath, the kid swallows visibly, takes another quick look in the direction of the water pitcher, and finally rasps out: "J-Jethro Peters. *Jet.*"

"See? What did I say?" Jackson smiles in relief, giving the boy's shoulder a firm pat.

Whale shares a quick, loaded look with August. "Do you go by any other name?"
Rufio looks at the doctor quizzically, looking genuinely confused. "...other n-name?"

"Sorry; other than Jet, I mean."

"...n-no?"

"No?"

The boy shakes his head.

"Are you sure?"

"...yes..."

_Uh - oh._

August runs a hand through his hair, a bad feeling going down his spine.

"Oh... I see... alright. Do you know where you are, Jet?" Whale continues.

"H-hospital?"

"Yes, that's right. You're at the Storybrooke Gen."

"W-why?"

"Are you having trouble remembering?" Whale shines a pen-light onto the kid's pupils. "Do you know what the date is today?"

Rufio frowns. And then looks at Jackson in a helpless, almost-childlike way. His brother nods and gives his hand a comforting squeeze, urging him on. "A-April," the teen answers, brows furrowing deeply, like he's struggling to remember. "April... s-something... 2012..."

In other words, in the kid's head, it's presently way before the curse broke.

August fights the urge to groan.

_Well..._ there goes their number one witness, it seems.

Thinking along the same lines, Whale shoots him another quick look, this one more worried than the last.

And it might just be August's mind playing tricks on him, but he thinks he hears a mocking snigger coming from the other side of the ward. Figment of his imagination or not, he mentally flips Gold the bird.

"W-What's wrong?" Rufio asks, looking at the disquieted expressions of the people surrounding him.

"You were, uh, just a bit off-base there, little bro. It's actually December 7, 2012," Jackson supplies, slowly, calmly, trying not to freak the kid out any further. "Don't sweat it, though. You got your head banged up pretty bad, so it's normal that your memory's all screwed up a little. Right, doc?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes." Whale confirms.

"Banged... up?" Rufio echoes; carefully, almost _fearfully_, he touches the bandages wrapped around his head. The kid's eyes bug out of their sockets in horror. "Where's m-my _hair_?"
"They had to hack it off," Jackson motions in Whale's direction.

Rufio's eyes widen even further. "Where's y-your hand?"

"They had to hack it off, too." Jackson sighs somewhat resentfully, hiding his disability behind his back. "My accident happened months before yours. I'll tell you all about it later,"

"A-Accident? What the h-hell happened to me?" Rufio turns to Whale for answers, his trembling fingers still unable to leave his shaved head.

"There was an earthquake a few weeks ago and you got hurt near Toll Bridge," Whale begins, careful to dish out the severely edited, magic-less version of recent events, since, apparently, there are now two amnesiacs in the Peters family. "You hit your head, and your brother's right, it was pretty bad. There was a bit of swelling and bleeding in your brain, so we had to take you into surgery. It's been a little over two weeks since then, and you were in a coma until now. This one," Whale nods his head towards Jackson, "hasn't left your side the entire time. It's a good thing you're finally awake, because as I'm sure you can tell, your brother needs a shower."

Unsurprisingly, Whale's attempt at levity falls flat.

And while the doctor takes an awkward moment to chuckle at his own joke, August sees a frail Rufio studying an extremely haggard and unkempt Jackson, an indiscernible expression crossing the boy's pale face. It almost seems like a mixture of awe, confusion, and something else...

Sadness?

August frowns, and then inwardly shrugs. He was never good at reading people.

"I want to run a few more tests, keep him under observation for a couple more days," Whale confides in him when they step out into the deserted third-floor hallway, the man's low voice made even more ominous by the thrums coming from the vending machine nearby. "Look, I know you're concerned, but I'm not hitting the panic button just yet. Retrograde amnesia is not uncommon in cases like Rufio's, and it's usually temporary, so don't stress about it too much. Good news is, aside from the memory lapse, his cognitive functions seem fine. His reflexes are a bit slow, but that's understandable given how long he's been unconscious. If everything checks out after all the tests, I think I can discharge him as early as Monday."

"Alright," August murmurs. He glances at the closed doors of the Trinity Ward with wary eyes, and even though the chance of them being overheard by the people inside was zero to nil, he drops his voice to a mere whisper and asks, "Do you think he's faking it?"

"What, memory loss?"

August nods. "I don't know," he admits quietly.

The leader of the Lost Boys has always been outspoken about his hatred for Captain Hook, and as
much as he's notorious for his pranks, Rufio is also infamous for the grudge he harbored against the man. Interestingly enough, the kid August saw inside the ward? The one who didn't recoil from an amnesiac pirate's touch? The one who was all teary-eyed when his mortal enemy gave him the tightest of hugs? That kid looks and acts just like a certain Jethro Peters that Ruby's been telling him about for weeks.

"If he's faking it," August sighs, meeting the other man's gaze, "then he's a damn good liar."

"And you'd know a thing or two about liars," Whale agrees.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, I didn't mean that as a bad thing," the doctor quickly clarifies. "I was just thinking about the movie Disney made about you. You know, that thing about lies making your nose grow longer? I've always come to associate Pinocchio with lying because of that. No offense, Booth."

"None taken." August smiles tightly. That cartoon has never been his favorite, and that particular scene? Takes the damn cake. He's lost count of the times that part—as well as the many pornographic images and videos that it inspired—had brought him grief from his colleagues at the station.

And speaking of said colleagues...

"Excuse me a sec, I guess I better let her know," he tells Whale, excusing himself from the man's company. Pulling out his cellphone, he hits number two on his speed dial.

The person on the other line picks up after seven agonizing rings.

"Boss, it's me."

"..."

"Sheriff?"

For a moment, static is all August gets. And then, he picks up muffled movements accompanying vexed groans. Some heartfelt grumbling follows suit, until finally, he hears an obscenely hoarse voice muttering: "Time... 'sit...?"

"Quarter to six."

"AM?"

"Yes,"

"In the morning?"

"Yes," he answers patiently. "AM means morning, Sheriff."

Predictably, another round of grumbling ensues, and then... "Quarter to six?"

"Yes, boss."

"Then you better be dying, or getting there; if it's not either, I'm hanging up."

"Wait! I'm sorry," August apologizes, rushing in the words before a dial tone starts beeping in his ears. "I just thought you might want to know that Rufio's awake," he says, and then pauses for effect.
"Or, more to the point, Jethro Peters is awake — if you know what I mean."

"..."

"Sheriff?"

"Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

"...well, fu—"

August smiles ruefully, tugging the phone away from his ear.

_Crass_, but that pretty much sums everything up perfectly.

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This infernal machine is taking forever.

A hearty yawn escaping from her lips, fingers drumming impatiently on a polished countertop, Emma looks down and glowers at Regina's newest purchase. She can't figure out if her housemate got a faulty unit, or if it really takes a hundred years for this overpriced contraption—a fancy schmancy Keurig—to do its job and brew one simple cup of coffee; either way, maybe if she glares at it hard enough, it'll take the hint and start hustling. It's a little past six, and the sun's barely out, but she pulled herself out of bed on this chilly Friday morning, because for some ungodly reason, August decided that the best time for her to find out that Rufio woke up from his coma is at the butt-crack of dawn. And not just that, it turns out, the kid doesn't remember jack, too. So, yes, goodness knows she needs some caffeine in her system, if only to offset the irritation that's coursing through her ve–

"G'morning!"

"Fuck!" Emma's heart jumps up to her throat. She almost swipes her favorite mug from the drip tray, too. Luckily, it just spins and rattles in place instead of flying off the counter and breaking into several pieces.

Naturally, the coffeemaker chooses that moment to finally start filling her cup.

Head snapping to the side—just about giving herself whiplash—Emma stares at the disheveled figure standing by the doorway. After a beat, her sleepy brain registers the identity of the intruder, and she finally allows herself to breathe.

"You said the F-word..." Henry yawns heartily, scratching at his belly.

"Well, you scared me," she says in her defense, following the boy with her eyes as he toddles barefoot inside the kitchen, the ends of his oversized Iron Man pajamas dragging across the floor like a pair of mops. Present grumpiness aside, Emma's _not_ the biggest non-morning person in this house. That honor belongs to the kid. So, to see him up and about a full hour _before_ his alarm is set to go off? Miraculous, to say the least. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Couldn't sleep anymore," Henry mutters, disappearing inside the pantry. "Excited, I guess."

"About what?"

"You remember the big fight scene I was telling you about? We're rehearsing it today. They're letting me fight _three_ bad guys at the _same_ time; all the other Knights just get to fight _one._"
"That's awesome," she lauds.

"I know."

"They must think you're really good with a sword,"

"Yeah, Gramps says I'm a genius."

"Are you, now?"

"I am." He says, matter-of-fact.

Emma holds back a snort. Well... at least what he lacks in humility, he more than makes up for in self-assurance.

Shaking her head, a soft grin on her lips, she dumps a buttload of caramel-flavored creamer in her coffee and then some. The whole thing looks like brownish milk when she's done 'corrupting' it, as Regina would often say, but that's just the way Emma likes her coffee — heart palpitations and diabetes, all in one cup. Palming the green mug between both hands, she brings it up to her nose and takes a long, deep whiff, savoring the cavity-inducing aroma that permeates her sense of smell.

"Emma?"

"Hm?" she asks, taking a careful sip, and then humming in contentment as the hot liquid trickles down her throat, spreading warmth throughout her belly.

"May I have some?" Henry sticks his head out of the pantry and waves a box of her chocolate chip-flavored Pop-Tarts, giving her his best approximation of a puppy begging for a treat. "Kinda not in the mood for cereal today."

"Uh... I dunno, kid," Emma crinkles her nose, swallowing another mouthful of coffee. Prone to binging on them in the mornings ever since she was young, she's always considered Pop-Tarts a proper breakfast meal. Regina, on the other hand, thinks quite the opposite. It's one of their many philosophical differences. "I might get in trouble with your mom."

"Good," the grin disappears from Henry's face.

Emma stiffens, pausing mid-sip. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Good," he repeats, stepping out of the pantry. "If mom decides to yell at you, then good."

"Wait a sec, hold up," she lifts a finger, squinting at the poker-faced boy. "You want your mom to yell at me?"

In lieu of a reply, Henry just shrugs.

She'll take that as a tentative yes.

"And may I ask why?" Emma lifts a brow, taking another sip.

"Cause then maybe you guys would actually start talking to each other again."

She chokes on her drink.

"Or, shouting, I dunno, whatever."

"I'm ten, Emma, not stupid," Henry tells her, and the expression on his face is just teeming with such sass, it's as if she's getting some attitude from a miniaturized version of Regina, herself. And speak of the devil... Henry meets her gaze dead-on and asks her point blank, "Is something going on between you and mom?"

Her mug almost slips out of her grasp, so just to be safe, she goes ahead and sets it aside.

"You guys have been acting really weird around each other lately," Henry continues, placing a Pop-Tart inside the toaster oven — even though she hasn't given him her blessings to do so. Either way, she doesn't stop him. More like she couldn't. Really, she's too damn flustered to object. "Mom's all quiet when you're around. You're all quiet when mom's around. And both of you haven't talked, or fought, for days now; it's weird," he makes a face, cranking the timer knob and heating up his sugar-loaded breakfast. Glancing at her sideways, Henry's eyes narrow into slits. "What did you do to mom, anyway?"

"Me?" Emma points to herself, and if she appears to be a little bit more defensive than usual, it's probably because she is. "What makes you think I did something to her?"

"No bear claws." The kid simply says.

"What?"

Henry makes a production of glancing around the room. "I don't see any bear claws anywhere,"

"Bear... claws?"

"The doughnut kind, not the real thing."

"Oh," she breathes out. And then frowns. "What the heck does a bear claw have to do with anything?"

"It's just something I kinda noticed before," he shrugs, still barely making a lick of sense. While his food's still warming up, Henry walks around the island counter and props himself up onto it, making their gazes level. "Remember the time you fell into the lake, and mom did a wind spell to dry your clothes, but she ended up giving you gas instead?"

Seeing how she did nothing but fart and burp and embarrass herself till Regina's wonky magic wore off—two whole days later, mind you—that incident is likely something that she'll never forget.

"What about it?"

"How about when she erased all the Futurama and Walking Dead episodes you recorded on the DVR and replaced them with Antique Roadshow?" Henry continues. "Or, the time your car was blocking hers on the driveway, and instead of just asking you to move it, she had it towed away?"

A dark cloud passes across her face. Oh, she does remember those slights. She also recalls giving Regina the silent treatment shortly afterwards.

"And also when—"

"What are you getting at, kid?" A weary Emma interrupts, eager to just move things along. "Is there a point in here somewhere?"
"There is," he nods.

She looks at him expectantly. "And that's...?" she prods.

"I told you: bear claws," Henry reiterates. "You love them, right?"

"I do..." she says slowly, still struggling to follow his train of thought.

"And after she did those things to you, mom bought bear claws, remember?"

"She did, but so what?"

"So, there aren't any bear claws in here now," he says for the second time, motioning around the kitchen.

Whatever his point is, she's still not seeing it.

Sighing softly, Emma clutches at the side of her neck, massaging away a non-existent kink. She's feeling hopelessly clueless, and it's probably showing on her face — if the impatient little eyeroll the kid gives her is anything to go by. "Emma," Henry says a little huffily, "didn't you ever notice that when mom did something that made you super mad or sad, she went to the bakery and bought you a box of bear claws?"

At the other side of the kitchen, the toaster oven dings.

Emma stills. Then, blinks. And the epiphanic kind of amazement that suddenly washes over her is matched only in intensity by how stupid she also feels.

Here she is, the Sheriff of Storybrooke—who, for all intents and purposes, should be the most perceptive individual in this entire town based on her job description alone—and she didn't even notice Regina's habit of using baked goods as a form of conciliation until their kid pointed it out. Jesus. Maybe she did inherit more of her father's denseness than she'd care to admit.

"So... since there aren't any bear claws in here," Henry points out for the nth time, jumping off the counter and grabbing a plate for his Pop-Tart, "whatever it is that's going on between you and mom, it's obviously your fault."

Yes and no.

She didn't do anything wrong, but... well... she may have said something to Regina that wasn't entirely right.

It depends on whom you ask, really.

"Just say sorry," Henry advises sometime later, when he's finished wolfing down his third Pop-Tart and just wiping away the crumbs from his face. "Cause this is silly, Emma. Whatever you did, just apologize. Mom likes to play hard to get, but she'll forgive you; she always does."

And then he strolls out of the kitchen as casually as he came in, as if he didn't just turn her head inside out with his astuteness.

Just say sorry, huh?

Emma sighs, depositing her empty mug into the sink.

That's easier said than done.
It truly is.

Cause how can you even begin to apologize for professing your fondness to someone? It's not like her and Regina's still undefined, and extremely ambiguous, love-hate relationship isn't complicated enough already.

Like.

Emma re-thinks, pinking up to the tips of her ears.

Like-hate relationship.

Henry's right, though.

This is silly.

It's been days.

Three days, to be exact, since that now infamous joyride around Storybrooke that sent many a tongue wagging about her and Regina's alleged romance. And if she's counting, also, two days since Emma gamely endured the relentless teasing of her deputies; from Leroy and August's over-the-top nuzzling while they did their sleazy reenactment of the bike ride, to Ruby's shit-eating grin whenever their gazes met over their desks. On top of it all, it's been a day since she had to sit through the most exhausting brunch she's ever had with her parents; with Mary Margaret and David blathering on and on about the pros and cons—but mostly just the cons—of riding motorcycles. And, also, Evil Queens. Of course, the latter was more implied by the stammering, purple-faced pair than said upfront, even though no amount of subtlety could've lessened the awkwardness of the whole situation. Really. Getting the birds and bees talk would've been a million times less painful for everyone involved.

It's been a hell of a few days, and so much has happened to Emma since that fateful afternoon. But... truth be told, it's what hasn't happened that's been bothering her the most.

Ever since her spur-of-the-moment declaration at Sherwood Park, she and Regina haven't been speaking to each other.

Hell, they can't even look at each other.

And even if Emma keeps telling herself otherwise, it's bothering her more than she'd care to admit.

Because never in a million years did she ever think that she'd care so much about not being able to speak with somebody else. Especially if that somebody happens to be Regina frickin' Mills.

But, well, this is Storybrooke after all, and stranger things have happened.

Still, that doesn't make accepting things any easier. Denial, she finds, is both her salvation and her downfall.
This evening's family movie night is no different from the dinners they've been having this past couple of nights, quiet and awkward. Gone are Emma's colorful, off-hand commentaries while the villain manages to outsmart the heroes, and in effect, so are Regina's snippy remarks to shush her up. Henry, bless him, tries extra hard to initiate a conversation between her and Regina, he truly does, even if he's never been the biggest fan of talking during superhero movies. Towards the middle of the flick, however, he throws in the towel and gives up. It's fairly obvious that their mutual love for their child is not enough to force them to get over themselves, grow a pair of steel ovaries, and just talk.

The movie couldn't have ended fast enough for everyone in the household.

As soon as the screen fades to black and the ending theme begins to play, Regina grabs hold of her decanter and pours herself a glass of cider. Emma, on the other hand, reaches for the lamp at her side and flicks it on, bathing her corner of the living room with soft, muted light. The heat from someone's glare prickles at the back of her neck, and she isn't all that surprised when she turns around and finds the kid leveling her with a disapproving frown.

She never saw herself a coward. And prone to hero-worshipping her for being the White Knight, Henry never did either.

Well... not until tonight at least, judging from the guilt-inducing look flashing in his eyes.

Ah... crap.

"I don't know why it's so hard for you to just say you-know-what," Henry tells her, low and quiet, shaking his head at her apparent cowardice.

"Look, kid, it's com—" she starts to say, but before she can even finish, an obviously disappointed Henry bounds out of the couch and heads for the stairs, leaving her all alone with Regina.

Running a hand down her face, Emma lets out a sigh. Over at the opposite corner of the sofa, Regina takes a long sip from her drink and sighs too.

.

.

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And then, like magnets, their eyes meet and lock onto each other.

Regina stills. Emma does too.

Rather unsurprisingly, they quickly avert their gazes.

The awkwardness between them is stifling as ever, it seems. Despite that, she finds it quite remarkable how neither one of them makes a move to leave the room.

Maybe they're both masochists.
Or... maybe she's not the only one who's beginning to yearn for the other's company.

Maybe... maybe... maybe.

Emma drowned once when she was eight-years-old.

It happened at a local YMCA; one of her foster brothers had promised to teach her how to swim — unfortunately for her, he never told her that his method involved catching her off-guard and kicking her into the deep end of the pool. That plan of his was as flawed as it was nearly fatal. A teenage lifeguard saved her, thank God, but other than the scary memory of feeling like her lungs were burning, Emma doesn't remember much about that harrowing, near-death experience. It's quite similar to her limited recollection of the fire that broke out at Town Hall—courtesy of a shady Gold and his machinations—the night before the big Sheriff debate. Apart from the doe-eyed, unbelieving look on Regina's face when she came back for the injured woman, it's the feeling of her airways constricting and her chest tightening that stayed with Emma the most. Like déjà vu, it was eerily similar to what she felt on that fateful day at the overcrowded community pool.

So, yes, she's experienced what it feels like to suffocate from both water and smoke, and while she never bothered with which one was worse, it wasn't until this very moment—as the credits continue to roll on the screen and Regina swirls the cider in her glass—that Emma has an epiphany: the answer's neither.

Between a copious amount of water or thick smoke assaulting her lungs, neither was more suffocating than this silence.

Because the kind of silence existing between the two of them this evening is especially smothering. It's not the comfortable type; it's not the easy one. It's the kind that weighs down on one's shoulders, heavy and exhausting; the kind of silence that's just begging to be filled.

Mostly because it's teeming with all the things that need to be said.

The proverbial elephant in the room, as some people would say.

Stealing a glance at the woman to her right, Emma rubs a hand behind her neck.

It's a big frickin' elephant.

And it's sitting on her chest, squeezing the air out of her lungs like nobody's business.

There are so many things she wants to say.

Little things, like how the Daily Mirror's saying it's gonna snow on Sunday, so she probably needs to store her bike in the garage soon, and big things, like Regina getting asked to light the ceremonial bonfire at the upcoming Lantern Festival, or Rufio waking up this morning as Jethro Peters, having little to no recollection of Argos, the Lost Boys, or Neverland.

Hell, maybe even...

You-know-what... Henry's words echo in her ears.

Emma chews on her lower lip.

Yes, there're a million and one things she wants to say—little things, big things—but when she opens
her mouth, not a single one of them manages to make it out of her lips. The words all catch in her
throat and die on her tongue.

Regina finishes her drink and leaves.

Henry's disappointed face flashes in her mind's eye.

And Emma feels like an even bigger coward.

But... she's not a coward. Never was, never will be.

So, Emma does the first thing that comes to mind before she completely loses her nerve:

She follows after Regina.

_Just say sor--_

"I let the kid eat Pop-Tarts for breakfast this morning," she blurts out the instant she reaches the foot
of the staircase. It's not what she meant to say, but it's what comes out, so, hell, she's just going to
stick with it. Taken by surprise, Regina falters mid-step and stops halfway up the stairs, turning
around and looking down at her with confusion painted on her face.

"He told me he wanted some and I didn't stop him," Emma continues, basically digging her own
grave, consequences be damned. "And I didn't just let him have seconds, I let him have _thirds_"

The muscle on the side of Regina's face tics involuntarily. The woman's a complete stickler when it
comes to what their child eats, as any good parent should be.

_Pop-Tarts are unhealthy because they have little to no nutritional value considering the obscene amount of_

other woman told her once in the past. Or, twice. Well, probably closer to a thousand times.

"I even gave him a box to bring to school," Emma finishes, observing the almost imperceptible way
Regina's jaw tightens.

Steeling herself, Emma plants both feet on the floor and waits with bated breath, anticipating a huge
torrent of indignation to come slamming her way.

It never comes.

The mind-numbing silence continues to hang over them like a thick fog, squeezing around her neck
like a noose.

"Aren't you gonna say something?" Emma prompts, unable to mask the pathetic little whine in her
voice. "Anything?"

Regina parts her lips, looking to be on the verge of a reproachful remark, but at the last second, the
woman decides against it and just turns around, intending to leave her with nothing but a huffy,
disapproving look.

_Seriously?_

Emma closes her eyes and balls her hands into fists. If they're playing a game of chicken, it's
clearly _she_ who balked first, not the brunette. And despite Emma setting aside her pride, Regina
doesn't budge. One can never accuse the former Evil Queen of making things any easier for people,
huh?
"I'm sorry!" Emma cries out in desperation, stopping Regina in her tracks for the second time. Exhaling a shaky breath, she opens her eyes and takes a step up the stairs, her hand seeking purchase on the banister, holding on to it like a vice. "I'm sorry," she says again, quieter, but no less firm. "Not for the Pop-Tarts, though," she clarifies. "I'm sorry about the other day, about what I told you at the park. When I said that I... well, that I like you."

The slight annoyance on Regina's face melts away in place of something else; an inscrutable look flickering in her eyes. Vulnerability, perhaps? The tiny chink in her armor.

"I–I mean, I'm not sorry for saying it. And I'm not saying that I didn't mean it. But I just," she pauses, grappling for the right words. Nothing comes. And for a second, she wishes she'd inherited even half of her mother's eloquence, if only to stop feeling like a bumbling fool now and again. Inhaling a deep breath, Emma takes a moment to gather her thoughts, and then tries again. "Look, if I made you uncomfortable, if you feel that I put you in a damn awkward position, then I'm really, really sorry."

She takes one more step up. And then another. And in a gentler, almost pleading tone of voice, Emma carries on, "But we can't keep doing this, Regina. You can't keep doing this. You can't ignore me forever. We work together, we live under the same roof. And for heaven's sake, we share a kid— who, by the way, is starting to notice something's up between the two of us."

Regina's wary gaze flits up to their son's bedroom door, a worried little crease manifesting itself between her brows. Still, the woman remains mum. Emma sighs inwardly. And Regina has the nerve to call her stubborn?

"So, if you want to, we can try to pretend it never happened; forget I even said it. It's your call; just say the word. Cause you know what, hearing you snark at me, or be mean to me, or poke fun at everything I do or say, is better than this." Emma waves her hands between the two of them as she continues to climb up the stairs, gesturing at the nothingness and silence that define every single one of their interactions—or lack, thereof—since her slip at the park. "This no talking thing? I don't know about you, but it's driving me up the wall."

She stops right in front of Regina and holds the woman's gaze unflinchingly, her confidence spurred on by desperation than anything else. "Honestly, Regina," she murmurs softly. "As much as I complain about you being a pain in the ass, I like it when you're actually being a pain in my ass. So, please, just... you know... say something. Anything..."

And as expected, Regina being Regina, says nothing.

Not a damn thing.

The infuriating woman just turns on her heels and makes her way up the rest of the staircase, leaving an utterly dejected—and now, confused—Emma in her wake.

Sleep does not visit her that night.

Apparently, being bone-tired is no match for feeling sorely disappointed.

So, for the good part of the evening, Emma just lies in bed and replays everything in her head, feeling more foolish and forlorn by the minute.

Because Jesus effin' Christ, god forbid Regina Mills actually sets her pride aside for one measly second, act like a grown woman, and just... just...
Just talk... and act... and, hell, just be her Regina again.

Emma pulls a pillow over her face, muffling a frustrated yell.

The following morning, she drags her weary self up to the kitchen and stumbles upon her stash of Pop-Tarts in the trashcan. The very same trashcan, mind you, that's always been kept out of sight in the cabinet under the sink, but for some reason or another, is now lying in full display right by the basement door. To add insult to injury, the snacks are unboxed and out of their wrappers; which basically means they haven't only been compromised, but they've also been made unsalvageable.

Over by the breakfast table, a relaxed Regina sips her coffee and leisurely flips a page of today's Daily Mirror, looking about as innocent as a teething puppy in a shoe closet.

And as she stares down at the contents of the bin and inwardly laments the grim fate of her precious Pop-Tarts, Emma pinches her eyes shut and counts to ten in her head. There's no bigger sin than wasting food. And if the food in question happens to be of the junk variety and hers to boot, well, that's an even bigger crime, isn't it? Even if it was done as punishment for spoiling their son's diet.

"Seriously, Regina? This is—" Emma grits out, but then trails off; the words dying pathetically on her lips like air coming out of a deflating balloon. Because as soon as she opens her eyes, she spots it: a stark white box sitting on the island counter, the easily recognizable logo of the bakery that's printed on it visible from a mile away.

Closer inspection of the said box confirms what Emma already knows: it contains bear claws. A dozen of them. And thanks to Henry, she now sees the sugar-loaded pastries for what they truly are: an olive branch—an apology—wrapped in dough, sprinkled with almonds and raisins, and glazed with Regina Mills' proclivity to make peace through bribery.

Sweet, sweet bribery.

And like a salve on a Regina-shaped burn, somehow, someway, it rights everything that feels wrong in Emma's world. And no amount of hurt feelings, bruised egos, and torturous hours spent tossing and turning in bed, can stop the smile that's spreading like wildfire across Emma's lips. And this grin of hers stays on while she makes herself a cup of coffee. It gets even larger when she takes out the biggest bear claw from the box. And it reaches epic, face-splitting proportions when she finally plops down across from Regina at the table, green mug in one hand and gigantic bear claw in another.

Her smile doesn't leave her face even while she eats, and barely two minutes into her breakfast, Regina's mask of nonchalance cracks under duress from Emma's blatant grinning. And true to form, despite days of avoiding interacting with her as if it were a plague, the first thing out of the woman's lips is a short and reproachful: "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"That." Regina sighs, setting aside her newspaper. "If you must persist on grinning like a fool, Miss Swan, then I insist that you stop looking at me while you're doing so."

"Why?"

"It's distracting,"

"You find me distracting?"
The look she receives is anything but amused. "Stop it," Regina tells her again, bristling in her seat, the lightest of red tints coloring her cheeks.

Emma's smile grows even bigger, if that's even possible. "I can't, sorry. You see, your majesty, people generally tend to smile when they're happy."

Regina's eyebrow rises, slow and deliberate. "You're happy?"

"Obviously."

"That I disposed of those vile snacks that you love so much?" The woman challenges, a wicked little gleam in her eyes.

"Well, not so much about that, no. And that's not what I'm smiling about and you know it," Emma calls Regina out on her not-so-subtle attempt at feigning ignorance.

The brunette, for her part, just gives her an unimpressed look instead of denying things outright like they both would've normally done. "They're only bear claws, Miss Swan."

But they're not only bear claws, they're more than that, and they both know it.

So, Emma just shrugs. "What can I say, I'm very easy to please—"

"That much is evident, my dear."

"—and appease."

Regina clamps her lips shut.

Letting out a soft hum, Emma takes a huge chomp out of her half-eaten bear claw and smiles even brightly at the woman. "Wanna bite?" she offers generously.

"No, thank you."

"C'mon, have some..." Emma goads, insistent as ever.

"No."

"They're really good."

"Considering how much that Martha Woodberry charges for one box, they have no right to be anything but," Regina says haughtily, swatting away Emma's outstretched hand.

"Fine, have it your way," she stuffs the remaining piece of the pastry in her mouth. "Your loss."

"Your gain." Regina retorts, watching her chew with a disapproving frown. "Those things are riddled with calories, princess, they're no better than those disgusting things I threw away."

"Then why buy them, then?"

"Because heaven forbid, you'd like anything remotely healthy and—" Regina stops abruptly, catching herself.

It's too late, though.

Realizing just what she'd revealed, Regina's lips pucker in distaste.
Emma's smile, however, just broadens.

And even when the temptation to rub this on Regina's face is strong, Emma graciously lets a moment pass and allows her housemate to regain her composure. "So..." she begins after the redness on Regina's face recedes.

"So...?"

"Bear claws."

The brunette's wariness is apparent from the long, drawn-out sigh that leaves Regina's lungs. "What about them?"

"They do mean 'clean slate', don't they?"

Sighing softly, Regina drinks from her cup, meeting her gaze over its brim. "No,"

Emma stops mid-chew. "No?"

"No," Regina confirms, the vein protruding on her forehead telling Emma that whatever it is that Regina is about to say, it's taking a significant amount of effort to get out. "Miss Swan, if your definition of 'clean slate' is still sweeping everything under a rug and pretending it never happened — then my answer is no," Regina says, frowning slightly, as if what she's admitting is killing her a little inside. "Those bear claws aren't cleaning any slates, so to speak."

For a moment, Emma's brain blanks out.

Because if she understands what Regina just said correctly, it seems her previous night's offer of glossing over her accidental confession at the park has just been rebuffed. It's... unexpected. Especially coming from someone as guarded as Regina.

The food in her mouth has barely been masticated, but Emma swallows it anyway. It almost catches in her throat, but she forces it down so she doesn't choke. "So, uh," Emma straightens, sloppily brushing off the crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand. "Do you wanna talk about what I said at the pa—"

"No." Regina is quick to cut her off. And Emma would've been severely let down if her ears didn't pick up the murmured, "Not yet, at least," that comes out of Regina's lips as the woman takes another sip of coffee.

She'll take that.

Eventually is better than never; hell, it may even be considered progress for two painfully stubborn and hopeless people who just can't seem to get their act together.

So, yeah, it's not nothing.

It's most definitely something.

Nibbling away at her second bear claw, Emma leans back into her chair and sighs contentedly. "You have no idea how much I've missed this,"

A pair of wide, brown eyes snap up to meet hers.

"I'm talking about the bear claws," she clarifies, motioning at the pastry in her hand. "I haven't had
these in a long time."

Regina hums in acknowledgment and goes back to perusing the paper's lifestyle section, visibly relaxing—or deflating—depending on how one chooses to interpret what they see.

And as Emma chews on her food, she tilts her head slightly and studies her companion's peculiar demeanor. "Oh, fine," she sighs after a moment, feeling reckless enough to test the waters. "I missed you, too."

The look on Regina's face? *Priceless.*

The look on her face when a flushed Regina *accidentally* flicks a wrist and sends a raisin from the bear claw inside her mouth? *Golden.*

And horror upon horrors, even though it goes inside her mouth, because Emma had been in the middle of breathing in air when it happened, the raisin decides to come out through her nose.

It lands in the middle of the table with laser-like precision. And for a moment, nobody moves. Or even breathes.

Until Regina decides to break character and laugh, that is. *Well...* it's not a laugh, per se. It's more of a *cackle.* And it's such a rich, genuinely heartfelt sound that even a pajama-clad Henry decides to plod out of his bedroom and come down to the kitchen, curiosity and fascination intermingling on his face.

In spite of herself, and the slight embarrassment she still feels, Emma begins to chuckle, too. Even Henry, who has no clue what's gotten his mothers so happy, decides to join in.

And it is in this very simple moment of lightheartedness and laughter that Emma finally realizes the truth:

The void that's always been present in her chest has already been filled. Since she's moved into this town, the loneliness that plagued her for years and years has all but disappeared.

And even though Emma tells herself every day—from the very first moment she decided to stay in this place for good—that Storybrooke is where she's meant to be, this is the very first time she actually believes it.

Here, in this moment, with her *family.*

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Christmas is exactly fifteen days away.

Life's different now, and for the first time in a long, long while, she's actually looking forward to the holidays. She's got friends and family to buy gifts for, a whole house and tree to decorate, and two very special people to spend Christmas morning with — and she's not just talking about her usual holiday buddies Johnnie, Jack or Jim. So, yes, Emma's anticipating this so-called season of joy with a zeal that's been missing in her life for ages... even if it *has* been extremely disappointing to find out that Santa Clause *is* real, and that he happens to be the maddeningly disagreeable judge that seems to get a kick out of putting her department through hell.

And since we're on the topic of that not-so-jolly old man...

"Hey, Rubes?" Emma calls out, glancing up from the Christmas list she's writing to look at the woman who's hard at work sorting out permit applications. "What's the update on that ward-lock
incident? Is Judge Poole's wife filing a suit against Jafar?"

"I'm not sure, but they're probably going to settle out of court. Their lawyers have been meeting at the diner all week. Granny says that Jafar might cough up at least seven figures," Ruby reveals as she, in rapid succession, stamps several permits with the department's seal. "He's claiming that the ones that catch fire are the prototypes that he gave away as samples a few months ago, but the judge, and even Snow, are pressuring him to issue a complete product recall."

"That greedy bastard ain't gonna do that; he does that, he goes bankrupt," a sleepy Leroy chimes in from one of the beds, the dwarf still prone to using his old jail cell as a second bedroom while he's working nights. "Baba Yaga's gonna make a killing if Jafar goes out of business."

"What're you guys talking about?" a newly arrived August inquires, fresh from his trip to the Peters' household at Sheppard Lane. Fluffing out his flattened hair, he places his helmet on his desk and plunks down on his chair with a worn breath. "Who's going out of business?"

"Jafar," Ruby supplies.

"If he issues a complete product recall," Leroy stresses. "And that ain't gonna happen, I tell ya."

"How's the kid?" Emma asks August.

"He's... okay, I guess. Memory's still shot and he's been complaining of headaches, but he seems happy to be back home."

"That's good. And his brother?"

"Been sober since Friday, if you can believe that," August shares, throwing a quick, meaningful glance in Ruby's direction. The woman, however, does not appear to notice the look he's giving her — or, at least, is pretending not to. So, August just shifts his attention back to Emma. "The whole time I was doing the home check, Jackson kept telling me to pass on to you that Rufio won't go running off with the Lost Boys again, he'll make sure of it."

"He damn well better," Leroy grumbles. Emma hums softly in agreement, wishing for the best.

See, Whale had given Rufio the all-clear over the weekend, and had the boy discharged from the hospital yesterday morning. And after discussing what to do with the kid ad nauseum with Regina and her deputies, Emma ended up listening to Ruby's suggestion and offered a deal with Jackson. The terms were simple enough: they won't book Rufio for his numerous misdemeanor offenses in exchange for Jackson keeping a close eye on the kid, and making sure that Rufio, or *Jethro*, stays the hell away from his old gang. With luck, the Lost Boys would disband without their leader, and its members would go back to being rambunctious children instead of pint-sized hoodlums. Not surprisingly, Jackson readily agreed. The brothers will still be monitored twice a day by August, but they're generally free to move around as they please. It's a damn risky gamble, Emma knows this, but it's one she's hoping would pay off in the long run.

Everyone deserves a second chance, right?

*Well... not everyone.* Case in point, *Mr. Gold.* But as undeserving of a second chance as that imp might be—thanks to a very flawed justice system and an army of presumably, very expensive lawyers—Gold's getting off with just a slap on the wrist and a couple of fines. Granted, very hefty fines, but *still.* It just goes to show how utterly ridiculous it is to enforce real-world laws in a magical town. Last time Emma checked—and she checked a *lot*—there were no laws against destroying two
legendary blades, and consequently, causing an earthquake and screwing over Storybrooke. So, restricted by the same system that gives her authority, even if it rankles her ass to no apparent end, Gold's getting away with murder and there's nothing she can do about it.

Twirling the emerald ring on her finger, Emma just sighs. And rather than dwell on the issue and let it ruin this blissfully uneventful Tuesday morning, she picks up her pen and goes back to her list. Christmas shopping might be frustratingly tedious, but at least it won't be as stressful as trying to incarcerate a slippery imp.

Tapping her pen at the empty space beside the names of her deputies, she starts to brainstorm for gifts. Barely two minutes into the task, Emma finds her mind becoming tired of drawing blanks, so she goes up and addresses the three. "What do you guys want for Christmas?"

"A raise," Ruby provides.

"Money," Leroy mumbles.

"What they said," August nods.

And Emma being a very, very good boss, does only what a good boss would do: she laughs. Mightily, at that.

"We're serious," Ruby chides, her expression puckering in mock offense. "Don't you think it's high-time for us to get one, Em? How many more near-death experiences do we have to face before this town decides to reward us a little bit?"

"Hey, you're preaching to the choir, Rubes," Emma is quick to point out. "Why do you think I've been sucking up to Mary Margaret and Worthington for weeks? A pay increase is part of my big plan when they approve our next budget."

That seems to appease the three a little bit.

"Now, seriously," she begins anew. "What do you guys want for Christmas? Remember though, I'm still a few thousand dollars poorer since I doubt that bastard stalker of mine can write checks from beyond the grave, so don't go crazy."

"I want a total spa package at Nail Tropics."

Obviously, Ruby did not hear what she'd just said. However, ridiculously pricey or not, the girl does deserve some pampering. Goodness knows this place would've fallen apart without Ruby helping her run things. So, with that in mind, Emma offers no protests. "What about you, August?"

"Uh... I don't know. Anything, I guess," he says while he sorts through the station's mail, perhaps trying to be considerate — but only succeeding in looking indecisive and annoyingly unhelpful. A second later, much to Emma's relief, August changes his tune, "Actually... a gift card from the autoshop would be nice," he smiles hopefully. "I'm planning on modding my bike this winter."

"Alright," she says, writing a hasty, 'Auto World gift card' beside his name. "And you, Leroy?"

Lying flat on his back, hands resting behind his head, and the newest issue of Motor Trend placed on his belly, the dwarf in question just yawns heartily and declares: "I want something that can go from 0 to 250 in two seconds flat."
"Zero to two-fifty, got it," Emma murmurs, scribbling on her list, "Leroy: weighing scale."

August snorts.

"Not funny," the dwarf huffs.


"Oh!" Ruby suddenly pipes up, much to everyone's surprise. "Emma, I ran into Mary Margaret at the diner this morning..."

"Okay?"

"She wanted me to ask you if you were willing to escort—her words, not mine—an old friend of hers at the festival this Friday? I think she said he works at the hardware store; cute guy, shaved head, big arms..."

Oh, Jesus Christ.

The urge to roll her eyes is so damn powerful, Emma doesn't even bother fighting it. Since the joyride, her mother's efforts to set her up with one of her so-called 'friends'—who are probably just random people Mary Margaret picked off the street—has not only grown in intensity, it's quadrupled in levels of absurdity, too.

Although...

Emma squints her eyes in thought. Hardware store, huh? "I think I know him..."

"You do?"

"Mhmm," she nods. "I met him once. Mike, right?"

"Yeah... I think that's what she said his name was," Ruby confirms, chewing on her lower lip in a thoughtful manner. "When did you guys meet?"

"About two, three months ago during a night patrol. He was out on a date, and things were getting hot and heavy in his car, so I had to step in. I remember he was parked along the pier, and I asked him to move things indoors before the kids at Seafood Shuffle start asking their parents if they could ride the bouncing car."

"Ooh," Ruby straightens up, permit applications momentarily forgotten, her deputy looking absolutely electrified at the prospect of fresh gossip. "Who was he getting down and dirty with?"

Archie.

"I don't know," Emma says instead, lying through her teeth. She did give Archie her word, after all. And as far as she's concerned, he's the only one who gets to decide just when, and how, he'll come out and share his sexuality with others.

Emma sighs in her head.

If only people would give her the same level of respect she's giving Regina's therapist. She's practically being yanked out of her own "closet" by just about everyone with regards to her attraction to Regina, and it's not a very pleasant experience.

"Anyway, tell MM I can't go to the festival with Mike," she tells Ruby,
writing 'dinner for two, Seafood Shuffle' beside Archie's name.

"Why not?"

"Cause not only am I not interested in getting pimped out by my own parents, I'm actually going to the festival with someone else."

Ruby and August exchange looks. "Who?" they both pry.

Emma doesn't even think before answering, it just comes out naturally: "Regina, who else?"

It gets so damn quiet all of a sudden, that the only thing missing is the sound of crickets chirping.

And then, shattering the stillness in the room, August sighs in defeat and pulls out a wad of cash from his wallet. Like a sad little puppy, he hands over half to a grinning Ruby and then throws the rest on a chuckling Leroy's desk.

Seriously?

Emma groans. If they're being this brazenly insubordinate, maybe she needs to re-think that pay hike they're demanding. "You know, from all the money you've been making at my expense, I think it's only fair that I start getting a cut from your winnings," she grumbles at Ruby.

Pocketing about forty bucks from the looks of it, Ruby just flashes her a salacious grin and does that whole eyebrow-wagging thing. "So... did you ask Regina out?"

"No."

"She asked you, then?"

Yes and no.

"She didn't ask me out," Emma mumbles feebly, finding herself squirming in her seat. "She told me to go with her."

Ordered, really.

"She got asked to light the bonfire this year, remember? So, unless you guys want the ceremonial bonfire to become a roasting, I better be there to hold Regina's hand and make sure her magic won't wonkify everything, and, you know, accidentally set everyone on fire."

"Okay... that's perfectly acceptable," Ruby agrees, though still looking a tad unconvinced. "But... you do know that the reason why the kids get to have their own thing at the school that very same night, is because the Lantern Festival is a couples event, right?"

What?

Emma stops drawing circles on her list. "It is?"

"It is," Ruby nods.
"It is?" August mimics.

Leroy clears his throat.

"Oh! Right, right, it is," August nods vigorously. "I think I heard my dad say something about that, yeah. It's a date night."

...huh.

"Did he also tell you about the wish thing?" Ruby turns to August, who then promptly shakes his head in the negative. "You see, towards the end of the festival, someone would ring a bell, and that's the signal for everyone to start lighting their balloon lanterns and releasing them into the sky. You're supposed to make a wish with your special someone, and they say it will come true, but only if you seal it with a kiss."

...double huh.

"Better bring some mints, Sheriff," Leroy snorts. "But stick with Tic-Tacs. Chewing on gum will make you fart, I shit you not."

Butterflies start fluttering in Emma's stomach; her mind racing a mile a minute.

Just the mere thought of kissing Regina? Again? Without a convenient excuse—like, say, performing an uber-important, lifesaving protection spell—to hide behind? It's... daunting.

And it's enough to make her mouth go bone dry.

But before her nerves can swallow her whole, Emma narrows her eyes at the two cherubic faces smiling at her from the bullpen, and also at that one smirking devil inside the jail cell. "Aren't all of you going, too? Who're your dates, then?"

Leroy opens his mouth to speak, but Emma beats him to the punch. "Lemme guess, you're following Sister Astrid around like a puppy for the entire evening? Let's be honest here, Leroy, I'm pretty sure your definition of a date fits everyone else's description of stalking."

A grinning August hides his amusement by coughing on a fist. Ruby, who's always been a little more brazen, throws her head back and laughs gregariously.

"I volunteered to do security for the whole damn thing, actually," a beet red Leroy harrumphs, propping his torso up with his elbows. "So, the way I see it, the only one who's going to be following anyone around like a puppy is you, sister."

He's got her there.

But Leroy's not done, it seems. "Not like you don't do that every single day, anyway. Everyone knows you're the Evil Queen's bi—"

Emma's eyes widen. So does Ruby's and August's.

"—better half," Leroy finishes lamely, catching himself at the last second and averting a sure-fire mess, much to everyone's relief.
"Anyway," Ruby speaks up, taking point before things get awkward. "Are you excited?"

She's petrified, actually.

"No," Emma says. That's lie number two for today. Her tummy's doing somersaults, and she kinda feels like throwing up, but in spite of her frayed nerves, there's anticipation lying just below the surface. But damn if she admits that to her deputies and give them more ammunition to torture her with.

"No?"

"No," she confirms.

"But there's going to be some kissing..."

The warmth that spreads across her face is enough to make Ruby smile like a damn Cheshire cat.

"You're not excited about the kissing?" her deputy continues to goad.

"N-no."

"Oh, well. That's good, I suppose," Ruby then says. "Cause I just made that part up."

Emma's face falls so hard and so fast, she might have just given herself whiplash.

"Kidding!"

The three assholes snigger.

Emma rolls her eyes.

Jerks.

The abuse continues for the next couple of hours, and no amount of glaring and huffing and barking things like: 'stop it,' and 'shut it,' and 'get back to work,' can seem to make the trio quit their relentless teasing. So, when noon rolls around and lunch hour begins, Emma grabs her brown bag and water bottle and makes a run for it.

Despite reeking of floor wax and disinfectant, the interrogation room is nice and quiet; a welcome change to the incessant hooting and hollering that she left behind at the office. And with her back leaning against the cool metal seat and her booted feet resting on the table, Emma is able to enjoy her Chipotle Chicken Panini in peace.

Time alone... truly relaxing and invigorating; too bad, it's also just as fleeting. After all, hiding is a pointless endeavor when one of the people you're trying to avoid happens to have superhuman tracking abilities.

"Hey..."

She sighs, glancing towards the door. "Hey..."

"Are you angry?" Ruby asks quietly as she leans against the doorframe, arms folded across her chest.

"No."
"Really? Cause you're wearing your pissy face again..."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"I'm not wearing my pissy face," an exhausted Emma swallows the last bite of her lunch, wiping off the chipotle sauce on her chin a little too roughly that the napkin chafes her skin. "I don't even have a pissy face. This is just my usual, normal face."

"You mean you normally look pissy?"

"I don't have a pissy face!"


"..."

"You okay?"

Patience... she needs it. Pinching the bridge of her nose, Emma expels a deep, cleansing breath from her lungs. "Haven't you had your fun already, Ruby? Did you honestly follow me here just to annoy me some more?"

Uncrossing her arms, her deputy takes several slow steps into the dimly lit room and casually perches herself at the edge of the table, sitting close to her. "You know," Ruby begins softly, meeting her wary gaze. "The guys and I, we annoy you cause we love you."

"You annoy me 'cause you want to," Emma returns with a bitter grumble. "And because you enjoy it."

Not bothering with a denial, Ruby just flashes her the tiniest of smiles, looking coy as hell.

Balling her now empty panini wrapper, Emma throws it at the trash can. It hits the rim and bounces out, adding to her frustrations. "Seriously, what do you want?"

"Per your orders, Sheriff, I sent Snow a text a few hours ago telling her that you won't be escorting Mike to the festival. She asked why, and I kinda let it slip that you were going with Regina."

Emma suppresses a groan.

Mary Margaret probably ruptured an aneurysm.

"Needless to say, I think she popped a hernia."

Close enough.

"She came by a few minutes ago, we told her you were out on patrol. That's probably her," Ruby ventures a guess, the werewolf's sharp hearing picking up the faint buzzing of Emma's phone coming from inside her pocket. True enough, it's her mother. Never been used, or comfortable, in playing the part of the dutiful daughter, Emma lets it go to voicemail. The last thing she wants to suffer through right now is one of Mary Margaret's long-winded, 'why don't you like the parental-approved penis I'm throwing at you?' spiels.

It's draining.
And the exhausted sigh that leaves Emma lips is one that cannot be helped.

"She'll come around... eventually," Ruby says in an attempt to give comfort, reaching a hand out and gently squeezing her shoulder. "Give her time, she's still in a bit of denial about you and Regina."

'A bit' is a gross understatement. Besides...

"There's no 'me and Regina'..." Emma counters stubbornly, though it's a half-hearted attempt at best.

"Not yet, at least," Ruby declares. "C'mon, even you would have to know by now that it's not a question of if, it's a question of when. It's only a matter of time, and judging from recent developments, I'd say: sooner rather than later."

The blank look that Emma adopts on her face is a lame attempt at playing dumb, and Ruby probably knows this, so the woman spells it out for her:

"You're going on your first official date with Regina. That's a major development, right?"

Official date, huh? Riiiiight.

"There's nothing 'official' about it," Emma snorts, trying to quell the fluttering in her tummy by clenching her stomach muscles. Her abs are getting a workout today, that's for sure. "She didn't even ask me out to the festival..."

"Emma, it's Regina," Ruby reminds her, sounding mildly exasperated. "When has she ever asked anyone to do anything? She tells, she orders, she bullies. More than anyone else in this town, that woman knows what the Lantern Festival is all about, and yet, she still told you to go with her. Trust me, it's official."

The butterflies are now having a full-blown party inside her tummy, and if they persist with their tickle-fest, Emma's got a strong feeling that she'll be seeing her lunch again.

"Anyway, I better head back to the bullpen and make sure Leroy hasn't stolen my food. He's been eyeing my burger all morning," Ruby jumps off the table, angling to leave. Before she can go past the door, Emma stops the woman in her tracks with a murmured: "How come?"

"Hm?" Ruby turns around.

"How come you guys seem to be okay with it? You, August, and heck, even Leroy."

"Okay with what?"

Emma clutches at the back of her neck, all feeble and embarrassed. "You know... the idea of me and... y'know..."

"Regina?" Ruby fills in the blanks.

The redness that explodes on her face is all the confirmation her friend needs.

It takes a few torturous moments for Ruby to respond, and when she's finally ready to talk, her deputy walks to the chair across from her and sits down. "You're our friend," is all Ruby says.

"You're also Mary Margaret's bestfriend. Same goes for Leroy," Emma points out. "And you hate Regina."

"I hated the Evil Queen," Ruby doesn't deny it. "But Regina hasn't been that woman for the longest
time, has she?"

"No," Emma shakes her head. Though Regina, of course, has her Evil Queen moments — but they're few and far in between.

"I still have my reservations, I won't lie," Ruby continues softly, playing with the leather cuff on her wrist. "Leroy, too — and he's more vocal about it than I am. But..."

Ruby blows a puff of air from her lips.

"We've both lost people we love, Emma; because of Blue's meddling, in Leroy's case, and because of an empty stomach in mine. And I think I can speak for Leroy when I say that we both know how it feels like to have fate and people get in the way of our happiness, so, what kind of friends would we be if we keep you from something—or someone—that obviously makes you happy? Even if you are being annoyingly dense about the whole thing."

"Hey!" A token protest.

"It's true," Ruby just shrugs. "Look, we may not agree with it a hundred percent, but we're also not going to be assholes or hypocrites about it. If Regina's it for you, then you don't have to worry about us raining on your pride parade. We're your deputies, we'll always have your back, Sheriff."

A lump lodges itself inside her throat. "Thanks... I think," Emma mumbles, scratching the side of her neck.

"The way I see it, what's going on between you and Regina isn't all that different from what happened to me and Peter, so I shouldn't really judge anyway."

Emma stops. Wait... "Are you comparing my... thing with Regina—" she can't even say it without turning into a tomato, "—to you eating your ex-boyfriend?"

"They're similar."

Uh, no.

"In that we just couldn't help ourselves," Ruby expounds further, pushing her chair back and standing up with a sigh. "As much as I couldn't keep myself from eating Peter, you couldn't stop yourself from developing feelings for Regina."

Unable to meet her deputy's eyes, Emma looks down at the table. And, of course, her gaze lands on the emerald ring on her finger.

"Let's face it, there are some things in life that we just don't have any power over," Ruby continues. And before she closes the door behind her, the woman imparts: "It's a terrible cliché, but it's also true: you can't choose who you love."

"..."

"Or, you know, eat."

And then, Ruby leaves.

Emma doesn't breathe for a full minute.

Love?
Who says anything about love?

_Hlike_, that's all it is.

She just _likes_ Regina.

And maybe the more she tells herself this, the greater the chance of shushing the treacherous organ in
her chest from constantly telling her otherwise.

"Mary Margaret just tried to set me up with Mike from the hardware store. Pass the potatoes please."

A pair of brown eyes flicker in her direction. Swallowing a morsel of roast beef, Regina hands over
the bowl of mashed potatoes and then wipes her mouth clean with a napkin. "And you feel the need
to tell us this, why?"

Chewing silently on his food, Henry watches the two of them with open interest.

"Just making conversation," Emma shrugs, dumping several helpings onto her plate.

After several beats, she sets the bowl aside and glances up. The vein on Regina's forehead is
protruding again, Emma notes wryly.

"I said no, by the way," she clears up in a completely nonchalant fashion, shoveling a spoonful of
potatoes and beef into her mouth.

Slowly, slowly, the angry vein disappears from sight.

"Why?" Henry probes. "Why'd you say no?"

"He's not my type." And she's pretty damn sure she's not his, either.

"Oh. Are you going to start dating guys soon?" he follows up after a moment, appraising her over
the mountain of food lying between them on the table.

"Probably _not._"

And that's the goddamn truth. Now, if he said something other than _'guys'_ then, _well..._

Emma downs several gulps of water.

"Good," Henry says, much to her surprise.

"You don't want me to start seeing guys, kid?"

"Nope."

"How about your mom?" Emma asks. Realizing that that question of hers can be taken in a
completely different way, she hastily adds, "I-I mean, you don't want her to start dating other guys,
too?"

"Nope."

This time, it's Regina who follows up with a curious: "And why not?"

"Cause I like our family just the way it is right now," the kid simply says, with all the innocence of
his age, and the astuteness of someone beyond his years. "You, me, and Emma. Just the three of us."
Emma and Regina share a look.

And it's not all that surprising that the rest of the meal is finished in relative silence.

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**OCTOBER 6, 2012.**

"I need a place to hide."

"From whom?"

"From the same people who're hounding your ass—*the cops.*"

*Interesting*, but unsurprising.

"Why? What the heck did you do? Murder someone?" Rufio lifts a brow, folding his hands behind his back, letting his fingers ghost over the knife in his pocket once more. Thanks to that stupid outfit of his, the guy already looks the part of a mass-murdering maniac, so it wouldn't be that big of a stretch to assume any different.

"Don't let the mask fool you, kid. I'm not in the business of hacking people to death," the stranger reassures, as if reading his mind. "I did, however, just pull off one—if not, *the*—biggest prank this town has ever seen, and I'm pretty sure the Sheriff is going to start hunting me down soon."

*Prank, huh?*

Rufio lets out a derisive snort. *He's* the authority on pranks and mischief in this town, and unless Hockey Mask can prove otherwise, he's nothing but a sad, second-rate poser in Rufio's eyes.

And as if following his train of thought, the man sticks his hand inside his leather jacket and proceeds to pull out a garment from the pocket within. Holding the cloth between his thumb and forefinger, he shows it to Rufio.

It's a white little thing. All plain and dull. Kinda ugly, too. Like something one of those chaste and virginal fairy nuns would probably own.

"The heck is that?" Rufio wrinkles his nose in distaste.

"*Panties,*" Captain Obvious says matter-of-factly. "Ever seen one up-close?"

"*Duh*... the hell kinda question is that? 'Course I've seen plenty," Rufio brags. He's seen a lot up-close — if one can consider watching porn on a laptop 'up-close and personal,' that is."That's probably the fugliest one I've ever seen, though."

"...*ugliest*?"

"*Fugliest,*" he reiterates monotonously. "So, why the heck are you showing them to me?"

Hockey Mask sighs. "Cause I went through the trouble of breaking into someone's house this morning and stealing them."

"You swiped a girl's panties? *That's* your big prank?" Rufio scoffs, rolling his eyes at the depraved asshat. "Dude, that's not a prank, you were just being a perv."

"That wasn't the prank. And she isn't a girl, she's a *woman,*" the thief corrects. "Emma Swan. Heard of her?"
Rufio stills.

_Who hasn't heard of the frickin' savior?_

"You stole one of the Sheriff's panties?"

"Not just one, kid, _all_ of 'em," the ballsy guy declares. "And when I say _all_, I also mean every... _single_... _piece_ of clothing she owns. Panties, bras, shirts, pants, jackets, socks, shoes—the whole nine yards. I left the Sheriff completely clothesless—that's the prank."

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**PRESENT.**

The fourteenth of December, the day of the Lantern Festival, comes in a blink of an eye.

And it isn't all that shocking that the day turns out to be a complete aberration — weather-wise.

The weather guy had forecasted snow. So, naturally, not one flake fell from the sky the entire day. And instead of the usual eighteens or twenties that they've been getting most of the week, the temperature by the time the festival is set to begin in the late afternoon is a decent—almost balmy by winter standards—thirty-five degrees Fahrenheit.

So, now, here's Emma, feeling so darn silly—and _sweaty_—as she goes home and steps out of the Bug after a quick trip to the pharmacy, wearing one of Regina's down jackets, a knitted hat, and leather gloves. So, one by one, she peels them off and throws them inside the passenger seat, until she's left in nothing but her jeans and a red, v-neck cotton sweater. The light breeze that hits her warm body is something that she welcomes with a refreshed sigh.

Thank God.

She was cooking in her own clothes for a while there.

After a few moments, when her body has significantly cooled down, she shrugs on the black bomber jacket from the backseat—a Christmas gift from David that he gave her weeks early after he found out that Argos oh-so-generously donated her coats to the thrift store—and it's a hundred times more forgiving than the one she'd just discarded.

It's almost by chance that she glances at her wristwatch. And so out of it is she, that it takes a moment for her brain to register what the hands on her sixty-dollar watch are telling her, and when it finally clicks, Emma quickly shuts the car door with the heel of her boot and bolts towards the house.

Shit.

It's five-forty in the afternoon.

Regina's going to skin her alive. Quite an _auspicious_ start to a maybe–slash–maybe-not official date, huh?

"You're _late_." The door swings open before she can even insert her key in the hole, revealing a glowering Regina in a pair of hot boots and a fitted black dress that Emma's never seen on her before. "We agreed on five-thirty, did we not?" Regina fumes, forcing Emma's eyes to snap back up to the brunette's face. "What was so damn important that you had to run out of the house ten minutes before we were set to leave?"

_Tic-Tacs._
But, of course, she's not going to admit *that*. "Gas-X," Emma fibs, saying the first thing that pops in mind, as if flatulence is significantly less embarrassing than admitting to buying mints to prepare for a kiss that may or may not even happen.

Predictably, Regina makes an unsavory face.

"And I'm *really*, really sorry for being late," Emma says earnestly, knowing that it really *is* her fault. The apology works, *kind of*; Regina's taut expression relaxes the *tiniest* bit. "Oh, I got you something, too."

"Gas-X?"

"No," Emma bites back a smile. "Why, do you need some?"

She promptly gets smacked with an unamused glare.

"Thought not," she mumbles. Digging inside her jeans, she pulls out a small tube from her front pocket. "This is the one you like to use, right? I noticed you ran out of it yesterday, *so*..."

Quite gracelessly, she thrusts the apple cinnamon-flavored lip-gloss at Regina and drops it onto the woman's palm.

"Just in case... you know..." Emma trails off, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Obviously, subtlety is *not* her strong suit.

"Just in case, what?" the brunette asks.

"Uh... just in case you need it. I hate it when I get chapped lips; you probably do, too. So, um, I just saw it and thought of you, that's all."

Regina just looks down at the lip gloss with a perplexed frown, unsure of what to make of the gift. But in the end, the woman just takes it for what it is and gives Emma a quiet, "Thank you... I suppose."

"You're welcome," she smiles lopsidedly. "You all set to go?"

That is probably one of the worst questions you can possibly ask when you arrive late to a date.

"Who am I kidding? Of course, you are," Emma dishes a quick save, stepping to the side to give Regina room to pass. Pulling on her favorite trench coat, Regina shoots Emma a mystified look as she closes the door behind her and walks ahead.

As soon as she locks the door, Emma catches up to the woman.

Walking past their respective vehicles, traversing the clear, snow-free paths, they head towards Main Street. There really is no point in bringing a car when most of the roads have been blocked off for the evening’s festivities; that, and, well, no matter how the evening ends, she's got a very strong feeling that alcohol will come into play somehow. And really, no one wants to be the sober one stuck with driving duties at the end of the night. Especially if things go south, as most things in her life usually do.

"Do you have a crick in your neck?" Regina sighs as they walk farther along Mifflin Street.

Well... that wasn't random, at all.
"Excuse me?"

"Do you have a pain in your neck?"

"Literally or figuratively?"

Regina gives her a dry look.

"Literally, then. No... I don't," Emma shakes her head. "Why are you asking?"

"Because a neck spasm would explain your relentless need to keep turning your head in my direction, princess. And since that's not the case, do us both a favor, my dear, and just spit it out."

"Spit what out?"

"Whatever it is that you've clearly been itching to say since we left the house."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"It's, uh, nothing, really..." Emma rubs below her nose with a finger and looks down at her feet, feeling the start of a blush creeping on her cheeks. "I was just thinking that you look really nice tonight. I like your dress."

"..."

"Watch your step," she warns a second later, noticing the sidewalk becoming uneven just right ahead.

Not heeding her warning, or perhaps not hearing it because the woman's too busy gawping at her, Regina walks right into the protruding slab of concrete and trips.

The knightly thing to do would be to catch the queen before she fell; so, Emma, with her quick reflexes, goes ahead and does just that. The other chivalrous thing to do would be to show concern and ask if said queen is okay.

Simple enough, right?

Not quite.

Proving that she still has much to learn about knighthood—or, just empathy, in general—the famed White Knight throws her head back and laughs at Her Majesty's crimson face. And in her mirth, Emma forgets that her hands are still resting on either side of Regina's waist, and she doesn't even notice her skin starting to tingle until it's too late.

So, the small, shallow ditch that magically appears right in front of her? The one that she steps on and, consequently, trips over?

She should've seen it coming a mile away.

Though, Regina does return the favor and grabs hold of her waist, so it's not all that bad.

...even if her ears are still ringing from all the cackling.
"Tit-for-tat," Emma says.

Beside her, Regina looks at her questioningly as they round the corner and the hubbub at Main Street comes to view about a block away.

"Give and take," she continues in sing-song.

"What on earth are you getting at now?" the other woman sighs warily. Without question, Regina takes the hand that Emma gallantly offers when they reach the pedestrian lane at one of the few major intersections that are still open to traffic.

"I'm just wondering," Emma tells Regina, nodding her head in gratitude at the driver of the Mazda who stopped to let them cross. "I annoy you, you annoy me... you push, I pull... you trip, I trip. This whole tit-for-tat thing, is this how we're always going to be?"

"Perhaps," Regina shrugs nonchalantly. "We do have a knack for getting on each other's nerves. You, especially, have a unique talent for being both maddening and exhausting in equal measure."

"What, do I offend you just by breathing?"

"No, my dear, that would be your parents."

Emma, in spite of it all, chuckles softly in amusement. "Be nice," she says in mock reproach, giving the brunette's hand a light squeeze.

"I believe I just heard you laugh, princess."

"You did, but they're my parents; I'm allowed to laugh at them."

"And since they're not mine, I'm allowed to mock them as I very well please."

"But, see, here's the thing, they're family."

"They're your family."

"And you're my family," Emma intones. "Which kinda makes them your family, too."

"..."

"What?"

"You think I'm your family?"

"Yes. You and Henry." Emma nods. And then... "Am I your family?"

Regina hums noncommittally.

"Yes? No? Maybe?"

"No."

"No?"

"Oh, fine, I suppose you are." Regina sighs. "A pet is part of the family, most would say."

"..."
"Problem, Miss Swan?"

"You're impossible," Emma rolls her eyes.

"And you're humorless; clearly, that was an attempt at levity."

"Since when do you crack jokes?"

"I believe I just did a few seconds ago."

"Well, it wasn't very funny,"

"Like I said, my dear, humorless."

"See?"

"See what?"

"We're doing it again," Emma says. "Pushing each other's buttons."

"And? What of it?"

"You don't think it'll change? This always challenging each other business?"

"Why, would you have it any other way, Miss Swan?" Regina raises a brow.

She thinks about it for a moment.

"No, not really," Emma admits quietly, glancing down at their still clasped hands. "Would you?"

Regina looks straight ahead, taking in the colorful lights dotting the near distance. "No," she says simply.

"Maybe it's a good thing," Emma murmurs after a while, unconsciously swinging their hands back and forth like they were children and not grown women. And the funny thing about it? Regina, of all people, doesn't seem to mind — even if they are garnering their fair share of stares and double-takes from fellow pedestrians. "Cause even if you drive me absolutely insane, I'm never bored when I'm with you."

Regina looks at her for a moment, brown eyes dark and expression unreadable. Then, of course, the woman returns to staring at the lanterns up ahead. And just when Emma thinks that silence is all that statement is going to get, a softly murmured: "Likewise, my dear," reaches her ears.

And that's enough to make her Mona Lisa-smile like an idiot.

And that's precisely how Paul O'Hara sees them five minutes later when they run into him near the cotton candy booth — Emma grinning all goofy like a moron and Regina looking peaceful, yet thoughtfully constipated.

"Pleasant evening to you lovely ladies," Paul greets warmly, tipping his porkpie hat at the two of them.

"Hey Paul," Emma smiles, giving him a pat on the arm — a friendlier salutation than the stiff nod of acknowledgment that Regina offers. "Didn't think we'd run into you here. I thought you said festivals aren't your thing?"
"They're not," he sighs, leaning against his cane. "I'm just here at the urging of our little friend. He, apparently, needed someone to 'smuggle' him in — though I, myself, prefer the term chaperone."

Discreetly, Paul inclines his head at Apple Smith's stall across the street — where the aforementioned lady, as well as her husband, is presently fawning over a cute, little duck, feeding it tiny morsels of the pastries they're supposed to be selling.

It's Pockets, of course. Or, Davy, as Paul insists on calling the boy-duck.

"They're pretending like they don't know it's their son so he won't run away. And he's pretending that the only things he's missing are his mother's sweet rolls and carrot cakes," Paul supplies in a quiet tone. "It's a dismal affair, if you stop and think about it."

It truly is.

"Has he tried visiting Rufio?" Emma fishes just as silently.

"He has, yes," Paul nods. And Regina immediately shoots her a tired 'I-told-you-so' look, the woman never a fan of Emma letting the leader of the Lost Boys off the hook so easily. "But he was turned away at the door," Paul finishes. Now, it's Emma's turn to raise an eyebrow at Regina.

"By Jackson?" she guesses, looking back at Paul.

"Jet."

Oh.

That has got to be a blow to the gut. Out of all the Lost Boys, she gets the impression that Pockets is the one who worships Rufio the most. "How'd the kid take it?"

"Not too well, as can be expected," Paul shares. "Which may be a good thing, in some way. He's always at the park now, and I see him sneaking into his house almost every day. I think, given time, he'll eventually decide to come home for good."

That's what she's been hoping to happen when she set Jet loose. And, unable to stop herself, Emma looks at Regina and gloats. "See? Told you so."

"Don't be so smug, my dear," Regina harrumphs, joining the conversation. "Whether that happens or not still remains to be seen. Nothing is set in stone."

"Oh, have some faith," Emma chides.

"And have some common sense," Regina returns.

"You're being too pessimistic."

"I'm realistic. Your parents are starting to rub off on you, princess. You're becoming too hopeful to the point of delusion."

"So, you think I'm deluded for believing that somebody can actually do the right thing and turn their life around? Isn't that a little hypocritical coming from you?"

That's all it takes. And for the next minute or so, they bicker and banter and try to out-talk each other. His presence all but forgotten, Paul looks back and forth between the two of them, just like an avid fan at a tennis match. Or... more like a fearful—yet greatly enthralled—spectator at a destruction derby.
And then, as it often does, their serious debate turns into a petty little tiff. About something, everything, 
*hell*, nothing at all.

"...yeah? Well, your hand's kinda clammy..."

Offended, Regina gives her the stink eye. "And yours could use a little moisturizer. If it gets any rougher, Miss Swan, I'd be holding hands with a loofah."

*Web of lies.* She's got baby-smooth hands.

"Why are you still holding on to me if my hands are so rough?" a slighted Emma throws right back, lifting her chin in challenge.

"Because, in the first place, *you* never let go after we crossed the street."

"Well, I could say the same thing about you."

And then, of course, since they've now mentioned it, Paul's eyes flicker down to their hands and he notices for the first time how they're entwined, and unable to tamp his curiosity, the old man blurs out: "Are you ladies here on a date?"

*That* shushes them up.

"Umm..." Emma clears her throat.

Paul tilts his head in question.

"Yes," she confirms timidly.

"No," Regina says at the same time.

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"No?" Green eyes widen.

"Yes?" Brown eyes do, too.

*Stab."

"We're *not*?"

"We are?"

*Another stab.*

A slightly bemused Paul watches with rapt attention.

"You think we're on a *date*?"

"Look at me, I even ironed my clothes..." Not to mention that she's also wearing a shit-ton of Chapstick and double the amount of perfume that she usually puts on.

Regina's nose wrinkles in confusion. "And so what if you did?"
"I never do that!"

At this, Paul actually laughs.

Now, she feels just stupid.

And if the ground should decide to open up and swallow her whole at this very minute, Emma would welcome it gladly. "I mean... I just... I only do that for special occasions, like, you know, like—"

"Like a date," Regina finishes wearily. "And what on earth would give you the impression that we're on one right now?"

"Cause you asked—well, told—me to go here with you," Emma mutters weakly, unable to meet the brunette in the eyes. "And since this thing is a couples festival, Ruby and—"

"Couples festival?" Regina interrupts, looking genuinely baffled.

Emma stops. Wait... "This is a couples event, right?" she asks slowly, almost fearfully.

Paul shakes his head in the negative. And the pity shining in his eyes as he looks at her? It just twists the knife in deeper.

Oh... no.

Emma screws her eyes shut and pinches the bridge of her nose. Because at that exact moment, it finally dawns on her:

She's just been played. And good.

In a snap of a finger, she stands on her tiptoes and whips her head from side to side, searching the crowd for the culprits. She spots all three of them watching her make a fool of herself from Granny's booth. The bastards look away as soon as her blazing gaze zones in on them; the three deputies concealing their impish grins by pretending to drink from their plastic cups.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Fuckity fuck.

If those three wanted a slave-driver for a boss, they just got one.

Annoyed, but mostly just disheartened that the 'date' was all in her head, Emma exhales in defeat and loosens her grip on Regina.

Or, at least, she tries to.

Because as soon as Regina follows her line of sight, and figures out what just happened, the woman's brown eyes narrow down into slits, and almost defiantly, Regina ignores Emma's attempt to let go and holds on tighter.

It's like a fire has been ignited somewhere inside the woman. And before she can even say a proper goodbye to Paul, Emma finds herself being dragged away towards Granny's booth by a silently fuming, and absolutely determined Regina.
It's kinda hot in a scary way. A very scary way.

So, it's not in any way surprising that before they can even get to the booth, the three buffoons scurry on out of there and make themselves scarce.

Granny's still screaming after her fleeing granddaughter by the time they reach the stall.

"You'd think with her foot still giving her problems, she'd find no excuse to go running off and gallivanting to goodness knows where," Granny grumbles to herself, the annoyed flush on her cheeks more pronounced because of the red lanterns decorating her stand. Formidable as ever, the woman carries a keg by her lonesome and heaves it onto a makeshift table without breaking a sweat. "If she weren't my granddaughter, I'd have her spayed.

Hell, she's one of her best friends, but Emma's not opposed to neutering that werewolf, either.

"So, what now?" Emma turns to Regina, leaning against the wooden booth to catch her breath.

Regina's nostrils flare, her face hard as stone. "If your deputies think for one minute that they can get away with making a mockery of us, then they have another thi—"

"Emma, good, you're here," Granny cuts in, handing a customer his drink before moving towards them, wiping the counter with a rag along the way. "I've been asked to pass along a message if you ever head in my direction,"

"Yeah?"

"Your mother's been looking for you. I think she wants you to go and meet someone."

Oh, for fuck's sake--!

Emma groans. And she doesn't even have to look at Regina to know that her majesty is not happy about it, too — the fact that the circulation on her left hand has just been cut off is a dead giveaway.

"Lemme guess, Mike Hastings?" she lets out a worn breath.

"Oh, you know him already? Big honking piece of a man, ain't he? He's Archie's roommate, too — and if I know that man, he wouldn't shack up with just about anyone, so you know that Mike fellow's a good egg. I think you and him would ma—"

The woman never gets to finish that statement.

To Emma's complete astonishment—and bewilderment—Regina chooses that exact moment to lift their joined hands and slam them onto the counter, laying them in full view of a now speechless Granny.

"Miss Swan, since we're here on a date," Regina turns to talk to her, though the mere volume of her voice tells Emma that the brunette's not just speaking to her alone. "I expect nothing less than to be treated like royalty. So, take out your wallet, my dear, and buy me a drink."

Emma's eyes bug out of their sockets. She's pretty sure Granny's eyes do, too.

Too busy gaping at a blank-faced Regina, she doesn't get a chance to look at the drinks menu. So, Emma, wide-eyed and blushing like a nun at a strip joint, just mimics the previous customer's order and mutters: "Whatever that guy had, please," and then lifts up two fingers.
"What are you doing?" she whispers at Regina when Granny goes and fills up their cups — the gray-haired innkeeper blatantly gawping at them the whole time.

"Saving face," Regina just says. "And annoying your mother while I'm at it."

*Saving face?*

"How the hell is pretending to be on a date with me supposed to help you save face?"

"Those bumbling idiots under your employ probably think that playing us for fools would ruin my evening," Regina sticks her nose in the air, her voice as cold as ice. "I intend to prove them otherwise."

Emma blinks. "Oh."

"And, my dear?"

"What?"

"We're not *pretending* anything."

Well... that's... that's... well... *okay...*

Emma goes ahead and bites the insides of her cheeks. Both of her hands are otherwise occupied; this is the only way of 'pinching' herself, so to speak.

This is *real*, it's really happening.

It's *official.*

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*Holy shit.*

"My famous Swinging Swill," Granny places two red cups in front of them, both containing an ominous-looking concoction. "It's on the house," she waves off, stopping Emma before she can pull out some bills. "Jog my memory a bit. David likes Guinness and Snow loves a good Merlot?"

"I think so, why?"

Granny's looks pointedly at their joined hands, and then slowly raises an eyebrow at them. "Because I have a feeling those two would need a few bottles tonight."

A few?

More like a whole damn *case.*

," Are you sure about this?"

"I am."

"Really?"
"Yes."

"..."

"..."

"So... you're really sure, right?"

Regina takes another careful sip from her cup, pulls the same disgusted face that she's been making with every taste of Granny's special drink, and then promptly levels her with an exasperated glare. "For the hundredth time, Miss Swan: yes."

"Okay," Emma murmurs as they walk amongst the throngs of people enjoying the fest, the lights stringed above their heads giving the illusion of walking underneath a canopy of candy-colored stars. It's kinda whimsical; if not excessively tacky. "I just wanted to double-check."

"You've been 'double-checking' for the past half hour, princess. If you're wondering if you've passed my limit for your relentless pestering this evening, look behind you. Or, better yet, look at my face."

"C'mon, can you honestly blame me for badgering you about it?" Emma sighs, subtly steering Regina away from the juggling clown nearby. She hates clowns; well, more like she's scared of them, really. "I mean, the last time we felt uncomfortable about... stuff, we avoided each other for days. I'd like to prevent that from happening again as much as possible, thank you very much. So, if you're really not up for this date, I want to know."

Her concerns are valid; she's not acting all pesky and pushy just for the sake of getting on Regina's nerves.

"And, look, here's the thing, you basically just said that you're doing this to save face and to spite Ruby and the guys. That's okay... I can accept that, heck, I'm even all for it. But... are those your only reasons?"

Regina gets very quiet, which is no big surprise, all things considering. If Emma thinks herself guarded, well, Regina would be like a well-fortified castle surrounded by an impenetrable wall, complete with cannons and a moat teeming with alligators.

There are moments, rare and fleeting, wherein Emma is able to get a glimpse of the woman behind all those walls; though tonight, it feels like Regina might actually let her in through the gate.

"...no," is the almost inaudible reply Emma is able to coax out a full minute later.

"No?"

Regina's gaze lands on her, and then goes back to watching the lights up above. "No."

"Then what's your other reason? Or, reasons?" Emma presses.

"You ironed your clothes," Regina merely states.

"And, what, you thought that was, I dunno... sweet?"

"I thought it was sad."

"..."

"And perhaps I didn't want your efforts to go to waste."
Emma stifles a groan. That's just... awesome. "So, you're dating me tonight out of pride, spite and pity?"

"Amongst other things."

She almost bumps into a guy walking on stilts.

"What's it now?" Regina asks a moment later, when a purple-faced Emma still persists on staring blatantly at her.

"And those other things are?" she prods stubbornly, unwilling to let the matter rest.

"Wouldn't you like to know," is Regina's completely blasé response, cruelly coy as ever.

And Emma's just about ready to walk over to the Whack-A-Mole, steal the mallet from the kid playing the game, and bash her own head with it. And maybe Regina's, too. She was let in through the gate, all right, but then her royal pain in the ass just had to slam it shut just as she's about to step through.

"Jesus effin' Christ, lady, do you really want to kill me?"

The wicked smile that she gets is answer enough.

She does.

She truly does.

Damn this woman.

Maybe Mary Margaret's right when she told her that the Evil Queen would be the death of the Savior.

That's certainly shaping up to be the case, isn't it?

The ceremonial bonfire is at the beach. And since it's not scheduled to be lit for another couple of hours or so, the two of them just make their way to the pier, wandering aimlessly near the different fried food and confectionery booths scattered there.

It's hardly shocking that Emma ends up spending a little over thirty dollars on junk food for herself alone, while Regina, naturally, spends the next few minutes clicking her tongue and giving her grief.

"Even our son has more self-control than you," Regina tells her after she polishes off her ninth deep-fried Oreo.

"He also has a smaller stomach than me, so there's that," Emma says flippantly, licking her thumb and forefinger clean. Besides, she didn't eat a bite during lunch.

"You're incorrigible."

"I'm hungry."

"Gluttonous."

"Starving," she corrects, popping the last Oreo into her mouth. Looking inside the now empty bag, Emma lets out a rueful sigh. "I want some more..."
"You've had a funnel cake, Oreos, a corn dog, and popcorn. How can you still be famished after all that?"

Emma shrugs.

"And you wonder why you're always feeling indigested," Regina sniffs in disapproval. "Don't you dare complain to me when your stomach starts to cramp again."

*Speaking of cramping...*

"Do you have any Tums with you? You know, just in case."

"Do you see my purse anywhere, Miss Swan?"

Emma runs her tongue across her front teeth, trying to clean off the chocolate bits still stuck there. "No," she finally says.

"Then that's your answer."

"Can you magic me some, if ever?"

The look Regina gives her is so dry, it chafes. "Do you think me your drug dealer now?"

"What? It's just Tums!"

"And that's how it always begins, doesn't it?"

"With Tums?"

"With small things. What are you going to ask of me next, a bottle of Pepto Bismol?"

"..."

"What?"

"Really, Regina? If you're trying to take the fun out of eating fair food and make me lose my appetite, you need to try harder."

"My dear, I can't possibly ruin something that you've already ruined yourself."

*True.*

Mentally shrugging, Emma crumples the paper bag and slyly chucks it at the bottom compartment of a passing stroller. "I can't be the only one stuffing my face, let me get you something to eat..."

The way Regina's face contorts in disgust, one would think she'd just offered to feed the woman a snack dipped in salmonella and sprinkled with hepatitis.

"Regina, c'mon, this is a *festival*. Will it really kill you to be in a more *festive* mood? Loosen up a little. Look, there're caramel apples right there. I'll grab you some."

"I'd rather you not."

"Don't be a killjoy."

"And don't be an idiot."
"How is buying you food idiotic?"

"It is when you know very well that that sugar-laden thing will only go to waste."

"It won't, trust me. We can share if you don't think you can finish it alone. You love apples; I love caramel. It's totally a win-win situation."

Is it, really?

See, after much beleaguering, Regina eventually folds and gives in, eating half of the delectable fruit dipped in gooey caramel.

But ironically enough, it's that very same apple that finally does Emma in.

Gluttony really is her favorite sin.

Ten minutes later, she finds herself bending by the waist, practically lying down on an oak barrel by the spiced wine stand. "Ugh," Emma moans in misery, sucking in a breath through clenched teeth. If she looks like she's in pain, it's probably because she is.

"You alright there, Sheriff?"

No.

There's a demon baby trying to claw its way out her tummy, for fuck's sake. "Yeah, thanks for asking," Emma reassures the concerned lady behind the counter, donning a weak grin. And before she can lie to the woman any further, she spies Regina stepping out of the pier's ladies room through her periphery, and like an electric jolt up the ass, Emma snaps up to attention and feigns wellness.

It doesn't matter, though. With just one look at her, her majesty knows.

"Stomach cramps, I presume?"

She doesn't answer; she doesn't need to. The pained wince on her face when the throbbing begins anew just gives her away. "Regina, did you do something to that apple?"

"Hm?"

"Did you do something to that apple?" she repeats.

"Of course, I did."

"What?"

"I ate it."

"..."

"Against my better judgment, I should also say."

As they resume their stroll through the festival, Emma appraises a stoic Regina through the corner of her eyes. And then she covers her lips with a fist, swallowing back a burp. "Tell me the truth, did you wonkify it?"

"Wonkify?"
"With your magic," Emma supplies. "Did you do something to it?"

"Excuse me?" Regina's spine straightens, looking gravely insulted. "I'll have you know that I resent that accusation."

"You resent a lot of things..."

"That I do," the former Mayor readily admits. "But why on earth would I hex my own food and compromise my own well-being?"

"To teach me a lesson? You did the same thing after that whole mess with Rainbow Sprinkles' eyeball — that chocolate cake you baked gave me diarrhea, remember?"

Regina scoffs. "First of all, my dear, that was an accident. And secondly, if I wanted to teach you a lesson about watching what you eat, I would've put a spell on your Oreos, not on the apple."

Emma stops walking.

"You jinxed my Oreos, didn't you?" she alleges, her green eyes narrowing into thin lines.

"I did no such thing."

"Yes, you did!"

"We've had our truce, Miss Swan. Tempting as it is, I'm no longer in the business of bringing you harm."

"Prove it," Emma dares.

"How?"

"Heal me."

The eyebrow raise that command receives is slow and deliberate, and just dripping with attitude. "Falsely accusing me of something I did not do, just to get me to heal you? Tell me, my dear, who's being manipulative and underhanded now?"

_Damn._

That was a long shot, but it was worth a try... right?

"Heal me?" she repeats, and this time, it's more of a request than a demand.

"No."

"Please?"

Regina walks ahead.

Tugged by an invisible leash, she follows after the woman like a lost little puppy. "C'mon, I said please,"

"And what of it? Despite the general consensus, my dear, 'please' is not a magical word, and it won't compel me to do something nice for you."

"Fine, how 'bout, sorry?"
"Mean it."

"I'm super sorry?"

"Try toning down the sarcasm, Miss Swan, and maybe then I'll think about it."

Emma sighs.

"I'm really sorry for accusing you of hexing me when I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt me; that was a jerk move on my part," she says in an earnest, quiet fashion. Abruptly, she stops walking; another cramp attacks her tummy... another wave of nausea hits... another burp comes out. And in a more desperate tone of voice, and clutching her abdomen for added effect, Emma practically begs: "Please heal me. Or, magic me some Tums. Pepto Bismol, whatever."

"Give me one good reason why I should, princess," an unmoved Regina continues to play hard to get, as the woman's prone to do.

"Cause it's our first date," Emma murmurs, catching up to her companion and reaching for Regina's hand. "And the last thing I want is to remember it as the night I got sick all over you."

And then, to prove a point, she dry heaves and retches and looks at the woman all pathetic-like.

That does the trick.

Or, at least, it softens Regina just enough that it doesn't take long for Emma to wear the woman down with her persistence.

Five minutes later, her arm's still tingling from the energy Regina pulls from her body — but at least, the tightness in her stomach disappears, and the urge to vomit dissipates.

And so grateful is she, that when they pass a stall selling deep-fried butter balls, Emma ignores the sudden craving that spikes up in her gut and speed-walks on ahead — much to Regina's approval, and silent amusement.

Through a flash of inspiration—or perhaps bad judgment—Emma leads them to the game booths lining the boardwalk. Most of the children are still at the school's own lantern-making event, which won't end until eight in the evening, so it's mostly just teenagers and those young at heart that are doing all the playing in the meanwhile.

"So... what do you want to try out?"

"Nothing in particular," Regina drawls in boredom, clearly in the mood for fun and games. "Why can't we just sit down on a bench and relax until the time I need to set that ludicrous bonfire to flame?"

"Jesus, you sound like an old woman. How old are you, seventy-five?"

"..."

Sore topic, obviously.

"Umm," she clears her throat. "How about this: I play, you cheer?" Emma suggests instead. She takes one good look at the unenthused expression on Regina's face, and then grudgingly changes her tune, "Fine, I play, you jeer."
And jeer, Regina does. And so damn well, at that.

"It amazes me how badly you're failing at this game, despite how disproportionately large that bucket is compared to the puny little balls you're trying to lobby in it," her majesty snarks after her fourth failed attempt at Bucket Ball. "Your hand-eye coordination is atrocious, princess. Is your arm's accuracy dependent on whether or not you're throwing a sword?"

"My arm's fine. This game's obviously rigged." Nevertheless, she slams another dollar bill on the table.

The balding game operator shoots her an uppity glare, but takes her money anyway and hands over three more purple balls.

The first one hits the rim and rebounds back towards her. The second goes over the bucket and smacks a teddy bear clean off the shelf. And the third one goes right in... and then bounces right out.

Regina cackles.

The attendant snorts.

And a bruised ego almost propels Emma to buy three more balls just to knock off the cigarette—and the grin—from the smug bastard's lips.

A minute later, after she's significantly calmed down, Regina gives her forearm a squeeze and motions towards the High Striker — where a red-faced Happy isn't particularly living up to his name after failing to hit the lever hard enough to the ding the bell at the top of the tower. "If you still insist on making a fool of yourself, and throwing away your hard-earned money on silly games that are turning out to be more frustrating than fun, then I suggest you try that one."

"Why that?" Emma pulls an unsavory face, feeling her muscles ache just from watching Happy swing the heavy mallet. He fails a second time, and after seeing his reaction, Emma reckons it's time for a name change. *Angry*, would be a perfect fit.

"It's the only one that has a fairly decent Iron Man toy as a prize; win one for our son."

"Uh, I dunno, it'll take too much effort to win in that game,"

"*Of course,*" her majesty sasses. "Because clearly, my dear, the last thing you need after binging on all that junk food is exercise."

"Right," she nods in agreement.

Regina rolls her eyes.

In the end though, they wind up going to the Basketball booth, which happens to be at the farthest part of the boardwalk. And it's not like they had much choice in the matter. See, there's a Weight Guessing game right beside the High Striker, and Doc's the one manning it. Not thinking clearly, Emma makes the fatal mistake of letting the bespectacled dwarf try to estimate their individual weights. Needless to say, Leroy's brother isn't so far behind Grumpy on Regina's shit-list this evening — the fact that the woman was *this* close to burning Doc's booth to the ground is a testament to this.

"Who cares if his guess is over by what, fifteen pounds? You don't look *that* heavy, you know." Emma looks at Regina over her shoulder as she holds the ball at an angle, getting ready for her first shot.
The withering glare she receives would've cut anyone else in half; Emma's used to it though, so it barely scratches her skin.

"If anything, the coat you're wearing just gives the illusion that you put on a bit of extra weight because it's bulky in some places."

She shoots... and hits nothing but air.

_Dammit._

"You know what's funny, though?" Emma catches the second ball the gangly attendant passes to her, and then dribbles it from one hand to another. "He thinks I'm a hundred-fifteen pounds and you're a solid one-twenty seven; that's a frickin' twelve-pound difference. So, when you think about it really, who has the crappy diet now? Still hating on my Oreos and Pop-Tarts, your highness?"

And just to rub salt in the wound, Emma flashes Regina a nasty, shit-eating grin.

Provoke the tiger and get the claws. Frowning mightily, Regina momentarily forgets herself and flicks her wrist once. That's all it takes for the ball in Emma's hands to come flying out of her grasp and ricocheting every which way like a possessed pinball. Some people dive out of the way, while most others stand paralyzed in their places, watching with morbid fascination. Thank goodness that Emma's always had an aptitude for dodge ball, cause she has more than a few close shaves when the demon ball zooms past their heads.

When Regina's wonky spell finally runs out of juice, the ball hits the signage of the booth across the way and then rebounds back towards the basket, of all places. Sailing high over their heads, it hits the backboard... and then bounces on the ring once... twice... thrice... before eventually falling into the net with a soft swoosh.

_Huh._

Emma tilts her head.

A couple of people break out into applause.

That was remarkable... and, also, kind of anticlimactic.

"We have a winner..." the attendant announces with as much enthusiasm as that of someone stoned out of their minds — which, judging by his red, puffy eyes, might actually be the case. "Please pick a prize from the second tier..."

"The pack of ballpens," Regina says before Emma can even open her mouth or point at one of the stuffed turtles. "My magic," the brunette reminds her.

"My money," she counters. "And who the hell chooses pens instead of toys?"

"I do, obviously."

"Oh, you mean, boring people?"

"Practical people."

"Exactly!"

Regina harrumphs, and Emma makes a face at the gaudy pack of pens the stoner guy hands over to her dark-haired companion. They have glitters... and feathers... but worst of all... "They're
electric pink..." she spits out like it's a curse, crinkling her nose in distaste.

"Yes, I can very well see that, my dear."

"But you don't even like pink..."

"I don't," Regina confirms. "Which is precisely why I won't be the one using these pens."

Sly as heck, the former Evil Queen tucks the bundle of three inside the pocket of Emma's bomber jacket.

"Hey!" Emma protests. Pulling the pack back out, she tries to hand it back. "Your magic."

"Your money," Regina returns with a deliciously evil smile, flicking her hand away.

"Seriously? I'm giving these to somebody else."

"Why?"

"You really have to ask? I'm not in junior high, Regina. What the heck makes you think I'll use these?"

"Because, my dear, it's our first date," Regina reminds, oh-so-innocently throwing back her own words at her. "And the last thing I want is to remember it as the night you gave away the prize I won for you."

Emma snaps her mouth shut.

That's just plain evil.

Evil... evil... evil.

And it's just like Regina to play that card.

"You're the only one I know who gives 'gifts' to be mean..." Emma grumbles, putting the pens away inside her pocket in resignation.

"And what about Gold?"

"You and Gold are the only people I know who give 'gifts' to make others miserable," she amends with a tired breath. Studying the time on her watch, she tugs at Regina's hand and leads them both to the beach.

It's almost time to light the bonfire.

"..."

"..."

"They're just garish pens, Miss Swan," Regina utters a while later, her expression closed off and drawn in. "Do they truly make you that miserable?"

Emma looks at Regina through the corner of her eyes, and then sighs. "No."

"No?"

"Not at all."
"That's a shame, then."

Emma rolls her eyes, shakes her head, and then allows her treacherous lips to form a fond smile. "You really are an asshole sometimes, you know that?"

An unapologetic Regina just lets out a quiet hum.

*Of course she does.*

"Check these out, man, they're fucking amazing,"

Leaning against the side of the Ring Toss, Jet slowly tears his gaze away from the race happening at the Water Canon game right across. Though, it's not the excitement in his brother's voice, or the fact that Jackson almost body-checks him off the barrel he's perched on, that grabs his attention. It's the sight and the aroma of the food that gets shoved under his nose that does the job.

"What are these?" he inquires, poking the golf ball-sized snacks with a cautious finger.

"Deep-fried butter balls," Jackson volunteers, popping a piping hot piece into his mouth with his good hand, and then hissing in pain when it, predictably, burns his tongue.

"Butter? I just woke up from a coma, you trying to send me back to the hospital with a heart attack?"

"I know, they're lethal, but believe me, they're frickin' awesome," his brother enthuses, his words garbled because of the artery-clogging treat in his mouth. "I had to wait in line for fuck knows how long just to get 'em, but they're damn worth it."

Curious, Jet picks one up and sniffs it.

"Anything interesting happen when I was gone?"

Nibbling a small bite of the decadent snack, he takes in the minor carnage in their surroundings—upturned floor-signs, knocked down stuffed toys, and many more—courtesy of a possessed basketball. "Nope," Jet finally says, his expression blank as a slate. "You didn't miss a thing."

"Fuck me, that's hot,"

"Maybe you should try blowing on them first before stuffing them in your damn mouth?" He rolls his eyes good-naturedly, chomping on the rest of his butterball.

"No, that," Jackson clarifies, looking over his shoulder and ogling the pair who just walked past—holding hands in the open with nary a care in the world. "So, the Sheriff's really banging the old Mayor, huh? I heard these girls in front of me talking 'bout it, but I didn't think it was true. Shit, definitely gonna have a date with the palm sisters tonight," he chuckles lowly, wagging his brows and making lewd, up and down hand gestures near his crotch.

"Stop that. It's not funny, man."

The deep frown that mars Jackson's face is one that's completely perplexed. "What's the deal with you?"
Jet scratches the bottom of his nose, mentally kicking himself. He can't get into this right now, he just can't.

"So, palm sisters, huh?" he says instead, steering them back to safer waters. "Don't you mean, palm sister?"

"..."

"Too soon?"

"If I didn't have my hands full," Jackson's mouth twists sourly, "hand full, I'd be smacking you behind the head right now. Just so you know."

To be honest, months ago, he probably would've been as shameless as his brother. But that was in another life. Now, he can't even look at Emma Swan—let alone imagine his old crush doing anything—without his stomach churning. And, also, his heart feeling like it's being squeezed to the point of death.

Death... how ironic.

Jet sighs.

Out of habit, he runs his fingers through his hair... or he would've, if he still had some. And he'll be lying if he says he's not bitter about that anymore. But... he's still alive though, so he might as well start counting his blessings instead of focusing on what he's lost. Like his hair. Like his frie—

The Sheriff and the former Mayor finally disappear into the crowd.

He swallows thickly.

"You still okay there, little bro?"

No.

It feels like there's a band being tightened around his forehead, squeezing his brains like a vice. "Head's starting to hurt again..." he admits wearily.

"Wanna go home?"

"Yeah... please."

Shoving the last two butter balls in his mouth, Jackson holds him by the back of his neck and gives him a comforting squeeze.

Weaving in through the crowd, they start to leave. And too preoccupied with his own discomfort, Jet misses the pair of eyes watching them from the other side of the pier, tracking their every movement with a disappointed glare.

Twelve torches, signifying every month of the past year, are to be lit from the flames of the ceremonial bonfire. And those torches, in turn, are to be passed around to set fire to the candles meant for lighting the balloon lanterns—the embodiment of their hopes and wishes for the next coming year—that everyone's going to be launching into the heavens.
Of course, before those torches can light any lanterns, and those lanterns can be released into the starry skies, the bonfire should be lit first.

That's where Regina—and by extension, Emma—comes in.

"Aim lower," Emma chastises under her breath, noticing how Regina's eyeing her mother and not the impressive pyre by the new Mayor's feet. "We're lighting a bonfire, not burning Mary Margaret at the stake."

"That's a pity," Regina drawls.

Emma squeezes her hand.

And as Mary Margaret continues to address the crowd, and her eyes flit from one person to another, it's inevitable that her gaze would land on the two of them — again. And just like the previous times it's happened, a wounded look flashes on the former teacher's face before Mary Margaret quickly tears her eyes away. It really doesn't help matters much that Emma and Regina are standing too close for comfort — shoulder to shoulder, arms brushing intimately against the other, their hands entwined. And it really, really doesn't help matters much that an uber shameless Regina is throwing just about everyone—but most especially, Emma's parents and her deputies—a wickedly smug look, appearing very much like the cat who ate the canary.

Vengeful as ever, the woman's rubbing their date in everyone's faces, and Regina's not even pretending otherwise.

Emma doesn't care much about the uneasiness of her deputies—if they are feeling any sort of discomfort at all, that is—but she does care about the two people standing side-by-side on the makeshift platform... even if their relentless match-making has been grinding her nerves for the past few days.

"Stop provoking my parents," she hushes at her dark-haired companion, speaking through the corner of her mouth. "C'mon, Regina, I'm already in enough trouble as it is, don't push it. Look at them, they both look close to tears."

David, in particular, looks practically catatonic.

And, naturally, Regina's grin only grows bigger and bolder.

Emma sighs.

It's gonna be a long night.

And if the look on her parents' faces is any indication, it's gonna be a pretty damn long week, too.

The bonfire-lighting ceremony goes off without a hitch.

Well... not unless you count Regina almost giving Emma—hell, everyone—a heart attack after the woman waves her hand with a flourish and hurls several fireballs in Mary Margaret and David's direction. They fly over her parents' heads, thankfully. And after giving everyone a light show and zooming all over the place like drunk firecrackers, the fireballs simultaneously drop down and strike the waiting pyre, igniting the humongous stack of driftwood with a resounding bang.

The once-horrified ahhhhhhhh's quickly turns into impressed oooooooooohhh's, and to Emma's astonishment, the crowd actually breaks out into cheers.
Meanwhile, on the platform, an unimpressed Mary Margaret and David both look like they just sucked on a lemon.

"Showoff," Emma teases quietly, rolling her right shoulder to try and shake off the slight buzz she's still feeling after the energy transfer. "A fire show? Really?"

Acting like it's nothing, but preening herself nonetheless, Regina's face is the picture of faux indifference. "If they insist on burdening me with such an insipid task, I might as well do it with flair."

Emma snorts.

_Spoken like a true queen._

"And give those two idiots a scare while I'm at it."

_An evil one at that._

They move away from the crowd.

Regina doesn't want to mingle with the peasants, obviously, but more than that, Emma isn't up for a confrontation with her parents just yet. That's something she'd rather have in a safer, cloistered environment — far from burning objects and the like. So, when the audience starts to disperse in order to get their balloon lanterns ready, and she sees Mary Margaret trying to look over people's heads in search of them, Emma keeps her own head low, tugs Regina's hand, and quickly guides the woman away from her mother's line of sight.

They bump into Archie and his infamous roommate, Mike, when they go and grab one of the lanterns that Marco's handing out, and rather than give her the evil eye for trying to weasel away his man—even if Mary Margaret's the one doing it on her behalf—Archie gives her a warm smile, leans close to her ear, and murmurs: "They'll come around, give them time," and then he walks away with a blissful-looking Mike trailing closely behind. It's reminiscent of what Ruby's told her at the interrogation room, and for a moment, Emma wonders if the two've had a discussion about it, or is it just the general consensus among their circle of friends. Either way, she just slings the lantern over her shoulder and leads Regina away. She'll think about it another day.

"They're dating, aren't they?" a statement, not a real query.

Emma almost trips on her own feet.

Far from a position to confirm or deny anything regarding Archie's affairs, she just zips her lips and keeps mum. Not like Regina needs her to confirm it anyway, the woman's more than capable of forming her own conclusions.

"I didn't realize your mother's in the habit of setting you up with the most unavailable and unattainable men in town. Is she truly that desperate or is she utterly blind, too?"

Emma can't help but smirk.

A little desperate, yes, but mostly just in denial.

Granted, _she's_ still in a bit of denial, herself. And Regina, also. So, really, who are they to speak?

"Hypothetically speaking, if Mike's gay—and I'm not saying he is—and Mary Margaret knows it,
and she's still setting me up with him regardless, I think it's because she thinks he's exactly my type."

"What, a gay man?"

"No, a queen," she murmurs softly, giving Regina a lopsided grin.

"..."

"Bad joke?"

"If you have to ask, my dear, then you know it is."

*Oh well...* she was never the joking type.

Everyone's just waiting for the elementary kids to come parading in with their handcrafted lanterns. See, the second half of the ceremony, the important part where they actually launch the balloon lanterns into the night sky, can't begin without all the revelers present and accounted for. The children are running late, which would've been a problem had there not been any alcohol to taper off the impatience of some of the more restless folks. Turns out, if there's one thing Granny's Swinging Swill did right, it at least made a significant chunk of the crowd drunk enough not to care about being made to wait.

In an area far removed from the general populace and all their noisy merry-making, Emma carelessly plops down on one of the rustic benches that dot the beach—benches that Mary Margaret commissioned, and Marco fashioned out of salvaged timber from an abandoned sawmill. And while her majesty is busy brushing off particles of sand from the spot she intends to sit on, Emma leans against the varnished wood and holds up the lantern near her face, studying it with a critical set of eyes.

The craftsmanship's impeccable, she marvels with an impressed little hum, as can be expected from someone like August's father. Ever so gently, she sets it down on the empty space beside her, careful not to tear holes in the fragile paper.

"So... what's the deal with this festival, anyway?" Emma turns to her companion, who's only now just deemed the bench clean enough to sit down on. "Is it like Miner's Day?"

Regina looks at her blankly.

"I mean did it come packaged with the curse, like Miner's Day, just to make this place feel more authentic? Or, is it some kind of event you had back in the Enchanted Forest that you added in for sentimental reasons?"

For someone who brought over a whole *frickin'* vault full of their own junk into this world, it's kind of funny how Regina's lips curl into a sneer at the mere mention of the word *sentimental*.

"My dear, for all intents and purposes, the Lantern Festival is just a silly affair started by my grandfather to distract the starving masses in his realm from revolting. If I truly wanted to bring over a fête for sentimentality's sake, I would've chosen the Centaur Stampede. That one, at least, is more thrilling than making frivolous wishes on flying lanterns."

*Bloodier, too...* Emma bets.

"If you didn't like it so much, why add it to the curse, then?"
"I never said I didn't like it, Miss Swan. I just don't care much for it."

"Then why add it to the curse?" she persists.

Regina sighs. "Because my father loved it," she shares silently, gazing out into the horizon. "And when I was a child, he planted this absurdly whimsical thought in my head that should I desire anything in my life, it shall and will be mine if I just wished hard enough."

"I thought you didn't bring this festival over for sentimental reasons?"

"I didn't, my dear. My father had always been excruciatingly naïve. Growing up, I remember making more than enough wishes to last a lifetime, and as you've guessed, none of them came true. My mother was still emotionally distant, my father still a henpecked husband, and Daniel still dead. The inevitable disillusionment that followed was a wake-up call. If one truly desires something, they have to get it themselves; this foolish festival serves as a reminder of precisely that. I made the curse happen. I made my own happy ending."

"Did you really?"

"I got Henry."

Emma stares at Regina. And when the other woman finally focuses her gaze away from the shore and notices the expectant look on her face, Emma points at herself and smiles softly.

"But I also got the misfortune of being saddled with you."

That wipes the smile right off.

"C'mon, we're family now, am I really that bad?"

"Half of the time," Regina says, unapologetic as sin.

"And the other half?"

"Barely bearable."

Emma rolls her eyes. "I could say the same thing about you."

"Of that, Miss Swan, I have no doubt."

An icy breeze blows from the sea, and almost instinctively, they huddle closer together for warmth.

"You know what's funny, though? 'Barely bearable' or not, you still chose to go on a date with me."

"Trust me, my dear, it's not nearly as amusing as the fact that you already believed we were on one from the very beginning." Regina smiles saccharinely cruel, just rubbing it in. "How gullible are you to fall for such an obvious scam? Didn't it ever occur to you to ask me—or anyone else for that matter—before making an utter fool of yourself?"

"It did, yeah," she admits softly, looking down at her feet.

"Why didn't you then?"

Emma smiles faintly, digging the tips of her boots into the sand. "I dunno, maybe cause deep down, I just didn't want to risk finding out that it wasn't true."
Regina falls silent after that. Actually, they both do.

They're stubborn women, both guarded, and both emotionally withdrawn.

But there's really something about this night that continues to chip away at the defenses they've spent most of their lives reinforcing.

Perhaps it's the lingering influence of Granny's swill.

Or, perhaps, it's something that's been a long time coming.

Interestingly enough, it's her royal pain in the ass who fills the pregnant pause in the conversation.

"Last week at the park," Regina begins in a voice so quiet that Emma has to strain her ears to hear. "When you mentioned that you—"

And that's it. The woman just stops there and leaves her hanging.

"That I...?" Emma goads.

"That you..."

"That I...?"

Her majesty lets out a harried breath, and then shoots her a disgruntled glance, as if it's her fault that Regina's having trouble finishing her own sentence.

"What, when I said that I like you?" Emma mercifully supplies, putting the poor woman out of her misery even though her own cheeks are warming up like an oven.

Regina's lips pucker in an almost tortured manner, until finally, she lets out a strangled: "...yes."

"What about it?"

"Did you mean it?"

"I told you the other day, I did," she murmurs, looking down at her lap and letting the pad of her thumb rub against the emerald ring on her finger. "And I still kinda do."

Kinda?

"I still do," Emma corrects. And then she lets out a low chuckle in spite of herself. "I even ironed my shirt today, remember?"

"So you did," Regina mocks, though the nearly imperceptible quirk at the side of her lips betrays her amusement anyway. Still, they both sober up quickly enough, and another round of quiet descends on them both.

"A piece of advice, Miss Swan," Regina speaks up after a while, sounding contemplative and, oddly, also a tad resentful. "You truly might want to reconsider your... affections... for me."

"Why?"

"Simply because misery and misfortune seem to befall the people who choose that path."

"So, being, um, attracted to you is deadly? Is that what you're saying?"
"You could decide to interpret it as such, if you so wish," Regina just says in a resigned tone of voice. "Fate has never been kind to an Evil Queen, my dear. And the same goes for the ones whom I hold dear."

That gives Emma pause. "Like... me?"

"You are family, aren't you not?" the woman finally acknowledges, even if it's accompanied by an eyeroll.

A chilly gust of air hits from the north; shuddering lightly, Emma sucks in a breath and zips her jacket all the way up to her neck. It almost goes unnoticed—the faint tingling that flows down her skin when Regina briefly touches her forearm—but the sudden warmth that spreads throughout her body clues her in on what the other woman just did.

"Thanks..." she smiles at her stoic companion, tugging the zipper back down. Burrowing deeper into the bench, Emma gazes up at the night sky and quickly finds Orion — whose shape and group of bright stars has always seemed to dominate the winter sky. "You know, fate has never been kind to me, either," she murmurs softly, eyes still glued to her favorite constellation. "But... it has cut me a bit of slack since I made Storybrooke my home. I know life's a bitch, and it may have been unfair to an Evil Queen, but maybe, this time, in this place, it'll be kinder to Regina."

If rendering people speechless was an Olympic sport, she'd have gotten a gold medal just for her efforts this evening.

"I... like you," Emma re-declares a moment later, when the mood feels right and the timing seems best. Tentatively, almost unsurely, she focuses her gaze on a supremely silent Regina. "Am I wrong to assume that you, I dunno, maybe feel the same way, too?"

There it is; it's out. And she's feeling as vulnerable and bare as an exposed nerve. Emma waits patiently for a response—as patiently as an edgy person like her can possibly be—so, it's only too bad that after what seems like forever of watching the other woman inwardly debating with herself, a hesitant Regina just looks away and avoids answering altogether.

Ouch.

Regina might as well have laughed at her face.

Misery's looming in the horizon like an ill wind, threatening to ruin her evening; the light breeze that's tickling the side of her face, however, carries something to her ear that keeps the gloom at bay.

"Not entirely..." she thinks she hears Regina say.

And in the distance, strangely enough, the bonfire turns a bright purple.

Taking in the queer sight, Emma exhales a shaky breath. "Not entirely?" she confirms quietly.

"No."

Okay.
Talk about throwing a dog a bone. Granted, it's a laughably teeny tiny bone, but heck, at this point in time, she'll take it.

The attraction is mutual.

That's all she needs to know, and maybe that's enough for now.

"Do you—"

"Would you—"

They both turn towards each other at the same moment.

Regina starts. Emma does, too.

They catch each other off-guard, yes, but more than that, it's the proximity of each other's faces that bring things into a standstill.

They're so close. So damn close.

She can actually feel Regina's hot breath on her cheek... on her chin... on her parted mouth...

Emma shuts her jaws with a click, swallowing thickly.

Her heart's hammering inside her ribcage, threatening to beat right out of her chest.

Regina's lips are right there.

If she just leans in a bit more... if she can just sum up enough courage to give in to her desires... if she just stops thinking for one damn second... if she just... just...

From under dark lashes, she sees Regina's dilated pupils dart to her lips and then back up to her eyes, and then back down again.

And something inside Emma snaps.

To hell with it.

Green eyes clouding, she crosses the point of no return, and just... surrenders.

Her own frantic heartbeat thundering in her ears, Emma closes the gap between them and captures Regina's lips into her own.

---

*Thank God for Tic-Tacs.*

Absurdly enough, that's the first thought that enters her head. Largely because Regina's lips are soft and warm, and they taste like apple cinnamon with the barest hint of caramel. And that, in turn, makes Emma grin into the kiss like a moron. It seems like sometime, somewhere, during the night, the lip-gloss she'd given had been put to good use.

And, really, she would've given herself a pat on the back if her hands weren't so preoccupied with traveling the length of Regina's slender neck and tangling themselves on silky soft strands of dark brown hair.

But enough about that, right now, all she can think about is the feel of velvety lips brushing against
her own... of a wet tongue sliding against hers... of a hand gently gliding to her nape and pulling her in closer, deeper into the kiss.

Emma’s pouring everything she’s got into it, and Regina kissing her back with equal fervor — and the nibbling she's doing on Emma's bottom lip feels pretty damn nice, too. Wait... not nibbling. Biting... hard.

"Ouch," she complains, tasting blood in her mouth. And even with her eyelids drifting low, in her mind's eye, she can picture the devious little smile that accompanies the low grumble coming from inside Regina's throat.

And as the rusty taste disappears, and Regina soothes away the sting with her tongue, the—

"Ouch!"

*Jesus effin' Christ, woman!*

"What the hell, Reg-
mmph,"

Pain and pleasure; dominance and surrender.

The complexities of their strange relationship, summed up in an imperfect and aggressive, but holy-frickin'-hell, toe-curling kind of a kiss.

"Did you see the classified ads today?"

Right in the thick of all the merriment and drunken revelry, a lonesome Ruby lifts her head and looks up at the man hovering behind her. "Hm?"

"Singlebrooke has an opening for a 'date coordinator,'"

"Do they now?" Ruby smirks. Scooting to the side to give August room to sit on the log she's perched on, she gamely accepts the cup of alcohol that her friend, and co-deputy, hands over.

"Just saying," August playfully bumps his shoulder against hers, and then takes a long, healthy sip of his poison of choice. "If you're getting tired of police work, you might want to consider a career change."

"Yeah?"

"You'd be pretty good at it, this sneaky match-making thing."

Ruby hums indulgently, swirling her drink. "You think so?"

"Rubes," August grins, gazing out into the darkness and squinting his eyes at the blurry silhouette of the two women that they've been spying on for the majority of the event. "I can see so."

The frenzied kissing mellows down into slow, lazy kisses. Eventually, Emma finds herself breathless and disoriented when it comes to a reluctant stop. Her eyelids are still heavy, and her hands are still cupping the side of Regina's face. And although her lips are feeling a little sore and swollen, that doesn't stop her from inching forward and lightly grazing Regina's parted lips with her own.

*It's crazy*, the way desire continues to swirl in her belly. *Scary*, the way her heart is tub-thumping so frickin' hard, it feels as if it would explode in her chest.
And then, Emma feels the smallest of sighs hit her face, and it's enough to obliterate all the
worrisome thoughts in her head and make her lean in for a quick kiss. And then, one more. Hell, just
for the heck of it, she presses yet another one at the corner of Regina's mouth.

Regina doesn't complain. Much. Always one to provoke and test her limits, her majesty proceeds to
tug hard at the tuft of blonde curls still wrapped around her fingers. Emma hisses in pain, smirks, and
then promptly quiets the other woman down with yet another kiss. This time, she lets it linger for a
deliciously long moment before she finally pulls away, catching Regina's bottom lip between her
teeth prior to letting it go.

Like most of their interactions, it seems like kissing is an act of one-upmanship.

Push and pull. Tit-for-tat.

Always, huh?

Emma catches herself smiling like a goof when she finally opens her eyes. And as her unfocused
gaze zeroes in on those dark pools of chocolate lying right before her, Emma lets out a shuddery
breath and blinks in wonderment at the lights she sees dancing in Regina's eyes. It's—

Wait.

Lights?

Brows furrowing deep, she slowly glances up at the night sky. Frowning in confusion, Regina
follows her lead.

The sky is on fire.

Well... not really.

"Oh," Emma breathes out when her brain finally registers what she's seeing.

Lanterns of all shapes and sizes are peppering the heavens like fiery stars.

And for a moment, with their faces only mere millimeters apart, they just look up and absorb the
spectacular sight.

"Pretty..." Emma murmurs in awe, even though she's feeling a little silly for being mesmerized by
flying lanterns at her age. "Should we launch ours as w—" she starts to say, her gaze flickering
down to Regina's face. But then...

Her eyes drink in her majesty's appearance, and though she knows it's unwise, she can't help the loud
snort that comes out of her nose. "Holy hell... your hair's a disaster," she muses with a lopsided grin.

"So is yours," an ever-vain Regina scoffs, squirming away from her touch and rearranging her
disheveled mane with a slight frown. And then, just to balance the scale, the woman returns the favor
with a snooty: "Your face is all flushed, my dear. If it gets any redder, it might just burst into flames."

"Says the woman who's currently doing the best impression of a ripe tomato."

Regina harrumphs.

"Wipe your mouth, Miss Swan. You have your saliva all over it."

Emma hastily wipes away the sticky remnants of Regina's apple-cinnamon lip-gloss—not drool,
thank you very much—around her lips. And while doing so, she accidentally hits the tiny cut on her
bottom lip, and immediately, she clenches her teeth and sucks in a breath. *Ouch.* "*Jesus Christ,*
Regina, on top of everything, I can't believe you're a biter, too."

"And I can't believe you're still a sloppy kisser."

"You're one to talk! That kiss was *wet.*"

Regina bristles in affront.

"It wouldn't be wet if you hadn't slobbered all over me like a dog, *princess.* Don't point fingers when
it's your sub-par abilities that need work."

*Sub-par?* Salt, meet wound. "Don't lay it all on me, *you* need practice, too," Emma grumbles,
running a hand through her hair.

And just like that, they begin to stare each other down. And it would've been like any other of their
many fights, but then, a minute later, Emma breaks first and cracks the smallest of wry smiles. "So...
practice, huh?"

Regina rolls her eyes and looks away. No matter, Emma's still able to discern the faint smile that
pulls at the woman's lips.

Exhaling a quiet breath, she looks at the sea of lanterns up above, and only then does she remember
the unlit one sitting neglected beside her.

"Hey, I think we should probably..." she trails off, carefully picking up their paper lantern. Regina
gets the hint, and even when the woman gives the object an unenthusiastic—and almost disdainful—
look, she still grabs hold of Emma's knee, siphons magical energy, waves a hand, and sets the
combustible material inside the lantern aflame.

Working like a hot-air balloon, it slips out of her grasp and starts to take flight. And as it slowly
makes its journey up into the heavens, Emma closes her eyes, and, with all her heart, she does
something absolutely laughable.

She makes a wish. *Several,* in fact.

And it's funny because she's always been a staunch cynic. Years of experiencing countless forms of
disappointment and heartache made sure of that. Maybe she's no different from Regina, really. But
still, even with all her misgivings, Emma doesn't stop herself from buying into the optimism and
hopefulness that the whole festival's been shilling.

She makes wishes for her loved ones.

*Safety* for her deputies. *Acceptance* and *understanding* for Mary Margaret and

She's not asking for much. And she's not even asking anything for herself. If selflessness will gain
her favors with fate, then perhaps that's enough reason for life to start dealing her a fair hand, and in
turn, make her wishes come true.

She hopes so. She truly does.

There's a superstition that if you tell others what you've wished for, it won't come true. Never the
superstitious type, and basically too curious to care, Emma pries about the nature of Regina's wish shortly after she opens her eyes.

"Nothing," is Regina's short and simple reply.

Which is, frankly, disappointing.

"Nothing? You didn't wish a thing? Seriously?"

The brunette sighs, staring—no, glaring—at their floating lantern; it's not yet a speck in the sky like all the others, but it's getting there, inch by slow inch. "I told you, my dear, pinning my 'hopes' and 'dreams';" Regina's lips curl in disgust, "on silly lanterns has never done me any good in the past. Whatever it is I may want, I'd rather keep it close to my chest."

Okay... a killjoy response, but one she can respect, nonetheless.

Letting a moment of silence pass, Emma leans forward and rests her elbows on her knees, fixating on the sea of lights up above. "If you did make a wish though, what would you have wished for?" she queries softly, still intrigued.

She doesn't hear a reply. Well, she doesn't really need to. Through a stroke of luck, and also good timing, she turns her head in time to catch the fleeting look that passes Regina's face after the dark-haired woman shifts her gaze from her own emerald ring to the sky.

The answer's unspoken, but it doesn't matter.

If her intuition is correct, she'd just wished the same thing for Regina that the woman's also secretly yearning for. And even if she doesn't believe in silly superstitions, Emma clamps her mouth shut and elects not to share this tiny tidbit with her companion.

It's better not to tempt fate, you see.

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.
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"Regina?" Emma says after a while, in the softest of tones, keeping her gaze locked onto their lantern. "So, what's going to happen to us now?"

"I've no clue, Miss Swan," Regina admits, equally as silent, her posture rigid as she sits with her hands folded on her lap.

Emma sighs. That makes the two of them.

"...but I suppose we can take it one day at a time."

A lump lodges itself in her throat. "...yeah?"

"Yes."

One day at a time. She can handle that.

Blowing out a puff of air from her lips, Emma places a slightly quivering hand over Regina's own and holds on tight.
"Sounds like a plan."

OCTOBER 6, 2012.

"You stole the Sheriff's clothes. So, what? You think that's 'nuff for me to actually trust you and let you stay with us?"

"Of course not," the Masked One intones, stuffing Emma Swan's panties back inside his jacket. "Listen, I'm not gonna be a mooch. I'll carry my own weight; chores, protection, whatever. Trust me, you need me."

"And why the hell do we need you?"

"Cause you guys are sitting ducks," Mysterio says simply. "You really think that pranking people left and right won't catch up to bite you in the ass? The Sheriff and her dogs will go after you and your friends soon. When that happens, you'll need my help."

Rufio snorts. Who is this windbag kidding? "You're a wanted guy yourself, ya idiot. What kind of help can a thieving fucker like you even give us?"

"This safehouse of yours," Hockey-Mask says in lieu of answering, rocking back on the heels of his boots. "Just how safe is it? Does it have wards? Cloaking magic?"

"N—"

"Yeah, didn't think so," the guy says quickly, not allowing him to get a word in edgewise. "Cause those things require money, and you kids are pretty flat broke, aren't you?"

"Look, jackass, we don't need—"

He never gets to say anything past that.

Because a remarkable wad of cash appears in the stranger's hands then, and, almost immediately, Rufio loses his train of thought.

"I can upgrade your place's security and make it virtually impossible for the cops—hell, anyone—to find," the man entices, waving the rolled up bills—around one or two grand, Rufio guesses—before putting it back inside the pocket of his trousers. "And if wards won't cut it, I also have this," Hockey-Mask pulls out the sword sticking out of his back. It's quite a badass one, too, with its twin serpents and golden hilt. Walking over to the edge of the ladder, the man proceeds to hold the blade over his head, and then effortlessly swings it down. It slices through a red box monogrammed with a cobra—Jafar's ward-off, obviously—like a hot knife through butter. And just like that, the magic surrounding the scaffold fizzles out into the atmosphere with a sad, sad whimper.

Rufio blinks.

Ward-offs—and some of Baba Yaga's more expensive ward-locks—are practically indestructible and can only be deactivated by its owner or Jafar, himself. At least, that's what they were told.

"So," Creep-o with a sword turns to him, putting the weapon back in its sheath. "Think you can make room in your safehouse for me now?"

PRESENT.
Air.

That's what he needs.

Throwing off the covers from his sweat-riddled body, Jet lets out a tortured groan and forces himself to roll out of bed. It's a double whammy, you see; he chose to wear sweatpants and a hoodie to bed, and Jackson probably forgot to turn down the heat. So, now, at one in the morning, his room is like a rotisserie and it's roasting him alive.

The lone window in his bedroom is stuck, as usual, and it takes several heaves for it to finally budge and rise a measly four inches. The wind that enters his bedroom feels a little too balmy for winter standards, but it still elicits goosebumps from his heated skin.

Sighing in relief, and still pretty much half-asleep, he paddles back to his bed and plops facedown on the mattress. The old springs groan under his weight, and his duvet falls to the wayside, but he's out as soon as his hairless head hits the pillow.

He wakes up again fifteen minutes later.

This time around, it's not the room's temperature that pulls him out of slumber, it's actually someone climbing up his bed and kicking him right on the ass that does.

"Ow!" he yelps in both pain and surprise. And if he hadn't shouted into his pillow, he's damn sure that a half-naked Jackson would've been bursting into his room just about now.

A spiteful snort reaches his ears, and as soon as he whirls on his back and flicks on his reading lamp, his eyes fall on a pudgy kid in ratty clothes, sitting at the foot of his bed.

"The hell?!" Jet snarls, propping himself up with his elbows. "Who the fuck are you?!"

"A friend, which is more than I can say 'bout you."

"What the fuck are you doing in my room?!"

"Visiting."

"How the fuck did you get in here?!"

"Window."

"And how the fuck did you fit in there?!"

The boy rolls his eyes. "The living room window," he clarifies impatiently, jaws setting. "We need to talk."

"We don't need to do anything. I don't know who the heck you think you are, but get the hell out of my house before I bash your head in with a baseball bat."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, cut that shit out, Rufio!"

"Rufio?"

"You, you fucking asshat," the kid sneers, looking just about ready to pounce and sock him on the face. "I know you've been faking it all along; you remember exactly who you are."

"The heck y—"
"You do," his visitor insists, cutting him right off. "I was following you tonight; I saw you watching the Sheriff playing at the basketball booth."

"So?" says a defensive Jet.

"So?" the boy mimics, raising his voice. "You didn't freak out or even bat a fucking eyelash when the Queen put a berserk spell on the ball, that's what! If you've really gone back to being just Jet, you would've lost your shit at seeing magic up-close. So, drop the act, man. You're not Jethro Peters, you're fuckin' Rufio, and you're a dick."

. .

"Keep your voice down," Rufio hisses at Thud Butt, throwing a wary glance at his bedroom door. It's shut, but Jackson's a light sleeper and his room is just across the hall. "Be quiet or I'll punch your teeth in, Norberto."

"Yeah? Go right ahead," Thud Butt dares, raising his chin defiantly. "Not like you didn't punch us all in the face when you left the group cause you were missing your precious Hooky too much."

"You don't know shit, so shut the hell up,"

"You've gone soft, Rufio."

He lets out a scornful breath.

"No, you've gone soft," Thud Butt maintains. "This world changed you."

"That's a load of bull," Rufio scoffs, but even if he thinks the mere thought absurd, he still finds it increasingly difficult to continue looking Thud Butt in the eyes.

"It's not, and you know it. Why else would you leave us for Cap'n Hook?"

"I didn't leave you guys," he whispers sharply, forcing his body to sit upright. "I didn't have a choice. I got hurt, you dickwad."

"You got better."

"Look at me," Rufio motions at the bandage on his head and the assortment of pain meds on his nightstand. He doesn't even have to look at a mirror to know his face is all pasty; he always turns pale when his head's starting to throb. "Do I look any better to you?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck off."

The amount of tension in the room goes up a notch.

Thud Butt's practically gnashing his teeth. His lieutenant has only been this pissed at him once in the past, and that was eons ago, when he assumed leadership of the Lost Boys when Peter Pan left Neverland. Thud Butt had seniority over him and was next in line to succeed Pan, but Rufio had more muscle, more guts, and more charisma. And in the end, in a group composed of easily impressed kids who decided on matters by majority rule, those attractive traits made all the
difference.

"So, that's it, huh? That's your reason for pretending not to remember jack? For leaving us high and dry? Cause your head still hurts?"

"No, and it's not that simple," Rufio asserts in a controlled tone, choosing to ignore the maliciousness in his friend's voice despite feeling his own anger flaring in his chest. "I woke up from a frickin' coma to find the cops right there, breathing down my neck. We got lucky; accident or not, if I didn't think fast on my feet, I'd be rotting in jail, you guys would be sent back home to your fake families, and we'd all kiss Neverland goodbye. If I didn't lie, we'd all be screwed."

Looking away, Thud Butt lets out a bitter snort and then starts working his jaw.

Pulling at his hoodie since it's getting a little tight around the neck, Rufio just sighs. "Look, TB, you wanna know the reason why I had to fake it? It's right there." He points at the corner of the room, specifically, at the object lying atop his study table.

The Mad Hatter's hat, the portal jumper's heirloom, is there on full display.

And the sight of it gives Thud Butt pause.

"Listen, man, telling the truth would've cost us our ride back to Neverland. I'm sorry if I had to lie to you guys as well, but I couldn't risk getting my cover blown and letting the cops take that thing away from me. From us."

The resentment in Thud Butt's expression falters.

"It was there when I woke up at the hospital; I saw it and I knew right away that we finally got our ticket out of this hell hole. So, when I spotted an opening, I took it."

"At the hospital? How the hell did it get in there?"

Jackson unintentionally accepted a bribe from the devil, that's how.

"It's not important," Rufio says with an exhausted breath, reaching for a pill bottle and popping a tablet into his mouth. He makes a face when it hits his tongue, even though it's not nearly as bitter as the taste that's already in his mouth at the mere thought of Gold. "What's important is that we have it, and come Christmas Eve, we'll be out of here."

"Christmas Eve? Why not tomorrow?"

Because I'm not ready to leave just yet.

"They're keeping me on a tight leash, dude. Jackson and the police won't let me out of their sight, but I'm sure, they'll let their guard down 'round the holidays. I'll be able to slip out then."

That's not a lie, not really.

It's just not the entire truth.

"Besides, we still have to make some prep, and I don't think I'm strong enough to survive a portal jump at this point in time," he adds in for good measure, keeping his gaze locked onto Thud Butt's face and not the corkboard on the wall behind his friend. Despite his best efforts, however, his eyes stray briefly to the newspaper clipping pinned there — that of a cut-out photo of him and his brother hamming it up for the Mirror's photographer during this year's Miner's Day.
A painful pang hits his chest.

*Time.*

Rufio just wants more of it.

More than saving his own ass from being incarcerated... more than protecting the hat from being confiscated by the authorities... more than worrying about his own weakened and fragile state... more than *anything* else... he just wants more time with the stupid prick that's been his one and only family for more than two decades.

It's pathetic, really, but that's all he wants.

And that's the real reason why he still can't leave, the biggest reason why he decided to fake memory loss and revert back to Jet.

If there's one positive thing his accident near Toll Bridge managed to bring about, it's that it forced him to stop lying to himself. Even if he is, technically, still lying to everybody else.

"So... Christmas Eve, then?" a relatively calmer Thud Butt speaks up a few moments later, pulling him out of his thoughts.

"...yeah," he clears his throat, scratching at his neck. "Send word to Tink, will you? Tell the other boys for me, too."

He then spends the next few minutes giving out hushed instructions to his lieutenant, laying out every inch of his master plan. And when it's finally time for Thud Butt to take his leave, it's already a little past two in the morning.

Before departing, however, the frumpy boy stops by the door and turns his head in Rufio's direction. The disappointment in Thud Butt's eyes is unmistakable, even in the semi-darkness. "Just so you know, you're still a dick. What you did to Pockets was low, man."

"I know," Rufio agrees with a sigh. "How's the kid?"

"Hurt."

"Tell him I'm sorry."

"Tell him yourself."

He nods once, feeling the familiar twinge of guilt from his conscience.

"Rufio? A Lost Boy never abandons his own," Thud Butt reminds him quietly, casting a poignant glance at the newspaper clipping on the corkboard. *Especially not for a grown-up. And a shitty pirate, at that."

And then, he disappears into the hallway and stalks out of the house as quietly as he came in, incredibly light-footed for someone with such a hefty built.

Lying back down on his pillow, Rufio stares at the ceiling and pulls the covers up to his mouth. And as he extends a hand and flicks the reading lamp off, he closes his eyes and, for some strange reason, he thinks he hears Pan's lilting voice in his mind, reciting the tenets that he's come to know by heart:

*A Lost Boy never trusts a grown-up.*
That's the first one that Peter had drilled into his head after his initiation into the brotherhood.

A Lost Boy never abandons his own.

That one, he's always kept near his chest.

And last, but not the least, the one that's hitting a little close to home:

"A Lost Boy never forgets to put family and brotherhood above all else," Rufio whispers into his covers, and then sighs.

Family and brotherhood.

How... ironic.

It always starts the same way: with a fight.

Not the type of fight that involves claws breaking out and things getting thrown around—at least, not yet—but it's the kind where one does something, says something, that ticks the other off, and before they know it, words are flying all over the place and they're bickering. It's no different from all the other times they've fought, really. But unlike in the past—where fatigue, or silence, or Henry's meddling, played a hand in ending their tiffs—nowadays, their preferred route to shut each other up is to mash their lips together and make out. And in the most unusual places, too. Like the garage, the garden shed, the laundry room, the powder room, the kitchen, and, well, even the walk-in coat closet.

This afternoon—just three days before Christmas—it's the pantry.

And like most of their fights, it starts with something petty — case in point, Pop-Tarts. See, the squabbling begins when Emma brings home a ginormous box of it from the adjacent town's newly opened Costco, and it ends shortly after Regina follows her inside the pantry and proceeds to lecture her ear off. There's only so many times a person can be reminded of how imprudent it is to binge on unhealthy snacks, and, feeling mildly exasperated, Emma sets the box down on the shelf as calmly as she possibly can, turns around, and lays a big one on Regina. It shushes up the nagging woman immediately, and for a moment, it gets Emma thinking that if she had known from the very beginning that the most effective method to wipe away the superciliousness off of Regina's face is to kiss it right off, maybe things would've been a whole lot different between them. Well... different in a sense that she'd probably be laying in a pool of her own blood, but different all the same.

"You know, we've been fighting more and more recently," Emma hums in between languid kisses, and then grins into Regina's lips. "If you want to kiss me, you don't have to pick a fight, you just have to say so. Or, better yet, just do it."

Regina, of course, responds the best way she knows how...

"...ouch."

This woman.

Emma rolls her eyes inwardly.

And, minutes later, when they finally break away, a pair of half-lidded eyes search her own, and, like a perfect bookend to how all the kissing began, Regina slowly arches an eyebrow and murmurs, "Still sloppy."
"Still wet," Emma mumbles back, her fingers lightly grazing Regina's scalp. And just when she's in the middle of leaning in once more...

"Mom? Emma?"

Emma's back connects with the shelf so damn hard and fast that it feels like her brain actually rattles inside her skull.

"Jesus Christ, Regina," she hisses, rubbing the spot on her backside that took the brunt of the damage. "What the hell was—"

The door swings wide open.

"What are you guys doing in here?" a very curious-looking Henry inquires, and for a second, Emma feels like she's just been transported back to that moment in junior high when she was caught making out with Timmy Thomas inside the Janitor's closet. This time, however, it's more sheepishness than mortifying shame that floods over her body.

"I was trying to... plug a leak..." Emma says lamely, scratching the side of her neck. Regina directs a raised eyebrow her way, and she just replies with the smallest of shrugs. "Your mom's here to, uh, supervise and make sure I don't do a crappy job."

"A sloppy one," Regina concurs almost snidely, subtly tugging at the bunched up ends of her blouse. Henry's gaze darts up to the ceiling. "Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"The leak."

"Uh, fixed."

"Already?"

"I sure hope so."

An obviously unamused Regina shoots her a withering glare.

And it's largely unsurprising that the appraising look both of them receive from their child is just jammed packed with suspicion. Though, it's nothing compared to the squirm-inducing stare that Emma gets when Henry's gaze start to focus on her guilty-looking face.

"Why do you look like a clown?"

"Huh?"

Henry's brown eyes narrow down into slits. "Your lipstick's all messy and smudged."

"I'm not wearing any li—"

Regina steps on her foot.

"—thanks, kid," Emma changes her tune, hastily rubbing her mouth with the back of her hand. She can practically see the cogs turning in his head, and he's so damn smart that she won't be surprised if he's already connected the dots. However, Henry's conclusions would still need
confirmation, and before he can go into his own version of the Spanish Inquisition, Emma decides to turn the tables on their son. "Why do you have a dust bunny on your shoulder?"

"Cause you should really clean under your bed," he says without thinking, flicking the clump of dust away.

"And what the heck were you doing under my bed?"

A busted Henry stills, his eyes widening like a deer caught in headlights.

The police officer in Emma decides to make its presence felt then. "You were trying look for the present I got you, weren't you?" she deduces, towering over the kid.

"It's not under the tree..." Henry practically whines.

"Well, it's not under my bed, either."

"Something else was under your bed, though."

The corners of Regina's mouth set. And Emma probably would've looked as worried if she didn't know that her toys are hidden in a shoebox inside her closet.

"Can I have this?" Henry asks in a very hopeful manner, pulling out a mask that, until that very moment, he'd kept hidden behind his back.

"I thought I told you to throw that vile thing away?" Regina gives her a huffy look, pushing out of the pantry and gently taking the white Jason-mask out of Henry's grasp. "I'm sorry, sweetheart, I believe your other mother is in the process of disposing of this, aren't you, Miss Swan?"

"Actually... no," Emma accepts the object from Regina and follows her family into the kitchen. "I've been meaning to put this thing in the evidence locker for weeks, I just keep on forgetting to get it from under the bed and bring it to the station."

The simultaneous eyerolls she receives from the two Mills is both uncanny and remarkably endearing.

"That Argos guy sent you that, right?"

"Yeah," Emma confirms with a tired sigh, throwing the mask on the counter with her car keys and the rest of her stuff. "And I got electrocuted trying to bring it inside the house," she mumbles somewhat bitterly, walking to the fridge and pouring herself a glass of water.

"I really thought you were just breakdancing..."

"I know you did, kid."

"It was awesome."

"I bet it was," Emma mutters into her glass.

"Did it hurt?"

"It did."

"Are you okay now?"
"Of course I am."

"Does your ring still zap you?"

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Your mom disenchanted it."

"Why?"

"Cause I don't need to stay in the house anymore."

"Why are you still wearing it, then?"

"Cause I like it."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Really?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I just do."

"Like my mom?"

"Yes."

"You like my mom?"

"Ye—" Emma stops.

Regina freezes by the sink.

Henry, the little devil, just smiles from ear to ear. "So... what were you guys really doing inside the pantry?" he fishes like a pro, his eyes twinkling with mischief.

And that's how their son outed them before Christmas.

The kid played her like a fiddle and she fell right into his trap.

Maybe in a few years, Emma would look back on this moment and laugh. But as of right now, while her entire face's matching the smidgen of Regina's blood-red lipstick still at the corner of her mouth, Emma's finding it difficult to see anything past her own discomfort.

And, judging from how the normally outspoken woman seems to have lost the ability to speak, it looks like Regina is faring no better.

Fuck.
Two pairs of brown eyes snap towards her.

Oh, did she say that out loud?

"Yep," Henry nods.

Regina sighs.

And Emma just wants to turtle-up and hide inside her proverbial shell.

This is awkward. And torturous. But mostly, just awkward.

Though, no matter how discomfited she's feeling, Emma does still manage to see the silver lining in the entire thing:

Henry doesn't stomp off to his bedroom in a petulant fit. He doesn't call his mom evil; he doesn't label Emma a traitor. The kid doesn't express any sort of violent reactions to the thought of his mothers being more than just housemates and co-parents.

The boy is actually grinning.

And as Emma catches Regina's gaze from across the island counter, she lets out a breath that she didn't even know she was holding in, and then flashes Regina a small, eased smile. The tight expression on the other woman's face relaxes a fraction, and something resembling relief washes over Regina's face.

Their kid looks happy. At peace, even.

And that's enough to lift the invisible and unspoken weight that's been bogging them down since the festival. Because despite Mary Margaret and David's—and possibly half of the town's—condemnation of their still very much undefined relationship, at the end of the day, it's their son's approval that truly matters.

The twenty-fourth of December comes in a blur of glossy wrapping paper, badly tied bows, paper cuts and a slew of extremely imaginative curse words.

Unlike Regina—whose perfectly put-together presents had been wrapped and sent out to a very select few as early as the first week of the month—Emma decided to wait until the very last minute to get her act together and wrap her gifts. This is especially problematic now that she's practically giving a quarter of the town a little something for the holidays—well, as much as her sparse budget would allow her to, that is—and now since she's gotten so used to barely giving any out, she never set aside time for gift wrapping, let alone delivering said presents to those people before the holiday itself.

"Okay... done," Emma says as she loads the last of the presents into the Bug and slams the passenger's side door shut. She finishes wrapping things in the nick of time. Barely, but she does. Now, gingerly making her way to the other side of the vehicle, she stops right in front of Regina and gives the frowning woman her best attempt at an apologetically endearing smile. Though... she probably only ends up making herself look pathetically constipated, judging from the unmoved expression on Regina's face.

"Look, I'll be back before midnight, trust me."

"Trust you? Need I remind you, my dear, that you also said the same thing when you promised to
have those presents of yours sorted out a week ago?"

"C'mon, I was busy..."

Regina scoffs. "Busy? And what on earth with?"

"Well, work, for one, and, you know, things."

"Things?" Regina frowns deeply, as if the thought of her actually doing stuff is somehow difficult to imagine.

A couple of months ago she might've been offended, but now, Emma just leans in, and almost shyly, kisses the corner of Regina's mouth. "Things," she whispers into the brunette's ear, the tiniest of smiles playing on her lips.

They haven't done anything past kissing, really; nevertheless, a good chunk of her time seems to have been allocated to spontaneous, fight-induced make-out sessions recently. And it's, well, new. And to be honest, it's quite nice, too.

Regina probably shares the sentiment, going by how the woman's eyes immediately cloud over when Emma pulls back, and something that looks remarkably like arousal flashes in those dark brown pools. Though before Emma can say anything, or do anything, she finds herself being spun around in place and nudge towards her car.

"Wha—?"

"I believe you have gifts to deliver, don't you, Miss Swan?"

If the driveway weren't so slippery from the thin sheen of ice that she still needs to salt, Emma's damn certain that the brunette would've manhandled her into the driver's seat. As it goes, Regina just ushers her in and closes the door.

"Be home by ten."

"But that's like, what, an hour from now? I thought Henry doesn't get to open a couple of his presents until midnight?"

"Ten," Regina barks in an impatient manner, and then turns around and starts to make her way back inside the house.

"Two hours!"

Hands tucked inside the coat she had hastily thrown on to follow Emma out of the house, Regina stops mid-stride at the freshly shoveled walkway and raises a questioning eyebrow.

"If I get home by ten, we'd have two hours to kill before midnight," Emma points out, sticking her head out the window. "Know anything we can do to pass the time?"

The look she gets in reply is practically predatory.

"I suppose I can think of certain... things," Regina drawls.

And even when her lips curve upward into an amused grin, Emma's still finds her mouth going bone dry. It's pretty darn amazing how one person can be that coy, say something so damn alluring, and still manage to keep a straight face. It must be a talent, there's no other explanation for it.
"I'll see you at ten sharp," Emma promises, inserting her key in the ignition and starting her car.

Regina, for her part, just saunters back into the house.

It takes some time for the Bug's ancient engine to heat up, and when it finally does, Emma takes in a deep breath and centers herself before backing out of the driveway. A little under fifty-seven minutes; that's how much time she has left to go all over town and give people their presents. But perhaps 'give' is a little too much of a wishful thought. With the rate her heart's pumping in her chest, and the way excitement is swirling in her belly and shooting down between her legs, she'll probably end up throwing the presents against doors like a frickin' newspaper boy. And, you know what, she doesn't even care; because on the night that should be all about giving, she finds that the very last thing she can give right now is a shit.

It really feels like your stereotypical night before Christmas.

They've got a pleasantly warm fire going in the living room, candy canes and eggnog to enjoy, the smell of pine lingering in the air, and Nat King Cole's soft baritone in the background...

"Christmas roasting on an open fire..." 

Rufio almost chokes on the candy cane he's nibbling on. He pauses and stares at the singing goofball on the armchair beside his, and then softly snorts. "I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be 'chestnuts' roasting, dude."

"Close 'nuff," a slurring Jackson grins, his head lolling uselessly like a bobblehead doll.

The bastard's more than a little past tipsy, and it's funny, seeing how the pitcher of eggnog lying between them on the coffee table is still halfway full. That, and Rufio hasn't even had a drop of the spiked drink.

"Shit, how many glasses have you had?"

"Three," Jackson lifts up two fingers.

Wrong question, obviously; perhaps the more prudent one is: "How much frickin' rum did you put in that thing?"

Drunk as a skunk, a squinty-eyed Jackson just smirks.

"You're gonna burn a hole in your liver, you moron."

"Burn," his half-brother mimics with a gleeful snort, too out of it to notice the disapproval on his face. "Heeeeey... remember the time when dad worked as a Santa and he accidentally set his fucking beard on fire when he snuck out for a smoke?"

"He got fired," Rufio looks down at his lap, idly dragging his hands across the rough material of his jeans.

"Your mom got so pissed, I thought she was gonna kick him out of the house. You were, what, eight then?"

"Seven."

A smiling Jackson stares unseeing into the fireplace, drumming his fingers on the armrest. "Classic dad moment, huh?"
Rufio lets out a noncommittal hum.

It was a classic Jimmy Peters moment. Too bad it wasn't real. And too fucking bad that that particular memory—as well as many others including their own "parents"—were just phony memories implanted into their heads by an extremely potent curse. For twenty-eight years, he mourned the loss of his father and mother, and you know what, he still does, perhaps even more than before, simply because he knows now that they never truly existed in the first place. It's one thing to miss dead people; it's another to miss figments of his imagination. And it's rankling Rufio's ass to no end; cause even if the memories are false, the emotions they invoke are real.

Jackson conks out fifteen minutes later.

And as Rufio towers over the snoring guy—a thick coat on his frame and a backpack slung over his shoulders—he drapes the rank-smelling blanket from the couch on his brother, takes a step back, and just observes. The fact that Jackson doesn't even stir just goes to show how far gone the drunk-ass is, and Rufio lets out a relieved sigh.

He leaves his present on the coffee table; the gleaming hook that he had asked Thud Butt to steal from Smee the other day. And as he tightens the ratty, red bow on the gift, Rufio prays that it will be enough. Enough to trigger a memory, enough to help Jackson remember who he is. The pirate won't miss Jet the way Jackson will, and it'll make his deception, and subsequent abandonment, easier to swallow.

At least, he hopes it does.

As quiet as a thief, he slips out of the house. The music from the radio is muffled by the door, but as Rufio makes his way down the unshoveled path, the haunting melody of Silent Night reaches his ears, and then an overwhelming kind of sadness descends and blurs his vision.

He digs his nails into the palm of his hands and blinks the tears away.

This isn't where you belong, he tells himself with every heavy step he takes, even though he knows it's not the thick snow that's making every trudge feel so damn difficult.

He's going home, he thinks to himself, but why does it feel like he's actually leaving it?

"Shit... shit... shit..."

She's running late.

It's three minutes past ten and she's still got a few gifts lying beside her on the passenger seat. This isn't good; Regina's probably going to be pissed, and if Emma knows her royal pain in the ass, Regina is just wicked enough to make her grovel for whatever things the woman has planned, just to teach her a lesson about tardiness.

If she hurries it up though, she can probably be home in about—

"Ah... fuck it."

That's it. After this last delivery, she's going home. She's getting a little too antsy behind the wheel, which is just perfect when one's driving through icy roads like she is. So, the way Emma sees it, three of the dwarves, Ashley and Sean, Councilor Worthington, Blue and Nova, and Archie, can all wait another day or two. It's not like they won't survive the night without receiving her hastily wrapped, cheap-ass presents anyway.
The Sherwood Park neighborhood is more dead than usual when she pulls up at Paul's street. The area is quite close to the convent, so she's not surprised if most of the homeowners are still hearing Christmas Eve mass at the nuns' chapel. Come to think of it, her chess buddy's probably there, too.

"Sheriff Swan! Emma!"

Or, probably, *not*.

She's barely come to a full stop in front of Paul's bungalow when the old man's cane connects with the Bug's roof.

"Jesus!" Emma almost jumps out of her skin in fright.

Though, it's not like Paul smacks her car with it on purpose; it's more like he trips on the sidewalk in his rush to talk to her, and the only thing that saves his flailing self from hitting her vehicle is the cane that somehow hits it first and keeps him upright.

"Are you alr—"

"I was just about to call you," a breathless Paul peers into the passenger's side window, clutching a piece of paper in his hand so tight that his knuckles turn white. "It's Davy. The lad, he's leaving."

*Leaving?*

"Where's he going?"

"Home," Paul supplies, showing her the crumpled goodbye letter that was obviously written by his young, duck friend. "Neverland."

Before she can even ask him how on earth that's possible, a bright pink light erupts from the park across the street. It's not just some fancy light show, however; it actually looks and sounds like a proper candy-colored windstorm.

Emma instantly pales.

She's only seen something like that once in the past, and she vividly remembers it sucking her and Mary Margaret in and transporting them to the Enchanted Forest.

A portal, that's what it is.

"Oh, dear..." a wide-eyed Paul breathes.

"Oh, crap," Emma agrees.

"Remember, the hat takes you where you wanna go! Think Neverland, y'hear?!"

Rufio can barely hear himself over the roaring wind whipping around their bodies, so it's a surprise that Thud Butt and the other boys even nod their heads and give him a thumbs up. They're standing at the edge of the frozen pond, Jefferson's hat spinning madly a couple of feet away on the ice. The portal's right there, all they have to do is jump in.

"I don't know how long it'll stay open, so if you brats wanna go, go now!" Tinker Bell shouts over the cacophony, holding a stolen wand and an almost empty pouch of fairy dust that Argos had procured with Rufio's help.
"Me, first!" Ace declares at the top of his lungs, holding on to his pants before leaping right into the vortex. Like a turd spiraling down the toilet, Ace spins around the portal until he finally disappears into the black hole at the very bottom. It's quite a visual, and if he isn't presently being bogged down by anxiety and all sorts of annoying feelings, Rufio's sure he would've laughed.

"We goin' alphabetically?" Johnny chimes in. "Bacons, next!"

The triplets hold hands—their backpacks bursting at the seams with all the chocolate and junk food they hoarded—and with a last look at Rufio, they hop into the hole in perfect synchrony.

"Pockets? You ready?" Rufio gently taps the kid huddled by his legs.

"...

"Pockets?"

The little one reluctantly tears his gaze away from the two-storey house in the distance and Rufio finally gets his reply. Pockets looks close to tears, and for some reason, the sight of the kid's face brings a lump in Rufio's throat. It's like he's peering in a mirror and seeing himself; a ball of nerves and mixed emotions just ready to implode.

"You jumping in or what?" an impatient Thud Butt asks, looking just about ready to grab Pockets by the waist and hurl him in. "We don't got all day!"

"Then you go ahead!" Rufio snaps at his lieutenant, placing a protective hand on the boy's shoulder. "We'll follow after you!"

"Suit yourself," Thud Butt shrugs, taking as many steps backwards as the snow at their feet would allow. "See ya at the other side, suckers!" he shouts, and rather ungainly, he darts forward and cannonballs into the portal.

"Pockets?" Rufio bends down at the waist, locking into the boy's teary gaze. "You okay, buddy?"

Lips quivering, the youngest member of the brotherhood just pulls his oversized cap down and hides his eyes.

"Are you scared? You don't have to be. I'm right here. We'll jump in together, okay?"

The wind quiets down just the tiniest bit, and despite the madness going on around them, Rufio's ears still pick up on the subtle change.

"It's gonna close soon," Tinker Bell voices out what he already knows.

"Then keep it open as long as you frickin' can!" Rufio barks at the woman; the eyeroll he receives in reply is one he chooses to ignore. Going down to his knees, he forces eye-contact with the boy, and in a less tightly-wound voice, he says, "P, we really need to go..."

Panic sets in Pockets' eyes then, and instead of taking his proffered hand, the kid takes a step backwards. "I... I don't wanna go back anymore..."

Rufio doesn't even attempt to ask why. It's futile to inquire when Pockets keeps on glancing backwards, looking at the house beside Paul's.

"You wanna stay with them? With your fake family?"

"Don't cha?"
Rufio doesn't answer.

"I wanted to get 'em a bye-bye gift, but mommy said that the best gift I could give her this Christmas is to go home..."

"Then let's go home, P. Let's go back to Neverland."

"T-that place don't feel like home anymore, Rufio," Pockets admits, and a tear finally slips and cascades down his face. "Mommy and daddy ain't there."

"But the boys and I will be there. We're your family, remember?"

"But they're my family, too."

"Kid..."

"Just like Jackson is your family, right?"

"...

"Any second now, ya twerps!" Tink reminds them, watching the portal getting smaller and smaller.

"Go, Rufio!" Pocket gives his shoulder a nudge. "Tell the others I'm sorry..."

"But—" Rufio stays in place.

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Tink interrupts again. "Can I go back to my place now and call it a frickin' day? It's obvious you don't think ya wanna go, either."

"Oh, shut up the hell up, Tink!" Rufio snaps at the woman. "You dunno shit!"

"I don't? You're still here, ya prick. If you really wanna go to Neverland, jump already."

He doesn't jump.

"See?" Tinker Bell says smugly.

Rufio doesn't get the chance to wipe the condescension on her face—not that he lacks the compulsion or the motivation—because just as he's about to dish out a retort, someone, or something, else beats him to the punch.

A horrifying shriek sounds over all the racket.

The coldest chill runs down Rufio's spine.

That noise, he knows it.

A wraith.

"Shit."

Magic is different in this world.

The fairies now have to use double the amount of dust they'd normally need for simple spells; the Evil Queen's magic is unpredictable and erratic without the Savior's stabilizing influence; long-time practitioners of arcane arts like Baba Yaga and Jafar find their abilities stilted and largely unreliable.
And, perhaps, the biggest change of all: even the most insignificant amounts of magic can open up one-way portals that serve as gateways into this town for creatures and monsters from the old world. *Fissures*, as the inhabitants of Storybrooke have come to call them.

Opening a portal into another world like Neverland? That's no small matter.

Hence, the fissure that breaks out in the ice. And, also, the creature from the Enchanted Forest that comes flying out of it like a bat from hell.

For some reason, well, it's probably Tinker Bell's ear-splitting scream, the wraith swoops downwards and tries to claw the woman's face off.

She ducks in the nick of time.

But Pockets, brave little Pockets, does the unimaginable and heaves his Avengers rucksack at the undead creature. He misses by a mile, of course, but he does manage to succeed in drawing the wraith's attention... and ire.

"Run!" Rufio yells at the top of his lungs, hauling Pockets over his shoulder and running as fast as the ankle-deep snow would permit.

Naturally, he trips on one of the willow's hidden roots, and the two come tumbling down like a sack of potatoes. Tinker Bell, agile and light on her feet, just runs past them and guns straight for the rusty behemoth that she calls a car.

*Shit.*

Rufio rolls on his back and stares up at the creature hovering over them.

They're dead.

So fucking dead.

The wraith lets out another shriek and lunges in.

Salvation comes in the oddest places.

Or, people.

Tonight, it comes in the form of an old geezer in a porkpie hat and a bright red parka, armed with nothing but a gun-wielding Sheriff and a golden pocket watch.

As Emma Swan struggles to aim at the moving creature, Paul O'Hara, the dotty old fart, just clicks the topmost button on his watch a couple of times and waves a hand. And to Rufio's astonishment, golden dust shoots out of the ticker and hits the wraith just as it's about to claw at him and Pockets.

Engulfed by the yellow glitter, the wraith vanishes as quickly as it had appeared.

And just to cap his evening, the pinkish light at the pond fades away and the portal to Neverland closes shut.

Shaken up, Pockets bursts into tears.

And Rufio almost passes out.
"What the hell?"

Naturally, is the first thing out of Emma's lips. Possibly because it's the only thing that's running through her mind as her brain's still struggling to make sense of what she'd just seen.

"Don't... fret... it's... gone," a wheezing Paul tells her, sweating bullets despite the cold. "We're... safe."

"What the heck did you do? What was that... that... golden shower thing?" she sputters, her shaking hands still holding up her service weapon and pointing it at the spot where the wraith disappeared. Not like a gun can save them if, or when, it decides to return, really.

"I sent... it... back..." Paul struggles to say, still trying to catch his breath.

"To the Enchanted Forest?"

He shakes his head. "Time..."

What?

"Back in time? As in, the past?"

Paul nods bleakly.

She would've sighed in relief, but then a thought strikes and Emma finds herself paralyzed by dread."Just how far back in the past?" she asks quietly, fearfully.

With trembling fingers, Paul lifts up his watch to his face and squints at the time. "How many... did I...?" he begins to mutter to himself. "Three? Four? No, two. Two clicks... yes... two..." And then finally, he turns towards her. "About nine weeks ago, Sheriff."

Emma does the math in her head.

Her arms begin to slack to her sides, and when her brain registers the fact that approximately nine weeks ago was the third week of October, her pistol slips away from her grasp and sinks deep into the snow.

It's the same week in October when a wraith appeared at the stables and tried to kill Regina. That was the week she almost lost the mother of her son. And if it weren't for the Sword of Ashe, the soul-sucker would have succeeded in its mission. If it weren't for Argos, Regina would be dea—

Wait.

Argos ...

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**OCTOBER 6, 2012.**

"So... we have an agreement? I can rent out space in your safehouse for seven weeks?"

"Yeah, fine, whatever," Rufio shakes the gloved hand the Masked One offers. "Just remember, I'm in charge. Whenever the boys and I need help with a prank, you help, no questions asked. Deal?"

"Deal."
"And you'll upgrade the wards around the cabin?"

"Yeah."

"When are you planning to do that?"

"Now," Mysterio declares, letting go of his hand. "Wanna come with?"

"Jafar's shop is on the other side of town. I ain't gonna walk it with you."

"Who says anything 'bout walking?" the guy says, nodding towards the dilapidated structure a few meters away and then walking towards it.

And it's then that Rufio finally notices the front of a familiar-looking motorcycle peeking out behind some oil drums.

"That's my brot—uh, Jac—Hook's bike," Rufio frowns, stumbling on his words as he follows after the man. "The heck are you doing with it? You stole that, as well?"

"Nah, I bought it."

"You're shitting me, he sold it?"

"Yeah, dirt-cheap, too. I guess he's kinda desperate for cash."

No kidding. Jackson loved that bike about as much as he loved a good lay, and that's saying something.

"You hopping on or what?"

"Hold on a sec, I just remembered something," Rufio stands at the side of the motorbike. "I don't know who the fuck you are."

That admission earns him an amused chuckle.

"The heck's your name?"

"So... it's only occurred to you to ask that now? After you've agreed to let me stay at your place?"

"Shut the fuck up and just answer the question," Rufio rolls his eyes. "What's your name?"

"Argos."

"What kind of a lame-ass name is that?"

"What kind of a name is Rufio?" Argos returns.

"An awesome one."

The older guy snorts.

"So... Argos, huh?"

"Yeah."

"That your real name?"
The man just hums in reply.

And Rufio imagines a cryptic little smile that's probably behind that hockey mask.

**PRESENT.**

"Rufio..." Emma murmurs, her voice deathly quiet.

Standing to his feet, and helping a sniffing Pockets up, the guilty-looking boy proceeds to look at her.

"Argos. *Tell me,*" Emma implores, her green eyes boring intensely into brown ones. "I need to know, who the hell was behind that stupid mask?"

The haunted look on Rufio's face twists Emma's stomach into knots, but the whispered words that leave his lips shakes her to the very core.

"You."

Chapter End Notes

First of all, I'm sorry it took 3 (!) months to get this chapter out. It's been a struggle to finish. I really, really appreciate your patience. I'll probably ask for your patience again as I write the last chapter, though. :s Super thank you to my awesome, awesome betas: J, feather-of-maat, and ExactChange! This chapter (actually, the whole story) is for my Stinky. Blah, blah, blah, bb!
You.

The word reverberates inside her head like a cruel taunt, and with every haunting echo, bile inches up her throat and burns a trail upwards... slowly, and then altogether quickly... until it finally reaches its destination and leaves a sour, unpleasant taste in her mouth. Emma dry heaves, then retches, and the only thing that keeps her from throwing up is her own trembling hand covering her pale lips.

She gulps in a shaky breath and takes a moment to center herself. And as her gaze leaves Rufio's guilty face and focuses on the spot where the wraith disappeared, the coldest of chills runs down her spine and the painful truth hits her like a slap on the face.

Argos.

The thief.

The perverted stalker.

The bane of her existence.

And, also, Regina's savior.

"He was... you?" A wide-eyed Paul staggers a step backwards, wobbling on his feet.

Emma pales even further.

It's simply ridiculous, the whole idea of it all, but at the very same time, it also makes so much damn sense that even when denial starts to worm itself inside her brain, a resigned kind of acceptance slowly edges it out and takes its place.

We're very similar, you and I.

That's what Argos had said in his—her—last letter. And as memories of those words swim in her mind's eye, Emma's shoulders begin to shake with laughter. It's a hollow laugh, as empty as the look in her green eyes, and as Paul and the boys gaze at her in confusion, a strangled sob escapes Emma's lips.

The brazen thief who made her life a living hell, the unsung hero who saved Regina from a wraith, and the impish bastard whose actions directly and indirectly paved the way for Regina and her coming together... of course it had to be no one else but her own damn self.

She is Argos; Argos is her. Fate has proven time and again to have a wicked sense of humor — as well as a healthy sadistic streak. And now, it would seem that destiny has played its cruelest prank yet.

"But... how?" a wide-eyed Pockets breathes out, voicing out the very same thing that's niggling her short circuiting brain. "I don't understand, how can you be him?"

How, indeed.
And amidst all the questions swirling in her head, making her vision blur and her temples throb, Emma's flitting gaze somehow lands on the tattered object lying forgotten on the icy pond behind the two boys. It's inconsequential, especially given present circumstances, but the sight of it still gives her pause. And as she keeps on staring, a strong foreboding feeling hits her unexpectedly and makes her shiver in dread, and before she can stop herself, Emma turns to Rufio and asks, "That thing... that hat. Who gave it to you?"

The boy's shoulders seem to slump down even more, and his downcast eyes mirror those of Henry's whenever she would call him out on a deed that he's not particularly proud of.

"Gold," Rufio murmurs weakly, unable to meet her gaze.

And like the flakes of snow that are beginning to rain down from the skies, the pieces of the puzzle finally fall into place.

Tilting her face upwards, Emma closes her eyes and exhales.

*Rumple-fucking-stiltskin.*

Things in her life—good or bad, but mostly just bad—certainly have a way of circling back to that man, don't they?

The Bug skids on the icy roads twice on the drive over to the pawnbroker's mansion.

The first time, she almost sideswipes a lamp post and a fire hydrant; the second time, she nearly rear ends Gold's beloved Cadillac. On both occasions, Emma's able to regain control of the vehicle and steer it away in the nick of time—even if the latter is a crash she honestly wouldn't mind having just to spite that awful imp and indirectly hurt him like he's hurt her. It's immature and petty—sort of like the time she drove a hammer into her foster brother's favorite Tonka truck just because he decapitated her one and only Barbie doll—but it's also an all-too-*human* reaction against somebody who's caused her so much damn misery, that she quickly brushes off the shame that always seem to accompany such dark thoughts.

Belle answers the door in a knee-length sweater and a whimsical pair of reindeer slippers, of all things. The overpowering smell of pine and cinnamon wafts from the tiny crack on the doorway as the town's part-time librarian peers outside, her forehead creased in puzzlement.

"Emma? What are you doing h-"

She doesn't let the woman finish.

The yelp of surprise that Belle lets out when Emma smacks the door wide open with her palm makes her ears ring in protest, but she trudges right into the foyer with nary a care, her feet leaving a trail of unsightly wet boot prints on the hardwood floor.

"Where the hell is that bastard?" she snarls like a feral animal, head whipping side to side in search of Gold, her fingers tightening around the moth-eaten hat in her grasp.

She finds Gold in his study, standing by the fireplace and drinking a cup of jasmine tea, the glow from the flames making the deadly calm expression on his face seem all the more sinister in her eyes. Gone are the cast on his leg and the bandages that encased his frail body since the last time she's caught glimpse of him at the hospital during his discharge. The snake looks good as new; courtesy of a potent healing elixir, Emma guesses. It would seem that even without the Dark One's magic, he still has the ability and know-how to concoct his own potions. *Unsurprising,* yes, but still *troubling,* for
"Merry Christmas, dearie. Does her majesty know that you're out and about at this hour? It's a bit too late for a social call."

He takes another sip from his drink and gives a little sigh of pleasure.

"Tell me, to what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

"Cut the crap, you sly son of a bitch. You know fucking well why I'm here."

Jefferson's ratty velvet hat hits Gold's chest and lands unceremoniously by his feet, her throwing arm remarkably accurate as it's always been.

"That hat look familiar to you?"

He doesn't even glance at it. The enigmatic man merely sets his cup aside and tilts his head to look at her, the sides of his lips pulling upwards into a small, dastardly grin. "The Lost Boys made it home, I take it? And I gather you're here to try and get some answers, Sheriff?"

"No, I've just been dying to do this," she bridges the distance between them in three big strides, cocks her arm back, and hits him square on the nose. "But now that you've mentioned it, yeah, I need some answers, too."

The teacup shatters into several pieces as Gold stumbles backward and knocks it off the mantle. Wincing, he clutches at his nose, a trail of blood dribbling down his nostrils and into his mouth. In an instant, a horrified Belle comes running up next to the imp, fussing over the bastard as if he's a hapless, defenseless man and not the manipulative monster that everyone knows him to be — a beast capable of inflicting a world of pain and suffering without so much as batting an eyelash.

"I'm fine, dear," he reassures his girlfriend—a concept that still makes Emma uneasy to this very day—and hastily wipes away his blood with the back of his hand. Unconvinced and undeterred, Belle reaches for his face, and for a moment, even with a cringing audience in their midst, Gold allows Belle to stroke his cheek. "Really, I'm fine. Miss Swan, much like her father, is just in the habit of greeting people with her fists."

Emma snorts, hands balled into said fists, pacing before the pair like a tiger just itching to pounce. "I wouldn't call it a habit; it's more of a knee-jerk reaction to bastards who deserve it."

"Emma, I think you should leave," Belle turns to her, mouth set in a thin line. "No, I think I'll stay," she says brazenly, standing ground. "I need to have a chat with that asshole of yours. So, maybe you should leave."

Belle's eyebrow slowly lifts, the woman looking just about ready to give her a piece of her mind, but then Gold steps in and puts a hand on Belle's arm, giving it a light squeeze.

"Belle," he murmurs softly, though his eyes are trained on Emma. "Would you mind making me some more of that jasmine tea? Don't worry about the mess, I'll clean up after our dear guest leaves."

"Rumple, she-"

"Please."

Belle's judgment might be suspect—especially when it concerns her taste in men—but the woman
shows herself capable of discerning social cues and understanding just when she'd just been dismissed. Giving one last worried look at Gold and a darker, warning one at Emma—which is just so frickin' ridiculous that Emma can't help but roll her eyes—Belle steps out of the room and closes the double doors behind her, giving them their privacy.


"About what?"

"Your angle. What the hell is it?"

Perching himself at the edge of his desk, the imp lets out an exaggerated sigh. "We'll get nowhere if you continue to be so vague, dearie. Be more specific."

"Your. Angle." Emma hisses. "You disappear for months and months and when you finally come back, all of a sudden, everything goes to hell. The earthquake, the monsters, the fissures. And I can't even begin to understand why you would give the Lost Boys, of all people, Jefferson's hat. You knew opening a portal would trigger a fissure to erupt. So, did you know that the wraith you summoned months ago would come out of that very same fissure tonight? Did you?"

He says nothing, but the fiendish gleam in his eyes is answer enough.

"Don't even get me started on you endangering your own dagger, getting it broken, and in the process, killing Ar-" Emma stops abruptly, the name of the thief catching in her throat. "You killed Ar-" she falters once more. Slowly, almost mockingly, Gold archs an eyebrow. And with just one look at his face—at the grating arrogance she sees there; an arrogance bred from knowing more than one's letting on-Emma's expression hardens. "You knew all along, didn't you?"

"Knew what, Miss Swan?"

"Argos."

"And what about him?"

She takes a step closer, her eyes flashing with murder.

"Or her?" he finally concedes, eyeing her balled fists in a wary fashion. "The boy told you, I assume?"

"You knew all along," Emma repeats, her fingernails digging so deeply into her palms that they'll surely leave angry indentations on her skin. "You fucking bastard, you knew from the very start, didn't you?"

"Knew what? That you and that thief are one and the same? Would you even believe me, dearie, if I said that I didn't?"

Emma scoffs.

"Well, I didn't. Not from the very beginning as you would like to think, at least. It came as much as a shock to me as I'm sure it did to you."

"I highly doubt that."

"Believe me or not, that's your own prerogative," the haughty bastard dismisses. "Although, I suppose I should've known earlier. That, I can give you. The future has always come to me in
fragments, and most of the pieces I can't seem to make sense of until after the fact. But this—your **part** in the whole affair, I **should've** determined from the start. After all, who better to free me from my own curse than the Savior herself? It does make perfect sense, doesn't it, Miss Swan?"

Emma snorts. *Nothing* makes a lick of sense. "What the hell are you talking about? What curse?"

He straightens up then and moves around his desk. And just like Regina and the woman's love of having hidden safes and thingamajigs all over the mansion, Gold depresses some kind of concealed switch underneath the table. With a soft swoosh, the unremarkable painting of a rolling hill behind his desk lifts and reveals a secret compartment inside the wall. Emma squints her eyes and cranes her neck. As far as she can tell, there's nothing in there but a drab-looking wooden box — unvarnished, heavily scratched and antiquated.

Slowly, gingerly, Gold reaches for it and carries the rectangular object to the table and sets it there. His gaze flickering up to meet hers, he unlocks the iron latches keeping the box shut, his eyes never leaving her own. Without much fanfare, he flips open the lid.

And all the color drains from Emma's face the moment she peers within.

*No...*


"The legendary Sword of Ashe..." Gold presents with the slightest of hand flicks. "You're familiar with it, yes?"

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**Pocket-sized.**

That's how Peter Pan described Davy Lacroix when he first laid eyes on the diminutive boy and took him under his wing. Even then, he was tiny for his age, all skin and bones and vertically challenged, and as the original leader of the Lost Boys welcomed him into the fold, Pan took it upon himself to rename the tiny orphan *Pockets.*

For decades and decades in Neverland, Pockets was frozen in time, experiencing no kind of growth whatsoever—whether it be in the physical, emotional, or mental sense—and even when the inhabitants of the island were forcibly transplanted into Storybrooke by the Evil Queen, the dark curse made sure that for the next twenty-eight years, no amount of maturing ever occurred.

So, he was always tiny, yes, but even after years of living as his next door neighbor, Paul doesn't think that he's ever seen Davy look as small as he does at this very moment: curled up in his mother's warm embrace—and swaddled in clothes that are two sizes too big—the boy practically looks like a fragile little infant. It's ironic in more ways than one, given how technically, Davy has more years on all the "adults" in the living room combined.

The events of the night seem to be catching up to the poor, shaken lad; sobbing in earnest, Davy is clutching onto fistfuls of his mother's tear-soaked blouse as if he's holding on for dear life, like he's scared that someone or something would tear him away.

"It's going to be alright, my love. You're home now, you're safe," Apple Smith murmurs softly, peppering kisses on the side of her son's head.

Paul looks out the window at the park across the street, his fingers grazing the cool metal of his trusty pocket watch. The wraith is no more, but its shadow continues to loom over all of them, it seems.
And while the boy weeps and Mrs. Smith continues to whisper words of comfort in his ear, Paul feels the tiny hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Tearing his eyes away from the deserted park and the flecks of snow falling outside, he meets Peter Smith's watery gaze. The burly man nods warmly and flashes him a shaky grin—a million thanks expressed without a single word—before kneeling down and wrapping his arms around his family.

Paul feels the slightest of twinges from the faulty ticker in his chest.

Most of the time, he's big enough to admit that he's a cynical old coot, but the sight before him can warm even the coldest of hearts. And the longer he watches, the more it feels like he's intruding on a private moment; so, with one last fleeting glance at his neighbors' emotional reunion, Paul slips out the front door and ambles back to his modest bungalow. His presence all but forgotten, his departure goes unnoticed.

The mood switches from bittersweetly happy to depressingly morose the instant he crosses his own front gate.

Gone is the infamous hellion just brimming with bluster and bravado; sitting hunched on the porch steps, cradling his shaved head between his gloved hands, Rufio looks just as little and vulnerable as Davy.

Exhaling a breath, he hobbles towards the leader of the Lost Boys, taking extra care not to slip on the damp walkway. He stops right in front of Rufio, but even as his shadow looms over the teen, the sniffling boy fails to register his presence.

"Rufio?"

Sitting up with a start, the aforementioned boy hastily wipes his face with the sleeve of his jacket. But it's too little, too late; tears aren't completely unnoticeable in the darkness.

"The fissure's closed," Rufio says gruffly, his teary eyes downcast. "How's the kid?"

"The poor lad's scared and rattled. I suppose he's also more than a little confused, and rightfully so," Paul shares with a sigh. "But I believe he'll be just fine. His parents are good people, they'll make sure he'll be okay."


"What about you, are you okay?"

"I'm... fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Y-yeah. I'm good, I'm fine."

Paul tilts his head.

The boy still can't meet his eyes.

"Rufio, are you okay?"

"Are you?" the evasive teen returns, stubborn as always.

"No," Paul says readily, completely unabashed. And even as his creaky joints sound out in protest and all his muscles ache, Paul plops himself down beside the boy and sets his cane aside. "I'm not
Finally, Rufio looks at him.

"It's a lot to take in and process, everything that happened tonight. Argos, Emma, that wraith... I don't even know where to begin to try and make sense of it all. So... I'm not fine; no, not even a single bit," he admits. "Rufio, you treated Argos like a brother and you were never shy about your affections for the Sheriff. You were closer to hi-her," he takes a deep, steadying breath. "Our friend... than I could've ever been. So, forgive my persistence, lad, but I'm just concerned. Are you alright?"

Sniffling quietly, Rufio picks at his shoelaces.

And Paul, for his part, just folds his hands on his lap and keeps mum. If there's something that he's taken away from all his years of playing chess, it's that it takes an inordinate amount of time for some people to get ready and figure out what their next move is going to be. It's not dissimilar to what's happening at this moment. So, possessing an unholy amount of patience, Paul just waits it out.

The seemingly never-ending onslaught of snowflakes has already let up by the time Rufio feels ready enough to speak.

"It's... it's my fault, isn't it?" the boy murmurs, his voice so tiny that Paul feels the need to reach inside his pocket and turn up the volume on his hearing aid. "Argos-the Sheriff-dying. It's my fault."

"What makes you say that?"

"I... you know, ever since I got out of the hospital, I've been wracking my brains out, trying to make sense of every single thing that I saw near that bridge. I mean, how the fuck can Emma Swan be Argos? Why the hell would Emma Swan be Argos? It just didn't make any damn sense!" Rufio throws his arms out in frustration and lets them fall uselessly on his lap.

"But now, now I think I know why: it was because of that wraith, wasn't it? That creepy-ass motherfucker almost killed the Evil Queen a couple of months ago, and for the longest time, I could never get why Argos went all gung-ho to save her butt. It didn't make sense at that time because I thought he hated her for being 'his' competition for the Sheriff's affections, but now I know better."

Rocking back and forth as if trying to comfort himself, Rufio blows out a puff of air from his lips.

"I think the Sheriff became Argos because of the wraith, Paul. The very same fucking wraith that got here in the first place because of the portal I opened up. So, the way I see it, it's all my fault."

"It's nobody's fault, you hear me? Nobody's. You couldn't have possibly known what would've happened, lad."

"No, but here's the thing, I should've known," Rufio counters. "Magic always comes with a price, and you can never trust anybody - least of all the Dark One. Those are the two things I got out of Tink making a deal with that snake and screwing over everyone in Neverland. That bastard's 'help' always comes with strings attached. I don't know what he got out of this whole mess, but I should've known better than to use the fucking hat that he 'gave' me. I should've."

"Well, if you insist on laying blame, then you should also point a finger at me," Paul says. "I was the one who sent the wraith back in time."

"You did it to save us..."
"And however misguided I think it might've been, you opened up a portal so you and your friends could go home. We both meant no harm."

Rufio smiles somewhat bitterly. "The road to hell is paved with good intentions, huh?"

Paul just hums.

"You were a pawn, Rufio, nothing else," he speaks up after a moment, reaching out and giving the boy's slumped shoulder a comforting pat. "And if it's any consolation, you're not the only one. We both played a hand at how things shaped up to be. We were both pawns."

"Whose pawns?"

"Fate. Destiny. Call it whatever you will."

The boy snorts. "That's stupid."

"Yes, but sadly, it's also very true."

"It's a copout."

"That, too, I suppose," Paul admits with a wry smile. "Did I ever tell you that I used to be a historiographer back in the day?"

"A what?"

"Historiographer. I dedicated my whole life to studying history and documenting it."

Looking greatly uninterested, Rufio gives him a tired stare, as if willing him to get to the point.

Never one to be rushed into things, Paul takes his sweet time reaching inside his pocket and pulling out his golden watch. He flips it open with the tip of his thumb and shows the intricate clockface to the impatient-looking boy.

"This watch was entrusted to me by Emperor Maduin II when I was anointed the Grand Historiographer of Asheneamon. It's the only one of its kind remaining in all the magical realms. You see, lad, I was quite good at my job because I had this. It gave me the power to go back in time and observe history right as it was happening."

"So you were a time traveler…"

"I was. For decades, I would journey to the past and watch important moments in history as they would unfold, and then go back to the present and write about it."

And that's precisely why he knew every single thing there was to know about Willan's Incantamentum, even the crucial component—true love's kiss—that sealed the protection spell and made it work. He witnessed it firsthand. Shape-shifting as a rabbit, he was hiding under the kitchen table when Willan's wife performed the spell that would save her husband, and ultimately, also grant the lowly knight both fame and infamy throughout their land.

"Wait…" Rufio stills. "Does this mean you can send me back in time, allow me to fix my mess?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, lad."

"Why not?" the boy whines.
"The past isn't something that can be just 'fixed', Rufio. It's not something that can be tampered with without significant consequences. That's why I was always just a passive participant — merely observing, not interfering with events."

"Then how come-"

"Argos is part of this timeline," Paul interrupts, guessing what's running through the boy's mind. "Sending Emma back won't change anything. You know, now that I'm thinking about it, I actually believe sending her back will preserve our timeline - it will ensure that everything that has happened will happen. It won't create a temporal paradox. I think she's meant to interfere; we, however, are not."

"Then if you can't send me back, what the hell's the point of telling me all of this, you old fart?"

"To teach you a lesson, of course."

Rufio rolls his eyes.

"Now, now, hear me out," Paul wags a finger. "When things go awry, our first instinct is to blame ourselves. To wallow in regret and self-pity. It's normal, it's human nature. But it's also quite pointless. There are things in life that are out of our control; outcomes that are impossible to predict. What happened tonight is one of those things, Rufio."

Looking away, very much the picture of a rebellious youth who’s finding it difficult to listen and accept the wisdom of his elders, the teen just knits his brows and works his jaw.

Yet, no matter how seemingly unreceptive his audience is, Paul just trudges on.

"Listen, if there's one thing I found in my travels to the past, and from studying history in general, it's that even the smallest, most innocent of actions can cause the greatest catastrophes. It's just like throwing a pebble in a quiet pond. No matter its size, it will create ripples. Any attempt to prevent such a thing from happening is an exercise in futility."

"But I should've."

"No, you couldn't have," Paul interrupts again. "Lad, did you know that the Ogre Wars that ravaged the Enchanted Forest was started by a trespassing hunter? He had been tracking a stag for two days when he accidentally crossed the boundary separating his kingdom from an ogre encampment. It was an innocent mistake, but his actions were seen as a grave faux pas by the territorial creatures. He was torn limb from limb, and his grisly death sparked a war that lasted for decades and cost thousands upon thousands of lives," Paul recounts with a rueful breath. "All that bloodshed just because a father wanted to feed his family. How's that for cause and effect?"

Swallowing visibly, Rufio's mouth sets into a thin line.

"So, is he to blame for all the innocent lives that were lost? Not at all. In my opinion, the hunter is just as blameless as the stag who decided to traipse into forbidden soil."

"But, Argos, he's-she's dead, Paul."

"I know, lad. But the future is impossible to predict. I don't believe that even the greatest seers can say with absolute certainty the things that will come to pass. So, believe me when I tell you that what happened to our friend is not in any way your fault. There are greater powers at play here, Rufio. People are just pawns to the whims of fate. That's how it's always been, and that's how it will always be."
"But it's…" Rufio sniffs, brows knitting together, and then his whole face just crumples in despair. "It's not fair…"

Exhaling softly, Paul wraps an arm around the shaking teen's shoulder, his own heart breaking all over again as Rufio's breathless sobs fill the night air. "I know, son. I know."

_Nothing's ever fair._

---

The Sword of Ashe was no more.

The only thing left of it—a broken hilt—had been stashed away in a secret chamber in the deepest part of Regina's vault. Emma was there when Regina placed the serpentine-shaped object in a glass enclosure, and it was her own energy that powered up the sealing spell that locked it inside.

As far as she knows, the notorious weapon is about as intact as her slowly diminishing grip at her own sanity. The sword is now just a mere relic, Emma's damn well certain of this. _But…_ that said, at this point in time, when her life feels like it's just been turned topsy turvy, she might as well start questioning everything that she's ever known to be true.

Because right now, before her very eyes, the aforementioned sword is lying in one piece.

"How…?" she mutters lamely, gaping at the glinting blade, her eyes as big as saucers. "That thing's broken…"

"Oh, it _will_ be," Gold agrees. "In due time."

_What…?_

"Where'd you get that?"

"I'll give you one guess, dearie."

"But… you don't have your powers anymore…"

A blank-faced Gold lifts an eyebrow in question.

"How did you even manage to break through all of Regina's wards and get inside her vault?!" she sputters. "And how the hell did you put that thing back together?!!"

"I just got out of the hospital, Miss Swan. I'm recuperating. I've no time to be skulking around your _girlfriend's_ secret vault and reforging broken weapons."

'Recuperating' her ass. He looks healthy as a horse.

"But make no mistake about it, it _is_ the same sword," the imp blathers on, calmly and all business-like. "Though, at the same time, not _quite_. You see, the sword that broke my dagger is merely the activated form of this blade. This, right here, is essentially the Sword of Ashe in its rudimental, uncharged state."

_Same, but not quite. Rudimental. Uncharged._

Emma's temples start to throb.

It's a lot to take in.
She probably looks like a moron, standing there just frowning at the sword, but her poor, overtaxed brain is still struggling to catch up. And as Gold moves around the table and takes a seat on his chair, he stares at her and actually takes a moment to observe her obvious frustration. The man has the nerve to smile.

And at that moment, when his arrogance is hitting her like a slap on the face, it finally dawns on Emma.

"It was you," she breathes out. "Argos, he-no, I, got the sword from you."

His tiny smile morphs into a full-on grin.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

Gold hums noncommittally and leans forward, resting his forearms on the desk. "You've been wondering where I've been these past few months, haven't you, dearie?"

"Who hasn't?"

"Well, this is your answer right here," he runs a finger along the length of the steel, careful just to touch the blunt part of the blade. *Shame*, a tiny nick would've ended his arrogant ass right then and there. "I'm sure Regina wasted no time in telling you how I'd sent a lot of people to acquire it for me back in the day; they all failed, of course. So, I decided to take a little journey to Asheneamon to *borrow* this sword from its owner, myself. It wasn't easy, I can say as much. The Emperor's not one to share, but I did manage to *convince* him to part with it in the end. Piece of advice, Miss Swan, when you want something done right, you need to do it yourself."

Going by the dark look that washes over his face, Emma wouldn't be surprised if Paul's old home is presently mourning the death of their Emperor. For something as revered as the Sword of Ashe, blood must've been shed. *A lot of it.*

"I must say, it's truly amazing how time works differently in other realms. I don't know how Jefferson kept track of things; portal jumping is a tedious affair. I was in that dreary world for only a few days; imagine my surprise when I returned to Storybrooke and discovered that months had already gone by."

Emma scoffs. She can bet a hundred bucks that it's *nothing* compared to the shock of discovering that your own arch-nemesis is actually *yourself* in disguise.

"You went through all that trouble for that sword, huh?"

"I did."

"But then you're going to give it to me..."

"I believe I will, yes."

"Why?"

"Why not?"

"What's your angle?" she asks for the nth time.

"Let's just say that I'm invested in your future," he shrugs. "And your past, too, I suppose."

*Oh, for fuck's sake-*!
Emma slams her palms against his desk. "Cut the fucking crap! For once in your life can you quit with all the cryptic bullshit and just say what you actually mean?!"

Her complete polar opposite, a calm and collected Gold just looks at her, unfazed by her outburst.

"Here's what I know: Paul sent a wraith to the past. I have to chase after it or else it'll kill Regina. And for some reason, the only thing that's capable of getting rid of that creature is this thing right here," she motions at the blade.

He nods in a slow, patronizing manner, as if urging her on.

"So, you give me the sword, I go back in time and save Regina from the wraith. Those parts are all cut and dry," she states. "I get them. But you," she motions at Gold. "You're a frickin' mystery. And I don't understand it, what the hell's in it for you? What do you get out of all this? What's your fucking angle?"

"And here I was thinking that you already figured it out," he exaggerates a sigh, leaning back against his leather chair. "I told you, Miss Swan: my curse."

"The Dark Curse?"

"That's Regina's curse, dearie."

"Which you created. It's your curse."

"Semantics," he dismisses with a wave of his hand.

This time, she smacks the table so hard that the framed picture of Belle falls flat on its face and the globular crystal paperweights spin and rattle against each other. Nevermind the stinging pain in her hands, Emma just leans forward and glowers at Gold. "Cut. The. Crap."

"Power," he finally sighs. "That, Miss Swan, is my curse."

"Power," she repeats, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes," he murmurs. And then, perhaps in an effort to push her buttons even more, he goes off-tangent - again. "Your life hasn't been easy, has it?"

"What?"

"Growing up an orphan, bouncing from one foster home to another, running away at a young age, thieving your way to survive in the streets, giving birth to your son in jail, and then giving him up for adoption. Your life hasn't been easy."

"Jesus Christ," Emma runs a hand through her hair, fighting the urge to punch his face a second time. "What the hell does my life have to do with your fucking curse?"

"Patience, dearie," he says in reproach. "There is a point and I will get to it if you just be patient."

_Bastard._

Emma grits her teeth.

"As I was saying, Miss Swan, on paper, you were a lost cause; an unfortunate soul destined to live a sad, mediocre existence. But then... you defied the odds and turned your life around. Now, you're a Sheriff in a town that venerates you as a Savior. You've been reunited with your parents, you have
your son back in your life and, even if the mere thought of it amuses me greatly, you somehow managed to gain Regina's affections."

"Your. Point," Emma hisses. "Get to it."

"You've been struggling most of your life - as have I. You're a fighter."

"And, so?"

"You're a fighter," he states once more. "I am not."

"Cause you're a coward."

A pathetic, bitter smile pulls at his lips, but he doesn't deny her words.

"My point, Miss Swan, is that you changed your life through your own strength of will. I, on the other hand, changed my life through magic. Through power."

"The dagger?"

He nods slowly.

"It's amazing how it changed everything, becoming the Dark One. I went from being the village joke to the most feared man in all the realms. I was untouchable; I was invincible. It was invigorating," he smiles almost wistfully. "And so power became so invaluable that it became an addiction, a crutch. A crutch I couldn't let go. And because of it, I lost the most important person in my life."

"Your son," Emma guesses.

"I see you've read Henry's book."

She shrugs.

"I chose power over my own child," Gold murmurs somewhat shamefully, suddenly looking older than his years - which is saying something given his true age. "And the moment I let him go is the moment I realized that power has become my own undoing; what had once been my salvation has turned into a curse - my curse."

"Your dagger," Emma realizes. "You wanted it broken."

Gold just half-smiles.

"It was... necessary. Extreme, yet necessary. You see, I possessed-acquired," he corrects with a tired, sardonic little laugh. "The gift of foresight from a demented seer. I've long since lost the ability, but as I've said a while ago, dearie, I only had a fragmented view of the future to begin with. There were a lot of things about it that eluded me, but there were also certain things that I knew without a shadow of a doubt."

"Like?"

"One, that I would be reunited with Bae. Two, that I would lose my powers-the very thing that drove him away-in order for reconciliation to take place. Three, the Sword of Ashe would be the one to destroy my dagger. Four, some mysterious, faceless man would wield it and free me from my curse. And five, certain denizens of Neverland would be instrumental in the shaping of these events."

"Faceless man?"
"I told you, Miss Swan, Argos' identity came as a surprise to me, too," Gold reminds her. "In all my visions of the mysterious stranger, his face was obscured. Blurred and hazy. It was as if there was something actively keeping me from knowing who 'he' was. Now, I know why. And how."

How?

Perhaps reading her mind, he stands up and pulls open a drawer. "Magic, Miss Swan. My magic."

"You're powerless."

"Am I?" he sweeps a hand downwards and motions at his body - the body that's now free of any evidence of the many injuries that confined him to the ICU for weeks. "I may no longer possess the Dark One's magic, but I still have a few tricks up my sleeve."

He plucks out an amber vial from inside the drawer and tosses it toward her. It's nothing short of a miracle that Emma catches it. Her mind may be fatigued from information overload, but it looks like her reflexes are still okay. Thank God.

"What's this?"

"Cloaking potion," Gold volunteers. "It will mask your identity - your appearance, your voice. Everything about you, basically. I recall I once used a similar kind of magic on Regina. She wanted to disguise herself so she could walk among the peasants and find out what they really thought of their queen. Needless to say, it didn't end well."

Mask her identity, huh?

Emma blows out a breath from her lips.

That's-wait…

Mask…?

Well, fuck.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, she shakes her head and lets out a sad little chuckle.

"Something funny, Miss Swan?"

"I got myself electrocuted because of a damn mask," she shares, lifting her left hand and showing her once electric emerald ring to Gold. Sometimes, she swears there are days that she can still feel the horrible sting on her backside. "Argos sent me a mask identical to 'his' a while back as a prank," Emma sighs. "At least I thought it was a prank then."

"Well, there you have it. Looks like you just made your life a little easier,"

"Did I?" she snorts.

"Where is it? This mask?"

"In the backseat of the Bug. I keep on forgetting to bring it to the station to put in the evidence locker."

"Then your forgetfulness worked for you in the end. Pour the contents of that vial onto that mask of yours, dearie, and as soon as you wear it, Emma Swan will be no more. You will become Argos and none will be the wiser; so long as you have it on, of course."
"That easy, huh?"

"That easy."

Yeah… right. Emma runs a hand through her hair and scoffs.

So… she becomes Argos with the help of Gold's potion and the mask. She goes back in time with Paul's help. And she's going to save Regina's life by using the sword. Sounds easy, but hell if it truly is.

Looking down at the weapon on the table, Emma sighs and reaches for the sword.

Naturally, Gold slams the box shut and almost catches her fingers in the process.

"Jesus Christ! What the hell?!"

"Not so fast, dearie," he wags a finger in warning. "Before you can get your hands on the sword, I require something first."

Of course he does. "I thought you were letting me have it from the goodness of your heart?"

The look she gets from the man is just dripping with attitude.

"The heck do you want?" Emma asks warily.

"Your word," he says plainly. "We need to make it official, our deal."

"We have a deal?"

"Of course we do," Gold replies. "It's a transaction, Miss Swan. I give you the sword, you use it whichever way you please, so long as my dagger is destroyed. In the end, that's the only payment I require."

He extends a hand, his eyes boring intensely into hers. "Do we have a deal?"

"Like you gave me a choice," Emma rolls her eyes, shaking his hand and then letting it go just as quickly.

"Oh, but you do have a choice, dearie. You can choose not to go back. You can choose to say no. You can walk away right now and go back home to your family - no hard feelings."

He smiles at her then, all teeth and no compassion.

"Of course, then you'd alter this timeline. Without Argos and the Sword of Ashe, there'd be nothing stopping the wraith. Regina will die. You, however, will live, Miss Swan. But your survival will be at the expense of Regina's life. So, now, I suppose the more prudent question is: will you be able to live with your choice then?"

"You know what, fuck you," Emma snarls.

"Be nice, Sheriff, I was only stating facts," Gold tells her, nonplussed by her anger. "Hm, though I suppose I should also tell you that there is another way to ensure that you and Regina both make it out of the whole affair alive, but I'm not sure you'll like it."

"What is it?" she asks warily.
"It's simple, really. You see, the Sword of Ashe," he begins, laying a hand over the wooden box, "when fully activated, greatly overpowers the Dark One's dagger. It will slice through it like a warm knife through butter and break it easily - no fuss, no mess."

"No earthquake."

"Precisely," Gold confirms. "Disaster will be averted. You will survive."

"But what's the catch?"

"Do you recall how to activate the sword, Miss Swan?"

"Yeah… it needs to absorb a being of pure light and a being of darkness," she recites in a tired manner, remembering the talk she had with Regina way back when.

"Correct. That's why Petrius, the demigod who forged the weapon, named it Gray," Gold shares. "The wraith is a dark entity. If you succeed in your mission and let the blade absorb the creature, you will have partially activated the sword."

"And will a partially activated sword be able to destroy your dagger?"

"Yes, but there would be consequences - significant ones."

"I die," she ventures a guess.

Gold nods. "Half activated, the Sword of Ashe is merely on equal footing with the dagger. The second they meet, both of them will break. I believe I don't have to tell you what will happen when that occurs."

The town will be plunged into the deepest bowels of hell, she remembers that part all too well.

"So, Miss Swan, if you want to prevent a catastrophe from happening and come out of the whole experience unscathed, there is only one thing to do: activate the sword fully."

She can feel her insides twisting at the mere thought of what fully activating the sword entails. Mainly, homicide. "No, I'm no murderer."

"Ah, yes," Gold murmurs. "I seem to recall you telling me that."

Huh? Emma's brows meet. "When?"

He just smiles.

Argos, then. Figures.

"I could give you names, dearie," Gold offers. "You might be the most famous one in this town, but that doesn't mean there aren't others like you here. That Lost Boy, Davy Smith, he's a product of True Love, too. Alice Mishawn is another. And, of course, there's Alexandra Herman."

"Ashley's baby?" Emma sputters in horror. "You expect me to kill a frickin' child?!"

"No, I don't expect you to kill a baby," he counters in a tired, monotonous way. "I know you're not the type, Miss Swan. I was just laying out your options, nothing else."

"Yeah, 'course you were," she mutters under her breath. "Is that why you wanted to get that little girl in the first place? You needed Ashley's kid as some sort of a sacrificial lamb?"
He doesn't answer; instead, he just walks around his desk and stands right before her, looking at her straight in the eyes. "Go home," he says in lieu of a rebuttal. "It's past midnight, Miss Swan. I don't think Regina would appreciate you gallivanting around town—or socializing with me, for that matter—on Christmas."

Mi**nch**t...? Already?

Her eyes quickly search for a clock. She finds one on the mantle and her heart plummets even deeper into her stomach as she confirms the time. Shit. Maybe she won't even die as Argos; Regina will skin her alive before she can even make the trip back in time.

"Don't worry about the sword, dearie. It'll be in your hands before you journey into the past. For the time being, however, I'll keep it with me for—"

"Leverage?" Emma supplies.

"Safekeeping," Gold smirks.

"Right."

"There's just one last thing I need to tell you before I let you go,"

"Of course," she exhales, grabbing the back of her neck. "What is it?"

"You leave tomorrow evening."

"..."

.

.

.

"What?!"

"You leave tomorrow evening," he repeats. "Precisely nine PM. So, I suggest you start saying your goodbyes and getting your affairs in order. You don't have much time left, no dilly-dallying."

Indignation has a way of robbing people of their ability to speak. And so she just stands there like an idiot, her mouth flapping open and close like a fish out of water.

"Oh, don't look so shocked. I've waited far too long to be reunited with my son. I can spare you a day, Miss Swan, but no more than that. I'm already packed and ready to go."

It's only then, after he motions at them, that Emma notices the packed bags at the corner of the room.

"I just need to make sure that you've gone and traveled back to the past before I can finally venture out of this godforsaken town."

But...

"A day?! A frickin' day?!" Emma exclaims, finally finding her voice. "Are you kidding me?"

"I'm doing you a favor, dearie."
"Bullshit."

"Believe it or not, I am. The longer you stay, the harder it is to leave. You should've learned that lesson from your early days here in Storybrooke. Weren't you only supposed to bring your son home? But look at you now, Miss Swan; it's been months and you're still here."

"But."

"No 'buts' - you need my help more than I need yours,"

"That's not true."

"Oh, but it is. See, Bae's life does not depend on my curse being broken," Gold says. "Regina's survival, on the other hand, depends on whether or not I give you the sword."

"So, what makes you think I won't just take it from you, then?"

"For one, you'd have to pry it from my cold, dead hands," the snake hisses, his slit-like eyes promising a thousand and one gruesome deaths. "I dare you to even try."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"No, you be careful. I didn't massacre an entire castle and turn a whole empire on its head for this sword just to have it taken away from me by a two-bit goon like you. As tough and hardened as you are, you still have Snow White and Charming's overly self-righteous blood coursing through your veins. You are every bit their child, and at the end of the day, I can take a life when need be - you cannot. So, piece of advice, Miss Swan: bury your empty threats and stand down."

If someone would stumble in between the two of them and get caught in the intense stare-down going on, Emma wouldn't be surprised if that poor soul burst into flames.

But lo and behold, despite her bravado, she finds herself breaking eye contact first.

Because in spite of her innate never-say-die attitude, as much as it pains her to admit it, he's right. She needs the sword. And she's no killer.

The victorious little smirk that pulls at Gold's lips when she backs down is another blow to her pride, but she brushes it off and takes it in stride. Or at least she tries to.

Screwing her eyes shut, Emma rubs her heated face with her hands, willing herself to wake up from this nightmare. It's one nasty surprise after another and there's seemingly no end in sight; how many more can she possibly take before she finally keels over?

He wants her gone by tomorrow evening.

It's a day. One day.

She needs more time. To process; to tie loose ends; to say... things... to her loved ones. Hell, she needs more time just to even breathe.

"So, that's it, huh? You drop this bomb in my lap and then you skip away from all of this in one piece? I get screwed over in the worst possible way while you get your happy ending? Is that it?"

"Life is cruel, dearie. Blame fate."

"Fate?" she scoffs. "No, thanks. I blame you. Fate didn't throw me under the bus, you did. Only
a coward would blame destiny for how their own selfishness ruined people's lives. You orchestrated every single thing; it's your damn fault. So, don't you dare try and wipe your hands clean - you're a coward, through and through."

He doesn't say anything. And while it might not mean much, in her head, Emma considers the dig a punch thrown and successfully landed.

"What about Belle? What does she think about all of this?" she throws another jab. "Does she even know what you're doing?"

"Will Regina know what you're about to do?" Gold hits back just as easily.

"She-" Emma stops. It's easy to declare that yes, she will tell the mother of her child, but then...

"Yes? No?"

"She... I'll...

He tilts his head in wait. And when she doesn't speak, he forms his own conclusions. "You're not going to tell her, are you?"

Emma finds herself looking away.

"Smart choice. What Regina doesn't know won't kill her," Gold says. And then the bastard actually smiles. "Literally, in this case. Her Majesty is a lot of things, but as self-absorbed as she is, I don't believe she'd allow you to die in her stead."

She wouldn't in the past, Emma's not even going to delude herself into thinking otherwise. But things change; people change. And the Regina she knows now? The one who gave her an electric ring just to protect-and subsequently punish-her ass? The one who begrudgingly admitted to thinking of her as family? The one whose wet-but oh-so delicious-kisses start and end her days? The one who's probably pacing their living room-yes, their living room at their house-worried sick and ready to murder her because it's more than two hours from the time she promised to come home? That Regina wouldn't hesitate to lay her life in the line for her.

That, Emma knows to be true.

Because despite their usual cattiness and proclivity to get on each other's nerves, they're both hopeless idiots who'd willingly die and sacrifice their own lives for each other. She's known this from the time they fought against the wraith at the stables and it's been reaffirmed time and again by all the battles they've been fighting ever since. As much as they complain about it, they've always had each other's backs - always, and without fail.

"She'll kill you, just so you know."

"Of that, I've no doubt," Gold acknowledges, leaning against his desk. "But I'll be long gone by the time she finds out the truth."

"She'll take a page out of your book and go after the people you love, then. As much as she's changed, I wouldn't put it past her. You've done nothing but ruin her life."

"You don't have to tell me about Regina's tendency to retaliate; this town is living proof of it. That's why Belle's coming with me."

Well, that's just...
"Crazy," Emma shakes her head in disbelief. "You're frickin' crazy. She'll lose her memory; everything that she is as soon as she crosses the town line. As will you - not that I give a rat's ass about your well-being," she quickly adds. "You can walk around like a neutered amnesiac for all I care."

"Not if I can help it," he says darkly, looking at the chipped cup near the bags - the one that's lying atop an antiquated trunk, cocooned by the thick, tan scarf wrapped around it. "I didn't wait centuries for this moment just to be thwarted by trivialities. Rest assured that I've taken the necessary precautions to make sure everything goes according to plan."

"Course you did," Emma says, running a hand through her hair. "You've thought this through, down to the very last detail. Find a way to retain your memory? Check. Screw me over? Check. Packed your bags? Check. Is there anything left to do-or any other lives you need to ruin-before you leave?"

"Everything I did, I did for my son. My family. Given what you're about to do, I think that you, of all people, can respect that."

Oh, that's just precious.

"Go fuck yourself, you bastard."

And that's it. She can't take much more. She's reached her bullshit quota for the day; if she hears any more, her head might actually explode. Might as well go home now and spend time with her family. God knows she doesn't have much of it left.

Gold, however, isn't quite done with her as she is with him.

"You're the Savior, the curse-breaker," he says quietly right before she steps out of his study, his voice the closest to what can only be described as sincerity that she's ever heard it. "Don't I deserve salvation, too?"

Pausing by the door, she glares daggers at him over her shoulder. "Not at my expense, no."

And not just hers, but her family's too.

Her cellphone's dead.

It's still on the passenger seat, lying silently atop Blue's present.

She had a single bar remaining the last time she checked - and that was before she arrived at Sherwood Park and everything spiraled into hell. Typically, one bar would've lasted her two-at most, three-hours, so for it to run out of juice so fast? It can only mean one thing:

Someone had been calling. And calling. And calling.

And she doesn't need to think that hard to figure out who; Emma's just barely through the back door when that someone comes charging out of the basement, a crazed, wide-eyed look in that usually calm and controlled facade.

Regina looks positively murderous.

And the moment they're only a hair's breadth away, Emma winces and flattens herself against the door, anticipating a blow to the stomach or a slap to the face.

They never come.
Still, it feels like all the air gets violently pushed out of her lungs when Regina slams against her and then pulls her in close, locking her in an embrace that stuns her in its ferocity and, well, also in its novelty.

It's like the woman is holding on for dear life.

And even as her head continues to spin from everything, it freaks Emma out above all else. This isn't like Regina at all.

"R-Regina?"

In her daze, she doesn't even realize that their son's right on Regina's coattails; of course, she quickly notes his presence the second he crashes against the both of them and joins in the hug.

*What the heck...?*

Now, there are two people holding on to her as if their life depended on it.

*Wait...*

Emma stops breathing, panic seizing her chest.

*Did Paul or Rufio...?*

"The wraith's back," Henry fills her in, his words so rushed it's a wonder she can even understand him. "Mom's hand burned when she was making me cocoa and the scary-looking mark appeared on her palm again. We thought it was coming after her, and so mom told me to hide downstairs in your closet while she stood guard at the front door."

*Oh.*

"But it never came, and the mark also disappeared after a few minutes, so we tried calling you to warn you about it," he says in one breath. And then a wounded look replaces the urgency on his face. "You never answered our calls..."

"I was... I..."

"Where were you?"

*Lie.*

"I..."

"Did you know the wraith's out there?"

*Just lie.*

Henry's brown eyes bore into hers.

Emma swallows hard.

"Emma?"

"Y-yeah, I did," she admits quietly. He pales ever so slightly, and even though she can't really see it, she knows he tightens his hold on Regina — the sharp tug she feels on the woman's blouse tells her as much. "It's gone now, though. So, don't you worry about it anymore, kid."
"Did you-?"

Emma bites her tongue. "Don't worry about it," she just says again.

"Are you sure?"

"Mhmm."

Looking a tad skeptical, and still more than a little fearful despite his obvious struggle to put up a brave front, Henry just burrows deeper into the hug, refusing to let her or Regina go.

"Kid? It's alright now, okay?" Emma murmurs softly, freeing her right hand from the embrace so she can rest it on his disheveled mane and give it an affectionate ruffle. "Trust me."

"I didn't know what to do. I thought…” he mumbles, his lower lip quivering. He bites on it and keeps it still with his teeth. "I thought…”

"Yeah?"

"I thought mom was gonna die…”

Regina stiffens.

"She's not," Emma says firmly. Not if she can help it. "I promise you, she's not dying. I won't let her. I'm the Savior, remember? Besides, it'll take more than a stupid wraith to bring down your mom. Right, Regina?"

The fingers that are latched to her jacket tighten their grip.

"Regina?" Emma tries again, pulling back slightly to look at the woman's face. 

**Big mistake.**

"You idiot!"

Emma and Henry both flinch.

Ah, see, now **this** is more like the Regina she knows.

A pair of hands smack her flat on the shoulders, knocking her backwards a step.

"Why the hell didn't you answer your phone?!"

**Definitely** the Regina she knows.

A spooked Henry, the poor kid, finally lets go and just backs towards the breakfast table, watching the drama unfold with wide, wary eyes.

"I left it in the car," Emma says feebly, grabbing the back of her neck. "It was an accident, okay? I'm sorry. Calm down."

"Calm down?" The vein on Regina's forehead protrudes and becomes very visible - **never** a good sign. "You really have the gall to tell me that, Miss Swan? Calm down?"

"I guess I should've just left it at 'I'm sorry', huh?"

The angry red tint on Regina's cheeks grows deeper in color.
Emma promptly shuts her mouth.

"How the hell can you be so careless as to leave your phone in the car? I thought-" Regina works her jaw, "...our son... thought the wraith got to you first, that you were lying unconscious somewhere in a pool of your own blood. And you... you have the audacity to tell me to calm down? How dare you be so infuriatingly blasé about this after giving Henry a scare like that?"

"Mom was super scared, too," Henry pipes in, as if that fact's not obvious to Emma at all; Regina's practically hysterical. "She wanted to look for you but she didn't want to leave me alone here. We were both worried that you got yourself killed or something."

"What? Me?" Emma forces a chuckle. "C'mon, I'm not that reckless. I might've forgotten my phone in the Bug, but I did remember to take my gun. I wasn't that careless."

Regina's nostrils flare.

Emma clamps her mouth shut again. Well, that didn't help at all, no surprise there.

"I'm fine," she reassures instead, switching tactics. "Look, I'm right here - no gashes, no broken bones, no nasty cuts. My soul didn't get sucked out of my body; I'm not dead."

Yet.

She bites her tongue for the second time.

"Where have you been?"

"Sherwood Park. I was dropping off Paul's present when we saw a portal opening up near the pond area."

"A portal?"

"The Lost Boys opened one to Neverland using Jefferson's hat and some stolen fairy dust," Emma explains further on. "A fissure broke out near it, predictably, and the wraith came out of that."

That obviously unsettles the other woman even more, and for just a teeny moment, worry chips away at some of Regina's anger.

"Where is it now?"

"Gone," Emma says, reaching out and grabbing hold of Regina's left hand, turning it palm-side up. There's no trace of the mark, and so she makes Regina look at the unblemished palm by tracing circles on it with her thumb, just to drive her point in further. "I swear to God, it's gone."

"How? What did you do?"

"Not me," Emma shakes her head. "Turns out Paul dabbles in a bit of magic, too. He did some kind of spell and sent the wraith back in... uh, I mean, to... to..."

"To...?" Henry frowns. "To where?"

Oh... shit.

Lie.

"To the Enchanted Forest?" he guesses.
Clearing her throat, she gives him a shrug — whether or not he takes that as confirmation is up to him.

"A banishing spell?" Regina assumes incorrectly. "Did he use some sort of magical object?"

_A watch._

Keeping a straight face, Emma plays dumb and just shrugs again.

"No? Then how on earth did he manage to accomplish such a complicated spell like that? I don't believe even Rumplestiltskin was able to banish people to other worlds without the help of enchanted objects - mirrors, hats, the like."

"You know what, don't sweat it, I'll get Paul to show-tell," Emma corrects quickly. "I'll get him to tell me all about the specifics of the spell he used tomorrow."

"So... Paul can shape-shift into a bunny and he can also do magic?" Henry mumbles to himself, and then furrows his brows. "Does that make him the White Rabbit? But he's not from Wonderland..."

He tilts his head and looks at her.

Keeping her gaze locked on Regina's frowning face, Emma pretends not to have heard his musing.

Thankfully, unlike their inquisitive child, Regina doesn't dwell on the matter any further. "And what of those moronic delinquents? Did they all escape?" the woman asks instead.

"Most of them made it back to Neverland; Rufio and Pockets stayed behind."

"Rufio?"

"You were right all along," Emma concedes, giving Regina's hand a squeeze. "He was just faking it. He remembers everything."

Regina merely scoffs in response, but that's enough of an 'I-told-you-so' for Emma. "He ought to be punished."

"Yeah, he does," she agrees with a sigh. And then the anguished look on Rufio's face when they parted flashes in her mind's eye. "But, you know what, something tells me that he's already punishing himself well enough on his own."

"Debatable at best. You don't have the best judgment, my dear. Do what you should've done from the very beginning; throw him in jail, he's a menace."

And he's also Gold's unwitting victim; another sucker whose desperation was exploited just to further that snake's goals - not much different from her if one thinks about it, really.

So, in the end, she just doesn't comment on it.

"There's still a fissure at the park?"

"Fairies took care of it," Emma says. And that's the truth; well, only a part of it, but it's still the truth. Before she left for Gold's place, she ordered Rufio to haul Tinker Bell's ass back and have her close the fissure with the pinch amount of fairy dust the kids have left. So, yeah, she might not be a fairy nun, but Tinker Bell's still technically a fairy, so that wasn't a total lie.

"It took me a while to get home cause I had to make sure there weren't any other fissures in the area.
I should've brought my phone with me or even borrowed someone else's and called home, I know - and I'm really sorry I made you guys worry. I just got caught up in the search."

Now, that... that part's a lie.

But... it's necessary.

*Lie to save her life,* Emma reminds herself, tamping down on the guilt that's threatening to close her throat after all the false things that came out of her mouth.

"Look, the wraith's gone, there are no more fissures, everybody's safe. I'm sure you guys are exhausted so how 'bout we just turn in and call it a night?"

"No, we can't," Henry says, adamant.

"Huh? Why not?"

"We can't call it a night yet, right mom?" he turns to Regina - who, despite looking exhausted, just nods her head indulgently.

"It's Christmas," the woman says in way of explanation.

"Christmas," Henry echoes.

*Right.*

*Christmas.*

The fear and uncertainty that plagued their son's young face just several minutes ago fade away in place of what looks to be excited determination. If there's any doubt in her head that opening presents can offer the best form of distraction for a spooked kid, it's now been completely obliterated.

"Well," Emma acquiesces with a sigh, waving a hand towards the door. "Lead the way."

Henry doesn't need to be told twice.

Regina, however, lingers behind and floors her with a disapproving glare.

"What?" Emma asks.

"You're an idiot."

*Of course.*

"It was gonna come after you," she says quietly.

"Yes, I know that," Regina frowns. "But, a gun? Against a wraith? What if Paul hadn't been there? What if he hadn't known how to use magic? What then?"

"But he was and he did. And I'm right here."

"It's Christmas."

"I know."

"You could've died..."
"Likewise."

"Our son would've been orphaned twice over on his favorite holiday."

"But he wasn't," Emma insists. "And he won't be, I promise."

_He might lose one mother… but he won't lose both._

Regina just sighs and runs a hand through her dark locks.

"You're an idiot," she says for the nth time.

"I know," Emma smiles sadly.

. .

"Miss Swan?"

"Hm?"

"Don't you dare get yourself killed on my account."

The sheer irony of that statement. It's a wonder she's not bleeding from the mouth yet; God knows how many times she's bitten her tongue since she came home.

"I know you can't help yourself, _princess_, but don't play hero."

But, see, she _must_.

So, in a night where she just wants to hold on to her family and never let go-and perhaps even shed a tear or two, or a hundred, at how heartbreakingly _unfair_ her life has _always_ been-she just puts up a brave front and gives Regina a calm, unaffected nod.

She has to be strong.

She _has_ to.

As hard as this is for her, she can't drop the ball. She can't afford to; there's too much lying on the line.

So she just walks behind Regina as if tugged by an invisible leash and follows after the woman to the living room, where a warm fire is still going and the dulcet tones of a classic Christmas carol's flowing out of the built-in speakers on the ceiling.

And as Emma stands by the doorway and leans against the frame, she watches fondly as Regina hikes up her skirt a little and carefully kneels by the foot of the tree. Henry plops down beside his mother with way less finesse, and with the excitement of a toddler and not a preteen boy, he drums his fingers on his lap and waits impatiently for Regina to hand him the first of the three presents that he's allowed to open tonight. It's tradition, apparently; a way to satiate his overeagerness before the main unwrapping affair on Christmas morning.

She takes a mental picture of the two in her head; this is her first - and last - Christmas with her
family, after all.

*Remember it...*

A lump lodges itself in her throat.

...*and from it draw strength.*

She stores the image in her heart.

The way Henry's whole face lights up when he tears through the reindeer wrapper and uncovers her gift makes her chest both swell and clench. And as his gaze flits in her direction, Emma clears her throat, puts back on her happy-go-lucky mask, and gives him a sly wink.

"He's alive..." Henry marvels, running a finger along the embossed cover of the special edition issue of *Arachno* — the one with the presumably dead Hound Edge gracing the cover. "I thought he was gone for sure."

"Dying's a right of passage in the superhero world," Emma murmurs.

"Yes," Regina tucks an unruly strand of hair behind Henry's ear and away from his eyes. "Because most-if not all-of those superheroes are-"

"-idiots," Emma and Henry chorus.

Regina rolls her eyes — but it's more out of resigned amusement than malice.

And while their son's opening Regina's present - a brand new DS that sends him into a fit of giddiness - their eyes meet over his head and Regina's lips quirk upwards ever so slightly. It might not look like much, but it's an olive branch; a truce. Emma responds in kind, of course, even though her smile probably looks more bittersweet than anything else.

"Merry Christmas," she mouths to the brunette.

Regina doesn't return the greeting; instead, the woman pats the space beside her and beckons Emma to sit. And like an obedient little puppy, she complies and paddles right over.

Sitting crosslegged between the pair, she places a soft kiss on Henry's head before a hand on her forearm draws her attention away from the enthralled boy.

"I told you he'd like my present best," Regina murmurs in her ear.

Emma rolls her eyes good-naturedly and snorts. "Does it always have to be a competition with you?"

"Old habits, my dear."

They share another smile, and while their distracted son continues to gush over the gaming unit, they slowly, almost shyly, lean close to each other and share a chaste, but slightly lingering kiss.

Emma sighs against Regina's lips.

Gold's right, you know?

She *has* a choice.

And she chose this.
The role and all the weight of being fairytale land's almighty bringer of salvation may have been forcibly thrust upon her, but she chose to be her family's savior.

And she'll protect them with all her heart. With all her might. And with her entire life.

Sleep completely eludes her, surprise, surprise.

And by twenty past two in the morning, Emma throws the duvet off of herself and sits upright with a weary sigh. If this is her last night in this house, she's not going to spend it staring at the ceiling, tossing and turning, waiting for something that will never come.

A couple of minutes later, she's making her way up the winding staircase to the second floor of the mansion, maneuvering through the darkened halls more through sheer memory than her senses.

Carefully, quietly, she stalks towards the room nearest the landing and peers inside.

Empty.

The kid's sheets are rumpled and his pillows are strewn about, but his ten-year-old teddy bear is missing - the one Emma's forbidden to talk about to anyone outside the household, and by anyone, he probably just meant Paige - so even when fear and panic should've been her initial reaction to his absence, Emma just shuts the door with a soft click.

Henry's fine.

She's sure of it.

True enough, she finds him curled up in the master's bedroom, enveloped in Regina's arms - Mr. Jammy's shaggy head poking out of the covers beside him. Lips parted slightly and drooling on the pillow, Henry looks so comfortable and warm in his mother's embrace, and even though in a few years he's most likely going to be towering over everyone, right now, he just appears like a tiny ball of tousled brown hair.

"If your idea of stealth didn't involve clomping around like an elephant in tap shoes, I would've lobbed a fireball at you."

Closing the door gently behind her, Emma smirks at the larger figure on the bed - the one being illuminated by the faintest bit of light from the digital alarm clock on the bedside table. "Good luck with that. You're more likely to burn yourself than me, what with your wonky ass magic and all."

An insulted Regina harrumphs.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"Why aren't you?" the brunette whispers in return.

"It's Christmas."

Even in the semi-darkness, she can see the way a perfectly sculpted eyebrow slowly inches upwards at that answer of hers.

"As you can very well see, my dear, any form of special 'gift-giving' you may or may not have wanted tonight simply cannot-and will not-happen."

There's a five-foot-tall ladyboner-killer on the bed, she knows. But that's not the point. Really.
"I didn't come up here for that," Emma denies. Though, to be honest, she wouldn't be opposed to it if ever it happened either. "It's Christmas," she says again. "A time to be with your loved ones and all that jazz. It just… it felt really… cold… down in the basement tonight."

"So, you came all the way up here for warmth?"

"Among other things."

Now, both of Regina's eyebrows hike up to her forehead.

"Company," she supplies. "Mind out of the gutter, your majesty."

"You're one to speak; yours live perennially in that so-called gutter, princess."

That's open to debate. Kinda.

"So… mind if I…?" she motions to the bed.

"By all means," Regina says all-too-magnanimously. "Just try not to hog the covers. Or move a lot. Or, god forbid, snore."

"Can I at least breathe, your majesty?"

"Only if you do so quietly."

Ass.

But still, Emma can't help but smirk.

Careful not to wake the slumbering kid, she gingerly slips underneath the duvet and settles in place, sandwiching their son between her and Regina.

"What about you?" she asks in a hushed tone, turning her head to the face the brunette. "Why are you awake at this hour?"

"Henry couldn't sleep."

"He's drooling all over Mr. Jammy's head."

"Now, he is. He surely wasn't when he knocked on my door, worried that the wraith would somehow find its way back to town."

"When was that?"

"About an hour ago - give or take."

"And you're still awake?"

"Of course I am. I'm-"

She waits, but Regina never finishes her statement. "You're…?"

"…"

"Regina?"

Emma's ears pick up a sigh.
And after a beat, she hears Regina softly admit: "You might say that I'm merely savoring the moment…"

Well, that's remarkably… honest.

"When was the last time he slept beside you?"

Regina tightens her hold on the kid and places a kiss on his head. "Too long," she murmurs against his hair.

Smacking his lips lazily, Henry mumbles incoherently and stirs. Thankfully, he doesn't wake.

And it's only after he stops moving that Emma takes notice of the desperate way he seems to be clinging onto Regina's left hand - that even in his sleep, his grip doesn't appear to slacken even for a little bit.

Drinking in the sight, Emma lets out a quiet little laugh.

"What's so amusing?"

"You. The kid."

A deep crease forms between the middle of Regina's brows.

"He loves you a lot, y'know?" Emma murmurs. "It should be pretty obvious to you right now. I mean, it is to me. Look at the way he's holding your hand. He's not just worried that the wraith will come back to Storybrooke - he's obviously scared that it will come after you and finish the job."

Every bit as guarded as she's always been - despite that hopeful expression on her face - the other woman just replies with a noncommittal hum.

Emma sighs.

"Look, I know you don't believe it, and there's probably a part of you that will always question if it's real, but if someone like me can see it, then I think you better start accepting it to be true. You're his mother, Regina; he loves you."

Breaking eye contact, Regina just stares at the wall behind Emma, chewing on her bottom lip thoughtfully. Several moments pass before Emma hears from her again.

"Do you think," Regina exhales. "Do you believe that he's finally forgiven me for everything? For all the lies? The forced therapy sessions? The turnover?"

"I don't know," she admits the truth. "I think only the kid can answer that for sure."

Swallowing thickly, Regina visibly deflates.

"But you know what," Emma is quick to follow up. "Look at him…"

"Hm?"

"He's practically cutting off the circulation in your hand."

"And what does that have to do with anything?"

"Just saying, he's too clingy - and he looks far too comfortable snuggled up against you to be the
kind of son that hates his mother's guts. Trust me, he loves you."

Regina takes a moment to consider her words. "You think so?"

"I see so."

And in spite of the tiny ounce of uncertainty still lingering in those pools of brown, Regina just stares at her and, finally, cracks the tiniest of smiles.

And then, of course, Emma ruins the serious, sentimental moment by letting out an amused snort.

"What?"

"See so…"

Regina frowns in confusion.

"See-saw… see so. Get it?"

That, it goes without saying, earns her an exasperated eyeroll. "Go to sleep, Miss Swan."

"What? I thought it was kinda clever…"

"And once again you've thought wrong."

"Oh, c'mon, cut me some slack, it's almost three AM."

"That doesn't excuse all the other times your comical endeavours fell flat, my dear."

"Whatever," Emma mutters dejectedly. "I have a specific brand of humor."

"You do, and I believe it's called humorless."

*Rude.*

*I'm humorless? You're humorless.*

Regina scoffs. "I certainly have more wit than you do, my dear."

*Dry wit,* Emma points out. "Which is really just a polite way of saying that your sense of humor is offensive and sarcastic and unfunny."

"Well, my dry wit is better than your no wit."

*I have wit."

"Inaneness is not wittiness; don't confuse the two."

*I'm not-"*

"Mooommmm… Emmaaaaaa…" Henry whines in between them, eyes closed and voice thick with
slumber. "Noisy..."

Chastened, they promptly shut their mouths.

Twisting in Regina's arms till he's lying flat on his back, Henry blindly feels around the bed with his free hand until he finds Emma's left one. And with a hearty yawn, he takes it and guides it to his and Regina's entwined hands and lets it rest over them before muttering a grumpy, "Sleep."

With that, he conks out once more.

Emma and Regina share an amused - yet also, kinda sheepish - look.

Ever the considerate rulebreaker, she waits until Henry starts snoring before breaking his command and speaking to his other mother in a hushed tone...

"So..."

Regina looks at her.

"We were arguing again..."

"Debating," the brunette counters just as silently. "There's a difference."

"Tomato, tomahto," she brushes off, tracing lazy circles on the back of Regina's hand. "Point is, whenever we would argue lately, we would always settle our differences the same way."

The eyebrow raise that she receives is one that is slow and deliberate.

"There's a child between us," Regina reminds her.

"And not all kisses are of the french variety," she responds in kind. Propping herself up with her right arm, careful not to jostle the kid, Emma leans over Henry and Mr. Jammy, and lays a soft, tender kiss on Regina's waiting lips.

And since one is never enough - especially now that she knows that she's operating on borrowed time - Emma kisses her again. And again. And again - until her head is swimming and her chest feels full of all the thoughts and emotions that kissing someone so enthralling - and equally infuriating - like Regina Mills invoke.

"See?" she whispers against Regina's parted lips moments later, when she's all kissed out. Actually, that's one humongous lie.

Only the weak would tap out of kisses, and she's no weakling.

Unfortunately, her right arm is going numb and shaking ever-so-slightly from holding up the weight of her torso, and if she doesn't lie back down any second from now, she's in danger of falling and squishing their snoozing kid.

So, reluctantly, Emma pulls away and lies back down, easing the weight on her poor limb.

"Good night, Miss Swan," Regina murmurs, tapping the back of Emma's hand until she gets the hint and hooks her index finger with Regina's.

"Good night..."
And with one last lingering look at her, Regina closes her eyes.

"Hey, uh, Regina?" Emma calls out in a hushed tone. "Are you asleep?"

A sigh. "It's barely been a minute. You're mistaking me for that narcoleptic dwarf of your mother's."

"Sorry," she says feebly. "I just…"

Indulging her, the other woman slowly re-opens her tired eyes and meets her gaze.

"I just…"

"You just…?" Regina prods, not a little impatiently.

"I just wish this night would go on forever."

And then, with quite impeccable timing, Henry decides to shift and elbow her right on the boob.

Jesus fucking Christ.

"Ouch!"

"You were saying, my dear?" Regina quirks a brow, stifling a cackle.

"Still wish this night could go on forever," Emma bites back a groan, massaging her aching chest. "Just minus the assault on my ti-breast."

Despite the mirth in those chocolate brown eyes, Regina sobered up a fraction and searched her face. "You're being awfully sentimental."

Emma shrugs. "Maybe I am."

"Is there a reason behind it?"

She tightens her hold on Regina's index finger.

"It's Christmas," Emma just says, leaving it at that.

*Her last one.*

"And you've always been alone on Christmas," Regina says, matter of fact.

"I have, yeah."

"You're not alone now."

"No, I'm not," Emma smiles softly. "Thanks to you and the kid."

"And you won't ever be alone again."

*That's...*
Her throat closes up, and if she hadn't bitten the insides of her cheeks, she's sure she would've choked on a sob. Clearing her throat, she thanks her lucky stars that it's dark and Regina probably won't see the way her eyes are starting to shimmer with tears.

"You know, I-"

_Say it._

"I-"

*Three words, eight letters.*

*Just say it._

"I'm kinda sleepy," she says thickly, chickening out.

The woman stares at her like she's some kind of confounding puzzle just begging to be solved, and despite looking like she's simply itching to get Emma to say what she truly wanted to, Regina mercifully backs down. "Good night, my dear."

"Good night..."

Emma screws her eyes tight and bites back a sigh.

Now's not the time to raise red flags and set off alarms. And those loaded words? The ones that are filling up her chest and just begging to leave her lips? The ones she'd been feeling for the longest time, but just couldn't define nor put a finger to until this very moment, when it's too late? They'd raise the biggest flag yet and set off warning bells in Regina's head. And she can't afford that; the stakes are too damn high.

She only has eighteen hours left.

Eighteen _fleeting_ hours.

And for the hundredth time tonight, she hopes for the improbable and wishes that the Dark Curse would somehow become unbroken and once again force time to come at a standstill - keep her frozen on this bed, on this night, with her family.

It's irrational, it's silly, and it's futile. Yet, also, it's a desire that's so tragic in its predictability.

Desperation, you see, is a powerful thing.

And she's just that desperate to hold on to her _home_…

Emma tightens her grip on the finger looped around her own.

...and if she's being honest with herself, she's also just that desperate not to be alone.

---

The bedside clock's flashing ten past four, yet despite her best efforts, sleep continues to slip from her grasp. It's pretty difficult to chase after something when your mind's insisting on running the other way.

And, well, it also doesn't help matters much that Henry's probably dreaming that he's in some kind of cheesy martial arts film.
After the fifth - or is it the sixth? - staggering blow to the body, Emma sucks in a tortured breath and finally decides that she's had enough. Weasling her way out of the kid's sprawled limbs, she inches out of whatever mediocre space she has left and rolls out of the bed.

Interestingly enough, the second she lets go of Regina, the woman wakes up. Emma's never known her majesty to be a light sleeper; but... well... she doesn't know much about anyone's sleeping habits except her own, so there's also that.

"What are you doing?"

"Moving," she answers simply. "Your son just elbowed me again and tried to kick me off the bed. One more blow to the boobs and he might just turn them concave."

Sleepy brown eyes track her movements, following her until she's standing at Regina's side of the bed.

"Move a little," Emma orders.

The stubborn woman doesn't budge an inch. "Why?"

"What does it look like? I'm sleeping beside you."

"And what makes you think I won't do the same thing he did when you nestle up against me? Unlike you, Miss Swan, I'm not one to snuggle - unless it's with my son."

"Regina, seriously, do I look like a snuggler to you? I think I'm more inclined to punch people in the face then give them hugs. Now, scoot."

Regina, as can be expected, grumbles in dismay, but eventually gives in and moves a little closer to the middle of the bed.

Proving that they're both a couple of hopeless hypocrites, barely ten minutes later, they're already kinda snuggling.

And complaining about it, too.

"Your feet are cold…"

"I know," Emma mumbles. "Why do you think I'm rubbing them up against yours?"

"Well, stop it."

"Only if you stop wiggling your ass..."

"Excuse me?"

"Just saying, if you keep on grinding against me, you might wake up the kid."

"Oh, don't flatter yourself, princess," Regina scoffs underneath her breath."No one's 'grinding' against you; I'm merely giving Henry more room to sleep. Our son seems to think it wise to lie diagonally on a queen-sized bed."

"Uh-huh. Right. Blame the kid."

This time, there's no denying that the butt bump she receives is anything but intentional.
Emma chuckles quietly and gives the irritable woman an affectionate squeeze, and before she realizes what she's doing, her lips are already touching the exposed patch of skin where Regina's neck and shoulder meet.

The brunette stiffens momentarily, then relaxes into her arms.

The kiss was innocent enough, but it's a different kind of intimacy than what they're accustomed to sharing with each other, and quite frankly, it's fairly new for the both of them. So, spurred by Regina's reaction, and feeling brazen enough, Emma does it again.

"I thought you're not the snuggling type?"

"I thought so, too," Emma drawls. "Hey, you said you weren't either..."

"Perhaps I lied."

"You? Lie?" she exaggerates a gasp. "No."

Eyebrow arching sharply, Regina looks over her shoulder to glare at her; seeing an opportunity, Emma quickly leans in and lays a big sloppy one on that luscious set of lips.

And despite letting out a disgruntled sound from her throat, barely a few moments later, Regina kisses her right back in earnest.

The temperature in the room spikes up a degree, but sadly, the kissing never gets heated.

Because true to form, their beloved little boy - and wet blanket - chooses that moment to strike again. And since Emma is no longer there to serve as his human punching bag, Henry sets his sights on Regina and kicks his unsuspecting mom on the leg.

Face contorting in pain, the poor woman hisses against her lips.

"How do you like them apples?" Emma chuckles. 

*Bad joke.*

"Ouch!"

"I don't know, my dear. You tell me."

*Evil.*

Emma pouts, reaching down and massaging her shin.

"Between you and the kid, I'm gonna be all black and blue tomorrow."

"Well, I'll be wearing a blue dress with black piping to your family's Christmas dinner," Regina tells her with a wicked little gleam in her eyes. "We'll match; I'm sure your mother and the other peasants will be thrilled."


Yet, also, so… addictively, frustratingly, maddeningly... *alluring.*

Which would probably explain why, just two minutes later, everything's forgiven and they're back to making out again.
This love-hate, push-pull relationship of theirs? Truly a fascinating-albeit, sometimes, vexing-thing.

Emma sighs inwardly.

It's just too bad that like most good things in her damned life, it'll be over before it's given a real chance to begin.

Sunlight is beginning to streak through the tiny gaps between the curtains.

Green eyes bloodshot but still wide-open, Emma stares at the shadows on the wall, her mind racing a mile per minute.

She didn't get a wink of sleep. And while her inability to get some well-deserved rest had irked her in the beginning, after the first hour of holding a slumbering Regina in her arms, a resigned kind of acceptance had set in. If these are her last moments with her loved ones, she might as well spend every single waking moment, well, awake.

Leaning into her hold, snug in her embrace, Regina mumbles in her sleep. Something about pastries or spells or whatever, Emma's not quite sure.

Still, it elicits the smallest of smiles from her lips.

It appears that while their son is an incessant toss-and-turner, Regina is quite the proficient sleep-talker.

Emma swears she'd heard her name twice in the past couple of hours alone. The first time, the growled 'Miss Swan!' made her start in surprise, spooked that all the stolen kisses she's been leaving on the back of Regina's neck had woken up the testy brunette. They hadn't, thank God, so she doesn't stop herself from doing them. The second time, well, Regina - in a way that was so breathy, yet, oh-so velvety - practically moaned out her name, and it sent her blindsided self into another tailspin and forced all her body heat to pool between her legs. Quite the predicament when you have a ten-year-old boy within arm's reach.

Speaking of their sleeping child…

Henry, the sweet kid, still hasn't let go of Regina's left hand. And she can't really blame him. Take away the distraction brought about by opening gifts, and despite his best efforts to be the brave, unaffected little prince, in the end, he's still just a ten-year-old boy who's frightened to death at the prospect of losing his mother.

Emma feels her throat constrict for the millionth time.

There's a reason why someone like her-who's always been averse to physical contact-is doing something incredibly out of character and being the big spoon to Regina's little one; a reason why her fingers are clutching the sleeve of Henry's red, cotton pajamas like a vice.

When faced with certain and imminent death, only liars can say that they feel no fear. And she may be a Sheriff, a princess, a White Knight, and a Savior…

...but she's also very much human.

And she's scared shitless.

Her heart hammering in her chest, Emma buries her face in the crook of Regina's neck and shuts her
eyes, breathing in the woman's intoxicating scent, letting it wash over her every pore.

It helps keep the fear at bay.

And sometime later, when the warm body that's pressed up against hers starts to rouse, Emma has just about gathered enough courage to hide her anxieties behind an expressionless mask, that when Regina initiates the first of many good morning kisses before inching out of bed, the woman doesn't suspect a thing.

"It's a possum…"

"No, it's a ferret…"

"It looks nothing like a ferret," Henry makes a face, holding Mary Margaret's gift at arm's length. "It looks like a fat rat... a possum."

"Nah. Trust me, kid, I've seen one at the zoo - that's a ferret."

"But why would she make me a ferret sweater?"

"Same reason she decided to knit me one with a goat. Your grandmother's got strange taste."

"That's a goat?" Henry cranes his neck and peeks at the navy blue sweater on her lap. "I thought it was a unicorn..."

"What? C'mon, how can anyone mistake a goat for a unicorn?" Emma says, tracing the two horns protruding out of the disfigured animal's head with a finger. "This guy's way too horny to be a unicorn."

Setting down a tray of cocoa on the coffee table, Regina stills and arches an eyebrow in her direction.

Reaching for her green mug, Emma just shrugs. It probably flew over the kid's head.

"Mom, what did grandma knit on your sweater?"

"A dog, sweetheart."

"Not a horse?" Henry crinkles his nose in puzzlement, chucking Mary Margaret's present to his growing pile of gifts at the foot of the couch. "Why a dog?"

"She was probably going for bitch," Emma jokes underneath her breath.

Kneeling beside Henry near the tree, Regina gives her a dry look.

"Sorry," she mumbles behind a cup of cocoa. "Humorless, I know."

"Here," Henry butts in, placing an exquisitely wrapped present on her lap. "Open our gift for you. Mom and I thought really hard about what to get you."

"Alright."

Always the obedient one, she sets her cup down and gets right to work. Barely a few seconds later,
she finds herself staring at a fancy, leather-bound notebook - one of those kinds that she's only seen some hoity-toity, intellectual types writing on in those hole in the ground coffee shops. And seeing as how she's not much of a reader, much less a writer, Emma hides her confusion by feigning delight.

"Uh… thanks?"

She must look pretty constipated, going by the amusement in Regina's eyes.

"Yours is the only story that's missing from my book," Henry begins to explain, drawing her attention from his mother. "I wanted to know more about you, and mom does, too. So, we thought we should give you something you can write your story on."

Oh.

Emma's chest begins to hurt.

"I mean, it's kinda unfair that no one really knows much about the Savior. I bet you have a lot of interesting stories to tell."

That, she does.

"You will write on it, right?" Henry checks, looking and sounding a little unsure.

Emma manages a tight-lipped smile and nods, swallowing visibly.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Awesome," he grins from ear to ear, just brimming with excitement. "Just leave some blank pages between your entries, 'kay? I'll draw some illustrations and other stuff there."

"You may also want to consider withholding the lurid details from your stories, Miss Swan," Regina chimes in. "I'm sure there are more than a few aspects in your life that need censoring."

No shit.

"Keep it PG, got it," she mumbles in agreement, toying with the leather strings that kept the notebook closed.

"Mom?" Henry turns to his other mother, taking the spotlight off of Emma. "You haven't opened my gift yet..."

"I was saving the best for last, my dear."

"You haven't opened my gift, either," Emma points out.

"After the depressingly tacky presents I received from your family and friends, I thought I needed a good laugh at the end."

Emma rolls her eyes.

"I got you a really nice gift."

"Forgive my dubiosity, Miss Swan, but if your tastes run along the same vein as your mother's, then I'm keeping my expectations very, very low."
Placing her notebook on the table, Emma pushes herself off the sofa and plucks her gift from under the tree. "Just open it," she tosses it on Regina's lap and plunks herself down beside the two.

Naturally, just to drum up suspense and probably toy with her patience, the maddening woman decides to take her sweet time and starts peeling off the first of many sticky tapes on the gift.

"Seriously?" Emma groans.

Regina ignores her.

"Want me to open it for you?" Henry offers a moment later, displaying the same amount of fortitude as his birth mom.

"No, thank you, sweetheart," Regina says, calm as heck, diligently working on removing another piece of tape.

"Oh, God. Just rip it," Emma huffs. "It's not rocket science. Wrapping paper is meant to be ripped, y'know?"

"Why, is the suspense killing you, Miss Swan?"

"No, you are," she sighs. "I swear, woman, you're gonna be the death of me."

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.

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Oh.

Right.

Emma grabs the back of her neck and clears her throat. That was... awkward. Well, for herself, at least. The two Mills barely bat an eyelash.

"What's in it?" Henry prods several moments later, after Regina finally frees a plain black box from Emma's laughably excessive wrap job. She might've rushed all the other presents, but she was very meticulous when it came to wrapping the ones for Regina and Henry. The two, by far, even if the kid thinks himself otherwise, are the most judgey people in this town. And that's saying something considering the arrogant bastard trifecta of Councilor Worthington, Judge Poole and D.A. Spencer also call Storybrooke their home.

Keeping true to what she started, Regina lets her fingers glide against the bottom of the lid for a few torturous seconds before finally flipping it open.

"Oooh, nice," Henry crows.

His mom, however, just stares at the gift.

"You gave me an exact copy of your ring," Emma murmurs softly, gauging Regina's reaction with fearful eyes. Just to further her anxiety, the woman's expression is as unreadable as ever. "I thought it'd only be fitting to give you a replica of my necklace. So, that, in a way, you'll have something of mine, too."

Regina slowly traces the swan on the pendant with the pad of her thumb.
"It's not made from cheap silver, don't worry. I promise it won't make your skin itch. I had the jeweler make it using white gold - so that thing's actually a high-rent version of my low-rent necklace."

Slowly, gingerly, Regina takes it out of the box and holds it up to eye-level, studying the pendant with discerning eyes.

"Do you like it?" she asks quietly.

"No."

Unfazed, Emma studies her companion's face. It's always a game of semantics with this woman. "Do you love it?"

A pair of brown eyes flicker in her direction, and though it's fleeting, the touched little glimmer she sees is enough of an answer.

A smile tugs at the corner of Emma's lips. "Good, I'm glad," she says in relief.

"I don't believe I've answered your question, my dear."

"You didn't have to."

"Oh! Speaking of swans..." Henry taps on her knee and joins in the conversation, excitable as ever. "Did you know that in England, swans belong to the Queen?"

"They do?"

"Mhmm," the kid nods. "I heard mom tell that to grandma the other day."

"You told Mary Margaret that?" she turns to Regina. "Why?"

"Your mother has always enjoyed the pursuit of knowledge, I just thought she might appreciate a bit of trivia," Regina says simply.

Right.

Emma shakes her head and runs a hand through her hair. "Will you two ever get along?"

"Well, contrary to appearances, my dear, we have been getting along. I haven't tried to kill her in months."

"You've been flaunting our... thing... in her face since the Lantern Fest," she reminds the woman. "Trying to induce a heart attack every opportunity you get sorta falls under the attempted murder category, your highness."

Regina merely hums.

And then, before she can say anything more, Regina hands her the necklace and holds up her brown hair. Taking her cue, Emma places her gift around the woman's neck, and despite her fingers trembling ever-so-slightly, she eventually succeeds in locking the clasp.

"There," she says softly, letting her hands trail down Regina's slender neck and across the planes of her shoulders. "Now I'll always be with you."

Regina twists her neck to look at her - and for a second, Emma swears those brown eyes see right
through her mask and know something's off - but before the brunette can say a word in edgewise, a
certain someone decides to butt in.

"Gross," Henry pulls a face. "Do you have to be so mushy, Emma?"

The funny thing is… she kinda does.

Thirteen or so hours until time's up, you see.

So, even if it's supremely uncharacteristic for her to be so damn mushy, circumstances do call for it.
"It's Christmas, kid." Her go-to excuse, handy as ever. "Not a lot of chances to gross you out within
reason. So, be a good sport and let me have this one, 'kay?"

It truly is uncanny how he looks just like Regina every time he rolls his eyes. "What if I say no?"

"Then you just have to deal with it," she places a kiss on the back of Regina's neck, on the spot just
above the delicate chain. "Right, your majesty?"

The woman doesn't disappoint. And for once, actually takes her side with a sly little smile.

Henry groans.

"You guys are gross…"

"Parents are supposed to be gross. You're lucky we're not making out in front of you."

The kid's face contorts in horror.

"Well, not when you're awake, at least."

The look in his eyes? Traumatized.

Regina's elbow connecting with her ribs? Worth it.

The festivities begin at five in the afternoon.

Decked from wall to ceiling for the private gathering among family and close friends, her parents'
apartment is a mishmash of three different holidays - Christmas, Hanukkah and…

"Naturai?" Henry wrinkles his nose, reading the sign on the wall.

"Hanukkah, I get. That's for Leroy and Doc," Emma says to her family as they continue to stand
dumbfounded by the front door, momentarily immobilized by the weird hodgepodge of holiday
decor assaulting their senses. "But what the hell is Naturai? Who celebrates that in here?"

"Me," August supplies from the sofa, slamming his empty shot glass on the coffee table. "Hey, boss!
Happy Naturai!"

"Banzai!" A red-faced Leroy cries out beside August. "Or... bonsai? I dunno."

"It's a pagan holiday in the Enchanted Forest," Regina makes a disgusted face at her chortling
deputies - who, by the looks of it, are taking full advantage of their day-off and the open bar. "Has
something to do with worshipping ancient spirits living in trees, or some other mystical thing that I
can never understand."
"But why…” Emma points at a very merry August.

And then it dawns on her.

**Woody.** Right.

Shrugging off her peacoat, Emma helps Regina out of hers and hangs both on the rack by the door. "Are you sure you don't want help with those, kid?"

"Nah, got it," Henry says confidently, balancing two glass trays of lasagna in his arms. "Where should I put them?"

"Buffet table, my dear," Regina motions to the corner of the room.

"I'll go with you," Emma tells him. "I need a bite. You coming, Regina?"

"No," the aforementioned woman takes another good look at their surroundings, and the look of distaste on Regina's face intensifies by a mile. "I need a drink. A stiff one."

"Okay… but go easy, alright?"

"Naturai!" August lifts another shot of tequila.

"Bonsai!" Leroy does the same. And then they clink their glasses together, down their shots with a wince, and laugh again.

"I make no such promises," Regina mutters darkly, and then heads for the bar. "This is going to be a long night."

*That, it is.*

Emma smiles sadly and blows out a puff of air from her lips, her hand ghosting over the cellphone in her pocket.

It's the same way for her, too.

But for reasons other than what Regina has in mind. *Entirely* different reasons.

Steeling her resolve, Emma forces her mind to file away the text message that she's just received - at least for the meantime - and follows after the kid.

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**9 PM SHARP, SHERWOOD PARK. TELL YOUR PET RABBIT TO COME AND BRING HIS WATCH. SEND MY REGARDS TO YOUR FAMILY, MISS SWAN. I'LL SEE YOU SOON.**

Tonight's hostess finds her and the kid as soon as they get to the buffet table. And after the perfunctory exchange of greetings and lung-squeezing hugs, a giddy Mary Margaret delves right into the important stuff:

"Did you like the sweaters I made for you guys?"

Like deer caught in headlights, Henry and Emma exchange wary looks.

"Uh, yeah, 'course we did," she smiles lopsidedly, lying through her teeth. "Right, kid?"
Henry nods enthusiastically - a little *too* enthusiastically.

"Oh, thank goodness," Mary Margaret sighs in relief. "I was so worried. The patterns I got from Archie weren't that easy to follow. Let me tell you, that donkey was especially difficult to knit."

"Donkey?" she frowns. "What donkey?"

"Your sweater," her mother says like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "Wait-what did you think it was?"

"Um…"

The town's new Mayor tilts her head in question.

"A unicorn," Henry says weakly, "at least, I did." The kid thumbs at her. "She thought it was a goat."

"The horns threw us off a bit," Emma scratches the side of her neck.

"Horns?" Mary Margaret mimics, frowning slightly. And then, as if hit by an epiphany, her entire face lights up and the woman breaks out into giggles. "Oh, you two are silly, those were its *ears.*"

Ears.

*Huh.*

Those things were too damn phallic-looking to be donkey ears, but to each her own. So, biting her tongue, Emma just smiles.

*Still…* a donkey, though? Quite an interesting animal choice.

A jackass to match Regina's bitch. How… *quaint.*

"You know," Mary Margaret speaks up again, eyeing their clothing - a red button-up shirt for Henry and a simple green blouse for her. "I was hoping you guys could've worn your sweaters to the party, let me see if they fit and all. I wrote a note on the card, did you see it, Em?"

Henry and Emma look at each other through the corner of their eyes.

*Uh-oh.*

She saw it, ignored it, and, of course, forgot to come up with an excuse before the party began.

"Why aren't you two wearing them?"

"Because it's *Christmas,* not Halloween," Regina says, unabashed, joining them from the makeshift bar that Granny had set up.

Mary Margaret hopeful little smile sours. "Regina," she greets flatly.

"Snow," Her Majesty returns just as unenthusiastically.

"Merry Christmas."

"Same to you."

"Thanks for coming and bringing your lasagna."
"Don't mention it, dear," Regina brushes off. "As part of my probation, I do believe it's my duty to make sure that at least one of the dishes in this party of yours be palatable. Wouldn't want any of your precious guests to get sick."

"Oh, how considerate of you," Mary Margaret coos, smiling so tightly it's like she got a booster shot of botox right on the cheeks. "Of course you would know a thing or two about food poisoning, won't you?"

Emma almost chokes on her own saliva. "Mary Margaret!"

"I... I'm sorry, that was a bad joke." Chastened, Mary Margaret forces a laugh. "I meant nothing of it."

"I'm sure you didn't," an unruffled Regina murmurs into her glass. "Now I know where your daughter gets her sense of humor - or lack of it."

Emma sighs.

Probably seeing imaginary electric bolts snapping between his mother and grandmother, Henry mumbles something about wanting some eggnog and scurries in Granny's direction.

_Traitor!_

Emma watches his departure almost longingly.

And just to make things more interesting, out of all the things Mary Margaret could say next, her former roommate just had to go with: "So, Regina, how did you like my present?"

_Shit._

It's strong, but Emma fights the urge to facepalm herself. And maybe her mother, too. The woman's just asking for it.

"Well, I do have a soft spot for dogs and I always appreciate a good sweater," Regina says all-too-graciously, swirling her glass of red wine. "The way I see it, dear, you could've given me a boxful of puppies decked in mini-sweaters and it would've garnered the same reaction from yours truly."

Obviously expecting a more scathing response, Mary Margaret's eyes widen in surprise. And as soon as she lets her guard down, Regina goes right in for the kill.

"Of course, only before you gave me the puppies, you doused them in gasoline and handed me a match."

Emma tamps down a groan.

_Here we go..._

"Now, despite my strange fondness for dogs in human clothing, all I can seem to think about is setting those puppies on fire. It's quite a conundrum."

Face as red as a tomato, her mother's mouth flaps uselessly like a fish out of water, utterly flabbergasted.

_Jesus Christ._

"Regina," Emma warns in a low tone. "Please."
"Oh, I'm only kidding," her unofficial girlfriend drawls, sipping on her wine. "I love the sweater just as much as I love you, Snow."

Oh, God.

"Not helping," Emma mutters.

Looking more than a little proud of herself, Regina smiles indulgently and drinks more wine.

"Well," Mary Margaret clears her throat, bristling in place. "I better make sure your father doesn't burn the turkey. If you'll excuse me…"

And with that, she's out of their hair.

"Seriously, your royal pain the ass?" Emma turns to her innocent-looking companion, lifting a brow. "Was that really necessary?"

"What was?"

"That," she stresses, motioning towards the kitchen area, where a flustered Mary Margaret almost runs into David and his carving knife. "'tis the season to be jolly, not snarky."

"Of course it is, princess," Regina counters, unapologetic as sin. "In any case, it's all innocent fun, nobody's getting hurt. Your mother can take a punch just as much as she can throw one right back. And, besides, what's a Christmas party without some good, old-fashioned drama?"

"Oh, I dunno, a peaceful one."

"No, Miss Swan, a dreadfully boring one."

Emma bites back a sigh. "So, let me get this straight, you're trying to be the life of the party by acting like the pooper?"

"Pooper?"

"Party pooper, you know what I meant," she waves a hand. "You're being a sassy, funny, rude little pooper, and that is just so… so…"

"Yes?" Regina goads.

"You," Emma finishes in resignation. "That is just so you."

"And would that be such a bad thing?"

"No," she admits with the barest of smiles, allowing her hand to brush against Regina's hip until they settle on the curve of the woman's waist. "Not really, no."

And despite the eyes that are probably watching them from the different corners of the room, Regina leans into her touch as if intimate physical contact is the most natural thing for both of them. "If that's the case, then what's the problem?"

I'm gonna miss your arrogant, party-pooping ass so damn much, that's what.

"I'm…" Emma swallows hard. The painful stabbing in her chest begins anew. So, then, without giving any warning, she swipes Regina's glass and downs half of its contents in one gulp. The alcohol doesn't help much, but just the act of drinking it takes a bit of the edge off. "I'm gonna get
"Miss Swan?" she hears when she's already several steps away.

"Yeah?"

"Is there..." A frowning Regina searches her face, as if trying to discern something she can't quite put a finger on. "Are you feeling alright?"

"I'm good."

"Something seems o-"

"I'm good," she stresses with a smile that makes her cheeks hurt. "And after more of this," she waves the glass and some of the liquid almost sloshes out. "I'll be just great."

Regina gives her a suspicious look but doesn't say anything else.

And Emma, mentally kicking herself, thanks whatever, whomever is out there for such small miracles.

She doesn't get blitzed.

Unlike Dopey, who's already attempted to take off his shirt twice after his third helping of Granny's Swinging Swill, or Bashful, who's turned into some kind of mistletoe kissing fiend under the influence of vodka, Emma can hold her liquor.

Still, that doesn't mean she's not completely immune to its effects. As the minutes tick away, so does her grip on her fraying nerves, and with only two hours remaining until the moment of truth, she finds herself drinking more and eating less.

So, after her fifth glass of red wine, and another dig from Regina about her slow descent into alcoholism, Emma finds herself clambering up to her old bedroom and plopping down by the sill with a groan. Cracking open a window, she sticks her face out and lets the night breeze cool off her reddened face.

It's below freezing and the wind chill drags down the temperature several notches, so it feels just like she's being slapped with an iceberg.

And it works too fast and too well, that barely two minutes later, she pulls her head back in and closes the window shut.

By this time, she's feeling sober enough to finally pick up on the fact that she's not alone in the room, and that somebody had actually followed her upstairs.

It's not Regina. Or Henry. But it's family.

"Hey," David stands by the doorway, hands tucked inside the pockets of his jeans, looking very much like something out of a catalog and not the father of a twenty-eight-year-old woman. "You
okay there, Em?"

"Yeah, I'm fine." She runs her fingers through her hair, slipping the carefree mask that she's been wearing all night back on. "Just catching some air. What's up?"

"Oh, nothing. I-uh, kinda noticed you were going through Granny's wine stock like there's no tomorrow. So, I just wanted to check up on you. Is everything okay?"

"Y-yeah, yeah." She grabs her right shoulder and massages a nonexistent kink. "Everything's just… peachy."

*Peachy?*

Emma recoils inwardly.

It might be the wine talking, but still, something inside her dies - and it's probably a shred of her dignity.

And apparently, her lying skills aren't up to par with her bullshit-detecting abilities, because instead of taking her word for it and going back downstairs, David steps into the dark room and asks, "Is everything okay at the station?"

"Mhmm."

"Your deputies giving you any trouble?"

Emma shrugs, and just as well, her ears pick up Leroy and August's boisterous laughter from downstairs. "No more so than usual."

"How 'bout the kid? Any problems with Henry?"

"Nah, he's good."

"Your mother? Is she still bugging you about Mike?"

"I think she finally gave up on it, actually."

"Ah, I see," he breathes out, even though she suspects that it's something he actually *knows*. "He seems like a good guy..."

"He is."

"And, hey, Archie seems to like him."

*Understatement of the century.*

"He does," she says with a straight face.

David purses his lips and nods slowly, as if giving his stamp of approval. "He's a good judge of character."

She lets out a hum of agreement. "Too bad Mike's not my type - and I'm not his."

"How'd you know that?"

*Gaydar.*
"Gut feel," she shrugs.

Standing right before her, David shuffles on his feet, shifting his weight from one foot to the other. "So-uh, you and her? How're things on that front?"

_Ah, see, there it is._

All those questions about work and her son and Mary Margaret, and even that short segue into Mike and Archie, was obviously just her father beating around the bush.

"Regina and I? We're fine."

"Really?"

He couldn't sound even more disappointed if he tried.

"Really," Emma stresses, lifting her brows.

"Oh. Okay."

"She's really not that bad, y'know?" she murmurs softly, picking at the loose threads on Mary Margaret's bluebird throw pillow. "And I thought we had this conversation last week?"

"We did. But it's just, she's-" David scratches at the tiny stubbles on his jaw and carefully sets himself down beside her. The sill's antiquated wood groans under his weight. "She's the Evil Queen."

"And?"

"You're the Savior."

"So?"

"I'm trying to respect your wishes and be more accepting of whatever it is that's going on between you two, but I just can't help but think that you… deserve better."

_This again._

Emma fights the urge to bang her head back against the window.

"She _was_ the Evil Queen - I'm not glossing over that part of her history. And neither is she, trust me on that. But now, now she's just Regina; your grandson's mom, this town's magic consultant, and really, just a woman who's trying so damn hard to change and do the right thing."

"The right thing? By whom? By _you_?"

A rueful smile tugs at the corners of her lips. "By herself."

That answer seems to throw him off momentarily.

"It's just… I worry a lot about you, y'know?" he murmurs after a while, and the moonlight that catches on his face illuminates the concern in his bright blue eyes. "Your mom and I were absent for most of your life, and because of that, you probably feel that we have no say in it, and I really can't blame you for that. But that doesn't change the fact that you're still our child, Emma, and we love you."
There's a frog in her throat, and it lodges itself there so snugly that she's barely able to let out a strained, "I know…"

"I'm your father," he continues with an awed little grin, though his eyes are slightly glistening. "The desire to protect you and make sure you don't get hurt has always been there, even when you were still in your mom's womb. And as annoying as it may be to you now, it's my job to be suspicious of whichever chump dares to win your heart. I can't help it as much as you can't seem to help having feelings for… you know."

"Regina," Emma breathes out. "She's not Voldemort. You can say her name."

"Voldemort?"

"Nevermind," she dismisses with a wave of a hand. And having been accustomed to doing it since arriving at the party, she pulls back the sleeve of her shirt and checks the time on her watch.

Her expression, undoubtedly, drops.

_An hour thirty minutes left._

"Something wrong, Emma?"

She shakes her head vehemently. "N-no, nothing."

"You sure?"

"Mhmm."

"Then why do you seem so edgy tonight?"

"I-"

_Lie._

"Emma?"

.

.

.

_Just li-_ "Something happened last night," she comes clean.

He doesn't say it out loud, but the perfunctory _I knew it!’_ is written so plainly on his face that he looks more like a proud little boy than a man his age.

"The wraith came back yesterday…"

And like a douse of ice water, that wipes his smugness away.

"What?" David blurts out. _How?"

"Long story," Emma exhales. "The important thing is that it's gone now. Remember Paul O'Hara? He poofed it away."
"He can do magic?"

"Apparently so."

"And you're sure it's gone?"

She nods.

"Your mom know about this?"

Emma shakes her head.

"Why not?"

"I had it under control."

"Who else knows about this, then?"

"I dunno… Paul, a couple of Lost Boys, Regina, Henry, Ruby, and now, you."

"Ruby? Is that why she's still not here?"

"I told her about it this morning, so she's been sniffing all over the place, looking for a fissure ever since. She's a damn good cop, you know? She'll make an excellent Sheriff when I retire."

The innocuous comment flies over David's head, but she hopes deep down that he'll remember it when the time comes. It truly is a load off her mind that she's going to be leaving the department in capable hands.

"But why keep it a secret from the others?"

"It's Christmas," she says for the hundredth time. "And like I've said, I've got it under control. If word gets out about the wraith, there's gonna be a massive, unnecessary panic among the townsfolk. The threat's over, David; there's really no need to scare the crap out of people and ruin their holidays."

He looks like he wants to argue, but after several moments, he just takes in a deep breath and exhales loudly, probably seeing the logic behind her decision. "So, that's what's been stressing you out, huh?"

"Mostly," she fibs. "Regina got a bit pissed at me last night, too."

"What's new?"

Emma gives him a look.

"Sorry," he mumbles weakly. "You were saying?"

"Well… she got angry that I tried to go head-to-head with the wraith…” she pauses for effect, but it's more out of sheepishness than actual dramatics, "...with my gun."

"…"

"David?"

"Emma!" he exclaims. "What the heck were you thinking?! That's-"
"Suicidal, I know," she sighs.

"I was going for stupid."

And *that*, coming from him, kinda feels doubly insulting.

"That, too. But it was going to come after Regina and I didn't have the luxury of time to come up with a smarter plan of attack. It was one of those 'act now, think later' moments."

"You could've gotten yourself killed!"

"Yeah... so?"

"*So?*" his eyes bulge out even more in incredulity. "Emma, are you even hearing yourself right now?!"

"Look," she licks her lips, takes a deep breath, and then decides to go about it another way, "what would you do if you found out that Mary Margaret was in mortal danger and time's not on your side?"

"But it's not the same thing..."

"Is it not, really? How's it any different? And please don't bring up the 'Evil Queen' argument again, 'cause that shit won't fly."

Unable to meet her eyes, he grabs at his neck and looks away.

Emma sighs.

*Hypocrisy*, it seems, sometimes goes hand-in-hand with chivalry.

"David, what would you do if Mary Margaret's life was being threatened by a soul-sucking monster?"

He works his jaw, sighs deeply, and then mutters, "I'd do everything in my power to save her."

"Even if you knew you could die?"

"Yes," he says without an ounce of hesitation.

"Cause it's what good does, right?"

"No," he shakes his head, and then meeting her gaze once more, he smiles softly at her. "It's what *love* does."

"It gets you killed?"

"No, it teaches you the value of sacrifice."

Her heart clenches in her chest. It truly is a wonder that she hasn't had a heart attack for all the times it's happened today.

"You know, we don't always see eye-to-eye, but I do respect, and sometimes, even look up to you," she tells him eventually, hugging the throw pillow against her tummy, filling the pregnant silence permeating the room. "I've always been cynical about the things you and Mary Margaret are passionate about, I admit that, but I see the value in them now. And I sort of admire how even after
everything you've been through, you're still a brave, noble man who'd do anything for… uh… y'know…"

"Love?" he volunteers.

"Love," Emma echoes timidly, letting her thumb brush against the emerald on her ring. "Family," she adds with a fond smile. "And I guess what I'm saying is that… I'm every bit your daughter. Which basically means that despite our fundamental differences, I'll probably make the same choices you would - the same sacrifices you would."

"Cause we're both hopeless idiots?"

"That, we are."

They share a little smile.

"Can you… can you promise me one thing?" she asks him, meeting his gaze and bravely holding on to it even though she knows that the sadness she's struggling to hide might eventually give her away.

"Anything."

"I want you to remember what you just told me. Tomorrow and every single day after that."

The concern that had faded moments ago returns with a vengeance.

"Emma?" David says fearfully, deep lines marring his handsome features. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," she brushes off with a casual shrug. "I'm just, I dunno, covering my bases, I guess? Being the sheriff and savior isn't really conducive to my health. And the whole thing with the wraith just got me thinking, that's all. You never really know what the future might bring - I mean, I might be here now, but who says I won't be gone tomorrow?"

"C'mon, don't be so morbid."

"I'm not being morbid, I'm just being realistic."

"But you're talking about dying…"

"Everybody dies."

"See? Morbid."

"Realistic," she counters again. "It's inevitable."

"What's inevitable?" Regina queries from the doorway, arms folded on her chest, and if Emma didn't know any better, she might actually think that the woman had materialized out of thin air.

"Dying," father and daughter chorus.

An eyebrow arches sharply at that reply. "So, I see I'm not the only one contemplating my own mortality after only two hours at this party."

It's a testament to how used he is to Regina's biting humor that not a single one of David's facial muscles tic in offense.

"What are you doing here, Regina?" he asks in a resigned tone instead.
"At this party? Torturing myself. In Miss Swan's old bedroom? Just making sure that you didn't stuff your daughter in another wardrobe in a valiant effort to save her from me."

"Does she need to be saved from you?"

Regina eyes his bear-or is it a beaver?-sweater in blatant contempt. "No more so than you believe you need saving from your wife."

"I don't need any saving from Snow,"

"My point exactly."

"Everything okay downstairs?" Emma cuts in and asks.

"The depends, my dear. If your definition of 'okay' involves drunken, half-naked dwarves and a tipsy Archie and his boyfriend kissing torridly under a mistletoe, then yes, everything's perfectly okay downstairs."

"Oh, okay," she nods. Wait…

"What?!" her father beats her to it.

"If I were you, Charming, I'd go check on my darling wife," Regina advises, looking positively bored - yet also devilishly sly. "The way she's gawping at Archie and Mike, one might think she was a sheltered little princess most her life. Oh, wait."

He's up and out of his seat so fast, it's like his ass had been lit on fire, and for a second, Emma wonders if his haste is due in most part out of concern for Mary Margaret - or out of curiosity to see two grown men playing tonsil hockey.

She suspects it a mixture of both.

"And you…" Regina begins, pointing a manicured finger in her direction.

"Me?"

"Why on earth were you two talking about dying, of all things?"

"It's Christmas," Emma shrugs flippantly, casting off the pillow on her lap and pushing herself off the sill. "And what's a Christmas party without drama, right?"

The look she gets is just dripping with suspicion. "Stop misconstruing my words, Miss Swan."

"Was that what I was doing?"

"You know very well that it was."

"Well, it wasn't on purpose." She stops right in front of Regina and slowly leans in, and when there's only a minute amount of space separating them, she murmurs, "I told David about the wraith."

Regina pulls back before Emma's lips can even find its mark.

"I take it you told him that you almost died?"

"I told him you almost died."
"Did you tell him about the gun?"
"Yes."

"And did he tell you off for being so damn reckless?"
"He called me stupid."

"Ironic," Regina comments. "But good on him."

Emma slowly lifts an eyebrow. "You're agreeing with my dad?"

"On this matter, yes."

"Well, the wraith's gone and there's no sense beating a dead horse, is there? Let's move on, it's over now."

"Is it, really?" Regina says silently, taking note of the reddish tint on Emma's cheeks and the lingering smell of alcohol that's still on her breath. "If you're trying to escape this party, my dear, there are better ways to accomplish that than by drinking yourself into a stupor."

"Like what, sampling some of Marco's deadly chili?"

Wisps of dark hair tickle her face as Regina shakes her head, her brown eyes boring deeply into Emma's green ones. "I'm talking about going home with me."

"..."

"And also Henry, of course."

"I..."

...can't.

"I'd love that," she says thickly before clearing her throat, a finger tracing an imaginary line on the part of her chest that's starting to ache yet again. There truly is no limit to how much her heart can splinter off into smaller and smaller fragments tonight. "But I kinda told Mary Margaret that I'd help her clean up at the end of the party."

And while that's not a lie, it's one of many promises that she's going to be breaking on this fateful day.

"Did you really have to go and promise such a thing? The dwarves are better suited for menial tasks. Why, they were practically hatched for manual labor. Let them do your mother's dirty work, Miss Swan; they've never had qualms doing so in the past."

Just then, audio feedback from a microphone screeches from the first floor, making both of them jump in surprise. Horrific instrumental music follows after the noise, and while Regina frowns in befuddlement, Emma's face contorts with recognition.

"Is that-?"

"Karaoke," she confirms with a weary breath. "'Jingle Bell Rock' by the looks of it."

And just two lines into the song, Emma finds herself wincing.
Doc's baritone is what sharp nails are to a chalkboard. And to make matters worse, Leroy's raspy bass joins in and the two start butchering the bridge. By the time the chorus rolls in, all seven dwarves are singing at the top of their godforsaken lungs; all slurring, all off-key.

And while laughter and cheers and silly catcalls reach their ears from down below, Regina looks like she's about to pass a kidney stone.

"I don't think those guys will be in a position to clean anything in a few hours," Emma remarks, taking a brave peek downstairs from over Regina's shoulder. Her Majesty wasn't kidding about half-naked dwarves. Emma quickly pulls back. "Yeah, definitely not."

"Fine," Regina huffs. "We'll straighten this place up before we go home tonight. But we'll use magic; we're not staying here any longer than it's necessary."

"Wait… so you'll help Mary Margaret out, too?"

"No," Regina rolls her eyes. "I'll be helping you, you idiot. There's a world of difference between the two."

"Is there?" she teases with a roguish grin. "I don't think there is, really."

"Don't make something out of nothing, Miss Swan. Indirect help is-"

"-still help," Emma interjects. "And you're helping Mary Margaret."

Regina bristles in indignation. "Not if you persist to be so damn annoying, I'm not."

"Aha! So, you do admit it! You're helping her out. Trying to get on my parents' good side, are you?"

"Oh, shush."

"Make me."

And, like always, Regina's eyebrows slowly inch up to her forehead, doing that thing they do when presented with a challenge.

"What's the matter, your highness? Scared?" she taunts.

"Of you?" Regina scoffs. "Hardly."

And then, before she can say any more, her majesty tugs at the end of her blouse and jerks her forward, turning the tiny space between them nonexistent.

The kiss is as wet, sloppy and toe-curling as ever.

And while it certainly does things to her body, the tingle that suddenly starts at the top of her head and then flows down to the base of her spine gives Emma a moment's pause.

"Did you just…?" Emma frowns, pulling back slightly from Regina's delectable lips. "Did you draw energy from me?"

"If I did," Regina purrs in that velvety voice of hers, wiping away the traces of her gloss on Emma's lips with a thumb. "All I can say is: you're welcome, my dear."

_Huh?_
Then a loud pop and an electric fizz come from the first floor.

The music stops abruptly - so does the dwarves' painful yodeling - and then the sound of disappointed 'awwww' echoes from below.

Looks like the karaoke machine is no more.

"Regina!" Emma whispers in horror. "What the hell?"

"Oh, don't look so scandalized, Sheriff. After all, you were an accomplice to the crime."

"I was an accessory. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Regina asks rhetorically, and then smiles oh-so-darn wickedly. "Indirect help is still help, my dear."

Evil.

Evil.

So frickin' evil.

"What the heck am I gonna do with you?" she sighs almost affectionately, pressing her forehead against Regina's own.

"Take me and your son home?"

If only.

"Nice try," she says instead, laying another kiss on Regina's lips before taking the woman by the hand and guiding her down the stairs, hiding the torment in her eyes under the guise of looking down and watching her step.

Under the influence of alcohol, lying gets progressively easier as the minutes tick by. Still, as effortless as declaring 'I'm okay' with a huge-ass smile on her face starts to become for her, Emma still can't seem to come up with a way to slip out of the party without raising suspicion.

At eight-fifteen, a little over half an hour before the designated meeting time, she's almost at her wits' end.

But as luck would have it, just as she's contemplating an elaborate ruse that involves "finding" and dragging a patrolling Ruby to the party, deliverance presents itself in the form of a woman in a frumpy floral dress and an exhausted little scowl. Granny, of all people, hands her the perfect way out on a silver platter. Well, more on an empty beer cooler, really.

Emma notices it at the same time the older woman does. And, seeing her opening, she volunteers her services before the innkeeper can even tap one of the dwarves to go. Preoccupied with mixing yet another pitcher of her Swinging Swill, Granny just grunts in gratitude and waves her off towards the door.

She doesn't need to be told twice.

Naturally, Mary Margaret, of all people, chances upon her just as she's buttoning up her coat. "Heyyyyy… where are you going?"
"Uh, beer run."

"We're out? Already?"

"Whale, Michael and Thomas are drinking like frat boys on spring break." She inclines her head in the general direction of the three men, holding court in the dining area and playing poker with their respective dates. "I'm surprised they haven't started taking their-

A crimson-faced, smiley Whale starts unbuttoning his shirt.

"You were saying?" Mary Margaret giggles like a school girl, and Emma's pretty sure it's not the fact that Mary Margaret's already seen what's underneath that shirt-and way more-that's making her mother blush. She's obviously not the only Charming that's had one too many to drink.

"I better go," she sighs. "You, uh, gonna be okay while I'm gone?"

"Of course," her mother says in an obvious way. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Emma manages an unaffected shrug.

"Take care of yourself, okay? And look after David, too."

"Don't worry about us," Mary Margaret dismisses. "Despite what Regina might've been telling you, your father and I are not lightweights, Emma."

"I know…"

"And believe me, we've gone through worse than a beer-induced hangover," the woman tells her in a stage whisper. "Vodka ones are particularly nasty, too."

Despite the heaviness in her chest, Emma's finds her lips curling upward. "I'm gonna miss you, y'know?"

"Silly, the convenience store is just a five-minute drive away," Mary Margaret laughs. "But I'll miss you, too. Now, go before the boys riot." She gives her a quick peck on the cheek and then gives her a weak nudge on the shoulder. "Come back as soon as you can, okay? But be careful, the roads are slippery tonight."

Icy roads are the least of her worries, but Emma nods and gives her mother a tight-lipped smile.

And proving that ignorance is indeed bliss, Mary Margaret toddles over to where her husband is chatting animatedly with Blue and leaves her be.

Looking around the room-at the assortment of friends and loved ones-Emma finds herself lingering by the doorway.

And as Nicholas and Ava zoom right past her, she catches a trailing Henry, locks the squirming boy in a bone-crushing hug, and begins peppering his head with tiny kisses. He objects, of course - rather petulantly, too - but she pays him no mind. The second she eases up and lets him go, he bounds away without so much as a backward look and chases after his laughing friends, leaving Emma to watch his departure with a longing glance.

And for a moment, she wonders if he'll ever forgive her for leaving him a second time. She hopes he will, eventually, and come to understand. This decision of hers was not made lightly, not unlike the first time.
The back of her neck prickles, and feeling that all-too-familiar sensation of having eyes on her, Emma begins to scan the crowd.

Their eyes meet over the sea of drunken heads.

Chatting with Archie at the bar—or just listening to him drone on and on and on, by the looks of it—Regina's fatigued gaze comes to life under her own. And despite the chaos going on around them, they share the barest of smiles—their last in a long, complicated history of arguing, sassing, punching, laughing, crying, and kissing.

"Idiot," Regina mouths silently, eyes twinkling in an impish manner.

"Yours," she returns just as affectionately.

And while the other woman is none the wiser, Emma ducks out of the apartment before her vision completely blurs and she loses her nerve.

Hot tears slip from her eyes and streak down her face as she makes her way down the corridor; the sound of her own beating heart thunders in her ears, drowning out the merriment happening behind closed doors. Biting her quivering lip, she wipes the moisture away with the back of her hand and takes in a deep, shuddery breath.

And through the tears, she bravely walks on, taking off the ring on her finger and unclasping the necklace around her neck. Gingerly, she inserts the golden band into the chain and slips it on again, and as the swan pendant clinks against the emerald ring—like two unusual halves merging into one—Emma feels a strange calm descend upon her very being.

You won't ever be alone again… Regina's words from last night reverberate in her head. And as her fingers graze the two symbols of their affectionately antagonistic relationship, she finally realizes it to be true.

The people who manage to worm their way into her heavily guarded heart have a way of staying there for good.

And as such, Henry's boyish grin and Regina's tranquil smile—the one only her and the kid ever see—sear themselves in her mind and in her soul.

And those images are the ones that give her the strength to put one foot in front of the other as she continues her death march towards the Bug… the ones that steady her trembling hands behind the wheel on the drive over to the park…and, at the end, when she stands before Gold by the pond, they're the ones that grant her the courage to lift her chin and meet the devil's gaze with her head unbowed.

"Twenty-six minutes early, I must say I'm surprised," Gold remarks after he dumps a vial of the cloaking potion onto the hockey mask that she had given, their feet standing buried in ankle-deep snow. "I was expecting you to milk every second you had with your family after that tantrum you threw last night."

Her hands ball into fists, and it's taking every ounce of self-control in her body to stop herself from bridging the distance between them and breaking his thin nose—again. Instead of handing it over like a civilized human being, he tosses the mask in her direction and ambles away.

"Lucky for you, Miss Swan, I'm a man of my word," Gold continues, swiping a few chunks of snow off the bench with the sheathed sword and sits himself down. "And when I say nine o'clock, I mean
nine o'clock. You have several minutes left, dearie; if there's anything else you have to do, I suggest you do them now."

His words might've been meant for her, but overhearing them too, Paul takes advantage of the small window and quickly shuffles to her side, Rufio tagging right along.

"Sheriff-Emma, a quick word?" the old man queries in a hushed manner, motioning towards the side of their willow tree, a spot out of Gold's earshot.

"I-" Paul begins, but before he can continue, Emma interrupts him by raising a hand.

"Kid," she turns to Rufio, clasping the mask on her forearm and letting it dangle loosely. "What the heck are you doing here? It's not safe."

"He's blaming himself for what you're about to do," Paul shares, earning a sharp look from the boy.

"I want to be here," Rufio mumbles, and just like the previous night when they talked on this very spot, he's still unable to meet her gaze. "I need to be here; see for myself what my fucked up decisions brought about."

"Your brother know you're here?"

"He thinks I'm in bed."

"Look, kid, don't bother beating yourself up; the only guilty party here is that bastard," Emma glances toward a motionless Gold, who's sitting primly on the bench with the Sword of Ashe on his lap.

"Emma, listen," Paul draws her attention back. "Before we do this, I just need to know that you understand what you're getting yourself into. Magic is different in this world."

"You don't have to tell me that."

"No, I do," he says, his tone laced with quiet determination. "I do believe that you're fated to journey back, but you should also know that my watch no longer functions the same way it did in Asheneamon. For some reason, I can only move the hands backward, not forward."

"Meaning?"

"I can send you back in time, but I can't bring you back to the present," a somber Paul tells her. "If you leave, you can never come back. Do you understand that? Do you understand what that means?"

"I do."

"Do you really?"

"I'm here, aren't I? I know what I'm getting myself into." Emma shrugs. "It's a one-way trip."

"And you're... you're prepared to make that sacrifice?"

"Yes."

Paul seems to accept that, but Rufio just pales even further.

"This is for the best. It has to happen. It needs to."
"Why?" Rufio practically whines. "Argos fucking died."

"I know," Emma swallows. The image of a lifeless Regina flashes in her mind's eye. "But she has to live."

"At the cost of your own life?"

"This is my choice," she stresses. "It shouldn't be on yours-or anyone else's-conscience."

"You have some balls, I'll give you that," Rufio works his jaw, his brown eyes dulling in disappointment. "But you're also out of your damn mind..."

"Someone I admire once told me that every act of bravery requires a smidgen of crazy, so I'll take that as a compliment."

"But there must be another way. Like... like... fairy dust! We can ask the fairies for help. You're tight with them, right? Or, you can tell the Queen! She has magic. And, look, there's three of us! We can easily overpower Gold and steal some of his magical items and shit. Or... or..." Rufio grapples in desperation. "I dunno... something. There must be something else. Is there anything I can do to make you reconsider? Anything at all?"

"No, I'm sorry." Emma shakes her head, and even if just a few weeks ago she loathed the very existence of the Lost Boys, tonight her heart goes out to the distressed teen - who's looking as if his puppy just got murdered in front of him. "You can try to stay out of trouble from now on, though."

"But-" his eyes well up with tears, his voice breaking. "You'll lose everything if you do this."

At that, Emma can only manage a sad smile, her fingers touching the ring on her necklace. "No, kid; I will lose everything if I don't."

Rufio doesn't like her answers that much.

Emma can tell from the way he's sulking by the frozen pond, trying to hide the fact that her stubbornness and determination literally brought him to tears. He's frustrated, guilt-ridden and feeling helpless - a cocktail of emotions that she knows all too well.

"Thirteen minutes left, dearie!" the imp decides to crow, helpful as always.

Oozing with gratitude at the much appreciated reminder, Emma almost makes a snowball to lob at the man as way of thanks.

"Fucking bastard," she just hisses underneath her breath.

"How such a despicable creature managed to best my Emperor and steal that sword is beyond me," Paul intones in a grave manner, his voice as tight as the expression on his face. "It's a great affront to Ashe's memory that his beloved weapon is being sullied by such filthy hands."

She doesn't really know much about the legendary hero aside from the Cliff's notes version of his story that she was told way back when, but still, Emma couldn't agree more with her old friend. Gold being in possession of the Sword of Ashe is no more horrific and ill-suited than an ogre wielding Excalibur.

"You know, there's something I've been meaning to ask you," she tells Paul, her gaze still locked to the weapon on Gold's lap. "I remember something Regina had mentioned when we were
investigating the site where the two blades got destroyed."

"Toll Bridge?"

"Yeah, in that area," she confirms, looking at Paul. "Anyway, she theorized that those two weapons could have leveled the entire town when they broke."

"Oh, yes, easily."

"But they didn't. Yeah, the earthquake happened and a lot of fissures cropped up, but it could've been way worse. Can you think of a reason why it wasn't?"

He pushes his eyeglasses up his nose and stares unseeingly at the blanket of white surrounding them, taking a moment to consider her query.

"The Sword of Ashe in its activated state would have surely destroyed the dagger with little to no repercussions."

"That's what Gold said, too."

"And the Queen's correct. If the sword was on equal footing with the dagger - power-wise, I mean - then Storybrooke would've been reduced to nothing but ash and smoke. The mere fact that we're still here suggests that wasn't the case."

"But I, Argos-me, didn't take a white soul, I'm sure of that," Emma insists. "Gold confirmed that, too."

He throws a discreet glance in Gold's direction, double-checking that they weren't being overheard, and then shuffles closer to her.

"Not a lot of people are privy to this, and I only know about it because I studied the sword's history extensively, but there is some sort of failsafe," Paul confides in a whisper. "An emergency power source, if you may."

"What is it?" she leans in closer.

"Not what, who."

"Who?"

"You."

What?!

"The men and women who have brandished the sword were mostly virtuous folks. And while it was easy to find a dark soul, they, like you, had qualms about taking a white one. Ashe, himself, only fully activated the sword once - and the pure soul he took was that of a paladin who had volunteered to sacrifice himself so Ashe could slay the dragons that were attacking the capital."

"So, how does that make me the failsafe?"

"During circumstances that require the sword to be more than slightly partially activated, the great heroes would offer up their own blood to add more power to the blade."

"And how can I do that?"
"When the time is right, concentrate and will the sword to do your bidding. The twin serpents will come to life and bite down on your wrist, siphoning your own energy into the weapon."

She's no stranger to acting as some sort of magical battery, so that's a plus.

"Just like Regina absorbing energy from me, then?"

"Yes, but only more draining."

"But won't it kill me before I even get to destroy that snake's dagger?"

"If you give too much energy, then you die," Paul says. "Think of it as donating blood, only in this case, you control just how much of your lifeforce you're willing to give. The more you sacrifice, the more powerful the sword becomes."

"And total crisis will be avoided?"

"We're living proof of it."

And that's all the convincing she needs.

"Um… hey…" Sidling up to them once more, a composed and less sulky Rufio taps her shoulder tentatively, walking on eggshells around her still.

"Hm?"

"If I really can't change your mind, thought you might want to know that I met Argos - well, you - right after you bought Jackson's bike. You found me at Sebastian Bishop's fugly billboard at Forest Road. I was about to vandalize it, but I didn't know it was protected by one of Jafar's faulty wardlocks."

"The same prototype that set Judge Poole's wife on fire?" Paul chimes in.

Rufio nods, his dark eyes set on hers. "You saved my ass from being toast."

Emma nods, taking a moment to absorb that piece of information. "How did I end up kinda joining the Lost Boys anyway?"

"You manipulated yourself into the fold," Rufio tells her, matter-of-fact. "Well, more like you bought yourself in - offering rent money, protection, the like."

"Oh."

So much for helping a 'brother' out of the goodness of their hearts.

"Nobody really trusted you at first," the teen continues. "But somehow, Pockets took a liking to you. And despite being the youngest, that kid happens to be a good judge of character so the others started trusting you, too. And, honestly, you were a sarcastic and kinda preachy dick, but you turned out to be okay. You became like an older brother to everyone, and pretty soon, even I was willingly taking orders from your bossy ass."

"I guess I have a way with orphans…" Emma smiles weakly, running a hand through her hair.

"You can sympathize," Paul surmises.

"I can empathize."
The pity in his eyes no longer fazes her as it would have in the past.

In some ways, and despite having been reunited with her parents, she still feels like an orphan. Twenty-eight years of living as one just doesn't make the feeling magically disappear, no matter how much Mary Margaret likes to believe otherwise.

Rufio clears his throat, pulling her out of her thoughts.

"Um, listen, since we're on the subject of your time with me and boys, I... well, my past self is a bit of a tool, and I... I mean, he..." the kid stammers, clutching the back of his neck, flushing all the way down to his collarbone. "He might've said some things to you-Argos you-about you... um... Sheriff you... that might be seen as offensive and rude and demeaning and just plain bad. So, um, you know... I... well..."

"He liked to talk about your bosom in a very ungentlemanly manner," Paul puts it simply, helping the boy out. "In that convoluted, roundabout way of his, I believe the lad is merely asking for your forgiveness in advance for all the sexually objectifying things you might hear from his past self. Am I right, Rufio?"

The boy nods in a sheepish fashion, staring at the snow covered ground. "So, uh, just please tune past-me out whenever that happens, 'kay? You also have my permission to smack past-me behind the head when I push things too far."

"Noted," Emma scratches at her chin, feeling some of Rufio's awkwardness creeping into her skin.

"Sheriff?"

"Yeah?" she turns to Paul.

"Just one more thing..."

"Shoot."

"The things you did as Argos - however small or insignificant they might've seemed to be - they all played a role in the greater scheme of things. So all that thieving, stalking, flirting - no matter how cumbersome it must've been for you when 'he' did them - they served a bigger purpose."

_They brought her and Regina together._

"I know," she says quietly. When Argos told her that she'll get all her money back eventually, she didn't think for one second that 'he' meant it literally. "You're saying that no matter how iffy it makes me feel, I should just buck up and do them anyway, correct?"

"Sadly, yes."

"Right, so I'm going to be perving on myself, got it," Emma chuckles, and continues to do so until her mirth eventually dwindles down into a sad little whimper. "Guess I'm about to take masturbation to a whole new frickin' level, huh?"

No one laughs at that joke.

_Humorless_, the Regina in her mind mocks.

And as expected, the sadness in her gut flares to an overwhelming degree and she has to look away for a moment to get a grip on herself.
"Eight minutes!" the annoying cock crows from the bench.

"For fuck's sake," Rufio snarls below his breath, echoing her sentiments perfectly.

Paul throws an expressionless Gold an exasperated glance before turning to face her again, "Did you say your goodbyes to your loved ones?" he prods in concern. "Have you made your peace?"

"In some way," she shrugs. "It wasn't the kind that they deserved, so I'll give them a proper farewell when the time comes."

"How?"

Reaching inside her coat pocket, she pulls out Henry and Regina's Christmas gift and shows it to the pair.

And almost immediately, Rufio's eyes widen in recognition. "That fucking notebook!"

"Wait… you know about it?"

"If Argos wasn't tending to those pansy-ass lilacs he asked me to help him steal, the dude was writing on that damn thing. Of course I know about it."

"Oh."

"So… was that what you were writing the whole time? A goodbye letter?"

"No," Emma shakes her head and carefully returns the leather-bound journal inside her coat. "My story."

"A memoir?" Paul murmurs.

Emma sighs. "Sort of."

"Five minutes!" Gold carries on like he's doing her a favor and not a frickin' disservice.

But before she can even roll her eyes at the snake, her ears pick up a sound that makes her blood run colder than the ice by her feet.

Her cellphone's ringing.

And she doesn't have to look at the screen to know who's calling.

"Where the hell are you?!"

Her Majesty is not pleased.

That much is clear when Regina is screaming into her ear.

"Uh… 7-11, where else?"

"You are a lot of things, Emma Swan, but a good liar, you're not."

"Huh? The heck are you talking about?" she forces an incredulous laugh. "I'm getting beer, you know that."

"Do you take me for a fool?" Regina snaps, and even Paul and Rufio, who had given her some
privacy, wince from where they're standing.

Emma shuts her trap.

"I know of your tendency of closing yourself off when prodded, so I never pushed. I was just biding my time, waiting for the moment you decide to share whatever it was that's clearly bothering you."

"Regina, I-

"I see now that I should have forced the matter instead of tiptoeing around it like a spineless idiot."

Panic creeping up her chest, Emma's mind blanks out, completely at a loss.

"Tell me where you are. We need to have a little chat."

"I, uh, I'm about to come back…"

...in time. But still.

"Good. Because your package arrived, my dear."

_Huh?_  

"I'm sorry, what?"

"A boy from Pizza Shack delivered a box to me that you had apparently paid for a month in advance. Imagine my surprise, Miss Swan, when I opened it and saw what was inside."

"Pizza?"

_Nothing," Regina enunciates darkly, drawing out the word as if it were a curse. "There was nothing in there but a handwritten note.""

"Then, really, it's not nothing; 'cause, technically, a note is something."

"Now is not the time for you smartassery, princess."

"I know, but I really don't remember doing anything of the sort," Emma says with a sigh, and it's the honest-to-fucking-goodness truth. "Are you sure it's from me?"

"I'd recognize these illegible squiggles anywhere. It's your handwriting."

"Are you positive?"

"Your h's look like b's and you tend to overarch your a's."

_Huh._

That's her sloppy writing, alright.

"But I didn't-" she stops abruptly, and then blinks, a light bulb going off in her head.

_Argos._

"Regina, what did the note say?" Emma fishes in a quiet tone of voice, her heart hammering in her ribcage.
"Call me now and ask me for a huge-ass serving of pepperoni pizza."

She screws her eyes tight and bites back a groan.

*Emma Swan, you fucking asshole.*

"What kind of game are you playing at? Is this your idea of a joke?"

"No." But she still laughs at the bitter irony of it all. Whether or not she looks like she's actually cry-smiling, in the end, she doesn't really care. Regina can't see her anyway. "Remember what I told you about pepperoni pizzas?"

"They're your stalker's metaphor for the truth."

"Exactly."

"Three minutes!" Gold announces, and it's only by some miracle - or probably because it's noisy at the other woman's end of the line - that Regina doesn't catch the imp's voice.

"And?" the unsuspecting woman asks instead.

"Regina…" Emma looks down and kicks at the snow by her feet. "Argos sent you that box."

"What?!" the woman screeches, a violent yet understandable reaction. "How?!"

Emma blows out a puff of air from her lips and watches as her breath dissipates into the cold night air. "You remember all those times you asked me about the reason why I tried to save you from the wraith?"

"Henry," Regina murmurs, and the background noise on her end dulls, and Emma guesses she had stepped out of her parents' apartment. "You made a promise to our son."

"I did," she confirms with a small, tender smile. "But that was just a slice, not the whole damn pie."

"What are you trying to say, Miss Swan? And what on earth does it have to do with that man?"

"Everything, believe it or not."

"Oh, stop speaking in codes, for heaven's sake!"

"There… that's your answer, right there. You, your majesty, are a major pain in the ass, and nine times out of ten, you drive me up the wall. But…" she looks up at the starless sky and tries to blink away the tears that are starting to form in her eyes. "You're my and the kid's pain in the ass, y'know?" she admits softly, her voice cracking slightly. "And as much as you annoy the crap out of me, I could never, ever let anything bad happen to you."

"...and why not?"

"Because, your royal pain the butt, even back then, you had made yourself such an important part of my life. And the real reason why I tried to save you from the wraith, Regina, was because I could no longer imagine living in a world where your snarky ass didn't exist."

"Emma…"

She smiles tearily and bites her lips, trying to stop her voice from quivering even more. Her heart's probably now just powder in her chest. "What, no 'Miss Swan'??"
"Stop being an idiot," Regina says in reproach, even though Emma can hear the woman's voice breaking ever so subtly, too. "After all this time, why the need to tell me this now?"

Because in the end, she owes herself the whole frickin' pie. But other than that, Regina deserves more than pathetic crumbs; so much more.

Emma takes a deep breath and clutches her phone tight until her fingers start to go numb, and before she even realizes it, Gold is up and off the bench.

She only takes notice of him when he stands right before her, his lips set in a thin line.

"Time's up," he mouths without remorse, and then thrusts the sheathed sword flat against her chest. The force of the action makes her stumble a step backwards, her right shoulder protesting against the abuse.

"Miss Swan... answer me. Tell me why..."

"Because... I..."

Gold turns his gaze towards Paul and curls a finger, beckoning the old man closer. Her beloved chess buddy reluctantly obeys and pulls out his golden pocket watch, flipping it open with his thumb.

"Now," Gold commands.

With a heartbreaking look, Paul meets her gaze and murmurs softly:

"October 6, 2012, correct?"

Emma nods in affirmation. And through it all, she hears sniffles coming from Rufio's direction as Paul clicks the knob on the ticker.

"Emma. Tell me why."

A hot tear slips from her eye, and another follows suit.

"Because... I'm Argos. And I-"

Golden light shoots out of the watch and hits her square on the chest.

"love you."

She's alone.

Gone are the three men and the cold winter night. It's sunny and hot and she's surrounded by a canopy of trees - where dried leaves crunch under her boots and birds chirp overhead.

She's standing in the clearing at the back of the mansion, where everything began.

And while she still feels a bit woozy, having experienced the disorienting sensation of every molecule in her body being ripped apart and then coming back together, Emma just inhales a deep breath and slowly exhales it out.

She finds her center soon enough, and after she tucks her now dead phone inside her pocket and straps the sword to her back, she unclasps the mask hanging on her forearm and secures it over her face.
The second she does so, she feels something in the air shift, like cellophane had just been wrapped all over her frame. Looking down at her body through the slits on the mask, she marvels at the transformation that had just taken place. She still feels like Emma Swan, but everything else about her - even her damn clothes - look different.

"Woah."

And sound different.

There it is, then.

Argos is born.

And as 'he' runs towards that all-too-familiar house on Mifflin Street, every step he takes and every breath he makes seem to fill his lungs with purpose. See, he's got clothes to steal, money to swipe, a bike to buy, Lost Boys to befriend… and a queen to save.

With a teary smile, Emma touches the necklace dangling on her neck and draws courage from it. You won't ever be alone again.

"And neither will you."

It is the sixth of October.

A typical Saturday in sleepy Storybrooke, Maine; a day that should've been insignificant in the greater scheme of things. But it isn't. Far from it, actually.

Today is no ordinary day, but nobody will realize just how important the sixth of October is until it is too late. A year down the road, people will begin to see it in a different light. And they will come to appreciate the blessing, the sacrifice, the devotion that would forever change a broken woman's life. They will know, but will not fully comprehend, the essence of one soul's sacrifice in order to save another.

No one will, until it's too late.

It is the sixth of October. A pivotal moment in Storybrooke's history and the turning point in Regina Mills' life.

And it all began with a spell, a Sheriff, and a thief.

THE END.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaannnnnnd now we come full circle. Major props to the people who helped me with this fic - awesome betas (J, Petri, Alezabee and ExactChange). It's been one hell of a ride for me - I hope it's the same for you guys, too. Thank you thank you thank you to everyone who's read the story, and also to those who took the time to bookmark, like,
and leave reviews. Much appreciated.

I know this is the end (the big bolded words up there kinda say so), but TSITTT isn't truly over yet. There will be an epilogue and it will be posted (fingers crossed) in two weeks. Enjoy the episode tonight, people.
Fifteen minutes after Emma Swan had disappeared right before his very eyes, Rufio still can't move a muscle.

With an air of a man who had just been given a new lease at life, Gold had walked away with a bounce in his step merely a few seconds after the woman had vanished into thin air. And even a teary Paul, the miserable coot, left for his bungalow after standing with him for several moments, probably deciding to do his grieving behind closed doors.

Rufio can't really blame the old fart - his cheeks are numb from the cold and his ears are starting to feel like they're about to fall off.

But despite it being so, he just continues to stand there, motionless at the spot.

If there's one thing he hates more than growing up, it's feeling powerless to the whims of fate. It brings him back to the time before Neverland - to a life long forgotten - where all he could do was watch helplessly as his family was taken from him one by one by a merciless plague.

He feels as weak and impotent now as he did back then. And he hates it with the passion of a thousand and one burning suns.

It's a blow to his pride, a kick between the legs, and a swift punch to his-

"Ouch!" Rufio yelps, clutching the back of his head - to where a snowball hit him square on and exploded into tiny bits. "What the fuck?"

Another one finds its mark and hits him right on the butt.

Whipping around, finally regaining control of his legs, he spots the nasty dickwad several meters away.

Rufio can't see the guy's face, but whoever the jerk is, he's probably the same age as him, going by their similar built and height, plus the fact that he's wearing a winter hoodie with the high school's crest emblazoned in front.

"The hell's your problem?" Rufio snaps, stalking forward, gloved hands balling into fists and ready for a fight.

The bastard just shrugs, lobs another snowball in his direction and then makes a run for it.

Never one to back out of a fight - and just itching to unload some of the pent-up frustration that's eating at him from inside - Rufio takes the bait and chases after the cowardly asshole.

He's lead to a merry chase, which is as unsurprising as it is annoying.

And even as his breathing comes in violent wheezes and the stitches on his bald head feel like they're about to burst, Rufio follows the running guy into the woods, slipping and almost losing his footing several times.

"Stop... running... and... face... me... like... a... fucking... man... ya... asshole...!"
His taunts fall on deaf ears.

Several minutes later, however, the chase comes to an abrupt-and almost painful-end.

See, he almost runs straight into a frickin' trailer.

Yes, a trailer; smack-dab in the middle of the fucking forest. And here he was thinking that he knew every part of this town like the back of his hand.

"You okay there?" he hears an all-too-familiar voice behind him.

Pivoting in place, hands raised and fists primed for a fight, all the color drains out of his sweaty face.

*What the-

"-fuck?" his doppelganger finishes the thought, as if reading his mind.

Pulling back his hoodie, exposing a head that has at least an inch and a half of hair on it, the Rufio in front of him grins from ear to ear. "Hey, handsome," the guy winks.

"Tink? The hell? That you? Quit playing games, you sad fuck."

The Rufio before him raises an eyebrow, and then pats his chest with both hands. "Do you really believe that a doppelganging Tinker Bell can rock a body like this?"

"If you're not Tink, who the heck are you?"

"You."

"Oh, shut the hell up!"

"You wank off in the shower every morning and at night before you sleep - once on weekdays and twice on weekends."

Rufio's jaw drops.

"You also stole one of Jackson's old magazines way back when and use it every single time to get off. That's the reason why pages seven and eight have been stuck together for years."

"..."

"Just sayin', man, you and me?" Hoodie-Rufio lifts his index fingers and slowly mash them together. "One and the same."

His arms slacken and fall limply to his sides.

"No more different from the way Emma Swan is Argos, really," the guy before him finishes. And that's when it clicks in Rufio's spinning head.

"I went back..." he breathes out.

Hoodie-Rufio just smiles, silently egging him on.

"But Paul said we're not meant to go back... he said that we're-"
he hadn't shaved in weeks. "I said a lot of things, lad. And though it pains me to admit, being old and wise doesn't save one's self from being wrong."

"No shit," Rufio's doppelganger snorts, and then turns back to face him. "Go back to the bungalow and tell that old fart that the future belongs to those brave enough to change their destiny."

"And that'll work? That's enough to convince him-" he looks at a rumpled Paul. "er-you?"

"Goodness, no," the man laughs. "But take out that thingamajig of yours,"

"He means your cellphone," Hoodie-Rufio says helpfully.

"Yes, that," Paul waves a hand. "And use it to take a picture of what you see inside the trailer. Then show the picture to me... well, present me, and it will be more than enough to prove that we have already altered the timeline. That, somehow, Emma wasn't the only one meant to interfere."

...inside the trailer, huh?

"What's in there?" he asks quietly, almost fearfully.

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Hoodie-Rufio nudges him up the step and into the trailer - where a portable heater hums by the dining area and opened cans of pork and beans litter the sink.

It smells like sweat and looks like a pigsty.

And as his brown eyes take in the cramped space, his nose wrinkling at the mess, Rufio finds himself immobilized by the shock of what he sees on the bed. Or, more importantly, who he sees.

No one ever did find a body...

"Well, fuck me..."

"Been there, done that. So, no thanks," his doppelganger smirks, and then drapes an arm around his shoulder. "Now, go," he whispers. "Go find Paul; do what you have to do, put on your big boy pants, and go save the Savior."

Chapter End Notes

Just to clarify: this is a supplementary chapter to the previous one. An epilogue will follow soon. :)
Epilogue: Bound

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Entry # 1

I… don't know what to say. Or where the heck to start.

To me, writing has always been as painful as pulling teeth – maybe even worse.

I've been staring at this page far longer than Rufio's been hogging the bathroom, and if you think you're vain (yes, I'm talking to you, Regina), trust me, you've got nothing on this kid. Outside of Halloween, I don't think I've ever seen anyone take this much time and effort to make themselves look like the punky lovechild of Beetlejuice and Ronald McDonald. It's as hilarious as it is annoying...

...I need to pee. :(

Um… I guess what I was trying to say before I got a bit sidetracked was... beginnings are hard. And even though I wanted to start this thing off on a more poetic note, I guess you guys will have to make do with, I dunno, this. I'm pretty sure you're not expecting a lot from me, anyway; it's not like I'm writing this journal to impress a bunch of literary snobs. Oh. Wait...

Nevermind.

So, I guess I'll just begin my first entry by simply saying... hi.

My name's Emma.

I am the Sheriff of Storybrooke, Maine.

I was once a foster kid, a small-time thief, a convicted felon, a former waitress, a one-time pizza delivery girl, and a kickass bail bondsperson.

I am the (reluctant) White Knight and Savior of Fairytale Land.

I am the daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming.

I am Henry Mills' other mother.

And I am someone's idiot.

My name is Emma Swan. These days, I also go by the alias Argos. And this, ladies and gents, is the PG-13 version of my... well... our story.

Enjoy, I hope?

Here we go.

The fire has been lit; the message delivered.

And as Paul stands against the side of the rusty, antiquated trailer - their home for the past five or so
weeks - and watches the other version of his young friend take to his heels and sprint back towards town, he finds himself smiling inwardly and exhaling a deep breath. His chest that had grown heavy with anticipation with every day that passed, now feels as light as the flecks of snow that are starting to fall from the sky.

Their time of hiding in the woods and living like hermits in their own town is nearing its conclusion.

It's almost over, and the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel is so damn close that he can practically feel the heat prickling on his skin despite the cold winter night.

And as such, Paul's outward smile soon matches his inner one.

"Hey, old fart..." a quiet Rufio nudges him with an elbow, his forehead creased in a thoughtful manner.

"Yes?"

"It's very firm, huh?"

"Hm? What is?"

"My ass," the lad simply says, his approving gaze glued to his other self's fleeing posterior. "Why'd you never tell me that I had a pretty nice butt?"

"Because I'm not in the habit of staring at people's rear ends – especially those that belong to seventeen-year-old boys," Paul deadpans.

"I'm just saying, ya old geezer, this one? This a real man's ass. Solid. Hard."

"Yes," he bites back a sigh. "I'd say it's about as hard as–"

"Ow!"

Paul smiles. "That."

"Seriously?!” Rufio hisses in affront, massaging the top of his skull. "Fucking hell, you trying to open up my stitches or something?"

"You exaggerate too much; that was just a little tap."

"Whatever; as if getting brain surgery wasn't bad enough, you probably killed what, another five hundred of my brain cells?"

"Trust me, lad, you don't need any help with that. You're doing an excellent enough job on your own."

"Asshole." The boy rolls his eyes.

He could very well argue that it takes one to know one, but Paul just drops the issue with a carefree shrug and tucks his cane on the crook of his arm. "So…"

"So?"

"It's almost time. Are you excited to finally go home and see your brother?"

Rufio merely shrugs and scratches at the bottom of his nose, feigning indifference. "I'm more excited
about seeing my bed."

"Tired of sleeping on the floor beside me, I gather?"

A dry look is what that query receives.

"I take that as a yes?"

"Old man, you snore like a tugboat and your fucking cologne reeks like embalming fluid," Rufio says matter-of-fact, candid and unapologetic as ever. "Do all geezers stink like death?"

"Only those who'd kill you in your sleep."

"Lucky we're parting ways, then."

"Lucky," Paul agrees with a tiny smile. "You know, there's still one more thing you need to do before you can go back home to Sheppard Lane…"

"Talk to you-know-who, I know."

"Well, yes, but there's another thing…"

"Huh? What other thing?" Rufio absentmindedly kicks at the snow at his feet, brows knit together. "We just went over the plan this afternoon; you never mentioned anything else aside from me playing messenger tonight. What more do I have to do?"

Preferring to elaborate by demonstrating, Paul makes a pair of scissors with his fingers and makes sniping motions near his head.

The leader of the Lost Boys frowns at him, and then blinks, and in an instant, the look of confusion on Rufio's face morphs into that of pure, unadulterated horror. "No…"

"Yes."

Rufio shakes his head vehemently. "No."

"Yes," Paul nods.

"C'monnnn," the boy whines. "Do I have to?"

"For your own brother's sanity, once again, I'm going with yes," Paul says, and before Rufio can open his mouth and whine, he lifts a hand and preempts any protests with a pointed, "Lad, you couldn't have possibly grown all that hair overnight."

"That's cause I didn't."

"Yes," Paul says patiently. "That healing potion you procured from Baba Yaga worked wonders on your headaches and your hair, I can see."

"Exactly! This ain't cheap, y'know?"

"I do know. But you also have to keep in mind that, even if it's been more than a month since you've last seen him, it's only been hours since Jackson last laid eyes on you."

"Yeah, so?"
"So, for the love of God, stop being so obtuse and get a damn haircut! You can't go home looking like that; you'll only make the poor man think he's lost his mind."

The pout on Rufio's lips is as petulant as the foot stomp the teen makes.

"Oh, for goodness sake, its hair; it'll grow right back."

"Says the dude who likes to wear stupid porkpie hats to cover up the fact that his no longer does."

Paul's expression levels out, unimpressed. Still, he doesn't take the bait.

"I'm like that Samson dude, all my power's in my 'do."

"You know very well that that's not true," he sighs. "Rufio, you defied the dictates of fate and rescued our friend when you were bald. I think you're putting too much stock on your goddamn hair; the power's in you, not in measly strands of keratin on your thick skull."

That seems to work. Or, at least, Paul thinks it does. Working his jaw, Rufio just looks away.

"Listen, it took you only a little over a month to grow all that, what's another five weeks?"

Lips puckering in a surly manner, donning the face of every teenager who'd just been coerced into doing something they didn't want to do by their elders, Rufio tucks his hands inside the pockets of his hoodie and stomps toward the path that leads out of their little clearing.

"Give her the last dose; I'll go back to the park and wait," he grumbles at Paul.

"Lad…"

Waving a dismissive hand, not even looking back, the boy just continues to walk away. "I know, I know. I'll pass by the barber's before I go home and 'borrow' a fucking razor, too."

Appeased, Paul lets out a low hum. "And you're certain she's going to be at the park?"

"That lady almost ran me over, remember? I'm pretty damn sure."

"If you say so," he acquiesces, and through force of habit and some type of fatherly concern, he doesn't move an inch until Rufio reaches the tree stump that marks the boundary of their cloak-ward's influence; soon as the boy passes it, only then does Paul clamber up the metal steps into the trailer.

The second the creaky door swings shut behind him, the smell of musk and stale meat slaps him squarely on the face, and, as always, Paul's expression twists and sours as if he'd just sucked on a lime. He can never, ever seem to get used to the revolting aroma – nor does he really want to – and, thankfully, in a few hours, he never has to live with it again.

And if in the future, he suddenly gets hit with another bout of self-pity over his solitary existence, he'll just think back to this moment – to the time he shared a cramped little trailer with a teenaged slob – and nip that emotion right in the bud.

Standing on the threadbare rug, he pulls off his boots with a grunt and leaves them there, preferring to shuffle around in his wool socks than on dirty, damp footwear. The kitchen is within arm's reach, and as he heads for the shoe box sitting by the toaster, he grabs the remnants of Rufio's dinner from the sink and tosses it in the trash bag by the fridge.

He finds only one tiny vial left in the box – and it's not even full. There's only so much remaining for a single dose, but really, that's all they need.
Soon, his charge will get the proper treatment that she deserves; the right form of sustenance, the appropriate medical care. But, for now, he just tucks the vial in his free hand and totters towards the room at the end of the trailer, his cane thudding against the cold, metallic floor.

He pauses by the door, just like always, and merely observes the figure lying prone on the bed, motionless as a rock.

And like every single time he's checked in on his ward, Paul grips the door handle and waits with bated breath. The moment he sees her chest rise and fall is the moment he allows himself to breathe once more.

"Time for your meds, Emma," he says softly. "I know it tastes horrid, but bear with me one last time, okay?

Sitting himself at the edge of the lumpy mattress, Paul rests his cane on his lap and unscrews the cork from the vial, the stomach-turning smell of the putrid concoction making his face scrunch.

"Rufio just left," he murmurs, reaching over and gingerly parting the woman's lips with a thumb. "I finally told him about shaving his head, and just like I predicted this morning, he wasn't very happy about it."

Slowly, carefully, he pours the blue, shimmering liquid inside Emma's mouth, not allowing a single drop to go to waste.

"You always did complain to me about how vain that lad is; I never doubted it, of course, but I suppose one could never fully comprehend the extent of Rufio's vanity until they had to share a bathroom with the boy. Every day, I thank the powers that be that I don't have an overactive bladder; I've packed a paltry amount of undergarments as is."

The vial now empty, Paul gently pushes Emma's chin up and closes her mouth shut. And not unlike the other times he's given her a dose of Jafar's elixir – a healing potion he procured by trading his knowledge of Asheneamon's most powerful wards to the part-time sorcerer turned full-time businessman – a tinge of red ever-so-gradually creeps back to Emma's face, coloring her cheeks and her pale lips.

Nevertheless, she still doesn't stir.

Once again, the hope flickering in his chest dims, and Paul's shoulders slump in disappointment.

"Ah, Emma," he sighs sadly, shaking his head. "When I told you about the failsafe and encouraged your decision to power up the sword with your own energy, I didn't mean you should sacrifice within an inch of your life."

He plugs the vial closed and discards it along with the rest of the empty ones, lying in a box by the foot of the bed.

Another sigh leaves his lips.

"But I suppose all heroic souls bear the same predilection for self-sacrifice, hm? All or nothing; go hard or go home. The honorable fools, as scholars like myself would often say; the subjects of countless tales of bravery and valor."

He covers her limp hand with his own, and even as a sad smile tugs at his lips, Paul gives it an affectionate squeeze.
"Well, my dear friend, you did not only save her, you saved us all. The town still stands because of your actions. And even though I'm grateful for the fact, I still wish you more than what you got in return for your selfless deeds. It's always the good that has to pay, isn't it?" Paul exhales ruefully, and then as an afterthought, he murmurs, "Not that I'm saying that life is more lenient towards evil, it's just that people like you are always more willing to pay the higher price."

And there is no greater reminder of this than the broken shard lying on the shelf; a piece of the Sword of Ashe that he and Rufio had great trouble wrenching out from underneath the dying woman's collarbone after the boy had pulled Emma out of the river. It's still a wonder how neither of them got nicked by the blade and had their souls absorbed, given the circumstances.

It had been quite an ordeal, yes, but what stayed with Paul the most about that harrowing point in time was the image of a wide-eyed Emma heaving out copious amounts of blood from her crimson-stained lips – and the way her fingers had scratched and curled helplessly against his shirt as if overwhelming pain was intermingling and warring with the knowledge – and acceptance – of death looming near. It was no different from the expression on his sick mother's face when she reached the end of her life, and the resemblance was so striking that he faltered for a second and fumbled with their box of elixir.

Taking matters into his own hands, Rufio had snatched the container from him – and without an ounce of hesitation, the boy then dumped the contents of a whole vial into Emma's parted lips and another onto her gushing chest wound.

Only then did the violent bleeding come to an abrupt stop.

That was the last time they had caught glimpse of those bright emerald eyes before her body's self-preservation instinct kicked in and hid them away from this painful, cruel world.

It's been more than a month, yet Emma hasn't woken up since then.

"Here's hoping that you're exactly like your mother," Paul murmurs as he pushes himself up with the help of his cane, his wobbly knees protesting in pain. "If twenty-eight vials of elixir didn't wake you, my dear friend, maybe a little kiss will."

*It has to.*

It simply has to.

Honorable fools deserve a happy ending, too.

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**Entry # 5**

*Hey, you wanna talk about irony?*

*How about this… after weeks of feeling like I'd been yanked out of my own, kicking and screaming by almost everyone in this small town – but mostly just my deputies – here I am again.*

*In a closet.*

*And the best part? I'm living in it, too.*

*I bet Ruby, Leroy and August would be pissing themselves if they knew.*

*This is the only 'room' that the Lost Boys could spare, you see. And since beggars can't be choosers,*
I bit my tongue, dumped all my junk inside and just settled right in. Besides, I've slept in way worse places (case in point, see entry number 3), and I could do worse than a small, dusty wardrobe that reeks like old newspaper and wet socks.

And, to be honest, it's not really that awful.

Sure, it's not my room in the basement, and yeah, it might be bad for every single muscle in my body that I have to sleep like a fetus just to be able to fit in, but at least this closet is a walk-in one, and I have my own pillow, my own blanket, and, best of all, my own space.

I have my privacy in this 'room'. And trust me, in a cabin chock full of kids who're always up in your business, that's all a person can really ask for.

In here, I can slip off my mask and let Argos rest; in here, I can be just plain Emma again.

And that's… refreshing.

I kinda miss her, y'know?

I mean, not as much as I miss you guys, but still.

I just never realized how much I loved living in my own skin until I had to wear someone else's. I guess sometimes you do have to take a step back and try to see yourself from another person's eyes to finally appreciate the things that you've always taken for granted. To accept and embrace the many glaring flaws that make oneself imperfectly... perfect.

And it's funny how it took becoming Argos for me to come into grips with the truth that, yes, despite my many shortcomings, I am worth something.

To someone.

Even if that someone, after twenty-eight years of existence, is my own damn self.

Regina can't move.

She's hyper-aware of her surroundings; the faint humming coming from the heating vent near the floor… the flecks of paint chipping off the hallway walls… the illuminated sign by the fire exit flickering on and off… and the sound of her phone as it hits the floor when her arm slackens and eventually falls to her side.

She's hyper-aware, yes, but still, comprehension falls short and so is her control of her limbs.

It's been minutes since the call came to an abrupt end – perhaps even hours, for all she knows – and yet she's still incapable of moving.

Because… I'm Argos. And I–

No.

She screws her eyes shut.

No… no… no… no… no.

That man is dead; that man is gone.
Emma Swan is *alive*; Emma Swan was just *here*.

*And as much as you annoy the crap out of me, I could never, ever let anything bad happen to you...*

A lump lodges itself in Regina's throat.

*Is.*

Emma *is* here.

That insufferable woman is just somewhere in this godforsaken town, on her way back to her for a much deserved lambasting. No one deserves getting a scare like that. *No one*… not even an evil queen.

*The real reason I saved you from the wraith, Regina?*

The fire exit sign flickers weakly once more… twice… and then, finally, dies.

Regina stills.

*I could no longer imagine living in a world where your snarky ass didn't exist.*

And without warning, as if finding its focus, her brain regains a semblance of clarity, and then all of a sudden, those heartwarming words take on an altogether different meaning.

She hears her own blood rush to her ears, and as she pales, Regina lurches forward and sways on her feet. Reaching out, she steadies herself on the wall, the muted noise from the party reverberating against the cheap plywood to her skin.

Argos had saved her from the wraith; that person had succeeded where Emma Swan had failed. And for the longest time, Regina was never able to wrap her mind around that and comprehend the peculiarity of his uncharacteristically selfless action – nor his motivations for it. At least, not until–

*No.*

*No... no... no.*

She specifically told that stubborn woman not to die on her account.

But… now… now she can't seem to breathe.

She can't even think.

All she can seem to do is *feel.*

And since denial had just fallen like a stack of cards in a storm, the all-too-familiar, all-encompassing anger soon takes it place and flares in Regina's chest.

*Not this.*

*Not again.*

*Not that woman... not that idiot.*

Regina inhales a shaky breath, her nails digging into her palm.

*Her... idiot.*
"Mom?"

**Henry.**

And just like that, her outrage is cut down to size and swiftly overwhelmed by the devastating sense of loss that suddenly grips at her heart.

"It's time for the secret santa thing. Grandma's calling for everyone to gather 'round the living room."

Swallowing thickly, she bites down on her lip and straightens her spine, keeping her back to her dear boy.

"Uh, mom? You dropped your phone, y'know?"

When she doesn't make a move to pick it up, an oblivious Henry carries on and probes:

"What are you doing out here anyway? Is Emma back?"

That's all it takes, and despite Regina's best efforts, a strangled noise wrenches itself out of her trembling lips.

And the next thing she hears is the apartment door closing shut and hurried footsteps coming near.

"Mom? Is… is everything okay?" Henry asks in a cautious manner, and as he steps around her, his brown eyes that are alight with concern widen when he sees her face. "You're crying…"

And it's only then, after she touches her cheeks with her fingers, that she feels the abundance of moisture on her skin.

She hastily wipes away her own tears, but just like facing the other direction, it's another exercise in futility given that no amount of wiping can erase what he had already seen.

"Mom?"

"Henry, I–" she starts to say, and then frowns, the hoarseness of her own voice sounding foreign to her ears.

"Did something happen?"

"I–" she falters once more, and as helplessness and frustration gnaws at her from inside, the only thing Regina can manage is a weak, yet truthful, "I–I don't know."

"How 'bout Emma? Is she okay? What's going on?"

"I don't know," she insists with the desperation of a woman who's nearing her wits' end. "I don't… I just… I don't..."

"But mom–"

"I don't know what the hell's going on anymore!"

Henry startles.

Regina blinks.

She doesn't use that kind of tone on him often – they both know it – and as such, her outburst only
serves to deepen the line between her son's brows, and a perturbed Henry merely mewls a feeble, "Mom…"

And that – mixed with the look on his face – sobers her up just enough.

"I–I'm sorry, sweetheart," she says quickly, reaching out to cup his cheeks. "I shouldn't have raised my voice. I'm just–"

"Scared," Henry observes, not sounding any different himself. Then, he goes absolutely still. "Is the wraith–?" Before he can finish the thought, he grabs hold of her left hand and wrenches it away from his face, his wide eyes zeroing in on her palm.

His facial muscles relax at the absence of a mark.

"Mom?" His gaze flickers up to meet her own, and with the contrived calm of a boy who is obviously struggling to put up a brave face, he asks, "Where's Emma?"

"That's… that's what I want to know as well, my dear," she admits in a quiet tone of voice.

"She was just getting more drinks, right? Did something–" he hesitates. "Did something bad happen to her?"

Her stomach churns, and the sides of her eyes start to prickle with fresh tears.

For her sake… for his sake… for both their sakes…

"I sincerely hope not."

"Henry? Regina? We're about to start."

_Snow._

As if this night couldn't possibly get any worse.

"Is Emma back?"

_And… it just did._

Slowly, and despite her lack of composure, she turns around and faces the pixie-haired woman peeking out of the apartment door.

Just one look at her and Henry's faces, and Mary Margaret steps out into the hallway – a little less jovial and a great deal more subdued – a modicum of lucidity seemingly creeping back to her alcohol-addled brain.

"Is everything okay? What happened?"

Her throat constricting, Regina looks away and works her jaw, blinking so rapidly that a tear or two slip and roll down the planes of her face. It's a testament to her current state of mind – and heart – that she allows Snow White, of all people, a glimpse of her vulnerability.

"What happened?" Mary Margaret asks again, this time more urgent than before.

It's Henry who steps up to the plate and shakes his head. "We don't know."
Entry # 8

Guess what I did today?

My first act of larceny since getting out of juvie.

And no, I'm not talking about breaking into the mansion and getting clothes and money – I did that a couple of days ago as soon as I got sent back. Besides, since finding out the truth, I don't even consider robbing my stuff a felony anymore. It's not really stealing when it's yours to begin with, right? I should know, I'm the Sheriff.

So... what did I steal, you ask?

Oh, just a couple of lilac shrubs.

Innocent enough.

So, technically, my only real crime in Storybrooke is swiping your flowers, your majesty.

It was a pain in the butt, I do have to admit. Rufio and I had to make two trips, and we had to do it in broad daylight, too.

Ballsy, huh?

Nah, I just knew nobody would be at the house all day. Everyone's out combing the woods for a fissure; you know, the one I was responsible for (indirectly) when I arrived at the clearing? Yeah, that one.

Of course, considering that a cyclops will stumble into it several days from now and find its way into town – smack dab in the middle of the Fall Festival, too – let's just say that the whole 'searching the woods' operation will be one complete bust.

Don't worry, though – I've got it all covered.

Jackson's cannon – coupled with your magic, Regina – will end up saving the day. So, when I bought his bike, I made sure to plant the seed in his head. And since there was no trace of the cannon when I drove past Sheppard Lane this morning, it seems like my little scheme has already borne fruit. The guy's strapped for cash; the cannon should already be on display at Gold's pawnshop at this time.

Anyway, back to those lilacs.

I wish I could tell you I'm sorry for stealing them, I really do. But I'm not.

More than an instrument to taunt my past self with... more than a way to grab attention... more than anything else... those tiny little flowers serve no greater purpose than to make me feel less homesick.

So, rest assured, they're in good hands.

I'll take excellent care of them, I promise. And when the time comes and you're finally reading this journal of mine, please reach out to Rufio and have the kid take you guys here, to our cabin in the woods. Have him show you my garden; my precious patch of home away from home.

Take the shrubs and re-plant them back where they belong.

And when spring comes and they start to bloom, I hope you think of me, your little lilac thief, and
remember that, like these flowers, I found my home with you.

The missing woman's words were prophetic.

Regina, indeed, becomes the party pooper.

The second the words 'Emma is Argos' leave her lips, a grim hush descends over the once-boisterous crowd – even the holiday music wanes and eventually fades – and for the briefest of moments, one can hear a pin drop. And then, as if propelled by an invisible force, every single person in the room springs into action at the very same time.

Now, it's all-around pandemonium.

"Doc, Sleepy, Dopey, you guys search the woods east of town. Bashful, Sneezy, Happy, go west," Leroy barks at the tipsy, half-naked dwarves, and then promptly addresses the men by the mistletoe. "Archie, you and your gay lover come with me; we're heading south."

"Everyone else with cars, go in pairs," August announces from atop the coffee table, knocking a plate of salted nuts and several empty cans to the floor. "Search every road, every alley. When you see any sign of Emma or the Bug, call the station's hotline. It should re-direct your call to me, Leroy or Ruby."

"I'll cover the docks and the beach," Granny declares, stomping towards the door with purpose, and then blithely flicking Marco's collar when she passes him by. "You're free to join me, old man, if you think you can keep up. Now someone call that granddaughter of mine and tell her what's going on!"

"I'll do it!" Whale pipes in, buttoning his shirt and tucking it in his pants on his way out. "I'll search the hospital and the school, too."

"I'm coming with you," Thomas follows, Ashley in tow.

"I'll mobilize the rest of the nuns," Blue tells the Charmings before she skitters away with Nova and her other minions. "We'll send word soon as we catch a glimpse of her."

"Let's go to Toll Bridge and Aris Cove," an ashen Mary Margaret turns to her husband, holding on to his forearm like a vice. "We'll find her, right?"

"We will." David kisses his wife's forehead. "We always do."

Regina, in spite of everything, rolls her eyes.

"Let's go home," Henry tugs at her hand, pulling her attention away from his galling grandparents and their equally tiresome catchphrases. "She's gonna be there, I know it. I mean, I know it's too obvious for her to be there, but it's always the last place you think of, right?"

That might be true, yes. But there's just one problem…

"That idiot drove us here," Regina pinches the bridge of her nose. "We'll have to walk because I can't teleport us home without her h--"

"I can drop you guys off," Michael Tillman offers, much to her surprise. The man's never been shy of letting her know just how much he hates her very existence, despite how their children seem to be the best of friends.

So, before she can even stop herself, the ever-dubious part of Regina blurts out, "And why on earth
would you do that?"

"Emma reunited me with my family," he puts it simply. "Thought it'd only be fitting to help in reuniting hers."

"I…" she swallows. "Thank you."

Less than a couple of minutes later, she finds herself in the passenger seat of the mechanic's truck with Henry and Michael's offspring squeezing in the back.

The way people are frantically scrambling out of the Charmings' decrepit apartment building and into their respective vehicles, one might think the police had just raided a party full of underaged debauchers.

And if she wasn't just another shaky sigh short of a panic attack, Regina would surely have cackled at how, after all these years, she still has a way of clearing out a party.

One of the bumbling dwarves runs headfirst into a telephone pole.

And even as Michael winces beside her, and the children chorus a sympathetic 'ouch', Regina does little to fight the groan that resonates from deep within the back of her throat.

"I'm m'kay…" that Dopey fellow waves to everyone and no one in particular as his brothers carts him and his bleeding nose inside their stationwagon.

Regina grits her teeth.

Good luck finding that oh-so-foolish woman of hers with this kind of crowd comprising the search party.

It's difficult enough to try and locate a person in the dead of the night with road conditions as bad as they are this evening; she imagines it a thousand times more challenging when the people doing the searching are either: a) drunk out of their puny little minds, or b) running around like chickens with their heads hacked off, or c) all of the above – as is clearly the case.

The icy roads of Storybrooke are going to be inundated with panicky, drunk drivers tonight. It hasn't even truly begun, but this manhunt is already shaping up to be one hell of a ridiculously disastrous nightmare; a fiasco of catastrophic proportions.

Regina is not even remotely religious, nor is she spiritual, but she prays to whomever, whatever is out there that her idiot not be the one to pay the price for the ineptness of her would-be rescuers.

And as Michael maneuvers away from the curb, she presses her throbbing temple against the frigid window and tries to find even the smallest iota of calm amidst the chaos in her surroundings – and, also, deep within herself.

In the backseat, Nicholas and Ava are chirping incessantly like crickets, talking a mile per minute, asking questions that she can't even begin to answer.

"I don't get it, how can Emma be that creepy person?"

"I thought that Argos dude was a man?"

"Yeah, and isn't he, like, dead?"

Regina shuts her eyes tight and tunes them out, lest she lobbies a fireball to shush them up.
Even a disquieted Henry elects to ignore the relentless tittering of his insensitive friends. Leaning forward, he rests his forehead on the back of her seat and puts a hand over her shoulder, grabbing hold of a fistful of her coat as if seeking solace in their shared state of anxiousness.

"We're gonna find her, right?" he eventually speaks, his voice a mere whisper as his fingers tighten their grip. "I don't want her to die…"

"You and I both, sweetheart." Regina places a hand over his own, yet another errant tear slipping from her eye as her other hand touches the pendant hanging from her neck. "You and I both."

Entry # 15

It's past one in the morning and I'm writing this entry on my back with my legs propped up against the closet wall; a flashlight between my teeth and Thud Butt's jackhammer snoring booming in my ears. The eyeglasses I stole from myself keep on sliding down my nose, and I've lost count of the times I've almost stabbed my eye out with my pen when I push them back up. It's a struggle, I'm telling you, but as always, I'm managing. Maybe I'll duct tape them to my head, I dunno.

Anyway, as you'd have probably guessed, the gremlins are asleep. I call them gremlins, but believe it or not, I say that with a certain kind of fondness now. And it's not Stockholm Syndrome-y in the very least, trust me. These boys, these orphans, they remind me so much of someone I know. It's as scary as it is kinda heartbreaking. Looking at them is like looking in a mirror and seeing myself twenty years ago; the same jaded look, the same hardened expression.

Well... save for Pockets.

That boy is a special one. And though I remember Gold telling me that he's a True Love baby just like yours truly, I don't think that's what makes him unique.

I believe he's what you'd call an old soul.

Yeah, the grunt's a rascal like his buddies and has a mischievous streak that sometimes even puts Rufio's to shame, but somehow, someway, Pockets has managed to hold on to a solid amount of lightness and joy and purity that would make someone like Mary Margaret look like a frickin' scrooge.

And even though I've never been a fan of overly naive optimism, it's kind of refreshing to see such innocence in someone who's lived as long as he has.

He took a strange as hell liking to me, you know? He follows me around like a puppy, all eager to hang out and stuff in spite of the freaky mask and the even freakier sword. Not gonna lie, as touched as I am, I'm maybe also kinda worried about his sanity.

Little ol' Argos has a starry-eyed groupie. Ain't that a scary thing?

Anyway, speaking of my little fanboy... there he goes again. He sleeps in a cot near my closet, and just like Thud Butt's snoring, I hear him every single night. Pockets always – always – calls for his mother in his sleep.

And it never fails to give me god-awful flashbacks of my own childhood.

I don't think I've ever called for my parents when I was young – but that doesn't mean that I didn't wish for them or pray for them or hope against hope that, somehow, they'd magically appear right before my bed, apologetic and sad that they'd ever given me up.
I woke up disappointed every single day.

But, whatever, I got over it. Somehow, I did.

I know I already glossed over my time in the system a few entries ago, but let me tell you something quick about the foster system in this country again. Like most things in life, there are levels and criterions – good, better, best, and the like. See, there are some homes that are perfect… others that are good… a lot that are just plain and decent… and then, there’re the shitty ones that would make a crack den seem like the most perfect place to raise children.

I told you I got bounced to a lot of different ones, and, well, you have one go at what type of home I often ended up in.

If you guessed the last one, you get a star.

My crappy luck meant that I always got the short-end of the stick when it came to foster homes. It's just the way it is, I guess.

Though, I did manage to land in a perfect one, once. Sweet, young couple, struggling to have children; Tim and Isabel Wilson, I believe their names were. They took me in and treated me like I was theirs. Then, of course, they got pregnant. And whatever plans they had of adopting me got scrapped, and a few months later, three-year-old me found herself being carted off to another home.

I didn't find out about that almost-adoption until I was six; Tommy (yeah, also the same foster brother who tried to 'teach' me how to swim by letting me drown) told me about it after I had driven a hammer into his Tonka truck when he decapitated my Barbie (and, yeah, I also used to own one; don't laugh). I think that was the day I just stopped hoping. That was the moment the bitterness inside me just grew and grew and grew until it took over my whole chest and I couldn't breathe anything else but my own resentment. I mean, seriously, there must've been something really wrong with me if I had been rejected by parents, and would-be parents, not once, but twice.

I finally gave up on the thought of a family, then.

To me, a family was just as foreign as the flashy sports car that the guy next door owned. Sure, it was nice to look at, and probably even nicer to own, but even though I could imagine myself driving around town in it, I knew deep down that it was just one of the many things in life that I'd only get to admire from afar.

That car, like family, was just a nice pipe dream.

Then, of course, fast-forward twenty-two years, and this gutsy little kid knocks on my apartment door and basically twists my arm into taking him home to this little town in Maine.

So… I did.

And when I should've left, I stayed; when I should've walked away, I laid down roots.

Then several months later, I moved in with the kid and his mother in their big old house and, soon enough, I found out for myself what it was like to drive a fancy red sports car.

It was awesome.

Frightening, yeah, but holy shit was it exhilarating.

The best ride of my whole damn life.
And I say that despite of – or maybe because of – the snarkiest, bitchiest, sassiest backseat driver I had sitting right beside me.

So… thank you Henry… thank you Regina… for letting me ride in your Ferrari.

(even if I did have to jump out of its moving self in order to save it)

I'm sorry that I'm not sorry.

Because, really, why the heck would I be when all I'm doing is protecting my family?

P.S. We do have insurance, right?


Just like how they left it several hours ago, the mansion is pitch black when they get home.

Nevermind the outside shoes they still have on, the moment they step inside the foyer, they start running around the house calling Emma's name; Regina scouring the first floor and the basement with Henry covering the second floor and the attic.

They search every room, every closet, every nook, every cranny, and to her son's disappointment and her dismay, they find no sign of the missing woman anywhere.

Frustrated, unsuccessful, and simply terrified beyond belief, they meet up at the bottom of the staircase when all is said and done, identical looks of consternation painted on their faces.

Henry, her poor child, looks close to tears. "I really thought she'd be here," he murmurs, eyes downcast – as if them being unable to find his other mother in their home had been his fault. "Where could she be?"

The only response she can afford to give him is a feather-light touch on the side of his cheek. She doesn't know either.

Closing her eyes, and feeling at a loss, Regina takes a moment to focus on her breathing, trying her hardest to clear her frazzled mind. They'd be doing themselves – but most especially, that stubborn buffoon of theirs – a great disservice if she didn't keep a level head throughout Operation Idiot.

And even though it's not easy to find clarity when heightened emotions and frayed nerves are clouding her head and impairing her ability to think, she absentmindedly grabs hold of her pendant, presses the pad of her thumb onto the swan, and wills herself to focus.

Inspiration comes after several trying moments.

And almost immediately, she starts to move.

Burning with purpose, she takes Henry's hand and leads them both out of the house with a determined stride, deciding to employ one of Emma's favorite tactics and go-to excuses when things
inadvertently blow up in her face, like they always do. Regina goes with her gut.

And so, she takes the Mercedes and drives them both to Sherwood Park, where the winding paths are as desolate as the roads surrounding it... where burnt out street lamps grossly outnumber the working ones... where the abundantly thick foliage is covered in heavy snow... and where they almost run over a sprinting Lost Boy.

"Mom, watch out!"

Snapping her gaze away from the park and back towards the road, Regina instantly slams on the brakes; the next thing she knows, a loud thump echoes from outside as a pair of sneakered feet jump and slam down against her hood, agile as a gazelle but landing as heavy as a rhino.

"Sorry!" that Rufio character yells as he hops right off and continues to scamper in the direction of the houses nearby, the near collision neither breaking nor slowing down his stride.

"You," Regina hisses, her heart thundering in her ears, having half the mind to chase him down and actually hit him for real.

And then, like a flash, realization quickly edges out her anger. Given that Emma is Argos, that Lost Boy can – and will – give her answers.

Making up her mind, she turns the wheel towards the curb, intending to follow after him like a snowplow going after a mound of snow with legs, but then, Henry thrusts a finger towards the windshield and screams:

"BUG!"

Once again, Regina hits the brakes with a vengeance, and it's a good thing they're just at a slow, coasting speed because if not, they would've skidded off the road and into a ditch.

That slippery Lost Boy disappears inside one of the homes – maybe even Paul's, if she's not mistaken. But going after the teenaged rascal gets pushed to the wayside in favor of heading to the yellow eyesore that's sticking out like a sore thumb amidst the abundant heaps of white in the near distance.

She pulls up behind the parked car so quickly it's a wonder she doesn't rear-end the Bug.

And although her stomach drops when she peers inside the vehicle and sees no one inside, the key that is still jammed inside the ignition offers the smallest smidgen of hope.

The smile that tugs at the corner of Regina's lips is probably of the same sentiment as the relieved sigh that Henry lets out.

That woman is here.

Now they just have to go and determine exactly where.

And as Regina straightens and scans her surroundings, another inkling starts to make its presence known at the back of her skull – niggling and nagging like a persistent itch – although, before she can go and voice it out, Henry seems to come to the same conclusion and beats her to it.

"Didn't she say that the wraith popped up near the pond?"

Hand-in-hand, they're off and running in a heartbeat.
Reminiscent of their sojourn to Mifflin Street, they rush towards the frozen pond only to find no one there. However, that doesn't mean they didn't come across nary a single trace of Emma Swan.

The flakes that are falling from the skies have made them faint, but Regina can still make out several bootprints on the ground. And as she hovers over one set of prints and sees how they almost match hers in size, the tiny hairs that stand up at the back of her neck make her stop dead cold.

She shivers, but it's not because of the biting breeze nor the trepidation that's humming through her veins.

*Magic.*

It's unmistakable, the residue of a powerful spell still lingering in the air like a potent perfume.

Regina breathes it in as easily as oxygen, and as it fills up her lungs and seeps into her very being, dread slithers down her spine and makes her tighten her hold on Henry's hand.

She knows this magic; she's stumbled upon it before.

It feels… smells… tastes… like the spell at the clearing a couple of months ago.

*Because… I'm Argos. And I—*

"No…"

*Turns out Paul dabbles in a bit of magic, too. He did some kind of spell and sent the wraith back in… uh, I mean, to… to…*

Back in *time.*

Time-bending magic, that's what it is.

"No…"

"Mom?"

*I got him to confirm that he was at the clearing on the day of the break-in… but a furry friend of his was responsible for the spell… he claimed that this friend of his was trying to get rid of the soul-sucker, not summon it back to town…*

"No… no…"

"Mom… what's going on?"

*The real reason I saved you from the wraith, Regina? I could no longer imagine living in a world where your snarky ass didn't exist.*

"No… no… no…" Regina whispers, shaking her head, her tone breaking in a way that she hasn't heard since Daniel's untimely demise. The overwhelming sense of deja vu is like a bitter slap to the face; only, this time, it hurts a million times more than it did before, partly because of the beautiful, innocent soul whose hand is entwined with her own – looking at her with those big, brown eyes. Bright eyes that will soon dim when she tells him what she thinks she already knows.

They're too late.

She's... *gone.*
"Mom," Henry whimpers. "You're crying again…"

This time, Regina no longer makes a move to wipe the tears away.

"What's going on? Where do you think she is?"

A sob is all that comes out of her quivering lips, the pendant hanging from her neck feeling almost as heavy as her aching heart.

"Mom?" he prods urgently, tugging at her hand in an incessant manner.

Her throat is closing up and the tears continue to fall; one after another they slide off her chin and disappear into the faint footprints in the snow.

"Where's Emma?"

"H-Henry…"

"Why are you crying?" he cries out in desperation, his own eyes starting to blur with tears. "What's going on? Where is she?"

"She's–"

"Waiting for you guys," a voice supplements from behind the nearby willow tree – a stone's throw away from the table where Emma and Paul meet for several rounds of chess every Tuesday.

And as they spin in place, Regina's hand up and ready to defend themselves with a spell that will most probably backfire and hit her, a boy steps out of the shadows and reveals himself, his own hands raised in a gesture of surrender.

"You," Regina hisses for the second time.


"Hey…" Frowning mightily, eyes still glistening, Henry looks over his shoulder at the bungalow several yards away, and then back towards their guest. "Weren't you just–?"

Regina stills. And then frowns. Now that her son's mentioned it, she's also quite certain that the boy who most likely left a dent on the hood of her vehicle had less hair than… that.

**Shape-shifter, then?**

"Who the hell are you?" She wills a fireball onto her palm. Naturally, and almost crushing in its predictability, it turns into an ice shard. **Close enough,** she lifts it up and points it towards the boy.

"Rufio Jethro Peters," the said boy says with a flourish, neither flinching nor batting an eyelash at the sharp object floating above her opened hand. "Prankster extraordinaire and resident heartthrob. At your service."

Stepping in front of her son, and despite the tear tracks on her face that only serve to make her look susceptible and weak, Regina glowers menacingly at their smug guest.

"If you're Rufio, then who's…?" Henry looks back towards Paul's home.

"Me," Rufio manages a nonchalant shrug. "Or… I dunno, past-me, I guess? In a few hours that handsome bastard you guys almost ran over is gonna travel back in time and go on a big ol' quest
with an old fart. So… I guess I probably should've also mentioned that I'm like, you know, the Savior's savior, too?"

Regina falters for only a mere second, but that's enough for a crack to appear on the shard.

"Is Emma alright?" Henry rushes before she can even open her mouth.

"She's… alive," Rufio replies cautiously, leaving it at that.

And despite the ever-present need to protect herself from further torment and heartache, the glimmer of hope that had died in her chest just moments before swiftly flickers back to life.

However, doubt has always been a constant companion, and so Regina hardens her expression and snarls:

"And why should we believe someone like you?"

"Simple enough," Rufio says, and with his dark eyes never leaving her own, his hand inches down his left leg and pulls out an object from his cargo pants' oversized pocket. He waves an all-too-familiar mask for her to see – cracked from top to bottom and matted with dirt and blood. "Because she did."

Several more cracks appear on the shard.

"I wasn't kidding when I said that she's been waiting for you guys," the blustery boy continues in a tone that's a little more softer and a lot less pompous, taking several brave steps forward. "I'll take you to her, I swear."

"And if you're lying?"

He stops within arms reach and extends a hand, offering the mask for her to take. "Then feel free to poke as many holes in me with that icicle of yours."

The said icicle fractures even further, and before Regina even realizes what's happening, it crumbles and falls apart as easily as the reservations she's harboring in her head.

Hope, it seems, is more potent than her cynical mind's fatalistic inclinations.

She takes the grubby, bloodied mask.

Rufio's lips quirk into an almost imperceptible smile.

"Follow me."

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**Entry # 24**

_I beat Paul in chess for the first time ever._

_Ha!_

_And guess what? I didn't cheat._

_Don't get me wrong, having your invisible hand guiding mine had been fun, Regina, and even though I had won against him a couple of times then, technically, those weren't my victories – those were ours._
This one, though? All mine.

You'd be happy to know that I listened to your advice. Remember you told me that Paul likes to start his games with that Queen's Gambit opening move? I had Rufio research it for me, and then I had him teach me how to beat it as well. It was a loooooong-ass sleepless night, and towards the end I had to bribe the kid with new hair gel just so he wouldn't pass out on me, but it was damn well worth it.

Victory is, indeed, pretty darn sweet.

But I wish you could've been there to see it, Your Majesty. You probably would've scoffed and snarked that I could've beaten the old geezer in two moves less – but I know you would've been proud regardless.

I miss your sass.

I miss you.

All the damn time.

And as sweet as winning had been, I bet it would've been a million times better if you'd been there, mocking my every move.

If you're reading this, Henry, I'm sorry for being mushy. It's only 'coz I just got back from a date with my self (well, past self) – and I'm kinda in the mood for pepperoni pizza now. Not the real one, the metaphorical kind. Ask your mom about it.

Anyway, I gotta go and cut this entry short. Ace just got back with the Jason mask I asked him to get from the costume shop. Now I just have to wipe it clean of prints, typewrite a note, and have one of the boys drop off the package at the mansion tomorrow.

Remember the breakdancing moves of mine that you loved so much, kid?

You're welcome.

:P

The trailer's bedroom is no bigger than your standard closet. Fitting two people inside is difficult enough, let alone three adults, one pre-teen boy and a comatose woman, but through sheer force of will – or perhaps just a mutual sense of urgency – they all manage to squeeze right in.

It's a tight fit, but aside from Rufio's relentless shifting, nobody seems to mind.

His back flat against the wall, and regardless of his young friend's elbow digging into his side, Paul watches intently as a wide-eyed Regina carefully sits herself down on the mattress, bereft of speech and pale as a ghost.

The woman's son is faring no better.

Clutching at the strap on the back of his mother's black coat, an ashen Henry clambers onto the bed and grabs a fistful of his birthmother's moth-eaten blanket, his fearful gaze never leaving her slumbering form.

Tentatively, almost fearfully, Regina sets aside the sullied mask she's clapping and lets a trembling hand hover over Emma's face, hesitating for an agonizing moment before finally cupping her cheeks.
– as if petrified that the woman might be just a mirage that would crumble and vanish under her touch.

Nobody disappears, of course.

And as Regina exhales a shaky breath at the contact – at the mere confirmation that the blonde is indeed here – a tear makes its way down her cheek and lands on Emma's bare arm.

"What happened?" she asks, her voice but a whisper.

Paul sighs inwardly.

Where does he even begin to explain?

"Gold happened," Rufio murmurs darkly, speaking for the both of them.

The queen's gaze snaps upwards.

"Gold?"

Typical of the impish teen – and akin to a person who fans a flame and then quickly runs away just seconds before it turns into a blazing inferno – Rufio shoots a poignant look in his direction; getting the hint, Paul stands straighter, clears his throat, and gamely takes point. "I may not know all the sordid details – Emma and that despicable man didn't give me nor the lad here much to go by – but I do know enough to give you an abbreviated version of events."

"Then tell me," Regina commands.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Paul nods indulgently, obedient as always. "You see, it all began with a sword, a dagger, and a hat…"

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Entry # 26

Henry:  This entry is probably gonna have some things you may not want to read about me and your mom. Just saying, better skip this part if you don't want to be scarred for life. Don't worry, you're not gonna miss much, I promise. But, in case you're being your stubborn self and want to read it anyway, don't tell me I didn't warn you, kid.

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So… today is the 14th of November.

And while I sit here tending to my little garden of stolen lilacs (sorry, still not sorry), I can't help but feel excited and, honestly, more than a little jealous of my past self.

It's happening today, you see.

Well, technically, it's already happened. But for past-me? It's going down in about T-minus two hours.

Willan's Incantamentum.
Or, as I've come to call it in my head nowadays… When Emma Got Her Mack On.

Gotta nice ring to it, huh? :)

Looking back, I still can't believe how I got all up in arms when Paul brought up the kiss at the park – and how I fronted like making out with the infamous 'Evil Queen' was the last thing I wanted to do. Which, at that time, was something I kept on insisting to everyone but, really, couldn't have been farther from the truth.

Of course, I just didn't know it back then.

I was neck-deep in denial that when I got called out on it by my deputies, I got all defensive and angry and testy. Basically, I was so in denial that I was in denial about being in denial. That's how bad it was.

And now that I'm literally seeing things from a distance, I can't say that I blame Ruby and the guys for giving me hell and constantly harassing me about you, Regina. If I were in their shoes, I probably would've done the same. How the heck could I've ever been so damn blind, y'know?

I was practically living in a glass closet. And everybody – and I mean everybody – could see me falling head-over-ass for the mother of my kid, while there I was, ignorant and clueless as ever. I was tumbling down a slippery slope, my head catching and hitting every damn bump, and I didn't even realize it. I'd like to say that I was no better than my parents, but that would be a gigantic lie, because even they saw it too – if you go by Mary Margaret's many sad attempts to pimp me out to any, and every, available fool in town.

It's an endless source of embarrassment and amusement for me these days.

But… whatever.

I'm just taking comfort in the fact that, in the end, I did manage to snap out of it. And even though it might've taken more than a little pushing and prodding from me – and by me, I mean Argos – and more than a fair share of abuse from my deputies, at least I got to the point where I had no choice but to confront my own damn feelings and be honest about it. To me; to you.

I kind of think now that you and I getting together, Regina, was inevitable. And that Argos and the guys were a pesky but necessary evil – some sort of annoying catalyst that just sped up the process.

Though, when I say inevitable, I don't mean that us being together was predetermined by destiny or any of that fate crap. I'm saying we're a certainty because we're… us.

I'm Emma; you're Regina.

Yin and yang; "light" and "dark".

And, somehow, despite our many differences, we just… fit.

We belong.

And I know we never got to the point of making it "official", but in my head, and in my heart, I got you. We're an 'us', my royal pain in the ass. Partners in more ways than one. Short as it was, we had our moment in time; we had our chance, took it, and made the most of it as we possibly could. And when all is said and done, that's all that really matters.

So, yeah, no regrets.
I hope, that in time, you won't have any, too.

Today is the 14th of November.

A pretty big milestone, if you ask me. It's the beginning of the end for yours truly, because somewhere in Mifflin Street, my old in-denial self is in for a rude awakening.

I look forward to it as much as I look back to that moment with both fondness and melancholy.

I wish I could be there right now.

Or I could be there again. And again. And again.

And live forever in that painfully awkward yet oh-so-glorious moment.

The trailer is shaking.

It starts off very inconspicuously; the quivering hardly perceptible that Paul doesn't even pick up on it until his palm starts to itch from his cane vibrating in his grasp.

Thinking none of it, he pays it no heed and just continues on with telling his tale; however, the tremors get progressively stronger and increasingly violent the further along he goes, that when he reaches the end of his recounting of events, the trailer's metallic plating is already groaning like a dying ogre and the empty vials by the bed are clinking against each other like spoons hitting glasses at a wedding.

He's always taken pride at how his storytelling skills could bring a house down, but this is simply absurd.

Spooked, Paul grabs on to Rufio's arm in reflex, both of them wearing identical expressions of concern.

"Old fart," Rufio mutters lowly, giving him a reproachful look. "Next time you decide to tell the story, tone down on the fucking dramatics, will ya?"

Duly noted.

Surrounded by a purplish glow, pulsing with magic, the queen is looking staggeringly homicidal.

Yet, at the same time, so heartbreakingly devastated that his own heart would've gone out to the distraught woman if it currently weren't so preoccupied with trying to beat right out of his chest.

The shaking intensifies.

Paul tightens his hold on his young friend.

His paperback novels topple off the shelf; Rufio's container of Altoids fall off the dining table and spills mint in every which direction.
The lights flicker on and off.

And just when Paul starts to think that they're about to be crushed inside this rank metallic box, an unlikely hero swoops in and presents itself in the form of an intuitive young boy.

Even when his eyes mirror Regina's despair and some of her anger, Henry has the presence of mind to put a hand over his mother's arm and mutter a quiet, yet firm, "Mom."

That's all it takes.

Regina's eyes regain a modicum of focus.

The brutal shuddering comes to an abrupt halt.

Paul and Rufio simultaneously sigh and sag against the wall.

"Where is he?" the intimidating woman asks, her tone subdued but no less deadly.

"Gone," Rufio replies. "Skipped town with that girlfriend of his soon as Emma went back."

"And you let him get away?"

"If I had a choice, I wouldn't have. But it's what she wanted."

"They had a deal," Paul confirms. "Your life in exchange for breaking his curse."

Just like that, the slight humming of magic that's still buzzing like white noise in the background crescendos to a hair-raising degree as some of Regina's self-control falters once more.

And as Paul gazes at the infamous queen's blazing eyes and the shaking fist on her lap, there's no doubt in his mind that the infamous Rumplestiltskin will, one way or another, meet his timely end by this woman's hand.

Even though he considers himself a peaceful man – a scholar whose weapons of choice are a pen and a piece of parchment – there's a small, vengeful part of him that looks forward to that vile man's comeuppance.

The thrumming subsides to a less jarring extent as soon as Regina fixates on an unconscious Emma again, the hard, sharp look in those brown eyes losing some – if not most – of its edge.

Carefully, tenderly, she brushes away an errant strand of blonde hair and tucks it behind Emma's ear. And as she looks down at the woman and strokes her cheek with a thumb, Regina works her jaw and exhales. "You fool," she says under her breath, her voice cracking slightly. "I told you nothing good ever comes out of white knights trying to save evil queens."

"But there is, Your Majesty," Paul murmurs, smiling in consolation. "You're alive. And regardless of appearances, so is she."

"Cause you guys saved her…" Henry tears his gaze from the slumbering woman and looks at him and Rufio.

"No, lad," he says softly, shaking his head. "Your mother did."

The aforementioned woman stiffens.

"What?" Regina frowns.
Looking at the shelf, Paul takes that moment to point at the transparent plastic container lying on it, specifically, at the shard secured inside. It looks harmless enough, but looks can be deceiving. Even in its fragmented state, the Sword of Ashe is still as deadly as can be.

"We took that out of her chest... just below her clavicle..."

Looking vaguely nauseous, Regina hooks a finger inside the collar of Emma's black shirt and tugs down.

The potions have made the scar all but nonexistent, but if one squints hard enough, they'd see the faintest bit of white where the wound had once been.

Regina pales even further.

"So you see, Henry, Rufio and I may have intervened, but even if we had given her all the elixirs we had, if there's no soul left in the body, then there's no life to save. So, if you're looking for Emma's real savior, you don't have to look any further than your own mother."

"Willan's Incantamentum," Regina whispers, looking at him, eyes widening in realization. "It worked?"

Paul hums in affirmation.

"Willan's Incanta-what?" Henry wrinkles his nose. "What's that?"

"A protection spell," Rufio supplies, leaning against the wall like a model and eating up more space. The boy inclines his head towards the shelf. "Against that."

"Well... it's famous for being one, yes," Paul agrees, nudging the lad to give himself more room to stand. "But if my theory is correct, I believe it's more than just a protection spell."

"Huh?" Rufio looks at him, brows furrowed. "Theory? The heck you talking about now?"

"The witch Luciana – Willan's wife – once claimed to have gained the ability to tell if her husband was in any sort of peril after the spell was cast. I've never been able to prove my hypothesis because, as far as I know, this is only the second time it has worked, but deep in my gut, I sincerely believe it to be true."

"What is?"

"That the true strength of Willan's Incanamentum lies not in its capacity to grant protection against the Sword of Ashe, it's in its ability to tether souls."

"Tether souls?" Henry echoes.

A deep crease manifests itself between the brows of everyone in the room.

"Do you recall the incantation, Your Majesty?" Paul turns to Regina.

Swallowing thickly, the woman nods, once, licks her lips and then almost monotonously recites, "Dark and light, protect thy knight. Powers that be-" Regina suddenly stops.

Slowly, deliberately, Paul raises his eyebrows and gives the dark-haired woman a meaningful look, urging her on.

"Tie thy soul to thee..." Regina finishes, eyes alight with understanding.
Paul smiles.

He's always pegged the Evil Queen as one tremendously smart and cunning cookie, and she doesn't disappoint in the least.

"The formidability of the Sword of Ashe lies in its propensity to pull one's soul – a being's very essence – from its mortal shell and absorb it into itself. Willan's Incantamentum undermines this by tethering the protectee's soul to its caster, thereby ensuring that the blade be unable to absorb it. At least, that's what I postulate."

"That's some weird, complicated shit," Rufio comments.

"But it's simple when you really think about it," Paul counters. "Emma persists to live simply because a part of her is eternally bound to someone else. The very person she decided to sacrifice her own life for is the one that also kept her alive in the end; it's poetic, truly."

And as her glistening eyes transfix themselves on that pale spot on Emma's chest – and then at the pendant and the ring hanging from the woman's neck with a chain – Regina goes rigid for a moment, and then her lips begin to quiver.

"You..." she breathes out ever-so-quietly as she stares at the necklace, or at least, Paul thinks that's what she says. "At the store... it was you..."

"Mom?"

Regina shakes her head and bites her lips, brusquely swiping away at her tears with a finger. "Emma Swan, you idiot."

"You can save her again," Paul murmurs softly.

"How?"

Bringing a finger to his mouth, he taps his lips in a suggestive gesture.

"True Love's Kiss," Henry perks up.

Needing no further provocation, Regina promptly leans in and presses her lips against Emma's, seemingly oblivious to the audience watching with both baited breaths and rapt attention.

She kisses her once... twice... thrice... and then so deeply that the people in the room – except a shameless Rufio – avert their gazes.

Breathless and flushed, Regina pulls back and stares at Emma with blatant anticipation.

Everyone holds their breath.

And with every second that ticks by without the blonde's eyelids fluttering open, the hopeful little smile on Regina's face slowly wanes until there's nothing left but a grief-stricken frown.

"No..." Paul murmurs.

Regina's watery gaze flits in his direction, and the look of betrayal aimed towards him is like a vice to his heart, squeezing to the point of excruciating pain.

"You said--" Regina accuses, her voice breaking.
"I–" he swallows. "It should've worked..."

Despite its reputation as the be-all and end-all of the Enchanted Forest's most difficult dilemmas, True Love's Kiss fails to deliver.

Which begs the question...

"Are you even her true love?" Rufio blurts out, outspoken and filter-free as can be.

Head whipping up, Regina glares at the lad from under wet lashes, brown eyes flashing in rage. But instead of fear, pity is what Paul feels. Because behind that smoldering fury, it's painfully obvious that therein lies a deep hurt.

"What did you just say, you impudent monkey?" Regina snarls.

Jaws tightening, his own face marred with disappointment rather than offense, Rufio pours more salt onto the wound and says, "Fine, she was willing to die for you, so you must be hers. But how 'bout you, do you even love her?"

Regina's slit-like eyes widen in outrage. "How dare you!"

"Do you?"

"Of course I do!"

She starts then, as if it's the first time she's said it out loud – or even acknowledged it to herself.

But Rufio, on the other hand, isn't quite done. "Then prove me wrong and wake her the fuck up!"

"Stop it," Paul puts a hand on his young friend's forearm. "Please calm down, both of you," he implores, and as he glances around the compact space – at the faces ripe with desperation and fear and all sorts of mixed emotions – it becomes clear as day. "I was wrong."

"No shit," Rufio mutters.

"Emma's in a state between life and death, and I had assumed that True Love's Kiss is enough to draw her out of it. But I was wrong. This isn't a matter of love, because, obviously, there is no shortage of it in this room."

Rufio looks away.

Refusing to meet his gaze, Regina just stares at Emma and absentmindedly strokes the blonde's cheek with a thumb.

"So, whether it be true or not doesn't matter," Paul continues. "Emma willingly offered her own energy – and nearly depleted her own life force at that – to give additional power to the sword. There's no curse to break, no spell to undo. Therefore, True Love's Kiss is--"

"-futile," Regina finishes hoarsely, tightening her hold on the unconscious woman. "Useless as ever."

Rufio grabs the back of his neck and looks down at his feet, perhaps now feeling a little ashamed for his outburst.

"So... how will she wake up?" Henry fastens his hand over Emma's. "When will she wake up?"
The only thing Paul can offer the boy is silence.

And as such, Henry's mother takes up the burden.

"I don't know, sweetheart," Regina murmurs, red-rimmed eyes blurring with more tears. "Only time will tell."

Paul sighs, his hand ghosting over the watch inside his pocket.

If only he still had the ability to jump forward to the future, maybe then he could bring them all to that moment.

Shorten the wait; cut down the worry.

Diminish the agony.

If only.

Two weeks.

That's the amount of time it takes Whale to finally make a decision.

After days upon days of close monitoring and relentless testing, he comes to the conclusion that Emma's condition does not require hospital care. The elixirs did their job; the woman's as healthy as can be.

He elects to send the Savior home.

And soon after he signs all the necessary paperwork, he finds himself being pulled away from the nurses' station by an obviously troubled David, the man looking no less gaunt than his sleep-deprived wife.

Poor guy looks like he's aged ten years in the span of just several days.

"Can I help y–"

"What the hell are you thinking?" David blurts out, not even giving him the chance to finish. "Are you out of your damn mind? You can't just send her home…"

"With all due respect, I can and I just did," he inclines his chin at the papers he'd just been signing – the ones that are now being gathered by the Trinity Ward's supervising nurse. "They're about to prep her for discharge."

"She's in a coma," David stresses, and then he jabs a finger to his own chest. "I was in a coma for twenty-eight years and I never left this hospital."

"Because you didn't have a choice," Whale points out, calmly, evenly. "No offense, but at that time, you were a John Doe and you didn't have a family to see to your care; Emma, on the other hand, does."

"But she needs to be here..."

"No, she doesn't," he says carefully, making sure the other man not only hears but actually understands what he's saying this time around. He's already been through this with him and his wife just half an hour ago. "Like I said, what your daughter needs now is time."
"Time?" David frowns. "Time for what?"

Whale stifles a groan. As much as he loathes agreeing with Regina, he has to concede that the woman has a point when she lost her patience and snapped at David last week and told him that his mind is the polar opposite of a sponge; it can't seem to – or at least has trouble with – absorbing and retaining information.

"To recharge," Whale says in a tired tone, stating the obvious. "Look, we've both seen this before, it's similar to all the other times she's fallen ill whenever Regina would draw too much energy from her – only this time, imagine that a hundredfold. I'm telling you, all Emma's body needs now is time to recover, and she can do that outside of this hospital."

Exhaling hard through his nose, David scratches at the stubbles on his cheek, still looking more than a little unconvinced.

"If it makes you feel any better, Regina has already made arrangements for a nurse to visit her house once a day," he informs the ex-prince as patiently as he possibly can. "I know for a fact that Jamie's a very capable nurse; she'll make sure that Emma will get the best care possible. And for my part, I'm on call twenty-four seven; anytime she needs me, I'll be there."

"But–"

"Being in a familiar place might do her good. Would you rather she wake up in a dreary hospital bed or in the comfort of her own home?"

"Okay, alright, alright," David says with an exasperated sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Can you at least give me a time frame? Are we looking at days? Weeks? Months? Years?"

"It's been eighty-four years…"

"Oh… God," Ruby rolls her eyes and smacks Leroy on the back of the head.

"Ow!"

"Really, Leroy?" she gives him a dry look. "Really?"

"What? They're showing the movie at the cineplex again," the man shrugs, rearranging the beanie that her actions had left askewed. "Gotta say though, everyone bawled like crazy when that Jack person died, but I wanted to cry when someone used magic to butcher the best part in the frickin' film. Who the hell censors Titanic, anyway?"

"Nuns," August chews on a Twizzler. "You watched it with them, didn't you?"

"Blue put Kate Winslet in a fucking muumuu during that 'draw-me-like-one-of-your-French-girls' scene," Leroy grumbles, reaching inside the bag on August's lap and grabbing a fistful of licorice candy. "Saddest part in the whole frickin' movie if you ask me."

"Okay, don't watch movies with the fairy nuns, point taken. Can we go back to my report now?" Ruby gives the two – but most especially, Leroy – a pointed look.

The two men merely grunt and chomp on their Twizzlers.

"As I was saying," Ruby uncoils the ten-page printout she had rolled to hit Leroy with and turns to the person on the bed. "Em, it's been–"
"Eighty-four years," the two jerks chorus below their breath.

Ruby sighs and shuts her eyes, but instead of lashing at them, she just tunes out their snickering. Men have different ways of coping, she guesses. These two just happen to prefer juvenile jokes and general immaturity when dealing with stress.

"It's been eighty-four days since Christmas," she tries again. "Eighty-four days since your last day in office as Sheriff of Storybrooke."

Clearing her throat, she looks down at the first page and quickly skims the various paragraphs. "As Interim Sheriff, I'm pleased to let you know, boss-lady, that your town is still standing. Just like last week – apart from the usual traffic violations and some misdemeanor arrests at Pride Rock Point and the Rabbit Hole – things have been pretty uneventful on the workfront this week."

"You're really not missing much," August supplements, picking at a piece of candy that's stuck to the back of his teeth with a finger. "The only real exciting thing that happened was when Ruby made us organize all the station's files and we saw a spider inside one of the cabinets. And just in case you're wondering how many cops it would take to kill one, the answer's none."

"We had to call Granny," Leroy says with not an ounce of shame.

"Don't judge us," Ruby exhales, involuntarily shuddering at the memory. "It was ginormous; you would have freaked, too."

The two men nod solemnly in agreement.

"Anyway," she clears her throat again. "I wanted to read you a couple of minor incident reports from the other day, but... August wrote them, so..."

"Hey!" the said man exclaims when she tosses him the clump of papers in her hand.

"They're still wordy, overly descriptive and just overflowing with too much information," Ruby tells the unresponsive woman, ignoring the petulant pouting from her colleague. She distinctly remembers Emma complaining to her on more than one occasion how August's reports are more potent than any sleeping curse, so given her friend's current state of unconsciousness, Emma probably wouldn't mind if they skipped the readings today.

"All you need to know is that Facilier got into a drunken brawl with Whale at the Rabbit Hole over some girl, and that Mr. Gosling got caught by Mother Goose with his mistress and now his car's in the shop."

"I worked hard on these reports, you know," August mutters from his armchair by the bed.

"Then in the future, please don't work too hard and strain yourself," Ruby smiles sweetly, and then deadpans, "And by extension, me. This is about the only time I'll tell you – or anyone – that, so better take it to heart, August."

More like a child than a grown man, he just bites hard on a Twizzler, pulls the rubbery snack from his mouth with a snap, and then sulks.

Fighting an eyeroll, Ruby sighs inwardly and just focuses her attention back to their out-of-commissioned leader. "Oh, before I forget, Em, Jet paid us a visit yesterday."

"Jet?" Leroy pauses mid-chew.
"Old habits," Ruby shrugs. "Anyway, Rufio went to the station. I think you'll be happy to know, boss-lady, that after cleaning up the… um, art—"

"The schlongs," Leroy supplies.

"—that he spray-painted outside the admin office last year, Principal Weiner allowed him back to school last Monday."

"He also wants to volunteer at the station during the summer," Leroy tattles, not even bothering to hide the disapproval in his gruff voice. "That little fucker's claiming that he wants to study to become a cop as soon as he graduates."

"And considering none of us got any sort of formal training whatsoever, I don't know where the heck to even begin mentoring him," Ruby plops down on the bed with as much grace as an eleven-hundred pound elephant, and despite doing it on purpose to jostle the woman, Emma shows no sign of stirring.

She bites back a sigh.

"That said, I did tell him that if he's really serious about it, he has to step up and do months and months of community service first. He needs to wipe his slate clean; start making it up to the folks in town if he ever wants their respect when he's finally wearing a badge."

"Damn right," Leroy grouses, wiggling on his chair as if he's still feeling the phantom butt arrow that chasing Rufio into the woods had once earned him.

"And since we're on the topic of Rufio, I also offered Jackson a job as dispatch. He doesn't get to have a badge or a title; he'll be more like a glorified telephone operator, really. He came to ask me for work and I thought I might as well help the poor guy out; we've got funds to spare after Worthington upped our budget."

"Nepotism," August coughs.

"No ulterior motives, I swear," she denies.

"Mhmm," Leroy sasses. "No ulterior motives, huh? How 'bout romantic ones?"

"Oh, shut up," Ruby huffs at the dwarf, feeling her cheeks heat up. "I'm seeing a fireman, by the way," she turns back to Emma. "Early stages, nothing to report."

"Except that he has as much personality as a rock and he also looks like his face had been bashed into one," Leroy snorts.

"Looks aren't everything and he's just shy," Ruby frowns. "Joe's an angel."

"I thought you didn't believe in heaven or angels?"

"Well, I don't believe in hell or demons either, but there you are."

"Touché," Leroy snorts.

Speaking of her new boyfriend though...

"We better head out," she glances at her watch and sighs at the time. "Sorry Em, because of Ashley's little accident with a curling iron last month, Mary Margaret decided that the town needed another Fire Prevention talk at town hall. All government employees are obligated to attend."
"License to snooze and pig out," Leroy practically purrs as he lifts his arms and stretches, the laziest grin tugging at his lips. "Woody, did you bring more snacks?"

"Cheetos."

"That'll do, I guess."

"Don't worry, I'll keep them in line, boss-lady." Ruby exhales a weary breath, pushing herself up and off the bed. "We'll see you same time tomorrow for your daily dose of small-town gossip, 'kay?"

"By the way, they wanted me to tell you that they're gonna be a bit late this afternoon, but Mary Margaret and David are still dropping by to read you the paper and watch TV with you." August stands up too, balling the empty bag of Twizzlers and chucking it in the bin by the desk.

"Wake up soon," Leroy pats Emma's foot over the blanket. "We need you back at the station ASAP, sister."

"Cause Ruby's a slavedriver," August mock whispers.

"Yeah," Leroy agrees. "And I say this as a dwarf who used to mine dust for Blue without pay."

Pulling on her jacket, Ruby rolls her eyes for the nth time; seriously, a few more months supervising these two smart-asses and she's got a feeling that her eyeballs are gonna roll out of her head.

She lingers for a few moments under the guise of re-tying the laces of her boots and lets the two men go on ahead. The moment they close the basement door behind them, Ruby straightens up, and just as she does every single day, she leans in and presses a chaste kiss on Emma's forehead.

"Leroy's right, you know?" she murmurs softly, squeezing her friend's non-IV hand. "We need you back. Police work is half as fun and twice as tedious without you. Besides, I think our magic consultant would rather work with you than me or the boys. So, cut us all some slack and get your ass up and off that bed, 'kay?"

And as her ultra-sharp hearing picks up on the click-clacky footsteps echoing from above, Ruby tucks her hands inside the pockets of her crimson jacket, rocks back on her heels and just smiles.

Regina's been very good about keeping the sass to a bare minimum over the amount of foot traffic going in and out of her home for the past several months, but the woman still has a way of letting people know when they're overstaying their welcome.

Wearing sharp stilettos and stomping around the kitchen is one of them...

"Your girlfriend's being all passive-aggressive again…" Ruby whispers conspiratorially to her sleeping friend.

"And you're dilly-dallying as usual," the walkie-talkie by the bed crackles to life. "Run along now, Miss Lucas."

...and spying on them with the baby monitor taped to the headboard is another.

"As you wish, your highness," Ruby smirks. "We'll see you tomorrow."

"If you must."

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Entry # 48
Today's the day.

I was planning to write this thing, my last entry, last night. No matter how much I tried, though, the words just wouldn't come.

I was wrong; beginnings are hard, but endings are way harder.

Goodbyes are never fun.

And so I just sat inside my closet, staring at a blank page until my flashlight batteries finally crapped out and my 'room' was plunged in complete and utter darkness.

I just sat there for hell knows how long, eyes wide-open, soaking in the silence.

I remember thinking that I better get used to it, y'know? Being in the dark, I mean. In a few hours, that's all I'm gonna see.

...shit.

I'm sorry if this is way too morbid.

I planned on ending my 'story' on a happier note – or at the very least, a bittersweetly hopeful one – but this is the complete opposite of happy; it's all bitter and no sweet, and it's practically without hope.

So... let me try again, okay?

---

Henry,

I hope you're not mad at me. Remember how I told you that I wanted to give you your best chance? I meant it. Now, more so than ever.

I wish I could tell you that real life is just like one of your comic books, that somehow, people are as invincible (and as hilariously immortal) as guys like Hound Edge. But life is unfair, and to tell you otherwise would be doing you a huge disservice. It's just the reality of things, you know? It sucks, but we can't all be superheroes (though most of us try).

So, don't blame anyone; don't get pissed at people.

Don't worry about me, don't even feel bad about how I ended up.

I got you. I got your mom.

I got my happy ending.

I lived a full life; now, near the end, I'm glad to say that I'm making it mean something.

So, trust me, I have no regrets.

And I have you to thank for it.

Thank you for finding me, kid. Thank you for taking that trip to Boston and knocking on my door.

Thank you for dragging my butt here and bringing me home.
You’re the greatest thing I could’ve ever contributed to this earth, and I am so damn proud to be one of your mothers. Love you, always.

---

And Regina,

I’m not even gonna ask if you’re pissed or not.

I know you are.

But I cannot – and will not – apologize for doing what I did. And also what I’m about to do in a few hours.

And I know I’m in no position to ask anything of you at this point, but please, I need you to promise me one thing…

Live your life; try to be happy.

Okay?

Don’t let my actions – no matter how much I know you disagree with them – be in vain.

I’m not the only one who cares whether or not you live or die, you hear me?

Henry loves you, and our son needs his mother now more than ever. So please, please, no matter how tempting it is, don’t give in to the darkness again.

I’ll know if you do.

And if that happens, I'll haunt the shit out of you.

Because whether in necklace form, or as the frickin’ ghost haunting your basement, I'll always be there.

I'll always be with you.

You’ll never be alone.

.

.

.

I need to start packing my things soon and leave the cabin, but in the spirit of full disclosure, I can’t end this without letting you know that...

Every time I shrugged off any of your well-placed barbs…

Every time I played along and fought right back…

Every time I smiled when you called me an idiot…

That was me falling in love with you.

And I know I should’ve said it sooner, but it's better late than never.
Goodbye, my royal pain in the ass.

I love you.

"Idiot," Regina mutters, letting her fingers trace the illegible, chicken scribble-like writing before closing the notebook with a sigh – the very same notebook that another pizza delivery boy brought to her home the morning after they took Emma to the hospital.

That was several months ago; the bleakest winter the town's ever experienced has come and gone, and now spring is officially here.

She's lost count of the times she's read the journal; lost track of the times she's pored over every entry by her lonesome and, on occasion, with her son. Still, the constant rereading doesn't make it any easier – not even in the slightest.

Snow White and her Prince Charming's offspring is by no means a Shakespeare, but the woman's writing succeeds in eliciting feelings that she can't even begin to comprehend, let alone get accustomed to.

It hurts in the most profound of ways, yet also, uplifts in the most unexpected of ones.

It's a frustrating kind of dichotomy that she's come to associate with someone as maddening as Emma Swan.

"Spirit of full disclosure, hm?" she murmurs to the person on the bed. "Then I suppose you should know, Emma, that every disparaging remark I made... every petty argument I instigated... every insulting name I called you... that was me loving you back."

In front of her, the illuminated numbers change.

One-fourteen AM.

Regina sighs again.

It's always the same time every single night.

Despite being in bed by ten, she'll always wake up just after midnight. It's the same thing day in and day out; she'll lie down for a minute, panic-stricken, and then'll press the baby monitor against her ear and check for sounds of breathing. She'll always hear those steady breaths, without fail, but still, she'll find herself pulling on her robe, putting on her slippers and making her way down to the basement.

The mind-numbing, chest-tightening anxiety only subsides when she sees Emma's chest rise and fall with her very own eyes.

Instead of heading back up, however, she'll always linger. And lingering meant pulling up an armchair beside the bed and reading an entry or two, and maybe even more, before calling it a night.

There are times when she doesn't even go back up; moments when Henry will get out of bed in the morning and find her just sitting there, oblivious to the passing hours because of the lack of windows in the basement.

Perhaps that won't happen tonight, because as Regina gazes at the flashing numbers on the alarm clock, she stifles a yawn and gingerly replaces the notebook on its usual spot on the bedside table.
She doesn't stand up, though.

"I believe the lilacs will start blooming next week," she makes small-talk instead, turning sideways towards Emma and resting her head against the back of the chair, her legs tucked under herself. "The buds are starting to form."

She turns the blonde's limp hand over, and without much thought, starts to trace lazy circles on Emma's palm with a finger.

Oblivious to her ministrations, the other woman lies as motionless as ever.

"So, if you want to see them blossoming, my dear, you better pull yourself together," she continues. "If you wanted to shirk your responsibilities so badly, Sheriff, I could've come up with better ways than taking an extended power nap."

She hooks her finger against Emma's and just stares at her silent companion.

"It's Sunday, by the way. Paul will be here after lunch with his chess set as per usual," she shares. "I'm very certain that you'd be more than happy to know that you have won all the games thus far. But before your head gets swollen, pillow princess, I should also tell you that there is no doubt in my mind that he's letting you win."

A rare smile tugs at the sides of her lips then.

"You have a knack for making the oddest, yet most faithful of friends, you know that? And as cloying as I've always found it, I suppose I should be grateful for the fact. You wouldn't be here otherwise."

A soft whirring sound draws her attention momentarily as the heater springs to life and hot air blows from the ceiling vent.

"Just so you know, I've been practicing every chance I get," Regina turns back to her companion. "It won't be too long now, I'm sure of it."

Planting her feet on the floor, she straightens her spine and closes her eyes, willing herself to concentrate.

Paul's words reverberate in her head.

Tethered, that man had said; a part of Emma is now eternally bound to her.

And as such, if she can just harness this and take advantage of the fact, there'd be no further need to siphon energy from the White Knight in order to get her magic to work properly.

Inside of her, entwined with her very core, is her own miniaturized Swan-battery.

And so, she takes in a deep, steadying breath and thinks of Emma.

Of how the woman has the uncanny ability to make sense of the chaos that is her magic and stabilize her abilities; stabilize her.

And when she finds her center – that small part of the Savior that never fails to ground her – Regina wills her favorite spell into life.

When she opens her eyes, there's a fireball on the palm of her hand, its heat radiating against her skin.
The smile that pulls at her lips is almost as bright as the flames dancing before her very eyes.

With more practice, she'll be able to do harder, more complicated forms of sorcery.

Like, perhaps, an energy transference spell.

She closes her hand into a fist and the fireball dissipates into thin air.

"True Love's Kiss might have failed, my dear," she murmurs, standing to her feet and affectionately caressing the side of her Savior's face. "But I will find a way to wake you, if it's the last thing I do."

Leaning down, she presses a kiss onto Emma's pinkish lips.

And then another.

And another.

And then one more for the sake of saying goodnight – for the second time.

She's halfway up the stairs when her ears pick up the strangest of sounds and a chill runs down her spine.

"You've been doing it wrong…" a hoarse voice chides.

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Regina misses a step. Whipping around in place, her hand gripping so damn tight on the banister, her heart jumps up to her throat at the bright green eyes looking at her from the bed.

"Just saying, your majesty, magic is different in this world. If you wanted to wake me up with a kiss, maybe you should've used tongue."

"You idiot," Regina sobs.

Reaching out to her, extending a hand, Emma merely smiles. And that lazy lopsided grin of hers is so blinding that it makes Regina's vision blur.

"I know. I love you, too."

It is the fourteenth of April.

A typical Sunday in sleepy Storybrooke, Maine; a day that should've been insignificant in the greater scheme of things. But it isn't. Far from it, actually.

Because somewhere in the heart of Mifflin Street, a former Evil Queen and the bravest of White Knights are finally getting their happy beginning.

It is the fourteenth of April. A pivotal moment in Storybrooke's history and one of the happiest points in Regina Mills' life.

And the tale continues with a royal pain in the ass, her beloved idiot, and a whole lot of kissing.
"With tongue."

"Your kisses are still wet…" 

"And your breath is horrid." 

"I was in a coma, what's your excuse?"

"No practice."

"...fair enough."

"What are you wearing?"

"..."

"My pajamas?"

"...no."

"They totally are. Missed me that much, huh?"

"Oh, shush."

"Whipped."

"If you're so concerned that I'm wearing something of yours, my dear, then why don't you just do something about it?"

"Like?"

"..."

"...oh."

"Idiot."

"Yours."

Chapter End Notes

A/N: And now we've come to the real end. Thank you for taking this journey with me - I hope you enjoyed the ride as much as I loved taking you guys on it. Special thanks to Petri and J - my ever-present cheerleaders and sounding boards - for putting up with me during moments of doubt and extreme freak outs. Thank you for being awesome betas. This story wouldn't be what it is without your input. Thank you also to Alezabee, Maria
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Till the next story.

Pyrophoric out.

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