**Safe**

by **SgtMac**

**Summary**

Post Miller's Daughter. Emma and Henry kidnap an enraged and homicidal Regina and take her out of Storybrooke so that she can heal in a place without magic. Along the way, these two damaged women begin to slowly discover just how much they have in common and exactly how strong the connection between this little family of theirs truly is.

Slow-burn SQ, semi-graphic (eventually).

**Notes**

A/N: This is a slow-burn love story about two damaged women trying to recover from the massive amounts of pain that they have each experienced in their lives. It's not an easy journey by any stretch of the imagination and there will be points that hurt terribly, but as you will soon discover, this is a path that will bring them both to a place of emotional healing and love (internally and externally).

Timeline: Post Ep 2x16 – The Miller's Daughter. Everything up until this point on the show is considered canon. Everything afterwards probably should not be considered so. Specific warnings will be supplied as needed in each individual chapter.

Other: Considering when this story was originally written (S2/S3), neither Hook nor Robin are involved in any way in the story. This updated draft won't alter that. Neal, however, IS in the story.
Thanks for the read! Enjoy!
It's Henry's idea.

Of course it is, Emma will muse later over a glass of wine; it was the kid who had brought her to this town, and it'll be the kid who will somehow remind them all what family and home means. But that's for later. For now, there's...just madness.

The madness of his plan.

"I think we need to get her away from here," Henry says almost casually as he drops himself down onto the somewhat unbalanced wooden stool in front of the breakfast bar. He's frowning in the kind of thoughtful way that only a child his age can actually pull off. To her eyes, he looks hopeful, excited and a little pensive all at the same time. His dark brow is furrowed and she can almost see the wheels moving inside his head, each turning rapidly to connect with the next in order to bring together whatever his plan is.

"Get who away from where?" Emma asks in response as she leans across the counter towards him, propped up by her elbows. She hides a yawn behind the back of her hand, remembering for a brief moment the many years of not having to wake up so damned early in the morning because the majority of her job had taken place in the night hours.

She wouldn't give this up – wouldn't give up Henry or the family she's found – for anything in this or any other world, but that doesn't mean she doesn't sometimes miss the simplicity of the days before Storybrooke. The lonely ones before she'd been a sheriff and a mother and a daughter. All of those things separately and together.

She sighs to herself at the thought of what had once been, all while acknowledging that what she has now is so much better; sometimes what you think is comforting because it's the only reality that you understand isn't really much at all once you know better.

"Regina," he answers almost curtly, and she finds herself shifting anxiously at the not quite right use of his adoptive mother's first name. He doesn't give her much time to really consider her thoughts on this before adding, "We need to get her out of town."

"As in out of Storybrooke?" Emma presses, lifting an eyebrow. As she waits for his answer, she stands up straight and pushes an already poured bowl of cereal across the counter to him, then offers him a carton of milk. That she'd been quite proud of herself for not only thinking about breakfast for him, but also having it ready for him in advance of his school day is something that she keeps to herself. She's learning, she thinks.

A little bit more every day.

Henry shakes his head in the negative as he regards the milk. "I like it dry," he insists before reaching into the bowl in a way that she's dead certain that Regina has never ever allowed, and scooping up a handful of Fruit Loops. He crunches his way through the first handful and mouthful before he adds, "And yes, out of Storybrooke."

"You're a weird kid," she chuckles before retrieving the carton and soaking her own Fruit Loops to
the point where the colorful little rings are pretty much drowning in the low-fat milk. She stirs the cereal for a moment, takes an oversized bite, swallows it and then asks in a intentionally (though deceptively) neutral voice, "Out of curiosity, what makes you think that she'd willingly go, well, anywhere with us? Me especially."

"She won't," he concedes between loud crunches. "So we have to kidnap her."

Emma coughs at this, just about spitting her entire mouthful of cereal and milk right back over the counter at him. Her eyebrows leap up into her hairline and her blue-green eyes widen almost comically in response. "Sorry," she apologizes. "It's just…I'm pretty sure that I didn't hear you right there because what I thought I heard you say was that you want the two of us to go batshit crazy and kidnap your already pissed off mother."

He nods his head sharply, even smiling as he does so. "No, you heard me right."

"Right; of course I did. " She sighs dramatically. "Okay, you know what, kid? Because I think I might be wrong and this isn't actually the most batshit crazy thing that I've heard since moving here – though, I have to say, it's pretty damned close - I'll play along. What would be the point of us kidnapping Regina and dragging her out of town?"

"We get her away from the magic. She can't get better while it's around."

He says this so simply and so matter-of-factly, like it's the most obvious answer in the world, and for just a moment, she wonders if maybe – just maybe – it actually is.

But then she shakes her head, her blonde hair swinging out a bit. "Henry…"

"I know what happened at Mr. Gold's shop," he tells her with more than a hint of impatience in his youthful voice. He reminds her for a moment of Regina – utterly unable to humor fools for even a few seconds before snapping. "I heard you talking to David before he and Mary Margaret left. I heard what happened with Cora."

"You weren't supposed to," Emma sighs.

"But I did," he states, that impatience still there. "And I heard David tell you that he's afraid my mom will do something terrible in retali…retali…you know what I mean."

"Retaliation," she murmurs in response, choosing not to comment on the fact that he's started addressing Regina as his mother once again. Calling Regina by her given name was and is simply a defense mechanism for him and his conflicted heart. She nods her head as if to confirm his words. "Henry, your mom is angry right now. Really angry."

"I know that. And I know that she's really hurt right now, too. Thing is, Emma, when she's both of those, she does one of two things: if I'm around, she hides away in her office and gets really quiet and sad and cries a lot when she thinks I don't notice. But I do. And if it's anyone else that's around, she lashes out at them and is really mean."

"Really mean is one way to put it," Emma chuckles between bites of cereal.

He gives her a pointed look, one that says that he's in no mood for her attempts to derail the conversation with jokes. "She doesn't want to be that person," he insists.

"And you think that we – you and me - can help her not be it?"

He lifts his chin and looks right at her. "I think that we were helping her, and then we weren't and
because of that, this happened." His voice lowers as he speaks, and then he's looking away, his lips curling into a frown. "We let her down. I let her down."

"Oh, Henry, no," Emma says, leaning across the counter once again so that she can touch his shoulder lightly. "What Regina does or doesn't do isn't your responsibility. No matter what you think, you're just a kid, and what happened isn't your fault."

"Isn't it? All she wants is me in her life. She was fighting for me to be there. She was fighting to be better...for me. If we'd believed her instead of Pongo, we would have been there for her and she wouldn't have given in to her mother. That's on us, Emma." He looks up at her with such big wide eyes, so full of hope and trust. So sure that despite his anger over her lying to him about Neal, she can help make this better.

She sighs, suddenly so very weary. "It's a lot more complicated than just that, Kid. Yes, we let her down – especially me – but some things have happened since the whole Archie incident. And some pretty bad things happened before that, too. Your mom...Regina, she has done a lot of bad things in her life, and she's made a lot of bad decisions."

"I know. I also know that when she tried not to, we didn't believe her."

"Maybe so, but we're responsible for our own choices," Emma counters. "And if she wanted to be a better person, it needed to be for herself. Not just you. She couldn't."

"She tried," he says once again. "You've never tried and failed?"

She chuckles dryly at that, and just does manage not to start listing off the many times that yes, she has tried and terribly failed. Instead, her tone quiet and thoughtful as she carefully regards her determined son, "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"I don't want to lose either of you," he tells her, suddenly sounding so very young and innocent and terribly scared. He stirs his cereal around for a moment before continuing in an even more disturbingly quiet voice, "She's my mom and so are you, Emma. Despite everything she's done, I still love her."

"I know," Emma says immediately, almost urgently. "And I --"

"Have never told me that it's wrong to love her," he smiles softly at her. "I know. But I know what happens next. I've read the storybooks – I read my book again. While you were trapped in the Enchanted Forest. And I think I get it now. Maybe I didn't really understand it before, but now I do. I love her. I love you, too. You're both my moms. I don't want you to have to go after her because she went after Mary Margaret."

"And you think getting her away from Storybrooke will do...what exactly?"

"Maybe it will let her get all of her angry feelings out in a safe way. If she can't use magic and she can't hurt anyone, maybe she'll have to talk things out like she was doing with Archie before her mom screwed everything up. She won't talk to him anymore, but maybe if she doesn't have a choice, she'll talk to us. Maybe she'll talk to...me."

"Your mom's not much of a talker," Emma reminds him. "I think the only time that I've really gotten her to open up to me is...well...and I kind of blew that, didn't I?"

"Yeah," he allows. He shrugs, then. "So we keep her there until she does."

Emma laughs. "So let me get this right: not only do you want us to kidnap your mom, you want us
to forcibly keep her from returning before we're ready for her to. That all?"

"Yup."

"Do I need to remind you that what you're talking about is actually illegal? I believe they call that false imprisonment," the sheriff reminds him with a smirk and a head shake.

"My mom is the Evil Queen," he reminds her.

"True, but that doesn't mean she's not entitled to her rights as a person."

"If she goes after Mary Margaret for tricking her into killing her mother, you're going to have to stop her or lock her up or even worse, maybe hurt her. I don't want that, Emma. So yeah, this is better." He looks up at her with fierce certainty shining in his bright green eyes. She wonders if she's a complete fool for listening to a child about matters such as these, and yet, beneath all of the naivety of his thoughts, she wonders if he has a point.

"You really do think I'm the Savior, don't you?"

"I know you are. You saved everyone in this town. Just one more person."

"She's the hardest of all to save," Emma tells him, and again wonders why she's having such an intense and adult conversation with her twelve-year-old son. The implications and intricacies of the situation are well beyond his years, and yet here they are discussing it like it's all so simple.

"Superman doesn't get to call himself that for saving kittens," Henry reminds her with an almost derisive scoffing sound accenting his words.

"All right, fine. So what's your plan? Besides the kidnapping part, I mean."

He shrugs. "That's where you come in; I'm just a kid, and really, I took care of the hard part by coming up with the kidnapping."

"Oh, now you're a kid."

"Was a kid twenty seconds ago, too," he reminds her with a smirk.

"Uh huh. You do understand that your mom might very well turn me into a toad for even attempting to do what you're suggesting here, yeah? And that's even if we're successful in... defusing her." It's an understatement of a word as far as those go, but she can't really come up with another one to so perfectly explain what they'll be attempting to do. Calm an Evil Queen down before she goes completely homicidal? Yeah, defusing a bomb sounds about right when you think of that way, she realizes.

"She won't."

"And why's that?"

"Because she trusts you."

"Okay, what have you been sniffing and where are you hiding it?"

"What?" Henry asks, giving her that weird look that reminds her that he's spent most of his life beneath Regina's insanely protective wing; he certainly has no idea about things such as huffing and drug addiction.
"Forget it," she mutters. "What would make you think Regina trusts me? Like you said, my believing in Pongo helped all of this to happen."

"But you couldn't have hurt her if she didn't care."

"I think you're reaching pretty far and pretty hard there, Kid, but fine, I'll take your word for it; leave it to me, I'll figure something or other out."

"I knew you would, Emma."

"So, uh, does this mean you've decided to forgive me for lying about Neal?"

"I guess so. I just…I don't want to be lied to. I may be only twelve years old, but I'm not a little kid anymore. I see and hear more than you all think I do."

"I know, and for what it's worth? I get it. I remember wishing people would just be honest with me for once, too. I used to think that all the time when I was your age."

"Look, I am sorry. I thought lying to you about your dad was the right thing to do at the time. I was angry and I justified it. But that doesn't make it okay. I know you've probably heard enough lies for a whole lifetime."

He smiles at her as if to confirm her words, then jumps up off the stool. He points at the soggy mess that is her cereal. "That's disgusting."

"What do you know? You have no style," she shoots back.

"Enough to know you're not supposed to drown your cereal." He shakes his head, and she's again reminded of the fact that Regina had raised him for the first eleven almost twelve years of his life. The way his eyebrow arches up as he regards her food choices, disdainful and almost haughty and full of all-knowing judgment. Yeah, he's Regina's kid.

"Whatever," she drawls. "Go get dressed for school."

"School?"

"School," she confirms. "I'll figure out what to do with Regina, but until I do, you are going to class, and if I find out that you skipped…"

She lets that hang for a long moment because honestly she's not at all sure what she would do; being the tough mom has never been one of her skill-sets, and they're both more than a little bit aware of this. He gives her a look that tells her that he sees right through her attempts to muscle him, but then bobs his head forward as if to humor her.

"Fine," he says, then turns and heads up the stairs.

She waits until he's gone and sighs loudly once again, all the while stirring the cereal soup around in the bowl. It's been a long last forty-eight hours. Two days earlier, Snow had crossed a line when she'd chosen to manipulate Regina into killing her mother. That Cora had needed to be stopped—perhaps even permanently—is beyond dispute as far as Emma is concerned; unchecked, the woman would have certainly killed all of them.

But that doesn't justify putting more blood on Regina's hands.

Snow and David are elsewhere; he'd taken her to the house they've been looking at for the last couple of weeks. It's somewhere where they'll be mostly left alone so that they can try to deal with
what she's done in a way that won't bring on a lot of attention.

Regina, though she's back at her Mansion according to Red. What she's planning all alone in the loud silence and solitude of her own thoughts is anyone's guess, but it's not hard to imagine that her intentions are likely bloody and horrible. She's a badly wounded woman and daughter right now with a lot of pain and anger. She's essentially someone who has been backed into a corner feeling like they have nothing to lose.

That's dangerous for everyone.

And this damned blood war has gone on long enough.

It's time for it to end.

So apparently, she is going to help Henry with his wild insane absurd idea.

Apparently, she's going to kidnap an Evil Queen.
One

Chapter Notes

Warnings For: Magical violence, a bit of purple-eyed murderous rage and some Neal, too.

The plan to abduct Regina comes together fast once Emma stops and thinks about all the various screwball pieces and parts of it. She fully recognizes the absurdity of trying to subdue an astonishingly dangerous woman who has an insane amount of magic coursing through her bloodstream and violent hatred currently residing in her heart. It's close to batshit crazy, really, but then again, so is Regina right now.

Which means that what they need is a bit of good timing and a sprinkle or two of luck; if they have those things, then maybe - just maybe - Emma thinks she can turn all this craziness and insanity to her advantage.


And if they can do that, if the plan to get Regina out of town works, then maybe they can do exactly what Henry suggested: maybe they can get the Queen to take a breath and stop letting her rage control and motivate her.

Oh, but if only anything was ever so easy.

"Are you sure about this?" David asks, his voice echoing oddly across the phone line. The three-bedroom house that he and Mary Margaret are staying in right now is completely empty of all furniture aside from an air mattress that he'd brought over for them to presumably sleep on. By the tired and hassled sound of him, Emma is guessing that there hasn't been much of that happening for anyone. Be that person Mary Margaret, David or Regina.

Or herself for that matter.

"I am," Emma answers as she leans across her bed and gathers up a stack of half folded shirts. She frowns at a dark stain that she sees on one, then roughly rubs at it with the pad of her thumb. When that inevitably fails, she tosses the shirt away; there's no point in bringing along anything that will act like a beacon of mockery for Regina. And that's what will happen, Emma knows for damned sure; once Regina is out of the blindly red rage stage, she'll slide back to the sharply worded and delivered insults.

Emma thinks it's maybe just a little bit weird how happy she'll be for that stage. But it makes sense, too: that kind of attitude and behavior from Regina is something she recognizes; it will be normalcy in a weird way, something she can handle with ease.

Sure, it's just another roadblock from Regina, but it's one she knows how to work with.

"I have to admit, I don't like this, Emma," David tells her with a bit of a muffled yawn breaking up his words. "What better way to get back at your mother for what happened with Cora than to go through you? You're practically offering yourself up on a platter."
"That's one way to look at it," Emma agrees as she zips up the bag. There are enough clothes for about a week. Any longer than that – and she's assuming that it will be much longer than that - will require some degree of laundry services.

Thankfully, where they're going, they will definitely have that.

"What's the other way?" David prompts, his doubt quite clear to her ears.

"I guess maybe the other way to look at it is that I'm taking care of someone whom no one else ever has," Emma counters as she takes a last look around the room.

Could be a long while before she's back here again.

"Why is that your responsibility?" It sounds like an honest nonjudgmental question from him, and so she allows his words to roll around in her mind for a moment. "You're not the one who...you weren't responsible for what happened to Cora."

Finally, "Not directly, no, but a lot of things led to what happened there. Bad stuff from everyone involved. And besides, protecting my family from any kind of harm is my job. That family includes you and Mary Margaret and Henry, and yeah, I suppose it includes Regina, too. Even if maybe we don't want it to. She's his mother, David. He loves her and he doesn't want to lose her, and we both know that if we don't do something to stop this whole mess from spiraling out even more, then she will do something and we'll have to do something and then...and then I think we all stand to lose. I guess maybe I think we can prevent that."

"Okay, I can buy that. I still think this idea is completely crazy, Emma, but I trust your instincts."

There's a pause and then he continues with, "But something else about this whole thing is bothering you. Something about Regina specifically. What is it?"

Emma chuckles knowingly at his words. "Yeah, well, something about Regina has always bothered me, I think you know that." She sighs then, fumbling for a moment with the thick strap of the bag while she tries to pull her thoughts into a coherent sentence. Then, thickly, her stormy eyes stuck on the far wall of the room. "But I could have been her."

"No," her father states immediately, and with the kind of confidence that only someone as dead sure of his righteousness as David is can have. "We'd never have allowed that to happen to you. Never."

"You weren't with me for most of my life," she reminds him as gently as she can. "A lot happened to me before I got to Storybrooke. I did a lot of bad things. I know it's a great story to think otherwise – to think that I really am some perfect Savior - but I'm not the great person everyone wants to make me out to be. I'm just...I'm just me, David."

"I know," he sighs and he sounds somewhat bothered but not nearly as devastated as Mary Margaret usually seems to be whenever she's reminded of this reality. Once again, Emma finds herself aware of the strange separation that exists between she and her father. Oh, he most certainly sees her as his daughter and there's definitely strong affection for her – even love - but there's also a wall caused by twenty-eight years of absence and the fact that she's now an adult and not a child and he had no real part in how she got to this place. His voice pulls her from her thoughts as he continues speaking, his tone soft, "But we're here now, Emma. And we'll always be here to catch you. I hope you know that."

"I...I do, but maybe that's the difference," she replies. "I have you and Mary Margaret and even Henry to always be there for me. She had Archie and then she didn't because he tried to help her
and ended up just making everything worse…and then things got crazy. She had Cora, but Cora, well; we know all the good that that woman ever did for her. Pretty much none, but it doesn't matter because in Regina's head, all she knows is that now she has nothing, and I think we all know what happens when she has nothing."

"Too well," he allows with a grunt, a shadow apparent in his voice. "But do you really think that kidnapping her and whisking her out of Storybrooke is the best plan here?"

She laughs loudly. "Oh, no. It's honestly the worst plan I've ever heard of…ever," she confesses, her gallows humor apparent. "But it might be the only one that has a chance to work. Away from magic, away from Mary Margaret and with Henry there to try and help her remember why she wanted to be somebody better, well maybe there's a chance."

There's a long pause as he considers her words, and then, grudgingly, he says, his voice deep and authoritative, "All right, I guess that's okay."

"David," she says kindly, because she truly doesn't want to hurt him more than the distance between them already does. "I didn't really call you to ask for permission or support on this. I'm getting Regina out of town with or without that."

"So why did you call?"

"To let you know that I might be gone for awhile."

"But you will be back?" There's a curious urgency she hears there, a plea for her not to remove someone that he's just finally starting to have the chance to know.

"I will; I promise."

He allows a breath of relief. "Good. All right, so your mind is made up about doing this, I get that. But you'll be careful, right? We can't…we couldn't handle losing you again."

"I'm not going anywhere. I mean, I am for the time being, but…hey, in the real world, I'm a lot stronger than Regina is," Emma reminds him. "I can handle her."

"I don't doubt that, but strength isn't everything," he tells her in that voice that tells her that he still doesn't really understand what this is all about. "If it were…"

"I know, but yeah, I'll be careful. Just take care of Mary Margaret; help her come to terms with what happened. That's what she needs right now. I…well, that's what I need, too."

"Don't you worry about that," he answers with a soft chuckle that is full of a kind of confidence that only he can pull off. "Your mother will recover and then some."

"Hopefully, we all will," Emma sighs. "I'll talk to you in a few days."

"Okay. I love you, Emma."

While she wonders about the sincerity of the sentiment – she thinks what he feels for her is more like some kind of kindred affection than love – she appreciates it all the same because these are words that she has heard so rarely. He says them with a kind of ease that she envies, and she wonders whether she'll ever be able to repeat them back to him.

Instead of answering him, she smiles awkwardly to herself in response. "Bye," she says, hoping he doesn't hear the slight tremor in her voice. She hangs up the phone then, and sighs loudly. After a
moment of staring at her cell almost blankly, she pockets it, lifts up the bag – and another filled with clothes for Henry - and exits the bedroom of the loft.

It's time to get this show on the road.

There are just a few things that she needs to take care of first.

"Are you certain about this?" the woman asks, her eyes narrowed. She's known as Blue to all of those from the old world, but here in Storybrooke, she still goes by Mother Superior and the almost haughty expression that she's wearing on her pinched and perpetually annoyed face – one that is trying to be humble, but failing miserably – explains exactly why she's still carrying around that high and mighty title.

"I am," Emma nods, shifting from foot to foot. This woman makes her oddly anxious, but she doesn't perceive any kind of immediate threat coming at her from Blue. It's more that she gets a feeling that the Fairy just might be more than she's pretending to be.

But then again, isn't everyone in Storybrooke?

"All right," Blue nods, the motion sharp and deliberate. "I believe that I can help you. I presume you do realize, of course, that the magic will fade once you're across the line?"

"I do; that's the point."

"I see. I suppose I needn't warn you that some people are beyond saving?"

Emma frowns at this. "I'd really prefer that you didn't."

"Because you're afraid that I'm right about her? Right about how much like her mother she truly is?" Blue presses, her eyes narrowing into dark intense beads.

"My son believes in her," Emma says, unwilling to answer the question from Blue head-on. The many ugly truths about her fears and doubts about change – truths which say more about her than Regina – are ones she has no intention of discussing with the Fairy.

"Children tend to believe the best in the most unworthy of people. But what about you, Sheriff Swan? Do you believe in the fallen queen?" Blue asks her with a tilt of her head.

"I believe in the ability to change with help. I intend to give her that."

"Your faith is commendable if unwise," Blue says, sounding so very weary and exasperated. Before Emma can counter, Blue says, "I'll need your hands and your cuffs."

Emma lifts an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

Blue smiles thinly in response, leaving absolutely no doubt as to her rather dubious feelings about this plan. "I'm always serious," she states. "Now, please, your hands."
It feels a bit like walking the Green Mile, Emma thinks. Every step is heavy, cautious and full of emotion and fear. One of her hands is clenched tight at her side. The other is open, but keeps jumping around, going from a semi-relaxed position at her hip to checking her service pistol, which is holstered behind her back. She runs her fingers over the grip, then floats the hand back to anxiously pick at a loose thread on the leg of her jeans.

She's come up the walk to this mansion a hundred times, perhaps more. It's never been like this, though. What she's doing – what she's planning to do here today – is about as risky a play as she's ever made. She's hoping that there will be some reason and rational sense still in Regina; enough, anyway, to ensure that the former queen won't try to murder her before the "how are you" type statements have even been exchanged. If she's that far gone, all bets are off and this whole plan is doomed to fail. If she's not, if Regina permits just a little bit of air to exist before she inevitably flies off the handle, well really that's all Emma needs.

She thinks about the enchanted handcuffs, which are clicking against each other inside of the pocket of her red leather jacket, the metal rings clinging every now and again.

She thinks about magic and hate and death and hurt.

She thinks about mothers and blood feuds.

She thinks about Regina and wonders again why she's doing this.

For Henry, she reminds herself. She's doing this because of him.

Yes. Him.

She takes a deep breath as she approaches the front door of the mansion, her eyes drifting up to settle on the gold plated numbers there. After a long pause, she lifts her hand, hesitates for a beat, corrals all of her courage, and then reaches forward to knock.

Turns out that she needn't have bothered.

"You really are your father's daughter," she hears from behind her.

She snaps around and stares into the furious red-rimmed eyes of the woman that many in this town know as the Evil Queen. Her eyes sweeping up and then down again, Emma takes Regina and her nearly murderous body language in, observing how she's standing on the sidewalk, dense purple smoke dissipating around her. The Queen is dressed in neatly ironed beige slacks and a sharp bright red blazer as usual, but there's something not quite perfect about her appearance. Her makeup is heavy. Too heavy. Like she's trying to cover up hours upon hours of crying. It's enough to make Emma's heart clench.

"Regina," Emma says calmly. Or at least she hopes that's how she sounds.

"Miss Swan," comes the icy cold response. "Are you really this stupid?"

Emma blinks. "Excuse me?"

"I'll take that as a yes," Regina snaps out, placing a hand on each hip. Her posture is rigid and furious and her gaze is harsh and unforgiving; the violence in her eyes impossible to miss. "You do realize, Miss Swan, that it's very likely that I won't allow you to leave my property alive, don't you? Or are you counting on your birthing of Henry to save you?"
"My birthing of Henry," Emma repeats before her shaking her head to clear the odd turn of phrase out of her mind. "Look, Regina, I'm really not here to fight with you, okay?"

"Of course not. We both know that despite your terribly cute little fledgling White Knight powers, you're no real match for me; we both know that I could destroy you with a twitch of my nose. Which means that you're here to try to talk me out of killing your mother for killing mine. How nice it is that someone will always come to plead the case for Snow White." The words are practically spat out, each drenched in venomous rage.

"I am," Emma admits. "Here for that, I mean. I was hoping maybe we could work something more sensible out. Something that doesn't involve anymore blood."

Regina laughs coldly at this. "Something more sensible. Like what, Swan? Oh! How about I give up my desire to make your mother finally have to pay for something she's done and in return you'll give me what? A supervised visit every two months or so with the child I raised for over ten years. Excellent. Most certainly a deal too good for me to pass up.

Emma flinches at this because the anger in Regina's voice is so strong, and the pain in her dark red-rimmed eyes is so poignant. "I don't know," Emma replies honestly because truly, negotiating isn't really part of this plan of hers; there's no win to be found there.

Not yet, anyway.

"I just know that not doing anything will only lead to a lot of people dying," Emma says.

Regina sneers in disgust at that and then leans in towards the sheriff, moving close enough to kiss Emma if that's what she'd wanted to do. The lack of distance is more than a little disconcerting to the blonde, but she rigidly holds her ground because this is part of the plan. "As well they should," Regina snarls. "She took someone away from me and now, I'm going to take someone from her. And maybe, just maybe I'll start with you."

"You won't."

Regina pulls back, the surprise clear in her darkly turbulent eyes. "And why won't I?"

"Well, because you were right about what you said before; I did…'birth' Henry, and that does mean something to you whether you like it or not. It means you owe me."

"You're out of your mind," Regina growls out between tightly clenched perfectly white teeth. Emma can almost see the anger rising up through the Queen, sliding along her skin like a poisonous snake about ready to strike. "If you really think that I owe you anything for you having gotten down on your hands and knees for Rumplestiltskin's worthless grifter of a son, well then, Swan, you're even stupider than you look."

"I think you just called me a whore," Emma states with a shake of her head, her voice deceptively bemused. She can feel her own irritation growing, perhaps even her own anger, but she forces both down because really, this is just a taste of things to come.

She can't imagine that Regina is likely to suddenly get all pleasant and nice just because they're outside of Storybrooke. In fact, she's rather expecting things to get a whole lot worse before they get better. Which, she supposes, is the nature of things like this.

"If the shoe fits," comes the sharp answer from the Queen, a cruel smile accompanying the words. Well, Regina is nothing if not efficient and effective with her insults.
"Yeah, well, just so you know," the blonde sheriff shoots back in her most annoyed tone. "Neal wasn't just some random guy I screwed; I was in love with him at the time."

"Which has to do with me?"

"Everything. What happened between he and I gave me Henry. And what Neal did to me when he abandoned me made it so that you got Henry so I'd think you might be willing to remember that before you start making death threats just for the hell of it."

"Just for the hell of it?" Regina rages. "Your horrible mother forced me to murder my mother, you unimaginably stupid girl. Do you have any clue what that's like?" The vein in her forehead is pulsing rapidly, furiously, and for a moment, Emma has the strangely unnerving idea that it just might suddenly explode beneath the force of her fury.

"No, but I also don't know what it's like to have had Cora as my mother."

Regina's head snaps back on her neck sharply. "Watch yourself, Swan."

Emma ignores her, pushing forward almost forcefully, "I mean, I had a crap-ton of foster parents, and some of them were pretty damned violent and mean; some were just hideous people, but none of them actively worked to destroy me like your mother-"

And that's as much as Regina will allow. Frankly, Emma's surprised that it's taken this long; from the moment the queen had appeared behind her on the walk, Emma thinks that she had probably known that there was no other way for things to go than this one.

Thankfully, this is the one thing that Emma had planned for.

She'd known from the beginning of this whole damned plan that Regina would never leave Storybrooke willingly. Not before she got her revenge, anyway. Her mind is too polluted by rage and hatred and her heart is too seized with hurt and grief to be able to think clearly or coherently. There's simply no place inside of her for such reason.

There's no place for healing, either.

Which is why this actually does have to happen the way that it is.

God, she hopes Blue isn't some magical crank and actually knows her stuff.

"How dare you," Regina growls, and suddenly she's lifting her hands, which are both circled in rings of bright red light. Not fireballs, but some kind of energy that Emma just somehow knows could be catastrophic and even deadly to her if allowed to connect with her fairly unprotected torso. She wonders if the brunette woman is in any way in charge of her mind right now, and wonders if Regina has any control over her darker self.

She thinks not.

Well that's okay because that, too, was part of the plan.

Regina violently thrusts her hands forward, as if to throw the red energy at Emma, and then suddenly she's the one being tossed backwards into the hedges, a loud grunt of surprise tearing from her lips just before her head loudly connects with the ground and slumps against it, a crimson trail of blood leaking down from a jagged cut on her temple.

"Wow," Emma mutters, looking down at her hands. She shakes her head, laughs a bit nervously,
and then makes her way over to the unconscious woman. She drops down to her knees, leans over and checks for a pulse – finding a strong one hammering away there – and then lets out a sigh of relief. She runs a finger over the cut; it's more than a little bloody, but not terribly deep. Reaching into her jacket, she extracts the handcuffs and clicks each of the bracelets around an individual wrist. She considers for a moment tightening them more than is technically necessary, but stops herself before doing so.

This is all about stopping vengeance and pettiness, not perpetuating it.

She's about to try to lift Regina's unconscious form up into her arms when she feels his presence above her. She rolls her head to the side and looks up at her former lover, her lips quirked in an expression of bemused annoyance. "Gonna help me or just watch?"

"Well, I have to admit that I was a little bit curious to see if you could actually lift her up," Neal confesses from where he's leaning against the hedges. He's smiling awkwardly at her, his hands jumping in and out of his pockets in a show of clear anxiety. She thinks it's almost sad how uncomfortable they around each other. Sad, but also earned considering.

"I can, but if you're willing to help, well I'd be appreciative," Emma shoots back at him.

He sighs and pushes himself away from the hedges. "What do you need?"

"Her laid out in the backseat of the car over there."

He turns his head and looks towards the street. "Where's the Bug?"

"With Ruby. I traded it for her wheels. At least until I get back."

"Because you need to transport an unconscious Evil Queen out of town."

"I see you talked to David."

"I did. I was looking for you. I was hoping maybe you and I could spend the day with Henry. Guess not. Your dad is not all that thrilled about this plan of yours. Can't say I am, either."

"Not sure you have the right to an opinion about this."

"Yeah, I get that," he admits. He shuffles his feet a bit before saying, "But what he said is right? You are leaving town with her? And Henry?" He frowns deeply at that; what he'd really like is a chance to make all of this up to Emma, and maybe start over again, but if that's not possible – and she's broadcasting loud and clear that it's not – he'd at least like the opportunity to get to know his son better. To maybe become a real father to him.

"I have to do this," Emma tells him, slightly surprised at the vehemence and urgency which she hears in her own voice. Fifteen minutes ago, she'd been uncertain about this whole thing, wondering if she could think of a way to back out of this absolutely absurd plan of Henry's. Now, though? Now she knows that this is the only way to stop an all-out blood war from occurring. Now she's certain that if this doesn't work, nothing will.

Which means that this has to work.

"And us?" he pushes.

She purses her lips and shakes her head, frowning a bit as she says, "There's no us, Neal. I know your engagement with Tamara is over, but that doesn't mean –"
"I know. I know. That's not what I meant, Emma. I mean not really. I get it. I might be thick sometimes, but I really do get it. I screwed you over and...I let you go. Damn, Em, you know there are mornings – a lot of them, actually - where I wake up wishing I could go back to that day and change things, but I know I can't. Whether I like it or not, what's done is done. I don't regret it because you found your family, and maybe that will eventually make you happy. Me, too, maybe, but I get why we are...what we are."

"Okay, then..."

"I guess I was just hoping we could be..."

"Friends?"

"Yeah," he says, then shrugs his shoulders. "We have Henry."

"I think...I don't think we're there yet," she tells him. "Friends, I mean."

"Oh. Right. Okay." He shuffles his feet again.

"You broke my heart," she reminds him, her voice quiet, but still clearly affected.

"I know. And I'll be sorry for doing that for the rest of my life." He licks his lips. "But does that mean that you're going to shut me out of Henry's life, too?"

"No, of course not. But we're not the only ones in his life, Neal." She indicates towards the unconscious woman. "Regina is his mother. I gave him up when he was born because you put me in prison. Whatever your reasons, that's what happened. I couldn't give him the childhood I wanted for him so I gave him up, and she gave that to him."

"She's the Evil Queen."

"True, but she still loved him and took care of him to the best of her ability, and maybe she wasn't always above board about how she did things, but she did try to do right by him. And here's the thing, Neal: no matter who she is, Henry still loves her because all the Evil Queen stuff aside, she's his mom, and he thinks she can be a better person. He believes that deep down, she wants to be a better person. So do I." She lifts an eyebrow and looks pointedly at him. "And you know what? So do you about your father."

"Yeah, but I know that he never will be."

"Maybe you think you believe that, but I think we both know that a part of you still hopes that you're wrong." She looks pointedly at him until he concedes the point, then continues with, "And even if you are right, Gold and Regina aren't the same person. Just because one of them can't walk away from power doesn't mean the other one can't."

"And yet you're taking her out of town to force her to do that."

"I'm taking her to a safe place where I hope she can heal."

"Heal from what?"

"Her life," Emma says quietly, looking up at him, and knowing that he understands.

Because none of them have exactly lived lives of bliss and peace.

"And if she can't? If she won't?" he pushes.
Emma shrugs her shoulders, trying to feign confidence that she doesn't truly feel. "I don't know. I guess I'm hoping that we won't ever have to cross that bridge."

"I don't want to lose the kid. I just...found him."

"You won't," she promises. "I'm hoping that none of us will. Including Regina. That's what this is all about. Our son is fighting like mad to keep his family together. He's an amazing kid, Neal, but neither you nor I had anything to do with that. She did. And as much as I don't particularly like her – and she definitely doesn't like me - I think I kind of owe it to our son and I guess to his mother, too, to try to make this whole mess right."

"Okay, I get it." He leans down and lifts Regina's surprisingly light body up into his arms. He carries her towards the car, Emma walking at his side.

"Are you going to stay here or return to New York?" Emma queries.

"I'm going back there for the time being."

"What about your father?"

"It's complicated, and I'm not yet ready to be around him every day. I promised him that I'll try to come back here as often as I can, but I still need space from him."

She just smiles in response because try as she might, it's hard for her to root too hard for these two; yes, she hopes that Neal can be happy because spiteful and vindictive is never something that Emma Swan has ever wanted to be (that she's failed at this a time or two is something that she carries around with her as proof of how hard a person can allow themselves to fall), but it's difficult to spend too much energy cheering on the reunion when it was that desire to reunite which had allowed for all of this to happen.

If Gold had chosen his son instead of power so many years ago, then Regina might not have become the Evil Queen and cursed an entire land to a small town in Maine.

Then again, if she really wants to consider cause and effect – and she doesn't because that's always boggling – had Gold chosen his son, Regina might never have been born.

But what's done is indeed done, and there's only forward to go from here.

"I'll text you when we get where we're going," Emma assures him as she pulls the car door open. "I have no idea how long we're going to be there, but it could be a good long while. Regina isn't going to take to this...well, I don't imagine it's going to be easy."

"No," he chuckles. Then, "You'll let me see Henry from time to time, right?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"Thank you," he says, before leaning in and kissing her lightly on the cheek, his scruff scratching against her skin in a familiar way. She feels her heart accelerate for a moment, but is only moderately surprised when it slows just as quickly. Some feelings apparently do fade with time. "I am sorry," he tells her once he's pulled back and away.

She lets the words slide over her. It's what she's wanted to hear almost since the day she'd been arrested. She's not sure if it's enough-- it probably isn't -- but she thinks that maybe if she's about to preach forgiveness and letting go of old hurts to Regina, it's time to take her own advice. She'd spent a lot of time and emotion being angry. She'd even let it consume her and turn her towards
deeds that she might not have otherwise considered. Now, perhaps, though, now maybe it's time to forgive and move on.

"I know," Emma replies. Making the choice to be the bigger woman here, she takes his right hand, interweaves their fingers and squeezes tight, allowing for some of the old sentiment to seep through for just a moment before she clears her throat. "Back seat. Gently. The last thing I want to hear from Her Majesty is that we kinked her neck."

"You are insane," he laughs. "You know this, right?"

"All too well," she admits wryly as she watches Neal very gently place Regina across the backseat. She sees the handcuffs that are around Regina's wrists glimmer a bright shining blue, a sign of the magic that had been sprinkled atop the metal bracelets by Mother Superior. They're meant to stop the queen from being able to utilize her magic within city limits should she happen to unexpectedly regain consciousness there.

Once they're outside of Storybrooke, they'll become just normal handcuffs just as Regina will become just a normal hurt and brokenhearted woman.

Yeah, except there's nothing normal about Regina Mills, magic or otherwise.

But then maybe, Emma thinks, that's why they've always understood each other.

"Be careful," Neal tells her as he watches her shut the car door.

"I will. And Neal, good luck. With...whatever you're doing."

He smiles at her. It doesn't quite meet his eyes, but she doesn't need it to. One more touch of his arm, and then she's walking away from him, satisfied that while some things between them will never been forgotten, she's finally been able to put behind her the pain of his abandonment and betrayal. She's finally able to start forgiving him.

Seems like as good a place as any to begin this adventure.

She pulls the car up in front of the school a few minutes later, and is greatly relieved to find Henry already there and waiting, his backpack slung carelessly over his shoulder. He's bouncing with excitement, his eyes bright and wide. He waves at her once he sees her. "Hey," he calls out as he pulls the door open and jumps in. "Ruby's car?"

"Yep. Think you'll miss the Bug?"

"Not really," he admits with a grin. He glances into the backseat, and immediately his expression drops into a frown as his bright green eyes settle on the unconscious form of his adoptive mother; to his young eyes, she looks smaller than he can ever recall. "Is she okay? She's bleeding." He reaches out towards Regina as if to perhaps touch her.

"Wait," Emma says, catching his hand and bringing it back towards the front, squeezing it as she does so. "Wait until we're across the line. We don't want to wake her up."

"She won't hurt me," he answers defiantly.
"She might not mean to hurt you, Kid, but she's not going to be happy about what we're doing here," Emma reminds him with a soft understanding smile. "And I'd feel a whole lot better if we didn't wake her up before we're certain that she can't turn both of us into... well, whatever the fuck it is that Evil Queens turn people they're pissed off at into."

"Fine," he grumbles. They drive for a few minutes, heading towards the town line, and then he asks softly sounding so very young and unsure, "Do you think this will work?"

Emma laughs. "It's a bit late to be worried about that since we've already kidnapped her." She grows immediately somber when she sees his serious expression, his eyes so wide and worried and perhaps even a little bit afraid. "I think that you and me, we'll do whatever we need to do to make sure it works," she assures him.

"Even if she gets angry and tries to hurt you?"

"I'm kind of expecting her to try," Emma admits. "But I'm pretty tough."

"You're not nearly tough enough to deal with me, Miss Swan," a voice rumbles from the backseat. It's low and throaty, and it just about scares the living shit out of Emma. So much so that she almost jerks the wheel entirely to the side, which causes the car to skid. Thankfully, Henry reacts quickly and grabs the wheel to steady them (suddenly she's very glad that she's been allowing him to play so many games of Mario Kart).

"Jesus Christ, Regina," Emma gasps, a hand over her rapidly pounding heart. She looks in the rearview mirror and is infinitely relieved to see the older woman trying to force her magic forward and failing thanks to the now brightly glittering handcuffs.

"What have you done to me?" the older woman growls out as her eyes snap from Emma to Henry and then back to Emma. "This is kidnapping." She holds up her wrists and jangles the cuffs as if to punctuate her words.

"Exactly," Emma says with a sharp nod of her head. "And one day, you're going to thank me for it."

And then, as if to punctuate her own defiant point, she drives the car right over the town line. There's a shimmer of bright blue light as they cross over the border, and then Regina gasps as the magic inside of her is quite literally turned off.

"Mom?" Henry asks, reaching for her.

She meets his hopeful but scared eyes with her own wide pained ones. She mouths his name almost desperately, and then suddenly, her eyes are rolling and she's pitching backwards onto the seat, unconsciousness dragging her down once more.

"Mom?" he says again, fear sharpening his tone. "Emma, I think..."

"No, hey, it's all right, kid," Emma assures him with a faint smile. "Don't worry. I thought that this might happen. Your mom isn't affected by the memory part of the curse, but there are some side effects to losing her magic, apparently. Blue told me to expect that if she was awake when we crossed the line that it might hit her kind of hard. It did."

"But she's okay, right?" Henry pleads.

Emma thinks for a moment, and then answers solemnly, her words a promise that she intends to keep no matter what it takes, "She will be."
Two.

Chapter Notes

Content Warnings: Violence, profanity and rage. Oh my.

Regina wakes up forty-five minutes into the drive. Icy sheets of rain are coming down all around them, and there's a brutal whistling wind battering the side of Ruby's already dented car. Inside of the warm vehicle, however, all the attention immediately sweeps back towards the furious brunette woman as she rather dramatically jerks forward on the backseat, a hand rising to her wounded forehead, her fingers lightly glancing against the still weeping cut there.

"Ow," Regina hisses, sealing her eyes shut as a bolt of pain rushes through her skull. She feels blood beneath her fingertips, and smells just the slightest bit of iron, and it makes her stomach roll.

"Mom?" Henry queries as he turns to face her completely, his expression something between a slight smile and a worried grimace. His favorite blanket is slung over his knees; a last minute grab by Emma before she'd left the loft earlier that same afternoon.

She forces her eyes open, looks up at him, starts to speak and then groans.

"Regina?" Emma prompts this time, turning her head ever so slightly so that she can get a better view of the sickly looking woman in the backseat. She doesn't dare to take too much of her attention off of the road. Not in these terrible conditions. "You okay?"

"No, Miss Swan, I am most certainly not okay. I believe that I'm going to be sick," Regina manages to force out, her naturally deep voice raspy and choked. "Pull over."

"Are you serious?" Emma exclaims, frowning deeply as rain slaps hard against the windshield. Visibility is slim to none right about now, and she really doesn't fancy stalling out on the side of the road to allow Regina a chance to run and try to get away.

"Very much so, but if you'd prefer I throw up in this disgusting filth-covered vehicle of yours, well that's fine, too." Regina looks around, curling her lip in disgust. "I'm not sure we'd actually notice the difference."

"I'm amazed that you can manage to be so insulting while feeling so sick," Emma notes.

"Emma," Henry cautions before Regina can reply. His eyes are raking over Regina, taking in his adoptive mother's waxy complexion. The red gash on her forehead is vivid and bright against her unusually pale skin. "I think we should listen to her. She looks like she's about to hurl." He wrinkles his nose in childlike disgust at the thought of her doing so anywhere in his vicinity. It really doesn't matter how old you are; that's still gross.

"Fine," the blonde grunts, angrily and dramatically pulling the car over to the side of the road. She puts it into park, and then gets out, stepping into the cold rain. Grumbling, she moves back to the passenger door and unlocks it from the outside (she'd specifically engaged the child locks to try to prevent Regina from doing something stupid – like she herself would do – such as try to jump from a moving vehicle) and yanks it open. She offers a hand to Regina, wiggling her fingers as she does
"I don't need your help," Regina growls in response as she shimmies along the seat, her cuffed hands held up high in front of her body. "I will never need your help."

"Okay, have it your way," Emma answers as she backs away from the door, palms up in surrender. "But since your center of balance is off, this could get pretty messy."

Regina throws her an icy glare, but otherwise ignores the blonde woman as she rather awkwardly – and clearly uncomfortably - pushes herself up and out of the car, using the side of the vehicle to balance herself once she's standing. Her face tightens as the rain and wind strike against her, causing splotches of pink and red to immediately form on her cheeks. A moment later, though, she's doubling over towards the side of the road.

Apparently, she wasn't lying about feeling sick.

Emma moves away so as to allow Regina some privacy. She's not terribly surprised by this rather sickly turn of events, to be completely honest; not only had Regina taken a whack to the forehead back at the mansion during their little magic fight, but she'd also had her magic snapped off like a light switch as they'd driven over the town line. Nausea seems rather obvious.

She listens to the sound of Regina retching for a few seconds before Henry's voice redirects her back towards the car. "Is she all right?" he calls out from inside, his young face poking out from the window, screwed up into an expression of intense worry.

"Yeah, I think she's just sick from the whole disappearing magic thing," Emma tells him as she leans in through the window, offering him a small not quite honest smile. "She'll be okay. Do me a favor, though; reach behind you and open the cooler that's right behind my seat. I think I brought some Sprite for you. It'd probably do her some good to –"

"Emma," he cuts her off suddenly, eyes widening in alarm.

"What? What is it?"

"Mom!" And then he points out towards the road. "She's running!"

She snaps around and lets out a loud groan of frustration. "Goddammit," she growls out as she watches Regina staggering down the water soaked road, ambling like she's drunk towards a nearby row of high trees. The escape attempt is utterly absurd – Regina's cuffed and likely still quite queasy – but Emma feels as annoyed with herself as she does with the Queen; she damn well knows better than to ever turn her back on a prisoner.

And yeah, until they get where they're going and she can convince Regina to give this whole therapy and trying to heal by getting away from magic thing a chance, the Evil Queen is definitely a prisoner of the Savior. It's honestly best for everyone.

She hopes so, anyway.

"Stay there where it's warm and safe," she orders Henry before taking a deep breath. She lifts her hand up, wipes rain away from her forehead and eyes, and then tears after the disappearing woman who has now reached the trees and is slowly disappearing into the wooded area there. Emma narrows her eyes as she moves; focusing on the bright red blazer that Regina is wearing, concentrating exclusively on that flash of color.

The water-logged ground gives slightly under her feet, but years of hunting criminals through some
of the most disgusting environments and locations ever created keeps her upright and moving even as her boots try to topple her. Regina, on the other hand, is both a former mayor and a fallen queen; she might know how to navigate a forest on horseback but in her absurdly high heels and cuffs, she's at a complete disadvantage.

Which works out great for Emma as she catches up to the older woman almost immediately and not at all for Regina as the blonde slams her body into the brunette's back, throwing both of them to the muddy forest floor, Emma's arms circling her.

"Are you insane? Get off of me!"

"Yes, definitely and no, not a chance," Emma snaps out, and it's mostly just a random word that spits from her mouth thanks to her irritation at this whole mess and not quite an order, but Regina takes it as exactly that and begins to flip out, panicking as she's held down against the ground.

For Emma, this is always the point where things tend to get really interesting, and rarely in a good way. Once the bounty is down and on the ground and she's atop them trying to regain control of the situation, they always struggle with everything they have in them.

She's expecting that to happen here, too, and though Regina Mills is unlike any other person that Emma has ever met, there are some consistent realities in life, and trying to get away when you're restrained and therefore trapped is certainly one of those.

And Regina does try. Oh, does she try.

She thrashes and kicks and spins her lithe body around as hard and as violently as she can, her sharp elbows catching Emma twice in the ribs. It's the second time that pisses the sheriff off enough to angrily flip the cursing and furious Regina around onto her back, her knee pressing into Regina's belly. Once the woman is there, her head flopping repeatedly and painfully against the wet dirt, Emma moves fully back atop her again, straddling the older woman's thighs and locking around them to secure Regina as she grits out in her most over-this tone, "Stop fighting or I swear to God, Regina, I will knock your ass out. Evil Queen or not, if you hit me again, I will clock you into tomorrow."

"I'm not afraid of you," Regina hisses, her eyes blazing with pure hatred and rage. Her tone is defiant, but shaky. Uncertain. Despite her words, Regina is quite clearly more than a little bit scared, and that frankly unsettles Emma more than she cares to admit.

Because it means something.

This fear of being restrained and being controlled by anyone, it speaks to who Regina is now; it tells volumes about who she has become and why they're being forced to do this.

"Good," Emma says finally, nodding her head in agreement. "Because believe it or not, Regina, I don't actually want you to be afraid of me so if you will please stop –"

But of course she won't listen because she's Regina and despite (or perhaps because of it) all that she has been through, this is a woman who doesn't know how to stop fighting.

And honestly, Emma of all people should have seen it coming.

One moment she's straddling Regina, and the next she's gasping in pain when the brunette's right knee suddenly jerks up and slams into her groin. As she's reeling backwards, wincing, Emma finds herself insanely grateful that she's not a man because if she were, she's pretty damned sure that she'd never be using certain body parts again.
For anything.

"Fuck," she hisses, hot tears running down her face. "Fucking fuck."

And then she turns and sees Regina crawling away.

It's the most ridiculous thing that she thinks that she has ever seen: this proud and insanely powerful woman on her hands and knees, the rain beating down against her, and the wind reddening her cheeks. Dirt bites into her palms and stains her skin dark as she stumbles desperately forward, but the frightened brunette doesn't seem to notice.

Which seems just plain wrong to the sheriff.

Regina frightened frightens her.

"Regina, come on. Stop this." Emma pushes to her feet and ambles gracelessly over to where Regina is (she hasn't gotten very far at all thanks to her cuffed hands). Emma realizes perhaps a moment too late that it looks like she's standing over Regina. Which she kind of is, but the unintended almost looming posture, well it appears dominant.

Like maybe she enjoys having the Evil Queen on her hands and knees before her.

"Never," Regina growls, looking up at Emma, the Queen's dirt-smeared face a mask of anger and undisguised fear. "So, if you thought that I'd beg for mercy, Miss Swan -" she laughs darkly - "If that was your plan here, well I'm afraid that I'm going to have to disappoint you."

"Excuse me?"

Slowly, painfully, awkwardly, Regina pushes herself back up to her feet, hissing at the new cuts on her hands. "That's why I'm out here in the woods, isn't it? So that you can execute me? Did you expect me to beg for mercy first? Because I won't. I will not."

"What? Jesus, no, Regina. No…no." Feeling a bit like she's been gut-punched, Emma backs up a few steps, her hands up in protest. "That's not what this is about at all. It's not."

"Really? Then why are we out here, Swan?" She sounds skeptical, suspicious and damned close to homicidal; Emma has no doubt that had Regina a weapon available to her, she would utilize it right now with murderous intent. "What's your plan?"

"We're out here because you ran!" Emma practically screams back at her, her own boiling frustration and the icy cold weather that's beating down in her mercilessly creating a volatile mixture within her. "My only plan is to get you back into the car!"

"You're lying. You kidnapped me, and brought me out here to die!"

"Are you…do you even hear the words you're saying?"

Regina laughs. "Frankly, I'm surprised that your parents aren't here to witness my end. I would have expected your mother to want to see it even if she didn't have the courage to do it herself. But I'm sure that your call home will certainly help her feel better about herself. Maybe once I'm dead and buried and she no longer has to wrestle with whatever nagging guilt she might feel, she'll be able to sleep the sleep of the righteous again."

"Regina, stop. I'm not going to murder you."
Another shrill laugh, this one close to hysterical. "No, no. Of course not. I'm an enemy of the crown, aren't I? It's not murder, then. It's a lawful monarchy approved execution."

"Well since we don't live in a monarchy, that doesn't exactly apply here," Emma growls.

"Don't we? You are a princess. You can do whatever you'd like."

"Shut up. Just…shut up, would you, please?" Emma hisses, stepping closer to her, their icy visible breaths practically mingling as they stand typically toe-to-toe once again. "I'm not a princess and I'm not here to hurt you in any way, okay? I'm here to help you, Regina."

"Help me? Really? By attacking me at my house and then restraining me with these… cuffs," she lifts up her hands, "By bringing me out to the middle of nowhere and then tackling me into the dirt like a common criminal? That's your idea of helping me?"

"Well first, Your Majesty, you're the one who ran into the woods; I just followed after you to keep you from killing yourself. Second, do you really think I'd bring our son out here if I were planning on murdering you and third…really, Regina? Really?"

Regina just stares back at her, and there's something so very scared and lost that Emma sees in the brunette's dark haunted eyes. Something that tells Emma that yes, Regina really did believe that she'd been brought out here to be shot like a worthless thief.

Which, yeah, that's just a bit too much on the nose for Emma; it's enough to make her take a step backwards. Time to start over. "Okay, how about we take a deep breath, huh?"

"I'm breathing just fine," Regina retorts. It's a lie, though, because they're both breathing hard, both of them feeling the tension and strain of this very emotional encounter.

"Yeah, sure, of course you are. And you're shivering just fine, too. Which probably means you'll catch something. Unless you'd like to stop fighting me for half a second, so that maybe just maybe we can get back to the car and get warm and dry."

"Not until you tell me why I am out here. Why did you kidnap me?"

"I already told you, Regina; to help you."

"Help me with what?"

"Well, for starter's: not killing people."

"You mean your mother." Regina nods her head, like this all makes sense now. It's enough to make Emma curl her hands into fists. And count to ten. And twenty.

"I mean anyone," Emma grits out. "I want to help you to try to not be her."

Regina snorts at this, self-loathing flooding her voice. "Well then, Sheriff Swan, you are wasting your time because I am now and will always be her. The Evil Queen."

"I don't believe that, and neither does Henry."

As always, Henry's name does the trick and all of the anger just fades away.

There's a moment of silence as Regina rolls Emma's words around, turning them over and possibly even considering their honesty. Unfortunately, though, long nurtured suspicion and paranoia eventually wins out within the former mayor's troubled mind.
She steps towards Emma, then, sliding into the blonde woman's personal space once more. "I don't know what your angle is here, Miss Swan, and I don't know why you're not killing me when you have the chance to, but I want to be very clear: no matter what you do to me, no matter what you try, I will not let you break me if that's your game. I've never let anyone break me before and I'm sure not about to start now. Your mother didn't break me and you most certainly will not, either. So if that's what this is all about, then you're better to just take your gun out and put a bullet between my eyes."

Emma blows out a gust of air between teeth ground tight in frustration. "You really are a piece of work," she growls out at the older woman. "But since I'm neither planning to shoot you or break you at this exact moment, maybe we can try walking instead."

"You first," Regina suggests with a small cold smile. She gestures forward with her cuffed hands, the chain between the bracelets making a hollow clinking sound as she moves it.

"Yeah, I'm really not half as stupid as you think I am," Emma mutters. She places her hand flat against Regina's back and gives her a hard push towards the road ahead. The rain has thankfully slowed down to a cold spraying sprinkle, but the mud everywhere is wet and sucking and each step feels more than a little bit dangerous. She sees Regina stumble a bit, and though a very big part of her really doesn't have much of an issue with watching the former mayor do a face plant, the more noble side of her wins out enough to make her reach out to grab Regina by the hand so as to steady the furious woman.

Not that Regina is at all grateful for the assistance. "Get your hands off of me."

Emma immediately moves her hands away. "Sure, whatever. Tell me something, Regina; did you really think that you could get away from me? Out in the middle of nowhere and in the middle of a rainstorm? You do happen to remember what I used to do before I came to Storybrooke, right? Chasing down runners was my day and my night job."

"I recall," Regina replies, her dark eyes harsh and mean. "I just assumed that you were exaggerating your aptitude at such just as you exaggerate every other part of yourself."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I might be an Evil Queen, but you're little more than a fraud, aren't you? You're a little girl playing dress up, always trying to be more than she is, aren't you?"

Emma locks her jaw, refusing to snatch at the bait; refusing to rise to it.

But her stony expression had apparently been enough because Regina smiles coldly, "Now then, since the car is right up above, perhaps we should discuss pretending for Henry that you weren't just planning to murder me in the middle of the woods, yes?"

Emma actually growls in response to this, unable to hold her tongue any longer. "You know what, Regina? Whether you want to believe it or not, I'm going out on a major limb for you so maybe just maybe, for three seconds, you can stow the attitude and –"

"And what? Be appreciative that you rendered me unconscious with magic, and then kidnapped me? Should I be appreciative for the fact that you abducted me so that you can save your pathetic mother from my anger? Anger that is well deserved and well earned considering what she made me do, I might add? Well then, yes, Sheriff Swan, please allow me the opportunity to fall over myself with gratitude. I'm so very thankful for your desire to strip me of my free will because really, no one else in my life ever has."
Emma softens considerably at this. "Regina –"

"Enough. I have no idea what you're planning or what you think any of this will accomplish, but for the sake of my son, I will pretend to behave. At least for the time being. But do not think for even a moment that I won't find a way out of this situation and when I do find my way out, I promise you that you will pay for what you've done."

Emma closes her eyes. She prays for strength and calm and patience all the while reminding herself that she, too, is doing this for Henry. "Get in the car, Regina," she sighs after a moment as they reach the vehicle on the edge of the road. She angrily yanks the door open, and then shoves at Regina's shoulder, practically pushing her inside.

The older woman all but falls in, but quickly recovers, restoring some degree of her natural grace as she jerkily rights herself and moves to the middle of the seat. She lifts her head up, then, and smiles at Henry, the expression wide and fake and utterly unconvincing in all ways. "Honey," she says. "Don't worry; everything's fine now."

"It is?" he frowns.

"Of course it is. Miss Swan and I just needed to speak."

He rolls his eyes at this. "You tried to run away; you're not fine, Mom."

Her expression falters then; for someone who has utilized masks as efficiently and as effectively as she has throughout the many troubled decades of her damaged history, Regina always finds it rather hard to hide her true feelings and emotions from her son.

And from his irritating birth mother, too, for that matter.

Not that she wants to dwell on that.

"I…"

"I know," Henry reassures her, his voice terribly soft and perhaps even uncomfortably understanding. "And I know that you didn't want this, but you do need it."

"Need what?" she asks gently, her eyes flickering up to the driver's seat as a now almost violent shivering Emma gets into the car and slams the door shut behind her. The engine was left on for Henry so the cabin is still fairly warm and ready to go, but it'll take some time to get warm again. Her expression tight and frustrated, Emma pushes the vehicle out of park and into drive and moves it back to the now very dark and muddy road.

"To be free of the magic," Henry explains.

"Sweetheart."

He shakes his head, making it clear that he has no intention of being mollified or told that he doesn't understand and perhaps never could. "No, magic was never good for you, Mom. It never helped you be anything but someone you never wanted to be. We can."

His expression is so honest and hopeful, so full of love and affection for her. It's been so very long since she's seen these directed at her and it renders her speechless.

When she recovers, she tries again, "I don't think –"
He stops her before she can even really get started, his gaze so focused and determined. He's just about twelve years of age now, but at this moment, he's so very much older than that in spirit and in presence. "We can," he says again. "We can. If you'll just trust us."

She can't tell him just how hard trusting anyone – even him - is for her so she simply smiles sadly and hopes that it's enough to end this uncomfortable conversation.

She looks up towards Emma and sees the woman smirking back at her – almost smugly – from the front seat. The rational part of her insists that it's just the blonde sheriff making a silent comment about Henry's ability to reason with his adoptive mother in a way that no one else can, but the darker side of the Queen starts screaming at her, telling her that this is all part of some kind of cruel trick.

But then Henry's reaching for her and touching her arm, and even if she doesn't trust Emma's intentions, she realizes that in spite of herself and the many wounds she has received to her faith thanks to his previous rejection of her, she still does trust his.

He's protected her before; she has to hope he's doing so now, too.

She closes her eyes and lets his small warm hand slide into her much cooler one. When he squeezes, she squeezes back just as hard and then she holds on tight to her son.

All the while practically begging that for once, her trust in someone will pay off.

It's almost three hours – and two uncomfortable in-and-out of semi-consciousness naps for Regina– later when they finally reach the beach house. It's beautiful and modern and full of large glass windows that wrap around the house. There's a sprawling oak deck that surrounds the massive structure, which is held up off the ground by large supports.

"Here we are," Emma says as she gets out of the car, stretching and popping muscles. It's mostly just misting now, a fine spray of water drifting around in the cool coastal air.

"Where's here?" Henry asks.

"Can't tell ya that, Kid," Emma grins in response. She adds a wink and he laughs in response, his mood still rather buoyant. She almost adds a line about having to kill him, but chooses not to when she catches the icy glare that Regina is throwing her way.

"How droll, Sheriff," Regina sighs, her tone full of open disdain. "You really think hiding the location of this place will keep me from escaping and making my way back?"

"That's actually exactly what I'm thinking, Your Majesty" Emma confirms as she pulls the back door open. "Now, do you need help this time or are you gonna be an ass again?"

"Still no. Never from you."

"Mom," Henry cautions, tilting his head. "Let Emma help. Please?"

Her face contorts a bit, but then, with an angry grunt, she lifts up her hands. "Fine."

"How's your head?" Emma queries, her voice growing soft and sympathetic as she leans into the
backseat, her green eyes going up to the now bright red cut on Regina's forehead. It's not very deep, and stitches probably aren't warranted, but it really should have been taken care of hours ago. The dirt that had gotten into it thanks to their run and tackle through the forest certainly hasn't helped in keeping it clean and sanitary.

"My head is perfectly fine. Just give me your hand and get me out of this filthy car. And no, I won't say 'please' so you can either do as I ask or let me do it on my own."

Emma's jaw twitches and for half a moment, she thinks both of kicking the damned woman out of the car and driving away and of walking into the house and letting Regina get herself up on her own. Ultimately, as pissed off and annoyed as she is, she chooses to do neither. Instead, she reaches down to clutch Regina's hand and help her out.

"I'm a lot more stubborn than you think," she growls into Regina's ear.

"So am I, dear," comes the practically purred response.

"We'll see," Emma mutters in return before pushing Regina towards the house.

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The decor inside is mostly glass and metal, the colors muted and the furniture sparse and specific. Not that Regina has much chance to think about this before she's being shoved into one of the bedrooms and tossed onto a fairly firm king sized bed. "What the hell?" Regina grinds out as she struggles to sit up. She honestly needn't have bothered because almost before she can get her head up, Emma's pushing her back down.

"I'm genuinely sorry about this," Emma offers up as she once again straddles Regina's hips. This certainly isn't her preferred way to do this but absent knocking the brunette out cold (a serious consideration, honestly) she doesn't know of a better way to move around the handcuffs on the damned woman without risking another attempted escape adventure. "But I need to do a few errands before we can get fully settled in here."

"And that has what to do with you assaulting me?"

"I'm not assaulting you; I'm restraining you."

"On top of me?"

"Unfortunately."

"I'm beginning to think that perhaps you enjoy sitting on me. Do you, Sheriff? Is that what this is all really about? Some twisted little sexual fantasy you've been harboring?"

"Yes, that's exactly it, Regina, you caught me; I brought our son to a beach house in the middle of nowhere all so that I can have my wicked perverted way with your psychotic Royal Majesty. Jesus, where do you come up with this kind of crazy?"

Regina purses her lips at Emma's snapped out vitriolic rambling, but continues right on glaring. The moment Emma unsnaps one of the cuffs, she tries to lurch up and attack the sheriff, but the blonde is both faster and stronger out here in the non-magic world.
With considerable force borne of annoyance and perhaps some anger, she slams Regina back against the bed and snaps the open cuff to the swirling design metal bed-frame.

"I'll release you from those as soon as we get back," Emma promises her. "I'm sorry I even have to leave you like this, but I didn't go to all the trouble of kidnapping you and bringing you all the way out here just to let you escape on the very first night."

"Did you ever think that it wasn't your right to do this to me? Or is it your title as the Savior going to your head so much that casual disregard comes easy to you? Or perhaps that's just the Charming part of you finally coming out to play," Regina growls at her, all while yanking sharply at the cuffs. They were tight before when they were around both hands, but now that's it's just one, and she's struggling, she can feel the painful chaffing.

"I thought maybe I could do right by you, Regina. Believe it or not, that's what this is truly about; I am trying to stop you from crossing a line that you can't come back from."

"I've crossed so many of those in my life; really, what's one more?"

"Yeah, well, I don't know much about those lines and I can't do anything about them now anyway, but this one, maybe this one we can help," Emma tells her. She stares at Regina for a long pointed moment before saying in an almost gentle voice, "I know you have a ton of cuts all over you from what happened in the forest, and we need to clean those up, but the one on your head is really starting to look ugly. I'll see if I can find us a –"

"Absolutely not. You are not to touch me in any way, do you understand?"

Emma holds up her hands once again in defeat. "Of course. God forbid while I'm already sitting on top of you that I try to make sure that you're not suffering from some kind of concussion. Or infection. You want to wake up with a second head, that's on you."

"Beyond that being nonsensical, I would think that the easy solution would be for you to get off of me. Then, you won't have to worry about what you should do while on me."

"Sure, fine, whatever" Emma says as she crawls off the former mayor, and moves to the opposite side of the room, safely away from Regina's physical fury and the pure hatred that seems to be flowing off of her in waves. "The Kid and I are going to get some food and supplies. We'll be back in about an hour or so, and then maybe you and I can have a glass of wine and try to actually talk about things that don't involve ripping out hearts."

"How romantic," Regina drawls.

"Yeah, aren't I just the most? Try not to pull against those cuffs too much, Regina; you won't get loose, but you will cut yourself up if you try."

And with that – and before Regina can reply – she turns and exits the room.

"Hey," she says to Henry when she sees him standing in the front room, all of their bags around him in a weird kind of arcing half-circle. He's looking side-to-side and frowning deeply. "What's wrong?" she asks as she steps closer to him. She's not sure she can handle any kind of big problems right about now; she's already exhausted and annoyed.
He gestures towards the away-bags scattered around his feet, pointing first at hers and then over at his. "I see your bag there and I see mine here. But what about hers?"

"Hers," Emma repeats, dread and realization whipping through her.

Henry tilts his head and she finds herself reminded once again of exactly who it was that had raised him for most of his young life. "You…forgot to pack her a bag? Really?"

"Shit."

He lifts an eyebrow at her, and she finds herself laughing at the absurdity of it all.

"I guess we're going clothes and food shopping, Kid."

"You're going to clothes shop for my mom?"

She offers a somewhat sickly smile. "I think I am."

"Oh, this should be fun," Henry laughs (she thinks at her and the situation), shaking his head as he walks back through the door, stepping out into the cool coastal air.

"My thoughts exactly," she mumbles, and then follows after him.
Three

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Some salty language, self-harm (in the context of trying to escape) and a brief reference to Regina's marriage to Leopold.

The moment the door closes behind Emma and Henry, Regina leans forward on the bed as much as she can manage considering the restraints. She waits until she hears the car engine wheeze to life, and then she starts pulling at the cuffs, yanking against them as hard as possible. It's impossible for her to think of allowing anything to defeat her, and it's somehow even worse to believe that it might be something as pedestrian as a metal bed-frame that does so.

Still, despite her intense focus on getting herself out of this absurd mess, after almost two dozen pulls that do little more than cause her wrist to bleed badly and her back to ache even worse, Regina finds herself having to admit that brute strength and simple force of will aren't going to get it done.

"Dammit," she growls in defeated resignation just before she drops her head back against the oversized pillow beneath her. She can feel the stinging almost searing pain radiating from her now injured wrist, and her head is pounding like there are a thousand jackhammers at work in there.

That's not the worst of it, though.

No, the worst of it is that she's beat down tired, and not just physically so. These last few weeks have been a maddening whirl of every nightmare that she's ever had and then some. So little time has passed throughout all of this and yet so very much has changed inside and outside of her.

A month ago, she'd been humbly trying to keep her head down and her ears clean all the while trying to do right by Henry. Then, by the wishing well, she'd made the stupid mistake of allowing that need to please him - to make him proud of her - step in the way of the voice in her head that had warned her that if she allowed his blonde mother to return home, she'd lose her son forever.

And that's exactly what had happened or so she'd thought after she'd been accused of murdering the cricket. She'd been pushed into hiding, and then ended up falling back into Cora's arms with the kind of simpering ease that would sicken her if her rage wasn't completely shorting out her common sense and rational thinking.

Instead, that white-hot fury is all she feels at this moment.

Well, that and deep almost unspeakable fear.

Despite what she'd defiantly and proudly snapped up at Emma, she is afraid because in her entire life, no one aside from Daniel has ever done anything for her without expecting something in return. Even Maleficent who had been in love with her had wanted something from her – someone to save her from the misery of her own life. Throughout her many long days and years, no one besides her beloved Daniel has ever offered to help her without their assistance being little more than a tidy set of strings attached to her back. She's been an expertly-danced puppet and a well-played pawn of so many people, and perhaps the most pathetic part of it all is just how many times
she's walked into such inevitable disasters almost willingly simply because she'd craved the potential end results.

Results which have almost never materialized.

She'd cast the curse hoping for a happy ending for herself and pain for everyone else. What she'd gotten instead had been soulless monotony and eventually, simply more heartbreak and loss.

And then there had been her mother.

A woman who had once again reminded Regina exactly how much of a weakness even the ideal of love can be.

She quickly – like snapping a light off – flicks her thoughts away from the subject of her mother, and away from the lessons learned from her. It's all too painful, too complicated and too dark.

Because even she knows that beneath the surface of her grief over her mother is something else entirely; something that she doesn't know how to deal with, and has never known how to deal with.

*Relief.*

So she simply refuses to allow herself to feel it.

The corrosive rage that slithers through her bloodstream feels vibrant and strong and powerful, the burning heartache feels clear and cold, and the icy touch of vengeance within her damaged heart is comfortable. She understands all of these terrible feelings, and has walked with them for most of her adult life. Though they are the worst of friends, they are still the only willing companions that she's ever had; they're the only ones that have refused to leave her no matter how difficult things get.

Relief on the other hand, well that's something that she can't cope with.

Doesn't know how to.

So she doesn't.

She thinks instead, then, of escaping this house. This unacceptable situation.

How, she wonders. What will she do? Will she need to kill the sheriff?

Something cuts through her and makes her heart clench painfully, and this, too, is a feeling she doesn't understand well. Surely, since the sheriff is absolutely planning to hurt her before this is all over, it makes sense to strike first as soon as she's able to. So why then is she bothered by this?

No, she's not, she decides. She's bothered by how Henry will react to such.

That's all.

She most certainly does not care at all about the welfare of the woman who had broken her curse, stolen her child and has now kidnapped her thereby denying Regina her much-earned and owed vengeance on the woman who had played a primary role in the murders of Regina's mother and her fiancé.

She certainly feels nothing but hatred for Emma Swan. Snow White's daughter. Certainly.

Absolutely.
Yes.

So if kill the loathsome sheriff she must in order to escape, then kill the loathsome sheriff she will. She tells herself that she can do this because she's done so many other horrible things in her broken life so really, what's one more?

Even she's amazed by just how good she's become at being able to lie to herself. Especially when the lies are unbelievable in every single way.

She thinks about other lies told.

She thinks about standing up in front of five hundred well-dressed nobles and saying "I do" to a man whom she'd hated almost from the moment she'd first laid eyes upon him. She thinks about convincing herself that she just needed to survive until she could find a way to bring Daniel back.

She thinks of realizing that she never could.

She thinks of lying on a massive mattress, hot tears in her eyes as her unwanted husband moved above her, his breath hot against her neck as he pushed against and into her, his hands cold and hard.

Fear streaks through her, then, and she starts violently and frantically pulling at the cuff again, each yank against the metal headboard tearing the skin at her wrist a little more, but not loosening the restraints even a bit. Panic sets in and then a loud shuddering sob rips forth from her throat.

And then a scream.

She screams – not for help because she knows by now that none of that will ever be coming, but for everything else that's ugly and dark and so terribly damaged and broken within her – until she can't.

And then she falls back against the bed once more, no longer moving, just crying silently.

She thinks of being lost.

So very lost.

"You're still not going to tell me where we are?" Henry asks as the two of them walk down the sidewalk, the cool breeze continuing to prickle at both of their faces. This town reminds him a lot of Storybrooke; it's sleepy and overcast, crisp fishy-smelling coastal air flowing down every street.

"Nope," Emma replies with an impish grin. "It's a secret."

"No, it's not," he says, pointing towards a wooden sign that's hanging just to the right of one of the quaint little shops (it says "Made From Home For The Home on a decal on the door). "Haydenport. Home of the best Seagull Burgers in Maine." He wrinkles his nose at this. "Ew. That's super gross."

She laughs. "Hey, you never know. Maybe they're awesome. Okay, they're probably not, but, Kid, this place might not be exactly a state secret or anything like that, but it is somewhere that is far enough away from Storybrooke to be a safe place for your mom. That's what we wanted, yeah?"
“Yeah. So you think this will work, then?” he asks, looking up at her. “She seems so angry.”

“She *is* angry, Henry. She's been angry for a very long time now, and what happened with her own mother, well it made everything that's going on inside of her head and heart so much worse.”

“But we can help her, right?” he presses.

Frowning a bit at the sudden weight of his expectations, she turns towards him, reaching out to fold her hand around his forearm. "I'm not going to lie to you, Henry; this is going to be very difficult. Your mom on her good days is volatile and dangerous. On her bad days, well, she's something else entirely. Something kind of scary, actually. And right now, these are definitely not good days for her. I don't think she sees what we did for her like you and I do. She thinks that we took her away from something she wants to do even if it hurts her to do it. She doesn't see this us as trying to help her.”

“But we are!”

“I know, and our goal is for her to eventually realize that, but, Henry, it's not going to happen over night. There are going to be times during this…well whatever this is when all of us going to say things we might not mean. Your mom and I have a habit of pissing each other off pretty good.”

"Then don't let her."

"I can't always help myself," Emma admits dryly. "She's very good at pushing my buttons. And I'm very good at pushing hers. Maybe all things considered, that could be a good thing for us in the long run. All I'm saying is that it's going to take time to calm her down, and that's if we're lucky."

"We need to be better than lucky," he shoots back, his jaw set into a stubborn insistent line.

"More than just about anything in the world, I want to be what you want me to be, Henry. I want to be the person who can make this better for you, for me, and for Regina, but I'm not perfect."

"I don't need you to be perfect. I just need you to be who you are, Emma."

"The Savior?" she asks with a somewhat bitter edge to her voice.

"Yes, but it's not just that. You're the one person who sees my mom as more than just the Evil Queen. Even…even I didn't." His face contorts for a moment, and she thinks back to the conversation earlier that morning in the loft, the one where he'd taken on the blame for losing faith in Regina.

She wants to tell him that he's just a kid and shouldn't assume this kind of weight for himself, but a sharp look from him stops her cold. He doesn't want to hear excuses right now. He's Regina's son, and thus has no use for flowery statements meant to make him feel better. He wants results.

"Why me?" she asks. "Why am I the person you think can help her?"

He shrugs his shoulders. "You don't give up on anyone even if it's someone you don't really like. You were still willing to have faith in her. Everyone else gave up on her, but you didn't, Emma."

"Yeah, I did," Emma corrects.

"So did I. But now we make it better."

"I suppose that's why we're here, isn't it?" Emma squeezes his arm to reassure them, and then gives
him a playful push away from her. "Okay? Okay? Okay?" She's just about tickling him now, and the twelve-year-old in him can't help but laugh entirely too loud. It's music to her ears, heart and soul.

"Okay," he cries out as he backs away, still giggling. After a moment and several breaths, he glances down the street, towards the tidy row of stores. "So how are we going to do this shopping thing?"

"Well, first we're going to get food and supplies at the store over there, and then we will deal with your mom's clothes. You, uh, wouldn't happen to know what size pants she wears, would you?"

He frowns. "Why would I know that?"

"Right; that's pretty much what I figured," she replies with a dramatic sigh.

"You should have looked when we were back at the house with her."

Emma laughs aloud at this because somehow, she doesn't think Regina – who'd already been furiously accusing her of having some perverted ulterior agenda to the kidnapping – would have taken well to being asked about her clothing sizes. "Yeah, probably not a good idea," she admits.

Grocery shopping goes well enough.

Well, perhaps that's not exactly the right way to phrase it considering they both browse and buy like they're hyperactive kids on a sugar high (he at least has the excuse of actually being a child, while she's uncomfortably aware of the fact that she does not). There are entirely too many bags of potato chips and far too many boxes of powdered doughnuts thrown into the basket, but Emma tries to tell herself that it's all right to get this stuff because she remembered to buy bacon and eggs and milk.

For drinks, she buys several packs of bottled water, some caffeinated sodas, beer and wine and then tries to make it all better by grabbing some V8 juice because it's healthy and good for kids.

Even Henry gives her a mocking look for this thought. The V8 stays, though.

Things don't get really squirrely, however, until the two of them are standing in front of a rack of cotton and polyester button-up shirts at the women's clothing store that's tucked tightly in-between a men's shoe shop and the little German bakery that specializes in hot-from-the-oven muffins (Emma buys a few blueberry ones, the ones with the crunchie-munchies on top, of course).

"She likes black," Henry says finally, gesturing at a few such shirts. "And she likes silk. But I don't see any silk shirts here. There are some…ew, polyester. She doesn't like that; I know that much."

"Yeah. Unless we both want to end up dead, I think we're going to stay away from that. But, she's is going to have to make do with cotton," Emma answers, and then winces a bit and once again kicks herself for not having the presence of mind to pack a bag for Regina before they'd left the house.

Well, what's done is done and now there are cotton shirts to look at. For example, there's a bright pink one which makes her contort her face like she's about to throw up, and oh that green one. God,
it's going to be a miracle if Regina doesn't find a way to hurt both of them rather seriously for this.

Well, she won't hurt Henry, Emma assures herself. And yeah, sometimes maybe you do have to hide behind your son to get spared the wrath of a poorly dressed furious former Evil Queen. Bravely so even.

"So we'll get her a few black shirts," Emma says as she pulls one of them off the rack and gives it a look from both the front and the back. It's plain and has a nice cut to it, but it's ordinary, which isn't likely to please Regina one bit. Then again, she reminds herself, this is something of a magic/anger rehab and usually people in recovery don't get to wander around wearing designer labels.

Which is convenient considering this town doesn't actually have anything even vaguely designer in it. If she'd thought Storybrooke to be small and rather sleepy, Haydenport is downright comatose.

And that includes its commerce, which appears to be stuck in the idea that everyone should wear denim, flannel and fleece. Which is completely fine by her, but for Regina…yeah, not so much.

"Then what?" Henry prompts, reaching out to touch one of the polyester shirts. He scowls on contact, and immediately pulls his hand away like the fabric had burned him.

"Black slacks?" She suggests, knowing that she sounds as uncertain about this as she feels. "If we can maybe manage to find a pair that doesn't look more like cargo pants than slacks, that is."

"They all do," Henry notes, frowning as he peruses a stack of pants.

"Of course. Okay, so we'll figure that out in a minute. What other colors does she like besides black?"

"She wears red a lot."

"Red. Good. That's good. What shade of red does she like?"

He frowns. "I'm a boy, Emma. Red is red."

"You lived with her your whole life." It's almost a whine.

"Still a boy."

"Yeah, I'm getting that. Okay, fine, fine. We'll just…we'll grab her some pants, and maybe a few dark colored shirts. Probably need to get her something warm like a sweatshirt, too. Have you ever actually seen your mom wear a sweatshirt? Anything that looks vaguely comfortable? Ever?"

"No."

"What about jeans?"

"Never."

"Flannel?"

"Are you kidding me?"

"Right. Well, I guess there's a first time for everything."

He nods, and then wrinkles his nose as a thought comes flying into his head. He gestures over towards where the bras and underwear racks are. "What about under…stuff?"
"Under…stuff? Oh, you mean underwear," And suddenly Emma is as insanely uncomfortable about all of this as Henry is. Because she really hadn't thought about such things at all.

"Yeah."

Emma grunts in resignation. "I guess I can take care of that. You go pick out some shirts for her. Go with mediums for size, I think. And that dark red one, I like that color."

"It'll look good on her," Henry agrees, seeming grateful for the assignment.

Emma, on the other hand, gets the unenviable task of trying to figure out just what Regina might like to wear beneath her clothes.

Which, yeah…some days are just weird.

Regina hears the car pull up, and though she's utterly and completely exhausted and every part of her body now hurts thanks to her panicked and ultimately fruitless escape attempts, her pride forces her to sit up on the bed, and straighten her body out as much as she can manage. She hears her back pop and grind in protest, but through sheer force of will, she pushes a cold smile across her face.

"We're home," Emma calls out in an obnoxiously cheerful voice as the front door to the house swings opens. Regina hears the sound of two people entering, something getting dropped, and then someone – presumably Henry – racing back outside again. She assumes he's bringing in groceries.

Funny, she muses with more than a slight hint of bitterness, how much he'd always detested doing that back in Storybrooke; she'd always had to nudge, bully and harass him to get his help.

Now, though, for Emma…

She bites these thoughts back; she won't think badly of Henry.

"How was your time alone, Your Majesty?" Emma jokes as she steps into the room carrying two large brown bags full of clothing. Almost immediately, upon entering and seeing the slight damage to the metal bed-frame (two hours of pulling had bent the little bastard thing at least, and she supposes that's some kind of Pyrrhic victory), and then the bloody streaks running down Regina's arm, her eyes go wide. Almost panicked, Emma drops the bags and surges forward. "Jesus, what did you do to yourself, Regina?"

"Well, He did bleed from His hands," Regina quips, her dark eyes dancing maliciously, a kind of circling madness presenting itself. "And I am a higher power so I suppose that's appropriate."

"You're a higher idiot is what you are," Emma growls back, her lip curling up into a furious snarl. A voice in the back of her mind warns her that these are exactly the kinds of confrontations that she should be avoiding right now, but the part of her that Regina absolutely knows how to antagonize and annoy pushes her forward. "I told you not to pull on the cuffs. Why won't you ever listen?"

Regina laughs at this, the derision and disgust in the sound quite clear to Emma's ears. "Why would I ever listen to my kidnapper? Have you truly never watched a Lifetime movie, Sheriff? My job is to escape my captor, not wait around for them to do heinous and wanton things to me."
"Are you fucking serious?"

"Your language skills are, as always, atrocious; however, yes, Miss Swan, I am quite serious. You might even say deadly serious. And really, if you'd just wanted a little bit of action –"

"Knock it off," Emma snaps. "This isn't some game and you're not some misunderstood hero trying to escape…you know what, never mind. I'm not doing this with you tonight. I'm just not."

"Then what are we going to do tonight?" Regina mocks. "Just stare at each other?"

Emma forces herself to take a deep breath, placing her hands out in front of her body as if to steady herself. Finally, between teeth grit in frustration, "What we're going to do involves me cleaning up your self-inflicted injuries and then shoving alcohol down your throat until you stop being an ass."

Well, that wasn't what she'd meant to say at all, she realizes. Dammit.

Regina, however, seems darkly amused by her words. She chuckles and replies with, "That might be the worst plan I've ever heard, and considering it's you, Miss Swan, that's saying something indeed."

"Fantastic; now I'm getting criticized by the lunatic that I'm trying to help."

"Word of advice, dear," Regina offers dryly. "Continuously calling me a lunatic might not be as helpful to my so-called mental recovery as you might think. It might even trigger a few slightly homicidal feelings. And we wouldn't want that, now would we? Would defeat the grand quest."

"I said I wasn't doing this with you and I meant it. I'm going to go get a first aide kit and you're going to shut up for a few seconds so I can clean you up. That's what we're going to do here."

"I don't take orders from anyone. Especially not you."

Emma bites down hard on her lip, and then turns and exits the room.

Were Henry not moving in and out of the house with his arms full of groceries, Emma's quite certain she'd throw the mother of all tantrums right about now. It'd involve some kicking, punching and screaming. But then there's Henry racing back in, dropping another bag, and running back outside like the good son trying to do whatever is needed to assist to help one mom do right by the other.

Which means it's her job to do right by him.

Even if the other mother is irritating the crap out of her right about now.

First aide kit finally in hand, Emma sits beside Regina, who is still cuffed to the bed. She's on the mattress next to the Queen, her legs folded under her. Emma starts by focusing on the gnarly looking (but thankfully no more serious than she'd originally thought) head wound first, but the brunette most certainly isn't making it easy with all the moving around, grunting and twitching that she's doing.

Oh and there's swearing and cursing, too.

Apparently former Evil Queens don't have very clean mouths.

She blinks at the not quite appropriate implications of this, and then scolds herself for letting her mind stray to…strange places that make no sense.
Oh it's been a long day. Yeah, that's it.

"Hold still," Emma finally hisses because she's had just about enough of this, and she hasn't even gotten to the wrist yet. She tries to dab at the forehead wound again, but once more, Regina shifts.

"No," Regina answers defiantly.

"What are you? Five?" Emma snaps back. "I get it, all right? You are seriously pissed off about all of this. Well guess what, Regina, so am I. Instead of being back at home in my own bed watching TV, I'm here with you trying to help keep you from doing something completely batshit crazy."

"I didn't ask for your help," comes the angry response from the Queen. "Why don't you get that? I don't need your help and I sure as hell don't want it. Everyone else might consider you the Savior, but you're not my savior. So why don't we both save ourselves a lot of time and trouble. Let me go."

"You mean so you can return to Storybrooke and try to kill my mom again?"

"She killed mine!" Regina's eyes are shining darkly, furiously, but there are also tears in them, a sign of the ragged emotions running through her. "She made me kill mine. With my own hands."

"That doesn't justify another murder."

"Really? And if I had murdered your mother, if I had forced you to kill her in the same way your mother forced me to, would you think the same or would you want my blood in retribution."

"I don't know."

Regina blinks in surprise at the unexpected answer. She'd been anticipating the typical hero nonsense of how vengeance is always wrong, but then perhaps she'd forgotten the most interesting thing of all about Emma: no matter her lineage, she's still unpredictable and more gray than white.

"Unchain me," Regina says finally, thickly, her hands trembling more than a little bit. "I don't like being restrained." She could say more; she could explain exactly why it is that she panics at even the idea of being tied up or held down by anyone or anything, but she's hidden such nightmares away for so very long now that even if she wanted to speak of them (and she doesn't), she's not sure she could.

Emma studies the older woman's face, seeing both fear and exhaustion etched deep into the lines there. Regina is still beautiful in a way that's almost beyond description, but almost sadly so. And there's something about this whole situation with the cuffs that feels important, but Emma knows enough to understand that those kinds of answers won't be forthcoming until trust is somehow established between them.

So instead, "Are you going to try to hit me as soon as I do? Are you going to try to run again?"

"I have a hand free now, Miss Swan," Regina reminds her before wiggling around said hand (her weaker one, unfortunately). "If I wanted to hit you, I'd have already tried to do so. The hand that's restrained is – as you can well see – rather mangled at the moment. As for running, well, I think we both know that I couldn't get too far even if I wanted to in my poor condition. Release me."

"And you won't try to run away?" Emma asks once more.

"Not tonight." It's as much of a promise as Regina is willing to make or offer. Tomorrow – when perhaps she feels better and more like herself once again - is a different matter all together.
"I suppose that will have to be enough." Emma reaches into her pocket and extracts a key. A moment later, she's pulling the cuff off and gingerly lowering the wounded hand down. A close inspection shows several ugly bright red gashes and tears and a whole swath of skin that has been viciously scrapped away. "Nice work," she murmurs almost absently, frowning at the injuries.

"I don't like being restrained," Regina says again, snatching her wrist away and cradling it against her chest with her uninjured hand.

"So noted. So how about this: if you promise to give this thing we're doing a chance, I promise not to restrain you again. Can we make that deal?"

"Give what a chance? You've never told me what this is beyond saying that you're going to try to help me so that I don't kill your insipid mother."

"Okay, then allow me to introduce you to our plan. This is therapy 101," Emma answers with an almost endearingly awkward smile. "Also known as Magic and Anger rehab for former Evil Queens."

"Excuse me?"

"In this world, sometimes when someone has an addiction that they can't beat on their own or with 12 step programs, we can send them to a rehab center so that they can get more intense treatment."

Regina's shoulders square at this, and her chin lifts. "I am not –"

Emma cuts her off, "Look, I know you don't view yourself as an addict, and maybe that's because of the whole elemental magic thing. I get it, magic is part of who you are and has been for a very long time now, but even you have to admit, Regina that you have used it for some pretty awful things."

"I have used it to protect myself."

"You have used it to destroy yourself and everyone around you."

"This is ridiculous."

"Maybe it is or maybe it'll actually work if you give it a chance."

"How could it possibly? You're not a therapist, Emma," Regina snaps back, and neither comments on the familiar use of the blonde's name. "At least I gave Archie a degree with the curse. You? You're just a screwed up woman who has made as many mistakes as I have. Why should I listen to you?"

"Precisely because I have made as many mistakes as you have. I know exactly what it's like to be alone and angry and completely fucked up beyond all reason, Regina. Everyone in this world – everyone in Storybrooke – they think that because I'm their precious Savior that all I'm capable of is white light and sunny happiness, but we both know better. I've done things that I'm not proud of."

"So is this my therapy or yours, Swan?"

"Maybe it's both of ours," Emma confesses with a sigh. "I know you don't trust me. Well, I don't trust you, either. I do trust our son, though, and I trust that he believes in both of us, and wants both of us in his life. So, how about it? How about that deal? You don't run and I don't cuff you. Okay?"
"I have no free will, then?"

"Not to return to Storybrooke so you can burn the town down."

"And what if all I wanted to do was walk away from everything? If all I wanted to do was disappear into this world of yours and never be heard from again? Would you stop me if I tried to do that?"

"Are you actually considering that?"

"Some days, I think about it," Regina admits, no anger in her voice now, just a deep heavy weariness.

"Yeah, well, then, that's just another thing we have in common," Emma answers as she opens the first aide kit up again and starts extracting supplies. "Will you please let me clean up your wrist?"

"Only because I can't do it myself."

"I'll take that as a yes." Emma reaches for the wrist and begins to dab at it with an alcohol pad, gently trying to clean the blood away. After a moment she says, "For what it's worth, I'd hope that you wouldn't leave Henry like that; he would be devastated by your loss."

"I doubt that. And it would make all of your lives easier," Regina says; gritting her teeth to keep herself from crying out as Emma pushes down harder, trying to get the alcohol pad into the uglier part of one of the cuts. The blonde offers her a smile that seems vaguely apologetic, but keeps on digging in.

"You might think so, but you'd be wrong; no matter what you might think about yourself or your relationship with Henry, abandonment is never easier for anyone," Emma tells her, her head down.

"Again, Miss Swan, whose therapy is this?"

The two women lock eyes, holding the intense gaze for a moment before Emma looks back down at Regina's damaged wrist and mutters, "I hope you like red wine."
"Here," Emma drawls as she steps out onto the deck. She's holding a bottle of red wine and two already full glasses – plastic ones, Regina observes with annoyance showing on her face – in her hands. Warily, she offers one of them to Regina.

"Are there sleeping pills in there?" the former mayor asks with a lifted eyebrow. She's pulling her red blazer tight around her to shield against the fierce coastal night air, and her teeth keep making that loud chattering noise that broadcasts how cold she is fairly clearly. Emma briefly considers returning to grab one of the hoodies that she and Henry had purchased for Regina, but that's a fight for later.

"No," Emma answers dryly. "I'm not you; I don't drug or poison things." The words are pointed, and perhaps even hard, but Regina has shown an ability to not flinch away from the truth of her actions, and really, there isn't a lot of denying that back in her Evil Queen days (and even fairly recently with the cursed apple turnover that she'd given Emma), she'd done a whole lot of really bad things.

"Touché," Regina chuckles before taking the plastic glass, and holding it up so that it can catch the moonlight shining off the slightly clouded up material. She swirls the red liquid around within, enjoying the fluidity of it. "I'm wounded that you don't trust me enough to give me actual glass."

"No, you're not," Emma says as she sits down onto the patio chair next to the identical one that Regina is in. Their positions on the deck afford them each a gorgeous and unobstructed view of the ocean and the rising and crashing tides down by the dark shoreline. "It's been a long day, and I know damned well that you don't want to be here. I'm not about to give you a weapon to use on me. And I think if our positions were reversed here, we both know you'd be thinking the same way that I am."

"I'm mildly impressed; you can actually manage to think more than a step or two ahead," Regina says, her eyes on the water.

"You have no idea," Emma murmurs noncommittally, allowing her eyes to follow Regina's to the waterline. For a few minutes, all they do is watch the tide come and go.

Turbulent and affected by so many things.

It's about ten at night, and Henry's been in bed for the last hour or so, having finally crashed into the pillows of the couch in the living room thanks to the long day that he'd been a crucial part of. Working together to carry his not-quite-as-light-as-it-used-to-be body to the bed in the room that the boy had chosen for himself had been the only time all night that the two women had managed not to snark and snap at each other. That time has now passed them by, apparently.

And for good reason, too, Regina thinks. Emma's right; she doesn't want to be here. She doesn't need to be here. She needs to be back taking care of Snow White.
Avenging her mother's murder.

Evening the scales.

Anywhere but here with this self-righteous arrogant woman.

Frowning, Regina lifts the plastic wine glass up with her uninjured hand and brings it to her mouth. The fluid inside is a deep almost blood red, but the smell is at best quite stale and bland, and she really isn't expecting much from the taste. The bottle the alcohol had come in had been wearing a label of some vineyard from California, and she'd be shocked if it had cost more than ten dollars.

"Cheers," she hears Emma say from beside her. She spares a glance over at the sheriff, who is holding up a glass of her own. She'd never picked the blonde for much of a wine drinker, and perhaps were she not so annoyed by this whole situation, she might even be touched by the gesture of picking this instead of something like beer or ale or even some kind of cheap wine cooler.

Right now, though, she's thinking it'd been a good decision on Emma's part to have the wine-glasses be made of plastic as opposed to actual glass because had they been made of the latter, she's certain that she would have already broken it into tiny sharp shards and put it against the sheriff's throat.

Perhaps even drawn some blood. Maybe even killed the idiotic presumptuous arrogant woman.

Yes. She might have done that, indeed, Regina tells herself with a smirk.

"Something funny?" Emma asks just before the glass gets to her lips.

"Nothing that would amuse you," Regina answers before taking a sip. Almost immediately, she scowls at the taste. "Where did you find this? The dollar discount bin?"

"I'm surprised you even know what one of those is."

"I had your mother shopping at one for thirty years; of course I know," Regina shoots back.

"Right. Well, this particular bottle came from the grocery story here in town. Sorry, there weren't exactly a lot of options," Emma shrugs before taking a quick not exactly lady like swig of her own. It occurs to Regina as she watches Emma knock back the wine that this is a woman far more used to whiskey and vodka. It's really no surprise that she doesn't have a clue how to pick out wine.

"You couldn't have managed to grab a few bottles from my wine cellar while you were kidnapping me?" Regina queries, eyebrow lifted. Her tone makes the question sound almost humorous, but Emma knows better; this isn't exactly a trap, but nor is it an opening for further deep conversation.

"I suppose I was a bit more preoccupied with ensuring you couldn't turn me into a toad."

"You needn't have worried; I'm not a fan of turning people into toads," the brunette assures her with a low throaty malicious sounding chuckle. "A rabbit on the other hand, that might have been a distinct possibility. I know your wolf friend likes to eat those during her time of the month."

"That's actually pretty damned disturbing, Regina. And considering it's you and you just gloated about screwing with my mother, that's saying something," the blonde snaps back, looking queasy.

"Touch a nerve did I, Miss Swan?"

"No, you're just being a jerk."
"Did you actually expect me to be welcoming of this little ill-conceived adventure of yours?"
Regina replies with a raised eyebrow. "Because if you did, then you really are more like your idiot parents than I'd realized. Which, well, we all end up falling from the same tree eventually, don't we?"

"Does everything go back to them with you, Regina?"

"Your mother at the very least. Almost every tragedy that I've ever experienced has her oily entitled fingerprints all over it," the brunette woman answers, her tone suddenly strangely emotionless. She brings the wine glass back to her lips and takes another sip, but this time, she doesn't comment on the terrible taste, just stares straight ahead towards the rushing and rising water. There's an odd blankness to her dark eyes as she gazes out, a practiced form of apathy that doesn't ring true.

Not anymore anyway.

"Yeah, well, I'm not here because of them."

"Aren't you? This is all about keeping Snow White safe."

"It's not."

"Then what is it about?" Regina demands, turning her head towards Emma. "Henry?"

Emma pauses for a moment, considering her response. She could tell the truth, she could tell Regina that the kidnapping had all been Henry's idea, but something inside of her suggests that perhaps what Regina really needs right now is someone else besides her son on her side. And so she lies.

"I want to help you."

"So you've said. And my question – still unanswered, I might add - remains the same. Why would you want to help me? What's in it for you? And don't you dare lie to me and say nothing because we both know the world doesn't work that way for people like us."

"People like us. What does that mean, Regina? Who exactly are people like us?"

The brunette opens her mouth to answer, but suddenly feeling as though she's already said too much, she clamps it shut again.

Emma sighs, recognizing the shutdown. "Well, whoever we are, I think we can help each other."

The sentiment is so nauseatingly hopeful – and so utterly un-Emma like- that the words actually make Regina's teeth grind and ache. "Are you being intentionally obtuse, Miss Swan or are you just trying to test my patience enough to see if I can find a way to make my magic work even out here."

"Well, if you can make it work out here, I'm pretty well screwed, aren't I?" the blonde chuckles.

Regina smiles at this, and it's a cold enough smile to make Emma want to squirm in her seat. Want being the operative word because she's never been good at letting others see her weaknesses.

Even – perhaps especially - Regina.

She decides to change the focus of the conversation, tries to momentarily de-escalate it. She
glances over at Regina's glass, noticing that it's empty. She considers making a comment about how the brunette had powered through the admittedly foul tasting alcohol, but instead goes with, "Refill?"

"Trying to get me drunk, are you?"

"Absolutely. Maybe you'll knock out like a light and I won't have to worry about whether or not you'll be here in the morning," Emma replies, shrugging her shoulders in the infuriatingly nonchalant way that only she truly can. She lifts the bottle up again in offer. "So, how about it? Sleep city?"

"Mm. I can handle my liquor." She lifts up the glass and lets Emma refill it.

"I imagine you can," Emma says, intentionally attempting to keep her tone somewhat light even if her words are anything but light. "Forty – or was it more like fifty - years of drinking will do that."

"Are you calling me an alcoholic?"

"Well, you do make the stiffest drinks in town," the blonde reminds her, the both of them taking a moment to think about a man long buried now. It causes tension to flow through Emma, even anger.

But that's for later.

Not right now.

Eventually.

Regina turns again to stare back out at the beach, watching as the tide brings in several branches and deposits them on the shore. When the water rushes back out once more, it leaves the debris behind.

Unwanted. Unneeded.

She takes another sip. And then another.

Finally, "What do you think is going to happen here at this fancy little beach house of yours, Miss Swan? Do you think that we'll chat a bit, maybe even cry in each others' arms some and then I won't want your mother dead? Is that how you think things will go? Because frankly, Swan, despite all of your obnoxious habits and characters traits, one I have never attributed to you is gross naivety."

"Like I said, Regina, we're not here because of my mother. At least not just because of her." There's a a pause and then gently, "We're also here because of your mother and what she did to you."

If the glass were real, it'd have shattered in Regina's hand, breaking into a thousand tiny poisonous shards. Instead, her fingers tighten around the stem, knuckles white. "She did nothing to me."

"This discussion is over," the former mayor growls, tears stinging her eyes.

"Okay, then how about we try a different discussion. Something easier, maybe. How about you tell me about one happy memory from your childhood. Just one," Emma suggests with a smile.

It's another attempt to bring things down a bit, but Regina isn't playing. "To what end? Are you just
throwing darts now? Could you have maybe read a book about therapy before starting this fiasco?"

Emma clenches her fists and then releases them. "No, I just thought maybe it'd be a good idea to try to find a way to communicate with each other," she grits out. "You know, try to maybe get along."

"And if I have no real desire to get along with you? Or to communicate in any way with you?"

"Your choice completely, but I'll tell you mine if you'll tell me yours."

"How very juvenile."

"If you say so," Emma answers almost lazily, leaning back and slumping against the chair. "Or if you want, we can both just crash out for the night and try to do this all over again in the morning."

"You really do believe that you'll eventually wear me down, don't you?"

"You of all people know that I'm stubborn like that," Emma answers almost lazily, leaning back and slumping against the chair. "Or if you want, we can both just crash out for the night and try to do this all over again in the morning."

"I think not," Regina answers stiffly, and there's something in her eyes that says that it's about more than just being bullheaded. Maybe it's about wondering if there's a memory that exists within her troubled and tormented mind that isn't somehow tainted by all of the terrible horrors of her past.

Emma nods her head, and if she's a little bit relieved, she doesn't say as much. If she's a bit thankful not to have to speak of her own tragedy and sadness tainted childhood memories, well that's something she keeps to herself. For now, at least. She knows this conversation will come up again.

Because part of therapy is repeating themes and consistency.

And the other part is all about working out the pain.

She might not have read a book on this before starting this adventure, but well…she's not inexperienced when it comes to talking to counselors and sponsors; she has her own stories.

It's too early for these kinds of thoughts and admissions, however, and though she's not sorry to have started the ball rolling on this…fiasco as Regina had called it moments ago, Emma had known from the very beginning that the chance of early success would be limited and even unlikely.

Regina has to accept the need for help first.

She's not there yet.

"Well, it's a nice place to hang out for awhile, anyway," Emma says after a few long minutes of deeply uncomfortable silence have passed between the two of them. "This house, I mean."

"Certainly beyond your means," Regina comments and the words are meant to be cruel and dismissive; they're meant to cut deep and to wound, but she sounds so very tired. Enough so that the comment is more a scratch than a bite, and Emma barely feels the pain.

"Absolutely," the blonde concurs. Then, and without knowing why she's admitting it, she adds, "Let's just say that I once helped out someone who has bank accounts that make yours look…pathetic."

Regina snorts at this.
"No, seriously; the guy who owns this place – and about seven other houses just like this one - is the very definition of filthy rich."

"Based on the lovely and decidedly non bacheloresque decor of this house, I'm going to guess that your 'friend' is married to a woman with actual style. Former lover of yours, I presume, then?"

Emma purses her lips, but the slight ticking in her jaw gives away her shame.

"Ah. And is allowing us to stay in this house for however long you plan to continue this ridiculous stunt some kind of blackmail associated repayment for you having kept your mouth shut about this tawdry affair of yours?" She doesn't wait for the reply which she knows isn't coming before adding on in a satisfied tone that is openly judgmental, "At least now I understand where the filthy part comes in."

"I think that's the second time today that you've called me a whore."

"You certainly seem to make the kind of bad choices that justify such a term," Regina replies, the brutal snap of her words obvious. "Rumple's worthless deviant of a son and your married friend."

Emma doesn't reply. Anything she would say would be defensive and angry, and she has to be the bigger person because she knows exactly what Regina is doing. The former mayor is simply trying to push her away. Make her give up and walk away as everyone else in Regina's life has always done.

But Emma vows that that's not going to happen no matter how much her legs twitch to move.

Regina, however, takes the silence as admission of a direct hit having been scored upon the blonde sheriff's ego. She nods her head, grinning coldly. "And there we go. Once again, it seems as though you're the one who needs therapy to sort through your myriad of issues, Miss Swan. You, not me."

"Whatever you say, Regina. Either way, we're going to be here awhile."

"And if I never agree to cooperate with your ridiculous therapy nonsense?"

"How many different ways do you have to call this plan of mine terrible?"

"I actually have an above seventh grade vocabulary so quite a few."

"I'm sure we'll have more than enough time to get through all of them" Emma retorts. "And if you insist on not working with me, things could get damned boring around here pretty damned fast."

"I've spent the last several months practically sealed away in my mansion, Miss Swan. All so that I could make people who hate me be willing to tolerate me. I understand boredom far better than you can even imagine. If you think that I'll get restless and just start talking, you'll be waiting awhile."

"Maybe, but you know what I really think, Regina?"

"Oh, this should be delightful. Go on; please, tell me what you're thinking."

Emma smiles thinly at the obvious mockery, but doesn't let it throw her off course. Not when this matters so much. "What I think is that there's a part of you – maybe even a big part – that actually welcomes having someone to talk to finally. I think if you'd actually let down your guard just a little bit and realize that I have no ulterior motive to helping you besides wanting to help you –"
"You mean wanting to keep your mother alive."

"Fine, if it means so damned much to you to have me say it, then yeah, I'll admit that I'd very much prefer you not go on a murderous rampage, but if that was all I wanted, do you really think I'd be putting my own life on hold for you? Do you really think I'd have brought Henry here if that was it?"

Regina doesn't bother replying because honestly, she has no good answer for why the sheriff is doing what she's doing. It frankly makes not a damned bit of sense.

"Exactly," Emma nods, deciding that the Queen's inability to respond means that she won that one. "Regina, back in Storybrooke, you were a bad-ass and pretty much no one could take you down, but out here, well I know this world, and if I wanted you to disappear, I could make that happen."

"Is that a threat?" Regina demands, straightening up in her chair. Her fingers flex even though there's no magic within them. She thinks that if necessary, she could still try to fight.

But that's not what Emma wants.

That's not what this is about.

"No, it's me trying to convince you that the reason we're here is honestly because…"

"I'm tired," Regina interrupts suddenly, because she really is worn out, and she has no desire to hear any more about this whole therapy nonsense. She's not interested in being saved from herself.

There's only one thing she wants right now and that's to find a way out of this idiotic situation.

"Okay, fine. We can talk more tomorrow."

"I think I liked you a whole lot better before you were a Charming," Regina snarls, her tone sharply derisive. "You didn't think everything in the world could be fixed with a conversation and a hug."

"I still don't," Emma assures her. "But I do know that people like us, Regina, get to where we are because we don't have anyone willing to let us be angry without condemning us for it. You're pissed at everyone and everything. I get it, okay? I really do. You're pissed, and you have the right to be. That doesn't mean you let go and let everything burn down around you. There are better ways."

"And you of all people know those ways?"

"I've never cursed a whole land to Maine or ripped out hearts and stored them away in creepy little boxes inside an even creepier vault, but I'm also no saint. I have some experience with fucking up pretty badly. I also have some experience with somehow managing to find my way back to the right decision, too."

"Lucky me," comes the response. Regina stands, wincing as she puts her injured hand out to steady herself after two glasses of wine. Without commenting on the pain that she feels, she turns and heads inside. After a moment and one last glance at the ocean, Emma follows.
magic left within the Evil Queen. Sure, the line of Storybrooke is supposed to be the cutoff, and Gold certainly hadn't been able to pull anything forth, but Hook had gotten his ship to New York so…

And besides, none of that compares to trying to make Regina Mills sleep in flannel pants and a tee shirt. This is a woman who wears silk. It's optimistic to assume that once Regina sees the bag of rather pedestrian clothes that Henry and Emma had picked out for her, she won't lose her temper.

Which means it's time to get the show on the road.

Stalling…is pointless.

"What's this?" Regina asks as Emma drops two bags in front of her. The former queen is sitting on the bed, her wounded hand resting limply in her lap, the other one lightly atop it. There's blood on the bandages suggesting to Emma that the dressings need to be refreshed, but well, first things first.

"I forgot to pack for you," Emma admits. "Clothes, I mean. I forgot to grab a bag for you."

"Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately," Emma admits with a small awkward smile. "It's the kind of ridiculous look that only works on this woman, and for the life of her, Regina can't figure out why she's not already trying to rip the blonde's face off for the humiliation and disrespect of this entire situation. "On the upside," Emma continues, that smile still there. "At least this means that I didn't go through your drawers."

"And on the downside?"

"You're probably going to hate everything. Henry and I grabbed some things for you at the local department store or whatever it is." She motions to the bags. "Our options were pretty limited."

"Is there a reason you mentioned Henry assisting you besides perhaps a poor attempt to try to hide behind a child?" Regina demands, making no move to look within the bags. Not yet, anyway.

"Not really, no," Emma admits.

Regina spares her one more decidedly cutting look, and then finally reaches forward and dips her hand into the closest bag to her. Slowly, with disgust on her face, she starts extracting the clothing article by article. There are a couple of semi nice darkly colored blouses and a pair of completely ordinary black slacks, but beyond that, it's almost all the kind of stuff that Emma would wear.

Flannel and denim. Hoodies and tee-shirts.

"Sorry," Emma says simply.

"You actually expect me to wear these things?" She holds up a flannel shirt. "They look like something a vagrant would wear." She glances up at Emma and then adds, "No offense, dear."

"Of course not, but you know what? If you're so gung-ho on looking like a Queen or a Mayor or whatever you want to be, you could always wear what you have on now…indefinitely. Or, you could take the mighty stick out of your royal ass and remember that we are on the beach and you have been freezing for the last hour and a half. That shirt that you're looking at like it's a dirty rag – or even the hoodie that's right under your hand – either would have kept you warm and those flannel pants will certainly do that tonight. So yes, I expect you to wear them. Or don't. I don't really care, Regina."
"You find this amusing, don't you?"

"If by amusing, you mean terrifying, then yes, I guess I do." After a moment - and realizing that she'd done exactly what she's spent most of the night trying not to do and lost her temper - she sighs. "I swear, Regina, this was an honest mistake on my part and not some attempt to humiliate you. I wanted to get you out of town before you woke up and I screwed the pooch. I am sorry for this."

"Screwed the pooch. Well, I certainly couldn't have said it better myself," Regina comments, unwilling to give even an inch as her eyes continue to roam across the coarse fabric of the flannel pants that she's now holding in her uninjured hand. They're purple and black, and definitely oversized. She'll practically swim in them, she's certain.

"They'll look good on you," Emma assures her.

"About as good as any of your too-tight rags look on you."

Emma chuckles in response, her lip quirking into an odd satisfied smile. This kind of banter between them, she knows and is even comfortable with. "And there it is. Knew it was coming eventually. So, are you going to wear the clothes your son picked out for you or are you going to sleep in slacks?"

"Using Henry again. You really are a coward," Regina snaps back.

"I'm a well-meaning coward," Emma replies, the infuriating grin growing.

Regina doesn't seem to find the humor implied in the statement. Instead, she shakes her head. "Live as long as I have, Swan, and you'll realize that there's no such thing as a well-meaning anything."

"I hope that's not true," Emma answers softly, becoming quite serious.

"It is. But yes, I suppose I'll wear these…things for tonight. I don't wish to freeze before I figure a way to end this charade."

"That's the spirit," Emma responds; relieved that the blowout that she'd been expecting has since been downgraded to a bout of royal pissiness instead. Apparently, there's something to be said for exhausting someone before you tell them news that would normally make them blow their top.

"Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to take a shower and clean all of the dirt and grime of your attempt to kill me off of me. That is, unless you plan to to shower with me. Am I allowed to do that on my own or will I need a chaperon for that as well?" Regina asks suddenly, interrupting her thoughts.

"I wasn't attempting to kill you; you ran, and I followed," Emma reminds her, sounding impatient and irritated. "But no, I wasn't planning on doing it…you know what, never mind." Seeming somewhat oddly flustered, she waves her hand in the air. "Go ahead and shower. Just yell for me when you're done so that I can clean up your wrist one more time before we sack out for the night."

"I don't imagine if I told you I could do it myself that you'd listen."

"You're more than welcome to try to do whatever you want to try," Emma sighs. "I'm done fighting with you for tonight so if you'd like to re-wrap your wrist on your own, have at it." And with that, she steps away from the door and exits the room, shutting the door behind her.

Once she's gone, the former mayor dips her uninjured hand back into the second brown paper bag
and extracts a plastic package.

Underwear.

She scowls.

They're white and cotton and she's pretty damned sure that they sell five of these for three dollars down at the store at the end of Main Street back in Storybrooke.

Not that she'd ever been caught dead wearing them.

And yet now, unless she plans to wear and wash the ones she currently has on indefinitely….

She grinds her teeth, then wills herself to find calm. She takes a deep shuddering breath, and reminds herself that she just needs to stay in control long enough to figure a way out of this ridiculous mess.

And she will.

No matter the cost.

It's around two in the morning when she wakes up shaking from a dream that leaves her mind even before her eyes open. Her body is weary, and just about every part of her aches or burns or even in some places actively hurts. Her head is pounding, and her wrist is seething with pain. She lifts it up and looks at the bandages. They're sloppy and once again bloodstained. She thinks that she probably should have let Emma assist her, but then forcefully shoves the unwanted thought away.

She doesn't want that woman touching her in any way.

She sits up in the bed, and winces as her tired muscles protest. After a long moment, she's able to stand. She makes her way to the bathroom, does what needs to be done and then steps over to the sink to wash her hands. A look up and into the mirror makes her stop cold. What she sees there is the face of a broken and lost woman who has badly lost her path. She sees a fallen queen who exists on little more than the toxic fumes of her anger and pain. Her eyes are dark and hollow, her skin waxy and unusually pale. The cut on her forehead, cleaned out but left open to the air is red and bold.

It's this place, she tells herself. It's being removed from her magic by violent force and by the will of another.

It's Emma Swan.

She feels red-hot corrosive rage tear through her entire body like a surging fire through a forest full of dry trees. Her fists clench as she plays the last few hours of humiliation back in her mind. It's not the ridiculous clothing – though she's annoyed to see the reflection of herself wearing the oversized flannel pants and a gray tee shirt – it's the arrogance of the blonde to believe that she has the right to refuse a queen her freedom.

Bad enough that the woman has already stolen Henry away, worse that she'd destroyed the curse, but stepping in the way of vengeance?
A step too far.

Regina tells herself that she doesn't want to be saved, couldn't be saved anyway.

She wants to make Snow pay and then whatever comes after that be as it's meant to be.

If that means death by mob and at the end of swinging rope, then so be it. It'll be worth it, she tells herself.

For Daniel. For Father. For Mother.

She has a right to this.

If she had magic within her right now, her eyes would be glowing purple beneath the weight of her anger. She can feel it streaking through her heart, gripping and pulling and devouring. The voice in her head which begs her to not to give into these feelings is shoved backwards, denied once more.

She thinks of an innocent young woman pulling a child from a racing horse.

She thinks of sweet Daniel falling to the ground, his once beautiful and full of hope eyes forever staring vacantly ahead. (The voice in her head asks where Cora is in this scene, but she ignores it).

She thinks of Snow handing her a box with a heart. Mother's heart.

The fury within her grows.

She looks around at her magic-free prison – this little room which screams of bland unaffected normalcy - and decides that it will hold her no more.

She's leaving, she decides.

Tonight.

Right now.

But not before she ensures that no one will ever again stand between her and her unquestionable right to extract vengeance.

Never again will she be denied what is rightfully hers to have.

She steps out of the bathroom and walks to the closed door of the bedroom. After Emma had exited the room earlier in the evening, Regina had waited for the lock to be engaged, her heart suddenly pounding in her chest hard enough to actually be frightening as she'd remembered many nights of Leopold imprisoning her within her chambers in order to keep her from going out into the world.

Those nights had led to her mental destruction, and eventually to his death.

This time, though, the sound of a door being locked never comes.

Stupid silly woman, she'd thought of Emma at the time. She thinks that now, too.

Regina opens the door slowly, and thankfully it neither creaks nor squeaks. She steps out into the hallway, coming up to one of the rooms. A look inside and she sees Henry sleeping soundly, curled onto his side, face in the pillow.

Good.
She doesn't want him awake for this. She stalls for a moment, wondering how she will ever explain this to him. How will he ever forgive her for it?

She can make him, she tells herself. There are ways.

That her heart aches and breaks at even the thought of forcing his love is something which she chooses to ignore as she closes the bedroom door, moving away from the son she so adores.

She walks into the kitchen and looks around. It takes her only a moment to find the knives, and then she's pulling out one large enough and sharp enough to do its duty quickly. She *hates* Emma – she does, she insists – but she sees no reason to make the woman suffer more than is necessary.

Strange considering all that Emma has taken from her. Such mercy is unwarranted, Regina thinks as she stares down at the knife. Emma deserves nothing but pain and tremendous suffering for all that she has so easily destroyed. She's Snow White's wretched daughter. That alone is reason to suffer. And to die.

So why then does she insist on providing the blonde sheriff a quick death?

She chooses to let these troubled thoughts slide away. They don't matter.

She makes her way back down the hall and steps into Emma's room. The door had been left open, presumably so that she could react quickly to any kind of unexpected situation that could arise.

Something like this.

She's sleeping now, and as Regina approaches the bed, knife lifted high up in the air as if ready to strike, Emma does no more than roll from her side onto to her back, her eyes still closed. Her gray tee-shirt covered chest is rising and falling gently, seemingly easy dreams rocking her back and forth.

Not that Regina would know the feeling; she has few of these types of dreams.

She suspects that she'll have even fewer after tonight.

She licks her lips and steps closer, her hand tightening on the handle. She wonders when she'd become this person – someone who murdered like this.

She reminds herself that she has been this kind of darkness for a very long time.

It's why she's not worth saving. It's why she can never be saved.

She wonders, then, why she's not doing anything to end Emma's life – end it and get this horror show over with. But she's just standing above Emma. Standing. Waiting. Doing nothing.

The dark voices inside of her – the anger – rages at her, demands blood.

She closes her eyes. She opens them again.

Emma sleeps on.

One voice reminds her of what this woman has taken from her and tells her to stop acting like a child incapable of taking what she wants. The voice is all too familiar to Regina and she thinks that there was probably a time when she would have called it mother and shrunk far away from it.

Another voice steps forward, moving in front of Mother. It reminds her of all that she has taken
from Emma. It reminds her of the broken and unhappy life that the blonde has led. It bluntly reminds her of all of the pain Emma has suffered and the very many ways that they are more alike than unalike.

_People like us._

Her wounded hand trembles. She lifts it and puts it over her mouth just before a sob breaks forth, spitting forward from her in a strangled gasp. She staggers backwards then and roughly—loudly—hits the far wall, dropping to her butt a few moments later, the knife still grasped tight.

_Whoever we are, we can help each other._

She thinks of a lover who had become a dragon. She thinks of righteously furious headhunting mobs. She thinks of screaming soul-sucking wraiths and wells filled with painful green magic.

She thinks of Henry and his arms around her.

And then she looks up and sees Emma watching her. Sleepy, but aware.

Apparently awake the whole time.

Her eyes are bright and full of understanding and empathy instead of the anger and hatred Regina expected to see. There's no pity reflected back at her from the blonde, and that's just about enough to make her stomach seize violently at the thought of what she'd just been about to do to Emma.

The knife falls from Regina's hand, hitting the carpet with a soft thud.

"Are you ready now?" Emma asks, her voice so soft.

Regina closes her eyes, tears streaking down her face. When she speaks, the single word she says is almost inaudible, little more than a gasped whisper, a kind of desperate confession.

"Yes."
Interlude I

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Non graphic implications of marital rape (Regina) as well as attempted rape (Emma as a prisoner).

Interlude I.

She should get up and get out of this room, Regina thinks as panic and anger settles over her mind just before they coldly bury themselves deep within her gut. The anger fades away quickly – she's tired, and lacks the energy for the passion of it – replaced by a flushing shame, but the panic seems to grow.

She tries to breathe, tries to collect herself.

"You okay?" Emma asks; she doesn't reply, just keeps breathing.

Silence surrounds them - just the sound of breathing letting them know that they're both still here. After a long moment of this, Emma sighs loudly. Sheets crinkle and shift as the blonde moves within them, reaching down to pull a heavy quilt across her flannel and cotton clad body as she does so. The window across from the bed is open, blowing in the cold crisp ocean air.

Regina glances at her briefly before turning to stare out at the open window for a long moment, wondering absurdly if she could get through it without being stopped by the blonde woman who is still carefully watching her. Her eyes drift to the knife and she almost laughs because really, how much further can one fall than this? She supposes it's something of a win that the panic is finally receding, but it's a small one indeed. Because panic attacks are for children and not former Evil Queens with black hearts and red hands.

She's the one who finally speaks first, and it chafes at her that she is because her entire life has been about recognizing, achieving and then maintaining power and control, and right now, she clearly has neither of those things. Still, the words spill out, "I should…"

And then she stops abruptly because she has no idea what she should do.

Run? Hide? Rage?

Curl into a ball and sob?

No, those are all things that people who are allows to surrender their pride without consequence are allowed to do. But she's a woman who been born and raised to think of everything besides power as weakness.

She falls back against the wall with a grunt of pain and frustration. Her head is pounding like a jackhammer again, and with it, her damaged wrist begins to ache anew. Her eyes flicker back up towards Emma, who is gazing at her with an unreadable almost neutral expression. Regina imagines that it's supposed to be a look free of judgment, but honestly, they're well past that point now.
Once someone has kidnapped you because they're pretty damned sure that if they don't do it, you'll go on a murderous rampage, well judgment free is pretty much out the window. And the worst of it is that deep down, Regina knows that Emma had been right in both her timing and her assumptions.

Just like she'd apparently been right in assuming that the former mayor wouldn't hack her to death with a kitchen knife.

One more look over at Emma, and this time it's the blonde who looks away from her.

Normally, Regina might consider this to be the smallest of victories, but the sheriff manages to win this battle, too, by laying her head against the pillow and closing her eyes as if to fall back asleep. As if to suggest that she's not the least bit scared of the woman sitting across from her against the wall.

It's an insult.

It's the truth.

She hears the blankets move and realizes that yeah, it's a bit cold in here.

She takes a deep breath, and then after a moment, follows suit, allowing her eyes to slowly slide shut. Just for a second, she tells herself without a shred of actual confidence in her thoughts.

Long enough to catch her breath and get her bearings.

And then she'll recover both her sanity and her composure.

And her dignity.

That, too.

Yes, that, too.

And once she has it, she'll get up and walk out of this room, her head held high. That's what she'll do.

That's what she'll…

She sleeps.

She dreams.

She's eighteen and so very young and innocent.

So very naive and foolish. Still so hopeful, and willing to believe that she can survive a deal with the devil just long enough to find a way to win back her happy ending.

To win back her happiness.

She's wearing her wedding gown, a dress so white and beautiful that it'd made an old woman at the ceremony quite literally swoon. It's so terribly elegant and regal.
So very perfect.

Worthy of a Queen.

Regina hates it with everything inside of her.

Almost as much as she hates the massive bed that she's now sitting on.

Sitting and waiting.

She looks at her hand and sees the wedding ring that sits upon her finger. She notices, then, that her hands are shaking fiercely. She clenches them into fists. Not of anger, but of fear, and then feels like a child for such silly emotions; Mother would be appalled.

Ah, but Mother is no longer here.

And suddenly Regina rather wishes that she was.

Not that Mother would stop this, she thinks bitterly, but perhaps she could help?

No. No.

She wouldn't.

Because it was Mother who had delivered her to this terrible place.

A place where she finds her reassuring herself that she's doing all of this – that she's waiting for a man whom she loathes with every breath she takes - for a very good reason. She tells herself that she just needs to survive this. She tells herself that she can survive this. It's just a simple act.

She hears Mother scoffing and saying, "It's just sex, Regina; it means nothing."

Nothing. Nothing at all.

Her fingernails dig into the soft flesh of her palms, creating perfect little crescents of pain. She thinks of her beloved Daniel. In her mind, he's simply sleeping. Just waiting for her to have enough magic to be able to wake him up. Her imagination is strong and hopeful, and she believes…she believes.

And yet beneath it all, there are doubts. Ugly and dark and festering.

Like what she has begun to feel for Snow. She's sickened by these feelings.

Horrified.

And yet she can't seem to stop them or the dreams that have come with them. Dreams that have only seemed to get worse ever since she'd followed the imp's advice...suggestion...whatever...and sent her mother through the mirror. No. Don't think of that, she tells herself. Just don't.

Focus on Daniel. On happiness. On freedom.

She just needs to hold out and stay strong for a little bit longer, she thinks.

If she can, if she can do what she needs to do, everything will be all right. Then, everything will be as it should always have been. She'll be with Daniel and she will be happy. They will both be happy.
And yet when the doubts and fears surge up within her, she can't help but wonder if he'll forgive
her for what she's about to do. For what she's about to give up to a man that she has no interest in.

She wonders if he'll understand that once you (or your mother, in this case) says "yes" to a King,
you don't actually get the option of saying "No" to him ever again. Humiliating a monarch is
something that always leads to immense pain and suffering. Sometimes even violent death. This is
a reality that both of her parents have drilled into her, one that she doesn't even begin to doubt for
a moment.

But that doesn't mean that once she has a very much alive and healthy Daniel back in her arms,
and once her magic is strong enough to protect them both, that she doesn't plan to run.

Run away and start over somewhere far away from this nightmare.

If that means finding a way to cross realms to find some kind of peace, then that's what she'll do.

Daniel will understand, she tells herself.

She closes her eyes, feeling her heart hammering away within her chest.

The door to the room opens suddenly, and she lets out a soft gasp of surprise, her body jumping at
the same time as her eyes widen. She watches with undisguised fear (fear which will very likely be
mistaken as simply the nerves of a young bride) as her new – and very much unwanted - husband
enters the chamber. He's drunk and smiling, and she wonders what must be going on in his mind.

She wonders if he's thinking of his former wife, his great love.

She wonders if he's thinking about his new Queen at all or if he's envisioning a different woman
entirely. His eyes are glassy and distant, but he's still smiling in a way that makes her heart sink.

"My Queen," he slurs, stepping towards her, hand outstretched.

She tries to stand, but her legs refuse her the dignity of such. "My Lord," she stammers, the words
just barely forcing themselves forward. She thinks of telling him that she's tired or sick or...well,
anything. In the end, she says nothing, though, just stares back at him with wide pleading eyes.

Because she knows that there's no way out of this now.

There's only the desperate hope that all of this will mean something one day.

He touches her face, and try as she might, she can't help herself from moving her cheek away. If he
notices, though, if he feels the way she shakes and hears the way she breathes, he doesn't speak of
it. If he sees the fear in her eyes, this, too, he pays no mind to. She's his wife, and this is her duty.

He kisses her, and her skin begins to crawl as his taste invades her mouth – cloyingly sweet
alcohol on her lips and tongue now. Tears forms in her eyes, and one even falls down her cheek.
His hands grip at her body, roaming and touching – possessing in a way that no other person ever
has.

She tries desperately to think of Daniel – tries to make it Daniel who is doing this to her instead of
Leopold - but as her beautiful white dress is pushed from her body, Regina finally realizes that
there are some things that you can't make better with just a little bit of bright imagination and
hope.
She dreams.

She's eighteen years old and sitting by herself on an uncomfortable chair in the far back of the library. She's not much of a reader, but this is the one place here that she can actually get lost in. People rarely look for her here unless it's time for her to be somewhere else. Like back in her cell.

She's flipping through a thirty-year-old book about the causes of World War 2, her eyes scanning over words that her brain refuses to absorb (until she's asleep, anyway; she dreams of the oddest things these days). This is when her confused mind begins to wander and she thinks back to Neal.

Why had he done this to her? What had she done to deserve it?

There had to have been something that she had done to him to make him willing to throw her away because in her life, there has always been something. A brutal beating which she had received at age nine had been because she'd made a mess in the kitchen that her exhausted foster mother had had to clean up at two in the morning. Getting sent back into the system at age twelve had been because she'd opened her mouth to a teacher about seeing her foster father looking at weird pictures of little girls. Being tossed out on the side of the road by her birth parents had been...

Well, there's always something, isn't there?

She's not a child anymore, and she knows that the world is wicked and mean and full of awful people who do awful things to each other just because they can, but she also believes that there's always something that she could have done better to prevent a terrible thing from happening.

She's been raised by so many different and often rough hands to always take the blame and the responsibility for everything that's ever happened to her in her life. This is a lesson that has been drilled into her almost since the day that she'd first understood what the words meant.

Taking responsibility, no matter the situation, has both saved her and cost her.

So what was it, then? What had she done to make Neal betray her? Had she not been worth loving?

Had she not been worth -

"There you are, Swan," she hears suddenly from behind her.

Warily, she turns her head, her blonde ponytail swinging out. Her tired green eyes take in the bemused face of one of the guards who regularly works here in the library.

Pete, she remembers. He's big and muscular, his breath always smelling of tobacco.

She says nothing to him even though she can tell that he's waiting for her to address him with some kind of title of respect. She simply watches and waits for him to make his move. She knows how this goes; she's seen too much now to not know what he wants from her.

What he expects from her.

And then his hand settles on her knee. He squeezes, his thumb rubbing.

"Just us in here," he tells her. "I hate seeing you so lonely."

"I'm not lonely," she insists (it's a lie, and she is terribly lonely, but not for the reasons that he
thinks or wants, and even if he was right, she wouldn't want him), pushing his hand away from her.

"Shh," Pete urges. "It's all right, Swan. Everything is all right."

He smiles at her and leans in as if to kiss her, his breath ripe.

She thinks for half a moment that she'll let him take what he wants from her and then it'll be over and he'll be gone (that's what the others have always told her to do) but then something cold and hard snaps inside of her. Something says no. Something says fight back. Don't stop fighting.

Fight until you can't, Emma.

Fight.

Feeling stronger than she has in a long time, her body tenses, and she prepares to kick Pete as hard as she possibly can if he moves in even a little bit closer. If he tries to touch her again in any way.

She'll pay terribly for this, she knows.

She'll be responsible for hurting him.

She doesn't care.

She doesn't fucking care.

He leans in closer, his hand touching her thigh, and then moving up towards her waistline. She notices his own hand moving to his belt, releasing the buckle of it, and making sure she sees it.

She turns in to meet him with her knee.

She turns in to take his balls off if she can manage it.

That's when the nausea hits her like a freight train going a hundred miles an hour. Her stomach clenches and flips, her brain turning fuzzy and her eyes watering as her body betrays her as badly as Neal had. The meager lunch that she'd consumed just hours earlier surges up through her.

And then onto Pete's steel-toed boots.

"Bitch," he growls out, jumping back and away from her, his brown eyes wide with anger. When she still doesn't shrink from him, even bent over at the waist and clearly ill, he slaps her hard across the face and she goes down hard, arms around herself, wrapped tight around her belly (she can hear Neal in her head, telling her how to protect herself should someone ever attack; she'd already known how to box, but he'd shown her...other stuff). She can feel the pain rising up through her reddened cheek – and then another voice in the back of her head (this one belongs to a foster mother she'd had, and God she wishes she could forget her) reminds her how thankful she is that she seldom bruises – but she pays it little mind because right now, her body is freaking out on her.

Her stomach rolls again, and well at least this time it's not on him.

She's not sure whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

"Get up," Pete orders from several inches away from her now, disgust tainting his tone.

She looks up at him with fire in her suddenly dark green with rage eyes. "Fuck you," she hisses out because she's finally realizing that she's just about done bending to people like him. She won't give
He grunts and then grabs her by the arm. He practically yanks her up, paying no attention to the obvious discomfort that she's in. He pulls her close to him, and breathes on her again, making her stomach roll violently again (she doesn't think that she has much more in her to come out, but that hardly matters). "You say a word about any of this and I'll make sure you never speak again."

She simply glares back at him, refusing to flinch away from him. She's got nothing to lose here, and maybe he sees that in her defiant gaze because after a moment, he shoves her away from him.

As he stalks from the library, she finally allows herself to fall backwards, shaking.

Frightened.

But still standing.

When her stomach continues to revolt later on when she's back in her cell, she tells herself that this is just a bug. Just bad lunch or maybe overexcited nerves, she insists. That's it. That's all.

She thinks, suspects and even fears that maybe it's something else entirely when even hours later, she's still throwing up, still feeling like she'd happily curl up and die if she could find a way to do so.

And when the next morning comes and the one after that, and both of these daybreaks bring to her more nausea and more fear, she finally allows herself to understand exactly what this really is.

Somehow, she just knows.

Apparently, she realizes as she holds a pregnancy test, she does still have something left to lose.

Emma wakes up with a violent start, her breathing hard and panicked, a shaky suddenly unsteady hand settling over her hammering heart as she sits up in the bed. Sweat soaked sheets tangle around her legs, trapping her. Panic kicks in for a brief moment before reality starts to bleed back through.

She takes a breath, and then another, drumming her fingers against her chest to try to calm herself down. It's been many years since she's thought of Pete the pervert juvenile detention guard.

A long time since she'd felt the fear he'd sparked inside of her.

She's a far different woman now. No longer willing to assume responsibility for the acts of others, but perhaps just a bit more understanding about the nuances and realities of life. Back then, she'd understood that people could and would hurt others, but she hadn't understood why.

Sometimes, it doesn't matter.

And sometimes it does.

She looks across the room, her eyes widening in surprise.

Regina's still there, her body now slumped against the wall. It's a decidedly undignified posture for a queen, and the soft tremble to her shoulders indicates that she's as troubled by her dreams as
Emma had been. She watches the brunette sleep for a few moments more, frowning deeply as she regards the woman who had so very recently been her enemy – a woman so few see as an actual person.

But in so many ways, Regina Mills is more real and honest than anyone else Emma has ever met before. Some of that honesty is unsettling and disturbing, but it's also...terribly recognizable.

What she had said to David before this whole thing had kicked off? About how this could have been her? She'd meant it.

Different lives.

So many paths.

Emma pushes herself up slowly from the bed, stands up and then approaches the Queen cautiously, her hands out in front of her as if to show her good intentions should Regina suddenly come to.

She doesn't; Regina's chest rises and falls, and she sleeps on.

Emma drops down next to her, picking up the knife that had been carried into the room just a few hours earlier. A knife that Regina had fully intended to violently murder the blonde with.

Emma sighs and moves the blade away; she'd known that Regina was going to try something that night, and had been on-guard for it. But somehow, she'd also had faith that Regina would stop.

Stupid ridiculous faith.

She'd been right.

Emma gazes into the restless features of the older woman, studying her carefully.

Wondering.

They're not friends, and she's not sure if they ever will be.

They're just two women who both love the same child.

Two women who have been through similar flavors of the same slice of hell.

Their stories aren't identical, and they're not the same, but when Regina whimpers and her hands clench and then reach out for something to grab onto like whatever she can get to might be her only chance at survival, Emma feels like she has a little bit of an idea of what's going on in Regina's head.

Not everything, but something.

It makes her sick.

It makes her want to do something.

She considers waking Regina from her nightmare, but she chooses to hold back.

Some secrets should be shared willingly and not just because they plague your nights and disturb your rest. Some tightly held-back torments should only see the light of day when the time is right.

She thinks of trying to move her back to her bedroom – or to a bed at all – but though she's strong,
she's not strong enough to do that without waking or accidentally hurting Regina, and honestly, as much as the woman pisses her off, that's the very last thing that Emma wants to do right now.

Which is weird enough considering their history with each other.

Instead, she steps back over to her own bed, pulls off the blanket and brings it back over to where Regina is. Bending at the knees, Emma lays it over the older woman's flannel covered body.

"What a pair we make," she chuckles, the sound low in her throat.

She adjusts the blanket, ensures that it's properly covering the former queen – enough so to at least keep her from shivering as she had been from the cold - and then turns and heads back to bed.

Sleep never returns to her.
Five.

Chapter Notes

A/N: A bit of salty language is the only call out here. Maybe some general crankiness. :D

It's neither her aching head nor her throbbing wrist which wakes Regina up from her uneasy slumber come morning. Instead, it's a pulsating pain in her back. It originates just above her waistline, but upon shifting, it shoots its way up and along her spinal column before finally settling within the muscles between her shoulder blades.

Groaning, Regina rolls over and looks up at the ceiling of the room that she's in. It takes a long moment for her to remember where she is, and exactly why it is is that she's here in this beach house.

Snow. Mother.

Emma Swan. Henry.

Magic. Kidnapping.

Knife. Almost murder.

And then Emma Swan again.

Regina lets out a shaky breath that's just a shade shy of a dry sob. She closes her eyes, and fights to win back control. She fights to pull her emotions back down inside of her where yes, they can fester, but they can't defeat her.

She thinks be the Mayor not the Queen.

Be the stronger one.

Or at least be the one who seemed like she was stronger, anyway.

Looking down, Regina is surprised to see a blanket settled over her. It's warm, and part of her would like nothing more than to curl back into it and return to sleep. She thinks the dreams she has are often terrible, but she seldom recalls them enough to burden her during her waking hours. She can deal with nightmares.

What she's not so sure she can deal with is…all of this.

She sighs loudly, and tries to remember where the blanket had come from, but the only memory that she can pull up and out of her pounding head is one of Emma watching her from the bed across the room, the comforter wrapped around the blonde's lean frame. Which means that Emma – always the stalwart hero – had put the blanket over her.

She's touched. And annoyed.
Really annoyed.

She stands up slowly, leaning against the wall as she does so. Now that she's finally stretched out, and the muscles in her back are loosening, she finds that the worst of it is coming from her throbbing wrist. A look down shows more blood on the bandages. The red hasn't completely leaked through the white gauze, but the crimson spots there are more than enough to remind her of the damage she'd done to herself by trying to escape the sheriff's handcuffs.

Just the reminder of being restrained sends an icy chill up her spine.

Never again, she tells herself.

She's told herself this before, though.

She closes her eyes and swallows, attempting to bite back the fear that is streaking through her. It won't do to show these emotions, to reveal them so easily. She knows that it's not acceptable to show such weakness to anyone (and, of course, Mother is in her head, reminding her of this.)

But most especially not to Emma Swan.

Regina opens her eyes and looks down at her wounded wrist, and the thick comforter.

Too late, she realizes.

Because Emma knows just how weak she is better than anyone else.

And there's absolutely no way to un-ring that bell.

"Tell me that you can cook something besides just eggs," Henry says after a few long minutes of watching his birth mother stare into the refrigerator, a slight frown contorting her features as she catalogs the groceries that she had bought just the night before. She reaches in and moves a few things around.

"Hey, there are a lot of different things you can do with eggs," Emma assures him as she glances over her shoulder at her less than impressed son. "You can scramble them or poach them or…"

"Yeah, but they're still eggs."

"Yes. In different wonderful egg flavors. And they're cheap."

Henry wrinkles his nose. "Did you actually live on nothing but –"

"Eggs? Yes. I don't really know how to cook anything else," she admits. "Okay, occasionally pancakes, and I learned how to not burn sausages. Hey, breakfast foods are pretty cheap."

"Cheap perhaps, but hardly healthy to live on," a low voice says from the hallway, the sound cool, calm and completely controlled. "Lucky for us, Henry, I do know how to cook other things besides just eggs and pancakes and sausages." Regina enters the kitchen, walking softly on socked feet, looking smaller than Emma has ever seen her. She stops by Henry and bends as if to kiss him on the top of the head, but then pulls up and settles for a light touch instead.
Emma studies her counterpart for a long moment, taking in the heavy bags that are resting under her eyes and the deep exhaustion which she sees dug into the lines of the older woman's still quite beautiful face. Regina is holding her head up, trying to look superior, but never before has it been so easy to see behind the mask. Never has it been so easy to see the Regina Mills that might truly exist behind the cold and powerful Queen's demeanor.

"Problem, Miss Swan?" Regina queries, dragging Emma's attention back to the conversation about food as opposed to the real reason that they're actually here at this beach house.

Probably best for now, anyway; Henry doesn't need to know about last night.

He wouldn't handle it well.

"Nope, and you're right; I suck at preparing that which doesn't involve a box and milk and, of course, eggs. Which is exactly why I bought other things to mix in with the eggs," Emma offers with a smirk. "Things such as bacon and cheese and mushrooms. Red bell peppers, too."

She gets matching incredulous looks from both Regina and Henry for that.

"I like omelets," Emma mutters as she pulls out a massive block of sharp cheddar and drops it onto the counter. She smiles widely, and for a moment, Regina is completely silenced by the expression. Regina can't, for the life of her, recall the last time that she herself had been able to smile so freely.

That Emma – who has hardly led an enchanted life by any standard that that can be judged by – can still find a way to smile is something that she is intensely – almost bitterly - envious of.

Quite unwillingly, Regina's face contorts into an ugly mask of pain and heartbreak and so bloody much want, and for a moment, it seems as though she might break down into tears.

" Regina?" Emma prompts, putting a hand out as if to try and comfort her, but stopping abruptly just short of touching the older woman. There's something vaguely skittish about Regina right now, Emma notes. It's tied to the handcuff issue and the loss of free will, and a whole lot of other things, too, she suspects. Which, of course, makes her eyes drop down towards the fresh bandage that sits on the brunette's wounded wrist. "You okay?" she asks, and it's a stupid question, but it's the only one that pops into her mind as she continues watching Regina.

"Fine." She roughly wipes her hand past her eyes. "I'm perfectly fine. Did you want me to make the omelets this morning?" the brunette stammers out, her voice shaky enough to make it clear that she's uncomfortable with being asked if she's okay. And, of course, Emma had noticed.

"No," Emma answers in a gentle voice that seems utterly absurd for this conversation. Her eyes flicker back upwards, moving from the gauze to Regina's clouded over face, the emotion there still thick and dark. "Like I said, eggs are my thing. You can make dinner tonight. I got this."

A look of understanding passes between the two women (that Henry is watching this entire interaction between them with an uncertain frown is lost on both of them; he's not sure what's happening, but he thinks that it's some kind of communication which probably means it's a positive turn of events all things considered) before Regina nods her head in agreement. "Right. Well easy on the cheese for Henry and me, please," she insists, her shoulders squaring up tight as she reasserts control over the emotions that had slipped out of her grasp for the smallest of moments. "Too much of it is not good for the digestive system."

"God forbid."

Regina's eyebrow jumps into her hairline and immediately the fire is back in her eyes. "Don't you
"think you've already put enough garbage into my son's stomach over the last few months?"

"You mean when I introduced him to that weird substance known as chocolate?"

"Yes. He was eating three healthy and well balanced meals a day before you drove your tin deathtrap into my town," Regina snaps. "Now he eats cereal for breakfast, lunch and dinner."

Sensing an argument that could grow quickly into something bigger, Henry quickly breaks in, stepping in between them and offering up a chipper, "It's okay, Emma; Mom doesn't like cheese much, and I actually prefer mine with less of it, anyway. But more bacon, please?"

His words are oddly formal and seem to suggest a child who is trying to calm his parents down like a psychologist would a married couple. It's unsettling for both Regina and Emma. Enough so that they simultaneously stand down, each retreating to a different part of the kitchen.

"Sure," Emma nods after a moment. "It's turkey bacon, anyway."

"The grocery store in this town has turkey bacon?" Regina queries. The question sounds innocent enough, but there's a sharp edge to her voice, like she's searching for an opening.

"Apparently the mayor here is as anal retentive as the one back home."

"You mean she doesn't want to die early of cardiac arrest."

"I mean she has a stick up her ass."

"Emma," Henry cautions because damned if he isn't starting to get just a little bit tired of having to referee between these two. It seems to him as though they can turn almost anything at all – no matter how innocent or innocuous – into the opening salvos of a brand new argument.

This could all get very tiresome very quickly, he thinks.

The blonde offers a tight smile. "Sorry. Two eggs or three, Your Majesty?"

"Two. And I don't need bacon in mine."

"Fine. More for me."

"You don't need bacon in yours, either," the former queen comments with a not so sly glance at the sheriff's backside. It's not at all sexual, but Emma finds herself shifting anxiously foot to foot all the same. Maybe it's because Regina's eyes are so damned intense or maybe it's because she wonders if the brunette might just be right and perhaps she should skip the bacon.

Nah.

If for no other reason than because Regina is suggesting that she should.

"Yes, well, too bad," Emma snaps back as she grabs a handful of the bacon and tosses it onto the grill. It pops and crackles, grease snapping around the lean piece of turkey. "I like bacon."

"Way to take a stand, Sheriff," comes the dry response as Regina sits down on one of the stools, folding one leg over the other in a way that makes her look like royalty even though she's wearing flannel pants. It's an absurd visual, and yet Regina makes it work.

"Yeah, whatever."
"Mm. Another great response; you're really on a roll today, Miss Swan."

Emma's jaw clenches and this time it's to Regina that Henry is saying. "Mom."

But it appears that it's Regina who is actually on a roll; she pushes right past his warning and eyes glinting darkly, challenges Emma with, "So, after all the fun that we had last night, are you not going to ask me how I slept? It wasn't quite as comfortable as I'd hoped for."

"What fun last night?" Henry asks. "What'd I miss?"

"She means yesterday. With, you know, everything," Emma assures him, shooting Regina an exasperated look. "Look, Kid, do me a favor and take out the garbage, please? It's getting up there," She flicks her hand towards the barely filled metal container settled against the wall. Maybe it's the firm tone she's using – one that the easy-going Emma Swan never uses – but whatever it is, he simply nods, grabs the trash and then exits the kitchen, and then the house.

"Thank you," Regina says once the front door has snapped shut. Her voice has changed again, going from that one that was almost malicious to one that's somewhat more mellow.

"For not kicking your ass last night?" Emma asks, her anger clearly fired up.

"Well, I was going to say for not telling him what I planned to do to you last night, but if you'd like to congratulate yourself for the stupidest stunt ever, don't let me stand in the way of that."

Emma's head snaps back in surprise. "Stupidest stunt ever? Excuse me? What was that? Some kind of test to see if I'd tell him what happened? Is anything not a game with you, Regina?"

Regina suddenly – and with a shocking and even slightly disturbing amount of predatory grace - moves towards Emma, getting almost into her personal bubble. "Who are you to talk to me about games, Swan? What were you thinking? I could have killed you last night."

"Are we actually having this conversation?" Emma demands, eyes wide, cheeks flushing.

"I had a knife, you utter moron," Regina seethes.

"I recall. I watched you standing over my bed with it," Emma replies dryly.

"Ah. And I assume that you rather stupidly believed that you could have stopped me if I had decided to see how many times I could stab you before you bled to death, yes?"

"Lovely visual, Regina, but yes, I was fairly certain that I could take you down if I absolutely needed to," Emma counters. "But I knew I wouldn't need to. I knew you wouldn't do it."

"You owe our son better than your moronic Charming confidence."

"Our son? Now he's our son."

Regina glares at her.

"I have no idea what is actually happening in this conversation," Emma tells her after a long tense moment. "Are you pissed at me for having faith in you or for taking a risk with you?"

The brunette doesn't answer; just stares back at her, her dark eyes fiery.

Emma sighs. "Right. Okay, why don't we take a deep breath here?"
"I could have killed you."

"But you didn't. And in a few minutes, we're going to have omelets."

It's the strangest non sequitur ever, but after a rapid blinking of her eyes, Regina just goes with it. "And then? Do you have my day all planned out for me, Miss Swan? Down to the minute?"

There's an odd kind of anger that seems unreasonable considering how much of Regina's life in Storybrooke had been planned out. She'd been nothing but schedules and timelines.

So why the bizarre straightening of her spine now, Emma wonders. Why the weird fear?

"No. Look," the sheriff says after the staring match between the two of them has become awkward and uncomfortable. "I know it's gonna be hard, but I need you to trust me on this."

"I don't." Said flat and plain and without any way to maneuver around her words.

"I know you don't, and you know what, Regina? I don't trust you, either," Emma reminds her. Then, with a wry chuckle, "I'd be an absolute idiot to trust you."

"You're already an idiot. We wouldn't be here otherwise."

To Regina's surprise, Emma just grins at this. Like she'd just been given a compliment. It's absolutely infuriating if just a tad bit endearing as well. Oddly endearing, that is.

"Yeah, well," Emma replies finally, bouncing on her heels in that hyper way she's prone to, "I've been called a lot worse." She uses a spatula to put an over-sized omelet onto a plate and then pushes it across the bar towards Regina. "Breakfast is served. You've got dishes afterwards."

"I've been doing my own dishes for more than twenty-eight years, Miss Swan," Regina answers with just a hint of teasing to indicate that she's mostly just harassing Emma for her own sick and twisted amusement now. "Tell me, have you even done one in all that time?"

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "Plastic and paper are godsend."

"Shocking." She glances around, her eyes settling on a long table in the adjoining dining room. "Are we eating at the bar instead of in there?"

"You want to do breakfast at the table?" Emma asks with some surprise.

Regina sighs. "As you said, we could be in this little hell-hole –"

"We're on the beach. Not too many people would call this a hell-hole."

Regina ignores her almost entirely, "For awhile. This is already hard enough on Henry; if we can give him…"

She trails off, her eyes diverting and sticking to a spot on the far wall. Her hands join in front of her, clasping together to keep her from fidgeting more than she already is. She's suddenly - uncomfortably - aware of just how small she is without her heels to lift her up off the ground.

"Yeah, okay," Emma nods, immediately picking up Regina's line of thinking in a way that is slightly disconcerting. If Emma is at all aware of Regina's new agitation, she doesn't show any indication of it. Instead, she picks up the plate, and then another and brings them both over to the table. "Can you handle real glass this morning?" she calls back, the tone deceptively light.
Regina rolls her eyes, and reaches for the tall slender glasses which Emma had already pulled down. She fills all three with orange juice and then brings them over to the table, settling each of them neatly above the plates. "Did you make coffee?" she asks, like everything is normal.

Like she hadn't seriously considered murdering Emma last night.

"Oh, yes. After last night, I figured we could both use it."

"The first smart thing you've done since you came up with this idea."

"Uh huh. And the lady who ripped apart her wrist trying to escape handcuffs thinks she has the right to call me out on being stupid?" Emma chuckles darkly at that and shakes her head.

"I don't like being restrained," Regina says quietly again, and then turns away from Emma and makes her way to the opposite counter, leaning not quite casually against it as she turns back.

Silently, Emma curses herself. The first time Regina had said those words, they'd been interesting. The second time was worrisome. Now, they're somewhat revealing, and not in a way that Emma cares for. Add to it Regina's uncharacteristic retreat, and well, Emma knows that this isn't something she can just leave out there untouched if she wants this to work.

"Hey, wait, I'm sorry," Emma says, trying to infuse as much sincerity into her words as she can manage. When Regina finally – slowly - turns back to face her, Emma tries to meet the Queen's stormy eyes, hoping that the older woman will recognize the honesty she's trying to show her.

The apology for careless words.

Regina tilts her head. "Sorry for? For the cuffs or kidnapping me or…"

"The cuffs. I'm sorry for restraining you. It won't happen again."

Regina imagines that she's supposed to be gracious here, perhaps she's even supposed to nod out an acceptance of what certainly appears to be a genuine apology from the blonde woman standing opposite her, but she finds that she can't because there are some memories and torments from the past which dig down too deep into the heart and soul of a person.

Some fears which go beyond simple words.

The silence between them lingers long enough that Emma, feeling more than a little awkward and uncomfortable about the weird emotional moment that they're having, tries to get them conversing again because she doesn't know what else to do. "If you'd like to talk about it…"

"Coffee," Regina cuts in, her tone thick and meant to end the conversation. "What I would really like right about now is to get some caffeine flowing through my bloodstream."

Emma nods her head, seeming oddly relieved. "Over on the counter. It's a vanilla blend. Might not be the same one that you're used to back in Storybrooke, but they smell alike. To me, at least," she offers with a shrug of her shoulders, one that seems oddly insecure and uncertain.

Like she's worried that what she's done will be thrown back in her face.

Regina's eyebrows lift up, surprise clearly showing in her eyes. It's a ridiculously small gesture – to try to get the same kind of coffee that she is used to – but it's more than just about anyone else has ever even thought to do for her, and yes, she supposes, it does mean something.
Enough of something that Regina inclines her head and says softly, "I...appreciate it."

She thinks she sees Emma let out something of a breath before a broad smile overtakes her pink lips. "Good. That's good. So, uh, I was thinking...after breakfast, I have some things to do. Calls to make. Maybe you and Henry want to check out the beach. It's a private one so you guys can walk for a good long while without worrying about anyone interrupting."

"You're letting me have time with my son," Regina notes, the small amount of gratitude that Emma had earned for the coffee dissipating at the realization of just how suddenly dependent on Emma's grace she now is. It's galling and makes her fingers twitch, even free of magic.

Emma lets out a low growl that is clearly frustration based. "Dammit, Regina. Would you cut this shit out, please? I'm not letting you do anything, and if you think I have some ulterior motive for every single thing I do, we're not going to get very far. Henry is here with us because he wants to be with you. All morning he's been talking about checking out some woodpile he saw yesterday. He'd like to do it with you," Emma insists. "I swear, that's all this is about."

"And I don't owe you anything for it?" Regina asks, her eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Emma's head jerks back in surprise. "Jesus, did your mother really do all of this to you?"

"That's not a path you want to try to walk us down, Miss Swan," Regina cautions, her eyes suddenly blazing with a fresh coat of anger. The rage comes on so quickly, she realizes, sliding through her with poisonous ease. "You'll find me extremely non-receptive to it."

"Fine," Emma agrees, because she's honestly not ready for this conversation yet, either. "For now, anyway. But we both know – at least somewhere deep down you know - we'll walk down that path eventually. But for now, just answer me one question, okay? Have you ever in your entire life had someone do something for you without expecting you to do something back?"

"No," comes the immediate response, Regina's chin lifting in defiance. "That's not the way my life has gone. That's not the way of the world that I came from." She meets Emma's eyes dead-on. "And considering your background, I would say that people doing things for you without hoping to use your back as a way up isn't something that you're terribly used to either."

"No, it's not what I grew up being used to. Things change. So welcome to the new world order," Emma retorts, eyes blazing. She's angry, she knows, but what about...well, she's not sure.

Is she angry on Regina's behalf? On her own behalf? Is she pissed off because this whole mess had fallen into her less than able hands? Is she angry because the world – and apparently other worlds, too – always seems to hurt the innocent ones that it should protect the very most?

"But that's not true, is it?" Regina counters. "You do want something to come of this."

"Yeah, peace on earth," Emma snaps back angrily. "That's what I want, Regina. I want our son happy and whether you believe it or not, maybe I want you to find some of that, too."

"I don't believe you, but that's neither here nor there. But what of you? What do you specifically want? No one is so selfless as to not want anything from something. Even you."

"Like I said yesterday, maybe we can help each other find...happiness or whatever it is that we're supposed to find doing this. Maybe that's what I want." She stares right back at Regina for a long moment, and then sighs. "I'm going to go find Henry; I'm sure he's sick and tired of staring at the garbage can." She chuckles in dark amusement at this, and then turns and exits.
Her eyes locked on the disappearing back of the sheriff, Regina scowls in reaction to Emma's words. An exasperated sigh follows, and then she reaches for the coffee cup on the counter.

The one that smells like vanilla.

She lifts it up, inhales the scent and then takes a sip.

No, not just like home.

But close enough.

She allows for the smallest of smiles.

And then reminds herself that she still doesn't know what Emma's angle truly is.

Because yeah, everyone always has an angle.

Always.

The sand is cool to her bare feet. The conversation – or lack of – between she and Henry is far less so. They've been walking for about ten minutes now, almost completely in silence. Every now and again, she's asked him a question and he's answered, but then everything stops again.

She wonders if the right words are within her, the ones that will make her son love her as he once had. She wonders if her heart is strong enough to convince him that there is still something worthwhile about her. Something that one day he could learn to love again.

She wonders if he'll ever look at her as something other than damaged and wicked.

She thinks that she must have drifted off deep into her own thoughts because suddenly Henry is stepping in front of her and forcing her to look at him when he asks her, "What's wrong?"

She opens her mouth to respond, but then snaps it shut again. She's spent the last decade of her life trying to protect this boy from all of the dark evils of the world. It occurs to her, then, that letting him in on a few of those evils now just to soothe her own wounded feelings seems like a self-indulgent act of cruelty. That she hadn't protected him from the greatest of them – namely herself – is just a harsh bit of irony that she doesn't quite know what to do with.

Just as she suddenly doesn't know what to do with him.

How to talk to him.

He's her son – her beloved little prince - and this should be so very easy because they still have almost twelve years of shared experiences that predate Emma and that book.

And yet she just gazes down at him, an uncomfortable fake smile plastered across her face, she realizes that she has no idea how to bridge this gap with him using either the truth or lies; it seems to her that both will cost her. "Nothing," she says, her voice gentle. Her mother tone.

He shakes his head, denying her even that kind of an escape from this. "No, that's not true, Mom; it's not. Tell me the truth. What happened last night with you and Emma? Did you try to escape?"
His eyes are soft and non judgmental, like he'd been expecting her to do exactly that.

"Yes," she says, hoping that she's reading him right. Hoping that he won't flinch from her again.

He doesn't flinch; instead, he nods his head like he understands. "Thought so. It's okay."

"Henry, it's not okay; it's not," she tells him because this isn't a Hallmark movie with a swelling score and easy hugs, and a few moments of understanding between she and Emma aren't going to make all of this better. It won't make her better. Even vanilla coffee and stupid risks won't do that.

She's not honestly sure that anything can ever make her better.

"No," he agrees. "It's not. You're not okay. You're hurt," he explains, and it makes her blink because that's not what she'd been expecting at all. She'd been anticipating another angry rail about her being the Evil Queen. What she sees looks like sympathy. And that, too, hurts.

Regina doesn't want her son to sympathize with her because if he does, it means that he understands the terrible and violent life that she's led. It means he knows who she is.

Who she truly is.

And somehow that's worse than thinking of her as just the cardboard Evil Queen from the storybooks and Disney movies. It's worse than seeing her as just pure ungodly evil.

Because he's just a child and children shouldn't know of these things.

Children shouldn't know that sometimes even good people can become bad ones.

"I…"

"You miss your mother." His tone is measured, allowing for little argument. He's so sure of himself, so confident that he understands all. "I know she was bad, but it's okay to miss her."

Quite against her will, her jaw tightens and she has to fight back on the urge to snap at him or even flinch away from him. She can see the parallel that he's setting up between the two of them as children who love their mothers in spite of what their mothers have done to them, and it tears at Regina to think that Henry sees her as she sees her own mother. Finally, thickly, she exhales a short terse, "Yes."

"And you're angry about what Mary Margaret did to her."

"I'm angry," Regina admits, wondering where he's going with this. Suddenly so very weary.

"Well, that's why we're here. To help you get past what happened with your mother."

She reaches for his hand, wincing as the sudden movement of her wrist causes one of the cuts to break open and dribble blood across white gauze. Her fingers close over his, and she pulls him towards her, the motion gentle and allowing him to refuse it if he wants to. When he doesn't pull away from her, she drops down to a knee in the sand, the cloth of her slacks (yes, she'd chosen to wear her own clothes again today – she's not yet ready to allow for coarse denim) scraping against the sand below her. "Henry, sweetheart, I know that you're hopeful, but do you really think a few days by the beach are going to make me someone…better?"

It's an honest question, and she's immediately appalled that it's fallen from her lips. She blames it on her exhaustion and frayed nerves, but it hardly matters because the words are out there and he's
looking at her, thoughtfully. He's actually considering the question, turning it over.

Thinking.

"I think we can help you to learn how to not hate as much as you do," he tells her, such wonderful innocence gleaming in those beautiful green eyes of his. "And that's better."

She feels tears sting against the back of her eyelids. "Henry."

"You're not ready yet, but it really is okay, Mom," he tells her, and she's struck by the frantic desire to wrap him into her arms and squeeze him as tight as possible. Protect him from all of this better than she had. She wishes she could turn back the clock and do everything right.

Make him happy.

Make him not see her as something to be pitied, broken down and then repaired.

"Why is it okay?" Regina prompts, lifting a hand to flick moisture away from her eyelashes.

"Because we have all the time in the world," he answers with a grin.

"Do we?" she laughs. "And what about school?"

He frowns. "I wasn't really going before."

"Absolutely charming," she grouses. "No pun intended."

He gives her a strange look at that, which she just shrugs off.

"Henry," she tries again. "Sometimes adults are hurt beyond the point of repair. Sometimes…"

"And sometimes they're not. Sometimes everyone just needs to try a little harder," he answers stubbornly, lifting his eyes to meet hers with a fairly knowing gaze. "You love me, don't you?"

"With all of my heart."

"You'd do anything for me, wouldn't you?"

"I hope you know that I would."

"I do, and what I want is for you to give this a chance to work. Give us – give me and Emma – a chance to help you. Give yourself a chance to be better." He smiles at her. "Please."

She knows that she's being manipulated by him; it isn't even really a subtle attempt at trying to do so. Apparently, he really is her son because he's doing it while looking right at her, big eyes and all. He's using her love for him to keep her from trying to escape this ridiculous adventure.

The only reason she's not freaking out is because she's tired of not being able to trust anyone.

He's her son and if there's a chance for anything good still to be found in this world for her, well then maybe it has to start with believing that a young boy truly wants the best for his mother.

Regina briefly considers asking him not to break her heart again, but the words catch in her throat because even in a moment where she feels close to losing everything, she still recalls that she is his mother and she doesn't want him carrying around the weight of her demons and nightmares. She nods, sniffles, and then points ahead with a shaking hand that she hopes he doesn't notice, "There's
"All right!" And just like that, the boyish part of him is completely back again. He grins at her, and reaches for her hand, his fingers closing around hers. The movement is more instinctual than planned and perhaps that's why it fills her with an almost suffocating amount of warmth right in the middle of her chest. His words might have been manipulative, but his touch is not.

She lets him pull her along – as she has allowed him to pull her through so very much of her otherwise depressing and lonely life. He anchors her even as she feels the vague uncertainty of the situation which she's found herself trapped within twitching beneath her skin. She knows enough to understand that he can't be the whole of her healing; there's too much inside of her that is damaged for her love for him to be able to repair it all. She knows that losing him once before had thrown her into a tailspin – one that she's still within if she's honest with herself.

If there's ever to be a chance of real recovery (and she's not entirely sure there is), deep down in the part of her mind which craves being whole again, Regina knows that she can't do this for him.

Whatever this is.

But she also knows in the part of her that is ruled by her heart and always has been ruled by it, as his fingers tangle with her own, that she can't ever be whole without him, either.

She tightens her hand over his, and squeezes. Lightly. Just enough.

He looks up at Regina and then smiles back at her, the expression as wide and as real as she's even seen it be. The honesty there – the hope that he has for her and them – steals her breath away.

It takes everything Regina has not to break down. Not to drop to her knees and beg Henry for forgiveness. Not to plead for his love. She won't do that, though because, even now, she knows that what she wants – what she so desperately needs from him - is for him to give it willingly.

Instead, she offers him a watery smile in return.

"Are we building a fort?" she asks, gesturing towards the woodpile.

"The best fort, ever" he tells her with an easy laugh.

"The best," she agrees with a laugh of her own.

"How many bottles of this dreck did you buy?" Regina asks as she accepts the plastic wine-glass from the blonde woman, and then without a moment's pause brings it to her lips. It's once again late in the evening, and apparently Emma means for this to become a nightly thing of theirs.

Drinking wine and staring out at the ocean.

Interesting.

"Three," Emma says as she drops into the chair next to Regina. She slouches outwards, her boots clunking heavily against the deck with all of the grace of an old west cowboy.

"And I'll be allowed to drink out of an actual wine glass when?"
"When I'm sure you won't stab me with it."

"I didn't stab you with glass this morning," Regina reminds her.

"Our son was in the room."

"Ah."

"Hey, I'm joking, Regina," Emma says gently, seeming too tired for their usual antagonistic banter. "I just grabbed whatever was available. And I didn't want to do any more dishes."

The former queen nods her head, grudgingly accepting the explanation even if a part of her can't help but doubt the honesty of the words. It's too soon, and trust comes too hard.

Frowning, Emma tries again. "Dinner was good."

"Twenty-eight years of not having much to do besides read a lot of books and practice a lot of recipes gave me quite a bit of time to learn how to cook," Regina comments between sips. The wine is still terrible, but tonight, she almost welcomes the taste. If she drinks enough, she thinks maybe she can sleep and try to forget how much in conflict she is with herself.

"Well, it paid off."

"Thank you." She turns to look at Emma. "Is this how things are going to be from now on? Are we going to be this ritualized every day? Almost domestic in our routines?"

"It's only day two; how about we see how things go from here?"

"And what about this part? You and I sitting out here on the porch?"

"Relaxes me, but if you'd prefer to go watch television…"

"No," Regina answers with a curl of her lip. "This is fine."

"Also, I think it gives us a chance to talk."

"Because we're such good talkers, you and I."

"Maybe not, but there's no reason we can't try to be better at it."

"Yes, better. The word of the day. Well, then, by all means go ahead and tell me a story."

Emma sighs in response. Then, her voice very quiet, she offers up, "Okay, fine."

"Fine?"

"Fine; you want a story? I'll tell you one, but spoiler alert: it's not an especially happy one." She chuckles at her own joke, then continues with, "After I got released from jail, I didn't know what I was doing or what I was going to do. I was eighteen, and my only usable skill was my ability to pick a lock. I considered for about half a second trying to find Henry, but if you think I'm a mess now…" She trails off, and then lifts the wine to her lips, taking a hefty swig of the red liquid.

"Is that where the man who owns this house comes into play?" Regina queries after a few moments of silence, and though the words are a bit accusatory, the tone is far more gentle.

"Yeah. Sometimes you look for someone to take care of you."
"That rarely works out."

"Try never in my experience. He was a complete jerk – a prick looking for a lost girl, and I should have recognized his game and what he wanted me for from a mile away. Oh, but I was young and stupid and hurting and I just wanted someone to make me pretty promises of forever."

"And he did?"

"He did. So many of them."

"You believed him."

"I did. You'd think after what Neal did to me that I'd have learned, but I guess I needed to get taught that lesson twice to understand it. He – the prick - told me he'd leave his wife for me. I hated the whole world back then. What did I care if someone else got hurt because of me?"

Regina simply nods her head in understanding and sips from her glass again.

"It was always a lie, though. I was always just a useful toy to him. A fact which he made sure I knew the moment I started asking too many inconvenient questions about when he'd pay out on his promises." She shrugs her shoulders, as if trying to mask the hurt of rejection that's still there. "Fortunately for us, I'm a toy that knows how to apply pressure to the right places. He's a son of a bitch who doesn't want anyone – his well-connected wife especially – knowing that he has a fetish for screwing eighteen-year-old girls." She motions around. "And so here we are."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to understand that no matter what you might think of me or my past or how I've acted towards you, I don't actually see myself as better than you. I never have. Maybe I'm just the person who really gets what it feels like to get punched in the gut repeatedly."

"Oh," Regina says, and it's an underwhelming reply, but Emma gets it. What do you say to someone who has just ripped open an old wound simply to show you that they, too, can bleed?

"Regina –"

"I don't have any good childhood memories," Regina cuts in.

"What?"

"I assume that's what your next question was going to be. You told me something personal about yourself and now you'd like the same. That's how therapy of this type works, yes?"

"I'm not sure that there's an actual name for this type of therapy but okay, sure, we can go with that if you would like to. But for the record, I didn't tell you that for any other reason than because I thought… I thought maybe… you know what… it just seemed like the right thing to do."

Regina gazes back at flustered painfully honest Emma Swan and chuckles.

"What?" Emma challenges.

"This is the stupidest idea. I'm the Evil Queen for God's sakes, Emma. Do you really believe that you – that we - can talk me into a place where my heart will suddenly turn from black to red?"

"Why not?"
The brunette woman blinks in surprise.

"You've spent so long deciding that you're exactly what everyone keeps telling you you are --"

"Everyone including you," Regina reminds her, remembering the confrontation on the porch of her mansion after Archie's supposed murder. A murder which she'd been entirely innocent of.

"I lost my mind," Emma admits, thinking about the exact same confrontation.

"But in the end, you were right, weren't you?" Regina challenges. "My mother returned and I --" she stops and swallows, unable to say more as a million painful feelings surge up through her.

"You let her twist you again."

"No one can make you do anything that you don't allow them to do."

"We both know that's bullshit."

Their eyes meet, brown on green.

"I'm not ready for this," Regina says finally. "I don't want to talk about her."

"Okay. So tell me something else."

"What?"

"You offered me a story in exchange for mine about the asshole who owns this place. So tell."

"I did not."

"Come on. Something small. Tell me what the one thing you liked the most about this world as opposed to the world you came from is? Besides indoor plumbing and electric blankets, I mean."

"That's a moronic question."

"Okay, then talk to me about Daniel," Emma lobs back, eyes blazing.

Regina's reaction is immediate and expected; her shoulders stiffen and her jaw tightens. Her eyes turn hard and then she's not so much looking at Emma as glaring at the woman, "No."

"I didn't think so," Emma replies as she reaches out to refill her wine glass; Regina refuses an offer of the same. "Okay, so here's my question: all this anger you have going on inside you, it's been there for a very long time, right? I mean you were pissed off even before I showed up to further piss you off on a daily basis. What did you do to handle it before you had magic back?"

"I destroyed lives, Miss Swan; haven't you been paying attention?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking we need to find a better way to channel that anger."

"Yes, well, let me know when you figure out exactly how to do that. In the meanwhile, I suppose I will resign myself to continue drinking bad wine and building forts."

"Yeah, about that. The kid really enjoyed getting to do that with you today," Emma tells her with something of a faint smile as she imagines the visual which Henry had relayed to her in rather enthusiastic detail. "He had a great time out there with the two of you all digging around in the mud. Said you looked like you were having a blast even covered in dirt and sand."
"I did," Regina admits, surprising even herself.

"You know, that's all he wants from either of us. He just wants us all to be happy."

"I know," Regina answers softly, emotion shining in her eyes. "But you and I both know better; we both know that intentions aside, that that's not always a possibility."

She stands up, then, not in the mood to continue this conversation any further.

"Going to bed?" Emma asks.

"With any luck."

"Do I need to keep my eyes open again tonight?" Emma queries, and it's the somewhat deceptively light tone which she uses that almost completely defuses the situation. A quick come-and-go smile seals the deal.

"No," Regina sighs. "I have no intention of stabbing you to death tonight. Perhaps tomorrow."

"I'll keep that in mind. Eggs at nine, Your Majesty."

Regina turns to head back inside, and then suddenly stops. "Aspirin," she says quietly.

"Excuse me?" Emma queries, turning to face her.

"You asked me what I liked the best in this new world. Aside from plumbing. Aspirin."

"Why?"

"Since I was a very young girl, I've…dealt with somewhat severe migraines," Regina offers up, looking somewhat uncomfortable with the admission. "In my world, we used oils and steams and sometimes badly smelling creams to treat the headaches. That is, assuming they were ever considered to be real, which often they were not. The treatments and remedies were rarely successful, and I discovered that the more powerful I got, the worse the pain would become."

"You couldn't just heal yourself?"

"I was never taught to be a healer. It wasn't an important skill for my…teacher. Besides, healing oneself is pointless; you're just moving energy within your own body around."

"But the aspirin here helped."

"Immeasurably. At least until you showed up." The comment isn't said maliciously, but rather factually. The implication of the migraines being stress related is clear, and in spite of herself, Emma feels a spark of guilt wind its way through her. It's ill deserved, but there just the same.

"I'm sorry. Believe it or not, I never meant…I wasn't trying to hurt you."

"I do believe that you believe that, Emma; I believe that your intentions started in what you believe to be a better place and with more heroic end goals. But perhaps that's why you were so very good at doing exactly what you did all the same," Regina suggests with a sad almost wistful smile. Before Emma can respond, she dips her head, and says, "Goodnight, Miss Swan."

And with that said, Regina disappears inside leaving Emma with just the wine and the rushing waves to keep her company.
After a few long minutes and another glass of wine, she reaches into her pocket and pulls out her cell phone. She finds a number near the top of the list, punches it and then waits for a sleepy voice to answer on the other end of the line. "Hey," she says. "I need a favor from you."
She likes her showers cold. Always has. Contrary to what would likely be the popular belief by many if asked, it has nothing to do with sexual frustration, but rather the fact that Emma has always preferred the chill of frigid water to the cloying steam of overwhelming heat. Right now, she's enjoying such a shower, her forehead rested against equally cool tiles, her mind whirling as it has been for almost every moment of the last seven days.

It's been an eventful last week. Never a dull moment.

But then what else is to be expected after you kidnap a Queen?

An Evil Queen.

She chuckles, and shakes her head. Thick wet blonde hair slaps against the tiles and then sticks to her forehead before climbing into her eyes. She pushes it away, and leans back, allowing the cold water to slide over the front of her. It tumbles down her skin, waking her entire body up.

It's been seven days of small steps. Baby steps.

It's still progress, she likes to think.

Well, Regina hasn't tried to murder her with a kitchen knife again, at least.

And yeah, that's something.

There have been other small things, too.

Regina seems to have accepted that this situation is a long term one and has stopped asking "why are you doing this, Miss Swan?". Which isn't to say that she doesn't cast suspicious glances over at the sheriff every opportunity that she gets, but there's been something different in her attitude since the second night on the porch. Something less hostile.

No, that's not right, Emma determines with a scowl. She's definitely not less hostile. Rather, she's less skittish. She seems more like she's decided to give Emma the benefit of the doubt.

And then there's the now nightly talk on the deck.

On day three, Regina's confession after two glasses of red wine (she'd managed to find a vaguely better label on the latest store run) had been about her enjoyment of peppermint, something that hadn't been native to Fairytale Land. She'd admitted – with a slight blush to her cheeks – a fondness for the plant, even going so far as to confess to often having it added to her coffee and to buying chocolate flavored with it. Why this had been such a big secret for Regina is still lost on the blonde sheriff, but she'd filed it away in her brain nonetheless.

On day four, Regina had admitted to having tried to learn about American sports after coming over
to Maine. She'd been something of an athlete in her earlier days (Emma had noticed the strange tightening of her eyes when she'd ever-so-briefly spoken of her youth), and had found herself curious about the activities of this world. When Emma had asked her which one she'd ended up liking the most, the brunette had shrugged her shoulders and returned to sipping her wine like the answer would explain too many secrets and provide too many answers. It'd been as puzzling a reply as the peppermint admission, but this, too, had been filed away for later.

Day five had brought with it conversation about the strangeness of driving a car. The knowledge of how to do so had come with the curse, but the comfort level had taken an almost absurd amount of time. When Emma had asked how many accidents the prideful Queen had gotten herself into before she'd figured things out, Regina had simply chuckled and taken another sip of her wine. Emma had noticed an interesting half smile tugging at Regina's lips, but the brunette hadn't elaborated and had instead changed the subject to something safer – Henry.

Also known as the default position that Regina falls back to anytime that she doesn't want to discuss something that might be too revealing or too intense. Which is pretty much every single time. Still, Emma has gladly received the tidbits of information where she can get them.

On the sixth day, Regina had spoken about the first time she'd tried to cook a pot roast and how it'd tasted like dried leather left out in the sun for far too long. She'd stated that her need to actually become good in the kitchen hadn't come around until Henry had (before then, she'd eaten quite a bit at Granny's and other places in town), and then she'd wanted to be more than just good, she'd wanted to be perfect. Almost immediately after admitting such, she'd locked down again.

Which brings it all to this morning.

Day seven.

Emma smiles as she wonders what today will bring. She finds these little confessions of Regina's charming and intriguing, even wondering if they can somehow form the puzzle that is Regina.

Of course, should Regina realize that Emma is actually trying to use her words to understand her, Emma has no doubt that the former queen will immediately shut her out again.

As she has a couple times already. For asking too many questions. Or getting too close.

It's maddening, really, but then Emma hadn't been naive enough to think this could ever be easy for either of them. Though in a weird sort of way, it has been for Henry. He's enjoyed getting to spend time with his mothers. He's enjoyed not being pulled between them.

If she's honest with herself, Emma has enjoyed this little retreat of theirs, too.

With a dismissive grunt, Emma snaps off the cold water. She holds still for a moment longer to allow the chill of the air to settle against her body (it makes her skin feel almost painfully alive, something she's welcomed since she was very young), and then steps out of the shower.

She dresses quickly – indigo jeans, a gray hoodie, and thick socks – and then pulls her blonde hair back into a fast and messy ponytail. A glance at the clock on the wall (who puts a clock in a bathroom, she wonders grouchily) shows that it's eight fifty-five in the morning, which means that she's right on time to get breakfast started.

Because that has become as much a ritual of theirs as wine and confession time is.

But the meals involve their son which has made it critical to them. In the morning, she makes something egg related, lunch is usually sandwiches of some kind and then dinner is whatever
Regina feels like throwing together. It was spaghetti one night and then chicken salad a couple evenings later.

Emma’s pretty sure that the salad had been some kind of passive aggressive dig at her for some perceived slight or another, but like a good girl intent on finding a way to make this work out for everyone (and after everything that she has put on the line, she will be damned if it doesn’t work out, she insists to herself), she had dutifully chewed the inside of her cheek to stay quiet, and swallowed down the rabbit food (even the carefully sliced up chicken hadn’t made it any more appetizing).

All the while, she’d been thinking about trying to make Regina eat runny eggs in the morning. Just for the fun of it. And maybe just to see the half incredulous/half infuriated look on Regina’s face.

Come the next morning, though, she’d dutifully made Regina a two-egg omelet with spinach and mushrooms, and the brunette had even nodded her approval between bites. Emma had gladly – and perhaps even proudly - taken that for the win that she’d been looking for.

This morning, well she’s not sure what she’ll go with. Something different maybe?

And then she chuckles to herself because God, around here, everything every day is different.

Maybe that’s the point.

She makes her way past the still closed door to Regina's room, and into the kitchen where Henry's already sitting at the counter, flipping through a Captain America comic book.

"Morning, Kid," she chirps, flashing him an affectionate smile.

"Morning, Emma," he answers without looking up. He turns the page, his eyes on the colorful panels. "You're behind," he adds, and she notices a glass of orange juice in front of him.

"Your mom's already up?" she asks incredulously; mornings and Regina? Not really a mix. She gets up because she's supposed to be up, but almost never before she absolutely has to.

"Was. Then she went back to her room."

"She did?" She wonders vaguely if she sounds as dumb to her son as she sounds to herself.

He looks up at her, his expression curious, "Yeah. She seemed upset."

"She did?" Emma asks again, frowning deep enough for lines to form on her forehead.

"You just asked that," he tells her, and she can hear Regina in the impatience of his tone.

"I did," Emma admits with a sigh. "Okay, so just to be clear here: your mom was already up – way before usual, mind you - got you orange juice and then stormed out of the kitchen?"

He screws up his face for a moment in an expression meant to imply concentrated thinking, and then shrugs his shoulders. "More like walked briskly out." She wonders for a moment if a kid his age should know that word, and then wonders if she'd known it when she'd been twelve.
"And she didn't give any indication as to why she was upset?"

"She never lets me see," he answers, and then he scowls. "But she should, right?"

"Maybe," Emma hedges. "But she's trying to protect you." As she's saying this, she walks around the counter towards the massive stainless steel refrigerator against the far wall. She pulls up a bit short next to it, her eyes tracking over to her cell phone, which is plugged into the wall charger. She picks it up and flicks the home button. On the screen is a message informing her that she has a voicemail that has not yet been listened to from Archie. She'd called him the previous afternoon to ask for some advice on what the next step or course of action should be in this whole therapy thing. Apparently, they're playing a game of phone tag with each other.

She makes a mental note to call him back once Regina and Henry head out to the beach to work on their fort, and then puts the phone back down and pulls open the door to the refrigerator.

"I know what she's trying to do," he says, the impatience growing. "But I can handle the truth."

"It's not always about the truth or even what you can handle, Kid," Emma tells him, glancing back over her shoulder at him. "And I know you can, but some old habits die hard."

"You mean like lying?"

Emma turns to face him, leaning backwards against the counter and looking over at him. She meets his eyes – green on green. "Did she lie to you before she walked out of the room?"

He lifts his chin. "She told me that she was fine."

"That's not really a lie," she tells him. "Sometimes adults say that because we want to protect someone – you – and sometimes we say it to protect ourselves. And sometimes we - your mom and I in this case – say it because if we don't, we're afraid that we might not actually be okay."

He wrinkles his nose at her words, trying to wrap his mind around them. "Sounds complicated. Why not just feel what you feel and say what you mean? If you're hurting, just tell people."

She laughs. "Do me a favor, huh, Henry? Don't ever change, okay?"

"Why would I change?"

She almost answers him with the word "life" but manages to stop herself short. Instead, she answers him with another smile and then asks, "Scrambled this morning, you think?"

"Sure. Can I have extra bacon?"

"Only if your mom doesn't eat hers."

"You know she won't," he reminds her with a slight frown.

"She not like it?" Emma queries.

"She loves it," he replies and then returns to his comic book.

Like those words should say everything.

They do.

And they don't.
It's ten minutes later, and breakfast is just about ready to go when it occurs to Emma that Regina doesn't intend to come out of her bedroom because maybe she's ticked off. It's absolutely absurd and childish, and she can't figure out for the life of her what could possibly be pissing Her Majesty off today, but she knows that she needs to find out.

"Set the table for me, would you?" she asks Henry. He nods his head and puts down the comic book, jumping to his feet and moving over to the cupboard. She hears the clatter of dishes and instinctively winces before a more vindictive thought – a few broken plates ought to serve the son of a bitch who owns this place right – skips through her mind. She quickly shakes it away because even though her ex is a scumbag, she really is grateful to have use of the house.

She takes a deep breath and then heads back down the hallway, coming to a stop in front of Regina's still closed bedroom door. Another breath, this one deeper (and she wonders why she's so damned nervous about this), and then she knocks lightly. "Hey, breakfast is ready."

"Not interested," comes the very quick sharp reply.

Emma's head jerks back and for a moment, she just stares at the door. Then, a wave of frustration moving through her, she steps towards it and asks, "Is something wrong, Regina?"

Something hitting the door with a not quite solid smack is her only response. It's not heavy sounding, which means it likely wasn't Regina's hand against the hard wood, but it was loud enough to have some violence behind the motion.

Which means that for whatever reason, the former queen truly is pissed.

Emma sighs. "All right, I guess I'm coming in."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

"Why not?" Emma asks as she pushes open the door open.

"Because I'm naked."

Emma blinks. "So you are."

And so she is. Thankfully, she's not completely naked. Instead, the former queen is standing smack dab in the middle of the room, surrounded by denim and flannel, wearing only a pair of red lace panties (presumably the ones she'd been wearing when they'd kidnapped her) and a black cotton tank top. That the top doesn't match the bottom seem to be the least of Regina's concerns right about now. Or maybe, Emma wonders, that's what this is actually all about.

No, even Regina isn't that crazy, she tells herself.

"Having a wardrobe malfunction, are we?" Emma offers up weakly, averting her eyes quickly, and looking around the messy room instead. It looks vaguely like Regina is in the middle of something like a complete temper tantrum and all of this is the catastrophic fallout from such.

"I have nothing to wear," the brunette snaps back at her, her dark eyes blazing murderously.

"Really? Because we're standing on about eight different outfits." She bends down and lifts up a
gray and white flannel shirt. It's one of the smaller ones that she'd been able to find.

"Your clothes, Miss Swan, not mine." Regina sniffs angrily at them, then crosses her arms across her body, which probably is meant to hide herself from Emma's eyes, but ends up yanking the blonde's attention towards her instead. And though Emma is desperately not looking, she can't help but see what the queen has on display and...yeah, there's a lovely wall right over there.

"Something interesting on the wall, Miss Swan?" Regina demands.

"No," Emma answers before returning her eyes to Regina's face, and taking in the expression of pure fury she sees there. "You want to tell me what's going on here? You've been wearing these clothes, which by the way are not my clothes, for the last week. Why flip out now?"

"I am not 'flipping' out."

"You could fool me."

"Most people can, dear."

Emma clenches her fists and counts to ten. And then twenty. And then thirty. It's not working as well it usually does. Right now, she'd really like to hit something.

Which reminds her, where is that favor of hers?

Another call to make once she's gotten Regina calmed down enough to return to their routines.

Because those might be slow going, but God, at least they're not violent.

And they're not this, whatever this is.

"Okay," Emma starts again after several seconds and a half dozen inhale/exhale exercises that don't do much besides make her feel like she's out of breath and panting. "You're pissed about something. That much is obvious. So, why don't we start with you telling me what it is, huh?"

Emma's pretty sure that if Regina still had her magic available to her, the former mayor would have knocked her clear through the wall in the hallway. At least, that's what the furious flashing of Regina's eyes seems to suggest. "I owe you absolutely nothing," the brunette growls out.

"Okay, putting aside for a moment that nowhere in my question was there anything about you owing me anything, where is this coming from, Regina? Did I put a plate in the dishwasher upside down and your inner control freak flipped out about it? I know I took out the trash."

Regina stiffens up suddenly. "As I said previously, Miss Swan, I am not flipping out about anything, and this has nothing to do with dishes. I am simply stating that these despicable garments are not mine." She turns and points at the bed. "And that is not mine, either."

"Okay, the bed part is definitely new, but you already mentioned the clothes, and aside from the fact that you still refuse to wear jeans, which means we have to do a load of laundry every night, I'm not understanding what the issue is. So maybe instead of throwing things around the room, you could just talk to me and tell me what's going on in that head of yours. For once?"

"I don't want to be here," Regina answers. "I don't need to be here; I want to go home."

"Pretty sure you're proving the counterpoint to your argument right now, Your Highness."

"Majesty," Regina snaps out.
"What?"

"You, Miss Swan, being a princess would be called Your Highness. I – as a ruler of an actual kingdom – would and should be addressed as Your Majesty." There's a derisive hint of malice in her tone, but it's hard for Emma to feel threatened while she's getting a lesson in honorifics.

"Fine, Your Majesty," Emma spits out between angrily clenched teeth. "But since we're not going home anytime soon, when you're done having a temper tantrum like our son would over clothing, if you would deign us worthy of having breakfast with us, that would be appreciated."

"I am not having a –"

"You are and it's ridiculous, Regina. I don't know what has got you so wound up, but I do know it's beneath you," Emma retorts. "You're a gigantic fucking pain in the ass with a bad attitude and a piss poor temper, but you're typically more tyrannical in your psychosis than childish."

"Are you calling me a psychopath?" There's an odd chill to her voice, but something else, too. Something that sounds a whole lot like hurt. Something that sounds like she's wounded.

In fact, this whole damned conversation sounds like she's smarting from some kind of wound, and for the life of her, Emma just can't figure out why that it. It can't be over clothes, right?

Emma shakes her head. "It wouldn't be the first time that I've called you that, but no. What I'm saying is that this," she gestures around the room, and then down to the piles of discarded clothing on the floor, "Well this is something I'd expect from Henry and not from his mother. Not from you. Like I said, Regina, this is beneath you. It's beneath both of us, and I guess that means it's up to me for once to be the adult and step out of it. Henry and I will be at the breakfast table waiting for you to join us. Do it or don't, I honestly don't really care." She turns to walk away, but stops briefly. She considers reminding Regina to put on clothes, but thinks that maybe that'll just cause whatever this ridiculous argument is to flare up all over again.

So she says nothing at all.

Instead, she finished turning around and then swiftly walks away, leaving the former queen towering over mounds of unwanted clothing, wearing only her mismatched underwear.

And then, standing in the middle of the hallway, a quite frustrated Emma blows out a gust of air, because that was surreal in a way that frankly makes her stomach curdle anxiously. The behavior that she'd just witnessed is so counter to everything that she's ever seen with Regina and while she understands enough about basic psychology – some of it thanks to her many hours spent with counselors as a foster kid and some of it thanks to Archie – she's at a complete loss as to what might have caused Regina to act out in such a childish manner.

Because no matter what Regina thinks, that absolutely had been a tantrum.

Emma's always thought of herself as a teenager stuck in time, someone who hasn't quite grown up no matter how much she's tried to, but even she can't recall the last time she'd had a flip out like that. She thinks back to the many months spent dancing in circles (all the while playing every kind of mind game) with Regina before the curse had been broken. Regina had been cold, cruel, manipulative, and at times straight up malicious. She'd also shown moments of pettiness, but she'd never acted like that. Once the truth had been revealed and she'd been laid bare, she had tried on humble and docile, and when that hadn't worked she'd gone for angry and bitter.

None of those things match what Emma had just witnessed.
Yeah, she thinks with a resigned sigh, she's definitely going to have to call Archie to get some advice on this whole mess. Hopefully, this is just a small blip on the radar and nothing more.

"Is she joining us?" Henry asks, his voice quiet and uncertain.

The two of them – he and Emma - are seated on opposite sides of the long dining room table, and much to Emma's surprise – and annoyance - it feels oddly empty without the third person there. Normally, their meals are consumed in relative silence from the two women. Instead, both of them concentrate on their son and his desire to tell them stories. He relays tales from the storybook that had started all of this. Emma suspects Regina knows the real details about all of these, but if she actually does, she never lets on. She simply smiles at Henry and nods.

And urges him to keep talking and to tell another story because the sound of his voice, and that he's talking to her seems to be the best cure for her rage. At least in the short term.

All in all, the shared meals have become strangely comfortable and they, too, have after only a week become something of a routine for the trio. Now, the ritual is completely out of whack.

"I don't know, Kid," Emma admits as she nudges the plate of bacon towards him. He takes just a few pieces, leaving some behind for Regina. Like she might just suddenly show up and eat it.

There's a pause, and then he asks, "Do you think she's mad at me for something?"

"No," Emma replies. She shakes her head, her mind circling back to a similar conversation that had occurred a week earlier in Mary Margaret's loft. Then, Henry had been firmer, strong, more resolute. Now he looks like an unsettled and uncertain child. It cuts right through her heart.

"Are you sure?"

"If she's not, then I am," a soft voice says. Mother and son look up to see Regina walking slowly towards them, wearing familiar slacks on the bottom but one of the hoodies – a dark red one with Maine written in cursive across the front of it - on her top half. She's padding around in just socks, and thus doesn't look quite as dominating and regal as she usually does, but Emma's smart enough to hold her tongue and not mention this aloud because the vivid expression on Regina's face is one of deep shame, and while Emma's pleased that the outburst seems to be over, something inside of her tells her that she doesn't actually want to push down on the darkness.

Something tells her that doing so would be the quickest way back to anger.

She watches as Regina seats herself slowly, the former mayor's spine straight as a board against the back of the chair. Whatever had been going on before is over, and the breeding and upbringing parts of the brunette have kicked in. She looks entirely composed, back in control.

It's a lie, but not one that she's going to call Regina on. At least for now.

"Henry, sweetheart, I could never be mad at you. Ever." She meets his eyes when she says this, trying to make him see the truth of her words. Even if the words unsettle Emma a bit. Because no one should ever be beyond the anger and hurt of another. That's too high a pedestal.

He nods his head and offers her a half-smile. "Okay. Are you okay?"
The former queen looks like she's thinking her answer over for a moment, trying to decide just how much honesty he can truly handle from her. Finally, with a small smile and a soft sigh that seems to stretch, "I had a rough morning. It seems that I owe you and Miss Swan…"

She pulls up short, frowning. Her jaw tightens suddenly, and her lip purse. It almost seems like it's physically painful to get the words needed out. Like it exposes too much vulnerability.

"Are you all right right now?" Emma asks, and she's not one bit sure why she's jumping in to help Regina out right now. Regina definitely owes both she and Henry the apology that she's trying to spit out, and yet the same voice that has been guiding Emma from moment one of this little adventure is telling her that there's something innately dangerous about Regina uttering the words "I'm sorry" right now. Something that maybe no one is yet ready to deal with.

"I am," Regina answers quietly.

"Good. Then let's eat." Emma pushes the plate with bacon on it towards Regina, and their eyes meet. She thinks she sees something like gratitude there, and while she still has no idea what that whole explosion was about, she finds herself smiling at Regina in spite of her frustration.

She finds herself allowing the tension to roll away from her shoulders.

They can return to their routine now.

And that routine for the moment includes Regina lifting up an eyebrow at the plate of bacon and shaking her head.

Turns out, there is more bacon for Henry.

She hears the soft footsteps behind her and for a moment, her mind blanks because although this is pretty much all she's heard for the past week, it's still odd to not hear the click-clack of Regina's heels. It's weird to think of her moving around in just socks. Weirder to actually see it.

Queens don't wear socks. They dominate and rule; they don't pad. And yet this one is clearly doing exactly that, moving around much more like the soccer mom that she's become.

"So, now that the kid is gone, are you going to tell me what that was all about this morning?" Emma asks as she turns to take a plate from Regina. Henry has already left the room, eager to shower and get ready for the day – another one spent mostly on the beach with Regina, most likely – which leaves just the two women to clean up the breakfast mess.

"I lost my composure," Regina states.

"No shit. Why?" She takes another plate, scrubs it off and then slides it into the dishwasher next to the rest of the morning dishes. Technically, per their routine, dishes after breakfast fall to Regina, but it hardly seems worth the hassle of reminding her of such. Especially when getting to the bottom of the Great Clothing Temper Tantrum is so much more important right now.

She watches as Regina worries her bottom lip for a moment, and it's an unbelievably vulnerable action. So much so that Emma finds herself having trouble tearing her eyes away from the Queen's face. Finally, Regina offers up in a halting somewhat unsteady voice, "I feel like I'm completely off
balance. Like I can't seem to get my footing on...well, anything." She blinks and shakes her head, like she's not entirely certain that she'd said the words that she'd just said.

Emma nods. "Believe it or not, I understand."

Regina stiffens up, all of the vulnerability disappearing from her features and her face becoming hard again as she perceives condescension from Emma. "I don't want your understanding."

"Don't you? Isn't that what this is about? No one has bothered to understand your side."

"I'm not a charity case, Miss Swan, and I do not need your pity."

"Hey, easy. That wasn't...look, I actually thought you and I were getting along pretty well up until this morning. Well, about as good as we're ever going to be capable of, anyway."

"Considering you're my captor and I'm your captive, then yes, we've been getting on fine."

"Sure, yeah, considering that," Emma answers with a frown.

"So then I suppose I..." she stops abruptly again, biting her lip.

"Why can't you say it?" Emma queries, stepping closer to her.

"Say what?"

"That you're sorry. Twice this morning you've tried and both times you've looked like you were about to pass out. I don't get it; you said it outside of Granny's Diner a few months ago."

Regina meets Emma's eyes, her gaze cool and suddenly quite controlled. "Exactly," she replies sharply. "And look where that got me, Miss Swan." She gestures around. "Just look."

She holds the gaze for a moment longer, and then turns and walks away.

Emma swears that she hears the sound of heels clicking against the floor.

She swears that she hears a Queen departing.

She knows that she's missing a crucial part of the story still.

And vows to figure out exactly what it is.

It's about to rain, Emma realizes as she stands on the back deck of the house, overlooking the ocean. She knows she should probably go out and get Regina and Henry, and bring them home before the storm touches down, but she's reluctant; she's made a point of staying away from their time. They've been working on his wood fort for the last week, every night covering it up with a blue tarp. They won't even let her see it yet, and she finds herself oddly intrigued by this.

And pleased.

Because deep down, she actually does feel a kind of churning guilt about the many ways that she's come between Regina and Henry. No, Regina certainly hadn't helped matters out all on her own,
but neither had she gone out of her way to remind the boy of the true nature of family and how
blood only matters when it comes to infusions and biological medical histories.

She'd allowed Henry to come to her instead of Regina. Irritated and pushed to the edge by Regina's
defensive actions, she'd almost vengefully allowed the older woman's relationship with their son to
deteriorate. Which in the end, hadn't been in the best interests of anyone.

Now, it's time to fix things, and the best way that she can do that is by not doing anything at all.

This time is important for them. No one is watching over them or telling them how they should
feel; it's just mother and son bonding and building something more than just a fort together.

She lifts a cup of coffee up to her lips. It's getting cold quickly, and the dark clouds hovering
overhead suggest that the rainstorm incoming will be a good one. This house is up enough from the
surf that it shouldn't sustain damage, but that doesn't mean she isn't just a bit on edge.

These days, she's always on edge. Rightfully so, really.

It's the sound of a car approaching from somewhere around the front of the house that pulls Emma
away from her thoughts of rain and windows and edges that always seem to cut hard.

She frowns a bit, wondering who could be coming here to see them, all the while desperately
hoping that it's not the man who owns this place. She'd had to talk to him via email to arrange this,
but she could happily go the rest of her life without speaking to the son of a bitch again.

Turns out it's a different son of a bitch entirely.

"Neal," she says mildly as she walks down the short path towards where his car is parked, her
hands shoved deep into her pockets. He looks up at her and smiles that lazy smile of his.

"Hey."

"You were supposed to be here five days ago," she reminds him, not falling for the charm.

"I know. I did text you back and tell you I had some things to do, right?"

"Yeah, five days ago," she fires back before taking another sip of coffee.

He shrugs his shoulders. "I'm here now."

"You are." She glances up at the sky. "We should get you going again before the rain starts."

"Eager to get rid of me?"

"Actually, yes. I don't think Regina will take well to seeing you here."

He nods his head. "I get that, but I'd like to see Henry if that's possible."

"It's not."

"Emma —"

"Now's not a good time, Neal."
"You promised."

"And I mean to keep my promise, but not a week into this thing with Regina. Come on, you had to know better than that." She grits her teeth for a moment and then adds, "Don't push this."

"Fine. Bag is in the back. Mind if I ask if it's for you or her?"

"Both of us, hopefully."

"You really think she'll use it? Fists are your thing, Em, not hers."

"Well, hopefully I can change that," Emma replies with an uncertain smile as she walks around with Neal to the back of the car. He pops the trunk and they peer in. "Used?" she asks.

"Yeah. Got it from a guy I know at a local gym a couple blocks from me. It's still in great shape, though and has a whole lot of hits still left in it. In any case, it'll do what you need it to do."

"Yeah. How much do I owe you?" she asks, reaching into her back pocket for her wallet.

"Nothing," he replies, his voice quiet.

"Neal…"

"You don't owe me anything." He meets her eyes, and she sees regret there. It's weird to her, though, because though she has no desire to hate him or even feel any dark emotion for him, she can't quite find it within herself to really care about his regret. He made his own choices. They all have.

She's had to deal with hers.

About time someone else had to as well.

She considers arguing with him about paying for the bag and then shrugs; there's no point in fighting him on this and they both know it. "Right." She leans in towards the deep trunk.

"I can get it," Neal offers.

"No, I got it, and then you need to get going. I'm sure Regina's felt the drops by now and is on her way back here with Henry. I really don't want her seeing you. It's just not a good idea yet."

As if to prove her point about the urgency of the oncoming storm, several drops of icy cold water from above suddenly spray the two of them, one of them dribbling down her nose.

"You really think she'll lose her cool over me?"

"You're Henry's dad and Gold's son. Considering how little fondness she has for your dad, she's predisposed to wish you dead on sight," Emma replies, a humorless smirk appearing on her lips.

"Right. Oh, hey, you got something on your nose," he says, and with is own smirk – this one stupidly boyish - he lifts his hand as if to wipe the water away from her. Startled by his actions, she's moving away while he's moving forward and it's right out of a really bad rom-com.

Especially when she hears, "What is he doing here?"

She jerks back, moving as far away from Neal as she can manage. She turns her head; eyes wide as
can be as she takes in the furious expression settled on the face of the former mayor. Regina and Henry are standing just a few feet from her and Neal, but for all the safety of that distance, it might as well be inches. There's just no way around it: Regina looks damn near homicidal.

"Fuck," Emma growls out beneath her suddenly visible breath. Because this situation just went from uncomfortable and unwanted to dire and catastrophic. Especially if the fury flowing off of Regina in massive waves is any indication of her current ugly emotions and state of mind.

"Hey, Dad," Henry calls out cheerfully, his expression widening. He's blissfully unaware of the tension in the air, completely ignorant of the frantic looks being traded back and forth between his two moms. One desperately apologetic, the other furious beyond the telling of it. He doesn't notice the way his adoptive mother tenses and then flinches at the ease with which he is able to call Neal by that name. "Dad".

While she sometimes still begs for him to call her "Mom".

"Hey, buddy," Neal answers with a broad smile. Then, his eyes tracking up towards the glowering woman standing next to the son he'd just recently come to know. "Regina."

She ignores him, her attention completely locked on Emma. "Is there anyone that you haven't decided to let know about this little fiasco of yours, Miss Swan? Is there anyone else that you would perhaps like to bring here in order to humiliate me? Oh wait, most of them still can't cross the town line, can they? That must be quite the bitter disappointment for you."

"Regina, wait. Just…wait a moment. You've got it all wrong, okay? Neal isn't here to…whatever you think he's doing here, it's not what's happening. He brought something for me. That's all."

"Oh, I'm quite certain that he did bring something for you. In fact, my son and I were able to see quite clearly what it was that he was going to give to you," Regina snarls in response.

It takes everything Emma has to be the bigger person and ignore the pointed dart that's just been thrown towards her self worth. As if she would ever take back the man who'd sent her to prison all while loving her. There are some things that you just can't get past; that's one.

But then, this isn't about Emma and Neal hooking up, anyway, and in a flash of red hot clarity, Emma gets that. This is about fear over losing Henry and it's about Gold, and history that goes back several decades, and then several centuries beyond even that. This is about a ruined life. And hurt. A whole lot of hurt.

"Regina," Neal starts.

Emma steps in front of him. "I swear to you, Regina; Neal is just here to bring me supplies."

"You're lying."

Emma's head snaps back, indignant anger making her flush. "I'm not."

Neal turns his head towards Henry. "Hey, how about we go inside?"

That's enough to remind Regina of his presence. "You will go nowhere with my son," she growls, her hands flexing dangerously. Emma has no doubt if Regina had still had her magic, Neal's life would be in serious jeopardy right about now. His easy familiarity with a boy whom he's barely spent any time at all with isn't helping Regina's seething rage towards him.
Neal tries for a disarming smile, casual and laid-back lazy. "Hey, I'm just trying to –"

"Neal, I need you to leave," Emma cuts in once again (she knows Regina entirely too well, and knows that the Queen's reaction to Neal's attempt to charm her is likely to be a violent one), shifting her head slightly as several more raindrops hit her face. "I need you to leave now."

The casual slides away, and the man who had survived several worlds all on his own surfaces, his jaw setting and his eyes hardening. "No. No way. I'm not leaving you or him with her."

"Oh look, Miss Swan, you have a defender. Shame that he's the son of a coward," Regina states, her eyes blazing, and nostrils flaring. "Shame he's nothing more than a coward himself and –"

"Mom," Henry says abruptly, suddenly understanding that what's happening is much more than the usual parental arguments that he's become rather used to witnessing going down between his two strong-willed mothers. There's danger crackling in the air now. And anger. A lot of it.

Emma ignores them both for the moment, her attention glued on her ex. "I'm not asking you, Neal; I'm telling you. Take the bag inside for me, and then get in your car and go. You probably have about an hour before the storm really hits. You can make your way to a motel by then."

"Emma –"

"Go. Now."

"All right. Fine." He holds up his hands. "But maybe I should take Henry –"

"If you touch my son, I will rip your throat out," Regina snaps, stepping towards him, her fists clenched like she's thinking that she might actually strike him. She's in sneakers, and far shorter than Neal, but even he's smart enough to be intimidated enough to step backwards and away.

"Mom," Henry says again, and now he's truly frightened. He'd seen his mother nearly kill his grandfather with vines in the middle of Town Hall several months ago, but this is somehow much worse than that. The intensity of hatred that he feels rolling off of Regina is terrifying.


Regina spins on her, her fists still clenched. "How –"

"How dare I? How about this? You're scaring our son. I dare because I know that's not what you want to do. So yes, Your Majesty, chill out, and put your hands down because we both know I can take you down if you try to come at me; I did it before and I can do it again. But for reasons even I don't understand, I really don't want to hurt you, so please stop this. Please," Emma replies, her own hands clenching.

A strange look crosses Regina's darkened features – awareness and perhaps even a bit of humiliation, Emma thinks – and then suddenly the smaller woman is stepping backwards.

Emma lets out a breath. "Good. Neal?"

"Right. Bag and go."

"Exactly."

Her ex nods slowly. It's clear that he's not happy about this, but frankly, Emma couldn't care less. The only reason she'd asked him to do this was because she'd known he would. She hadn't expected
his timing to be so poor. She also hadn't anticipated Regina's violently bad reaction.

No, that's not quite right; she'd definitely known that Regina would react negatively to seeing Gold's son considering everything, but even she hadn't expected the response to be so bad.

Regina never fails to surprise her.

In good or bad ways.

Then again, she thinks, perhaps this tantrum is tied to the one from this morning.

God, she hopes another kitchen knife isn't going to be hanging over her head tonight. After the last week of constantly being on edge, she could really use a full eight hours of sleep.

She watches as Neal bends down and then lifts the heavy punching bag from the trunk. It's massive, but he manages it well enough, his arms wrapping tightly around it. Grunting, he carries it up the walk and into the house, and is back outside with them within two minutes.

Two minutes that were spent in awkward uncomfortable heavy silence.

With Henry looking desperately between his two mothers, wondering the whole while if his desperate plan to save his adoptive mother from herself has just collapsed beneath his feet.

All because of a biological father whom he barely knows.

"I can set it up for you," Neal offers, his hands jammed roughly into the pockets of his now damp jeans, the rain now flattening down his dark hair to his scalp. "If you'd like, I mean."

"No, I can do that. Thanks for bringing it all the way out here, Neal; I really appreciate it," Emma tells him, her tone crisp enough to let him know that their business here has concluded.

"Sure. When will I –"

"Neal."

"Right. You're sure you don't want my help?"

"You don't listen too well, do you, Mr. Cassidy?" Regina notes, her eyebrow arched up in a manner that screams Evil Queen. "You're unwanted here. Leave. And feel free not to ever return."

He starts to reply but gets stopped by a hard look from Emma, one that tells him that this isn't a battle worth fighting. Instead, he puts up his hands in surrender. "This is a mistake," he says.

"It's not," Emma replies softly. "Be safe; let me know when you're back in-doors, okay?"

"Yeah, okay." He hugs Henry, ruffles his hair, and with one last look back at Regina, gets into the car, fires it up and screeches away from the house, water spinning up behind his wheels.

Emma turns to face the older woman. "Goddammit, Regina," she growls.

"Getting full of yourself, aren't you, Miss Swan? Were we back in my land, I would have had you strapped to a wall –"

"Mom, stop," Henry says as he surges towards her, grabbing her hand and squeezing it as hard as he can manage. "You're scaring me. Please. Come back to me. Please."
She turns her head and looks at him, eyes wide. "Henry." It's almost as if she's just now noticed that he's there and has seen everything. Her cheeks blush red, and her mouth drops open.

"It's just us," he assures her, and in that moment, Emma again is reminded of just how old a soul her son actually has. At times he's so young and childlike, and then in other moments, he seems to understand exactly the right words to say. A gift that he clearly didn't inherit from her.

"He's right," Emma offers, trying to lighten up her voice from the hard edge that she'd been using a few moments earlier; she's still angry at Regina for the violent outburst against her and Neal, but she reminds herself how early they are in this process still. "Just us. Neal is gone. I promise you; all I asked him to do was drop off the bag. There's nowhere here to get one."

Their eyes meet, and then Regina says softly, "It's not just about Neal."

"Then what it is about?"

Regina turns towards Henry. "Go inside, sweetheart; it's raining, and you'll get sick."

"You should come in with me," he tells her. "You don't need to get sick, either."

She smiles warmly at him, like she's touched that he cares at all. It's absolutely gutting for Emma to witness, and she's just starting to realize that she understands why Regina has responded in some of the ways that she has. "We will, kid," Emma assures him. "Just give us a couple minutes to talk. Why don't you go start up some hot chocolate; it's going to get cold tonight."

"You're not going to hurt each other, are you?"

And there's the child side of him again. It's enough to startle both women.

"Oh, Kid," Emma says because for a moment, other words fail her. It's Regina who recovers first. "We'll both be inside in a moment, Henry. We're not going to hurt each other. I...we promise." She looks over at Emma, who quickly nods her agreement.

"Okay." He casts them one last wary look and then heads inside, away from the icy cold rain.

"So out with it," Emma says after the door shuts and she's sure that it's just the two of them in the freezing rain. "Because this is the second time today that you've completely lost it on me, and this time was pretty ugly. You have to know that you're out of control, right?"

"I do," Regina admits. It's a staggering confession, but more than that is the way Regina closes her eyes, once again ashamed and not bothering to hide it from Emma. "Believe it or not, Miss Swan; I am almost always aware of my many shortcomings."

Emma considers offering the former queen reassurances, but the words die bitterly on her lips. Such statements wouldn't be received well, anyway. She knows that right now, Regina will simply see them as empty sentiment. And that's no use to either of them. So instead, "All right, then what is this all about? What was this morning about? The freak out with the clothes?"

"You really want to know?"

"It's wet and it's cold out here, Regina," Emma answers with more than a hint of frustration. "If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't have asked. And if I didn't want to hear what you have to say, I wouldn't be here because I got to tell you, you are pushing me about as hard as you can."
"And yet you are still here, aren't you?" Regina says, looking right at the blonde.

"Yeah, I am. And I would hope that would mean something."

"It does. All right; fine." She steps towards Emma, then, and reaches out for her. For a moment, Emma goes completely rigid, all the while trying to remind herself that Regina no longer has the ability to take hearts. She feels hands settle over her hoodie, and then dip into the pockets of it.

"What are you –"

Regina pulls out a cell phone and holds it up. "Dr. Hopper."

And then it hits her with all of the impact of a linebacker. "Oh my God; you saw the notification for the voicemail from him this morning, didn't you? That's what pissed you off so badly."

"You want me to trust you," Regina says softly, hurt burning in her dark eyes. "But how can I trust someone who constantly takes away every bit of my free will? I've had more than enough of that in my life." Her lips seal shut, then, and it's clear that she intends to say no more on that.

At least for now.

Emma closes her eyes and then takes a breath to steady herself. She opens them again and shakes her head. "You're right; I screwed up. This is on me. I never meant – as off balance as you are, Regina, so am I. This kind of stuff is way over my head. At least I thought so. That's why I called Archie. Not to humiliate you or tell anyone about what we've talked about. I swear, Regina; I haven't repeated a word you've said to anyone. Not even about the peppermint."

"So what did you talk to him about?"

"What you need. What I need. How we can help each other through this. I wasn't trying to take away your free will." She frowns because the reality remains that Regina isn't exactly here willingly, and pretending that she is won't get them anywhere. "At least not this part of things. This won't work if you're not part of it. We both know that. I just…I needed help, I guess."

"And your ex?"

"Is just the man who gave us both Henry. He might also be Gold's kid, and I know after what happened – all of what's happened – that you have a lot of bad feelings for Gold –"

"Call it what it is," Regina advises. "Hate."

"Okay, fine, hate. But here's the thing, Regina: that part isn't on Neal. You can hate his father all you want, hey, hate him on my behalf but don't hate Neal because of what his father did to you in order to get to him. Neal did stupid shit, too, but that's not his fault." She smiles slightly, the look vaguely impish, "You can only have so many vengeance quests at a time, right?"

In spite of herself, Regina laughs. There's water running down her face, and her hair is starting to frizz out in every direction, but the mirth makes her seem younger and lighter instantly.

"Exactly," Emma says, smiling in return, breathing out a sigh of relief. "Now, can we go inside and get warmed up, and then maybe I can show you why I had Neal drive out here."

"With that…bag?"

"Yeah."
"Fine, but only if you answer a question for me."

"Shoot."

"What did Dr. Hopper tell you to do about me? How are you supposed to be able to help me not be the person that my son is so afraid of?" Her chin wobbles as she speaks, sadness and despair washing over her as she thinks about Henry's wide-eyed look of fear at her anger.

"He's not afraid of you, Regina," Emma insists. "He truly isn't. Not of you. He's afraid of what you become when you lose control. Like you just did a few minutes ago. That's…terrifying."

"How?" Regina repeats, in no mood to be let off the hook. "How are you going to help me?"

"By being myself," Emma answers with an uncertain shrug. "As frightening as that prospect is to both of us, and trust me, I know that it is. Look, I've been trying to help you – help us - using a book on psychology and the internet, but here's the thing, Regina: neither you nor I make a bit of sense to anyone who is even vaguely sane. Books can't explain either one of us. We've both been through too much and conventional ways won't work here."

"So what will?" Regina asks, sounding very old and tired, like the weight of the world is settled on her shoulders. For a moment, she feels every day of the sixty plus years that she actually is.

Which, of course, is where Emma Swan comes into the picture.

Emma's face breaks out into an abrupt grin that completely overtakes it, her bizarre humor almost infectious. "Sometimes, Your Majesty, you just gotta hit the crap out of something."

An eyebrow arches gracefully. "Really?"

"Really. And after we get something to eat, I'll show you exactly what I mean by that." She motions towards the house, edging her body that way. "For now, though; shall we?"

Regina inclines her head in agreement, and then in tandem, they start back towards the door. They are perhaps a dozen steps away from the steps up to the front deck when Regina reaches out and catches Emma's forearm, the touch light and uncertain. "Emma," she says softly.

The blonde sheriff turns to look at her, eyebrow up. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Everything. I…I am…"

"I know. And I am, too. I let you down this morning. You let me down afterwards. We both have got to get over it or we are both wasting our time at this. I need you to try to trust me here."

"I don't know how to," Regina admits, taking her hand off of Emma and then turning to look away. "I can't remember a time when trying to trust someone didn't bite me in the ass."

"Yeah, well, unfortunately that makes two of us. And I don't just mean in regards to you. So maybe we figure this whole trust thing out together, too. In for a penny, in for a pound."

Dark eyes track back, meeting hers, their breaths misting in front of them.

Finally, Regina nods.

"Good. And you're drinking hot chocolate with me and Henry."

"I don't –"
"Today, you do. With whipped cream even. Henry will like that." The last comment is said lightly, in a tone free of judgment.

But of course, it's still Regina.

"You really think whipped cream will make him not afraid of me."

"No, I think staying in control will do that. A little bit of whipped cream will just remind him that his mother knows how to let loose and have some fun every now and again."

"Whipped cream is your idea of fun?"

"Well, it can be." Emma coughs, then. "Forget I said that."

Regina smirks in response. "I forget nothing, Miss Swan."

"Figures," Emma chuckles. Then, a bit more cautiously like she knows what she's about to say is likely to get a stronger reaction. "And hey, maybe tomorrow morning, you even have some bacon with us. I know you don't actually hate it. Henry told me you love it."

"Tastes change."

"Yeah, or maybe you're letting him have yours as some kind of -" Emma prompts.

"It's not a sacrifice, Miss Swan," the brunette insists. "It's just bacon."

"It's just bacon, but what you're doing is still kind of sweet."

Regina smiles at that, and for once, just accepts the compliment.

They enter the house together, virtually side-by-side, both of them looking like drowned rats. Henry looks up from his position behind the counter, eyes hopeful. "Everything all right?"

"All good, Kid," Emma confirms.

His eyes sweep to Regina, and she offers him a small sad smile.

"As Miss – as Emma said, we're…good. And Henry? I…" she takes a breath, and Emma wonders for a moment if it's easier or harder to say these words to Henry. "I'm sorry for letting you down again," Regina finally says. "I wish I could say it won't happen again, but –"

"I know, Mom. And I forgive you," he tells her almost immediately, and Emma thinks she hears Regina gasp in surprise. It occurs to her that the brunette has very seldom heard these words – words that mean more to her than most others ever could. "Just trust us," he pleads.

"I do trust you. Completely," she tells him, and it's clear to Emma that despite their talk outside, for now, Regina means just him. And that's okay because trust between adults takes time.

Especially when the two adults have hurt each other as much as they have hurt each other.

She thinks back to her conversation with Archie from earlier in the morning. He'd told her to have
faith in herself, to believe in her own methods.

He’d told her to trust in how she’d made it to where she is.

Not quite fixed, but not exactly broken, either.

Her eyes drift over to the heavy bag lying on its side on the ground. There's gray tape across the lower part, and some wearing near the top, but it'll more than serve its purpose for them.

Her hands flex, her knuckles cracking.

She thinks that she's going to enjoy this.

She's pretty damned sure Regina will.

A smile slides across her face.

Balance, she thinks. It's all about regaining control and keeping balance.

And trust.

All in time.
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Some mild violence of the training nature, and talk of difficult subjects from Emma's childhood.

There's something rather comical about watching the notorious Evil Queen attempting to figure out how to eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with anything approaching grace and dignity. Regina eats it delicately, her fingers pinched ever so lightly around the soft white bread. It takes her several moments to bring the food to her mouth, but when she finally does bite down into it, a strange expression flickers across her features – something that looks like an almost childish form of delight – before she seems to catch it, and then she abruptly slams her typical disinterested mask back into its usual place.

Emma knows that she should let it go, but she simply can't; the temptation is simply too much.

A smile lifting her lips, Emma asks between sips of her hot chocolate (Regina's own mug is sitting untouched in front of her, the mountain of whipped cream that had once sat atop it having long ago melted into the warm dark liquid; that she had made herself one had been enough, anyway), "Have you really never had a PB&J sandwich before?"

"No, I most certainly have not," Regina replies haughtily, like it should be so very obvious to everyone. "And to be quite plain, Miss Swan, I'm not sure why I'm having one now, either." She turns the sandwich over in her hands, gazing at it with a raised eyebrow and a disgruntled frown.

Emma and Henry had made lunch which means that the sandwiches are messy and jelly is dribbling out of the sides, purple and sticky and damned if she doesn't look perturbed by this. She probably is, Emma imagines; it's hard to think that Regina has ever made anything that looks quite this ridiculous and catastrophic. Nor tastes quite as simplistically good and right.

"Because it was Henry's turn to choose lunch," Emma replies. She glances over at Henry, who grins. He then motions to her lips with his finger, and she quickly reaches up and wipes jelly away from the corner of her mouth. A shrug, and her son is giggling, his eyes sparkling.

It warms her heart, and she's certain that it does the same for Regina.

"Well, then, I suppose I should be pleased that we're not eating Twinkies," the brunette comments between absurdly dainty mouthfuls of her own overfilled sandwich. The words are said with bite, but the tone is surprisingly light. Enough so that Emma feels her smile widening.

"We considered it, but after a quick vote between the two of us, we decided we wanted to save those for dessert," Emma chuckles. "By the way, a big bite really won't hurt you. Promise."

"Mm. This is children's food," Regina shoots back, her eyes flickering around the kitchen. Because of all of the over-sized windows in this house, it's easy to watch the rain pouring down outside. It's just a after two in the afternoon, but it might as well be night for as dark as it is.

"Yep," Henry nods, grinning at her from across the table as he finishes off the last of his own
sandwich. "They serve it at school. If you're wondering where I got a liking for it."

"Yes, well, of course they do," Regina responds, and something dark and unsettling slides across her face as if she's remembering exactly who it was who had likely introduced her son to this kind of sandwich. The former mayor has always been meticulous about her meals, providing only the healthiest ones available to her son, insistent on providing the utmost by the book care. Peanut butter and jelly had absolutely been out thanks to the high sugar content of it.

Mary Margaret – Snow White - had, however, had an entirely different idea.

As always.

She wonders if a few sandwiches served at home before the book had come into her life might have changed everything. Would a little more sugar have made Henry love her more?

"Sometimes it's nice to be a child," Emma states, pulling her from her darkening thoughts.

"When are you not a child, Sheriff?" Regina drawls, blinking rapidly to refocus herself on the aggravating blonde woman sitting across from her. A woman who continues – for some absolutely inexplicable reason – to try to reach out to her and make a connection with her.

"Fair point, but you have to admit that it sure seems like I have a lot more fun than you do."

And it's absolutely the truth, and they both know it.

"Lately anyway," Regina sighs as she finishes the sandwich. She reaches for the napkin, wipes her hands clean on it and then looks over at Emma, her chin raised up as if to show off her strength. "All right, then, let's get on with this ridiculous punching thing of yours."

Emma snorts in response. "Way to embrace it one hundred percent there, Regina."

"Oh, I very much plan to embrace this," Regina assures her. "Especially if it allows me to..." she trails off and turns the smile to Henry. It's when she does this – as if remembering that he won't approve of the comment that she'd been about to make – that Emma sees the way the skin around Regina's eyes crinkles as if suggesting that she's in pain.

Emma wonders if the former mayor is having yet another of her migraines. She has been rather carefully watching Regina over the last week – ever since the woman's confession about taking aspirin for headaches – and she's noticed that whenever there's any kind of uptick in tension or stress between any of them, the pained squinting begins.

Today has been a terrible day for stress and tension thanks to Archie and Neal and misunderstandings galore. Emma thinks that it's probably high time to bring things down a bit.

"Right. And I promise you we will, but I need to get the bag set up first. Which will take time."

"Time," Regina repeats as a hand slowly lifts up towards her right temple and then stops, her eyes still on Henry. She's watching him, ensuring that he doesn't see what Emma does.

Ensuring that he doesn't see her weakness.

The slight frown and frozen hand is enough to confirm her suspicions about Regina suddenly dealing with a quickly on-rushing migraine. The rapid blinking and squinting seals the deal.

"Right, time," Emma confirms. "If it's all the same to you, Regina, I'd prefer to do it without you
making smart-ass comments the whole time. So why don't you go chill on the couch for a bit. I found some books in the study. A few looked like your type," she suggests, her expression neutral, like she's trying to hide whatever intent she might have.

"I doubt very much that the…owner of this house has the same taste in literature that I do," Regina answers with something that sounds a whole lot like an indignant almost snobbish kind of sniff. To her credit, she doesn't add anything jerkish to the end of the statement even though the sentiment is implied. Well, maybe she is growing. Or maybe Henry being in the room had stilled her hand and her typically sharp tongue. Either way, Emma's thankful not to be reminded yet again of why it is that they have this house to stay in. No matter the truth of said comments.

"You might be surprised," Emma replies. "Looked like a whole lot of true crime stuff."

"Perhaps, then. Though, I think I'd prefer to read in the bedroom," Regina counters, her voice controlled. "I really have no desire to hear you cursing as you fumble putting up the bag. I do, however, ask that you try to restrain yourself in front of my…in front of Henry. Please."

"Of course," Emma grins, and there's something else there. Something that looks like maybe Emma knows exactly why Regina is choosing to retreat to her bedroom. She also knows exactly why Regina is hiding behind coolly delivered insults and Henry – because it's easier than accepting that someone might understand what she's going through.

Because even a little bit of understanding is a whole lot of terrifying.

"Excellent," Regina says, standing up. "Well then, I'll be in the bedroom reading if…well that's where I'll be." She offers the smallest of smiles – the look vaguely sheepish and uncertain, like she's not quite sure what she's supposed to do or say after the two tantrums that she's already thrown today – and then turns and walks towards her bedroom.

"Is she okay?" Henry asks once they hear the bedroom door close, his voice quiet.

"Yeah, she's okay. Just a headache," Emma tells him, and it's mostly the truth. Enough of it to pass muster with him, anyway. "You ready to help me get this thing set up?"

"You mean the punching bag?"

"The bag," she repeats, lifting her eyebrow comically. "The bag."

"You're a dork," he tells her, shaking his head. She has a flash of what he might be like a few years from now when he's a teenager and being the Savior isn't nearly as cool. She imagines that even she will have to deal with her growing child thinking she's something of a weirdo.

Well, she reasons, she's that now anyway so why not later as well?

"Yeah, well maybe, but you're my son," she counters before reaching out to tickle him on the rib-cage, her arms circling him. "So, what does that make you, huh?"

He breaks away from her, gets some distance to ensure she can't attack again, and says, "Not a dork like you."

"Nice," she laughs as she reaches out and pushes against his shoulder with the knuckles of her hand. "Real nice. You really are the son of the Evil Queen, aren't you?"

A strange look flickers across his face and when it's gone a moment later, she's reminded of how almost that same thing had occurred with Regina just a few minutes earlier. She wonders just how
much Henry has learned about how to hide his feelings and thoughts away.

She wonders if he understands masks.

"Henry?" she prompts. "What's going on in there?"

"Nothing," he replies after a moment. "Can I hit the bag once it's up, too?"

"Yeah," she answers with a thin smile. "But one step at a time."

He meets her eyes, and it occurs to her that they're having separate conversations here – or at least moving in and out of different ones. "As long as it gets up," he says, his voice intense.

They stare at each other, and she wonders what it is that she's supposed to say here. How does she say the words that he needs to hear to believe that everything will work out as it should?

Thankfully, he doesn't need the words yet because after a moment, his smile returns and he's jumping back towards her and then racing towards the heavy bag, which still lies on its side.

And she follows after him.

Which is pretty much what she's been doing since the day she gave birth to him.

Turns out that Henry's idea of helping her to set up the heavy bag – which they do in the massive empty garage positioned on the side of the house – is to sit on an upside down paint bucket and comment on how not centered the bag is. The door leading to the outside is hanging wide open, allowing for the cool crisp air to drift through the room, which is a good thing considering how sweat drenched Emma is after having moved the bag for the third time.

He's so Regina's son, she grouses as he tells her once more that there's too much room on one side, and not nearly enough on the other. After all, he reminds her with a mischievous grin, the Internet (and he's looking down at her cell phone as he says this) advises that there should be plenty of space to swing around and for the bag to do the same.

She sighs, moves it a few inches (causing the four-ended chain harnessing the bag to jingle in protest) and looks over at him in exasperation. "Better?" Up above, she can hear rain pelting against the metal roof of the garage, the sound comfortably rhythmic and oddly soothing.

"Better," he nods.

"Finally," comes her grunted response as she steps back. She lifts her hand up and swipes sweat away with the back of her palm. She's dressed in running shorts and a gray tank, the dip of it soaked through with perspiration thanks to the exertion of moving the bag from spot to spot.

"Should we go get mom?" he asks as he gazes up at the swaying bag.

"Not yet. I think she's taking a nap in her room," Emma tells him as she drops a hand against the metal roof of the garage, the sound comfortably rhythmic and oddly soothing.

"She does that a lot," he notes.
Frowning, Emma turns to face him. "She does?"

"She doesn't think I notice, but yeah. After I brought you to Storybrooke, she'd disappear into her office a lot at night. She'd tell me she was working, but sometimes I'd look in and see her sleeping on the couch with her arm over her eyes like she was trying to make the room darker."

"Do you know what migraines are?" Emma asks him after a few seconds of her son staring at her. His look is so expectant, so sure she has all of the answers. It's more than a little unsettling.

"They're headaches, right?"

"Yeah. Really bad ones. And they can be triggered by a lot of things, but stress is one of the biggest drivers that there is. Which me coming to town and poking around you definitely created. But I'm guessing there was some stress before I showed up, too, though, right?"

He nods his head. "Things weren't good between us."


"She said so I could have someone to talk to."

It's the right thread, she knows, and one that needs to be pulled on to get Henry to understand and really open his mind about all of this, but there's old hurt there – much of it still unresolved. He and Regina really haven't ever worked through this, and before they can go home, they'll need to. "Why couldn't you talk to her?"

"She wanted me to be perfect." He looks away. "And I wasn't."

"None of us are, kid. Not me, not her. None of us. And her wanting you to be perfect doesn't mean she ever loved you any less because you weren't it. She may not have been able to listen to what you were trying to say because she was wrapped up in her own head and her own thoughts, but even then, Regina knew that you needed someone to talk to."

"Until the book came and she tried to make me think I was crazy."

"Yeah, she messed up. She panicked. That doesn't make it right, but…"

"I know; people make mistakes and we have to learn how to forgive," he says. "And I get it. I mean I think I do. And I do know that she loves me. I love her, too. She's my mom. I just…why can't she control her anger like you do? Why isn't she good just because she is like you are?"

Emma laughs. It's loud and not especially humorous, and perhaps the almost hysterical tinge that Henry hears lurking just beneath the not really there mirth is enough to cause him alarm because his eyebrows shoot into his hairline and a frown spreads across his young features.

"Emma?"

"Oh, Kid," she says with a dismayed shake of her head. "No one is good just because they are. Especially not me. I know you want to believe that and you know what? So do I, but it's just not true. Your mom wasn't born bad and I wasn't born good no matter what anyone thinks or what anyone tries to tell you. The lives we live are what makes us who we are, not birth."

"But you control your anger. She doesn't. She…"

"I know. Trust me, I know what she's done and what she's capable of. But I also know that
controlling your anger and stopping yourself from doing terrible things isn't as easy as it seems. I've failed to control my anger at times, and it has cost me a lot. Just as it has cost her. Thing is, when you're an adult, sometimes you feel like…” she stops for a moment, rolling over the words in her head. She can well imagine that this isn't a conversation that Regina would want her to have with Henry, but it occurs to Emma that maybe it's one that should have been had a long time ago. "Sometimes you feel things that tear you apart inside. They hurt, and they make you feel like everything is bad and you're bad and nothing will ever feel good again."

"Like a Dementor?"

She thinks about this, then nods. Per Archie (and her understanding) it's entirely psychologically normal for Henry to try to understand all of this using familiar terms and such. He's a child who has just learned that most of the cautionary literature that he grew up on is either true or has elements of truth within the stories that he knows so well. It's completely natural for him to gravitate back towards his books when he's stumped on adult issues such as pain and rage.

"Kind of," she allows. "But it's much worse than that. When a Dementor is anywhere nearby to someone, everyone kind of feels like there's no hope and everything is cold and bad, right?"

"Right."

"For adults, that can be real life, but what's worse is that sometimes we do things to cause our own pain. Your mom has done a lot of bad things, and she's trying to come to terms with those things and the ones that others have done to hurt her as well. It's not easy and the anger and feeling like nothing you do matters can be…it can make everything inside of you feel empty."

"So what do you do?" he asks, his voice so young and innocent.

"You try to focus on the good parts of your life and you look for ways to feel better and to feel like everything might be okay. And sometimes, if you're very lucky, you have someone there to pull you back from the edge and stop you from doing those things that you'll regret. And sometimes, even when you don't have that, you have something happen to you that makes you understand that the person you've become isn't the person you've ever wanted to be."

"Is that what happened to you?" he asks her. His eyes are on her and it seems as though he's absorbing everything she's saying to him, but she can't help but wonder how much of this he can possibly understand. She has eighteen years of hard-lived life on him and she barely gets it.

"You happened to me, Henry," she tells him softly, reaching for his hands and squeezing them tight. "You coming into my life changed everything. It changed who I was and who I am. Before you were there, let's just say I was doing a lot of other stuff. Much…lonelier type stuff."

"Why can't I do that for her?"

"You have," Emma assures him. "But nothing happens overnight, and what your mom has been through, well…I've been through a lot, but she…" She stops again, wondering how much she's supposed to tell him, and wondering just how bad Regina will freak out when she finds out. "Henry, your mom has been hurt very badly in her life. And by a lot of people who should have been there for her including her own mother. That doesn't justify what she's done to you or me or anyone, but I'll tell you something I figured out a very long time ago: life really isn't all about justifying behavior. Sometimes, it's about understanding and realizing that what you think you know is only half of the story. Sometimes it's about the things that you don't know. There's more to me than you're aware of, and there's certainly more to Regina than either of us are."
"Well that's why we're here, right?" he says, motioning around.

"Exactly. We're here because your mom needs somewhere where she can breathe for a few minutes. Somewhere where no one is going to hurt her. Where we can be there for her.

"But she doesn't trust us."

"She doesn't trust me," Emma corrects with a small smile. "If you told her that the sky was purple with silver dots across it, she'd believe you without a second thought. Me, on other hand, well I'm one of the people who let her down. What happened with Archie—"

"So we fix it," he interrupts, nodding his head sharply, resolutely.

She laughs. "Yeah, we fix it. That's the plan, anyway," she confirms.

He jumps up off of the bucket and crosses over to the bag, reaching out to touch it, his hand flattening against it as he feels the texture. "Will you teach me?" he asks as he pushes at it.

"Of course."

"And if I ever get as angry as she is—"

"You won't," Emma assures him. "I can't promise you that you won't ever have anger or hurt in your life. Neither your mom nor I can protect you from everything bad in the world, but we can be there to stop you from falling should you ever feel like you are. Believe it or not, Kid, you are one of the lucky ones; you have two mothers who love you more than anything in this world or any other and will do anything to make sure that you are happy and loved. So when the time comes and you need us, I want you to know that we will always be there for you. Both of us."

"You promise?"

"I do, and if she was out here with us right now, I know she would say the same thing and make you the same promise," Emma assures him before sweeping down to press a kiss to the top of his messy-haired head. It's an oddly affectionate gesture for a woman who is far more comfortable with rough one-armed hugs and awkward tickle fits, but they both allow it.

And then, because the moment is too long and too intense for both of them, Henry says loudly and energetically, "Cool. So do I get to tape my hands up?" He jabs at the air as he speaks.

Emma laughs loudly, thankful for the break in the tension. "If you want."

"Do I have to?" a voice drawls from the open door of the garage.

The two of them look up to see Regina standing in the doorway, wearing a plain gray hoodie over loose black sweatpants. The entire look is completely wrong for her but Emma would be lying if she didn't admit at least to herself that her eyes had taken in the dressed down casual clothing of the queen with more than a little bit of appreciation. Well, some women look beautiful in anything, Emma reasons, and Regina Mills is certainly one of those women.

The former mayor steps towards them, winding a hand through her slightly damp hair as she does so. The garage is about fifteen feet away from the main house, which means that Regina had had to step out into the elements to make her way over. It's a good look on her, though.

Dressed down, her hair wet and not a bit of make-up on flawless features.
Beautiful and oddly natural.

And something Emma finds herself a bit surprised that she's noticing right here and now.

She clears her throat and offers Regina a slightly awkward smile. "Well, I'm guessing you'll be hitting the bag a lot harder than he would be so preferably, yes," Emma notes. She doesn't ask the other question running through her mind which is, "How long have you been there?" because it doesn't matter; everything she'd said to Henry had been the truth and she would hope that Regina would recognize it as such. Instead, she asks, "How was the book?"

The two women share a look – one that suggests that they both understand that Regina had actually been sleeping as opposed to reading. The brunette, after a moment, inclines her head slightly as if to say thank you for the consideration, and then answers with, "Quiet."

"I bet. Which reminds me, I picked you up some tea when I went shopping yesterday. Peppermint," Emma says with a slight knowing smile. "Bags are in the pantry."

"Peppermint is good for headaches, Mom," Henry offers up helpfully, his look innocent and completely unaware. He has no idea that his exact words had just been said by Emma to his adoptive mother without ever actually being said.

"Yes," Regina replies after a moment. "Indeed, it is. Thank you, Miss Swan."

"Sure. You about ready to try the bag out?"

"If it'll shut you up about it, then yes," Regina responds with a sigh that's meant to let everyone know that she's going along with this simply because there's nothing else to do. But there's a curious twinkle in her eye betraying her. Still: "Let's hurry up; I have to get dinner started soon."

"All right," Emma agrees as she moves back over to the bag and then places both hands on it before turning to face Regina and Henry once again. "Then let's start with lesson one."

Lesson one is more for Henry's benefit than Regina's. It's about preparation and control, and the whole time that Emma is speaking to the two of them, Regina finds herself wondering if controlled violence is what she wants or needs right about now, because yeah as it turns out, she really does want to hit something about as hard as she can.

"Miss Swan," Regina interrupts after the third time of watching Emma show Henry how to do an exaggerated knees-bent position. "Is there a point coming where I will actually get to hit the bag or is this all about watching you look like you need to use the bathroom?"

Emma chuckles at that, her bemusement obvious. "After dinner," she says. "I just wanted to ensure everyone knows the basics of how. Tonight, you can hit it as hard as you want."

"I suppose that will have to suffice," Regina responds, sounding as though she doesn't really care one way or another. A cocked eyebrow from Emma lets the brunette know that the sheriff sees right through her pretense of indifference.

It's fairly annoying, but Regina lets it pass.

"So what's for dinner?" Henry asks, almost like he can tell that something is building again. He's well aware of the fact that there's already been two knock down fights between his mothers today; he's not in the mood for another one even if this seems more like poking than arguing.

"I was thinking maybe we could have some spaghetti and meatballs," Regina answers before
adding an uncertain: "Does that...does that sound all right to you?"

"Yeah! Can I help?"

"You...you want to?" she asks, and it rather breaks Emma's heart just how hopeful and surprised the older woman sounds at the mere suggestion of Henry being involved.

"Of course," he replies. "You've just never let me."

"No, I haven't," she says with realization suddenly burning in her eyes. She bends down towards him, meeting him at eye level. When she speaks, she lowers her voice. She knows that Emma can hear her, but it doesn't matter; these words are for Henry. "So how about we change that?"

"I'd like that."

"Me, too," she replies quietly, and realizes then that she actually means it. She reaches out for him, allowing for a small watery smile when he doesn't flinch away or run from the contact as he once had. Her fingers settle over his shoulder and she squeezes lightly.

She keeps his eyes the whole time.

What she sees there is acceptance and understanding.

Maybe even love.

It's confusing and terrifying and the dark and ugly voices inside of her head are telling her not to believe what she sees there (who could ever really love her, they ask and taunt) but it's Henry and she refuses not to believe in him. She refuses not to hope that he could actually love her.

She simply refuses because yes, love is weakness.

But it's hers.

And though it may one day burn her from the inside out, she still finds herself reaching for it.

For the first hour or so, it's just Regina and Henry standing over the massive pot of simmering spaghetti sauce, the two of them huddled close together as they add in ingredients.

The whole time they're working together on dinner, Regina is patiently explaining everything that's going into the sauce to Henry. It seems as though initially, she does this to put him at ease, to ensure that he doesn't worry that she is poisoning either he or Emma. However, as she begins to realize that he actually is interested in what she's doing, it becomes educational instead and the two of them begin to look as though they're truly enjoying doing this together.

It's utterly heartwarming, and Emma can't stop grinning as she watches.

This goes on for a while, until finally they both step back to let the sauce cook. "Nice work," Regina says softly, her hand rested on Henry's cheek and then dropping to his shoulder.

"Thanks," he grins. "That was fun."
"It was," she agrees, moving her hand to cup his cheek.

Emma watches all of this from the stool on the opposite side of the counter, a bottle of beer in her hand. She smiles when she sees the wonder in Henry's eyes and the happiness in Regina's.

"Miss Swan?" she hears, and looks up to see Regina staring at her.

"Would you like to help?" the older woman asks. There's an odd look in her eyes, a kind of strange uncertainly, like maybe she's not sure that she wants to be extending this offer. Like maybe she'd prefer to keep these moments between just she and Henry only.

But one look at Henry, and both of them know what they'll say next because they know exactly what he wants. He wants his family together, and he considers these two women to be that.

"You already know how badly I cook," Emma reminds her between sips.

"I do, but I presume you can toss a salad, yes?"

"I think I can manage that. Yes."

"Excellent. We're still a bit away from that, but once I start making the spaghetti itself, you can begin on the salad. No radishes, though; Henry is allergic and I'm not fond of them, either."

"He is?" Emma queries, leaning it. It seems a strange thing to be interested in, but it occurs to her that she really doesn't have much of a clue about Henry's medical history. So much of his life had occurred before she'd come into the picture and the only people who really know it all are the other ones in this kitchen. More specifically, the woman standing across from her.

"I am," Henry confirms with the kind of broad smile that lets her know that he finds the whole thing awesome in retrospect. "Blew up like a balloon when I was seven." He makes a motion with his hands and blows air into his cheeks to make them look like he's a chipmunk.

"Yes. Thank God that Dr. Whale has some value," Regina drawls, clearly not nearly as amused as Henry is by this memory. "Now, do you understand the instructions I've provided to you, Miss Swan or should I repeat them for you?" Her eyebrow is arched, and she's clearly teasing.

"That I do, Your Majesty," Emma replies with an impish grin.

Regina laughs, the sound full and rich. It's beautiful and for a moment, it's easy to forget just how much pain the three people in this room share and just how much they don't.

It's easy to forget, and for a few hours, Emma sees no problem with doing so.

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Considering the topsy-turvy highly emotional day that they've all had, dinner is a relatively quiet and lovely affair. The spaghetti is fantastic and even the salad manages to be worthwhile.

The conversation is light and easy, focused almost entirely on Henry and Regina's wood fort, and the slow but steady progression of it into something worthwhile. His hands flailing, Henry tells his mothers of his plans to turn it into the greatest castle ever built. He speaks of doing so with such admirable enthusiasm that neither Regina nor Emma has the heart to tell him that this storm – which is now slanting sideways and blowing gusts of wind and rain against the reinforced glass
windows of the house - has likely washed the wood back into the water.

This isn't a night for hard truths like that.

Not yet, at least.

That will come later.

But not…not now.

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He's a smart boy. Smart enough to know that his mothers need some time alone. He's hopeful that the quieter moments of the day signify progress between the two of them (and this family as a whole), but he's seen enough now to understand that these things will take time.

Healing – even if he doesn't exactly understand it as such - takes time.

At around eight that night, he lifts his arms up into the air and yawns loudly. "Tired," he tells them even though his bedtime isn't for another hour yet. They're sitting in the living room, Regina in one of the chairs reading and he and Emma playing their third game of checkers.

Emma lifts an eyebrow, like she knows exactly what he's doing, but Regina – always the mom even when she herself is crumbling - buys into it completely, her brow wrinkling in concern as she leans towards him "Are you not feeling well, sweetheart?" Emma gets the impression that if Regina were closer to him, she'd be touching Henry's forehead.

"I'm okay," Henry assures her with a slightly sheepish smile. "Just sleepy; been a really long day, you know? Besides, Emma's supposed to be showing you how to use the bag."

"Yes, I suppose she is. And you don't want to be around to watch that?"

"I don't think I'm supposed to be," he tells her in the voice he uses when he's saying something obvious. "This is kind of like your talks on the porch at night, right? And I'm not supposed to know that you guys are doing that so this is me pretending I don't know about this, either."

Emma groans. "Go brush your teeth."

He wriggles his eyebrows in amusement, sticks out his tongue at Emma, and then jumps up from his chair. "By the way," he says to her, his chin lifted up. "I was about to beat you."

She looks down at the board and scowls. "No, you weren't."

"He was," Regina comments, her eyes flickering across the playing board. "In three moves if I'm reading the board correctly. And don't make that face unless you want it to stick there permanently." She says the last sentence with the kind of flippancy a mom casually uses, but just the same, Emma feels appropriately chastised enough to immediately alter her expression to a far more neutral one. One that perhaps she could handle being stuck with forever.

Which…ugh. Dammit.

"You know how to play checkers?" Emma asks, a bit awkwardly, and just to change the subject away from her rapidly changing facial expressions and the question of them freezing in place.
Apparently, it's completely the wrong thing to say because a look of sadness crosses her face before Regina replies to her in a very low voice, "Well, I did raise him, Miss Swan so yes, I am aware of the child's game of checkers. I may have even taught him how to play it."

"Right. Of course you did. Teeth, Henry; go brush them." Her words are delivered softly – mostly so as not to engage Regina's parental reflex – but they're still firm and absolute.

In response, Henry looks from mother to mother, and frowns but then exits the room.

"I didn't mean anything by that," Emma insists, once he's gone.

"I know."

"I guess I just always saw you as a chess person instead."  
"You would be correct. Chess was the game my mother taught me."

"Personally?"

"Of course not. My father and then my tutors were the ones who showed me how to play." She glances down at her book and flips a page, but it's clear that she's not really reading anymore.

"Well now that I've stuck my foot in my mouth in true Emma Swan fashion, how about we put our kid to bed and go hit the bag. After the day we've both had, I could use a few swings, too."

"The day you had?"

"Believe it or not, I have no more desire to see Neal than you do. I just needed him to bring me the bag. I could have gone the rest of my life without ever seeing him again. I might be trying to forgive him now and I might one day completely forgive him, but we'll never be what we were."

"And you're telling me this because?"

"Because you still don't believe me when I tell you that hurting you or betraying your trust is the last thing I want to do," Emma insists. "Because when I tell you that, you look at me like you think I'm running a con on you, and I need you to understand that I really do care about this."

"Why is that, Miss Swan? Why is hurting me the last thing you'd want to do? Why do you care? Because if our situations were reversed, I'm not sure that I could say either of those things."

"I honestly don't know," Emma admits. "I just know it's the truth."

"Interesting. I thought you were about to tell me that you're a good person and good people don't do such things," Regina comments, her tone dry, her disdain for such words clear.

"Ah, but we both know that I'm not a good person, don't we, Regina?" Emma presses, and there's honesty flaring in her eyes. "You've seen my records. You know some of my past. And we both know that there are very few actual good people in the world. Really good people."

Their eyes meet, and for a moment, a strange look comes over Regina; it seems as though she's about to burst into tears. It seems as though she's just been told something that hurts her even worse than someone telling her that she's not a good person. She shakes her head, then.

"There are good people," she insists, snapping her book shut as she does.

"Why? Why does there have to be?" Emma counters. It's strange, her playing this role, the devil's
advocate to a degree, the one testing and pushing Regina to find some kind of hope. She supposes that she's trying to make a point here, and she imagines that Regina knows it.

All the same, the brunette answers honestly, quietly even, "Because I don't want my son growing up in a world where there are no good people. I want…I need him to find happiness and love and…well, he already has me. He deserves better than that. He deserves to have…"

She stops abruptly, and then in a quick burst of motion, she reaches for the glass of red wine which she has had sitting next to her for the last hour. She's barely sipped it since they settled, but now she practically guzzles it down, her dark eyes closing as she swallows the alcohol.

"Regina," Emma starts, and then stops because she has no idea what else to say. She swallows roughly, painfully and wonders if there are words for the kinds of doubts and self-loathing that exists within the former mayor. She's always thought of herself as being worth very little to anyone (most especially herself), but one glance at Regina and the way she's tightly holding herself together, an arm around her own waist like it might help to keep her from spilling out, and Emma knows for a fact that her own self-image is downright healthy comparatively.

Thankfully, Regina changes the subject. "You really think hitting that bag of yours will help?" she asks, her voice a bit shaky. Her eyes are dark, like her thoughts are a swirl of pain and loss. Like she's somewhere lost in the nightmare that is her past.

"I think that at this point, it can't possibly hurt."

"You would be surprised at what kinds of unassuming things can end up hurting you when you least expect it," Regina tells her, shadows bleeding through her tone. "I thought Henry would be the one thing…well. The things you love the most." She looks away then, swallowing hard.

It takes Emma everything that she has to not reach out and touch the older woman, to not offer the comfort which Regina clearly so desperately needs. But they don't have that kind of relationship. Yet.

She almost laughs because well, that's putting the cart in front of the horse, isn't it?

So instead, she says, "I know, but trust me; this will help."

"And if it doesn't?"

"It will."

"You're so sure of this," Regina comments, her head slightly tilted in curiosity.

The blonde simply shrugs her shoulders in response. "It helped me."

"We're the same, are we?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes no. In this, though, I think we are."

"I hope you're right," is all Regina says, and then she's standing up and walking away.

Emma wonders when it is that she'll stop following these two around. She thinks…never.
And knows that for the truth that it is.

"There are rules," Emma says once it's just the two of them standing in the garage, one of them on each side of the massive heavy bag as it lazily sways back and forth between them.

"Of course there are."

"Rule number one," Emma states as she presses a hand against the bag. They're both in sweats and tanks, and though it's chilly now thanks to the cold air outside, the blonde has assured her that once the workout begins, they'll both heat up quickly enough to think that even those clothes are too much. "You never hit the bag to hurt yourself."

"I have no idea what you mean by that."

"Try bullshitting someone else, Regina; I know you too well."

"So you think." She flicks her hand in the air dismissively. "But please, go on."

"This workout is about exercise and channeling emotions into something useful. You don't do it to hurt yourself. You do it to give yourself a way to work through your issues, not to punish. No matter how much you think you deserve it," She hits the bag then, somewhat lightly. It swings around in the air, circling before swaying back and forth.

"Punish the bag for my many failures at life, not myself. Got it." She might as well be rolling her eyes, but to her credit, it's just her voice she utilizes to show her disinterest in the "rules".

"Rule number two: always use the hand-wraps or the gloves. We don't have any gloves here yet but Neal did bring some wraps for us." She points over to a box sitting on the ground. "I'll try to order us some gloves online, but until they get here, these will do well enough."

"And the point of them?"

"To keep us from getting hurt. Which ties into rule number one."

"Mm. I'm not sure I'm understanding the stress relief part of this."

"You will. Rule number three, do it long enough to break a sweat but not long enough to –"

"Hurt myself. Right. You've made your point, Miss Swan."

"Good," Emma grins. "Then I think we're ready. Let's get you wrapped up."

She can't stop looking at her hands, and it's almost comical because there's a degree of disgust in her expression. She's a Queen and this is so far beneath her that it's almost unthinkable. Queens do not box. Certainly, she was taught how to use a dagger for self-protection and she does know how to throw a fair punch, but this is something far different. This is common.

This is almost base.

"So we'll start with a light workout," Emma says, pulling her attention back up the blonde woman, whose hands have also been wrapped. Emma's pulled her hair back and away from her face and
she's standing right next to the bag, an arm against it. "Would you like to go first?"

"Fine," Regina says because anything else will lead to more discussion.

She steps towards the bag, takes a breath and then throws her fist against it about as hard as she can. There's no poetry in the motion, and no satisfaction because all she feels is a burst of rather excruciating pain rush through her knuckles and then her hand. "Ow," she growls.

"Yeah, the first time isn't easy."

Regina's eyes snap up, and a thousand thoughts go through her mind at Emma's clumsily uttered words, almost none of them about boxing or hitting the swaying punching bag.

If Emma sees this, she doesn't let on. Instead, she says, "Can I show you…can I maybe…"

"Yes, show me," Regina sighs, not because she really wants Emma to touch her, but because the blonde's desperate attempts at asking for permission are almost pathetic and unbearable.

Emma moves even closer, reaching out then to take Regina's right hand into her own. She folds her fingers around Regina's and gently presses down. "Okay, so make a fist. Like that, yeah. No, a normal one and not one like you want to break my face open." Regina smirks just a little bit at that (she's learning that Emma actually has a much better sense of humor than she ever gave the blonde appropriate credit for), but follows the directions. Emma nods. "Good, that's good. But don't squeeze so tight. And keep your thumb out. When you swing at the bag, be careful not to tense up until you actually hit it. You want the impact to be purposeful not painful."

"Like this?" Regina asks, doing exactly as instructed.

"Yeah, exactly like that. Good. Really good. Okay, so next up comes the footwork; this is trickier. Can I…uh…can I put my hands on your waist?" She offers a small shy smile when asks this.

"Quickly."

Emma nods and then slides her hands down, settling them very lightly on Regina's hips. "Legs apart, feet squared up right in front of your shoulders." She slides a foot between Regina's and taps both ankles to encourage the movement of them apart. She supposes that she could have just provided the instruction from a distance, but honestly, this really is so much easier. It's also how she'd learned to do it years ago. "Point your left foot towards the bag. Right one should be here. And bend your knees like so. Okay, yeah, good. Perfect. I think you're ready to try again."

She steps away then, and nods her head.

Regina takes another breath and then thrusts her right hand out. It hits the bag solidly, and while there is some reverberation up and down her arm, the pain that she feels from the impact is significantly less. She follows the first jab up with another one and then another.

"See?" Emma prompts. "Good?"

"Mm," Regina answers noncommittally, mostly because she's just not willing to give in and concede the point to her quite so easily. "Tell me, Miss Swan, where did you pick this up?"

"That's a...well, that's not really a great story."

"Ah."
"But it's one I'll tell you if you tell me something in return."

"So this is like our wine therapy with a punching bag?"

"Sure."

"Fine; I accept your terms.

"Wait, wait. Don't agree too quickly," Emma cautions, reaching out to stop the bag from swinging. "My story is about some of the crazy I went through growing up. Jumping between foster homes and families. Really not an easy time for me. If I tell you it, I want something in return. I want you to answer any question – just one – that I ask. Do we still have a deal?"

"What makes you think I care enough about your past to offer you that?"

Emma flinches slightly at that, but quickly recovers. "Nothing. So it's your choice. We can just work out and hit the bag for a while and that's fine or we can hit the bag and talk. Your call."

"I don't wish to speak about my mother," Regina says softly.

"Then we won't," Emma agrees. "That's off the table. For now, anyway."

"Fine; I agree to your deal." She almost says more, almost says that she kind of does care to know Emma's stories, but that feels like too much here; it feels like offering up too much.

So she lets her agreement hang in the air, and waits for Emma to respond.

Finally: "Okay, good." Emma slides behind the bag and wraps her arms around it. She can't imagine that Regina will hit it hard enough just yet to be able to need someone to steady the bag, but it gives her something to do while she talks about a past which she'd rather forget.

But to get something, you have to give something, and she'd made the deal, right?

"So?" Regina prompts after several moments of unnerving silence have passed. She's watching Emma carefully, observing the clear tension in her shoulders and her pensive expression.

"Keep hitting and I'll...just give me a minute," Emma suggests.

The older woman opens her mouth to say something, and then snaps it shut and instead reaches out and jabs the bag. It's light and the bag barely moves, but Emma still feels it.

Enough to make her start speaking.

"I was a little bit over sixteen years old and in my third home within a year. This was after I'd been out on the streets for a little while and got caught with another runaway who just happened to be a klepto. The social workers had me pinned as difficult, argumentative and uncooperative."

"About right," Regina comments between jabs.

"Yeah, figured you'd say that. By the way, you hit like a girl, Your Majesty. Tell me you have something more than that in there." She motions towards Regina. "So much anger and all you can do is slap at the bag like you're a cute little kitten who just found herself some catnip?"

Regina rolls her eyes and then delivers a hard enough punch to actually move the bag a little bit. "You're the most insufferably obnoxiously person whom I have met," she states.
"I'll take that as a compliment," Emma replies. "And that's better. Remember, you did cold cock me in the face a while back; I know you can hit pretty goddamn hard when you want to."

"Want is the operative word," Regina counters. "And I wanted to do a whole lot more than punch you. You took something from me. If I could have killed you then, I might have."

"But you didn't, and perhaps we shouldn't talk about him just yet."

"Graham?" Regina says, swallowing thickly. Off Emma's nod, she says, "You know what I did to him." She lifts her head and looks right at Emma, dark eyes on light ones. "I can't take it back."

"I know. Do you regret doing it?"

"It's one of the two things I've ever done that I do regret."

"And the other?"

"I believe you owe me a story first, Miss Swan."

"I do. Hit harder. Like you mean it."

"Are you sure that you're not the one who should be hitting the bag?"

"I'll have my turn," Emma assures her. She tightens her arms around the bag again, and in doing so, causes the lean muscles in her arms to ripple. It takes Regina a bit by surprise because although she's always appreciated that Emma is attractive, she's never noticed her strength.

Not like this anyway.

She shakes her head and returns her attention back to the bag.

One hard punch and then another.

Perhaps she could take a liking to this after all.

"So," she prompts. "You were sixteen."

"And about as antisocial as a kid that age can be," Emma chuckles. "The parents I was with had six other foster kids, but they were one of the rare ones who tried to care. They were stressed out and always going in five directions, but they really did try. Especially my foster father. His name was Jim. He had bright red hair that never stayed combed and he always looked like he was trying to pull it out."

"You liked him?"

"He was truly and genuinely decent to me. He never tried to do anything, never tried to touch me or get too close. He respected my boundaries and my reasons and he let me decide what he was to me. Until I got arrested for breaking into a school with some...well they weren't friends."

"So you were a juvenile delinquent?"

"In every sense of the word," Emma confirms. "I don't know how but Jim managed to convince the cops not to charge me for what I did. They released me into his custody instead. When we got back to the house, I expected him to do about a thousand different things including tell me what I had to do to not go back to the kid's home. It wouldn't have been the first time."
Regina pulls back, surprise and repulsion tightening her muscles. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying hit the bag and let me tell my story," Emma insists. Her jaw tightens and something dark shines in her eyes for a moment. Something like pain and Regina recognizes it too well.

Regina swallows hard, but does as told, smacking the bag once again with almost violent force as different possibilities of what a young Emma Swan might have gone through streak through her mind. In spite of everything that hurts within herself, she finds her heart aching at this. In spite of all of the anger that still darkens her soul, she feels a kindred kind of pain for Emma.

"He didn't ask any of those things of me," Emma assures her. "Like I said, he was one of the decent ones. He told me that in order to stay with the family that I needed to figure out how to channel my restlessness. He said that was my biggest problem at the time; I didn't know what to do with myself. So the next morning, he took me to the gym and he showed me how to box."

"So he didn't…"

"No. Jim never laid a hand on me; he just wasn't that kind of guy. One of the other kids in the house did try something, though. He tried to corner me a few months after I started working out. And when he did, I used all the training that Jim had shown me and I broke his jaw."

"Nice job," Regina nods, her approval clear.

"At the time, I thought so, too, but then I panicked. I figured I'd end up in jail or somewhere even worse than that, and well all the home kids told stories about what happened to blonde girls like me in there. So I ran as fast as I could. I ran away and I hid and I never went back."

"Never?"

"No. That was my last family. I went from bus to bus and city to city looking for…anything. Six months later, I met Neal. And well, we all know how poorly that worked out for me. Turns out I ended up finding out exactly what jail was like for girls like me." She smiles sadly at that.

Regina steps back and away from the bag. "I…I never…"

"How could you?" Emma asks.

"I wanted everyone to hurt, but I didn't want what you went through. I wanted you dead, but -"

"The day with Graham or –"

"Yes, but…even before that. When you were just a newborn baby. If you hadn't been put in the wardrobe, I would have killed you to stop you from being able to break my curse." She says this softly, shame shining as brightly as the tears that are now glistening in her very dark eyes.

"You would have killed a baby?"

"I think so," Regina admits.

"But you don't know."

"You're kinder in your assumption of me than I deserve, Miss Swan."

"No, I just understand that thinking you might be capable of something doesn't mean that you actually are. I've seen you with children, Regina. I've seen you with Henry, and I'm sorry, but I don't believe you capable of killing a defenseless child. Even if you already did hate me."
"I hated everything. The things I was willing to do in the name of that hatred are unthinkable. It would be a mistake to believe that there were lines that I wouldn't have crossed back then."

"And now?"

"I know you want me to tell you that I'm better –"

"I don't," Emma assures her. "We've only been here a week, Regina; I know that nothing heals inside or outside of us that quickly. Especially not after all of what you've been through."

"Or you? Don't think I've forgotten that this is as much for you as it is for me."

Emma nods, accepting this. "Point is, I don't think you are who you think you are anymore. You're not the woman who cast that curse and might have been capable of killing a child."

"Then who am I, Emma?" It's an honest if slightly gut-wrenching question. It's not lost on the sheriff how Regina slips to using her first name whenever she exposes vulnerability to her.

"I don't know yet," Emma admits. "But I do know that you owe me a story now. She smiles when she says this, as if to try to release some of the tension that's formed between them.

Regina chuckles at this, but the sound is quite far from humorous because of the story she has to tell. "Indeed, I do. I believe that you wanted to know what my other regret is?"

"Yeah."

"Killing my father for his heart so that I could cast the curse. He was a good man."

"Was he?"

Regina blinks, clearly not having expected that question. Silly really because as she's quickly finding out, Emma's not shy about pushing into dangerous areas. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Yes, you do. Being a good man isn't just about not intentionally hurting someone. I mean, it is that for sure, but it's also about standing up for people who can't. Did he do that for you?"

"The best that he could."

"Really?"

"Yes," Regina answers, chin up in defiance and a bit of righteous anger.

"I thought we were being honest with each other."

"We are. My father tried. My mother was…" She shakes her head.

"Okay, you don't want to talk about your father and Cora, fine. But what about afterwards? Mary Margaret told me your dad was with you during your Evil Queen days. Why didn't he ever try to talk you out of your anger? Why didn't he ever try to pull you back from the edge?"

"He did. I…I was resolute."

"Why didn't he try harder? That's what parents do, Regina. That's what good people do. They try and they keep trying even when it stops making sense."

Regina turns her head. Tears sparkle in her eyes, and for a moment, it looks as though she might not
be able to hold them back.

"Regina," Emma says, reaching around the bag as if to touch her, but stopping just short. "If you don't want to –"

"No. We had a deal," the brunette says suddenly, sharply. "We had a…I keep my deals. I…I do." She nods her head as if to convince herself.

"Okay. Okay."

"I don't know why he didn't try harder," Regina admits. "But I do know that he genuinely loved me, which so very few people in my life ever actually have. And I know that he was the one person who never actively tried to hurt me. He tried to teach me things. Good things. He taught me how to ride horses and how to play chess and he taught me...he taught me how to love, and maybe I've never done it well and maybe I don't really know how, but he did try to teach me."

"But it wasn't enough."

Regina shakes her head. "Not enough to make him stand up to her. No."

A few seconds of uneasy silence pass where neither woman knows what to say next. The air around them is thick with emotion and moisture, and it all feels like too much all of the sudden.

It feels like something wants to break.

Maybe even needs to.

Emma sighs, and the sound is loud in the garage, louder than the rain from above. "You ready to stop talking?" she asks, smiling thinly.

"I think so."

"Then give me what you got," Emma tells her. "I've got the bag."

It's a bit like saying "I've got you" without saying exactly that, but Regina hears the words just the same. She nods her head in appreciation.

And then punches until she can't.

She punches until her hands ache and she knows that all there is left is pain.

That's when Emma places a hand on her forearm and steers her away from the still swaying bag. That's when Emma pushes her down onto the paint bucket that Henry had been sitting on earlier, unwraps her hands and then just holds them tightly within her own, lightly squeezing the pain away and saying nothing at all. Their eyes are locked on each other, but there's nothing but the sound of raindrops loudly and rhythmically hitting the metal roof above them.

Finally, Regina says in a quiet voice, "The bag helps."
"I thought it would. Just remember the rules; don't hurt yourself."

"Of course." She stands up, freeing her hands and sliding them behind her, safe in a place where Emma can't see the way they still tremble.

"You want to nightcap on the porch before bed?" Emma asks.

"Not tonight. But…I…thank you for this."

"Any time. Goodnight."

Regina nods her head curtly at that, and then starts to leave. She gets two steps before she stops, her back still to Emma. When she speaks, her voice is low and throaty, cracking just a bit on each word. "You are a good person, Emma. How that happened, I don't know and I think I hate you a little bit for being able to be something that I'm incapable of, but you are it. In spite of me, in spite of everything that this world has thrown at you, you are a good person."

And with that, she turns and leaves, shutting the door behind her.

If Emma could scream out her frustration and fear and sadness and heartbreak, she thinks that she would, but instead, she stands up, walks over to the bag and hits it as hard as she can. And keeps hitting it until she falls against it, her forehead against the weathered leather.

She doesn't cry because she rarely cries anymore.

She does, however, hold onto the bag as tightly as she can. She holds onto it until she has the strength to hold herself up again. Until she's sure she can be strong.

Until she can be the good person that she wants to be.

The good person that everyone needs her to be.

The person she still doesn't believe actually exists.

She desperately hopes she won't let everyone down. The stakes are too high and she's not sure that she can…

She stops herself, takes a deep breath, and then steps away from the bag. She squares her knees and her shoulders and curls her hands into fists.

And then the workout really begins.

And now perhaps, so does the real work with the former Evil Queen.
Eight

Chapter Notes

A/N: Salty language, and some talk about nightmares and mothers.

The techno music thumps loudly in her ears, but Emma barely hears it; doesn't need to. She focuses her eyes on the sand ahead as she moves her muscles quickly, gliding along the path. She loses herself in the motion, the exhilaration of her heart pounding and her blood pumping.

The feeling of being alive.

These are the rare quiet peaceful moments where she can just be in motion. The moments when little else matters besides the feeling that nothing can stop her and nothing can control her. So much of her life has been spent in the service of others - even when she hadn't known it to be so - but this right here and now? This is freedom.

It's early morning and the air is crisp and clean flowing off the ocean. Sweat pours down her body and glistens against her pale skin, and this, too, feels good and exactly like it should. Since moving to Storybrooke, morning runs have become a relic of the past, something she hasn't had time for thanks to everything else there.

And that's a shame because this feels like ice cream on a hot day and cocoa on a cold one.

Who'd have thought, she thinks as she approaches the house, that it'd take an intervention to remind her of the things which she needs to remember or risk forgetting like one might forget the joy of childhood.

"How was your run?" the Queen asks the moment Emma steps into the kitchen, her shirt soaked through with sweat. As she asks the question, Regina's tone casual and just barely interested, she's standing over the whirling buzzing away juicer, pressing in apples and bananas. Over the last three weeks, Regina has become quite acquainted with this particular appliance. Which is good for everyone, really, because yes, fruit smoothies are much better than soda.

Or so Emma's been told about fifty times since the fruit drinks started getting pushed into her hand the morning after the blowup over Neal. She'd imagined it then for something of a thank you mixed with an apology, a face-saving way for Regina to add to the cohesion and peace of the household without admitting that she was doing so (because doing so would be equal to allowing for the reality that she really had needed this intervention, and she's nowhere close to ready for that kind of self-truth, Emma understands and accepts – not yet, anyway). Now days, though, the sheriff thinks that maybe Regina is just having fun creating new combinations.

Yesterday it'd been blueberries and pears.

Strange and unsettling; Emma's quite pleased to see apples and bananas back today.

Even if apples in Regina's hands still give her pause.

"Good," Emma nods, lifting up a hand to wipe sweat away from her brow.
"Good," Regina repeats, and then returns her eyes to the machine.

"Henry not up yet?"

"Not yet. I thought maybe he could sleep in this morning," Regina responds, frowning for a moment as she glances around the counter, clearly looking for something that's gotten away from her. Her eyes settle on an orange finally, and she reaches for it, turning it over in her hand.

"You're about to get creative aren't you?" Emma queries as she settles herself onto one of the stools in front of the counter. She tries to blow a strand of wet hair away from her eyes, and when it predictably refuses to budge, she roughly uses her palm to shove it back and away.

Regina's eyebrow lifts. "You think oranges are creative?"

"I think oranges are only the start of things when it comes to you. Where are the pears?"

A dramatic roll of the eyes greets her, and it takes everything Emma has not to laugh. "Drink your juice and stop complaining about someone wanting to keep you reasonably healthy, Swan," Regina answers finally as she extends a glass full of thick pinkish-yellow liquid to her.

"Yes, my Queen," Emma mocks lightly as she takes the glass.

Regina for her part, though, just lets the mockery roll over her like a light breeze. "I see you're finally learning proper responses and honorifics," she comments dryly, an eyebrow lifted in approval. "About damned time, Miss Swan; I was beginning to think you couldn't be trained."

Emma snorts in response. She tips the glass back and takes a sip. "Good."

"You expected poison?"

"I expected pears. Which might actually be the same as poison."

"You really need to get over the pears."

"And the blueberries," Emma reminds her, grimacing slightly in memory of the foul flavor.

Quite in spite of herself, Regina chuckles. "Yes. Those, too."

They share a comfortable moment and then Emma stands up and steps around the counter, coming to stand next to her. "Wanna get out of my way so that I can get started on breakfast?"

"Saying 'please' is usually the polite way to ask someone to move aside."

"Fine; please, get out of my way."

"I suppose that's better," Regina says softly, nodding her head almost graciously as she steps away from Emma. Taking a glass of the juice with her, she heads towards the Living Room. Emma watches her go, her expression altering into one of confusion. Ever since the night with the bag, Regina has been calmer and quieter.

Almost easy going.

It's been more than a little bit surreal.

Because even though beating on a bag can be insanely therapeutic – and even though Regina has taken to working out with it almost every evening like she has an almost ritualistic need for the
physical venting (and she likely does) – Emma knows for a fact – and from experience – that absolutely no one heals from just a few sharply delivered punches.

Especially not a former Evil Queen.

Which means this is all a show.

Or it's something else completely.

At first, she had really believed that Regina's new almost mature attitude to this whole in-house therapy set-up was a complete game of hers – an intelligent way to stop conversation and to try to convince the sheriff that the problem had been solved and they could all just go home.

But then, much to Emma's surprise, weeks passed and Regina never once mentioned going back home. Instead, she has settled into an almost calm routine. Effortless and easy.

Like she hadn't been planning to murder someone just days before the bag had arrived.

As the days have flickered past them, merging together, Emma's noticed a few things.

First: Regina is almost absurdly domestic – especially for someone who had once had hundreds of servants waiting on her hand and foot, attending to her ever announced whim. To Emma's eyes, Regina is a bit like someone in one of those "looking for love" ads (absent the homicidal tendencies and violent temper, of course). She cooks, cleans and makes damned good lemonade if the weather manages to warm up from frigidly cold to somewhat cool. Oh, and her chocolate chip cookies are worth killing for. She even does all of this while listening to jazz piped through the house thanks to incredibly powerful speakers that have been wired through every room.

Second: While Regina is willing to humor conversation about little things, she changes the subject anytime anything deep or serious comes up. Their porch talks have continued, but they've become mundane in their content. The most interesting thing that Emma has gleaned from Regina over the last three weeks is that the former mayor has an affinity for Andrew Lloyd Webber. One which she's oddly – almost endearingly – embarrassed by because rock operas are below a woman of her station. Emma had filed this away with the rest of the little random details she's learned.

Third: Regina suffers from hideous nightmares almost every single night. This rather unhappy revelation is the one which tells Emma that Regina's whole "doing so much better at everything these days" thing is utter bullshit. Because every night for the last three weeks, the sheriff has been woken up by the sound of soft cries echoing through the house. They're muffled and broken, and at first she'd thought that maybe a wounded animal had gotten itself trapped in the house, but a slow unsure walk down the hallway had brought her to Regina's door.

And the reality about the terrors which plague the Queen every time she closes her eyes.

So far, Emma hasn't said a word about them. Not to Regina, at least. She'd somewhat casually and coolly asked Henry if he'd heard anything weird at night, and gotten a shake of the head.

Apparently, the kid really does sleep like a rock.

She'd assumed that he'd been faking this during the weeks and months he'd been sharing a room with her at the loft, but it turns out that when he drops off, he really does do so hard.

Lucky bastard, she thinks as she gazes across the room at Regina.

"Miss Swan?"
"Hm?"

"You're staring at me; is there a problem?" Regina queries. She's seated herself on the couch, her elegant legs folded beneath her like this is natural for her (it might be natural for the Regina who had once existed, Emma thinks, but not the Queen). She has a pair of reading glasses on (Emma had picked them up in town and while they're hardly up to the style and sophistication of a woman like Regina Mills, they clearly do their job) and a hardback book in her hands. The way she holds it is delicate and careful, and she's going out of her way to ensure that she doesn't break the spine – almost like doing so is something that's been ground into her. That it's just after nine in the morning seems unimportant to the Queen. This is her new routine and part of that means reading something until breakfast is ready.

"Am I actually allowed to answer that?"

With a soft humoring sigh, Regina removes her glasses, folds them up, settles them on the end-table next to her, and then closes the book and looks up at her. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Really? You don't? Because for the last three weeks, you've been avoiding everything that's actually wrong," Emma pushes. There's a part of her that feels bad about this; after all, they have been getting along and Regina has been calmed and less filled with omnipresent rage. It seems wrong to try to poke the bear just to get a reaction – especially what's likely to be an angry and deeply hurt one - even if she knows that the bear's calm demeanor has been a lie.

Perhaps not an intentional lie, but one all the same.

And all the lies – told to themselves or others - have to stop.

All of them.

"I have answered every single question that you've asked of me," Regina counters as she reaches for her glass and lightly sips at the smoothie. It occurs to Emma that the former queen is drinking it like she would champagne and the sheriff almost laughs at the absurdity of this.

Almost.

Stay focused, she tells herself. And for once, she actually does.

"Yes, you have. Usually by changing the subject to something entirely different than the question asked," Emma notes as she pulls out a carton of eggs and starts cracking the shells.

"Ah. So my therapy is only therapy if we discuss the things that you want us to?"

"Well, no, but it's hardly therapy if we're spending thirty minutes drinking wine and staring at the water all while talking about Henry's fort or…something otherwise irrelevant."

"Henry's fort is coming along quite well," Regina nods, and there it is again. Yes, the little wood fort, which had miraculously survived the massive storm from weeks ago, is actually starting to resemble something more than a stack of wet lumber, but these days, it mostly serves as a way for Regina to find a safe topic. Because it's Henry and he is the one thing which both of his mothers continue to agree upon; his safety and happiness are paramount.

But that doesn't mean that Emma doesn't recognize deflection and diversion when she sees it.

"We're not here to build a fort, Regina," Emma reminds her as she tosses the eggs into the pan, and
listens to the sizzle of them as they start to cook. She's going with scrambled with just a pinch or two of cheese this morning. Sometimes the classics are the most obvious option.

Just like sometimes direct confrontation and calling bullshit is the only way to deal with Regina.

"No, we're here to try to keep me from murdering your mother. Congratulations, Sheriff; your mother is in no immediate danger from me," Regina tells her, the tone dry and cold.

Emma rolls her eyes.

"Mature," Regina states, eyebrow up.

"Yeah, well, you did it just a few minutes ago."

"You probably said something idiotic. In which case, it was justified."

"Of course it was," Emma sighs. "Look, Regina, we're not just here for my mother. We've been over this a hundred times by now and you know what, you know it. You know exactly why we're here. And why we're staying here until you deal with the things you need to deal with."

"Such as?"

"Your mother. My mother. Me. You. Pick a subject. We have a ton of them."

"Yes, perhaps we do, but in regards to my mother, there's not really a lot to discuss there, Miss Swan; my mother is dead. She died by my hand thanks to your mother. It really is that simple."

"No, it's not; your mother was a horrible human being," Emma shoots back. The words are callous and truthful and she immediately gets the response she was looking for because Regina full on flinches in her seat, her head just about snapping back on her neck in protest of what Emma has just said.

"Watch yourself," she growls.

"Or what? You'll fireball me? You can't," Emma reminds her.

"No, I can't," Regina angrily agrees. "But whether or not I can use magic is irrelevant; it would be unwise to underestimate me simply because I don't have that kind of power at my disposal."

"You're absolutely right; it would be. Good thing for me, then, that I have never underestimated you, Regina. And because apparently I have to say it again, I'm not trying to hurt you. After all we've been through over the last month, I'd hope you'd believe that. Or at least maybe try to."

Her blue-green eyes are so sincere, so wide and honest. So fucking Emma.

Regina sighs, visibly deflating, all of the tension become resignation. "I don't want to talk about this," she says simply, her eyes closing as if to suggest that she's trying to blink back hot tears.

"Okay," Emma replies. "But we need to. I'm willing to wait until you're ready because...because I know you need to be, but Regina, you'll never be ready if you refuse to allow yourself to feel anything but anger at my mother and grief for yours. It's far more complicated than that."

"I know it is," Regina agrees, still rapidly blinking her eyes. "I know." She opens her eyes fully then and looks over at Emma, and sure enough, the blonde sees the wetness of un-shed tears sparkling there. "But I can't...not yet. Maybe not...not yet." She swallows, then does it again.
"Then can we talk about the nightmares you have every night?"

The flinch she gets from Regina at this is almost more dramatic than the one she'd received from calling Cora a horrible person. Regina's eyes widen comically and for a moment, she looks truly and horribly stricken. "Nightmares?" she asks, a tremor to her voice. "I don't...I don't."

"You do. Every night," Emma confirms with a bit of a frown.

"No," Regina says again. "No, I don't."

"Yes, you do. Do you not...do you not realize it?"

"I don't recall most of my dreams," Regina says softly and though Emma tries to ping for a lie, she can't quite detect one. Which is strange because she'd figured that the queen must have woken up with a scream on her lips almost every single night, but perhaps she doesn't.

Perhaps she's just lived with these horrible dreams for all of these years.

Like unwanted trophies from a life better left forgotten.

"All right," Emma tells her, her voice gentling even further. "Then we'll find something else to talk about, okay? But I've already taken two things off the table for you. If I agree not to bring them up again until you're ready, do you promise to at least consider my next topic?"

"I'll consider it," Regina agrees, sounding terribly weary.

"Good enough. Want bacon this morning?"

"You know I don't."

"He won't starve if he only gets his portion."

Regina reaches for the reading glasses, put them back on, and then picks up her precious discarded book and opens it up again. "Maybe not," she says after a moment, her eyes on the page once more. "But he'd miss it, and I think he's missed more than enough because of me."

And there it is, Emma thinks.

The truth in the quietest of moments.

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They're side by side in the kitchen doing the dishes left over from breakfast about an hour later when Emma turns her head towards Regina and says almost casually, "I need to call David."

And then she takes a deep breath and waits for Regina's reaction.

She's suddenly quite glad that Henry's in the bathroom getting ready for a day at the beach because this conversation with Regina really could go upside down in a hurry.

But it doesn't. Instead, after a few moments of tense silence have passed, Regina quietly asks her, "Are you going to give me the next plate or just stand there looking frightened?"
"What?"

"You're acting like I'm about to grab the knife and stab you for wanting to call your insipid father. I presume that you want to check up on your even more insipid mother, yes? While my feelings for her are...poor, that's most certainly something that even I can understand."

"Well, you did kind of flip out when I called Archie. And Neal. Remember? The tantrum with your clothes and then another one out in the rain. Your anger isn't unprecedented."

"No, I suppose it isn't," Regina responds coolly, "But thank you for the reminder."

Emma smirks, and reaches for the dishrag. "Hey, I'm just trying the whole honesty between us thing. I know that my parents are not your favorite people, but I really do need to –"

"Ensure that they're all right, yes, I know; I'm certain that they're just as concerned about you as you are about them. They probably think I've murdered you and well, I am a witch."

"I have no idea what you're suggesting, and I don't think I want to know. And for what it's worth, my mind has never really associated the word 'witch' and you together. Just...hasn't."

"No, but I'm sure there was a similar sounding word that you've used plenty of times to describe me, true," Regina asks. Off Emma's shrug of admission, she continues with, "I am surprised, though, that they haven't been calling you around the clock. Surely your mother is over what she did by now; your father has had plenty of time to convince her of how –"

"Stop," Emma says, her voice soft. "Please."

"Because it upsets you?" Regina prompts.

"No, because it upsets you."

Regina tilts her head, suspicion gleaming in her eyes. "Explain."

Emma scowls at that and then reaches across the counter and retrieves one of the egg smeared plates that's still sitting there. She hands it over to Regina and says, "Try asking nicely for once."

"No. Explain."

"You know I'm not one of your subjects."

"No, you're not," Regina agrees with a sharp nod of her head, her eyebrow lifted in an imperial kind of way. "If you were, I'd have you tied half naked to a wall by your wrists and –"

"That's the second time you've alluded to that; kinky, you know?" Emma interrupts, picking up the last of the plates and placing it into the dishwasher. She snaps it shut, and then grins up at Regina. The look is so maddeningly endearing that it's almost instantly disarming as well.

The Queen huffs in irritation, and then waves her hand. "Anyway. Explain yourself, Swan."

"You have some things that you're not yet ready to talk about and I respect that you need the time to get yourself there. Mary Margaret – Snow – is a different matter completely. You'll talk about her if I press you to, but whenever you do, you get so angry and I can see everything inside of you. I can see the person that would have ripped my mom's heart out in your eyes."

"She's not a very nice person is she?" Regina says, her eyes suddenly seeming quite dull and sad. These are the moments that confuse Emma, and frighten her just a little bit. She's learned how to
deal with angry Regina, figured out how to handle the quiet Regina, but she has no clue what to do with the one who is clearly full of self-loathing and disgust with herself.

This one feels honest and laid so very bare, and it scares the piss out of Emma.

"No, she's not," Emma admits. "But you don't have to be her, Regina."

"We both know that's a lie, Sheriff; you are who you are no matter how far you run from yourself. I can become the quiet and docile woman you want me to be –" She holds up a hand to stop Emma from interrupting. " – And I can become harmless and humble, but it won't change who I truly am inside. Nothing will never alter the things I've done or who I really am."

"No," Emma nods. "I'm not going to get into the subject of who you really are yet; you're not ready for it. But I agree, changing won't alter what you did, but that's no reason to just give up."

"Who said anything about giving up? I never give up," Regina tells her with a sharp humorless laugh. "Some might see that as a positive trait. Persistence in my goals no matter the obstacle, but we both know the truth about that, too, don't we? My persistence is nothing more than my pride refusing to ever allow me to stand down and it has led me here. To a place where my own child needs to run an intervention on me." She shakes her head in disgust.

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "When you care about someone, you do what you have to do to help them through the hard times. You might be upset that Henry is doing this, but he's not; he wants to be here with you. He wants to be here for you, Regina; that's what family does."

"And you? We're not family, and I've still never completely understood why you went along with this. We both agree that it has at least a little to do with your mother, but there is more."

"Yeah, I guess there is. I guess my own truth is that maybe I needed a time out from everything, too," Emma admits, and then offers a sad smile. "Your world…well for a place that's supposed to be about happy endings and true love, it's pretty incredible just how insanely jacked up it is."

Regina chuckles, "My land was…a difficult and unforgiving one."

"Yeah." Emma shrugs. "Sometimes I miss the old me. The before Storybrooke me."

"Interesting. Would the old you have kidnapped someone to prevent them from murdering someone else?" Regina asks. "Or would she have washed her hands of it?" Her head is tilted, and though Emma searches for it, she finds no malicious intent in the Queen's dark eyes.

"Well, if it was my job, I would have hunted that person down across the country if need be and then I would have turned them in, but if it wasn't my job, you're right; I'd have walked away."

"We change. And sometimes we can't go back to who we once were," Regina tells her.

"Are we talking about you or me here? Or both of us?"

"Why did you become a bounty hunter?"

Seeming oddly discomforted by the unexpected question, Emma answers, "I sort of fell into it."

"That's it?"

"Yeah."

"Mm. I may not have your notorious superpower –"
"Infamous, not notorious."

"Notorious, dear," Regina chuckles. "For failing."

"Whatever. You were saying?"

"But even I know when someone is lying through their teeth and you, Savior, are absolutely lying about simply falling into the job. Something else pushed you into it."

"It's a long story."

"And yet you want me to tell you mine."

"Yeah, well I have my off limits ones, too," Emma replies defiantly.

"Fair enough," Regina answers shortly, nodding her head sharply as she steps away from the sink. "Call your parents, Miss Swan; assure them that I haven't murdered you yet. I'm sure they'll be quite relieved." And with that, she turns and exits the room. Absent her heels, her steps are soft, but her stride remains dominant and regal. She's still every bit the Queen.

Just some days maybe not as evil anymore.

"Hey," Emma says softly, cradling her cell against her ear. She's on the back deck, looking out at the ocean. It's a beautiful day, and she's considering taking a swim after she finishes this call.

Or maybe she'll wander down to watch Henry and Regina work on the fort.

Maybe.

She's been hesitant to do so because that's their time together, and she doesn't want to interrupt it, but she is curious to see how the rebuilding of their fort has been going.

First this, though.

"Emma," David breathes, and she almost laughs because he sounds so damned relieved, and maybe just a little bit surprised that she's actually...what? Still alive. Yeah, that's hilarious.

At least to her it is.

"I'm fine," she tells him before he can even ask.

"You are? No, of course you are; you're my daughter."

She bites back on the urge to remind him that she's more than that. His words come from a good place, and he means no harm by them so she lets it go. "How's Mary Margaret doing?"

"Better. She has her moments, but she's better. She misses you. We miss you. You and Henry."

"I know you do, but it's going to be awhile before we can come home," Emma tells him.

"Oh. So I'm guessing you're not making much progress?"
"No, we are," Emma says, and then offers nothing further.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, he says quietly, "Emma…"

"I know what you're going to say; we're staying," she interrupts. "Until she's ready to go home."

"Her or you?" he asks.

"Maybe all of us."

"We never asked you, did we?"

"What do you mean?"

"We never slowed down long enough to ask how you were handling everything that's been happening since the curse broke," David elaborates. "You seemed okay with everything, but –"

"I'm doing okay," she assures him. Then, with a shrug of her shoulders that she knows he can't see, "And if I'm not, I will be by the time I come home. That's kind of the whole point of this."

"And when will that be? You being home, I mean."

"When the war is over."

"The war? Between Regina and Snow? Emma –"

"Trust me," she pleads.

"I do. More than you know, I think. But Emma, this war between the two of them has been going on for a very long time. Do you really think a few weeks at the beach can fix everything?"

"Of course not," the sheriff responds. "They're eventually going to have to deal with each other, but maybe between you and I, we can make sure that when that time comes for them –"

"Maybe they don't have to come to blows," David finishes. "I got it."

"Yeah. Or try to rip out each others' heart," Emma chuckles.

It's a lame joke, but David laughs anyway because really, what else can you do?

"I hope to see you soon," he says after a few more moments of silence.

"Me, too. Take care of her."

"I will. And you take care of them."

"Regina, too?" Emma asks, eyebrow up.

He laughs again. "Her especially. I'm not sure I understand their relationship; I'm not sure I ever really will, but I know Snow wants Regina to be…well, she doesn't want this. She really doesn't."

"Then we do what we do," Emma tells him, thinking if he were in front of her, she just might hug him because he sounds as lost as she feels. "I'll talk to you in a couple weeks, okay?"

"Will it really be that long?"

"Most likely, yeah."
She watches them for almost an hour. She's seated on her butt in a patch of sand high up the beach. She imagines if Regina were to turn around and look, she'd be able to spot her easily, and that'd be fine because Emma's not trying to hide from them; she's simply watching.

She watches as mother and son stack pieces of wood atop each other, using wet sand to keep them stuck together. It's a fix that wouldn't withstand an actual storm, but Emma's starting to wonder if the whole point of this exercise isn't about creating something, but repairing it.

Making it stronger with each rebuild.

She's smiling to herself as she thinks this, and of course, that's when Regina turns around and sees her sitting there watching. Their eyes connect – brown on green – and for a moment (long enough for Henry to notice) they just stare at each other, as if they're sizing each other up.

And maybe they are, but Emma thinks that this is more about Regina making a choice, trying to decide how she'll react to the intrusion instead of just reacting on impulse. And that's progress.

Which just make Emma smile all the wider.

"Wipe that obnoxious smile off your face, Miss Swan," Regina finally snaps.

"Sorry," Emma offers as she stands up and brushes off of her legs. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

"And yet you have so you might as well come down and join us."

She considers it for a moment, turns it over in her mind and tries to figure out why it would be such a bad thing to allow for this bit of family bonding between Henry and his two mothers.

What stops her from doing this, though - what makes her give this idea up for the time being, at least - is the way Regina is lightly touching Henry's back. Her palm is flat there, vaguely possessive, and even though the former mayor is inviting her into this moment of theirs, Emma knows that it's for Henry and not because she actually wants the sheriff to be part of this.

The two women have come a very long way with each other, but not yet this far.

And Emma...well, she finds that she actually kind of respects the honesty of that.

"No," she says. "Thanks. I'm gonna go for a swim and maybe lay out."

"Work on your tan, Sheriff?" Regina asks, a slight teasing lilt to her voice.

"I do hate lines," Emma drawls. She smiles when she sees Henry's confused expression. She reminds herself that he's probably never seen a woman in a bikini even though his house had been less than a mile from the beach. Regina had been nothing if not protective of their son.

"Well, then," Regina nods. "Enjoy yourself. We'll be up for lunch shortly."

"Sure. And...thanks for the invite."

They look at each other again, perhaps both of them remembering another invitation and just how badly the aftermath of that had been for everyone involved – but Regina mostly.
"Of course," Regina says softly, her eyes shifting away anxiously.

"Have fun, kid," Emma says, then waves her hand as she trots away leaving them to their fort.

For now, anyway.

Next time – assuming there is one - she thinks she might accept the invitation.

"Why is that horrible thing here?" Regina demands as she steps out onto the deck. She's holding two (real) glasses of red wine in her hands, but her eyes are on the massive storybook – Henry's book - which is settled in Emma's lap.

"Been doing some light reading," the sheriff replies with a shrug.

"On your parents?"

"On you, actually."

"Ah. Yes, well, I am well represented within those pages," Regina replies coolly. She hands Emma one of the glasses and then settles into the chair next to her and brings the wine-glass to her lips. She nods as the flavor – still beneath her, but better than before – flows over her tongue.

"Not in a very kind light," Emma notes.

"Is there a kind light to represent me in? As we're both well aware: I'm the Evil Queen."

"Were the Evil Queen. You're Regina now. And that matters just as much as who you were," Emma insists. When Regina doesn't respond, she changes back to discussing what they'd originally been talking about – or at least what she had been, "But that was kind of my point. You'd think a book built on stories would bother to include some about what you were doing when you weren't destroying lives and cursing people to little fishing towns in Maine."

Regina shrugs her shoulders, "I'm afraid none of that is very interesting."

"Tell me anyway. What did you do to release steam?"

"I rode horses."

Emma's eyebrow lifts. "No one has ever seen you by the stables."

Regina chuckles. "I always knew that you kept an eye on me as much as I kept one on you."

"Yeah, well, I was always trying to figure out your angle."

"Well, you most certainly tried, anyway. In answer to your question, the reason you've never seen me by the stables is because I haven't touched a horse since I came to this world."

"But it helped you there so why not here?"

"You are aware that the last time I went to the stables here in town, I lost Daniel, yes?"

"I am. I didn't think you really wanted to talk about him right now."
"I don't. I want – I wanted - to leave all of that behind."

"Even the things that made you feel good?"

"Especially the things that made me feel good."

"Magic?"

Regina nods and takes another sip, taking a long moment to swallow down the alcohol before responding, "Magic made me powerful. Entire kingdoms feared me. Even Rumple if he could ever be honest with himself would admit that I was…strong. And yes, it made me feel good."

"But?"

"The things that make you feel good tend to make you feel empty."

"Yeah," Emma nods.

"Then you know."

"I do." She points down to a page showing the Evil Queen. "Tell me about saving my mother."

"Why?"

"Because that's when everything changed for you, right?"

"Everything changed for everyone that day, I'm afraid," Regina admits. She sighs then, and slowly, in a tone so even and controlled as to almost sound unaffected, she recounts the by the beats story of how she'd saved Snow from the runaway horse. She even tosses in the recently discovered details involving her mothers' manipulations (though Emma notes that Regina's voice dulls even further as she quietly speaks of Cora). When she's done, she finishes the glass of wine and stands up, brushing her pants off. "I think we're done for tonight," she says.

"Okay," Emma nods; she would prefer to keep talking, but she can tell by the tightness around Regina's eyes and the sad almost empty expression on her face that it's pointless. "Sleep well."

"I'm sure I will," the former queen replies, her voice so very soft and thoughtful, like she's recalling their conversation from earlier. She enters the house, shutting the door behind her.

Emma watches, knowing that they're far from done talking about these things.

Any of these things.

It's two in the morning when Emma hears the soft sound of anguished cries echoing through the house. Flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling with an expression of frustration on her face, listens for a few minutes, and then forces herself to roll back over in her bed; she tries to force her face into her pillow, tries to force down every impulse that she's currently having. She tries not to hear what she feels like she's helpless to make better.

"Stop," she hears, and it's too much.
She knows that she shouldn't do this, but finally it really is too much, and she stands up and shuffles down the hall. She passes Henry's room, pushes the door closed, and then keeps moving. She even gets to Regina's door and places her hand against it like she's about to open it. She thinks maybe she'll shake the Queen awake, maybe even pull her out of her nightmare, and help to make this better for her - maybe help chase away the encroaching demons.

But...then what?

What would she say then?

How would she explain her presence?

Would Regina accept the comfort, recognize the compassion?

Probably not.

Emma closes her eyes, brings herself back under control and then turns away from the door and returns to her bedroom. She pulls the blankets over her, and then her pillow, finally managing to muffle out Regina's cries.

And finally, she sleeps. Restlessly, fitfully, but all the same.

Until she's woken up by the sound of something solid getting hit with an almost violent amount of fury. Until she hears the sound of someone screaming bloody murder.

Someone whom she eventually realizes sounds a whole lot like Regina.
Interlude II.

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Violence, talk of marital rape and Rumple being an absolute bastard. This will be...rough.

Interlude II.

Stretching her tired muscles slowly, Regina steps out of the bathroom, her longer than normal still wet hair slicked back against her scalp. She's dressed in gray and blue flannel pants and a white shirt that stretches tightly across her chest. After a month of wearing these very plain clothes, Regina finds that much to her severe irritation, she's almost gotten used to them. Still, she can't stop the slight sneer of disgust from curling her lip upwards when she sees her reflection staring back from the mirror.

The woman coolly gazing back at her doesn't at all look like a Queen; she looks ordinary and unimportant. Like a nobody. Like someone who could easily and happily be forgotten about.

Perhaps like someone who should be forgotten about, she muses darkly.

Her hand trembling slightly, Regina reaches out and lightly touches her reflection, trailing a too long fingernail across the tight pained lines she sees around her eyes. She looks tired and sad. Broken.

This is who she is now, the former mayor of Storybrooke thinks to herself. Little more than a powerless angry woman, who now finds herself playing house with the biological mother of the beloved child who'd helped to bring about her downfall. It's all quite absurd and preposterous.

And the worst part is that she no longer finds herself struggling against it.

She's resigned to this, she realizes. Resigned to the reality that Emma Swan will take her apart piece by piece, dismantling her until she has no defenses left in place. Slowly, bit-by-bit, the Savior will break her down until defeat will become inevitable, perhaps even wished for.

And all of this will happen over red wine and pleasant conversation; the ocean as a backdrop.

She grunts in disgust, and then turns away from the mirror, refusing to spend another minute looking at the weak woman looking at her from it. She makes her way to the bed, and slides beneath pale blue cotton sheets. She's still not quite used to the feel of this fabric against her skin, far preferring the unforgiving but comforting silk that she'd spent decades sleeping upon.

After settling her head against the pillow, Regina allows her weary eyes to glance upwards towards the bedframe. The bent metal uncomfortably reminds her of her first night spent in this room, handcuffed and furiously struggling. Her wrist is mostly healed now, only a reddish discoloration providing evidence of her initial captivity and failed escape attempts.

She licks her lips, and swallows, fighting back against the unpleasant memories of being restrained.
Fighting against Emma and Leopold and Mother and Rumple.

All of them.

Gods, no.

Be stronger, she demands of herself.

She closes her eyes and orders herself to sleep. Tells herself not to dream. Just sleep.

No nightmares.

She tells herself this each and ever night, and yet each and every morning, she comes to her waking sense in the middle of messy sheets and blankets which tell a tale of unsettled sleep.

But she never remembers the nightmares, and perhaps that's enough.

At least it used to be.

Until tonight.

He's waiting for her at the top of the hill when she arrives. She dismounts gracefully from her horse, her heavy leather boots hitting the ground with a wet thud. She scowls slightly at her teacher, "Why here?" she demands, her dark eyes flitting across the open area that surrounds them. Typically, their magic lessons are done in secluded locations, far away from curious eyes; curious eyes who could potentially report her quite illegal activities back to her husband.

The King.

A King who loathes her as much as she loathes him, and would likely see her executed if he knew exactly what it was that she was doing during her many times away from the castle.

This risk has been apparent since day one of her training in the dark arts, and her teacher has always been aware and respectful of such; he's always met with her in the middle of the woods or within his own castle, but never here. Never on the edge of a cliff overlooking her kingdom.

It is quite lovely here, Regina finds herself admitting; the view from this treacherous height breathtakingly beautiful. She sees everything that falls within Leopold's realm beneath her feet. The land stretches in front of her – towns and valleys and roads. And she can see the people moving around like ants, each of them little more than a toy soldier to be owned and controlled.

Most of the peasants drifting aimlessly through their lives actually realize it – most understand that they exist to please their monarch. Some don't, though; some actually believe that they have lives that they and they alone control and own. Oh but she of all people knows better.

She, of all people, knows just how little independence truly exists when you are property.

But for the moment at least, up here, watching everything down below, she feels like she's the one with the power. It's a lie, of course, but that doesn't stop the feeling - the furious hysteria of the hope of freedom - from coursing through her veins; it doesn't stop her heart from pounding as it occurs to her that she is the Queen of this land, and everyone on the ground is not only literally
beneath her, but also figuratively.

At least in theory.

The reality falls back on her before she’s even really allowed the momentary euphoria of standing above the peasants to wash over her. Just as she understands that she’s property, she knows exactly what kind she is: she is simply the King’s wife and the stepmother to his child; a woman expected to perform care-taking tasks, sexual duties and occasionally ceremonial obligations and little more.

And up here, up here on this cliff overlooking her despised husband’s kingdom, she’s exposed. Should someone on the ground happen to glance upwards, perhaps they’d see their Queen standing above them with a man of ill repute, and should they decide to relay this information back to Leopold, she could find herself being questioned about her activities. And should the King decide to believe such rumors over the frantic protests of his wife, well it could cost her.

Everything.

Including her life.

Rumplestiltskin laughs in response to her question, his hand coming up into the air long enough to whirl around in a typical show of dismissive theater. "I like the scenery," he says, his voice an annoying giggle. "And it smells so…fresh here." He inhales dramatically. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Is this a test?" Regina demands of him, and she’s certain before he even replies that she knows the answer to the question; everything is a test for him. A chance to push her closer and closer to the edge of her sanity. An opportunity for him to see just how far she’s willing to go. How far she’s willing to fall.

All for the sake of a quest for vengeance which will never make her happy.

He knows this even if she doesn’t.

"I just like the scenery," he repeats, his tone entirely too airy to be honest.

"Of course you do," she says, shifting so that she’s leaning away from him, her hands rested upon her hips, her fingers pressing hard into the fine leather of her jerkin. "And what is our lesson today?" Her eyes glint and there’s an edge of obstinacy he sees there; a kind of rebellion.

"Today, the lesson is about the frailty of the human heart," he says with a tilt of his head. He steps – well, more hops - closer to her, enough so that she can see the glitter of his skin. The sun shines off of him obscenely, giving him a strange greenish tint that causes her stomach to curdle in an unnatural kind of way. Still, Regina holds her ground because while she’s still relatively young at magic, she’s not the girl he’d first talked into pushing her mother through a mirror.

She’s got blood on her hands now, and hatred eating away at her heart.

His grin widens as he takes in the deep frown which crosses her beautiful features. "I thought we already learned that lesson," she insists. "I know how to take a heart. I know how to crush one." It’s almost like she’s trying to convince herself that these words mean nothing to her.

"Oh, yes," he confirms with a nod of his head, his curly hair bouncing. "We’ve learned that lesson, and you proved quite adept at taking hearts and destroying them. Yes, you did, indeed."
“Then?"

He leans in towards her once more and lowers his voice down to almost a malicious hiss, "Taking them is one thing, but what you don't yet know, dearie, is how to control them."

She swallows hard. "Control them?"

"As I told you before, once you take a heart, you own the body you take it from. You can make them do, well...anything." He twitches his hand in the air and giggles.

"Anything?" she repeats.

"Anything." He steps away from her and looks down at the kingdom below them, his eyes focusing on the people moving down below. His look is disinterested, utterly dehumanizing.

"Show me," she says, almost greedily, approaching him from the side. She's desperately afraid, but that hunger for power and control that has been growing within her for very long now barks. She thinks of the husband who had come to her bed on the previous evening, his hands rough and demanding against her unwilling skin. She thinks of his mouth on hers and how he'd chuckled when he had pushed inside of her, taking her pained gasp as a form of pleasure.

She wonders what it would be like to control him, to demand submission of him. She wonders what it would be like to order him to bring a knife to his throat and to draw it across and –

She shudders and pulls away from the thoughts.

Such delusions and daydreams are exciting and terrifying and she finds herself spinning towards them even as the part of her that still sees Daniel so very clearly screams against her continuous downwards spiral. Even as she hears him begging her to walk away from this wicked madness.

"Oh, I will," he assures her. "Are you ready?"

"You know that I am," she snaps back at him impatiently. She looks around, then, as if searching for another person or perhaps another animal. "What will you teach me these lessons on?"

He grins again. "On you, of course."

"What? No..."

He steps towards her again, and this time she can feel his hot breath against her cheek just before his skin presses up against hers as he nuzzles her. "Power is seduction, Regina. If you are to truly know control, you must know what it feels like, you must understand the touch of it."

"I know what it's like to be controlled," she snaps back, indignant and furious. She can all too well recall the touch of her mothers' magic, and she has quickly learned the restraint of the label of the King's wife, too. She knows what it's like to be held down and to be forced to submit.

She knows.

"Not like this," he insists.

"I don't want –"

He shrugs his shoulders. "Very well, then. I suppose the the lesson is already over. A shame really because once you've learned how to control a heart, there's nothing you can't do."
Regina looks up at him, her eyes locking with his. It's a battle of wills, and one that she knows that she will eventually back down from. He knows it, too, and he's just waiting her out.

She doesn't make the bastard wait too long; why bother, anyway? She knows she'll give in.

"Fine," she grunts in anger. "Do what you must, Rumple, but show me. Everything."

He smirks at her and because he truly is only interested in breaking her down and leaving her little more than a shadow of the girl he'd once met, he pushes. "You're sure? If you're not, we don't have to do this. We can learn about how to gather…leaves for a fortune spell, perhaps."

Yes, he's definitely playing with her now and the worst part is they both know it. This is all about forcing her to be the one to ask for it, making her have to own what he's doing to her, what he's turning her into – the monster that she's becoming. And it's working because she urgently nods.

"I am. Do it."

"As you wish, Your Majesty."

His hand jerks forward blindingly fast and a moment later, he's holding her heart in his palm. It's bright red still, but there are dots of black around the edges of it, signs of what she's been doing to herself, bitter signs of what's she becoming. "Beautiful," Rumple murmurs, almost in awe.

"That's mine," Regina gasps, and though it seems a silly thing for her to say, her teacher allows for it because the surprise in her eyes is not unexpected; it's not every day that you see your own heart existing freeform outside of your chest. And realize that even as it is, you're still alive.

Or so you think.

"It is," Rumple nods, glancing down at the heart, which is beating fiercely, pulsing a glowing red as it tries to stake a claim to a right to live. "You're scared."

She looks up at him as if she's about to argue, but then nods her head slowly because yes, she is scared. And excited, but so very scared. Of all of this. Of what she sees herself turning into.

"Good," Rumple says with a slight knowing smile. "Remember the feelings that you're having right now, because it's what your victims will feel when you rip their hearts from their chest. Fear. Of you. And what you're about to do to them. And what you can make them do."

She lets out an involuntary gasp and then steps away from him. "I don't want that," she stammers, her dark eyes wide and horrified. "I don't want to do this…this isn't what…"

"Isn't it?" he presses, his palm still open around her heart. He's exerting little to no pressure on it, simply allowing it to exist within his hand. Simply allowing it to steadily beat away there.

"No. I told you; I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Really? But…but I don't understand. You killed my other apprentice – an apprentice whom I had high hopes for, I might add - in order to secure your position. I would think, your Majesty, that we've well crossed the line of no return in the regard of not wanting to hurt anyone."

She closes her eyes and allows his words to wash over her. He's right, of course; she had murdered that girl in a fit of anger, jealousy, depression, and so many other ugly emotions. She'd wanted to hurt someone in those moments, wanted someone else to feel as she did.
As if that could ever really be possible.

Either way, that girl had paid a terrible and final price so that Regina could be the one to learn these horrifying lessons. And learn them, she intends to. Better than anyone else ever has.

"I just want," she whispers, "To be in control. I don't want him to own me."

"The King?"

She nods her head, biting her lip as she again thinks of him touching her, as she remembers him whispering into her ear, telling her of his ownership. Telling her what a good girl she was being.

Calling her his.

"One day, he won't," Rumple assures her, almost gently.

"And this will help me?"

"It will," he tells her with a malicious grin. But then, as if realizing his words, he sobers up and adds, "Though not with taking his heart. No matter how angry you get, you must understand that it would be far too risky to take the King's heart and to try to control him in that manner."

Her head snaps backwards on her neck, surprise and disappointment registering in her furiously dark eyes. "That what good is this? What will this teach me? He's the one I want to make pay."

"And eventually, you will. But for now, you must learn how to control the others around him," Rumple soothes. "How to keep him from seeing what you're doing by owning those closest to him." He reaches out and very lightly touches her cheek, his fingers dancing for just a moment over her skin. He inhales sharply as he does so – like he always does – as if overwhelmed by the power he feels flowing off of her in waves. "You have much to learn," he continues. "Ensuring that the King isn't aware of what you are doing is far more important that controlling him."

"That's easy for you to say," Regina retorts, pulling her arms around her chest as if to protect herself from a man who isn't even up here with them. As if to keep him from touching her.

"Not enjoying private time with your husband are you?" Rumple goads.

She moves away from him. "If you have a lesson to teach me, then stop playing, and just do it."

"Impatient as always, I see," Rumple states, adding a slightly mad sounding giggle. "But, of course. There are three basic things that you need to understand about controlling a human heart. The first is what you can do with it." He lifts her heart up, gives it the very lightest of squeezes (which causes a tightening within her own chest, but little more) and says, "Walk to your horse."

To her horror, she does exactly as he tells her to. Without any kind of active permission from her mind, Regina finds herself walking – stiffly so, but still - back over to where her horse is grazing.

"Excellent," Rumple laughs. "That, Your Majesty, is control."

"You can make me walk like I'm a puppet on a string?" Regina asks, her eyes wide.

"Oh, Your Majesty, I can make you do so much more than that."

"Like what?"

The most horrible smile spreads across his lips and then dances upwards to meet his hideously
dark eyes. "I can make you drop down to your knees in front of me, and beg me for mercy."

Her eyes snap up to him. "Don't."

And that's a challenge she never should have made.

He squeezes her heart again. "Kneel before me."

"No," she growls, fighting to resist the pull of her body. Tears spring into her eyes, and it's taking everything she has to battle his control. She shakes her head, her hands curling into fists.

"Kneel," Rumple orders again, so very calmly, and squeezes harder. The tightness in her chest intensifies, becoming uncomfortable, and then after a few brief moments, even quite painful.

"No," she says once more, but even as she does, she feels her entire body dropping down, her leather-clad knees slamming against the hard earth with an uncomfortable thumping noise.

And then there she is, on her knees in front of Rumple.

Humiliated and furious, but unable to resist. This realization fills her with rage.

And the fierce overwhelming desire to be the one in his position.

He tilts his head at her. "See? Control. Even over a Queen."

"You bastard," she growls.

"Well that was not very ladylike at all, was it?" he giggles. "Nevermind that, though. Now, for part two of the lesson. You understand control." He gestures towards her. "Now comes power."

And then without another moment of hesitation, he squeezes her heart, his fingers digging into the fragile organ with frightening intensity and force. Almost immediately, Regina screams as shock-waves of intense pain tear through her. Her hands rush towards her chest, and her fingers frantically and instinctively scrabble at her clothing, as if trying to rip the leather vest that she's wearing away so that she can get to the area where her heart should be housed.

"Uh uh," he scolds. "Not too loud or someone will hear and come running. What will you tell them? That you were learning how to control hearts with an infamous warlock whom every monarch in this land fears? It would be far better for you to be caught with your dragon lover than me, dearie." He smirks at the brief look of surprise that comes over his face. "Of course, I know. Another thing I don't imagine your King would be happy to hear about, now would he?"

She looks up at him once again with hot tears streaming down her cheeks. When he squeezes her heart once more as if to remind her that he can, she opens her mouth but this time, she screams silently, her teeth digging into her lips, the coppery taste of blood filling her mouth.

Unfortunately, throughout her life, Regina has had far too much practice at doing this.

He nods in approval. "Better. Now, beg me to stop."

He's holding the heart away from him when he says this, making it clear that this order isn't one that's being forced upon her, but one that is being demanded of her, instead – this is a request that is being made of her simply so he can teach her – again – about submission and obedience.

Oh, but she knows those lessons pretty goddamn well, already.
She shakes her head in the negative, gritting her teeth against the pain.

"Your pride will be your downfall," he sighs dramatically, acting as though he's dismayed by her decision. She knows otherwise, though; the bastard is absolutely thrilled about her refusal to submit too easily; he enjoys the fight. He's perhaps even getting off on breaking her in this way.

"I won't beg," she growls out.

"Then perhaps we should move onto part three of the lesson," he says, his smile growing into something than can only be called predatory. "Ah, but you know this one already, don't you? This is the end. When control and power are no longer needed and it's just about...death."

His eyes harden into dark malicious coals. As he gazes down at her, he squeezes her heart hard, using just about enough force to cause it to explode within his hand. He's too practiced to destroy it so easily, but as she collapses to the ground, she pays this crucial reality little mind.

Instead, tears coming fast and furious now, she lies writhing on the ground; her eyes rolled backwards, her teeth grit tight enough to crack and break enamel as another scream catches in her throat and dies there, painfully. She feels as though she's experiencing a true heart attack.

And perhaps, she is.

"Beg me to stop," he says softly, kneeling down to touch her. "And I will."

Her pride forces one last stand. She shakes her head, the motion small, the tears many.

He grins again, as impressed as he is frustrated by his protégé. His hold tightens just a bit more, bringing them both to the brink of madness. He can feel the organ breaking apart, starting to tear and even the slightest bit of pressure will reduce it to dust. "Beg me to stop," he repeats.

"Please," she finally whispers, her sanity shredding as the words spill out. "Please stop."

"Call me Master," he says. "Say 'please stop, Master'."

She looks up at him with realization of exactly what he is to her clear on her face. In that moment, she knows he's not her teacher, but her dealer – the one person who will hand-feed poison into her veins and laugh as she pleads for more. Her eyes close, and she softly repeats his words. It'll be the only time that she will ever call him this, but neither of them will ever forget it.

"Of course," he replies with a shrug. He stands up and releases his hold on her heart. Almost immediately, the pain relents and she can breathe again, air filling her lungs in a painful rush as her body continues to shake from aftershocks. "See there," he taunts. "Wasn't that easy now?"

She just glares up at him.

"Rise," he sighs after a moment. "And brush yourself off. If you return to your castle like that, they'll wonder who you've been rolling around with, and I do believe that you're trying to hide your affairs from your King, no?" He gestures towards the dirt that now covers her clothing.

"You could have killed me," she says, anger sparking in her dark eyes. She refuses to rise to his bait about the affairs – those don't concern him, and besides, they're...nothing. Nothing at all.

Just hands that perhaps touch her with the intent to pleasure instead of to control and hurt.

She pushes these thoughts away – they do her no good, anyway.
"I could have," he agrees. "And that's the lesson. Owning a heart gives you three options. One of those options is not love so in case any of those lovers of yours are templing you in that direction – in case she is - get that out of your mind now. But you can have control; you can have power and you can kill, and I dare say all of those things are better than love anyway."

"What do you know of love?" Regina snaps back.

"Enough to know that it has never done you any favors and even you know that which is why you're here with me today," the imp replies. "With your heart in my hand and not in theirs."

"Return it," she demands.

He squeezes her heart and she gasps as pain tears through her chest.

"Ask please," he says, his tone perfectly pleasant. "Or do you intend for us to have yet another battle of wills that will leave you groping around on the ground like a blind child once more? It matters not a bit to me if you would prefer that route, but I'm not sure you can handle any more of it; you're looking a bit sickly, already. I really would hate to see you make a mess of yourself."

"Please," Regina whispers out tiredly, the fight leaving her quite suddenly as she considers the humiliating visual that he has supplied her with. "You've made your point." And he has. Entirely too well for her liking. She feels every bit of the helpless and controlled woman that she is.

"See? That was easy. But no, not yet."

"But –"

"Not yet because there's one more lesson that you've to learn."

"And what's that?"

"What the line between life and death – between sanity and insanity - feels like." He extends his hand to her, offering the exhausted heart, which sits nestled into his palm. "Go on; take it."

She frowns, but shaking more than she cares to admit to, she does as she's told and takes her heart from him. It's quite strange to hold her own heart within her hands. Surreal even.

"Now squeeze it."

"You want me to hurt myself?"

"You won't know what it feels like otherwise. The line is so very thin, and if you don't know –"

"Fine." She takes a breath and then, with considerable trepidation, she gives her own heart a soft tentative squeeze. It causes an uncomfortable tingling sensation in her chest, but that's it.

He laughs. "Well that was pathetic. Squeeze it like it's Snow White's."

Her eyes snap up to him. "Be silent."

"Is that a sore subject? You have so many of them."

"She's a child," Regina insists.

"So, you keep telling yourself in order to try to stop the thoughts you're having – the thoughts that frighten and unnerve you because you think you don't want to be that person. But you are that
person, Regina, and deep down in that darkening heart of yours, you know that Snow White is not just a child." He leans towards her, his hand sliding over hers. "Deep down, you know she did what she did to you in order to ensure that she could get what she wanted, and deep down, you know that the hate which you try to control will only end one way. With her death. You have been preparing for this from the moment you left Maleficent and returned to me."

She squeezes harder now, and immediately wincing, tries to stop.

So that's when he decides to help her. His hand closes over hers and then he presses inwards, tightening the grasp, folding both of their palms over her frantically beating heart. "Feel it.

And she does.

Even as red hot waves of agony crash violently through her, ripping away at every nerve ending she has, she feels the power of life and death surging through her fingers. She feels the control.

She feels death.

She gasps in both pain and pleasure.

She crashes to the ground once more, only somewhat aware that Rumple has caught her on the way down, and is somewhat cradling her shuddering body. Her eyes are up on the sky and she's staring, lost in the dual sensations, mesmerized by the conflicting feelings and emotions.

"I think that's enough," she hears Rumple says, his voice high and amused.

A moment later, she feels him pull her thundering heart from her fingers, and then there's a strange kind of warmth within her body and suddenly, her heart is back within her own chest.

It doesn't quite feel right, though.

In fact, it rather feels like it doesn't completely belong to her anymore.

It takes her another few moments before she can rise again, but once she pushes herself back to her feet, trying to ignore the sudden nausea, she looks up at him. "I understand," she says, her hand settling atop her chest. Her fingers drum there, as if feeling out the beat beneath them.

"Good," and his voice is suddenly quite serious. "Then our work here today is done. I warn you, though; be careful about how you go about practicing these new skills of yours. Take only the hearts that you absolutely must. Any more than that and you will bring suspicion down on you."

"Control, power and death," she says softly, to herself. She looks at her hands, clenches one of them, and then releases it, as if testing her grip. As if feeling the new kind of magic that she has.

The new kind of evil.

He steps behind her. She feels him turn her body, moving her around so that she's facing the kingdom below her. His hand settles on her shoulder, darkly intimate and understanding.

"Over all of this," he tells her. "In time."

Her eyes slide closed and a tear trickles from them, because no, this is never what she had ever wanted. She'd wanted a quiet home with a gentle lover and she'd wanted peace and a family.

And love.
That's all lost to her now.

No one could ever really and truly love what she has become.

And so now, she'll settle for this.

Control. Power. And death.

She nods her head, her eyes hardening. "In time," she repeats.

She thinks she feels her heart – newly returned to her – squeeze in pain, burning hot within her, as if it's on fire. As if it's burning.

And turning to ash.

Regina jerks forward in her bed, her eyes wide and panicked, her breath coming in spurts. The images are fresh in her mind, and perhaps it's the fact that she so seldom recalls her nightmares that causes these horrific scenes to frighten her all the more. Within seconds of coming to, she's climbing from her sheets.

She hits the ground loudly, her knees colliding with the carpet. The left one tears open, as if burnt, blood spilling from the newly opened wound and soaking the flannel fabric. She hisses and pushes herself up, but before she can even get up on her elbows, she's struck by the image of herself lying on the grass of the hilltop, writhing around as Rumple had stood above her.

Squeezing the life from her and demanding that she beg him to stop.

Her hands go to her chest, and she desperately feels for her heart, her fingers bending as if to try to reach within herself.

It's useless, of course, because there's no magic out here.

And her heart is still within her chest. Pounding away in time with her fear.

"Just a dream," she tells herself.

That only makes things that much worse.

She pulls herself upwards, steadying herself using the dresser.

She sees Graham, then, her hand clenched around his heart as she had turned the precious fragile organ to ashes. As they'd slipped between her fingers along with the sands of his life.

She sees her father, his eyes wide as she had shoved her hand into his chest.

And then she sees her mother standing in the middle of Gold's shop, her back to the door as Regina had rushed inwards, a cursed heart in her hands. She sees herself pushing the heart in.

"No," Regina whimpers, stumbling from the room. She uses the walls to brace herself as she makes her way outside, and out to the garage.
She leaves the door to the garage hanging open as she mindlessly races towards the heavy bag, her feverish and tortured mind focused only on finding a way to make the terrible pain stop.

A way to make the visions stop.

But they don't.

They won't.

The glassy and distantly staring eyes of the executed villagers stare up at her, wide and condemning even in death. That she hadn't actually killed these people with her own bare hands matters not; their blood is forever on her, and their eyes will never stop accusing.

She starts to hit the bag, slamming her fists against it as hard as she can. She feels blasts of pain rushing up and down her hands and arms, but she doesn't actually register the physical hurt. She hits hard, harder. Her skin cracks and then breaks, and blood streams between her fingers.

She feels nothing but the pounding of her heart.

Like it's about to break through her chest.

Tears stream down her cheeks and she screams, her fists hitting the bag in staggering streaks of frantic motion. She screams again and again, timing each one with a violent strike forward.

"I know who I am," she hears herself tell Archie outside of her house.

"You've been bad for too long," Cora reminds her from the passenger seat.

"The one thing no one can escape," Gold taunts her through the bars of the jail-cell as she stands there lonely and defenseless. "Destiny. And I promise, yours is particularly unpleasant."

"We know how you are," Emma yells at her as they stand nose to nose in front of her mansion, hatred and revulsion coming at her in waves from the Sheriff. "And who you will always be."

"I don't want to be you," Henry insists, disgust in his eyes.

She cries out again, her body continuing to move as if possessed as she tries to force out all of her dark feelings. Her bloodied fists slam violently against the bag, each punch more painful than the previous one, each hit releasing a little more of her self-hatred and self-loathing.

A little more of her rage and hurt.

Until something stops her.

Until something grabs her and pulls her back and away from the bag.

No, not something - someone: Emma.

"Stop," she hears a soft urgent voice whisper. "Regina, you have to stop."

Strong arms circle her, coming together across her chest. Two hands lay atop each other, in the middle of her breasts, an open palm cupping over a closed fist. Unable to prevent it, Regina feels herself being pulled against the sheriff's body, and then they're both falling backwards.

"You have no soul. How in the hell did you get like this?" Emma demands of her, standing in the doorway of the Mayor's office, hands on her hips, her loathing clear.
"That woman lost much," she hears her own voice whisper, her eyes drawn to the flicker of a candle, the nearby presence of Snow biting at her damaged soul. "And now she's gone."

Teeth grit as she tries to bite back a sob – as she tries to keep herself from shattering. She again lifts a hand to her chest and places her fingers over Emma's and she presses downward.

Towards her heart.

She feels it there, pounding away beneath their combined touch.

Broken and blackened and so terribly damaged.

"I don't want power," she hears herself tell her mother in a voice so terribly innocent and naïve, so unknowing and so unaware of the bitter truth of her situation. "I just want to be free."

"But I believe, given the chance, we can find happiness. Together," her father assures her, like it could ever be so easy – like simple words can heal so much hatred. "But the choice is yours."

"There are lines even we shouldn't cross," Mal warns her, an old friend who had been more in a way that she had been unable to accept. "All power comes with a price. Enacting it will take a terrible toll. It will leave an emptiness inside of you. A void you will never be able to fill."

"Because despite what you think," Mary Margaret tells her, somehow knowing the truth even when she hadn't, "It won't make you happy; it's only going to leave a giant hole in your heart."

"Then I am lost," she tells Rumple as she slumps against a table.

Desperately, the need to silence the voice overwhelming, Regina lunges for the bag again, but Emma holds her tight, securely. "I've got you," the sheriff says quietly, her voice a whisper.

"This would have been enough. You would have been enough," her mother insists, looking up at her, Cora's eyes wide with the understanding of how much they'd never truly had as she dies.

"I'm sorry, and I forgive you," Graham reads, his eyes on Snow's letter.

"Then love again," Daniel begs.

Regina's mouth opens and this time she doesn't try to hold back the sob.

This time, she can't.
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Violence between our ladies, talk of murder, Henry not understanding the dark way of the world and some salty language.

Notes: This is a major turning point in the story - a shifting between the ladies. It does feature a collision which is not...preferable, but is accurate to the nature of these women where they are. Understand that the point is very much that what happened here is wrong...and then we move forward from there.

It takes a half-asleep Emma Swan more than a few minutes to figure out exactly where the hitting/weeping sound is coming from. At first, as she leans forward in her bed, pushed upwards on her forearms, she thinks that there must be an intruder in the kitchen, and her mind runs in circles trying to explain why someone breaking into the house would be crying. It makes no sense.

Of course, then she thinks about Henry and Regina, and protecting them (yes, *them*, she realizes with a jolt of surprise) and suddenly it doesn't actually matter why the intruder is upset. It just matters that he or she is stopped before anyone Emma cares about is hurt.

She rises slowly from her bed, reaching for the hoodie that she'd tossed off before she'd climbed into bed. She pulls it over her head, and then for a long second, she just stands in the middle of her room trying to figure out what to do next. If there is an intruder, she needs to grab her gun, she thinks, and she needs to be ready to fire it as needed.

But then she hears the agonizing sound again – pained, awful and gut wrenching – and in a moment of crystal clear clarity, she knows for a fact that no one has broken into the house. That, and she realizes that the crying is coming not from inside, but rather from outside.

She looks over towards the open window next to her bed, and that's when she sees the bright light shining out from the garage. It's the one part of the house that runs adjacent to her room, and right about now she'd like to kick herself for not realizing what was going on much sooner.

That horrifyingly broken sound which she's hearing right at the moment? Well it's the noise of someone hitting the living shit of the heavy bag that's hanging from the ceiling in the garage. Which means that the person who is making that awful sound is actually Regina.

And if it is her – and Emma knows it is – that means that something very bad has happened.

The door is hanging open for Emma to rush frantically through, and as she does so, she finds that she's not one bit surprised to find the former queen slamming her body against the bag with the kind of force that would make a heavyweight boxer green with envy. She's not even all that shocked to see the blood running down the woman's hands and arms thanks to several gaping cuts.
torn into the flesh of Regina's typically delicate fingers. What does stun her is the way Regina is screaming as she punches (occasionally missing completely) out at the bag.

It's like she's completely lost her mind.

Which knowing Regina, she probably has.

Emma thinks to call out for the Queen, but past experience dealing with both Regina and other people who have been in the state that she's clearly in tells her that the brunette woman won't hear her, anyway; it'd be a waste of time and energy. So, instead, she stays quiet and simply moves forward, moving to stand behind Regina. She doesn't say a word until she has her arms around Regina's shuddering frame. "Stop," she insists, her tone firm. "You have to stop."

But, of course, Regina doesn't just give in; she doesn't actually know how to do so even if she had wanted to – even if doing so would spare her immeasurable pain. Instead, she pushes against Emma, struggling and fighting, and refusing to let down even when it's for the best.

Emma responds by wrapping her arms tighter around Regina, her hands joining in the middle of Regina's chest, an open palm resting atop a balled one and pressing downwards in order to establish control over the disturbingly hyper-emotional woman, who continues to struggle.

She feels Regina shake violently against her, and she sees the way that Regina is looking upwards, her deeply troubled dark eyes staring straight ahead as if she's looking directly at something or someone.

As if she's lost within her own troubled mind.

After a brief moment of this, they fall backwards together, hitting the ground with a loud painful thump. Emma's backside protests the contact, but she pushes the momentary discomfort away, instead focusing completely on the distraught woman within her arms.

She feels rather than sees Regina drop her hands to her chest, settling them atop Emma's balled hands, and then there's a sudden intense pressure as Regina pushes downwards, towards her own heart, like she's trying to get to it. Like she's trying to feel the beating of it.

And then suddenly, Regina is surging forward once more, as if she's trying to get back to the bag so that she can start hitting it again. Emma holds her tight, though, using all of her strength to keep the frantic clearly distraught woman in place. "I've got you," she whispers gently.

Apparently, that bit of kindness is all it takes because just like that, Regina comes apart.

Teeth grit, her muscles in her neck straining as she leans forward, the Queen begins to sob. It's violent and horrible, and for a terribly long moment, Emma can do little but watch in openmouthed shock as the typically tough as nails woman in her arms cries nearly hysterically into the icy cold air of the garage, a thousand old and new hurts spilling out and exposing themselves like bloody war wounds which are now absent their once protective scabs.

"Regina," Emma finally whispers, her voice shaking beneath the strain of her fears, the word just loud enough to be heard over the sound of Regina's choked out sobs.

She gets no reply beyond the continued crying, and it occurs to her that until whatever this emotional turmoil that is currently burying Regina alive is over, there's nothing that she can do to help Regina. So, instead of trying to stop it at all, Emma simply tightens her hold on Regina.

Then, absent anything else to do, but try to offer some degree of comfort to the shuddering woman
who seems incapable of stopping the cries that are coming out of her mouth, Emma whispers softly into Regina's ear, saying over and over – assuring her - that it will all be okay.

Somewhere along the way, sometime during all the rocking and promising, sheer exhaustion overtakes them both and they both just drop backwards. Her arms stay tight and secure around Regina's torso, their hands still connected atop the Queen's frantically beating heart.

Even when everything seems to drift away from her, she doesn't let go of Regina.

She doesn't know why she doesn't, but something tells her that it's never been more important to hold on to Regina and this understanding of theirs than it is right now.

Emma has no idea how much time passes. Enough of it, she supposes.

When all is said and done, she doesn't actually fall asleep; she more dozes out and loses contact with reality for a time. Everything turns shades of black, white and gray, and for a while, Emma just stares blankly straight ahead, her arms still wrapped tight around Regina's trembling body.

It's the feeling of Regina finally separating herself with a kind of frantic anxiety that brings Emma fully back to her senses. Her head pounding from the rough contact with the cement surface, Emma watches from her semi-laid out position on the ground as Regina rolls herself away, and then quickly scurries – in a decidedly un-Queen like manner – across the garage.

"Regina," she sighs, as she places a hand on the ground to push herself up. "Are you –" "Stay there," the former Queen interrupts, her words said sharply and harshly, a finger lifted up as if to keep Emma away from her. She's practically panting with badly disguised panic.

"Regina," Emma tries again, sitting up more fully now and popping the strain and soreness out of her back; her head is pounding, but that she can worry about much later. "It's okay –" "It's not okay!" Regina replies immediately. "It's not. This isn't…this is your fault." She shakes her head and that's when Emma sees the glassy look in the Queen's red-rimmed dark eyes.

That's when she notices not only the fear, but the way that she's rapidly folding inwards. Survival techniques, Emma thinks, and knows that she's about to get hit with all of them. She should resist, not rise to the bait. See and understand what this is; easier said than done.

"My fault?" Emma repeats, clearly surprised. Then, with a bit of annoyance, "How's that?"

"You made me remember," Regina growls, her hand curling into a tight fist as she fights for control that seems to be flowing past her. "I told you that I didn't want to."

"Remember what?" Emma presses as she finally pushes herself up to her feet. Wincing slightly at the pain she feels, she takes a couple slow cautious steps towards Regina, and then stops.

"My dreams," comes the still not quite connected to reality response. There's an odd lilt to Regina's voice, like she's still stuck in her own mind. "You had to keep pushing, didn't you?"
"I…I don't know what –"

Emma's barely gotten the stammered words out of her very dry mouth before Regina is back across the room and up in her face, her eyes snapping fire. It's weird, though, because while she's absolutely there physically, she still seems completely absent mentally. "You did this to me," Regina hisses. "I was fine until you forced me to remember. And now they won't stop."

"Who are they? Who won't stop?" Emma asks, holding her ground even though Regina is almost disturbingly close now. She can smell the Queen's scent – earthy and salty mixed with something that smells a whole lot like sweat and fear. It's intoxicating and unsettling and Emma finds herself wanting to run both towards Regina and away from her all at the same time.

"They want me to know who I am," Regina babbles out, shaking her head, her eyes somehow growing even wider and more panicked again. "Do they really think that I don't know who I am? Do they really think that I don't know what I've done? What I am? Do you think that? Do you?"

"No, " Emma says softly, reaching out to gently wrap a hand around Regina's wrist. She feels the warm wetness of blood there, and finds herself forcibly reminded of the ugly cuts that now mar Regina's knuckles and the rest of her damaged hands. "I think that you know entirely too well who you are, Regina. I think you have always known and have hated yourself for that."

"Then why did you make me remember?" There's something chillingly young and innocent lurking in her trembling voice. "I was doing fine. I was fine. I was… I was…" Her words are swallowed up by a harsh coughing sound, like her throat has suddenly closed up on her.

"But you weren't," Emma counters as she lets go of Regina's wrist and puts a few feet between them – just for the moment, anyway. "You weren't doing fine at all, Regina, and I think we both know it. Forcing yourself to forget what you've done won't help you to deal with what you - "

"You don't know! You…don't. It helped me!" Regina growls, and her suddenly red face shades with enough hurt and pain to let Emma know that wherever Regina's mind was previously, she's right here now, and emotionally, she's bleeding out all over the place. She steps even further away from Emma, and starts pacing, turning her back on the sheriff as she moves around. Her stride is long and agitated, and yet there's something quite predatory about it.

Emma wonders idly if this is what the Evil Queen had looked like when she'd been stalking around her palace, high as a kite on fury and dark magic. Had she seemed to those around her to be terrifying and yet fascinating then, too? Had she been as charismatic and as repulsing?

"Did it?" Emma replies, forcing a flat tone despite the fear that she feels. "You locked away everything you ever did, everything you ever felt. You even locked your conscience away."

Regina spins around on her, her dark eyes flashing malevolently. A sneer crosses her lips. When she finally speaks, her voice is suddenly low and almost silky in its purposeful cruelty. "What would you know about a conscience, Miss Swan? The hardest decision that you've ever had to make is whether or not to fuck another woman's husband. Hardly seems relevant here."

Swallowing back the instinctual urge to fire back, Emma instead nods her head. She knows what this is, knows exactly what Regina is trying to do, and she's determined that after all of this – after all they've been through both back in Storybrooke and here - she's not going to let it work.

She's resolute that she's going to be the bigger woman, and that she's going to stand tall and let these painful blows hit against her without fighting back. She's dead set that even if it hurts a little – or even a lot - she's going to be the punching bag that Regina so desperately needs right now
because the real one, which is still swaying back and forth, isn't going to cut it tonight.

"I've done my fair share of ugly things," Emma answers after a few long intense seconds, her own blue-green eyes misting up as she punctuates her words with a small sad smile mean to admit her remorse. "I have a pretty damned good idea what it means to hear that little voice."

"This isn't a fairytale, dear," Regina snorts derisively. "There's no little cricket sitting on my shoulder telling me how I can make better choices. Not one on yours, either, for that matter."

"No, there's not. Not out here in the real world, at least," Emma agrees, stepping forward again, and putting out a hand as if to reach for Regina; she stops short, but the offer remains there. "But that doesn't change the truth of what we've done. That doesn't change who we are."

"And who am I, Emma?" Regina asks, stepping close to her again. They're practically touching now, little more than half an inch separating them. "Who do you truly see me as, Savior?"

"I see you as Regina," Emma answers, again refusing to rise to the bait of the title.

"No," Regina breathes, her eyes wild. "I'm the Evil Queen, silly girl." She leans even further in, and Emma's struck by the bizarre thought that she's about to be kissed – claimed even. It takes everything she has not to swallow, to hold herself steady and not flinch beneath the intensity.

"Do you really believe that you're still her?" Emma challenges, eyes locked. "Because I don't think you are. I think this is all just a familiar mask that you slip on whenever you get scared."

Regina laughs, the sound entirely too forceful to be completely real. "How many masks are you aware of that have as much blood and death on them as mine does?" Another high cold laugh and then Regina adds on, "What makes you think this is a mask and not just the real me?"

"Because I know who you are, Regina."

"You think so, do you? Tell me you don't really believe that a bit of kickboxing can change me into something better? You think the ocean can make me anything more than what I am."

"I guess that all depends on what you actually are."

"A murderer."

"Okay, but I don't think you have to be that person anymore. And what's more? I don't think you want to be her, anymore. I think that all of this – this whole fit - is just you being afraid."

"Of you?" Regina asks, the derision clear. "Hardly."

"No, not of me, though maybe you are afraid of me, too. The truth can be pretty goddamned scary. But I think mostly you're afraid of finally facing the things you see in your nightmares. The things that you've done. That's why you've been blocking out your dreams for so long."

"You want to know what's in my dreams?" Regina asks, smiling coldly.

"Yes," Emma replies immediately, squaring her shoulders, and readying herself for an answer that she instinctively knows is going to hurt like a bitch. Because this is all about pushing back.

And pushing away.

"Graham," Regina hisses, leaning in again. "I dreamt about killing him." She bares her perfect white teeth as she speaks, her eyes narrowed and cruel. The vicious lie pours forward, "I dreamt
about the power and the joy and the satisfaction I felt when I crushed his heart to –"

Emma never lets her finish; something angry snaps inside of her, and suddenly she has her hand around Regina's throat and is throwing them both backwards against the far wall of the garage.

"Stop," she demands, tightening her hand.

Regina laughs, the sound almost hysterical.

"Stop talking or I swear to God I will make you stop," Emma says once more and then slams Regina into the wall. She hears the pained grunt, but in front of her eyes, all she sees is red.

"Tell me," Regina taunts, her voice choked. "Did he look like he was in pain when he died?"

"Fucking stop it," Emma gasps out now, her throat closing around the words even as her hand jerks forward to slam Regina against the wall once more, her fingers crushing inwards.

"Good," the former queen whispers, blinking fiercely as she tries and fails to force a rush of hot tears back. When she speaks, there's no anger there, just resignation. "Then maybe it's time you make me pay for that. Maybe it's time, my dear Savior, that you give me what I deserve."

"What you deserve?" Emma repeats in a barely audible voice, and just like that, the switch inside of her head and her heart gets thrown again, and she's staring at her hand which is wrapped around Regina's throat, her fingers pressed viciously into delicate skin. Regina's head is against the wall, and her eyes are squinted in pain. Emma sees the tears running down Regina's ashen cheeks, and she shakes her head in disbelief, realizing that she's been played.

Realizing that she'd allowed her anger to be manipulated and controlled.

Which, of course, is exactly when Henry decides to show up.

The kid has slept through dozens of nights of bad dreams and frantic cries, but apparently a fight between his mothers is enough to pull him from his bed. He enters the garage, his eyes widening as he takes in the sight of Emma holding Regina against the wall by her throat.

"Emma!" he cries out. "Stop! What are you doing? Let her go!"

Her hand immediately falls away from Regina's now badly bruised throat. She imagines that within a few hours, the Queen is going to have some vivid color wrapped around her neck.

"You're supposed to be helping her," he insists.

"Henry," Emma starts to explain, and then she abruptly just stops because how can she even begin to explain what had just occurred between she and Regina? How can she even figure out where to start? She clenches her hand at her side in order to try to stop it from trembling.

She should have seen this coming; after all, Regina is a pro at self-destruction. She could teach a class in how to manipulate people in order to push them away before they can get too close.

"You promised you'd help her."

"I…"

"She tried," Regina says suddenly. Looking like she's about to collapse, she instead steps away from the wall and approaches him, wincing as she drops down to a knee in front of him, doing what she always does and insisting on being on his level to speak to him. "I did this, Henry" she
tells him, her voice trembling. "I attacked Emma; she just defended herself. This is all my fault."

"Regina," Emma tries to cut in, reaching out a hand, but grasping only air.

"I'm sorry that I keep letting you down," Regina tells him, ignoring Emma completely.

"I thought you were getting better?" he asks, so young and confused.

Her eyes close for a moment, and more tears stream out, splashing down her cheeks and spilling onto her shirt. "I'm sorry," she says again because everything else sounds like a lie.

"I don't understand," he tells her. "I thought –"

"You thought right. It's just...things got out of control," Emma offers up, stepping towards them and reaching out for Henry. She puts a hand on his shoulder, and insists, "That's all."

"You were choking her," Henry reminds her, his eyes on his mother's bruised throat.

"She was defending herself against me; she had no choice," Regina tells him once more, and then refuses to look Emma's way when the blonde sheriff throws her an incredulous look.

"I guess not. I guess maybe coming here was a mistake," he states, shaking his head.

"Henry, no," Emma insists. "It's wasn't –"

"Maybe everyone else was right and we were wrong. Maybe she can't be saved," he snaps, his face corkscrewing into one of betrayal. "Maybe we should just go home."

He doesn't allow either of them a chance to answer, just turns and storms away from them, rushing back towards the house, the door slamming behind him thanks to the force of his rage.

"Why?" Emma says softly, turning to face the Queen once the door has slammed shut with thud which makes Regina noticeably jump. "Why are you so damned determined to burn everything down around you? Why are you so insistent on finding a way to push everyone away?"

"Because he's right," Regina answers, her voice flat, but somehow still so very sad. "And it is time you realized it and let go of this ridiculous notion of yours, Sheriff; I can't be saved."

"Regina –"

"Enough. Enough of this madness."

"No! I saw – I heard you. I held you, Regina. I know what you're doing right now; I know what you were doing by talking about Graham. You think that I'm that easy to push away? You think Henry is?"

"Yes, I do. So please, don't let me down this time."

"Let you down? What –"

Regina lifts her chin up and gazes directly at Emma, their eyes meeting, watery broken brown on vivid determined green. "You lost your faith in me when I needed it the most; don't make a fool of yourself now, Swan, and keep that faith when I deserve it the very least."

"Life isn't always about what we deserve," Emma insists.
"No," Regina nods. She smiles sadly, then. "It's not."

And with that, she turns and walks away, following Henry out of the garage.

Leaving Emma alone to wonder what had just happened.

Morning rolls around a few hours later, and though she's exhausted out of her mind, Emma reluctantly pulls herself from her bed, and makes her way into the kitchen. She considers a beach run, but she's too weary and sore for that, and so instead she starts on breakfast.

Henry comes out of his bedroom at his normal time, and sits down at the table, his expression morose and sulky, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. She'd love to shrug all of this off to him just rapidly spinning towards his teenage years, but she knows that it's more than that.

"Hey," Emma says, her voice intentionally light, from her position behind the counter. She's making hefty overstuffed bacon and cheese omelets this morning because she knows how much he loves them, and right now he looks like he could use something to smile about.

"Hey," Henry grouses, leaning back in his chair. She wonders idly if he gets not only the clear petulance, but also the terrible posture from her. The temper and irrational behavior certainly have to have come from Regina, she thinks as she watches him crumble up a napkin in his fist.

"Did you happen to see your mom in the hallway?" she asks as she flips the omelet over and listens to the sound of it grilling against the pan. She tries to keep her tone neutral and even gentle, but he sees right through her, giving her a look of annoyance that's almost patronizing.

That expression comes from Regina, too, she's certain.

"No," he finally says as he drops the napkin on to the table, and then almost compulsively goes about smoothing it out. Like that, too, is something deep in his head.

"Well, why don't you go get her? Breakfast is just about up."

He blinks, confusion shining in his eyes, like he can't figure out why she would want to pretend like everything is normal and okay after what he'd seen and heard in the garage. Why would she want to break bread with a woman who had attacked her as his dark-haired mother had?

Why would she want to have breakfast with a woman whom she'd almost choked to death?

"Please?" Emma presses.

"Fine," Henry grumbles, standing up and scuffing his feet against the tiled floor. He makes his way down the hallway and knocks on Regina's door. "Hey," he calls out. "Breakfast is ready."

The door opens a few moments later, and it's only because he's so young that he doesn't see and understand just how tired and worn down she is. Even so, even he can quite plainly see that something isn't quite right with his adoptive mother. She doesn't seem right to him, and it's enough to make the anger that he'd been holding onto bleed away. Because deep down under all of the emotions that he doesn't understand is one that he does: he loves this woman.

For all the ways that she has failed him, she is still his mother and he still does love her.
"Henry," she smiles, the expression both sad and oddly discomforting. She reaches out as if to touch his chin in a way that she has done a hundred times before, but pulls up short, balling her fingers into a fist instead. Then, as if realizing the defensive nature of the gesture, she forces her hand to loosen up, and instead settles it shakily against the dark cotton of her slacks.

"Breakfast is ready," he tells her, frowning as he looks down at his mom's hand which is now thumping against the leg of her slacks, her nervous behavior impossible to hide. His eyes widen slightly as he takes in the vivid red gashes there, cuts that circle around her palms and push deeply into her knuckles. They're all cleaned out now, but even that can't take away from how bright and angry they are. Shifting anxiously, Henry finds himself wondering where they'd come from considering that it'd been Emma whom he'd seen holding Regina in place earlier that morning. True, Regina had claimed to have attacked first, but he hadn't noticed marks on Emma.

"Thank you for coming to get me, sweetheart," she tells him, her tone oddly distant. Her voice draws his eyes back up towards her face, and that's when he notices the ring of bruises around her throat – perfect purplish fingerprints dug into the skin. "But I'm not hungry this morning."

"You should still...you should eat with us. It's what...it's what we do."

She swallows, and for a moment looks as though she might relent, but then says in a tightly controlled voice, "Normally, yes, but I'm not feeling very well; I would like to be alone."

There's a crisp finality to her words that makes him nod his head, mutely acquiescing to her demands despite the fact that they both know that it's a bad idea to do so. But it's hard not to surrender to her will right now; to him, she sounds a whole lot like the woman he'd lived with during the months after Emma had come to town – the ones just before the curse had broken. That woman had been cold and distant even as she'd tried so desperately to hold onto him.

He watches the door close in his face, and then turns and walks back down the hall, dropping himself into the chair at the table, looking even more miserable than he had before.

"Is she coming?" Emma asks, glancing up from the stove-top, her brow furrowed with worry.

"No. She said she wanted to be alone. I think...I don't think she's feeling very well." He muses about the bruises he'd seen on his mom's neck, and instinctively, his left hand comes up and he touches at his own throat, feeling the unblemished skin there. He frowns. "She's hurt, Emma."

"Maybe she's having one of her headaches," Emma offers him, adding on a tight smile.

"Yeah," Henry agrees as he watches her place the plate in front of him. The massive omelet there smells fantastic, and his stomach growls appreciatively. Still, he simply stares at it.

"Henry –"

"Can I have some orange juice, please?" he asks suddenly, looking up at her. She gets the feeling that he's taking another page out of Regina's book; this one is all about pushing her away from him, refusing to let her in to help him when he needs her the most.

And the worst part is, she doesn't have a clue what to do about it. "Sure, Kid," she says with what she hopes is a comforting smile. "Of course."

"Thanks." And then he drops his head, and focuses on his omelet.

She sighs, glances down the hallway towards Regina's room, and then makes her way to the refrigerator to collect the orange juice for him.
It's going to be a long day, she thinks.

"Hey, sorry for calling so early. Am I bugging you?" she asks, holding her cell to her cheek. She's standing outside on the deck, a hot mug of coffee nestled in one hand. It's a cool morning, and there's a light mist hanging down in the air. As she talks, she faces the water, eyes on the surf.

"Pun intended?" he asks, and she hears him chuckle.

She winces. "God, no. Sorry, that's just me being well, me." She lifts the mug up to her lips, and takes a long drink from it, closing her eyes as the smooth taste of Regina's vanilla bean coffee rushes over her tongue. "I've been doing that a lot over the last couple of days."

"There's absolutely nothing wrong with that," Archie assures her, and she can just about see him smile. When he speaks again, his voice is typically warm. "What can I do for you, Emma?"

"You're not going to ask how things are going with me and Regina?"

"Well, honestly, I'm assuming that if you're calling to check in with me for the first time in almost a month that the answer to that questions is probably 'not good', right?"

"Yeah. I need some advice. And it kind of has to do with the whole me being me thing," she replies with a tired sigh. She watches as a high wave crashes the beach, depositing several long branches. She thinks about going down after the call is over and collecting them for the fort.

And then wonders if Regina would see that as another form of attack against her.

"Do I get to know details this time?"

"What do you think?"

"Right. Good. She needs that from you. Trust."

"Yeah, that's kind of the problem. Without telling you too much, we kind of got into a bit of a fight this morning. A really bad one, actually. More to the point, she kind of…well, I think the best way to say it without saying too much here is that she manipulated me into reaction."

"I'm guessing it wasn't a good one."

"No. It was…exactly what she wanted."

"Ah. And right now your relationship is?"

"Feels like we've gone all the way back to square one."

"Which you think was her intention when she started the fight?"

"I think a lot of things happened this morning, but by the time the fight started, her intention was to piss me off and hurt me enough to make me grab Henry and walk away from her."

"I see," Archie says. In the background, Emma hears Pongo barking away.
She chuckles. "Well, I'm glad you do. Can you help me see?"

She hears Archie shush Pongo, and then, returning to the phone he says, his voice remaining so very patient and kind, "Tell me something, Emma; what made you fall into her manipulation?"

"She pushed my buttons. One specifically."

"One that she knew would get the reaction she wanted?"

"Yes."

"Did you know what she was doing while she was doing it?"

"Yes."

"So why did you fall into it?"

Emma considers her answer for a moment, sighing before she says, "Regina has a way of pushing past my defenses and making me lose my head, and I guess... I don't know."

"Your instincts told you what she was doing, right?"

"Yeah."

"But you stopped trusting them?"

"Same answer as before."

"So maybe that's the answer here, too; you have to trust yourself, Emma. You talked at the beginning of this call about this being a matter of you being you, but I would argue that it's the opposite. The problems aren't arising because it's you being you, but because every time you deal with Regina, every time you get close, something happens and you stop relying on your instincts. You let emotion take over and she pushes you away or you break trust with her."

"This time she forced that."

"Because last time when you thought she killed me, you did so willingly."

"Yeah, she mentioned that," Emma says with a wince. She winds her fingers through the curls in her hair, clenching for a moment before dropping her hand down again, gazing at her fist.

"Whatever caused Regina to push back on you was something that scared her enough to give up on what's actually been working for the two of you for the last several weeks. That alone should tell you that you're making massive progress. Now is when you have to trust yourself more than ever, Emma. Now is when you have to trust your instincts about Regina."

"So you're saying I have to keep pushing."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Regina is used to everyone giving up on her or walking away from her or choosing someone or something else. She probably expects that after whatever happened between the two of you today that you'll give up as well. If you're serious about helping her -- and yourself -- then you have to be strong enough to let her know you're not going anywhere no matter what she throws at you. She wants to open up to you, Emma. She wants someone to trust. She just needs to believe that that person won't betray her."

"Got it. Thanks, Archie."
"Of course."

"Hey, how's Mary Margaret doing?"

"She's fighting," he says with a sigh. "She's tough; she'll get there."

"You sound like -"

"Snow sees things...differently. There's a lot to unpack there as well," Archie tells her.

"Yeah, I know. Thanks again. For everything."

"Always. If you need me -"

"I know where you are. Bye."

"Ice cream?" Henry asks, an eyebrow lifting up. It's a fairly cool day, even at twenty minutes past two in the afternoon, but he's still a kid, and there's absolutely no way that he'll say no to ice cream. Even if he's suspicious as to what her purpose for bringing him here might be.

"So suspicious," she mutters, picking up on it. "And here I just thought we could share a sundae," Emma shrugs as she places the bowl full of different flavored scoops and syrups in front of them. They're sitting across from each other at a table inside the local ice cream store.

They'd gone into town together to do grocery shopping for the week, and this had seemed as good a place as any for the conversation that she wants to have with Henry about his mom.

And hey, a chance to share ice cream is always a plus.

"Sure," he agrees as he places his spoon into the bowl. After a few bites from each of the strawberry, vanilla and chocolate scoops, and several moments of awkward silence from Emma, he looks up at his blonde mother and says, "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"Am I that obvious?"

"Captain Obvious," he tells her.

"Awesome. Can we pretend I'm not?"

"No. What's up, Emma?"

"Even more awesome. Fine, I was hoping we could talk about your mom."

"Are you going to tell me the truth about what happened last night?"

She chuckles.

"What?"

"You're the second person today who has asked me that. Kind of."

"Archie?"
"You heard me speaking to him on the phone. Kid, you really have got to stop eavesdropping on everything and everyone. Despite what I do, it's not cool." she scolds. Or tries to anyway.

He simply shrugs his shoulders, and blows off the honestly fairly weak attempt at scolding him, saying instead, "Yeah. I heard you say my mom manipulated you into what happened."

"She did." Emma nods. "She intentionally pushed my buttons until I lost control of myself and attacked her. That's what you walked in on. She didn't actually physically attack me first."

He blinks, clearly surprised to be hearing the truth from her. "Why?"

"Why did I attack her or why did she push my buttons?"

"Both. And why did she lie to me about it? Why did she make herself…the bad guy?"

"Well, let's break that down, okay? I did what I did because she pissed me off. She did it because she's scared of a whole lot right now, Henry. She's starting to remember and really think about all the bad things that she's done and that's terrifying for her. Your mom's usual way of handling all the fear and bad emotions that she has is to try to run away from them. Or in my case, since she knows I'm not going to let her do that, she chose to try to push me away."

"Did it work?"

"Yeah, it did. You remember what I told you the first night we got here?"

He shakes his head, and then reminds her, "That was four weeks ago."

"Yeah. I told you that your mom knows how to push my buttons better than just about anyone alive does. And in turn, I know how to push hers, too. But what happened this morning, that was all about her trying to get me to run away from her because…that's what I've always done."

"But not anymore," he insists.

"But it wasn't all that long ago, either," she reminds him. "Remember, the day you ate the apple turnover? I was trying to leave town. I was trying to run away because it was too much; it was too hard and I was scared. It's what I've always done, Henry. It's how I've protected myself, and you know what, Kid, I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but I think maybe it's time you hear some honesty in this whole mess. Maybe it's time you finally realize that I'm no saint."

"I know that," he says, and she knows immediately that he doesn't actually.

"Mm," she nods, reaching forward and taking a spoonful of strawberry ice cream that is heavily drizzled with chocolate syrup. After a moment, she says softly, "What happened this morning, Henry, it's as much my fault as it is hers. She pushed my buttons, but I knew exactly what she was doing, and I let her do it. I let her push me away. That's on me as much as it's on her."

"Why?"

"Because I stopped trusting myself." She shakes her head. "We brought your mom here because she needed a safe place to be where she could heal. She needed somewhere where she could face her past and grieve for her mother. We brought her here so she could have a place where she could be honest and truthful about all of the really ugly stuff inside of her. We brought her here and promised to support her, and then this morning, I failed her in that."

Their eyes meet.
"I failed her, too," he says, holding a spoonful of ice cream in mid air.

"Hey, no, you didn't; you're just a kid, Henry, and it is okay to get angry at your mom when she does some of the things she does. It's okay to feel what you do. That's not the problem."

"So what is the problem? What did she do?"

"The problem is forgetting how complicated she is and how much she has lived before either of us became part of it. As for what she did? She reminded me of who she used to be in a way that I wasn't prepared for," Emma says, refusing to say more than that. She already thinks she's telling him too much, but this entire conversation feels way overdue and completely necessary.

It feels like something that should have happened a very long time ago.

"Then I don't understand –"

"What I'm saying is, it's okay to get angry at her and wish she wouldn't do the crazy things that she tends to do when she gets scared and hurt, but it's not okay for us to lose faith in her ability to be better, because that's what she believes already and she needs more from us than that."

He nods his head slowly. "I get it."

"Do you? Do you understand why I'm telling you all of this?"

He shakes his head. "Not really," he admits.

"What do you see your mother as?"

"She's mom," he offers up with a shrug.

"And?"

"She's the Evil Queen."

"And that's part of the problem. She was the Evil Queen, Henry. Thirty years and a different world ago. That's not to say that she hasn't done some truly terrible things since then, but she's not the woman from your book, and to be honest, Kid, I'm not sure that she ever really was."

"But –"

"What did that book tell you about how she grew up?"

He frowns as he thinks about this. "Not much. Her mom was…kind of mean."

"That's…an understatement. But what about her marriage to your grandfather?"

"She wanted to marry Daniel but after he died, she married the King instead."

"What has it ever told you about how she feels about things?"

"Not much. It doesn't really focus on the bad guys."

"Exactly. Your book for all the times that it's right about things is also very black and white in how it tells its stories. It's about love and winning and defeating the bad guys, but it never tells you about loss or pain or why the bad guys became who they were. It never tells you about the desperation that causes someone to turn their back on the best of themselves." She smiles sadly,
reaching out to put her hand over his smaller one. "The reason I told you that I'm no saint, Henry, is because I'm not. My life before you wasn't easy, and I did some bad things, too."

"Not like her."

"No, not like her, but this world isn't like that one, and you know what, Kid? Who's to say what could have happened – what I might have been willing to do - if I'd been in her shoes over there. Everyone thinks it would have been all tiaras and balls, but you just never know."

He thinks over her words, and then says softly, "She seemed so sad this morning."

"I'd guess she probably was sad. Your mom believes that the one thing she really is good at is pushing people away, and I'd bet that's what she thinks she did this morning. Which means it's up to us to prove her wrong." She leans towards him, lowering her voice and making it almost conspiratorial in nature, "You think we can do that? Prove to her that we do believe in her?"

He nods his head in the affirmative. "Yeah, we can do that. Do we need an operation?"

"Nah, no operations for this. Just you and me," she says with a relieved smile. Then, using her spoon to slap at his, "Now get your spoon out of my strawberry. You can have the vanilla."

"I don't want the vanilla," he protests with an adorable wrinkle of his nose. "How about I get the strawberry and you get the chocolate, and we both agree that that's how it should be."

"No. I'm the adult. I get the one I want."

"And I'm your son whom you love more than anything in the world and would do anything for."

"Which means what exactly?"

"Which means I get the strawberry, and you get the chocolate."

"You are your mothers' son," she grouses.

"Is that a good thing?" he asks, growing suddenly very serious again.

She nods her head sharply, resolutely. "Yeah, definitely. Because under all of the anger and hurt is a brave woman with a strong and loving heart. We just need to help her show it better."

"We can do that," he says.

"Yes, we can," she agrees. And then she reaches over and stabs her spoon into the chocolate ice cream, the motion deliberate and petulant. "But don't think I won't remember this."

He grins, and she thinks that maybe it's the most beautiful thing that she's ever seen. "Bring it," he says before jamming strawberry ice cream into his mouth. "Mm, delicious," he manages.

"You suck."

"Eat your ice cream, Emma," he says with a triumphant smirk.

"Yeah, definitely your mothers' son," she grumbles.

He grins again, and she laughs and wonders how she ever got so lucky.

It's then – as she lifting an admittedly delicious spoonful of chocolate ice cream to her lips – that
she makes the vow to herself that no matter what it takes, she will find a way to make Regina feel
the exact same wonderfully warm and perfect thing that she is right now.

Regina is sitting on the couch reading an old Crichton paperback when they come in, their arms
overloaded with huge bags of groceries. They stop when they see her there, mother and son both
regarding her with badly veiled curiosity and interest. They seem oddly pleased to see her, and she's
not terribly sure as to why considering her last interactions with the two of them.

"Do you need help?" Regina asks softly. Her eyes meet with Emma's for half a second, and then
slide away, towards Henry. She offers him a small smile, but it doesn't quite ever look real. She
looks so damned tired and worn out, and Emma can see the telltale frown lines on Regina's
forehead, the ones that indicate that the former queen has likely been battling a rather severe
migraine for most – if not all - of the day. That's not terribly surprising considering how the
somewhat debilitating headaches seem to be brought on by very high stress and emotion.

"No, I got it," Emma assures her with a far more generous and engaging smile. "There are only a
couple more bags. Besides, I think that cartoon that you like is on right now, isn't it, Kid?"

"Oh right," Regina nods, standing up. "I'll –"

"No, stay and watch with me," Henry insists, reaching out and grabbing her hand to keep her from
getting too far away from him. He tightens his hold on her, squeezing their fingers slightly. Her
eyes track down to their adjoined hands, and she finds herself staring stupidly at them.

"You hate when I watch cartoons with you," she reminds him, her voice soft and slightly shaky, her
head slightly tilting like she can't quite figure out what's happening here.

Is this a game? A set-up? Some way to try to provoke her into another reaction?

But then Henry is grinning at her again, and it's so very hard to think any kind of bad of her little
prince and his intentions. "That's because you always tell me how preposterous they are."

"Seriously? You do?" Emma asks, smirking a bit. "Why am I not surprised?"

Regina knows this is strange, all of them acting like nothing is wrong even before they've had a
chance to clear the air about what had happened this morning, but that's for later, she thinks. Right
now, even if it's just pretending for a few minutes, it's nice to have some calm again.

"Cartoons are actually preposterous for the most part, Miss Swan," Regina offers up as she tries to
regain some control. "I mean that one with the roadrunner and the coyote is just absurd."

"It's also a classic," Emma chuckles.

"It's preposterous."

"Says the woman who can create cupcakes out of thin air."

"Well, yes," Regina agrees with a shrug. "I suppose you have a point there."

"Oh! The Queen allowed me a win! Score one for me!" Emma grins, and this whole moment is so
utterly silly in both presentation and execution that Regina can't help herself from chuckling.
Which is when she feels Henry tug her hand again. "Watch with me."

"Are you sure, Henry? I can –" 

"Please?" He gives her a look that is both pleading and unsure and she's overcome by the need to give him whatever he wants. And what he wants right now, apparently, is to be with her.

"Of course." She allows herself to be pulled back down onto the sofa, and then has to clench her jaw to keep herself from gasping when he just about presses himself against her available side. Her arm goes around his back, and she scratches at his shoulder. He smiles up at her, and she responds in kind. "So," she says, her voice breaking slightly. "What is this one about?"

"Batman," he says as he flicks on the LCD TV. The screen blinks to life, and after he changes the channel, darkly animated visuals showing off the Gotham based crime-fighter spring forward.

"The lunatic who dresses like a rat?" she asks with a lifted up eyebrow. She vaguely remembers him from the comic books of Henry's that she's audited over the years. Behind them, in the kitchen, she hears Emma snort; a glance that way shows her the blonde shaking her head.

"A bat, Mom," Henry corrects with the kind of sigh that only a boy can muster. "And trust me, you'll agree that he's the coolest in a minute; he's like you and Emma if you were one person."

"That's actually kind of terrifying," Regina drawls.

"Have to agree with her, Kid," Emma says as she exits the kitchen, and heads towards the front door to go for another armload of groceries. "Can't we be two separate superheroes?"

"No," he says, then turns his attention back to the television.

He doesn't see the look his mothers exchange – one that says that there's a very deep and in-depth discussion that still needs to be had between them; there's still so many things to be worked out, but that they both agree that this moment right here is something worth having.

Something worth holding on to.

They tuck him into bed together as they've done almost every night they've been here, but it's Regina who stays a few minutes longer, sitting on the edge of his bed, and listening to him as he talks about the ice cream sundae that he and Emma had shared earlier. She strokes his hair away from his forehead as he speaks, allowing her fingers to weave through the silky tresses.

Finally, reluctantly, she says, "All right, sweetheart, I think it's time for you to close your eyes, and try to get some sleep; it's been a very long day." She pulls the blankets up to his chin, and then, wondering if he feels like he's being smothered by her, loosens them back up again.

"Okay," he grumbles, reaching down to yank the blankets up over him once again.

Her eyes watering as she watches him, impulsively, she leans down and presses her lips against his forehead, leaving them for a moment longer than is probably necessary. When she lifts back up again, she stays hovered over him for just a moment. "You know I love you don't you?"

He smiles. "You know I love you, don't you?"
It's an odd thing for him to say, and if she tried to describe the warmth that spreads through her
chest and the way her heart nearly explodes, she honestly couldn't even begin to.

"Oh, Henry," she says instead, and then wipes at her eyes, not even bothering to hide the motion or
the way that she flicks tears away. "Have some good dreams for me, okay?"

He nods his head. "Goodnight, Mom."

"Goodnight, my perfect little prince."

It's cold and late, and on any other night, she'd be sitting on the deck in a chair with a glass of wine.
Tonight, though, she's in the sand down by the water, the surf lapping at her bare feet.

She's been out here for almost an hour now, just staring ahead and thinking. Trying to figure out
how to deal with all of the thoughts and voices that are suddenly swirling in her head.

Trying to figure out what's going on with Henry, and whether it's a lie.

And wondering if she cares if it is.

At first, she doesn't recognize the sound of footsteps for what they are. She hears the noise behind
her, but she thinks it's the swirling wind or the oncoming waves until the steps come closer, and
then she realizes with a spot of panic that someone is approaching her from behind.

She thinks that maybe she should be wary and on edge (and truly, she is), but the bone-deep
exhaustion that weighs on her so heavily keeps her from doing much more than turning her head to
see who it is coming towards her.

Emma Swan.

Of course.

"Swan," she greets, her voice throaty and thick from the crisp damp air.

"Hey," Emma replies, and Regina notices that the Sheriff is carrying four things with her – a large
scratchy looking blanket, two glass tumblers and a full bottle of Jack Daniels. "You look like you're
freezing," Emma notes, gesturing towards the way Regina is shivering. And yes, she is quite cold
and has been for the last hour. She's wearing a light hoodie, but the temperatures have dropped far
below where even that is enough to keep her warm and comfortable.

"It's not too terribly bad," Regina lies, and sometimes even she's surprised with just how easy it is
to say something that is so very clearly a complete fallacy. "I'm all right."

"Sure you are," Emma chuckles, then steps forward and drapes the heavy blanket around Regina's
shoulders. It's brown and ugly and yes, quite scratchy, but it's also damned warm.

Regina considers protesting, but realizing that doing so would be petty and for no real reason at all
beyond just to do it, she instead smiles out her thanks, and then, turning back towards the dark
water that continues to run over her feet, says softly, "Why are you out here, Emma?"

"I thought maybe we should talk."
"That hasn't really been going well for us."

"Actually, it has been," Emma corrects as she seats herself next to Regina. "It's the rest of the stuff that has been blowing up in our faces. You know, the part where you stop trusting me, and went back to trying to push me away from you; that's the part that hasn't been working."

"Well, you don't make it difficult to push you away," Regina tells her. The tone she's using is curiously devoid of accusation, like she's just presenting a very obvious statement of fact.

And perhaps, Emma muses, she is.

"Is that your way of telling me that you find it really easy to manipulate me?" Emma queries as she places the glasses on the sand. She opens up the bottle of Jack and fills both glasses to the top with the dark liquid. She swirls them around and then offers Regina one of the glasses.

"It's my way of saying I knew exactly where to push," Regina says simply, eyes on the glass.

"Yeah," Emma agrees, and then reaches forward once more, urging Regina to take it from her.

"Where did this bottle come from?" Regina queries as she finally accepts the drink, and brings it up towards her face, sniffing at the alcohol. "I don't recall seeing it in the cupboards before."

"It wasn't there. I picked it up when I was out shopping today. This felt like a whiskey kind of discussion," Emma says, lifting the glass to her lips, and taking a large indelicate gulp.

"Yes, probably," Regina agrees, taking a sip herself. If anyone were to watch the differences in the way the women drink, they'd simply nod their heads; Regina – who will most certainly drink her fair share of the JD – drinks somewhat delicately where as Emma practically inhales it.

It's all so completely them even when it's just liquor involved.

"Why Graham?" Emma asks after a few moments, and a few more gulps.

"Why Graham what?"

"Why was he what you threw in my face?"

Regina takes another sip – this one larger - and then replies, "Because I'm pretty sure it's the one thing you haven't forgiven me for." She turns her head to look at Emma, her eyes heavy. "For reasons I don't understand, you don't seem to blame me for the curse itself or how you grew up or even for separating you from your parents for twenty-eight years, but for him –"

"Yeah. What hurts the most can be kind of weird," Emma allows.

"Indeed. And I knew it was still an open wound for you."

"And for you?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

Emma tilts her head, examines Regina's face and smiles slightly, humorlessly.

"Yes, you do. Is Graham's death still an open wound for you?"

Another sip, this one even larger, almost approaching a gulp. A swallow and a deep breath as the alcohol burns its way down her throat and then in a low voice, Regina admits, "Yes."
"Did you actually dream about him last night?"

Regina looks over at Emma again, and their eyes meet for a moment. Emma gets the feeling like she's been scanned and gauged and perhaps even vetted for the honesty of her approach, and it takes everything she has not to shift beneath the intensity of the gaze that lingers on her.

She wonders if this is what the soldiers and knights who served under Regina felt like when they were called in for review? Did they always wonder if the Queen was seeing all of them?

Finally, Regina replies, "No, I didn't dream about him. I thought about him, but…no."

"So you bringing him up, it was all just about pushing me away."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want those dreams, Emma. I don't want them. I don't…I don't know what to do with them. I don't know how to handle them. I don't know how to survive being what I was. I don't know if I want to." There's so much honesty in her words, and it's almost overwhelming for both of them because for a moment, it looks to Emma like Regina is about to break again.

But then the Queen – the woman who wants to be Regina Mills – forcibly pulls herself back together, her shoulders tightening as she straightens, her back sliding into perfect alignment.

"I'm sorry," Emma says softly. "I never meant for you to be hurt by that. I didn't. I just…I want you to actually be who you can be, Regina. Who I'm pretty damned sure you want to be."

"How do you know who I want to be?"

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "I saw you with Henry this afternoon. And I've seen you with him a thousand other times. You want to be that person that you are when you're with him, the one who was watching Batman with him today and cheering on the Joker getting taken down."

Regina smiles softly at the memory. Then, growing serious again, "I'm not sure – as much as you or I might want me to be something better - that I can ever really be that person again. I'm not sure I even have the right to be her." She shakes her head, swallowing roughly. "If I were any other person, I would be thrown away in a dark cell and left to rot. And perhaps that's what I deserve."

"That's not really for me to decide. This world isn't your world, and here, you get a second chance at being someone other than who you were. Here, you're –"

"Regina Mills. I know that's who I want to be, but it's not that easy. Because all the lovely words aside, I am the Evil Queen, Emma, and gods, the things that I've done." She taps the side of her head. "I've always remembered everything, but I've done a damned good job of not thinking about them. They were what I had to do to survive. I was able to tell myself that and believe it."

"So what changed? Just the dreams?"

"Henry. And Graham. And you."

"Did you dream about me last night?" Emma asks, refilling both of their glasses. She shivers a bit as she does so, wishing she'd grabbed her own jacket on the way down to the beach.

Regina laughs, the sound oddly but wonderfully warm. "No, Emma. Not about you."
Emma smiles in response, and lets the moment hang for a few seconds – Regina's reaction feels curiously charged in a way which Emma doesn't quite know what to make of so it's best left well alone for now, she thinks - before she pushes again. "So, what did you dream about?"

"Why is it so important to know?"

After a slight bit of hesitation, Emma reaches out and takes Regina's hand, lifting it up and showing it to Regina. "Because this morning, you definitely broke rules one and two." She runs her finger lightly across one of the cuts on Regina's knuckle. "You freaked out pretty bad."

"So I did," Regina murmurs, lifting the glass up again, her eyes on their joined hands.

"So?"

Regina sighs and pulls her hand back. "I dreamt about my magic lessons."

"And those made you lose it on the bag bad enough to do this to yourself?"

Regina licks her lips, and it's clear to Emma that this story is one that she finds uncomfortable, and more than a little painful. She'd love to tell the Queen that it's okay, and that they don't need to speak of this, but she knows that they do; it's never been more important to open up the lines of trust and communication between the two of them. This right here? It matters. So she waits and allows Regina the time she needs.

Finally, softly, "You know that Rumple was my teacher, yes?"

"I gathered as much."

"He taught me a lot of things. Most important amongst them was how to take hearts." Her hands now free of Emma's curiously careful inspection of them, Regina flexes them, wincing a bit at the sharp bolts of searing pain which course through her wounded palms and knuckles.

"And those are the ones in your vault?"

"Some are, but what I dreamt about wasn't him showing me how to take them; he'd already taught me how, and I'd already done it. Last night was about when he showed me what to do with them." Another sip for the courage to say the words, and then, "Control. Power. Death."

Emma tilts her head. "I don't –"

"When you take a heart, you can control the original owner of it," Regina tells her, and her voice has suddenly gotten very dull, like she's repeating information, like it hurts terribly to even say it. "You can make them do anything that you want them to. If I had your heart in my hand, and I told you to kill your mother, there would be nothing that you could do to stop it."

"I'm pretty strong."

"Not that strong," Regina tells her, and there's no joy or even gloating in the way she says these words to Emma. In fact, she seems more than a little sickened by her own statement

"Okay, we know your mother did that to Aurora."

Regina nods her head. "Lesson two is power. You can hurt someone terribly when you have their heart in your possession. You can squeeze it and cause them unfathomable pain. You can bring them to their knees." She looks forward again, and Emma's struck suddenly by the understanding
that this has clearly happened to Regina before; she's been felled by such pain.

"You?"

"It was part of the lesson," Regina answers dully, her hands continuing to flex.

"And it hurt?"

"More than you can imagine. And just as controlling a heart can make you do things, power over it can force you to surrender yourself," Regina tells her, closing her eyes for a moment as cold memories once again wash over and through her. "It can make you say and do things – it can make you give up ownership of yourself – in ways that you'd never have thought possible."

Emma lets this hang for a moment, and then, wanting to ease the terrible pain and heartache that has clearly settled over Regina again, she softly pushes on, "So control, power and –"

"Death," Regina breathes, trembling a bit despite the blanket over her. She clutches it tighter around herself, but in that moment, they both know that her shiver isn't from the elements.

"How did he show you that one?"

Regina glances down at her wounded hand, which has suddenly clenched into a fist, a tiny stream of blood seeping out of the edge of one of the now broken open cuts. "He squeezed my heart until I thought it was going to explode. And then he had me do the same so that I knew what it felt like both to have it done to myself and to do it to someone. In this case, once again, myself."

"Jesus."

"It felt…horrible. And wonderful."

Emma's head snaps backwards. "Wonderful?"

"It's hard to explain, but it was power and control and death all wrapped into one surreal experience. It felt like I was a god even as it felt like I was being suffocated." She reaches forward and swallows down the rest of the glass of whiskey. For a moment, she looks terrified and panicked, but the alcohol seems to calm her enough to take in a few ragged breaths.

"More?" Emma prompts, holding up the bottle.

"Please."

Emma refills the glass and hands it back to her.

"So you dreamt of that last night?"

Regina nods. She gazes down at the amber liquid as she speaks, her voice very soft and slow. "I did terrible things before and after that lesson, but that was the turning point for me in what I realized that I could do with my magic and my hands. It was when I realized that I could make others feel what I was, and I wanted that. I didn't want to be the one being hurt anymore. It felt good to make others hurt worse." She looks up, and there are tears in her eyes. "I made others hurt like I was because I could. Emma, I did all of those things to Graham. Every one of them."

Emma licks her lips. When she speaks, her words are careful, "I know. I also know that you're not the Queen anymore. You're not even the woman you were when you did that to Graham."

"You keep saying that, but what proof do you have? Four weeks ago, I would have gladly done all
of those things to your mother. Perhaps even more if there had been a fourth lesson."

"There's not though, right? Just three, yeah?"

Regina smiles a bit at this, oddly appreciative of Emma's incredibly awkward and perhaps ill-timed attempt to lighten up this desperately dark conversation. "Just three, yes."

"That's good. Look, my mom hurt you. She took something from you she can't give back. That doesn't make going EQ on her okay, but it's not the same as just randomly hurting anyone."

"That's a very thin line of distinction, Emma; even I know that."

"Maybe it is, but I do know that it's a line that does actually mean something. Thirty years ago, it didn't matter who you destroyed. Now, at least it's just about the ones who hurt you first."

"You almost sound like you're encouraging me to go after your mother," Regina says with a lazy smirk and another drag from the glass of whiskey. "In which case, I believe that this therapy of yours has failed rather spectacularly, Sheriff as it appears that I have corrupted you."

This time, it's Emma who laughs. "No, I'm just saying progress is progress."

"Mm. I suppose."

They sit side by side for a few moments, drinking down the rest of the bottle together and listening to the waves crash the beach, and then Emma says, "There will be other dreams."

"Yes, there most certainly will be," Regina agrees, tiredly. "And other nightmares. And I will probably break rules one and two several more times. She holds up her hand, showing off the cuts and gouges. She shrugs at Emma's scowl at the new tendril of blood that they both see.

"Fine," Emma nods, reaching for Regina's hand again and turning it over to ensure that the wound isn't serious (it's not – just a cracked open cut that needs to be dressed anew). "But how about next time I find you freaking out, maybe you don't try to push me away. Maybe you actually believe for once that I'm with you here because I want to be. Because I choose to be."

"I don't trust easily."

"Neither do I. But I also don't come to choices easily. That I'm here, Regina —"

"I will test you a thousand times over," Regina cuts in.

"Okay. As long as the tests are fair."

"I can't make that promise."

Emma shrugs her shoulders, shivering again as she does so. "All right, well, then, at least let me have a makeup test if I fail the original one. I mean; if you're going to cheat like a dog and start throwing out crazy-ass obstacles at me, I should get the chance to cheat my way through, too."

"Ignoring the fact that I think you just called me a dog, what kind of logic is that?" Regina challenges, a teasing lilt in her tone indicating that she's not actually upset. "I really hope that's not the kind of questionable philosophy you're teaching our son as he heads towards his harder school years."

Emma grins, "As you said, I can't make that promise."
"You are infuriating, Sheriff."

"And you're a pain in the ass, Your Majesty."

"Yes, well, you're shivering."

"What?"

Regina rolls her eyes in response, and then, stretching her arm out, she extends the wool blanket to settle over Emma's shuddering shoulders. They're sitting close to each other, but still a few inches apart, and it stretches the blanket a bit more than it should be in order to be truly useful, but not enough to remove warmth from either of them.

"Oh. Thanks," Emma says, pulling the blanket around her, and scooting slight closer to Regina.

"Mm. So tell me, Emma, now what?"

"Well, first things first, I need you to understand what I meant about choice."

"I do," Regina says quietly. Making it clear this isn't something she's ready to discuss in any further depth just yet. Because choice has never been something she's had much of, and someone choosing not to leave her or see the worst of her by choice is…frightening.

As frightening as it is hopeful.

She's not ready to open herself up to the idea of hope.

Not yet.

But maybe…maybe…

Thankfully, Emma gets it; she understands and takes the words as enough. "Good; then for now, we finish this bottle up, and we go to bed, and tomorrow we figure out what comes next."

"You make it sound so easy."

"Easy? You and me, Regina? That's hilarious. No, I'm pretty sure we're both going to screw this whole thing up about fifty more times, but hey, where would the fun be in not doing that."

"You have a strange idea of fun, Swan."

"Pretty sure that was you I heard cackling with our son earlier today about Batman holding someone over a ledge by their ankles," Emma reminds her, a smile gracing her lips as she thinks about just the quiet moments of watching her son and his other mother laughing together.

"Well, that did look like fun," Regina mumbles, her face shading just a bit.

In a good way, though. In a lovely way.

"Exactly my point." Using the hand that's not clutching the blanket to her shoulder, she reaches for the bottle of whiskey and brings it to her lips, taking a long swig of it right from the neck.

"Drinking straight form the bottle now are we?" Regina asks, eyebrow up.

Emma shrugs, and then offers her it.
Regina takes it and holds it in her hand. "I'm not sure I deserve this."

"Whiskey? I'm pretty sure everyone deserves some whiskey from time to time," Emma insists with a dopey grin which suggests that the liquor is finally starting to catch up to her.

Again, she offers a soft smile at Emma's attempt at humor (she finds herself wondering how she'd never noticed how much Emma extends herself out there like this – always looking for ways to use herself to put others at ease). "This," Regina corrects. "I feel things that I've never wanted to feel, and I'm not sure I deserve another second chance."

"Maybe not but you've got one anyway. So maybe you make the best of it."

"Maybe."

Regina lifts the bottle to her lips and takes a deep drag from it, enjoying the taste of the liquor which long ago stopped burning its way down her throat. She glances once more over at Emma, who is now staring out at the surf. Her dark eyes curious and fascinated, Regina studies the sheriff's seemingly serene profile. She looks her over, and then shakes her head in disbelief.

There's no logic in this woman having the faith that she does.

There's no reason for it and yet it's there just the same.

It's there, and Regina finds herself reaching for it.

Finding just a tiny bit of hope existing in spite of everything.

So yeah, maybe.
Ten.

Chapter Notes

Chapter Warnings: Morality talk, salty language, vomit (yuck) and some of Emma's backstory.

It's the sound of violent retching which pulls Emma from her slumber this time. She's about six hours into the night when she begins to register the gagging noise. Grumbling to herself, she reluctantly slumps forward in her bed. Hands fisted, she rubs at her eyes like a child would, trying to force the sleep away.

Leave it to Regina to not be able to handle half a bottle of whiskey, she grouses to herself. Actually, that doesn't seem quite fair or right. Thinking about it, Emma can still recall the high alcohol content in the admittedly excellent apple cider that the Queen had offered Emma on her first evening in Storybrooke, and she knows for a fact that Regina is quite familiar with liquor (enough so that she'd thrown an accusation of being perhaps too familiar with it towards Regina during their first night here at the beach house).

So yeah, Regina being ill right now thanks to liquor seems…unlikely.

She climbs slowly out of the bed, pushing back on the uncomfortable feeling of déjà vu that sweeps through her. Just a night previous, she'd been woken up by the sound of screaming and crying, and following up on those things had led to an explosion of anger.

And then, hopefully, an emotional breakthrough between she and Regina.

All the same, she's in no real mood for a repeat.

She steps out of her room, and makes her way down the hallway, stopping abruptly when she comes to Henry's door. The sounds of throwing up that she's hearing, she realizes with a sharp and almost frantic start, are coming not from Regina, but from within there.

She shoves the door open, and isn't surprised to see a sleepy Regina already there, sitting next to him on the bed. The Queen is wearing a dark green high-collared bathrobe (it looks like a large man's style which is likely why it's overwhelming Regina almost completely, swamping her smaller body beneath terrycloth) and holding a trashcan up for him while she rubs his back. She looks up at Emma. "He can't quite make it to the bathroom yet."

Brow wrinkling and all of her frown lines showing, Emma asks, "Is he okay?"

"He's obviously not feeling well, and he's a bit feverish," Regina confirms, her elegant hand sweeping up to lightly settle against Henry's forehead. "But nothing to be concerned about."

"Nothing to be concerned about?" Emma contests. "He sounds like he's trying to –"

"Emma," Regina cautions; it's the cool set of her eyes that gives Emma the message: shut up.

Emma sighs and slumps against the wall. "Is it food poisoning?"
"I don't think so. All you had was ice cream and what we ate. Likely just a bug."

"Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"Go get him something to drink. Preferably something with bubbles."

"What about crackers?"

"Not yet. Let's try seeing if he can keep liquids down first."

"Got it."

Regina smiles in response, and then turns her attention back to Henry.

"Mom," he mumbles, sagging against her.

"It's okay, sweetheart," Regina soothes, her voice wonderfully low and almost hoarse, a pitch she reserves uniquely for him. The sheriff watches as Regina slides her fingers through his hair and pushes damp brown strands away from his sweaty forehead. "Everything's okay."

"Mom," he says again, his voice a whisper. "I think I made a mess."

"It's nothing for you to worry about," she assures him. "We can clean it up. But do you think maybe we can try to make it to the bathroom now? Just to be careful?"

Henry sluggishly nods his head, the motion weak and uncoordinated, like he can't control his little body. His arms are wrapped around his mother, and he's clutching her tightly, practically curling into her warmth.

"One more minute," he pleads, his eyes watering as he swallows repeatedly.

"Whenever you're ready," Regina says, her hand still rubbing out circles. "No need to rush."

Emma watches all of this unfold in front of her, a thousand different feelings surging through her head and her heart. There's deep worry and fear, of course but also a bit of disgust (she's never been especially good at dealing with the illness of others). And yeah, of course there's jealousy, too, because dammit if Regina isn't just a bit of a natural at this. It's a strange mixture of emotions, and she hasn't a clue what to do with them. All she knows for sure, though, is that she's never been so glad to have Regina around as she is right now. Because Regina gets this.

She knows what to do.

And all Emma can do is hope she gets Henry the right thing to drink.

She turns away from the door, then, and quickly makes her way down the hallway, into the kitchen and over to the refrigerator. She yanks it open, and then with her hands shaking just a bit, pushes through bottles and cans until she finds the large plastic green one labeled Sprite.

"Be cool, Swan," she mutters as she pulls the bottle out, pours a glass for Henry, and then rushes back down the hallway. She comes to an abrupt stop next to the bathroom just across from his room. He and Regina are in there now. She's sitting next to him on the floor, her flannel clad legs beneath her. She doesn't look like a Queen at the moment, but rather a worried mother. A frown wrinkles Emma's forehead as she watches Henry bend over the toilet once more, his tiny frame shaking as he retches. "You're sure he's okay?" Emma asks quietly.

"Of course he is," Regina says with an entirely too fake smile. She holds out her hand for the glass,
taking it from Emma, and then pushing it towards Henry the moment he leans away from the toilet. "Drink this," she says. "But slowly, sweetheart; don't over-do it, all right?"

Her tone is kind, but her words are direct enough to leave no room for argument. He nods, and brings the glass to his mouth, drinking down the bubbly liquid slowly.

"We'll be just outside," Regina tells him, her voice so very soft.

"Mom –"

"Just outside," she says again. "Drink as much as you can." He offers her a sickly smile, and then reluctantly takes another sip. With one more pat on his hand to reassure him, she then stands up, reaches for Emma's arm, and then pushes her back into the hallway. They move a few feet away from the bathroom, going just out of earshot and then Regina says, her voice curiously understanding, "I take it you haven't dealt with many sick children in your travels?"

"That obvious, huh?"

"Well, generally the first rule is not to worry the child. He feeds off of us, Emma. If we tell him that he's going to be all right, he'll believe us, but if we're visibly worried, well he's going to be just as worried as we are. Children have terribly active imaginations to begin with, and Henry –"

"Has the most active imagination of all. Right. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Emma," Regina says kindly, a small almost fond smile lighting up her face in a decidedly beautiful way. "My first time dealing with him being sick was well…interesting."

"Interesting? Why doesn't that sound like a good thing?" Emma queries as she leans against the wall, taking momentarily comfort from the hard surface. What she would love right now is a day of just sleeping and relaxing, but as that's not going to happen, weird family time will do.

"Because it really wasn't a good thing. Especially for me," Regina replies with a deep nostalgic laugh. "But that is a conversation for later. For now, let's try to get him back into bed."

"Okay." They start back down the hallway, and then Emma reaches for Regina again, touching her hand slightly. "But he is all right, right? This is just some kind of stomach bug, right?"

Regina smiles again, and Emma's not sure if it's because this is something that Regina actually understands well enough to be good at or because she genuinely feels for Emma's concern, but whatever it is, the expression is quite lovely on the older woman. "Yes. He'll be just fine."

"Good, good."

And then with a small nervous expulsion of air, she follows Regina back into the bathroom.

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Far be it for her to doubt Regina's mother instincts (not again, anyway), but she's starting to get concerned when for the first time since Emma has known him, Henry is actually sick to the degree that he's running a low-grade fever. Were it up to Emma, they'd be in the Emergency Room right about now, but Regina, who somehow managed to locate a thermometer, has been equally adamant that while he is warm, he's not dangerously so. She keeps saying that he's fine.
She keeps promising Emma that he is.

So instead of driving him to the ER, they take turns through the rest of the night either sitting with him in the bathroom while he dry heaves – having long emptied his stomach - or staying by him while he fitfully slumbers in his bed. Comforting him seems to come so naturally to Regina, Emma observes with a bit of jealousy, and Henry appears to gravitate towards the Queen like she's something of a life line – the only one who can make him truly feel better.

And perhaps, she is.

It's weird, Emma thinks as she lies next to her son in his bed (she's been with him for the last couple of hours – since his last journey to the bathroom), to think that right now she's the one jealous and uncomfortable with the things that she can't give to her son when he needs it most.

She wonders what kind of person that makes her. After all, who gets jealous over their kid finding comfort while he's sick wherever he can manage it? Who does that?

She hears the door to the room open, and lifting her head up from the pillow, she watches as Regina pads into the room, her socks blunting the sound. "Hey," Emma greets, her voice rough. She feels the light dip of the bed as Regina crosses over and lightly sits upon the edge of it.

"Good morning. I'm guessing that you didn't sleep all that much?"

"A little bit here and there," Emma says, and it's only slightly a lie. "You?"

"Well enough," Regina answers softly as she crosses her legs, the massive terrycloth bathrobe again swamping her body. She offers Emma what's probably meant to be a smile to punctuate her words and reassure the sheriff, but deep purple shadows beneath her eyes betray her.

"I hear that," Emma replies, her head dropping back against the headboard.

"Mm," Regina murmurs as she places her hand on Henry's forehead. After a moment of frowning contemplation, in a move that is completely effortless and smooth, she suddenly glides her hand over to Emma's forehead, lying cool knuckles against the blonde sheriff's warm skin.

"What are you doing?" Emma asks, eyes shooting upwards to observe Regina's passive face.

"I'm just making sure that you're not coming down with something as well," Regina responds with a throaty chuckle that suggests her own amusement. "The last thing I want to be doing is taking care of two sick children." She's teasing when she says this, but Emma squirms just the same because honestly, she's never really had anyone take care of her when she's ill. Even when she had been with Neal and things between them had been good, his way of dealing with her being sick had been to throw a blanket at her and ask if she wanted him to pick her up some chicken soup, all the while shifting his feet around anxiously.

Like he hadn't had a clue how he was supposed to act in such a situation.

Now, knowing what she does about him and how he'd grown up, she realizes that he hadn't.

"And...am I?" Emma prompts, perhaps enjoying the care-taking just a bit too much to be safe.

"You feel fine. It probably is exactly what I thought; just a little stomach bug he picked up in town or from being down and around the beach; it's hard to say," Regina notes, her relief obvious. "And as he seems to be sleeping better now, I think we can just let him rest and see how that goes. He'll probably be in bed all day." Her hand returns to his forehead, and settles there, as if she'd been
overtaken by a need to touch her son, and confirm her words.

"Right. Bed." Emma yawns then, failing to get her hand over her mouth first.

"Go," Regina says gently. "Get some rest; I've got this."

"Is this mom mode?" Emma asks and for anyone else, that might sound like some kind of mockery, but Emma finds that she's honestly curious because in her mind, she'd long ago created a picture of Regina as a distant and cold parent who'd been unable to connect with her son on any level. That distance had been the driver behind his decision to try to find his birth mother, but now she finds herself wondering if this is how it had actually been between them.

Regina smiles almost sadly at Emma's words. "I've learned a few things along the way."

It's a loaded answer, and Emma wonders if maybe she should let the line of conversation go, but she never has been good at that. "When we first met, you said you'd soothed every fever –"

"And I taught him how to walk and talk and pee straight, too," Regina replies tersely, "But that doesn't mean that I ever gave him what he truly needed from me. Clearly, I didn't because if I had, I think it's safe to say that we probably never would have come to know each other at all."

Perhaps if they weren't both sitting next to what appears to be a heavily slumbering Henry, maybe Emma would continue pulling on this heartbreaking string. She very much wants to know why Regina looks so upset all the sudden, but the exhaustion which she feels so deeply stops her, and to be honest, Regina looks equally tired so Emma just nods her head, and lets it go.

For now, anyway. "Okay."

"I'll see you in a few hours," Regina says, looking up over at the clock on the wall. "It's only five now. I see no reason why we can't have our nine am breakfast as usual."

"Sounds good," Emma replies, standing up. She glances back at Henry, does a visual check of his chest – what an absurd thing to do, she thinks to herself even as she does it - to ensure that it's still rising and falling, and then turns and exits the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

Once she's gone, Regina glances around the room like she doesn't quite know what to do with herself, and then, gathering her wits about her, she gently extends herself beside Henry on the bed, now residing in the same position that Emma had been in just a few minutes earlier.

She closes her eyes and starts humming to herself.

It's an old song, one that she just barely remembers, and she has no idea where she learned it from (strange, she thinks, that she's just now realizing this), but she's been humming it to Henry since the day that he'd been given to her, back then only a baby wrapped up in a warm blanket.

She hums it to him now, all the while wondering where she'd learned the song from and why she suddenly cares about the origins of it. And more importantly, she wonders why she feels an odd sense of dread and perhaps even fear about finding out the answer to that question.

The first thing Emma hears as she enters the kitchen, still dressed in her pajama bottoms, and
rubbing sleep from her eyes, is the sound of Regina humming to herself. It's a lovely if slightly unsettling sound, and Regina's deep and throaty voice just makes it that much more engaging.

Seconds later, though, Emma forgets all about the oddly haunting song that the Queen has been humming to herself when her stomach growls. The blonde steps into the kitchen further, taking in the fact that Regina had apparently assigned breakfast duty to herself this morning.

"Those aren't omelets," Emma notes as it occurs to her that Regina is preparing a full on meal for the two of them. The smell of bacon is in the air – though they both know that Regina won't eat even a piece of it – but it's the scent of the roasted potatoes that catches Emma's nose.

They smell heavenly. Actually, the whole damned breakfast does.

"No," Regina shrugs, the humming stopping immediately, almost as if she hadn't realized that she was doing it. "I thought perhaps we could both use something a bit more substantial after last night." She motions towards the table, and with a smile that seems oddly open and easy especially for her, Regina says, "Go ahead and sit down; breakfast will be ready in a moment."

Emma lifts an eyebrow. Over the last month, she's seen several different and completely contradictory sides of this mercurial woman, but this one is absolutely new to her. This is more than just about being domestic; what she's seeing right now sure looks a whole lot like happy.

Which, though absolutely nice to see, is all kinds of strange considering everything.

"Is there a…problem, Sheriff?" Regina queries as the smile abruptly falls away. There's a hitch to her voice when she speaks, and Emma sees the way that Regina swallows, and the slight flush on her cheeks, which indicates that she's embarrassed. It's only because Emma's been here before that she recognizes the signs as easily as she does, but even in doing so, she finds herself surprised by just how fast Regina has appeared to shift both her mood and her personalities.

"None at all. Smells great," Emma answers with what she hopes is a reassuring smile. She makes her way to the table, and drops down into one of the chairs. As if on instinct, her eyes track over to the one that Henry typically occupies, and she finds herself staring at it as she forcibly reminds herself that he's fine; he's just resting in his bedroom, sleeping off his bug.

"It is a bit strange, isn't it?" Regina murmurs, coming over to the table with a cup of coffee in each hand. Emma can smell the vanilla rising with the steam and without even really thinking about it, she gratefully accepts one of the cups from Regina (she notes the cuts on Regina's knuckles, and is relieved to see that they look reasonably well tended to), eagerly gulping down a whole mouthful of the hot liquid before it has even had a chance to cool. She ignores the look of mild disgust that she's getting from Regina, who prefers her own coffee to be much cooler.

"You mean not having Henry here with us?" Off of Regina's slight nod, Emma continues, "Yeah, I was actually just thinking that; it's weird not to hear him rambling away." She puts the cup down on the table and glances back over at the pensive looking Queen. She doesn't need Regina to elaborate on the thoughts going through her mind at the moment because they're fairly tell-tale. But then, frowning again as a different entirely unwelcome thought streaks through her mind, Emma asks, "Is this what it was like after he came to live with me? Quiet?"

Regina brings the mug to her lips, and takes a long sip. It's clear that she's carefully considering her answer, and even this feels like progress to Emma. There was a time not too long ago when Regina would have simply snapped back and tried to make her anger and pain clear to everyone around her. That she doesn't feel the need to do so now does indeed suggest that their time on the beach together had brought them to a place of understanding. A place of peace, even.
"Yes," Regina says finally. She licks her lips, and for a moment looks like she might offer up more, but then she simply plasters on a smile that reminds Emma of Mayor Mills, and says, "I think the potatoes are ready; I'll go get them. Would you like some orange juice as well?"

"No, the coffee is fine; thanks," Emma replies. She wonders if this is a subject that she should push on, but decides against this one as well because even though there is still so very much to talk about and work through, they both have the right to a nice breakfast without the hurt feelings that are sure to come up if they spend too much time talking about custody of Henry.

"So what was that song you were humming when I walked in?" Emma asks as Regina comes back over with two plates. She doesn't fail to notice the lack of bacon on Regina's plate, the spot there occupied instead by perfectly sliced up pieces of cantaloupe and honeydew.

Apparently, even when Henry isn't dining with them, Regina doesn't allow herself to indulge in such frivolous things. Which is strange because Emma can recall seeing the former mayor eat bacon a time or two in Granny's so she knows it's not a lack of interest in this particular breakfast food. No, she's certain that it has something to do with Henry, and that weird need to spoil him after the fact even with something so small and to most people's minds, insignificant.

"Hm?" Regina responds as she sits. As is her typical way (Emma's seen her do something like this a hundred times over the past year – and finds herself a bit surprised that she's noticed), Regina unfolds the napkin that just minutes earlier she'd folded up beside the plate, and settles it into her lap. It's all very orderly and dignified - the sign of her high breeding and training.

The sign, Emma thinks, of someone relentlessly grinding a habit into her in a way that can never possibly be forgotten; Emma has a pretty damned good idea just who that someone had been.

"You were humming something to yourself. It was…nice."

Regina glances up at her, and the strangest set of expressions – anger, surprise, worry, hurt and something that looks a lot like fear - flitter across face before they all drop away and there's just a bland practiced neutrality there once more. She shrugs her shoulders. "Hadn't noticed I was."

"Oh," Emma says, eyes wrinkling a bit as she takes in Regina's suddenly much harder tone, and the tight draw of her face; the lie is clear there, but not intended and that unsettles Emma more than a little bit because that means it's not about hiding something from others, but rather from herself, and the one thing Emma has figured out after all these weeks spent here with the Queen is that the internal secrets are the very worst of them. "Well, this is delicious."

"I'm glad you like it," Regina replies, and then falls silent.

They eat for several minutes like this; in complete silence save the sound of silverware scraping against the plates. Finally, because the one thing that Emma has always hated is the absence of sound (it's always made her feel anxious), she asks, "Okay, why is this so awkward?"

"Awkward? I don't –"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about, Regina. Every night, we chat for hours out on the porch over wine. Last night, it was whiskey. Are you telling me we can only really talk to each other when we're drinking? Because I'm not sure that that will work out long-term to Henry's advantage."

She says this last line with a light smile meant to indicate that she's just teasing.

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"Yeah, okay, I'm sure that's true, but –"

"I always knew I'd lose him eventually," Regina says suddenly, abruptly steering the conversation down a path that Emma hadn't been expecting or anticipating.

"What?"

"I think I knew from the moment Henry was placed into my arms that I would eventually have to let him go, and then I'd lose him forever." She glances across the room – her eyes fixed on a spot on the far wall, and Emma sees the expression that flitters across Regina's face. It looks a whole lot like disgust and self-loathing mixed with an unhealthy serving of sadness.

"But you didn't have to let him go. Not for good," Emma insists. "He's here now. I told you it was me, but Regina, he's the one who pushed for this to happen. He's the reason that all of this got kicked into motion. We're here because he loves you and he doesn't want to lose you."

Regina ignores her, and keeps talking, her fingers coming together to nervously fidget in a way that seems quite unlike the Regina that Emma had gotten to know back in Storybrooke. There's something anxious and terribly unrefined in the way that she's moving now – not befitting a Queen, Emma thinks. "I figured I'd lose him to college, though, not to his birth mother," Regina says with a humorless chuckle. "I tried not to think about it because I thought I could come up with a way to keep him close, but it was always in the back of my head that eventually he'd move away, and then I'd never see him again. I'd lose him to a wife and family and then –"

She wipes her napkin past her mouth, clearing away crumbs that aren't there. Her tongue comes out again to nervously lick at her lips before she nervously continues.

"When he went to live with you, all I noticed was how quiet it was every minute of every day. The things that used to drive me insane about him – the way he left his shoes around, the way he'd never just walk up the stairs and how his idea of doing laundry was to undress in the service porch and leave all of his clothing in a heap next to the washer machine – I found myself missing. I even found myself missing when he wouldn't talk to me over dinner because at least he was still there.” She shakes her head as if to fight off the emotion that seems to be rapidly overtaking her. "But he wasn't really there at all, was he? He didn't want to be there with me, and he hated me for making him stay with me when all he wanted was to be with you."

The words gush out of her mouth like a fountain, and even she seems surprised to have said them. Such honesty and vulnerability is hard for her - this is not a secret - but this is beyond that. This is the exposing of a bloody and infected wound that has thus far refused to scab over.

"I never meant for that to happen," Emma says, and wonders how often she's said some variation of these words to Regina in the last several days. It occurs to her with something of a sick feeling in her stomach that since coming to Storybrooke, she's scored more than a few body blows against Regina as well. They'd been proud victories back during the days of the Mayor versus the Sheriff, but now she finds herself pondering how deep the wounds are.

"Yes, you did," Regina counters, and her mouth quirks into the kind of smile that a person uses to hide darker and more painful emotions. "After the curse broke, there was a time when you were just fine with knowing that Henry wasn't with me; at least be honest about that, Emma."

"Fine," Emma agrees warily. "But it wasn't all about being vindictive. I honestly thought that I was doing right by him, and I honestly thought that considering what we'd just found out –"

"You thought that it made no sense to leave your son with the Evil Queen. I get it. I do."
"Yeah," Emma admits, and has the good sense to look a bit ashamed. Not because she'd been wrong – Regina had been the Evil Queen – but because hearing the words said aloud makes the absurdity of everything so much more real and honest. She'd taken Henry away like he had been a spoil of war, and she'd never once considered the ramifications of what she'd done.

"You were right," Regina says, smiling that awful forced smile again.

"Regina –"

"Would you like more potatoes?"

"Uh, yes?"

Regina nods, and stands back up, picking up the plate and heading back into the kitchen. She scoops the rest of the potatoes up, and returns with them, sliding them in front of Emma, who has noticed that Regina really hasn't eaten much more than the fruit that was on her plate.

She waits for Regina to sit down, waits for Regina to refold her napkin back into her lap, and then she takes a deep breath and starts to explain herself. "Having Henry live with me seemed like such a good idea at the time, and yeah, I was pissed at you and I wanted to take him away from you, but I also wanted to protect him from something I didn't – and still don't – completely understand. And I guess I was an idiot; I thought it would be so easy because he's a good kid, you know? But the first thing I figured out is the same thing I figured out a couple hours ago – I'm making it up as I go along. I don't know how to do this like you do, Regina. I don't know his shoe size or his favorite comic book character or how he likes to cut his hair, and I sure don't know how to make him feel better when he feels like...this."

"I know how to feed him crackers and ginger ale when he's feeling under the weather; I'm not sure that's something to put on a motherhood resume," Regina says, her mood suddenly quite morose. Gone is the woman who'd been present when Emma had entered the kitchen.

There's a severe danger, Emma knows, in becoming too self-aware too fast. Especially when the terrible things which you find yourself reluctantly coming to terms with involve blood and pain and deeds beyond the comprehension of the sanest of people. Regina has committed acts that are hideous, and Emma imagines that the person that Snow had once described to her – the one that had taught a frightened young child the true meaning of love – is someone that would be somewhere well past horrified by the actions of her older and far more broken self.

Considering all of this and the ugly reality that is starting to slap Regina like cold water to the face, frankly, Emma's more than a little surprised Regina isn't curled up in the fetal position in her bed with her blankets, shaking beneath the heavy weight of her nightmares and regrets.

She thinks that it's a sign of the stubborn fighter inside of Regina – the one that never quits even when continuing to fight on is sure to only lead to more hurt – that she's sitting here now, willingly exposing her pain and the inevitable heartbreak and sadness that it always brings with it.

"That's more than I know," Emma counters, trying to find a way to push the Queen's confidence back up. "I'm the one who probably would have tried to give him whiskey instead of Sprite."

"I don't think you're quite that bad," Regina chuckles, thankful for Emma's obvious attempt. Then, she wrinkles her nose. "You...wouldn't actually do that. Right?"

"No, probably not," Emma laughs. "And I like to think that I would have eventually figured my way out to the Sprite myself, but in the meanwhile he would have thrown up all over his room and
She shudders a bit at the thought of this. "That wouldn't have been pretty for anyone."

"No," Regina agrees. "But the point is, you would have figured it out."

"No," Emma disagrees forcefully. "The point is, no matter what happened in the past between us, all that matters now is that he needs us both so don't start pulling away from him now."

"I wouldn't worry too much about that. I've never been good at letting anything go," Regina answers, and the defeated sadness in her tone is almost too much. Emma tries to think back to the conversation on the beach, and tries to remember if she'd seen this painful surrender showing as brightly, then. No, her mind insists. There had been sadness, but not like this.

And what of the almost happy woman she'd walked into the kitchen on just a short time ago? Where had she disappeared to? What is going on here?

And then she thinks about the dreams. The ones Regina now remembers. The ones which the Queen can probably no longer forget or stop thinking about even when her eyes are open. The ones that are probably acting like Pandora's Fucking Box.

Jesus. If she could face-palm herself and get away with it, Emma's pretty sure she would.

Okay, the blonde sheriff thinks, it's time to change the subject and get this tracked back to a better place. Somewhere where the conversation doesn't feel like a suicide prevention hot-line.

She knows that these issues – the guilt, remorse and bone deep sadness that have suddenly hit Regina with full force - will have to be dealt with at some time or another, but not while all of those wounds are so fresh and bloody. Not while Regina is so tired and emotionally vulnerable.

Emma clears her throat. "So, the first time?"

"First time?"

"That he was sick. You said it was an adventure."

Regina's eyebrow lifts up. "No, I believe that I said that it was interesting."

"Yeah, well, tell me about interesting, then."

"Over breakfast?" Regina asks, clearly surprised. She knows what Emma is doing, and perhaps in the spirit of the new forced upon her self-awareness, Regina thinks that she should insist on continuing upon the path of answering for her many sins, but she finds herself thankful for the chance to step away from her grievously dark and painful past even if only for a moment.

"I have a strong stomach," Emma assures her.

"For as much as you drink, I should certainly hope so."

"Says the Queen with a full bar. And I'm pretty damned sure you're the one who actually drank most of the whiskey last night," Emma counters with a challenging wiggle of her eyebrow.

"You're remembering incorrectly," Regina lobbs back. Then, "But all right; just don't say I didn't warn you. It'd be a shame to find you wasting your breakfast in the bathroom afterwards."

"No chance of that," Emma replies, and then punctuates it with an impish grin. It's such an easy and honest one, and in spite of herself, Regina finds herself answering it with one of her own.
"Well, that's good at least," Regina chuckles. She takes a sip from her coffee mug, and then she says, "He was just a couple of months over two the first time he got sick. Not just runny nose and cough kind of sick, but the extremely messy type, and let's just say, I was unprepared."

"Unprepared for?"

"The mess, Emma," Regina laughs, her dark eyes twinkling in a way that makes Emma want to speak of nothing besides stories about Henry's many youthful misadventures. Such tales seem to bring out the lighter side of Regina. The part of her that still remembers how to be happy. The part of her that is worth getting back to.

At just after one in the afternoon, Regina finally exits from her room. Since breakfast had concluded, she's been hidden away in there, presumably resting off the massive headache that had seemed to suddenly come on not long after the story about Henry's first illness had finished up. While their meal had ended on a positive and upbeat note, Emma had nonetheless felt a bit unsettled by the unfinished nature of their conversation about other...more important issues.

Still, as she watches Regina enter the kitchen, she does little more than offer up a soft smile as she lowers the Stephen King paperback that she's been reading for the last two hours. She'd found it in the bookcase, between the true crime novels and the historical reads on the rise and fall of the Nazis. A somewhat eclectic and weird, variation in theme but what isn't these days?

"I've always found him to be a bit macabre," Regina comments as her eyes slide over the cover of the book, a black and white construct which shows off several brightly colored embossed balloons rising lazily upwards towards a decidedly more thunderous and foreboding dark sky.

"Macabre for you?"

"Even for me," Regina nods as she stretches herself out. It's then – for the first time today, and Emma thinks it weird that she's just now noticing the marks once again – that Emma sees the dark ring of bruises around Regina's throat. They're splotchy and colorful, having gained a few yellows and greens in the middle. What Emma sees the most, though, are the clear indents of her fingers.

"Something wrong?" Regina asks, finally noticing Emma's pensive eyes on her.

"No. Just...how's your throat?" Emma asks, her anxiety clear. Perhaps this is a bad subject to be bringing up; perhaps, now that they've spoken about what had happened in the garage, it's best to let it be and not draw attention back to the fight that had occurred between them.

Ah, but they both know that leaving things alone is what other people do.

"Tender," Regina admits, and Emma thinks the comment is loaded, but then Regina is sighing and pushing on with, "I admit that it's a bit strange to see marks there. That's...not typical; usually there's nothing left behind to speak of."

Emma tilts her head. "Is this something we can talk about?" Because clearly, there is more there. Clearly, there are stories behind her words – stories about marks that no one had seen.

"No," Regina says softly. She crosses over to the cupboard in the kitchen, and pulls it open so that she can look inside of it. When she speaks again, she's changed the subject back to the book. "I'll
give him credit, though; for a horror writer, he has a reasonably solid understanding of the concepts of black, white and gray. There were no authors like him in my world."

It takes Emma a moment to follow her jump, but then, somewhat shakily, "None at all?"


"Good always wins?" Emma queries as she closes her book and sets it aside. She thinks again about pushing on the comment about invisible marks, but Regina's body language is telling her that this truly isn't the appropriate time for that. And perhaps, this conversation that they're having – while not as deep as the one they could be having – might be revelatory on its own.

"And Evil always loses. No matter what the reason for the evil, it always loses," Regina says, her voice muffled. Emma wonders for a moment if she's hiding her face and eyes on purpose.

"Right. Well, every day I'm a little more thankful that we're not in your world."

"Me, too," Regina agrees as she moves a few cans around.

"Did you check on Henry?" Emma queries as she watches Regina continue to root through the cupboard, the cans getting stacked to one side as she searches for something. Emma had looked in on their son herself about thirty minutes ago, and found him to be soundly sleeping, curled up beneath a mountain of warm blankets, a glass of recently refreshed Sprite nearby.

"I did. He's awake and hungry."

"You think it's a good idea for him to eat anything?"

Regina turns towards her, a small smile tugging at her lips even as her dark eyes glitter with something mischievous. "Afraid of my story from earlier coming to life are you?"

"Yes, I am. Very afraid, actually. Your story was…disgusting."

"You asked to hear it," the Queen reminds her with a half-laugh.

"I did. And I'm glad I got to hear it, but it was still disgusting."

"Indeed," Regina nods. "So, then, I think you'll be delighted to know, then, that I agree with you that it might be a bit early for him to try actual food just yet. I would prefer to keep him on crackers for a little longer just to ensure that his stomach has completely settled down."

Emma nods her head in agreement, unable to hide her relief.

"That and –" Regina reaches into the cupboard and pulls out a can of Campbell's soup and holds it up for Emma to see. " – there's not a chance in hell that I'm feeding my son this…garbage."

Emma frowns. "I think it's the only soup we have."

"Then I suppose you'll need to go into this lovely town and find him something for tonight when he's feeling better," Regina shoots back, the tone undeniably scolding, and absolutely firm. And as if that isn't enough, she settles her hands on her hips, and stares right at Emma in order to make her point quite clear. "I assume it has something comparable to Granny's, yes?"

"Sure," Emma answers, because she's not about to feel awful about buying the kind of cheap soup that she'd lived on for years. Maybe it's beneath a Queen, but it'd done just fine by her.
Of course, she and Henry aren't the same person. He deserves better than the kind of food a pair of aimless wandering thieves would live on between scores.

And just like that, Emma deflates with a sigh.

"Fantastic," Regina says with a sharp nod, and a curious sigh of relief (Emma wonders if despite the clear lead that Regina has on her in the parenting department, Regina still finds herself second-guessing every choice she makes with Henry these days). "Now that that's settled, for us; will grilled cheese do for lunch or...would you...would you prefer something else instead?"

"No, grilled cheese sounds great," Emma answers, frowning just a little bit as she does so. In the time it'd taken to blink her eyes twice, the firm steady confidence and certainty that had been there disappears and just like that, Regina seems oddly hesitant and completely uncomfortable.

It occurs to Emma that the breaks and dents in Regina's once impenetrable armor are showing more and more, and she can't help but feel the guilt of having caused them. She firmly believes that pushing on the dreams had been the right thing to do; you can't heal until you face what you've done, but that doesn't mean that she wants to see this woman hurting as she plainly is.

Those bruises around Regina's throat – vivid reminders of how easily things can go to a place you could never have anticipated – refuse to let her forget just how much she is hurting.

"Take the crackers into Henry," Regina says suddenly, abruptly (and thankfully) pulling Emma from her rapidly darkening thoughts. "I'll get the sandwiches started for us and then maybe, since it's not raining for once, we can have lunch out on the deck, and enjoy a little bit of sunlight."

"Yeah, that sounds nice," Emma replies, reaching for the crackers. As she does so, she says softly, her voice almost inaudible, "I'm sorry." Her eyes flicker up, towards Regina's throat.

"I deserved it."

"No," Emma replies, and then she's moving away with the crackers, towards the hallway.

As she goes, as she walks away, she thinks she hears Regina humming that song again. Haunting and unsettling.

He's propped up against several over-sized pillows, sitting up in bed and reading a Batman comic when she enters the room. He looks pale and a bit unsteady, but even so, he appears to be quite a bit better than he'd been earlier that morning. "Hey, Kid," she greets. "I brought lunch."

He lifts his eyebrow. "Crackers." He wrinkles his nose. "I want food."

"I know, but not yet, okay? At least not for a few more hours."

"She's too cautious," he grumbles. "I feel better now. Really, I do." He drops the comic down to the blanket, and turns his full attention to his blonde mother as she approaches the bed.

"Yeah, well maybe you do, but if it's all the same to you, we'd both prefer you stay that way,"
Emma says as she sits down next to him. She reaches out with her hand, stopping for a brief second before moving forward again and sweeping her fingers through his messy hair.

He grins at her.

"What?"

"Mom does that," he tells her.

"Yeah, I thought maybe you'd, you know..." she starts before trailing off and looking down at her other hand. And then because she doesn't know what else to say without making an even more ridiculous fool of herself, she pulls her hand back, and then thrusts out the one with the crackers in it. "Here. Eat these. But, uh, slowly. So they don't end up...everywhere."

"Thanks," he says, giving her a strange look before popping one into his mouth.

"Do you want me to stay for awhile?" she asks after a few moments have passed in silence. It's weird how uncomfortable this feels after all that they have shared. They broke a curse through True Love, and yet right now she couldn't feel more out of sorts about taking care of him.

Some mother, she thinks to herself, all while offering a smile.

"No," he replies with a shake of his head. "I think I just want to sleep."

"Yeah, good idea," she agrees, hiding both her relief and her dismay as she pulls up the blankets so that they're just about around his neck. "If you need either of us, we're just outside."

"Okay," he mumbles, then drops his head back against the pillow like he's suddenly lost all of his strength. It's a decidedly melodramatic action, and she's again reminded by just how much of Regina's child he really is. She supposes that when you're the son of a Queen notorious for making big entrances and even bigger exits, you learn how to put on a dramatic show or two.

"Henry," she says as she gets to the door, and turns back to face him.

"Yeah?" he leans upwards, but just his head, the rest of him still flat.

She considers apologizing to him for not being able to offer him more comfort. This seems like the kind of thing that any mother worth a damn should just understand how to do by instinct.

She doesn't, though.

She knows how to pull up his blankets around him in order to try to keep him warm and cozy, and she knows how to make a bowl of thin watery chicken noodle soup out of a tin can.

And maybe in a few years, maybe then she can teach him how to not feel the effects of a hangover even after spending all night long drinking cheap whiskey and cracking peanuts.

No, she thinks with a wince and a mental image of Regina, probably not.

Either way, what she can give him today – right here and now - is clearly not enough, and though it's just a stomach bug, and nothing more serious than that, she's never felt less like a mother than she does right now. She forces a smile in response to his expectant gaze.

"Sleep well," she tells him, feeling about as pathetic as a person can possibly feel.

He nods and closes his eyes.
She blows out air and sighs.
And decides that one way or another, she'll find him some good soup tonight.

Lunch – super gooey grilled cheese for Emma and a chicken salad sandwich for Regina - is fantastic as usual, if a bit quiet and melancholy. They stare out at the ocean, watching the sun blink off of the waves. They sit in companionable silence, neither one of them saying more than pleasantries.

Emma thinks that she's about to explode.

"Chess," she says suddenly, jolting forward in her chair.

Regina's eyebrow shooting upwards. "Excuse me?"

"Chess. The game. You play it, right? You said your father taught you?"

"He did, and I do," the former queen says in a voice that seems almost hesitant.

"Great. Play me?"

"Really? You know how to play?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" Emma counters, her lip lifting up into a smirk. "Come on, Your Majesty; play me a game or two, huh? I saw a board inside. Looked like a nice one, too."

"Fine, but don't whine when I destroy you."

"Right back at you," Emma counters.

"My dear Savior," Regina says haughtily. "I was taught by the best of the best."

"And I was taught by a bunch of super hormonal kids playing for cigarettes and airplane sized bottles of vodka," Emma informs her. "I'm guessing my games were a bit more…passionate."

"Classy."

"Always. So how about it?"

"I already said I'd play."

"No, I mean how about we play for stakes?"

Regina's spine straightens up at that. "What kind of stakes are we talking about here?"

"If I win, you have to tell me about the song that you've been humming all day."

"And if I win?" Regina asks, suddenly seeming quite anxious.

"I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Whatever story you want, it's yours."

Regina thinks for a moment, clearly considering her odds. "Fine, but I won't be gentle."
"I would be deeply disappointed if you were," Emma answers with a smile that is almost flirtatious in a way that she is clearly quite unaware of. "Inside the house or outside?"

"Outside," Regina responds, her eyes drifting towards the water. "Feels good out here."

"All right; hang on, I'll grab the board. And some beer."

"Yes," Regina agrees. "You're going to need it."

Emma just smirks in response.

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Turns out that she has a reason to smirk; apparently, contrary to all common sense, the blonde is a shark when it comes to chess. Or maybe Emma thinks as she chirps the word "checkmate" for the second time in three hours, maybe Regina just doesn't know what to make of her.

Oh, the Queen is a good chess player for sure. Actually, she's damned good. Technically, anyway.

But Emma recognizes quickly that Regina doesn't have a clue in the world how to play against someone who doesn't act the way most people do. She doesn't know what to do with a person who makes moves that seem ridiculous and counter-intuitive. It's the very story of their history together, and every time Regina snorts in derision at a move that she makes, Emma just smiles.

All the way up until Emma reaches out and wraps her hands around the black queen as she claims it for her own, and then says with a wolfish grin, "Triple or nothing, Your Majesty?"

Regina just about growls at her, her eyes glued to the black queen.

Emma holds up her hands in mock surrender, the maddening smile still there. "Come on; just one more. If you win, no questions from me tonight, I promise. But if I win, no more stalling."

"Set up the goddamn board, Swan," Regina demands, her teeth tightly grit in frustration. She's staring at the board like it's a bitter enemy to her, a disloyal subject who simply won't submit.

Emma does as she's been instructed to, her hands reaching out to place the black and white pieces back onto the board. The set is gorgeous, made of expertly cut high-quality marble, and it's a pure joy to move each of the tiny little soldiers forward over the sleek glass chess table.

And then they begin again. At first, it's competitive, but as soon as Emma starts gaining the advantage, she notices Regina's focus beginning to slip. The Queen suddenly looks pensive and ill at ease, unable to think even one move ahead. She becomes sloppy and desperate.

Like she's playing scared. Like maybe she's even a bit terrified of what losing will mean. Her fingers twitch repeatedly, analyzing and over-analyzing each move to the point of paralyzation.

When it's all over and Emma has claimed her third unexpected win, the blonde simply smiles back over at her opponent, doing everything that she can not to rub it in even a little bit.

Apparently, her efforts do not go unnoticed.
"Go ahead," Regina sighs, her shoulders slumping (the motion allows Emma to see the bruises again, and this takes away more than a little bit of the pride that she’d taken from the win).

"What’s that?" Emma prompts.

"Go ahead and gloat over your wins," Regina pouts. "But be quick about it, because I am a very poor loser, and even absent my magic, I can still be quite vindictive when I want to be."

"No, that's okay," Emma assures her a small laugh and then a wave of her hand. "I mean it's not your fault that the boys from the home knew how to play chess better than your stuffy best of the best Enchanted Forest teachers. Cigs and vodka were serious business to kids like me."

"Kids like you," Regina repeats. Their eyes meet for a moment, and Emma thinks that there's something else being said there, but then Regina sighs and says, "Well, just try to keep your serious business away from Henry. The last thing we need is him smoking before he's fifteen."

"Promise," Emma chuckles. She supposes that Regina's words could have been a diminishing crack about her parenting skills, but one look at the Queen and she thinks that this is just basic human petulance at work and nothing more; Regina really does hate to lose at anything.

Emma clears her throat and starts reaching for the pieces once again. "I'll set the board up for us again. No stakes on this one, just something to do with your hands while you talk."

"Talk?"

"No stakes for this game," Emma reminds her, "But you still owe me three stories."

"Fine, but I don't need something for my hands; I'm actually capable of staying still."

"Well, I'm not," Emma replies with a grin. She resets the board and nods to Regina to move. It's a typical one, safe and cautious. Like she's taking her time to figure out what to do or say next.

Finally, with extreme reluctance, she grits out, "I don't remember the song."

"You've been humming it all day."

"I know. When Henry was young, I'd hum it to him when he couldn't sleep."

"But you don't remember where you learned it from?"

There's a brief pause, and then softly, "No."

"Is it from your own childhood?" Emma presses.

She sees the look flash across Regina's face – the same one that she'd seen that morning in the kitchen. It's so many emotions but the most prevalent one of all is fear. And maybe panic.

"No," Regina replies almost immediately, the tremor of her voice surrendering the lie. "I think… I'm pretty sure that it's from this world. I must have learned it from the radio."

"Okay," Emma says as gently as she can without being obvious about it in a way that will insult Regina. "Fair enough." She knows Regina's words for the lie that they are, but that warning bell that has always guided her away – and sometimes towards - danger is banging around in her head like a goddamned klaxon and she knows that if she pushes on this particular bit of Regina's history too soon, she'll end up with an ugly repeat of the unwanted dreams situation.
And neither one of them is ready for that just yet.

Besides, Emma thinks as she moves her rook forward, there's no more whiskey in the house.

"Your turn," Regina states.

"I just took it."

"For the story, Swan; keep up."

"That wasn't the deal," Emma reminds her. "I won."

"True, but I've been doing all the talking lately, and I'm tired."

Emma lifts her eyes up and studies Regina for a moment expecting to see more of the petulance, but what she sees instead are deep bags beneath her eyes and a tight jawline.

"The dreams are getting worse, aren't they?" Emma prompts.

"No, I don't actually think that they are," Regina counters, her expression falling into a deep and troubled frown. "I think that maybe they've always been like this. Just as bad. I just…"

"Didn't remember them."

Regina nods, suddenly looking so damned helpless. She runs a hand over the marble of the black queen a moment before quickly yanking it back almost like she's been violently burned.

"You've been all over the place today," Emma states, eyebrow lifted.

In a motion that's nothing short of terrifyingly submissive, Regina ducks her head for a moment, her eyes on the board even though it might as well not even be there for all she sees of it. "I feel," she starts after a moment, her voice barely a whisper. "Like I can't ground myself."

"Maybe that's how you're supposed to feel," Emma replies, and it feels like an awful thing to say, but it also feels honest, and after how far they've come, now doesn't seem like the time to be stepping backwards. "Maybe you're supposed to kind of feel like everything is swirling around."

"Maybe," Regina admits, her hand coming up to cover her eyes. Emma sees the Queen's thumb sweep out past her eyelashes as if to brush tears away. "It's all there,"

"Everything I worked so hard to never think about again. The awful things I've done, the faces I blocked out. The names." She looks up sharply at Emma. "I've always been good at forgetting."

"Believe it or not, " Emma tells her, "This is actually good."

"Is it? The things I've done –"

"Can't be undone with your guilt, Regina; that's not how this works. You need to remember the things you've done because they should be remembered, but you can't let them bury you."

"How can I not?" Regina insists, tears slipping past her fluttering eyelashes. She holds up her hands, palms out, and for a moment, Emma thinks that she's about to get blasted with magic.

But no, this is more like surrender.

"You're a fighter," Emma insists. "It's what you do."
"Why? Why should I keep fighting?"

"Because giving in doesn't make up for what you've done anymore than me breaking your curse makes up for the horrible things I've done. We have to live with our mistakes. We have to –"

"We? What have you done that even begins to compare to what I have done?"

"I've never killed anyone if that's what you're asking, but there was a time when I did some terrible things to people in the name of making myself feel better. It was after prison and after the creep who owns this house, and I swindled good people because they were too good."

She swallows hard, then, because it's the first time that she's ever spoken of these things. She feels shame wash through her, hot and sticky. She takes a breath, nods and then starts again.

"There was this sweet couple in Tallahassee," she continues on. "They wanted a child so badly and I was so pissed at everyone, but especially them for trying to have what I'd had to give up because of Neal. I was twenty-one and in reasonably good health, and they were young and so damned trusting. They paid me to surrogate for them and I...I took their money the moment they gave it to me and I ran like you wouldn't believe; always been a winner at that." She rubs her hands past her face, her fingers rubbing harshly at her eyebrows. "Some things you can't make better. You don't get the right to forgive yourself, either. You have to wear those scars, and maybe you have to bleed sometimes, too."

She nods her head, like she's trying to convince herself.

Then she looks up at Regina and sees complete empathy in her eyes.

And perhaps even a desperate kind of recognition.

"We're not the same," Emma says softly. "But we're not that different, either. We both have things that we will never be able to amend for no matter how much we try. Doesn't mean we get the right to wallow in our pain and guilt. Doesn't mean we shouldn't try to be better."

"I don't know how to be better; this is all I know how to be," Regina admits. "Gods, I just want to --" she trails off, shaking her head like even saying the words makes her that much weaker.

"Curl up in bed and never come out?" Emma finishes.

Regina simply nods.

"Yeah, trust me when I say that doesn't make it better, either. What I did to that couple wasn't the end of the shitty things that I did to make myself feel less...owed. I even started being a bounty hunter because I was angry. I got it in my head that I could hunt down Neal myself and make him pay. I'd turn him in and smile while his ass got thrown into jail. And then I'd tell him about the child that he'd lost. So I get it, you know? The need for vengeance? Not to the extremes you went, but there was a time when I wanted nothing more than to make him hurt."

"But none of that happened. You never found him, did you?"

"Not then, no. I mean I looked for him. I looked everywhere for over a year, and I think even came close to running into him a couple times. Then one day I woke up in a hotel room in Vancouver, and I looked at myself in the mirror and I realized that this person I'd become was completely my own fault. Neal may have started me along, but I chose my path."

"So why did you continue doing the job?"
"Because people like me who had hurt people like that couple deserved to be stopped," Emma says, and she feels a familiar self loathing roll upwards in her stomach. "So that's what I did."

"Did stopping yourself make it better? Did preventing someone else from doing what you did to that couple balance the scales?" Regina queries, leaning in across the chess board. It's a painfully honest question asked in a tone that sounds so very young and almost even hopeful.

"Only slightly." She shrugs her shoulders. "Last night, you said that you didn't think you had the right to another chance. Maybe neither did I, but I got one, anyway. Maybe, I made one for myself, and maybe I didn't deserve it anymore than you do but hiding away in my bed didn't make anything that I'd done better. Eventually, you've just got to live. And do better. Be better."

And then she does something that surprises even herself; she reaches out with her hand and puts it over Regina's hand, squeezing it lightly, her fingers lightly grazing the closed-up cuts that she feels. She looks up and meets Regina's eyes when she does it, insisting on a connection.

"So that's what this is. And that's what we're going to do," Emma insists.

"You make it sound so easy."

"It's not, and it never will be, but I am here for you, Regina. If you want to talk about songs that you don't want to remember or if you want to talk about what Gold did to you, I'm here."

"And if I want to talk about what I did to Graham?"

It's an attempt at pushing Emma back, but mostly it's a legitimate question meant to feel for the walls of this new relationship. It's an attempt to figure out what lines can't be crossed.

"Then we talk about Graham. I might get angry at you because I am so goddamned far from perfect that it hurts sometimes, but I'll listen as long as you're honest with me. No more bullshit, Regina. If you feel like you're about to come apart, you tell me, and you let me help."

"You don't deserve this. You don't deserve to have to deal with my…any part of me. It's not your fault who I am, Emma, but it is my fault who you are," Regina states. "If I had never –"

"Then there wouldn't be a Henry, and that'd be pretty awful, I think," Emma shrugs. "Look, what's done is done, and maybe if you don't snap and do the curse, I end up in a dress."

"They weren't all awful," Regina insists with something of a smile.

"Whatever. Your move. And your story."

"What do you want to know?"

"Daniel. Tell me about the first time you met him?"

"Why?"

"Because life isn't all about pain. It took me awhile to remember that but I did. Eventually, I remembered the kids who taught me to play chess for cigarettes, and maybe it's not something I'd ever want Henry to do, but it was actually one of the few good times that I had. It was fun."

"Daniel," Regina says, his name gentle on her lips. She'd already told Emma about meeting Snow and how his death had tied into that, but this is different because yes, her first memories of the stable boy had been wonderful. He'd been a sweet boy from the moment they'd met. Kind and
gentle and so very innocent. Someone she could have lived happily ever after with.

In spite of the pain that still weighs her heart down, Regina smiles.

And begins to speak about the boy whose death had altered the course of her entire life.

It takes her almost two hours, and a drive all the way around the little town that is Haydenport, but eventually Emma finds chicken soup that even Regina – after a quick sniff – approves of.

Henry, of course, loves it.

It's clear that he's feeling quite a bit better, enough so that he's asking for ice cream, and to watch TV. The kid is milking his illness, and that's okay. When it's time for bed, he settles down into his warm blankets and grins up at both of his mothers as they each lean down to kiss him.

Getting sick hadn't been part of the master plan to heal his mothers, he muses as he succumbs to the shadows that are dancing around at the edges of his vision, but he'll gladly take the results of it anyway because it's quite clear to him that something has changed between them.

Something has changed with his adoptive mother. He doesn't understand pain and hurt the way adults do, but he knows enough to see the difference in the way she's sitting and moving.

He thinks he knows what hope looks like.

It's in the way she looks at him, a gentle smile playing over her lips as she reaches out to brush his hair back and away from his forehead. And it's in how she looks over at Emma, like they're no longer enemies, like maybe they get each other and are finally fighting the same battle.

These concepts are far beyond his comprehension, but he gets them, anyway, because hope is hope. And for the first time in a long time, Henry Mills thinks he has it for his family.
As it turns out, being filthy sick isn't actually the worst part of the whole coming down with the flu thing; no, the worst part of all is the aftermath. An aftermath which includes three days of mother-enforced bed rest. Three days, which up until this morning, have featured nearly continuous rainstorms, a increasingly cranky Savior in desperate need of a run, and an equally grouchy former Evil Queen itching to do more than just sit around drinking coffee and losing at chess.

Lucky for Henry, he's pretty much slept through all of it.

On the other hand, he wonders just how lucky he really is when he comes out of his bedroom on the third day after falling ill with the stomach bug to find his mothers sitting on separate sides of the Living Room, neither saying a word to the other as both of them gaze down intently at their books. Well, to be more exact about it, Emma's reclined across the couch, absently chewing away at her nails as she's reading, while Regina looks calm and typically poised, sitting in a chair, her bare feet crossed at the ankles in front of her, her glasses high on her nose.

"Are you guys fighting again?" Henry asks, not even bothering to hide his weary exasperation. Three days earlier, he'd seen them sitting over him, working together to take care of him, but now there's this, and he wonders what he's missed, and if things will ever get easier for any of them.

Regina sighs, and puts down a novel with balloons on the cover, a slight hint of distaste in her expression as she carefully folds a bookmark between the weathered pages of the book. "No, sweetheart," she assures him. "I think we just ran out of things to say to each other."

Emma snorts at this, and lowers her own book – one that looks oddly like the kind of true crime novel that his adoptive mother would read. He notices that unlike Regina, Emma simply folds a page over to mark it before she places the novel face-down on the end-table next to her.

"Something you'd like to add, Miss Swan?" Regina asks, turning her head to the side, a slight smile playing over pale lips that haven't seen lipstick in a little over five weeks. It's a bit funny to Emma just how used to this Regina she's quickly become; this woman is dressed casual and wears no makeup, and when she's not being a pain in the ass, she's almost fun to be around. Almost.

The rest of the time, well, there had been at least one incident involving profanity and chess pieces flying across the room. Actually, Emma muses with a small smile spreading its way across her face, that had been moderately fun as well, though perhaps in all the wrong ways. "We didn't actually run out of things to say to each other, Kid; I don't think that's even possible considering how good we are at annoying each other. Truth is, she got sick of me kicking her ass at chess, and decided to try reading one of my books so that she could find something new to harass me about."

Regina doesn't even bother to hide the roll of her eyes or the derisive snort that bubbles up and out. "It's really not hard; this book is about a clown living in the sewers. It's ridiculous even for
someone who has lived the life that I have."

"I thought you said that you liked King."

"No, I said that he was more nuanced about good and evil than most writers in this world. That’s a fairly low bar. He’s still messy, pedestrian, juvenile and –"

"Right, got it. You have the imagination of a pencil. Which, actually explains your love for true crime novels." Emma lazily gestures towards her book.

"The truth can be even more terrifying than fiction," Regina reminds her, an eyebrow lifted up as if to remind Emma of whom she’s speaking to. Which, honestly, Emma doesn’t need the reminder and it bothers her a bit how much Regina is stuck in the belief that she’s little besides the Evil Queen. But that’s for later.

"Sure," Emma agrees, smirking just a bit. "But who’s to say this book isn't truth, too? "I mean considering your origins, maybe there is a Pennywise the Clown lurking somewhere in the sewers in this lovely state of ours.”

"Emma," Regina cautions.

"What? There can be Evil Queens but not Evil Clowns?"

"I don't like clowns," Henry admits, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

"Do I want to know?" Emma asks, trying very hard not to laugh.

Mother and son at the same time shake their heads.

"Got it. For later maybe?"

Another look, and another shake of their heads, this one perfectly synced.

"Right," Emma chuckles. Then, to Regina, "Don't think I won't get it out of you; you know I will."

"We'll see," Regina responds, lifting up an eyebrow in challenge.

"Wait, so, you guys aren't actually fighting?" Henry asks, unable to hide his confusion. "Or you are and you're fighting about…books?"

"No, we're not," Emma answers as she stands up. "But we are glad to see you up and about again, Kid; we were worried about you. How are you feeling?"

"Better. Hungry," he replies, once again looking between his mothers as if to suggest that he’s still trying to figure out what’s going on with them. After a moment, he just shakes his head.

"Yeah, me, too. But I think we're getting close to the back of the cupboard as far as food goes."

"Let me translate that for you, sweetheart," Regina offers, standing up from her chair in a manner that seems to completely disregard the less than glamorous sweatpants that she’s wearing. How she manages to look regal in baggy gray cotton, Emma will never know, but damn does the former queen actually manage to pull it off. "She finished off the tortilla chips last night, ate the last of the bacon this morning, and is out of her cheap beer as well."

"And cheap wine," Emma reminds her. "You knocked that out last night."
"True."

"So we need to go into town, then?" Henry asks. "For food, I mean."

"Yeah, I guess we do," Emma replies with a nod. She glances back at Regina, and observes with a bit of surprise that the older woman has suddenly stepped back towards the chair she'd been previously sitting in. While she hasn't quite gone cold on them – the last three days have been spent conversing with each other about little personal things that don't really matter, but they're personal things all the same and there's a calm kind of companionship that has settled over the two of them – Emma can tell that Regina is trying to hide her disappointment at –

At what?

At them leaving to shop for food?

No, Emma realizes with a start, at being left behind like she’s someone who is easy to leave behind. That’s what this is: Regina is disappointed about once again being abandoned. This new self-aware and self-conscious Regina no doubt considers her feelings silly, because Emma and Henry are just going into town for a few short hours as they've done a dozen times since they first arrived in Haydenport, but right now fear of being unwanted is at the very core of things, and Emma is suddenly hit with the understanding that this is a cycle that has to be broken.

She’s suddenly struck with the realization that it's not enough for Regina to heal herself inside these four walls; Regina has to have faith that she can do the same on the outside and back in the real world. In short, the former queen has to learn to believe in herself and that isn't going to happen if she keeps getting left behind whenever a supply run back into town is required.

It's time to do something different, Emma thinks.

"Why don't you come with us?" the sheriff asks her, keeping her tone light and as airy as she can manage. The last thing that she wants is for Regina to think she's being pitied.

"What?"

"Really?" Henry chirps, eyes wide and bright.

"Yeah," Emma nods. "We need to get some groceries and maybe stop and get some lunch somewhere. The only food left around here is peanut butter and jelly, and while I personally find it rather hilarious watching you try to figure out how to look like a Queen while eating a PB&J sandwich, I think maybe we could all do with a day out after three of them spent cooped up inside."

"You have cabin fever," Regina notes.

"Don't you?"

The brunette woman shrugs her shoulders in a gesture that seems vaguely defeated. "I've spent a lot of time alone inside my house over the last year."

"Well, not today. Everyone get showered up; we're heading into town."

Henry grins, "Awesome," he says, and then turns and heads back (almost hopping as he goes as only a kid of his young age can) towards his bedroom.

Before Regina can even say a word (and she will because she seems to be completely incapable of believing that any act of kindness can be offered simply for the sake of offering it), Emma turns to
her and says, "There's no ulterior motive here, I swear; I just think it might be nice for him to get to spend the day out with both of us. And yeah, I have cabin fever like crazy."

"So that's it? Nothing else?"

"All right, so maybe I thought you might like to get some fresh air that doesn't smell so much like salt and dead fish," Emma shrugs her shoulders, a small smile lifting her lips. The implication of "and maybe it's time for you to get out of the house" is as clear as day.

"Thank you," Regina replies softly. She almost seems shy when she says this, and it unnerves Emma more than a little; this is that young Regina that she's seen a few times over the last couple of days. Regina certainly seems happier like this, but less confident by a landslide. The worst of it, though, is that when this part of Regina drops away, something darker and more pained takes over. It's not split personalities or anything like that; it's a matter of Regina still trying to figure out who she is now that her armor has finally cracked open. It's a matter of finding balance between the different sides of herself, and she's still struggling to find it.

"Don't thank me," Emma says. "I know you still don't completely believe me, but this place was never meant to be a prison for you. Sounds like you already had that with your own house."

"Many houses," Regina admits, and then clamps her mouth shut.

"Yeah, well not this one. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to go change into something you won't mock me for going out with you and Henry in."

"You have such an outfit?"

"Yes, Your Majesty, I do," Emma chuckles. "What about you?"

"Well, I have the clothes you bought for me so…no."

Emma snorts, somewhat thankful that they can joke about this now. "Right; I'll see you in a few minutes." She shakes her head in mock exasperation, and then exits the room, leaving the queen standing by herself next to the couch. All the while wondering why exactly she feels so damned nervous about seeing civilization and other people for the first time in six weeks.

She's former royalty, Regina reminds herself with a bit of irritation and self-loathing; dealing with people is what she does. Yes, she thinks, she can do this. It's beyond absurd to think that she can't. She can smile and make nice, and enjoy some time with her son and –

Well, she can enjoy some time away from this place. Yes, that.

She closes her eyes for a moment, trying to center and balance herself. These concepts are fleeting to her these days, and when she sees them – even if only for the briefest of moments – she grabs at them greedily, because it is only when she has balance that she feels like herself.

It is only then when she feels like she has any degree of control.

She counts to sixty, and then does it again. She breathes in and then out. She thinks of a grove of trees and a hill, and she's walking towards it, her hand out-stretched as if to take a piece of fruit off of the lowest branch that she can get to without having to struggle too much and -

"Mom?" she hears.

Her eyes snap open, and she looks down to see Henry watching her.
"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I am," she replies, forcing a smile that doesn't meet her eyes. She wonders if he'd seen her breathing exercises, and wonders what he thinks of them.

She finds herself hoping that he doesn't ask about them; she doesn't want to have to admit to him that she'd learned such things from Rumple during the early days of their training. Back then, he'd taught her how to control her breathing because she'd been unable to focus her magic, and he'd needed better of her. Now, four decades removed from that training, she still uses his old tricks to try to keep herself from panicking. They're simple, but they work.

So maybe there was one thing good that had come of her association with Rumple.

Well, two, she thinks as she looks down at her son.

He steps closer to her. "Are you scared? About going into town?"

She laughs, the sound humorous even though she's not amused. His look tells her that he sees right through her, though. "A little," she admits, because really she is tired of lying to him.

"It's okay," he tells her with a careless shrug of his shoulders. "We'll be there with you."

"I know," she confirms, not telling him how much this conversation hurts, and how much she hates that she needs her son to keep her from wanting to scream in frustration and fear.

"Cool," he nods. "Then you should probably get out of those sweats."

"You picked them out," she reminds him.

"No," he corrects her with a vehement shake of his head. "I didn't."

"They are ugly," she admits, reaching down to pick at the gray cotton. After a moment, as if remembering that such motions show off the anxiety that seems to roll through her constantly these days, she snatches her hand back, and lays it across the top of her other hand.

"The worst," he confirms.

She laughs, then leans down and kisses him on the top of the head. "I love you so much; I hope you know that," she tells him, speaking into his ear, her voice so very soft. Her arms slip around him, and she feels like she's about to cry when his circle around her torso in response. This is that weird unbalance that she always feels around him – more these days than ever – but she's not terribly sure if she wants this to go away, because these moments are pure heaven.

“I know,” he says as he grins up at her, a thousand watt smile full of easy happiness that makes her want to hold him just a little bit tighter (she doesn't, though, because doing so has never worked out for the better for them, and more than anything in this world or any other, she wants to do right by him). And if she has to break into a thousand little shards of glass to make that happen, she will just as long as he's there to help her pick them all back up again.

She knows that that's not at all fair to him; he's still just a young boy, and he deserves so much better than a broken and damaged mother who is falling apart a little bit more with every day that passes by. She likes to think (hope) that she's coming together again, too, but slowly.

One day, she tells herself. One day she'll be strong enough not to need him.
But that day is, as much as it pains her to admit, not today, and for as long as Henry is willing to put his arms around her and hug her without someone forcing him to, well then she's damn well going to accept the embrace and return it back to him with all the love she feels for him.

She's standing in the middle of her bedroom, trying to decide between a red sweater and a black hoodie when her cell phone rings. She lets the first two rings go, considers allowing it to go to voicemail, and then sighs and grabs at it, scowling when she sees the name on the screen. She'd been expecting David or Archie – or even Mary Margaret by now – but not him.

"Neal," Emma sighs as she brings the phone to her ear.

"Well, that's just shy of 'what do you want'," he chuckles, and she has a moment of wondering how hard it would be to get a replacement phone if she were to throw the one she's currently holding against the far wall of the room. It's not that she hates the guy; she honestly doesn't really feel much of anything about him anymore, but she knows why he's calling, and that makes Emma grind her teeth because honestly, the timing of what he wants is all wrong.

They're just starting to make progress, she and Regina, and the last thing that she wants or needs is for them to get kicked back to square one because Neal, who had rather effortlessly managed to go eleven years without seeing his son (that he hadn't known about him is irrelevant to Emma; that lack of knowledge is his own fault), suddenly has to see him right now.

She wonders if she's being completely unfair; after all, not too long ago she'd been the one butting into Henry's life after over a decade away. She'd been the unwanted interloper, the one that the rightful parent had been trying desperately to keep out and away from Henry.

She'd been the inconvenience.

But still…

"What do you want?" she asks him, grabbing for the charcoal hoodie. The weather has finally warmed up again – well as warm as it gets around here, anyway – but it's still fairly chilly out.

"I was hoping we could talk about the promise you made me," he says.

And yeah, there it is.

She considers reminding him of his own many broken promises, but that's water under the bridge, and the last thing she wants him thinking is that her irritation means she's not over him.

It's not about that.

It's about not wanting him to ruin the things that are happening here.

It's about being there for the infuriating woman, who is currently showering, and the child sitting on the couch flipping through one of his comic books. It's about family and healing and –

She shakes her head. Stay focused, she tells herself. Don't get dramatic.

"Now's not a good time," she insists, trying to sound as casual as she can.
"You said that five weeks ago. I've been patient."

The whine of his voice agitating her, Emma laughs sharply, harshly. "You do remember that you don't actually have a right to him, yeah?" It's a cruel jab, but it feels more than a little owed.

Which makes her feeling absolutely awful, because if life were all about getting what you deserved, then neither she nor Regina would be here.

And then, of course, he wipes away all the guilt she's feeling by replying, "Neither do you. Or have you forgotten that while you're playing house with our boy's adoptive mother? The Evil Queen."

"Neal," she growls, her voice muffled by fabric as she pulls the hoodie on over her head.

She hears him sigh in response, and in her mind's eye, she can see him putting up his hands in surrender, because that's what Neal does; he gives in when things get too hard for him. She's always considered herself a runner, but he makes her look like an amateur in that regard.

"Hey, no," he says in that strange "aw shucks" way that he has. "That was dumb. I didn't mean anything by that. It just came out and, look…I just miss him, you know? I just want to see him."

"And you will. I promised you that, and I mean to keep the promise, but it's not just my call, Neal; like you said, I don't have legal rights to him, either, which means that when he can see you is up to her, and not just me."

"Then I'll never see him," Neal answers dully. "That's not fair."

It's in moments like this that she's reminded how much of a man-child her ex truly is. When she'd been eighteen years old, she hadn't noticed, because he'd been fun and reckless and that's what she wanted at that point in her life; she'd wanted to be out of control and he'd been just fine with that.

Now, though…

Now, she wants more for herself and for Henry.

Now she needs more for everyone.

"Neal," she starts again, doing her best to keep her voice even and calm.

"Talk to her, Em; make her understand." Now he's just whining, and she's again struck by the desire to throw her cell phone. He's not always like this, she reminds herself, but she does remember this state entirely too well; she knows that when he hits the wall between want and have, he tends to regress; he becomes the boy that spent hundreds of years in Neverland.

She wonders why everyone in her life has emotional maturity issues.

She laughs again. "Seriously? Do you not remember her threatening to rip your throat out for even thinking about touching Henry?"

"I remember, but she trusts you, right? I mean she hasn't tried to kill you. Lately, anyway."

She winces sharply at his words. While technically true, they're a complete understatement in regards to the relationship that she believes that she's built with the queen over the last six weeks. She likes to think that they're starting to approach something more than just trust by now, maybe even something that looks a little bit like friendship. But is it enough for this?

"Yeah," she confirms. "But –"
"Talk to her," he pushes again. "Please."

"Fine," she growls out, mostly because she's so done with this conversation, and his tone of voice, and his arrogant belief that he has a right to Henry, and yeah, she gets the irony, but dammit, Regina does trust her and –

"Thanks," he says quietly, and she closes her eyes, allowing a wave of guilt to wash over her. He doesn't deserve her sympathy or empathy, but she hates to think she could ever be vengeful enough to deny Henry a father just because she really wouldn't mind hurting Neal a little bit.

It's not who she is, not who she wants to be.

"Sure," she says. "I'll talk to you later."

"Soon?"

"Neal."

"Soon," he says again, this time a statement. "Later, Em." The phone clicks off, and this time she does throw it, as hard as she can against the wall; it smashes brilliantly against the hard plaster of the wall, a little clinking noise signifying that something within the tiny device had broken.

"Telemarketer, dear?"

Regina. Of course.

Emma takes a deep breath, then turns around, and offers Regina – who is standing in the doorway dressed in slacks, a red blouse and a dark charcoal oversized men's peacoat that she'd found in one of the closets - the most fake smile ever. "Yep," the blonde lies, her eyes sliding down to take in the black heels which Regina is wearing. They give the Queen several inches of height, making her look much taller than she actually is. Much more in control and regal.

"Mm. Did they offer you encyclopedias?" Regina asks, stepping deeper into the room, the sound of her heels getting lost into the plush carpet.

"The whole damn set."

"You could have just asked," Regina drawls, her dark amused eyes making it clear that she doesn't believe a word Emma is saying. "I have them already."

Emma wrinkles her nose. "Really?"

"I was new to this world," Regina shrugs. "And while the curse gave me much in the way of information, it failed to give me details on so-called pop culture. People like Springsteen for example." She trails off when she says this last part, seeming slightly thoughtful, a bit sad even.


"So I see," Regina replies, shaking off whatever it was that had been bothering her. Her eyes track over to the broken phone, and her brow lifts. "I suppose we'll need to include phone replacement on our list of activities today, yes?"

"Yeah," Emma admits sheepishly. "It slipped."

"Mm."
Their eyes meet, then, and it's quite clear to her that Regina desperately wants to ask her what that the phone call had really been all about. For whatever reason, though, the queen doesn't push for the truth, and Emma thinks that maybe she should just offer up the information freely anyway, because this is a conversation that they will need to have eventually, anyhow.

Not yet, though, Emma decides.

Because she still needs to decompress, and let go of the anger and frustration.

If she's going to keep her promise to Neal, and do right by Henry (and by Regina as well), well then, she needs to present Regina the case in a way that doesn't beg the queen to say no.

So instead, Emma smiles. "You ready to head into town?"

"I am."

"In heels?"

"I like my heels. They're elegant and sophisticated."

"Uh huh. Whatever you say, Madam Mayor. Personally, I think you just like to pretend that you're taller than me," Emma teases, earning her a lifted eyebrow and a not quite haughty but definitely superior look in return. It's familiar and comfortable and so completely them, and just like that, Emma feels all of the tension brought on by Neal just bleed away from her shoulders.

An easy smile passes between the two women, and then Emma offers her hand towards the door of the room, as if to say "after you."

Regina holds the blonde's eyes for a moment longer – long enough for Emma to squirm beneath unnerving scrutiny - and then she nods her head. "I'll make sure Henry is ready to go, and we'll meet you by the car."

"Right; give me two minutes, and I'll be out."

Regina starts to turn away from the blonde, but then abruptly stops, and with her back still to Emma, says in a soft voice that is almost trembling beneath the weight of what sounds a whole lot like fear and worry and even rejection, "Are you all right?" She pushes her hands into her pockets as she asks the question. It's a motion that Emma has come to associate with Regina feeling insecure and exposed; it's like she thinks hiding her hands will somehow protect her.

Or maybe, Emma mused, Regina thinks that putting her hands away will protect others.

She might not have magic out here in this “real” world, but old instincts die hard, and sometimes you have to holster yourself especially when you stop trusting your self-restraint.

There it is, Emma realizes with a small internal start. Neal might have been right; Regina might actually somewhat trust her blonde counterpart now, but she clearly still doesn't trust herself. She doesn't have faith in herself not to lose her mind over the many things that she's afraid to hear and deal with. Which means that until she does have faith, her hands go into her pockets.

"I am," Emma assures her because she suddenly understands just how much they both need the security that they've carved out for themselves over the last few weeks. "I'm good. Really."

"All right." Regina nods before leaving the room, closing the door softly behind her. Once she's gone, Emma allows for a loud sigh before she crosses the room and scoops up the impressively
broken phone into her hand. Turning the shards of it over in her palm, Emma tells herself that she's not going to think about Neal anymore today; she'll deal with him and his untimely request to see and spend time with Henry later.

Today, she reminds herself as she squares her shoulders, is about getting outside and having some fun with her son and his adoptive mother.

Today is about new beginnings and not old hurts.

Today is about family.

She chuckles, and thinks for a moment about how strange life is.

How very strange indeed.

Grocery shopping with a former Evil Queen is bad enough; Regina is almost intolerably bossy about what goes into the basket. Add to that the fact that Regina just might be the most anal retentive mother ever, and it's almost surprising that a bag of plain Sun Chips manages to stay when everything else with more than ten grams of sugar finds itself tossed back to the shelf.

It's only when Henry finally pleads for something that doesn't taste like cardboard that's been lightly salted, and Emma adds her own voice to his desperate request that Regina finally sighs and gives in. "M&Ms," the queen grunts. "I like those well enough. The peanut ones."

"Blue or green?" Emma asks, because how she could resist such a question.

"They all taste the same," Regina counters, looking at the blonde like she's just asked an utterly ridiculous question. After a moment, though, grudgingly, she allows, "Red, I suppose."

"I like the blue ones," Henry states as he tosses three bags of the peanut M&Ms into the cart. He reaches out for a fourth, but an arched eyebrow from Regina stops him cold and he steps away from the candy rack. There's the briefest moment of awkwardness between the two of them – like Regina is trying to figure out if it's wrong thing to do to deny Henry the sugar he desires and he's trying to decide if he should push the advantage over her emotions that he has – but then just like that, he shrugs turns his attention to powdered doughnuts, instead.

"Green for me," Emma states, grinning more than is appropriate.

The joke goes flying over Regina's head, but even she can't help but chuckle just a bit at the youthful exuberance that both Henry and Emma are showing. Even she can't resist the pull towards the two of them. Then again, perhaps the truth is that she never has been able to.

"We need bacon," she says after a moment, her voice sounding thick.

"I'll get it," Henry offers, before scurrying around towards the cold goods.

"It's just bacon," Emma tells her because she has a pretty good idea what strange thoughts might be going through Regina's mind right about now.

She has a pretty good idea just how much Regina hungers for moments like the one that the three of them had just shared together. She knows that Regina craves the ease with which Henry has
always been able to show Emma affection. She desperately desires the bond she sees between them. And she probably wonders if sugar and bacon would make a difference.

"Of course," Regina nods, hiding away again. "We also need milk."

"On my way," Emma assures her. "Anything else?"

"Well, lettuce, too, but being that I'm not sure you know what that looks like when it's not between two buns, I think I'll take care of that."

"Good call. Since I'm down that aisle anyway, I'll grab the wine."

"As you said," Regina drawls. "Good call."

It doesn't occur to Emma until she's halfway down the aisle that Regina hadn't told her which wine to pick out. This omission is small to the point of being minuscule, and to absolutely anyone and everyone else, it'd mean nothing at all. But to Emma Swan, it's yet another confirmation of the strange not at all ordinary brand of trust that continues to grow between them. It means something exactly because it had been offered without comment or fanfare.

It means something because these days, everything does.

As Emma picks up the best bottle of red wine that she can find – something that's dry and spicy and completely up Regina's alley, she thinks with a smile – she knows for a fact that come this evening, she'll be telling the queen the truth about her unhappy conversation with her ex lover.

It'll be uncomfortable and unpleasant as it can possibly be, but it has to happen.

Hopefully, Emma thinks as she tucks a jug of milk under her arm, they've come far enough over the last several weeks that when the conversation does happen, Regina will understand that they're on the same side on this issue. And if she doesn't, well, they'll work through that, too.

It's kind of what they do these days, anyway.

After the groceries are packed away into the back of Ruby's car, the trio stops in at the only store in town that sells cell phones. It's tiny, and the models that they have are absolutely ridiculous in how badly aged they are. Enough so that Emma – never one for restraint - can't stop herself from making an admittedly lame crack about how this town must be stuck in time.

It's a badly delivered joke, which does little for her beyond earning her an identical look of amused disgust from both Henry and Regina.

She shrugs her shoulders helplessly, as if to say she couldn't help it. And then she forks over two hundred dollars for a phone that she's pretty sure she could have gotten off E-Bay for twenty bucks. Apparently, needing the damned thing immediately allows them to gouge her.

Well, if she's thinks she's about to get any sympathy from Regina or Henry, she's barking up the wrong tree, because they both look at her like she's the village idiot, and honestly, she kind of feels like she is. Breaking a phone against the wall? Not exactly something that a woman who's almost thirty years old, and a mother and the goddamned Savior should be doing, right?
On the other hand, aside from the smirking almost exasperated looks which she is receiving from
the queen, Regina stays curiously quiet; she doesn't dig for information or push for the details of
exactly why the phone had been shattered (she's under no illusions that Regina had bought her lame
salesman cover story), and it all just makes Emma feel a whole lot worse because this whole new
start between them is supposed to be built on a foundation of trust.

But then maybe that's the point, Emma thinks as she pockets the phone, and holds the door for
Henry and Regina to go through; maybe this is about trust, and Regina trusts the blonde sheriff to
talk to her when the time is right. Maybe this is that leap of faith that she's been pushing Regina to
take. Or maybe, Emma muses, maybe she's crazy overthinking things here.

"Careful," she hears Regina say, her voice low and throaty.

"What?" Emma blinks.

"You're about to walk into the door."

And of course, she's right; Emma looks up to see that she's standing about half an inch away from
the same door that she'd been holding open. Only, instead of walking through it, she'd been moving
towards it. She groans and mutters some kind of curse under her breath.

"Mom?" Henry asks, head tilted. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just hungry. Low blood-sugar."

"Shall we get you a ho-ho?" Regina asks, not bothering to hide her open derision for Emma's
rather apparent on-going lies. Their eyes meet and oh yes, Regina certainly knows.

Emma lifts an eyebrow, but then – remembering that Henry is with them - quickly thinks better of
the first three replies that come shooting into her mind. "No, but lunch does sound good." She
points over to a little bar across the street called The Down And Dirty. "How about there?"

"You want to take Henry to lunch at a strip bar?" Regina gasps; glaring at Emma like the blonde
sheriff has completely lost her mind. It's almost amusing how utterly scandalized and horrified
Regina looks right about now. Actually, scratch that – it's quite amusing. "Are you insane?"

Emma snorts. "What? No. It's just a... badly named bar. Actually, during the day it's not even really
that. It's like Granny's with pool tables and darts and a pretty good Philly Cheesesteak."

"She's right, mom," Henry confirms. "We had lunch there a couple of weeks ago."

"So how about it, Your Majesty? Party with us plebs?"

"What's a pleb?" Henry asks.

"Your mother," Regina responds dryly. Then, "If I say no, will you break another phone?"

"I might," Emma grins.

"Well, we couldn't have that. Very well."

"So gracious."

"Em-ma," Henry groans.

"Got it; you're hungry, and if we don't shut up, you just might die."
He sighs at her like she's the biggest dork in the world, and all she can do is grin in response.

Reasonably comfortable, as it turns out, The Down and Dirty isn't nearly as small – or as stripper bar looking - as it appears to be from the outside. It reminds Emma of the Rabbit Hole, and she finds a degree of comfort in this realization. It'll never stop amazing her just how much she considers Storybrooke home, and how much she misses the place in spite of how being brought to town by Henry had turned her entire life upside down in the strangest of ways.

They find a small table near the back of the bar, close enough to one of the exits that they can make a getaway should they find the need to do so. They're also close enough for Emma to be able to read the hand-written sign taped to the door. It reads "Only 21 Allowed In After 9PM."

"So," Emma asks after the waitress – a little redhead named Kimberly – brings over their drinks, "Ever had a hot-wing before?"

"No, I most certainly have not ever tried a hot-wing," Regina replies as she delicately sips from a glass of red wine. The vintage they serve here is still not top shelf, but it's still better than the best of what the grocery store offers, and the former queen makes sure to state as much.

"Because they're greasy?"

"Because they're disgusting."

"How do you know that they’re disgusting if you've never tried them?" Emma queries as she lifts her beer bottle up to her lips, and takes a deep swig of it.

"They look disgusting."

"Sound logic," Emma nods. She looks over at their bemused son "What about you, Kid?"

Henry shakes his head. "Nope, never."

"Well, I think it's high time to change that."


"Emma," Regina cautions.

"I know; you were planning on going with a salad or something equally boring, and if that's what you want to do, I won't stop you. But do me a favor, Regina, and try at least one wing. That's all I ask. Try one wing, and I promise I won't say another word about it. I promise."

"You keep saying that but we both know you’re lying." There was a time when this statement would have been delivered with vitriol, but that seems to be behind them for the time being.

"Yeah, okay, I probably am," Emma chuckles. "But humor me on this one." She looks over at Henry, who is watching his mothers interact with curiosity, and winks at him to reassure him that all is well. He grins back at her. She can almost see the wheels turn in Regina's mind, like she's examining the offer and looking for the trap. She licks her lips, and then nods her head.

"Fine, but just one," she says, as if confirming the details.
"Just one," Emma nods. "And then you can eat your rabbit food."

"It's healthy," Regina grumbles, folding and refolding her napkin.

"True, but it's not nearly as much fun as a bacon cheeseburger or hot-wings doused in atomic sauce," Emma challenges.

"Yes, well, neither is having a heart attack, but I digress."

"After taking one last potshot," Emma notes.

Regina smirks in response.

"Right," Emma chuckles, shaking her head in bemusement. She waves over the waitress, orders an appetizer of wings, and then a cheeseburger for herself – heavy on the bacon. Henry gets the same, and Regina, just to be completely stubborn about it, requests a Caesar salad.

And another glass of wine.

After the waitress leaves, Emma glances towards the pool tables, most of which are currently not in use. "Ever played?" she asks.

Henry starts to reply, but before he can get a word out, Regina says in a casual tone, "I know of the game, and yes, I've played a time or two."

The tone is entirely too casual for such a reply, Emma thinks; she knows when she's been sharked, and every instinct in her body is telling her that right now, the former queen is playing her. Or at least she's trying to do so. And yet like a moth to the flame, she goes willingly.

"Food will take a bit," Emma says, "Up for a game?"

"If I recall the last game we played, it didn't end well for me," Regina notes, reminding them both of many hours spent hunched over the chess board – most of the games in Emma’s favor.

"I'll be gentle this time," Emma promises, because this is what a mark is supposed to say, and right now she really wants to know if her instincts about Regina’s abilities are spot on.

The look that Henry is throwing towards his adoptive mother – disbelief and a bit of amusement – tells her that they are.

"Mm," Regina nods. "Should we set a wager?"

"Sure." She glances over at Henry. "Our usual? A story?"

"What kind of story?" Henry asks, sitting up straighter.

"The boring kind," Regina responds almost immediately, her attention still on Emma. "But, no, this time I was thinking about something a little more interesting. Maybe even healthier."

"I don't like the sound of that," Emma grumbles.

"If I win, the both of you have to eat salad for lunch for the next week."

"Mom," Henry says, shaking his head in clear dismay, and Emma just knows that her son is about to sell out Regina over rabbit food. It'd be hilarious except for the fact that she just can't predict how the former queen will react to things. It'd be just like Regina to completely lose her cool over
Henry choosing salad over some little secret that the two of them have.

So Emma smoothly steps in, "How about just me? The kid shouldn't have to suffer for me accidentally scratching on the eight ball."

Regina lifts an eyebrow. "Fine. Henry, you're off the hook."

And that's all it takes for Henry to settle back in his chair, a slight uncertain frown on his lips as he tries to figure out just what exactly is going on here; seems like everything keeps changing.

"And if I win," Emma says, pushing forward and bringing Henry’s focus back to the bet being wagered between his moms. "You have to eat a full on greasy cheeseburger – with all the fixings. Including bacon." She meets Regina's eyes when she says this, and though she sees a flash of something go across the older woman's face, Regina finally responds with a sharp nod.

"You have yourself a deal, Sheriff," she says.

"Great, then I'll be nice and even let you break."

"How kind," Regina drawls, and yeah, this is a sharking. Emma wonders if it'd be convincing if she was someone different, someone unaware of how to play every angle of every con ever.

They stand up and make their way over to the table, trailed closely by Henry, who seems just a little bit nervous that they might use the pool cues on each other instead of on the balls. He jumps up on a stool next to the table, and accepts both of their jackets across his knees.

Once the balls are racked up, and Regina is moving around to the top of the table with her pool cue in hand, Emma slides up next to her, and lowering her voice says into Regina's left ear, "By the way, Your Majesty, I know when someone is trying to hustle me. And you definitely are."

The reaction she gets from Regina is unexpected indeed; instead of surprise and maybe even anger, she receives a wide megawatt smile that is utterly breathtaking in it's intensity and lack of self-conscious reservation. "Good," the queen says with a wicked gleam in her thunderously dark eyes that Emma hadn't realized that she'd been missing until just now. "All the better to beat you, then. I assume you're comfortable with a no-scratch, called-shot match?"

"I am. Game on?" Emma challenges.

"Game on," Regina confirms before bending over the table and executing a picture perfect break. She watches as the multi-colored balls spin around for a moment or two, and then, as she straightens up to observe the table, she announces with a wide grin, "Solids, it is."

The first match is at least fairly tight, but the next two are complete blowouts, and where as Regina is a sore loser, she's an absolute ass about winning. She, of course, hides it behind what might appear to be gracious statements such as, "that was a good game, Swan," and "don't feel bad; you tried" but Emma sees right through it all. And finds herself laughing just the same.

Because dammit if Regina isn't enjoying herself, and it's quite nice to see.

Even if it's going to cost Emma terribly.
"Okay, so out with it," Emma demands as they're sitting back at the table. The wings have been delivered (they'd ask the waitress to hold up until they'd finished their games) but have thus far stayed untouched.

"Out with what?" Regina asks between sips of her wine.

"How you just kicked my ass. Somehow I don't see you hanging out in the Rabbit Hole."

Regina wrinkles her nose. "You would be correct."

"Exactly. So?"

"We have a table," Henry says. "Down in the basement."

"You have a basement?" Emma asks in surprise.

"Indeed. The house is quite large and has a lot of...interesting extra rooms within it. The table was there when we arrived, and well, I've had plenty of time to practice over the years."

"So, I noticed." Emma shakes her head. "I beat you at chess, and you destroyed me at pool; I don't think that's how it's supposed to go."

"Probably not," Regina admits, her eyes flickering down to the wings.

"You ready?" Emma prompts, seeing what she's looking at.

"I suppose. Just one, right?"

"Mm hmm, and then you can gnaw away at your lettuce."

"You, too, Sheriff," Regina reminds her.

"Oh, no. Not yet. Not until tomorrow. For the rest of today, at least, I get to eat like I want my veins to explode with happiness."

"Well, they'll certainly explode with something."

"You're stalling," Henry points out.

She is stalling - that much is obvious to Emma. It makes her laugh far more than is appropriate that a woman like Regina who has seen and done the things that she has is afraid of something as banal as a chicken wing. And yet from the apprehensive look on her face, she clearly is.

"What is it?" Emma asks. "Is it really just dislike of greasy food?"

"I was a Queen," she says simply, like that should explain everything.

"So you weren't allowed to eat anything that tastes good?" Henry queries.

"I was expected to stay in good shape so no, there wasn't much tasty on that menu," Regina replies, and it's a terribly sanitized answer for what surely indicates something far darker.

Something that smells and sounds and looks a whole lot like loss of control.

"Well, I don't care if you're fat," Henry shrugs as he reaches for one of the wings. The words are so careless and tactless, but also so endearingly honest and innocent. Enough so that even if a part of
Regina wants to rail against them and the naive simplicity, she finds that she can’t.

So she laughs instead, and it’s quite beautiful, Emma thinks.

"Good to know, sweetheart," Regina says before leaning forward and picking up one of the wings with the very tips of her fingers. She quickly deposits it onto her napkin, and then stares at it like it might bite her.

"Go on," Emma urges. "I bet you’ll love them."

"I don't think you should be making anymore wagers," Regina reminds her with a mischievous glint in her dark eyes. "You've already got a week of salads ahead of you; I'm not sure that you can handle two of them."

"Yeah, probably not. Still, you are stalling at this point."

"They're great, mom," Henry assures her. "Really."

Regina licks her lips, and then does it a second time. Finally, her shoulders squaring like she’s going to war (a rather hilarious visual, Emma thinks, at least until she remembers that Regina actually has gone to war), she lifts up the hot-wing and brings it to her mouth, the red sauce smearing across her pale lips (even though she'd dressed up like her old self, she'd gone curiously absent her normal audacious makeup) despite her best attempts to limit the mess.

"Well," Emma says after a moment. "How is it?"

"Greasy," Regina responds as she puts down the bone, continuing to show distaste at the mess created. She quickly dabs her lips clean and then does a sweep of her hands as well.

"But?" Henry prompts, grinning up at her as he reaches for another wing.

"Who said there was a but?"

"There's always a but," Emma states.

"Not always, but I suppose in this case, yes. The taste was…satisfactory."

"Which in your vocabulary means pretty damned good, yeah?"

And that earns her the eye roll that the blonde sheriff was looking for.

"Exactly," Emma nods, feeling entirely too victorious for her own good.

At that moment, Kimberly appears with the rest of their food, and an easy smile that Emma finds herself envying. Not that she would ever assume to know what goes on behind the eyes of someone she doesn't know, but she wonders what it'd be like not to have the weight of the world on her shoulders. What it would be like to be just a waitress and not the Savior.

And then she remembers a time when she’d been “just” something and wanted to be more.

The grass is rarely greener on the other side, she reminds herself.

"Ladies," Kimberly drawls as she settles a hamburger in front of Emma and a salad in front of Regina. "Sweetie," she adds on as she puts Henry's food in front of him. "If there's anything else you lovely people need, just let me know. I’m right –“ she points towards the bar. “Over there."

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She adds on a wink, and then wanders away with a swing of her backside.

Emma laughs.

"What?" Regina queries, her brow furrowing.

"She thinks we're together," Emma says with a shake of her head.

"We are," Henry says as he lifts the cheeseburger up to his mouth.

The women exchange a look; Emma's words had meant something else entirely to Regina, but then Emma thinks as she studies Regina's thoughtful expression, perhaps they hadn't.

Perhaps as always, Henry had been the one to see things clearly.

Not as far as she and Regina being together in the way Kimberly had likely assumed, but rather in the way that a family is. For better or for worse, over the last weeks, they've become that.

"Yeah, Kid," she says. And then she reaches out and sneaks two of his fries.

"Hey!" he protests. "Eat your own."

"I like yours better."

"Emma," Regina sighs, looking exasperated and amused all at once.

And damn there's that easy smile again. She's flashing it at Henry, and she's flashing it at Emma, and she seems blissfully unaware that she actually appears to be happy for a moment.

"Fine, fine," Emma good-naturedly grumbles in response to Regina's light-hearted scolding, all the while wondering why she hadn't thought to get all of them out of the house together before today. She knows the answer, of course; Regina hadn't been ready for a trip like this until recently. She's still not what anyone sane would call steady and calm. Her moods continue to fluctuate badly, and her emotions are all over the place even from minute to minute. She doesn't know who she is anymore, and that's all kinds of dangerous for everyone involved.

And yet seeing this right now, seeing mother and son laughing as Henry tries to cajole Regina into taking a bite of his cheeseburger, it makes Emma feel warm. It makes her feel like the last several weeks have been worth it. It makes her feel like the wildest most insanely improbable plan in the world just might work out beautifully for all of them.

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Dinner, once they're back at the house, is a hearty beef chili that just about burns out all of Emma's sinuses. When she coughs in response to the first bite, she gets a knowing smirk from Regina, and a mischievous grin from Henry, and she knows – she just knows – that the two of them planned this dinner together specifically for the purpose of seeing her reaction.

Any other time, being made the butt of a joke between mother and son might annoy the crap out of her, but she actually finds herself laughing between ample gulps of ice-cold water.

Laughing and then in the same breath, wondering if she has the guts to keep the promise that she'd made to herself in the grocery store – the promise to talk to Regina tonight about the phone...
conversation that she'd had with Neal earlier in the day. The conversation about Henry.

One look across the table – one wary look over at Regina and Henry who are laughing together in a way she hasn't seen in a very long time – and Emma feels her stomach clench as anxiety rolls through her. This conversation has to happen tonight; she knows. The question is: how.

Part of her wants to wait for a different day – one that hasn’t been as wonderful as this one has been. She stops herself cold, though because, in spite of all of her worry about this, Emma knows that she can't preach and ask for trust if she doesn't extend as much back to Regina.

She can't promise Regina that she’s worthy of such if she holds back hard truths from her.

Regina can handle this, Emma assures herself.

Sure, the last time Neal had become an unwanted part of their lives, it had kicked Regina off into a nearly murderous rage that had required hot chocolate and a boxing bag to calm her down from. But the thing is, Emma kind of understands Regina's fear regarding Neal.

She has the same fears.

Fears that she knows need to be addressed.

Tonight, she tells herself between sips of beer, they will be.

It's while they're cleaning up after dinner – and she's watching Henry and Regina clean and stack the dishes like this is something they've done a hundred times (they have, she knows) – that she realizes that she needs to clear her head and figure out the best way to go about this.

"You guys got this?" she asks, leaning against the counter.

"Of course. Is there something wrong?" Regina asks; her perfectly sculpted eyebrow lifted in concern. She knows that Regina had seen her sudden mood shift during dinner; had seen her go from laughing with them to quietly brooding over her darkening thoughts.

"No; it's just really nice outside and it's been a few days since I've had a chance to really stretch my legs. If it's all right –"

"Go," Regina says, and there's something in her eyes that tells Emma that Regina sees through her. It's unsettling, this odd familiarity that exists between them, especially in these moments.

Unsettling and oddly comforting.

"You sure?"

"You're like a child with too much sugar pumping through their veins, Miss Swan," Regina tells her with a dry chuckle. "And in my experience, it's best to just run all of that energy out when you have the opportunity to. So go and get out of here; let us clean up in peace."

It's clearly an attempt to allow Emma the space she needs to figure things out, and the blonde finds her wondering just how much Regina already knows. Had she overheard the call? Is she just waiting to be told the truth? And if she is, does she think less of Emma for how long it's taken for
her to come clean? She finds herself more than a little surprised by just how much that thought
bothers her especially after the day that the three of them had had together.

"Cool; thanks," Emma sighs. She nods at Henry. "You missed a spot."

"Did not."

"So the red blotch there is part of the plate?" She flicks her hand towards the dish, pointing directly
at a spot of chili sauce still stuck there.

He scowls at her. "Yes," he says, and then scrubs at it.

Her eyes flicker up, then and she catches Regina's own. She offers the older woman a small smile,
one meant to reassure Regina because she can see the doubt there.

If only Regina knew the truth of the matter.

Soon enough, Emma thinks, and then heads out towards the sand.

Long done with her run, she's been sitting in the sand by the edge of the water for almost an hour
when she hears the soft sound of footsteps approaching from behind her. She knows who's coming
towards her without even looking; there's only one person it could be – Regina.

This whole scene is oddly familiar to both of them, and she's just a little bit surprised when she
doesn't see a bottle of whiskey in Regina's hands.

"Sorry," Regina says with a smile as she seats herself next to Emma in the sand, folding her legs in
front of her. She's barefoot now, having tossed off her heels. She is, however, still wearing her
slacks, but has at least allowed for the cold by slipping on a hoodie. "No alcohol tonight."

"That's a shame," Emma notes. "No blanket, either?"

"Henry was using it."

"Ah."

"So, are you going to tell me what I've done this time?"

Emma closes her eyes; this is the last thing that she'd wanted to happen, and the one thing she
should have known would occur; Regina is in a vulnerable place emotionally right now, and is
susceptible to self-doubt. She's coming face to face with her past and her deeds a little more every
day, and part of that means taking responsibility for well, just about everything.

Including the things that she's not sure she'd done, apparently.

"You didn't do anything," Emma assures her. "This one is on me."

"Does it have something to do with the reason you shattered your phone this morning?"

"Yeah, Neal called."
"Did he now?" It sounds like a question, but Emma can hear the darkness of the tone, and the disdain that drips off every syllable. Emma slips her hands into the pockets of the hoodie and brings them together inside of there, trying to hide the nervous twitching of her thumbs.

"He wants to see Henry."

"I see. And you said?"

"I said it wasn't my decision, and it's not."

Regina tilts her head. "Then whose is it?"

"Yours and mine. We're in this together, right?"

Regina nods slowly, surprised but clearly pleased. "So that's it?"

Emma's brow furrows. "What do you mean?"

"You threw a phone through a wall --"

"Into a wall, not through."

"Semantics," Regina dismisses with an impatient wave of her hand. "You – who chastised me about acting beneath my age - had a temper tantrum and broke your phone. And then, you spent all of dinner brooding about this, and this – a phone call - is all it is and was?"

"Well, when you say it like that, it sounds pretty stupid," Emma grumbles. She offers a small sheepish smile "But, for what it's worth, I've spent more than just dinner brooding about it."

"Should that make me feel better? Tell me, what reaction were you expecting from me?" Regina holds up her elegant hands as if to show Emma how useless they are. "I have no magic in this world, as you well know; did you think I would come after you with the knife again?"

"No! No. I didn't – I'm not afraid of you…I…” she sighs and tries again. “Okay, look, I get that you don't want to let Neal into our lives. I don't really want him to see Henry, either, but –"

"But Henry wants it, and if I've learned anything over the last year, it's that trying to keep him from the people he considers family" – she closes her eyes for a moment when she says this, letting the pain and rejection of the word wash over her like ice cold water - "Will only lead to heartbreak and loss for me. If letting him see…your ex boyfriend is what needs to be done –"

"Hey," Emma says with a shake of her head. Her voice softens even further. "No, this isn't about losing him to Neal; I swear to you, Regina, that's not what's going to happen here."

"You only say that because since you returned to Henry’s life, you haven't actually been in danger of losing him," Regina reminds her. "I, on the other hand, spend every minute of every day wondering if some decision I'm about to make or have made will cost me my son for good."

"I'm sorry," Emma tells her, frowning as she stares out at the water. The sun is rapidly setting over the blue ocean now, spraying brilliant beams reds and golds across the crashing waves. "It all made so much sense in my head. I didn't believe you, you know?"

"When?"

"When we first met; I asked you if you loved him. You told me you did, and I was so sure that you were lying. I convinced myself of it, and I never thought about what I was doing to you."
"No, you didn't," Regina confirms. "But you did think about him, and what you thought was best for him, and if I want to be the mother he deserves, I guess I should start doing that, too."

"I'm sorry," Emma says once more.

Regina chuckles. "You already said that."

"I meant for making a mess of this thing with Neal. I should have just told you the truth this morning, but I didn't want you to think I was pushing Neal on you. I didn't want you to think I was taking his side. Because I’m not." She looks towards the water for a long moment, drawing in a deep breath before continuing, “I wasn’t thinking of Henry when I chose not to believe you. It’s weirdly kind of you to say that I was, but we both know otherwise, Regina. I was thinking of myself and what I’d lost and my own guilt and you were a convenient target for all of that.”

“I didn’t help matters,” Regina reminds her.

“No,” Emma admits.

A moment of quiet passed between the two of them, and then Regina says softly, "All I ask is that you be honest with me, Emma. Despite our poor beginnings, you're the only person in my life who ever has – for better or for worse – and yes, I might react badly, but I'm trying not to, and maybe that doesn't mean much because it's me, but I'm trying, and I hope that's enough."

"It is, and I will," Emma promises her.

"Thank you," Regina murmurs, then looks out at the water once again. “You know; I was thinking earlier – after you left for your run - about the question that you asked me the night we got here. Before I tried to kill you with a kitchen knife, I mean."

"Yeah, fun times." She shakes her head. "What question?"

"About whether or not I had a childhood memory that was good."

"You said you didn't."

"I wasn't lying," Regina insists. "I just…didn't remember."

"I'm guessing you had another dream?" Emma asks with a lifted eyebrow.

"Yes, last night. It didn't end well, because other things took over and…twisted around what actually happened, but I remembered what was really there. It was…it wasn't bad."

"Tell me," Emma suggests, turning to look at Regina.

"It was my father, and no, he wasn't a strong man, but he tried to be a good man and he did love me, and that might not seem like enough to some people, but it was enough for me most of the time," the queen answers with more than a hint of wistful sadness in her tone.

"Okay," Emma says softly, realizing that her less than charitable feelings for Henry's namesake don't really matter; this isn't like Cora where it's a matter of Regina being in denial about all of the horrible things that her mother had done to her in the name of ambition and possession.

No, maybe Henry Sr. hadn't always been a protective father to his little girl, but he had loved his child, and for someone who has seen so little of that in her life, that is something.

It's something that no one has the right to take away from Regina.
"Anyway," Regina continues. "I was maybe eight or so, and it was just the two of us for a few days because my mother had been called away. She rarely left us alone so it was kind of a special thing. He told me he was going to show me some of the things he'd done as a child."

"He'd been a prince, right?" Emma queries, trying to remember some of the history that she'd dug up from Mary Margaret about Regina's father.

"As a child, yes, but he'd been the youngest in his family, and there had been little expectation of him ascending to the crown. Not yet, anyway. He'd mostly been allowed to just be the young spoiled prince that he was."

"So what does a young spoiled prince do?"

"He breaks every rule he can," Regina laughs. "We had a fairly large amount of property – lots of space to run and ride around in and over those three days that my mother was away, that's exactly what we did. He had one of the ladies from the kitchen pack us a lunch full of the things my mother never would have allowed me to eat, and we went out to the highest point on the estate and had a picnic. I'd never had one before. It was wonderful."

Emma thinks to point out to the former queen that she's speaking about her mother in a somewhat negative way without flinching or reacting with defensive anger, but it seems like neither the place nor the time for such a thing; she wants to let Regina stay in this moment.

"So when you say they packed you all the things you weren't allowed to have, you mean lots of sweets?" Emma presses, tossing out her most impish of grins.

"The stuff you won't eat now."

"Yes, exactly," Regina confirms. She smiles warmly at the memory. "Afterwards, he took me fishing; my mother never would have approved, because girls of my breeding didn't fish, but he taught me how to bait a line and I caught a six-inch grizzle on my first try."

"Grizzle? Do I want to know?"

"It was an ugly little fish that was completely inedible, but I didn't care."

"No, I wouldn't think so," Emma nods, feeling a hint of jealousy. Considering the nightmare of Regina's own upbringing, it's unwarranted, but she feels it all the same because even a few good memories are something worth treasuring, no matter how tarnished by reality they might be.

"When my mother returned a few days later, she asked what we'd been doing. She had instructed my father to show me how to better ride my horse, and he had – only he'd shown me how to ride without a saddle. You should have seen it: the two of us racing through the woods. It was… it was amazing, and it was our secret. His and mine."

"Sounds amazing," Emma states, carefully observing the expression on Regina's face. It's happy and open, and full of joy. Her eyes are glittering, and she looks so very young and at ease.

"Yes," Regina confirms with a bright smile. "It was."

"You know, you're beautiful when you smile like that," Emma says softly. The words just spill from her lips, and the moment they're out, she wishes that she could pull them back because she's not sure how they'll be received by Regina. That they're true seems irrelevant to her.

But then Regina smiles again, this one quite a bit sadder, this one looking like the weight of the
world is once again settling down upon her shoulders. "Yes, well, unfortunately this isn't the real me, is it?"

"Isn't it? There's not just one side to you, Regina," Emma reminds her. "And I think I would know that better than most people. I've seen your dark side, and after this, I think it's safe to say I've seen your..." She trails off, frowning at how absurd the words sound in her own head.

"My light side?" Regina presses, smirking.

"Yes, Your Majesty, your light side."

"Well, I suppose it's nice to know that I still have one."

"You do, and Henry got to see it today, and so did I. It was really nice. I enjoyed myself, and I know he did, and I think you did, too."

Regina turns to look at her, her eyes narrowing in disbelief and amazement as she studies Emma. She shakes her head. "I don't understand you."

"Is that a good or a bad thing?"

Regina ignores the attempt at levity. "You come at me directly about my past, and the terrible things that I've done, but then you spend all day worrying that I'll be upset over Neal wanting to spend time with Henry. You tell me the honest awful truth about who I am, but you seldom try to hurt me with that knowledge, and then you tell me that I'm not who we both know that I am. I don't understand why you care so much about me, Emma. It doesn't make any sense to me."

"Does it have to?"

"Yes," Regina insists. "Yes, it does."

Emma nods her head thoughtfully. "Okay. You said your father – for all the things he did and didn't do – was still a good man, right?"

"He was."

"And Neal, in spite of what he did to me, I still believe that he's a good man, too. I wouldn't let him anywhere near Henry if I didn't believe that."

"I'm afraid that I don't follow."

"What I'm saying is, I care because I see that in you, too. I see the good in you and, I see the bad in you, and I see everything in between. I see everything that's there, Regina, and that's scary as shit because you're scary as shit, but you're also kind of...beautiful when you are and even when you're not. I care because I see all of that in me, too. Not necessarily the beautiful part, but everything else, and maybe it's selfish of me, but I want you to see it, too, you know?"

She shrugs her shoulders as if to hide the fact that she'd just babbled out what sounds to her like incomprehensible gibberish. She knows that her words sound silly, and childish, and they make her feel so very foolish, but they feel honest and truthful and right and so very necessary.

She sighs and looks right at Regina.

She startles when she sees Regina's dark eyes - wide and surprised, and full of such intensely complicated emotion - gazing back at her. "Emma," Regina whispers. She lifts up a shaking hand
and presses it against the blonde's pale cheek, her palm warm and soft against the skin there. "How do you not see what you are?" she asks in gentle disbelief. "How could you not –"

She trails off, shaking her head.

It happens, then, and Emma knows she should be surprised, and perhaps even slightly horrified – because God, this isn't supposed to be happening - but she isn't surprised.

Not even a little.

There’s a moment where everything just seems to stop, and then she feels the air between them lessen, and oh, there's the petal soft touch of Regina's lips against her own.

Regina tastes like red wine, spicy chili and peppermint flavored coffee.

Emma doesn't answer the kiss at first; she just allows for the feel of the contact.

Warm, gentle, and ever so slightly wet.

And then, her body kicking in, she does respond in kind, moving her own lips against the soft ones touching hers. Her eyes close, and she enjoys the feeling of being kissed by a woman who bleeds passion; she enjoys the heat and the contact, and the odd unexpected emotions that are rushing through her like fire.

That is, until she feels teeth nip against her lower lip, and her brain turns back on, and everything comes crashing back to her. She pulls back and away, her mouth open in surprise.

Emma starts to speak, starts to say Regina's name, because she has to say something, but Regina is looking at her with so many different things rushing through her dark eyes. Self-loathing, fear, hurt and the absolute certainty of rejection. The crushing belief that no one could ever really want her as she is.

She puts a hand out, but Regina shakes her head just a bit, and offers up the most awkward of smiles. "It's okay," Regina stammers out, but her tone and her eyes make it so very clear that it's far from okay. “You don’t have to say anything, I understand…you…you don’t.”

"Regina," Emma finally manages, her tongue thick and her voice heavy.

Another shake of the head, this one more urgent and desperate, and then Regina pushes to her feet and, with all of the dignity that she can muster up inside of her, lifts up her chin and walks back up the sand. Too shocked to do anything else, Emma watches Regina until she approaches the house, and then Emma turns back towards the water, and drops her head into her hands.

She mutters several curses against her palms, fighting back the urge to scream.

It shouldn't have happened, she scolds herself; she's not at all sure why it had because she certainly harbors no romantic feelings for Regina.

Right?

No, none. That had just been about the emotion of the memory of Regina’s father, and maybe the conversation about acceptance and maybe -

"Fuck," Emma growls out, because she honestly has no idea what that was about or why she'd responded or why part of her isn't sorry that it had.
She wonders how she could have been such an idiot; the first rule of trying to help someone through the darkest parts of their lives – a lesson she'd heard repeated a hundred times over during the many times that she'd crashed an AA or NA meeting in hopes of cornering a mark (or just because she'd needed to be around other people who understood how far a person could fall down) – is to never get emotionally involved with them. Never ever ever lose perspective.

Yeah, well, that's pretty much a crock of shit when the person you're trying to help is a former evil queen and the adoptive mother of your son.

Still….

It'd just been weird raw unexpected emotion running away from them.

That's it.

That's all.

Right?

Yes, yes, of course.

So simple a thought, but then she thinks of the expression she'd seen on Regina's face after the kiss had ended; she thinks of the hurt she'd seen there. It doesn't take a genius to guess how badly Regina is probably taking the perceived rejection right about now. She's stunned to realize just how much this bothers her.

"Stop being a coward," Emma says to herself as she stands up, because this time she doesn't plan to hide behind broken phones and good intentions.

This time, she can't afford to.

Henry's is sprawled across the couch with a blanket over his legs when she enters. "Hey," he greets, putting the book he'd been reading down.

"Hey, is your mom in her room?" Emma asks, stepping past him, and heading towards the hallway like she already knows his answer.

His eyebrow lifts. "No, she went out to see you."

Emma pulls up hard, stopping in her tracks. "Wait; are you saying that she hasn't come back to the house yet?" she asks, unable to hide her worry.

He sits up straight. "No. Why? Did something happen between you two?"

"Yes. No. Ask a question that isn't so complicated, okay?"

"Okay? How about where's my mom if she's not with you?"

"I don't know. Are you sure she didn't come back? Maybe she went right to her room."

"No. She would have said something," he insists with a deepening frown. "Even when she's upset,
she doesn't ignore me; she's not here, Emma."

"She has to be." She moves past him, and heads down the hallway. When she gets to Regina's room, she shoves the door open, and looks inside, immediately realizing that it's empty. The bed is made, and the closet is closed and everything is neat and tidy.

Regina, however, isn't anywhere to be seen.

She strides back down the hallway, and makes her way to the porch. The car is still parked in the driveway, but it only takes her a moment to notice that the sneakers, which are usually settled by the mat in front of the door, are gone. Which means that Regina is on the move.

"Fuck," Emma says again (though Henry hadn't heard it the first time), this time louder and with more vehemence.

"Emma?" Henry asks, moving to stand beside her. "Is my mom out there by herself? She's not ready for that; you know she’s not!" The words sound ridiculous, because Regina isn't someone incapable of taking care of herself, and yet there's a cold truth in the fact that right now she's not ready to deal with people on her own; she's been split open emotionally as of late, and if you add on whatever ugly emotion she's feeling after what had occurred on the beach, well God only knows what trouble she could get into with her temper and her constantly simmering self-loathing. That fear she has of never being enough (something Emma knows entirely too well - it's pushed so very much of her life) is exactly the kind of thing which leads to reckless bad choices.

"I know, Kid, but I'll find her, okay? Don't worry; finding people is what I do."

"What do I do?" he pushes.

"Stay by the phone. If she comes back, call me immediately.

"What happened out there?" he demands again.

"I screwed up," Emma admits. "But I'm going to make this right; I promise."

And with that, she turns and leaves, shutting the door behind her.

All the while praying that she hasn't cost all of them everything.
Possible Trigger Warnings for this chapter: a physical fight which involves a man striking one of our ladies. There are also crude sexual statements and a threat of a sexual assault. Neither is overly graphic.

His eyebrow lifts up and he grins at her in a way which makes her skin crawl. Not because he's a threat to her, but because his attempt at what he likely considers to be "harmless, but charming" flirting just reminds her of the horrendous mess – of her own creation – that she'd just run away from like a coward.

"I'm going to need to see an identification card, love," the bartender drawls as he leans across the counter. He adds on a grin that's meant to be suave, and she wonders if this routine actually ever works for him. Or maybe, this is just his typical shtick; she's hardly what anyone would call practiced at this kind of thing.

Even before the people of Storybrooke had known her to be the Evil Queen, she'd been the icy Mayor. Even before the truth of her identity had come out, she had been known as the one that could control people with her eyes and her words; she'd been the one who never failed to get what she wanted. And while that had been good for her as far as maintaining power and control, it had been horrific in regards to building long-lasting mutually beneficial relationships.

Even worse for learning how to casually flirt with strangers just for the "fun of it".

Then again, she'd always convinced herself that she'd never really wanted to do any of that, anyway. What good would it have ever done for her?

None, she thinks.

None at all.

"I don't have one," Regina admits. "But, I'm clearly over twenty-one."

"Are you now?" he asks, still laying it on thick.

She quickly comes up with three different ways to insult his manhood, but a part of her suggests a different course of action; be the Mayor, that old voice in her head tells her in a somewhat placating if patronizing tone.

Regina smiles silkily at him. "Oh, yes, I am well past twenty-one." She adds a deep laugh, then says, "I know I don't have my ID on me, but it's been a very long day, and all I want is a glass of wine to help me unwind. You can help me with that, can't you, dear?"

His look says that though she intrigues him, he's not going to give in on this one. That is until Kimberly – the pretty waitress from earlier in the day; apparently working a double shift – wanders behind him and whispers something into his ear, grinning at him before clapping his shoulder and then walking away.
Regina tilts her head. "Is there a problem?"

"Not at all. My girl was just telling me that you were in earlier."

"Your…girl is right," Regina nods, though she's guessing that Kimberly told him something else as well because the bartender – she finally notices that his nametag says Bobby - is no longer flirting with her. He's far from rude, but he seems to be consciously trying not to annoy her now. His smiles are polite and casually friendly instead of charming. Or what he'd considered charming, anyway.

"So what can I get you?"

"Your very best red would be lovely."

"You want a tab?"

She thinks for a moment – remembering the fact that not only does she not have an identification card on her, but she's also lacking a wallet – and shakes her head in the negative. "Probably best to keep it at just one."

"On it," he says before turning around to go for the wine bottles.

Her eyes track around the bar. It looks so different at night. Whereas earlier that same day, when she'd been here with Henry and Emma, it'd been cozy and quite family orientated in nature, now it's loud and rowdy. The pool tables are completely surrounded, and there are pitchers of beer everywhere.

A normal night around here, she imagines.

A good place to hide and think, she hopes.

Because she has to figure out just what she'd been thinking.

God, does she.

Impulsively – stupidly - kissing Emma, well that had quite clearly been a huge mistake on her part, Regina knows. She'd let her out-of-control emotions get the best of her, and because of that, she'd done something absolutely inexplicable.

Story of her life, she thinks bitterly, unable to stop her lips from curling into an angry sneer for just a quick furious moment before she manages to get her facial expressions back under control again. Her life and its subsequent unraveling has always been about her runaway emotions cutting her to the quick, the damage suffered leaving her exposed and bleeding out for everyone to see and laugh at.

She had gone to great extremes to stop the laughter.

For all the good that that had done.

"Here," Bobby says, placing a wine glass on the table. "On the house." He nods and offers her a knowing smile. "On account of the fact that you clearly have no cash on you, and something tells me you're not much for doing dishes."

Regina laughs loudly at that, and it actually feels nice to be having such an empty and light conversation even if only for a moment. As she accepts the glass from him, she says, "I will have
"You know that I'm actually quite good at dishes."

"Yeah, maybe. But have you ever washed them in the kind of hard soap and water that we use here?" he counters, glancing down at her elegant hands, but thankfully making no attempt to try to touch her. "Because I'm guessing no."

"No, probably not," she admits. She nods towards the glass and offers him another smile. In days long gone, she wouldn't have bothered with gratitude to the serving class even if doing so would have represented good manners. Per her mother, they'd been beneath her, and it had simply been their duty. This world isn't like that one, though, and she doesn't want to be that woman anymore even if she's doomed to always be her anyway. "Thank you," she says softly. "For the...for the kindness. It is...very much appreciated." These are difficult words for her – not only to say, but to believe – but she pushes them out just the same.

"Certainly. And you know; bartenders have good ears."

"Of that, I'm certain," she smiles. "But in this case, I just need to think."

"Then my suggestion is to grab the booth in the corner over there. Not the quietest spot in this bar, but it's away from the crazy of those idiots over there. Oh and word of advice? Stay clear of Bo. He's harmless until he's had four or five beers, but he's never less than a dumbshit." He points over to a well-muscled man bent over the pool table. He's in jeans and a red and black flannel shirt, and in the three seconds that Regina watches him, she sees him laugh loudly twice, and slap one of his buddies on the back with enough force to knock him out.

"So noted," Regina says, taking a sip of the wine. It's a great deal better than the spirits that Emma has been bringing back from the grocery store, and it takes everything she has not to sigh in relief at the taste. She offers one more smile towards Bobby the Bartender, and then makes her way over to the corner booth.

Bobby is right; the booth is off to the side enough that while it's certainly not hidden, it's not in the direct sight-lines of the loudmouths playing pool, either.

With an exasperated huff, Regina drops down into the padded seat, brushes crumbs off the table with the side of her hand, and then affixes her eyes to the wall opposite her. Her hand moves up almost automatically, bringing the glass of wine to her lips time and time again, the taste barely registering. Without her permission, her exhausted mind whirls as she thinks back to the kiss she'd shared with Emma.

To a taste which does linger.

Emma had tasted like light beer, lemon-lime Gatorade and cherry chapstick.

And salt.

Regina hates that she can remember all of those things so clearly. She's not some silly girl flying high from her first kiss. She's neither tender nor virginal and it's somewhat annoying to her that she can remember everything so damned vividly.

She reminds herself that it never should have happened, but the reality is that over time, Regina has learned the value of regrets; which is to say there is none. Which doesn't mean that she isn't plagued with them every minute of every day.

The dreams that she's been having as of late have made those regrets more constant. The guilt gnaws at her skin and at her mind, and she sees images and flashes of her horrific past in full color;
the people she's hurt and the things that she's done, and now can never truly escape from. The 
person that she is and as Emma had once said, will always be no matter whom else she might wish 
to be.

That, she tells herself, is why Emma had pulled away.

Why wouldn't she have?

Regina brings the glass to her lips once again, and practically inhales the next sip, allowing the 
vibrant spicy taste of the red wine to wash over her. She closes her eyes and tries to focus on flavor 
all the while pleading with herself not to cry.

There's been more than enough of that in her life.

And she is so damned tired of always feeling like there will be more to come.

She knows what she's done now, and she'll likely know even more tomorrow, she thinks, but for 
one night, is it too much to ask to not have to deal with the hurt and the tears and the feeling like 
everything is caving in and crushing her alive?

Is it too much to ask for everything just be quiet and painless for one night?

Her jaw hardens in frustration, and her hand tightens angrily around the wine glass, for a moment 
just about hard enough to shatter it. It's only the sight – once she opens her eyes again – of her 
intensely white knuckles that makes her release her hold and blow out a gust of cool air. She 
follows that up with a nervous laugh.

A nearly hysterical admission to herself that what she sees when she looks in the mirror is someone 
that she can barely tolerate – someone she is disgusted by.

After all, there had been a reason behind her blocking out all of the bad and horrible things that 
she's both experienced and caused for so long; she's not equipped to handle these kinds of emotions 
and feelings. She doesn't know how to navigate pain in any way that isn't both outwardly and 
inwardly destructive.

Worse than that, though, is the bitter understanding that she doesn't know how to deal with 
rejection and humiliation, and the absolute soul-rending knowledge that both are entirely earned 
and, that she's not good enough and never will be.

But she wants to be.

The question is – and likely will always be – is that even possible?

The more her mind treks back to the beach, and to the shocked look of horror that she'd seen on 
Emma's face, the more that she thinks that the answer is quite clearly "no". And the more she 
thinks that the answer is "no", the more she thinks that she just need to accept that some doors 
aren't open to her anymore, and perhaps that's exactly as it should be. Perhaps, they shouldn't be, 
anyway.

It's not just about Emma, she tells herself, and it isn't.

Her thoughts about the sheriff are confused and uncertain, and while Regina has always struggled 
to break good and bad emotion apart, and to understand the difference between them, even she 
knows that the complicated feelings for Emma that are racing through her heart right now are far 
more than platonic.
Still, the corrosive and greedy darkness that's beginning to steal its way across her soul once more, she knows that it's about more than just rejection from Emma.

It's about rejection period.

She looks around the bar, her eyes settling on Bo. He's an absolute brute, and there's nothing at all attractive about the man, and yet people are all around him, surrounding him. Some are clinging to him because he's the big man there, but others seem like they want to soak up his energy. They want to be near him.

Bobby the Bartender had called Bo a dumbass, and yet even Bo is managing to find those who would choose to be around him of their own free will, and not simply because they're trying to keep him from murdering someone that they care about. Or because they're trying to save him from himself.

She cocks her head as she continues to watch Bo. She's fairly certain that though he wouldn't reject her physically (for all of her self-doubts and all of her self-loathing, the one thing she knows for sure is that she is externally, at least, a beautiful woman), probably even he would be horrified by the truth of who she really is.

She's pretty damned sure that anyone would be.

Even Emma Swan.

There's a line between helping someone and being more than that to someone, and Emma had drawn it into the actual sand tonight. Not that she can really blame Emma for that. First, she was most likely quite surprised by the sudden kiss and second, she was clearly rather obviously disgusted by who it was kissing her.

Moving all of that aside, there's also the question of where the sudden romantic feelings for Emma had come from. Had they always been there to some degree or another? What are they about and why are they surfacing now? Why had she felt so damned compelled to be as close to Emma in that moment as she could?

And what had she been expecting to happen?

What had she wanted to happen? What had she wanted Emma to do?

The realization that she doesn't actually have answers to these rather frightening questions hits her hard, and for a moment, Regina struggles to breathe around the icy grip of the decidedly negative and painful emotions that are flooding her.

She takes another breath and another sip, and realizes that yes, she's going to have to find a way to open a tab tonight because thoughts like these, well she's certainly no stranger to them, but at least back in Storybrooke, she'd had her full cellar and her apple cider available to her. Tonight, one glass of red wine just isn't going to cut it. Alcohol makes her strong and angry – it brings out the fighter in her and while that might be dangerous with magic, it's harmless out here.

She wants to be a better person, a person worthy of love and being loved, but she also wants to be strong and sometimes the only way to be that is to be angry.

Anger has destroyed her, but it has also kept her on her feet when everything in her life has been hell-bent on driving her to her knees. Including Emma Swan.

Her anger has always been the worst of friends and the best of allies.
She lifts her hand up and waves to Kimberly.

Flashes the pretty waitress what she hopes is a dazzling smile, and asks for something stronger. Something that will help her deal with this terrible night.

She'll worry about how to pay for it all later; for now, she's going to just forget everything. Forget everything and let the anger take her away from the pain.

Emma finds that she's almost ridiculously glad that it's a fairly cool night, because she's been walking around for the last hour and a half, all the while getting more and more frustrated with each passing minute. Even with the chill of the crisp Maine air, she's sweating through the thin fabric of her gray zip-up hoodie.

Which is perfect. Just perfect.

Add to that the fact that her vocabulary is starting to devolve into little more than creative curses and angry grunts of irritation as place after place that she looks for a likely very angry Regina comes up empty, and she knows this night is quickly becoming a rather impressively epic clusterfuck. The kind that she specializes in.

She feels a buzz in her pocket and quickly yanks her phone out, her green eyes lighting up when she recognizes the number as the beach house line.

"Henry," she asks as she speaks into her cell phone. "Is your mom back yet?" She can hear the desperate hope in her voice, and yeah, it's a bit pathetic, but she doesn't even really try to hide it because she thinks if anyone might understand the need to find Regina as soon as possible, it's Henry. He might not know the all of it – he certainly doesn't know about the kiss – but he knows that his adoptive mother missing in action and clearly upset is almost always a bad thing.

"No; I was calling to ask if you'd found her yet."

She blows out air. "Not yet."

"Okay," he says quite reasonably. "Well, where have you checked so far?"

She considers reminding him that she knows what she's doing, and doesn't actually need his help to find his mother, but instead of getting into it with her not-quite-teenaged son (which if he's anything like Regina – and he's actually a lot like her – will just lead to more arguing) she decides to just answer, "The beach."

"And?"

"Your fort."

There's a pause before he speaks, and she can pretty much perfectly visualize the way he wrinkles his nose in annoyance at her words. "Did you really think she'd be sitting in the middle of it? It's cold and wet outside, and it's not finished yet."

"Yeah, I got that. But, hey, Kid, here's an idea: how about a bit less mockery and a bit more help, yeah? I've been trying to think of places that she might know around here. There aren't that many,
but that seemed like maybe it was a possibility. Okay?"

"Okay. Fine. Sorry. She's not there. Where else?"

Emma rolls her eyes as his obvious annoyance. "What else is that I'm making my way down Main Street," she responds, scuffing the tip of her shoe against the cement of the curb she's standing on. She scratches idly at a dark stain she sees there, and finally stops when the intelligent part of her brain kicks in enough to tell her that no matter what she does to remove the mark, it isn't going anywhere; it's been there far too long and –

Jesus, the metaphors.

"Have you tried the bar we went to for lunch today?" Henry asks her.

She kicks at the stain again and scowls before finally replying petulantly, "No."

"Em-ma."

"Hey," she protests weakly because really, what else is there to say?

"You find people," he reminds her with an impatient sigh, and she wonders why she's having this conversation with her son. Right before she wonders why she didn't think of the bar first. Because he's absolutely right: finding people when they're running is what she does best, and the way she does it is by thinking about who they are and what they would do in times of desperation and fear.

So why hadn't she done that with Regina?

Simply stopping for a moment and thinking would have told her to retrace the steps of the town that Regina might have known well enough to go back to assuming she hadn't tried to leave Haydenport entirely – which considering Henry is still back at the house – Emma's fairly certain isn't the case here. So logically thinking, the grocery store and the phone shop wouldn't have made much sense, which would have left checking out the bar where they'd had lunch as a…

As a family.

Right.

She curses under her breath.

"What was that?" Henry asks.

"Nothing," she mutters. She runs her fingers through her hair, feeling the dampness of mist between the blonde strands. It's all so insanely confusing.

She kicks at the stain again.

Sometimes, metaphors help you understand things that you might not have otherwise; sometimes they shine a bright needed light on difficult situations.

And sometimes, conveniently handy metaphors are just meaningless and trite words meant to help you separate yourself from the emotions and feelings and thoughts that maybe you shouldn't be having because they complicate things.

Emma wonders, then – with more than a slight degree of self-disgust and guilt - if maybe she's been intentionally/unintentionally stalling for the last hour.
She wonders if - subconsciously - she has been trying to collect her thoughts. Perhaps trying to figure out a way to explain to Regina why she'd pulled away from the kiss without hurting Regina or destroying all the progress that they've make together as…

Together as what?

Yeah, that's probably why she's stalling, she thinks. Because she has no idea what she feels or is supposed to be feeling or…or well, anything. She knows herself well enough to know that it hadn't been surprise which had made her respond to the kiss (or break away from it for that matter), but she also has the part of her that is reminding her of all the things she'd promised Regina, and all the things Regina needs in order to heal. Romantic complications of any nature fail to qualify.

Romantic complications?

What?

Where had the idea of those come from?

She'd growl if it wouldn't look so insane and unhinged.

"Emma?" Henry prompts, and it occurs to her that she hasn't said a word in several…seconds? Minutes? Either way, she'd checked out of the call.

"I'm here," she sighs. "Sorry. Yeah, the bar is a good idea."

"You're worried," Henry notes. "Do you think she's doing something bad?"

She almost laughs, once again reminded of how very simple Henry's moral code is. Things are so clean for him: so very black and white, right and wrong, good and bad. He has no concept of gray, and though he genuinely loves his adoptive mother probably even more than he realizes, his lack of understanding about the gaps between absolutes always seems to bring him back to those absolutes.

"No," Emma assures him. "I'm just…I'm worried that she's hurting."

"Because you…screwed up."

"It's complicated."

She can almost hear his scowl.

"I know, I know," she laughs, deriving just the smallest amount of satisfaction at his frustration; seems to her that after his mocking of her, he deserves it. "Look, just stay by the phone, and I'll be in touch as soon as I find her, okay, Kid?"

"Fine. You have ten minutes."

"Seriously?"

"She's my mom, Emma; she doesn't handle being hurt well. I would think that you more than anyone would know that. Remember? She cursed a whole world because she was heartbroken and mad. You have nine and a half minutes now."

"First, that's a ridiculous oversimplification of things, and second, I'm fairly certain that you just gypped me fifteen seconds." She almost adds on the endearment, "you little shit" but manages to stop because she's pretty sure that Henry's never been called that before – even as affectionately as
"Fine," he lobs back. Now you have nine and a half minutes."

"Out of curiosity, what happens after the ten minutes are over?"

"We could be in Iowa."

"Iowa; right. Bye." She hangs up and shakes her head in amusement; the kid certainly has a vivid imagination and an odd sense of humor. Her eyes track up the road that leads towards the bar. Somehow, she just knows Regina is there.

Because, yes, Regina is a wildcard with extreme predictably issues, but she's also far from home, and likely looking for something to anchor onto right now.

The bar isn't much of anything, but it is the one familiar for her in Haydenport.

And the afternoon spent there? Well it's surely a good memory for her.

"And for me," Emma mutters, and then kicks the stain again.

She takes a deep breath, claps her hands together like she's readying herself for battle, shrugs her shoulders like she's a drifter without a care in the world, and then starts down the street, each step longer and faster than the previous one.

She has no idea what she's going to say to Regina or how she's going to even begin to explain herself to the Queen, but she knows that she needs to try.

They've come too far – both separately and together - over the last few weeks not to at least try to figure out where they are and how to get through it.

And what she'd said to Henry back at the house a few minutes later about making this right, well that's accurate, too, she thinks as her pale lips set into a thin line of determination. Now, she muses as she reaches the door of the quite busy and extremely loud bar, now she just needs the right words.

She laughs to herself at the absurdity of this as she pushes the door to the bar open, and wonders how it is that she always ends up in such stupid situations.

By the time she's on her fourth tumbler of top-shelf whiskey, the anger has melted away to morose brooding, which frankly just pisses her off all the more.

She'd been counting on the tightening of her muscles and the hardening of her heart to get her through the hurt of tonight, but instead, she's thinking about the people she's loved and lost in her life. Instead, she's thinking about her mother.

Who is the very last person in the world that Regina wants to think about right now; if only because there are so very many landmines lurking out that way.

So very many ugly and jagged rocks just waiting to be turned over only to expose pain that runs far too deep to ever be truly eradicated or properly exorcised.
And yet, as the last swallow of alcohol sears its way down her throat, Cora and her last moments of life – and her last words – are the only things on her mind.

You would have been enough.

It's a great thought, Regina thinks bitterly, but would it have been the truth? If Snow White had given her a heart free of poison to place back into her mother's chest, would Cora have been a good soul dedicated to ensuring Regina's happiness or would she still have wanted absolute power and control?

Would she still have –

Regina growls; this is pointless madness, and worse than that, it's an insult to the dead. Cora can no longer defend herself thanks to Snow White, and even absent that, she'd still be Mother. She'd still be the one person willing to cross multiple worlds to convince her daughter of her love for her. Wasn't that enough?

No, something deep inside of her rumbles, because that's not love. That's something else and hasn't enough blood been spilled because of it?

"You're running up quite the tab," she hears from above her, the voice low and familiar in a way that causes everything inside of her to both speed and heat up.

Her eyes narrowed and hazy, Regina blinks and looks up, seeing Emma standing above her, a small smile playing across pale lips even as frustration and irritation shows clearly on her face; she might be trying to play this soft, but she's not one bit happy about being here. Likely considers this a burden, Regina thinks angrily.

"Miss Swan," Regina drawls. "So very nice to see you."

"And we're back to that. You know what? Because you're clearly drunk, and it's been a pretty weird night for both of us, I'm going to let you get away with it."

Regina snorts in disgust. "I don't need anything from you, Swan. Ever."

It's not the words that make Emma's head snap backwards – she'd expected them, to be honest – it's the vehemence she hears. The disgust. Like Regina is absolutely beside herself at the idea of what she'd done. And with whom.

Well, fucking fine, then.

"Actually," Emma counters, her tone tight and hard. "You need me to pay your bill." She gestures back across the bar, to where Kimberly is standing over a table, talking to the two men there. "She told me that you promised her that 'your Emma' would handle it. She's under the impression that we're having a fight."

"Aren't we always?" Regina replies, lifting an eyebrow in a way that's supposed to come off as haughty and superior, but mostly just looks lazy and tired.

"Sometimes," Emma admits with a shrug. Realizing that things are getting away from her again, she intentionally lightens her tone and tries to ease back on the tension a bit. "But I don't think that this was really a fight, and –" she chuckles and grins, " I didn't know that I was 'your Emma'." She's clearly trying to tease Regina out of the funk that she's currently in, but the Queen isn't budging. Her fingers are curled tightly around her mostly empty glass, and Emma finds herself quite certain of the fact that had Regina any of her magic right now, many an object in this bar would be flying
around it.

Her eyes are turbulent, angry and sad.

And Emma just wants the right words to make this all better.

"You're not anything besides my captor, Miss Swan," Regina snaps back, lifting the glass to her lips and draining out the last three amber drops of burning alcohol.

"Got it," Emma mumbles in defeat. Intelligently, Emma knows that Regina doesn't actually mean what she's saying; they're a long way now from captor and prisoner, and Emma's fairly certain that what had happened tonight wouldn't have if Regina still viewed her as a jailer. Intelligently, she knows all of this. Emotionally, it hits a bit harder and deeper.

Because she's still the Lost Girl who just desperately wants and needs to be enough for someone.

Even a former Evil Queen.

Perhaps especially one simply because if anyone could understand the depth of despair and self-loathing, well...it's someone who could write a book about it.

It's someone like Regina who has been living with those emotions for longer than Emma has been alive.

Letting out a tired, weary breath, Emma drops down into the seat opposite Regina, and then places her fumbling hands into her pocket of her hoodie.

"I didn't say you could sit with me," Regina reminds her in a petulant tone.

"Yeah, well, I didn't say that you could make me pay for your night of indulgent drinking, but here we are," Emma shoots back. She lifts her hand up, and grabs at the empty glass before Regina can try to find anything else at the bottom.

It's a bit funny to her; she'd spent her first year in Storybrooke wanting to bring Regina to her knees, wanting to humble her and make her act like a human being capable of showing weakness and vulnerability. Now that she sees all of those things, though, she just wants to make it all go away. Not because she doesn't want to see the honest and real side of Regina, but because she knows that this isn't truly that side of her. This is walls and more walls, and there's nothing good that can come of watching Regina humiliate herself by getting herself piss-drunk.

"Why are you here, Miss Swan?"

"Because I thought we should talk."

"About what?"

"Really? About what? Are you serious?"

"Deadly. I'm always deadly serious." She grins then, and yeah, it's a bit unsettling because there's a cold cruelty gleaming in her furiously dark eyes, but there's also enough slackness in her jaw to offset it and just make her look sad and broken.

"Then, I suppose it's a good thing that one of us has a sense of humor, isn't it?" Emma lobs back at her. "Because I'll be damned if I'm going to let what happened on the beach ruin everything we've built over the last few weeks."
"What exactly have we built, Swan?" Regina retorts, leaning forward, and getting close enough for Emma to get a warm brush of her alcohol spiced breath.

"I honestly don't know, Regina," Emma answers softly, refusing to move back and allow herself to be pushed away from the spiraling Queen. "But it is something, and we've worked too damn hard to let it go because we're both...confused."

"Confused? Is that what we are? Interesting." Regina backs away, arms across her chest in the motion which always signifies that she's trying to protect herself.

"You kissed me," Emma reminds her, picking at her nails even as she tries to maintain eye contact with Regina. It's a fruitless endeavor, unfortunately, because the Queen is too jittery and too anxious to stay steady enough for such.

"And you pulled away," Regina reminds her. "Like you'd been slapped."

"I think we're remembering things a bit differently," Emma states.

"Well that's hardly new," comes the dour response.

"Okay, look, here's the thing: you're drunk," Emma placates. "Very drunk, and I don't think that this is either the place or the time for this conversation. So why don't we head back to the house and --"

"And what? Pretend like I didn't just make an ass of myself?"

"You didn't, Regina; I did."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about...okay, I really don't want to do this here. If we can get out of here and find somewhere quiet to just talk, I promise I'll try to explain."

"Fine. Lead on, Sheriff." The words are practically spat out.

Emma nods, choosing to - for the moment - ignore the derisive anger she hears in Regina's biting tone. Half of that is alcohol related and the other half, well that's what they're going to go have a conversation about. She reaches into her pocket and pulls out her wallet, extracting several twenties (she's suddenly quite glad that she'd pulled some money out at the ATM earlier in the afternoon) and places them on the table next to the empty glass tumblers. "Ready?"

"Are you going to help me to my feet, too?" Regina drawls.

"Only if you want me to."

"I don't need it."

"Has anyone ever told you that you're a belligerent drunk?"

"Has anyone ever told you that it's not nice to antagonize an Evil Queen?"

"Yes. You. But I would think by now that you'd remember just how good I am at listening to people when they tell me what to do."

"We wouldn't be here if you were," Regina snaps back, her eyes blazing. "All you had to do was listen when I told you to leave town. Leave and never return."
"And if I had, you'd still be trapped inside your curse," Emma counters.

"At least I wouldn't be here."

"Here with me or here in there?" she points to Regina's head.

The Queen, for her part, simply rolls her eyes in response to a question which she appears to deem too deep for her rapidly fogging over mind. Refusing to continue playing this "game", Regina stands up, a hand out to keep Emma from reaching for her, and then pushing her head up to an almost impossibly sharp angle, she walks towards the door leading to the back alley of the bar. Her gait is awkward and clumsy, and right now she couldn't look less like Regina Mills if she actually tried to.

Emma finds that she kind of hates that.

It's weird, Emma thinks with a bit of a wry inward chuckle, just how much she's actually come to like and enjoy the company of the headstrong, sardonic, hot-headed pain-in-the-ass woman whom she's spent the last six weeks living with.

What she's seeing right now isn't any of those things.

This is hurt and sadness and the fear that nothing she does will ever matter anyway. This is the truth of who Regina Mills is beneath all of the titles.

A woman who truly does not see herself as anything beyond the Evil Queen.

Her jaw set, Emma's about to follow after Regina when Kimberly saddles up beside her. "You left too much," she says, glancing down at the twenties.

"Maybe, but I appreciate you keeping an eye on her."

"Sure. She looks like a difficult one."

"You have no idea."

"Mm," Kimberly smiles. "Be careful, honey. It's always the difficult ones who turn your whole life upside down and inside out. Even if it's worth it."

"Yeah, I know. Thanks again."

"I hope to see you guys again soon. Especially if you leave tips like that."

Emma laughs and nods her head, then follows after Regina, who has just exited into the alley, a hand extended out to the far wall in order to brace herself.

It's three seconds after she's come up behind where Regina is that she hears the sound of violent retching, and immediately, Emma knows that the walk, the cool air and the abundant alcohol are finally catching up with the broken queen.
As all things eventually do.

Emma briefly considers announcing her presence to Regina, but she's fairly certain that even drunk, Regina knows when her co-parent is around. It's not about the emotions that had sparked the kiss, but rather the weird string of fate and destiny and kismet that just seems to hang down between the two of them.

She steps behind Regina and after only the briefest second of hesitation, Emma reaches out and wraps her arms around the older woman's torso. The touch is light and not meant to constrict Regina in any way. It's there simply to offer her comfort and support, and to let Regina know that she's not alone in this moment.

Thankfully, for once in her life, Regina doesn't resist the offer of comfort. For once, she just allows someone to be there for her. Emma sees the way her head bows, and for a moment, she thinks that maybe Regina is crying, but then she hears the soft breaths, the ones meant to help her regain control of herself.

"It's okay," Emma whispers to her, just barely stopping herself from holding Regina tighter when really, that's all she wants to do right now. "It's okay."

"Now, this is adorable."

Emma doesn't bother hiding the growl of frustration that she emits as she lets go of Regina and turns around to face the newcomers. She sees the big dude she'd noticed when she'd come into the bar – the guy in the red and black flannel shirt.

"Such lovely ladies," he grins. "Ain't they?" he nods over at two of his very drunk buddies, both of whom are wearing matching stupid expressions.

Several different thoughts go through Emma's mind – various threats and promises – but finally, realizing that Regina isn't exactly the kind of wingman that she'd need for a fight like this, she says instead, "Buddy, I'm a cop. Don't do this."

"You're a cop," the guy in flannel laughs. "She's a cop. You know, I like cops."

Emma rolls her eyes at that. "Oh, of course you do. Look, here's the thing: my friend here isn't feeling very well, and I need to get her home so why don't we just smile at each other real nicely and we'll go that way, and you'll go –"

She doesn't even get the sentence out before he's moving towards her.

"Fuck," she growls as he pushes her into the hard wall of the alley, his belly pressing up against hers. "Are you seriously this much of an idiot?"

"Yes, I am," he breathes, the smell of beer and nachos violently assaulting her senses. "But I should let you know that I really don't like being called it."

"Then stop being it because if you don't let me go, I will rip something vital off of you and shove it down your goddamned throat," Emma growls out.

"Oh yeah? And while you're doing that, how are you going to protect your cute little girlfriend?" he chuckles, grabbing her by the hair and spinning her around so that she can see the way that his buddies have started moving in on Regina.

These drunk pricks truly are idiots, Emma muses; they're reading Regina's posture and body
language right now all kinds of wrong. The Queen is bent over a bit still, a hand on her knee, and she looks unsteady on her feet and like she's close to vomiting again, but her eyes have hardened.

The Queen is angry and getting angrier.

And God, normally that's the stuff of nightmares, but right now maybe it's a good thing.

Emma thinks that she just needs a little space to work with. Just a little and then they can make their way back into the bar and then out to the front of it.

"I don't need to protect her," Emma states, hoping that she's right.

"Really?" he laughs as he leans in towards her neck. "She looks so small. Is she tight, too? Little woman like that? I bet she fits just right." He laughs at his own horrible joke and it takes everything Emma has to not escalate the situation.

Because the men are still advancing on Regina and -

"I might look small, you inconsequential Neanderthal, but you're still no match for me," Regina growls out suddenly, standing fully up now. She's opposite Emma and Bo, separated from the sheriff by Bo's thug pals, but she's paying them absolutely no attention, her eyes locked on the man who has Emma pinned.

"No match for you?" Bo laughs. "Oh, you're cute."

For the second time tonight, Emma knows what's coming before it happens. She's almost smiling when Regina rumbles out in a low throaty voice that just about makes her shiver from her toes up, "You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"Oh now I get it," he chuckles. "I was trying to figure out what a broad –"

"I wouldn't finish that sentence if I were you," Emma says, inching her knee up towards his crotch. Normally, had it been just she and Bo, she would have taken him out by now, but with his buddies and Regina in the picture, things have to be timed better. She needs to ensure that once Bo hits the deck, she can grab Regina and get them inside quickly.

"Listen to her," Regina says. The only obvious signs of her intoxication remain in her eyes and the ever so slight wobble of her chin. Otherwise, she looks strong and in control. She looks furious, and positively absolutely murderous.

"Release her now," the Queen demands, and yes, at this moment that's exactly who Emma is seeing. She might not have her hair up on her head or her breasts lifted to her eyeballs like in the pictures from Henry's mysterious storybook, but there's a cold menace in her posture. There's command in her stance and tone.

"Whatever, bitch," he laughs, and then slams Emma against the wall again.

And that's just about enough. Emma's knee jerks up and into Bo's crotch with enough violent force to make him scream and tumble to the ground.

"Regina," she calls out, hand out to her.

It almost works, too.

Almost.
But Regina is just sluggish enough to be slow to respond, and in that moment, one of Bo's buddies is on her. With an angry yell and a crude profanity, he slams her to the wall, a fist cracking loudly across her face before he moves his hand to press against her throat in order to keep her pinned. "Stay," he commands her.

Emma expects a reaction to that – something furious and mean.

What she gets is all of the color draining out of the Queen's face.

What she gets is Regina yelling out in fear as a hundred different memories crash down upon her. She makes an almost inhuman sound – like wailing and screaming and crying all at once, and in that moment, Emma knows that wherever Regina is – and it's certainly not here in the now – it's a very dark and painful place, indeed.

A place that explains her terrible fear of restraints.

A place which unhappily elaborates on her need for absolute control.

"Get off of me," Regina demands, her voice shaking and breaking. She's fighting, struggling frantically, violently pushing against him, her nails sinking into his arms, and he's looking at her like he thinks she's gone completely mad. "Get off!"

"Knock it off," the thug orders, his other hand lifting up to strike her again.

She doesn't seem to hear him; just keeps struggling, and keeps fighting.

Until he again punches her across the face with considerable force, and then she just goes down. He's atop her almost immediately, once again pinning her.

Emma calls out for her, desperately trying to get her attention – trying to let her now she's not alone in the middle of this nightmare. Unfortunately for the both of them, one of the other men has Emma now and he has her in a tight chokehold of his own, his thick forearm pressed up against her throat, cutting the oxygen off.

And then everything starts to shake.

All of the sudden, and without any kind of warning, the light bulbs in the alley explode, glass flying everywhere, shards of it cutting through available skin.

"Earthquake," the man holding Emma screams out as he lets go of her.

But Emma's watching Regina's eyes and she sees it – the dim purple swirling there, light and hazy but there just the same – and knows that what's happening now has absolutely nothing to do with nature. Not that kind of nature, anyway.

Thankfully, Bo and his idiots don't know that. His boys lift Bo up from the ground and without a single look backwards, they run off like the cowards that they are.

The shaking continues, and another light somewhere else down the alley explodes. Pushing away from the wall, Emma approaches Regina slowly, her hands extended outwards. "Hey," she whispers. "You need to stop."

Another bulb explodes.

"Regina. Listen, please. Stop."
"Stop?"

"Stop. Stop doing that," Emma says, reaching out to very lightly touch Regina, and hopefully anchor her to the here and now. "I'm here. You're okay. I'm with you."

Emma's words of reassurance work because a moment later, the fierce shaking stops, and Regina looks up at her, her intensely dark eyes wide and panicked.

"I don't understand," she says, looking so very young and vulnerable.

"You can do magic," Emma breathes, her eyes equally wide.

"I…" Regina trails off, unsure of what else to say. Emma's right, of course; she had most certainly just used magic. How that's even remotely possible, she has no clue, but she knows the touch of magic far too well to even try to dispute it. She knows exactly what it feels like when it's turned on thanks to her fear and anger.

And that had been like a switch being thrown somewhere deep inside of her.

The terrifying memories had swept through her mind, and then she'd felt warmth within her blood and coldness across her skin. When that idiot had struck her the second time and then held her down like he'd been intending to do far more to her, she'd felt magic swimming through her, and then exploding out of her.

"We need to get out of here," Emma says suddenly, reaching out for Regina's arm, and grasping her fingers around the soft warm skin there. She gives Regina a hard tug, and then pulls her to her feet. "What you did was probably felt inside, too; I'm sure there will be cops on the way, and well…we shouldn't be here."

Regina simply nods her head in agreement, too stunned to protest.

They're about a hundred yards away from Henry's wood fort when Emma finally stops walking, and begins pacing back and forth in the wet sand instead. "Did you know?" she demands when she finally snaps around to face Regina, her hands settled anxiously on her hips, her elbows at sharp angles. Her body language is openly agitated, but the tone of her voice is shaky, and uncertain and she looks like she's about to either scream or cry. "Have you always been able to use it? Has this always been a fucking game to you, Regina? Has everything been a lie?"

Regina takes a step forward, her gait awkward and far more aggressive than she might have chosen to use towards Emma had she been sober, and thus more in control of herself. "No. I didn't…do you think I would…no, I didn't know. Don't you think if I could that I would have during the first few days that we were here?"

Emma allows the logic of those words to wash over her, dousing the rage that had suddenly jumped to the surface. "Okay, fine. But what about the boundary line? Blue told me that once we crossed over it, all of the magic would be gone. It was gone when I went across with Gold a few months ago. I don't understand."

"You think I do?" Regina queries, sounding so sad and scared and perhaps even a bit hysterical. "I thought I was free of this, but every time I try to be…" she trails off, her eyes closing as she blinks
back tears. "Believe it or not, I don't want it."

"Well, what do you want, Regina?" Emma snaps out suddenly, taking a quick hard step towards the Queen, her hands balled at her sides. "Because that's something that I've never been able to figure out about you. What do you want?"

"In general or from you?" Regina counters, her dark turbulent eyes finding and locking on Emma's. That Regina is still slightly inebriated seems to be a non-issue at this point, because she's fully aware of everything right now. Tired, but aware.

Emma's head pulls back, and suddenly, all of the anger leaves her body.

Suddenly, she's not facing off against an Evil Queen who might have been lying to her or fooling her – again – but rather she's standing against a woman who seems like she's running on the very last of her mental fumes. And in that moment, Emma realizes that she desperately doesn't want to be fighting her. "Either."

"In general? I want the same thing you do, Emma. I want happiness. I want something that doesn't feel like it hurts every moment of every day. I want a morning when I can wake up and not want to go back to bed. I want a child who loves me in spite of the monster that I am. I know how unfair it is to ask that of him – of anyone - but...I still want it. And you know what else I want? I want to not see red in front of my eyes before I see sunlight. That's what I want."

"And from me? What do you want from me?"

"I don't want a savior," Regina says softly, shaking her head, her hair for a moment sliding in front of her eyes before she brushes it away. "I know that's what you think you are to me, but that's not what I want or need. Maybe when this started, that's what I needed, but now...now maybe I need something else."

"Yeah? What's that?" Emma challenges, feeling her chest tighten up as the words leave her mouth. She can still quite vividly recall the soft kiss that they'd shared on the beach, and though she also remembers very much enjoying it for the three wonderful seconds that it had lasted before she'd pulled away, she finds herself worried that Regina is about to ask for something more in that vein - something that she's not sure that she'll be able to give her.

Now or ever.

That Emma is still not even remotely sure how she feels about what had happened between them is something she chooses not to dwell on for now.

Because the same reasons that she'd pulled away from the kiss before still hold true now. Whatever emotions might or might not exist between them, common sense dictates that building on an unsteady foundation isn't the way to go.

"I need a friend, Emma," comes the soft reply a moment later, the whispered words almost inaudible. A slight sniffle accompanies them, and then a gruff hand is wiped past Regina's eyes as if to push tears away. "That's what I want, too."

"A friend," the sheriff repeats in an expulsion of air as she turns the surprising word over in her mind. She'd honestly been expecting something more physical, and yet this request – so simple - seems so much bigger, so much more intense.

And for now at least, so much more important, too.
"Believe it or not, I've only ever had three in my life." She smiles sadly at this before adding, "Maybe I don't deserve friendship from you after all the things I've done, but, well, you asked me what I want and what I need, and there it is."

"I did ask and…I can be that for you," Emma assures her. "And to you. Friends."

Regina smiles once more, this one real and full, and Emma finds herself reminded of the tender moments on the beach that had led to the kiss between them.

A beautiful smile just like this one.

And then equally beautiful words expressed between the two of them.

A shame, then, that that had gone pear-shaped so damn quickly.

"Regina, look, I need you to know that I didn't pull back from what happened on the beach because I was…because I was…" She frowns trying to come up with the words to explain why she had done what she had done, and to not hurt Regina more at the same time.

"Disgusted?" Regina offers.

"No! I wasn't disgusted," Emma tells her. "Far from it. I just…you deserve better than something like that." She shrugs her shoulders awkwardly.

"I deserve better? Have you forgotten who I am? There are many who would vehemently argue that I no longer have a right to be loved at all. I'm fairly certain that if you told them that I deserved better than, well…they would laugh."

"Many people are idiots; doesn't make them right."

"Be that as it may, it's absurd to think that you are not worthy of me."

Emma has to look away for a moment. When she finally looks back up, she sees something strange in Regina's eyes – some kind of hurt, maybe? It's hard to exactly pinpoint. Choosing not to dwell on that, she pushes on. "Maybe, but that's not really what I meant anyway. What I meant was, we're here because both of us are pretty much giant messes. You were right when you said I have issues to work on, too. And believe it or not, you've been helping me as much…well, I don't want to lose that because of whatever attraction might exist between us. I'm not the smartest about relationships – I never have been – but I know that some things are more important, and what you said about needing a friend? I need one, too."

Regina nods her head. A part of her wants to rewind back to the comment about there being some kind of attraction between the two of them, but even in the dying embers of her alcoholic haze, she recognizes Emma's words for what they are.

Not rejection - not a promise either - but for once not the absence of hope.

For friendship if nothing else.

For once, someone is trying to be there for her in a way that isn't purely self-serving or some kind of game. Yes, helping her saves Snow's life, but there's no reason to be extending an offer of genuine friendship to her if that's all this is.

And it's not all it is; it hasn't been such for many weeks now.
"Are you okay?" Emma asks after a moment of thoughtful silence breathes between the two of them. "That moron in the alley got you pretty good."

"I've taken worse," Regina answers darkly. "And yes; I'm fine."

Emma thinks to push on that (there's a bit of a bruise on Regina's left cheekbone, and it bothers her that being hit isn't terribly alien to her – even accepting that she herself is one of the people who has struck Regina – admittedly, that had been in self-defense after Regina had hit her first, but still), but then chooses to let it go. Instead, with a loud sigh, she says, "We should probably call Henry. He's been buzzing my phone every thirty seconds for the last ten minutes. At least."

"He doesn't like to be ignored."

"Yeah, so I've gathered. You want to head back up to the house or…"

"I think I need to know."

"Know?"

Regina holds up her hands, palms out towards Emma. "I used magic back there in that alley, yes, but it was extremely weak. Making things shake is first day skills, Emma. I need to know if there's more than just that inside of me." She looks up at Emma. "I don't deserve it, but I need you to trust me when I tell you that I have no actual desire to use it, but that I just need to know if I can. I need to."

"Okay, but I think in the interest of that trust, we should tell Henry."

"I agree," Regina says with a hard swallow and wide eyes that suggest that maybe she doesn't agree as much she's implying that she does. But Emma knows that this is the part of Regina that wants to be better – the part that wants to do the right thing even when the wrong one might be so much easier for everyone.

"It'll be okay," Emma assures her, stepping close to her and then lightly placing a hand over hers. "One way or another, we'll figure this out. All of us. Together."

Regina offers a sad smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

And Emma wonders why it is that she thinks this one is beautiful, too.

Regina's standing by his fort when Henry arrives ten minutes later, out of breath and drastically under-dressed (wearing only his flannel bottoms and a Batman tee shirt). When she scowls at him – because even though she's trying to be the mother who isn't strict and inflexible, he still knows better – he answers her with an impish grin, and then a hard hug that somehow makes everything better.

"All better?" he asks, so innocently.

She laughs because gods, if only it were so easy. Still: "For tonight, yes."
"Good. So why are we here instead of in the house where it's warm?" he queries as he looks between his two mothers, frowning slightly when he sees his breath.

"Something happened at the bar that we thought you should know about," Emma states, choosing her words very carefully.

"So she was at the bar, then?"

"Yeah, Kid," Emma drawls. "You were right. Happy?"

He nods his head. "Go on."

"He's so your kid," Emma huffs.

"The lack of appropriate dress comes from you not me," Regina says.

"Um, guys," Henry sighs. "It's cold."

"The bad attitude and impatience are definitely yours," Emma cracks before turning back to Henry. "Okay, so here's the thing: when we were there, we ran into some trouble with a couple of the locals."

"Of course you did."

"Hey! First, no one needs a running commentary and second, hey."

"Thankfully his speaking skills came from me, too," Regina comments dryly, and it occurs to Emma that the Queen has sobered up all the way now. Which means that she's back to her regular snarky self.

Perfect.

"Okay," Emma nods, knowing full well that she's still stalling, but unable to resist playing around just a little bit more just for the fun of it. "He got his attitude and being a smartass from you. What exactly did he get from me again?"

"Your ability to find people," he reminds her. "I knew mom was at the bar."


Regina rolls her eyes in response.

"So are you guys going to tell me what happened? What did Emma do to make you take off?" Henry pushes, wrapping his arms around his waist.

"Right. Okay, so the first part – what I did and why your mom went for a walk – that was just a misunderstanding," Emma says, locking eyes with Regina, because while trust and honesty is the name of the game right now, it would be beyond ridiculous to let him know about something that might not have meant anything at all, right? Or perhaps even worse, it'd be a bad idea to let him know about something that had meant something, and then have to deal with whatever fallout from whatever his reaction might be.

Yeah, best not to go there unless they actually have to.

"And the second part? The part that has you guys acting all nervous?"
"I used magic," Regina says bluntly, her voice suddenly very soft. She licks her lips and waits for his reaction, knowing that it won't be good.

It's not.

"What?"

Emma imagines that he doesn't actually mean to use the hard harsh tone that he does, but it spills out of him anyway, and try as she might, Regina can't manage to stop herself from visibly flinching in reaction.

"It just…happened," she offers up, blinking rapidly. "I don't know how."

"And it wasn't much," Emma puts in quickly. "Just enough to shake a few lights and make our new friends run away."

"But you have magic still?"

"I don't know," she tells him, trying to make him see how truthful she is about this. "That's why we brought you here. I'm going to try to see if I can do simple things like move wood around or light a candle. We wanted you to see it so that…so that you know that I'm not lying to you."

He cocks his head to the side, studying her for a moment. "Okay," he says, "But you don't have to do this if you don't want to; I believe you."

She echoes his head movement, unable to hide her surprise. "Why?"

"Because you're telling me about this and you didn't have to. That means a lot to me, Mom." He offers her a bright smile.

"I appreciate that, sweetheart, but I still need to know for me, too."

He nods his head, and then points towards the fort. "Then try to lift that board there. We were going to have to ask Emma for help, anyway."

"Were you now?" Emma laughs, eying the massive branch with a bit of wary bemusement. "What am I? Just the muscle of this operation?"

In sync, both mother and son answer with, "Yes." And then Regina flashes her a smile meant to take any possible perceived bite out of the word.

Because these days, she finds that she does care about hurting Emma.

"Whatever," Emma shoots back, then offers them both an amused grin. "Go on, Your Majesty; see if you can lift the wood up." Her tone is much lighter than she actual feels; she's terrified that Regina will be able to use magic out here.

She's not ready for that. None of them are.

There's still so much trauma and emotion to work through before they can deal with the magic side of the coin. Still, there's no point ignoring what could be.

It's time to find out.

Henry slides down next to Emma and they both watch as Regina focuses on the woodpile, her eyes locked on a specific waterlogged board. She extends her hands, and her teeth grit as she
concentrates. It doesn't move even an inch.

After a moment, she shakes her head, takes a breath and tries again.

Still…nothing.

"You feel anything? At all?" Emma asks.

"No, not even a stirring." She flicks her wrists in the way that has always provided her with results (outside of her first few days post curse), and is rewarded with nothing beyond the slight irritation of the movement.

"I saw the purple in your eyes. Back in the alley, I mean."

"And I felt it," Regina admits. "But it's gone now." She holds up her hands and holds them out. "I don't understand. Like you said, there's no magic out here."

"That's a good thing, isn't it?" Henry asks, frowning slightly. He's looking between his two mothers, trying to read and understand their expressions.

"It is," Regina tells him. "I just…don't like being surprised."

"But everything is okay now, right?" His eyes flicker past the bruise on her face, and he thinks to ask her about it, but instinctively, he knows that they won't tell him the truth about how it had happened – they'll brush it off, and change the subject. He knows without even asking that this is one of those "ugly things".

"Everything is fine now," Regina assures him.

"So how about we get inside and get warm?" Emma says, clapping an arm around Henry's shoulder. "Your mom will even make us all some hot chocolate."

"Very well," Regina says. She and Emma exchange a look – slightly relieved, a bit worried, and terribly confused – and then she watches as Henry and Emma head back up the sand towards the house. She glances down at her hands once more, then back at the wood. A last failed try at lifting it up and then she sighs.

And hopes that that's the end of her magic out here in the so-called real world.

The kid – always smart and savvy - milks the craziness of the night for everything it's worth, managing to convince them that he wants to stay up just so he can be around the two of them for a few more hours. And it works; they let him stay up until almost eleven, and they probably would have allowed for even longer if not for the fact that when Emma looks over, she sees him dozing, mouth wide open.

"And he's out," she says, reaching out as if to tickle him.

"I wouldn't do that unless you want to be up for another two hours," Regina warns as she leans down to pick Henry up into her arms. He's far too big for her and Emma has certainly never
thought of the Queen as being physically strong, but Regina doesn't even hesitate to lift him, her arms protectively around him. "Can you hold his door open for me, please?" she asks as they near his bedroom.

Emma nods her head, her eyes still on the impressive scene in front of her.

Once he's down in the bed, and buried beneath a stack of heavy blankets, they both press kisses to his forehead, and then turn and leave, Emma turning the light off, and then closing the door behind them.

"Well, that was certainly a night," she sighs once they're out in the hall together.

"Yes," is all Regina allows. "And considering all the whiskey from tonight, I think it's safe to say that we can forego the nightcap."

"You had whiskey," Emma reminds her. "I had a beer six hours ago."

"Yes, well, I'm already going to wake up with a headache, but if you would like something, I can make you another cup of hot chocolate."

Emma grunts in response and nods her head in confirmation. She slides herself up to the barstool, watching as Regina effortlessly glides around to the refrigerator.

"So, since this is question and answer time…"

"It's not," Regina counters as she begins to warm the milk.

"It is. This is our thing."

"We need a new thing."

"I believe we tried that tonight, and I don't mean what happened on the beach. That whole taking on a bunch of small town morons? I think I'll pass."

"Indeed. All right, you get one question. Use it well."

"How very generous, Your Majesty."

"You're just about down to half a question now."

Emma snorts. Then, growing slightly more serious, "You'd mentioned that you've only had three other friends. Do I know them? Or at least of them?"

She sees the way Regina's muscles tense, and thinks that maybe the answer to her question is one of those "for later" topics. "Does it matter?" Regina queries.

"I suppose not, but like you said, you don't make friends easily so I would think whoever it was would have been fairly impressive."

"Not necessarily," Regina says, pressing a cup of hot chocolate into Emma's hands. When she sees the way Emma frowns in response, she sighs, "Do you need whipped cream or can you drink it like a big girl?" A lifted eyebrow - and a slight entirely too endearing pout - from the sheriff makes her chuckle in response, her own lips rising in response. "Right," she draws, completely incapable of hiding the smile which has overtaken her face. She steps back over to the refrigerator and pulls out the Readi-Whip. Two bursts of the heavy cream, and she's placing it back on a shelf and shutting the door again.
"Thank you," Emma says, feeling a bit foolish.

"Mm," is the only reply she gets as Regina leans casually across the counter, lounging in a way that Emma is dead certain she wouldn't have done even as soon as six weeks ago. So much has changed so quickly.

Feelings. Emotions. Relationships. All upside down and inside out.

"So," Emma prompts, trying to push away her own tumbling thoughts. "Your old friends. Unless you're putting them off-limits. For now." It's a gentle way of saying that if that's what Regina wants, she'll allow it. But only for the time being.

"Like you ever observe my off-limits," Regina retorts. And that's her own way of telling the Sheriff that yes, she knows exactly what Emma is saying to her.

It's their own language, Emma thinks, and it actually seems to be working for them.

Emma shrugs in response. "On or off-limits. You tell me."

Regina huffs, but then shrugs, like she knows that this isn't worth throwing a wall up about. "Fine. But only because whatever other stupid story you'll ask for in exchange will probably be even more irritating and intrusive." Off Emma's nod of confirmation (and her pointed refusal to rise to Regina's rather cantankerous bait), she continues with, "Well, there was Jefferson for one."

"Seriously? I figured the two of you were always a hate-hate thing."

"Far from it. For quite a time back in my world, we were very close."

"How close?"

Regina smiles slightly, her eyes for a moment growing distant as if to suggest she's remembering something from long ago. "Close."

"Ah. So what happened?"

Whatever wistfulness had been there before fades away rapidly, replaced by iciness. "We went down different paths and…he helped me down mine."

Emma tilts her head. "What does that mean?"

"I found out that he lied to me about one of my other friends."

"Who was?"

"Daniel."

"Daniel was a bit more than a friend," Emma counters, her eyebrows knit.

"Yes," Regina allows, her voice soft and pained. Like there are some wounds that will always be sensitive to the touch.

"What did he do? Jefferson, I mean."

"He worked with Victor and Rumple to convince me that there was no chance to bring Daniel back from the dead. I…reacted quite badly to the news, which ultimately was exactly what Rumple wanted." She shakes her head at the memory. "I fell right into his trap and that's on me, but it was a
"By Jefferson and...Whale?"

"Yes. After Jefferson fell in love and had a daughter, he decided that he needed to clear his conscience and come clean with me. I don't react well to that, either. I suppose the only reason that I didn't rip his heart out then and there was that...well, aside from that lie, he'd been a good friend to me most of the time."

"But you still left him in Wonderland. Which is where he got his head hacked off by your mother," Emma clarifies, her eyebrow slightly raised.

"Can't say he didn't deserve that," Regina shrugs.

"That's pretty intense as far as revenge goes."

"I don't take betrayal well," Regina says softly. She reaches for Emma's cup almost absently and brings it to her lips, wrinkling her nose at the taste. "Which brings me to my third friend. Maleficent. I, of course, knew her more as the person."

"And I killed her."

"You did what you had to do. What happened to her?" Regina shakes her head. "It's complicated. My relationship with her was complicated. But for a time, she was the most important person in my life. And then we chose different paths."

"Different paths," Emma muses. "Seems to be a running theme for you."

Regina looks right at Emma and then pointedly says, "It's the story of my life."

The not quite clear implication doesn't go over Emma's head, but doesn't entirely land, either. Choosing to push beyond it, she decides to change the subject to one which she's sure will end the night. "You don't handle betrayal well, I get that. But then tell me something: why do you accept it from your mother? Whatever else you've been, Regina, you've been a good mother to Henry and you know the difference between what should and shouldn't be. Why do you just accept the things she did to you? You said you've only had three friends; well, one of them was killed and the person you blame for that isn't the person who actually did it."

She sees the way Regina's shoulders stiffen up in instinctual protest, and she knows that she was right; Regina's going to pull back and away here. She's not sorry for bringing it up, though, because they're rapidly reaching the point where this is an issue that needs to be dealt with head on. Regina deserves closure.

Regina deserves the right to stand up for herself.

"I only gave you one question," Regina tells her, her voice soft. "And you used it on Jefferson and Daniel and Maleficent, I'm afraid. I think we're done for tonight."

"Okay, but done for tonight suggests that I get another question tomorrow night, right?" Emma queries, offering her most impish of smiles to punctuate her words.

"We'll see," Regina replies with a dry chuckle. "Sleep well," she says and then moves down the hallway, humming that uncomfortably haunting tune under her breath again, clearly unaware that she's doing it. It's still lovely, but very strange.
Everything is these days.

Like Regina having been friends with…

"Wait a minute," Emma says suddenly, jumping up from the stool. "Jefferson."

Regina turns back from where she is – deep down the hallway that leads to the bedrooms. She lifts up an eyebrow. "What about him?"

"When he kidnapped me last year; during one of his rants he told me that there was magic everywhere in the world, but that people just didn't know how to look for it or see it. Or something like that; honestly, he was rambling like a lunatic."

"He is a lunatic," Regina notes. "But go on."

"What I'm saying is, maybe that's what happened today. You have what Gold calls elemental magic, right?"

"We both do. We were born with it, and absent some kind of magical exorcism that I'm unaware of actually existing, we will always have it. There are ways to restrain and contain magic, but not to completely remove it from an elemental."

"Okay, so what happened in the alley tonight, maybe that was your instincts protecting you. You can't call forth your magic willingly because that's not how it works out here, but when you needed it, it surfaced to take care of you."

"I panicked, Emma," Regina tells her, her voice steady as if to suggest that she's trying very hard to stay calm and controlled here. Emma knows better, though because she'd been there, and she'd seen the look of absolute terror that had been in Regina's eyes when the man had restrained her after hitting her for the second time (the bruise has bloomed now, and it takes everything Emma has not to say something about it; she knows that Regina will blow her off, and they don't need another misunderstanding), the threat of his intentions towards her quite clear. "I was being held down, and I panicked. I don't believe that that qualifies as instincts. It's far more likely that my anger and fear called my magic forward."

"I'm not so sure about that. A few weeks ago, you were as pissed off as I've ever seen you when you were facing off with Neal. I really thought that you were going to kill him. If you'd had your magic then, there would have been nothing I could have done to stop you. And before that, you were angry at me when I first brought you here. But you couldn't use magic then, either. What you felt tonight might have been anger, too, but it was also something more personal than that."

"Like?"

"That's your story to tell," Emma says quietly.

Regina looks away for a moment before finally saying, "I don't know what happened out there tonight, Emma. I just know that it's been nice not to have to worry about magic and what cost I might have to pay for using it."

"So does that mean we never go back to Storybrooke?" Emma queries. The unexpected question is thrown out at her lightly, almost as in jest, but the strange look which she gets from Regina instead stops Emma cold. It's almost thoughtful and curious, as if Regina is wondering if that's really a valid avenue for her.

"That's not really an option though, is it?" Regina asks, voicing her thoughts.
"Isn't it?" Emma counters. "There's nothing forcing you to return."

"Except that that's where Henry wants to be and...well, as much as I worry about my magic and what it makes me capable of, the truth is that using my magic as a crutch solves nothing. I'm capable of all those things without it. The sad reality is that I'm not sure that I belong out in this world any more than I'm sure I belong back in my old one. Storybrooke just might be the last place that will have me."

"Fortunately, that's not a bridge that we have to cross just yet," Emma tells her.

She doesn't tell Regina that she, too, has been fighting a battle inside of herself about where she belongs. There had been a time – not all that long ago - when this world outside of Storybrooke had been hers. If she's honest with herself, though, even then she'd mostly wandered through it like a disconnected shadow.

Now, having spent the last six weeks outside of Storybrooke, it's felt a bit like what the memory of a childhood vacation would. She craves things like knowing that the guy she meets down at the store with the name of Joey isn't actually Sinbad, but she likes knowing that back in Regina's little made-up town, she isn't just a screw up that will be forgotten the moment the door closes behind herself.

There, she actually matters.

It's for that same reason that the Enchanted Forest - the world her parents and Regina had come from - holds little appeal to her, either.

There, were they to somehow return permanently to it, she knows that she would be little more than the awkward princess daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming. In Storybrooke, she's a sheriff, and she has her own life and her own reality, and so yeah, it really is meaningful (at least to her). Sure, it keeps getting hijacked by destiny and scaly dragons, but at least in Storybrooke, there aren't drafty castles and beheadings and other kinds of executions at dawn.

At least when she opens her eyes in the morning, she's still Emma Swan.

It's funny, but in many ways, Storybrooke is her normalcy.

She misses it, but it's not yet time to return.

Not until Regina is ready.

That she might not ever be, well yeah, that's a bridge for later.

"Yes, fortunately," Regina confirms, her voice low and scratchy from both the emotion of the day and the alcohol that she's consumed. "Again, good night."

Emma smiles in response, and then returns to her hot chocolate. She hears the soft footsteps down the hall again, and then the sound of a door closing.

What a day, she thinks as she places her forehead against the counter.

And as insane and topsy-turvy as it'd been, she knows for sure that she's damned glad that it'd happened. Because the one thing she knows now – the one thing that she absolutely believes now – is that, yeah, they are in this together.
Regina knows, even before she closes her eyes, that she'll dream tonight, and she knows that come morning, she'll remember everything which she saw in the nightmare she's sure to experience whether she wants to or not. She thinks these things as that strange tune starts playing across her lips again (she's not sure why it's there, but supposes that Emma pushing on Mother had brought it back to the surface, and it's funny to her how it bubbles up - funny and unnerving). It's low and throaty, and she's barely thinking about it, and yet it's rolling around in the back of her mind, familiar and somehow so very horrible.

Because it means something awful, and she knows it.

And yet she can't stop humming the song because suddenly she needs to know what it means and why it makes the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

She needs to know why it reminds her so very much of Mother.

Needs to understand exactly why it feels like some kind of key just waiting for a lock - a lock maybe she doesn't want to spring open, but knows she needs to if any of this is ever going to be better.

Oh, how desperately she wishes Emma would just leave Mother alone, but deep down, of course, she knows why Emma can't, and she knows that one way or another, before this is over, Mother will have her trial by words. It's a terrifying thought and instinctively, Regina shrinks from this. Because loyalty and duty and obligation run deep in her upbringing and training and the idea of viewing her mother in a way which might allow some justification and explanation for why she no longer draws air…is troubling.

And confusing.

It makes her heart hurt and ache and everything inside of her is terribly conflicted.

She hates her mother and loves her.

She hates Emma and…doesn't at all.

Weary almost beyond reason, Regina groans loudly and then with an indignant irritated huff, she drops back down onto the hard mattress, the scratchy fabric of the flannel pants which she's wearing to keep her warm preventing her from feeling the coolness of the sheets. She puts a hand out and touches them, anyway, delighting in them because while the consistency of the fabric is wrong, they nonetheless remind her of the sheets on her bed back in Storybrooke.

They remind her of home.

Such a strange thing to think, Regina thinks. Storybrooke had been an escape, a way to get away
from decades of hurt and anger and terribly bad choices.

It'd been her new beginning but not her home.

Right?

Maybe. She doesn't know anymore. Doesn't know up from down or left from right. Because everything is changing. Turning. Becoming other than what it was.

It's spinning faster and every protective wall that she'd ever erected to keep her safe and secure is tumbling down around her with little more resistance than a house of Legos might give an eager child wondering what it would look like to make it all come crashing down. She's tried to hold the pieces up simply because protecting herself is the one thing that she knows how to do and has always done, but her efforts are wildly in vain because it's all falling apart now.

It's terrifying and horrifying and a lot of other words which she can taste and feel on her tongue, but doesn't want to actually say aloud. If she does, it'll make the strange things stirring deep inside her real; it'll make the fear real, and she's not sure that she can handle that. She's walked with fear and anger for most of her adult life, but there's something far different about what's happening right now.

There's this little voice inside of her head – the one that has usually led her down the wrong path in its desperate need to keep her from drowning (the Queen, she knows, and pushes this thought away because it's utter madness to think of the different parts of herself in separate terms, and really, what would it solve, anyway?) – telling her that if she's doesn't protect herself better, soon there will be nothing left to protect. Soon, she will be exposed for everything that she is.

And isn't.

The problem is that the longer she enjoys this little house with Henry and Emma and the safety and comfort and other strange things which they create around her and inside of her, the easier it's becoming push that voice back and away from her. The longer she's here and has two people willing to listen and try to be there for her, the harder it's becoming to allow the hate back inside of her.

She sighs, and then acknowledges (at least to herself) that she desperately needs sleep. It's been a tremendously long day what with her stupidly deciding to kiss Emma and then getting drunk enough to get into a bar brawl which had somehow yanked elemental magic out of her. It's been a crazy night and she just wants to slide beneath the sheets and forget about it all (even if she knows she won't and can't and those are other issues entirely). So she does just that and she pulls the blankets up to her hips. Breathing in slowly, her hands settled across her belly, she stares up at the flat white ceiling above her.

She tries not to think of Emma as she waits for sleep to carry her away towards the darkness and whatever waits for her there. She tries not to think about the beach and the soft kiss, and it takes everything she has not to touch her lips with her fingers because she's not that kind of girl. She's not a girl at all, she reminds herself. She hasn't been for a very long time and such silliness is beneath her.

But maybe she's just a little bit tired of girlish silliness being beneath her. Maybe, Regina kind of wishes that she could be romantic and cloying and all of those disgusting things that sell books by the dozens. Maybe, she wishes she could be the kind of girl, woman, whatever who stays in bed all day just to do so.
And not just because depression is crushing down on her shoulders like a block of ice, and the very idea of getting up and facing more emptiness is horrifying.

So very many years ago, Daniel had encouraged the gentler and happier side of her to exist and be strong and proud. He'd said all the right and wonderful things to make her feel like she was worth something. He'd told her it was all right to laugh inappropriately and for no real reason just because she'd felt like doing so. He'd told it was okay to love, and then, when he'd been unable to return that love because death had taken him away (and was on the verge of doing so again), he'd told her to love again.

Regina freezes at the thought of this and swallows hard. She pushes him from her thoughts, but can't push the other ones that bubble to the surface anyway.

She can hear the TV on in the front room of the house. Though it's well after midnight now, and everyone should be sound asleep, only Henry is. Emma had seemed edgy and anxious, probably because of both the kiss and the magic.

That's a lot of change for one day.

She has no doubt that the sheriff is trying to drown out her whirlwind thoughts with a bit of mindless stupidity (Regina thinks that she can hear the sounds of a laugh track every now and again), and for a moment, Regina even thinks to join Emma out in the front. It's an exciting thought, but she quickly decides against it because even though they'd ended the night relatively well – as friends as she herself had requested – they still have the need for personal space. They still have so many things to think about and figure out between them.

Things like can you actually pretend like something hadn't happened when it had?

And if you can't, what does that mean?

Anything? Nothing?

No, friends, Regina insists to herself. That's what she wants. What she needs.

She closes her eyes, and hopes for a dreamless night.

And feels the rumbling vibration of the song in her throat.

Haunting and familiar.

The song is with her until sleep finally takes her away.

Until the nightmare begins.

---

Regina is fourteen, and things with her mother have been getting a bit strange and uncomfortable for a long time now. Her father loves her deeply, and would do just about anything for his little princess, but he doesn't know what to do with a teenage girl who is becoming a woman almost before his very eyes.

He wants to hold onto her and protect her, but well he's never been terribly good at either of those
things. So he simply stays as close to her as he can, and he keeps his mouth shut and doesn't do anything that might cause Mother to react badly.

Thankfully for both Henry and Regina, he plays his cards well enough so that Mother infers no threat or challenge from him. That she sees him as a harmless fool is why he hasn't disappeared, as everyone else has always seemed to.

Regina may be only a child – though that's quickly draining away with every change of her body and every somewhat violent swing of her mood towards something darker – but she knows that her mother is not one to be trifled with.

And so does Daddy.

But they're both smart enough to keep their wits about themselves.

Most of the time, anyway.

It's becoming harder and harder for Regina to keep herself from doing stupid things that will surely upset Mother. The ugly and dark things that she feels these days are swirling around in her mind in ways that she doesn't understand.

The anger and frustration, which she feels, is strong, and she wants to hit back so badly.

These kinds of thoughts and emotions are terribly wrong, Regina knows.

Because anger and frustration and hurt are for bad people and not ladies.

And that's what she is, Mother always reminds her, Mother's tone haughty. She is a Lady who will one day be so very much more than that. When she tells Mother that there is little that she wants besides love and open air, she's laughed at.

Because those are silly dreams.

Beneath a girl of her potential.

Beneath the promises that have been made for her.

Regina has never quite known what to make of statements such as these – and thankfully Mother only makes them when she's angry – but they unsettle Regina because she has this strange feeling that there are things she doesn't understand about Mother's plans, and possibly never will. She has the feeling that the world is turning around her, and she's just stuck in the middle watching the clouds go by.

"Regina," she hears from just behind her. She turns from her thoughts – and the large mirror that she has been staring absently into for the last ten minutes – and faces her mother as the older woman sweeps into the room, looking spectacular.

"Mother," she answers quietly, her tone deferential. She feels a flicker of anger deep down within her, frustration at the fear she recognizes within herself.

No matter her intent at pacification, though, her mother is unimpressed and annoyed with her as always. "Why are you not ready?" Cora demands sharply, her eyes coldly taking in the simple clothing of her child. The garments are leather and more leather, something that Regina has gravitated towards; Mother hates them, but they're comfortable and they feel like a sort of rebellion that she can get away with. "We are expected over at the O'Malley estate shortly."

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"Do I have to go?" Regina asks, and yes, it's a bit of a whine, which is entirely the wrong way to go about this, but she finds that it's becoming more difficult these days to give Mother the responses which she's looking for right away. In spite of her better judgment, Regina finds that she wants to fight back just a little bit. She finds that she wants to make a stand about the person that she thinks she is.

Unfortunately, Mother isn't actually interested in who it is that Regina thinks she is or wants to be; she only cares for who it is that she wants Regina to be.

It's enough to make Regina want to make Mother angry so she knows how such frustration feels. Perhaps if she did, perhaps she would back off just a little.

But then Regina realizes with ice in her gut, she doesn't really want that, either. Partially, because she's afraid of Mother's anger, but mostly because she really does want Mother to be proud. She wants desperately to be loved by her mother.

And not just because she dresses like a perfect princess, and can curtsey like one. She wants Mother to be proud for more than just because she knows how to smile appropriately and say the right things to the right lords who one day might offer up their son in marriage. Idealistically, stupidly, Regina wants her mother to be proud of her simply because she is Cora's beloved daughter and that's enough for her.

Deep down, though, even Regina knows that she will never be enough for Mother.

"You do," Cora replies plainly, and the omnipresent warning voice in the back of Regina's mind tells her that she should take this answer as the best one she's going to get. Mother simply looks annoyed right now, and that's far better than angry or in the mood to make a statement. Regina knows – from instinct and even from the chill of experience – that she should count her blessings and go with it.

But she's a teenager, and the world keeps spinning around her so she pushes.

"Fine, but if I go, can I at least go riding with Daddy and the others?"

The voice inside her head screams at her to shut up, shut up, shut up right now because Mother's starting to get tense, her growing anger beginning to tighten her shoulders and her jaw in a noticeable way. "Absolutely not," Cora snaps.

"Please," Regina insists, refusing to listen to the voice and refusing to see the warning signs that she more than anyone knows all too well. "I don't want to —"

"Enough," Cora snaps, her dark eyes blazing. "You are a lady, Regina. You are not a man no matter how much your father tries to convince you otherwise. You will get dressed, and you will present yourself with the dignity and grace that I expect of you or so help me, you will find out..." she trails off, shaking her head in disgust, her face furious in a way that almost always leads to bad things for Regina.

Usually, it's just the unpleasant matter of being locked away without food and with only water in her room for a few days, but sometimes it's far worse than just that. Sometimes, there's a cold room and even colder magic involved, and sometimes, her mother's anger even hurts more than it probably should.

These memories are enough to make Regina finally surrender to her mother's desires. "As you wish," she says, bowing her head as is expected of her. And then, because this, too, is expected of
her, she softly says, "I'm sorry, Mother. I know better. I let my childish thoughts get the best of me. It won't happen again."

"It will," Cora replies with an impatient wave. "Because you are insistent on throwing away the things which I have set in motion for you. You're selfish and foolish."

"I am," Regina agrees as mildly and passively as she can manage. She doesn't mean this subservience – she's so damned angry about this – but she knows when it's time to stop fighting and to give in. She knows when to let her mother win.

Better to surrender and apologize now rather than after three cold days spent in hunger and solitude have gone by.

Lessons learned the hard way, of course.

Cora's eyes narrow for a moment, and she studies her daughter carefully, as if looking for signs of disobedience. She must know that Regina is being a little bit cheeky with her, but for whatever reason, she chooses to let it go for the time being. She nods her head sharply. "I'll send Maria in to help you get dressed."

"I don't need her," Regina insists because being dressed by others has never been something she's cared for. While many of the upper class (and high middle class as they are even after Grandfather's fall) in this land like the feel of servants tending to their every need, she finds it invasive and a loss of self.

It's one thing when the dress is extravagant and needs multiple hands to get it on and in place, but it's quite another when it's something simple and innocent like what this little meet and greet with a neighboring lord will require.

But, of course, Cora won't hear of it. "Just because you insist on acting like a worthless peasant does not mean that you are one, Regina," she reminds her daughter. "And considering the clothes that you choose to adorn yourself in," she indicates towards Regina's leather pants – a particularly sore spot for Cora – "Well, my dear daughter, I'm afraid that I simply have no confidence in your ability to look like a young woman instead of a filthy street rat. You will let Maria dress you and that will be the end of this ridiculous conversation. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"Very well. I will see you shortly." She's about to turn and leave the room in the flurry and flutter of her elegant skirts, but she suddenly stops, taking a moment to stare at the blank expression on her daughter's face. She steps forward, then, and reaches out to touch Regina, her cold palm cupping Regina's chin with unnerving gentleness. "I know this is difficult for you to understand, and I know that you want to go out and be frivolous with your father, but you are meant for far more than such simple things. I have bigger dreams for you, Regina. Bigger dreams for both of us. Today is an important step in that direction. It's a step that we can make together. Can you be a good girl for me today? Can you make me proud?"

The voice inside of her head screams at her to answer the question asked appropriately, to give Mother what she wants to hear here because Mother is being loving and kind, and this is all that Regina has ever really wanted from her.

A soft touch and her mother's love.

She listens to the voice for once, and forces a smile. "Anything for you, Mother."
"There's my girl," Cora replies before leaning forward and pressing a dry kiss to Regina's forehead, her lips lingering almost affectionately – like this moment means something to her just as much as it does Regina. And for the briefest of moments, it's so very easy for Regina to forget all the fear and anger that she feels. It's so very easy to look beyond the pain of feeling as though her life isn't her own because Mother is showing her love and pride, and that's enough.

When Cora finally steps away from her, she looks at her daughter once again, her expression suddenly growing cool and detached before she then turns and sweeps from the room, the hem of her majestic gown swirling around in her wake.

Regina lets out a breath, and then, turning back to the mirror to stare at her reflection, determines that yes, even though she'd much rather be out riding and hunting with Father (that she knows how to use a sword and a crossbow is one of their little secrets), she'll do as her mother asks of her today.

Not because she cares a bit for the lofty dreams that Mother has for her, but because she really would do anything to make her mother look at her with the kind of pride and love she just had. Even if that means losing herself a little bit.

With a well-practiced sneer of disgust, Regina rather haughtily reminds herself that she's only fourteen years of age. What does she really know of herself?

Perhaps Mother is right and there are bigger things in store for her.

Mother is usually right, she thinks as an elderly woman enters the room and begins the uncomfortable business of undressing and redressing Regina.

She says nothing to the woman because this, too, is expected of her. Per Mother (and told to her repeatedly) Maria is just a servant, and servants do not require more than the most basic of communication. They should never be treated as equals because they're not equals and they'll never be more than what they are. That they have a name of their own, well that's dignity enough, Cora had sniffed on the one occasion that Regina had dared to ask her about showing kindness to one of the servants who had worked in the kitchen (a woman who had shown her considerable kindness first). She's never forgotten the strange look that had gone through her mother's eyes, then; something that had looked a whole lot like some kind of self-loathing. Something that had seemed a bit like a haunted and painful memory of a past not quite as forgotten as Cora might have preferred it to be.

"My lady," Maria says, her voice so scared. Regina has no doubt that her mother has been quite clear in her orders and expectations. She wonders idly if Maria still has her heart, and then thinks that that's absurd because those are just rumors being thrown around; stories being told by bored and jealous peasants.

Her mother knows magic certainly, but she's no murderer. She might be wicked in her own way and certainly scary, but it's not like she's out there stealing hearts. Just spiteful rumors and terrible stories surely.

"Proceed," Regina nods.

She stares straight ahead at the mirror as her comfortable clothes are removed from her shivering body. She stares ahead as she's dressed in a light blue gown. It's pretty, certainly, and it makes her look young and virginal and it compliments her natural complexion in a way that's entirely natural and simple, but the truth is that it's far from comfortable for her. It's not who she is or who she wants to be.
But then again, Mother knows best.

And for her mother's love and pride, she really will do almost anything.

Unfortunately for Regina, all of these good intentions go out the window when she meets the neighboring lord's fifteen-year-old son Joshua O'Malley. He's just as disinterested in all of this pairing and pretending as she is. Part of that has to do with the fact that not only is he the youngest son of seven (with all of his brothers being knights with terrible stories and frightening reputations) but also that he was born with a bad leg which will always cause him to limp terribly. This affliction makes him unworthy of marriage, and thus likely to be little more than a long-term ward of the manor – someone to be taken care of.

It's after they've been in the middle of this for over two hours, and the both of them are bored of the pleasantries and small talk, that Joshua says to her in a low voice, "Want to do something else?" His green eyes twinkle, and he seems mischievous, but not at all dangerous. He seems as out of place here as she is.

"What did you have in mind?" Regina asks, her eyes sweeping over to where Mother is standing with several other well-dressed ladies. She knows how much her mother despises these interactions (the other women – disdainful of her low breeding - treat her as inferior to them unless forced to do otherwise) but Cora is playing nice all the same because this is part of her bigger plan. Whatever that is.

"We have a river running northwest through our land," Joshua tells her as he leans heavily against the wall, his hand going down to rub anxiously at his thigh. He winces, his face contorting for a moment before he forces his expression neutral again. "It's nothing spectacular, but it's not here, and that's still something."

"Mother will never let me leave," Regina replies sulkily. She takes in the others in the room – mostly young women and much older men. Her father is long gone now, having happily left with the younger royals to go ride and hunt. Before he'd left, he'd given a knowing smile and told her to make her mother proud.

"She's not paying attention to you right now," Joshua comments. "They're too busy trying to manipulate each other into invites to other important parties. That's all this is, Princess; a way for them to try to move their pieces around the board."

Somewhat surprised by his bluntness, she looks up at him and sees the shrewdness in his eyes; she sees the way in which he regards the room with open disdain but while still pretending to be docile . This isn't his world anymore than it is hers. Fortunately for him, no one seems to be trying to force it to be.

"She'll notice," Regina murmurs. "She always notices."

"Maybe, but not for a time yet," he assures her with a smile that's meant to be easy but comes off as forced. She wonders if he struggles with the ability to be happy as much as she does. "We can be back in a half hour. You can just say you went to get some fresh air." He extends and then offers her his hand and for a long moment, Regina simply stares at it before nodding her head in agreement.
"Fine, but just a half hour," she states. She doesn't take his hand, though, because such contact with a boy she barely knows would be too familiar and completely inappropriate for a girl of her social station. Frankly, simply leaving with him is as well, but it'll only be for a few short minutes, she tells herself. No one will know.

And she really does need the air.

She needs to be anywhere but here.

That this boy somewhat excites her makes it all the more compelling. That he is considered by everyone here to be something broken and less and yet he seems to understand the game perhaps even better than they do, well that fascinates her.

Mother would hate him…

"Promise," Joshua says, his smile becoming impish as he motions towards a side door that leads to the outside. "Half hour, and then we will back to stand against the wall and watch as my mother and yours try to stab each other in the back all so that they can find a way to get invited to King George's royal birthday party."

Regina wrinkles her nose at that (she knows of George and thinks him to be a cruel and selfish King). "Fine," she agrees and then returns the smile. She then follows him across the room, just barely managing to escape her mother's sweeping gaze. Cora is looking for her, Regina knows, but not actively so.

The conversation that she's in – yes, likely about George's birthday party - appears to be important enough to provide the necessary cover for their escape.

And it is; she and Joshua slip from the manor with relative ease, and then, running and yelping, he takes her down to the flowing river that forms the border of his father's land. It's beautiful and blue, and there are bright green trees everywhere.

"I come here a lot," Joshua tells her as he gazes down at the flowing water. His voice is gently and thoughtful and suddenly terribly sad. "Just to get away."

"It's nice," Regina comments, her eyes on the water She shifts anxiously as she sees him watching her, her heels sinking into the tall green grass beneath her.

"Go on," Joshua urges with a chuckle. "Sit down. The grass won't bite you."

She laughs because it's an entirely absurd thing to say. "Of course it won't," she replies dryly, but she stays standing, her eyes now on the blue of her dress.

"Afraid?" he challenges.

Her response is immediate and heated. "No." She squares her shoulders – and thinks that she must look rather bizarre doing so in a dress – and stares at him.

"Then sit, Princess; I promise your royal butt will survive the experience."

She frowns at his words – at his repeated use of the honorific. He's not the only one who does it, but the reality is that she is no longer a princess. That title had been stripped away from her family after her grandfather had been defeated in an ill-chosen battle with another king. The frown disappears after a moment, though, because she can tell he's teasing her, and she'd forgotten how nice it felt to laugh. So she smiles at him, and then with a tilt of her head meant to tell him that
she'll gladly meet his challenge, Regina folds her pretty dress beneath her and sits.

"That's better," Joshua drawls before dropping down beside her. He picks at the grass, yanking a few blades out before tossing them towards the water.

They sit like this in companionable silence for several minutes, her eyes on the movement of the water down towards the rocks. It's slow, lazy and peaceful, and she thinks that she could sit here forever just watching the world move forward.

She's never really wanted to do that before; so terribly afraid of being lost in the swirl and madness of things. Afraid of having her life decided for her.

"You're lucky," she says finally, not able to take her eyes off of the water.

"My leg would beg to differ," he chuckles as he reaches down to rub at it. She notices the way his fingers move inwards, pressing down and in quite hard.

"Yes, but your leg might keep you from being traded like meat."

"Really? You think so? Perhaps my older brothers - the honorable murderous knights that they are – will be allowed to decide whom they wish to be with, but not me. If my father were to find someone desperate enough to be willing to allow their daughter to marry me, he'd do so in a minute. Maybe even faster."

"Oh." Then, lightly, looking at him and offering a slight smile meant to reassure him because he looks like he needs it, "I'm sure that they all mean well."

"Save your comforting words. They mean well for themselves, Princess," Joshua comments, his tone bland and she's reminded again of the keen intelligence which lurks in his eyes. "For us, well...I'm not sure that we're much of a consideration."

"No," she agrees. It's hard to argue with his words when she herself has spent so much time fighting against her mother's designs and plans for her.

It's hard to argue when you know your life isn't really your own.

Her eyes stay locked on the water and she just watches it continue to flow.

She lets the world move forward without her.

And for once, it actually feels good to do so.

Time flows too quickly, and a half hour is gone before either of them is aware that it has passed away with the light from the sky high above. It's this rapidly growing darkness which brings Regina – who had foolishly allowed herself to doze off next to Joshua on the soft green grass – to her waking senses. Her dark eyes snap open and she lets out a short cry of fear as the reality of their situation sets in on her.

"She'll know," she hisses out at him as fear floods her. "You lied to me," she accuses, and she's suddenly so very angry and scared. At everything and everyone.

"I'm sorry," Joshua protests, looking confused. She thinks that maybe he's so used to being forgotten that he doesn't really understand what it's like to not be.

Ignoring him and his apologies, she stumbles up to her feet, and immediately loses her balance. It's
only Joshua's hand – the firm touch of a boy with a bad leg and as much of the world against him as she has against her – that steadies her.

"Easy," Joshua soothes. "It'll be okay." Her words are gentle, kind. A balm.

And then he cries out in horrific pain and falls away from her, his face contorting in agony as he reaches down for his bad leg. He screams and falls to the grass.

"No, you wretched boy, I don't believe it will be," an icy voice says from nearby.

Regina's head jerks sharply and painfully to the side and she sees her mother standing there, her coal black eyes darker and more furious than Regina has ever seen them before. "Mother," she whispers. "No, it's not what you think."

Because she knows exactly what Cora is thinking. And the way her mother is squeezing her hands, she knows that Cora is the reason why Joshua is on the ground, whimpering in pain and clawing for purchase against the green grass.

"And what is it that I think?" Cora growls out. "What were you doing out here with this useless boy? Were you planning on ruining yourself with the family garbage?"

"No! And he's not trash. He's...I just needed to get away for a minute," Regina insists. "Please, stop hurting him. He did nothing wrong. He did nothing to me but let me get some air. Please." She steps towards her mother, her hands out.

Unfortunately for both she and Joshua, Cora ignores her pleas completely. She focuses her attention on the wounded teenage boy. "Tell me; what were your intentions with my daughter? Did you really believe that a crippled dog such as yourself could ever have a chance with someone like her? Did you think that –"

"Mother, no!" Regina cries out as her hand settles over Cora's forearm, squeezing down. "Listen to me, please! You need to stop right now. Stop or I'll –"

It's entirely the wrong thing to say and do because suddenly Cora's rage is turning from the now very hurt Joshua to Regina and then it's Regina who finds herself in the grasp of violent magic. For a moment, everything freezes and then suddenly Regina feels her being body lifted into the air. "You'll what?" Cora demands.

Unable to actually answer, Regina cries out in shocked surprise, the words locking in her throat as her muscles and bones seem to squeeze together. She thinks she hears a dry snap and then there's nothing but pain flooding through her. Tears spill hotly down her cheeks and she tries to find her mother's eyes, but all she sees is a deep purple swimming within them. Something like hatred.

"You do not get to ever talk back to me," Cora hisses as she squeezes her hands even tighter. "After all I have done for you, you don't ever talk back to me."

The terrible things that I have done for you," Cora continues, the words leaking out of her mouth like hot acrid smoke from an exhaust pipe. "The humiliating awful acts I have done to myself; I will not allow you to throw everything away like this. I will not allow you to destroy everything that I have built for us because you think that you have the right to do so. You do not. You belong to me. To me!"
Regina's just about blacked out from the pain and the lack of oxygen when she hears the hard and fast thudding against the ground. Horses, she thinks as she fades away, her vision going gray and then dark. She wonders who has arrived.

"What the hell are you doing?" she hears. There's a lot of shouting, then – male voices and there's anger and excitement, and then again, "What have you done?"

Oh, it's Daddy, Regina thinks, realizing in some kind of absent way that for the first time that she can ever truly remember, her father has come to protect her.

She's falling, then, spinning rapidly and horribly out of control.

Her wounded and broken body slams against the ground with a terrible cracking noise, and then there's nothing but pain.

It all goes black after that.

She floats in and out of feverish consciousness for hours, her mind becoming aware for a few minutes at a time, and then quickly surrendering back to the softness of nothing. Presumably drugged, she feels very little each time that she surfaces, but she hears bits and pieces of the strangest conversations.

"You could have killed her, Cora. What were you thinking?"

"I was protecting her."

"From whom? Yourself? And who will protect her when everyone comes for you for what you did to that poor boy. They know you have magic now."

"So let them come. Do you think I'm afraid of a few spoiled princes?"

"You've gone too far this –"

"I did what I had to do to ensure her future. You would be well to remember that, husband. As you would be well to remember your place with me, Henry. Always."

"I'm not afraid of you, Cora. Do whatever you want to do to me. I don't care and never have; just make her better. You hurt her. Make her better. Please."

"She's my daughter, Henry; I will always take care of her."

There's a soft humming sound, low and in her ear. The song is strangely melancholy, but also undeniably beautiful. It's also familiar to Regina, like something which she remembers vaguely from when she was a very small child.

She has the strange sensation like she's being rocked by someone. She's resting against something soft, something that feels like a woman's chest. There are warm arms wrapped around her. Protectively, perhaps even possessively.

The humming continues, and Regina surrenders to it willingly.
"I'm surprised you've called me, dearie."

"I didn't have a choice. She's not getting better."

"Oh, yes, yes; I see that. Go too far this time, did you?"

"I have no patience for your games. Can you help me?"

"Can't do it yourself, no? Healing magic is fairly simple."

"You never taught me it, and I've never had use for it."

"Until you nearly killed your own daughter that is."

"I'll ask you again: can you help me."

"But of course. There's little I can't do."

"Then do it."

"Uh uh uh; you know the rules. Magic always comes with a price."

"Fine. What do you want from me?"

"From you? Nothing. There's nothing that you can give me anymore."

"There has to be something."

"Desperate aren't we? Tell me, now that you've revealed your true nature to all of the frightened little nobles around here, what exactly is your plan to get your daughter to the…next stage. Because I doubt they'll marry their boys off to you."

"Not that I owe you any explanation, but I have my ways of getting what I want. There are other kings and lords besides the ones here. One in particular."

"Still on about that one, are we? Obsession doesn't look good on you."

"You would know."

"I suppose I would. Well, you have never lacked for ambition, now have you?"

"Enough of this. You must have a price. What is it?"

"Oh, yes, I have a price indeed, but you won't be the one paying it."

"Who will?"

"She will. Eventually."

"We'll see about that."

"Yes, we will. Now if you'll step back, I really do need the space."
When Regina finally comes completely to her waking senses almost three days after the incident by the river, she's in her own bed, the blankets pulled up tight over her still quite wounded torso. Cora is sitting next to her, dabbing at her forehead with a damp cloth, still humming the strangely dark little song.

Every part of Regina's body aches, but not as she might have expected it to.

"Mother?" Regina says finally as she pushes the blankets down a bit. She's never particularly liked being restrained by them or well, anything at all.

Immediately, Cora stops humming the song, and looks down at Regina with what seems like worry. As always, there is strange dullness to her expression, like the emotions don't quite make their way all the way from her heart outwards. Still, it's a much softer expression than what Regina is used to, and in spite of everything that Mother has done to her – in spite of the pain and hurt that she still feels, however reduced those things might be - she finds herself gravitating towards it.

"I'm here, Regina," Cora states, brushing a hand over Regina's sweaty brow.

"You hurt me?"

"I did," Cora admits. "I didn't want to. I didn't mean to."

"Then why?"

"You scared me," Cora answers, presenting as much honesty as she can manage. "I came upon you and the boy, and I was frightened about what you might have done with him. What he might have done to you. I'm afraid I reacted badly."

"I didn't do anything. We didn't do anything. He just showed me the river."

"It's never just anything, my sweet girl. There's always more to everything that happens, and it's my job to protect you from such terrible things. It's my job to help you become what you're meant to be. That's what a mother does."

"You hurt me," Regina repeats, this time a statement instead of a question.

"And I am sorry for that, Regina. I love you so much that I lost my mind when I thought you were in danger from that boy. Will you forgive me for it?"

"You attacked me when I asked you not to hurt Joshua."

"I reacted to what I perceived as danger to you," Cora says simply, again brushing at Regina's hair. Her expression has hardened, however, and it's clear that she's growing weary of this conversation and the submissiveness of it. She wants it over with, and in the past quickly. "But you're all right now. Everything is all right."

"Did you have someone use magic to heal me?" the young girl asks, lifting herself up slightly in the bed. The bones that had felt so savagely broken earlier now just simply ache like they're bruised and sore. The pain is still there, but not as it was.

"I did," Cora replies, her voice oddly brittle.
Regina gets the strange and somewhat unsettling feeling like there's more to this story – more to the odd conversation between the strange healer and her mother that she'd heard, and now just barely remembers. What it is, she doesn't know.

"I'm afraid," Regina tells her, changing the subject much to Cora's relief.

"Don't be," Cora soothes, reaching out to cup Regina's chin. "I promise you, Regina, I'll never hurt you like that again. You believe me, don't you, my love?

Regina pauses for a moment, searching for what she needs in her mother's eyes. She doesn't see it, but then again, she's not completely sure what she should be looking for anyway. And her mother does sound remorseful for what she'd done.

"I do," Regina whispers, sagging slightly back against the pillows.

Cora smiles then, holding it there for just a moment before she schools her face again and finds something more neutral. "Good. You're my daughter, and I love you. Nothing in this world means more to me than you do. I hope you know this."

"I do," Regina repeats. "I'm tired, Mother."

"Of course you are. Rest now, my love; I'll be here when you wake up."

Without pause, Regina does exactly as instructed, darkness once more overtaking her already fuzzy vision. The last thing she hears before she allows the exhaustion to pull her down is that sound of her mother humming that damned song again.

Lucille Ball will always make her laugh. It's about as cliched as something can get, but Emma finds the absurdity of Lucy and Ethel rather ridiculously enjoyable.

And easy to get lost in.

Right now – lazily slumped down against the back of the couch, a scratchy blanket over her and her eyes on the big screen TV - that's exactly what Emma needs.

Because a day that had started with Neal and ended with magic (and had a rather enjoyable, but badly timed shared kiss on the beach in the middle of it) is the kind of day that tends to make a person think some fairly deep and weird thoughts.

Like what is she doing trying to be the sane and stable one of the two of them? Like what if they actually do allow Neal to take Henry for a few days and he runs off with him? What if he tries to take their son away from them permanently?

Thoughts like what if there's a way for Regina to make the magic work out in the real world? What if she gets homicidally angry again? Is she still that person?

And, of course, the impossible to avoid question of what did the kiss that they had shared actually mean? Nothing? Everything? Better question, then: why can't she stop thinking about it and wondering why she can't stop wondering about it? It's all just a self-defeating hyper-cycling mess, and the more that she tries to work it out in her head, the more complicated things get within her
own exhausted mind.

So yeah, thank God for Lucy. And even Ricky, the hilarious little bastard that he is.

She's laughing under her breath, and shaking her head in amusement at this thought when she hears the first soft cry from Regina's bedroom. It's low and panicked, and at first all Emma does is clench her jaw in frustration because she's been hearing the telltale signs of these nightmares for weeks now, and so far, she's never stepped in to stop them. It simply hasn't been her place to do so.

But then the soft cries and whimpers become outright shouts of pain and fear which echo through the halls, and she hears Regina scream out, "Mother, no!"

That's it – that's enough to make her decide that yeah, it's time to do something.

Emma jerks up from the couch, and she's halfway down the hallway – running as fast as she can and without any real thought - before she even realizes that she's in motion. By that point, she reasons with herself that she's come too far to turn and go back. Besides, they're friends now, and friends don't let each other suffer.

The truth is, though, that even if they weren't friends, Emma thinks that she probably would still be doing what she is doing because no one deserves to go through this kind of hurt.

Anxiously, her body tense, she enters Regina's bedroom and is stunned by what she sees: the Queen is thrashing around in her blankets, the cotton sheets tangled around her flannel-clad legs. Her typically olive skin is blanched white with fear, and her lips have been pulled into an expression that can only be called terror.

"Regina," Emma calls out, approaching the bed quickly, sounding breathless. When there's no response – and honestly, she hadn't expected one – she places a hand on both shoulders and shakes the older woman as hard as she can manage.

Dark eyes snap open suddenly and then Regina's staring up at her, confused and scared, and looking like she's about to break down and lose it at any moment.

And then…and then she just does.

Tears spill from her darkly shining eyes, rushing down her cheeks, and pooling against the soft cotton fabric of the soft shirt that she'd gone to bed wearing.

"Regina," Emma says again, loosening the hold she has on the woman, finding herself suddenly somewhat afraid that she's hurting her. But if Regina actually hears her or feels her touch in any kind of way, she shows no sign of it. Instead, her breathing becomes heavy and labored, almost like she's hyperventilating.

Almost like every single part of her is being torn apart by panic.

Acting purely on instinct now, Emma removes both of her hands from Regina's shoulders, and lifts them up to the Queen's face, cupping a palm around both sides of her neck, the semi-circle between her thumb and pointer finger on each hand resting just beneath Regina's earlobes. "Hey," Emma says. "Easy. It's okay."

Regina blinks, somehow drawn back by both the touch and gentleness. "Emma?"

"Yep. All day long," Emma says with a soft slightly sheepish smile. All the same, her eyes never leave Regina's. She rubs her thumbs lightly - almost absently - against the soft skin of Regina's
cheekbones, sweeping gently past earlobes.

"I…"

"Sounded like you were having a pretty bad dream there," Emma puts in after it becomes clear that Regina isn't going to finish the sentence any time soon. "About your mother," she adds, her green eyes locking with Regina's darker ones.

Regina's eyes close, and she sags down.

Not that Emma lets her go. "Hey," she says. "You can talk to me. I'm right here."

"You woke me up," Regina notes weakly between pained gasps as she tries to calm herself down and get her emotions back under some kind of control. Everything feels upside down, and any walls that she had had up are long gone.

She's falling as she'd thought she would.

Only difference is, there does seem to be something stopping her fall this time.

Someone.

"Yeah, well, you kind of were interrupting Lucy and Desi," Emma answers with an impish enough smile to let Regina know that she's just teasing her about this.

"Sorry," Regina retorts, her heart not as much into the banter as usual. That she tries, though, warms Emma's heart because it means that Regina is still there.

"Yeah, it's okay. Lame ep. Next one looks to be the chocolate one."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"We really need to modernize you. Actually, Lucy and Desi are old school."

"I didn't spend much time watching TV."

"Yeah, so I gathered. You want to talk about the dream you were having?"

"It was my mother," Regina says. She lifts her hands up and places them over Emma's, letting them rest there for a moment, her soft elegant ones warm and light. It's incredibly intimate, and for a second, all they do is gaze at each other.

All they do is lose themselves in each other's eyes.

There are some intimacies deeper than the physical, and this is one of them.

Regina exhales loudly, caught in the moment. Another few seconds pass before she says in a voice that's almost inaudible, "I remember what the song I've been humming is. I remember where it came from. My mother sang it to me after…"

She shakes her head.

And Emma waits. And waits.

Finally, Regina pushes both of their hands away from her face, and pulls back. "I don't know how to talk about this," she admits, looking away from Emma then.
"Then don't."

Her eyes snap back to Emma. "I don't understand; you've been trying to make me talk about this almost since the day we arrived here. Why the change now?"

"There's no change," Emma insists, noting that while Regina has pushed their hands away from her and somewhat pulled back and away, their hands are still touching, both sets of them resting on the Queen's cotton-clad shoulders. "But you need to be ready for this, Regina. And if you're not, well…I want you to be."

"And if I never am? What then? Do we stay here indefinitely?" The thought makes Regina's stomach curdle simply because while this place has most certainly been a haven and an escape, she's come to realize that it's not home for either of them.

"You will be," Emma assures her. "And I'll be there when you are."

"Tonight," Regina says suddenly, her voice oddly firm as she glances over at the table-clock. It's almost two in the morning so yes; technically it is a new day.

"What?"

"I'll do it tonight."

Emma shakes her head. Her hands tighten around Regina's and she gives them a reassuring squeeze. "You don't have to put timelines on yourself for this. You -."

"No…no, I do. I do because if I don't, I never will. I don't want to forget again."

Emma blinks and then frowns in confusion. "You don't…want to forget?"

"I do, but I can't," Regina says softly. She looks down at their joined hands for a moment, and then slides them away, folding them into the sheets, her anxiety as clear as day to both of them. "Not again."

"All right," Emma nods. "Tonight. But, if you change your mind –"

"Don't let me. Make me be brave. Promise me that you will."

Their eyes lock, and Emma nods again. "All right; I promise."

She receives a shaky smile of gratitude for this. And then a soft awkward chuckle as Regina realizes the heavy moment that's just happened between them. It's been a strange few weeks with a whole lot of honesty, but this feels even more than that. In so many ways, Emma's soft touch feels more passionate than kissing.

It's terrifying.

"Do you want to try to sleep again?" Emma asks after a long moment has passed between them. Off Regina's almost urgent shake of her head, she tries again with, "Okay, well then, would you like to come watch some Lucy and Desi with me?"

Regina lifts an eyebrow, waits for the punchline, and then once she realizes that it's a serious invitation, she drawls, "Probably not, but I will anyway."

Emma sees right through the false bravado and need to protect her emotions, of course, but chooses to just go with it. "You know, it's pretty awesome, actually."
"I fear that your understanding of that word and mine are not the same."

"True, but some things are universal," Emma notes as she stands up from the bed, and gives Regina the space to crawl out of her blankets. The Queen's beautiful face – thankfully no longer pale - is streaked with tears, and she looks like a mess.

And this is still progress, and she's still beautiful.

She tries not to wonder where that thought had come from.

"I'd like to wash up," Regina says to her, her voice low and almost embarrassed.

Emma nods her head, "Cool. I'll grab some popcorn, and make us some coffee."

"At two in the morning?"

"I don't think there's an actual time requirement on popcorn or coffee. I mean there is, but I'm pretty sure that being that we're adults, we're allowed to have it or whatever we'd like whenever we'd like. Including at two in the morning."

"Well, one of us is an adult. I'm not sure what you count as," Regina fires back, and a suddenly grinning Emma finds that she's almost ridiculously pleased to see the old haughty snarky sarcasm showing in the bemused quirk of her lip.

"Yeah, whatever. I'll meet you in the Living Room, Your Majesty," Emma tells her.

Regina offers a slightly watery smile in confirmation, and then turns to stare back at the sheets behind her. Emma considers for a moment saying something more to Regina, considers offering some sort of comfort, but then decides against it.

Tonight, Regina had said. Tonight, they'll talk about...a lot of very ugly things.

But not now and so she favors Regina with one more worried look, and then leaves the room, stepping into the hallway, and settling her hand against the wall.

She recognizes the look that she'd seen in Regina's eyes.

She remembers all too well the troubled kids that she'd lived with; the ones with the deeply haunted eyes. She can still vividly recall the tortured and damaged ones who'd woken up screaming and begging their parents to stop hurting them.

She remembers doing that a time or two herself.

It's been a very long time since she's had one of those nightmares.

And still, they're familiar.

She doubts that they will ever not be.

Regina doesn't even make it through the first episode.
It's maybe ten minutes after the Queen had sprawled herself across the couch, a thin blanket over her flannel-clad legs, that her eyes droop down and she's asleep, finally resting after the insanity of a terribly long day. Two mugs of barely touched coffee and a half-eaten bowl of popcorn sit on the table in front of them; somehow this feels like some kind of symbolic sum-up of everything, but it's all too messy.

Everything is.

Emma watches Regina sleeping for a few minutes, her green eyes narrowed as she searches for any signs of the unwanted dreams that had plagued the older woman just a little more than an hour ago. There's nothing there, however.

Not even a slight tremble.

And still, Emma watches.

Because she understands all too well the force of such nightmares.

She places a hand onto the couch, as close to Regina's sleeping form as possible without actually touching her. As much as Emma wants to do exactly that right now – as much as she wants to offer comfort - she won't without permission.

As it turns out, she needn't have worried; when Regina turns slightly, her hand slides over Emma's, her fingers intertwining with the blonde's and clutching.

When Emma looks up at Regina in brief surprise, she sees the Queen watching her, sleepy dark eyes still somehow managing to be intense. She's reminded of how just weeks earlier, she'd been the one who had been awake unexpectedly.

That had been about attempted murder.

This is about attempted comfort.

"You okay?" Emma asks softly, her voice barely audible.

"Not yet," comes the honest response. "You?"


Regina nods her head at that, and then closes her eyes again. "You'll stay?" she asks without opening them again, her fingers tightening around Emma's.

"Yeah, I'll stay."

"Thank you."

"Sleep," Emma says, refusing to take gratitude for something which not only seems suddenly so important but also so very human. "The sun will be up soon."

"Just don't forget your promise about tonight. Even if I fight you."

"I'm used to you fighting me."

Regina's sleepy eyes open again and in an exhalation, she says, "Emma."

"I won't," Emma promises her. "Sleep."
There are no other words after that; Regina simply closes her eyes once more, and dozes off again, her body still beyond the slight rise and fall of her chest. She looks almost peaceful, and Emma's surprised by just how much she enjoys this.

She stares at the beautiful Queen unabashedly for a few minutes, taking great liberties with her eyes, and only feeling slightly ashamed of them.

Finally, reluctantly, her eyes go back to the television.

Back to the slapstick silly comedy which will thankfully keep her from dwelling on foolish romantic thoughts which she knows she shouldn't have as well as terrible things like mothers and fathers who don't love their children as they should.

When the sun rises several hours later, a bleary-eyed Emma watches it do so.

Only then, having ensured that the new day has arrived, does she finally allow her eyes to close.

She'd never asked for the title of either Savior or White Knight, but she has become both of those things, anyway.

And tonight, she'll honor her promise to Regina. Tonight, she'll make Regina be brave about her mother in a way that will likely break both of their hearts as the memories of their shared and not quite shared pasts wash over them like fire.

For now, her hand curled tightly around Regina's, even as she dozes off, she continues to protect.
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Mild language and some conversation about violence which occurred in the past.

Henry finds his mothers sound asleep next to each other in the morning, and to say that it's a surprise to him would be an understatement, indeed.

Oh, there's nothing strange or even terribly compromising about their positions: Regina is sprawled indelicately across the couch, the scratchy brown blanket slung over her legs and hips, and Emma is dozing on the floor, slumped uncomfortably against the front of the couch. No, it's not really their positions which catches the curious attention of their son, his green eyes narrowing thoughtfully as he stares down at them. Rather, it's their hands. Their hands which are still connected and clutching, their fingers woven as tightly together as they'd been just hours earlier. Henry is young, and knows very little about adult relationships and the emotions involved, but he knows that this is both intimate and new.

He doesn't know what he's supposed to feel about all of this, but he knows that he can't seem to take his eyes off of his two peacefully slumbering mothers.

Or their connected hands.

"Henry," Emma mumbles out suddenly, making him jump just slightly into the air. When his heels settle back down on the ground, his hand over his beating heart, he has a distinctly guilty look on his face, and for a moment, Emma's curious why it's there because she can't figure out why he'd be wearing such an expression. And then she feels Regina's slim fingers tighten around her own, the action apparently more instinctual than intentional considering how Regina's still sleeping. She looks back up at Henry, sees the way his eyes slide towards their hands, and sighs. "She had a rough night," Emma offers up after a moment, adding on a soft smile which seems to be pleading with him to try to understand and not push any harder here.

Because…well, she doesn't have any answers for him.

Or herself.

Thankfully, the statement about Regina being in some kind of distress seems to do the trick; whatever other thoughts Henry might have been having about whatever he thinks he is or isn't seeing going on between his two mothers, well those thoughts slide away the moment worry sets in, Almost immediately, a deep frown replaces the curiosity and his brow furrows. It's a relief for Emma to witness this because it means that their son is not immediately jumping to some bizarre conclusion that overrides his ability to care about his adoptive mother.

It means that these past six weeks together have mattered to more than just she and Regina.

"Is she all right?" Henry all but demands, his eyes widening with worry.

Emma slightly tilts her head backwards and glances up at the still sleeping Queen. Her dark hair is
mussed and over her eyes. That she's quite beautiful like this is something that Emma firmly pushes into the far recesses of her mind because nothing has changed just because they'd fallen asleep holding each other's hand. There are still a lot of very good reasons why the kiss which they'd shared on the beach is something that neither one of them should think too hard about.

There are reasons why they should both forget that it had ever happened.

Not that it's likely that they will.

The fact remains, however, that their hands aren't connected together now because of anything sexual; this contact is all about emotion. It's about what Regina had asked her to be to her; it's about friendship and support. It's about being there for Regina while she's struggling to unpack everything in her turbulent mind and it's about letting Regina know that she's not alone anymore.

Especially considering the sure to be unsettling conversation that's likely to come this evening.

Regina had asked Emma to push her into talking about her mother, and though Emma finds herself more than a little bit fearful of the revelations to come, she means to uphold the promise which she had made to the Queen the night before. They're here in the house together because of a hundred terrible things that have happened to both of them throughout their less than perfect lives, but more specifically, they're here because Emma's mother had murdered Regina's mother.

So, yeah, this conversation is not going to be a fun one, but perhaps it's never felt more necessary than it does right now, and though Emma shudders at the emotions which are likely to spill out, she plans to ensure that they do come out even if the rawness of it all leaves them both a little more heartbroken by the realizations of the past. Facing the truth is one of those things you can't take back; Emma knows for certain that once Regina completely accepts who her mother had been and what Cora had done to her, well then the Queen won't be able to un-ring that bell.

Cora Mills had shaped her child in a truly heinous way, and yes, she may have been absent a heart when she had been doing it, but that doesn't scrub away the damage that she'd done.

"She will be," Emma assures Henry, offering her son another soft smile.

But he's not a little boy, and he's not going to be pushed off so easily. "Did she have another dream?" he asks, his eyes still on his adoptive mother, his frown still prominently featured.

"She did."

"What was this one about?"

"Her mother," Emma tells him after a brief pause. She's not sure that she should be this honest with him – and especially not about this -, but she thinks that maybe he needs to understand how truly human his own mom really is. Maybe he needs to know the names of a few of her demons.

Just not in detail.

"Oh." He swallows and then nods his head, looking suddenly quite anxious and upset.

"I'm all right, sweetheart," a low rumbling voice says from up on the couch, drawing both Henry and Emma's attention to where Regina is now sitting up, rapidly blinking away the sleep. A hand – the one not connected to Emma's - sweeps out and brushes dark hair back and away, fingers threading through her locks as if to try to untangle knots that have formed during the night.

"Mom," Henry breathes, and he sounds almost ridiculously relieved.
Regina smiles over at him, her make-up free beautiful face lighting up in a way which Emma finds almost breathtaking. "I'm all right," Regina says to him once more. "They're just dreams."

"But your dreams hurt you."

"No, my little prince; my dreams are just the past. They can't hurt me anymore."

It's not a malicious lie by any stretch, but it is a blatant one – at least to Emma's eyes and ears - and it makes the sheriff lift her eyebrow up in curiosity. She doesn't contradict the Queen's words, however; she just watches and observes and tries to understand what Regina's up to.

"Okay." Henry nods, seeming relieved. His eyes slide back to their still joined hands, and that's when Regina finally notices them as well. When she pulls away, it's not exactly dramatic, but it's hard to miss the frantic urgency of the motion. Regina suddenly seems quite uncomfortable, and Emma can almost see and feel the protective walls going up; she can see Regina's shame.

And it deeply confuses her.

Part of Emma thinks to demand an answer right here and now, but she manages to bite down on her bottom lip to halt such blatant absurdity. Regina has a reason for her reaction, and it seems suddenly absurd to Emma that she should feel so slighted by the Queen pulling away from her.

After all, hadn't she done exactly that the day before? Hadn't she been the one to pull away from something far more intense than just holding hands? Hadn't she been the one to fully retreat?

Yes, yes she had.

And yes, it had been far more intense than just fingers tangled together while sleeping.

Well…perhaps not when you think of it like that, she muses. Because there are ways that -

"Are you hungry, sweetheart?" Regina says abruptly, and though she's clearly speaking to Henry, Emma uses the words as a good opportunity to get out of her own complicated and decidedly conflicted mind. And away from dangerous thoughts which she has no idea what to do with.

"I don't know about him, but I definitely am," Emma chirps as she pushes herself to her feet. Her back pops and cracks in protest, but if Henry notices, he doesn't say anything. And Regina, well she's just suddenly wearing this grin that seems to say that she'd heard every single sound.

"When are you not hungry, Swan?" Regina teases, her tone sandpaper dry but friendly.

This is the new them, apparently.

Friends.

Weird. And kind of cool. But yeah, definitely weird.

"Henry," Emma drawls, sliding her gaze over to their bemused son. "Remind your mother here that we're both young and growing and that insulting our food intake is rude."

"What she said," Henry notes. "Though –"

"Stop right there," Emma warns. "I am young, and I am growing."

"Well young is certainly accurate at the very least," Regina sighs, sounding put upon. Emma sees through her, though; after all these weeks together, she knows the difference between Regina
playing the part of being annoyed and when she actually is it. This is acting. "Or perhaps more
correctly, you're both children." Regina adds on an overly large smile meant to be scolding, but it
completely fails because Emma and Henry exchange looks, and then they're both just laughing.

At her. At themselves. At all of this.

Regina thinks maybe she should feel a bit insulted, perhaps even feel a bit left out because of the
way Henry and Emma are laughing together right now. It's just the two of them sharing this joke
and it looks so very natural and easy for the both of them; Emma's hand is rested casually on
Henry's shoulder, and she's leaning forward, her body trembling beneath the weight of her mirth.

It's beautiful and perfect, and yes, Regina is almost insanely envious.

But she's oddly pleased as well, and she has no idea what to make of such feelings because they
simply make no sense to her; she's never been one to accept someone else placing claim on the
things she cares about. And not too long ago she'd hated even the idea of Emma near Henry.

Now, though…

Now, she doesn't know what she feels.

She pushes these thoughts away, rolls her eyes as dramatically as possible, and then she turns on
her heels (she finds herself suddenly missing her once omnipresent stilettos). "I'm going to get
breakfast started. When you two are done acting like children at a circus, you may join me."

"Have you ever actually been to the circus?" Emma follows up. "Have either of you?" She's
technically asking both mother and son, but judging by the sudden tightening of Regina's shoulders,
she has a pretty good idea that the Queen won't be answering this question willingly.

"No," Henry answers finally, frowning slightly like he's remembering something. "We've never
had one in Storybrooke." He looks up at his adoptive mother. "Why didn't we have one there?"

"I'm not a fan of them," Regina says simply and concisely, her clipped tone making it quite clear
that this isn't something that she wishes to speak of.

Deciding to allow Regina a few moments of reprieve (Regina has to know by now that the sheriff
will yank on this as she has yanked on every other skeleton in the closet) Emma turns to Henry.
"Well then, I guess I can rule out that being where your fear of clowns came from, huh?"

"Yeah," Henry chuckles. "But good try."

"I will get that story out of the two of you."

"You keep saying that, Swan," Regina drawls. She's standing in the entrance of the kitchen,
watching the two of them with a slight look of bemusement on her face. "One day, perhaps, you
even will. Now, can we maybe get breakfast started before the two of you begin to starve?"

"Sure, but you know what, Regina? Just for the record? One day I will find out about Clown-Gate,"
Emma teases, adding on a cocky grin just for effect. "I. Will."

"If you say so, dear."

She turns her back on them and makes her way deeper into the kitchen, stepping behind the
counter. Following, Emma and Henry enter the kitchen, Henry pushing himself up on a stool, and
Emma moving to join Regina at the stove. Then, because she's decided that it's time to push just a
little bit about this whole circus thing, as she pulls out a carton of eggs, Emma presses forward with, "So, what's your thing about circuses? You have been to one in your life, right?"

"Of course," Regina answers, her voice suddenly tightly controlled. It's clear that she'd been hoping for Emma to drop the subject. She should have known better by now. "As the Queen, it was my duty to attend them so as to support the various entertainers within the kingdom."

"I'm guessing fifteen little men jammed in a car together not your thing?"

"There were no cars in my world. Though I'm sure that Dopey would have enjoyed that."

"You know what I mean."

"Mm. As I said before, the circus just wasn't something I enjoyed."

"Why not, Mom?" Henry asks, leaning forward on his elbows, his eyes bright and curious like he has no idea that this might be something that hurts.

Regina pauses for a moment before offering up in a voice that sounds entirely too controlled to be normal, "In this world, circuses are often considered to be unnecessarily cruel because they gather outcasts together and have them make fools of themselves for the pleasure of the masses. The Enchanted Forest was not so different in that regard, but it could also be unspeakably savage and terribly unforgiving to those who… failed to entertain the King or anyone within his court."

"What does that mean?" Henry queries, and Emma's suddenly quite certain that she doesn't want Regina to answer the question. Regina's world is far darker and meaner than Henry's book had ever suggested it to be. Had the Enchanted Forest been the home of True Love? Yes, perhaps for some of the lucky ones like her parents and Cinderella and Thomas, for sure, but for everyone else, the whole thing had seemed a bit like a constant crap-fest full of pain, hurt and despair.

"It means," Regina says after licking her lips. "That if the performers failed to entertain the King or the Queen or any part of the Royal Court, they were…" She trails off, suddenly looking very uncomfortable. Her eyes slide up to Emma's and Emma sees the shame and regret shining there.

"Killed?" Henry demands, his voice sharpening. "The circus people were killed?"

It's so insanely inappropriate, but Emma almost laughs because of the way Henry asks the question. All of this…it's all so very absurd. And yet in the raw honesty of it, so very real.

"Sometimes," Regina says softly, her eyes closing for a brief moment as she looks away.

"Did...did you...kill anyone for failing to entertain you?" Henry asks.

And there it is; the question that Regina has clearly been trying to avoid. Emma feels like slapping herself for missing the signs. "Henry," Emma warns, not sure what she's going to say.

"No, it's...well it's not all right, but we...I promised you the truth, Henry and I mean to keep that promise to you the best that I can," Regina cuts in, her voice shaky, and her dark eyes suddenly shiny and wet. "You already know that I did terrible things there as the Evil Queen, yes?"

He nods, his brow furrowing as he tries to take in what she's saying.

"This occurred before those days. When I was just the Queen. It was my first time at the circus, and I didn't know...well, that doesn't matter, does it? I was angry and I didn't want to be where I was and it was never really about the young man who was trying to entertain us, anyway. I'm
afraid that I didn't realize the consequences of my behavior and it cost someone their life."

"Oh," Henry says, looking disgusted. He looks down and away, and though Emma doesn't actually need to see the heartbroken expression on Regina's face, she does so anyway, and it hurts far more than she had expected it to considering where they had all begun this journey.

"Henry," Emma suggests in a gentle voice, her hand on Henry's shoulder, "Why don't you go and get showered up, huh, kid? Breakfast should be ready by the time you're done with it."

"Yeah, okay," Henry agrees, for once not fighting back. He casts one fairly unreadable look over at Regina, and then turns and leaves the room, his footsteps soft and almost tentative.

"So much for progress," Regina says quietly, looking away from Emma. Her hand comes up and after brushing unshed tears away from her eyes, it ascends and she scratches almost anxiously at her temple for a moment before seeming to realize what she's doing. When she does realize that she's broadcasting just how upset she is, she quickly snatches her hand away, and fisting it into a tight ball, she presses it against her leg to keep it still, her arm settling them across her belly.

"Hey, it'll be okay," Emma promises her, stepping forward. "He'll be okay."

"You keep telling me that," Regina answers with a nod and a harsh pained sounding chuckle that sounds more like a sob that she can't quite disguise as she once had been able to. "And for some reason or another, Emma, I keep believing you, and then he asks me another question, and I have to show him who I actually am yet again." She shrugs her shoulders in what appears to be an attempt to control her own body lest it give out from beneath her. "How am I ever supposed to earn forgiveness from him if every day is just another story that reminds him of the truth?"

"And what truth is that, Regina? That you were the Evil Queen, and that you did some pretty fucked up things? He knows all of that already."

"Really?" Regina laughs humorlessly at that. "You saw the look on his face. He doesn't just think that I'm a monster; he now absolutely knows that I am one, and always will be one. He knows."

"All due respect, Regina, but I think you're reading him wrong."

"Am I now? All right, then, Sheriff, tell me, what was my son thinking? Since you know him so much better than I do, apparently."

It takes everything Emma has not to roll her eyes at the obvious defensive jab from the clearly quite upset Queen. It's not unexpected really; when in pain, Regina lashes out and tries to create operational distance. "Probably the same thing I was; your world was pretty whacked out."

Regina laughs once again, but this one sounds just a bit lighter than before, and considering how very dark her emotions had been just a moment earlier; it's a wonderful sound. "I really hope he wasn't thinking it the exact same way you were; I'd like to think he has more class than that."

"And there we go insulting my breeding. Feel better now?" Emma asks with an impish grin.

"Because I insulted you?"

"Yeah."

"A little bit," Regina admits with a shrug. Then grudgingly, "Thank you."

"No problem." She offers Regina a small smile, and then reaches forward and takes an egg out of
her hand. "Breakfast is my gig, Regina. It's what I get to contribute to the household. So sit."

That she's trying to keep Regina from crushing the poor egg in her noticeably shaking hand is something neither mentions, but both are aware of. All the same, Regina seats herself on one of the stools, somehow managing to look regal in flannel pants and a tee that is way too big for her.

"So, what's the rest of that story?" Emma prompts as she starts gathering the pans.

"The rest?"

"I'm sure there's more to it than that you disliked someone and they died."

"Unfortunately, there isn't much more than that. I was very young and very desired," - another bitter laugh sounds – "And the King was showing me off to the members of his Court that had joined us. He had his arm around me and was making sure everyone knew I was his wife. And me? Well, depressed doesn't really begin to cover it. It was a few months after the wedding and I was beginning to understand that this would be my life going forward. The circus came to town, and your mother wished to go so we did even though I asked the King if I could abstain from it. He might have even allowed it initially if not for the fact that your mother wished me there."

"Don't tell me you blamed my mother for this, too?"

"I wouldn't have been there at all if not for her so yes, at the time it was just another stone in the wall that existed between the two of us. Not that Snow was even vaguely aware of it."

"And now?"

"Now I suppose I understand that that boy's death is on me and me alone," Regina answers coolly, her eyes lifting to meet Emma's. "That is what you want me to say here, yes?"

"Well, no, not really. I don't want you to say anything that you don't actually mean, okay? And you know what? Maybe after all we've been through over the last several weeks; maybe we can stop having this conversation where I ask you to believe that I'm on your side? I'm not judging you here, Regina; I'm just trying to figure out where your head is on all this. That's it; I swear."

Regina sighs, her shoulders sagging down in a display of unsettling resignation. "You're right; I'm sorry. I just…" She stops abruptly, swallowing almost convulsively as she looks down at her hands like they're the greatest and most horrible weapons ever created.

"You're afraid of losing him," Emma finishes for her, her voice gentle.

The Queen nods her head slowly, the look on her face nothing short of stricken and defeated. "Yes, I am," she admits. "Every time he finds out a new detail about my past, I confirm for him the worst of his thoughts about me. It was one thing when I was just some vague kind of evil on a page, but now he knows that I'm it in the flesh as well. I'm every nightmare that he's ever had."

"And yet he loves you, anyway."

Regina shakes her head, unwilling to believe the words which she's hearing from the woman who had once been her sworn enemy. "And how is it that you are so very certain of this?"

"Because I am, and because we're not going to let you lose him. You and me, Regina, we're in this together; he needs us both and he's going to have us both. We can figure out everything else along the way, okay?" She punctuates her words with a determined glance, the kind she'd once thrown Regina's way when they'd been at war with each other. This time, it's meant to show her strength.
This time, it does.

Regina lets out a breath, trying to calm herself. "After the King…died," she offers up after a moment, "I stopped going to the circus. In fact, as soon as I was able to, I had them outlawed."

"Good."

"I'm afraid you're one of the rare ones who thinks so. My decision was not met with much joy by the peasants. It was their entertainment, and I was the Evil Queen taking it away from them just to show them that I could. By that point, however, I'm not sure I cared what they thought of me."

"Well, what did they know, anyway? Damn peasants."

"Indeed," Regina chuckles, deeply appreciative of the obvious attempt to make her laugh.

"So, not to pull us back to the uglier stuff again –"

"But you're going to, anyway," Regina notes.

"Kind of got to," Emma insists as she breaks three eggs into the pan. "Why did you lie to Henry about your nightmares and yet tell him the truth about what happened at the circus?"

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yeah, so bullshit on that. Wanna try again?"

Regina lets out an annoyed huff, and then permits, "He doesn't need to know everything."

"Okay, sure, but does that mean that you're going to pick and choose what truths to tell him."

"I promised him that I wouldn't lie to him. I'm not lying to him. Do you think if I were that I would tell him the ones sure to push him away from me?" Regina challenges as she moves herself to her feet. She steps away from the bar-stool and starts pacing back and forth anxiously.

"You know, for as much as I understand you sometimes, Regina, there are things about you that I don't think I'll ever get," Emma confesses. "You're telling our kid the bits of your past as the Evil Queen which are the ugliest and most damning, but then when he wants to be there for you, you're hiding how much you're hurting from him. I don't get that at all; I'm sorry, I just don't."

Regina stops pacing and turns to stares right at Emma, but she doesn't bother to offer up a defense or an excuse or well, anything at all. Her eyes tell the tale anyway; Emma's right.

"Just tell me why?" the blonde presses. "Why won't you let him see how much all of this has hurt you? Why won't you let him see you vulnerable? Why won't you let him see you as a person?"

"Because he's a child and I'm not a person; I'm his mother, and I'm supposed to protect him."

"If he's old enough to hear about yours sins, then he's damn well old enough to know about your wounds as well, Regina. He's damn well old to know that yes, you are a person," the sheriff fires back, her hands set sharply upon her hips as she glares back at Regina over the dividing counter.

"No," Regina answers simply. "He'll never be old enough for that."

"That sounds to me like a pretty twisted way of trying to ensure that he'll never love you as much as you want him to," Emma shrewdly notes. "And it's not how actual relationships work."
"You act like I'm trying to manipulate him."

"Not intentionally, no, but this is a manipulation of sorts."

"I'm not…it's not –"

"You're testing him."

"No. No, I'm not," Regina insists, her normally tanned face paling considerably at even the thought of such a thing. She looks genuinely outraged and horrified at this idea, and this is almost enough to sway Emma off course.

Almost but not quite enough.

Because she's right about this even if Regina doesn't yet realize it.

"Yes, yes you are. You're trying to see if he's capable of loving you for all that you are, but here's the thing, Regina, there's no way for you to get to that result because the test is fixed, isn't it?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about; there's no test," Regina hisses out, her dark eyes gleaming with anger and something that looks a lot like fear. "And I would say, Miss Swan, that it is probably in your best interest to drop this ridiculous line of conversation right now."

"Yeah, you're right; it probably would be. But, as we both know, I'm not really one for doing what might keep me safe from former Evil Queens with severe anger management issues."

Regina actually growls at this, her teeth clenching. It'd be almost comical if she didn't look so goddamned homicidal. The thing is, though, while Emma is smart enough to recognize that Regina will always be dangerous, she finds that she herself is no longer afraid of the once Evil Queen. She believes that they've come far enough that Regina is no longer a threat to her.

"Right; exactly," Emma replies with a smirk. "Now, how about the truth?"

"From me or from you?" Regina challenges.

"Okay, my truth is that you don't actually believe he can love you so you're making sure he only sees the bad parts of you to prove that. Like I said, it's a fixed test that he can't possibly pass."

"Let's assume your delusions are correct. To what end? Do you think I'm trying to lose him? Didn't we just have a conversation where you promised me that you wouldn't let that happen?"

"We did have one, yeah, and no, I don't think that you're consciously trying to lose him at all. I think it would devastate you and completely break your heart if it happened again, but I think that there's a part of you that believes – for whatever reason – that you're not worthy of his love."

"I'm not," Regina says simply. "But that doesn't mean that I don't want it, anyway."

"Yeah, well, he wants to give it to you so maybe it's time for you to start letting our son see all of you. Even the parts that scare the piss out of you. You're a lot more than just the Evil Queen now, Regina. She's who you were. Let him see who you are today. Let him see who I see."

"And what do you see, Emma?"

Emma nods at the question, her lips slightly curling upwards. "I see someone who is fighting like hell to be the person that they genuinely want to be. That's who you should let him see, too."
"And what of you?" Regina fires back. "Does he see all of you?"

"No," Emma admits with a hint of sadness that seems to freeze Regina's anger cold. "He sees me as the Savior and some grand conquering epic hero, but he doesn't see me as his mother."

"That's absurd."

"Is it? When he's hurt or scared or sick, he goes to you. Which is okay because...you're right; it was always you who was there for him. But that doesn't change the fact that when our kid needs someone to save someone or pull out a sword, he comes to me. For comfort, he goes to you."

"There are worse things to be than your son's hero."

"Until I inevitably fail him," Emma counters, lifting up her chin and looking defiantly – and perhaps even sadly – right at Regina. "And let's be honest here, Regina; we both know that I will fail him eventually. I'll do everything in my power not to, but..." she shakes her head. "But I suppose that's okay, right? It'll even things up between you and me in his eyes a little at least."

"I don't want that. I don't want him to see you as anything close to how he sees me."

"No? Time was that's exactly what you would have wanted."

"Times change, don't they?"

"I guess they do," Emma answers with a wide grin. "After all, you did manage to call me Emma instead of Miss Swan even when you were pissed at me a few seconds ago. I mean first you called me Miss Swan, but then Emma. You know what, I think you actually really do like me."

Regina demurs with a roll of her eyes, and if Emma didn't know better, she'd think the Queen to look a bit awkward and uncomfortable about what the blonde had just said. With something which sounds a whole lot like a huff, Regina says, "I suppose I am growing accustomed to you."

"Right. Well, right back at you, Your Majesty," Emma tells her, meeting the brunette's eyes. It's suddenly become quite important to her that Regina understand that though Emma's words are light and airy and even just a little bit teasing in tone, the sentiment behind the words is not.

Regina nods finally, accepting what she's saying even if she's still clearly struggling to absorb and internalize them. After a long moment of entirely too much of a connection between them, desperate to retreat, Regina says, "As lovely as this talk has been, you're going to burn my eggs. Try to concentrate on them while I go find out what's taking Henry so long in the shower."

"You may not actually want to know the answer to that," Emma suggests.

Regina's eyebrow lifts. "I have no idea what you're trying to say."

"He's knocking on the door of being a teen," Emma grins, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

"Focus on the eggs."

"Of course."

"And Emma?"

Emma looks up from the eggs. "Hm?"

"Thank you for last night. Waking me up, and then staying with me through the morning, I mean."

"Have no idea what you're trying to say."

"He's knocking on the door of being a teen," Emma grins, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively.

"Focus on the eggs."

"Of course."

"And Emma?"

Emma looks up from the eggs. "Hm?"
You could have kept your distance and let me deal with the nightmares on my own, and that would have been all right and perfectly understandable, but you didn't and…well, thank you."

"I'm glad I was able to help."

"You were," Regina confirms. "More than I think you know. It's not been often in my life that I've had anyone willing to be there for me without wanting something in return for it."

"You've got me now."

"I won't forget that again," Regina says softly, then turns and leaves.

Emma watches her go, and thinks about how times really do change.

And how both she and Regina seem to be changing with them.

"Hey," Emma says as she presses her cell phone to her ear.

Her hair is still dripping wet, and she's wearing little more than a pair of faded jeans and a white sports bra, but seeing the caller ID come up with David's name instead of Neal's (she knows that he's expecting an answer about Henry) had been enough to convince her to pick up the phone.

"Hey back," David chuckles, a hint of familiar humor in his decidedly hot chocolate warm voice. "It's been awhile since I've heard from you." There's a slight scolding note to his tone, but not enough to really annoy her. His willingness to give her space has always been appreciated.

"Sorry," she answers. "Things have been kind of crazy here."

"Yeah? Crazy how? Are you all right? Has Regina—"

"David," Emma sighs.

"Right. Everything's fine. Got it."

"It is," she states. "Fine. Or at least it's getting closer to that every day."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really," Emma assures him. There's a pause, then, and she knows that he's waiting for her to supply him with more information, but she doesn't say a word; she won't betray Regina's trust like that, and besides, what exactly would she say to her father? How could she even begin to explain the massive relationship shifts which have been occurring between she and Regina?

And that's not even including the kiss.

Really, though what could she say to him that he would understand? He long ago had placed Regina into the role of the villain incapable of being more than that, and in those moments where he remembers that she actually is a person, he regards her with suspicion and patronizing self-righteousness. Emma has a lot of affection for her father, and even she sees these things.

That doesn't mean that he's completely wrong in his feelings about Regina; the Queen had
certainly done a number on her parents. She'd split them up for three decades all because of a wrong-headed desire for vengeance. And even before that, they'd all had ugly history together.

But Emma hadn't been part of that history, and while she understands that it's not her right to simply disregard it, she has no intention of it allowing to inform Regina's future – or her own – more than is absolutely necessary. If David wants to be wary of Regina, that's understandable, but Emma doesn't plan to allow him to be skeptical of the progress which Regina has made.

The progress which both she and Regina have made.

"Okay," he says finally. "Well, then how are you doing? How's Henry?"

"He's good. I think he and Regina are out on the beach together."

"Is he enjoying himself?" David asks, and it sounds like genuine curiosity.

"I think he is; he has both of my mothers with him, and he's pretty much the center of our worlds. Plus, let's face it, he's a snarky bastard with a mischievous streak. Just like her."

David laughs, the sound loud and rich. It's wonderfully refreshing to hear.

"Yeah, well, good luck with that," he tells her.

"Thanks. So, not that I'm not happy to hear from you – you know that I am - but is this just a general check-in or is there something else that you wanted to talk to me about?"

"There's something else I – we – wanted to let you know about," David replies, and she can almost hear the happiness bursting in his voice. "Your mother went back to work today."

"She did?"

"Yeah, she did. It's been a really long six weeks, Emma, but your mother woke up finally feeling like herself again. She wanted to get out and see people and you know, get back to normal."

"Good. That's good…good for her," Emma replies, frowning a bit.

"And yet unless I'm mistaken, you don't actually sound happy about it."

He's right, of course. It's not that she's not happy for Mary Margaret. Not exactly, anyway. It's more that it just seems so damned easy. For the last month and a half, she and Regina have been on the edge of almost every emotion known to man, and for as much progress that they have made together, there's still so much more healing and recovering in front of both of them.

There's no such thing for them as just one morning deciding that they feel better and thus all is well. There's no such thing for either of them as simply choosing to push all of the past away and focus solely on the future. The one thing which Emma knows for sure – and thinks that she will always know – is that the past is life-altering both backwards and forwards whether you want it to be or not; even once she comes to a place of peace with everything that has occurred and not occurred within her often-turbulent life, she knows she'll always carry old battle scars with her.

Always.

She thinks that she actually prefers it that way.

Her parents aren't like that, though. Her parents carry their bloodied pasts around with them only as a reminder of the many things that they have conquered and risen above. They don't use the
memories of the dark days which they have defeated as warnings, and they don't reflect on how
their victories may have led to the downfall of others who might not have deserved such.

She shakes her head and tries to clear her head. She thinks that maybe she's being unfair to her
mother and father right now; perhaps this is a bit of Stockholm, and her time here with Regina has
made her empathize with the queen, and perhaps that's fogging up her view of things.

Her parents aren't the villains of this bizarre little tale.

But then again, the more time she spends with Regina in this little world-retreat of theirs, the more
she understands just how worthless that word really is. It's black and white, and Regina is anything
but either of those. It's simplistic and Regina is anything but simplistic in nature.

More importantly, the word doesn't speak of the pain and hurt beneath the flesh and bone.

"I am happy," Emma finally manages to say, a lie delivered with a smile before she remembers that
he can't actually see it. "I'm glad that she's doing better. I'm glad she's back to her life."

"But?"

Okay, so he's going to push.

Fine.

She shrugs even though he can't see that, either. "There's not really a but; just a question."

"Go on."

"How is she about what she did?"

"To Cora?"

"To Regina," Emma corrects.

"I think," he says after a long moment, "That if she could go back and do everything again, she
would have done things differently, but Emma, Cora had to be stopped from becoming the Dark
One. God only knows what she would have – could have – done with that kind of power."

"We're not debating that," Emma assures him. "But we are debating whether it was okay for Mary
Margaret to put more blood on Regina's hands. Especially her own mother's. We agree that Cora
had to be stopped, but that doesn't justify using Regina to kill her. You know it doesn't."

"I know," David admits in a soft voice, the frown he's likely wearing coming through, "She doesn't
speak much of it, honestly. She's been really trying to get herself back to who she was."

"So you mean she's been avoiding what actually happened?"

"Is there a point in her dwelling on what happened that night? What's done is done," he replies
stubbornly, suddenly sounding like he's getting defensive. And he is; he's digging his heels in to
support his wife as he believes he should. Still, Emma can tell that his certainty is wavering.

"That's not how it works. You can't move on and figure out who you are until you actually deal
with the past," Emma insists. "That's why I'm here with Regina right now. Helping her let go."

"Your mother and Regina aren't the same person, and they don't need the same things," David
reminds her, his tone growing impatient and frustrated, like he's talking to a small child. "Snow
needs to remember the best parts of herself, not fall back into the darkness that consumed her."

Emma actually feels herself flinch because the words he's saying sound so ridiculous to her ears. They sound so flowery and hopeful and perfect. Perfectly wrong.

"She murdered someone, David," Emma reminds him. "And please, don't tell me that Regina actually did it. You know that's not the point. Nor is it the point that Cora probably deserved what she got. None of that actually matters; all that does is that she has blood on her hands now."

"But that wasn't your mother," David insists, almost sounding like he's pleading with Emma to understand what he's trying to say here. "That's not who she actually is. She wasn't herself."

"You're right; she wasn't. That's why it is so important that she doesn't just pretend like it never happened. She can't sulk under her sheets like she was, but she can't just make it all go away, either. She killed someone, and she has to wear that as much as Regina has to wear her sins."

"They're not the same person," David says again. There's some desperation in his voice, and it's just enough to make her move in for the kill, recognizing her chance to finally break through.

"I know, but I also know how slippery that slope becomes once you start justifying your actions with words like good and evil. I'm telling you – I'm begging you, David, please don't let her just bury this because if you do, one day she'll wake up and look at herself in a mirror and she won't like who she sees staring back at her. She's my mother and one of my best friends, and I want more for her than that. And I know that you do, too. Please. Promise me you'll make her deal with this. Even if you don't want her to have to, promise me that you'll do it anyway."

It's not lost on her that this is a variation of the promise that Regina had extracted from her the night before, but somehow, it feels appropriate. She thinks it's time for everyone to stop running. It's time for everyone to stop hiding behind labels and intentions.

If she and Regina have to account for their pasts, then so does everyone else.

"I promise," David finally answers with a resigned sigh.

"It's the right thing to do," Emma assures him. "And I know that doesn't make it easy for her or you or anyone, but David if there's one thing I've figured out over the last thirty years of life, it's that the easy thing is usually the wrong thing, anyway. Might as well start out right, yeah?"

"I promise," he says again, and this time his voice is a bit firmer.

"Thank you." Then, with a small smile, "I miss you guys. You know that, right?"

"You can come home anytime you want."

"She needs me," Emma says simply. "And I don't really mind being here. I just miss you."

"We miss you, too." There's a pause, and then, "You two are becoming friends?"

"Does that bother you?"

"A bit," he admits. "After all, she took you from us for almost thirty years."
"Not really. I'm not going to bother trying to defend the crap she pulled back in the world you came from because it's indefensible, but the two of you, you're the ones who made the choice to send me through the wardrobe. There's a lot on her, but choosing to let me go is on you guys."

"One of these days you'll forgive us for that, right?" He asks this quietly, his hurt unmistakable.

"I think that's how family works; I think we find a way to forgive each other," Emma replies, and she knows it's not the response which he'd hoped to hear, but she doesn't want to lie to him and tell him pretty false words just to make him feel better. She owes everyone more than that.

"Right." She can feel the sadness radiating off of his reply, and so much of her wants to find a way to reach out towards him and make him better because he's her father and she loves him but still, she knows that this is something they have to get through; she believes they will eventually. "Just, make me a promise now," he pleads. "Be careful, okay? You may think she's changed –"

"I know that she has," Emma cuts in, keeping her voice gentle. "I knew it a few months ago, too. I ignored my instincts when it came to her then, and I won't do it again. She has changed. She's still the same constantly pissed-off arrogant obnoxious control freak of a woman –"

"That almost sounds affectionate," he breaks in.

"We've had a lot of time to talk over the last few weeks. A ton of time," she admits, and then clamps her mouth shut. That's frankly more than she should have said, but hardly revelatory.

"You know your mother still love her," David notes. "Has never really stopped."

"Well, then, maybe if we're lucky, we can help get both of them to a place where they can forgive each other for the past and move forward. Maybe we can all get to that place."

"You make it sound so easy."

"It's not," she admits, and offers nothing else.

"Right," David answers because he knows a brush-off when he hears it. After a moment, he sighs, and she finds herself desperately wishing that he would laugh instead. "I hate to do this, but I should probably get going. I need to get into the station before it gets too much later."

"Because there are so many bad guys to chase down."

"Hardly," he chuckles. "Me and Leroy have just been trying to keep an eye on this Mendell fellow who keeps lurking around town. He's a bit insistent on staying around and getting to know the area so we've been trying to make sure he doesn't accidentally see anything he shouldn't."

"Wait...you made Leroy a deputy?"

"Temporarily, yes. Just until you get back. It was him or Granny and between you and me, I'm a bit worried about her trigger finger and how much she likes to shoot people in the backside."

She laughs and he laughs, and there it is – exactly what she'd been looking for. It's a pure and perfect moment between them. The kind of idealistic moment that you see on TV in those Family Channel movies that are made to show someone how love can conquer all.

She's never really believed in such silliness, but that doesn't mean she doesn't want to.

"Good point," she agrees after the laughter has faded to silence. Finally, softly, "Tell Mary-
Margaret…well tell her something that makes me sound like the daughter I'm supposed to be."

"You are the daughter that you're supposed to be," David insists, and his tone is firm and suddenly unrelenting – suddenly so very strong where he'd been tired before. It pushes a flood of warmth through Emma's chest, and try as she might, she can't stop herself from squirming.

Because in spite of the epic mess that she is and in spite of the mess that she has made of her life time and time again and despite twenty-eight years of separation, her parents love her just because they do. She swallows roughly and then does it again, blinking back impending tears.

Finally, in a voice roughened with emotion, she manages, "Thanks. I'll talk to you soon."

"Soon," he repeats.

"Yes," she agrees even though she knows that the word is meaningless until Regina is ready.

It's still something, and it's her family and she wants all of this so much. Trembling slightly, she hangs up the phone before she can do something ridiculous like break down crying on it.

He's her father, and she barely knows him.

He's her father and she's not terribly close to him.

He's her father, and he misses her anyway.

She exhales sharply, her whole body shaking beneath the effort of it.

She laughs, then (it's better than crying) and wonders if she'll ever get used to any of this.

He's been silent for almost the entire hour that they've been out here on the beach together.

She's tried to start up a conversation a few times by asking him random questions – mostly about little inconsequential things such as how he liked the comic book he'd read the night before or if breakfast had been good – and he'd answered them, but then immediately returned to his fort.

She feels a bit like they've lost all of the progress that they've made over the last six weeks, and it hurts her in a way that makes her stomach churn fitfully. She recalls this particular soul-searing agony all too well. During the days just before Emma had come to town and in the dark ones after her arrival, the distance between she and Henry had been vast and catastrophically painful.

This – standing so near to him and yet appearing to be so far from him once again – feels exactly like that had. That she believes it to be her own fault – as usual – offers Regina little comfort.

"Henry," she says softly, her voice cracking sharply. "Can we…can we talk?"

He turns his head and looks at her, the expression on his face unreadable.

"Please?" she puts in when it seems to her like he might refuse. She swallows hard, and then, realizing just how poor a job she is doing at hiding her emotions, she tries to retreat just a bit. Not physically, but more emotionally; she tries to push her protective walls back up again.
It hurts that she has to do with Henry, but perhaps no one can hurt her more than he can.

"Sure," Henry says, shrugging his shoulders as if to suggest that he doesn't actually care. He's holding an oversized waterlogged branch in his hands and when his body moves, he almost smacks himself in the face with the stick. Regina thinks to herself – and then scolds herself for the absurdity of the thought – that Emma probably would have laughed if she'd seen that.

She steps towards him, pushing her shaking hands into her pockets to hide them from him as she moves towards her anxious looking son. "I'm sorry," Regina starts out with, licking her dry lips. He tilts his head looking strangely confused all of the sudden. "Sorry? For what?"

"For disappointing you again."

"Because of the circus story?" he asks as he puts the branch down, his head cocking to the side.

"That and...so many other things. I was a very angry young woman back then and I did terrible thing to try to make myself feel better. I hurt people terribly. Even when I didn't intend to like with that boy at the circus, I still did. I was...I was the Evil Queen that you thought me to be."

"I know," he answers.

She visibly flinches away from him, the hands in her pockets clawing forward; it's one thing for Henry to have read about her and to have believed the stories as a child believes in Santa Claus, but it's quite another thing entirely for him to actually understand what a monster she'd been.

It's another thing entirely for him to be completely accepting just how terrible she truly is.

Her mouth goes completely dry and her heart violently seizes like it's about to explode. For a moment, she thinks that it's going to. She starts to reply, but before she can (and to be honest, the words are trapped somewhere in her throat), Henry speaks again, "But you're still my mom."

"Henry," she gasps. "I...I don't understand."

"I know," he says again, pushing ahead with the kind of righteous boldness that only a child – or a member of the Charming family – can possess. "The first night we got here, Emma told me that someone had hurt you very badly once. Is that true?"

She offers him an uncomfortable smile, the kind that's meant to keep the ugly emotions in and locked away. "Yes," she confirms, not bothering to add that it was far more than one person who had contributed to her downfall and far more than once. "But that doesn't justify what I did."

She's still not entirely sure she believes the words she's saying, but they're the words she needs him to hear (she thinks that maybe one day, she'll find a way to make sense of them and maybe even believe them) because she will not allow him to become who she is. She might not be a good mother overall, but if she can prevent him from walking her path, well that's something.

"Emma told me life isn't about justifying everything that's happened. She said that sometimes it's about understanding the reasons why," Henry states, his green eyes strong and confident.

"She did, did she?"

He nods his head. Then, with a frown, he notes, "You've never seemed like you ever needed anyone, Mom. You were always so strong. I guess I never thought anything could hurt you."

"Oh my sweet prince, how I wish that were true."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Because I'm not…because what you think is true? Me strong? That's what I want to be for you. I want to be what you need me to be, and a broken mess isn't that. I owe you more than that."

"You're not broken," he announces, his chin up.

"No?"

"No. You're my mom. You're Mom," he says once more. It's almost exactly the same words that he'd said a few moments earlier, and yet they mean something else entirely to her this time.

They mean acceptance if not yet forgiveness.

"Henry," she whispers again, not knowing what else to say and too afraid to try a longer sentence for fear that she might break down into tears. Which…no, she can't do that to him. She can't.

"When I said I don't want you to lie to me anymore, I meant about everything," he tells her, his jaw set in determination. He reminds her a bit too much of his grandfather in the moment, but she lets the feeling pass. "I meant that I want you to be honest with me all the way around."

"I want that, too, Henry. I do. But…there are some things that I can't tell you," she insists, her already low voice rough with emotion. "There are some things I don't want you to know because you shouldn't have to know…you shouldn't have to know the terrible things I do. No one should. I love you so much, and I promise I will do everything in my power to be as honest with you as I can, but I need you to understand that there are things that I can't talk to you about and believe me when I tell you that my reasons for not doing so have nothing to do with deceiving you."

There's a pause and then he says quietly, firmly, "I believe you."

Her eyes close for the briefest of moments and then she smiles as much as she can manage without cracking. It's still tinged with sadness, but there's relief and a surge of joy there, too.

For this child, she will do anything. For Henry, she will face any obstacle.

Even herself.

For his love and acceptance, she will confess any and every sin.

That he might not need her to is something she can barely comprehend; that's something she's certain that she doesn't deserve. But for once, maybe – just maybe – she'll accept it, anyway.

"We're almost done," he says suddenly, bringing her attention back to him.

"Done?"

"With the fort. I think I'm kind of sad about that, actually." He motions to their fort, and truly, there's not all that much more to be done on it.

Until the next storm rolls in and tears it down once more.

"It's still our thing," she says, praying that he won't reject her.

Praying that he won't take this from her. From them.
He doesn't.

"Yeah," he nods, looking smugly satisfied with what they've built. "Yeah, it is." He picks up the branch and holds it out to her. After a brief moment, her hand closes around the wet wood.

He's a child and doesn't understand metaphors and things of the like, but all of this means something to her. All of this feels like a sign. All of this feels just a little bit like hope.

She places the branch atop the fort.

He grins at her and then puts his own – a piece of driftwood - atop of hers.

She finds Emma working out in the garage when she and Henry get back to the house around noon. Emma's in a tank and she's got her hair pulled back, and even though it's a cool day, she's dripping sweat. Her hands are taped up and she's standing barefoot in front of the heavy bag.

Looking a bit like she's been at this for hours. Punching away the pain of everything.

Regina understands this even as it worries her because…it means Emma is hurting.

And God, when had she started to care so damned much?

"Are you all right?" Regina asks from the doorway of the garage as she watches Emma deliver two particularly brutal jabs to the swinging bag that both of them have made excellent use of over the last several weeks. Slightly wary, Regina glances back towards the house, her eyes locking on Henry's form as he moves through the kitchen prepping lunch for the three of them.

Emma tilts her head and offers her a smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes.

"That wasn't actually a response," Regina notes after a few seconds.

There's a moment when it looks like Emma is going to blow her off and come up with some way to push her off, but then she sighs and says, "David called." She turns from the bag and faces Regina even as she places her taped hands down by her legs, her fingers curling and uncurling.

"And?"

"Mary Margaret went back to work today."

"I see."

"You see? That's it? That's your only response to your mortal enemy getting back to her life like nothing has happened?" Emma snaps out as she steps closer to Regina. There's a mean kind of light in her nearly moss colored eyes, the kind that signifies when someone is picking a fight.

A fight Regina refuses to partake in; she steels herself and stares back at Emma, her chin up.

"Is that what you want from me? Me to rage at your mother? Because I was under the impression that you wanted me to let go of my hatred of Snow White instead of holding it close to me. Was I wrong? Would you prefer I consider a new curse? There are so many other ones possible."
Emma lets out a huff, her shoulders sagging. "God, no, but…ugh, I'm an ass; I'm sorry."

"Hardly the word I'd use for you at the moment, but I digress. Now would you care to tell me what's bothering you, Swan? After all, as you said, I should be the one angered by this."

"Are you?" Emma asks, and this time it's genuine curiosity.

"Angered? You want the truth?" Off Emma's nods, she allows," A bit, yes. Am I surprised? Not at all. Snow has always been good at recovery. It's both an obnoxious trait and an enviable one. That she found a way out of this before I could, though, well that seems appropriate, I suppose."

"Why?"

"Well, she's good and righteous and I'm evil and wrong, right?"

"I think you know by now that I don't buy the whole black and white thing."

Regina tilts her head in acceptance of this. "No, I suppose you don't." She shrugs but it's not quite as disinterested as she's playing at."There's a part of me that wants her to be crying every moment of every day. There's a part of me that would like to know that she feels what I have."

"Just a part?"

Regina chuckles. "It's perhaps a bit strange, but I've found over the last few weeks that my care of what Snow White is or isn't doing has decreased considerably. She has her perfect little life, and there's nothing I can do about that nor am I sure that I'd even want to try to, anymore."

"Because?"

"So many questions," Regina murmurs. "Wasn't I asking about you?"

"Yeah, but humor me, anyway," Emma pleads as she puts a hand on the bag to stop it from swaying back and forth. Once it does, the hand returns to her side, clenching tightly again.

"Fine," Regina allows, and suddenly her posture has gone stiff like she thinks she's about to say something which she might get thrown back at her. Her walls are up just a bit. Not as much as they have been, but enough for Emma to notice. "I'm not sure I even want to do anything to her anymore because it would hurt you and Henry and…and I don't want that. For either of you."

It's the kind of confession that couldn't have been made six weeks ago.

Perhaps it wasn't even possible then, but things have changed and shifted and there's a spark jumping between them as they stare at each other. There's this connection running hot now.

Regina lowers her head after a moment of silence from the blonde, feeling embarrassment and rejection wash over her as the only sound that exists around them is the sound of breathing.

"Don't," Emma says abruptly.

"What?"

"Don't look away from me like that. Like you're…like you have nothing. It, Regina, it means…it means everything to me to have someone…" She stops, takes a deep breath and then tries to start over again. "Earlier this morning, you said that no one had ever been there for you just to be there. I haven't had a whole lot of people rushing to put me first, either. Neal chose destiny over me and my parents, well, we all know how that went…" she trails off, chewing her lip a bit.
"I can't and won't speak for your ex, but you need to know...you parents love you, Emma," She says this softly as she suddenly steps closer to the blonde, close enough to touch her taped up hand. "Whatever else you might think about them or your relationship with them, they love you."

"Because I'm their daughter and they're supposed to."

"No. Because they do." Regina puts out her hands and places them gently on the sides of both of Emma's strong shoulders, the light contact of her palms against Emma's bare skin warm and reassuring. "You know how I feel about them. You know I have no desire to ever speak well of the two of them so I need you to listen to me now so that I do not need to do it again, all right?"

Emma nods, her green eyes locked on Regina's dark ones, the turbulence there so thick.

"About four weeks before your birth, your mother – without consulting with your father, I believe - sent an emissary to my castle. He was armed with a promise of a truce and peace and whatever I wanted as long as I would promise to not harm you. That may not seem like much to you, but Emma, she was offering me all of my titles and all of my land back. Everything."

"You turned her down?"

"I had her emissary beaten nearly to death and returned to her with a promise of my impending vengeance in hand," Regina states flatly, her eyes for a moment finding the wall behind Emma.

Emma blinks. "All right, then. I guess that answers that question."

"Not for her it didn't. She didn't send any more men to try to convince me to talk and listen, but she did send various...creatures. Entirely too many of them, to be honest. She kept trying and trying, offering me the sun and the stars and everything in between. She tried so very hard."

"To protect me?"

"Oh, yes. Her last message even offered me not just my old lands, but also the new kingdom which she had carved out through other absorptions. It was ridiculous, of course, and we both knew it, but it didn't matter to her; she had to try something and so she did. After that last message, she gave up, and I believe that's when she and your father went to see Rumplestiltskin."

"Which is when they walked right into his trap of a grand plan?"

"I'm afraid that we all walked into that trap of his," Regina drawls. "I was certainly his greatest fool when it was all said and done, but I think we all willingly took part in his puppet show."

"Right." Emma shakes her head. "All right, I get it; they loved me and wanted me. What I don't get is why they didn't keep me with them. I don't understand why they sent me away."

"Because they didn't want that life for you."

"You mean because they wanted me to save everyone from you," Emma counters.

Regina thinks for a moment and then says, her tone more confident, "Henry told me once after you came to town and I'd said something to him about how you'd abandoned him -" she frowns slightly, shame washing over her at the words she'd said to her son – "That that wasn't true; you hadn't abandoned him at all. He told me that what you had done had been all about giving him his best shot at a good life. At least that had been your intention – he may have added...it doesn't matter, anymore." She waves off the worried look from Emma. "I was less than pleased with him – or you – when he said that, but I think maybe he was right, and I think maybe that is what Snow and
Charming thought that they were doing for you as well, Emma. Giving you a chance."

"Why are you telling me this?" Emma asks, tilting her head. "After everything that happened with Henry, wouldn't it be easier – wouldn't it be vengeance – to turn me against my mother?"

"It would be, but as I said, I have no desire to hurt you. Not anymore," Her hand moves from Emma's left shoulder up to gently cup the blonde's cheek, the tips of her fingers lightly pressing against the soft skin she finds there. She's more than a little surprised when she feels Emma dip towards her palm. "I know that I'm hardly an expert on being a mother or a daughter; I've failed at both –" she holds up her hand to stop the protest that is once again clearly right on the tip of Emma's tongue. "But I believe that to their dying day, your parents – especially your mother - will regret having let you go through the tree. I believe that even with things working out as they have, if they could change it all and go back and have all that time growing up with you, they would."

"Because they wanted the princess?"

"No, because they let you down. And they will never forgive themselves for that."

"Oh," Emma says, the sound more an expulsion of surprised air. Regina's words roll around in Emma's mind and for a moment, beneath the weight of the emotion and the feelings and the warmth, she almost can't breathe. She just looks back at Regina and sees the honesty in her eyes.

"Who would have thought that you of all people would be the one helping me with my mommy and daddy issues," Emma finally says, covering up her awkwardness with a slight hiccupping chuckle. Her hand slides up to cover Regina's for a moment, and then, almost absently, her thumb rubs over Regina's knuckles. It's unintentional but no less intimate because of that.

"No one sane, certainly," Regina murmurs as she reluctantly pulls her hand away from Emma's and takes a step back and away from her. She's not sure where this sudden need to touch – and be touched by – the blonde has come from all of sudden; she only knows that when they do touch, she feels this strange vibrating warmth directly in the middle of her chest. It feels good.

It feels right.

Still, Emma had made her feelings on the subject of them getting any more involved than they already are clear and she plans to respect the fear and wariness that both of them feel.

She intends to respect Emma's understandable hesitation about getting involved with her; she intends to respect Emma's choice.

So she smiles and keeps backing away. Slow steps, not going too far. Just enough.

"Yeah," Emma agrees finally, folding her hands into fists to keep them from shaking. Because whether or not Regina intends to honor Emma's desire to keep things platonic, that hasn't stopped the strange charge of energy from forming around them. The feeling that everything is continuing to shift and change, and maybe they don't have a clue what they're supposed to do.

Maybe, they should just let things play out as they will.

Maybe, they should let the changes happen and see what occurs next.

"Henry's probably wondering what's taking so long," Regina notes, taking one more step back.

"Right," Emma concurs.
"Then we'll meet you in the kitchen once you've taken the tape off of your hands and taken a shower," Regina instructs, adjusting towards the open doorway that leads back towards the house. It's clear that she's trying to escape; clear that she's trying to put some air between them.

"Wait," the sheriff says suddenly.

She's about to ask why, but then she feels Emma's hand settle around her forearm. Her mouth opens to protest the hard grip, but then she's being spun back towards Emma and they're just staring at each other, green eyes on brown ones, both of them trying to understand what this is.

Emma tilts her head and her lips part. Without thinking, Regina nods almost imperceptibly.

It's the strangest kind of silent agreement ever.

It's the understanding that this must involve both of them.

Emma moves forward, then, and when she kisses Regina, her lips are so very soft. Her hands reach up – one gently cradling Regina's neck and the other settled lightly on her cheek as she pushes in to deepen the kiss – and then she pulls the older woman even closer to her.

It's salt from the ocean and the faintest taste of orange juice.

It's sweat from the workout and the tangy cinnamon apple of lip-gloss.

The kiss is gentle and exploratory, and Emma's the one who finally adds a bit of teeth, nipping slightly before running her tongue lightly over Regina's lips in another form of asking for permission just before she pushes inwards even more, wanting to taste and feel everything.

Arms tighten and fingers grip, knuckles growing white with exertion.

Regina moans and Emma chuckles against her lips at the unusual loss of control.

Finally, after what seems like the shortest eternity ever to both of them, it's Regina who breaks away this time, her dark eyes wide and uncertain. "What was that?" she manages to gasp out.

"That was thank you," Emma breathes as she leans forward to press her forehead against Regina's. The feeling of being so very close to the Queen is intoxicating. "You didn't have to, but you did anyway so thank you for putting my needs first. Thank you for putting me first."

Regina lets out a sigh and for a few long seconds, just enjoys the contact. Part of her wants to ask if this means anything, if it changes anything (after all, just yesterday Emma had been insistent that starting anything during this bizarre therapy of theirs could only be considered a bad idea), but she manages to fight against the urge to ruin a wonderful moment with senseless words.

Fight and win, and they're so close and it's just the two of them in this wonderful moment.

"Lunch," Emma says after almost two minutes of this, not yet moving away.

"Up at the house," Regina agrees. "And yes, you need a shower first."

Emma laughs, the sound loud and genuine "So noted." She moves back, then, breaking the physical contact and allowing Regina to step away and get herself back under control.

Reluctantly, Regina does exactly that, again making her way to the door of the garage. "By the way, Sheriff," she husks out just before she exits the garage, her hand gripping the door-frame, her knuckles still white. "I approve of the apple flavored lip-gloss. Quite cheeky, my dear."
"What can I say, Your Majesty? I try."

They share one more warm smile between the two of them, and then Regina is gone.

Leaving Emma to stare after her.

Leaving Emma to wonder why she isn't nearly as terrified by what had just happened as she should be.
Chapter Notes

Warnings: Some blunt (though not overly graphic) talk of child abuse, some rough language. Oh, and Neal.

There's something rather interesting, which tends to happen, after you kiss someone: you tend to find that you want to do it again. Regardless of the sensibilities of your mind, you quite often discover that you have this strange need to touch them and feel their skin against your own. You want to come up behind them, wrap your arms around their waist and press against them.

It's a burning desire, really, the almost core compulsion to be close.

Close enough for everything to melt together and become -

Emma lets out a loud groan of protest because these are dangerous thoughts and feelings and emotions and yes, dangerous desires, too.

After what had occurred between them in the garage, Emma had allowed Regina a several minute head start back to the house before she'd followed after. She'd then mumbled, "I'll be right back" to Henry, and promptly retreated to the bathroom. It'd felt a bit like being a coward because all of the sudden, she hadn't wanted Henry or Regina to see her face.

She hadn't wanted them to see the fifteen different emotions rushing through her.

And so now, here she is, standing under the shower-head with cold water dripping down her naked form. The water is doing its job for her slightly sore body, but it's doing absolutely nothing for her rapidly spinning mind, which is a maddening swirl of conflict and fear and doubt. To be fair and honest, not all of those things are about Regina. Some are about her parents, some are about Henry and some are about Neal. There's the whole Savior part stuck in there, too.

Still, Regina is a big part of all of the crazy going on in her mind right now.

It's troubling, really, because it had just seemed so natural to pull Regina back and into her arms at that moment. It had felt so right to kiss her and to hold her and to just be close to her, and Emma can't help but wonder when this change between the two of them had happened.

Had it occurred because of one event? Had the day spent out with Henry and Regina altered them? Has it been happening all along? Does it actually matter when or how it'd happened?

Yes, it does matter.

It matters because the one thing that Emma is absolutely set and determined about is the desire to be there for Regina emotionally. Sure, yes, it might be nice (and is nice, in fact) for both of them to touch and be touched by someone with gentle hands and no desire to cause harm (Emma finds it a bit strange how very confident she is that they're past those ugly antagonistic feelings which had once been the entirety of the relationship between the two of them), but she knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that what both of them actually really need right now the most is someone to be willing to listen to the nightmares and then stay around when the tears start flowing down.
What both of them need more than anything else in the world is someone who will choose to stick around to listen to the darkness and pain even when it might be more convenient for them to simply turn and walk away. Regina has certainly lacked this kind of support in her life, but if Emma is completely honest with herself (and it is time to be such, she thinks grimly), so has she.

Throughout her rather difficult life, even the well-meaning people have always left her behind or pushed her forward into other things, intending for her to stand up and fight back on her own.

Her relationships have always gone down that way, too.

The ones she'd tried to make mean something special and more – and since Neal, there have been very few of those, indeed – have always ended up in tears and more abandonment because very few people – even the good and generally kind-hearted ones - are strong enough to want to stick around when the closet opens and the darkest of the nightmares and secrets start pouring out.

It's always been so much easier for all of those lovers and so-called friends to walk away with a shrug and a lie and it's always been safer for her to pretend like it never mattered.

But it did.

Of course it did.

Because they'd all just amounted to another suitcase in another hall.

That's how the song goes, right?

Well she's been sick of that tune for a very long time now.

A little over a year ago, lonely and alone in a little apartment in Boston, she'd been so damned tired of friends and lovers walking away and leaving her to wonder what was wrong with her and what she had done to make them leave. She'd been so over it all and yet so very much aware of the lack of a way to change her fate in that regard. It'd just seemed to be the way of her life.

And then Henry had knocked on her door.

Things had gotten better for her though once she'd arrived in Storybrooke and found Mary Margaret and Ruby. No, they hadn't been lovers (she shudders even thinking that considering what she knows now), but they had been something else that she'd had so very little of: true friendship. Much of that has been lost now, Emma thinks as a knot of sadness settles in her belly, thanks to having found out the truth about her parentage. The special closeness that she'd shared with the woman whom she now knows to be her mother has been lost, and Emma's honestly not sure that it can ever really be regained. She's not sure that they can ever be how they once were.

Because Mary Margaret isn't just some timid schoolteacher in love with a weak-minded amnesiac. No, she's Snow White and he's Prince Charming and they're her parents and God, as much as they might both wish otherwise, mothers and daughters don't talk in the same way that roommates do. They don't share the quiet ugly secrets the way that best friends do.

She misses her roommate and best friend.

She thinks herself ungrateful for feeling this way because she'd spent twenty-eight years wanting parents and now she has them, and yet part of her would happily turn back the clock and change things.

Part of her.
The other part knows that the things which have happened are for the better.

The woman she is now is better than the woman she was a year ago, Emma believes.

A year ago, she'd been a closed-off bounty hunter who had been hardened by life and cynicism. She'd been skeptical and mistrusting of everything and everyone. She'd seen bad guys around every corner and she'd stopped believing in the very idea of hope and love and even redemption. Now, all of these emotions and ideals walk along beside her like hesitant new friends. Her relationships with them are fragile and easily broken, but these strange new hopes of better and more are stubborn and the people who have shown her the truth of these things are persistent.

Henry is persistent.

He believes in the ideals of love and hope and family, and by the pure force of his faith and almost against her will, she finds herself wanting to believe in all of these things as well.

She wants to believe that she can find redemption.

She knows that Regina wants that, too.

Regina's path towards redemption is even harder than her own, but the last year has changed her as well. A year ago, the former Mayor had been completely hidden behind impenetrable walls and impossibly high heels. A year ago, everything had been about power and control and working angles to get where she’d needed to get, no matter the personal cost. She'd been trying to protect herself in all of the wrong ways, but they'd been the only ways she'd known.

Now, she's no longer the Mayor and she's no longer the Evil Queen.

She's just Regina Mills.

Still a bit of a Queen, but also an imperfect mother, devastated daughter and heartbroken woman.

And Emma is beginning to realize that she actually likes Regina.

Really likes her.

Emma drops her head against the cool tile of the shower and just stands there. The water is off now, and so she's just standing naked in the stall, icy cold droplets dripping down her as she tries to get her emotions and thoughts under control. She's certain that eventually she and Regina will need to talk about what had occurred in the garage. But perhaps not immediately because the foreboding of tonight's impending conversation about Cora is already too much for both of them.

Eventually, though, the question of why Emma had pulled Regina back and kissed her will be asked again, and she has a feeling that saying she'd just wanted to thank Regina for being there won't be enough to explain why she'd feel the absolute need to be close to her in that moment.

She wonders what she'll say then.

What will Regina say?

Will they try to push everything back and away or will they discuss taking a leap of faith that she knows for a fact that both of them will be terrified of?

Is this madness to even consider these thoughts?

Yes, probably.
A day ago she'd been so dead-set against the idea of anything non-platonic growing between them. This is therapy and friendship, she'd decided. It would be wrong to allow it to become anything more than that. It could hurt them both terribly, and cause greater harm than good.

It could destroy them both.

Nothing has changed.

Everything has changed.

Because in that emotional moment in the garage wherein the once cold as ice and dark as obsidian former Evil Queen had stepped away from her hatred of Snow White in order to offer her comfort, Emma had understood that the thing between she and Regina hadn't ever really been about doctor and patient or Hero and Villain at all. In that super-charged with electricity and desire and need moment, Emma had finally understood that it had all been about the damaged lives that lay behind them like the broken ruins of a temple long ago sacked and defiled. It had been about the dense ties between them, and the things they could both understand and see better than anyone else ever could. It hadn't mattered what had created their damaged lives in that moment; all that had mattered was the fact that someone had actually chosen to stay and listen.

Someone wasn't, for once, choosing to run away.

This is what's between them. This is their bond.

Perhaps this is what has always connected them, even when the emotions that had sparked like electricity had been bent more towards hatred and disgust. But even then, Emma thinks they'd understood each other probably better than anyone else in their lives ever really had.

Not too long ago, Emma would have been repulsed by this realization, but now, she understands that that which had once acted as opposing magnets seems to be drawing them closer together.

It's absolutely terrifying, of course, because she has spent so long looking for someone who won't run away when the darkness spills from her lips and bleeds from her pores. And now she thinks that maybe she's finally found that person, but that person just happens to be the mortal enemy of her family.

Figures.

"You're thinking too much," she says to herself with a nervous laugh.

Because it'd been just a kiss of gratitude. That's what she'd told Regina.

Why does it have to be more than that?

A knock on the door pulls her from her thoughts. "Emma?" she hears Henry yell. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine, Kid. Why?"

"You've been in there forever. Mom sent me to tell you lunch is ready."

Emma groans to herself; she must have been locked away in here for far too long if Regina had sent Henry to collect her. "Sorry, lost track of time. I'll be right out," she calls back to him.

She waits to see if he'll reply, but when all she's greeted by is silence, she blows out a breath and steps out into the cold air of the bathroom. The one downside of icy showers is the aftermath, and
She's feeling it vividly now. She shudders as she grabs for the towel and wraps it around her slightly shaking frame. A glance up at the mirror and she almost laughs because the woman she sees staring back at her isn't the Savior. And she isn't at all strong.

But she wants to be.

Needs to be.

And dammit if she won't find a way to be for Regina.

Maybe for herself, too.

"Is she all right?" Regina asks with a lifted up eyebrow as Henry returns from the hallway. He drops himself with a heavy thud upon the barstool and perches his head upon his hands to gaze up at her. She has a moment of thought to remind her that his neck can hold his head up just fine, but she bites that down because her own mother used to say that kind of thing to her.

She'll be damned if she ever repeats anything of Cora's to Henry ever again.

It's a bit amazing to her how sudden this emotional shift within her is occurring. A little over six weeks ago, the very idea of thinking bad about her mother would have sent waves of panic rushing through her. Sure, in her more lucid moments she's always been aware of the darkness that Cora had brought into her life, but the need to love and be loved has always won out.

And her mother had loved her better than anyone else ever had.

Right?

No.

No, she hadn't.

"I guess so," Henry says, pulling her away from her realizations. She rewards him with a bigger smile than he's probably expecting considering the odd look he throws her, but then he doesn't know just how afraid she is of walking down the path that will lead to the truth about her mother.

She can feel dread settling in her, grinding her ribs together in a way that reminds her uncomfortably of the nightmare she'd had about her mother nearly killing her many years ago.

"She said she'd be out in a minute," he finishes.

"Good," Regina nods, swallowing past the panic and focusing instead on lunch. When they'd returned to the house after…what had gone on between them in the garage, Henry had been in the process of setting the grill up to make cheese sandwiches. Now, they're all made and waiting, stacked neatly atop of each other on the table while tomato soup sits simmering in a large pot on the stove. "Well then why don't we get seated; Emma can join us as soon as she's ready to."

"Okay," he hops off the stool and is about to make his way over to the table when the buzzing of a phone gets his attention. He shifts his gaze over across the counter and to where Emma's cell is vibrating away. "It's just my dad again," Henry announces once he's taken a look at the screen.
His expression sours a bit as he says this, not because of any unpleasant emotion he has towards Neal, but rather because he's anticipating a negative reaction from Regina. By his comment, it's clear that he knows that his father has been calling frequently.

Calling for – and about - him.

Regina stares at the phone, and then, in a swirl of what can only be insanity, she reaches for the phone and picks it up. Her lips settling into a line of irritation, she stabs at the ANSWER button.

"What are you doing?" Henry demands, jumping forward. His bright green eyes are wide and afraid, like maybe he thinks that she might be able to find a way to throw some kind of magic at his biological father over the phone-line. Oh, if only that were actually possible.

She ignores him and puts the cell to her ear. "Mr. Cassidy." It's a coolly delivered statement instead of a mild question meant to invite further conversation. Her tone is unimpressed; he's a nuisance that she'd rather not deal with and she wants him to know it.

There's a long pause before he says anything in response, and she thinks that she can almost hear the wheels turning in Neal's head. A part of her – okay, most of her if she's entirely honest with herself - hopes that he's more than a little frightened right now because well, he should be.

"Regina?" Neal finally queries, his confusion apparent. She almost corrects him on his use of such a familiar name for her, but chooses to let it pass. She'd picked up the cell because it's time to finally deal with this – with him and his request to see Henry. It's highly likely that demanding that he call her something like Your Majesty or Ms. Mills would get in the way of such.

That doesn't mean she's going to let him completely off the hook, however.

"You would be correct, Mr. Cassidy; it's good to see that your father's comprehension skills were properly passed along," she snipes.

"Mom," she hears Henry caution.

"Where's Emma?" Neal asks, and she hears a hint of suspicious worry there.

She almost tells him that the Savior is buried in the backyard.

Not that this place exactly has one of those.

A beach, though. There's lots of that around and really, if that failed her, she could always just toss a body into the Atlantic and -

No, perhaps it's best not to antagonize him just for the twisted fun of it.

"Emma's in the shower," Regina replies with considerable chill in her voice. "And while I'm sure you'd prefer to deal with just her, I believe that you want something from both of us."

"I…"

"You want to see my son," she states, like she's irritated with his waffling indecision. The tone she's using right now is the one she would have once used on a peasant who had dared to waste her time by coming to her court with a request for something absurd. Something above his station and right.

"I want to see my son," Neal corrects. "Regina, he's…he's my son." There's a pause and then he
finishes with a quiet and somewhat unsure, "Too. Henry is my son, too."

It takes everything she has not to snarl. "You didn't raise him," she reminds him.

"She didn't, either," Neal states.

"Because of you."

"That's between her and I," he retorts, and she wonders if he's starting to get his confidence back. Strange, she thinks, that he gets it back while he's trying to defend himself about something that is indefensible. And it is indefensible as far as she's concerned because the wicked and horrible things which you do to the people you claim to love, the ones that you're supposed to protect and take care of, those are the actions which go beyond reasonable explanation or understanding.

She'd murdered her father to enact the curse.

There is no forgiveness or redemption for that.

Not from within herself, anyway.

"Perhaps," Regina agrees with a cold smile that doesn't meet her eyes. "But my son having any relationship with the man who put one of his mothers in prison is between she and I."

"Mom," Henry says again, and she thinks he's starting to get angry.

She wonders, then, if it was a mistake to pick up Emma's cell. Not because this uncomfortable conversation with Neal Cassidy isn't going exactly as anyone sensible might have expected it to, but because the risk of damaging the finally repairing relationship with Henry is so terrible.

And so very easy. Funny how easy the worst things in life are.

She sighs.

Because the bitter and inescapable reality is that Henry actually wants a relationship with this man. A man he considers to be his father. No, Neal doesn't deserve the title. He doesn't deserve to have Henry in his life, but then perhaps none of them – starting with herself – actually do.

She can hear Neal sputtering out some kind of angry protest, something about a promise Emma had made to him, but the words fade away out; instead, she's thinking about the days before Henry had taken the bus to Boston. She thinks about how closed down he'd been. How much he'd viewed every rule she'd enacted and every decision she'd made as an attack.

As an invitation to a war that she hadn't known that they'd been fighting.

She thinks about how close to losing him forever she'd come.

She can't let that happen again.

She won't let that happen again.

"Mr. Cassidy," Regina finally interrupts, adding on a sigh to indicate her impatience. He falls silent immediately, and well, that's something, at least. "What exactly are you proposing?"

"Proposing?"

"You want to see Henry. When? How? Where?"
There's another pause, and she's certain that he's trying to catch up to the change in the direction of the conversation. A glance over at Henry and the confusion showing on his face suggests he's trying to do the same. He's looking at her, she thinks with sadness, like he's trying to find the lie. It breaks her heart that this is still true, but then, what did she expect? They are better – each day seems to be repairing them a bit more - but nothing heals overnight.

"If you're serious about the question, I'd like to take him for a weekend," Neal answers, his tone hesitant. "Maybe bring him here to New York and take him to a baseball game."

Regina's first instinct is to snap out an immediate and firm, "absolutely not" but then she hears the sound of footsteps coming closer, and thinks about the last six weeks, and the woman she was and the woman she is now. She thinks about the woman that she desperately wants to be.

She sees a wet-haired and dripping but now dressed in for once loose jeans and a hoodie Emma enter the kitchen, her eyebrow lifting when she spots her cell pressed against Regina's ear. "Who is it?" she mouths as she somewhat leans against the side of the counter.

"Neal," Henry tells her with what looks like a sickly and uncomfortable smile, and Emma's eyebrow goes from lifted to being launched up somewhere deep in her blonde hairline. In the space of three seconds, she goes from appearing almost obnoxiously relaxed to looking almost like she's about to have some kind of panic attack. It's far more amusing than it should be.

"Regina," Neal prompts, his tinny voice a frantic plea. "Look, come on, I promise I won't hurt him or let any harm come to him. Not ever, all right? I just…I want to get to know my boy. I don't think that's too much to ask, okay?"

"How do I know…how do we know that you won't just disappear with him? Your track record for staying where you should is not what anyone would call exemplary."

"I wouldn't do that to her. To Emma. I wouldn't."

Her eyes flicker back over to Emma and she can't help herself from smiling just a bit when she sees the anxious way that the blonde is moving around. "You let her go to prison for you."

It's not really her place to stand up for Emma like this, and yet she feels the need to do so because Emma's been spending so much time trying to be mature and understanding and forgiving. She herself has benefited from such, but suddenly she finds the need to stand in front of Emma even if she won't do it for herself. Not that Emma looks terribly appreciative of this.

In fact, she rather looks like she's lost three shades of color in her face. Her hand reaches out for the phone as if to demand that it be handed over to her, but Regina refuses with a sharp shake of her head.

"You let her grow up without parents," Neal shoots back.

_Touché._

He's right, of course; her oversized role in Emma's damaged childhood has been haunting her for a long while now. Ever since she'd started to realize just how much she actually cares about the sheriff. If Neal is culpable for Emma's damage, she believes that she is equally if not doubly so.

Not that she's about to let Rumple's little bastard know that.

"Fine," she grunts out. "I will speak to Emma, and we will decide."
"That's not –" he stops, then, as if thinking better of his words. As if finally realizing that he doesn't actually have any control of this situation. The adoption of Henry had been as legal as it could be; Neal's paternal rights had been severed thanks to him fleeing the country as a fugitive.

He has no rights – legal or otherwise - to Henry.

But this isn't really about legalities; it's about doing right by her child.

"Okay," he says softly. "When?"

"When what?"

"When will I hear from you? Or her? I asked her –"

"A couple days ago; I know. You cost her a phone." She looks over at Emma and smirks at her. Unfortunately, the blonde isn't at all amused with this.

"She's that pissed at me?"

"I'm that pissed at you. As for when, Emma will let you know our decision by this evening."

"Thank you," he says, and he sounds both surprised and sincere.

"Don't thank me yet," she replies. And then, because she has no desire to exchange pleasantries with this man, she simply hangs up the phone. And then sighs and turns to face Emma. "Lunch is ready," she says in the same voice that she had once used to call a City Hall meeting to order.

"Fuck lunch," Emma growls out. "What the fuck was that?"

"Your ex – or whatever he is to you - called to ask if he could take Henry for the weekend," Regina bristles, choosing to ignore the profanities that had just poured from Emma's lips.

"My…he…what?"

"Eloquent as always."

"Mom," Henry says for the third time, and for once, he doesn't sound disappointed, but rather exasperated. And perhaps bemused. Because he recognizes when she is playing with someone.

And yes, she probably is playing with Emma just a little bit right now because some old habits – ones such as screwing with people just for her own twisted amusement - really do die hard.

"Regina," Emma warns. "Why did you pick up my phone?"

"Because the last time you picked it up when he called to ask about Henry, you shattered yours," Regina replies. She tries to sound unimpressed, but the truth is that she feels a bit unsettled because Emma actually seems pissed. Regina wonders if she'd misgauged the situation, wonders if there's more to Emma's anger than just frustration. Is she afraid of Neal taking off with Henry or is she annoyed that Regina had dared to speak for her?

"He could have waited a few more days," Emma insists.

"He could have," Regina agrees. "But he was going to keep calling until you picked up and…" she stalls out, then, because she doesn't want to have this conversation in front of Henry. Not just about why she'd answered the phone, but the one about whether they should let Neal see him. In truth, it's a conversation that frightens her down to her toes because she worries that if she and Emma agree
to let Henry go stay with Neal, she'll be willingly allowing her son to slip away from her just a little bit more. Still, she had promised Neal that they would have this conversation, and for Henry's sake, they absolutely will. For him, she suddenly understands just how much she'll do.

She realizes that she would even let him go if it meant that he just might find it within his heart to love her more for it.

This realization is enough to make the air catch in her throat.

It's enough to make her want to throw up.

Which apparently Emma notices because suddenly the anger and tension are all bleeding away from her. "Okay," she says, her voice growing considerably softer. "So lunch is ready?"

"It is," Regina replies, unable to hide her gratitude at the change in subject. Her eyes meet with Emma's for a moment – just a moment – of understanding, and then, "How was your shower?"

"Cold."

"Cold? Did you need a cold shower for some reason?"

Emma smirks at her. "Nope; I just like cold…things." She frowns at the end of the sentence as her attempt to be clever and perhaps spin a double entendre collapses beneath her.

Still, it's something like teasing, and a bit like flirting and the look on Henry's face suggests that he can't figure out what all had just happened. But Regina gets it; this is that weird understanding that seems to have suddenly developed between she and Emma.

They'll talk about this later. Sometime after lunch.

When it's just the two of them and they can both worry together.

"Oh, I'm sure you do," Regina lobbs back, amused by Emma's inability to keep up with the banter. "But, if you're done with cold for the time being, there's hot soup over there. Or at least it was hot before you decided to take a twenty-minute shower. It's probably just lukewarm now."

"We can warm it up again," Henry assures them both, his eyes going from mother to mother like he's still trying to figure out what's going on. What he knows is that something has changed.

Something between them.

He just has no idea what it is.

"We can," Regina confirms, her low husky voice gentle and almost soothing. She reaches out and touches the top of his head, her fingers weaving into his hair. When he doesn't pull away, doesn't try to distance himself as he once might have, she allows her hand to linger there for a moment longer than is probably necessary. Finally, pulling her hand away and stilling it, she says, "Why don't the two of you get started on the sandwiches while I get the soup re-warmed?"

"Grilled cheese sandwiches without soup?" Emma frowns. She looks at Henry and shakes her head, and then he mimics the motion.

"That's just wrong," he announces.

It's their not at all subtle way of saying that they'll wait for her to join them.
That they want her to be at the table with them.

As a family.

She nods her head slowly, trying to blink back the tears. "All right, then."

"Can I go read my comics out on the deck?" Henry asks about three seconds after he's jammed the last bit of his grilled cheese sandwich into his mouth. He's looking right up at Regina when he asks the question. Because everyone knows that she's the one who runs the show at the table.

"Fine," Regina agrees. "But you do the dishes tonight instead."

"Okay," he agrees as he wipes off his mouth and stands up. They both know what this is about; he's trying to give them time to talk about Neal. What he lacks in subtlety, though, he more than makes up for with the bright beaming smile which he so easily throws towards both of his mothers as he leaves the kitchen, the door leading to the deck swinging shut loudly behind him.

"Neal wants to have Henry for a whole weekend," Regina announces as she brings the lunch plates over to the sink and hands them one by one to Emma. Her eyes track out through the window to where Henry is sitting; he's in the chair that she's certain she'll be in later this evening.

"A whole weekend," Emma repeats, her lips curling into a frown.

"I take it you're not anymore happy about this idea than I am?"

"Understatement," Emma chuckles. She turns the water off, and then pushes the last of the plates into the dishwasher and closes it.

"But?" Regina prompts.

"But I think…I think maybe we should consider it."

"We need to more than consider it," Regina counters. "You've been considering it for the last two days. We need to decide yes or no now."

"Yeah, I know. So, where's your head on this?"

"Am I allowed to be honest?" she queries, seeming a bit hesitant and unsure about just what's acceptable to say and feel here. This is all such new territory for her, and she doesn't want to damage her relationship with Emma by allowing some of her old doubts and fears back out.

But Emma seems to understand, seems to get her fear. "Of course," she assures her.

"I don't want this, Emma. I don't want Neal Cassidy to spend time with Henry and I don't want Henry to want to spend time with him. I don't want him in our lives. I don't want this."

"Neither do I, but I'm not sure what we want here is what's best for Henry," Emma admits.

Regina swallows hard. She looks out the window again, her eyes settling on Henry as he focuses intently on his comic book. Softly, she asks, "All right, then, tell me: what is best for him?"
"You think I know?"

"Better than I do."

"No," Emma replies, her tone adamant. "Believe me, no. I don't have this whole mothering thing figured at all, and I am not any kind of mom of the year. I'm not. I just want to do right by him."

"And you believe letting him spend time with your ex is that?"

"You know, Regina, I think that might just be the nicest thing you've called him."

"Mm. Answer the question, Swan."

"Neal's no threat to him. Or us."

"Mr. Cassidy implied the same thing during my conversation with him."

"Yeah, about that, seriously Regina, what was that?"

Regina looks away for a moment, a frown showing up on her lips. Finally, "It was a bad attempt at trying to help you deal with something I thought that maybe you couldn't. Or didn't want to."

"I don't understand."

"You clearly didn't want to speak to him or make this decision on your own so I…so I tried to help and I just…that's not what you wanted and…" she trails off, looking about as uncertain as Emma has ever seen her. It occurs to Emma, then, just how new and uncomfortably strange it must be for Regina to be trying to think of someone else before herself for the first time in a very long time. It occurs to Emma how oddly unsettling it must be for Regina to be so uncertain about how to do that without stepping over boundary lines which she had never noticed before.

It's a bit strange for Emma, too, to see the rapid changes occurring; from the Mayor who had shown little care for anyone aside from herself when they'd first met to the former Evil Queen who had tried to curse her perceived competition to sleep in order to keep Henry all to herself to the unsteady but trying her best to do right mother that Regina is now.

"Hey," Emma reassures her. "I appreciate the attempt, but…well, Neal is a part of my life and I don't think he's going to be going away again. I have to learn how to deal with him. We both do."

Regina clears her throat; her shoulders tensing as she pulls her emotions back in, "Indeed," she agrees as she stands up straight again, the agitation of the impending decision tightening her spine. "So, what are we going to do, then? Do we let him have Henry for a weekend?"

"Are you ready to let him go for a few days?"

"Never," Regina admits with a tight humorless smile. "But…but I think that I'm supposed to be able to, right?" That strange discomforting darkness passes over her face once again, and Emma gets the distinct impression that the different parts of Regina are at war right now.

The Mayor, the Queen and the Mother.

She wonders who's winning.

"We don't have to do anything before we're ready to. He's our son first," Emma insists. "And like I said, Neal isn't going anywhere, unfortunately. He can wait if we need him to."
"I don't want to be selfish anymore," Regina states.

"Loving Henry isn't selfish."

"Making him unhappy just to keep myself happy is."

Emma thinks of the days before this conversation would have ever been possible; she thinks of an angry and cold woman who would have burned down the world before she would have let anyone else lay claim to her child. She thinks of holding that same woman in the garage the night after Regina's first nightmare, their hands joined in front her heart. Sure, that hadn't ended well for either of them, but the point is that everything had begun to really change that night.

Regina had begun to look into her past and see the darkness staring back.

She'd begun to see the person she'd become; the one she'd never wanted to be and had allowed herself to fall into through her own weakness. The problem is, Emma thinks with something of a frown, Regina doesn't seem to realize that falling is only the first part of the story. The second part is the rising up, and the Queen doesn't seem to be giving herself credit for that part of it all.

She doesn't seem to be willing to give herself credit for the fact that simply by trying to be good enough for her son, she is doing exactly that.

"What do you want to do?" Emma prompts.

"I want to make him happy."

"That's not always possible," Emma reminds. "You know that. You're twice the mother I'll ever be, Regina; go with your instincts here, and I'll follow. Whatever you decide, I'm with you."

Regina exhales, "We allow it. But just for a weekend. And with no promises of it occurring again."

"I'm cool with that. Anything else?"

"I'd prefer they do their weekend back in Storybrooke."

"Really?"

"I may despise your parents, but I trust that they will keep an eye out for Henry and...and I think maybe he would like to see them." Her lips press together for a moment, and Emma can tell that Regina's struggling against her actual feelings about this; it's clear that she no more wants Henry to have a relationship with Snow and David than she wants him to have one with Neal.

And yet because she is trying to be a better person and a better mother for Henry and hopefully for herself, too, she bites back whatever other thoughts she'd had and waits for Emma to reply.

"Okay, that...that sounds fair and good and all of that other stuff."

"Other stuff?"

"Eh, it's been a long day." She shrugs her shoulders and smiles brightly, the expression unguarded and easy. "If you recall, Your Majesty, I didn't sleep terribly well last night."

"I'm sorry," Regina says immediately. It's enough to make Emma want to kick herself because really, she just been teasing Regina. She should know better, though; right now Regina is too raw and too vulnerable and every perceived bad deed is hitting her like bricks to the chest.
"Don't be," Emma replies with what she hopes is a grin big enough to defuse the darkness she sees creeping over Regina. "Even if I hadn't woken you up from your nightmare, I was still going to end up out in the Living Room watching *I Love Lucy* all night. Which means, I still would have woken with a stiff neck and a sore back. Doesn't mean I'm not whooped now."

"Then why don't you go get some rest? We can deal with everything else later," Regina proposes, her face lightening up a bit. What she doesn't say directly is that the night and conversation which they have ahead for them – the one that looms over both of them like an overly sharp guillotine – is something that will likely require all of their emotional and physical energy.

"Sounds like a plan," Emma answers with a yawn. "What about you?"

"I think I'm just going to read for a little bit. I do have something of a headache."

"Want me to grab you some aspirin?"

"No need; I can get it myself," Regina assures her. She lifts her hand up, then, hesitating for a slight moment before she places it on Emma's cheek, her fingers lightly curling inwards.

"What is it?" Emma asks, her brow furrowing. She tries not to think about how much she enjoys Regina's touch; she tries not to think about warmth and how she naturally leans towards it.

"I want to do right by you as well, Emma. I don't know exactly why, but…" Regina swallows then, like she can't quite get the words out. Like maybe she believes that if she says exactly what she's thinking or feeling right at this moment, she'll get rejected all over again.

"You mean something to me, too," Emma translates for them both. She lifts her hand to cover the one of Regina's on her face. "And no, I don't know exactly why yet, either."

"I did such terrible things to you," Regina reminds her.

"You're hardly alone in that."

Regina laughs, the sound sudden and sharp. "Was that supposed to make me feel better?"

"No," Emma corrects. "I think it was supposed to tell you that you need to stop worrying about what you did to me. I know you're sorry for whatever role you played in my life –"

"Whatever role? I –"

"I know what you did to me," Emma tells her, her tone strong and firm. "I also know that you were far from alone in screwing me over. And what I believe now – what matters to me now - is that you wouldn't hurt me again. I believe you wouldn't let harm come to me. Not anymore."

"I wouldn't," Regina confirms, her voice soft, her fingers scratching against Emma's cheek. "

"Then really, Regina, that's all I need to know. We can sort out all the other pieces of my childhood and your childhood and everything that's all kinds of jacked up later. Okay?"

"You mean tonight."

"Yeah, I guess I do." She lifts Regina's hand off of her face then and brings it to her lips. It's an incredibly impulsive and risky move – especially considering the fact that if Henry were to turn his head and look through the window, he'd be able to see exactly what she was doing to his adoptive mother – but she can't quite stop herself from pressing a light kiss onto the warm tight skin of
Regina's knuckles. "I forgive you," Emma tells her, her words muffled and low.

"Why?"

"Because I do," Emma says simply and with an almost careless shrug of her shoulders. "And that's my choice to make." She lets go of Regina's hand, then, and steps away from the surprised Queen. "Why don't you let Henry know the 'good news', huh?" she says before yawning again.

"Of course," Regina murmurs. She watches Emma leave the kitchen, then, listening as the door closes and then she just keeps staring because a part of her mind refuses to believe that there is actually someone as impossibly frustrating, complex and contradictory as Emma Swan.

But there is.

There just...is.

After a moment, Regina finally turns away and reaches up into the cabinet above the dishwasher. She pulls out the bottle of aspirin that she'd stowed there, pours three into her palm and then tosses them into her mouth. She can feel the migraine – this time caused by fear and confusion and even the thrill of hope and several other frightening emotions – swirling around in her skull.

Because forgiveness – true cognizant and aware forgiveness - is one of those things that she's wanted for so very long and received so very seldom.

It's almost too good to be true. It's not at all deserved.

But she can still feel the slight wetness of Emma's lips on her knuckles.

And she knows – believes - that deserve it or not, Emma had meant what she'd said.

It's a terrifying realization.

But then, almost everything about the sheriff is.

She takes a gulp of water, swallows down the pills and then steps outside onto the deck, a large smile appearing on her lips as she approaches her son.

"So?" he asks, looking up at her with hope in his eyes. Enough so that she knows that even though she's not happy about Neal getting to have him for a weekend, it was the right choice to make because Henry is happy about it, and she would do pretty much anything for that.

"If I tell you what we decided, will you read to me like you used to?" she queries. It's a strange question to ask, but she means it as much as she's ever meant anything. A very long time ago, before the book and everything else, him reading his comics to her had been kind of their thing. She'd never really listened or understood, but his voice and his excitement had been enough.

She's willing to let go of him a little bit, and yes, she knows it's the right thing to do.

But she wants a tiny part of him back, too.

And so she smiles and hopes he sees how much she needs this.


"I like Spiderman," she tells him, though he could have said Daffy Duck.
"And you have to do the voices with me," he tells her.

She thinks that she hides her surprise reasonably well. "All right."

"Cool. You want to be Peter or Doc Ock?"

"Whichever one you'd like me to be, sweetheart."

"You be Peter."

Her eyebrow jumps because she'd assumed that he would push her into the role of the villain, but then he's looking at her with the kind of smile that reminds her that he's Emma 's son, too. Like he knows what she's thinking and he's wondering when she'll stop expecting the worst from him.

She nods her head and then lightly settles herself in the chair that Emma will likely occupy later. "You want to know our decision first?" she asks as she leans towards him and the comic book.

He thinks about this for a moment and then shakes his head. "After."

It's yet another surprising answer from a child who seems as intent as his birth mother on challenging her every expectation of him. This time, Regina doesn't even try to hide her relief at his words. She offers him a watery smile, and then says, "All right then, shall we, Doctor?"

He grins up at her and then flips open the comic book. He shows her the brightly colored panel and then in a loud exuberant voice which seems to carry across the open air, he says, "Crack!"

Emma's barely out of her bedroom when Henry barrels into her and hugs her tightly around the midsection. "Thanks," he says, the words coming out in an overexcited blast of breath.

"For what?" she asks, her hand going down to touch his hair; she'd seen Regina do that before, and witnessed the hesitancy in her touch. That she herself feels little of that is…sad to her. She thinks that before this is all over, she'll find a way to make Regina see that Henry does love her.

"For agreeing to let me spend time with my dad."

"Oh, that." She tries to hide the fact that she's about as thrilled about Neal and Henry interacting as Regina is, but her smile is too plastic to be real, and he sees right through her.

"I know," he tells her with a small nod of his head. "But mom told me that you're going to ask him to take me back to Storybrooke for a few days, and I think it'll be nice to see everyone."

"I bet," she replies. "And you know what, you can do some recon for me."

"Recon?"

"Well, eventually we're all going to want to return to Storybrooke."

"Oh, you want to see if everyone will be cool with mom coming back."

There are times when she wishes he wasn't as savvy and bright as he is, and right now would be one of those times. But he is so she replies, "Yeah. That's as much her home as it is ours."
"So it's Operation…" he frowns as he tries to come up with a new name for this investigation.

"No names, Kid," Emma laughs. "In fact, don't consider this to be one of our operations at all. You're just…feeling the situation out. I want you to have a good time not worry about…stuff."

"Yeah, okay. So mom told me that you both agreed to it, but she didn't say when."

"I don't think we decided on when. Maybe next weekend?"

"Cool." He turns his head, then, to glance towards the front. Emma can just barely make out what appears to be the form of Regina asleep on the couch, the now familiar scratchy brown blanket once again curled over her legs. "Is she okay with this? She seemed kind of…upset?"

"She's okay with whatever makes you happy. We both are."

He frowns at her like he knows that that's not much of an answer. "Am I hurting her by wanting to see my dad? Like I hurt her when I wanted to be with you? I don't…I don't want to do that."

It takes everything Emma has for her mouth not to drop open; she's pretty sure that a boy of his age isn't supposed to be asking questions like this. Even if it is a valid question considering how much his previous rejections of Regina – especially after Emma had come to town - had hurt the her. That he seems to have some degree of awareness is surprising and unsettling to Emma. It's also just a little bit of a relief as well because there had been a time in there when Emma had wondered about Henry's ability to dismiss his adoptive mother's feelings as unimportant and invalid. For a while there, he'd thrown all of the love that she'd pushed towards him back at her.

"Why would you think that? Did your mom say anything to make you think she was hurt?"

"No, but…she asked me to read to her," he says, his frown deepening as he turns everything over in his mind. "She hasn't asked me to read to her in years."

"Have you offered in years?"

"No. I was so mad at her for so long; I didn't really want to share anything with her." Then, looking almost like he's about to start crying, he says softly, "I did hurt her again, didn't I?"

"Henry…"

"Wait, am I hurting you now, too?" he asks, the pitch of his voice rapidly rising to something which sounds panicked and frightened in a way which makes Emma's heart want to explode out of her chest. "Because I don't want to…I won't go stay with my dad if I'm hurting –"

"No," Emma breaks in, grabbing at her son and pulling him closer, her hands gripping his shoulders. She gives him a quick abrupt hug and then states as forcefully as she can, "No. Look at me, okay? Your mom and I, we're both all right with this. We're not hurt; we understand."

"Then why did she want me to read to her? Why does she look so sad?"

She considers his question for a long beat before replying with, "I don't know a whole lot about parents or parenting, Henry; you know I didn't grow up with any. But I do know that when you love someone, your memories with and of them are important. I think maybe the ones she has of you reading to her from way back probably mean a lot to her and you're growing up and well…"

She trails off, then, because no, she doesn't have the memories Regina has, but Henry is growing
up and she's suddenly struck by just how much of his life she hadn't been around for.

How many memories she doesn't have.

"Emma?" he asks as he steps out of her arms and looks up at her.

"I'm fine. It's just…we just want what's best for you. We want you happy."

"And you want what's best for my mom, too, right?" Henry says more than asks, his head tilted slightly to the side as he regards her with a look that's half curiosity and half certainty. Like maybe he's figuring something out for himself. "You want my mom to be happy, too, right?"

"I do," she admits as she jams her hands into the pockets of her jeans.

"Because we're family?"

"Yeah, Kid, because we're family."

It's an underwhelming and not completely accurate answer, but it seems to satisfy him for the time being, and she's glad of that because how could she even begin to explain the seismic shifts that have occurred between she and Regina when she herself doesn't understand them or what they mean. How can she even begin to help him make sense of what makes no sense to her?

Over a month ago, they had brought Regina – by force – here to conquer the ghosts and demons of her past. The first few weeks had been difficult due to Regina's stubborn refusal to open up. The last ones have brought them a different kind of complication due to the moments of extreme pain and emotion which Regina has started to experience ever since she'd begun to really look inwards and into the debris of her past. All which means that Regina is finally starting to heal.

But something else is happening here, and it's happening not just to Regina, but also to Emma. She thinks that maybe it has everything to do with the fact that she, too, is starting to heal up from her own life-incurred battle wounds and damage. Maybe she's even beginning to open herself up to –

No, best not to think of that.

Not now, anyway.

Not while she's standing in front of their son who is watching her so intently.

Like he can see right into her.

"What do you say we let your mom sleep for a bit longer and get dinner started ourselves?" Emma suggests, flashing him a big smile. It's partly meant to change the subject, but mostly it's because a kid his age shouldn't be bogged down in such heavy emotions and thoughts as these.

"Tacos?" he offers up.

"Yeah, I think we have the fixings for that."

"Cool," he says again, just before reaching out and hugging her once more, this time a bit harder.

"Okay, what was that for this time?"

"For not giving up on her. I knew you wouldn't."

She thinks to tell him how much more complicated it actually is and has been; none of the progress
which she and Regina have made over the last six almost seven weeks would have been possible without Regina having finally allowed herself to heal from her many wounds. Emma knows that all of the patience and understanding in the world would have amounted to nothing without Regina having found the strength to finally face the shadows of her gruesome past.

Emma knows that she should probably correct Henry, but she can't find the words to do so because then he's hugging her and he's so proud of her and he's so proud of Regina and all of their progress apart and together and really, this kind of connection – this kind of love – is all that Emma has ever wanted. It's the kind of emotion she'd do just about anything for.

Will do anything for.

She calls Neal back after they've both said goodnight to Henry. If Henry notices how oddly emotional both of them are, he says nothing of it; he simply tells them both that he loves them and rolls over in his sheets. And so now, here she is in the kitchen, her green eyes locked on Regina's form as she stands out on the deck, dressed in flannel and cotton, staring out at the ocean, her short dark hair pressed back against her forehead by the crisp night breeze.

"Hey," Emma says once Neal's picked up on his side.

"I didn't actually expect to hear from you," he answers in that tone of his that could be saying that he'd just eaten a chilidog and it was just all right. Nothing special, just kind of okay.

She always hated that particular tone.

"Regina told you I'd call," Emma reminds him.

"Yeah, but…she's the Evil Queen." He adds a quiet chuckle at the end.

"Was, Neal. She was. She's Henry's mother now."

There's a pause and she can almost see his frown. "So, what's the verdict?"

"So, she…we agreed to let you take him for a weekend. Next weekend if you're up for it, but –"

"Really? Em, that's –"

"But that are conditions."

His excitement is decidedly less when he mumbles out a petulant, "Yeah, of course there are."

"Neal."

"No, I get it. I screwed you over and…I get it. Let's have them."

"You have to do the weekend in Storybrooke and not New York."

"Why? Do you really think that I'd run off with him?"

"You ran off on me."
"And I told you I'm sorry. I don't know what else to say to –"

"You don't have to say anything else, Neal; you just have to prove to me you'll stay around and not just take care of yourself. And that means agreeing to the conditions that Regina and I have."

There's a pause and then, "All right. So Storybrooke, fine. What else?"

"This one is for me. Check in on my mom. My dad means well, but he coddles her. He told me he'd try to talk to her, but, I want to come home soon; I need to know that it's safe for everyone."

"Safe for everyone or safe for Regina?"

"Everyone includes Regina," Emma comments, her tone cool.

"Okay, but I don't know these people well, Em. Or at all, really."

"You don't have to. They'll want to be around Henry as much as possible, and you'll be around them. Use the skills you taught me and just listen."

"I can do that. That all?"

"Just make sure Henry calls every night," Emma says, smiling to herself when she realizes just how much like every other normal mother in the world she sounds. "She needs that and so do I."

"Not a problem. So, you said this weekend?"

"Right. You get him Friday and give him back to us Sunday night."

"We sound like divorced parents with a custody arrangement."

"We kind of are that, Neal," she reminds him dryly.

"Kind of," he muses, but is smart enough not to call out the difference between their arrangement and normal ones – namely the fact that Regina is actually the alpha parent in this weird situation. "Thank you," he adds on after a moment. "This really means…it means a lot to me, you know?"

"I do, but don't thank just me. This doesn't happen if Regina doesn't want it to. She's his mother, too, Neal, and there's nothing that happens in his life without her being part of it. You get me?"

"I think so. This is…goofy as shit. You know that, right?"

"I do, but maybe it'll get easier for all of us eventually."

There's another long pause, and then, in the kind of tone that makes her visualize him scuffing his feet. "Em, is there something going on between you and Regina? Like, something...more?"

"That's none of your business," she replies. She says these words as gently as she can because she's not trying to hurt him, but her tone is firm as well; she won't speak of whatever might or might not be going on between she and Regina. Not until at least they know exactly what it is.

"Copy that," he replies with what sounds like a grunt. "So Friday noon?"

"That's fine."

"Thanks again."
"Yeah, I'll see you then."

She hangs up the cell and places it down on the counter. She looks out the window, sees Regina still standing at the rail and sighs. Because it's probably time to get this show on the road.

Maybe it won't be so bad.

She knows better, of course.

Their lives can never be so easy.

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"Hey," Emma greets as she steps out onto the deck with two glasses and a bottle of alcohol.

"Is this a whiskey kind of conversation?" Regina asks as she turns her head to acknowledge the sheriff's arrival. Her eyebrow lifts up in bemusement as Emma drops down into one of the chairs with her typical brand of graceless style. That she's coming to almost find Emma's unrefined rough edges more and more endearing by the day is something of a wonderful surprise to her.

"I'm pretty sure this is the epitome of that kind of conversation," Emma chuckles as she places the bottle down on the deck and then with her other hand extends a glass of whiskey towards Regina.

Regina takes it from her, swirls the amber liquid around for a moment and then takes a swig of it. Then, "I know this is supposed to be all about…my issues with my mother, but I need a favor."

Emma almost replies with "anything" but the cautious and wary part of her which has guarded and guided her for so very long pulls her back and stops her from being able to say the words. "What kind of favor?"

"I need you to start."

"I'm not sure I understand."

Regina swallows, the motion oddly rough for her. "I need you to tell me about…I need you to tell me about your childhood." She reaches her not in use hand forward and takes one of Emma's. She runs her fingers over the knuckles there, rubbing at a light scar that she'd noticed earlier that afternoon. It's faint now, but the jagged line that Regina sees stretched there reminds her of the many wounds which she'd suffered – ones which Cora had magically healed away. "How did you get that?"

"Oh," Emma says as she pulls her hand away and stares at the lines on it.

And just keeps staring.

She doesn't speak for almost two minutes; long enough that Regina is actually beginning to fidget in a way which makes her uncomfortable. Not because it physically hurts to move around in the chair (though it's not exactly a pleasant experience, either), but because the very motion of shifting about makes her think of the reprimands which she had once received from her mother.

_Ladies are able to stay still, Regina. Ladies are always composed. Children act like they are unable to control their bodies. Is that what you are, my dear girl? Is my beautiful daughter little more than an unrefined child? Is my daughter little more than a mewling pathetic peasant?_
She forces the thoughts away; they'll be with her before this night is over, anyway. She'd asked Emma to make her be brave and that's what this is all about right here and now. It's about the truth and the past and the terrible thing that goes bump in the night while wearing the face of someone who should have loved her more than anything or anyone else in the world.

It's about the sins of her mother, and it's about eighteen years of damaged love.

But that will come soon enough. For now, she waits on Emma. She's not yet ready to be brave; not enough to speak of these things first, and so she hopes that the sheriff will be the one to get this ball rolling. It's unfair and it's awful and the grinding in her ribs is for more than just herself because the haunted and horrible look in Emma's eyes tells her enough to know that they share pain that no child should ever have. They share a dark and horrible past even across two worlds.

"You don't have to," Regina says finally because her heart is pounding and Emma's jaw is still working to try to form the words that she needs to say in order to answer Regina's question. She's looking out at the water now, her glass tumbler trembling in her too tightly clenched hand.

Emma Swan looks absolutely terrified.

"Emma," she tries again. "You don't have to do this…you don't have to say anything. I'm sorry I even asked. This isn't…this isn't your…"

"It is," the sheriff cuts in, sounding so very young. There's a terrible break to her voice when she speaks "You want me to make you be brave; well, maybe I need you to make me be it, too."

Regina laughs at this, and it's not to be cruel, but rather because the very idea of Emma Swan not being brave is preposterous to her; this woman is the most courageous person she has ever met. Sometimes, Emma's courage is foolhardy and stupid (like trying to save the soul of an Evil Queen), but it's always powered by the desire to do the right thing. To help and not to hurt.

Surprised by the burst of laughter, Emma turns her head to look at her, seeming for a moment insulted by the strange display of mirth, but before she can even open her mouth to voice such a sentiment, Regina surprises her by leaning towards her and lifting a hand up to Emma's face and settling it there, the warmth of her palm gently caressing the slope of Emma's pale cheek. She lightly grazes her fingers across the soft smooth skin there and says in a terribly soft voice, "Just be you, Emma, and that will be brave enough for the both of us."

Emma exhales, an embarrassed smile lighting on her lips. "Okay. Okay."

Regina smiles at her and then pulls her hand away and brings it back to her lap. She says nothing as Emma takes another large sip from the glass. She simply waits and tries to ignore the knot of guilt in her gut. The grinding and twisting knot which reminds her that she's at least – no matter Emma's words to the opposite - somewhat responsible for whatever Emma is about to say.

Finally, Emma says, "I think I was eight, maybe nine. The ages all eventually run together. They seemed like a good family; they'd already permanently adopted three of the kids that they'd taken in so they were kind of the ones constant throwbacks like me jumped to be a part of because the chance of a forever family was there and really, that was all any of us lost kids ever wanted."

She glances down at the lines at her knuckles again.

"They weren't the worst foster family I'd ever had or ever would have, but I realized something real fast with them; they weren't interested in helping me through all of my abandonment issues. They
didn't want them to even exist at all. I was supposed to be the perfect little blonde girl with a cheerful smile, but even at eight or nine, I was already angry and I wanted someone to help."

"What did they do to you?" Regina asks because she's starting to get the uncomfortable feeling that Emma is trying to justify why these people would have hurt her. It's bizarre and completely un-Emma like to let someone who had injured an innocent child off the hook, but then Regina suspects that Emma has very rarely seen herself as a child. Certainly never an innocent one.

"They corrected me," Emma states, the tone flat and emotionless. "When I acted out, I was put in the closet and told to stay there quietly until I'd learned my lesson. Let me tell you, when you're in that dark little room, you don't actually believe someone is going to come and tell you you're a wizard." She laughs when she says this, a bit of bitterness leaking in. "You believe things like maybe that you're going to die in there and you wonder what you did and how bad you are."

"Emma…"

"Brave," Emma reminds her. "Let me get this out."

Swallowing, Regina nods, and brings the glass to her lips.

"The scars, these scars, anyway, they came from me ruining a dinner party. There was this pan of chocolate flavored cupcakes out and I was hungry, but you know, that's the worst part; I wasn't really hungry. They weren't starving me. I just saw the cupcakes and I wanted them because they were chocolate and they looked good and I was a kid." She shakes her head, her lips pursing. "My foster mother was the one who did this. They're from a ruler. It was the side of it that broke the skin. She probably should have stopped when I started bleeding, but…I kept crying."

"I take it that wasn't allowed."

"No. We were supposed to accept our punishments silently. That was the very first rule I was informed of by my foster siblings when I got to the house. Punishments were done for my own good and so that I could learn to be a valuable part of the family. Crying and screaming were considered to be an insult to my trying-so-very-hard parents and were never ever permitted."

"That's barbaric."

"Your mother never had anything like that?" Emma asks, tilting her head in a way that suggests that she already knows the answer to her question.

*Shush, my girl. I know this is hard for you to understand, but I only hurt you because I want you to be strong. Because I love you so much and I want you to be the best that you can be. Shush.*

"She did," Regina replies stiffly. "It's still barbaric."

"The one good thing that came out of the ruler mess was that once I'd healed up enough to not alarm the social workers, they returned me. I was told that I was just not a fit for the family."

"You didn't say anything?"

"Are you kidding? No way. Kids who talk get a reputation." She smiles humorlessly, even sadly before adding, "And besides, the only ones who could have backed me up about what was going on in that house were the ones who'd been adopted permanently. They sure as shit weren't going to risk getting taken away from their new parents."

"Could they have been? Taken away, I mean?"
"Sure. If my foster parents had actually been convicted, all of those kids would have ended up sharing beds next to me. I was angry and hurt, but I knew that I couldn't do that to them."

"You would have been saving them from something worse than that."

"Would I have been? For them, a little punishment every now and again was worth it for the soft bed, the warm meals and the idea of family that they'd won. They figured it was a good trade-off, and kids like me knew better than to try to take that away from them." She thinks for a moment, and then adds, "I think my problem was that I never did learn the lesson about just shut up and accept whatever you need to in order to get what you want. I was always trying to make sense of things. I was always trying to fight back. No one wants a fighter. Not for a kid, anyway."

"I would imagine that your mother would disagree with you there."

"But I might not have ended up a fighter if I'd grown up with her."

"True," Regina agrees with a small wry smile. "You probably would have become a pampered princess with a nauseating predilection for the color pink and the bizarre ability to talk to every furry animal in the forest." She wrinkles her nose in disgust at even the idea of that.

"That's really disturbing."

"Indeed." She takes another long sip of her whiskey and then grows serious again. "Was there anything good that happened…was your childhood all bad?"

"No, it wasn't all bad. I told you about the friends I'd had, the screw-ups and the hard-asses. There were others along the way, too. Some good and some bad, but they were friends all the same. There was a girl named Lily who kind of tossed me upside down for a time, but I think it was all worth it. The problem was, they all moved in and out of my life and after awhile, I stopped believing that someone would be there tomorrow. The other side of that, though, is that I also learned how to make things matter more. If I met someone, I didn't waste a lot of time with pleasantries and bullshit and even trying to know them. That's kind of how I fell into Neal."

Though the words of how that'd worked out – or not worked out –go through Regina's mind, she manages to push them down. Because right now, they'd do little else besides hurt Emma.

"I'm sorry," Regina says after a moment. "I can't say that if I had known what you would go through in your life that I would have done things differently; I was in a place where I simply didn't care who got hurt. But now, for whatever it's worth, Emma, I'm sorry."

"It's worth a lot, but like I said before, I forgive you."

"Because you choose to?" Regina presses, as though she can't believe it.

"And because I'm okay now. All the wounds, the scars and even the nightmares, they're my past," Emma assures her. "They're still with me. They will always be with me, but I am okay."

"Tell me how you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Not let your anger consume you whole. Not let it burn you all the way down. How do you keep yourself from wanting to hurt everyone for letting you fall? For not protecting you better?"

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "I learned to protect myself. It just seemed…better. I think when I got
to a place where I just assumed people would let me down; I stopped being angry about it. I already told you what I did after Neal screwed me over so you know I wasn't always successful, but I tried to be. I tried to be…empty. I tried not to feel anything. And for awhile, it worked."

"Until Henry."

"And my mother. And you. Both of you made me feel things again. Now, granted, totally different things than what I feel now, but still, you all made me feel something again."

"You wanted to kill me," Regina surmises.

"Not kill, but I certainly had it in my head to try to run you over with my Bug a few times."

"Your car probably would have stalled out first."

Emma laughs. "Probably." She refills her glass and then Regina's, noting that both were emptied during their conversation. "Okay, your turn. If you're ready, I mean; we have all night."

"My turn," Regina repeats. "Right." She thinks for a moment and then starts where she thinks it matters most. "You know this part already: my mother was heartless. Literally so."

"She took it out herself, right?"

"I don't know the complete story there, but yes. I think it has something to do with Rumple, but I never did exactly find out how they were connected to each other. Besides the obvious, I mean."

"The obvious?"

"My mother was the Miller's Daughter; I'm sure you know the tale."

Emma's mouth drops open. "Are you serious?"

"Unfortunately. It was something she told me about just a few days before what happened at Rumple's shop. Though I suspect her version was a severely abridged version considering she made him sound almost exactly like the stories from this world portray Rumple to be and well, he's a mean son of a bitch but he's certainly more than just a little imp with moniker issues."

"Right. Mean son of a bitch works pretty well for me."

"For me, too." She knocks back the rest of her glass and then extends it for another refill. "My mother removed her heart to protect herself from feeling anything that could slow her down."

"Such as love?" Emma queries as she re-pours for both of them.

"Indeed. It made her cold and brutal and obsessed."

"Who was she before that?"

"Someone who was willing to take out her heart," Regina answers, suddenly blinking rapidly, her vision blurring for a long moment. "Someone who actively chose power over love."

"But you didn't know that when you were a kid, did you?"

"That she had no heart? No, and I'm not sure I would have understood the meaning of it even if I had known what she had done to herself. I didn't really and truly understand what a heart meant until I started training with Rumple. I knew my mother collected them, but I had no idea what that
really meant. I had no idea how many lives she'd destroyed in her quest for control."

"Tell me about the nightmare you had last night."

Regina takes another sip, feeling the burn. It's less than it'd been after the first drink, but it's still there. That she's probably a bit inebriated hardly matters; she's never felt more clear-minded. "My mother almost killed me when I was fourteen," Regina answers, her voice dull. "For sneaking out of a party with a boy who'd had no interest in me beyond being someone he could speak to. When she found us together, she used magic on me and she crushed my…"

It's funny just how hard it is to say the words. The images are so clear in Regina's mind now. She can see herself up in the air and she can feel the intense pain of her ribs cracking inwards. She can taste the metallic of blood in her mouth and the rancid of stale air in her lungs.

She can smell how close to death she'd been.

And yet the words are catching in her throat. She tries desperately to blink back the hot tears, but her body is betraying her now, and all she manages to do is contort her face into an expression of pure misery. She feels Emma's hand slide into hers. "I'm here," Emma tells her. "She's not."

Regina exhales and suddenly it's like she can breathe again. "She crushed my ribs. I probably would have died that night if not for…I believe it was Rumple whom she brought to my bed to save me. I didn't know it then, of course, but…well the dreams seem to be filling in some holes."

"Is that where the song is from?"

"Yes. I can't believe I sang…hummed that to Henry." Disgust colors her face darkly.

"It's just a song."

"It was how she apologized for hurting me."

"It's what helped Henry sleep as a child, right?"

Regina nods her head.

"Then it's his and it's yours now."

Another gulp and then, "She killed Daniel. She tore out his heart and crushed it in front of me."

"Yeah."

"She manipulated my life in order to get me to Snow's father. She forced me to marry him."

"Yeah."

"She took away everything so that I had nothing but her."

"Yeah."

"But I let myself fall."

"Yeah," Emma agrees once more. Then, frowning, "Okay, what I don't get is this: my mother told me yours disappeared before the wedding. Why didn't you just…not marry the King?"

"I actually did try to get away at first, but Rumple brought me back. He convinced me that he
could teach me magic, and I stupidly thought I could use it to bring Daniel back to life. I actually convinced myself that I just needed to buy a little time to get strong enough to do it and then Daniel and I could run away and be happy. It was…well, you don't run away from a King."

"And if you had tried? If you'd left before the wedding?"

"He would have hunted me down and likely had me executed."

"Jesus."

"Our land was not one of kindness and fairness. Your mother has been ridiculously fortunate in many ways, but even she would have eventually been forced to step aside for your father. That's part of the reason why I never married again, and with my magic, no one could force me to."

"And I think that's another mark in the con category for ever going back to the Enchanted Forest," Emma drawls. "I mean aside from the smelly-ass ogres and killer zombies."

"My mother did have a thing for zombies," Regina states. "Creatures whom she could control with ease; ones who would never fight back and always obey her every order and whim."

"But you did fight back at times?"

"At times, and like you, I was punished terribly for it. My mother was especially fond of restraining me with her magic. She would hold me up in the air for hours, until I was begging her for forgiveness and promising her that I'd never disappoint her again. She knew how much I hated the loss of control; it was her way of reminding me that I'd never had it to begin with."

"Is that where your restraint issues come from?"

Regina's eyes flash darkly for a moment before she says, "Partially."

"And the other part?"

"Not germane to this particular conversation."

"Okay," Emma agrees with a slight inclination of her head, but they both know that she's simply filing this away for later; the sheriff never lets anything go. Dog with a bone and all that.

Not that she's particularly fond of the comparison.

"Tell me about Storybrooke. Why did you go back to her after everything she did?"

"Because she's my mother, Emma; because she came for me. Because even obsession seems like true love when you're alone and when all you want is for someone to give a crap about you."

"You know she was –"

"Using me. Yes. I knew, but I didn't care. She wanted me at her side, and after forty years of being everyone's second choice…" she shrugs. "My mother wanted to kill Rumplestiltskin and become the Dark One. I knew that if she did, I would lose what little I had left of her."

"Enter my mother."

"Yes. She played me perfectly. She knew what I wanted and needed. And she knew exactly what I would do with that heart. And what I did do. I killed my mother. She was terrible to me, and maybe she never loved me as she should have, but I did love her, and her blood is on my hands."
"I'm sorry," Emma says quietly.

"Why? You didn't do this to me. And it's not your job to apologize for her."

"I'm not. I can't. But I can apologize – over and over if I have to - for not believing in you when it did matter. I can apologize for not being there for you. That won't happen again."

"Don't make promises that you can't keep; I may be changing into someone…different, maybe someone far better than I was before, but, Emma, you would be wise not to trust me when I can't trust myself. And I don't dare trust myself." There are brightly shining tears in her dark eyes again, the ghosts of the self-loathing that never seems to completely surrender its hold on her.

"Then I guess we'll have to work on that, won't we?" Emma replies, reaching up with her hand to lightly brush the tears away. The gesture is so gentle and so sincere, provided completely for the sake of offering comfort that it's enough to make Regina's heart pound like a young girl's.

Like the young girl that she'd once been.

Hopeful and young and so very stupidly innocent.

"You are an idiot, my dear."

"And you are a sweet talking charmer."

"Not exactly a skill-set that was ever important."

"Really? Because I have strong memories of a silver-tongued Mayor who could charm the pants…proverbial pants, I mean…off just about anyone."

"Politics and love are not at all the same thing."

"Are you telling me that as a Queen, you never had to play politics?"

"Oh I did, but in the end, if something didn't go exactly the way that I wanted it to, I always knew I could just force the situation. Politics are different when you're assured an outcome."

"If you say so. Want another refill?"

"At this point, I think we might as well finish the bottle."

"Yeah." Emma pulls her hand away, reminding Regina that they'd been joined at all; it's a bit of a surprise to her just how used to the sheriff's touch she's become. Just how much she might even crave and desire it. "What are you thinking about?" Emma prompts after a long quiet moment.

"My life," Regina admits. "My whole life has been…it's been a perversion. A perversion of purpose, of love, of destiny, of just about everything you can imagine. And the absolute worst part is that I'm to blame for almost all of it. I let this happen. I let myself become who I am."

"You did," Emma agrees with a nod. "But now the question is, now what?"

"I don't know. I've spent so much time wanting…hating everyone."

"And now?"

"I still hate everyone. Just less, I suppose."
"Well that's a start," Emma laughs, unable to hide her amusement.

"Yes. And what of your mother?"

"What of her?" Emma asks.

"What do you expect to occur between she and I? Do you expect for all to be forgiven?"

"No," Emma says. "That's not how life works. And it's between you two. As long as you're not trying to hurt each other, it's not my business if you don't want anything to do with each other."

"What do you want from us? From me in regards to her."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

"It shouldn't," Emma insists. "You can't live your life for others. Not for me and not for Henry. You can try to be better for him, but you have a right to what you feel and if you can't ever forgive my mother for what she did to you, I think that's okay. I think that's your right."

"And what if she can't ever forgive me?"

"Do you care?"

Regina smiles thinly.

"You do," Emma says, surprise lifting her eyebrows.

"The bottle is empty," Regina says, then, making it clear that she doesn't wish to speak of this any further. She's spoken of Cora and those emotions are raw and painful within her; she doesn't have the energy for anything else tonight. Certainly not anything more about Snow White.

Emma swirls around the last bit of whiskey at the bottom of the bottle and says, "Almost." She splits it between their glasses and then brings the liquid to her lips and downs it. Once she's done, she places the glass on the rail and turns to look at Regina. "You think you'll dream tonight?"

"I'm certain I will."

"There's another Lucy and Desi marathon on. There's actually one on almost every night, but, well you're more than welcome to join me out on the couch; laughter is good for the soul."

"You sure your neck can handle it?" Her hand slides up to gently touch at Emma's neck before retreating back again. It's interesting, Emma thinks as she finds herself immediately missing the soft contact, just how comfortable they've suddenly become with touching each other.

"I was hoping you'd be willing to share the couch this time," Emma counters, punctuating her words with an almost goofy grin.

Regina's mouth opens and it's embarrassing because once upon a time she never would have shown her cards so easily, but there's something about the way Emma feels; the way the sheriff exposes her in the strangest ways.

Emma makes her think about new beginnings and love again.

Madness. Utter madness.
Or perhaps just alcohol.

And it's just a couch and those were just simple kisses.

But nothing is ever simple.

Maybe it shouldn't be.

Unfortunately, while Regina's busy turning everything over in her head and trying to make sense of emotions which are utterly foreign to her, Emma's busy misreading Regina's expression as rejection and she starts to backpedal furiously, her face red. "I mean, I didn't –"

Regina reaches for her, her hand circling Emma's wrist, her thumb lightly rubbing at the skin there in a way that is far from platonic. "I am willing to share the couch, but the blanket is mine."

"It's scratchy anyway," Emma grouses, her eyes lowering down to watch the way Regina's thumb is moving. It's remarkable, she thinks, just how nice it is sometimes simply to be touched. And this feels like more than that. This feels like an offer of intimacy, a promise of a connection.

This feels like assurances that a night of whiskey and pain have amounted to something that could save them – and perhaps heal them – all.

"Then I guess it's a good thing you won't have to worry about it," Regina lobbs back, her thumb swiping once more before she removes her hand.

"Yeah, yeah. I'm going to go brush my teeth. And find my own stupid blanket."

"You do that. I'll be on the couch."

Emma shakes her head, but she's smiling and Regina's smiling, too.

And for a night which has hurt so much, it feels like perhaps it's ending rather beautifully.
Fifteen.

Chapter Notes

A/N: This chapter deals with intimacy issues related to touch as well as trauma suffered during Regina's marriage to Leopold. Neal is also within.

There's lightning flashing across the sky when Regina opens her eyes several hours later. And while the tip-tap-tip-tap of the icy cold rain pelting melodically against the roof and windows of the house is what she hears first – a curiously soothing sound which over the last twenty-nine years of her life she has come to very much appreciate - what the confused Queen feels almost immediately, and indeed what freezes her in place, are the soft puffs of air blowing gently against her shoulder. Warm and steady, like the in and out motion of something breathing against her.

Specifically, like someone is breathing against her back.

The next thing which her desperately cotton-balled mind recognizes – the feel of two wonderfully toned arms wrapped loosely around her torso, settling just above her hips – confirms this thought for her. Inhaling sharply, Regina can smell the slightly earthy scent of the sheriff, and with each blast of warm air against Regina's suddenly hyper sensitive skin, she can almost taste the light hint of spicy whiskey which continues to linger on the blonde's breath. "Emma," she finally whispers, her voice trembling more than she would care to admit as she fights against her many warring instincts.

Her first instinct is to do whatever she has to do in order to escape the hold that she's in. Unless extremely inebriated (which had occurred on more than one occasion, though she's loathe to admit to such aloud; twenty-eight years is a very long time and depression had grabbed at her more than once), she'd never permitted Graham or any of the other souls that she'd brought to her bed over the years to wrap themselves around her throughout the night. She had always considered such creature comforts to simply be an intimacy too far (Leopold had sometimes – on the rare occasions he'd been sober - insisted upon keeping his arms around her after he'd finished with her. Letting him do so was the very least she could do as his wife, he'd told her as he'd watched her close her eyes against his invasive touch) and Emma isn't even her lover.

There's a curious other urge, though, and that is to stay still and enjoy the warm safety and security that Emma's arms offer her. It's a terrifying desire and one she's never allowed herself to indulge in because she's always feared relying on anyone else for anything.

Especially something as important as her safety and security.

She's always had to protect and take care of herself.

Only, that's not exactly true because her rather wild history with the Savior is absolutely littered with examples of Emma saving her life, and her at times extremely questionable sanity.

She hears a soft moan from behind her, just barely audible, but it's right next to her ear, and it sends an almost violent shiver down Regina's spine. And then just like that, Regina feels a surge of white-hot panic suddenly whip its way through her body like a poisonous snake. It's confusing even to her because she can't for the life of her understand why this is frightening but what they'd
done previously in the garage is less so? How is being held while sleeping far more terrifying than being kissed?

She doesn't know – she just knows that it is.

"Emma," she says again, and now she's starting to struggle against Emma's arms even though Emma's hold is hardly restrictive. They'd fallen asleep together on the couch sometime after the conversation on the porch – and after snarking through about two episodes of I Love Lucy - and while she's quite certain that they'd done so positioned parallel to each other on the sofa, it seems clear enough that sometime during the night, Emma's natural instincts had taken over.

Apparently, the Savior is a protector even in her sleep.

No, that's absurd and Regina is certain that she's overthinking things. The couch – though just wide enough for two people – is narrow enough that Emma leaning into her had likely just been a normal rolling reaction, and it's plausible Emma is just an aggressive cuddler.

It means nothing more than that.

Nothing.

Only now Emma is nuzzling into her neck, her messy blonde hair tickling lightly against Regina's cheek. And oh, hey there's a gentle just-barely-there kiss right on top of the exposed skin where her shoulder becomes her neck. Regina takes a deep breath and prays for calm. In. Out. Calm.

All of that goes out the window, though, when she feels Emma's arms tighten around torso. Her body tenses and grows almost completely rigid in reaction. Even as she tries to remind herself that Emma's still sleeping, which means that she really has no idea what she's doing right now.

Or how insanely good it feels.

Even the arms around her feel crazy good, which is somewhat surprising considering what she's always associated being held with. Not that how good any of this feels is at all the relevant point here. No, on the contrary, the relevant point is that this probably shouldn't be happening even if they were awake, but certainly not while one of them is asleep and –

But now Emma has moved her mouth up and is kissing the exposed underside of Regina's jaw. The kisses are light and gentle, almost non-existent, really, but Regina feels each as if it'd been a sharp punch to the face. She closes her eyes and inhales a ragged breath. "Emma," she finally stammers out, sounding not at all like herself. "Emma, you need to…you need to stop. Stop."

If Emma hears her – and Regina's pretty sure that she doesn't – she shows absolutely no sign of it; instead, the sheriff rather fluidly (especially considering that this is some kind of bizarre sexual sleepwalking) flips her body around so that she's on the outside edge of the couch facing Regina and then she's gliding forward and her lips are pressing up against Regina's and she's –

"Emma! Stop!"

It's the loudness and the urgency that does it; the blonde comes awake with a violently blinking start and falls back in one awkward uncontrolled motion. She tumbles off the couch and onto her flannel-clad ass, her limbs splaying outwards in an almost comical motion, her long legs just about ending up over her head before Emma finally manages to regain control of her body.

"What?" she asks, her eyes darting around, clear confusion etched into the lines of her face.
"Were you dreaming?" Regina asks, wide-eyed and alarmed.

"Dreaming? What…I don't...what?" Emma asks again, her voice sleep-husked. She looks from side to side, like she's trying to figure out why she is where she is and how she'd gotten there. Unfortunately, considering her just awakened state, the answers are dripping in slowly. Her green eyes blink slowly, sleepily. She rubs at them, but that only seems to help a little bit.

"Were you dreaming, Emma?" Regina demands once more, an unsettling kind of desperation noticeably present in her oddly trembling voice. Her arms tuck protectively around her.

"I…don't know? I don't...why am I on the ground and…are we having a thunderstorm?" Then, turning and finally looking right at Regina and really noticing the panic painted in broad colorful strokes across her face, Emma queries, "Regina, are you okay? Did something happen?"

"Yes! You kissed me."

"I did what now? When? Do you mean yesterday or…" She blinks again because she can't quite figure out why this is a panic situation. Yes, their relationship is ever changing and up in the air and this romantic element is still somewhat new to both of them, but it's not like the kiss in the garage – if that's what this is about - had been their first kiss and…well, Emma really just doesn't get it.

"No! No. In your sleep. You kissed me in your sleep. And…” She trails off, and then shakes her head in frustration because she kind of feels like a completely childish idiot right now. Here she is, a woman who'd brought many a powerful man to his knees with her unique brand of unapologetically brazen sexuality and yet right now she's flustered by one uncouth blonde.

Right now, Emma Swan is making her feel like a teenager again.

"I…I'm sorry?" Emma offers, her brow crinkling in confusion.

"You should be…you had…you had your arms around me like...you were holding me," Regina practically has to force the words out, like they're being spoken in a different language. It's clear that her panic is growing. "You had them…and then you were kissing me and –"

"Okay, wait…I need you to slow down. I didn't...what's upsetting you?" Emma asks, pushing herself up to her elbows. She's staring back at the confusion that she sees on Regina's face and she's trying to understand what emotions are driving the Queen's panic right now.

Because that's what it looks like to her. Not anger or rage, but rather panic and fear.

Fear of her.

Which Emma finds that she absolutely hates.

Regina swallows. "You were…" she makes a hugging motion with her arms and then sighs.

"Restraining you? I was…restraining you?" Emma presses. "Is that what this is about? Because if so, I'm sorry. More than you know. I –"

"No! That's not…that's not it. Not just it, anyway." She's not quite lying, but she's not quite telling the truth, either, because yes, the King had suddenly entered her troubled mind. Regina stands up, then, and starts to pace, looking more anxious and agitated than Emma has seen her in a long while. This whole thing feels off to the sheriff, and she can't quite figure out why just yet.
"Okay, look, I don't understand what's happening here. We fell asleep on the couch, right?"

"Yes. And then you..." she clamps down on the rest of the sentence because it's absurd even in her own head. She takes a breath in and then blows it out, like she's trying to get control of herself. Like she's trying to find balance.

"I held you," Emma finishes for her, head cocked to the side. "Right?"

"Yes," Regina stammers out as she clutches the scratchy brown blanket around her in a way that seems frankly just wrong to Emma. This degree of insecurity is unsettling and concerning. And then just like that, Regina suddenly flips a mental switch somewhere inside of herself and the anxiety seems to just melt back and away, replaced by an oversized completely false smile. "You know what? I...I think it's clear I just startled myself so before I make a bigger fool of myself, I'm going to return to my room," Regina says, the words as much of a lie as her smile.

Emma considers directly contesting her, but opts to go for a softer play instead. "Yeah, okay. Sure. But...did I do something wrong here?" And that works because almost immediately, the fake smile falls away and the truth of Regina's emotions – whether Emma particularly wants to see them or not (and she does and doesn't want to) – returns in the anxiety of Regina's stance.

"No. I..." Regina shakes her head, trying to clear the ugly thoughts away. She can still feel Emma's touch and it's terrifying because suddenly she's seeing other people in her mind, too.

People she doesn't want to see.

An unwanted husband that she never wants to think of ever again.

"I kissed you?" Emma prompts, drawing her back to the here and now.

"Several times, actually. It would seem that you're quite the cuddler in your sleep."

"Yeah, so I've heard," Emma says with what looks like a sheepish expression and a shrug.

"Oh. I see," Regina notes, glancing away for a moment, an odd expression – something that almost looks like disappointment – crossing her sleep creased features for a moment before giving way to blankness once more. "Well, at least now I understand why it happened."

"I kind of doubt it, but for what it's worth, Regina, I am sorry I did that. Really sorry."

"There's no need to be," Regina says quickly, her hand flashing up to wave through the air in what's meant to look like a dismissive motion, but somehow fails to be. "But I should –"

"Go back to your own room. Right. Hey, are...are we okay?" Emma asks, suddenly seeming almost frightened, and perhaps she actually is a bit scared; she's been working so very hard to give Regina a place where she can feel safe and secure and she's been going out of her way to be a friend and a reliable support system for the Queen, and the idea that carelessness while sleeping could cost them all they've gained is enough to make her stomach clench and roll.

"We're fine," Regina assures her, her voice thick and deep, far lower than it usually is. With a small indelicate cough, she clears her throat as if she's still trying to push back emotion and adds, "I just...we probably should be careful about giving Henry the wrong idea about us."

"And what is the wrong idea? What are we?"

"I think...I think that you're my friend, Emma. Maybe my only friend," Regina says softly, smiling
almost sadly, the expression painfully genuine and completely heartbreaking. "And I don't want to lose that when you realize that whatever strange thing is happening between us right now is very wrong. And, Emma, whatever you believe right now, you will eventually realize that."

She reaches out and touches Emma's face, her fingers sliding gently against the softness of Emma's lips. That they both want her to keep her hand there is something that neither woman dares to say aloud. Instead, they simply stare at each other, green eyes locked on brown ones.

"Regina," Emma starts, because she has to say something here to make this hurt less.

"You will," Regina reiterates, forcing a smile meant to keep her face from cracking. "And that's okay as long as..." she trails off and the smile turns decidedly sad. She then pulls her hand away and turns and leaves the room, her footsteps almost inaudible against the hard tiled floor.

"Well, shit," Emma sighs, her head dropping back to hit the lip of the couch with a soft thud, one hand lightly settling in her tangled mess of hair. "You really handled that one well, Swan."

And oh, had she ever.

To be fair, the somewhat unexpected upside down spin of the night hadn't been completely her fault. Perhaps, though, she should have seen it coming – should have seen how a night that had started with whiskey and horrible tales of their damaged youth had turned into an evening of cuddling (her mind chuckles at the absurdity of the word) and intimacy – but, well, she hadn't.

And now, all Emma can see is a brightly flashing neon sign warning her about the twist that her relationship with Regina has suddenly taken. All she can see is the ugly lights telling her that what they have between them has turned into something dangerous and frightening.

In a million billion years, Emma thinks that she could have never imagined this happening when she'd agreed to help Henry with his plan to kidnap Regina. But then again, she's learned a time or two over the years that the things that are worth a damn are never the ones you plan for.

They're the ones that just seem to happen.

Not because of fate (she outright rejects the absence of free will in such a concept) but because sometimes people just connect in ways which no one could have ever imagined. Sometimes, two souls just find a way to gravitate towards each other because they understand each other.

People like she and Neal Cassidy.

A part of her will always wish that she'd never stolen that car. If she hadn't, then everything would have turned out so very different (then again, maybe it wouldn't have thanks to interference from August). Back then, she'd been so young and still so remarkably hopeful after all that life had thrown her through, and instead of protecting her, Neal had shattered her heart and darkened her soul in ways that she's never wanted to know about and still doesn't.

She doesn't want to understand pain and hurt and loss and abandonment as well as she does.

She doesn't want to have the memory of his betrayal.

But she does.

She always will.

But she thinks that maybe it's time for the past to be the past because thanks to a curse, a tree, and a
car, she has Henry. Thanks to Regina and Neal and August, she is who she is today.

Maybe, she's just about done regretting being that person.

Maybe, she's done being sorry for who she turned out to be.

Yes, as far as Emma's concerned, she's a screw up and not half as good a person as everyone believes her to be, but she likes to think that one day, she could be. She likes to think that one day, she might be worthy of the faith and trust that so very many people have shown in her.

People like Regina Mills.

It's funny to Emma how this whole thing has worked out. They'd come to this beach house to help Regina figure things out, but with each day that passes, Emma is beginning to understand that truly, she'd needed this escape to somewhere safe and quiet just as much as Regina had.

She, too, had needed a place where she could just stop and take a breath.

Emma stands up then and after an uncomfortable stretch of her tired muscles and a craning pop of her neck, she makes her way down the hallway towards the bedrooms. She stands outside of Regina's for a moment, takes a deep breath and then knocks sharply on the door.

"Hey," she calls out, and then shifts anxiously from side to side as she waits – and hopes – for Regina to open the door and face her. As she waits and hope for Regina to be strong, too.

The door opens, then, and Regina – her face looking freshly scrubbed (of tears, Emma thinks with a hint of sadness in her chest) – stands there, surprise showing in her dark eyes. "Emma?"

"We are friends," the sheriff tells her. And then without further warning, Emma leans in and presses her lips hard against Regina's, the kiss bold and passionate but not at all sexual. For the moment – this moment, at least – it's meant to relay a deep emotion and not just a possible romantic attraction. When Emma finally breaks away after a few seconds, she continues with, "No matter what happens between us, no matter what this is, that's what we're going to be."

And with that said, Emma nods like her statement is the definitive word on this, and then she turns and walks down the hallway, entering her own room and shutting the door behind her.

"Well, all right then," Regina whispers, her words almost breathless and strained. And then, a moment later, she laughs to herself. Because surely, this swirling storm that represents the rapidly altering relationship between she and Emma is coming closer and closer by the day.

It's madness and well, she's never really been one to turn away from such.

Emma emerges from her own bedroom just before nine to find Regina already in the kitchen making coffee. "Sheriff," she drawls as she extends a cup out to the blonde, steam rising from it.

"You're letting me have some of your coffee?" Emma asks as she reaches for the cup and pulls it between her cold palms. She lets a soft sigh out as the warmth bleeds into her skin; she quite enjoys this house, but she'd be lying if she claimed that mornings around here weren't on the freezing side. The fact that it's still pouring outside makes the coffee all the more appreciated.
"Are you complaining because if you are, I'm sure –"

"Nope, not complaining at all," Emma corrects. "I'm thankful. Very, very thankful."

"Well... good. As for why, I suppose it's the least that I can do for you after what you did for me last night," Regina replies as she offers Emma a box of sugar cubes. While Regina tends to take her coffee black, the sheriff is well known to add ridiculous amounts of caloric additives to hers.

"What did she do for you last night?" Henry asks as he enters the kitchen and tosses himself carelessly up on the stool, his feet thumping heavily against the front of it. He rubs at his eyes and then looks up at both of his mothers, his youthful sleepy expression nonetheless curious.

The two women exchange a look -- the kind where they're both asking each other how much they should actually share with Henry about what they had discussed and... done -- and then Regina offers up, "Emma stayed up with me so that we could talk about my mother."

"Oh," he says with a nod meant to suggest that he understands even though it's completely impossible that he could truly could. "Was she able to help?"

"She was."

"Cool," he replies. "You know, I'm really glad you guys are friends now."

It's such an innocent statement, and it catches both of them off-guard enough that for a beat, neither mother can reply to him. If he notices, however, he doesn't show it. Instead, he plows ahead with, "But can you maybe be friends a bit more quietly. I heard the TV on all last night."

"Yeah, sorry about that," Emma chuckles, her tension bleeding away. "The TV helps me sleep."

"I remember," he tells her with what sounds a whole lot like a humoring tone and an almost patronizing shake of his head. "I Love Lucy again?"

"Yes," she replies dryly, again wondering if she can get away with calling her son a "little shit". A glance towards Regina convinces her not to try because she's sure Regina will side with him.

"Just how often do you fall asleep to that show?" Regina queries as she refills her coffee mug and then pours a glass of orange juice for Henry. He takes it from her with a bright grin.

"Almost every night that we shared a room," Henry notes between large gulps.

"He's exaggerating. Not every night. Just when I had a lot on my mind."

"And here? How often since we've been here have you stayed up?" Regina presses.

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "I dunno? Maybe a couple nights a week or so."

"Because you've had a lot on your mind," Regina circles back, eyebrow up.

"Yeah," the sheriff admits with a bemused chuckle. "You could say that."

She almost immediately regrets her words. Not because they throw Regina off – the queen is well aware of just how many shadows are lurking within both of their minds– but because Henry's eyebrow is lifting up and he's leaning across the counter like he's about to hear a story.

"What kind of stuff was on your mind last night?" he prompts.
"Stuff about what your mom and I are going to do this weekend while you're back in Storybrooke with your dad," Emma tosses back, her tone intentionally light and airy.

Henry frowns at this, and it's clear that her attempt at levity has failed because he's actually considering the question. "What will you guys do?"

"Oh, I'm sure we'll figure something out," Regina assures him.

"But something that won't end up with you hurting Emma, right?"

"Henry," Emma cautions. She's frowning right at him now but he seems not to notice, his eyes instead locked on his adoptive mother as he studies her like he's looking for a lie.

"Don't worry; I think we're...I know that I am well beyond that now," Regina reassures him, her voice dropping so suddenly that it's clear that whether she'll admit it or not, his words actually had hurt her. "And I promise you Henry, Emma and I are going to be just fine this weekend."

"Okay," Henry says with a sigh. "Because I'm counting on you two to behave while I'm gone."
He's smiling when he says this, and now it's his turn to try to lighten the tension in the room. "Which means, Mom, no throwing tantrums when Emma beats you at chess, and Emma --"

"Right. I still owe her a week of salads for losing at pool. Trust me, Kid, I know."

"Oh yes, I had forgotten about that," Regina chuckles. The fact that she doesn't seem to still be brooding over Henry's apparent lack of faith from just a few moments ago is once again proof to Emma's eyes and heart of just how far the Queen has truly come during the last two months. There had been a time not too long ago when such ill-considered - even if unintentionally hurtful - words would have sent her into an all-day funk, but right now, she seems to have moved past them as if they'd run right off of her without causing any kind of real damage.

"Really? You did?" Emma drawls. "Because I was under the impression you never forget about ways to torture me." She's grinning when she says this, the look somewhat challenging in the kind of way that's meant to be friendly and playful and perhaps even just a little bit suggestive.

"Well, I don't, but that one had slipped away for the moment," Regina smirks. "Thank you, Henry, for reminding me. Emma, how does a lovely spinach salad sound to you for lunch?"

"I'm guessing this is a rhetorical question?"

"Very much so, Swan."

"Well then it sounds wonderful, Your Majesty."

"Excellent. Henry, what would you like for breakfast?"

"Waffles with strawberries?"

"You think you can handle that, Sheriff? Eggs minimally needed."

"I think I can manage it. That is if you can go set the table." When Regina lifts an eyebrow at her, she tags on a quick sheepish smile and, "Please."

"Of course."

Regina turns and leaves the kitchen then, leaving Henry and Emma.
"Is she actually okay?" Henry asks. He tilts his head as he watches his adoptive mother glide through the dining room with ease. "She seems like she's in a good mood for having talked about her mom. I expected her to be a lot more upset about it. Like hiding away upset."

"A lot has changed since we got here, Kid," Emma informs him. "Your mom is changing and that means that she's really trying her hardest to handle the things that hurt her…better."

She almost adds on something about his earlier comment about Regina causing her harm over the upcoming weekend without him around, but chooses to let it pass for the moment. His habit of assuming the worst about Regina is certainly something to keep an eye on for sure, but she knows that Regina wouldn't appreciate her scolding their son for something that she herself doesn't appear to actually be too upset about. So for now, anyway, she chooses to let it drop.

"Because of you?" he presses, eyes flickering away from Regina and back to Emma.

"It's complicated."

"That's what adults say when they don't want to explain something that they don't think that kids like me will understand. But I understand a lot more than you think I do, okay?"

"I know you do, and you're right; sometimes that's why but sometimes it's what adults say when they don't understand what's happening, either. And I really don't. All I know is that everything that's going on here, everything that has happened, it is good. It's all good."

He nods like he really does understand exactly what she's saying. Which is impossible, of course, but she's certainly not about to correct him or clarify things for him. "I am glad," he says, his green eyes again drifting out towards where Regina is setting the table, each delicate plate being settled down with the utmost care. "That you and Mom are friends. She needs someone that she can trust. And you do, too, right? I mean, besides Grandma and Grandpa."

"I do," Emma answers, her tone cautious because she feels like every time she admits to even a little bit of the curious closeness which is rapidly forming and growing between she and Regina, she's opening herself up to confessing more than she's ready to. Far more than is safe to.

Neither she nor Regina have a clue about what is actually happening between them; they are three intense kisses into something that doesn't have a proper title or term, but they know that it's leading to something which neither one of them could have ever seen coming at them.

The question is what.

Actually, there are a lot of questions.

None of which either one of them is ready to answer.

So Emma grins at him, and tells him to grab the waffle maker so that she can start cooking breakfast. He gives her a look, the kind that suggests that he knows that she's deflecting and changing the subject, but then he grunts like young boys do and appears to – for the time being, at least - let it go.

Which is a relief.

Because Regina suddenly is looking over at her from where she's standing at the table with her wonderfully dark eyes full of a thousand emotions. Fear, hope and the typical swirling darkness that always seems so very ready to grab the Queen and yank her beneath its violent undertow.
And Emma suddenly knows – absolutely knows – that whatever happens or doesn't happen between the two of them as they go forward in this together, it won't be without consequence.

They've come too far for that now.

They're friends, yes. Absolutely – astoundingly – wonderfully that.

She reminds herself that's the most important thing of all because at the end of the day, they have both been through too much pain and hurt and rejection and betrayal in their lives to give up what they actually truly need from each other for something that could be frivolous and…

But to be honest, it's already more than that, isn't it? And to call anything between them frivolous considering all they've been through together and apart seems completely wrong.

Because when Emma thinks about holding Regina in her arms, it's a visual that she finds that she actually rather likes. One which she thinks that she'd like to be awake for next time.

"You're drifting, Swan," she hears, low and entirely too close to her ear.

"What?" she blinks, turning to look at Regina who is now standing right next to her.

"Your mind," Regina says with a knowing smile. "I presume you're deep in thought somewhere, which is really the only explanation I have for why you're pouring waffle mix onto the counter."

Emma groans loudly, her eyes on the mess in front of her. "Go away."

Regina laughs, the sound rich and wonderful. It rushes right into the middle of the sheriff's chest and digs down deep between her ribs, causing a flood of warmth up and down her body.

It's delicious and exciting and…

And Emma knows that they're already well beyond the point of consequences.

The rest of the week passes for the three of them in a wave of easy sameness, each day providing a little bit of the same in a way which once would have driven Regina around the bend. But now, she finds that there's a comfort in routine and the regularity of it. She finds peace there.

Which isn't to say that everything is fantastic, but it's…good. Yes, that's the right word for it.

The nightly porch conversations which they have over sometimes good and sometimes poor red wine between the two ladies don't touch on the really frightening skeletons in the closet for either of them, but neither do they shy away from the darker corners of each of their pasts.

For her part, Regina talks about her training under Rumplestiltskin. She doesn't provide too many in-depth details, but she gives out more than enough for Emma to understand just how entirely her teacher had altered her body and soul. She provides Emma with just enough for her realize how completely she had been molded into the perfect murderous puppet by Rumple.

Despite this, Emma begins to notice how with each conversation, Regina begins to own more and more of her education; she starts to notice how she starts to refuse to allow it to be about Rumple controlling and perverting her. This somewhat new need of Regina's to take full and absolute
responsibility for everything which she's done is unsettling in entirely too many ways for Emma, but she feels that for Regina's self-worth and mental growth, it's also a crucial step.

When it's her turn, Emma speaks of her early days in bounty hunting and how she'd ended up in the hospital on several occasions with broken bones and some nasty head injuries. She talks about how she had doggedly kept at it because back then, the pain had been a welcome visitor.

And when the evening is through, they each retire to their own rooms with a clumsy and slightly uncomfortable good night and a noticeable lack of physical contact. Like they think that this small distance from each other might help them deal with whatever seems to be happening between them. They both know better, of course. In truth, though, neither of them wants to deal with this while Henry is around to cast curious and entirely too thoughtful eyes on them.

They don't want to walk softly around whatever is happening, but they do with him around.

The weekend is coming, though, and they both know that it won't be an uneventful one.

She's waiting for him on the porch when he drives up in his desperately in need of being serviced car. A lukewarm cup of coffee clutched tightly between her palms, Regina glances up at the overcast sky once as if to confirm the lack of rain and then gazes coolly over at him.

"Mr. Cassidy," she says as he gets out of his car, his hands immediately pushing into his pockets when he sees her. She hates to admit it, but she gets a bit of a thrill out of his discomfort.

"Regina, hey," he mutters out, his chin slumped against his chest.

Her eyebrow lifts, and she waits for him to speak again. She could certainly just make this easier for him because she knows what he wants, but watching him squirm is simply too delicious and she thinks maybe he deserves this for even existing, honestly. Perhaps unfair, but well...life is.

Finally, "Uh, is he...I mean Henry, is he ready?"

"He will be shortly. He wanted to get a present for his grandmother."

"Oh. So...he's not here right now?" Neal scratches at his temple, scuffling again.

"No. He's with Emma. They went into town about three hours ago. I believe that they should be back shortly," Regina replies with a frown. Then, "Must you do that? You look like a little boy."

"Do what?" he asks.

"Pick your feet up, Mr. Cassidy," she instructs. "Pretend you're an adult."

"Maybe I don't pretend as well as you do," he says, his eyes lifting up to meet her gaze. It's an impressive if slightly foolish thing to do and he seems to realize it quickly so before she can even think to respond (and there had been so many responses), he says, "Look, if the kid is already all packed up, I can just go grab his stuff and get the car loaded. Make it easier for us."

"Actually," Regina starts as she walks towards him in a way which is vaguely – and intentionally so – predatory. "I was hoping that maybe we could talk for a moment." She punctuates her words with an overly large smile which is decidedly wicked; she can tell she's unnerving him.
There's a long pause before he finally answers. "Yeah, sure," Neal reluctantly allows, looking like he'd far prefer to get mauled to death by a vicious untrained tiger instead. "What about?"

"What else but Henry?" she asks, shaking her head at him like he's an outright idiot.

"Oh, I thought maybe you wanted to talk about Emma," he says intuitively.

"Is there something about Emma which we need to talk about?" Regina lobs back, acting like she's confused. "I was under the impression that your relationship with her was in the past."

"It is," he admits with an unmistakable show of sadness. He coughs, shuffles his feet before realizing what he's doing, and then mumbles out, "It's just...well, I still care a lot about her."

"And?" she demands, sounding more than a little bit impatient.

"And I don't want her hurt."

"I'm not sure I'm following your logic here, Mr. Cassidy."

"There's something going on between the two of you. Something more than friends. And I know that that's not...that's not my business."

"Quite right; it's not."

"But what is my business is that she's not hurt."

"Because you've cornered the market on that?"

He nods his head. "That's fair," he allows. "I fucked her over."

"Yes, you did."

"But so did you."

"Yes, I did," she echoes. "Now, is there a point to all of this?"

"The point is, Regina, don't hurt her. Please. She's been through enough."

"I have no intention of harming her in any way," Regina assures him.

"Good. That's...that's good."

"That's fair," he allows. "I fucked her over."

"Yes, you did."

"But so did you."

"Yes, I did," she echoes. "Now, is there a point to all of this?"

"The point is, Regina, don't hurt her. Please. She's been through enough."

"I have no intention of harming her in any way," Regina assures him.

"Good. That's...that's good."

"Mm. But yes, that's pretty much where I was going with this."

"Well you don't have to worry, Regina. You said that you have no intention of harming Emma, well whether you choose to accept this or not, I promise you, I will not let anyone hurt Henry. I may be a fuck-up overall, but I'm going to do right by my kid. I want...I need to do right by him."

His desperate words are enough to make her stand down because even though she can't stand him
and doesn't want him in her life, she understands him. Perhaps more than she'd like to.

She sighs then. "Don't we all?"

"Yeah," he admits with a small smile.

It's right as he's saying this that Emma (in Ruby's car) comes screeching up the drive, wheels spinning against still wet asphalt. She's barely parked before both she and Henry are out of the car, each of them wearing matching expressions of fear and worry.

"Relax, he's still alive," Regina drawls, an overly amused smirk spread over her unpainted lips.

Emma exhales. "Right." Then, with a nervous smile as she looks between them, "Hey, I'm sorry about being late; we got wrapped up looking at some new things that had just been…you know what, that doesn't really matter right now does it? Is everything…is everything okay here?"

"Everything's fine," Regina says without waiting for Neal to respond. "Mr. Cassidy and I were just coming to an understanding about this weekend."

"Mom," Henry sighs, but he doesn't actually look upset. Regina notices that he's holding a small box in his hands. Something for his grandmother surely.

"It's cool, Champ," Neal tells him with an easy smile. "We're cool."

"Indeed," Regina agrees. "Henry, why don't you go get your bags?"

"Yeah, sure," he agrees, but not before glancing at everyone one last time just to ensure that no one is actually close to throwing a punch.

Once he's gone, Emma turns and asks, "So is everything actually okay? I don't see any cuts or bruises or burn marks so…"

"As I said, everything is fine" Regina insists.

"Neal?"

"Yeah, we're good." He glances up at the sky. "But since another storm might be rolling in within a few hours, we should probably hit the road."

"You'll be careful, right?" Emma presses.

"I'll make you the same promise I did her," he replies. "Nothing is going hurt Henry. Not without going through me first and nothing is getting through me." It's a strangely aggressive – and creative - promise to make, but for a man who was once a Lost Boy, it makes a kind of sense.

"He calls to talk to us every night before he goes to bed," Regina reminds him as she stands next to Emma so that they're side by side. It's not an intentional display, but it does present a united front. A united front which is strong enough to make Neal chuckle in amusement.

"What's funny?" Emma asks him, her head slightly tilted.

"Nothing. Hey, buddy," Neal deflects, grinning as Henry comes out with his night bag slung over his shoulder. "You ready to get going?"

"Yep," Henry says. He turns to his moms and steps towards Regina first, his arms swinging out and rounding her, his hold strong. "Thank you," he whispers.
She closes her eyes and inhales, knowing that there's pretty much nothing which she wouldn't do for him if it meant getting embraced and held by him like this.

He steps away after a moment, gives Emma a hard hug of her own and then says to them with a grin, "Remember: no killing each other, and Emma, no complaining about the spinach salad."

"Yeah, yeah, go," Emma laughs. "Have fun. And say hi to everyone for us." She pointedly ignores the way Regina rolls her eyes because honestly, part of the reason she'd said the statement at all had been to annoy Regina; they might be friends – perhaps far more than that these days – but she still finds some amusement in irritating the Queen just for the fun of it.

Even if she knows that Regina will likely find a way to get even later.

Henry nods his understanding, and then follows Neal down the driveway (babbling to him all the way) and into the car. One last gleeful wave at his mothers, and then they're both watching as he disappears down the street with his birth father, a reality which makes neither of them terribly happy. But it is reality and facing it is pretty much what they do these days.

"So," Emma says after a beat. "You going to tell me what really happened between you two?"

Regina smirks at this. "Do you want the truth?"

"That would be preferable."

"I threatened him over Henry's safety and he threatened me over your safety, and yes, I'm quite aware that you're not some kind of meat to be fought over. It was nothing like that."

"Wait, rewind back to the point where…why were you two threatening each other over me? And what do you mean by threat? Like your usual one or –"

"Nothing quite so dramatic, my dear," Regina says with unmistakable affection. "No explicit promises were made. As for you, well he asked me not to hurt you." She chuckles at this.

"Which is funny why?"

"Oh, it's only funny in regards to how little he understands about our dynamic."

"I'm not sure I understand it either, apparently."

Regina smiles slightly and then steps towards Emma, a hand sliding out and up to settle against the sheriff's cheek her fingers again dancing across soft skin. "Since we began this new dance of ours, it has never been you that has been in any kind of danger from me."

"Which implies that you're in danger from me. Do you really think that I'd hurt you?" Emma asks, her head tilted and her expression showing just how much the idea of this bothers her.

"Not intentionally, no, but, well…it wouldn't take much." She slides her hand away, then, pushing it as well as its twin into her sweatshirt pocket, a small tenting showing her anxiety.

"Right. Well you're wrong. That's the last thing I'd…ever want to do."

"That, I believe," Regina assures her. Then, with that awful smile which always comes out whenever she's trying to hide emotion which is threatening to overtake her. "Ready for lunch?"

"Not really" Emma admits, a frown creasing her face as she gazes with concern over at the somber looking Queen. "But just so you know, Regina, this conversation is far from over."
"I expected as much," Regina admits with a wry chuckle which seems more sad than amused. She then turns on her heel and walks into the house.

"I can't believe I'm saying this - and I'll deny it to my grave if you repeat it – but maybe that salad wasn't as awful as I thought it would be," Emma offers up as she quietly steps out onto the porch with two glasses in hand and a bottle of blood red wine tucked under her arm. She hands one to Regina – who is now wearing a heather gray sweatshirt that looks casually fantastic on her – and drops herself into the chair next to the Queen. "I might even have kind of liked it."

"Good," Regina chuckles before taking a sip; she nods her approval at the taste. "Perhaps that will be the first step in getting you to not eat like a college student studying for finals."

"I'm surprised you even know what that's like."

"I do read, my dear; I want to know what Henry will be up to in a few years," Regina reminds her. After a moment, she gazes out at the water and says, "He sounded like he was happy."

"Yeah," Emma agrees as she brings the wine up to her lips. Their son had called in about thirty minutes earlier, sounding excited and hyped up on sugar. He hadn't provided any details on his interactions, but his joy at being back in Storybrooke had been obvious to both of his mothers.

"It's getting about time to head back to Storybrooke, isn't it?" Regina asks with a sigh. She sounds bothered by this, perhaps even sad. And she probably is considering just how much good has come out of her time here. Two months ago, the idea of wanting to stay here would have been absurd, but now, deep down, she finds herself a bit terrified at the idea of leaving.

Not that she plans to voice this fear.

Because it is absurd; Storybrooke is the home which she had created for herself and as much as many of the people there hate her and always will, Regina finds that she misses the simplicity of her town. She finds that she misses her knowledge of it, and perhaps she even misses such silly things as watching Emma swagger her way down the street with a badge affixed to her hip.

"Maybe, but I guess I don't see the rush."

"No? You don't think isolating him here with just the two of us is bad for him? Weren't you the one who once told me how lonely he was because of how separated from everyone he was?"

"This is different," Emma insists.

"Is it? Is it different because he's here with us?"

"Yes. No. Okay, I get your point. Kind of."

"He wants to be in the middle of things, Emma. You better than just about anyone knows that he needs to be active and moving around. Our curious little boy likes to be part of that world."

"Yeah, okay, that's true, but considering that coming here was the kid's idea, I kind of doubt that he wants us to leave before it's right for either of us. I'm pretty sure he'd tell us not to."

"Either of us?" Regina asks, her eyebrow up.
"The first night here, you asked me if I needed this therapy as much as you did, and well, I think by now it's clear what the answer to that is," Emma says between taking a long sip.

"Yes, which makes this…thing between us even more questionable."

"There doesn't have to be a thing," Emma tells her with a slightly frustrated shake of her head. "And I think maybe that's actually the whole point, Regina; we don't have to do anything that we don't want to. If we want to just be friends, that's all we have to be and that's okay."

"Is it?"

"Yes."

"And if I want more?"

"Do you?"

Regina chuckles and takes another sip, this one longer.

"That's not an answer," Emma reminds her after she's gotten sick of waiting.

"You assume I have an answer."

"Okay, so you don't. And that's okay, too, because believe it or not, I'm as turned around about all of this as you are," Emma insists. "I'm as inside out and upside down as you are, okay?"

"Are you? Then what was the kiss at my door a few days ago about?"

"It felt like something I needed to do."

"Why?"

"Can you ask me an easier question?"

"I'm not sure I know any easier questions these days."

"Yeah, I hear that," Emma sighs. Another deep swig from the wine glass and then, "You know it's not like this is a natural thing for either of us."

"That it's us or that I'm a woman or..."

"I meant relationships in general," Emma elaborates. "The woman thing…doesn't really matter to me, but the relationships part. God, Regina, I'm a goddamn mess when it comes to those, and I think you are, too. My longest lasting one was with Neal and yours was with…Graham, I guess?"

"In terms of years, yes, but I would say my most substantial and life altering relationship – if you could call it that - was with…" Regina shakes her head, a slight shiver running through her.

"My grandfather," Emma says, frowning at the thought of this. She tries not to spend much time considering the weirdness of her family relations because they're not overly relevant, but sometimes, she gets reminded of them in the strangest and most unsettling of ways.

"The King," Regina amends, her voice decidedly suddenly cold, and yet somehow still fairly sharp and emphatic. Emma doesn't miss the way her shoulders and back have tensed and tightened. "If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer not to think of him as your grandfather."
"Why's that?"

"Because I hate the man with everything inside of me and I don't hate you."

"Right, "Emma acknowledges, trying to ignore the surge of harsh emotion she feels at those words. Absurd because of course Regina no longer hates her considering the conversation they're having. "So is this where we talk about him now?"

"No," Regina replies stiffly, her fingers tightening around her wine glass.

"Because he's the last skeleton in your closet?"

"He's hardly the last, Emma. But no because he was a mean son of a bitch whom I'd prefer not to spend any time ever thinking about," Regina answers, her tone crisp and almost angry.

"Okay," Emma allows, one of her hands instinctually lifting up in a way that's meant to be placating. "So what story will you tell me tonight, then?"

Regina blinks. "What?"

"Well, if you don't want to talk about the King right now –"

"I'll never want to speak about the King," Regina corrects, her tone still cool. "So if you're expecting that to change anytime soon, I wouldn't hold my breath. That one won't change."

"What if you need to for…for yourself?"

"You need to eat less sugar."

"Huh?"

"You need to eat less sugar for your own health. Doesn't mean that you will."

"Okay, aside from the fact that those two things couldn't be more dissimilar, that's not exactly true," Emma challenges. "You've been forcing me over the last two months to be healthier and well, I have been. Like you said earlier, I'm starting to eat less and less like a college kid, right?"

"Fine," Regina sighs, sounding annoyed. "It was a bad comparison. Point is, I have no intention of speaking about the King to you or anyone else ever so, can we please move on now?"

"Yeah, sure, okay, we can do that. But, since you don't want to talk about him, and I presume that you don't really want to talk about your comment about me hurting you yet…"

"I don't."

"Then you owe me a story in trade."

"All right," Regina agrees, sounding petulant in a way which amuses Emma far more than it probably should. "There once was an obnoxious little blonde girl," the Queen starts.

"Hey…"

"Who didn't know when to keep her nose out of things."

"That's not nice nor fair," Emma pouts, the expression exaggerated just to garner a reaction.
And it does. Regina sighs and finishes with, "And she ended up in the house of three bears."

"Wait, Goldilocks?"

"Who did you think I was speaking of?" Regina counters with a wicked grin.

"Yeah, whatever. You know what? I'm going to cut you some slack tonight because it's our first night without Henry and we're both having a bit of empty nest going on, I think."

"How very nice of you."

Emma ignores her and says, "So for now, we'll call it a night early."

"No more story time?"

"Nope," Emma agrees. "I'm gonna go to sleep and so are. But tomorrow, you and me are going to do an all day trip into town and we're going to enjoy ourselves. Just us. Just the two of us."

"That sounds suspiciously like a date, Sheriff? Are you asking me out on a date?" Regina teases.

"I'm not really one for dating."

"Nor am I. In fact, I don't know that I've ever actually been on one."

"Honestly, you're not missing much. It's a whole dance of people trying to pretend that they're someone other than who they are. It'd tedious and boring and kind of stupid overall."

"Is that your way of saying you don't like dressing up?" Regina challenges.

"No, it's my way of saying that I hate pretending that I don't like to eat."

"So noted," Regina says. "So this isn't a date, then?"

"Nope. But before you start thinking of this like it's some kind of rejection, I think that whatever we do, it has to be us. Us, Regina. Whatever that means. Okay?"

"Okay." Regina allows, not entirely sure what that means, but assuming that it's a good thing. She knocks back the last of her wine, and then stands up, and places the glass on the railing. "Well then, I guess this is good night, then."

"Goodnight, Your Majesty," Emma says with a small smile.

Regina chuckles in response to the term which had once been thrown at her antagonistically, but is now meant affectionately. She starts back towards the house, but after a few steps, she stops and turns back. "I meant to ask earlier, but what did you end up getting for Snow?"

"A glass star for her desk. He said it was to help to remind her of the best parts of herself."


"Yeah, he's a sweet kid, Regina," Emma tells her, her tone serious. "Whatever else you believe or don't believe about yourself, believe that you did a great job with him because you did."

"Thank you," Regina says, just barely stopping herself from reaching out to touch Emma again. It's become a bit of a compulsion lately – one they've both been fighting like crazy – and it's getting harder by the day. Especially when she thinks about their non-date date which is coming up.
No, perhaps it's best not to think of that.

"Yeah," Emma says. "Sleep well," she says before reaching down for the bottle of wine. She lifts it to her lips and takes a swig from it while staring out at the water. Regina watches for a long moment, and then turns and allows the sheriff to have time alone with her deep thoughts.

Part of her would like to stay out here with Emma and share the rest of the bottle with her. Especially since she has a pretty good idea about exactly what she'll be dreaming about — what nightmares she'll be having - tonight whether or not she wants to have them or not. She knows what monsters — which specific monster — will be coming to visit her once she pulls the blankets up over her. Unfortunately, and without any doubt, she knows that her former husband will be there, reaching out to touch her once she turns the lights out.

And so she thinks to stay and drink with Emma.

But then she knows that Emma will ask about the King once again and she'll push.

She'll want to know why this demon hurts more than any of the others.

Even more than Regina's mother had.

But the inescapable truth is that Regina is not ready to talk about the King. She's not sure that she ever will be — though she knows that Emma will continue asking and pressing — and so for now, she simply turns and walks away, keeping this particular monster to herself.

Even though she knows that he'll be coming for her tonight.

Unfortunately, she's not wrong.

She's sitting on the oversized but still somehow uncomfortable bed in the chambers which she'd stayed in while she'd been married to the King (after his death, she'd moved out of the room, had it redecorated from the bottom up and then never again stepped foot within it). She's dressed in the simple light green dressing gown which the King had always wanted her to wear during their couplings; something he could get off her with minimal effort. As she waits for him to arrive to claim her, she can feel terror burning hot and dark within her gut. A fear of what's about to come.

When he enters the room, he's drunk as usual. King George is visiting with his son James, and in celebration of their new non-aggression pact (which is a joke in and of itself), Leopold and his guests had indulged themselves in alcohol almost to the point of madness. She can taste his rancid breath from across the room and when he sloppily kisses her, she almost gags on it.

And then he's touching her and she's forcing her eyes closed and her mouth open so as to receive him as he likes, and it takes everything she has not to scream and beg him to stop.

There's no point in such; he won't stop no matter what sound she makes.

There's never been a point in trying to stop him from taking what he believes is his.

She feels her back hit the mattress with a soft thud and then he's pushing the dress aside and moving atop her and then moments later, he's within her, breathing into her ear and calling her his
wife, and telling her how good she feels in the very crudest and ugliest of ways. Perhaps he means his words to be some kind of terrible turn-on and an ego boost to her, but all they do is make her feel cheap and horrible. All they do is make her feel like she's being used by him.

This sex is not overly violent this time even though he's drunk, but it is painfully clumsy and deeply uncomfortable. The King is demanding with his rough hands and his weight and he doesn't listen to the frantic gasping sounds that she makes as he crushes down on her; he doesn't even try to give her pleasure in return. Not that she'd want him to do that, anyway.

No, what she desperately wants is for him to go away.

What she wants is for none of this to be happening.

But that's not a possibility so instead; she closes her eyes and bears it.

When the tears leak down her face, he ignores them; they ruin the fantasy.

When she cries out in pain because he pushes too hard, he ignores that, too. Maybe he enjoys the sound of her hurting or maybe he just doesn't hear it. Most likely, he just doesn't care.

This – she – is his right as the King and her desires are irrelevant.

When he's done, he clumsily stands up and dresses, all the while talking – in a slurring voice - about some request of Snow's. Something she wants to do with her stepmother tomorrow.

Something which she will do with Snow tomorrow because it's what's expected of her.

Regina keeps her eyes low and on her tightly clenched hands until he asks if she understands what he's requesting of her, and then she lifts them up and quietly says, "Yes, my King."

He touches her face, his fingers rough against her soft skin. "You're a good Queen; you please me," he tells her in much the same way that a master would speak to his favorite dog. And then with a swirl and a satisfied grunt, he turns and leaves her, the heavy iron door closing loudly behind him and a bolt snapping into place as he locks away his most prized possession.

This is just a bad dream, she tells herself and even inside the dream, she knows this to be true because when she looks into the mirror, she doesn't see the eighteen-year-old girl with heartbroken eyes; she instead sees the fallen Queen, the woman who had destroyed worlds to find happiness. The one who never has and likely never will find such a thing to be achievable.

As the memory sweeps over her, she turns over in her bed and weeps out her pain and hurt into her pillow, crying until she -

- wakes up from the nightmare.

Not with a scream as she usually does but with a gasp.

It's a reaction that had been trained into her by the King.

He'd never wanted to know of her misery and he'd never allowed it to be known to others; as far as he'd been concerned, he'd given her everything she could ever want and pleasing him had simply
been the cost of that. As far as he'd been concerned, she was simply paying a debt.

Now, sitting in her bed in the middle of the beach house, the last of the storm dripping down the roof, she finds that she no longer wants to hide this pain away. She doesn't really wish to speak of it to anyone, but for once, Regina realizes she doesn't want to be alone with it, either.

As expected, she finds Emma sleeping on the couch, the TV on. There's something else besides *I Love Lucy* playing now, but Regina pays it no mind.

"May I?" she asks in a soft voice when she sees Emma's sleepy green eyes looking up at her.

There's a strange kind of understanding there, like Emma knows exactly why she's here and what she needs. She probably does. And so Emma's response is to lift the blanket up. She then pushes herself towards the back of the couch, allowing Regina room to curl in front of her.

She opens her mouth, then, to say something – perhaps to try to lighten the mood with a joking promise that she'll attempt not to molest Regina in her sleep – but the words abruptly die on her lips when she sees the dried tear tracks running down the Queen's beautiful face.

And somehow, she just knows that this isn't a moment for humor.

Once Regina has settled her smaller body in front of her, the sheriff pulls the blanket over them and then tries to slide even further back against the couch so as to give Regina whatever space she might want. But then, in a soft voice that's shaking far too much for Emma's liking, Regina says, "It's okay. You can…you can, I mean." She swallows hard, biting down against her pride and her fear and instead for once allowing for the need she has for comfort to come forward.

Right now, what she needs – what she wants – is to be held.

And, of course, again, Emma just understands.

Without another word, Emma slides her body forward on the couch and then presses her arms back around Regina's slim waist and pulls her close, the hold gentle and loose but somehow still strong. "Is this all right?" she asks, her voice so gentle and cautious, so very understanding.

"Yes," Regina replies, sliding her hands over Emma's.

"Good," Emma tells her, her voice husky with exhaustion. "It's okay," she adds after a moment.

"I know," Regina replies. She takes a deep breath and then relaxes her body into the sheriff's hold, allowing herself to enjoy the safety and security - the *peace* - of Emma's arms.

And then, finally, she rests.
When Regina wakes, she finds herself alone on the couch, the now familiar scratchy brown blanket wrapped loosely around her midsection. After rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she glances over towards the kitchen and is only somewhat surprised to see Emma sitting at the breakfast bar, a cup of coffee and a newspaper in front of her. Her slightly damp blonde hair is pulled back into a sloppy ponytail and she's wearing a pair of black and red jogging pants and a weathered oversized red New England Patriots hoodie.

"Good morning," Regina murmurs as she slowly approaches the bar. The part of her which worries about everything these days imagines that she's supposed to address the previous night head-on here – well, probably more the unusual request to share the couch with the sheriff as opposed to the conversation - but a smile from Emma almost immediately puts her at ease again.

"Morning," Emma echoes. "How'd you sleep?"

"Don't you already know the answer to that?"

"Sure, but I thought I'd ask, anyway."

Regina nods her head slowly, thoughtfully. "I slept…better."

"Good." Emma smiles and their eyes connect for an emotional beat before she pushes on with a deceptively casual sounding question for her co-mother: "So, hey, I know that we usually do a full breakfast but considering our plans for the day, I was thinking maybe just some toast?"

"That's fine," Regina agrees as she steps around the bar and pours herself a cup of the dark brew which Emma has already made for them. It's not lost on her that the sheriff has started helping herself to the vanilla coffee, and is now making it for the both of them. A bemused glance and an eyebrow up towards Emma gets her a grin and a somewhat sheepish half-shrug in response.

"Sorry," Emma says simply before taking a long sip from her mug. After a few moments of them both drinking their coffee in silence, she finally asks, sounding slightly cautious and perhaps a bit concerned, "Are you…okay?"

"I'm fine," Regina answers, desperately trying with her eyes for Emma to just let this – let the vulnerability of the previous night - drop for once. She's urging her to not pull on this thread. Thankfully, for once, Emma chooses to do exactly that. Instead of pushing on, she chooses to change the subject; setting down her coffee mug on the counter, she says in an almost airy voice, "So, the glass star that we got for Mary Margaret wasn't the only thing we picked up in town yesterday. Henry got something for you, too. Well, I mean, technically he and I got it for you."

"Did you now?" She glances around the room, her eyes finally settling on a garment bag that has been haphazardly slung over one of the chairs. "Is that it over there?"
"Yep," the sheriff answers with a mischievously large smile.

Regina's eyebrow lifts almost all the way up into her hairline, her dark eyes glittering with curiosity. "You bought me more clothes? That didn't exactly work out well the first time or have you forgotten?" She's a bit surprised to find that she's far more amused than irritated, though.

It seems as though every day here brings on a new bit of emotional change for her.

"No, it didn't, but I don't think you're going to hate these ones as much as the first set we bought for you," Emma reassures her, grinning.

"All right," Regina allows, her voice slow and steady. "Am I permitted to see what's in the bag or do I need to wait for Henry to get back on Sunday?"

"Nope, you can look. I mean I want you to look," Emma says before striding over and grabbing the bag. She brings it over to Regina and hands it to her, practically presenting it to her.

Feeling slightly nervous (perhaps even more so now because of how excited Emma appears to be about this gift of hers), Regina slowly pulls the zipper down and with considerable trepidation, looks inside the bag. Almost immediately, her worry dissipates and she smiles in relief – and maybe something else that she can't quite put a name on - when she sees a pair of finely tailored black slacks and a crisply pressed elegantly cut white dress shirt. They're exactly the kind of clothes she normally wears on an everyday basis; these garments are her typical comfort zone.

"We special ordered these and a few other things, which haven't come in yet from one of the more upscale stores in town. Which you know, is kind of silly because they're just slacks and shirts. I mean they're nothing special or even all that expensive, but this town is all about its flannel and denim and I guess we thought maybe you'd like these a bit better," Emma babbles out, the smile on her face becoming somewhat awkward and uncertain, even a tad pensive.

It's utterly adorable because Emma is clearly nervous about how her gift will be received. She's obviously worried because the truth is that she's wondering if Regina will – instead of being pleased - be irritated by the sheriff's presumptuousness and therefore throw it back in her face. And maybe two months ago, Emma would have had good reason to be so anxious about Regina's response because eight weeks ago, that's probably exactly what would have happened here, but not today and not anymore.

"Thank you," Regina replies softly, almost inaudibly. Her slightly shaking fingers run lightly over the fabric, feeling the softness of the material. The garment quality isn't quite on par with what she typically buys for herself, but for once, it truly is the thought that counts the very most.

"It was my carelessness which caused you to have to wear what you are right now, and though I think you would look incredible in a potato sack, I know you haven't been comfortable since the day we got here. I know you haven't been happy," Emma continues on, an awkward but sincere smile on her lips as she tries to stammer out an adequate explanation. "And believe it or not, that was never what I wanted so I'm sorry about all of that, and I hope that this helps at least a bit."

"Stop," Regina breathes out before she steps towards her and wraps her hands around Emma's neck, a palm on each side, her fingers settling just under each of the sheriff's ears. She traces the tip of one of them over the shell of an ear, and says in a soft voice, "Emma, thank you. Thank you." She then pulls the younger woman towards her and presses a tender kiss against her lips.

With the memory of Emma kissing her in the garage to express her own gratitude suddenly fresh in
her mind, Regina feels – no, she knows – that this is the only way to be sure that Emma will understand what she's trying to say to her; it's the only way to be sure that Emma will understand that she's trying to tell her how much she appreciates the effort of even trying to make her feel more comfortable and happy and at ease.

No one else in her life has ever cared enough to even try.

It's not about the clothes (though she'd be lying if she were to claim they were unappreciated), it's about the thought behind it. It's about the fact that the outfit, like the vanilla coffee and the peppermint and the aspirin and God so very many other things along the way means something to her, and Emma had thought of these things.

It's about the fact that Emma had wanted to make her smile.

After a few seconds, what had started out as a soft and mostly innocent kiss deepens into something that actually means something, too. It's still tender and gentle and just slightly wet, but it's also increasingly intense in what it's trying to say; it's decidedly passionate in how it's relaying their mutual feelings about each other as well as this crazy little thing that's rapidly growing and heating up between them like an out of control wildfire.

"Okay," Emma gasps out once they break apart, both of them breathing hard. "So, I guess it's my turn to say 'you're welcome', huh?"

Regina laughs at this (but doesn't correct Emma – she hadn't actually said those words after the kiss in the garage, but the sentiment had been there just the same). The mirth is for once full and wonderful and Emma finds herself grinning almost stupidly in response and wondering why it is that Regina allows herself to show so very little of this kind of almost reckless joy and happiness.

Before she can think to push on this, though, the Queen interrupts her runaway thought process by asking in a low voice that sends a strange shockwave through Emma's belly, "Tell me now, Sheriff, did you happen to get me a new pair of heels as well? The ones I came here with are...well useless for doing much actual walking in thanks to our little run through the woods."

That the run through the woods had preceded a horrifying moment of Regina actually genuinely believing that Emma had brought her out into the dark and at the time very wet Maine wilderness so that she could execute her is something that neither of them wishes to speak of ever again.

Partly because that day – one which had occurred less than sixty sunsets ago and had started with kidnapping and ended with near murder – has never felt so far away before. It feels like the kind of distant dream that a middle aged woman might one day have of her unpleasant high school years. It's real because the memories are there, but it doesn't quite feel solid anymore.

It's the past and it means as much as the past ever means: everything and nothing all at the same time.

It's foundation and history, but little more than that when it's all said and done.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Emma answers with a flirtatious smirk.

"Wonderful, my dear," Regina husks with an almost wolfish grin, the fingers of her left hand coming up to lightly dance across the soft skin of Emma's jawline. "Well then, it looks like I have something to wear for today."

"I was kind of hoping you'd say that," Emma answers as she finally steps away from Regina and retreats back to the neutral zone that is the kitchen.
"Oh? Missed my heels have you?" Regina teases. The comment is a challenge, and Emma knows that she's being baited into a dangerously seductive spider web. Suddenly, she understands with shocking clarity how the fly felt. No wonder the little bastard had gone to his death willingly.

And probably with a stupid grin on his face.

Emma puts up her hands as if to defend herself from the woman who is gazing at her with so much smugness. "Oh, there's no way I'm stepping into that trap." She's smiling but she'd be lying if she were to claim that she's not feeling a bit unnerved now. The kiss had been fantastic as usual, but it's serving to remind her of just how intense things are getting between them.

Just how inevitable things are becoming.

She hates that word simply because she feels as though it robs her of her free will (she'll never forget Neal telling her in the bar in Manhattan that fate had been behind them getting together and then destiny had caused him to break her heart like it'd been no stronger than an old china cup), but then again, the truth is that deep down – well, maybe not so deep anymore - she knows that she does want something to happen between them.

God – and everyone other deity in this world and the other – knows that this shouldn't happen between the two of them for a thousand different reasons, but looking over at Regina right now and seeing the almost childlike joy on her face over something as simple as familiar clothing, Emma finds herself suddenly able to come up with a hundred reasons why this thing between them should happen, all of them more interesting than their opposites.

All of them more relevant to whom they are now.

The main one being that they both clearly want something to happen.

And maybe, Emma thinks, they have a right to decide their own paths now.

"I'll take that as a yes," Regina drawls, her eyebrow lifted in a way that can only be described as cocky when paired with the shit-eating grin that she's wearing. It reminds Emma a bit of Mayor Mills, but oddly not in a bad way.

"Well it's not a no," the sheriff admits, her hands in her pockets again.

"Excellent. So, then, now that I have clothes; do you care to tell me what our plans for today actually are? For our…" She trails off, suddenly seeming self-conscious about being the one to speak of their impending outing.

Emma doesn't appear to share her uncertainty. "Our non-date date?" After receiving an oddly stilted confirming nod from Regina who has suddenly tensed up, the sheriff answers with, "Well, we finish breakfast, and then I'm sure you'd like to spend some time with the heavy bag, yeah?"

Regina considers for a moment telling Emma that she doesn't need to – that she can forego her now typical morning workout, and that they can, instead, do whatever Emma has planned – but something inside of the queen tells her that as wonderful as this coming day might be, it might also be emotionally trying for her, and it'd be best to start it grounded. "Yes," she admits.

"Yeah," Emma confirms, nodding her head like she'd been expecting that answer (and Regina realizes, with a bit of surprise and an oddly warm feeling in the middle of her chest, that Emma probably had expected that because, yeah, she more than just about anyone understands the need for grounding – it's why she'd introduced Regina to the heavy bag in the first place.)
"All right. And then?"

"After you're done punching the shit out of the bag all the while pretending you're not as nervous about this whole thing as I am, I thought maybe we could start by heading into town and having lunch together." Emma says these words as lightly as she can because she knows that she's throwing both of their worries out on the table, and she's wondering how Regina will react.

Will she admit to the same anxiety as Emma's feeling or will she choose to be the Queen who never lets anyone see the fear lurking behind the mask?

Considering how many looks behind the mask Emma has already gotten, she's hoping for full disclosure and honesty right now. She knows better, though; she knows that Regina isn't ready to be quite so honest just yet. And she's right, of course; Regina plasters a plainly fake smile across her lips, and completely ignores the comment about being nervous. Instead, she says in a liquid warm voice, "And are you planning for us to have lunch at that little bar of yours again?"

Emma sighs and frowns, but answers with, "As a matter of fact, yes."

"You don't think that might be a problem?" Regina asks, the smirk sliding away as she remembers their last visit there, and how violently it had ended.

How terribly upside down things had gone for both of them (Regina can still vividly – all too vividly for her liking - recall being pinned almost helplessly to the ground, and just as clearly she can still see the imbecile redneck holding Emma against the wall, his intentions all too obvious).

And she can still feel and almost even taste the strange rush of magic as it had – quite impossibly - surged its way up and out of her body.

But Emma because she's Emma and very little actually frightens her, simply sighs in response. "I don't think I care," she replies with a shrug, the kind that used to infuriate Regina. "But I also don't think that that idiot is actually there during the day. And if he is, well, I don't think he'll be coming anywhere near us; by now, someone has surely told him that there was no earthquake."

"Meaning what exactly?"

With mock seriousness, Emma lowers her voice to something that's almost conspiratorial in tone, "It means, Your Royal Majesty," she says, almost whispering now, "That he probably thinks that a witch kicked his ass to hell and back in front of his buddies and he really really doesn't want to experience a repeat performance. Or have to come up with a new lie to explain it. Ouch."

And just like that, the tension which had started to tighten Regina's muscles is gone; she laughs, then – fully and wonderfully once again – "One did," she replies, her voice low and dangerous.

The sheriff nods her head, clearly pleased with herself. "Exactly."

This is nice and new, the ability to talk about Regina's magic with a bit of humor instead of fear. Sure, neither one of them is particularly thrilled that Regina actually still has it lurking around in her veins, but as it doesn't appear to be an active threat, and it had gotten them out of a very ugly situation, well they're both willing to chuckle about it right now and just go with it.

And that, too, is new and nice.

As Emma is thinking about this – turning the madness of the last two months over and around in her mind – she watches Regina toast herself an English muffin, and then spread a light layer of strawberry jam atop it. There's a familiarity to this motion now; she's become incredibly
comfortable with watching the domestic Regina at work, and she finds that she even enjoys it.

Because yeah, there's something rather fascinating about the Evil Queen being as much of a badass in the kitchen as she is on her throne made of…

Emma wrinkles her nose at this, stopping the thought in motion.

"Is something wrong?" Regina queries just before she takes a bite.

"Nope, not a thing," Emma says quickly, shading red a bit around the neck.

"And yet you're staring at me like there is," Regina notes before glancing down at herself to ensure that she hasn't dripped jam onto her shirt. Thankfully, she hasn't.

"Your throne," Emma mumbles, looking almost nervous. She coughs loudly, then, as if to clear her throat. "I mean the one back in your old world."

"Yes, what of it?" Regina queries, tilting her head slightly, bemused and wondering where exactly this decidedly bizarre turn of conversation is going.

"I'm just curious. Was it actually made of…" Emma trails off then, unable to disguise both the queasiness of whatever mental image she's seeing in her head as well as the awkwardness of trying to get her thoughts out into actual words. She scratches at her temple for a moment, and frowns because God, how exactly do you ask a ridiculous question like this one?

"Are you asking me if my throne was made of skulls?" Regina offers up for her with entirely too much humor. When Emma opens her mouth to answer and then snaps it shut again, Regina laughs. Regina thinks she should probably be offended by the question because perhaps it reveals what Emma might actually still think of her, but she doesn't think it does; she thinks this is just a matter of Emma's imagination running away from her. It seems Henry gets that from his birth mother, and while that had not always been beneficial to her, this she finds rather amusing.

"Uh…" Emma manages after Regina has let her swing out on the ledge for far too long.

"No," Regina answers with a dramatic sigh, and a roll of her eyes. "Maleficent had one like that, I believe, but I was always more into comfort, and well, those bony things have a lot of edges and corners and points. I'm sure you can imagine how they could be quite unpleasant when you're sitting naked on the throne." She's watching Emma's face carefully as she says – well, purrs - these words, all the while trying her hardest not to grin at the shock she sees there.

"Seriously?" Emma inquires, the queasiness growing to overtake her entire face.

"No, of course not; I'm joking, Emma. There were no thrones made of bones. Especially not in my castle. I may have been the Evil Queen, but I had no desire to disgrace the dead. You should stop watching so much television." Her own expression has altered to an almost uneasy one now.

Emma lets out an unsteady breath, "You're kind of an ass, you know that, right?"

"Yes, I am," Regina admits, her voice suddenly quiet and almost sad, and her previously almost dancing darkening noticeably. "And you would do very well to remember that considering what you're considering stepping into with me. You know the terrible things which I've done and you know better than almost anyone but your mother who I am. That I feel great remorse for many of my actions now doesn't change either of those things. I will understand if –"

"Oh! Hey! Relax, okay? It's okay," Emma tells her, her hands lifted up in apology. "You're right; I
know, and I'm still choosing to have lunch with you today. Okay?" Trying desperately to cool things off again, she punctuates her words with what can only be described as an impish grin.

"Okay," Regina replies softly, unable to tear her eyes away from Emma.

"And for what it's worth? I never minded the ass part of you. The completely insane and trying to kill me with a poisoned pastry part, well that's something different."

"It was cursed, not poisoned."

"Really?"

Regina shrugs her shoulders and mumbles out, "It does matter."

"If you say so. In any case, I had issues with that, but honestly, Regina, I can deal with a bit of your crazy from time to time. Just like I hope you can deal with my less than…ideal parts."

"You mean your absolutely terrible fashion sense?" Regina queries, trying to change the subject to a safer and less intimately emotional one for both of them.

"The threads over there say otherwise," Emma notes as she jabs her thumb back towards the bag of clothes. Of course, she knows exactly what Regina had done, and had allowed it because she better than just about anyone understands the desperate need to relieve the tension.

So very much of the routine which they've created together over the last two months here has been about ramping tension and then releasing it so, yeah, she gets it.

"The clothes I'm currently wearing agree with me," Regina counters as she motions down to the too-big flannel pants and the tee-shirt. Contrary to Regina's dryly expressed derisive words, while they're certainly not at all clothes meant for a queen, they flatter Regina all the same.

"Really?" Emma responds with a laugh and a mischievous twinkle in her bright green eyes. "Because like I said before, I happen to think that they look damned good on you. But then everything does, right? I mean that's kind of one of the upsides of being well…perfect isn't it?"

Almost immediately, the sheriff winces because that's not quite the word she'd been looking for (something far more humorous and teasing had been her intent), and judging by the shadows suddenly crossing Regina's face, it hadn't been well received by the former mayor either.

"Perfect," Regina repeats, saying the word softly and with what sounds like an unsettling degree of internalized disgust. "You have a very strange idea of what that word means considering who I have been and who I am."

"I meant…I was…what I was trying to say is that you're beautiful," Emma stammers out, not knowing exactly what she's supposed to say here to make this situation less awkward and uncomfortable. "That's what I meant to say and…you know me and my mouth and foot."

"All too well, and yes, so I've been told before that I'm…beautiful," Regina answers with that same disgusted tone. She then clears her throat and pushes the muffin into her mouth to stop her from saying more than that. It's an odd and out of character move for her; an unwelcomed reminder to Emma that though Regina knows that she is attractive, she doesn't believe it.

"Regina –"

Regina cuts her off with a quick almost urgent shake of her head, her eyes just a little bit wild and
The son of a bitch that she'd been forced to marry is running around in her mind again. Not that he's ever really stopped being there; it's just that over the years, she'd learned how to think of him less. She'd taught herself how to not react to people getting too physically close to her by instead being the one to initiate proximity. She'd become the aggressor to remove all signs of him.

And yet, still, he's never really gone away. Not completely.

With every strike of her taped up palm against the heavy bag, she sees the King looming above her, his rough hands upon her body. With every kick out, she can feel his lips upon hers.

"You are perfect, my Queen" her tells her as drops her green dressing gown from her shoulders and onto the floor. He moves, then, to position himself over her, his naked body soft and heavy.

"Do you really think so?" the young Queen queries quietly, her words catching in her throat. She asks the question not because she actually wants an answer from him (she doesn't) but because if he's talking to her, well then maybe that means he's not using his mouth in other unwanted ways.

"Oh yes," the King answers with a chuckle as he places his palms between her thighs and then pushes them apart, his mouth dropping down to her breasts. "You are absolutely perfect."

Regina hits the bag again and again, her balled hands clenching and unclenching.

She remembers the rules and stops when her hands begin to burn.

And then when they don't hurt as much, when the burn has become merely an uncomfortable ache through her knuckles, she starts all over again. When she stops thinking about the pain and only thinks about the anger and hate, she hits and she hits and she hits until the hurt is less.

She doesn't see the woman standing in the doorway of the garage, worry painted across her face.

Emma is slouched in one of the deck chairs, waiting for her on the porch, when Regina finally steps out to join her at about twenty minutes after one in the afternoon. She's wearing the slacks and the dress shirt, and the heels that would be a nightmare for anyone except for Regina.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," Regina says as she flicks away imaginary lint.

"No, you're not," Emma answers, and it's meant to be teasing – a comment about Regina's days of being a Queen and therefore leaving people waiting for her simply because she could – but it falls flat because of the expression on Emma's face; something that looks a lot like concern.
"Is something wrong?" Regina queries as she takes in Emma's tense posture. She wonders if maybe the sheriff is having second thoughts about all of this. That would certainly make sense.

After all, this is madness. This pretending that they could ever work. That they even should try to be more they are to each other. No, they shouldn't, Regina thinks, and her own body tenses up as she stops herself from retreating away from the oddly intense expression Emma is giving her.

"Yeah," Emma admits with a sharp nod of her head. "Something is wrong."

"Oh, I see," Regina replies, and her calf muscles tighten as she all but magically glues her feet to the wooden deck to keep herself from running. She doesn't run from anyone or anything, she reminds herself. Anyone. Not even – or perhaps especially – Emma Swan.

"You're keeping things from me again," Emma continues, standing up and moving over to stand just a few inches from Regina – close enough so that Regina can smell her light deodorant. "I thought what happened in the kitchen – you pulling away from me and going ice cold on me – I thought that was about you not liking the word I used but it's about more than just that, isn't it?"

"No, I simply don't like the word," Regina says stiffly. "It's…" she searches her head desperately for a description that will be enough to stop Emma from pushing on this, but suddenly she's drawing a blank because everything she's coming up makes images she'd rather never think about again go through her mind. Every word she can come up with would tell Emma too much.

"It's what?" Emma pushes, stepping even closer, so that there is only a few inches of space still between them. This is a staple of theirs; the need to remove personal space and comfort in order to force the truth forward.

"It's pedestrian," Regina finally throws out, scowling as she does so.

"The word 'perfect' is pedestrian? Really? That's what you're going with?"

"Yes." Her chin lifts up in defiance and she stares right at Emma.

"All right," the sheriff challenges. "What word would you prefer, then?" Her green eyes are firing away, and Regina knows in this moment that though Emma may not know exactly what kind of demon is hidden behind the door labeled PERFECT, Emma is still able to see right through the queen's walls; she knows that Emma knows that there's intense pain lurking there.

"I don't prefer any word," Regina answers softly, and then chastises herself for the weakness she hears in her voice. "Because words mean nothing."

"We both know better," Emma replies. "And I thought you were going to trust me. I thought after everything that's happened between the two of us, you did."

"I do," Regina insists, and then without permission from her head, her hand streaks out and she finds herself touching Emma's cheek, her fingers lightly grazing over incredibly soft skin. "I don't understand what this is or what I have done to…why are you angry at me?" She hates that she sounds so young and silly. So very much unlike the powerful woman she'd once been.

But Emma does this to her; Emma throws her off kilter. Emma makes her want to come halfway and Emma makes her want to find balance.

"I'm not angry," Emma insists. "I'm frustrated." She puts her hand over Regina's and pulls it away from her face. Before Regina can perceive the action as some form of rejection, Emma turns it over so that they're both staring at the former mayor's knuckles. They're in good shape for the most part,
but there's still a significant amount of red and swelling visible there.

"You told me to go work out," Regina reminds her. Irritation streaks through her as one of the voices in her head tries to remind her that Queens need not answer to anyone.

"Yeah, I did, but that…that wasn't a work out," Emma replies, her frown deepening. "That was an emotional venting. I came in to see how close you were to being done and I saw you hitting it like it was a man not a bag."

Regina can't stop herself from noticeably flinching.

"Who?" Emma asks, her voice suddenly gentle, like she's talking to a spooked child instead of a former tyrant. This time, she's the one reaching out to touch. This time, she's the one who places a kind hand on Regina's soft cheek. "Who are you thinking about, Regina? Who hurt you?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me? Yes."

"Emma –"

"Tell me. Please. Was…was it my…was it my grandfather?" She says the word awkwardly, like she hasn't quite come to terms with the idea of it.

"And if I won't tell you who, what then?" Regina demands as she pulls away from Emma, her face contorting into a sneer of indignant rage. She will not allow herself to be backed into a corner; she will not permit herself to be forced by anyone to speak of the King.

"I don't understand the question."

"Fine, then I will make it clear to you, Sheriff Swan: if I refuse to answer your question, does it impact us? Does this…friendship between us end? Is it over?"

"Ignoring the fact that you're trying to push me away by defaulting to my title, is that what you think we are? You think that we're friends? And do you think what we have is that flimsy?"

Regina reacts with shock and perhaps a bit of fear. "Are we…are we not…friends?"

"I guess I thought that maybe we were something more than that." Emma gestures between them. "I have no idea if anything is ever going to actually happen between us, but I'd thought that by now, we were something more than just friends, but I guess maybe I was wrong and this is all just…I don't know." She meets Regina's eyes and the queen sees not a cool challenge there, but an almost desperate need to have Regina reaffirm her faith and hope. In the idea of them.

Regina takes a breath. "We are more than that…we are. I think…I think I don't know why it is that you…you throw me so off as much as you do but…she stops short, frowning. This is too much to admit to, too much vulnerability exposed. So instead, "I need you to trust me. I know that's a lot to ask with my past, and with ours, but Emma, this is something I'm not sure I can ever talk about. I don't want to remember that it ever happened. I didn't want to last night –"

"Is that why you came out to the couch? Because of…him?"

Regina nods her head slowly, stiffly, her expression contorting for a moment into something that is terribly vulnerable and so very small and hurt.
"And he's what made you go off on the bag? Emma presses. It's not lost on the sheriff that Regina isn't denying the pronoun that she's using; she's not fighting back against the assumption of exactly who her terrible boogeyman is. She's just choosing not elaborating on it, either.

Another nod from Regina and this time her expression hardens into rage.

"But you won't talk to me about it, will you?"

"I can't."

"Not can't, Regina," Emma corrects. "Won't. You won't tell me."

"Use whatever words you need to, but I need you to understand that I don't want to speak of this. Please." Regina swallows hard and does the one thing in the world she'd never wanted to do; she pleads with Emma, her eyes big and wide and so terribly frightened: "Don't make me."

Almost immediately, as if a closed fist has struck her, Emma starts to retreat, looking almost afraid. "I'm sorry," Emma says, sounding horrified. "I didn't…I don't want to hurt you. It's the last thing in the world I want to do. I just…I don't want anything hurting you. And something is."

Emma shakes her head when she says these words, unable to hide the deep frustration she feels about all of this; this is exactly why you should never get emotionally involved with the people you're trying to help. You become compromised, and things get dangerous. Then again, she's smart enough to know that whatever else happens, they're well past the point of warnings.

"Then help me to not think about it," Regina asks, her hands reaching out to grab at Emma's, her strong fingers threading between Emma's and squeezing hard. "Because you can't ever really make my demons go away; no one can ever really do that for me. But you can help me not think about them. You asked me a few weeks ago what I wanted and what I needed from you, and well, this is it: I need you to help me not be the person with those memories."

"But you'll always be her," Emma answers with an almost sad smile. "We can't change who we've been." There's a hint of wounded bitterness in her low voice, and Regina understands that this is now about the sheriff, too. It hits Regina in that moment just how shared their pain is; no, Emma may not have gone through the same kinds of awful she has, but she has gone through enough to have been scarred down to the bone. She, too has experienced enough to have doubts every single time she looks into a mirror and sees her own troubled eyes gazing back at her.

Regina knows the feeling.

And suddenly Regina is struck by the need – the absolute urgency – to convince Emma that she's so very wrong about all of this. She's possessed by the desire to fight for the ability and right to modify their fates. She shakes her head in protest. "Perhaps we can't ever change who we've been, Emma – maybe you're right about that - but if you have shown me anything at all over these last few weeks together, it's that we might still have a chance to alter who we will be," she insists. "Am I wrong in believing that? Is that just a beautiful lie that I've told myself?"

"No, of course not," Emma replies. "Of course not. But all of the changing and becoming someone different in the world can't make those nightmares of yours go away any more than you can make mine disappear. The only thing we can try to do is…deal with them. Face them."

"Are you telling me that you've faced every demon in your closet?"

"No." Quiet, succinct, closed down. An unwanted unwilling truth.
"Then when you have, come back to me and we can talk about this one of mine, but until then, Emma, I need you to let me keep him in the dark. I need you to let me keep him buried."

"All right," Emma answers, and it causes Regina's head to snap sharply back on her neck because letting go of things is not what Emma does.

"All right?"

"Yeah, I said all right. For now, anyway," the sheriff replies with a frustrated sigh. "I mean, I don't like it one bit, but I can't make you talk to me before you're ready to do so. I do hope you know, though, that whatever this is, I'll try to understand. I hope you know I'll always try."

"You'll try?"

"We both know your past can be a bit frightening," Emma states.

"Ah, and there might be things you can't handle."

"Would you prefer I lie to you?"

"No, never again," Regina replied without hesitation. She turns her head and looks out towards the ocean, frowning. "So much for our day out." Her shoulders slump and she sighs wearily.

"Oh, no, Regina, we are still going out," Emma tells her, her voice firm. "Me being frustrated with you for not being able to open up –"

"I have opened up," Regina cuts in, almost angry in her urgency, her eyes sparking. "More than I have with anyone else in my whole entire life. You know more about me than anyone else ever has or will, Emma; I hope….I hope that means something to you."

"It does. It means…it does," Emma answers, stepping towards Regina and closing the space down so that once again, there are just a few small inches of air existing between them. "I just…I think you're a strong woman, Regina, maybe the strongest I've ever met, and what I saw last night and what I watched happen an hour ago in the garage, that tells me that you're hurting."

"I might be hurting, Emma, but I am no less strong because of it."

"No," the sheriff agrees. "You're not, but I don't want you hurting, either."

"Oh how things have changed between us," Regina says with a slight chuckle, the words not nearly as light as her tone. "There was a time when you would have gladly seen that so."

"Maybe, but now I don't," Emma answers, staring right back at Regina, as if to suggest that she's daring Regina to keep pushing on that. To doubt her on what they are. But the frightening truth is, it's not Emma's current feelings or her current emotional state that Regina has doubts about.

It's what comes after everything inevitably goes bad that she's afraid of.

So, taking a breath, she decides to give voice to these worries. "And what if all of this…this dance that's happening between us, what if it all goes upside down and I lose myself again? What if I fall backwards towards whom I have always been? What then? What will you want then?"

"What I'll want even then is for you to be happy," Emma tells her with irrefutable sincerity gleaming in her green eyes. "Which believe it or not, is what I've always wanted for everyone. For me, for you and for Henry. Even when you were pissing me off, Regina, I just wanted you to stop
because I could tell that you weren't happy. Everyone around you could tell that you weren't happy, and most of them were trapped in that weird haze of yours. What I want – no matter what happens tonight or tomorrow or next week – is just for you to be happy. That's it. That's all."

"I believe you, and I want the same for you, which is…well it's honestly something of a novelty for me," Regina tells her with a humorless laugh, her eyes unmistakably sad. "It's been a very long time since I bothered to care about the feelings and happiness of anyone besides myself."

"As you said, things have changed," Emma notes with a knowing grin.

"Indeed they have." After a long moment of staring at Emma with entirely too much intensity for both of them, Regina takes a deep breath and steps back, putting space between them once again. "All right, Sheriff, I recall that you promised me lunch, and we're already late. I would think by now that you would know that a Queen should never have to wait for well…anything."

"Oh, so you're going to pull the Queen card on me now, are you?" Emma teases, her expression changing from one of worry to one of amusement.

"There's no card to pull," Regina corrects, her head lifting up. "No matter what else is or is not true, I am and will always be the Queen." She's smiling when she says this, though, and it's more like a flirtatious challenge than a dangerous taunt.

"Well then, Your Majesty, your chariot awaits." She motions towards Ruby's car, which causes Regina's lip to curl upwards. "Oh, come on, don't tell me you'd actually rather walk than ride in her Caddy? In those heels? Really? Five minutes into town in her car won't kill you."

Regina gives her a look that can only be described as dubious. "You don't know what she's done in that car." Her nose wrinkles when she says this.

"First, hey! She's my friend."

"Mm. And second?"

"Second, in case you've forgotten – and I know you haven't - we drove all the way out here the first night. In Ruby's car. And you're fine."

"I suppose that's true, but nonetheless, I would prefer to walk."

"Fine, have it your way, but when your feet start barking at you, I don't want to hear it."

Regina just smirks at her, though, giving her the kind of look that tells Emma that she knows better; Emma just isn't built to allow someone to be in pain or discomfort without trying to find a way to make it better. It's why they've spent the last twenty minutes arguing about what Regina doesn't want to talk about. Emma is a fixer; she has a compulsion to make things better.

It's who she is.

It's who she'll always be.

"Whatever," Emma says with a groan. "By the way, you look…" she stops because the first word that does come to mind is "perfect", but the smart part of her knows that that's clearly some kind of violent trigger for Regina, and so she stays away from it and goes with the next thing that comes to her mind. "You look amazing," she says, her appreciative eyes sweeping over Regina.

"Thank you," Regina answers. She looks at Emma – really looks at her – for the first time since
coming outside (she'd been drawn to the worry on the sheriff's face and hadn't noticed her clothing) and sees that she's dressed in sharp black jeans and a deep green button-up shirt. The color combination sets perfectly against her hair and eyes. "You're quite lovely yourself, Swan."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," Emma drawls, pinking up a little bit around the neck as she tries to deflect the unexpected compliment away. She gestures, then, towards the driveway. "Let's go."

The bar is almost completely empty - when they enter about forty-five minutes later. They immediately start towards the booth in the far back, but before they can get even a foot in that direction, they hear a low throaty chuckle and then an overly dramatic slow clapping of hands.

"Well now, I was wondering when I'd be seeing you two lovely ladies again," Kimberly drawls as she approaches them from the side. When they turn to look at the pretty red-haired waitress, they notice that she's wearing a huge grin across her brightly painted lips.

"Hi," Emma says, almost shyly. She even accents her words with a wave.

A ridiculous wave that is at once endearing and preposterous.

Regina shakes her head in a display of affectionate amusement before turning her attention to the waitress who is closely watching the two awkward women standing in front of her with undisguised curiosity in her pale eyes. "May I presume, then, that you have no problem serving us lunch this afternoon?" she asks of Kimberly, the queen's voice deep and almost challenging.

"Oh none at all," Kimberly shrugs. "In fact, it's on the house."

"Why's that?" Emma asks.

"Well, the way I figure it, anyone who makes Bo just about piss his pants is someone I want to be toasting to. It's a little bit early for that so lunch will have to do. I do want to know, though; what did you do to him? He's been whining up and down since it happened."

"What did he say we did?" Regina asks, her eyebrow up.

"Well," she leans in, lowering her voice. "He claims your eyes glowed purple and you threw magic at him." She chuckles when she says this, like it's the most preposterous thing ever said.

It takes everything Emma has not to wince in reaction because yeah, that's a bit too much truth. Bo The Drunken Idiot might be exactly that, but apparently he had been sober enough to actually see what had happened. Luckily for everyone, no one outside of Storybrooke believes in magic.

Regina, for her part, just lets out a loud laugh. It's only because Emma knows her as well as she does that she hears how incredibly fake it is. To anyone else, it seems like the kind of sound someone makes when they think what they've just heard is the stupidest most absurd thing ever.

"Yes, I'm a witch," Regina says, huffing in derision. "A terrible horrible evil witch. Clearly."

Kimberly snorts at the ridiculous nature of Regina's statement. "Exactly. Go on and grab yourselves what booth you'd like, ladies; I'll bring your lunch menus over in a just a minute."
Their lunch together, unfortunately, is not quite the romantic bonding experience that they'd both been hoping for. In fact, it's much closer to an awkward uncomfortable disaster than that.

It really shouldn't be this mess because they've been eating breakfast, lunch and dinner together every single day for the last two months. It absolutely shouldn't be because they've shared some of their worst secrets – some of the most terrible moments of their lives - with each other.

And mostly it shouldn't be this disappointing sludge because they've exchanged heated and gentle kisses and because they've kind of already spent a night holding each other close.

This little thing that they're doing right now – this trying to put each other at ease by going out on a not really supposed to be a date kind of date – well, it should be fairly easy after all of that insanity, but it's not. It's anything but easy and comfortable, and they both feel the strain of it.

They're just staring at each other while Emma taps her finger against a napkin, her eyes on the water ring made from the glass of lemonade atop it. Unfortunately for both of them, this is pretty much what's been happening for the last half hour or so. Sure, there have been a few half-hearted attempts at a real conversation, but all of those attempts quickly ended up fading out into silence. 

*This* silence.

It's utterly maddening and completely infuriating.

"This isn't working," Regina sighs as she puts down her fork next to her plate. The chicken salad there is barely eaten, mostly just picked through and pushed from side to side.

"No, it's not," Emma admits with a frown marring her face, her green eyes settling on the salad. She has the remains of a cheeseburger in front of her, but it's as uninteresting to her as this absurd silence between them is. So, because she has to say something, and because she's not willing to throw up the white flag on them just yet, she asks, "What's the deal with the salads?"

"Excuse me?" Regina looks at her like she's completely lost her mind. She had been about to offer Emma a way out of this; she'd been about to tell her that they could pack this whole thing in and return to the house and forget about it, but now that thought is gone and she's just staring at Emma like the other woman has suddenly grown a second head and perhaps two more arms.

"It's just, well I've seen you eat other things besides rabbit-food," the sheriff tells her between sips of the lemonade. When she puts the glass back down, she settles it perfectly atop the water ring. "And I know about the junk-food drawer you had back in your old office. No, don't look at me like that, Regina. You know which one I'm talking about. The one with the Snickers bars?"

"How exactly is it that you know about that?" Regina asks, eyes narrowed.

"You weren't the only one who did some snooping from time to time." 

"And during these illegal break-ins of my office, you found my…"

"Your junk-food drawer. Yes, I did." Emma smirks at her. "You Kit-Kat fiend."

Regina clears her throat, managing to look haughty as she does it. "Yes, well."

Emma chuckles, "Oh, but you know that's not actually an answer."
Regina's eyelids flutter when she says, "Even I have needs, Sheriff."

"Oh, I'm sure you do," Emma says with a chuckle that seems to imply that she might be thinking about something else entirely (likely what Regina intended). "But that doesn't answer why you insist on noshing down on bland salads instead of something you might actually want to eat."

"Noshing?"

"What you do with that salad can't actually be considered eating," Emma states, motioning to the plate. "You've just mostly moved it around, and it's not just today. I think you hate the stuff."

"Mm. What exactly is your point?"

"My point is the same as it was before: why?"

"You're not going to let this go are you?"

"I've actually let a lot go today," Emma reminds her, her green eyes boring deep into Regina's dark ones as she tries to make her point. "And you know what, Regina? I'm okay with the stuff that I have let go of because that stuff actually matters. This…well this feels…"

"It feels silly," Regina admits with a tired sounding sigh. "That's because it is, I suppose." She reaches for her own glass – water with a slice of lemon in it – and takes a long sip. After a few moments, she offers up, "I have always had something of a sweet tooth; my mother absolutely abhorred it, but my father encouraged it. Whenever he'd travel, he'd bring back candy from other places. He'd come into my room at night and tell me the stories of his adventures while we picked through whatever he'd brought back." She smiles when she says this, clearly remembering these moments and the happiness she'd derived from them. She'd been so young then – so very young – and she hadn't realized how dark and horrible the world could be. Not yet, anyway.

"What did Cora do?" Emma asks, dread in her voice.

"At first, not much. She forbade me to eat sweets, and we ignored her." She laughs, then, but it's not a pleasant sound. "Have you ever seen those sitcoms where the parents find out their child has been smoking, and the way they deal with it is by forcing the child to smoke an entire pack?"

"Yeah," Emma nods, and doesn't mention her surprise that Regina has seen such a show; aside from her recent introduction to *I Love Lucy*, she's never gotten the impression that Regina has even been much for television. But when just about everything is a trigger, maybe that's why.

"Yes, well, my mother had her own version of that little bit of…fun which she used on me," Regina says before picking up her fork and moving several pieces of chicken around the plate once again, her eyes disturbingly downcast. "Suffice it to say," she continues, "There was no happy message at the end of the story, though she certainly did give it her own unique…spin."

"Let me guess the 'one day you'll thank me for this lesson' kind of spin?"

"Oh, then you're familiar with this particular type of…correction?"

"Not quite like that, but I do have some experience with being forced to alter behavior, and not always because it was what was best for me," Emma offers up, and then presses her lips together. She's willing to talk if that's what is needed to in order to get Regina to open up in exchange, but truly, these are skeletons that have been buried within her closet for a very long time now.

"Obviously, I got over it enough to have a…junk-food drawer," Regina admits with a sigh.
"Maybe so, but old habits die hard. Some of them never really do die, do they?"

"No, but I suppose it was more than an old habit, anyway. As I told Henry the last time we were here, I was expected to stay incredibly slim and in impeccable shape at all times," Regina tells her. "Have you ever heard of a well-loved obese Queen?" She laughs at the absurdity of the idea. "My job was quite simple; I was to stand beside the King and look like his shiniest possession."

"His most perfect one?" Emma suggests before she can stop herself. Immediately, she knows she's gone too far because Regina's face changes from thoughtful to shocked and then hurt.

"Yes," Regina says stiffly, and then, clearly angry, she stands up. "And thank you so very much for reminding me of that." She brushes herself off, straightens imaginary crinkles on her shirt and pants, and then stalks away from the table, refusing to give Emma a chance to stop her departure.

"Regina!" Emma calls out after her, but it's pointless because Regina is already pushing through the door to the outside, and God this is so terribly familiar. "Dammit," she growls as she jumps up. She starts to reach into her pocket for cash to pay the bill, stops when she remembers that it's on the house, and then grabs her wallet, extracts a twenty and tosses it on the table, anyway.

With a nod over towards Kimberly, she follows Regina out.

And finds her standing in the alley, the fury having abruptly dissipated.

It's then that Emma realizes that they're now standing – just a few feet apart - in the same alley where they'd realized just a few days ago that Regina still has magic flowing through her veins.

Now, she sees Regina gazing down at her hands with a strange somewhat horrified kind of wonder, her dark head tilted slightly to the side as she almost curiously examines her palms like they're almost alien to her. "Hey," Emma whispers, moving slowly towards Regina until she's just a few inches away from the clearly shaken up older woman. "I'm sorry about...that was really stupid...are you...what's wrong? Are you hurt? Can...can you feel the magic again?"

"No, I...no," Regina lifts up both of her hands, and then shows them to Emma. "I just tried to see if I could make anything happen, but I can't. There's nothing there. Nothing is happening."

"That...that's good." She steps closer. "So how about you tell me what's going on. Please?"

"I don't think this is going to work."

Emma blinks and tries to catch up. "You mean us?"

"Yes."

"Is this about the magic? Because I thought we'd dealt with that."

"Can we ever really deal with that? Who I am? Who you are?"

"I think we can try," Emma shrugs her shoulders, then, seeming almost sheepish. "I get it, okay? This isn't the day either one of us were hoping for. I get it. We were having a bad date and right now you're most likely thinking maybe we shouldn't even bother with this...whatever this is."

"Ignoring the fact for a moment, Emma, that neither of us seem to be able to comfortably define what this actually is, is that what a bad date looks like to you?"

Emma chuckles, her self-deprecation out in full force. "Actually, that's kind of what a good date
looks like in my experience. I mean the storming out part at the end was familiar, but…"

"I did not storm out," Regina declares almost defiantly.

"Fine, Your Majesty, you did whatever it is that former Evil Queens do," Emma allows with a bemused snort. "Either way, I can promise you that I've had a lot worse dates than that. That was just…uncomfortable, and then I put my foot in my mouth. Which makes it normal."

Regina allows a small smile at that, then sighs in resignation. "I guess I'd hoped…it was stupid."

"You guessed what?" Emma prompts, taking yet another step closer.

"I guess I'd hoped that it wouldn't be so uncomfortable between the two of us, but maybe that's our problem," Regina says, defeat clear in her low voice. "As much as we might like it to be otherwise, we are not date people, Emma. Even when we try to call it something other than what it quite plainly is trying to be – a date. The truth is that this…normal is simply not us, and trying to make it so just points out the fact that we're not normal people and we never will be."

"Okay, fine. So we're not normal, and we know it. So now what?" Emma asks her. It's a bit of a challenge, a bit of a test to see how much Regina is willing to fight for something. For them.

For her part, Regina looks at her incredulously, surprised that Emma isn't just giving in. "You think I know? I keep waiting for you to come to your senses and realize that this is a mistake."

"And what if I don't?" Emma presses, taking the final step to her. "What then?"

"Do I actually need to remind you of all the reasons that this thing shouldn't happen?" Regina demands, refusing to retreat, but desperately wanting to because Emma is just so intensely there.

"Yeah, you can do that in a minute," Emma tells her. "But first, how about we answer your question. How about we try to answer what this thing between us actually is?" She moves against Regina when she asks this, lifting a hand up to each of her cheeks and holding her palms there.

"This thing is a very bad idea," Regina breathes, her heart pounding rapidly, eyelashes fluttering.

"Maybe, but it's our idea – good or bad - and believe it or not, Regina, that means more than anything to me right now," Emma counters and then she leans in and presses her pale lips ever so gently against Regina's; the contact is so very soft and tentative, but Regina feels it like someone has just struck her with a closed fist because this is Emma telling her everything that she needs to know: if she wants this – if she wants Emma – well then the sheriff is there for the…taking.

As much as Emma Swan can ever truly be taken by anyone; another thing they have in common. The kiss heats up quickly, and she feels Emma's hands settle on her hips for a moment before she's pushing Regina into the wall behind her, Emma's soft mouth sealed tightly – perfectly - over her own. Unfortunately, it's that rough unexpected contact with a solid surface which uncomfortably reminds Regina where they are. It's that which reminds her that they're in in the dirty alley where she and Emma had almost been accosted – that brings her out of her haze.

She pushes a hand against Emma's flat stomach, and roughly shoves her away. "No," Regina tells – well more orders – the younger woman, her voice firm and even slightly angry. "No."

"No?" Emma blinks, clearly confused. She lifts a hand up to her mouth, and roughly wipes away the wetness on her lips. She'd been of the impression that Regina had been enjoying the moment as much as she had been. She'd been under the impression Regina had wanted it just as much.
She'd been right, of course, and that had been the problem.

"Even if I am no longer a Queen, I am still me," Regina reminds her, hot humiliation curling her lip into something that resembles a disgusted sneer. "And I will not be screwed in an alley like a common…" she lets out a growl, her revulsion clear. "I will not have anything happen here."

"That wasn't what I was trying to…oh God, I'm sorry. I keep fucking this up. I've screwed up everything today, haven't I? I'm so…Regina, I'm sorry," Emma pleads, grimacing as she looks around and takes in the filthy stained walls of the alley. Her face colors in shame, and for a moment, she's thinking of all of the terrible places she hadn't been too dignified to do things in.

Seeing the hurt and self-loathing that are now coloring the sheriff's face, and dimming her usually bright eyes, Regina's anger quickly fades away, and she reaches out for her. "Emma…"

Emma shakes her head. "No, it's fine. This was a mistake and I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Emma, wait. I didn't -"

"We should probably head back," the sheriff announces, the humiliation still streaking through her as she thinks of all the ugly mistakes that she's made in her nearly thirty years of life.

She thinks of the man that she'd fallen madly in love with when she'd been little more than a child herself. She thinks of the baby he'd given her and how she owes herself no credit for finding him again.

She thinks of the married prick she'd let press her into a mattress with his body, and how she'd stared up at the ceiling hoping that someone else had been hurting as badly as she had been.

She thinks of the mark whom she'd made out with against the dirty wall of a Boston pub and she remembers how she'd paid her "great apartment with a view" rent with his turn-in money.

She thinks of all the terrible mistakes that she's made in her life, and how each one has left a deep permanent scar on her heart and on her soul. And then – staring back at the worry and hurt on Regina's face - she thinks of a once powerful woman whom she can't – shouldn't – ever see as someone who should be touched in an alley like she is someone who doesn't matter.

"Let's go," Emma says, her voice rough and wounded, and then because her mind is spinning too fast and too hard right now, and she feels like the very worst of herself, Emma takes a quick step away from Regina and towards the street, her hands jammed deep into her pockets.

Regina's shoulders tighten and her back tenses as she absorbs the perceived rejection like a violent punch to the gut. "Of course," she snaps back, sounding painfully imperious. She then moves past Emma, and strides quickly out of the alley, her head held terribly high.

Emma is not the least bit surprised by their complete and utter lack of even cursory conversation on the way back to the beach house. She's even less surprised by how Regina completely ignores her (even though she tries to apologize again and again for what had happened in the alley and in the bar) as she heads into the house, and then into her bedroom, the door slamming behind her.

Because even though Regina had been the one to stop things from going too far in the alley, Emma
had been the one to reject her when she'd tried to reach out to the younger woman.

And Regina never reaches out.

Which is why Emma now finds herself in the garage, staring at the punching bag as it sways back and forth on its heavy chain. She knows the rules. Better than anyone. She knows very well that this kind of workout should never be done out of anger or hurt or fear or worry.

She'd told Regina as much. Been pissed at her this morning because of it.

But she needs this because she needs the pain to help wash away the self-loathing she feels about having allowed herself to fall into the madness of this relationship. She had known – had warned herself about the dangers of it - that getting involved with someone who can hurt you as badly as you can hurt them was a bad idea. She'd known that this whole stupid thing was a bad idea.

So when she strikes out the first time, she forgets the rules.

No, Emma amends in her mind, it's not that she forgets them, it's that she disregards them.

They're not her rules, anyway, she tells herself as her unwrapped fist collides with the bag and a jolt of red-hot pain radiates through her knuckles and then up her arm. These rules were given to her from someone from her past. Someone who hadn't been able to save her from herself.

That's unfair, she acknowledges; because that man had been one of the few foster parents who had tried to be good to her – who had genuinely tried to care. In the end, though, he'd failed.

She growls and hits the bag again. Harder this time. It hurts more. The pain feels good because she recognizes it, and understands it. Still, she knows that this is wrong. She can't keep returning to the past. She can't keep ending up in this dark mental place all the while wondering –

"You're something of a hypocrite, aren't you, Miss Swan?"

Surprised, she snaps around and with sweat trickling down her brow, she stares into the furious eyes of the last person she'd expected to see tonight. She'd expected an angry Regina to hide away in her room for the entire evening, perhaps even the whole weekend.

"Hey," Emma offers up weakly, squinting as she tries to make out Regina's form. She's standing mostly in the doorway, shadowed by that side of the garage. Emma can somewhat tell that she's still dressed in the slacks and the white shirt that she'd been wearing during their aborted date.

"I heard the sound of you hitting the bag from my room," Regina explains, her voice cool.

Emma wipes the now stinging sweat away from her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, so you keep saying."

Something strange snaps in Emma; it's not anger because she's not angry at Regina for not believing her. No, she's hurt and scared, and she desperately needs this woman to understand that she's not the kind of person who would treat her like she's something cheap and worthless.

"And I will keep saying it until you believe me," Emma insists as she moves across the garage and into Regina's space. "I never intended...Regina, I need you to understand that I got caught up in the moment, and I forgot where we were. I never meant to humiliate or insult you." There's so much vehemence in her voice and in her body language that though Regina would like nothing more than to stay angry with the sheriff, she simply finds herself unable to do so. Which is so deeply strange
to her because she's never before struggled to find anger within herself.

"I know and I do believe you, Emma," Regina says softly, meeting Emma halfway, a soft light being cast down on them by the overhead bulb. She winces as she does so, and immediately Emma sees the tight lines around Regina's eyes; the telltale signs of a massive migraine.

Yet, for whatever reason, instead of being hidden away in her bedroom, her face tightly pressed into her pillow to help her fight the terrible headache off, Regina is now standing across from her in the garage. And strangely enough, even in spite of the queen having addressed the sheriff as "Miss Swan", Emma can tell that Regina's not actually angry with her right at this moment.

In fact, unless Emma's mistaken, Regina looks worried instead of upset.

"You believe me?" Emma repeats, her brow furrowing.

"I do."

"Okay, then what happened out there in the alley? Why did you get so angry at me?" Emma asks, suddenly feeling so very small and vulnerable. That she's a woman who has defeated a dragon, broken a curse and has a heart, which can - quite literally - not be removed means nothing right now; at this moment, she's as young and exposed as she has ever been.

"I wasn't angry at you, Emma. Not exactly. It was…well, I heard my mother whispering her usual warnings in my head. She was telling me that you'd set me up to humiliate me and I should have known better. I tried to ignore her, but when I did – when I tried to reach out to you - you pushed me away and I heard her laughing at me and telling me that she'd told me so. I'm afraid I didn't respond very well to that," Regina admits with a sigh, a hand threading through her hair.

"I didn't react much better, did I?" She shakes her head. "I didn't want that – the alley, I mean - for you anyway." She looks down when she says this, her face contorting into a deep frown.

She hears the movement before she feels Regina's hand settle upon her chin. The touch is light, but firm as she forces Emma's face upwards. "Don't."

"Don't…what?"

"Don't look away from me. Never you."

Emma tilts her head, clearly confused. "I don't understand."

"I want you to look at me because you are the one person in this entire world – in any world - who has always been willing to meet my eyes, and I need that. I need someone who will always be honest with me no matter what. I need who you are, Emma and that's the person who has spent the last hour beating herself up for…" a bright smile comes over her face, and such deep tenderness. "…for getting carried away with me. More than any of that, though, what I need you to understand is that you have no business ever thinking that you need to look away from me."

"Okay," Emma says softly, and then she lifts up her bruised hands and shows them to Regina, one of them slightly bent at the now bruised knuckle. "I ignored the rules; I guess I am a hypocrite."

She follows this up with a sheepish smile and a tagged on, "Madam Mayor."

Regina snorts. "You're a fool, my dear, and that's oddly one of your more endearing traits." She takes one of Emma's hands in between hers (Emma takes note of the not dissimilar bruises on Regina's own knuckles), and then lifts it up to her lips and presses a light kiss against the torn flesh there. When Emma inhales sharply, she darts her eyes up. "Did I hurt you?" she husks.
"No. I'm not...I'm not hurt." She swallows hard when she says this.

"Very good," Regina chuckles throatily. She presses another petal soft kiss against Emma's knuckles, holds her lips there for a long moment, and then reluctantly – for both of them – lets go of Emma's hand. "I was all set to be furious with you tonight because of you pushing me away. I had planned to stay clear of you because that's what I have always done," she admits. "When someone has slighted me in the past, I have never forgiven or forgotten; I have always held myself away from anything that could allow for such. Every instinct in my body was telling me to do that now, too, but I think I want...I think we should try to do something different instead."

"Yeah? What did you have in mind?"

"For now? You continue your workout – though within the rules that you established for us," she holds out the tape for Emma hands. "And I go and take a nap and sleep off this headache that we both know I have," she smirks when she says this, and it's mostly amusing because it occurs to both of them just how far they really have come that they can speak of such things openly and without trying to pretend they don't exist. "Then, maybe tonight, we can just have dinner together as us and see where this evening goes."

"As us. I like the sound of that," Emma nods as she takes the tape and starts winding it around her hands. Then, frowning, "You are okay, though right?"

"I will be. Will you?"

"Sure. I just..."

"Have a lot of demons in your head."

"Yeah."

"Well, whatever those demons are telling you, Emma, they are mistaken." She looks at Emma pointedly, her dark eyes boring deeply into the younger woman's vivid green ones.

"Oh, really? And how exactly is it that you know what my demons are telling me?" Emma challenges, a teasing smile lifting the corners of her lips.

Regina's answering smile isn't nearly as light-hearted. When she speaks, her voice is soft. "Because I know what I used to say to make you hurt. And I remember what worked and what did not. You're not very good at hiding what causes you pain." She lifts a hand up and gently touches the skin just beneath Emma's left eye. "It shows here whether you want it to or not."

"You're one to talk," Emma answers, doing everything she can to not squirm away from the intense contact and conversation. She knows how painful and difficult it is for Regina to put herself out like this, and she'll be damned if she'll reject the trust being offered up to her again.

"Yes, I show far too much, I'm afraid," Regina admits with a humorless chuckle. Over the last few months, Emma's come to recognize that sound as the one the queen makes whenever she's uncomfortable and struggling with herself and her built-in desire to just shut down and close up.

"Meaning what?" Emma presses.

"Rumple told me once that I show everything in my eyes. He said that I revealed too much of myself and allowed others to see my vulnerability. He said it made me weak to be so easily read. I always believed him. I believed that about you, too. And I used it against you."
"And now? Now, what do you think?"

"Now I think we're both weak," Regina replies as she lowers their hands down so that they're rested in the space between their bellies. They're still connected, though, and so she he tangles their fingers together, her pointer scratching – clearly absently – at one of Emma's knuckles.

"Because love is weakness?"

"It's what I've always believed."

"Not always, though, right?" Emma corrects, her eyes locked on Regina's.

"No, not always, but after Daniel…died and after everything that I went through and lost along the way, I started to really believe it, and I think that I've believed it long enough to hear it being said in my head every single time I… well, I hear it enough is all that matters, I suppose."

"Well, then I guess it's a good thing we're not in love yet, right?" Emma suggests, and her big beaming smile removes the potentially harsh sting of the statement. It's meant to assure Regina that they don't go have to go any faster than she's ready to go. It's meant to promise Regina that while this whole thing between them is very new and young, and maybe what they're feeling is becoming stronger every day, there's absolutely no reason to rush it or give it a more official name just yet.

It works; Regina exhales and allows for a soft smile that in spite of its tentative nature, lights up her beautiful face. In turn, Emma finds herself returning the expression, everything inside of her feeling lighter and easier and God, what is going on between them, she wonders.

"Indeed," Regina says after a moment. "Very well, then; I'm going to go take myself a nap. Do try not to tear up those hands more than you have; I might have need of them later this evening."

And then, with that suggestive grenade thrown out and left to explode – and before Emma can even manage to get her brain to fully absorb Regina's words and the implications there in – the queen turns and exits the garage, the soft click of her heels rhythmic against the cement floor.

"Okay," Emma breathes. And then she laughs and starts to hit the bag again.

This time, she remembers the rules.

Because tonight, she has a feeling that she'll be breaking every single one of them.

Turns out that Regina ends up sleeping most of the afternoon and early evening away. Which is more than a little worrisome for Emma simply because it means that the migraine that the queen had been suffering from when she'd gone to rest had been far more intense than she'd implied.

Thankfully, though, by the time Regina emerges from the bedroom at just before seven-thirty, she looks refreshed, and though she's a bit sleep tousled, she seems to be in an overall good mood. "Sheriff," she says with a nod as she delicately seats herself in the chair in front of the bar.

"Hey, there you are. Feeling better?"

"I am, thank you." Her eyes track towards the large pot that Emma is stirring. "Dare I ask what we are having for dinner? I don't see eggs."
Emma chuckles. "While eggs are my specialty, I can make a mean spaghetti sauce, too. I figured we'd go with something light and easy tonight."

"And?"

"And what?"

"And," Regina says again, making it clear that she knows what this is.

Emma sighs. "And I thought that me cooking dinner for you would be a nice way to start our second try at a non-date date thing. You know, like you said, more just us being...us."

"That sounds lovely," Regina states with a large smile spreading rapidly across her beautiful face. "Would you like some help?"

"I would," Emma says, and then shifts to the side so Regina can join her.

Between the two of them, they make a tremendous spaghetti sauce and thanks to that and several glasses of red wine, by the time they're sitting on the beach together with an untouched bottle of whiskey between them, Regina still in her dressy clothes absent the heels and Emma in sweats and a hoodie, they're both feeling very comfortable and at ease.

For a long while, neither of them says a thing.

For what feels like forever, they just sit next to each other watching the water as it it crests and rushes before they feel the coolness upon their bare feet. It's a cycle that circles repeatedly and never quite ends.

Finally, Emma sighs, her hand reaching up to twist and run through her surf dampened blonde curls. "You know that this is absolutely crazy, right?"

"I presume you mean us, yes? Or rather, the very idea of an us." Regina can't stop herself from shaking her head when she says this because yes, this is absolute madness. This almost feels like she's someone else entirely because the Regina that she has been for the last four decades isn't someone who would be sitting on a beach watching the waves crest. That Regina - though she'd craved it desperately - hadn't understood calm. That Regina would never have considered getting close to the woman who'd been responsible for her downfall. But she's not that Regina, anymore.

Hopefully, never again.

"Yeah," Emma admits.

"True," Regina confirms. "No one would understand."

"Do we care?"

"Not here, perhaps," Regina tells her. "But back home, you'll care."

"Isn't...isn't this kind of thing supposed to be what everyone smiles and sings songs about?"

Regina looks over at her. "Sure; when the Evil Queen isn't involved."
Emma turns her head so that they are looking right at each other, just a few small inches of space existing between them. "Right. I guess sometimes it's nice to forget about the whole Savior and Evil Queen thing. Sometimes, it's nice to think that we're just two crazy fucked up women with incredibly ugly pasts trying to figure out what comes next for ourselves…and us."

"But aren't we? The Savior and the Evil Queen? Two crazy fucked up women? Isn't that exactly what we are? I mean aside from the fact that our 'ugly pasts' seem to run parallel to each other."

"Parallel, diagonally, vertically and upside down, you mean," Emma chuckles.

"Yes," Regina admits. "Most don't end up in a situation where they're on a date -- or whatever we'd like to call what we've been trying to do - with the woman who was once the unwilling stepmother to their own mother in a world populated by characters known best in storybooks."

"No, most don't," Emma agrees with a laugh. Then, looking over at Regina and seeing doubt once again on her face, she adds on, "But that doesn't mean that I'm going anywhere."

"Good," Regina sighs, clearly relieved and not interested in hiding it.

And then, because it's time, she takes a deep breath and decides to throw caution to the wind; they can sit out here on the beach for the next hour and both wait for the other to make the first move or she can allow the part of her that wants to feel something – to be happy – to lead.

She leans over, rapidly closes the space between them, and kisses Emma.

Their first kiss had been on the beach, too.

It'd been tentative, and it had only lasted a few seconds before Emma had pulled away, and things had gone upside down thanks to their inability to communicate with each other.

This one deepens, instead.

This one, Emma doesn't pull away from.

Instead, she allows herself to delight in the explosive firework like feel of Regina's soft lips atop hers. She permits herself to enjoy the way that they are moving slowly, almost like they're mapping her own lips out. And then when Regina nips at her to get her to open her mouth so that the queen can slide her tongue in, this time Emma doesn't hesitate to allow it.

This time, Emma just closes her eyes and lets everything wash over her.

She's the one who eventually reaches out for Regina and pulls her closer, allowing herself a brief moment to take a breath before she pushes in for another hard kiss – this one even more intense.

She feels Regina's delicate hands gliding across her face, the queen's surprisingly strong fingers pressing into her cheeks as their lips continue to meld over and over again like they can't quite get enough of each other. She tastes spaghetti sauce and red wine and salt and it pushes her on, and makes her want to be as close to this insane woman as she has ever been to anyone in her life. She can feel the slight weight of Regina's shuddering body against hers as she holds her close, and this -- this amazing physical connection that is so explosive – encourages her as well.

And then Regina laughs, her lips vibrating wonderfully against Emma's.

Emma blinks. "What?"
"I think we should probably take this inside," Regina suggests.

"Yeah? You do?"

"I do, because if we don't, then we're probably going to end up drinking all of the whiskey in that bottle that you brought out, and I'd rather…I'd rather remember this. Every bit of this, I think"

There's something so terribly sad about the way Regina says these words – like maybe she believes that this might be the only time that they will be together in this kind of way and she wants to savor it (this thought makes strange little explosions go off inside of Emma's chest because it's almost unthinkable to her the idea of someone wanting to stay and be with her for more than a night), and Emma is about to say something about this – reassure her, maybe - but then Regina is kissing her again, this one even more passionate.

"Inside," Emma repeats shakily when there's a brief break between the feverish kisses. Her arms are wrapped around Regina's torso and Regina's hands are still on her face and they're so close to each other right now that they might as well be sharing air with one another.

"Yes," Regina agrees just before she leans in and again nips Emma's lip. "Right now."
As it turns out, it's hard to make it up the sand when you're tangled up in someone's arms kissing them like there might not be a tomorrow and you don't actually care if there is. It's almost embarrassing for them to be in this situation; they're grown women who have been with more than a few lovers in their many years of life. Between them, they have an abundant amount of sexual experience, and both of them have been made harder and more cynical by those experiences. They should know better than to think of this as more than a release of tension and stress; they should know better than to think of this as more than a way to put a fine point on all of the bonding and healing that has gone on at this safe house of theirs.

But that's not what this feels like.

This doesn't feel like something you check off of a list. This doesn't feel like a kind of medication that you swallow because it'll kill the pain for a bit of time. No, this feels like peace and acceptance and so many other words that neither of these women are exactly friends with. They've spent so much time in their lives feeling the sting and pain of rejection and hurt, well it's damned near impossible to believe that anything could turn out better than those things.

Even now, perhaps there's a cold voice in the back of both of their minds telling them that this means nothing. Maybe even now, there’s a voice reminding them that this is just sex.

Just sex and nothing deeper than that.

Just sex.

For once, though, they actually know better; for once they both know that this isn't just about sex because right now they're standing together in each other's arms on the cool sand of an empty beach with the moon overhead, and they're both just touching each other like nothing else exists in the world besides the feel of warm lips and fingers pressing against soft skin.

This feels so very good and so very right and like something that might just allow the both of them to breathe for the first time in a very long time.

And so they do.

The Savior and the Queen, pressed tight against each other.

Until Emma says between kisses that have swollen her lips, "My bedroom."

"Why yours?" Regina lobs back, challenging her because it's what she does.

"Softer bed."
Everything is going fine all the way until they get to the bedroom.

All the way up until that point, the worst problem they run into is figuring out how to walk and stay connected to each other, neither one of them wanting to separate for longer than a few moments at a time.

"That way," Emma manages as they stumble through the front room and just barely avoid colliding with the couch. Her voice is no louder than a low husky whisper as Regina continues her assault – using her teeth and her tongue - against the pale skin of her neck. The queen is nothing if not persistent and passionate, and Emma's quite certain that there will be marks.

Which is a problem for later, she figures as she feels Regina bite down hard on her rapidly drumming pulse point before she then swirls her tongue across the sure to eventually be black and blue mark on Emma's neck. The sheriff feels the vibration of Regina's low chuckle against her sweaty skin when she gasps in reaction, and she thinks – wildly, insanely, she knows - that she just might be willing to sell her soul to Gold if that's what would be required to make this evening continue indefinitely; Emma is not a woman who is easily impressed by much of anything especially sex, but there's something to be said about wildly explosive passion.

"I know the way to the bedrooms by now," Regina reminds her, her own voice quite low.

"Right. Then move it," Emma responds before grabbing Regina's face and crushing their lips together once more. She feels like a young teenager filled to the brim with ridiculous lust; it's absurd from someone who has been through as much as she has to feel so completely out of control, but she does, and she knows that the one thing she doesn't want is for this to stop.

"Giving orders now, are we?" Regina purrs in response. Perhaps this should have been Emma's first warning that something had suddenly shifted between the two of them because suddenly there's a strange almost condescending lilt to Regina's voice; it doesn't at all fit the Mayor to speak in this way, but Emma misses it completely. In fairness, she's pretty sure that if someone asked her name right about now, she'd probably babble out something nonsensical.

"If that will get us to the bed faster, then fuck yes," Emma retorts before she moves in for another kiss. It's at this moment that they arrive at her door, and with a wholly undignified kick outwards, the sheriff pushes it open and moves them both inside the still dark bedroom. "That is unless you'd prefer to stop this and go have some mint brownie ice cream instead."

"When did we get that?" Regina asks, seeming somewhat interested.

"I picked it up at the store a couple days ago," Emma replies with a shrug (or as much of one as she can manage considering her constant physical positioning), not bothering to add that Henry had told her that it was his mother's favorite flavor.

"Mm. Perhaps later," Regina chuckles as she grabs at Emma's shirt to pull her closer again. Her mouth goes to Emma's clavicle and she nips at it hungrily, her teeth trailing sharply across it.

"Later, right," Emma breathes out roughly as she fumbles behind her absently for the lights. Just as her fingers settle over the switch, one of Regina's hands settle over hers and pulls it away before she can flip it. "No, leave them off," she says, the words sounding like an order.

"Okay," Emma allows with a frown and a head tilt. "Why?"
"I prefer the darkness," Regina replies, and then she places a hand against both of Emma's shoulders and gives her a hard shove towards the wall, immediately pinning her against it.

"That feels loaded," Emma notes, her head falling backwards.

"Shush," Regina chuckles, the sound sharp and a bit cold sounding, and the previous softness gone now. "You're thinking too much. Sometimes it's nice to indulge in a little bit of darkness."

And it is dark, yes, but thankfully, there's still some light pouring in through the open window next to the bed. This small thin shaft of bright white allows Emma to watch as Regina – now moving in a way that seems almost predatory – glides towards her, her entire body seeming to sway.

"Regina," she warns, feeling the hard wall pressing up against her back. She wants to remind her soon-to-be-lover that the darkness has never really been kind to either of them, but these words catch on her tongue as she continues to stare at the older woman as she moves even closer to her. She wonders if this is what Regina had looked like so many years ago; wonders if her lovers then had been as turned on, awed and as terrified as she is right now.

And of course the Queen – because yes, this woman in front of her right now is the Queen, Emma understands with somewhat frightening clarity – ignores her half-given warning completely. Emma tries to tell herself that this isn't a big deal; it's not abnormal for people to slip into roles in the bedroom. Maybe Regina is a hardcore dominant beneath the sheets.

Sure, it's not exactly what Emma had been hoping for tonight, but she thinks she can probably work with it and go with it as long as Regina is in the moment with her. The problem is, one look up at the older woman, and Emma knows for a fact that Regina is anywhere but here.

This isn't about domination, Emma knows as a cold tendril of panicked realization swirls through her gut; this is about self-protection and control.

For a woman like Regina Mills, those are very dangerous things, indeed.

For a woman like Regina Mills, such things lead to torn out hearts.

"Regina," Emma says again, hoping her voice will break through and offer some comfort to the woman who is now standing just inches away from her, staring back at her with intense eyes.

"Be calm," Regina tells her in that wonderfully low voice of hers just before she's back in Emma's space and she's kissing her again, her soft lips slamming up hard against the sheriff's willing ones. Emma feels Regina's strong hands settle on both sides of her face, the Queen’s elegant fingers sliding inwards and then circling around Emma's neck so as to hold her in place as the older woman continues to devour the Savior's mouth with forceful kisses.

"Right," Emma breathes out as her head once again falls back against the wall with a thud, all of the ugly thoughts for the moment slipping away as a lustful haze seems to slide over her like Regina's magical purple smoke. Sure, she's a bit worried about the darkness which she can practically feel vibrating off Regina, but it's hard to think at all with the way the queen is touching her right now; it feels so good that it's hard to imagine that it could possibly be wrong.

Then again, Emma knows a thing or two about deluding yourself, and even she knows that that's what she's doing right now, right here; even she knows that something dangerous is happening, and it has more to do with the strange and almost cold way Regina is suddenly acting as opposed to the fact that they're just seconds away from making love to each other.

But then that's the problem; they're not actually about to make love.
These urgent pressing touches that she's feeling as Regina grinds hard fingers into her hips? As much as she would like to pretend otherwise, Emma knows that they're not the embrace of a lover but rather one of a fuck buddy. They're the hands of someone looking only to get off.

"Hey, easy, okay? Easy," she tries, hoping desperately that she can get this back on track emotionally for them. It's not about the fact that Regina is the dominant right now. Truth be told, Emma has never much cared about which role she takes on beneath the sheets and she doesn't really give a damn about that now, either. What she does care about is how cold and empty and wrong this feels. How much it feels like they've lost the connection to each other.

And that's just not what Emma wants right now. Not for either one of them.

Regina's head snaps sharply – almost angrily - back on her neck and that's when Emma sees – thanks to the bright white beam of the moonlight - just how terribly dark the queen's eyes are. How strangely devoid of any kind familiar warmth they seem to be. "Is there a problem?"

"No, but...are you okay?" Emma asks in a tone that's meant to be soothing.

A furiously dark shadow seems to run its way through Regina's eyes for a moment before her bright red lips curl into a cruel smile. "I'm quite fine, dear, but unless I'm mistaken and I rarely am, I don't believe that I gave you permission to talk," is all the queen says before she violently slams Emma against the wall again and once more covers the sheriff's mouth with her own, her lips still soft but the physical contact almost painfully hard and demanding.

Yes, Emma realizes with a sinking feeling in her gut, there is a problem.

Because this kiss – if it could even really be called that; for it feels far more like a declaration of war than an invitation to further passion - couldn't be more different than the previous ones that they've been sharing. This kiss feels a bit like she's being forcibly conquered.

This kiss feels like Regina is trying to break her with the power of her will.

This is about defeat, but more than that, it's about surrender, and while Emma has never had an issue with being dominated in bed, she's not about to allow herself to be treated like she doesn't matter. Never again and certainly not by someone whom she...well she doesn't know what she feels for Regina exactly so she settles for the words "cares deeply for".

Because that, at least, feels honest if a bit understated.

"No," Emma states, putting her hands over Regina's. She squeezing down so as to try to gentle her words, but that seems have little to no impact on the queen. "Stop," she pleads, her voice barely more than a choked whisper. "Regina, please. Please, stop."

But she doesn't; Regina keeps pushing up against her, and kissing her, and God, it's not like the kisses are bad because they're most certainly not. No, the problem is that they feel like they're coming from a complete stranger now. They feel like they're coming from an enemy.

They're mean and hard and possessive and violent.

And this is not what she wants.

"Dammit, stop it," Emma growls, her voice louder now, and then she shoves outwards, and this time it's Regina who falls backwards. With a grunt of surprised protest, the queen hits the edge of the bed and crumbles, wincing as her knees buckle and she just barely holds herself up.
"Stop?" Regina repeats, a hundred strange emotions rushing across her still shadowed face. She looks confused and a bit frightened, her eyes clouded and alarmed. And then she looks scared and hurt and rejected, and Emma knows that she has to fix this, and do it quickly.

And yet, now almost furiously angry – and a bit scared - herself, Emma can't prevent herself from stepping almost aggressively towards Regina, her jaw tightly clenched. "What was that?" she snaps. "Where were you?"

"What…what are you talking about?" Regina sounds hoarse and shaken, and perhaps she is because she has the unsettled and unsteady look that someone gets when they've walked into a room that they hadn't expected to find themselves in. It's like she's surprised by what's happening – by what's just happened – between the two of them. It's almost like she can't quite seem to figure out how they'd ended up in here together.

"Where were you just now?" Emma demands. Despite her angry sounding words, though, her voice is softer, more worried than furious because she is suddenly quite scared for this woman, and what she wants to do more than anything else in the world is reach forwards and pull Regina into her arms, and hold her as tight as she can.

What she wants to do more than just about anything is protect Regina, but she knows that they can't survive off that kind of relationship; they can't move forward if they aren't balanced. They can't find solace in each other if they're unable to walk and talk each other through the pain.

So instead of moving, Emma stares at Regina, waiting for the former queen to speak and somehow make this right. Unfortunately, though, that's not really how Regina works. She's more of a burn it down to the ground rather than calmly talk it out kind of woman.

"I was…I'm right here." She shakes her head in confusion, her eyes wide and almost frightened. Fear that is starting to bleed into anger.

"You weren't a few minutes ago."

"This is absurd," Regina barks back, but she looks more scared than angry.

"Is it?" Emma closes her eyes, takes a shuddering deep breath, and then she says in a deceptively calm voice, "Look, I think I understand better than just about anyone that sometimes sex is sex and normally I'm totally okay with that, but here's the thing: I wanted more than just that for us tonight so if all you wanted to have happen here, Regina, is for us to fuck it out against the wall of this room like we're two people who can barely stand each other scratching a mutual itch, then I think maybe we shouldn't do this at all."

"What are you talking about?" Regina snaps back.

Emma opens her eyes and really looks at Regina, and what she sees astonishes her.

What she sees isn't the outraged fury of a queen whose control had been defied; no, what the sheriff sees is a woman who is angry because she can't comprehend why what she'd done – what she had been offering up to her would-be-lover - had been so poorly received.

It occurs to the sheriff, then, that maybe Regina really doesn't have a clue about what she'd done wrong. Maybe she really doesn't know what she's supposed to have done right.

It strikes Emma that though Regina certainly knows what to do in the bedroom, she has no idea how to…act? Such an idea seems – as Regina had snapped out at her just seconds earlier – to be
absurd, but the lost and nearly fearful look in Regina's suddenly frighteningly dark eyes now – so very different from the cold emptiness that had been there mere moments ago - appears to be telling Emma a terrible story that unsettles her more than she might care to admit.

Emma gentles her voice even further in reaction to the clear hurt and confusion that she sees on Regina's face. She shrugs her shoulders before she says, "I don't actually mind being a little rough. To be honest, I don't mind being a lot rough from time to time; I'm no wallflower, Regina, and I've been around the block, okay? What I do mind, though, is feeling like I'm not better than..." She stops to think about what she wants to say here, and finally continues with, "You were ragingly pissed at me just a few hours ago for kissing you in an alley because you said it was beneath you, but what you just made me feel like..." She shakes her head in frustration.

Regina's shoulders visibly sag and she drops down to the bed, suddenly looking very small and shattered, as Emma's words seem to break through the ugly fog that had settled over her. Her bright brown eyes are gleaming with unshed tears when she speaks. "You're right," she admits in a low voice that is somehow both thoughtful and terribly sad. "This is what I do. I hurt people even when I don't want to. It's who I am."

"No. No, I don't believe that." It's a bit strange to Emma how vehement she sounds – and how much the words she's saying actually sound right to her. But they are because after spending eight weeks with this woman, she's pretty sure that she knows Regina better than anyone ever has or perhaps ever will. And she feels like she knows that the woman who had kissed her so very gently out on the beach isn't at all the same one who had just thrown her against a wall.

"Then what do you believe? What is it that you believe that I'm capable of?" Regina presses.

"I don't know, but what I do know is that I want more for us than just anything that can be described as cheap or easy against a wall. After all that has happened between us, and after everything that we've been through together, I want more than that for both of us. I...care for you more than that, Regina." Her voice lowers as she whispers out these last few words, and her face contorts for a moment like she's about to cry. It hurts to actually be so open and honest. It hurts to throw everything out on the table and pray that someone won't reject her.

"Emma," Regina whispers, her heart constricting painfully as she sees the anguish dug into the lines on Emma's face, as she witnesses the soul-deep pain that she's caused her. For so long, Regina has willingly hurt anyone that she could and she'd done it without a second thought.

But this, this she doesn't want.

"You said that you wanted to remember this; well so do I. I want to remember every moment of this, and I want it to mean more than just something we've both done more times than we care to admit," Emma finishes before she retreats and falls back against the wall, her eyes closing as she says the words. Her shoulders are shaking, but she's not making a single sound; this is some kind of silent weeping, likely something she'd learned while growing up.

It's absolutely horrifying to witness.

"Emma, you are more. To me. You're so much more to me," Regina assures her as she stands up from the bed and moves across the room towards the silently shuddering sheriff. She steps into the blonde's space and lightly places a warm hand on Emma's forearm, causing the younger woman to open up her eyes and look right at her as she continues with, "And I am sorry that I ever made you...I am so very sorry if you felt otherwise because I don't want that."

"I...I believe you. I do. And you know what? I get it, okay?"
"Do you?"

"Unfortunately, yeah because I've been there; you check out during sex because sometimes it's better than thinking about what you're doing and what it means." She frowns as she thinks about all the times she had done that. After Neal had abandoned her, and after the affair with the married man who owns the house that they're in, she'd started to think of sex as a means to a biological needs orientated end. The only difference is that she's pretty damned sure that she hadn't even looked like she was completely out of body and mind during the experience.

"I'm sorry," Regina says again, her voice low and trembling with the kind of pain that Emma knows comes from feeling something deep in your heart. When Emma lifts her eyes and looks right at Regina, though, it's not the words that move her, it's the devastated expression that she sees on the queen's beautifully sad face; it's the absolute remorse that she observes there.

"We've both been through entirely too much garbage in our lives, haven't we?"

Regina forces a sad smile which doesn't reach her eyes, the expression heartbreaking in what it says and doesn't say about her dark and bloody past. She then slides her hand into Emma's. "I don't want just a…I don't want that. What I want…what I want is you, Emma. I want you."

What's she trying to say is something that she has never said to anyone – what she's trying to say is that she wants to make love to Emma – and so she just gazes at the sheriff and desperately hopes that she understands.

She does.

"Okay." Emma says, and takes her hand. She turns Regina's palm over and then presses a gentle kiss against the skin there. She moves her mouth to Regina's wrist and kisses that, too, before repeating, "Okay."

Regina lets out a deep rumbling breath as she feels Emma's continuous feather light kisses against her suddenly feverish skin. "Hold my eyes," she pleads. "Don't let me go away. Make me…make me stay with you."

"I can do that," Emma assures her, her green eyes locking on Regina's dark ones for a long moment before she gently – slowly - leans in and presses her lips against Regina's.

She holds the contact like that for several seconds.

Quiet and sensual in just the absolute stillness of it.

"Those weren't my eyes," Regina teases once there is air between them.

"No, but you're still here with me, aren't you?" Emma replies with a sly grin.

"So I am and so are you, and if you're willing, I'd like to try to start again," Regina requests before lifting up her hand and settling it for a moment in the hollow of Emma's throat, her fingers tapping lightly against the skin before lightly trailing downwards rather suggestively.

"I'm very willing," Emma tells her between suddenly ragged breaths.

"Very good," Regina smiles before she slowly draws her fingers down Emma's chest, running them between the valley of her breasts and then finishing up at her belly button with a slight swirl before settling there, the warmth of her palm almost overwhelming in that moment.
"Yes, very…very good."

"Eloquent as always, my dear Sheriff," Regina notes with a low throaty chuckle. She adds punctuation to this by leaning forward and ever so gently pressing her lips up against Emma's exposed neck, the queen's teeth lightly grazing against the skin there before she moves towards the pulse point that she can feel hammering away in time with her light kisses. She settles her mouth over it, and then runs her tongue across it, enjoying the way it seems to accelerate in reaction to her ministrations. Enjoying the way Emma seems to respond to her.

"Yes, but we are both wearing way too many clothes," Emma tells her before moving her fingers to the hem of Regina's shirt. She slides her hand beneath it, and presses her own palm against the flatness of Regina's abdomen. She feels the muscles ripple in response and grins.

"Then perhaps you should do something about that," Regina retorts with a smirk that can only be described as seductively challenging. "Or maybe you need me to tell you what to begin with, is that it, Miss Swan?" The darker and more frightening emotions appear to have completely left her, and in their place, there is now a delicious amount of teasing and gameplay. It's enough to send an electric shudder through Emma's body.

"Well, you are the Queen," Emma reminds her.

"Indeed, I am," Regina acknowledges in a haughty voice, a perfectly sculpted eyebrow lifted up so as to give her the appearance of superiority. Emma can deal with this, though, because this is performance art. "And as I have no real use for this hideous sweatshirt of yours," Regina continues, her fingers rubbing against the rough cotton fabric of the hoodie for a brief moment before pulling away in a display of faux disgust. "I think that you should remove it. Now."

"Make me." And this is a bit of a test; Emma's trying to see how dominant Regina can get without losing control – without losing herself in the swirling madness which has for so many years owned her heart and soul. She's trying to find out if there's a switch that once flipped turns everything inside of Regina dark and mean. Something which makes her check out.

But then Regina's finding her eyes again, and Emma realizes with a bit of a start that the woman that she's come to know and care for – God, it's so much more than that, she realizes, though she's not even close to ready yet to put a different kind of word to what Regina means to her - over the last two months is the one that is smiling back at her right now.

Beautiful and full of desire and need for her.

"You know that I don't like to be denied," Regina reminds her with another smirk, her voice melodious. "So either remove the sweatshirt or I will take matters into my own hands."

"Then do it."

"So be it." Regina leans forward and captures Emma's lips, her tongue almost immediately pushing past her teeth and into her mouth for a moment before sliding back out to lightly run over Emma's lower lip. Emma's so distracted by this that for a moment that she doesn't notice Regina's hands sliding back to the hem of the sweatshirt. And then she does notice it because the Queen is lifting it up, the touch so light and gentle. "Everything must go," she murmurs.

Emma laughs, then. "Patience," she mumbles against Regina's lips.

"You should know by now that I have none. Now raise your arms."
Unable to stop herself from smiling like a lovesick fool, Emma does as ordered this time, allowing the sweatshirt to be pulled over her head. As it falls away, fluttering to the floor, Emma lifts her hand to the back of her own hair and releases her hair from the loose ponytail it had been in. Wavy blonde rushes down and cascades over her shoulders, curtaining her face.

"Apparently a diet of Twinkies actually does work," Regina husks out as her eyes sweep admiringly over Emma's body. The sheriff is in just workout pants and a white sports bra now, but it's her intense musculature that has captured the queen's very much intrigued attention; it's the way Emma's well-toned biceps and tightly wound abdominal muscles seem to ripple with each deep breath in and out. "Who would have ever thought such to be possible?"

"Yeah, well, I'm full of surprises," Emma offers up with a wry self-deprecating chuckle as her hands slide forward to start unbuttoning Regina's white dress shirt. As she does so, she moves in for another deep kiss, pressing her body flat against Regina's. She can feel Regina's heart slamming against her chest, and the sheer strength and power of it is intoxicating in a way that Emma would never have believed possible before. But then again, until she'd met Regina Mills a little over a year ago now, there'd been a lot of things that she'd never really believed possible.

What's happening right now? Well it's as close to proof as anyone will ever have that the world is an insane place full of unexpected twists and turns.

And the newest one of those? The wonderful noise Regina makes when Emma drops her head down and ever so gently presses her lips against the now revealed cup of Regina's delicate lacy white bra. Her mouth is warm and just slightly wet, and the sound the beautiful queen lets out is something like a rumbling whimper that sends vibrations rushing up and down Emma.

It takes everything Emma has not to shudder in reaction and then rip off all of her clothes and say to hell with slow and gentle and…but no.

No.

She'd meant what she'd said earlier; she wants more for the both of them – for this first and maybe only time – than something quick and fast and hard.

She wants it to matter.

Judging by the intoxicating way that Regina is reacting to her touch, it does.

She sees the way Regina dips her body backwards to allow her more room to work with; feels the way Regina's heartbeat quickens as she begins to gently suck on one of the queen's nipples through the now damp fabric of her bra, one of Emma's hands reaching over to lightly palm and squeeze the other breast. And oh does the Savior hear the delicious low whimper that rolls its way up and out of Regina's throat as Emma's teeth tease against the hardening peak.

"Oh, yes," Regina growls out, and Emma wonders if the queen is responding – belatedly – to her comment about being full of surprises or if this is just Regina muttering out near nonsense words because of what she's currently feeling. Emma finds that she doesn't really care what this is in response to; she only cares that Regina is happy and clearly feeling good.

"I think, Your Majesty, it's time for this shirt – as wonderful as it is on you, and God, is it ever - to go," Emma insists as she pushes the now unbuttoned garment off of Regina's shoulders. The fabric flutters to the ground and settles down next to Emma's sweatshirt, completely forgotten about now as Emma puts both of her arms around Regina's body and pulls her close again, her lips finding Regina's mouth again and pressing down hard and urgently. The kiss is answered in tone and
ferocity, and then they're both tumbling haphazardly together towards the bed.

For a few moments after they collapse onto the bed together in a swirl of legs and arms, they're a lot like two teenagers trapped in the heat of a passion that they can't even dream of controlling. For a short time, they just roll around on the soft mattress, both of them allowing and then taking the lead from the other as their mouths continue to connect over and over.

"Need these off, too," Emma says as she yanks her workout pants down her body, and then reaches down to fiddle with the snap of Regina's slacks. The queen lifts an eyebrow up at she watches the sheriff feverishly work the latch. "Legs," she says after a few moments of struggle.

"I should make you use your teeth," Regina husks out as she lifts up her hips and allows Emma to slide the dark slacks down her well-toned legs.

"We can do that later if you'd like," Emma agrees as she quickly tosses the pants towards the rest of the clothing pile. After allowing herself a brief moment to admire Regina's nearly naked body save her matching lacy white bra and panties (it occurs to her that she should have tried to find something in red for Regina, but then she thinks, the color won't actually matter for too much longer, anyway), she then climbs over Regina, straddling her slender hips for a moment of pleasurable review before she leans down and captures Regina's mouth in another long kiss.

Almost immediately, she feels the sharp scrape of Regina's nails as they rake against her back, light at first and then much harder as Emma moves her mouth to the queen's neck and begins to suck fiercely enough to leave bruises on her pulse point. When a hand slips down and under the cotton of her sports bra, she hears the message sent loud and clear: this, too, must go.

And so it does. In a flurry of quick motion, Emma pulls the sports bra over her head, and then looks down at Regina and grimaces uneasily. This is that moment – the one that always terrifies Emma; she's almost completely exposed now, wearing only a thin pair of Hanes for Women underwear, and she's desperately wondering what the woman beneath her is thinking.

Is she impressed? Pleased? Disgusted? Underwhelmed?

Emma's always felt like a bit of a lost girl, and though she puts up a pretty damned good front while in front of the lovers she’s taken, these are those moments that make her feel so very young, small and vulnerable. These are the ones that make her want to find a corner and hide.

But then Regina is smiling at her and her typically dark eyes are suddenly so very bright and they almost seem like they're dancing with a kind of strange wonderful happiness – the kind of which Emma has seen so little of. "As I've said previously, my dear Sheriff, you are absolutely beautiful," Regina whispers. She lifts up a hand to Emma's face and then gently presses a stray tendril of blonde hair back behind her left ear. "How have you never seen this in yourself?"

Unable to stop herself from responding as she always has to words that have usually been said to her because someone had wanted something from her, Emma looks down and away, her pale face puckering around the edges as her troubled mind goes to war with her wanting heart.

"No," Regina says suddenly, sharply. "I told you before: don't ever look away from me. Never." And then she's leaning up, pressing her arms around Emma's waist and drawing her into a kiss that is both gentle and fierce. Her heart nearly exploding from the force of the emotion and relief which she's feeling right at this moment, Emma allows herself to exhale into the kiss.

And then she takes the lead and pushes Regina back towards the pillows and the blankets; to her surprise, Regina goes willingly, her hair fanning out beneath her. Without a word of protest, she
lets the sheriff climb over her and flatten her body against hers. "I want you," Emma says.

She doesn't give Regina a chance to respond; instead, she drops her mouth down again and presses it back to Regina’s left breast, nipping lightly at the soft flesh there for a brief moment before she gets frustrated with the fabric that's separating her from feeling Regina's bare skin. Her hands moving expertly, she slides them behind the queen's muscular back and unsnaps the bra clasp. She flings the bra away, looks down at the stunning woman staring up at her, and then she bites down hard enough to almost draw blood on her lip when she almost breathes out the word "perfect" because good God this woman beneath her absolutely is that.

Instead, to keep herself from saying anything stupid, she puts her mouth down and tastes the salt and sweat, which glitters against the skin of Regina's breasts. She flicks her tongue against one of the queen’s hardened nipples and chuckles when she hears that rumbling growl working it's way up Regina's throat again. She thinks she could get addicted to hearing a sound like that.

She's pretty damned sure that she could get drunk on it.


"More what?"

"Don't tease."

"But I want to," Emma whines.

Dark eyes flicker up towards hers. "That's a dangerous game to play."

"Maybe, but you have to admit it's a game worth playing," Emma admits with grin before moving in for another feverish kiss. It's greeted warmly and then passionately and then almost combatively as Regina tries to flip her around so that she can take the lead again.

That's when Emma makes her mistake.

Later, when everything is quiet and calm and she's thinking about what had happened between them, she will believe she should have seen this coming, but in fairness which she will refuse to grant herself, despite the clues that she'd been provided with about restraints and Regina's former husband, there's no way that she could have foreseen this reaction; since they'd hit the sheets, they've been jockeying for a kind of dominance and this had seemed like that to her.

She's sure that it seems like that to Regina as well so the moment the queen tries to turn her over so that she can take over control of their little dance, Emma reaches out with her hands and in a quick motion, settles her fingers over Regina's wrists before she lifts them up and pins them above the older woman’s head, thereby holding Regina down and in position beneath her body, a wicked grin on Emma's face as she prepares to gloat about her assumed victory.

That's when Emma sees the decidedly dark and ugly shadows sweep with almost violent suddenness over Regina's now drawn face like a storm cloud that's about to offer up thunder and lightening and a whole lot of pain and misery. Her grin rapidly falling away, Emma watches in mute horror, as Regina's previously caramel colored eyes turn almost completely black.

And Emma knows – she just knows – that Regina is somewhere terrible.

It's this thought – this realization – that has Emma rapidly releasing her wrists.

But then something completely unexpected happens; Regina starts to fight back against whatever
demons are trying to settle in her mind. She blinks and blinks and the darkness fades into something hurt but not angry; something scared but not destroyed. She looks up at Emma.

"Emma," she whispers out in a broken voice, swallowing hard and then doing it again and again. Tears form in her eyes, and she tries to blink them away, but a few manage to slip out as Regina valiantly struggles against the nearly unimaginable nightmares of her shattered past.

As she fights back against the tremendous pain there.

"I'm here," Emma assures her as she leans in – completely on instinct– and kisses at the stray tears as if to wipe them away. "I'm right here and so are you," she promises. "And you're okay."

What happens next does so almost simultaneously; when Regina doesn't appear to be responding to her reassurances, afraid of causing the upset queen even more pain and anguish, Emma starts to back away, suddenly acutely aware of her nudity, but just as her naked legs separate from Regina's, one of Regina’s hands snaps out and grabs feverishly at Emma's. "Don't leave me," she whispers and Emma realizes that the older woman is trying desperately to find her eyes. To find something to hold her up so that she can finally stop herself from falling.

"I won't," Emma promises her, her other hand sliding out to touch Regina's cheek, the warmth almost blisteringly hot against her cool palm. "I'm so sorry," she offers, her face contorting for a moment into one of frustration – not with Regina, but with herself for not being more careful.

Regina doesn't let her finish the sentence; for once, she allows the passion which she feels for just about everything to come forward in a way that she hopes will protect her without ruining her. In a flurry of motion, Regina leans up and kisses Emma hard on the other woman’s pale lips, the contact fairly chaste considering previous kisses, but somehow intense in what it's communicating. "Touch me," she gasps out, the sound almost getting lost in the heated kiss.

Emma doesn't need to be told twice. Whatever this is or isn't, they both want it enough to try to push through their insecurities and demons; they both desire each other enough to want to fight for this evening to occur, and so she determines with a growing smile, it will.

In one quick fluid bit of movement, Emma rolls her body so as to pull Regina on top of her. She then puts her hands out, weaves them through the older woman's dark hair and brings her down so that they are flush with each other. The nearly blisteringly hot skin on skin feeling is enough to make Emma gasp and grit her teeth because it's been so very long since she's been this close to anyone like this, and so much longer than that since it was someone that she actually desired to be with; this, she wants in a way beyond the understanding of it.

It makes absolutely no sense to feel the wild and almost insane things that she does for this woman who has caused her family – and more recently, herself - so much pain over the years, but then again, she's starting to think that maybe she's done with caring about what is or is not logical. Life rarely makes sense and love…or whatever this is between them doesn't, either.

She wants to be with Regina; she wants to touch her and make love to her.

And right now that's all she cares about.

So when Emma drops her head back and moans along with the feeling of Regina's teeth grazing against her throat and then her breasts, all she thinks is that this is exactly right.

This is exactly what she wants and needs.

She feels Regina's hand slide down her belly and then beneath the waistband of her underwear.
Before she can think to react, Regina gives the intrusive garment a hard yank, and then begins to pull it down Emma's long legs. "I want this gone," the queen mutters against her overheated skin just before she leans in and takes one of the sheriff's nipples into her mouth. Emma squeezes her eyes shut and tries to understand exactly how it is that she's supposed to figure out how to complete a complex operation like undressing herself while Regina is doing...well that to her.

And that, apparently, is touching her in ways that are causing her brain to rapidly short circuit. The fact that Regina's other hand is now palming the breast that her mouth isn't on sure isn't helping Emma's thinking process.

What does help is when Regina pulls back and away from her – causing her to whimper rather embarrassingly in protest – and looks down at her with an eyebrow lifted up in what appears to be mock annoyance. "Did you not hear what I said?" she asks mock-imperiously. "I want these gone. Now. This is the second time that I've had to request a quicker disrobing, my dear Savior; I can't say that I'm overly impressed with your listening and obedience skills this evening."

"You're not with me because I follow orders well," Emma reminds her with an impish grin, her hand trailing up and across Regina's jawline. She feels vaguely lightheaded right now, and it's making her absolutely silly. "In fact, we both know that you're with me because I don't."

Regina chuckles, but doesn't bother to deny it, her own hand capturing Emma's and squeezing it for a moment before she brings it to her lips and kisses the tips of two of Emma’s fingers.

"Exactly."

"So cocky and sure of yourself, you are, Sheriff," Regina husks, shaking her head like she disapproves of Emma's attitude though the bright almost mischievous glinting in her eyes suggests otherwise. "I think it's time that I reminded you of a few very important things."

"Such as?"

"What I am capable of."

"You keep threatening me with that," Emma challenges.

"The time for threats is over," Regina assures her before she rather gracefully slides her way down Emma's body. "Just promises now."

"Right," Emma groans out as her eyes flicker up towards the ceiling.

"Be calm," Regina commands, her deep voice little more than an authoritative growl now. And then Emma feels a soft puff of warm air against her belly and the slight scrape of teeth as Regina places her mouth against the skin she finds just below Emma's well-defined hipbone.

"Oh God," Emma gasps out as two hands push at her already mostly descended underwear, finally forcing it all the way down her legs and over her feet. She has little time to really think about this – and she doesn't actually care to – before she feels Regina's mouth settling over her for a long drawn out dramatic moment, and then…and then her tongue is moving inside her.

She cries out and Regina – fucking Regina who knows exactly how insane she is driving her former enemy – chuckles against Emma's feverish skin. And then she just keeps on going until Emma's cries become screams and she's saying words that mean everything and nothing. Her hands are wrapped into Regina's hair and she's both pushing and pulling and holding.

She feels Regina's delicate fingers tap lightly – and perhaps even somewhat suggestively - for a
moment against her buttocks before they're joining the party that the queen's mouth has been throwing and though Emma knows exactly what is happening and exactly what part of Regina is inside of her right now, everything is just warm and hot and burning and oh…

Her now intensely bright green eyes shudder closed and then sharp white lights pop behind her clenched lids as her body all but lifts itself off of the mattress in response to the explosions that are tearing their way through her overheated body like tiny violent – perfect - firecrackers.

What she feels next is both less than that and more than that.

What she feels next is a simple almost chaste kiss.

Gentle curiously tasting lips pressed lightly, perhaps even lovingly against hers.

Emma laughs softly once they pull back from each other, both of their eyes still locked tightly together as they gaze at each other. "Well I guess that answers that question," she states.

"Which question is that?" Regina asks of her as she leans in and peppers light kisses up and down Emma's jaw, each of them a tiny pinprick of intense pleasure.

"If you'd ever been with a woman before."

Regina looks up at her, and smiles slightly, and there's a strange kind of unsettling sadness there, but it's one that she once again successfully pushes back against. "I think it's quite safe to say that I have always enjoyed beautiful things no matter the wrapping that they came to me in." Then, the smile growing into something truthful and magnificent because of that, she says, "You, though, my dear Sheriff Swan, well you make ripping the paper off quite worth it."

Something happens inside of Emma when she hears these words. It feels a bit like someone – Regina, in this case – has just poured balm all over her heart and all of the cracks and breaks that have been there for so long, well they feel like they're finally coming together. Finally knitting and healing.

As if possessed by the need to touch this woman again, Emma surges upwards and kisses Regina as hard as she can, pouring every bit of feeling and emotion and yes perhaps even the beginning of what might be called love that is currently swimming around within her into the passionate embrace. There's a clash of lips and teeth and tongues and it feels like she can't possibly get close enough to Regina, but she damn well intends to try. And then, when they're forced to separate so that they can breathe, she grins up at the stunning woman who is still perched over her, matching awe and amazement on her own face, and says, "My turn."

It's three in the morning when Emma wakes up. She can hear the soft sound of raindrops hitting the roof, and it's melodic, but she thinks nothing of this because what she notices first is that she's alone in the bed. The bed that just hours earlier, she'd been sharing with Regina.

Well, she'd been doing a lot more than just sharing it with Regina, she thinks with a smile. One which quickly fades away when she looks once more towards the opposite side of the mattress; she can recall them falling together into a heap of tangled limbs after the last shared orgasm, and she thinks she remembers the feel of Regina's warm breath on her shoulder as the queen had tucked her
head into her shoulder. So the important question is, where is Regina now?

Had she panicked and fled the room? The house? It wouldn't be terribly surprising if she had; they both have a bit of runner in them, and what had happened between them had certainly been panic-worthy. Funny then, Emma thinks, that she's not freaking out at all right now.

It's so very strange, she knows, that she doesn't have a single regret about having spent several hours making passionate love to a woman who had not long ago been known as the Evil Queen.

But she doesn't and she won't, and she hopes that she's not alone in this.

She pushes herself up from the soft bed, groaning at the pleasant tightness in her muscles. Chuckling at the absurdity of this, and then reaches down and grabs at a pair of shorts on the dresser and pulls them on. She follows this up with a tank top, and then exits the room.

Hopeful that when she steps into the front of the house, she'll find the woman who she thinks she might be falling in…yeah, that.

"Morning," she hears before she's even really stepped out of the hallway.

Emma blinks and turns towards the kitchen. Which is where she finds Regina standing, behind the bar wearing what looks like just the white dress shirt.

Perhaps only the dress shirt.

There's a carton of mint brownie ice cream in front of her as well, Emma notices, and it looks like Regina has done some serious damage to it, In all honesty, though, Emma is having more than a little bit of trouble focusing on anything past the white shirt and how unbelievable beautiful Regina looks with her dark hair slightly tousled. She looks so very young right now, and Emma wonders how she could have ever thought this woman had no soul.

A badly damaged and broken one certainly, but not an absent one.

"Morning," Emma says as she approaches. "Get hungry?"

"Mm, something like that. I woke up. Heard the rain. Thought of ice cream." Regina shrugs. "I did tell you that I have a sweet tooth. I just tend to indulge in it…quietly."

"Right. Give me a spoon."

"Such manners," Regina chides, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"Hey! I said please earlier. Numerous times if I recall." She all but smirks lecherously when she says this because yes, she had said that. And so had Regina.

Numerous times.

Regina chuckles. "So you did." She hands Emma a spoon and then watches as the sheriff dips it into the carton, carves up a bite and then pops it into her mouth, a grin spreading across her lips at the flavor of the ice cream.

"You have good taste," Emma notes with an endearing amount of happiness.

"In all things, yes."

Emma takes in another spoonful, swirls the ice cream around in her mouth for a moment, swallows
and then asks, "Are you okay with what happened?" She means their lovemaking for sure, but she also means the moment with the wrists as well, and they both know it.

And, of course, as impatient as ever, Regina cuts right to the heart of the matter. "Ask what you really wish to ask, Emma."

"Are you sure?"

"I am." Her voice is quiet, but they both know this for the massive moment that it is; Regina has spent so long running away from this particular nightmare, and that she is now willing to face it and speak of her former husband is the most clear proof that she is finally healing that there is.

"All right. What happened in there? With your wrists, I mean."

"No, you mean my wrists and when I...checked out. It's all part of the same, I'm afraid," Regina admits. She sighs like someone who has to face their worst nightmare. Which is probably an accurate description for this situation. "As I'm sure that you've figured out by now, this is something that I have never spoken to anyone about. I imagine that others knew; certainly Rumple was aware of what I was going through, and Jefferson at least suspected, but well Rumple wouldn't have helped because it wasn't part of his plan and Jefferson had his own reasons for letting me fall into the darkness."

"I'm here," Emma assures her, just as she had in the bedroom.

"I know you are, and I think maybe that's why it's time to exorcise this particular...demon from my heart." Her face contorts when she says this, as if to suggest that the word doesn't come close to expressing her true feelings about her now long dead former husband.

"You want me to grab some wine for this or -"

"Ice cream is good. Because when this is over, I'd like to return to something more enjoyable." She smiles slightly when she says this, and though the words are suggestive, there's something innocent and hopeful about the statement; like she wants and needs it to be that simple.

"I'm more than okay with that," Emma says with a nod, and then she waits.

It's several minutes and another quarter of the ice cream carton before Regina finally starts speaking, having finally screwed her courage up. "You have to understand that things in the Enchanted Forest were different than they are here. By the expectations and etiquettes of that world, the King might have even been considered gentle and kind in the way that he dealt with me. He never sought to deliberately hurt me. At least not at first. Initially, anyhow, there was no out and out malice in his actions, just a rather blatant – to me, anyway - general disregard for me as a person. He viewed me as his Queen and therefore as one of his possessions."

Emma wants to say something; she desperately wants to rage on behalf of Regina and tell her just how truly screwed up such an idea is, but reluctantly, she clamps her mouth closed because she knows that this is a story which her now lover needs to get out. Doing so is already hard enough without Emma offering up her sympathetic anger – no matter how well meaning it might be.

"On our wedding night, he called out for his first wife – Snow's mother - while he was atop me, while he was taking my virginity. He was drunk and he was rough and it hurt terribly, but it was my duty. He’d given me riches and title, and I was expected to offer myself up to him in trade."

She stirs her spoon within the ice cream for a moment, looking as though she’s lost in a memory of the past, which she can’t quite find her way past. A strange sad smile flitters across her lips for half
a second before fading away and leaving her without any expression at all.

"At that time, I was living within my own delusion; I believed that by learning magic, I could find a way to bring Daniel back to life. I thought that once I had, he and I could run away, and this would all just fade to the kind of nightmare that he'd hold me through from time to time."

She shakes her head in anger at this thought, like it's the most absurd thing ever.

Like it's something only a naïve silly child could imagine possible.

"Once I realized that that wasn't going to ever happen, I resigned myself to my fate and to my station as the Queen – to my role as his queen. For a long while, my husband seemed pleased enough with our arrangement which was basically that we ignored each other except when we were entertaining royal guests of honor or when he desired…companionship from me. Perhaps he, too, deluded himself. Perhaps he actually believed that I enjoyed these…nights together or perhaps he simply didn't care. The one time that I dared to let him know that he'd hurt me, I was rather harshly reminded of my responsibilities to him and the kingdom; that’s how it was phrased. I was told that I should never make a sound other than pleasure and that I was never to let the King believe that I was anything less than satisfied with his…performance."

"Jesus," Emma growls out in disgust, the word slipping out before she can stop it. She frowns in apology, but Regina quickly waves it away, the slightest bit of an appreciative smile on her lips.

"It's fine. As for Jesus, well I stopped believing in any kind of benevolent higher power – be it a supreme being high up in the sky or a so-called fairy godmother - after Daniel died and I was forced to accept the fact that I'd never be able to bring him back," Regina counters. "I started to believe in magic instead. I never actually wanted power, but having it – possessing the control it offered me – well that seemed better than being little more than a glorified prostitute which was what I felt like every single time the King came to my chambers to claim his marital rights."

"You said he wasn't malicious at first. That changed?"

"It did. I'm sure you've read the medieval history of this world, yes?"

"A little bit. Mostly watched it on Showtime and HBO."

Regina chuckles. "Excepting the rather gross and often bizarre creative licenses taken by the television of this world, some of it is quite accurate and similar; the King wanted a male heir, and he expected me to give him one as soon as was possible. It was my duty as his wife."

"Beyond that being utterly repulsive –"

"By the standards of here and now, yes, but by the ones I grew up in, it was as ordinary as losing a tooth or throwing a banquet. In the Enchanted Forest, women and girls were bought and sold as wives for the express purpose of providing heirs to the men who wanted them."

"Charming. No pun intended. Okay, but what about my mother? I was of the impression that my…that the King was quite enamored with her." She sees the quick look that passes over Regina's face as she stops herself from calling Leopold her grandfather; it hasn't been lost on her that this whole time, Regina has only referred to him as either her husband or the King. Emma wonders if this is a way for Regina to create necessary distance between herself and the man she still so deeply loathes. Either way, Regina's clearly thankful to not have to be reminded that the King was in fact the grandfather of the stunning woman whom she'd just spent several hours making love to.

"He was," Regina replies with a sharp nod. "He idolized Snow more than can reasonably be put
into words, but even he knew that his legacy would be that much stronger if he had a male heir ready to assume the throne. Women were considered by everyone to be the far weaker sex, and he saw Snow as a beautiful child and not someone capable of ever leading his Kingdom."

"But you never gave him a child. Male or otherwise."

"No. I got pregnant three times during the first two years, and miscarried each time within five months of conception – the last one was by far the worst because I actually believed he had a chance to come to term. After that, the dirty horrible little men there that passed for doctors decided that I must have what this world would call a hostile womb. Their terms for it were much cruder, though, and basically amounted to the word useless." She laughs bitterly at this. "After that, I went from a useful possession to a convenient one. Instead of potentially being the mother of the King's child, he saw me as little more than bed partner and Snow's well-titled nanny. But even so, I was still his and he expected me to always be obedient and docile."

"Obedient and docile. I'll be honest; I just can't picture that."

Regina shrugs. "I was a very good actress for the most part. And while he convinced himself that I was appropriately acting the part of his well-heeled queen, I was off jumping between worlds with Jefferson and studying how to control hearts with Rumple. Every time the King came to my bed, I played whatever role he wanted me to, and perhaps that was part of the problem. I really believe that after awhile, the King learned to hate me as much as I hated him. Maybe it was because I was unable to give him the son he so desperately wanted or maybe it was because I was giving him my body without a fight and he wanted to punish me for what I hadn't been able to provide him and couldn't, but either way, he started trying to keep me even closer to him with strange demands and requests that made little logical sense. And he tried to prevent me from leaving the castle whenever possible. When he heard that I'd been out in the woods, he punished me for actions unbecoming a Queen by locking me in my room for almost a week. I wasn't permitted to see anyone but Snow or himself during that time."

"Is that what the restraints are about?"

"Yes and no. I hated the sound of the door locking, and every time that he locked me in that godforsaken room, I saw images in my head of him dying in horrific ways that frightened even me. I even thought of how I might do it. Rumple slowed me down, of course, though back then he stated that it was because I wasn't yet strong enough to kill the King and get away with it. Not yet, anyway. Now I know that it just wasn't the right time for me to do it. Rumple's plan was quite specific and he needed me to play along with it. That didn't stop the daydreams. I had them of the King and I had them of your mother and they just got worse every day."

"Until Sydney came along."

"They didn't actually stop when he arrived; not the ones of your mother, anyway. But yes, he did give me a way out of my marriage and by that time, I had mostly broken free of Rumple. Or so I'd thought. I was wrong, of course, but that's an entirely different story." She purses her lips "I did try to help Sydney escape after he killed the King, and if he had just listened to me…"

"He was obsessed with you, and didn't want to leave you," Emma notes unnecessarily.

"So was the King and I think by now we know how things end up when obsession with me is involved; badly for everyone," Regina reminds her. "The King ended up dead by snakebite and Sydney found himself locked away in a mirror and then years later in an insane asylum."

"We really should get him out of there," Emma suggests with a chuckle.
"Probably," Regina agrees with a sigh. "As for the rest of the story on the restraints, well that happened deep into the marriage. That happened after the rumors starting making their way around the kingdom about me being into witchcraft. They were correct, of course, but the King was hardly willing to believe them. He saw me as little more than a silly stupid girl who couldn't properly follow orders and directions. He thought I was being frivolous out in the forest and he was furious that I kept allowing it to occur. One night, he came to my room quite drunk and yelling at me for embarrassing him with his advisors. I tried to calm him and assure him that I'd never do that, but I think he almost wanted me to confirm that I would because he got angrier every time I denied it. And then he slammed me against the bed and when I tried to struggle and tell him that he was hurting me, he held my wrists above my head and…well, I think you know."

Regina looks down after she says this, her eyes closing as the memories sweep through her. She wants to be strong and push them back, but for a moment she can see everything clearly. She can feel his hands on her, pushing her into position and reminding her of her place.

"Was it just that once?" Emma asks softly, mercifully returning her to the present.

"No. After that evening, such displays of ownership and force were more…frequent." She shakes her head as if to try to gain control of her emotions. "The thing is, even then, he was probably far kinder to me then someone like George would have been. George would have been unspeakably cruel and well…well, I wasn't allowed to cry or show pain in his presence, but afterwards, the King always sent someone in to care for me. In a weird way, my hatred for him grew simply because of that; I might have loathed him less if he had been honest all the way through about what he saw me as, but there were times when he would show compassion and they absolutely infuriated me. Even more so because that supposed kindness was all that your mother ever saw of his interactions with me. She believed – believes, I think – to this day that he loved me and was always good to me, and that I murdered him out of a lust for power."

"I'm sorry," Emma says, terribly aware of how underwhelming the word is for this.

"You have nothing to be sorry for; he might be your grandfather, but you share nothing in common with him aside from DNA, and I have to believe that biology is not what makes a person good or evil because if it does…" she trails off, clearly thinking about her mother now.

"I think the fact that Henry takes more after you than he does me proves that biology doesn't mean shit," Emma agrees. "And I know he's not really anything to me, but that doesn't mean I don't hate what you went through." As she says this, she steps around the bar. As she does so, her green eyes sweep over Regina, and she's able to see that the queen is, in fact, wearing only the now buttoned up white shirt and her previously discarded underwear. Seeing her like this is almost excruciatingly arousing, but Emma bites back on this and instead slips behind Regina and puts her arms around her, the hold loose and light. "Hey," she says gently, nonsensically.

Regina's response is to drop her head against Emma's shoulder. "I fought back," she states, her voice quiet. "When you touched me like that, I felt myself leaving again. It's the strangest feeling; you're completely there one minute and then you're just not and I felt that happening."

"But you stayed with me and he's dead and he can't ever hurt you again," Emma assures her, leaning in to press a very soft kiss against the hard line of Regina’s jawline.

"He is, but he still can hurt me if I allow him to, and…and I don't want that anymore."

"Give it time. One day it won't because…you’ll have so much more in front of you."

"One day," Regina repeats, her voice catching and her eyes fluttering closed as Emma moves her
mouth to her neck and starts to press kisses against the skin there. They're fairly innocent pecks, and Regina has no doubt that if she were to say no, this would stop immediately.

"There's still ice cream left," Emma says suddenly, between kisses.

Regina's eyes slowly open and she looks down at the mostly empty carton that is still on the counter. True enough, there is a bit of ice cream left, but just as she is realizing this, she's also feeling something cold and slightly sticky get smeared against pulse point. "Is that –"

"Ice cream? On you? Yup, sure is. I wanted to know if it tastes just as good...without the spoon," Emma tells her as her mouth covers the spot and she lazily licks at the sticky cold dessert.

"And?"

"No complaints here," Emma chuckles as she sucks at the sweet skin. As she does this, her other hands moves to the hem of the white shirt and she pulls free the bottom button. She stops then, and brings her lips to Regina's ear, running her tongue over the shell of it before she says, "Tell me what you want. If you want me just to hold you, I'm more than happy to do that, but if you're okay with it, I'd really like to show you what I'm capable of, Your Majesty."

"Show me," Regina stutters, her hand going up to cover Emma's cheek.

Emma grins and then without further hesitation – or warning, for that matter - she slips her right hand down the front of Regina's body and into the lace of her underwear. With her left hand, she cups one of Regina's breasts through the white shirt, rubbing a thumb across an already hardened nipple. She hears and feels the sharp intake of breath the queen allows and lets that wonderful satisfied sound guide her as she slides her fingers deep into Regina.

"Emma," she hears Regina whimper; it's a plea not a protest so she ignores it, instead dropping her mouth back to Regina's neck so that she can litter kisses all across the warm skin there.

"You're safe," she says when she lifts up mouth to Regina's ear. “I promise you, you’re safe.”

"I know," Regina allows, then turns slightly towards Emma. “Kiss me.”

"Gladly." And so she turns Regina fully towards her and kisses her, their lips and teeth crashing together as the sheriff continues working her hand and listening to the rumbling sounds that are coming out of Regina's throat as she brings the queen closer and closer to the edge again.

"Please," Regina whispers, and then she's shaking and nearly collapsing and the only thing there to keep her up are Emma's strong arms and the lips that are now pressed to her temple.

After a few long moments of this, Emma whispers, "Couch or bedroom?"

"Couch. Closer."

Emma chuckles at the abnormally monosyllabic responses and then with gentleness that she hadn't known that she possessed, she moves the older woman down towards the cushions and then – after meeting Regina's eyes and getting a nod of permission from her – she moves atop her, sighing as their still obnoxiously cloth covered breasts press up against each other.

"I really like you in this shirt," Emma mumbles as she finishes unbuttoning it for the second time in the last few hours. "I'm less fond of the underwear, though, I have to admit."

Regina laughs and it makes Emma do the same in response.
"I hope that you know you are," she tells Regina, then.

"I am what?"

"Perfect," Emma says, meeting her eyes with such passionate determination and emotional ferocity. "That awful son of a bitch can't have that word for you, Regina. Not anymore."

"You think it's so easy to defeat old demons, do you?" Though Emma doesn't know it, this is a familiar question for Regina. She'd asked it of Snow once not too long ago, though in a different way and then about the naïve princess's perceived lack of difficulty in regards to change.

"Not easy, but doable. And if it's not, well I am the Savior, and I've gotten pretty goddamned good with a sword as of late," Emma tells her between gentle quick kisses across the heated flesh of the queen's jawline. "I have no problem taking a few demons out if I need to."

"What you are, is an idiot," Regina says with a clear amount of affection.

"Yeah, but I'm pretty much your idiot after all of this."

"Indeed you are. Now, how about you use that mouth for something more interesting than telling me about your skills," Regina requests. "Or are you the one making threats now?"

"As you said, promises, not threats," Emma answers before she sweeps down and makes it her mission to make Regina scream as loudly as the queen had made her scream just hours before. She succeeds.

The sun is attempting to rise the next time Emma comes to. Unfortunately for it, though, the sky is covered in dark clouds and it is raining much harder now, cold water slapping loudly against the roof and the glass windows. "Are you awake?" she softly asks the older woman who is tucked against her, her back rested against Emma's chest. Emma's arms are wound lightly around Regina's midsection, her hands covered up by both of the queen's slender ones.

"I am," Regina replies, her voice throaty and hoarse in a way that makes Emma grin and then chuckle. "Stop that," she hears Regina mumble back at her. "I can feel it."

"Feel what?"

"Your satisfaction with yourself. It's utterly obnoxious."

"I'm just saying, you sound like you've been screaming. I like it."

"Mm."

"How long have you been up?"

"For awhile. I’ve always enjoyed the sound of the rain. It's peaceful."

"Yeah," Emma agrees. "So do I want to know what you're thinking about?"

"Henry."
"You're naked in front of –"

"Yes, and this blanket is far too scratchy in such a state," Regina observes.

Emma rolls her eyes, and plows on, "You're naked and beautiful in front of me right now," as if to properly punctuate this, she ghosts a hand over one of Regina's breasts, the tips of her fingers lightly passing over a nipple, causing Regina to inhale sharply. "And you're thinking about our son instead of finding a way to wake me up in a manner that I'd totally appreciate."

Regina rolls around on the couch to face her, and then after allowing for a small but incredibly honest smile, she leans over and kisses Emma soundly and passionately, making sure that the kiss expresses her feelings about what had occurred between them, and about what it means to her. "Good morning, Sheriff," she whispers once they part. "And now you're awake."

"Not exactly what I had in mind, but I'll happily take it. For now, anyway," Emma replies with the kind of impish grin a horny teenager might have as she considers how the rest of her day might go for her. "So why are you thinking about Henry? Something you're worried about?"

"He'll be home this afternoon."

"Which is good right because we miss our kid, and we didn't really want him to be spending time with Neal, anyway and...I'm a complete doofus because this is about us and what happened last night, right?"

"What do we tell him?" Regina queries.

"Do we have to tell him anything?"

"I guess that depends on what this is."

"Right. Well, I think maybe I'd like to find out."

"He might not approve. You are the Savior and I am the Evil Queen."

"No, you're his mom and I'm his mom, and I have to believe that more than anything else, he just wants us to be happy."

"He might not believe I'll make you happy. He might think I'll hurt you." Regina swallows hard when she says this, like the idea of this pains her. It's an amazing realization for both of these women, and a vivid reminder of just how far they've come and just how much everything has changed for them.

"He loves you."

"I know he does, but that doesn't mean he trusts me with you."

"But I do, and really that's all that actually matters here," Emma replies before she leans forward and kisses Regina gently. When she pulls back just a bit, she continues with, "Look, I love our kid to death, Regina but if there's even a small chance that this could be something special, then I don't think I'm willing to walk away from it just because it might take Henry some time to figure out if he’s okay with it. But...if you need to do that, if you want to not do this —"

"I do. I want to. I just...I don't want him to hate me." Her voice weakens at the end, a soft admission of just how vulnerable she feels when it comes to Henry’s perception of her.
"I think we're way past that, and I think if we tell him together, if we're truthful with him and let him know that we're still just figuring things out and we don't know what will happen, then I think maybe he'll support us. I think it’s worth a try, anyway.

"Okay, assuming that’s true…what about everyone else?"

"You mean my mother."

"If we're...if I'm very lucky, Henry might understand that there’s something happening here and we want to..." she trails off, her uncertainty so blatant. Swallowing, she continues, “He might. Your mother never will," Regina states with a deep kind of worry in her eyes. There's fear there, too, and Emma finds that it almost physically hurts to see this; Regina is presuming rejection from everyone and the sad thing is that outside of she and Henry, the former is probably right. "And as much as there is an appeal in staying here forever, we both know it's time to go home."

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "So we keep it to ourselves for now. Henry needs to know because he's going to be with us all the time and he's a smart kid, and we promised him the truth above everything else, but I see no reason why anyone else needs to know a minute before we are ready to tell them. Whatever this is, and I don't think either one of us is ready to put a name to it yet, it's between us and I think I'm okay with letting it stay there for now. Are you?"

"I…I am."

"Good. Then how about you close your eyes, and I close mine, and you just let me hold you, and we fall asleep to the sound of the rain, okay?" She nuzzles into Regina’s neck as she says this.

"Things are going to get hard this afternoon," Regina reminds her, her eyes already drifting closed as she turns herself around in Emma's arms so that's facing outwards. With one of her hands, she pulls the brown blanket up and over them. Yes, it's scratchy, but it feels like it's theirs, and though Regina has never been the most overly sentimental person in the world, there's something to be said about enjoying the things that they share.

"Probably, but we'll deal with all of that later," Emma counters before pressing her lips against Regina's shoulder. She moves her fingers into Regina's and then presses their hands together over the queen's hard abdomen, their palms settling lightly against the warm skin there.

"Okay," comes the mumbled answer and then seconds later, Emma feels the gentle way that Regina's breathing evens out to signify that she's sleeping.

Emma smiles slightly, drops another light kiss down, and then tucks her face against Regina's, cheek to cheek as she holds the older woman against her.

She doesn't know what this afternoon will bring with Henry and Neal returning to the house; it probably will be hard and talking to their son about their new relationship might be painful and rough. It could hurt them both if she's wrong, and Henry outright rejects the very idea of a "them"; more than that, though, it could cause Regina to retreat away from her completely.

So she hopes she's right because she thinks that maybe it's time for the universe to cut them a break and let them find their way towards some kind of happiness.

Even if that happiness is the strange fantastic kind which can only exist between a broken Savior and a fallen Queen.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

And so it ends...finally.

For this chapter: sexual situations, mild profanity, some Neal and lots of wrap up.

Enjoy and let me know your thoughts!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"So, is this what a panic attack looks like?" Emma asks as she steps into the kitchen, a towel over her shoulder. Sweat pools just beneath her hairline, and rolls down the side of her face – evidence of her recent workout. Above her, she can hear the sound of rain continuing to strike against the roof, and cold water is dripping down the windows in great blurry smears. Her attention isn't on the rain, though, but rather Regina's frenzied cleaning. She has a fairly good idea what this is all about. She'd even kind of expected this to happen. The one thing that she's known about Regina almost since the day that they'd first met – and this understanding has only been reinforced over the time that they've been here together – is that the queen almost always tries to hide the worst of her fears behind dramatic actions.

"Just because you prefer to live like a slob doesn't mean that the rest of us have to," Regina counters as she digs her elbow into the process and grinds down on a speck of what's probably just a slight color distortion in the surface.

"So this…fit of yours has absolutely nothing to do with you being worried about the talk that we need to have with our kid tonight?" Emma prompts as she leans against the counter and stares right at Regina, waiting for the older woman to realize that she's being studied.

"Well, we don't need to have that conversation tonight," Regina corrects before realizing that she'd given her fears away too easily. It's strange to be hiding her emotions – or trying to, anyway – from the woman whom she'd spent all of the previous evening and most of the morning with. Emma had seen her at her most exposed (figuratively and literally) and right now, she's looking back at her with a gleam in her green eyes that suggests that even now she can see what ugly scenarios are playing out in Regina's mind.

Truthfully, Regina's never felt so naked before and that's saying something.

She sighs and drops the rag to the counter, her energy seeming to seep out of her.

"I'll take that as confirmation," Emma nods, smiling thinly.

Regina frowns at this, her hands joining in the middle for an anxious twist before she seems to remember herself – or more correctly, she seems to remember her upbringing and likely harsh words from Cora - enough to settle them back against her sides. "I've been thinking about what we need to say to Henry all morning. I've been trying to figure out the right words so that maybe he'll understand, and I've been trying to convince myself that he'll be okay with us…developing…having a relationship, but if he isn't, then…Emma, if he isn't okay with it, I think…I think I've made a decision."
"Which is?" Emma queries. Part of her wants to know why this is a choice that Regina had come to on her own, but since she already knows exactly what the decision that her lover thinks she's come to is, she also already knows why.

"I won't let him be unhappy," Regina tells her. "I've done too much of that."

"Which means what? Remember, I'm blonde. So spell it out slowly." She attempts to say these words as lightly as she can manage to, like she's trying to ease the tension that's suddenly bled into the space between them, but the attempt at levity falls completely flat, ignored entirely by the suddenly anxious other woman.

"It means," she says, her voice too flat to be real, "That if he's not okay with us doing this, then I think maybe we shouldn't, because it's our job to make our son happy."

"Even if that means that we're unhappy?" Emma queries, stepping towards Regina, her movement cautious and careful. It's a bit amazing to Emma just how much she wants to touch Regina right now. At least part of Emma believes that she should probably feel completely sated after what had just shared with each other, but the more self-aware part understands that Regina is every bit an addiction. "Because I'm pretty sure that it's our job to love our kid as much as is humanly possible, but...but I don't think that means we have to destroy our chance at some kind of happiness for him. And...I don't think that he would want us to do that for him, anyway."

"I don't want him to hate me," Regina whispers, her shoulders slumping. She closes her eyes. "Gods, I despise being weak," she continues. "And right now, I feel weak."

"Maybe you feel that way, but it's not true. You're not weak," Emma insists as she takes one last step forward and then wraps her arms around Regina's waist. Pulling her close, she leans in and puts her chin on Regina's shoulder, the position just a bit awkward because of the small size difference between the two of them, but clearly appreciated because almost immediately, Regina seems to relax into the hold. "Feeling something for someone else - something good - isn't weakness. It isn't."

"My mother would disagree." Regina lets out an almost bemused sounding chuckle. "And yes, I know that she was wrong. Is wrong. But...it's hard to stop hearing her after so long." She lets out a frustrated sigh. "What the hell are you doing to me?"

"Damned if I know," Emma admits. "But what I said this morning? I meant it. I'd like to see where this goes. I know this could blow up in our faces, because neither one of us is a 'take a gamble on love' kind of person, but...you know this kind of thing' kind of person, but I think maybe this time I'm willing to. Maybe it's the sea air or whatever, but still."

The word – love - that she'd almost said makes both of them freeze for a brief somewhat terrifying moment, but then Regina turns around to face Emma. "Yes, still," she breathes, and then she leans up and kisses Emma gently on the mouth. It almost immediately morphs into something more intense that includes teeth and tongues and a generous amount of nipping.

"See? Now that's so much better," Emma chuckles against her lips. She dives in for another kiss, her hand slipping under the hem of Regina's shirt, nails scratching lightly against the warm skin of Regina's well-toned abdomen.

"Mm, I don't believe that we have time for this," Regina tells her, smiling into the kiss before pressing in for another one and then one more. "Henry will be home within the hour if your idiot ex knows how to properly read a watch which –"
"Can you try to be nice, please?" Emma laughs as she steps away.

"If you insist."

"I know that you consider it a crime against nature not to insult him at every opportunity, but I really would appreciate the effort," she jokes. She then picks up the rag and shoves it into the back pocket of her workout pants. "To stop you from another manic cleaning fit. I can already see my reflection." She frowns as she looks down and does just that. "I should probably comb my hair."

"I rather like the princess curls, my dear," Regina tells her, proving her point by reaching forward and sliding her fingers through thick blonde tresses for a moment before pulling back and returning to a relatively safe position a few inches away from Emma and that obnoxious knowing gaze that she's wearing on her face.

"Noted," Emma grins. Then, growing serious once again, "So, do you think we can do this together?"

"Us or Henry?"

"Both. We tell him the truth, and then whatever happens…happens."

"So blasé."

"Not even a little bit. Believe it or not, I am as scared shitless about this as you are, but the one thing I remember from when I was with Neal was that I wasn't weak, Regina. He left me, and he screwed me over, but when we were together, I felt like there was nothing I couldn't do. And sometimes, I even felt like it was okay to stay in bed all day and laugh or cry or whatever. I'm not weak with or without someone."

"I've never been the just stay in bed and relax kind of person anymore than I've been – as you said – the kind willing to take a gamble," Regina reminds her. "I think I had a chance of that many years ago, and well…instead I became the Evil Queen."

"Well, things have changed. I think maybe we both have another chance at all day slumber parties now," Emma says with a small smile. "As for being that kind of person, well, I haven't been her in almost ten years. I kind of miss her, though, and I think if you could stop feeling like you have to be strong and bulletproof all the time, you might even learn to like the woman who doesn't need to be. I know I do." She lifts her hand up and places the back of it lightly against Regina's cheek, gently rubbing her knuckles down across the queen's soft lips. "Either way, I'm here."

"You're telling me to have faith in you."

"I think I've been telling you that since the day we first met, but yeah, I am."

"Then yes," Regina replies, and she feels like she's jumping from the edge of one cliff to the edge of the next one, scaling a massive chasm that could pull her down to a horrific death if she were to miss-time the leap. "I think that we can…try to do this together." The words are difficult to get out because they mean that this thing between them actually is real, and if it's real, well then there could be a lot of pain at the end of this story. Or there could be happiness.

Maybe it's time to take that chance. Maybe it's time to grab at it with both hands.

But isn't that the problem? Hasn't it always been? Grabbing too hard and holding too close? What if she does pull Emma into her, and what if she actually allows herself to love the sheriff to such a degree that when it all falls apart – and God, as much as she doesn't want to, she can't find a way to
believe that it won’t - she loses her ability to do as she always has? What if losing Emma is the straw, which finally breaks her?

Before she can get too far down this dark path, Emma's forehead touches hers, and all of these terrifying thoughts slip away because in this moment, they're just two women who understand the massive risk they're about to take all in the name of wanting to be happy and loved. They understand and want to take the risk, anyway.

A moment passes and then another as they stay like this just absorbing everything. Finally, because everything inside of Regina feels like it's about to explode and burn, she forces it all away, chuckles and says in a deep voice, "You're sweaty, Sheriff."

"I have been working with the bag for the last hour," Emma reminds her.

"Oh. Deep thoughts?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," Emma teases.

"You should go shower," Regina admonishes with a suggestive smirk.

"Probably. Come with me."

Regina's eyebrow lifts. "Really?"

"Really. The kid is going to be here within the hour, and I'm betting that even if he's cool with everything, we're going to have to behave ourselves with him around."

"I wasn't aware that you actually knew how to behave," Regina replies. It occurs to her that she's actually flirting. Which almost makes her stop cold because she can't really recall the last time she'd done such a thing when it hadn't been part of some malicious attempt at seduction or manipulation. This is actually…innocent.

And it seems to amuse Emma.

"Says the woman who was once one of the most misbehaved in the land." And yep, Emma is actually flirting back, her words devoid of any kind of judgment.

Regina shrugs like she doesn't have the shame that she does for her past – because this moment isn't about those days. "Yes, well, as tempting as your offer sounds, we don't have time for this," she reminds her lover. "And if it's all the same to you, I'd prefer not to tell our twelve year son about our relationship with his eyes first."

Emma snorts indelicately at that, and then holds up her hand when Regina pins her with a scolding look. "Yeah, okay, you’re probably right about that," she allows, a mischievous smirk playing across her lips. "But I'm holding you to a rain check."

"That sounds suspiciously like a challenge."

"That's because it is a challenge. Which means – I do believe - that it's your move now. Your Majesty." And with that and a loud laugh, a wildly grinning Emma Swan, looking so very much like the infuriatingly beautiful woman who'd once maimed her tree turns and leaves the kitchen, her swagger on point as she exits the room.

Interesting, Regina thinks, as she gazes back down at the obnoxiously clean counter, how very often things seem to come full circle with she and Emma.
A little over a year ago, such a statement – fired off by one of them to the other - had been tantamount to a declaration of war, and it had, in fact, led to several skirmishes and a few bloody battles.

And yet, now here they are.

Waiting for Emma's ex boyfriend – Rumplestiltskin's son - to return with their shared son that they – his two different as they can possibly be mothers - can ask him for his permission to take a gamble on each other.

Life, Regina thinks, as she gazes over towards the bathroom where she can now hear the water being turned on, really is quite strange at times.

Neal is over two hours late and all she's thinking about at this point is how she's going to kill him, she thinks.

Slowly and painfully.

Deliciously slowly.

Her rational voice is telling her that the delay is certainly being caused by the terrible weather. Emma, who has been inside the whole time, hardly seems worried, but well, Regina has spent most of her life expecting – and often receiving – bad news, and so with each minute that passes, her fear grows into something darker.

Fucking Neal Cassidy.

Oh, yeah, she's definitely going to skin him alive. Emma will probably save him from certain death, she imagines, but not before she's able to remove a few vital –

The sound of wheels sloshing through mud brings her out of thoughts that are a bit too amusing to be safe for an Evil Queen in recovery.

Oh well.

She watches from her position on the loveseat on the front porch, an oversized sweatshirt all but swallowing her small frame and the scratchy brown blanket slung over her legs, as Neal's pathetic car finally makes its way up the waterlogged driveway. His wheels squeak and his engine sputters, and the car slides just a bit forward before he forces it into park.

"Regina," he greets as he gets out, looking wary but amused to see her. He would have been surprised if she hadn't been there. His eyes catch on the mostly still full glass of red wine in her hand. She's swirling it around almost absently, like it's there for a distraction as opposed to anything else.

And though her face is decidedly neutral, he thinks that her eyes tell the story of someone who has spent the last few hours being incredibly on edge.

He thinks maybe she plans to kill him and...he swallows and forces a smile.

"Mr. Cassidy," she responds coolly. "You're late. Two hours late."
"Guessing maybe you didn't notice, but it's raining cats and dogs," he responds with an impish grin, which he seems to know will infuriate and irritate her. She's almost - almost - impressed by his sudden suicidal desire to try to stand up to her. "I figured," he continues in that same lazy drawl that makes her want to stab him about fifty times in the face, "That you'd prefer I take it easy with Henry in the car as opposed to hauling ass just to make sure I got him back home to you in time for lunch."

"Yes, of course I'm thankful that you showed basic common sense with my son in your custody," she snaps out. "But I presume that you have a cell phone, yes?"

"I do. But again, I was focusing on the road. It's a nightmare out there right now."

"You couldn't have pulled that heap of yours over and made a quick call?"

"All right, I'm sorry," he sighs, sounding both duly chastised and completely annoyed. Whatever small amusement he'd been deriving from challenging her is gone, and now he just looks like a petulant man-child sporting a dramatic pout.

Which is apparently good enough for her for the time being. Putting the wine glass down on the railing, she stands up and moves towards him. "So? Where is he?"

"Dead out in the backseat. We've been driving for almost five hours."

"You think you can lift him?" Emma asks as she steps out onto the deck. She'd been in the kitchen putting away clean dishes when she'd heard Neal's car pull up, and though her first instinct had been to race out to stop Regina from finding a way to disembowel her ex for being late, she'd decided to hold back and just listen in.

Because these two are going to have to learn how to deal with each other.

"Yeah, sure. Why?"

"No need to wake him," Emma replies with a somewhat friendly smile. "If you can pick him up, we can just let him stay crashed out."

"Right, okay," Neal nods as he blinks water out of his eyes. Scowling, he looks upwards towards the sky, which is fiercely dark now. It's clear to all of them that this storm won't be moving on anytime soon. After a moment, he moves towards the back of his car and pulls the door open. Pulling off his jacket, he then uses it to shield Henry's face from the rain as he picks the boy up into his arms and carries him past the two women on the porch.

"He was late," Regina grumbles, seeming almost petulant. It's not at all lost on Regina that Neal had been wearing almost this exact expression mere seconds earlier, and just the realization of this pisses her off all the more.

Emma smirks at this.

Regina sighs loudly, dramatically (and adorably, Emma thinks, and then again wonders just what the devil is happening to her). "I know. Be nice."

"For Henry," Emma urges.

"Wasn't that exactly what we used to say to justify us trying to get along?" Regina asks, lifting an eyebrow up. "Because I must say, if that's how this always goes, I'm really not interested in your rather loathsome ex. Not even a little bit."
"That's good to know," Emma chuckles. "And yes, we did say that, but this is different. All I'm saying here is, stop thinking about ripping out his heart, okay?"

"Fine. I assume you're planning to invite him to stay here for the evening."

"How did you know?"

"Because it's the opposite of what I would do, and because Emma, though it drives me absolutely insane at times, you always find a way to do the…right thing."

"I'm not all that sure that having Neal around to annoy us – and tempt us both towards acts of murder - is the right thing to do," Emma grouses.

"So then why do you want him to stay?" Regina asks, frowning a bit as much darker thoughts go through her mind. It's probably far too early in this little romance of theirs to feel the green-eyed monster stirring, and yet, she does. And it is stirring.

Which Emma immediately picks up on. "No, hey, I really don't want him to stay," she assures the queen in a gentle almost soothing voice that makes Regina feel a little bit like she's being expertly handled. "But I also don't want him stuck out in that crazy fuck of a storm, either. Whatever used to be between Neal and I a long time ago, it's long gone now. I don't like him anymore much less love him, but I do think some part of me will always care about him at least a little bit. Does that make sense? I mean are you okay with me asking him to stay because what we have here – and I don't just mean this thing that's going on between us; I mean the safety that we have here - it means everything to me, Regina, and if Neal needs to go for that to -"

"I don't want him to be here at all much less stay for the night," Regina cuts in, her tone sharp and almost authoritative. "But I don’t have a right to tell you who you get to have in your life or who you get to care about. I don’t know much about healthy relationships, but that doesn’t sound healthy to me. And…if having him here tonight is what it takes to make Henry happy and to keep you from worrying about his safety, then yes, I'm fine with it." She punctuates these words with a stiff smile that makes it clear that this is all about her trying to do right by the child she loves and the woman that she's falling for. She'd been absolutely honest; she doesn't want Neal anywhere around either of them – she has far too many fears to not be almost insanely jealous of this man and his connections to Emma and Henry – but if she's going to prove to them that she's worthy of them, she knows that she has to try.

She has to be good enough for them, and that means that she needs to try to buck her more selfish self-protective instincts and do the good thing. The right thing.

At the same time, she finds herself wondering if she can make Neal sleep in the garage. It's technically indoors, and as long as he doesn't bunk under the small leak near the door, he'll probably manage to stay dry and warm.

No, Emma probably won't go for that, she thinks with an inaudible sigh.

It really is a shame how utterly confining trying to be a better person is.

"Thank you," Emma replies and then leans in for a quick kiss. Regina allows it, her eyes fluttering closed for a moment. With a soft sigh, she permits herself to feel what Emma's offering – the faith and strength that the younger woman is broadcasting – and then she nods her head because she thinks she'd do just about anything for her.

It's a terrifying thought, but falling fast and hard and completely has always been her way, and even
now, Regina knows she couldn't stop herself even if she were to try. Even if she wanted to get away from this unnamed thing of theirs, she knows instinctively that it's too late for that because everything inside of her which matters and has a voice beside her fear wants her to stay right here.

In this wonderful amazing moment with Emma.

"Well I guess that answers that question for me," Neal chuckles as he steps back outside. He cups his hands in front of his mouth and blows into them, and then grins at the two of them like he's just caught them going at it naked on the couch.

Regina pulls back first, her eyes blazing like she's once again thinking about creative ways to murder him and hide the body. She opens her mouth to tell him that he doesn't know what he's talking about but then she snaps it shut with an almost audible click because Emma's giving her this strange look which seems to almost be begging her not to deny them to Neal.

So in spite of her darker desire to not share Emma with anyone and despite the fear she has of their relationship being mocked by him, she stays silent.

"Neal," Emma urges once she's somewhat confident that Regina isn't about to try to pull the weird magic that still exists within her blood forward so that she can fry Neal to a wall. "Do me a favor and don't say anything stupid here. Please."

He holds up his hands. "Hey, no, I wasn't going to…I'm not surprised is all. I kind of figured there was something going on between the two of you."

"And why is that?" Regina demands between tightly clenched teeth.

He shrugs his shoulders, the motion somewhat careless. "Because I saw the two of you together, and because I know who Emma is," he answers softly, almost sadly.

"Which means what exactly?" Emma queries, eyebrows knit together.

"It means that you're an amazing woman, Em, and it doesn't surprise me that anyone would want to be with you. You were always amazing at seeing the good in everyone – even me - so I guess all I meant was that you choosing to be with the woman who was once the Evil Queen kind of makes sense. In a really weird way."

The women exchange a look, and then, her voice shaking a bit, Regina says, "We haven't told Henry yet. We're going to…we're going to let him know tonight."

"Hey, it's your story," he assures them. He glances up towards the sky, frowning deeply as strikes of lightning shoot across it. "I should probably get going, though. That hotel I used last time I came here during a storm looked like it had some vacancies so I figure I can crash there for the night."

"You don't have to - you can stay here," Emma offers. She nods over at Regina as if to suggest that she, too, is okay with this. The best Regina can allow is a tight smile that isn't all that convincing, but well, she does try to pretend that she’s welcoming.

He looks at both of them for the moment in surprise and then returns Regina’s smile with a thin almost amused one of his own. "I appreciate the offer and all, but I really think…well, too much is too much, right?" He gazes back at Emma when he says this, taking a moment to look – really look – at the woman he'd lost because of his own poor choices. She's not the girl she'd been with him, and he thinks it’s time to let go.

"If you say so," Emma replies. "But it's insane out there right now."
"Trust me, I know. That's why we're two hours late." He looks at Regina with a small smirk when he says this, but then quickly moves his eyes back to Emma, his voice softening as he speaks, "And hey, thank you for letting me hang out with him. The kid and I, we had a great time, and I'd really like – if it's okay, I mean - to maybe do it again soon. I know that you guys don't want me anywhere around him, and I know I deserve that for everything I did to you, Emma – for everything I put you through - but he…Henry, he means the world to me. I just want to be a small part of his."

"We'll talk soon," Emma promises him, her eyes flicking towards Regina who is watching this conversation with a frown. Almost like she's trying to figure out what his angle is. She's disliked this man almost since learning about him, and though even now she has no desire to get to know him any better than she does, she thinks maybe he's being honest right now. She thinks that perhaps this isn't a game at all.

She thinks that just maybe loss and regret and loneliness are feelings that everyone standing on this dark little porch knows entirely too well.

"Sure," he says. He nods and then starts to move towards his car.

"Oh for God's sake, wait a minute," Regina snaps out before she punctuates her words with an annoyed huff. "If you're not going to be smart enough to stay out of clearly hideous weather, then at least take some coffee for the drive so that you don't fall asleep at the wheel, and force us to have to tell Henry that you died wrapped around a tree because you were a massive bumbling idiot." She then turns and stomps back into the house to retrieve a travel mug for him.

Neal looks over at Emma, his eyebrow up in his hairlines. For her part, the sheriff just laughs. "I believe that was Her Majesty's way of saying that for now she's okay with you. Of course, she might be putting cyanide into your coffee so if it tastes a little bit weird, you're probably not going to want to drink too much of it."

He chuckles. "Thanks for the warning."

"Of course."

He looks at her for a moment, his smile morphing into one of genuine worry and concern. "I really hope that you know what you're doing here, Em. I was…well, I was pure garbage and maybe I still am, but I was never an Evil Queen."

"No, you weren't, and she isn't one anymore, either," she replies. "And as confident as I was then about you, I am even more so about her now."

"But you were wrong about me," he reminds her, his eyes full of self-deprecation. "I broke your heart and allowed you to go to prison."

"No, I wasn't wrong about you," she insists, her voice strong. "I was wrong about what I meant to you and how much you were willing to fight for us, but I wasn't wrong about what we could have been if you'd been strong enough. I wasn't wrong."

He scuffs the toe of his foot against the step, frowning as her words hit hard and as he realizes that he'd been right before and yes, it is time to finally let go of this woman because she's already let go of him. Still, he tells himself, this is about making sure that she's okay. He figures he owes her that much at least. "You were just a kid, Emma," he tells her. "You saw the best in me, but that doesn't mean that it was ever actually in me. Or that it's in her."
"I hadn't been 'just a kid' for a very long time, Neal. I might have been young then, but by the time we met in that car, I'd already been through entirely too much awful stuff. Too much hurt. What I saw in you was hope for a future and for happiness."

"And I took that from you. I don't want that to happen to you ever again."

"It won't because I'm not that young girl anymore and I won't let anyone take it away from me again. No matter what I feel for them. Okay?"

"Yeah, okay. Just...watch your back. You deserve the best. You always did."

"I know," Emma answers. She smiles when Regina comes back out with the mug, steam rising from the top of it. She's holding two granola bars as well.

"In case you get hungry, but do try to keep your eyes on the road."

"Will do," he says. "I'll text when I get to the hotel," he tells Emma.

"Okay. Anything you want us to tell Henry?"

"Something cool."

She nods and smiles. Then, as if remembering, "Hey, one more favor?"

"As many as you need," he answers, absolute sincerity in his voice.

She replies with a bit of a sad smile because she really doesn't want their relationship to always be like this even if it's somewhat owed to her. She wants them both to be able to move on and be happy. "We're going to tell Henry about this, but I think we want to keep it to ourselves for awhile. To just...everyone...here."

"Like I said, not my story. Which reminds me, I checked in on your mom like you asked me to. Seemed to me like she's doing okay, but I think she'll be better when you're home." And with that and a soft wistful smile that he can't quite manage to hide though he certainly tries to, he turns, and makes his way to his car. Once he's safely inside, the engine rattles back to life, and then moments later, he's gone in a spray of mud and water.

"I take it you heard most of our conversation?" Emma queries, her eyes sweeping over the not quite emotionless face of the queen.

"I did."

"And?"

Regina sighs, suddenly looking quite tired. "And...are you sure?"

"About us? As sure as I can be considering how much I suck at relationships and anything that sounds vaguely like adult responsibility. You?"

"That's quite the self-sales job," Regina comments dryly.

Emma shrugs her shoulders. "Answer the question."

Regina thinks for a moment and then nods. "I'm sure that I'd like to be happy."

"I'll take that as a yes."
"I suppose that it was a yes."

"Good, because I'm really – really - looking forward to cashing in my rain check. Preferably sooner as opposed to later," Emma murmurs as she steps forward and after wrapping her arms around Regina's slim waist, nuzzles her face into the queen's neck. Her tongue flicks out, and she traces it along the thumping pulse point that she finds there before using her teeth to nip at it which causes Regina to make a noise that best resembles what a cat sounds like when you're rubbing its belly.

"Mm. It'll have to wait," Regina answers, her voice throaty and thick with desire.

"Why?" Emma whines as she presses kiss after kiss against soft warm skin.

"Because, my dear Sheriff, I believe that I can see our son moving around inside, and unless you want him to find us in the exact same compromising position as your annoying ex did, then perhaps we should head in and greet him," Regina chuckles as she gently pushes a reluctant Emma away.

It's a little surprising to the queen just how affectionate Emma is being – especially considering the fact that the sheriff had initially been the one so adamantly against this thing of theirs – but there's no denying that Emma is being quite free with her touches. It's a bit unsettling how these loving embraces make Regina feel so young and innocent, and though part of her insists on reminding her that she can't ever be that naïve girl who'd been so stupidly hopeful again, the other part of her that clings to the same idea of hope that she'd heard Emma insisting on, doesn't care.

That part of her – her not quite as dark as it used to be heart, she knows - is daring her to take the gamble that her head is warning her not to.

For once, she plans to let her heart guide her towards something good.

"Yeah, you’re right. I mean, of course you…are we ready for this?" Emma asks, suddenly not seeming nearly as confident as she'd been before; she knows the stakes here, and she has a pretty good idea just how upside down everything could go if Henry were to reject the idea of his mothers being together. For all of the progress that he and Regina have made over the last two months, he's still a boy with very naïve points of view on good and evil, and it'd be easy for him to hurt and devastate his adoptive mother once more even without intending to.

"No," Regina admits with a wry chuckle. "I'm fairly certain that we're the opposite of 'ready' right now. Or at least…I am.” She tries to play it off with a smile, but it fails rather spectacularly, the haunted look in her eyes telling a far more frightened tale.

"Hey, we don't have to do this tonight if you don't want to. We really don't.”

"No, we don’t have to. Which is exactly why we should do it. Because we promised our son that we would be honest with him. And we’re going to be,” Regina replies as she straightens up her back and squares her shoulders like she's about to go to war. "So hold your head up high, Sheriff, and let's go face our twelve-year-old child."

Henry lights up when he sees his mothers walk through the door, and Emma thinks that that's already something of a win because not long ago, he'd treated Regina's coming and goings with suspicion and unkindness. He'd let the woman who had raised him know how little he'd thought of
her, and though he might not have ever realized it, each one of his rejections – both big and small – had hurt her terribly.

Hopefully, those days are in the past.

"Henry," Regina greets with a bright smile, which she gives only to him. It reaches her eyes and she's almost glowing as she steps towards him. He lets her wrap him into her arms, and even returns the hug, though not with the same degree of deep world-bending emotion. That's to be expected, though; he's years before actually understanding just how intense and revolutionary feelings can get for a person.

"Hey, Kid," Emma nods. They have a few seconds where it's clear that he's wondering if he should hug her, too, but they usually save those kinds of mother-son interactions for the all-too-frequent celebrations after rescues and things like that.

Instead, he smiles back at her and does a kind of half-wave and a goofy grin.

Strangely enough, that's a lot like a hug to her, anyway.

"Did my dad already leave?" Henry asks, looking around as if for Neal.

There's a moment of clear tension in Regina's shoulders – her strong dislike of how easily Henry can apply the parental title to Neal evident – but then just like that, it melts away and she smiles at her son again. "He did," she says as she stoops to look him in the eye as she always does. It's becoming less and less necessary thanks to how much he's growing as of late, but that doesn't stop her from doing it all the same. "I think he wanted to get to the motel as quickly as he could, and we didn't know how long you'd be sleeping. He promised that he'd call once he got there."

Henry glances over at the window, then out at the hammering down rain, and frowns deeply. "We should have asked him to stay."

"We did ask him to stay," Emma says, motioning to both she and Regina so that Henry knows that both of them had been involved in the offer. "He had some things he needed to do back at home, though, and so he wanted to hit the road." It's a bit of a lie, but for as mature as Henry can be at times, he's still just a child when it comes to understanding the nuances of adult interactions. "He did ask me to tell you that he had a great time, and… and that he's really looking forward to the next time."

"Will… will there be a next time?" He looks right at Regina when he says this, and Emma sees the look of panic streak through her dark eyes. The indecision is clear there, and Emma can practically read the conflicted thoughts running wild through Regina's mind. On one hand, they're about to drop something on Henry that just might cause him to reject them both completely (though most likely Regina will take the brunt of it, and they both know it whether they want to admit it or not), and Regina has to be wondering about the fairness of things, but on the other hand, she so desperately wants to make her son happy in whatever way that she can.

Even if that means continuing to allow Neal Cassidy into their lives.

"Yes, of course; as long as you're happy," Regina replies, her voice low and gentle, her fight for control of her emotions there for anyone to see. She reaches out with her hand and lightly brushes hair away from his forehead, pausing for a brief moment before yanking her hand back and dropping it to her side. It's only because Emma knows her as well as she does that she recognizes the gesture for what it is.
"Cool," he says with a careless shrug. Like he has no idea of the battle, which Regina had just fought – and won – within herself. Emma knows, though, and offers Regina a small smile of encouragement; Regina nods and exhales. Henry, aware of none of what has just gone on between his moms, looks at Emma and in a low conspiratorial tone says, "By the way, Operation Trojan Horse was a complete success."

"Operation Trojan Horse? Do I even want to know?" Regina chuckles as she turns to face Emma. "What are you two up to?"

"I asked Henry to do recon on Storybrooke," Emma answers. "That code-name is his and his alone, however." Then she nods her head in approval. "But it is clever."

"Indeed, it is," Regina agrees. "Though, who exactly is the Trojan Horse?"

"Me," he replies with a grin. "They miss me. And you, Emma. They want us both home, and it's safe for us to do it now."

"How's that, Kid?"

"I heard Grandma promise my dad that Mom wouldn't be in any danger."

"How terribly kind of her," Regina cracks before she can quite stop herself. When Emma glances over at her with an eyebrow lifted up in something that looks a whole lot like bemused exasperation, the queen simply shrugs her shoulders defiantly.

"Well, that's good," Emma replies, choosing to otherwise ignore Regina and her clear irritation with the Charmings. "Because I think that's what our plan is. Your mom and I, well I think we both want to get back home. I think we're both ready to."

"Awesome."

"Yeah, awesome. But…before we start talking about packing up here, there's something else that we wanted to discuss with you," Emma says. She steps over towards the couch, drops down onto it, then pats the area next to her.

As he sits, he frowns, his active imagination already off to the races. "Is everything okay? Is one of you hurt? Did…did something bad happen while I was gone?"

"No, Henry, nothing like that. It’s…”Emma looks over at Regina, then, her eyes wide, and it's clear to the older woman that though the sheriff had been the one with the confidence about this, she's at a loss for how to start the conversation. Which means, Regina thinks, that it's time for her twelve years of experience to take the floor.

Even if that means that she might take the brunt of rejection.

Well, she reasons, assuming that there is a rejection, her taking almost all of it was always going to happen, anyway, because – to him - she still is the Evil Queen.

Regina sighs and steps over towards her lover and her son, a hand sliding over and then past Emma’s right shoulder in a way which causes one of Henry’s eyebrows to lift. "Everything is perfectly fine, Henry," she assures him as she sits down on the opposite side of Henry on the couch. "But yes, something did happen. While you were gone, something happened between Miss – between Emma and myself."

He wrinkles his nose, looking so much like the innocent child that he is for the moment, and she's
struck by the need to just pull him close and hold him. She doesn't, though, because the idea here isn't to scare him. Unfortunately, by the near panicked look in his eyes, they've already failed at that. "I don't understand. Did you two have a fight? Because you promised me that you'd try to get along."

"And we did. We really…actually, Kid, we had a really nice weekend together, but here's the thing…" she stops, frowns and tries to find the right words to explain this. "You know that your mom and I have been getting along pretty good here, right?"

"Yeah," he says, his eyes jumping from mother to mother. And then he’s looking at Emma’s shoulder again even though Regina is no longer touching it.

Like he’s wondering…

"Well, some times, things happen between adults when they're getting along and some times, when those things happen, well then other things…happen as well, you know what I mean…?" Emma tries to explain, and she's practically stammering now because suddenly she feels like a complete and utter moron, and the incredulous look in Regina's eyes seems to be verifying her rather scathing self-evaluation.

"Henry," Regina says, her voice bizarrely even, "What Emma is trying to say – badly, albeit - is that she and I have been growing closer over the last several weeks, and while you were away for the weekend, we decided that we'd like to start…"

And then just like that, she's the one stalling out because what word is she supposed to use here? What's the proper term for this thing of theirs?

"Dating?" Henry asks, and if he notices the completely ridiculous way that both of his mothers sigh in relief at him providing the word that they hadn't been able to, he doesn't let on to it. "You two want to date?" he expands, his bright green eyes shot wide in disbelief and surprise, the pieces all falling together for him. "Each other?"

"Yes," Regina admits quietly, and Emma feels her heart constrict painfully because the queen is clearly assuming the worst. "We would like to start...dating each other."

"Really?" Henry queries, looking right at Emma as if for confirmation.

"Really. We'd like to see where this thing goes," Emma explains, offering a smile.

"But…but why?"

Regina opens her mouth to answer his question, but then it's like all of her own doubts come rushing to the surface, and she doesn't have an answer that she thinks will be good enough for him. So desperately, she looks to Emma for one instead.

To her great surprise, Emma almost grins – in spite of how inappropriate such a reaction is considering how close to a panic attack Regina looks. She grins because it occurs to her right now that she and the former mayor are acting like a team.

A weird tag-team, sure, but one just the same.

Oddly, that emboldens her.

"Because," Emma replies, her smile growing into something strong and sure. "I think your mom is pretty special, Henry, and I think that the two of us just get each other."
"Okay, maybe now, but you were enemies for so long," he protests, frowning like he just can't manage to figure out how this could have happened between his mothers.

"Yeah, we were. And now we're not. You helped us to not be enemies, Kid. And I think that we both like this way – this us - a whole lot better. We're hoping that you do, too." It occurs to her that her words sound young – probably younger than is needed for a boy of his age – but at the moment, his innocence is shining through.

"I do, but…Emma, what about my dad?" Henry asks, oblivious to the way that Regina stiffens next to him, her lips tightening into a hard line, her hands balling up.

Emma nods like she’d been expecting this question from him, and truthfully, she had. Because isn’t nuclear always the dream? Aren’t most kids raised with the idea of a happily ever after for their biological mom and dad? Yeah, of course they are.

"I loved Neal – your dad - for a very long time, Henry, but I don't want to be with him, anymore. Not in that way. Can you understand that?"

"Because you want to me with my mom?"

"No, not because of that," Emma corrects. "Even if I didn't want to be with you mom, I still wouldn't want to be with your dad, anymore, because it's not about her or him. It's about me, and what's right for me. And what’s right for me isn’t being with him."

"Because you don’t love him, anymore." His head tilts, genuine curiosity there. "You can fall out of love?" His eyes skip towards Regina as if for confirmation, but all she can do is smile thinly at him because prior to whatever it is that she feels for Emma, she's only ever loved one other person, and that had ended terribly for everyone.

So…she doesn’t know any better than he does.

"Yeah, you can," Emma confirms. "But that doesn't mean that what it was – what your dad and I had – wasn't special. Because it was. He might not have been the one for me in the end, but it still gave us you, which means it will always be important to me, but what we had, it's in the past now. Does that…does that make sense to you?"

"I guess so. So, now you want a future with mom?"

"I don't think that either of us are talking that far ahead, honey," Regina states. "I think –“ she looks at Emma for verification. "We just want to see where this goes."

“Yeah,” Emma agrees. “We just want to…take a chance. See what happens.”

"Oh. Okay."

There's a long pause, and then Emma asks with slight tremor audible in her voice, "So…what do you think, Kid? You going to be okay with this?"

"Can I think about it?"

Emma is about to respond – though she's not entirely sure how – but Regina immediately jumps in, a large smile plastered across her lips. "Of course."

"Thanks," he says, standing up. "I'm going to go make me a sandwich." He takes a few long strides towards the kitchen and then turns back to face his two mothers, "Why did you tell me?" he asks.
"You didn't have to." And just like that, their little boy goes from young and innocent to mature and thoughtful. He's watching them carefully, like he's looking for the lie. Like he’s wondering if there’s more to tell.

So Regina tells him the truth, instead: "Because I – we – promised you that we would be honest with you whenever possible. And so we are. Even if it's...difficult."

"Thank you," he says quietly, and then continues towards the kitchen.

"Well," Regina sighs after a moment. "That could have gone worse."

"Yeah, but it could have gone better, too," Emma answers with a frown.

"He needs time," Regina replies, her tone almost defensive on his behalf. "And we are going to give him it. As much time as he needs," Her tone allows for no room for discussion of this, and it occurs to Emma that perhaps there's a part of Regina that just might be hoping for Henry to reject them. Not because the queen doesn't want this, but because it might be easier than facing the very difficult struggle to come.

Regina is no coward, Emma knows, but gracefully bowing out before it gets hard and using Henry as an excuse for such, well that's totally something Regina would do.

"Fine," Emma agrees with a shrug of her shoulders, choosing not to bring up her concerns with Regina for the time being. It's not like she doesn't have doubts, too, and yes, it probably would be easier if Henry were to put the kibosh on them. But, she realizes that it’s really not what she wants. Still, that’s for later. For now..."It's not like we don't have other things to think about, anyway. Like returning home."

"Yes, we should focus on that," Regina agrees. "It won’t be...easy."

"Operation Trojan Horse was a success," Emma reminds her with a chuckle.

"In theory at least," Regina replies, her more controlled mask back in place.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it's easy for your parents to say that they have no problem with me returning to town when all they want is you and Henry home, but once I get back and there's magic inside of me once again, and I'm feeling all of the old feelings and temptations again... I think we both know that the first time I see Snow and she sees me, it's going to feel like we never left. A lot could go wrong in a hurry, Emma."

"Maybe, but you're not the same woman you were eight weeks ago. I believe in you."

Regina takes a deep breath, allowing Emma’s words to wash over her. Finally, sounding more than a little shaky, she replies, "Perhaps you do, but they won’t. And with fairly good reason. I don't think eight weeks away will convince her that I’ve changed; she and I have almost forty years of unfortunate history between us."

"Do you care?"

"About your mother's opinion of me? Perhaps not, but I don't want things to be difficult for you or Henry, and I suspect that neither your mother nor your father will be pleased with either of you wanting to spend time with me," Regina admits, and then she frowns because it's still weird for her how much truth and honesty Emma seems to be able to pull out of her.
"We'll figure it out," Emma promises before leaning forward and pressing her lips to Regina's in a gentle fairly chaste kiss. She holds it there for a moment, waiting for the tension in the queen's body to release.

And then it does, and Regina laughs and pushes her away.

"What?" Emma asks.

"I admit," Regina says. "I look forward to the day when we get to tell your mother about this. If for no other reason than to see the look on her face."

"Really?"

Regina’s shoulders sag, the humor bleeding away. "Actually, no, not really. Such a confrontation wouldn't go well for any of us, and I fear that if we were to get to that point, I might not act as you would want me to. I'm not a good woman, Emma, and I think that if I were to allow myself to fall into this…into you completely, and if your mother were to stand in the way, well then, like I said…I'm not a good woman."

"I disagree."

"You –“ Regina blinks, thrown by the simplicity of Emma’s statement.

"Yep, I do. You’ve been through a lot. And made some really bad choices. But I know you. And where it matters most—" she places her hand over Regina’s heart. “You are good.” She shrugs. "I know it’s hard for you to believe that – to see yourself as more than the Evil Queen, but even during the worst of us, I always saw you as just Regina so actually it's pretty easy for me to see the real you as who is in front of me now."

"The real me. I have a long way to go to get back to her," the queen says softly.

"We both do, and I think when we get home, we need to keep talking. This thing between us, even if we find out that it's not meant to be…what it was last night, it still means something, and no matter what happens next, I want to keep what we built here. That matters more than anything else. I want to keep our friendship."

"Me, too. You know, you're the only one who knows now," Regina tells her, placing her hand over Emma’s, which is still resting just over her heart. "I mean about my…issues with Rumplestiltskin and my mother and the King. Just you."

"You have my word that no one else ever will. Unless you want them to."

"Thank you." She blows out a breath then and chuckles, sounding almost nervous. "I suppose now it's time to prepare to head back to Storybrooke." She tilts her head, looking at Emma with enough intensity to make Emma squirm if she was the type to. “You said that our friendship meant more than anything else. Did you mean that?"

"I did. I do."

"Then I think that no matter what Henry decides, maybe for the first time in my life, perhaps I finally have enough to allow myself to be happy and let go," Regina tells her, and then with an almost beaming smile, she turns and heads towards the kitchen, her steps regal and proper. Like the Queen she is now and will always be.

Emma watches with an echoing smile, thinking that yes, it would be enough.
That doesn’t mean that it’s all that she wants.

It’s decided late that evening that they will depart for Storybrooke on the Friday to come; that gives them five days to clean and close up the beach house, and prepare for the long journey back home. It also gives each of them a bit too much time to worry about how many things can possibly go wrong once they cross the town line.

Not that either Emma or Regina will speak of this.

Regina's certainly on edge, and feeling the worries, however, so Emma takes it upon herself to try to be the voice of confidence and positivity. It's hard and the natural impulses she has to be wary try to surface, but one of them has to hope for the best.

One of them has to have faith that the last eight weeks have meant something that can continue to breathe and exist within the boundary lines of Storybrooke.

And so she does.

With soft touches and a few stolen intimacies.

Whispered reassurances and strong arms.

Foreheads pressed together

*It’ll be okay.*

It will.

One way or another.

"Want to play?" Emma asks, gesturing towards the chessboard as Henry steps out into the Living Room. The rain continues to pound against the windows and roof of the house, and Henry is starting to show extreme signs of cabin fever again, his anxiety at being cooped up quite clear even though it’s only Tuesday, and he's only been back with his mothers for two days.

"Sure," he sighs. "Is Mom sleeping?"

"She has a bit of a headache," Emma confirms with a slight nod as she starts to set up the board. "White or black."

"You're the White Knight," he reminds her.

She frowns at that, and then flips the white pieces around to him. "Just Emma," she reminds him. "And this is just a game of chess."

"Okay." He glances back towards the hallway. "Is this one of her migraines?"
"It is."

"Because of going home?"

"Most likely."

"But they said it'd be fine."

"You're not that young, Kid," she says gently. "And even you know that bad blood doesn't just disappear because someone wants it to."

"It has between you and her."

"It's a bit more complicated than that."

"Because you're in love with her."

"Well, first, I don't think we're that far down the path. I think right now, we're more like good friends who are trying to understand what else there might be if anything. But even besides that, none of this just happened. Any kind of relationship that your mom and I have now is because we've spent the last two months talking things out and we've listened to each other."

"So why can't Mom do that with Grandma and Grandpa?"

"Because none of them are willing to take that first step."

"So is that our job?"

"Nope," Emma replies as she watches Henry move one of his pawns forward. "As much as we might want to help them all out here, this is something that my mother and your mother have got to figure out between the two of them."

Henry frowns deeply at this; he's not accustomed to not getting involved in situations that clearly demand intervention. He sees no real value in the bizarre habit, which adults seem to have of just letting things settle and sit especially when it clearly hurts and upsets everyone involved. Still, Emma is pinning him with a hard look that tells him that she knows exactly what he's thinking. Which means that she plans to keep him from trying anything.

He sighs and then petulantly pushes forward another chess piece.

She laughs and then reaches over and ruffles his hair. "I know; it'd be so wonderful if we could just turn everything in life into some kind of awesome undercover operation and fix everything that doesn't make sense, but Kid, that isn't how things work. We can't make the two of them talk if they're unwilling to. All we can do is hope that one day they'll want to."

"Fine," he says. Then, his curiosity pushing through, "Do you think we're ready to go home? Do you think Mom is? There's magic back there, Emma, and magic has always been bad for her. It's why we're here now to begin with. What if she –"

"We have to have faith in her that she won't fall backwards. And she'll have us there to help her and support her if she feels like she needs to."

"Could you fall in love with her?" he asks.

She smiles slightly, almost thoughtfully. "I think maybe I could. Eventually."

"Could you fall in love with her?" he asks.
He nods and returns to the game. It's the last time he mentions Regina – or the elephant in the room, which is the relationship between his mothers - for the rest of the day. Instead, he speaks to her about what he and Neal had done together, and about the changes (most of them small and of little consequence) that had occurred in Storybrooke over the last two months. He speaks of home, and missing it.

And she realizes how much she misses it, too.

"It's cold," Emma states as she steps out onto the deck, two mugs in her hand.

"Indeed." She takes the cup from Emma and sips it, expecting plain coffee. Almost immediately, she coughs in surprise, and looks down at the mug. "What's in this?"

"Bailey's."

"I see. Something on your mind, Sheriff?"

"Not much. What about you? You spent most of the day locked away in your room."

"I’m feeling better now,” Regina reassures her.

"You're lying. And you're scared."

"I'm not lying," she replies sounding almost indignant. "I do feel better than I did earlier. As for being scared, that's absurd; I am not scared of Snow White."

"I didn't say that you were, Your Majesty. I don't think you're scared of my mother; I think you're scared about what going back might mean for you. And for us."

"Us. Right. You talked to him about us today, didn't you?"

"Not really. I'm giving him his space to think things over just like you wanted me to. He’s the one who initiated it. He’s the one who asked a few questions about us, and I answered them honestly, and then we both let it go, and I kicked his ass at chess."

"Charming," she mutters. Then shrugs. "Pun intended."

Emma laughs at that, and then takes a hefty gulp from her cup. "So," she says after a moment, her bright green eyes locked on the rain as it dances across the turbulent surface of the ocean. "Tell me a story."

"About?"

"You said your father would take you riding with him from time to time, right?"

"He did," Regina confirms. “Which never ended well for either of us."

"But it was fun while it was happening, yeah?"

"It was," Regina replies with an almost wistful smile. “A lot of fun.”
"So tell me that story."

"And what story will you tell me? That is still how this works, yes?"

"It is. So you tell me yours, and I'll tell you about my first kiss."

"And why, pray tell, do you think that's a story that I'd want to hear?"

"Because it's really funny, and you'll laugh. Probably a lot."

"Oh? Is it embarrassing?" Regina asks, grinning almost vindictively. That she feels stronger things for this woman every day doesn't change the fact that it still amuses her to watch – or hear about – the more clumsy and goofy sides of Emma Swan.

"Very much so," Emma promises her as she slips her hand into Regina's and gives it an affectionate squeeze before bringing it up to her lips to apply a gentle almost kiss upon the queen's knuckles. "Do we have a deal?" This suddenly feels like a loaded question – like maybe Emma is referring not to this story in particular, but to their recent habit of sharing their often dark and ugly past with each other tale for tale.

This, Regina understands then, is all about keeping what they've earned over the last few weeks; this is all about verifying the friendship above everything else.

Regina looks over at her lover for a long moment, and then in a voice much softer – one that is completely devoid of deceit or misdirect – she whispers, "We do."

The storm finally lets up the next morning – Wednesday – which makes it the first day that Henry and Regina have been able to head out for their walk down the sand together since he's been back. It's fairly cold and they're both bundled up in thick sweatshirts, but neither of them considers begging off.

Mostly because they both have a feeling that this might be the last time they have a chance to do this together. Sure, Storybrooke has its own beaches, and Regina is already thinking of asking Henry to take this kind of walk together back there as well, but there's something special about this particular patch of sand.

There's something that makes it feels like it belongs to just them.

They walk down the darkened by water sand in silence for the first fifteen minutes. It's companionable but still unsettling because it's clear to Regina that Henry has something important on his mind. Finally, gently so as not to let him think that she's upset with him, "Is something bothering you, sweetheart?"

He shrugs his shoulders and looks out at the calm water of the ocean.

"Henry, talk to me. Please."

He turns to look at her. "Does this mean Emma fixed you?"

She startles at the question for a moment. "Fixed me?"
"Are you all better? Is that why she's okay with being with you?"

"Oh," Regina says softly. She glances out at the water for a moment, trying to push away the fierce hurt, which sparks within her at his words – at the idea that her son sees her as broken. Finally, swallowing hard, she continues with, "No, honey, Emma didn't fix me. No one can fix someone else. I'm not even sure that I can be fixed to be honest. But what Emma did was help me remember how to be the better person that I once was. And she has helped me deal with some of the...very ugly things in my past. As for if I'm better, well I don't know. I'm trying to be, but there's still a lot of her inside of me, Henry, and I'm afraid that maybe there always will be."

"The Evil Queen?"

"Yes. You can't just make your past disappear, and I can't just pretend that everything that's happened to me, and everything that I've done never occurred because it did. All I can do now is try to be good enough for you."

"And for Emma?"

She nods. "And for myself, too, I think."

"You should go back to Archie," he advises. "He didn't mean to hurt you."

"I know he didn't," she answers carefully, forcing herself to keep the instinctive agitation that simmers to the surface out of her voice.

"So will you?"

"Go back to Dr. Hopper?" Off his quick nod, she considers her response for a moment, and then replies with a tentative, "Will you?"

He tilts his head. "What do you mean?"

"Come with me."

"To your sessions?"

"Some of them, yes. Some, I probably need to still do by myself, but I wouldn't mind having you there for others. If that's all right with you, of course."

He tilts his head and looks at her hard, like he's trying to see into her and really understand her; it's more than a little unnerving. "What do you want?" he asks her. "I mean really want." It's not the kind of question that most twelve-year-old boys ask their mother, and it reminds her of Emma having asked her much the same thing just a few weeks earlier.

"I want to be happy," she answers. "That's all I want for both of us. For all of us."

"Okay," he nods, like that's the end of the conversation completely. She imagines that she's supposed to ask if he's had time to think about the situation with Emma, but she doesn't want to break up this wonderfully quiet moment between the two of them with the pain that might come if he were to reject the idea of the Evil Queen finding solace in the arms of the White Knight.

She smiles at him instead, and then points ahead. "The fort is up there. You want to give it one last look before we go? See if we can make it stronger?"

"Yeah."
They make their way down to the little wood structure, and amazingly, it's held together. It's wet and waterlogged, but surprisingly sturdy, and though she doesn't quite understand why, Regina feels her heart swell at this.

Especially when she sees the way that Henry grins up at her, with something that looks a whole lot like love in his eyes. "It stayed together," he tells her.

"It did," she confirms, and then, because she's suddenly overcome with the need to pull her perfect little boy close, she leans down and kisses him on the top of the head, and then wraps her arms around him and pulls him into a tight hug.

And to her amazement and astounding joy, he fully returns the embrace.

It's Thursday evening, and the last night at the beach house. Dinner is almost decadent and the conversation at the table is uplifting and spirited (whether the good guys in comic books actually win or the bad guys just let them out of eventual boredom and the need to find something more fun), but there's an undeniable tension amongst the three of them, a kind of fear that none of them want to express.

It's simple, really; tomorrow morning they'll get into the already packed up car, and start the long drive back to Storybrooke, and after that, everything will work out as it will. That's Regina's thinking, anyway. Fatalistic for sure, but it's hard for her to be anything except that after all the times she's tried to have hope and still failed.

So she leaves it in the hands of the universe, and doesn’t dare to hope.

Only, she kind of does hope.

In spite of herself, and her entire history, and even with so many doubts.

She kind of…does.

"All right, Kid," Emma says at around nine. "Time to crash out."

"I'm not tired," he says. "And it's way before my bedtime." He's right, of course; even at home he'd usually be up until around ten, and here, well it's pretty much been whenever he passes out as opposed to a specific time.

"We have a big day ahead of us," Regina says gently. She reaches out and runs her fingers through his hair, pushing brown strands back and away from his forehead.

"It'll be okay," he promises her, his smile bright and light.

"Of course it will," she agrees. "Go brush your teeth."

"Yeah, sure," he grumbles, looking like he wants to remind her that he's not a kid, anymore.
Sometimes she forgets that he's almost a teenager, but then truthfully, sometimes he likes that she
does ignore it. Sometimes it's nice to know that no matter how old he gets, there will always be
someone that cares whether or not his hair is combed and his teeth are brushed. Sometimes, it’s
nice just to be a kid.

So he grumbles and groused but kisses her on the cheek and goes, anyway.

And both moms watch him with indulgent grins.

Once he's finally left the room completely, Regina retreats back to the kitchen and starts loading up
the dishwasher. In the morning, they'll make breakfast for the last time, and then do one final load
as they're packing up. And then…they’ll be gone.

And this will all be in the past.

She’s not sure how she feels about that.

"Hey, you okay?" Emma asks, coming up and leaning over the bar.

"Just thinking."

"About?" Emma prompts after a few seconds.

"The song that's in my head again."

"Your mother's?"

"Yes. And her words and Rumple's and the Kings and…and so many other things."

"Henry's right, you know," Emma assures her. "It will be okay."

Regina smiles, but it doesn't quite meet her eyes. "I hope so," she says.

"You think he's going to tell you he's not cool with us, don't you?"

"It's been five days since we talked to him," Regina reminds her. "I think he's made his opinion on
us fairly clear, Emma. And that's all right; I knew it was likely that he wouldn't be all right with us
being together. Who would be?"

"Hey…"

"It's all right," Regina says adamantly, straightening up. "I have my son, I have my sanity, and I
have a friend. All of those are things I didn't have eight weeks ago."

"Okay," Emma says. "And you do. We do. Have all of those things, I mean."

"I know," Regina replies, smiling fully this time. She shuts the door of the dishwasher and then
says, "Let’s go say goodnight to our son."

She can't sleep.

It's well past midnight, and they all need to be up and moving in about five hours if they're going
to avoid traffic, but Regina's mind is whirling with thoughts, and she's almost terrified to face the dream world with so much going on in her head.

Staring up at the ceiling, she wiggles her fingers a little bit, as if trying to feel the magic that she knows is still inside of her. The only time that it'd surfaced over the last eight weeks had been during the assault in the alley, but the fact that it's there still unsettles her because it seems like no matter how hard she tries to get away from this addiction, she can't.

And despite Emma and Henry's assurances, such understanding terrifies her.

During that first terrible night in this house, an overly emotional Regina had asked Emma what would happen if she were to just leave and disappear into the world. She’d been so certain in her belief that Henry would miss her for a short time, but then everything would move on, and everyone would probably be better for it. Emma had protested that that'd be like abandoning him, and such wouldn't actually be better for him. In moments like these, though, when her doubts are thick and painful, it's hard not to wonder if he wouldn't be so much happier without her.

And perhaps Emma would be, too.

This thought is dripping through her mind – almost like venom – when she hears a soft knock on the door. She's just opening her mouth to respond when it opens and Emma is standing there, framed by the light from the hallway.

"You still awake?" she asks, her voice just barely a whisper.

"Yes. Can't sleep," Regina admits, sitting up, clutching the sheet to her. "You?"

"Yeah. No such luck. So I figured I'd come in and see if you wanted to join me for a last night of *I Love Lucy* marathoning," Emma offers.

"I have a better idea," Regina replies, and it's like madness rushes through her mind, and suddenly she just doesn't care because she wants this. She wants Emma.

"Yeah? What'd you have in mind?"

"Emma," Regina says simply, and then she’s letting the sheet drop away from her even as she holds out her hand, wiggling her fingers in invitation.

There's no hesitation after that. They both know that this could be the last time for them because if Regina's right, and Henry's silence about them is his de facto way of telling them he's against it, then they both know that this is over before it'd ever really begun. They both know that Regina simply won't go against him no matter how much it might break her heart to be forced to give this up. In the end, her love for him, and her need to do what she believes is right by him will always win.

Even over herself.

But this moment isn't about Henry.

Emma's hand slides into hers, and then Regina is pulling the sheriff towards her, and into the bed, their lips immediately meeting and their hands quickly moving to rid themselves (mostly Emma) of the unnecessary clothing, which exists between them.

"What do you want?" Emma whispers as their hearts pound together.
"Everyone keeps asking me that."

"And?" Emma presses as she leans in and starts dropping kisses against the exposed column of Regina's throat, a pulse hammering beneath her lips. Her hands drop down, sliding over warm skin, fingers pressing and tracing, soft murmurs sounding.

"And I keep saying the same thing: I just want to be happy."

"What does that mean?"

"Right now? It means I want you."

She feels the way Emma's lips curve into a smile against her neck, and then the sheriff's mouth is on hers – hot and demanding and passionate. So very wanting.

After that, the whole world just slides away from them into the sounds of harsh breathing and whispers and pleas and whimpers and just barely muffled screams.

And when it's over, and Emma's arms are wrapped loosely around her, their fingers coming together just above the queen's belly button, Emma's cheek against hers, Regina finally manages to find the strength within her to say, "You should go."

"Not until I have to," Emma says gently.

"I just want to be happy," Regina whispers again. "That's all I've ever wanted."

"I know," Emma answers as she drops a kiss down against Regina's neck, the intense heat of the queen’s slightly damp skin intoxicating against the sheriff's pale lips. She winds their legs together, and pulls Regina even closer. "Sleep. It'll be okay. It will."

"I want to believe that, but I'm going to dream," Regina mumbles as darkness slips into her vision, and she feels the fuzziness of unconsciousness stealing over her already exhausted and passion dulled senses. "I don't want to dream."

"You won't," Emma assures her with a kiss to the patch of skin just below Regina's right ear. "And if you do dream, I'll wake you up. I won't let anything hurt you." She smiles slightly, sadly, knowing the reality of the world a little too well – love can’t wipe out the pain. Not entirely, anyway. "Not tonight. So sleep. I’ll be right here."

"You will," Regina allows with a soft smile, and then, she just lets everything go.

And allows herself to be happy.

Even if only for tonight.

Emma wakes first, reluctantly crawling from the warmth of the bed. She watches Regina sleep for a long moment, amazed by the soft peace she sees. Wishing that it – that they – could stay like this, but knowing that nothing real happens in isolation.

Assuming they have a chance – and she refuses to think about the Henry Problem for the moment – she knows that they have to find their way back to reality and try to make this work there, and not
just here in their safe place. As frightening as that is, it’s also the only way they’ll know if the romantic part of what’s occurred between them is real or just something created by their "escape" from Storybrooke.

Sighing, Emma makes her way into the bathroom. A quick shower (it’s not so quick) and then she’s in the kitchen making one last breakfast before it’s time to go home.

She has a full breakfast ready for them when they finally emerge from their bedrooms. Henry is tousled and sleepy, rubbing at his eyes. Regina is freshly showered and already a bit pensive. She messes his hair up more and he groans and turns away; when he does, she reaches over and squeezes Regina’s hand.

And whispers, “Breathe.”

Regina nods, and does so. Slowly.

Emma grins and hands her and Henry the plates, the rhythm so natural and easy now. They’re all a bit on edge, but this feels good and normal and even right.

And then Emma is lifting up the plate of bacon and offering it to Regina. There’s a pause, and it’s almost laughable – it shouldn’t be because this is bacon.

This is silly, and it’s just bacon.

It’s just…bacon, and weeks ago, it’d been a weird reminder of all of her mistakes. It’d been an uncomfortable reminder of how she’d allowed a distance to grow between she and Henry. It’d been a symbol of how she’d wanted to try to do better by him.

She thinks…hopes that she has at least started down that path.

Her eyes lift up and she looks at him; he smiles brightly at her.

Regina reaches out and takes a piece, bringing it to her mouth.

Because maybe it is just silly bacon, but perhaps right now, it means everything.

It's strange to be back in this car like this. Now riding shotgun beside Emma in the front seat, it'd been a different situation two months ago when she'd been cuffed in the back, a bloody cut on her forehead. Back then, she had genuinely believed that Emma had kidnapped her with the intent of executing her in the woods just outside of Storybrooke. Absurd, of course; even more so now that she's really come to know and understand exactly who Emma is.

But then again, she hadn't exactly been in her right mind then. Devastated by guilt, grief and decades of repressed pain, Regina had been waiting for the end even while fighting against it out of pure stubborn instinct.
Now, she finds herself lighter in the heart and soul, but perhaps just as scared.

Because going back to a place where there is so much well-deserved hatred for her feels a bit like walking back into the mouth of hell willingly. She knows that from the moment they cross the town line, she'll feel the magic sliding through her veins like the most addictive of poisonous drugs. She knows that she'll feel all of the old temptations to hurt and to do whatever she has to do in order to find peace.

Not that she ever has.

She smiles at something Emma says even though she doesn't actually hear it, and she laughs when Henry tells a joke that never penetrates her mind.

These are things that she had learned how to do as a Queen.


Her mother would be so proud.

No, no she wouldn't.

Her mother would be disgusted at her for the weakness that she’s showing in relation to Emma and Henry and wanting them to...well, just wanting them.

Regina grits her teeth, and tries to push the thoughts out and away because Mother is dead, and Mother is wrong, and she doesn't want to hear Mother anymore.

Her chest constricting painfully, and her head pounding like someone is kicking her, she wonders if she can tell Emma to pull over so that she can get out and run. Henry might not understand, but Emma would.

She says nothing, though, because it's time to face her past with her head held high.

So she simply laughs again in time with Henry's words.

And then, she tries to pretend that she doesn't see Emma looking at her.

Like she knows.

Like she understands.

She does.

They cross the line into Storybrooke at just after eleven in the morning, and just as she'd feared, the sharp magic surges through her body immediately. Perhaps it's how much she doesn't want to feel it which causes her to have the violent reaction she does, but whatever it is, seconds after they pass the wooden sign that Emma had once hit, Regina is doubling over in pain, her stomach rolling as bile rushes up her throat. "Emma," she whispers, her voice pained and broken. "Pull over. Please."

The car screeches to a sudden stop, and though she doesn't see it, she hears and feels the way Emma jumps out of the driver's side and rushes around to help her out of the passenger seat and
over to the side of the road, bent down beside her.

"Mom?" she hears Henry say as he comes up beside them. "What's wrong? Is it the magic? Is it hurting you?" he sounds so scared and innocent and she doesn't know how to tell him that yes, the magic is hurting her. The magic has *always* hurt her.

But never worse than she has hurt herself, and maybe that’s the lesson of all of this. Maybe when all is said and done, that’s what she needs to have learned – that the pain she feels is part of her, a weapon for her or against her, but still a part of her.

"It's okay," the sheriff assures her (and Henry, too, Regina thinks), and then Regina feels Emma's hands on her. One is resting lightly on her back, the tips pressing inwards, and another is settled against her hip, gentle and careful. Both are helping her to stay up and on her feet. Both are helping her to be strong as she fights to be.

"It doesn't look okay," Henry protests, but his eyes are on the way that his blonde mother is holding his brunette one. And though they don't see it, he's studying them carefully, looking for the lie, and searching for the truth as he has always tried to do.

But the truth has a way of changing as perspectives do, and what he’s seeing right now isn’t something that he would have been capable of seeing eight weeks ago.

"It's just the line again," Emma tells him. "You remember how when we went across it last time it caused her to get sick. Well, same thing this way. But it’s okay. It is."

"I remember," he says as he nods, all while continuing to watch as Emma practically cradles Regina until her body stops trembling. And then he watches as Regina sags against her, her fingers gripping the fabric of Emma's shirt as she gasps for air.

It occurs to him, as he watches this, that he's never seen his mother lean on anyone for support before. He's never seen her willing to be weak around anyone – even him. He thinks about the house and the bacon and a thousand other little things.

Like sitting on the porch reading comic books together.

Like the way his two moms look at each other, finding grounding in each other. He doesn’t entirely understand what that means, but even he sees the calm there.

Even he sees the strength.

"It's getting better now," Regina says suddenly, exhaling a few more times. "Less."

"Good. You think you can stand up?" Emma asks.

"Yes."

"Okay. On three."

Regina does it on one.

Emma chuckles and then gently helps her back to the passenger side. She's about to shut the door when Henry suddenly speaks up, his voice clear and determined.

"I want you both happy," he says, his green eyes blazing. "All of us."

His mothers turn towards him. "Henry," Regina says, sounding so very uncertain.
He kind of hates that.

And thinks that maybe what they’re all supposed to do is make each other stronger.

"Just promise me that if you guys are going to do this, you won't hurt each other again," Henry pleads. "Not intentionally, anyway." When they both look at him with wide eyes like maybe he shouldn't understand the difference between intentional and not, he shrugs his shoulders in response. "I'm not the little kid who got on a bus to Boston anymore," he tells them. "And I know that sometimes we hurt each other even when we don't mean to. I don’t want either one of you to be hurt again."

He looks at Regina when he says this, and it takes everything that she has not to tell him that he's wrong and that he doesn't need to be making the apology to her that he's clearly making. What stops her is the crisps clarity in his eyes.

He knows what he's saying.

Her little boy isn't one anymore.

She doesn't know if she wants to cry tears of loss over this fact or hug him for the son she feels like she's regained. Possibly both, she thinks.

She does neither, though; she just gazes back at her Henry with watery eyes.

"Just be happy," he says again, and then he gets in the back seat of the car, and picks up his handheld video game and returns to killing 3D aliens.

Leaving both of his mothers to wonder what had just happened.

And what it means for them.

They get to the Mayoral Mansion about twenty minutes later, and for a few long seconds, neither woman moves to get out of the car because they both rather distinctly recall their last time here, and how the beginning of this little adventure of theirs had been kicked off with a magical fight on the porch that had concluded with Regina unconscious on the sidewalk.

"So what now?" Regina asks. "Do I go inside, and the two of you leave?"

Emma frowns because she knows that they should have discussed this before they'd left the beach house, because now where Henry stays and who takes care of him suddenly matters again in a way that aches and burns.

They hadn't, though, and so now this is one of those delicate moments.

"I want to make sure that your house is safe for us, but then I probably need to go see my parents and let them know we've returned," Emma replies. "And I'm sure they'd love to see Henry, too, but I promise you that we'll be back right after that. If you don't mind, I'd like to crash here until I can find a new apartment; I think my days of staying with my mom and dad at the loft are probably over now. And I think it's time our kid comes home."

"Henry, sweetheart, are you all right with that?" Regina asks, looking right at her son. She's
fighting to keep the anxious hope from her voice; the choice to come back and live with her has to be his and his alone.

"Yeah," he says with a quick nod. "But no more fighting over me, okay? If you guys are going to be together, then I belong to both of you, right?"

"Yeah," Emma agrees, then looks to Regina, who nods. Then, because this seems as good a time as any to suggest this, she says to Regina, her voice gentle and understanding, "You're more than welcome to come with us if you want; I'm sure you and my mother have a lot you need to talk about."

"We really don't," Regina counters, her shoulders suddenly tensing and the expression on her face changing into a much harder one. "And even if we do have much to say to each other, the fact is that I'm not ready for that yet. I'm not ready to forgive, and I doubt that she is, either."

Henry starts to speak, but Emma silence him with the slightest of shakes of her head, reminding him with just that motion about the conversation, which they'd had about not forcing this relationship to heal before it's ready to.

"Okay," she says simply, gently. She gets out of Ruby's car, then and motions up towards the house before offering Regina her hand. "How about we head inside and make sure none of the idiots in this town caused too much damage while we were gone."

There’s a pause, a brief hesitation, and then Regina takes it and they head inside.

Thankfully, the mansion had suffered very little damage beyond a mass breeding of dust bunnies and a gathering of cobwebs in every corner of every room. And while both of these things irritate Regina to no end, the fact that her house has been untouched by those who would gladly see her dead gives her some comfort; this domicile is still hers.

Still safe.

She's by herself now, in the laundry room loading the washer with dirty clothes. Emma and Henry had left the house twenty minutes ago, and they probably won't be home for a few hours. Which is fine, she scolds herself, because it's not like she needs someone around her at all times; she's always done well enough being alone.

Only she knows that that's a bit of a lie. And even if it weren't, she finds that her desire – if it was ever actually that as opposed to a resigned acceptance of her lonely fate - for solitude isn't what it used to be.

Her fingers twitch as she feels a strong surge of magic flick it's way through her. It's not always like this; most of the time it's quite docile unless she's over emotional, but right now it's running around within her like a hyper child on a sugar high, and it wants to be released into the yard to play.

No, she thinks. Because she's in control now.

Because she won't become what she was again.

Her magic is part of her, and she has to accept this in order to conquer it.
To own it.
And so she will.

The anger and hurt are still there – especially when she thinks about where Emma and Henry are and how Snow is likely wrapping her arms around them and telling them how happy she is to have her family home. It make the fury burn bright and her eyes turn purple because the hatred still causes her skin to prickle and her heart to slam against her chest venomously.

But there’s something else there now, though.

The desire to be better than that.

Better than her mother.

Better than Rumple.

Better than the monster they created.

Good enough for Henry and Emma.

Good enough for herself.

As she steps out of the laundry room and moves past her office, her eyes sweep inwards and towards the locked cabinet. She strides in and almost without thinking, she opens and extracts the book of magic from within it.

The book that had belonged to her mother and Rumple.

Her hand grazes over the cover, and she feels the darkly hot magic burn against her fingertips. It screeches up through her skin, slithering through her blood like a poisonous snake, but oddly it's what the magic reminds her of – the memories of her wicked past – and not the feel of it that causes the most reaction; it's the realization that there's still something Emma doesn't yet know about – or at least understand – that causes her to inhale sharply.

But before this night is over, Regina thinks to herself as she places the book into the hot flames of the fireplace and watches it burn in a flare of purple and green and then corrosive sticky black, Emma will know the rest of the truth.

And then…and then she’ll have to make a decision.

Regina vows that she’ll accept it, whatever it is.

They hug her as tight as they can, and Emma lets them because they miss her so deeply even though they don't know her, and probably never will as well as they'd like to.

"You're home," Mary Margaret whispers.

"I am," Emma assures Mary Margaret as she finally breaks away. It's just her and her parents now; she'd dropped Ruby's car off on the way over (where she'd gotten an earful of gossip about the strange outsider Greg Mendell who hadn't yet left town and about Leroy continuing to hit on Sister
Astrid and about a date with Whale that had gone catastrophically bad) and the waitress had suggested to Henry that he might want to stick around and try out a new cake recipe. It'd been Ruby's not at all subtle way of saying that maybe Emma might want a few minutes alone with her mother and father.

Which was probably a good idea, Emma muses as she looks from David to Mary Margaret and sees the matching expressions of longing and sadness in their eyes, like both of them want to love and be as close to her as is possible, and yet can never find a way to make it happen as much as they want it to.

"You didn't have to leave for so long," Mary Margaret tells her with a kind of grimacing smile. There's an odd catch in her voice that suggests to Emma that she wants to be much stronger in how she says this, and yet she seems to know that such an approach wouldn't be at all appreciated.

"I did," Emma counters, her voice gentle. "We did. She – Regina - needed the time away from Storybrooke to try to heal and forget, and I think maybe I did, too."

Mary Margaret nods slowly. "And how…how is Regina?" It's quite clearly a hard to ask question, and she doesn't hide her emotions well at all – her clear jealousy and strong guilt – shine through even though she's trying not to let them. She's trying to be a good person, but she's deeply conflicted and confused, and she doesn't at all understand what's happened. She doesn't understand at all why her daughter had chosen to take care of the woman who'd spent so long trying to destroy their family. Even if it is a woman who - deep down inside - Mary Margaret still loves terribly.

"She's better than she was," is all Emma will allow.

"Good…good. So…what now?"

Emma laughs.

"What?"

"Regina asked me the same thing."

"Oh. And?"

"And, after this, the Kid and I are heading back to the Mansion for the night. And then tomorrow, I'm going to look for an apartment for myself."

"You don't have to," David protests, finally speaking up.

She smiles at him. "You know I do. You need your space, and I need mine."

"Emma, we just got you back," Mary Margaret says.

"I'm only going a few blocks," Emma assures them. "And you know what? In this town, it may not even be that far. I could end up living across the street from you."

"That'd…that'd actually be kind of nice," Mary Margaret says with a broad smile. Then, quietly, sobering up immediately, she asks, "And Regina?"

"What about her?"

"What about Henry?"

"He's our son," Emma says simply, shrugging her shoulders. "We’re going to do what’s best for
him, and that means we share him. We do right by him.”

A curious look passes between David and Snow, but then it fades, and Snow smiles brightly – too brightly to be real – and says, "Can we have breakfast? Tomorrow morning maybe? There’s so much that I want to catch up with you about."

"Yeah, I think I'd like that," Emma replies.

And then on impulse, she leans forward and hugs her mother tight.

Because people fuck up and do terrible things, and they wear that pain in their eyes and in the way they tremble when they think that no one notices.

But Emma’s gotten pretty good at recognizing the tremble.

"I love you," she whispers, saying words that she's not sure she would have been able to say eight weeks ago. Before she'd known about the deals that her mother had tried to make to protect her prior to her birth. Before she’d known just how much her parents had wanted her. "And I missed you, too."

Henry’s in bed – exhausted out of his mind and completely dead to the world – when Regina quietly tells her that they have a field trip that they need to take. It's just past eleven at night, and all Emma wants to do is sleep like Henry is, but there's something – a kind of almost crazed urgency – in Regina's eyes which suggests to Emma that she shouldn't ignore or push this off. So wearily, she rises and follows.

Regina doesn't say a word as they walk the mile from the mansion to the cemetery, not even when Emma tries to joke her way into an explanation of why they're headed towards the creepiest part of town late at night. Instead, Regina simply smiles and keeps walking, her high-heeled boots clicking on the cement.

Which is when Emma notices that Regina has changed herself back into her old clothes. Though she looks completely familiar to Emma like this, this doesn't feel natural; it feels like some kind of protective shielding technique, and realizing this sets all of the sheriff's nerves-endings on fire. It’s a fire, which becomes a five star one when they get to the doorway to the family vault that she and Regina had once – a long time ago - fought outside of.

For Graham.

"Regina, why are we here?" Emma asks, unable to hide how on edge she is.

"You need to see," is the only response she gets. And then Regina pushes the door open and steps inside, not waiting for Emma to follow because she knows that the sheriff won't be able to stop herself from doing it.

"See what?"

"Who I was."

"Regina…"
"No," the queen counters, turning around to face her just as they reach the extraordinary casket that houses Cora's body. "We've talked about what made me who I was, and how I became her, but you haven't actually seen her...me."

"Yes, I did. Yes, I have," Emma corrects. "Or are you forgetting my first year here?"

"You saw a fairly watered down version of the monster that I once was. The one I'm capable of being. You saw someone who used manipulation to get what she wanted, but in my old world, I used deadly force and terrible violence to get those things done. You need to know who that person was...and is," Regina tells her as she pushes the casket aside to reveal stairs, which lead downwards. "You need to see me."

She descends slowly, emerging in the middle of her chamber of hearts. It looks mostly untouched, though someone has clearly been here – most likely David. Thankfully, he hadn't touched anything. Probably out of fear of what she might do to him should he meddle with the wrong thing as his wife had.

She hears Emma come behind her, and slowly, her voice tightly controlled, she says, "The night Graham chose you over me, I came down here and I took his heart out of one of those boxes over there, and I squeezed it until it was dust. I killed him to protect my curse, and because I was...I was hurt."

"I know this already. That you killed him, I mean. I know. We talked about this."

"We did, but you need to understand that there were others," Regina says, indicating towards the drawers. "I took so many hearts. For control, for pleasure, for anger."

"They belong to people in this town?"

"Most of them do. Some belong to people who are long dead now."

"Can the ones that belong to those who are living still be returned?"

"I believe so, though I'm honestly not sure I'd remember who all of them go to, anymore. And that's kind of the point," she turns to face Emma, her jaw working for a moment to force back the emotion and fear that is trying to surge toward the surface. Once she's back in control of herself, she continues with, "This vault is everything that I once was – everything I was and am capable of. Through that wall over there is a secret room; it's the one I hid in after my mother framed me."

"Show me."

"Very well." She walks over to the wall and waves her hand past it, causing it to disappear and reveal a room full of dresses and old world finery. It's practically an ode to the Evil Queen, and it makes Regina want to throw up because she hasn't been less this woman since the day Daniel had died. Still, this is necessary.

"Damn," Emma says, her eyes lighting one on of the dresses. It's a stunning deep red with sequins running across the lifted bust of it. It was probably absolutely magnificent on the woman who had once been the Queen.

"It was a different place," Regina says simply.

"Yeah, I'm getting that." She turns to face Regina, a frown on her lips and confusion in her eyes. "Why are you showing me this?"
"Because I need you to know what you're getting into, Emma. I need you to know that the stories
about me aren't just exaggerated tales. I was every bit the monster that Henry thought that I was
and perhaps...perhaps, I was even worse than that. I took life because I could and I hurt others
because it made me hurt less."

"If you say so. I'm not sure it ever really did that, though."

"Emma..."

"Look, I get it, okay? You want to warn me about what I'm getting myself into."

"Yes! Yes, that's exactly what I want to do," Regina says as she moves closer, enough so that
they're just inches apart from each other. She reaches up and places a gentle hand on Emma's
cheek, cupping it. "Because this is your last chance to walk away. If we do this and if I fall in love
with you and then you decide six months down the line that I'm not someone that you could ever
love back, well, I don't think that I'd ever be able to forgive you for that so if that's what's going
to happen, then let's stop this now. Let's stop this before we lose something which...something
which I need."

Emma nods at the words, but then steps away from Regina without responding, leaving the older
woman wearing a confused expression across her painted lips. She watches as Emma approaches
one of the dresses and runs her fingers across the fabric of it. "Doesn't look comfortable," she
notes.

"It wasn't, but I got used to it. Emma..."

The sheriff turns to look at her, her expression serious and determined. "It's not my place to forgive
you for the sins of your past because aside from what you did to me, I wasn't part of the rest of it.
That's between you and my mother and...well, it's not between us. Graham, he is between us, and
you're going to have to carry that guilt with you for the rest of your life."

"I know."

"But none of that means that this is you. Not anymore."

"Perhaps not, but she's still inside of me, and always will be. I told Henry that, and I'm telling you it
now because you need to understand that the Evil Queen wasn't just a bad stage for me. She was
me, Emma. She is a part of me, and I have to accept her. I think...I think pretending that she’s
not...that’s not being honest, and I’m sick of not being honest." She smiles sadly. "She’s part of
me, and I want to be with you."

"Good, because I want to be with you too," Emma tells her and then steps over to her. "And yeah,
maybe I'm completely insane because this is insane, but I feel like the woman I've gotten to know –
the one I spent all of last night with – is the actual real and complete person. Not the Evil Queen
who wears absurd dresses and rips out hearts, and not the girl who you were before all of this. All
of that and none of that, right? I think...I think maybe Regina Mills who stole the brown blanket
that she claimed she hated and hopes that no one noticed that she did it is the real person."

Blushing slightly, Regina clears her throat and mutters under her breath, "I have no idea how that
hideous blanket got into the car."

"Exactly," Emma smiles. "There's no point in pretending that you didn't do all of these things
anymore than there’s a point in pretending that I haven’t done the awful things that I have -- she
holds up her hand to stop Regina from protesting. "It matters to me that I accept my mistakes; I
don’t want to be on a pedestal with you. I want…I think I need to be imperfect. I think maybe I want to be.”

“Okay,” Regina agrees, feeling almost lightheaded with hope now.

Emma nods in relief. “And yeah, maybe I should run because I get the feeling that being with you will never be easy, but I don't want to. I want this, too. I want you.”

"Why?" Regina presses because she needs to know. "Just a few weeks ago you were so unsure about us. Just a few weeks ago you said that this would be a bad idea."

"It still might be because the books all still say getting involved with someone while you're trying to heal yourself is a terrible idea, and we're both trying to do that, but you know what, Regina? For once I'm following my heart," Emma replies. "I haven't done much of that in my life but this time it feels like what I need to be doing. Maybe even what I want to be doing." She gestures around. "I see this. I get this, but it doesn't change that I think that I know who you are better than this room does."

"I meant what I said," Regina tells her. "This is your chance to walk away."

"I know, and I'm not. I choose this. You. So now it's your turn. Your choice."

Regina smiles, shaking her head in amazement. "You truly are a Charming."

"I might be exhausted, but that didn't actually sound like an insult."

Regina snorts. "Definitely exhausted."

"So?"

Regina answers her by leaning up and softly kissing her, gentle and chaste, and then they're both stepping forward and into each other's arms, for a moment just holding each other. Just allowing the warmth and comfort of acceptance to sweep over them.

After a moment of this – a moment of just enjoying the softness of a new beginning – Emma says, "Now that that’s settled, you think maybe we can get out of here now? This place is seriously creepy, and no offense but it's weird having this conversation with your mother's casket up there; I keep expecting her to jump out of it."

Regina shudders at the very idea of such. "She wouldn't approve."

"Of me or us?"

"Both. She despised you, and, you know what she thought of well, love…"

"Yeah. And she was wrong. It's the one thing my parents are right about."

Regina sneers at this, almost out of instinct. "We can leave now."

"Happily," Emma says, and then glances back at the red dress, a small smirk playing across her lips as far more interesting visuals assault her. As entirely improper as it is, it’s oddly not difficult to imagine Regina rocking the outfit, though she has a feeling that what she's seeing in her head doesn't come close to the reality of it.

"Absolutely not," Regina says simply, an eyebrow quirked in amusement.
Emma just grins sheepishly in response.

She thinks that tomorrow, they might need to talk about those hearts and they might need to think about returning the ones that they can – a kind of atonement that might soothe the queen's tormented soul - but for tonight, Emma allows the promise of a future – one that their son accepts for them – wash over her.

Side by side, and hand-in-hand, they slowly ascend the steps together.

She doesn't say a word when she sees Regina place her palm against her mother's casket because love – even the kind that's broken and twisted around in macabre circles – dies hard, and though it hurts Regina so deeply to still feel such things for a woman who had never done anything besides hurt her child savagely, Emma knows that it is this ability to love, which keeps Regina human and alive.

It's this ability to continue to love even amongst the burnt ruins of her heart, which has allowed Regina a chance at redemption, peace and a new beginning.

Perhaps it has allowed them both that.

They're back at the house when Regina laughs suddenly, the sound wonderful and light and real in a way, which feels almost instantly frighteningly addictive.

"What?" Emma asks as she hangs up her jacket and starts to remove her boots, placing them by the front door in a way, which will rapidly become routine.

"I just remembered that I owe you a rain check," Regina reminds her, stepping closer, a seductive saunter in her movements.

"Yeah, you do," Emma confirms. Then again, with a nod, "Yeah."

"I do believe that you're shorting out," Regina tells her, and then offers her hand.

Emma takes it and steps close. Though it’s clear that Regina is expecting something far more intense and passionate, Emma surprises her by leaning in and pressing a gentle kiss to her neck, and then the curl of her ear. "You're wrong," she whispers.

"About what? Owing you a rain check?" Her eyebrow quirks in surprise.

"No, you're definitely right about that, but you're wrong about me being the one to hurt you. I told you last night that I wouldn't let anything hurt you while you slept and I meant it. I wish I could always say the same about when we’re awake, but the truth is, we both know that we can’t protect each other from everything – that’s not reality. But I can promise you that you’re safe with me," Emma assures her.

Regina sighs. "Are you sure that's a promise you want to make? We're just beginning here, and anything can happen. This might not work out."

"It might not, but I still won't hurt you."

Regina studies her for a long moment, her dark eyes boring into Emma's intense green ones. There's
no lie to be found. Instead, all she sees is the raw honesty that has always been such an integral part of who Emma is.

"Then collect on your rain check, my dear Savior," she says then, smiling playfully.

“Emma,” she counters, because suddenly who they really are to each other matters.

“Emma.” Said with so much understanding about the power of the name. “Collect.”

"Gladly," Emma chuckles, and then leans in and presses her mouth against Regina's, stealing her breath and her thoughts and everything else away.

Because this might not work out for them, but it might.

Because this is her choice and their choice and because she does feel safe.

And because beneath the warm steady flow of the water surging down from the showerhead, Emma is touching her and kissing her and holding her in a way which makes her finally understand that her mother had never understood love at all.

But Mother is gone now, and finally, she has the chance to move forward.

The anger and vengeance of the Evil Queen is no longer in control of her and her future, she thinks as her head falls against the wet tiles of the shower stall, Emma’s warm lips on the column of her neck, her hands lowering even as their eyes meet.

She no longer needs to be defined by the girl who had been twisted and broken.

Their lives are stories, going backwards and going forward.

It’s time to start a new one.

One where she gets to decide who she is just as Emma has.

Emma who is kissing her, and murmuring her name, their fingers twisting together.

And Regina thinks, yes...yes...

Long live...long live Regina Mills.

-Fin

Chapter End Notes

If you'd like to know how dealing with the real world, Greg Mendell and Snow/Regina went down...read REAL. It wraps up the story and any dangling threads. Thanks!

(I can be found over on Tumblr at sgtmac7)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!