Nothing Comes from Nothing

by LainStardust, parakitty

Summary

AU, Post Cricket Game, Emma casts a not-so-innocent locator spell, provided by Rumpelstiltskin, to find Regina, and the unexpected consequences bring Emma and Regina closer while revealing painful secrets that not only change their lives, but everyone else's, too.

Notes

Spoilers: The AU timeline diverges at the end of The Outsider in Season Two. In the Name of the Brother has metamorphosed into a new animal. However, basic knowledge of the episode would be helpful as certain scenes/events are casually inferred and referenced.

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Author’s Note: This story includes visual canon at our discretion, and as our story shall enter the realm of AU, notable changes and tweaks will be made as necessary to both the show’s plot and mythos. Regardless of how the show continues to develop, we reserve the right to completely ignore or include the events from the show as it progresses. As a special note, the concept for this story developed during February 2013. The actual production was delayed for some misguided hope that OUAT would somehow “fix” itself. Apparently, that didn’t happen, and I gave into the pull of writing fan fiction for it.

Author’s Note—Emma Swan: We don’t particularly care for how Emma has been degraded to a plot pawn during the course of Season 2. Since TPTB have systematically stripped her of her powers and identity, it’s our goal to restore the character to her potential glory! Although, we saw a slight return of Season 1 Emma during The Evil Queen. Also, no more matching outfits with mommy, but Mary Margaret may still try.
Dropping fifty cents into a very dated coffee vending machine, Emma pressed her selection for a cappuccino since the hot chocolate was usually horrid. She stuffed her hands in her coat pockets while waiting for the clear plastic door to open. *Things have got to get better,* she thought, watching the dark brown, steaming hot liquid pour into the all-too-thin paper cup. She’d only been back in Storybrooke a few days, and crazy stuff was already happening!

Luckily, the sheriff managed to avert any further disasters by having the hospital staff hide Captain Hook, keeping him temporarily safe from Gold’s wrath.

“Finally,” Emma muttered as the door flipped open. Quickly, she grabbed her cup, set it down on the condiments’ counter and promptly dumped six sugars and four creamers into it. Snapping on the flimsy plastic lid, she took her cappuccino and left the vending area to talk to the now conscious Greg Mendell

Shuffling towards the main elevator, Emma was tired and cold. She hated being cold. Catching her reflection in the closing, mirrored elevator doors, she regarded her haggard appearance and thanked her parents for it. Lifting the cup to her lips, she realized two things: the cappuccino was still too hot and everyone was extremely agitated—about everything.

Apparently, Ruby had managed to avert Whale’s imminent mental crisis. Mary Margaret wholeheartedly believed Regina and Cora were going to destroy them all in some fantastically gruesome way. Leroy’s moral compass needed some serious recalibration. And David was just too psyched over the change of pace to focus.

There were some odd noises as the elevator finally reached the appropriate floor. Emma dared another tentative sip of her cappuccino, pleased it had cooled enough to drink. She stopped briefly to inquire about Mr. Mendell’s room number at the nurses’ station. Outwardly, the sheriff was the epitome of a cool professional, one that demanded respect, but inside, she was still agitated with her assuming parents. Reaching the door, Emma shook her head, downing the rest of the cappuccino with a wince. She knocked on the glass door twice and entered.

“Mr. Mendell,” she greeted as she tossed her empty paper cup in the trash by the door and introduced herself as she approached the man in his bed. “The doctor said you were capable of answering a few questions.” Emma had managed to glimpse the preliminary crime scene report which had been put together by one of the volunteers.

“Sheriff, things are still a bit fuzzy,” Greg said with hesitancy. He hadn’t heard much about the accident, but he knew a man and a woman had been injured.

Nodding, Emma pulled out a small notebook. “I still need a statement, Mr. Mendell.” She stared at the stranger. She couldn’t help but wonder if he was part of some grand scheme or master plan. Arching her eyebrow, the sheriff prompted him again for information.

“Um,” Greg said, growing flustered. “I was driving. I was starting to feel tired, but I wanted to get here. Then, there was a man in the road. I couldn’t stop in time, and I hit him.” He paused, glancing at the nurses’ movements outside his glass door.
“Uh huh,” Emma said. She jotted down some notes, realizing Greg wasn’t giving her the whole story—a story she was, unfortunately, going to have to hash out with Gold. Perhaps she should give Greg a little incentive to cooperate. “You do realize that texting and driving in the state of Maine is illegal.” She held her smirk at his obvious gulp.

“Yes, Sheriff, I . . ,” he stuttered for a moment, “I was updating a friend on my travels. She worries.”

Finishing her note, Emma saw a big, fat ticket in the man’s future. “Is there anything else you would like to add?”

“No at this time, Sheriff.”

“Alright,” Emma said, pulling a business card out of her notebook. Handing it to Greg, she added, “If you remember anything else, please feel free to call me.”

Sedately, Greg took the card. After glancing at it, he placed it on his tray. Right before the sheriff was about to open the door, he asked, “The man I hit, is he alright?”

Smirking, Emma nodded. “Mr. Jones will be alright, Mr. Mendell. So, I don’t think you’ll have to worry about a vehicular man slaughter charge.” After a beat to appreciate the paling of Greg’s features, she added, “Since the crime scene report hasn’t hit my desk, yet, I’m unable to formally relay or inform you of any possible charges at this time.”

“Of course, Sheriff.”

Nodding, Emma said as she left, “I’ll be in touch.” She frowned as Greg scrambled for his cellphone.

~SQ~

Exiting the elevator on the ground floor, Emma barely managed to remain impassive as she saw her parents waiting for her by the information desk. That agitation she had felt towards them earlier was coming back with a vengeance. She had longingly hoped for a hot shower, a quick meal and perhaps a few hours of sleep before dealing with them—or anyone, for that matter. Who the heck was with Henry? she wondered.

David had perked up upon noticing Emma, causing Mary Margaret to spin around. She smiled brightly and immediately asked, “What did he say?”

Arching an eyebrow at their eagerness, the sheriff ignored the question and asked her deputy, “Has Ruby had any luck, yet?” She stopped in front of the couple.

“She hasn’t called in,” David said.

“Accident site cleared?” Emma inquired.

“Leroy and Michael just got the car to the garage.”

“Did you get that press release typed up?” The sheriff frowned as the deputy slowly blinked. She had hoped David would’ve been able to get it done before The Mirror went to press. They’d just talked about it several hours ago. The citizens of Storybrooke needed to be made aware that a stranger from the outside world was in town and to be subtly reminded to behave. Crossing her arms, Emma sighed, “I need you to get that done ASAP.”
“Emma,” Mary Margaret interrupted, “what did he say?”

“Nothing important, but he’s holding back. It might be best to let Mr. Mendell simmer in his own juices for a few days and see what he does.” If Emma played her cards right, she was confident that Greg Mendell would be running for the interstate by the time he was discharged. She sighed and asked, “How’s Belle?”

Mary Margaret shook her head. “Stable but confused and very frightened.” Pausing, she glanced between her daughter and David, and asked, “What are we going to do about Cora?”

Emma’s brow furrowed. “What can we do about Cora? Our last encounter with her wasn’t one I’d like to repeat any time soon.” She shuddered at the memory of Cora’s hand around her heart.

“We need to find Regina. If they team up, Storybrooke is in for a whole lot of trouble,” the school teacher insisted as she instinctively snuggled closer to David. “There’s no telling what they’d be capable of.”

Wrapping a supportive arm around his wife, the deputy boldly proclaimed, “We’ll find them and deal with them.”

“How, exactly?” the sheriff asked, irritated. “We haven’t been able to find Regina for days, and she has a home here. How are we going to find Cora?” She crossed her arms. “And even if we do find Cora, how are we going to deal with her?”

Mary Margaret’s eyes sparkled. “We can ask the dwarves to construct cells deep in the abandoned mine, like the one that held Rumpelstiltskin in our land.” She didn’t wait for Emma to respond. The idea was just too perfect and such a wonderful solution. “I can go to Mother Superior and ask her for help!”

David smiled proudly.

Emma wanted to smack her head into the nearest wall. “In case it escaped your notice, the magic fairy ball thing didn’t work on Regina.”

“Only because she saw it coming,” interjected Mary Margaret. “Cora won’t be expecting it.”

Pursing her lips, the sheriff said with a drawl, “Yeah, I somehow doubt much gets past Cora.”

Taking a deep breath, Emma decided it was time to get her maverick parents in check. “Look, we all have a lot of work to do. We can’t just drop our responsibilities to go off and play hero.” Quickly, she held up her hands to forestall the impending argument. “Cora is lying low, for now. Let’s leave it that way.” Giving her parents a pointed stare, she continued, “So what I need is for my deputy to get that press release to the newspaper before it goes to press and to man the station. Also, Henry will be up in a few hours to get ready for school.”

Emma almost cocked an eyebrow at their collective sigh. She hated to be the responsible one, but at least it explained her occasional devil-may-care attitude.

Marginally content that she had waylaid her parents’ heroic tendencies, Emma readjusted her hat and jacket and pulled on her gloves.

“What are you going to do?” Mary Margaret asked softly.

“I am going to join Ruby and look for Regina,” Emma said, tugging her jacket down. “Then, in the morning, I’m going to get a statement from Gold.” With a nod, she turned and headed out the main entrance, not caring to drag out this conversation any longer with her parents. “Keep me updated!”
she called over her shoulder before the automatic doors closed.

“What can I do for you, Sheriff?” Gold asked as Emma entered his shop. He carefully snapped shut the box containing Cora’s gift and made his way to the back display case.

Honestly, he’d expected the sheriff hours ago, given the circumstances. However, he had more pressing matters to attend to and resigned himself to get this over with as quickly as possible. Yet, his disinterest regarding the upcoming conversation didn’t prohibit him from noticing Emma Swan’s tired frustration.

“I came by to get your statement about what happened last night at the town border on Route 6,” the sheriff said, pulling her gloves off and stuffing them in her pockets. Slowly, she unzipped her bulky jacket and removed her notebook from an interior pocket. Emma flipped back a few pages and looked at Gold expectantly with a cocked eyebrow and pursed lips.

“I believe you already know what transpired,” Gold said with a subdued bite in his tone.

Not wanting to waste any more time, Emma slowly followed Gold who now stood behind the backmost display case. “Look,” she snapped, her patience long gone after hours trekking around Storybrooke, “I don’t have time to play mind games or wade through emotional minefields of past grudges. I need to know what happened, now.” The sheriff paused and added, “We could always take this down to the station.”

Gold merely narrowed his eyes at the savior. But before Emma could stomp about like a bull and carryout her threat, he said, “I was attempting to leave Storybrooke, but Hook showed up and shot Belle. She fell over the line. I barely managed to get her back across before the stranger’s car crossed the border—well over the speed limit, I might add.” There was honest sadness and regret in his eyes. He’d never intended for Belle to be hurt.

Emma nodded as she jotted the story down. She frowned as she stared at him. “Why were you attempting to leave town?” The sheriff just needed collaboration of the story. She added a special note to hit Greg Mendell with an extra fine for speeding.

Hook had already spilled the vague details of their twisted history over a woman. In a world without justice, the captain’s vendetta almost seemed righteous, until an innocent was knowingly injured. Sadly, there was no way of knowing if Belle, or Sneezy for that matter, would ever get their memories back.

“That is none of your concern,” Gold said. He turned away with a dismissive wave of his free hand.

“Maybe not, and frankly, I really don’t care. So, you can either answer my questions and I’ll keep it to myself...” Emma trailed off until Gold cut a sideways look at her. “Or,” she drawled, “I’ll let it slip to a bunch of caged fairytale characters that Rumpelstiltskin has a potion that’ll let them cross the town line.” Pulling a small evidence bag out of another interior coat pocket, the sheriff set the small, clear vial on the counter between them. “That’ll come in handy as more and more strangers start noticing this quaint seaside town.”

Staring at the vial, they both knew it would be utter chaos if anyone found out.

Quickly, Gold turned back to the sheriff and said, “I was going to go look for my son.” He reached for the evidence bag, but Emma safely tucked it back in her coat. Eventually, he knew the Savior
would figure it all out. But today, he wasn’t interested in feeding her bread crumbs as there was no benefit to it. “May I have the vial?” Gold asked holding out his hand. “Please?”

“It’s evidence,” Emma quickly countered, leaning against the display case. She smirked at Gold’s slight frown. “However, I’d be willing to trade it.”

“I’m surprised, Sheriff. Surely your parents have warned you away from making deals with me, by now.” Gold commented slyly. His eyes, however, shone a tad too brightly, betraying his obvious interest.

“Help me find Regina,” Emma said, her smirk morphing into a frown at Gold’s amused chuckle. It was a risk to ask and would severely tip her hand, but what other option did she have at this point?

“Miss Lucas hasn’t managed to sniff her out, yet?” Gold didn’t even have to deliberate the trade. Giving a long-suffering sigh, he motioned the sheriff to follow him to the back of the shop. “The werewolf shouldn’t feel too bad. Regina always had a peculiar talent for not drawing attention to herself, when necessary.”

Something about the comment didn’t sit quite right with Emma, but she quickly pushed the thought aside. She needed to focus on the here and now, unless she wanted to get burned by dealing with Gold. Plus, she still owed the man a favor. She silently watched as the pawnbroker gathered up ingredients to what she assumed was a locator spell. She yelped, caught off guard when he unceremoniously yanked out several strands of her hair and stuffed them in a clear plastic baggy with some dark brown hair already present in it. Quickly, he tossed the hair and various other items in a small, brown paper sack.

“Wait,” Emma interrupted as Gold began rattling off instructions for a spell, “you’re not going to do it?”

“I’m not the one looking for Regina, Dearie. You are.” He held out the small package to the sheriff. “The vial, if you please.”

Slowly, Emma removed the evidence bag from her jacket, warning bells going off as his brusque attitude shifted to pleasantly accommodating. “So, this will really work? I follow your instructions and I’ll be able to find Regina?” She handed over the vial while taking the spell bag.

“Most definitely,” Gold said softly, carefully setting the vial on the worktable.

“Okay. Thanks . . . , I think,” Emma said hesitantly, turning to leave the pawn shop. In hind sight, the sheriff realized she should’ve asked a heck of a lot more questions. But then again, she was new to this magic stuff and very tired.

~SQ~

In the safety of her hidden rooms under the family vault, Regina sighed with disappointment. Storybrooke was indeed full of idiots. She glanced at the extreme costumes from another life on display. If only she could muster the will, this pathetic town would disappear in a wave of flame and fury. Now, however, the hurt and anger that had driven her for so long was replaced with a profound tiredness. Like many times before, Regina had failed, but for the first time, she doubted her resilience to continue.

Her self-analysis was cut short as she felt a familiar and unwelcome presence enter the cemetery. Cora had finally decided to seek her out.

Slipping out of a secret passage, Regina effortlessly maneuvered around the stacks of crates and
scattered trunks. She noted how many of them belonged to her mother and realized that everything that was hers would most likely have to be moved, depending on how this encounter ended. Stepping out of the mausoleum, Regina saw Henry a few yards away, and for a brief moment, she dared hope.

“How did you get through?” the former mayor evenly quipped, hiding her disappointment at the obvious ploy. Must the same dance be on constant repeat? “Manipulation suits you, Mother,” Regina snapped as she shied away from her mother and the crypt, never taking her eyes off her. “You framed me for the cricket.”

An ugly smirk marred the boy’s face before he was enveloped in a purple cloud. Cora emerged, slightly impressed by Regina’s quick deduction. “Determination; I had to see you.” She walked slowly toward her daughter. Her smile softened when Regina didn’t react. “I needed to tell you that I know why you sent me through the looking glass, and I know why you tried to have me killed.” Cora paused, reaching out to her daughter. “And it’s . . . it’s alright.”

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Cora paused, reaching out to her daughter. “And it’s . . . it’s alright.”

“I think it’s not alright,” Regina snapped as she shied away from her mother and the crypt, never taking her eyes off her. “You framed me for the cricket.”

Frowning, Cora seized her attempt to corral her daughter. “Only temporarily, so you could see what these people really think of you.” Sighing, she said, “I needed you to be receptive. I didn’t want you to reject me, not again.”

“You are the most manipulative . . .” Somehow, Regina managed to hold her tongue as the familiar burn of anger returned. Attacking her mother had always proved futile and costly. Her shoulders sagged a little. Exhausted by her rapidly changing emotions, she absently admitted, “I’m already broken, Mother.”

“Oh sweetheart,” Cora whispered, taking a bold step toward Regina again and latching onto her vulnerability like a leech. “I love you. I just . . . I’ve always shown it in all the wrong ways.” She could see her efforts were paying off. Pressing on now that she was almost within arm’s length, Cora continued, “I should’ve never made you marry Leopold.”

Regina couldn’t help it. She broke eye contact as tears threatened to fall.

Sensing the timing was right, Cora struck with her usual precision. “I just want us to start over.”

Immediately, Regina was flooded with anger and resentment—at herself, her mother and everything else. She had been trying so hard to be worthy of her son. “I don’t see that happening, Mother.” She paused before turning her back on Cora and walking away. “Come with me; we’re going to town.”

“It’s the middle of the night,” Cora scoffed, unmoving.

“I don’t care.” Regina gritted her teeth. “We’ll wake them up—Emma and Henry and the two idiots—and you can tell them what you did.”

Sighing, Cora still refused to follow but called after her daughter. “Taking me to be pilloried by the town might gain you some points, but as long as Emma and her parents are here, he’s not really yours.” She smirked when Regina stopped walking. “You’ve been too bad for far too long, and now they see you as nothing but a snake.”

Her mother was right, as usual. But somewhere, buried deep down inside, Regina found the strength to continue walking away and not give in to the temptation and false promises her mother presented her. She wanted to lash out and fight, to give in to all her rage. But it would serve no constructive purpose, only leaving this town full of idiots defenseless against Cora and dependent
Cora frowned at her daughter’s retreating back as it disappeared into the darkness. “I meant everything I said,” she called out. “I am sorry.” She sneered when her words failed to reel Regina back. Her eyes narrowed as she glared into the night. Her daughter had grown a backbone, after all.

Once her mother had left in a cloud of purple smoke, Regina sighed and turned around. “You can come out now, Miss Swan.” She watched as the sheriff climbed out of her hiding space behind a large tombstone.

“You’re one hard person to find, Regina.” Emma brushed the dirt and grass off her pants, hiding her relief at Cora’s departure.

“Perhaps I prefer it that way,” the former mayor said, once again leaving. “I wouldn’t linger, Miss Swan. Mother is bound to return.”

Glancing up from picking stray bits of grass off her jacket, Emma quickly trotted after the illusive woman. “Wait,” she said. Once in step with Regina, she quickly continued, “We’ve been looking for you.”

“I’m well aware,” Regina sighed, stopping in between the rows of headstones. Turning she gave the sheriff an exasperated look and asked, “What is it that you want?”

“Archie’s alive,” Emma blurted. Her eyes sparkled with the news.

“I know,” Regina said flatly. When the sheriff failed to add anything further, she resumed walking to her car. She had to reach her other hideout before Cora returned to investigate the crypt again.

Huffing, Emma blocked Regina’s path, earning an austere glare. She took a deep breath and looked Regina in the eyes. “I’m sorry,” she said clearly. “I should have trusted my instincts, not the memories of a Dalmatian.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Regina was curious to see where this particular conversation went, at least for now.

Taking silence as acceptance, the sheriff trudged forward. “I need your help.”

“I think not,” the former mayor quietly scoffed. “In case it escaped your keen notice, I have enough problems to deal with, no thanks to you.” She had said no to her mother this time, but how much longer could she actually hold out? Or how much longer before she was forced into submission?

Letting the despair and desperation through, Emma pleaded. “Please, we—I can’t do this alone.” It was pure dumb luck that she and Mary Margaret had survived their last encounter with Cora. Unlike her cocky mother, the sheriff didn’t think they’d be so fortunate the next time.

For a moment, the heartfelt plea appealed to Regina’s deeply buried, compassionate nature. The moment of weakness passed as her sense of self-preservation kicked in once more. “No.” With that, she quickly sidestepped the dumbfounded Emma. The benefits simply did not outweigh the risks of getting any more involved than she already was.

Irritated, Emma whipped around and grabbed Regina’s wrist. Her words of frustration were immediately forgotten as both women were encapsulated by a blue flash of light and then promptly knocked off their feet. The sheriff blinked a few times as she tried to stop the world from spinning.

“What did you do?” hissed Regina as she struggled to stand. Failing twice, she crawled to a nearby
tombstone and used it for leverage. Glancing over at Emma, who was still flopping about on the ground, she scowled at the apparent magical incompetence.

“What the hell was that?” the sheriff slurred, still unable to stand.

Not answering, Regina took a wobbling step away and then another. She had to get out of there immediately. No doubt, the inexplicable magical surge would draw unwanted attention. On her fourth step away from Emma, Regina was hit with overwhelming pain. She couldn’t stop her cry of agony as she dropped to her knees. Gasping, she fell backwards onto the ground. As the sudden pain ebbed, Regina glanced back at Emma who had curled into a fetal position, whimpering.

Crawling to the sheriff, Regina shook Emma’s shoulder roughly. “Get up,” she ordered. “We have to get out of here, now!” As much as it would please her to leave the savior to entertain Cora, the former mayor was quickly suspecting the worst.

Together, they stood and helped each other to the police cruiser hidden behind the short, brick wall surrounding the Storybrooke cemetery. Roughly, Regina shoved the sheriff in the front passenger's seat of the car.

“Give me your keys,” the former mayor demanded as she climbed in the driver’s side.

“Why do you get to drive?” Emma asked, absently handing over the keys. Fuzzy or not, she understood Regina’s urgency.

“Because you’re still drooling, Sheriff,” Regina said, starting the car and slamming it into drive. She hit the accelerator hard enough to send bits of gravel flying before the tires found asphalt.

The sheriff struggled to get her seatbelt buckled before she passed out again.

~SQ~

Infrequently, Emma would regain consciousness long enough to realize they were still driving. As Regina pulled the cruiser off the main road and onto an overgrown forest trail, the sheriff absently rubbed her eyes.

The car creaked and groaned from rolling over dips covered by dead leaves and fallen branches. Occasionally, a branch would scrape along the roof or side of the car.

Reaching their destination, Regina put the car in park and turned off the engine. She handed Emma the keys.

Absently stuffing the keys in her front coat pocket, she asked, “Why’d you bring us to the wishing well?”

“The well’s magic will mask us, but we shouldn’t linger long.” Regina glanced out the windows, surveying the moonlit forest. She debated how much information would be prudent to share. As the cold crept into the vehicle, she pulled her leather gloves out of a pocket. Slipping them on, she said sternly, “I need to know exactly what you did, Miss Swan.”

“I did a locator spell,” Emma said pointing down at the open ashtray. Her brows furrowed as the former mayor yanked the tray off its track and sniffed the remaining contents. She winced as Regina flipped on the overhead light without warning then was light blinded when it was just as abruptly shut off.

Regina shoved the tray back into place. Crossing her arms, she continued to stare out the
windshield at the wishing well. “I assume you went to Rumpelstiltskin for your spell.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t expecting the knockback as a reward for finding you, though,” Emma muttered, her mind finally beginning to clear. She shivered as the temperature continued to drop in the car’s cabin. “What was with that, anyway?”

“You’ve been duped, Miss Swan.” Regina scowled. Glaring at the sheriff, she said, “I assume you didn’t think to ask any questions about the spell. At least tell me what he wanted in exchange.”

*What is this torment worth to the imp*, she wondered.

“Exchange?” Emma sputtered as she thought back to early this morning. God, it felt like so long ago. “He didn’t ask for anything,” she admitted quietly. Her brows furrowed in concentration. Damn, she was tired and probably had a concussion. “No wait, I traded him a small vial I found at the accident at the town’s border.” The sheriff was uncertain how much detail to divulge, not wanting to end up on Gold’s bad side.

However, her worry was for naught as Regina simply nodded.

“You knew what it was?” Emma found her fourth wind since this whole debacle started. She unbuckled her seatbelt and twisted to face Regina. Why did she constantly feel left out of the loop?

“He’s been concocting it for weeks, Dear,” the former mayor said, bored. “It worked, too.” She almost felt pity for the manipulative scoundrel—so close to his goal. Now that she would be stuck with the frustrating sheriff for the foreseeable future, she decided to explain. “This all started during your sojourn in the Enchanted Forest. He tested it a few days ago on Smee then promptly transformed him into a rat when it worked.”

Halfheartedly, Regina had attempted to catch Smee the rat but to no avail. The wayward rodent was lost in the bowels of Storybrooke until he chose to approach someone.

“No one reported him missing.” Emma whispered. How could no one notice? How could no one care?

“No one would. That’s why Gold picked him as a test subject.” Regina glanced over at the distraught sheriff. “It was unfortunate, but a worse fate could have befallen him.” She sighed at Emma’s horrified look. “Someone of Smee’s particular talents, I assume, would take full advantage of his current situation.” Opening the car door, the former mayor slowly climbed out of the vehicle, careful of the distance between her and Emma. “We, however, have more pressing matters.” Locking it, she slammed the driver’s side door and walked to the front of the car.

Hesitantly, Emma followed suit. “What do you mean?”

“We will discuss it in length somewhere else, but we can’t stay here any longer, Miss Swan.” Regina reached out to grasp Emma’s elbow.

Taking a step back, the sheriff asked, “Where are we going?”

“Home.”

“I’m not going back to that god forsaken forest ever again,” Emma proclaimed stepping back again, bumping into the car.

Rolling her eyes, Regina pursed her lips and said, “My home, here in Storybrooke.”

“Oh,” Emma mouthed. “Will it be safe from Cora?” In that moment, she realized Mary Margaret
was right. Cora was much worse than Regina ever thought of being. And that scared her.

“Not indefinitely,” the former mayor said softly.

“What about Henry?” the sheriff asked with apparent fear. “We can’t let Cora get a hold of him. She knows about him.”

“He’s safe with your parents, for the moment,” Regain said, again reaching for Emma’s elbow.

“I should call Mary Margaret.” The savior’s gloved hands fumbled to get her cellphone out of her pocket. “Tell her what’s going on.”

“I would advise against it,” Regina said through gritted teeth as Emma stepped out of reach again.

“How long is this going to take?” Emma glanced up before dialing Mary Margaret, missing what the former mayor said.

Having lost what precious patience she did have, Regina growled in frustration before snatching the phone from the sheriff and turning it off. “We don’t have time for this, Emma!” Roughly, she slapped the phone back into Emma’s hand, ignoring the look of surprise as it quickly shifted to anger. “If the spell you cast is what I think it is, you’ve bound us—permanently! And how, precisely, do you think your idiot parents will react to that?”

Regina hoped that Gold wouldn’t be that cruel, but the man knew how to hold a grudge.

“What?” Emma whispered, face draining of color.

“Please, Miss Swan,” the former mayor said calmly, having regained her composure. “We have to get out of here.”

Not knowing what else to do, Emma took that fateful step forward. As Regina gripped her elbow, she asked, “What are we going to do?”

“Research,” Regina said before they disappeared in a cloud of purple smoke.

~SQ~

Hours later, Emma sat on a stool at the former mayor’s kitchen island while absently playing with her cellphone, which needed to be charged soon. She watched Regina pour two cups of coffee from a French press. Why couldn’t the woman own a coffee pot like everyone else?

“Can’t I call them after a nap?” she moaned, dropping her head on the counter as Regina set a cup in front of her.

“They’ve called you three times already,” Regina said retrieving cream from the refrigerator and sugar from a cabinet. Setting the containers down in front of Emma, she casually added a moderate spoon of raw sugar to her coffee. She idly stirred for a moment before asking, “Do they know how to access the GPS on your phone?”

Emma bolted upright in panic, her eyes wide. “No,” she sighed, visibly relaxing. She reached for the cream and added a small amount before dumping several heaping spoons of raw sugar into her coffee. Taking a tentative sip, the sheriff was pleasantly surprised. “This is good, kind of nutty.” She’d been expecting dark and bitter.

“Texas pecan roast,” Regina supplied before taking another sip. “It’s amazing you can even taste it
considering the amount of sugar you heaped into your cup.”

Ignoring the slight jibe, Emma took another sip and decided to add a tad more creamer. Maybe this French press wasn’t such a bad deal after all. Scrolling through the contacts on her cellphone, she asked, “Are you sure about this?” Emma didn’t feel too comfortable about lying, but she understood why it was necessary.

“Unless you have a better suggestion,” Regina prompted. Her eyes burned every time she blinked, dealing with Emma and their situation while remaining on magical alert was severely taxing. “We both agreed no one would react well to our predicament.”

“No,” the sheriff said blowing out a heavy breath. “Okay, here goes nothing.” She dialed and was immediately answered by a frantic Mary Margaret. “Yeah, it’s me.” Emma smiled but it quickly switched to a frown. “I’m fine!” she exclaimed. Her brows furrowed as she listened. “Hold on, hold on. I think we can relax about Cora for a little while,” Emma sighed when Mary Margaret cut her off. “David just needs to man the station. Tell him to leave Hook and Greg Mendell alone. Did he get that press release done?” Gritting her teeth, she said, “I have it under control.”

Regina cocked an eyebrow as she took another sip of coffee.

“Stop talking. Please, just stop talking for one minute,” Emma slapped her hand on the island. “That isn’t how we do things here!” she yelled, clenching her free hand into a fist. “He’s hurt and in pain. You can’t just drag him out of the hospital. There are rules, Mary Margaret.” Taking a deep breath during a blissful second of quiet, the sheriff was able to compose herself and calmly continue. “I found Regina…. Stop! Like I was saying, I found Regina, and she agreed to help me.” Emma planted her forehead in her palm and listened. “Are you done?” She had to repeat her question several times.

Finishing her coffee, Regina frowned. She hadn’t expected such turmoil amongst the Charming clan. If she’d known, the former mayor may have proceeded differently. She turned away from Emma and rinsed her cup in the sink before putting it in the dishwasher.

“We agreed on a mutually beneficial partnership,” Emma said, happy that she could finally explain and enjoy another sip of her coffee. “We’ll shadow each other for the time being, like a buddy system. That way Cora can’t run around as Regina and cause mayhem, destruction and general chaos.” She frowned, slamming her cup down with frustration.

Regina grabbed dish cloth and wiped up the spilled coffee. She nodded at Emma’s apologetic wince.

Pursing her lips, the sheriff hopped off the stool and paced the length of the kitchen. “Well, I think she deserves some slack,” she spat. “Because she didn’t kill Archie, and she said no to Cora…! I was there, Mary Margaret!” Sighing, Emma put a hand on her hip and stared up at the ceiling. “Look, we’ll meet up later and discuss things further, but I’m not changing my mind.” Ending the call, she dropped her cell on the island.

After a few deep breaths, Emma turned around to face Regina who stood in front of the kitchen sink, looking out the window. She’d gone off script a bit and wondered if the former mayor was devising ways to punish her. Grabbing her coffee, Emma downed the room temperature liquid, still enjoying the flavor.

“You’ll have to deal with Henry first—and quickly,” Regina commented after a moment. She turned and retrieved the creamer and sugar containers.
Emma watched as Regina started putting things away and tidying the kitchen. “You’re taking this awfully well.” Honestly, she’d expected Regina to go all Evil Queen on her stupid butt.

“No,” Regina said with a bit of bite as she closed the dishwasher, “I’m most certainly not.” She paused and turned to face Emma. “However, our fates are now entwined.”

“So, it can’t be broken?” the sheriff asked, leaning on the island.

The brunette shook her head, stating, “Not by anyone in this world or the other.” Regina stepped forward and mirrored Emma’s pose. “It would be a great risk to both of us to even try. Anyone who tells you otherwise is lying.”

“But everyone is always carrying on about true love this and true love that,” Emma said straightening the place mats in front of the stools. She glanced up at the former mayor’s snort.

“It can break any curse, but it can’t break a spell of its own creation. Since that’s where your magic stems from, it’s not a viable option in this instance.” Not knowing where to take their conversation from there, Regina walked towards the dining room.

“So we’re stuck together forever?” Emma asked, still focusing on the place mats. She could see Regina turn toward her out of the corner of her eye.

“Till death do us part,” the former mayor quipped lightly, unsure if the sheriff would appreciate the levity.

“Cute,” Emma smirked, standing up. Looking at Regina, she apologized, “I really screwed up.” Tears started to form. God, she was tired, and she hated showing any type of weakness in front of anyone, let alone the former mayor.

Regina opened her mouth but halted the sarcastic reply before it could leave her lips. It wouldn’t do any good for the sheriff to despise her anymore. “You’re exhausted. Come; let’s get some rest before facing Henry and your parents.”

Emma nodded as she wiped the corners of her eyes with her thumbs. Obediently, she trailed Regina as she led them upstairs. She had no choice but to follow unless she wanted to be a blubbering mass on the floor. A feeling of awkwardness came over her as they entered the master bedroom. She watched Regina sit down on the far side of the bed and pull off her boots.

Glancing over her shoulder, Regina rolled her eyes. “Sleep on the floor if it’ll make you feel better.” Shifting around a few pillows, she flopped back and closed her eyes. She smirked at the sound of more pillows being moved. The comfort eased her into slumber.

“Regina?” Emma rolled to face the former mayor. “Gold had me cast that spell on purpose, didn’t he?” Her eyes drifted closed of their own volition, but she did manage to hear Regina’s answer.

“Rumpelstiltskin doesn’t do anything without a reason.”

~SQ~

Emma leaned against the driver’s side of the police cruiser as she waited for Henry to come bounding out of the school building. She absently looked around, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Rubbing her hands together, the sheriff cupped her hands and blew into them. When the last bell of the day had finally rung, Emma ducked to chance a glance at Regina. The former mayor was still quietly reading her boringly titled book, A Universe from Nothing, or something equally mind-numbing.
“Are you sure you don’t want to handle this?” Emma asked again, not that she wanted to admit feeling worried about the upcoming conversation.

“It’ll be better coming from you.” Regina turned the page, losing herself in the scientific words.

Sighing, the sheriff scanned the confusing line graph on one of the pages, stood upright and leaned back against the car. She caught sight of Henry walking out of the building and frowned at his sad, downcast expression. However, that instantly changed when the boy looked up and smiled. It only took a moment for Emma to realize he was not looking at her but at Regina. He seemed to slow as he approached.

There were no greetings as Emma just opened the backseat driver’s side door. Without a word, Henry climbed in and buckled his seatbelt. As the sheriff drove them away from the school and all the curious looks, she kept glancing at Henry in the rearview mirror. He watched Regina intently, but his gaze would occasionally meet Emma’s in the mirror. It would always snap back to Regina after a moment or two, though.

They pulled into a small park along the water’s edge, overlooking the harbor. No one visited it this time of year. That’s why Regina had suggested it, and the sheriff had readily agreed.

Emma drummed her fingers on the wheel. She glanced over when Regina closed her book. The former mayor arched an eyebrow at her. Sighing, Emma unhooked her seatbelt and turned in her seat. “I royally screwed up, Kid.”

Regina looked down and idly stroked the slightly bent corners of her book. Her anger over their situation flared, but it was quickly squelched by her own feelings of inadequacy.

“What’s going on?” Henry demanded. He shifted in his seat, looking between his mothers.

Emma glanced down at her hands. Looking up at Regina, she felt tears threaten to form. She sighed and said, “I asked Gold to help me find your mom, and I wasn’t too careful with the consequences of using magic.”

“Why did you go to Gold? Did you make a deal? What did he want?” The questions came rushing out of Henry until he finally took a breath and asked in a hushed whisper, “What did you do?”

Regina winced. She didn’t see the heated glare Henry fixed on Emma but she did hear the sheriff’s hitched breath. Turning, she took in the tears in Emma’s eyes and Henry’s scowl.

“He gave me a locator spell,” Emma whispered. “When I found her, I sort of bound us to each other.” She gestured between her and Regina. Damn, this was turning out to be a lot harder than she’d thought. She didn’t like admitting her screw-ups, but denying it was futile.

“You promised you wouldn’t use magic,” Henry interrupted. “That’s what you said when you got back from the Enchanted Forest.”

“I know, I know, but I was under so much pressure.” Emma gripped the seat, her eyes pleading. “Trust me, it was a last resort. Mary Margaret and David were driving me crazy about finding Cora.” And she’d been so tired but thought it best to leave that bit out. “And with all the stuff going on with Belle, Hook, Gold and that stranger, Greg Mendell, it’s been a real zoo, Kid.”

Henry was quiet for a long moment, his eyes shifting between Emma and Regina again. He was confused. Why was Emma doing all the talking? Why hadn’t his mother said anything? “So that stuff the other kids were talking about at lunch, about mom helping you, it’s true?” Ever since he found out Archie was alive, Henry wanted to believe Regina was still on the path of redemption.
“Yeah,” Emma smirked as Regina cocked an eyebrow. “It’s true.”

“But that’s good, right?” Henry asked with hope.

“Partly, yes,” Regina spoke to Henry for the first time in days since Emma, her idiot parents and the Blue Fairy attempted their ambush. Turning, she accepted that Henry would not welcome this change once he understood the ramifications of it. “But it was not by our choice.”

Henry’s brows furrowed. Then suddenly, he understood. “Mr. Gold tricked you?” He looked back to Emma, surprise across his face and disappointment in his eyes. The hero was supposed to be smart, at least all the ones he liked were.

The boy’s judgment hit the sheriff hard—much harder than she had anticipated.

“But if you cast it, maybe you can undo it!” Henry exclaimed. He looked between his two mothers but quickly sobered at their lack of enthusiasm. “You already tried that, huh? I guess it didn’t work.” His eyes drifted downward. Looking up again, Henry asked, “What about the Blue Fairy?”

Emma hadn’t asked about her. For a moment, she allowed herself a shred of optimism, but the former mayor simply shook her head at both of them. The sheriff’s hopes were dashed as Regina repeated her words from earlier.

“It’s imperative that you understand us here, Henry.” When the boy focused on her, Regina continued, “The spell cannot be broken by anyone from this world or the other, and not without great risk to one or both of us.”

“But….” Henry stopped when Emma shook her head.

Taking a deep breath, the sheriff gave her son a sad smile. “We’re also going to have to keep it on the down low for a while.”

“More secrets,” the boy spat. He scowled spitefully at his mothers, crossing his arms and slumping in his seat.

“Henry,” Emma said soothingly, hoping to escape the impending wrath. She couldn’t stand it when he was mad at her.

“Something’s wrong,” Regina said ignoring her son’s bratty tantrum.


“Not here,” the former mayor said absently as she tried to focus on the source of the disturbance. She twisted in her seat, searching for some sort of visual cue but saw nothing. “It’s moving towards town.”

Immediately, the sheriff belted in and started the car. “Any idea what it is?” She paused as she steered towards the main road. “Is it Cora?”

“I lost it,” Regina whispered. Storybrooke’s thin magic atmosphere was still rather unsettling. It wasn’t thick and heavy like in the Enchanted Forest, but threadbare, and made the former mayor feel exposed. “It’s not Cora, but whatever it is, it’s big.”

It wasn’t until his mothers shared a concerned look that Henry got worried.

~SQ~
Sirens blaring, Storybrooke’s only police cruiser sped down Bayview Street, leaving a trail of dust in its wake. They reached downtown in a matter of minutes. Without slowing down or much notice, Emma jerked the wheel for a sharp turn and sent the cruiser speeding down the alley between Dave’s Fish ‘n’ Chips and Mr. Gold’s pawnshop.

“Holy crap!” The sheriff slammed on the brakes the moment a flying blue hatchback crash landed in the alley entrance. Emma bolted out of the cruiser and jogged out onto Main Street, Regina and Henry right behind her. Hearing screams, she ran to the nearest intersection. Glancing down Second Avenue, she watched a horde of townsfolk a block over run in the direction of Town Hall. The sheriff took off again but suddenly dropped onto her hands and knees.

Watching Emma fall, Henry desperately wanted to get to her and help. But as it was, Regina was practically dragging him towards her anyway. He glanced up at his mother’s face and knew she was in pain, just like Emma. Looking between them, Henry wondered if this had something to do with their new bond they had mentioned.

Letting go of Henry, Regina bent and helped the Savior up on her feet. “Push through it, Sheriff, and be mindful we have an 11 year-old with much shorter legs.” Once Emma was stable, she reached for the boy’s hand and was relieved that he immediately gripped it tightly.

Feeling rattled, Emma wiped at her eyes while taking slow, deep breaths. A series of loud crashes drew her attention back down the street. Suddenly, Mary Margaret, Leroy and David sprinted around a street corner over a block away, barely missing the dumpster barreling after them.

“She’s run!” shouted Mary Margaret over the clang of the dumpster slamming into a parked car. She ran like hell towards her daughter.

As the ground started to shake violently, the sheriff flailed her arms about in an attempt to keep her balance. After another, more pronounced shudder, Emma fell back onto the ground. Henry clung to Regina with both arms wrapped around her waist as she instinctively reciprocated.

“How on earth did a giant get to Storybrooke?” the former mayor mused as the giant’s head appeared over the rooftops a half-a-block over and moving towards Main Street. Apparently the do-gooder trio was trying to lead the giant somewhere specific, Regina surmised. Obviously, it wasn’t working. Glancing down at Henry as his small hands gripped her coat more tightly, she assured him. “It’ll be alright.”

His grip loosened a little as the boy watched the sheriff stand up. However, Henry’s eyes cut back down the street at the charging giant.

“That’s Anton.” Emma said, brushing her hands off on her jeans, having finally found her earthquake legs. “He gave us the compass.”

“Did you happen to leave on good terms?” Regina asked, watching as Anton gradually slowed as he approached.

“I thought so,” the sheriff smirked. “I didn’t kill him. He didn’t kill me. He even did me a favor.” She watched the giant and hoped she could talk him down from his rampage.

Emma’s amusement faded as the blue hatchback from earlier was hurled over their heads. Automatically, she used her body to shield Henry and Regina from the flying debris. Hearing Mary Margaret shout her name again, she moved away from her charges to peer around the smoking wreckage and was relieved to see all three standing up off the pavement, seemingly uninjured.
“Emma, move!” Regina barked as she dragged Henry towards the sidewalk.

As Anton chunked the abandoned police cruiser, the sheriff didn’t even bother to look. Instinctively, she twisted to run towards Regina and Henry. However, the blue hatchback’s gas tank exploded, sending shrapnel in all directions. The blast knocked Emma off her feet, tossing her several feet towards the giant to land directly in the path of the incoming car.

Helplessly frozen in the protective grasp of his mother, Henry watched as the police cruiser flew through the air, heading directly towards a severely disoriented Emma. He didn’t know what to do. But inexplicably, the car stopped mere seconds before impact. Henry blinked a few times as the car just seemed to hover for a moment before slowly and gently dropping onto the ground beside Emma. He looked up in time to see his mother dropping her hand.

Opening her eyes, the sheriff saw a car grill mere inches from her face. Glancing over at Regina and Henry, she sighed in relief and smiled at the pair on the sidewalk.

“Emma!” Mary Margaret finally reached her daughter, the exploding car having impeded the group’s progress to the savior. “Are you alright?” she asked helping Emma stand.

“I’m fine,” the sheriff said, ignoring Mary Margaret’s fussing. She tried not to wince as Henry slammed into her, squeezing her in a bear hug. “I’m fine,” she told him softly, hugging him back.

With wide eyes, the boy looked up at her and said, “Mom saved you! She stopped the car.”

The group’s reactions varied from astonishment to suspicion. However, the former mayor paid them no heed as she studied Anton. Her eyes squinted as she focused on the magic surrounding the giant and pondered its familiarity.

Anton halted his tear as he caught sight of the familiar blonde. “Emma?”

Gently extricating herself from Henry, the sheriff casually guided him back towards Regina who met the boy halfway. “It’s been awhile, Anton,” she said with a smile, peering upwards.

Mary Margaret and Leroy scowled as the boy reached for and took hold of the Evil Queen’s hand while David stood beside his daughter with his sword drawn.

“I’m sorry,” Anton said with great regret. “If I had known it was you, I wouldn’t have tossed those carriages.”

“They’re called cars,” Emma said. Her brows furrowed as she asked, “How did you get here, anyway?”

“The witch,” the giant answered with venom. “Not her,” he said as everyone but Emma and Henry glared at Regina. “The witch that came to retrieve Hook also made me small. The next thing I remember was waking up on a boat in a cage,” Anton sneered as he focused on David, “next to him. Then Hook showed up, and I managed to escape.”

A million things ran through the sheriff’s mind as she looked at her father. Obviously, he and Mary Margaret didn’t understand her when she had implicitly said to leave Hook at the hospital.

“Where’s Hook now?” she asked.

David simply pursed his lips, not willing to answer to his daughter or admit losing the pirate.

Mary Margaret, on the other hand, had to justify everything. “We were just trying to help.”
Frowning and ignoring the tension, Leroy asked, “Is there any way to shrink him? We can’t have a giant running around Storybrooke and doing more damage.” He looked up at Anton and shrugged. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s alright. The witch said—.” The giant’s explanation was cut short as he was consumed in a cloud of bright red smoke. Quickly and forcefully, the cloud swirled into a tight funnel. When it dissipated, Anton was once again a travel-friendly size. Clearing his throat, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the remains of a mushroom with a bright blue cap and white spots. “The witch said it wouldn’t last for long.”

Taking a tentative step forward, Emma glanced over her shoulder to make sure Regina and Henry were going to move with her. She wasn’t disappointed. When Anton met her half way, she cautiously accepted the mushroom.

“It’s from Wonderland,” Regina said interrupting Emma’s curious appraisal. Missing pieces of the puzzle were starting to fall into place, and she didn’t like the emerging picture.

“Like Alice in Wonderland?” the sheriff asked with wide eyes. She held the fungus out at arm’s length, easily surrendering it when Regina reached to claim it.

“I don’t think—,” David started but stopped when Regina brought the mushroom to her nose. He pointed his sword at the Evil Queen, ready to strike. He lost some of his vigor when Henry tugged on Regina’s arm. David watched as the former mayor allowed the boy to smell the mushroom.

“That stinks,” Henry said, wrinkling his nose in disgust.

“It’s a mushroom,” Regina smirked with amusement as she dropped the fungus into her coat pocket for safe keeping. She ignored Mary Margaret’s scowl.

Relieved the magical item was safely stashed for the moment, Emma turned her attention back to Anton. “Do you know why Cora brought you here?”

“I’m not really sure.” The giant thought for a moment. He glanced over Emma’s shoulder to glare at David.

“He’s a distraction,” Regina murmured to Emma, wanting nothing more than to walk away from this entire situation. Unfortunately, she was forced to endure the public display of idiocy.

With his sword still unsheathed, David stormed towards the former mayor and spat, “What do you know of it?” He stretched to his full height, attempting to intimidate the much smaller woman.

Biting her tongue, Regina cocked an eyebrow as she released Henry’s hand and nudged him towards the sheriff. “More by the second, it would seem.” Unimpressed by David’s display of anger, she asked, “This mess has something to do with your twin, Prince James, doesn’t it?”

David’s nostrils flared. “Yes.”

“You have a twin?” Emma asked, glancing between Mary Margaret and David.

“James was King George’s son,” Henry said, happy that he could contribute even though he was slightly confused. “He was supposed to marry Princess Abigail. She’s King Midas’s daughter.”

“Okay,” the sheriff looked down at Henry. “So if David isn’t James, what happened to the real James?”
“It doesn’t matter,” Mary Margaret said, flustered, ignoring Regina’s scoff. She turned to Anton. “This man, David, wasn’t responsible for the death of your family.”

Unconvinced by the proclamation, the giant looked to Emma for assistance. “Do you believe their story? Are these people worthy of your trust?”

Feeling the weight of the question, the sheriff glanced at Henry who merrily shrugged. Obviously, his storybook wasn’t complete in the Enchanted Forest’s history. Glancing around at everyone present, she took a deep breath and said, “I think you can trust everyone here.”

“Emma,” the school teacher hissed, not too subtly nudging her head towards Regina.

The former mayor donned a haughty smirk and a cocked eyebrow, but she had the good grace to drop both at Emma’s pointed glare. Having the sheriff’s attention, Regina stepped to the side and gestured towards Granny’s Diner. “Perhaps we should take this conversation elsewhere.”

“Great idea,” Emma agreed as she released Henry’s hand and smirked as the boy bolted into the diner. Smiling fondly at Regina, the sheriff said, “A cheeseburger sounds really good right now.”

Anton stepped up to the two women and glanced between them curiously. He asked, “What’s a cheeseburger?”

“Heaven,” the sheriff said in a reverent tone as she walked towards the diner with the giant and former mayor each flanking a side.

Mary Margaret and David held back and shared a perplexed look as the others entered the diner before them.

~SQ~

Absently wiping down the counter, Widow Lucas reflected on her long life during which she’d seen and heard many impossible things. But what was happening right now in her restaurant had to be amongst her personal top ten: the Evil Queen sitting at a dinner table with Snow White. Obviously, it was a strained affair, but so far, everyone had been rather cordial. More importantly, nothing of hers had been broken or damaged. So, Eugenia was content to eavesdrop, as usual, like the other few lingering patrons.

“I’m sure we can find some place for you, Anton,” the school teacher chattered on happily from her seat next to the giant. She glanced lovingly at her husband who sat catty corner from her. “If you want, I can take you around town tomorrow and introduce you to everyone. We can let them know that you meant no real harm. I’m sure there won’t be any hard feelings once everyone gets to meet you.”

Regina stabbed a little too forcibly at a chunk of tomato in her salad, causing the fork to scrape across the plate slightly. She ignored Emma’s curious glance.

“Yeah, I’m sure Granny has some room for you at her Bed and Breakfast,” added Leroy stuffing his last bite of burger in his mouth. “I’ll introduce you my brothers tonight, if you want.”

A soggy slap pulled Emma and Regina’s attention to the counter. Apparently annoyed, Granny had slapped her washcloth forcibly down in the rinse sink. She grumbled under her breath as she headed back towards the kitchen and yelled for Ruby.

“Anton,” Emma said slowly with a gentle smile. Making sure she managed to grab his undivided attention, she said, “I don’t mean to pry, but why do you think Cora brought you here?”
“I’m not really sure,” the giant answered, relieved to finally be talking to Emma. “I have an idea, but I’m hesitant to say.”

“You’re among friends here, Anton,” David boldly announced from his end of the table, his back to the diner’s entrance. Yet, even as he said the words, his eyes bored into Regina who sat regally at the other end of the table.

Anton scowled slightly but chose to ignore the twin of his dead enemy. Rifling through his robes as he hunted for his secret pocket, he pulled out a long, clear tube containing what looked like a clipping of a small, bright green plant. He held it reverently and said, “I believe it has something to do with this.”

“Indeed,” Regina whispered, captivated by the suspended sprout. She had read about the beans in countless, dusty tomes but had never expected to see a bean—let alone a seedling—in person.

Seeing understanding in Regina’s eyes, Anton nodded and handed the tube to the former mayor who hesitantly accepted it. He paraphrased his fallen brother’s words. “It needs to be protected at all costs because it would be disastrous if just one bean gets into the wrong hands.”

“Then give it to us,” interjected Mary Margaret. “We’ll protect it.”

“Sorry,” the giant turned back to the school teacher once again, still unconvinced by their declarations, “but you were having a hard enough time trying to stop me. How do you expect to stop a witch as powerful as Cora? Or anyone else who would want the beans?”

Cocking an eyebrow, Emma smirked at Mary Margaret and David’s inability to offer an answer. She knew she shouldn’t feel so cocky since she didn’t have a clue either.

“We’ll find a way,” David said puffing out his chest. He would not be deterred.

Regina rolled her eyes as she offered the suspended seedling back to Anton.

Graciously, the giant took the plant from the witch as he spoke to David. “I wish I shared your confidence, but these plants are very fickle and surprisingly tender. They require great care before they can potentially yield a harvest. From what I have seen of this world, I’m not even sure they could grow here.”

Smiling, David leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table. “We have fertile farmland here in Storybrooke. I know of several fields where we could secretly grow the beans.”

Mary Margaret gave Anton a hopeful look.

“Not that I’m a plant expert or anything,” Emma said shifting in her seat as she looked between Regina and her parents, “but don’t we have to let that seedling grow up before we can plant an entire field?”

“Yes,” Anton said with a hint of sadness. It could take months to grow anything substantial and before he could return home.

“May I suggest a visit to Widow Granger, Mr. Anton,” the former mayor said, taking pity on the giant’s crestfallen face. From what she had read of the giants, it was their solemn duty to grow the magical beans. “She’s an herbalist who mastered her craft decades ago. If anyone in Storybrooke can help you grow your beanstalks, if you choose to do so, it would most certainly be her.” She glanced at her watch. “However, I would recommend waiting until tomorrow. She’s undoubtedly already singing her yard to sleep.”
Henry’s brows furrowed as he looked at his mother and said, “Plants don’t sleep, not really.” He glanced sheepishly down the table at David. His grandfather had told him not to pester the adults with questions, especially about Prince James, shortly after they sat down. Naturally, Henry didn’t understand why his grandparents didn’t want to talk about their family.

Regina smiled softly at the boy. “You and I know this, but she believes otherwise. Her plants are her children.”

Pleased by the suggestion, Anton smiled at Emma and Regina. “Would either of you be willing to introduce me to Widow Granger tomorrow? I would very much like to meet her.”

“Yes!” Emma jumped in before Mary Margaret or David could say anything. “Regina and I would be happy to go with you. We’ll leave a message at the front desk of Granny’s to let you know what time we’ll be by to pick you up.”

Pleased with the arrangement, Anton nodded.

“Can I come?” Henry asked, wiggling in his seat a little. He wanted to hear about the beans.

“Don’t you have school?” Regina asked.

“Yes,” the boy slouched dejectedly as he ate a fry.

“Speaking of which, you need to get ready for bed, Kid.” The sheriff reached across the table and ruffled Henry’s hair, much to his and the former mayor’s annoyance. “Leroy, would you mind getting Anton settled at Granny’s?”

“Will do, Emma,” the dwarf said as he snatched the last handful of fries from his basket. “Come on, Anton. We’ll see if we can find you some normal clothes too.”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” the giant asked as he started to follow Leroy outside. Suddenly, he stopped, turned around and walked back to Emma and Regina. “Perhaps you should hold on to this for me,” Anton said, offering the suspended seedling to the two women.

Tentatively, the sheriff took the vial after a quick peak at the former mayor. “Okay, we’ll keep it safe, Anton.”

“Thank you.”

Once the giant was out of the door, however, Emma thrust the vial at Regina. “Please take this,” she whined. She could’ve sworn the sudden increase in responsibility was about to give her hives, or maybe it was all the magic. “Nobody’s going to pick your pockets.”

Standing to put on her coat, Regina smirked as she took the vial and tucked it safely in a coat pocket, opposite the side of the mushroom. Par for the course, she ignored the scathing looks from Mary Margaret and David. It was obvious that Emma and her parents were having a heated whispered conversation. She didn’t miss Henry tense in response to the Charming clan’s fighting but hesitated to offer any comfort. Instead, she opened her billfold and put a few bills on the table.

“No here,” the sheriff bit out loud enough for everyone to hear. “We’ll discuss it at the apartment.”

“Yes, we will,” David snapped as he dropped a few bills on the table, after which, he and Mary Margaret snatched up their coats and headed home.
Regina watched Emma seethe for a moment while Henry slowly slipped on his coat.

“Come on, let’s get this over with,” the sheriff mumbled as she added her own money to the table. With the former mayor and Henry in tow, Emma left the diner.

~SQ~

“What are you doing here, Regina?” Mary Margaret spat as soon as Regina closed the apartment door.

“I invited her,” Emma said calmly, taking off her coat and hanging it on the back of a dining chair. “We have some things we all need to discuss.”

“Actually, we do,” David said from behind the kitchen island, tossing down the dish towel. “I think you need to relinquish that mushroom and seedling, Regina.”

Clinching her hands into tight fists, the former mayor gritted her teeth but maintained her composure. She stepped away from the apartment door and moved toward the stairs leading to the loft, mindful of the distance between herself and Emma. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Henry peeking over the edge of the loft. Regina took a slow, deep breath before refocusing on the two idiots, still saying nothing.

“He’s right.” Mary Margaret turned to her daughter. Her eyes pleaded for Emma to see reason. “We can’t trust her with them, Emma.”

“Yeah, like how we couldn’t trust her when she didn’t kill Archie?” Emma scowled. Shaking her head, she looked over at the former mayor, caught her glancing up at the loft and realized Henry peeking over the edge of the loft. Regina took a slow, deep breath before refocusing on the two idiots, still saying nothing.

“We can ask Rumpelstiltskin for help,” Mary Margaret suggested, taking a step toward her daughter. She desperately wanted to hug her.

“He’d be willing to help, for a price” added David. He glared at Regina. “At least any deal with him would be binding.”

Releasing a long suffering sigh, Regina pinched the bridge of her nose. Had no one learned their lesson from dealing with the imp?

“No, Regina and I have already reached an agreement and I’m respecting it.” The sheriff took several steps in the direction of the former mayor, effectively standing between Regina and her parents.

“Well, I don’t like it.” David frowned as he moved around the kitchen island to stand next to Mary Margaret. “You have to understand, Emma. Nothing good will come from this arrangement.”

“Understand what?” the sheriff asked, tossing her arms up in exasperation. “Neither one of you tell me anything of substance. You say read Henry’s book. Well, obviously, it has some pretty major plot holes.” Pursing her lips, she gave her father a tired look. “You didn’t even get that press release to the paper.”
“I typed it up,” David defended weakly, thrown by the sudden shift in topic. “It just didn’t make it to the office.”

“It could’ve been e-mailed from anywhere,” Emma whined. “And now, Hook is in the wind.” Glaring at the table, she continued, “You both asked me how you could help. I explicitly explained what I needed from each of you.” She sighed and rubbed her face. Letting her hands fall to her sides, Emma added, “Now we have to deal with all the damage done to the town on top of everything else.”

“David’s doing the best he can, Emma, and Anton did say he was sorry,” Mary Margaret said softly, hoping to calm Emma. “I’m sure everything will work out.”

“Insurance policies don’t cover property damages by giants, Ms. Blanchard,” Regina cut in, feeling slightly sympathetic to Emma’s blatantly growing frustration.

“Then the town will pay for it,” David said matter-of-factly.

“With what, exactly?” Regina asked, crossing her arms as she narrowed her eyes at David and Mary Margaret. She did remember the state of the city coffers when asked to step down as mayor. “The amount of funds required to restore the multitude of damaged businesses to code would be far more than Storybrooke can cover, and that wouldn’t even start to cover the personal property damages,” Looking at Emma, she added, “That’s if you could convince the city council to agree—which they won’t.”

Looking back and forth between David and Regina, the sheriff absently nodded as she thought back to the few budgetary meetings she had actually attended with the city council, the same group of people who were currently running Storybrooke.

Taking a breath and standing up to her full height, Mary Margaret held her ground against Regina. “We’ll pay for it.” Ignoring Regina’s amused scoff and eye roll, she added, “I’m sure others will be willing to pitch in and help.”

“Possible, but doubtful, Dear,” Regina said with a hint of sadness and also ignoring Emma’s curious look.

“The people of Storybrooke are good and generous, Regina. You’ll see,” Mary Margaret said with a confident smile, feeling and sounding every bit like Snow White. She turned and headed towards the kitchen to start a pot of tea.

“I’m going to go pack a few things,” Emma said to Regina as she headed towards the stairs.

“Why?” David asked casting a worried glance to Mary Margaret.

Stopping on the first step, the sheriff hung her head for a moment before turning around. “I told you when I called this morning,” she huffed. “Regina and I are going to shadow each other until this situation with Cora gets resolved.”

“How are you planning on doing that?” From the kitchen, Mary Margaret narrowed her eyes at the former mayor. “They could be working together. Just because you heard something or saw something, doesn’t make it true.”

Looking at Emma, Regina simply raised her eyebrows as she moved to stand directly beside the stairs.

“We’re working together,” the sheriff said with finality before turning and heading upstairs.
The former mayor’s eyes followed Emma before turning back to face a glaring David and oblivious Mary Margaret. Sighing softly as she shifted to a more comfortable stance, Regina rolled her eyes as the deputy instantly tensed.

~SQ~

Trotting upstairs, Emma smiled when she saw Henry already in his pajamas. In the corner by the dresser, he sat cross-legged on his air mattress, flipping through his book. She ignored the boy as she dug a duffle out of the bottom of their shared closet. Tossing it on the bed, she grabbed a few shirts off their hangers and proceeded to haphazardly fold them.

When it was obvious that Henry wasn’t going to say anything, Emma asked, “Are you alright? I know things have been crazy tense lately.”

“Cora doesn’t have a story in the book.” Confused, Henry looked up at Emma. “She’s barely even mentioned.” Ever since he’d heard the name and learned of Cora’s association, he’d been searching for clues in his book.

Stuffing her shirts in the duffle, the sheriff moved to the dresser and started pulling out more clothes. “I have a feeling there’s quite a bit that’s not mentioned,” she grumbled, stuffing the jeans and undergarments in the bag.

“Are you going to stay with Mom?” the boy asked, closing his book.

Frowning, Emma zipped up her duffle and said, “Yeah.”

Pushing his book to the side, Henry stood up and hugged Emma.

Wrapping her arms around him, she whispered in his hair, “You have to keep this secret for us.” The sheriff pulled back and was relieved at the boy’s nod. Letting Henry go, she grabbed her bag and trotted down the stairs.

~SQ~

After hearing the closet door open and then close, David hissed, “I don’t know what you’re up to, but we’ll find out, Regina.”

“You do that,” the former mayor challenged, lifting her chin. After all, it was only a matter of time before the whole charade became apparent, anyway. “I imagine you might not like the truth.”

Ignoring the deputy, Regina pondered Mary Margaret’s consternation as she steeped her cup of tea at the kitchen island. “Or the consequences of it,” she added quietly.

Glaring, David waited for some reason to act, any reason to remove Regina Mills from this awkward equation regarding his daughter and grandson.

“I’m ready,” Emma said as she jogged down the stairs with her duffle. Dropping it on the dining table, she reached for her coat and put it on. “I need you to cover the station and dispatch tomorrow, David. Since the cruiser is in the shop, just call my cell if something pops up.” She rolled her shoulders to settle the bulky sheriff’s jacket and slung the duffle over her shoulder.

“Would you like a ride?” asked Mary Margaret after a sip of tea. “It’s cold out.”

Sighing, Emma said, “I think the cold air will do us some good.” If she wanted to escape from her parents, she knew Regina had to be chomping at the bit. “Ready?” she asked, turning to the former mayor.
Nodding sharply while walking, Regina opened the apartment door, stepped out and started down the stairs, confident the sheriff was close behind her.

“Bye,” Emma said grabbing the door handle. She was about to pull it shut when….

“Wait!” Henry called from the loft. Quickly, he darted down the stairs and slipped out the partially open door.

“Henry, no,” Mary Margaret ordered since David was unable to catch the boy.

Ducking her head, Emma covertly observed as Henry hugged Regina, wrapping his arms tightly around her waist. She kept a firm grip on the doorknob.

“Thank you,” the boy whispered, tears pricking his eyes.

Returning the unexpected hug and, sensing Henry’s inner conflict, Regina firmly stroked his back and softly said, “You’re welcome.”

After a moment, he pulled back and wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. There was more he wanted to say and ask but didn’t know how. Plus, Henry was still very angry with his mother. What made it worse, however, was that he was also mad at Emma.

When the boy composed himself, Regina offered a gentle smile. “It’ll be okay.”

With a weak nod, Henry gave a watery smile in return and bolted back into the apartment. In that moment, he believed everything might just be okay, but he didn’t want his mother to see him cry.

Smirking, Emma watched the boy hurry up the stairs, heard the unmistakable squeak of the air mattress and saw the light go out. She glanced at her parents, nodded and closed the door.

~SQ~

Walking towards Mifflin Street, Emma shifted the weight of her duffle before shoving her hands in her jacket pockets. “I need to ask you something.”

“Then ask,” Regina said, tired of talking.

“This feud between you and Mary Margaret…,” the sheriff paused for a second to gauge the former mayor’s reaction. “Is it like Henry’s storybook says?”

Regina stopped walking and ground her teeth. She pursed her lips before turning to face Emma with a hard gaze. For a moment, she considered not answering, but the sheriff would doggedly hound her. Taking a deep breath, she battled with her emotions and weighed the tactical benefits of saying anything.

“Hey, if you don’t want to talk about it right now, that’s fine. We’ve been through a lot today, but eventually, I’m going to have to understand your side of things.” Emma said softly, relaxing when she sensed a notable shift in the former mayor.

When they quietly resumed their walk, Regina sighed as emotions came bubbling to the surface—fresh, raw and powerful. “No, it’s not as simple as in Henry’s book.”

Emma nodded, expecting as much.

“In fact, none of the stories in his book are quite right,” the former mayor admitted.
Weeks ago, while she and Mary Margaret were actually in the Enchanted Forest, she’d inquired about the history of the land and its people, just mainly as something to pass the time. But the sheriff was simply told to read Henry’s book again upon their eventual return. Mary Margaret had said it was more comprehensive than what she could readily explain. Yet as they traveled, Emma was regaled with bits and pieces of Snow White’s glamorous past life, along with the occasional gushing over what could’ve been. It was all rather disappointing because she had hoped for a more profound bonding experience between them and not for the surface one they’d ended up establishing. When it was all said and done, however, the savior still felt like she was drifting and lost.

“Mary Margaret and David seem pretty content with them,” Emma admitted as she shifted her bag again.

“They would,” Regina sneered, unsurprised.

“So, set the record straight,” Emma prompted casually, kicking a pebble off the sidewalk. “I know we can’t hash out everything in one go, but....” She trailed off as she deliberated how much to expose herself.

“I suppose it would be for the best.” The former mayor cut a soft glare at the sheriff. “The short version?” she asked in clarification.

“That’ll be a good place to start,” Emma said as she smiled softly again, realizing the prickly woman wasn’t that bad, if one knew how to handle her.

“Your mother ruined me.”

Blinking at the singular statement, Emma waited for Regina to continue while she carefully mulled it over.

Eventually, they reached 108 Mifflin Street. As the former mayor headed up the drive instead of the walk to the front door, the sheriff curiously followed her to a large and meticulously organized storage shed along the back wall of the garage. She was quite astonished to learn that Regina Mills fed stray cats.

Remaining quiet and out of the way, Emma watched as Regina refilled a series of food and water bowls. Occasionally, the former mayor would affectionately pet a cat and talk softly to it. For their part, the strays mewed appreciatively and weaved around Regina’s legs, gracing her with the occasional, spontaneous head butt.

After the food was stowed and the shed locked back up, Emma followed Regina to the side entrance of the house while glancing back at the hungry cats. As the former mayor unlocked the door, she asked, “If you like cats, why don’t you have one?”

“Henry’s allergic,” Regina answered simply, closing and locking the door behind Emma. Stepping around the sheriff, she walked down a short, dark hall, flipped on the kitchen lights and went to the sink to wash her hands. “You need to be mindful of using the side door. A few like to slip inside and hide in the house on occasion.”

“Okay,” Emma said, dropping her bag on the floor by the kitchen island. She smirked at the idea of Regina chasing a cat through her house.

Drying her hands with a dish towel, the former mayor observed the sheriff’s awkward stance and searching eyes.
“Regina, I’m—,” Emma cut herself off and took a deep breath. Looking up, she caught Regina’s almost compassionate gaze and pursed her lips. “I’m sorry,” she said after a quick breath.

“As am I, Miss Swan,” the former mayor replied softly as she straightened the dish towel on its hook.

“I guess things are about to get really awkward.” Emma shifted back and forth on her feet. “How far apart do you think we can actually get, anyway?”

“Let’s find out,” Regina said, walking out to the dining room.

Emma was quick to follow.

During their impromptu experiment, the pair discovered they could be a grand distance of roughly ten feet without any painful side effects. At eleven feet, they both experienced an unpleasant prickly sensation, while at twelve feet, they were overwhelmed with a deep, searing pain. Needless to say, the sheriff noticed she was hit a lot harder by the pain than the former mayor but decided not to bring it up.

Now, they sat quietly at the dining table indulging in a glass of apple cider. Emma had never been so happy for a stiff drink in her life. Unfortunately, the beverage made her tongue a little loose after such a harrowing day—not to mention the last 48 hours.

“Thanks for saving my life today,” the sheriff offered, taking another sip while she watched Regina refocus on her. Swallowing, she smiled and added, “It was a little close, though.”

“It wasn’t my intention,” Regina explained before taking a sip. “Magic works differently here.” Her eyes glazed over as she once again lost herself in her own thoughts.

“It would’ve been bad for Henry to see me get mushed,” Emma mused, swirling the liquid around in her glass. She wanted more ice but didn’t feel like getting up and didn’t feel like making Regina get up. Searching the former mayor’s passive face, she gently said, “Henry seemed pretty clingy with you tonight.”

“IT was only natural. He was frightened.”

Confused by the dismissive answer, Emma frowned, realizing Regina honestly believed that all Henry wanted from her was protection. The sheriff wanted to probe the issue further, but she decided not to push her luck. “Shower and sleep, how is that going to work exactly?”

It turned out that the bathing dilemma wasn’t all that bad and happened without much fuss.

Emma was given free reign of the hall restroom—the same one Henry used if the wide assortment of colorful kids' shampoos and bath bubbles stashed in the tall, free-standing cabinet was any indication. She simply shuffled stuff around and made room for her own things. Basking in the high water pressure and copious amounts of hot water, Emma was mindful of the prickly former mayor sitting in the hall and rushed through her nightly process.

After being shown the guest bedroom, the sheriff reluctantly unpacked her duffle, tossing what little she had brought in the dresser and closet. If only for appearances, it further solidified that their new situation was indeed permanent. Regina casually commented that they may eventually be able to increase their limited range, and the sheriff could one night sleep in the guest room. However, Emma could only nod and dutifully returned the same patience Regina had given her. Everything was going remarkably well until the former mayor retrieved extra blankets and sheets from the hall linen closet.
“Why can’t I sleep in the bed? It’s huge,” the sheriff reasoned, crossing her arms as Regina laid down a sheet on the chaise lounge in the master bedroom. “I napped on it this morning.”

“Miss Swan,” the former mayor said, a little too reserved as she grabbed another flat sheet and proceeded to lay it over the chaise, “I have been remarkably patient.”

“Yes, you have,” Emma agreed, still watching Regina’s skilled movements as she situated the blanket. She wanted to say she didn’t need sheets, but the whole process seemed to keep Regina calm. “You’ve no idea how much I appreciate that, Regina—and this.” She gestured to the chaise-turned-bed.

Expertly turning back the top sheet and blanket, the former mayor fluffed the two extra pillows she’d grabbed from the hall closet and dropped them on the lounge. Stepping around the sheriff, she glanced at the stoic expression and sighed. She spoke as she removed the decorative pillows and turned back her own bed. “As two people who haven’t particularly cared for one another, our lives have become intimately entwined. It may not seem that way now, but rest assured, we will feel the impact soon enough.”

Sitting down on the chaise, Emma asked, “This is your way of putting some space between us?”

“Precisely,” Regina agreed, slipping under the sheet. She pulled the lightweight blanket up as she lay down. Reaching for the bedside lamp switch, she asked, “Do you still need the light?”

“No,” Emma said, sliding under the covers. The lounge wasn’t too uncomfortable. She lay there for a few moments, staring at the ceiling, her eyes adjusting to the cool glow from the street lamps. Hearing Regina roll over, she asked, “Aren’t you worried about your mother slipping in here while we’re asleep?” Her gaze drifted nervously to the large window by her head.

“No tonight,” Regina said, staring at her closet door. “Her plans have been disrupted. She’ll need time to strategize.”

“Do you think she really just wants to reconcile with you?” Emma asked softly, looking at the lump in the bed. She’d seen and heard of similar situations while in the foster system.

“I doubt that’s her only motivation.” Closing her eyes, Regina pushed all thoughts of her mother out of her mind and said with finality, "Good night, Miss Swan."

~SQ~

Half asleep, Emma once again sat at the kitchen island. Her head rested heavily on her left palm as she dumped spoonful after spoonful of sugar into her coffee. Then, she poured enough cream into the cup to raise the dark liquid to the mug’s brim. Hot chocolate would’ve been preferred, but it lacked the necessary caffeine to jumpstart her weary body.

While stirring the heating milk in a small stainless steel pot on the stove, Regina casually asked, “Would you like some oatmeal?” Apparently, Emma Swan was not a morning person.

After taking her blissful first sip of coffee, Emma answered, “No thanks. Have any cereal?” She hopped off the stool after being pointed to the rather impressive walk-in pantry.

Breakfast was a quiet affair. The former mayor stood at the island eating her oatmeal with dried figs and chopped nuts while drinking her coffee and glancing over the morning paper. The sheriff quietly ate two bowls of stale kids’ cereal, finishing off the box. When Regina finished, she started fluttering about, cleaning the kitchen. Emma turned the refolded newspaper toward herself.
After glancing over the front page, the sheriff asked, “Whatever happened to Sidney?” She paused and looked up at Regina. “David looked for him in the psych ward at the hospital, but he wasn’t there.”

“He’s in hiding, no doubt,” Regina supplied, loading the rinsed dishes in the dishwasher, “biding his time.” She looked out the kitchen window for a brief moment, cautiously reaching out with her magical senses and finding nothing.

“Do you think he’ll team up with Cora?” Emma asked, pushing the paper back. She felt useless.

“No,” the former mayor closed the dishwasher and considered the sheriff before picking up the paper. She turned, opened a low cabinet and stuffed the newspaper in a paper bag half full with other newspapers. “He’ll stay under the radar until a clear victor presents oneself.” She immediately moved to the refrigerator, opened the freezer and pondered their dinner options. Scowling, she asked, “When do you think we’ll be home tonight?”

Nodding, the former mayor pulled out a package wrapped in butcher paper and closed the freezer door.

While Regina opened the package on one side of the sink, the sheriff timidly asked, “Is there anything you need to do today?” Heck, if the former mayor could be bothered to ask, couldn’t she at least offer the same courtesy? It wasn’t like she knew what the woman did all day, anyway.

Washing her hands, Regina glanced over her shoulder at Emma with an odd expression. “Not today.” She shut off the water and dried her hands.

“Okay.” Shifting on the stool, the sheriff asked, “I know Mary Margaret thinks the townies will help each other out, but is there any other way to help expedite repairs?” She drummed her fingers on the counter. “Some way we can raise the money?”

“Finances aren’t the only issue, Miss Swan,” Regina said, opening the refrigerator. She started pulling out various sandwich makings and placing them on the kitchen island as she explained. “Even if the other citizens managed to provide sufficient funds, there remains the issue of skilled labor and time.” Constructing the sandwiches, she wordlessly inquired about the sheriff’s preferences. Regina continued, “Storybrooke only supports two construction companies, and their priority will be repairing the city’s infrastructure.”

Emma salivated over the yummy looking sandwiches as her two bowls of cereal seemed to have already worn off. She absently asked, “What about Marco? He obviously knows how to handle a hammer.” She frowned as Regina sliced the sandwiches and neatly folded them in plastic wrap.

“As talented as the man may be with his trade, he can only work so much in a day,” Regina said as she put things away. Then she slipped out of the kitchen and out of Emma’s sight for a moment.

Emma frowned as the prickling sensation started all over her body. She was about to get up and follow when the former mayor returned with a small, soft-sided cooler. Raising an eyebrow, the sheriff smirked as she remembered seeing a few snack-sized chip bags in the walk-in pantry. She quickly retrieved them and tossed them in the cooler. Watching the former mayor pack their lunch, Emma bent over on the counter, leaning on her elbows. She couldn’t remember the last time
someone packed a lunch for her.

“So, there’s nothing we can do to help?” Emma mentally reviewed everyone she knew of in town. In a flash of inspiration, she asked, “What about the dwarves? They enjoy hard work, and they’re skilled.”

Opening the freezer again, Regina scoffed as she grabbed an ice pack. “The serfs won’t take kindly to another royal decree on top of all their other jobs.” She closed the freezer and pinned Emma with a sour look. “And let’s not forget, they already work 40 hours a week to provide for themselves.” After adding the ice pack to the cooler, she got two bottles of water out of the fridge. “I wouldn’t bother asking the Blue Fairy. She’ll just say the experience is character building and severely frown on anything taking the dwarves from mining her precious dust.” Reorganizing the contents of the cooler, Regina zipped it closed. “So, the options are eliciting outside help, using magic or allowing everyone to deal with their problems in their own time.”

“We have enough outsiders with Greg Mendell in the hospital,” Emma retorted as she stood upright and eyed Regina. Having no desire to tangle with Leroy or Mother Superior, she said, “You could do it—fix the damaged businesses with magic.”

Pursing her lips, the former mayor considered the request but said nothing.

“If you didn’t care, you wouldn’t have stopped that car from landing on me.” The sheriff slowly smiled. “Let alone all the advice you've been giving me.”

“It would’ve killed you—and me, by proxy.” Regina arched an eyebrow, choosing to ignore the advice comment.

“True, but you wouldn’t have suggested that herbalist lady if you didn’t at least feel bad for Anton.” Emma grinned as Regina glared and stormed out of the kitchen, carrying the cooler. Archie was right. The former mayor was changing.

Dropping the cooler at the top of the foyer steps, Regina rolled her eyes at Emma’s lopsided smile. “He was kidnapped by my mother and crammed in a cage on a boat for untold reasons. It wasn’t a pleasant experience, I’m sure.” Stepping to a console table just off the foyer, she dug in her purse and unclipped her house keys from a larger key ring. Dropping the house keys in her trousers pocket and the others in her purse, Regina walked into the study. “I’ll call Widow Granger to arrange a time.”

Crossing her arms, Emma leaned against one of the couches while she idly listened to the former mayor converse with Widow Granger, vaguely mentioning the beanstalk seedling. It seemed a pretty cordial conversation, almost downright pleasant.

Hanging up the house phone, Regina said, “She’ll expect us around 1:30 this afternoon.” She shuffled around a few pieces of paper on her desk, opened a drawer and tucked something inside her blazer.

Nodding, the sheriff pulled her cellphone out of the back pocket of her jeans and called Granny’s Bed & Breakfast to leave a message for Anton at the front desk. Snapping her phone shut, she tucked it back in her pocket. Emma cheekily said, “I happen to know that not everyone in this town hates you.”

“Really?” Regina crossed her arms and lifted her chin while remaining behind her desk. She fixed Emma with a menacing gleam. “Enlighten me, Miss Swan.”
Realizing that her attempt at humor was grossly misplaced a little too late, Emma paled slightly. “I already said I was sorry, and I meant it.” However, she squared her shoulders and decided she wouldn’t be intimidated by that event again.

After a beat, Regina’s expression seemed almost sad as she stepped around the desk. “Henry won’t be pleased with your earlier suggestion, Miss Swan. I promised I wouldn’t use magic, and I’ve already tested the bounds of that agreement.”

“Yeah, he told me about that, but I think he’ll understand,” the sheriff said, walking back into the foyer. “We’ll just explain that I asked you to help the community.” She smiled brightly as the former mayor followed her.

Crossing her arms, Regina asked in a sharp tone, “And the community will simply accept this kind gesture as exactly that?”

“Probably not everyone, but it’s a step in the right direction.” Emma retorted, taking a deep breath while she gave Regina a soft smile. Archie believed in her enough to stretch patient-doctor confidentiality. That had to mean something. “We’ll just call it community service,” she explained with a shrug.

Cutting her gaze away, Regina reconsidered Emma’s plan, but more importantly, she quickly revaluated her current circumstances. “Very well, Sheriff.” After all, what did she have to lose? The Evil Queen was trapped and damned either way.

~SQ~

With the cool spring sun in the mid-morning sky, the walk downtown was relatively quiet as most of Storybrooke’s residents had already started the day. Emma would occasionally attempt small talk, but Regina wouldn’t elaborate beyond monosyllabic answers. So as they traversed the residential streets towards Main Street, the sheriff looked around, mainly to be nosey.

Turning the final corner onto Main Street, Emma spotted Mary Margaret and Anton walking away from them down the opposite sidewalk. “What are they up to?” she asked as she shifted the cooler strap to her other shoulder.

“Undoubtedly subjecting the poor fool to unwarranted ridicule.” Regina scowled as she tucked her chilled hands in coat pockets. She glanced at Emma and waited for the inevitable scolding for her continued sour demeanor.

The sheriff’s brow furrowed as she stopped and watched the pair. “It would suck—being dragged around town and forced to apologize to everyone individually.”

“Indeed,” Regina said from Emma’s side. “And solidify his indentured servitude.” She’d seen Leopold do the same with nobles and commoners alike.

“Really?” the sheriff smirked looking at the former mayor. “That’s what you’re taking from this?” She blindly gestured to Anton and Mary Margaret, who were now talking to one of the unfortunate shopkeepers.

Frowning at Emma, Regina elaborated. “I don’t doubt the giant’s honest regret over his actions. However, for someone to force him to apologize on a one-by-one basis when he has no means other than a word to rectify his wrongs is shaming and cruel for a member of such a proud race.”

Emma thought about that for a moment. “I thought she mainly just wanted to help introduce him to
“Why? He’s more than capable of making his own friends,” Regina retorted, walking towards the closest damaged building, Dave’s Fish ‘n’ Chips. A tarp covered the corner and front window by the alley. “It would’ve been more efficient to hold a town meeting and allow Anton the opportunity to introduce himself while apologizing in mass.”

Emma frowned, glancing over her shoulder and back down the street. Anton and Mary Margaret were nowhere in sight. Twisting, she looked up at the library’s clock tower. “Why isn’t she at school, anyway?”

“A very good question,” Regina noted as she opened the door to Dave’s. “Shall we get started?”

Nodding, the sheriff followed the former mayor inside to start the whole song-and-dance they had discussed before leaving the house.

“Good morning, Cecil,” Regina cheerfully greeted a small boy with reddish brown hair sweeping up dirt and debris in the restaurant’s small dine-in section. “Is your father available?”

“Good morning, Ma’am,” Cecil said politely with a hint of nervousness. His eyes shifted to the sheriff and back to the former mayor. “He’s in the back. Would you like me to fetch him?”

“That would be appreciated, Dear,” Regina smiled softly, linking her hands in front of her.

“I’ll be right back,” the boy said with a small smile. Leaning his broom carefully against the nearest booth, Cecil limped his way to the back of the store. He shot a glare over his shoulder at the sheriff before disappearing into the kitchen.

“Regina, what’s going on? Why do I feel like a fish in a barrel?” Emma asked as she glanced around at all the fishing paraphernalia decorating the walls. Her eyes were drawn to a particularly large harpoon. “He isn’t Captain Ahab, is he?”

“No,” Regina answered dryly, somewhat amused. “You mustn’t confuse fairy tales with classical literature, Dear.”

With furrowed brow, Emma pondered the possibility of other classical characters. If Storybrooke had Dr. Frankenstein, couldn’t there be a Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde character somewhere? She shuddered at the thought.

Suddenly, a burly man dressed in a dark blue beanie, grey fisherman’s sweater and dark jeans burst through the kitchen door. His blue eyes flashed hot and angry at the sheriff, but cooled upon noticing the former mayor. He stopped before them and took a slow breath. “Good mornin’, Mayor,” Dave said in a thick Scandinavian accent. His eyes cut to Emma as he added grudgingly, “Sheriff.”

Instinctively, Emma subtly shifted her weight in case this bulk of a man decided to take a swing. She slowly let the cooler strap slide off her shoulder and dropped the cooler on the floor.

“Mr. Salter,” Regina said, pulling Dave’s focus back onto her. “The sheriff and I would like to offer assistance, if you require it.”

The fisherman laughed. He quickly sobered and pointed at Emma. “That twig of a woman wouldn’t last five minutes on my boat.”
“Hey!” the sheriff countered indignantly, meeting Mr. Salter’s challenging glare. She was expecting to defend Regina, not herself, but the day was still young. “I have skills.”

“Be that as it may, Sheriff, I don’t have time for your chattering.” Dave returned his focus to Regina. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve work to do.” He turned and started to walk away.

Emma looked between the two. There was obviously some history here.

Taking a slow breath, Regina said, “That is why we’re here, Mr. Salter.” When he turned back towards her halfway, she gestured to the front window and crumbled corner of the restaurant. “How long did the construction company say it would take to get to you?”

“Four weeks,” Dave grumbled. His voice was tight as he continued, “The health inspector, the sadistic bastard, already came by this morning. He told me I had to close until the damage was repaired.” The fisherman’s eyes flashed again. His glower pulled the weathered skin of his face tight. “I can’t afford to be closed for four weeks.” Dave paused as if suddenly remembering with whom he was speaking. “But my problems are my own.”

“As unfortunate as the current situation may be, we are prepared to offer you a solution to mitigate your immediate woes.” Regina glanced behind herself at the damage. Turning back, she cocked an eyebrow.

“I heard you’ve forsaken magic for your boy,” the fisherman narrowed his eyes at the former mayor. He took a tentative step forward, subtly indicating his interest.

Pursing her lips, Regina gritted her teeth as she pushed back the annoyance of her private life being gossip fodder. “Such is the plight of casters.”

Nodding slowly, Dave agreed with a raspy, “Aye.” He knew the story. His own mother, a reclusive hedge witch, had suffered through similar mistrust.

The sheriff continued to look back and forth between the two. Yup, there was definitely a story here. She briefly wondered if this fisherman was in Henry’s book.

Taking a deep breath, Dave quietly said, “I have nothing to offer.”

“I’m not Mr. Gold, Dear.” The former mayor smirked as mischief laced her tone. She caught a glance at Cecil peaking around the serving counter. “Consider it a future investment.”

At Dave’s nod, Regina turned back towards the damaged corner, unlinked her hands and deliberated about how to best begin. She concentrated on the magic threads weaving themselves around her and to her. She focused on the debris littering the floor and how all the pieces were supposed to fit together. Most importantly, she remembered how Dave’s Fish ‘n’ Chips used to look.

Watching with great interest, the sheriff was afraid to take her eyes off of Regina. Quickly, she glanced back at the fisherman’s hopeful gaze and the boy’s innocent curiosity. The suspense was killing her. She could almost feel the excitement building inside and around her as she waited for that magical moment. Out of the corner of her eyes, the sheriff saw Regina move her hands in a seemingly useless gesture when…. Emma blinked, and the restaurant was returned to its tacky, fisherman wharf splendor. She blinked several more times as the dark purple cloud gradually vanished.

“Wow!” Cecil exclaimed, coming out from behind the counter. Moving to stand next to his father, he looked up with wide eyes.
With a smile, Dave ruffled his youngest son’s hair. He looked back at the former mayor and sheriff. “Thank you.”

With a quick nod, Regina turned and strode out of the building with Emma hastily scrabbling for the cooler before bolting after her, hot on her heels. Her heart was racing, and she felt oddly jittery. The blast of cool air across her face seemed to relieve her reaction to accessing magic. Ignoring the sheriff’s concerned look, she continued down the sidewalk at a brisk pace until they reached the next damaged storefront, Sarah’s Ice Cream. The large display window was covered with spiderweb cracks with a sizable, jagged hole off-center. A blackened piece from the blue hatchback lay inside on the black-and-white checkered floor. Several tiles between the chunk of car and window were ruined.

Regina cringed. This wasn’t going to be pleasant. She mentally braced herself as she reached for the door.

“Hold on a minute,” Emma said, seeing the faint tremor in the former mayor’s hand. She gently laid her hand on Regina’s forearm. “Are you alright? You bolted out of there pretty quick.” The sheriff looked back down the street to see Dave pulling down the blue tarp, a bright smile on his face.

Dropping her arm, and relieved when Emma released her grip, an irritated Regina shoved her hands in her coat pockets. “Mr. Salter is a man of action, Sheriff. He wouldn’t have appreciated us lingering.”

“Okay,” Emma glanced into the ice cream parlor. She saw Sarah Frost talking adamantly to someone on the phone. Turning back to Regina, she continued, “I got that impression, trust me. But what’s with the shaking hands?”

“Magic works differently here,” the former mayor supplied automatically.

“You keep saying that, but what does it mean?” the sheriff asked with furrowed brow as she resituated the cooler’s strap. She couldn’t wait to eat her sandwich. It was the only reason she kept carrying the damned thing.

“I’m not a hundred percent certain,” Regina admitted softly.

“Okay, but you’ll tell me if you can’t keep this up, right?” Emma accepted the pointed glare as an answer and carefully pulled open the ice cream parlor’s shattered glass door. She gestured for the former mayor to enter first.

“I’ll call you back.” Sarah Frost slammed her cordless phone down on the counter by the cash register. Marching to the front of the store from behind the serving counter, she glared at Regina but offered Emma a friendly greeting. “What can I do for you, Sheriff Swan?”

Sparing a fleeting look at the former mayor, the sheriff looked around the store. “We were wondering if we could help out in any way.” She flashed the warm smile that usually led to her getting an extra scoop of ice cream at a discounted price.

“You can help by taking out the trash,” Sarah scowled. Her eyes were hard as she crossed her arms and gave the former mayor a venomous glower.

Rolling her eyes, Regina scoffed, completely unimpressed. She caught Emma’s brief glare. With a sigh, she schooled her features to an expression of professional neutrality. It wasn’t like this woman’s homemade ice cream, custard or whatever it was called, tasted any good. The former
mayor did not, however, like Sarah’s amused look.

Obviously, Ms. Frost believed the savior cowed the Evil Queen into behaving.

“Like I was saying, we want to help. I take it the health inspector came by this morning.” The sheriff looked around and assessed the damage. It really wasn’t that bad, just a lot of broken glass, a few melted floor tiles and a piece of shrapnel from the blue hatchback. “How long until the glass can be repaired?” she asked.

“They have to order it. Russell said it’ll take at least two weeks.” Sarah watched Emma intently.

“You do realize you’re responsible for the glass out on the sidewalk, right?” the sheriff said as she kicked a large piece of glass away from her foot. “It’s a safety hazard. You’ll need to get that cleaned up today.” She fixed the parlor owner with a hard look. “Or else I’ll have to write you a ticket.”

Sarah’s eyes widened in surprise as she stammered, “Of course, Sheriff, I was just making some calls.”

“Naturally,” Regina commented in a bored tone as she linked her hands behind her back. “Good help is so hard to find these days.” She peered into the display case containing all the frozen treats. “How is Ashley enjoying motherhood?”

Sarah Frost huffed loudly. She opened her mouth to bark a retort at the most unwelcome former mayor but was cut off by the sheriff. Her eyes stayed on Regina.

“You’ll have to secure the glass panes in your front window and door.” Emma watched as Regina casually meandered away. “I’m sure the health inspector has already informed you of what needs to be done before you can reopen.”

Forgetting about Regina, Sarah snapped wide eyes onto Emma. “Reopen? That toad said nothing about closing. He just said I had to clean up all this glass and cover that hole.” Agitated, she gestured to the hole in the front display window.

“There are town safety ordinances that—,” the sheriff started to explain but was rudely interrupted.

“Whatever,” Sarah said in raspy exasperation, tossing her hands up in the air. “You mentioned helping. How are you going to help?” The question was punctuated with hands on hips.

Regina smirked as she cocked an eyebrow at Emma.

“Well,” the sheriff said carefully while wondering what mood Sarah would manifest next, “Like I was trying to say, the Mayor—.”

“She’s the former mayor,” the parlor owner snapped, tossing a haughty smirk at Regina. “The city council demanded she step down.” Her mother was a council member—she would know.

Shaking her head, Emma shifted the cooler strap to her other shoulder. She really wanted to eat her sandwich. “Look, Ms. Frost, we just want to help, but if you’re not going to cooperate, we’ll be on our way.” The sheriff turned toward the door, certain there’d be plenty of others happy for the help and who would give them less grief.

“Wait,” Sarah sighed, realizing her mother wouldn’t be pleased if she passed up free assistance. “How can you help?”
“Well, the Mayor would be willing to fix your store via magic.” Emma smiled as she added, “If you ask nicely.”

Raising both eyebrows, Regina graced the sheriff with an amused smirk before turning to Sarah. She didn’t have to wait long for the ill-mannered shopkeeper to grudgingly mumble the request. She briefly toyed with refusing, but frustration was rolling off Emma in waves.

Without another word, the former mayor strode to the front of the store. Once again, she focused on the magic threads and could almost believe she actually saw them. The necessary buildup was faster this time as the required energy quickly gathered at her command. And with an elegant roll of her wrist, Sarah’s Ice Cream was restored.

Immediately, Regina shoved her hands in her pockets and stepped towards the door.

Wordlessly, Emma pushed the door open for her. As the former mayor stepped out, Emma grinned, noticing the pieces of glass still littering the sidewalk. Over her shoulder, she ordered, “Don’t forget to sweep up this glass on the sidewalk, Ms. Frost.”

The ice cream parlor door slowly closed but not before an aggravated growl was heard.

Emma watched Sarah stomp to the back of the store. Facing Regina, she remarked, “You left that glass on the sidewalk on purpose.”

Tilting her head, the former mayor innocently blinked and then flashed a wicked smile. She started to walk down the sidewalk. “She all but asked for it with her imperious attitude.”

Shaking her head, the sheriff couldn’t agree more and fell into step beside Regina.

After the first few stops, the entire process sped up tremendously. Obviously, the news spread down the shopkeeper grapevine rather quickly. It seemed, for the most part, that many were quite happy to accept the help. A few outright refused on principle or disdain for the former mayor, but most wanted to reopen as soon as possible and reclaim their lost profits. Money was money, after all.

There were questions, though, lots of curious, meticulous questions from almost every shopkeeper. Yes, they were working together for the safety of Storybrooke. No, Mayor Mills didn’t kill Dr. Hopper. Yes, she did help stop the giant and save the sheriff’s life. Yes, Anton really was a nice giant. The whole situation was a simple case of mistaken identity. Yes, the mayor would like very much to fix your damaged store. It was virtually the same conversation over and over again until they reached their last stop for the day, the dentist’s office down the street from Granny’s Diner.

“Like a magic consultant for the sheriff’s department?” asked the mousey Stephen Doggle, proprietor of Storybrooke Dentistry. He looked back and forth between the two women. “You’ll be partners like on one of those cop shows on TV? Like the Dresden Files?” Pausing, he smiled and amended, “More like Rizzoli and Isles, I imagine.”

“Indeed,” Regina smirked, slightly amused by Stephen’s pop culture reference. Her attention was pulled away as Emma’s cellphone rang.

“Excuse me,” the sheriff said, stepping away from the receptionist’s desk to take the call.

Stephen watched Emma move to the far corner of the empty waiting area. He briefly glanced over the former mayor, assessing. Leaning forward, he said, “The Chamber of Commerce has been pestering the city council for weeks about their special election for the new mayor.”
“Really?” the former mayor questioned, tilting her head slightly.

“Oh yes,” Stephen nodded, happy to share. “I haven’t actually been to any of the meetings because they’ve all been behind closed doors for board members only, for whatever reason. But from what I’ve heard, Mr. Spencer has been pushing for his name to be added to the ballot.”

“Interesting,” Regina commented. The situation would undoubtedly require further research.

“That was the garage. The cruiser’s ready,” Emma said, cutting into the conversation. She looked between the dentist and former mayor.

Ignoring the sheriff, Stephen said, “Naturally, Ms. Ginger and Mrs. Frost have already added their names to the ballot.” He paused for a brief moment then added, “Of course, Mr. Nolan has petitioned to be included, as well.”

Regina lifted her chin as she scowled. It would appear that old world factions were vying for power in Storybrooke.

“The ballet for mayor?” Emma asked.

“It would appear so, Miss Swan,” the former mayor replied as she turned and examined the broken door.

The dentist’s office suffered minimal damage as compared to the other businesses. With a single wave of her hand, the door and other minor damages were restored to their original state. Regina nodded her farewell to Mr. Doggle and promptly headed out the door. And following the morning’s pattern, the sheriff was on her heels.

Pushing down her rising irritation, Regina peeked at Emma from the corner of her eye. Thankfully, the sheriff had given up on her persistent desire for small talk and quietly walked, staring at the ground with pursed lips. However, before the former mayor could inquire what troubled the sheriff, Regina’s eyes were quickly brought forward by a startled, high pitched “Oh!” and an all-too-close Mary Margaret Blanchard. Hadn’t she suffered this peculiar incident enough during the curse?

“Oh,” the school teacher said again, flatly, upon seeing Regina. Her eyes darted to her daughter, whom she greeted with a happy, “Emma!”

Regina rolled her eyes and sidestepped away from the impending nauseating conversation.

“What are you up to?” Mary Margaret smiled brightly at Emma while eyeing Regina with thinly veiled contempt.

“Just checking in with some of the more damaged businesses, seeing if there’s any way we can help,” the sheriff explained as she dropped the cooler on the sidewalk. “We saw you and Anton earlier.”

“Oh, I was just introducing him to everyone,” Mary Margaret said as she casually glanced at the cooler. “It went well, for the most part. There were quite a few people who were annoyed, but I don’t think it’s anything to worry over.” Her eyes cut to Regina as she regally said, “The good people of Storybrooke know there were no hard feelings.”

As her suspicions were further confirmed, Regina crossed her arms, unfazed. They had dealt with several of those vexed people, both pre and post Mary Margaret’s visit and they’d gotten quite the ear full. Luckily, the magical repairs had placated those willing to accept the assistance. Regina
hoped it would curry favor for Sheriff Swan because, as went the Savior, so did she.

“Yeah, the health and building inspectors made their rounds first thing this morning. It apparently put people in a mood,” Emma supplied. She looked around and asked, “Where’s Anton now?”

“He’s somewhere with Grumpy. I think they really hit it off.” Mary Margaret beamed.

Regina held her tongue.

“Maybe we can have lunch?” the school teacher asked hopefully, wanting to get Emma away from Regina and find out what was really going on between them.

“Thanks, but I think we’ll pass.” The sheriff bent over and picked up the cooler. “We packed lunch today, anyway.” Emma flashed a cheeky smile as she patted the side of cooler. She was about to mention heading to pick up the cruiser but was cut off.

With furrowed brows, Mary Margaret asked, “How, exactly, have you been helping?” She glared at Regina.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor sighed. “I’m not campaigning if that’s what you’re insinuating.” She cocked an eyebrow at the school teacher’s widening eyes.

Mary Margaret immediately schooled her features. “You’re using magic!” she hissed. Glaring at her daughter, she continued, “You went along with this? Emma, magic is dangerous.” Mary Margaret turned back to Regina and jeeringly said, “Especially in her hands.”

“Don’t project, Dear,” the former mayor said. Her tone took on a distinct edge. “Your hypocrisy is showing. How quickly we’ve forgotten eliciting the Blue Fairy’s assistance.”

“You’re traitorous, Regina.” Mary Margaret said, invading Regina’s personal space. “I know you’re scheming something, and I’m going to find out what.”

“You’re welcome to try, Dear.” A fire was lit inside the former mayor as she rose to the challenge.

“Alright,” Emma said, lightly cupping Regina’s elbow, gently guiding her away from Mary Margaret. “I’ll call you later,” she said to her mother from over her shoulder while they crossed the street. The sheriff sighed in relief as her mother entered Granny’s Diner.

As they approached the other side of the street, Regina gradually slipped her elbow free from Emma’s grasp. “You’re going to have to tell your parents—sooner rather than later.”

“I know.” The sheriff sighed once again, walking side-by-side with the former mayor. “I just don’t know how, yet.”

The short half-block walk to Michael Tillman’s garage was quiet and uneventful. Emma did catch a few curious glances from random Storybrooke citizens on their lunch breaks, but almost everyone avoided the pair. Putting the cooler on the trunk of the cruiser parked out front, the sheriff paused when the former mayor failed to immediately follow her inside the garage.

Ignoring the curious expression, Regina fell into step behind Emma, slowly increasing the distance between them. She ignored the snubbing from Mr. Tillman as he refused to acknowledge her presence. However, the former mayor refused to back down from his daughter’s hateful glare from inside the enclosed customer area. Ava sat perched behind the service counter as if she were a princess. Slightly amused by this, Regina tilted her head and smirked. It was that slight change in angle that caused her to notice Nicholas.
The boy, not much older than Henry, sat slumped between two chairs along the front wall. He was doing something with his hands but stopped when he glanced up at Ava. Some words were exchanged, and Nicholas slowly stood to give whatever was in his hands to his sister. Dropping down onto the floor beside the counter, he sat with his back to the wall.

It was during Nickolas's movement that Regina saw the bruise peeking out from under the boy’s too-big t-shirt collar. It was a large, sickly yellow bruise over the boy’s left clavicle. The former mayor quelled her initial flash of anger as her eyes snapped back to Ava. Her gaze avidly searched the girl for evidence both for and against the implied notion of the injury. Children were prone to hurting themselves. However, the sudden switch from hate to shock in Ava’s eyes only further fueled Regina's rising suspicions.

Emma and Michael were still talking when Regina turned toward them. The former mayor set her fiery gaze on the mechanic.

Quickly handing over the keys, Michael Tillman offered the sheriff a hurried goodbye and scurried to the back of his shop to bury his head under the hood of another car.

“Thanks, Michael,” Emma called as she turned around, catching Ava watching the former mayor from the service desk. Wordlessly, the sheriff gestured for Regina to head towards the cruiser. She cut another look into the enclosed area and quickly studied the kids.

Ava watched Regina with trepidation. Emma frowned, believing that emotion was spurred from seeing the Evil Queen. Yet, when the girl finally met the sheriff’s eyes, the look didn’t go away. Emma’s brow furrowed in confusion as Ava hopped off her perch and quickly tugged at Nicholas’s t-shirt. It was then she caught sight of the bruise, as well.

Stopping at the entrance of the garage bay, the sheriff peered into the dark and listened as Michael worked on another car. She had read this family’s story in Henry’s book and had felt extremely good about reuniting them. But as she rubbed her forehead, Emma felt the onset of a headache. Something didn’t quite add up, but given Regina’s rigid, dragon-lady stance, now wasn’t the time to get into it.

~SQ~

“Thank you again,” Anton said, following Emma and Regina up the short walk to Widow Granger’s front door.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor glanced around the perfectly manicured lawn boasting thick, green grass and full, lush bushes. It was nearly impossible this time of year to have such a lovely yard. She briefly contemplated that perhaps Mary Margaret broke the giant’s apparently fragile mind with the morning’s vigorous shaming regimen. Maybe she’d give it a try, the whole killing with kindness tactic.

“It’s really not a problem, Anton.” The sheriff said with a friendly smile as she followed the former mayor up onto the porch. Standing next to Anton, she waited as Regina pressed the doorbell. “You don’t need to keep thanking us. There’s no guarantee she can even help.”

“I realize that,” the giant fumbled with his words slightly. “I’m just grateful to get a break from Leroy and his brothers. They really like to work a little too much.”

With a sassy smirk, Regina tossed a wicked look over her shoulder at Emma who just rolled her eyes. Hearing the beautifully decorated wood and stained glass door open, the former mayor faced front, linked her hands in front of her and greeted Helena Granger.
“Right on time, Regina,” the elderly widow said with a pronounced English accent and a warm smile. With platinum silver hair and clear, green eyes, Helena’s once creamy skin was dusted with spots from years of sun exposure.

“As always,” the former mayor said primly. “May I introduce Sheriff Swan and Mr. Anton.”

“Anton is fine,” the giant offered, smiling bashfully.

“Very nice to meet both of you,” Helena said, releasing her hold on the door as she turned around and slowly shuffled across the small foyer towards the living room. She waved for them to follow her while using her other hand to tap the banister as she passed. “Do come in. I made us some tea.”

Entering the modest-home-turned-terrarium of the herbalist Widow Granger, Emma Swan glanced around with wide eyes while taking off her coat. Plants were virtually everywhere with almost every surface donning a plant in some form or fashion. She followed the former mayor’s lead and hung her jacket on a nearby coat rack.

“Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Mrs. Granger,” Regina said, slowly following behind the widow into the living room.

“I always have time for you, Regina.” Helena smiled fondly. She bobbed slightly as she shuffled to sit down in a high-backed chair by the fireplace. “Now, why don’t you serve us some tea, and you can tell me why you’re here. You were most vague on the telephone.” Absently, she gestured to the china tea service already on the coffee table. “Don’t be bashful about the biscuits, dears. There’s plenty more in the cupboard.”

With her usual grace, Regina took a seat in the other chair flanking the fireplace. Emma and Anton glanced at each other as they sat on the ghastly, floral-print sofa under a large bay window that overlooked the front yard. If they stood up, they could actually see past the potted plants. As instructed, Regina proceeded with explaining the exact reason and nature of their visit while serving tea.

Nodding throughout the short story, Helena sipped her tea and nibbled on her biscuits. “Isn’t this simply exciting?” she chortled, passing her empty cup back to Regina.

“Quite,” the former mayor said, deadpan. Ignoring the sheriff’s curious, covert stares, she returned the tea cup to the service.

“Does Mr. Gold know about the plant?” Helena asked, linking her hands across her lap.

“If he doesn’t, he’ll know in short order,” Regina replied, casually sipping her own tea.

“I guess I shouldn’t have told everyone in Granny’s Diner about it,” Anton admitted sadly.

With a dismissive wave of her hand, the widow sighed. “It doesn’t matter, not really. He’d find out one way or another, just like Cora. That is, if she doesn’t already know about it.” Her face took on a sour look as she pursed her lips. “It’s a bit of a pickle, isn’t it? Well, let me see it.” Helena leaned forward and held out her hand.

Shifting her tea cup to one hand, Regina proceeded to pull the vial out of an interior pocket in her blazer and placed it on Helena’s palm. Emma had refused to carry it, and neither wanted to leave it at the house while they were away.

“It’s in stasis,” the herbalist huffed. She glared at the former mayor. “How am I supposed to evaluate the seedling’s cultivating potential if it’s in stasis?”
“The tube’s clear,” Emma supplied. As soon as the words left her mouth, her eyes widened as she realized her error. “Oh.” She immediately pinned Regina with a hard glare and silently mouthed, “You could have told me!

Helena snorted as if she saw the exchange. “Don’t worry, Sheriff. It’s not Regina’s fault. I prefer that people aren’t initially aware of my blindness. It keeps them from bumbling all about—usually annoyingly so—while trying to be absurdly helpful.” She lifted the vial to her nose and took a good, long sniff. “At least the seal is stable. It should hold for another couple hundred years.”

“If you’re blind, why do you grow flowers?” Anton asked delicately, reaching for another cookie. This was so different from the meals with his brothers. These people actually had manners.

Smiling softly, Helena gently stroked a nearby fern. “I wasn’t always blind. Since magic has returned, I’m no longer completely without sight—of a sort.” She raised a small silver pendant on a matching box-chain necklace. “With this, I can perceive the brilliant colors of my plants.”

“That’s remarkable,” Anton smiled. He glanced at Emma before continuing, “Does the glass prohibit your enchantment from working?”

“Not necessarily, however, I need to touch the roots. Only then will I be able to determine if the seedling can be transplanted and decide on the best mixture of soil to promote healthy growth.” Helena fingered the vial. “The only way to do that is to open it.”

“Then open it,” the giant proclaimed.

“Wait, what if the plant won’t grow here? Can it be put back in stasis?” Emma asked, looking between everyone. Her gaze eventually stayed on Regina.

Returning her cup to the service, the former mayor shook her head. “I could, but there might not be anything left to return to stasis.”

“What do you mean?” Anton asked with slight worry.

“If I open this and the seedling instantly withers—which is quite possible—magic can’t restore it.” Helena absently caressed the vial. And as if she could hear the sheriff’s thought, she said, “Not even the rejuvenating waters from Lake Nostos can bring back the dead.”

“Open it and see,” the giant said after a slow exhale. Turning to Emma, he added with a tentative smile, “If we don’t take the chance, we’ll never know.”

“That’s the spirit!” the herbalist praised while fumbling with the vial. She pulled and twisted on the thing several different ways as she attempted to dislodge the cork stopper. “Now, if I can only open the damnable thing.”

Emma was about to offer aid when Regina simply shook her head. Suddenly there was a pop, and a small hiss was heard. Anton was rewarded with a brief rush of the sweet, earthy scent of his family’s beloved legumes.

“Ah ha!” Helen exclaimed in triumph. She absently passed the empty vial to the former mayor. “It seems to be stable and quite healthy.” Carefully, the herbalist went about her examination. A smile grew as she continued. “I think we can help this little fellow grow here in Storybrooke.” Cupping the seedling in one hand, she slowly stood and started to shuffle out of the living room. “Come help me in the kitchen, Anton.”

“Of course.” The giant eagerly rose from his seat and followed the herbalist, answering questions
Pouring another cup of tea, Regina glanced at Emma as she added a few condiments. She listened to the boisterous conversation coming from the kitchen. It was mostly orders intermixed with many to-the-point questions, but Anton’s easy manner and quick responses would certainly win Helena over.

The sheriff grabbed another cookie. She stuffed the whole thing in her mouth, ignoring the former mayor’s disapproving look. Emma glanced at the grandfather clock and shifted uncomfortably. “So,” she started and paused, “what’s going to happen to the beans?”

Finishing her sip, Regina answered, staring straight ahead in contemplation, “I suppose that’s for Anton to decide.”

“Yeah,” the sheriff frowned, looking back at the former mayor. “But what if someone tries to take them away from him?”

“In that case, Sheriff, I imagine you’ll do the job you were elected to do.” Regina turned her attention to Helena and Anton as they returned to their seats.

The giant proudly placed his freshly potted beanstalk seedling on the coffee table. With a smile, he said, “It should grow nicely here. Since we’re not sure how long it’ll take to mature and produce fruit, we’ll have to tend to it very closely.”

“How long do they typically take?” Emma asked as she bent forward and studied the plant.

“At home, it took a month to grow a crop, but that’s in their natural environment.” Anton shrugged his shoulders.

“If I had to guess,” Helena interjected, leaning forward and delicately taking another cookie, “I would say the seedling will mature anywhere between two and four months, much like any other bean of this world. It greatly depends on a vast number of factors that I won’t bore you with.” She started nibbling on her cookie.

“Okay,” the sheriff nodded. She leaned back and rubbed her hands over her thighs. “What about protection? Should we ask the Blue Fairy for help?”

Helena covered her mouth and laughed. Stopping long enough to swallow, she asked, “Why would you ask a fairy for help when you have a natural born caster at your disposal?”

Impassively sipping her tea, Regina said nothing. Helena always did like to overshare.

With an amused smirk, the herbalist resettled in her chair. “If anyone knows about the seedling, they won’t be able to tell it apart from any other legumes in my greenhouse.” She pointed at Emma, half of a cookie still in her hand. “That’ll be the safest place for it until it fruits. Even then, it’ll take someone significantly talented to detect them in their inert state.”

Glancing between the former mayor and sheriff, Anton said, “Helena offered to hire me on to help with her plants and garden.” He thought the offer was rather kind. At least he would feel useful here and not an oaf to be tolerated.

“Anton, would you mind introducing your seedling to the beans?” Helena asked kindly. “The greenhouse is just off the back porch.”

“Certainly,” the giant said as he stood, carefully lifting the small pot off the coffee table. He took a
few steps toward the kitchen before stopping. Turning back to the sheriff, he said, “Thank you.” Nodding toward Regina, he added, “Both of you.”

When she heard the back door open and close, the herbalist held out an open palm in Regina’s direction.

Setting her cup and saucer down, the former mayor pulled out a tight roll of bills. She ignored Emma’s wide eyes as she quickly counted out the required notes and placed the cash in Helena’s waiting hand.

“Nice doing business with you, Regina.” The herbalist smiled as she counted her money. Pleased with the generous amount, Helena tucked the cash away long before Anton ever returned.

The remainder of the visit was filled with typical social pleasantries, mostly Anton asking questions about the various plants and flowers in Helena’s home and greenhouses. At almost three o’clock, Emma decided they’d stayed long enough. The sheriff offered the giant a ride back to Granny’s or downtown, but Anton politely declined, opting instead to visit longer with Widow Granger. The widow was quite pleased and quickly shooed her other guests out the door, all too happy to show her new friend (and helper) her gardens.

~SQ~

In silence, Emma and Regina rode to the police station. As mentioned earlier in the day, the sheriff wanted to check-in on David and take a peek at the paperwork pile before heading back to the former mayor’s for a bit of Q&A and, hopefully, dinner.

“Are you alright?” Emma asked quietly as she opened the door into the building for the former mayor. “This shouldn’t take too long,” she added, noting how tired Regina appeared.

“I’m fine, just drained,” the former mayor admitted, seeing no reason in denying it. The strain of the day was finally starting to wear on her, although it took much longer than she’d originally suspected.

Walking side-by-side, the pair rounded the corner into the main area of the station. Emma frowned as she glanced at the clock and stepped into her disorderly office. Draping her bulky jacket on the coat rack in the corner, she quickly dropped in her chair and started shuffling through the mess that was currently covering her desk. As she determined the degree of disorder in which David had apparently left everything, Emma started mumbling under her breath.

Every once in a while, she’d glance up and check on the former mayor who primly sat across from her in a visitor’s chair, her coat draped across her lap. Sometimes, Regina would be watching her, others, she’d be staring off into space or looking around the office. However, the former mayor was unusually quiet.

Nearly thirty minutes after their arrival, Emma was done—or at least content with the state of her office. She slapped the newly organized papers in her desk, transferred the phones to the call service and stood up. “Ready?” she asked after stretching.

“Very,” Regina stood while slipping on her coat. She stepped out of the office and waited for Emma to finish locking the glass door.

That was when David burst through the double doors down the hall. Awkwardly, he slowed to a stop before the two women and frowned, noticing that Emma had locked the Sheriff’s office door.

Stuffing the keys back in her coat pocket, the sheriff spun around to her deputy. “Where have you
been?” she asked, narrowing her eyes slightly. After all, there could be a good reason why the deputy wasn’t at the station.

“I picked Henry up from school,” David said, glancing briefly at Regina. “I just dropped him off with Mary Margaret,” he explained, pausing for a moment before adding, “at home.”

Unfazed, the former mayor refused to be baited by the shepherd. Obviously, Ms. Blanchard had disclosed their earlier conversation. How predictable.

“Why didn’t Mary Margaret just bring him home?” Emma asked. Ever since they’d returned from the Enchanted Forest, she’d noticed the school teacher’s lack of interest in doing her job. Didn’t everyone still have to do their part? That’s what Mary Margaret had told her while in the other land.

“She didn’t go in today.” The deputy’s brow furrowed as he intently focused on his daughter and added, “She said she saw you today.” His gaze cut back to Regina.

“Well if you’re manning the station, then Mary Margaret can chauffeur Henry,” the sheriff said, crossing her arms, not hiding her irritation. “When I ask you to cover the station, I expect you to actually be at the station, David.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Regina’s eyes widened slightly as she glanced between father and daughter. She hadn’t expected this amount of opposition to remain prevalent amongst the family. No doubt, she’d likely be blamed for Emma’s behavior at some point in the near future.

“Emma, Henry needs to be protected,” David started, hoping to appeal to his daughter’s protective instinct.

“I agree, and so does the rest of Storybrooke,” Emma said, cutting the deputy off. Dropping her head, she sighed heavily while pushing her frustrations aside. She looked back up and saw David glaring at Regina, whilst the former mayor was curiously watching her. “We’ll deal with Cora and Hook, but first we need to get our act together.” Turning sharply, the sheriff pointed to the desk in front of the holding cells. “That’s your desk.” Pointing to the middle desk with a plushy red wolf on top of the computer monitor, she said, “That’s Ruby’s desk.” Facing her deputy, Emma jabbed her thumb backwards over her shoulder, pointing at the Sheriff’s Office. “That’s my office.”

Holding her gaze for a moment, David nodded, “Alright.”

“Good,” Emma said as she pursed her lips. “I already switched the phones to the call service, and Ruby’s going to patrol tonight. We’ll meet here at eight in the morning to discuss further scheduling issues.”

“Okay,” David nodded again.

Side-stepping around her deputy, the sheriff briskly headed for the exit. She was probably a little harsher than she had intended to be, but David just got under her skin so easily.

Quickly falling into step beside Emma, Regina looked over her shoulder, observing David’s scowl as they left. Again, if she had only known the extent of discord in the Charming camp, she certainly would’ve done things differently.

~SQ~

END OF PART 1
The drive to Regina’s was eerily quiet for Emma’s comfort. She’d expected some snarky comment about David or even herself, but there was nothing. Regina would glance at her occasionally but mainly looked out the window.

Parking the Beetle along the curb in front of the house, the sheriff took the keys out of the ignition and climbed out of the car. As she slowly walked around to the sidewalk, the former mayor followed suit, and together, they went inside.

Once coats were properly hung in the hall closet off the foyer, Emma shadowed Regina into the study. She watched as the former mayor dropped the remaining roll of bills in a desk drawer. “Is that a good place for that much cash?” she asked softly.

“As good a place as any,” Regina responded as she pushed the drawer closed. Looking up at Emma, she said, “It’s only money, hardly anything to quibble over.” Walking around the desk, she added, “Besides, who’s going to burglarize my home?”

With a shrug, the sheriff turned around and walked back out to the foyer, suddenly feeling unsure.

“I assume you’re hungry?” Regina asked, walking towards the kitchen. When the prickling sensation started, she stopped and turned partially around with raised eyebrows.

“You don’t need to feed me, Regina.” Emma shoved her hands in her jean’s pockets, her shoulders slumping over slightly.

Frowning, the former mayor said, “I need to eat as well, Miss Swan.” She gestured towards the kitchen and waited for the sheriff to take a step before she moved again.

In the kitchen, Emma didn’t know what to do with herself. She smirked as Regina took off her blazer, draped it on the back of a stool at the island and put on a frilly apron that screamed domesticity. Wordlessly, she sat on the other stool and frowned as the former mayor slid a cutting board and knife in front of her, along with several cloves of garlic and an onion.

“If you’re going to be in here, you’re going to help,” Regina explained as she grabbed the onion keeper from a cabinet and set it in front of Emma. “Mince the garlic and thinly slice half the onion, please.”

Getting up to wash her hands, the sheriff mumbled, “I can’t help but be in here.” She ignored the former mayor’s glare and went back to her stool. As she sliced the onion, Emma couldn’t deny the fluidity and purposeful skill of Regina’s movements.

Two generously seasoned T-bones were laid on a broiler pan lined with foil and slid in the broiler. Emma licked her lips. It had been a long time since she’d had a steak.

Two cast iron skillets were removed from a large pullout cabinet drawer and placed on the stove. After the respective burners were lit, a pat of butter was dropped in one of the warming skillets
followed by garlic salt and parsley. Regina retrieved a jar out of an overhead cabinet. Stepping over to the sink, she popped the seal, drained the water, and dumped the sliced new potatoes in the skillet.

Sniffing the air, the sheriff’s stomach growled as she finished with the onion. The former mayor immediately scooped up the slices and dropped them in with the potatoes. Using her apron, Regina opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bowl of already snapped green beans. Pouring about a tablespoon of olive oil over them, she gauged Emma’s progress with the garlic. She was obviously having some difficulty. Grabbing the tongs, the former mayor flipped the steaks in the broiler and moved to help the sheriff.

Emma watched with rapt fascination as Regina flew through pealing and mincing several cloves of garlic in the time it took her to do just one. Soon, the garlic was tossed in with the green beans and dropped in the other hot skillet. The former mayor stirred the contents of each before tidying up the kitchen whilst tending to dinner.

In the matter of twenty minutes, Emma had a plate full of food placed in front of her. She glanced up and saw Regina grab two wine glasses. “Have any beer?” she asked.

Setting down the glasses and pulling out a bottle of cabernet sauvignon from the wine rack, Regina smirked. “Yes, but this will taste better.” Pouring, she said, “If you don’t like it, you may help yourself to a beer.”

“Oh okay,” Emma easily relented. After all, this woman just cooked her an amazing looking dinner in no time at all. If she was at Mary Margaret’s, they’d still be chopping and debating how to cook their meal. Tentatively, she cut into her steak and took the telling first bite. Sinfully good, she chased it with a sip of the red wine. Quickly, she followed with bites of potatoes and green beans. “This is really, really good, Regina.” Talking around another bite of steak, she said, “And I don’t even like green beans.”

“Thank you,” the former mayor said as she meticulously cut her green beans and new potatoes. After dissecting half the steak from its bone, she glanced at Emma’s plate, seeing it already half gone. “I’m pleased you’re enjoying it.”

“Oh yeah,” the sheriff said after a sip of wine. “Steak is a very rare treat for me.” Noting the former mayor had barely touched her food; she made a conscious effort to slow down. They ate in silence for several minutes before Emma spoke again. “I didn’t realize Helena required a consulting fee.”

“There usually is a price, Dear,” Regina said before another bite.

After a few moments, Emma valiantly attempted to remove every bit of meat off the bone without picking it up. “We could’ve taken up a collection.”

“Oh just pick it up, I’ve seen enough high-born nobles suck the marrow from a leg of lamb,” Regina scolded, annoyed by the continual high-pitched scraping of utensils across the sheriff’s plate. “You gnawing on your bone would hardly be offensive.”

Relieved, Emma picked up her bone. “How much did you pay her, anyway?” she asked, picking at her bone and licking the meat from her fingers.

“Five hundred dollars,” Regina said before finishing her green beans.

“To grow a plant?!” the sheriff inquired incredulously as she cut a curious glance at the former
“Widow Granger’s prices have always been quite reasonable—especially for the quality of her work.” Regina skillfully removed another section of meat from the bone. “I would’ve easily paid triple for her services. She is, after all, attempting to grow a magical bean in a land that’s not supposed to have magic.”

Dropping her bone on her plate, Emma shrugged. “I guess you have a point.” She took another sip of wine. “So what happens now?”

Reaching for her wine, Regina asked, “In regards to what, exactly?”

Rolling the wine around in its glass, the sheriff considered things very carefully. “Between you and the construction crews, the town’s going to be back in one piece in a week or two.” She turned in her seat, facing the former mayor. “What do you think your mother wants? I get the impression that what she says isn’t necessarily what she means.”

Nodding, Regina idly speared another bite. “No, and I’ve been pondering that very question since her arrival.” Losing her appetite, she pushed her plate away.

“Mary Margaret’s convinced she’s going to be trouble. So, how are we going to...?” Emma trailed off, unsure how to articulate the Cora predicament.

“Ms. Blanchard knows exactly what my mother is capable of,” Regina gritted out as she stood and scraped the remains of her dinner in the trash. Dumping Emma’s plate, she ignored the sheriff’s puzzled expression as she rinsed the dishwasher-safe crockery.

Pursing her lips, Emma drummed her fingers on the cool marble of the island. The situation was incredibly complicated, especially since she only had half the information she needed. “I can charge her with murder and arrest her, but we don’t have any evidence or witnesses. Archie can only attest to kidnapping. That would be a hefty enough charge, but how can we keep her locked up?” She watched Regina wipe out the two skillets with a paper towel. “Mary Margaret thinks a magic cell in the mines will hold her.”

“Doubtful,” the former mayor said, wiping the skillets with oil and returning them to the drawer.

“Yeah,” the sheriff agreed, finishing her wine. “Gold wanted to be in his cell, while Cora killed Lancelot and posed as him in the camp of survivors so she could remain undetected.”

Regina glanced at Emma with a hint of surprise on her face but said nothing.

Spinning the wine glass by the stem, the sheriff continued, “Even if we found her, how would we...?” She trailed off, again uncertain how to word it. Sighing, she asked, “How do we defeat her?”

Finished with cleaning up, the former mayor poured herself another glass of wine. It was doubtful she’d even finish it, but she had to focus on something other than their insane situation. “It greatly depends on your definition of defeat.”

Brows furrowed, Emma studied Regina for a long moment. “How did you break free from her influence?”

“What makes you believe I ever did?” the former mayor countered, her voice low. She refused to look at Emma.
Rolling her lips and realizing she’d better tread carefully, the sheriff gently said, “In the book, Cora’s vaguely mentioned. Yet, Mary Margaret remembers her.” Thank god for Henry and his cliff notes.

Regina regarded Emma with a passive face but piercing eyes. “I never escaped, merely changed cages.” Always in a cage, yearning for something fate would never grant her. Even now, after she’d been thwarted—but then again, Rumpelstiltskin had designed it that way. Closing her eyes briefly, the former mayor willed her bubbling rage back down. Lashing out at the sheriff would do her no favors. “Snow White saw to that particular exchange, personally.”

Noting the white knuckled grip with which Regina held her glass, Emma watched as the former mayor took another sip of her wine. *There has to be more to this story,* she thought.

However, any further questions were quickly forgotten as the front door was slammed shut.

Immediately, the sheriff hopped off her stool and pushed through the swinging door into the dining room. Her shoulders sagged upon noticing Henry. Her relief, however, was short lived. “What are you doing here?” Emma harshly demanded as she remembered seeing Cora magically impersonate the boy the other night.

“I wanted to talk to you,” the boy explained as he dropped his backpack by the stairs. His eyes cut to Regina.

Glancing over her shoulder, the sheriff watched as the former mayor slipped back into the kitchen. She frowned. Regina would tell her if this was her mother, right? Turning to Henry again, she held up her hand, stopping the boy in his tracks. “Tell me something only you and I would know.”

“Huh?” Henry twisted his face in confusion. “Like what?”

“Humor me,” Emma demanded, crossing her arms.

“It’s Henry, Miss Swan,” the former mayor said, returning to the dining room, wine glass in hand. With her typical grace, she sat at her usual position, the head of the table.

“You promised,” Henry scolded, stepping around Emma and ignoring his mothers’ strange behavior. “You said you wouldn’t use magic.”

The sheriff’s eyes widened. “Henry…,” she started. Her eyes darted to the former mayor. “I asked her to help.” She tried not to wince as the boy’s scathing look landed on her.

“Why?” Henry looked between his mothers. Finally, he focused on Regina. “You tricked her.”

The former mayor never flinched, merely took a casual sip of her wine. She watched, though, never taking her eyes off her son.

Emma swallowed with concern that the boy would trigger Regina’s latent anger—something she was close to doing only a few minutes ago. “No, Henry. We talked about it this morning. We did it to help out the town.”

“That doesn’t matter. The town would’ve taken care of itself.” Henry twisted back to Emma. He parroted the words he had heard over dinner with his grandparents. If they believed it, it had to be good and the right thing to do, right?

“Not really; it would’ve taken weeks or months for people to make repairs, Henry.” The sheriff reached for the boy. She tried not to wince when he backed away.
“But everyone would’ve helped each other,” Henry said, shaking his head. He turned to Regina. “The people of Storybrooke are good.”

“Being good has nothing to do with putting food on the table,” snapped Emma. All she could hear was Mary Margaret and David’s words. It was infuriating. With a heavy exhale, she ran her hands over her hair. “It’s a matter of logistics, Henry.”

“What do you mean?” the boy asked, once again looking between his mothers.

“Supplies are limited, and now, demand for those limited supplies is high,” Regina calmly explained. “Despite a person’s desire to help, some may have to choose between depriving their own family and helping another one.” She could see the boy was having difficulty with the concept. After all, he’d wanted for nothing his entire, short life.

“Your mom’s right, Henry,” the sheriff said, drawing the boy’s attention back to her. “That’s how the economy works, generally.”

“But the curse, it’ll provide all the supplies,” Henry said with far greater certainty than he actually felt. Glancing back to Regina again, he asked, “Won’t it?” He frowned as his mother simply shook her head.

“Really?” scoffed Emma. How many trucks had she pulled over speeding on Route 6 barreling towards I-95? And that was during the last month before everyone gained back their Fairy Tale Land memories. “Have you not seen the delivery trucks coming into town?”

“That’s only since you broke the curse,” the boy said with a touch of pride in his voice. It disappeared as the sheriff shook her head and the former mayor took another sip of wine. “What? What am I missing?”

Crossing her arms, Emma said, “Oh just the bi-weekly Sysco deliveries in town or the USPS truck.” The truth was, that was why she’d had such a hard time believing in the curse. Storybrooke was just like any other sleepy town she had passed through over the years. “ Heck, Ruby has a crush on the FedEx Ground guy.”

“That doesn’t make any sense!” Henry threw his hands up in the air.

“Rumpelstiltskin created the curse,” Regina grumbled into her almost empty wine glass. “It doesn’t have to make sense to any of us.”

The sheriff furrowed her brows and locked gazes with the former mayor. “How can the outside world interact with Storybrooke and not remember it?”

Arching an eyebrow, Regina measured how best to answer Emma’s question. “I asked myself that very question shortly after our arrival. It’s absurdly simple, really. Storybrooke exists in this world’s peripheral.”

Nodding, the sheriff said, “Like there but not really there.”

“That’s a good analogy as any, I suppose,” the former mayor said before taking another sip. “However, for those who know of Storybrooke’s existence, the memories are intangible and give the impression that this sleepy town is inconsequential.”

“That makes sense, sort of, but how does the curse do it—or did it?” Emma asked, glancing at Henry. The boy poor looked awfully confused and rather unbelieving.
“I would imagine by magic,” Regina said, pursing her lips.

“But this world isn’t supposed to have magic,” Henry said. His ire having finally dissipated, he found himself inching closer to his mother.

“No, it’s not,” the former mayor admitted with great sadness in her voice. She eyed her son for a few moments. “Given the current state of the Enchanted Forest, it appears the curse pulled the necessary energy from both environments to transport and deposit us here.”

“You didn’t know?” Emma frowned. It was a little hard to swallow.

Sighing, Regina drained the last bit of wine from her glass and gently placed it on the table. “The price of magic is, at times, unpredictable and incalculable.” She tilted her head, curious as to why Henry glared at the carpet. However, when he looked up at her, she reflexively smiled softly as her heart fluttered.

About to smile back, Henry’s eyes widened as he seemed to suddenly remember something and turned to run into the foyer. “I should get back.”

“Wait,” the sheriff ordered as she grabbed the boy’s arm. “Did you come here by yourself?”

Henry grinned sheepishly and allowed himself to be redirected back into the dining room. Obediently, he sat at the table when Emma pointed at a chair as she pulled out her cellphone.

“You can’t just wander around by yourself, Henry,” the sheriff sharply chastised as she mashed several buttons on her phone. She turned and took several steps away while waiting for Mary Margaret to answer.

The boy slunk further down in his chair while Emma argued over the phone. As the sheriff paced back and forth, the former mayor wished she had more wine.

~SQ~

“See anything of interest, Love?” Hook asked from his reclining position on a balcony lounge chair down the street from 108 Mifflin. He lazily consumed grapes from a large bowl he’d pilfered from the home’s kitchen.

“The Savior is still with her.” Cora collapsed the telescope as Regina, Emma and Henry climbed into the police cruiser and drove away. Obviously, they were going to return the boy to Snow White. Her face contorted in a sneer as she watched the cruiser turn onto another street. “I had not adequately foreseen this development.”

The pirate remained silent while he ate a few more grapes. Finally, he observed, “Emma Swan seems to be a rather worldly woman.”

Cora turned to face him, her eyes flashing in the dim lighting of the street lamps. “What are you insinuating?”

“I mean no disrespect,” Hook offered as preamble, “but does the Queen perhaps favor the flower over the stem?” Cocking an eyebrow, he popped another grape in his mouth.

Narrowing her eyes, the sorceress scowled. “Vulgarity aside, you may have a point. Although,” Cora paused looking back at her daughter’s house, “I believed I had long ago rectified that peculiarity.”
“Always the dutiful mother,” the captain quipped, unconcerned about inciting Cora’s wrath. He could handle her easily enough. No, it was meddling with the queen that worried him. When she failed to respond to his snide remark, Hook decided it was best to change the subject. “I apologize for releasing your giant ahead of schedule. Snow White and her prince had me in a bit of a situation.”

“It’s of no real matter. The end result will still be the same,” Cora assured, still watching the house. She contemplated another exploratory visit, but no doubt Regina would sense her presence. Her daughter had become quite capable under the Dark One’s tutelage.

Finishing the last grape, Hook stood, dropped the bowl on the lounge and joined Cora at the railing. “So, what are we going to do now?”

Smiling, the sorceress caught sight of the police cruiser turning back onto Mifflin Street. “Don’t you have a crocodile to skin?”

“Indeed, I do, Lass,” Hook replied with a smile as he watched the savior and the queen exit the car.

“Then tomorrow, our real work begins,” Cora said. She roughly gripped the pirate’s elbow and transported them back to the Jolly Roger, safely moored in Storybrooke’s harbor.

~SQ~

Unable to get comfortable on the chaise, Emma stared at the ceiling, thinking, her feet hanging off the end of her makeshift bed. All sorts of thoughts had rambled through her head since they returned to the house, and Regina had made it absolutely clear she didn’t want to hear any of it. Hearing the former mayor shift, the sheriff’s eyes glanced over towards the large, very comfortable-looking bed. She could just make out the Regina-sized lump in the dim lighting.

“Are you asleep?” Emma whispered. She smirked upon hearing a sigh.

“Yes,” the former mayor ground out.

Rolling over onto her side to face the bed, the sheriff was quiet for a few moments. “Do you think Mary Margaret’s plan will work?” It was a long shot and extremely dangerous given Cora’s capabilities, but the school teacher and deputy wholeheartedly believed it would work. It had worked on Rumpelstiltskin and the Evil Queen. “Do you think Mother Superior can immobilize Cora with her fairy dust?”

“No,” Regina quickly answered. The whole scenario would end in a spectacularly horrible fashion for everyone. “She’ll sense the Blue Fairy long before she can get into position.”

One did not surprise Cora Mills—ever, at least as far as the former mayor was aware.

Blowing out a heavy exhalation, the sheriff drummed her fingers on her abdomen. “Is there anything we can do to protect ourselves?”

“Nothing practical,” Regina said. Sheltering Emma from the hard truth would do none of them any favors. “A barrier or ward would only serve to antagonize her.” A memory involuntarily surfaced, causing the former mayor to shudder and nestle further into her bed.

For some reason, Emma felt antsy, sleep the last thing on her mind. “I have magic.”

“You do,” the former mayor easily admitted. “I can feel it.” Since the beginning, she’d always felt Emma’s magic, and it unnerved her.
“Why can’t I feel it . . .,” the sheriff paused before adding, “magic?” She played with the hem of her blanket, rolling the silky border between her fingers.

“You’re not looking for it,” Regina countered. She contemplated Emma’s squandered magical potential. True Love in the other land was rare enough but to have a child born out of it . . .?

“So, am I like the magical equivalent of a nuclear warhead?” the sheriff asked. She swallowed as her brows furrowed from worry. Not waiting for an answer, she continued, “Because back in the Enchanted Forest, Cora tried to take my heart, but she couldn’t.” Immediately, Emma was light blind as Regina turned on her beside lamp.

“What?” the former mayor demanded, sitting upright in her bed.

Rubbing her eyes, the sheriff blinked as she tried to adjust to the light. “A little warning next time would be nice.”

“Miss Swan,” Regina barked.

Now able to see, Emma smirked at the former mayor’s cowlick. “What?” she asked defensively. “She was going after Mary Margaret’s heart. So, I jumped in between them, and Cora went flying after a few tugs at my heart.” She frowned and shifted under Regina’s pensive scrutiny. Clearing her throat, she said, “That means she can’t take my heart, right?”

The former mayor didn’t answer, merely looked out the window, an unreadable expression on her face.

Sitting up, the sheriff drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around her knees. Laughing lightly, she smiled and said, “I kind of riled her a bit and told her that love was strength after she babbled about love being weakness.” Her merriment was short lived, however, when Regina pinned her with an extraordinarily hard look. “What?”

“You’ve just painted a target on your chest, Miss Swan.” The former mayor swung her legs off the side of the bed. This entire situation was spiraling out of even the pretense of control.

Seeing the white-knuckled grip Regina had on the sheets, Emma stood up and walked over to the other side of the bed. “What’s wrong?”

“She’ll make an example out of you,” the former mayor looked up at the confused sheriff. “Everyone you love is in danger.” Saying the words made it all so real.

“She can’t take my heart,” Emma said. As if proving her point, she laid a hand over the organ in her chest. “If she can’t take it, she can’t control me.”

“There are other ways, Miss Swan,” Regina intoned. Taking a calming breath, she added, “Just because she didn’t take your heart, doesn’t mean she can’t or won’t try again.”

The sheriff took a reflexive step backwards, bumping into a standing dresser. Twisting to make sure she didn’t knock anything over, she dropped down in the arm chair cattycorner to the bed. “So, it was a fluke?”

“No,” the former mayor eyed Emma carefully as she weighed the implications of how the forthcoming knowledge would impact her—them really, given their new connection. “Courage of the heart is rare.” Seeing the sheriff’s head tilt in curious confusion, she explained further, “By stepping in front of Ms. Blanchard, you selflessly sacrificed yourself. Thus, you not only saved her but protected yourself as well.”
“That’s so Harry Potter,” Emma gushed. Her eyes widened in awe as she leaned forward.

“Let’s not bring those insipid books into this; they’ll only confuse the issue,” Regina said gritting her teeth. “But the analogy works,” she admitted with a huff.

“So I am a warhead!” the sheriff exclaimed, standing up suddenly. She felt empowered. “I can just do some magic mojo against Cora and our problems will be solved.” The suffocating blanket of despair that weighed across her since returning to Storybrooke finally felt lighter.

“Hardly,” Regina said leaning away from Emma’s flailing arms. She stood and grabbed the sheriff by the biceps, forcing her to look at her. “Magic isn’t a simple matter of wands and archaic phrases.”

Captivated by the intensity in the former mayor’s gaze, the sheriff asked softly, “Then what?”

Releasing her hold on Emma, Regina returned to the bed and sat down. “In the Enchanted Forest, it’s about emotion, but here, it’s different.”

Groaning, the sheriff dropped back down into the chair and shot the former mayor an unimpressed glare. “You keep saying that.”

“Because it’s true,” Regina said with a bite.

“Cora doesn’t appear to have any problems with magic,” Emma quickly retorted, tracing the delicate pattern on the chair’s upholstery.

“Unlike you, me or Mr. Gold, she hasn’t been in a world without magic for twenty-eight years,” the former mayor said gently as she watched the sheriff’s meticulous movements.

“So what, her magical gas tank is full?” Emma asked, looking up.

“More or less,” Regina sighed, thankful that the savior was at least quick on the uptake.

“We can always force her to expel it all at one time,” the sheriff suggested. She slouched at the former mayor’s disparaging look. “Bad idea?” she asked.

“Very bad idea,” Regina said, settling herself against the headboard and pulling the sheet over her legs. “Even if we could maneuver her into an appropriate situation, she’d see through the manipulations long before we could ever hope to execute it.” Crossing her ankles, she added, “An altercation, although impractical, would be the only way to significantly lower her reserves.”

Emma pursed her lips and seriously proclaimed, “I can taunt anybody into a fight.” She smiled at Regina’s honest and light chuckle.

“Of that, I have no doubt, Miss Swan,” the former mayor smiled despite the situation.

Lifting her legs up, the sheriff readjusted to sit Indian-style in the armchair. “So,” she drawled uncertainly, “how does the whole heart thing work, anyway? I mean, do you have total control over them as long as you have their heart?”

Regina lifted her chin as she carefully regarded Emma and her question. Finally, she answered, “Only while physically holding the heart can someone circumvent their free will or inflect pain, if desired.”

Surprise flitted across the sheriff’s face. “Okay, what happens to said person when they’re not
“being controlled?”

The former mayor’s brows furrowed. “Nothing, they exist as they always have and do what they will. However, their capacity to love may be impaired.” She paused and added, “Over time, their ability to express and experience emotion may become limited.”

Emma’s head dropped as she carefully considered her next question. Quickly, she glanced around and realized there was no escape if this went badly. She was, after all, on an invisible ten foot leash with Regina. Studying the former mayor through her eyelashes, Emma caught sight of the inquisitive expression. Clearing her throat, she lifted her chin and faced the former mayor head on. “Is that what happened to Graham, before you crushed his heart?”

“Yes,” Regina freely admitted. “Aside from sending him on a few retrievals over the years, he was his own person, made his own decisions.” It still hurt, crushing the Huntsman’s heart. She never wanted to cage his free spirit.

Blinking, the sheriff couldn’t quite settle on an emotion or an expression. Her mind fluttered with all the associations of Graham’s death. Quickly, she stood and paced along the foot of the bed. Several times she turned to Regina and started to speak just to begin pacing again.

“Out with it before you wear a hole in the carpet,” snapped the former mayor, tired of tracking the sheriff for the last five minutes.

Angry, Emma spun and pointed at Regina. “I don’t know what I find more disturbing, the fact that you killed him or you keeping him in your thrall for decades!” she declared in frustration.

“We are all subject to the consequences and the risks of our choices, Emma,” the former mayor said with resignation. During those long, lonely years, she knew Graham had worked against her just as much as he had worked for her. Whatever his reasons for staying, the Huntsman had genuinely cared for the Evil Queen but not enough.

The lack of venom and spit gave the sheriff pause. With the fight gone, she dropped onto the foot of the bed and searched the carpet. Had Graham known what he was doing? Had he just forgotten because of the curse? Looking out the window, Emma asked, “Do they know they’re being controlled?”

“Not always; it depends on the strength of the heart and the skill of the practitioner. Or something comes to pass that makes one realize the heart is missing,” Regina explained while watching Emma closely. Quietly, she added, “Sometimes, one can sense the thoughts and feelings of the heartless while holding the heart.”

“But I felt his heartbeat,” the sheriff somewhat whined as she turned to face the former mayor with pleading eyes. “Graham had a heart.”

“It was only an echo of the organ.” Regina shook her head slowly.

Emma asked. “Why did you take his heart?”

“He failed in his initial task and dared return as he was requested,” the former mayor said solemnly. “Such was his code of honor.”

Eyeing Regina for a few moments, Emma slowly stood from the bed and went back to her chaise. She knew Graham. There had to be a reason he’d return other than a request.

Watching the sheriff sit, the former mayor softly inquired, her voice gravelly, “No more
questions?"

Shaking her head, Emma slipped under her sheet and blanket. Once she had settled, the bedside light was turned off. Listening as Regina resettled, her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim lighting from the street lamps. Glancing again at the bed, she swallowed, forcing away the tightness in her throat. After a few moments, Emma said, “Goodnight, Regina.”

Facing the closet, the former mayor’s brows furrowed as she whispered, “Goodnight, Emma.”

~SQ~

At precisely 7:45 am, Emma and Regina walked side-by-side into the police station.

“All I’m asking is why can’t you have a regular coffee pot like everyone else?” the sheriff said as she unlocked her office doors. After setting down the travel mug she’d confiscated from Regina’s cupboard, she shrugged out of her bulky sheriff’s jacket and hung it on the coat rack. Absently, she reached for the former mayor’s coat and hung it up on an adjacent hook.

“Why would I want to be like everyone else?” Regina countered with a slight smirk as she once again sat in one of the visitor chairs. Before stowing her purse under her chair, she pulled out her book and reading glasses, content to let the sheriff work.

Emma rolled her eyes as she sat down behind her desk. She rifled through her drawers and pulled out a legal pad. Glancing up, she saw Regina reading that book again, *A Universe from Nothing*, or something similar. “If you get bored, I can always give you something to do.”

Glaring over her reading glasses, the former mayor cocked an eyebrow. “I’ll be fine, thank you,” she said dryly.

“Just saying,” the sheriff mumbled with a smirk as she started jotting things down on her pad. She pulled out a ruler and started laying out a large-squared grid.

About five minutes later, Ruby Lucas almost bounced down the hall into the main office area. She was feeling pretty good. The cool, brisk weather last night during her midnight run through the forest had been quite morale boosting. She was gaining more and more control over her transformations in this world.

“Good morning!” Ruby greeted brightly as she hung her jacket on the back of her desk chair. She flipped through a few stacks of paper, pulling out a few sheets, before grabbing a pad and pen. Without much care or notice, she took a seat in the other visitor’s chair in the sheriff’s office.

At exactly 8 am, the waitress asked, “Are we ready to start?” She glanced between Regina and Emma. Granny had given her a reprieve from her early morning shift at the diner since she had a mandatory work meeting at the station.

Surprised by the blanket inclusion, the former mayor cocked an eyebrow at Ruby and turned to Emma. It was her show, after all. She marked her place and closed her book. Her reading glasses dangled by their small chain around her neck.

Turning to look at the clock on the wall, the sheriff shrugged. “I guess so.” She handed her part-time deputy the pad. “How does this schedule work for you?”

Quickly scanning the chart outlining everyone’s hours, Ruby nodded, “I think that’ll work great with my hours at the diner.” Handing the legal pad back, she flipped through her papers. “Granny and I wanted to suggest proclaiming the diner as a way-station.”
“A way-station?” Emma repeated, not fully understanding the term. She absently took the written proposal from Ruby. Reading, she said, “I’m not sure how this would work.”

“It’s simple,” the waitress started, glancing between the sheriff and former mayor. “Whoever came into the diner would be obligated not to start any trouble, regardless of who was there. It’ll ensure that the diner stays a safe environment for everyone.” She paused and cleared her throat. “But it’ll only work if someone endorses and enforces the status of the diner as a way-station.” Ruby smiled brightly and suggested, “Who better than the sheriff?”

“Um, yeah, I—,” Emma stammered but was interrupted.

“It’s a wonderful idea, Miss Lucas,” Regina cut in, easily taking Ruby’s proposal from the sheriff. Readjusting her glasses, she scanned the document in short order before removing her glasses and passing the paper back to Emma.

With excitement, the waitress looked back and forth between the sheriff and former mayor. This would really take a load off her grandmother. “We were hoping you would agree. Granny didn’t think you’d have any problems enchanting a visitor registry. She’d seen several of them back in the Enchanted Forest.”

“We’ll talk about it, later,” the sheriff said taking the paper and frowning at the former mayor. Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, she turned to see David and Mary Margaret trotting down the hall.

Immediately, Emma stood and stepped out of her office. “Is everything okay? Henry?”

“Yeah,” the school teacher waved off her daughter’s concerns as she uncoiled her scarf. “Everything’s fine. We were just trying to get here on time.”

Everyone looked at the clock on the wall. It was 8:09 am.

Emma frowned as she went back to her desk. She was about to sit down when she saw David pushing a rolling chair towards the office for Mary Margaret. “Whoa, what are you doing?” She bolted around her desk and out the door, dragging the school teacher towards her deputy.

“I was getting Mary Margaret a chair,” David supplied easily.

Regina and Ruby shared a curious look before turning to watch the Charming family.

“Oh, no,” the sheriff crossed her arms.

“That’s fine. I’ll stand,” Mary Margaret smiled lovingly at David as he pushed the chair back. She attempted to move into the office but was firmly stopped by Emma.

Regina arched an eyebrow as Ruby pursed her lips.

“Mary Margaret, what are you doing here?” the sheriff demanded. “We’re having a department meeting.”

“I came to help,” the school teacher said, slightly confused by Emma’s hostility.

Sighing and putting her hands on her hips, Emma explained, “This is a meeting for employees only, and since you don’t work for the Sheriff’s Department, you can’t be here.”

Smirking, the former mayor watched as the waitress’s eyes widened in surprise.
“Regina and Ruby are here,” Mary Margaret said with furrowed brows and a slight pout. Her gaze cut to Ruby who just shrugged.

“Ruby is a part-time deputy, and Regina has been hired on as a consultant.” Emma pointed down the hall. “You can wait outside, in the interview room or the break room, but you cannot be part of a departmental meeting.”

“Emma, she just wants to help,” David said softly. Quickly, he glanced over his daughter’s shoulder to see Ruby and Regina watching them. It was irritating.

“We’ve always done everything together.” Mary Margaret looked up at David. She took on a firm expression before turning back to her daughter. “We’re a family.”

“Yeah, well, the sheriff’s department isn’t a family business,” the sheriff snapped. She pointed at herself. “I was elected sheriff.”

Absently nodding, Regina found she was strangely satisfied with the familial conversation. Ruby’s brows furrowed as she took on a pensive expression.

Taking a slow breath, Emma abruptly turned on her heel and stomped back into her office and sat down behind her desk. She glared while Mary Margaret and David shared a few quiet words. Finally, the school teacher wandered off down the hall, and the deputy slunk into the office. He stood in the corner behind Ruby’s chair.

Regina and Ruby shared one last look before facing forward.

“Alright,” the sheriff said holding the pad up, “this is the new schedule for the foreseeable future.”

The deputy moved forward and took the pad. A frown formed as he glanced over the chart. He opened his mouth to make an objection to his afternoons spent manning the station. Wouldn’t he be better suited making patrols and mingling to reassure the people?

“It’s not negotiable,” Emma intoned, pinning her deputy with a hard look before he could say anything.

“Fine,” David said, handing back the pad.

“And,” the sheriff said as she rolled over to a short bookshelf filled with binders and pulled out three separate handbooks: office procedures, firearm protocols and crisis management, “I want everyone to read and sign-off on each of these manuals.” She immediately passed the office procedures to David. “By the end of the week,” she added, passing Ruby the crisis management and Regina the firearm binder.

Staring at the cover, the former mayor furrowed her brows. “ Wouldn’t this better serve one of the deputies, first? Certainly you don’t expect me to carry a gun.” She found the notion greatly unappealing.

David scoffed.

“As a civilian, no, you won’t be carrying a service weapon,” Emma said, tilting her head, wondering if she had misread Regina’s open distaste for guns. “But, I need you to know the protocols for safety reasons.”

“Very well,” the former mayor relented. Laying the binder on her lap, she linked her hands and looked up at sheriff expectantly.
At that, Emma couldn’t stop both eyebrows from rising. She cleared her throat and said, “We’ll also log some hours in the shooting range downstairs.” Glaring over at David, she forcibly added, “During our off hours and with no civilians.”

“Well?” the deputy said with hands on hips. “But do you think it’s wise to teach Regina how to use a gun?”

“Please,” the former mayor sneered, rolling her eyes.

Ruby cast a funny look over her shoulder at David before refocusing on Emma.

“Safety is safety,” the sheriff ground out, bringing that particular topic to a close. Taking a slow breath, she stretched her arms out wide across the desk. She drummed her fingers on the surface for a moment. “Now during the afternoons, Regina and I will be on-call only, barring any emergencies. She’s going to teach me how to use my magic.”

“What?!” David hollered. Immediately, he was at the side of the desk. He leaned forward, almost hovering over his daughter, with his hands firmly gripping the edge of the desktop. “You can’t seriously trust her.”

Ruby was torn, but her body language spoke volumes to Regina. At the first indication of threat, the waitress shifted forward, quickly placing a hand on the desk between David and Emma. For her part, the former mayor remained completely unfazed by the exchange but, nonetheless, observant.

Emma narrowed her eyes, and her nostrils flared slightly, meeting David straight-on. “Back off,” she ordered.

Hesitantly, Ruby shifted backwards in her seat but remained tense.

Slowly, the deputy peeled his hands free from his vice-like grip on the desk and took a step back. Anger flashed in his eyes as he pointed towards the Evil Queen. “She can’t be trusted, Emma. She’s done horrible things. She’s using you.”

Tired of the constant badgering of the same old song over and over again, the sheriff rolled her eyes in frustration. “All that crap happened over twenty-eight years ago.”

“It doesn’t change—.” David started.

“But it does,” Emma sighed. She looked over at Regina. That night in the graveyard changed everything. Standing to her full height, she turned back to her deputy. “We made an agreement, and as long as you work for the Sheriff’s Department, you’re going to abide by it.”

Ruby nodded with a nervous smile.

With a hint of confusion, the former mayor lifted her chin.

David scowled. Stepping back, he nodded.

Taking a calming breath and sitting back down, Emma said, “We’ll start the new hours today.” Grabbing the cruiser keys, she tossed them to the deputy. “Go do a morning patrol.”

Easily catching the keys, David left without a word, no doubt taking Mary Margaret with him.

“I’m not going to have a problem with you, am I?” the sheriff asked Ruby, eyeing the waitress warily.
“No,” Ruby looked at Regina briefly before turning back to Emma. “Nope.”

“Thanks, Rubes,” Emma smiled, leaning back in her chair and slouching.

With a nod, the waitress stood and put a few forms on the desk before gathering her coat and leaving the station, crisis management binder in hand and the lingering thought echoing in her mind that she may be needing it sooner rather than later.

It was a few minutes before the sheriff snapped herself out of her mental funk, her parents being the surprising cause. Sitting up, she shuffled through the forms Ruby had left for her and shyly glanced up to see the former mayor reading the firearm manual.

Without looking up, Regina turned a page and said, “I suppose we can pick up a coffee pot on our way home.”

Smirking, Emma picked up a pen and signed off on one of the forms. “That’s okay. I don’t really like coffee.” She grinned at Regina’s noncommittal harrumph and the sound of another turning page.

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Finally giving up, Emma sighed as she flopped backwards and slid down slightly in her seat at the dining table. She’d been staring at this damn candle for almost ten minutes. Glancing at Regina sitting at the head of the table before facing the candle again, she asked, “Shouldn’t I have lit this damn thing already?”

With the amount of magical energy the sheriff was focusing onto the candle, the former mayor expected the pillar of wax to explode. However, neither flickering flame nor waxy incineration came to pass. “Touch the candle,” she instructed.

Frowning, Emma leaned forward, and no sooner did her fingertips make contact than the candle’s wick had a three inch flame. “Whoa,” she whispered in awe.

“Remove your hand, and concentrate on extinguishing the flame,” Regina softly ordered, watching Emma while feeling the magic move around them.

Pulling her hand away, the sheriff refocused on the candle, and once again, nothing happened. She tried for a good minute before looking at the former mayor with annoyance.

“Touch the candle,” Regina instructed again.

As soon as her fingertips made contact, the flame went out.

“Is that normal?” Emma looked back and forth between Regina and the candle. She reached forward again and touched the candle. It lit immediately. Tapping it again, it went out once more. She repeated this action several times.

“Magic works differently for everyone,” the former mayor explained absently, deep in thought and trying to remember secrets long forgotten.

“I got that dream catcher and that,” the sheriff cleared her throat, “other spell to work.”

“Yes, but someone of your potential wouldn’t necessarily have a problem engaging and enabling enchanted items or preforming spells,” Regina said. She focused on Emma. “Since both have a designated purpose that they can’t deviate from, it makes them easy for anyone to use.”
“So what, I’m like magical jumper cables?” Emma rested her chin in her palm. Absently, she touched the candle. “I got that hat to work when you couldn’t.” She sheepishly glanced at Regina, unsure how the proud woman would react.

Sighing, the former mayor drummed her fingers on the dining table only once. “In a land without magic, you apparently provide a jumpstart, but I doubt that’s the limit of your capabilities.” She paused for a moment and softly added, “We’ll just have to figure it out.” There was another unique quality to their bond, but she hesitated to mention it quite yet.

“I guess there’s no secret manual for children of True Love,” the sheriff remarked flippantly. Sitting up straight, she crossed her arms on the table and looked at the former mayor.

“Not unless you want to ask Mr. Gold,” Regina countered with a sassy smirk and cocked eyebrow. Pursing her lips, Emma shook her head. “No thanks, I’ve learned that lesson.”

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor scoffed and said, “It took you long enough, even after I warned you.”

“Hey,” the sheriff snapped, “I was desperate. You try dealing with Dudley Do-Right and Nell Fenwick high on impending doom.” Resting her chin on her crossed arms, she released a heavy sigh. She reached out with her right hand and touched the candle again, lighting it.

“Try to make the flame burn brighter,” the former mayor suggested.

Glancing at Regina, Emma removed her hand and squinted intently at the flickering flame. She frowned when nothing happened.

“Keep your hand on the candle,” the former mayor suggested and watched as the sheriff wrapped her hand around the candle. She smiled as the flame steadily rose to about three inches. “Good, now slowly reduce the flame.”

The flame was diminished to a mere circle encasing the tip of the wick.

“Release,” Regina instructed, and Emma pulled her hand away.

Both women watched as the tiny light sputtered for a few seconds before going out in a puff of grey smoke.

“Very good,” the former mayor said with a firm nod and gentle smile.

With a self-satisfied smirk, the sheriff continued to practice increasing and decreasing the intensity of the flame. Soon, she was lighting the candle at varying flame strengths and starting to push the physical limits of the candle.

“Careful, Miss Swan,” Regina warned as the flame danced at almost eight inches, its tip licking the bottom of the chandler over the table.

“I’ve got this,” Emma replied cockily, pushing the flame even higher.

The candle pulsed outward then inward before finally exploding. Instinctively, the sheriff flung her arms in front of her face to protect herself from the flying wax. Hearing a disgruntled sigh and realizing nothing had hit her, she pried her eyes open enough to see a floating sphere of wax reconstitute itself back into the candle.
“Hardly,” the former mayor said as she stood, grabbed the candle, and returned it to the sideboard. “I think that’s enough for today.” However, the experience did give her an idea on how to progress with the sheriff’s future training.

“Okay,” the sheriff easily relented, not wanting to push her luck. Tracking Regina as she went into the kitchen, she got up and followed while asking, “So, why did the candle explode?”

“Any given item can only contain a finite amount of energy, magical or otherwise, before it breaks,” Regina explained. Opening the fridge, she pulled out a pitcher of iced tea and a small container of sliced lemons. Depositing them on the island, she then grabbed two glasses from an overhead cupboard.

Selecting a few of the lemons and squeezing some into each glass, Emma asked, “Is this how you learned magic, trial and error?” She envisioned the process as a bonding affair between mother and daughter.

Placing the small sugar canister and a teaspoon in front of the sheriff, the former mayor poured tea in each of the glasses. Dryly, she answered before taking a sip, “My apprenticeship was much less benign.”

Casually dropping two heaping spoons of sugar into her glass, Emma lazily stirred her tea and focused on the disappearing granules of sugar. Tentatively, she took a sip and decided to add one more spoon of sugar. “Who taught you magic?” she asked.

“Rumpelstiltskin,” Regina answered, returning the lemons and tea to the refrigerator.

Choking on her swig of tea, Emma coughed and cleared her throat. Eventually, she was able to ask, “What?”

The former mayor glowered as she faced the sheriff. A sarcastic comment on the tip of her tongue, but surprisingly, she held it. Her eyes narrowed as she assessed Emma’s astonishment.

Emma opened and closed her mouth several times, unable to verbalize anything further. That was when the doorbell rang.

Quickly taking another sip, Regina left her glass on the island before briskly walking towards the front door. She only vaguely registered the prickling sensation before she heard the stool sliding across the kitchen floor.

Emma was standing in the middle of the foyer by the time Regina opened the front door to reveal Mary Margaret. Oh crap, she thought, taking another swig of tea.

“Miss Blanchard,” Regina coolly greeted the unwanted visitor.

Completely ignoring the former mayor, the school teacher darted into the house and up the short stairs to her daughter’s side. “Are you alright?”

Confused, Emma asked in a slow drawl, “Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

“Your father—,” Mary Margaret was cut off by the front door slamming.

An angry mother and a startled daughter turned towards Regina.
“By all means, continue your familial squabble in my home,” the former mayor said irritably while walking up the few steps toward them.

“Regina,” Emma said pleadingly.

Sighing, the former mayor’s expression softened as she looked at the distraught sheriff. She walked towards her study and said, “Very well.” If they could withstand the prickling for a moment, she could make it to one of the sofas and give the two women some privacy.

“This involves you too, Regina,” the school teacher said. The bite in her tone stopped the former mayor in her tracks.

“Mary Margaret,” Emma warned.

Slowly, Regina turned and took a step towards the annoying school teacher. “Really?” she asked crossing her arms. “How so?”

For a moment, it appeared as if Mary Margaret was about to back down under the former mayor’s pinning glare, but then, she drew up to her full height and said, “Yes. I don’t know how, but I know you’ve done something to my daughter. I won’t let you hurt this family anymore.”

Regina’s eyes narrowed and her scowl deepened.

Emma swallowed. It was then she noticed it, sensed it, or whatever. The same strange sensation that surrounded her while she was working with the candle—magic. The air was becoming heavy as the intensity of the feeling quickly gathered around them.

“She didn’t do anything,” the sheriff said firmly, looking back and forth between the former mayor and the school teacher, although, who she was actually speaking to was anyone’s guess. It must’ve been the right thing to say as the feeling of magic seemed to slowly dissipate. “We,” she gestured at Regina and herself, “have come to an agreement.”

The former mayor took a deep breath at Emma’s words but never took her eyes off of the school teacher.

“Yes, I’m aware, but does that mean you have to stay with her twenty-four-seven?” Mary Margaret whined, her eyes begging for an explanation. “We haven’t seen you,” she briefly glared at Regina, “in days. You’ve hardly spent any time with Henry.”

At the mention of the boy’s name, Emma bristled, and in a low voice said, “Don’t bring him into this.” Remembering the glass of tea still in her hand, she took a long drink in an attempt at calming her nerves. “Look, I already fought with David this morning. I don’t want to fight with you now.”

“Then don’t fight. Come home,” Mary Margaret suggested gently. She reached out to Emma, cupping the biceps of her nearest arm. “Let’s have dinner together. And if you want, we can talk about things, calmly.”

Regina cocked an eyebrow. Certainly Emma wasn’t going to fall for this obvious ploy.

The sheriff didn’t believe things would stay calm for very long. Glancing at the former mayor, she shook her head. “I can’t, not tonight.”

Briefly biting her lower lip, Regina looked away before sighing. She reached for Emma’s glass and said, “You might as well as tell her, Miss Swan. They’ll only become more insufferable.”
Releasing the glass, the sheriff suddenly looked guilty. She pursed her lips as she stared down at the wood floor, her hands on her hips.

“What?” Mary Margaret looked back and forth. When the former mayor stepped into the dining room, she charged after her. “What did you do?” She reached out to grab Regina, who glared at the hovering hand.

“She didn’t do anything!” snapped Emma, not moving from her spot as the former mayor put the glass on the table. “I did.” She finally looked up and met her mother’s horrified gaze.

“I don’t understand,” the school teacher stammered, twisting to look at her daughter whose distraught face confirmed it was all true. She dropped her hand to her side. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“She inadvertently cast a binding spell on us,” Regina said quietly when Emma continued to say nothing.

The sheriff hung her head.

“A binding spell,” Mary Margaret whispered. “You’re tethered to each other.” With wide eyes, she turned to the former mayor. “You have to break it.”

“Don’t you think I would if I could?” Regina snarled, taking a menacing step towards Mary Margaret.

“Maybe Gold—,” the school teacher started, backing up involuntarily at Regina’s advance.

“He gave me the spell!” Emma exclaimed in growing frustration, tossing her hands up in the air. “I thought it was just a simple locator spell, so when the blue, sparkly trail led me to Regina, I didn’t think anything of it.” She paused in her recounting of that evening and rubbed the back of her neck. “When she started to leave, I grabbed her arm, and that’s when we got whammied.”

Confused, Mary Margaret imploringly looked at Regina.

“That’s when the spell was activated,” the former mayor calmly explained. Linking her hands in front of her, she added, “We currently have a range of separation of about ten feet. In time, we hope to extend that range.” The absolutely horrified look on the school teacher’s face gave her a small measure of solace in her plight.

Shaking her head, Mary Margaret headed towards the front door. “Maybe Mother Superior can help.” She was just about at the door when….

“It can’t be broken. The spell used a phoenix feather,” Regina said, as if that explained everything. Of course, it did. “No one from this world or the other can break it.”

“No,” the school teacher snarled. She turned and stormed back to Regina. “You’re lying. A phoenix hasn’t been seen in centuries,” she cried, tears pooling in the corner of her eyes.

Surprised that the former mayor would endure a finger being pointed in her face, Emma swallowed, unsure of what to do.

However, Regina simply shook her head with a slightly sad expression. There was surprisingly little consolation in Snow White’s pain.

Mary Margaret drew her hand back, using it to cover her gaping mouth. She shook her head in
disbelief.

Her tolerance having worn thin, the former mayor stated with finality, “It’s the truth.”

“Why?” the school teacher asked, her throat tight.

“Rumpelstiltskin could answer that particular question, but I doubt he’d be very forthcoming on the topic.” Looking at the sheriff, Regina tilted her head in contemplation while crossing her arms and turned to faced Mary Margaret again.

Spinning to Emma, the school teacher asked, “So this arrangement you reached with Regina was just a cover for the spell?” At her daughter’s nod, she asked, “Why would you lie about it?”

“Because of your reaction,” Emma answered quietly.

Mary Margaret looked over her shoulder at Regina. “You would’ve let everyone believe you were honestly helping?” she sneered.

Stepping between the school teacher and former mayor, the sheriff decided enough was enough. “It doesn’t change the fact that she didn’t kill Archie or team up with Cora.”

Mary Margaret searched Emma and Regina’s faces. “Yet,” she murmured.

“And she has been helping,” Emma continued. “For the past two days, she’s been helping repair the town, helping those who don’t have the means to quickly restore their shops.” Pausing, she took a bold step forward, holding her mother’s gaze, and whispered, “Please.”

With furrowed brows, Mary Margaret glanced over the sheriff’s shoulder. Her eyes searched the former mayor for any sign of a trick but found none. “Why would you allow everyone to believe Emma had you under control?”

“It’s preferable to a mob at my door,” Regina chided, unmoving. It was the absolute truth. The fools would’ve killed them both by trying to save the savior.

Sighing and turning around slowly, Emma walked into the dining room, picked up her glass and drained the last of the tea. “I guess you were right,” she said to Regina with a shrug and a sad, half smile.

“Naturally,” the former mayor quipped, heading towards the kitchen.

Dutifully, the sheriff followed.

Mary Margaret wasn’t far behind. “Wait, what’s going to happen now?”

Regina ignored the question as she sipped her iced tea.

“I guess the same thing that’s been happening the last couple of days,” Emma said, opening the fridge and pulling out the pitcher of tea and container of lemons. Fixing herself another glass, she continued, “While we’re figuring out how to deal with Cora and Hook, the sheriff and her sidekick will keep the town safe.” She smiled at the former mayor’s scoff.

“What am I supposed to tell your father?” the school teacher asked uncomfortably. She’d never been this far into Regina’s house. Unlike the rest that she’d managed to see, the kitchen felt warm and lived in.

“Tell the shepherd what you must,” the former mayor said with a tone brooking no argument, “but
no one else.” After another sip, she continued in a lighter tone, “Henry already knows, so you
needn’t worry about little ears.” Facing out the kitchen window, she turned her back on Mary
Margaret and Emma. It was quiet signal that she was done with this conversation, or more
precisely, she was done with Mary Margaret in her house.

“Alright,” the school teacher said, taking a step towards the front door.

“Mary Margaret,” Emma said as she returned the tea pitcher and lemons to the refrigerator. “I think
Henry should move back here in the next few days.” Closing the door, she turned around and
expected another bout of arguing.

Instead, Mary Margaret merely nodded her head, and after one last look at Regina’s back, she
practically bolted out the front door.

“She didn’t even argue,” Emma said as she poked her bobbing lemon with her finger. “Was it
alright that I asked for Henry to move back here?” She’d never brought it up before. She just
assumed it would be okay. Moving to stand next to Regina, she studied her profile for a solid
moment. “You can protect him,” she affirmed then walked back to her tea.

Turning her head but not looking directly at the sheriff, the former mayor said, “We’ll protect
him.” She didn’t believe she could successfully standup to Cora, not alone.

“Yeah,” Emma sighed, feeling the weight of the world on her shoulders. In that moment, she felt
like August was showing her that tree deep in the forest, again. She still wasn’t ready for all this
fairytale crap. Taking a deep breath, she stepped towards the dining room. “I really need to
decompress. How about we watch some TV?”

Following the sheriff, Regina retorted, “So we can fight over what to watch?”

Chuckling softly, Emma weaved her way through the living room to the sofa across from the large,
flat panel television. “Nah,” she said, grabbing the satellite remote. “We’ll take turns.” Surfing
through the channel listings, she finally decided on something benign that she thought they’d both
enjoy, the Food Network.

Apparently, they’d hit the middle of a Drive-Ins, Diners and Dives marathon. Halfway through the
second episode, Emma spied Regina slipping out of her shoes and curling her legs under her.

It was during one of the many commercial breaks that Regina finally broke the silence. Never
taking her eyes off the television, she softly said, “I have an appointment on Thursday with Dr.
Hopper.” She paused and added, “I can reschedule if that’s going to be a problem.”

“No, no, that should be fine,” Emma quickly replied. Clearing her throat she hesitantly asked,
“When did you talk with him?”

“I called him last night while you were in the shower,” the former mayor easily supplied, now fully
captivated by the cooking show.

Refocusing on the show, the sheriff only half paid attention as the host took a bite of a cheese-
stuffed burger. Her mouth watered at the delicious prospect but her mind kept circling back to the
woman sitting next to her. Who was she? She certainly wasn’t the Evil Queen from Henry’s
storybook or even the formidable Mayor of Storybrooke from the last year.

Taking another swig of tea, Emma slouched further down into the sofa, curbing the impulse to put
her socked feet up on the coffee table. It was during a commercial that she spied Regina vigorously
typing on her iPhone. She didn’t dare ask what she was doing. It felt like too much of an invasion
Regina sighed as Emma closed the bathroom door. Crossing her arms, she couldn’t help but listen as the sheriff bumbled around preparing for her shower—the toilet flushing, the sink turning on then off, followed by the soft hum of an electronic toothbrush. Several long minutes passed before she finally heard the shower. Thus far, these were the singular moments she could truly relax, standing outside the main bathroom door.

She took the few steps towards Henry’s bedroom door. Given the layout of the second floor, the former mayor found she could easily stand in her son’s doorway while the sheriff was taking a shower. Taking little comfort that Henry might be returning home tomorrow, she accepted the shallow victory because she would never know if he had truly wanted to come home.

However, her thoughts were easily disrupted by the appearance of an all too familiar presence, one she was never likely to forget. Regina took a fortifying breath and mentally braced herself for the coming conversation. Would Emma sense her presence? Could Emma feel the magic coiling around them?

“Hello, Mother,” Regina greeted evenly, still facing into Henry’s dark room.

Thrown off by her daughter’s sudden acknowledgement upon materializing on the staircase landing, Cora’s eyes narrowed slightly. Regina had sensed her approach in the graveyard, as well. Gracefully, she climbed the remaining steps while glaring at her daughter’s back. “Good evening, Regina,” she greeted kindly, hiding her surprise well. Upon reaching the top and seeing the room her daughter was peering into, she dutifully cooed, “Oh my darling, why do you needlessly torment yourself?”

Unmoving, the former mayor held her sarcastic tongue in check. Best to find out what her mother wanted, after all.

“Let me help you,” Cora said softly. “Let us put all this foolish nonsense behind us and move forward, together as a family—you, me and young Henry.” She smiled warmly as her daughter turned her head. “We’ll leave this dismal place.”

“I don’t think that will be possible, Mother,” Regina said levelly, her ears keeping tabs on the shower still running. Apparently, Emma hadn’t noticed Cora’s arrival.

The sorceress scowled before quickly schooling her features to a more neutral expression. “Isn’t that what you want?” she asked softly, taking a tentative step closer. “A chance for us to become a real family?” She was close enough to reach out and touch her daughter now.

“The time for that has long since passed,” Regina said, facing back into Henry’s room. How foolish and naïve she’d been before to fall for her mother’s manipulations so easily. “I’m trying to be worthy of Henry.”

“Oh?” Cora scoffed, obviously unmoved. “By flittering around town with Emma Swan and preforming parlor tricks for the peasants?” She took a step away; turning, she surveyed the home, spying into open doors, and was unimpressed. She did, however, become aware of some oddly familiar magic that wasn’t her daughter’s and filed it away for future consideration. “A complete waste of your talents,” she sighed mournfully.

Turning, Regina fully faced her now smiling mother and ground out, “Your giant wrecked half of
downtown.”

Pleased to finally garner an emotional reaction, Cora once again moved closer to her daughter but kept her hands linked passively in front of her. “He’s merely an insurance policy, Dear.”

“Insurance for what?” the former mayor asked.

Smiling broadly, Cora finally reached out and gently stroked her daughter’s biceps. “A way home, of course . . .,” she paused before dropping her hand, “among other things.”

That much Regina had already surmised. She frowned as her mother took on an almost wistful expression.

“You really have grown to be quite the beauty,” Cora almost whispered.

“What do you want, Mother?” Regina demanded. She was determined not to be misled by the same watery comments Cora had spoon-fed her as a child.

Bristling slightly, the sorceress pursed her lips in mild frustration. “Besides our reconciliation?” she asked but didn’t wait for a response. In a tone oozing false sweetness, she said, “Nothing of consequence, just resolving some old personal business while I have the time and opportunity.”

Hearing a strange squeak followed by the absence of running water, her eyes looked beyond Regina to the only closed door on the second story. Cutting her gaze immediately back to her daughter, she smiled with a raised eyebrow and asked, “Entertaining?”

“Hardly,” Regina replied, all the while hoping Emma would take her time finishing in the bathroom.

Turning, Cora walked gracefully back to the landing on the stairs. “We should really get together again soon, Darling,” she said before gazing up at Regina. “Perhaps for tea.” A broad smile her parting herald, the sorceress was gone with a simple gesture of her hand.

Griping the railing, the former mayor shook her head and cursed her foolishness as well as the idiocy of the Charmings. She knows where the beans are, she realized. She knew they wouldn’t be able to resist planting the seedling.

The prickling sensation broke Regina from her thoughts. Moving back to the bathroom door, she didn’t acknowledge the sheriff as she exited and chattered on about her magic lessons.

Emma casually sauntered into the guestroom where she hung the still clean articles of clothing and dropped the dirty ones in the hamper. She needed to wash laundry soon or have Mary Margaret bring over the rest of her clothes. Rubbing lotion on her face, arms and legs, she covertly eyed Regina who vacantly stared at nothing. Long before she had opened the bathroom door, she knew something was wrong as a mild panic attack had almost overwhelmed her when she got in the shower. Was Regina finally going to crack and release her fury?

So being the master of denial, the sheriff proceeded to unleash a thousand questions about magic to distract herself and perhaps Regina, as well. The former mayor took the questions in stride, but it was obvious she was preoccupied by something else. Emma wanted to ask about it but didn’t know how, exactly. So she let it be, for the time being.

~SQ~

While she waited for David to come home, Mary Margaret laid in her bed reading, but her mind just couldn’t focus on the words. The changes in his work schedule were mildly inconvenient, but
they were dealing. However, the hardest adjustment was dealing with Henry all evening, alone. The boy was a whirlwind of energy—full of questions and requests when he came home from school.

Outside the structure of the classroom, she realized she didn’t necessarily know the first thing about raising a child. She’d had a governess for as long as she could remember, visiting with her mother had been a rare and special treat. Of course, that had changed when Regina married her father. She frowned at her own thoughts. Everything had been perfect, or so she believed, until her stepmother tried to kill her following the death of her father.

Hearing the locks turn, Mary Margaret laid her book across her belly. She quietly listened as David took off his coat, hung it up on the rack by the door, and moseyed to their bedroom.

“Hey,” he greeted, bending over and kissing Mary Margaret briefly on the lips. “How was your evening?” Immediately, he stood upright and started unfastening his over-the-shoulder gun harness, hanging the contraption over a hook on a nearby support pillar.

“It was good,” the school teacher said lightly as she watched the deputy unbutton his red and black flannel shirt. “I did manage to get all the mayoral election flyers passed out before Henry finished school.”

Dropping his shirt in the wicker hamper, David smiled and said, “Good.” Sitting down on the bed, he took off his shoes and socks. “I take it Henry’s already asleep?” He tucked his socks in his shoes, sliding them under his side of the bed.

“Yeah, I sent him to bed about an hour ago,” Mary Margaret said, setting her book on her nightstand. She rolled onto her side so she could continue to watch her husband. “How was your day?”

After slipping out of his pants, the deputy folded them haphazardly, stood and draped them over the chair. “Quiet,” he sighed, not too keen on staying cooped up in the station for hours on end. Lifting the blanket and sheet, he slid under the covers as Mary Margaret turned off her bedside lamp. Once comfortable on his back, he grinned and opened his arms to accommodate his wife.

They shared a few quiet and tender kisses before the school teacher contently laid her head on David’s shoulder and a hand on his chest. She idly traced lazy patterns on his sternum. Slowly, their eyes adjusted to the defused ambient light streaming in through the window behind their bed.

“Tired?” she asked in a whisper.

“No,” the deputy sighed. “I just can’t figure out this truce Emma’s made with Regina.”

“Neither could I,” Mary Margaret said. She debated with herself for a second before adding, “That’s why I went over to Regina’s this afternoon.” Feeling him tense, she soothingly stroked her husband’s bare chest. “Nothing happened,” she quickly added, “but I did learn something.”

“Oh? What did the witch do?” he demanded, ready to get dressed again and fight for his daughter.

“Henry’s asleep,” the school teacher said in a hurried and agitated whisper. Taking a deep breath, she patted her husband and continued, “It turns out Regina didn’t do anything, but it seems that Emma did.”

“What do you mean?” Confused, David shifted to peer down at his wife. He could just make out her facial features.
Moving so she could look her husband in the eyes, Mary Margaret said, “Emma bound herself to Regina, and now, they’re tethered to one another.”

“Why would she do that?” he asked, completely baffled.

“Apparently, Emma went to Gold for a locator spell, and he gave her a binding spell instead,” the school teacher explained. Laying her head on David’s shoulder again, she exhaled heavily. “And before you ask, Regina says it can’t be broken, not by anyone here or in the Enchanted Forest.”

“She’s lying,” David said with confidence, his eyes boring into the ceiling.

“No, David, she’s not lying,” she said, resuming her comforting strokes. “They already told Henry.” Pausing, she licked her lips. “I suppose we’ll have to make the most of it.”

Grunting, the deputy slowly ran his hand up and down his wife’s back. “For now,” he said, “I suppose we don’t have a choice.” Stilling his movements, he hugged his wife to him.

“Also, Emma asked that Henry move back to Regina’s,” Mary Margaret said slowly.

“Absolutely not,” David snapped.

“David, be reasonable,” she cooed lifting her head to once again look her husband in the eyes. “If Cora came in here, right now, what do you honestly think you or I could do? What can any of us do?”

Rolling his eyes, the deputy scoffed, “We’ve defeated Regina plenty of times. This is no different.”

Thinking back to her last encounter with Cora, the school teacher shook her head. “We need a plan, and until we can act on that plan, we have to keep everyone safe while figuring out what she’s up to.”

Nodding, David agreed with his wife’s assessment. “I called Grumpy this afternoon. They’ll begin constructing the cages in the morning.”

“Cages?” Mary Margaret’s brow furrowed.

“One for the mother and another for the daughter,” the deputy easily explained, pleased by his forward thinking.

With a sigh, the school teacher shook her head and said, “We can’t lock Regina up. She and Emma can only be ten feet apart.” She patiently waited for her husband to catch on.

“Oh,” he said. His brow furrowed before he finally asked, “Where are they sleeping?” He paused and added, “How do they use the bathroom?”

“I really don’t want to think about that,” Mary Margaret said with a groan as she dropped her forehead onto David’s shoulder. After a moment, she snuggled back down against her husband. “I’ll talk with Henry about moving back after school tomorrow.”

“Do you think he’ll want to go?” David asked, once again stroking his wife’s back.

Silently debating, the school teacher finally answered, “I think so.”

“And if he doesn’t?” the deputy asked with a yawn. One good thing about the change in his hours, he got to sleep in.
“Well, I guess we’ll just have to deal with it.” Mary Margaret affectionately patted David’s chest. She stretched up to place a soft kiss on his lips. “Goodnight,” she whispered and laid her head back on his shoulder, snuggling down for the night.

“Night,” David mumbled before falling asleep.

However, it took some time before Mary Margaret could fall asleep. There were a few more things about the situation she needed to discuss with her husband, but those could wait till the morning.

~SQ~

Silently, Emma Swan sighed as she stepped into a crowded and noisy Granny’s. It hadn’t been a full day since the talk with Mary Margaret, but so far, everything was going pretty well. David had reported to the station with, thankfully, not a whole lot to say. But, it was only a little after one-o’clock in the afternoon.

With all the booths taken, the sheriff decided against sitting at the lone table in the middle of the tiny restaurant, feeling too exposed. Instead, she wandered over to the first two stools at the counter by the cash register, shrugged out of her jacket and hung on it on the rarely used coat rack. Noting that the former mayor followed suit and easily perched on the stool closest to the door, she narrowed her eyes when Regina pulled out her reading glasses and started reading her book. She easily snatched two menus leaning up against the register and purposefully slid one in front of Regina.

Idly glancing over the menu despite already knowing what she wanted, Emma said, “You should get the cheese fries.”

“No,” the former mayor countered simply as she continued to read. David’s earlier stony silence and hateful glower was going to be quite tiring to endure on a daily basis. She just wanted to unwind, or more precisely, she wanted some peace and quiet. Running on high alert since her mother’s latest appearance was certainly taking its toll.

“Live a little,” Emma flashed a toothy smile but frowned when Regina didn’t even glare her way. Bored, she looked around the diner from over her shoulder. Every time she made eye contact with someone, they would either nervously look away or scowl. The couple of stools next to her remained woefully vacant.

“Ladies,” Granny huffed, sliding a glass of water to the former mayor and a cola to the sheriff. “What can I get you?”

With maybe a little too much elation, the sheriff grinned and said, “A cheeseburger basket.”

Putting her book down, Regina ordered, “May I have a grilled chicken sandwich al a carte, please?”

Writing the order down on the ticket, Widow Lucas nodded and headed back towards the kitchen window.

Emma glanced at the former mayor to see her reading again. Mildly annoyed at the lack of conversation for the last several hours, she began playing with the various unused packets of sugar and artificial sweeteners left on the counter from a previous customer. In a mirrored surface on the wall, she happened to notice Albert Spencer glaring at her from a booth while whispering to two men she didn’t immediately recognize.

Suddenly, Moe French bustled into the diner from the side door. All red faced, he slammed a piece
of paper on the table in front of Spencer. Jabbing at it angrily, he demanded, “What is this?”

Curious, Emma tried to focus on their conversation, happy for the distraction. After all, Albert Spencer was trouble, and Moe French was no saint, either. However, filtering out the other patrons’ conversations was proving difficult.

“A flyer about the upcoming town meeting regarding the mayoral election,” Albert calmly answered, sitting up straight. He casually gestured for the two men to take their leave.

Both nodded before starting to move.

Once they vacated the seat, Moe slipped into the booth across from the lawyer. It was a tight fit as his bulky coat spilt onto the table top as he balled his fists and hissed, “When were you going to tell me about this?”

“Really, Moe,” Albert said, rolling his eyes. “It’s public record. I hardly think you need me to notify you.”

“This could mean trouble,” the florist hissed, leaning forward as far as his belly and jacket would let him. “If your son—.”

“He’s not my son,” Albert growled, hitting the table with his balled up fist. The crockery rattled, and the diner immediately silenced with almost everyone looking at him. He took a breath and continued in a calmer, quieter tone. “David Nolan is not my son.” He paused while pulling out his wallet and selecting a few bills. Tossing the cash on the table, he said, “Just proceed as planned, and don’t worry about the town meeting.” With that, the lawyer left the diner.

Moe, however, wasn’t quite done. Grunting with irritation, he got out of the booth and stalked over to the sheriff. He slapped the flyer on the counter beside her. “Your family may be royalty in the other land, but here, you’re just like everyone else.” He jabbed the flyer with his finger. “We’re not going to stand by as your family monopolizes the municipality.” Stepping away, he pointed at the sheriff. “I’m going to tell everyone,” the florist threatened before barreling out of Granny’s.

Sliding the crinkled paper towards her, Emma pursed her lips. She read the propaganda flyer. Her father really was running for mayor. “Damn,” she muttered.

Glancing over, Regina said, completely unsurprised, “Mr. Doggle did share that tidbit with us the other day, Miss Swan.”

“Yeah,” the sheriff said, completely unsurprised, “Mr. Doggle did share that tidbit with us the other day, Miss Swan.”

“Stephen Doggle is a busybody,” remarked Granny as she snatched Emma’s glass to refill it. Coming back, she put the soda down and said, “He’s usually reliable, though.”

Regina covertly surveyed the restaurant, locking onto certain people mouthing specific words. Closing her book, she unwrapped her straw and dropped it into her ice water. “The damage has been done,” she remarked before taking a sip.

“What do you mean?” the sheriff asked, eyeing the former mayor and pursing her lips.

“Albert’s just stirring up trouble again. No matter, everyone will see through it,” said Widow Lucas as the cook rang the order-up bell. “Excuse me,” she huffed as she went about her work. She was short a waitress, again.
“Again?” Emma asked, confused, watching Granny walk away. Turning to Regina, she asked, “Care to enlighten me?”

“Didn’t the deputy appraise you of all the Storybrooke happenings whilst you were away?” the former mayor asked in a deceptively neutral tone. She frowned as the sheriff shook her head. “Mr. Spencer rallied a large portion of the town against Ms. Lucas.”

Brow furrowed, Emma probed, “Meaning?”

“Meaning,” Regina drawled, “he framed her for murder.” Her expression softened as she added, “And killed the young man who was apparently sweet on her.”

Shocked speechless, the sheriff looked around the restaurant. Still, no one appeared to be listening. The former mayor continued, “Of course, Mr. Spencer burning Jefferson’s hat didn’t help matters.”

“Why didn’t David arrest him?” Emma asked. “He could’ve gotten him for theft and destruction of personal property at the very minimum—murder if he had enough evidence!”

Sliding their orders in front of the sheriff and former mayor, Granny answered, “Ruby’s safe, especially now that she can control her transformations. That’s good enough.”

“Only until there’s another wolf attack,” Regina said, cutting her sandwich in half.

Narrowing her eyes, Widow Lucas shifted her weight to one foot while she asked, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means,” the former mayor said, unfazed by Granny’s bluster as she cut her sandwich halves again, “that people always assume the worst.” She lifted a quarter and took a bite, meeting Widow Lucas’s eyes as she chewed.

Opening her mouth, Granny was again interrupted by the order-up bell. She dutifully stomped off. Stuffing a fry in her mouth, Emma asked, “Do you purposely try to get people riled up?”

“Occasionally,” Regina admitted with a smirk while taking a sip of water. “She’ll get over it when she realizes I’m right.”

Picking up her burger, the sheriff took a large bite. She chewed as she considered her next question. “So, what’s the deal with Albert Spencer and Ruby?”

“Nothing. She was simply a means to an end,” the former mayor said before taking another bite. Out of the corner of her eye, she studied Emma’s face for a moment as she chewed. “The people of the Enchanted Forest region hate all wolves.”

The sheriff frowned at this as she ate a few more fries. After taking a long sip of her soda, she asked, “What’s the deal between Spencer and David?”

“That story is a bit more complicated,” Regina said simply. Before taking another bite, she added, “Needless to say, factions are being formed, and you’d better choose your allies carefully.” After chewing her bite and swallowing, she continued with her advice, “As sheriff, you’ll be expected to endorse someone for mayor.”

“So, I’ll have to endorse David,” Emma sighed, picking the lettuce off her burger. It was limp, pale and there was way too much of it.
“Not necessarily, and given Mr. French’s blatant disapproval of Mr. Nolan’s candidacy for the position, I’d strongly suggest you didn’t automatically offer your support, given your association.” The former mayor wiped her mouth with a napkin, carefully considering the last quarter of her sandwich.

The pair was quiet for a few minutes. Emma continued to eat as the diner slowly emptied. Regina finally picked up the last part of her chicken sandwich and took another bite.

“This just sucks,” the sheriff said irritably around a mouthful of french fries. She swallowed before sucking the rest of her soda down. “And now, Granny won’t refill my soda because you ticked her off.”

“It takes a lot more than that to push my buttons,” Widow Lucas said snatching Emma’s glass and wandering off to refill it.

When she came back, Regina gave a sassy smirk and said, “It keeps her young.”

Granny harrumphed and left the pair again. She started to bus tables since a vast majority of the lunch crowd had left.

Looking around, the sheriff turned to Regina and asked, “So what’s the story with Spencer and David?”

Wiping her mouth, the former mayor sighed. “To make a long story short, Prince James was killed during a contest with a Behemoth in King Midas’s land. It was part of a trial of sorts, to see if he was worthy of Princess Abigail’s hand.” She was ready to leave, but Emma was still eating and slowly dredging her remaining fries in copious amounts of ketchup.

“How did David get pulled into this mess?” Emma asked, taking a drink. She appreciated Regina’s willingness to answer her questions. Her parents hadn’t really been helpful in that department, and Henry’s book was rather sketchy on the details.

“Rumpelstiltskin procured James for King George since his queen couldn’t successfully bear children. So when James died, George called on Rumpelstiltskin again,” Regina explained. She watched as Widow Lucas hoisted a large tub full of dirty dishes and carried it back into the kitchen. “Ultimately, David was brought in as a replacement for his twin and to marry Abigail.”

“But as James?” the sheriff asked in clarification.

“As James,” the former mayor nodded.

Tilting her head, Emma’s brow furrowed as she thought for a few moments. “So,” she started slowly, “this whole thing about David not being King George’s son….”

“Nothing will come of it,” Granny boldly proclaimed as she walked up to the cash register. Opening the drawer, she stuffed the tips she collected off the tables into the till.

Frowning with annoyance, Regina’s eyes immediately locked onto Widow Lucas. “Not what Mr. Spencer is hoping, certainly, but his bellowing will be enough to ensure unwarranted difficulties everyone will have to endure.”

Closing the drawer, Granny eyed the former mayor with mild distrust and asked, “How do you know all of this, anyway?”

Lifting her chin slightly, the former mayor quickly said, “I have my sources.” She smirked as
Widow Lucas glared at her over her glasses. However, her eyes softened as she added, “But if you must know, Gertrude told me the majority of the tale. The rest I pieced together.”

“That poor woman,” Widow Lucas sighed, seemingly lost in her memories. It was something she regretted, not being able to help the sickly queen. She remembered Queen Gertrude from her youth and the splendor of her marrying a young, fiercely brave farmer of humble beginnings.

“Why? What happened?” Emma looked between her two very unlikely conversation companions.

“She lost a son and her home,” Regina said sadly, her eyes holding the sheriff’s gaze for a long moment. Answering the unasked question, she said, “She died shortly after Snow White and her Prince took King George’s castle.”

“You took her in?” Widow Lucas mocked in disbelief.

“Yes.” Regina’s ire rose, and her eyes flashed, expecting a fight. But surprisingly, as Emma timidly touched her arm, she managed to stop from verbally lashing out.

“Was Gertrude your friend?” Emma asked gently, partly out of curiosity.

Turning back to the sheriff, the former mayor nodded, “After I was married, she was kind to me.” Then, she looked Granny in the eye and said, “She never did understand why her son so unexpectedly and violently turned against her husband.”

“You didn’t tell her?” Widow Lucas snorted as she crossed her arms.

Emma grimaced. Things had been going so well.

“Tell her what, exactly?” Regina asked in a hard, quiet tone as fingers gripped the edge of the counter, turning white. “I’m sure you heard the stories.” She paused, cocking an eyebrow. “Grieving Gertrude?”

“Reprehensible limericks sung by worthless drunks in taverns,” Granny sneered, rolling her eyes.

“So, Gertrude thought what?” Emma cut in, looking back and forth between the two. “She thought her son took over?” Finally, her eyes stayed on the former mayor. She firmly asked, “Why didn’t anyone tell her that it wasn’t her son?”

Scowling, Regina released her grip on the counter. “Ultimately, it didn’t matter. Her mind was already slipping from her years of grief.” She looked at the sheriff. “She did, however, take small comfort that her son would hold the kingdom.”

“Wait, George never told her?” Emma whispered in haunted shock. “David never explained that he wasn’t James?”

“I doubt very few remembered Queen Gertrude,” the former mayor said. Her eyes drifted over to Widow Lucas and back. And in a softer tone, she added, “When Prince James was of appropriate age, King George systematically marginalized her from his life and from the world.”

Granny sighed and removed their plates. She returned with a wet cloth and started wiping down the counter. She had known and done nothing, too busy securing her granddaughter’s safety in the new regime of Snow White and Prince Charming.

Finishing her water, Regina stood, retrieved her coat and slipped it on. She cocked an eyebrow and asked while handing Emma her jacket, “I assume you’re paying for lunch, Sheriff?”
“Me?” Emma squeaked as she stood, as well. Taking her jacket from Regina, she put it on and asked, “Why am I left footing the bill?” When she had suggested Granny’s, she’d expected they’d go Dutch.

With a haughty smirk and a mischievous twinkle in her eye, the former mayor said, “It’ll be several weeks before my first paycheck.”

“Fine, whatever,” the sheriff said with a scowl as she pulled out the cash from her wallet. She sighed upon seeing it so woefully empty. After paying Granny, she followed Regina outside.

Adjusting her collar to protect against the chilly spring breeze, Emma walked towards Mifflin Street by Regina’s side. Several questions tumbled about in her head, mainly about the former mayor’s subdued and pensive mood of late. However, it was quickly forgotten as her attention was drawn towards Michael Tillman’s auto repair shop.

“I told you to knock it off!” Michael shouted from inside the darkened car bay. His words were followed by several loud bangs and a few clangs of metal hitting metal.

From across the street, both women watched as Nicolas Tillman bolted out of the shop in a dead run. He streaked down the sidewalk and ducked into the alley between Gold’s pawnshop and Dave’s Fish ’n’ Chips.

They both watched as the mechanic stepped out of the shop and stooped to pick up a wrench. He didn’t notice the audience and disappeared back into the darkness.

“Did he just throw a wrench at his kid?” Emma muttered incredulously, mostly to herself. She moved to cross the street but was stopped by Regina’s gentle hand on her elbow.

“Charging in there won’t do any good, Miss Swan,” the former mayor said softly, understanding the impulse. “Not yet, anyhow.”

“The hell it won’t,” the sheriff sputtered angrily, taking a bold step into the street.

“Not unless you have irrefutable proof, which you don’t,” Regina said, prepared for the fury in Emma’s eyes as she spun around to face her. “Presenting accusations will only make matters worse for the boy.” She paused and added with an icy tone, “And it will only ensure that Mr. Tillman is more careful in his future misconduct.”

A scathing retort burned at the tip of the sheriff’s tongue. Suddenly, her eyes widening, she looked back over her shoulder at the repair shop. “Is this something else the book got wrong?”

“Unfortunately, a key detail was left out of their story,” the former mayor explained sadly. She casually looked towards the alleyway where Nicholas disappeared. “In this instance, your guess is as good as mine.” Of course, she had her suspicions.

“Who wrote the damn thing?” Emma asked, stepping back onto the sidewalk. “They need to get their facts straight.”

Resuming their walk back to Mifflin Street, Regina said, “I’ve been asking myself that same question for a very long time.”

Eventually entering one of the quiet and more affluent residential areas in Storybrooke, the sheriff finally spoke again. “Did you know that Michael was a bag of dicks?”

Raising her eyebrow at Emma’s phrasing, the former mayor couldn’t disagree with the metaphor.
“It had crossed my mind,” she said dryly.

Huffing, the sheriff kicked at a few twigs that had fallen on the sidewalk. “When Ava and Nicholas got caught stealing at the pharmacy, did you know who they were?” She watched the former mayor out of the corner of her eye.

“I did,” Regina said in a low tone, looking straight ahead.

With furrowed brow, Emma asked, “Did you really use them to sneak into the Blind Witch’s house for an apple?”

“Yes.”

“So, you did separate them from their father,” the sheriff accused, stepping in front of the former mayor. “Why?” she demanded, her anger threatening to flare.

Immediately, Regina stopped and scowled. “If you must know, I was looking for an unwanted child for the task.”

Blanching, Emma whispered, “One who wouldn’t be missed if they failed.”

“Precisely,” the former mayor said as she attempted to step around the sheriff.

“How did you know?” Emma asked, blocking Regina’s path. “How did you know he didn’t want them?”

Sighing, Regina rolled her eyes. “What loving parent would willingly leave their child in a contested forest full of thieves, smugglers and slavers?” She paused as the memory of the day returned. “The woodsman didn’t even plea for his children until after my guards seized him.”

Having enough, she pushed past Emma and resumed the walk home.

Quickly, the sheriff fell into step again. She looked down at her feet, occasionally glancing at the former mayor. It wouldn’t be the first time a child was abandoned by their parents, she thought darkly. Quietly, she asked, “You offered to let them live with you?”

“I did,” Regina answered. “Gretel declined.” Her father had been proud, but she’d seen the guilt in his eyes. Of course, she also knew it didn’t take him long to find nearest tavern and spill his woes in a pint, painting himself as an unfortunate victim. That’s where the leech had stayed until the curse was cast.

Again, Emma was struck with the inconsistencies between Henry’s storybook and the woman walking beside her. It didn’t quite add up. “So…,” she prompted.

Sighing, the former mayor had hoped they were finished with this particular topic. “So, I sent them back into the forest.”

“To fend for themselves?” the sheriff asked with contempt. “They’re kids, Regina, and that place is no picnic.”

Cutting a hard look at Emma, Regina pursed her lips as her nostrils flared. “To a far less ruthless area, besides they are children of the woods. Toxic parental relationship aside, they were perfectly capable of providing for themselves.” In a softer tone, she continued, “Don’t confuse this world’s norms with that of the other. It will do you no favors.”

As they walked up to the front door of 108 Mifflin Street, the sheriff decided to drop the topic for
the time being. However, she was sure that she’d be mulling over the resultant revelations for a while.

~SQ~

Taking a deep breath, Emma Swan sat cross-legged on the grass in the middle of Regina’s back yard, her open hands out in front of her with palms facing up and fingers spread wide. She imagined a ball of light forming in the space between her hands as she attempted to manifest the magic surrounding them. Her brow furrowed as she squinted and twisted her lips in frustration.

“You’re trying too hard,” the former mayor gently commented. Mirroring Emma’s position but with her hands laced in her lap, she watched as the sheriff continued to struggle with the simple beginner’s exercise she had been working on for the last ten minutes. Quietly, she started reciting her earlier instructions, “Open your senses while imagining—.”

“Imagine collecting the magic like rain in my hand,” Emma mocked, irritation lacing her tone. “Yeah, I got that part,” she huffed.

“Obviously, you don’t,” Regina sniped back. She leaned forward and gently cupped the back of Emma’s hands with her own. A sphere of light formed between their hands, undulating in its transparency and color between blue and purple. “Magic is living, malleable but fleeting.” Slowly, she dropped her hands away and watched as Emma managed to hold and maintain the sphere which steadied to a clear, pale blue.

The sheriff grinned, looking between the ball and former mayor. Then, she frowned, and the ball of light dimmed. “I didn’t make this,” she said with disappointment. “You did.”

“We did,” Regina corrected, considering a change in the method of instruction. Looking around, she gracefully stood and retrieved a small stick a few paces away. Picking it up, she said, “We’re going to try something different.”

“What do I do with this?” Emma asked, uncertain as she nodded at the sphere.

“Let it go,” the former mayor said simply.

In a bare instant, the ball of light was dispelled. Its magical energies returned to the environment.

“Interesting,” Regina mumbled before gesturing for Emma to stand beside her. “Stand up, please.”

Dutifully, the sheriff stood, happy to be off the cold, hard ground. “So, now what?” she asked, relieved to be moving on to something different.

The former mayor handed over the stick. “Set the tip of this on fire,” she instructed.

“Wait, what?” Emma took the stick and waved it around a few times. “I thought you said magic wasn’t anything like Harry Potter.” She smirked and pointed her wand-stick at Regina. With a flourish of her wrist, she called out, “Expecto patronum!”

“Cute,” the former mayor sighed as she rolled her eyes. “It’s not.” She nodded to the stick and said, “Now, set the end on fire.”

“Regina,” the sheriff almost whined even as she took on a serious expression. “I couldn’t make a ball of light. What makes you think I can light this thing on fire?”

Suddenly, a spark sizzled at the end of the stick. Emma’s eyes widened in surprise as she grinned.
Then unexpectedly, the entire thing burst into flame. When the burning sensation registered, she immediately dropped the stick. Once released, the flames disappeared and the charred stick dropped onto the ground, crumbling to ash.

“Crap,” Emma cursed, shaking her hand. Tears welled up in the corner of her eyes as she held her hand to her chest and pranced around in pain.

“Let me see,” Regina said gently, reaching for Emma’s hand.

Tentatively, the sheriff relaxed her protective hold and allowed the former mayor to examine her hand. She hissed as her fingers were pried open with unexpected tenderness. It was going to blister, she could tell, and she’d be in pain for days. However, she didn’t miss the sad eyes studying her hand.

Cupping the underside of Emma’s injured hand firmly, Regina ghosted her other hand over it. A vibrant purple glowed between them until she finally released Emma’s hand, skin once again smooth, if a bit pink.

Curiously, the sheriff flexed her hand. “Thanks,” she whispered.

“You’re welcome,” the former mayor said absently as she glanced around for another stick. “It’ll be sensitive for a few days.”

“Better sensitive than painful,” Emma quipped, testing the degree of sensitivity with a caressing finger. She frowned as Regina held out another stick. “I don’t know...,” she drawled, looking between the stick, her previously burnt hand and Regina.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor continued to hold the stick and promptly lit it on fire.

Startled by the sudden emergence of flame, the sheriff hopped backwards. Her eyes darted between the flaming stick and the former mayor’s hand, which appeared to go uninjured. Then, the fire was gone, and surprisingly, the stick was not burnt.

“How?” Emma muttered, cautiously taking the stick. She smacked it against her leg a few times.

“You’re trying too hard,” Regina replied, watching Emma’s fidgety movements. Focus was still a problem, but harping about it wouldn’t help. Emma needed her confidence built up first. She paused for a moment and added, “As unfortunate as your accident was, it did provide insight into your abilities.”

“You mean my lack of magical abilities,” Emma said disparagingly. She held her wand-stick up in front of her. Her brow furrowed as she tried to relight the tip.

Ignoring the self-effacing comment, the former mayor continued, “I know very little factual information on children of True Love, most of which I read about in books. However, I doubt even Rumpelstiltskin knows much about their full potential, either.” She titled her head and regarded the sheriff inquisitively. “As with all magic, it’s a learning process,” she said. “And as far as I’m aware, you’re the first child of True Love in the last three hundred years.”

With great surprise, Emma lowered her stick and looked at Regina with a gaping mouth. “What do you mean? I thought True Love was like a thing over there?”

Sighing, Regina pursed her lips in thought. “It is an extremely rare and awe inspiring, if not annoying, thing.” She paused and took a slow breath. “And it is not to be trifled with or taken lightly.”
“What do you mean?” the sheriff asked, slightly confused by this new information. Her parents acted like True Love was a weekly occurrence.

“True Love is the most powerful magic of all,” Regina said softly, almost wistfully. After everything, she still believed it.

“Yeah, yeah, it can transcend realms and break any curse. I heard that spiel from Gold,” Emma said mockingly while rolling her eyes. Lifting the stick, she shook it at Regina and said, “But I can’t make a ball of light or light the end of a freaking stick on fire without hurting myself. How powerful is that?”

Smirking then scowling, the former mayor crossed her arms. “You’re missing the point, Miss Swan,” she snapped.

“Then what is the point?” the sheriff shouted, throwing the stick down. It bounced once and landed next to the former mayor’s feet.

Taking a deep breath, Regina closed her eyes as she rubbed her left temple, hoping to stave off the impending headache. “As I was trying to explain,” she said in a slow, clipped voice, “True Love isn’t an offensive weapon. Nor is it a nuclear warhead, as you so eloquently put it the other night.” She could tell Emma wasn’t completely following her but was getting close. “If someone you loved was in danger, what would you do?”

“Protect them,” Emma answered with a shrug, waiting for the point.

Cocking an eyebrow, the former mayor shook her head at the sheriff’s blank expression. “Exactly, you protect and defend.” She opened her left hand and a fireball formed. “This,” she said, glaring into the ball of flame, “is offensive.” It was rather simplistic, but it would do—for now.

“Oh, okay,” the sheriff nodded, watching the fireball closely. She visibly relaxed when it went out.

“I believe your stronger capabilities may be linked to the True Love nature of your magic, and we shall develop your training accordingly,” Regina said as she bent and picked up the stick. She handed it back towards Emma. “Shall we try again?”

With a sigh, the sheriff took the stick. “I don’t see how lighting a stick on fire is a defensive move.”

“Not in the strictest sense, but it’s applicable to a defensive stance,” Regina explained, gesturing for Emma to hold the stick out in front of her. “With the energy sphere, I was asking you to create something from nothing, but with this stick, I’m asking you to add something to something else.”

“I really don’t want to burn myself again,” the sheriff whispered, her eyes cutting to the former mayor who moved to stand directly beside her.

“You won’t,” Regina said as she cupped the back of Emma’s right hand with her own. Staring at the stick, she started her instructions. “Imagine a flame appearing just above the tip of the stick.”

A small flame flickered in and out of existence at the opposite end. Finally, it held.

“Good, now will the flame travel down the stick,” the former mayor said, watching as the little flames slowly crept toward their hands. “Very nicely done, Emma,” she praised. “Now, increase the intensity—slowly.”

“Won’t the stick explode like the candle, or actually, go up in a ball of flame?” Emma asked,
nervousness lacing her tone. The last thing she wanted was a bunch of splinters in her hand or face.

“Not if you go slowly and feel for the object’s threshold,” Regina said, watching the rising flames. She patiently waited as Emma increased the flame’s strength. “Good, very good, now dispel it.”

Instantly, the fire was gone, and the former mayor removed her hand.

“I believe that’s enough for today,” Regina said, backing away from Emma as she started to swing the stick again.

“That was awesome!” the sheriff said, focusing on relighting the stick. It ignited with a fiery whoosh and she immediately dropped the stick again. She shook her hand before briefly inspecting for damage. Finding none, she smiled and pointed at the stick. “Look, I didn’t burn it to a crisp this time.”

Chuckling softly, the former mayor smirked as she shook her head, clearly amused.

Bending over and picking up her wand-stick, Emma studied it for a few moments. “So, why didn’t this one get charred?” She looked over at Regina who was picking up various fallen twigs and branches.

“I guided you through the process,” the former mayor explained, still gathering. Stopping, she stood upright with a small bundle of sticks in one arm and regarded the sheriff with a critical eye. “Your excitement and frustration propels the magic, you’ll need to keep your emotions in check.”

“But if magic is about emotion, wouldn’t it be better to let loose?” Emma asked, helping with the yard cleanup.

“When teaching someone to drive, do you want them to start by going seventy miles per hour down an interstate?” Regina calmly asked, resuming the search for anything the lawnmower couldn’t handle.

Grimacing, the sheriff paused and glanced over at the former mayor. “I see your point.”

The pair traveled across the yard, gathering twigs and branches until their arms were full. Slowly, they walked to the storage shed behind the garage and deposited the sticks in a bin inside.

“So... Why keep the sticks?” Emma asked, dropping her armload in a wood crate.

“Kindling,” Regina said while scooping dry cat food into the various dishes.

“Why isn’t Henry out here helping? He’s been watching us from the dining room window the entire time,” the sheriff said, dumping the two water dishes in the hedge. She followed the former mayor around and inside the garage to fill the bowls.

“He’s been avoiding outside chores for some time now,” Regina absently responded, returning the bowls to the shed. It wasn’t that the boy was any real help, but his company was always appreciated, as was his laughter as he played.

“So, what does he do?” the sheriff asked as the former mayor locked the shed.

“He says he’s doing homework, but I doubt it takes him that long to complete,” Regina said, walking down the drive toward the mailbox. “But I know it’s an excuse to avoid me.”

Emma tried not to wince. She’d pulled the same trick many times to get out of game night or some
other lame activity while with a foster family. Watching Regina check her mail and flip through the various envelopes, she shifted from foot to foot, unsure if she should even ask. “And you let him?”

With a furrowed brow, the former mayor jerked her head and glared at the sheriff. She was silent for a long moment before finally shutting the mailbox and walking back toward the house. “Nothing will come from forcing him to interact with me or anyone else.” After all, she knew exactly how that felt.

“But you made him see Archie,” Emma blurted as she fell into step beside Regina.

“Those are two separate issues.” Sighing, the former mayor stopped and faced the sheriff. She cocked an eyebrow and lifted her chin slightly. “Whatever it is you want to know, just ask it. I have no desire to play twenty questions.”

Taken aback more by the willingness to talk than the hostility, Emma stuffed her hands in her jeans' pockets. “I guess what I want to know is why you sent him to see Archie.”

Tilting her head, Regina intently regarded Emma. “Henry used to have friends.”

“Really?” the sheriff squeaked in surprise. The answer was not what she had been expecting. She nodded towards the house. “The way he talks . . . , it was just you and him since the get go.”

Pursing her lips, the former mayor looked away briefly. “Believe what you may, but you yourself have pointed out that not everyone in this town hates me.” Her eyes locked onto the sheriff’s as she continued, “And not everyone is afraid of me.”

“So when did Henry start not having friends?” Emma asked gently, uncertain how much of this conversation Regina would continue to tolerate.

“It was the year before your arrival in Storybrooke that I noticed serious changes in Henry’s behavior and attitude.” Scowling, the former mayor’s eyes darkened in anger as she actively collated the dates. Her voice lowered as she said, “It was after the school book fair.”

Nodding, the sheriff decided to guess. “That’s when Mary Margaret gave Henry the fairytale book.” At the former mayor’s brisk nod, she said, “When I first met you, you had no idea about all the fairytale stuff.”

“I didn’t,” Regina admitted, irritated that she’d been so careless.

“You didn’t coerce Archie into—” Emma didn’t get a chance to finish her sentence.

Anger rolled off the former mayor. “I didn’t have a reason to,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Okay,” the sheriff backtracked softly, holding up her hands. She still had to sleep in the same room with the woman. No reason to piss her off unnecessarily.

Closing her eyes and taking a shaky breath, Regina debated on whether to end this conversation, but Emma would eventually bring it up again—gnaw it to death like a dog with a bone. “I promised not to pry. It was the only way I could get him to agree to do it.”

“For Henry to start therapy?” Emma asked tentatively, surprised Regina was still entertaining her. Maybe things weren’t as bad as she originally suspected, after all. What she’d managed to read from Dr. Hopper’s notes certainly didn’t point to an abused child—just a confused, if bratty, one.

“Yes,” the former mayor ground out, glaring.
“Okay,” the sheriff said with a small smile. “Thank you.” It never failed to surprise her how startled the former mayor reacted to honest kindness.

Confused, Regina instinctively said, “You’re welcome.” She eyed Emma curiously for a moment, waiting for the next question and for another fight to break out. Yet, neither came. “Very well,” she said after clearing her throat. “Shall we get started on dinner?”

Falling into step behind the former mayor as she walked back to the side door, Emma caught Henry watching them from the study window. She frowned at his perplexed look and realized they really needed to talk about a few things.

~SQ~

It was midmorning when Regina heard a very distinctive, soft tap coming down the hall. Sighing, she marked her place in the firearm safety binder.

Looking up from her stack of incident reports, Emma’s head tilted curiously as she watched Regina close her binder. Noting the bookmark in the last section, she realized she’d have to find some other busy work for her if Ruby or David didn’t finish with their assigned reading soon. Hearing the tapping in the hall, her eyes followed the former mayor’s hard gaze to see Mr. Gold heading towards them. “Crap,” she muttered.

“Ah, good,” Gold smiled charmingly, stepping into the sheriff’s office. “You’re both here.”

Rolling her eyes, Regina scoffed but remained silent at Emma’s pointed stare. She linked her hands over the binder and proceeded to blatantly ignore the pawnbroker. If she couldn’t criticize, she’d just keep her mouth shut.

“You would know all about that, wouldn’t you?” the sheriff asked sarcastically, cocking an eyebrow. She hadn’t wanted to start out hostile. It just sort of happened.

Looking down, the former mayor smirked as she brushed imaginary dirt off the binder cover.

Choosing to ignore the sheriff’s obstinacy, Gold continued, “I’d like to report an act of vandalism.” He pulled out a few Polaroids from an inside coat pocket and handed them to Emma. “As you can see, someone slashed my tires and keyed my car last night.”

Flipping through the photos, the sheriff asked, “Where’s your car now?” She raised her eyebrows at the holes in the tires and the multiple deep scratches down both sides of the car. It was definitely done with something larger than the typical knife or keys.

“In my driveway, waiting for Mr. Tillman to tow it to his shop for repairs,” the pawnbroker answered. He gave the former mayor a quick once-over. “In order for my insurance to cover the damages, he said I needed to file a report with the sheriff’s department.”

“Yup,” Emma said, dropping the Polaroids. She rolled her chair over to a filing cabinet and pulled out a fresh incident report. Filling in a few fields, she looked up and asked, “Any idea who would’ve done this?”

“Killian Jones,” the pawnbroker supplied, taking seat in the free visitor’s chair. “If I recall correctly, he’s wanted for the attempted murder of Belle French.”

Huffing, the sheriff ignored Gold as she continued to fill out the form.

“Well brings me to my next order of business,” the pawnbroker said, turning in his seat to face
the former mayor.

Focusing on Emma’s writing hand, Regina gritted her teeth. “What would that be, Gold?”

“What do you know about restoring memories?” the pawnbroker asked with a soft tone.

Instantly, the sheriff stopped writing and avidly watched the exchange from across her desk. She briefly wondered if she could break them up if an actual fight broke out. Somehow, she doubted it.

At the unexpected question, Regina’s face softened almost unperceivably as her eyes searched Gold for a moment. Finally, she said, “You know I can only offer cursed memories.”

The pawnbroker pursed his lips. There was an edgy glint in his eye that made Emma wince.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Gold said, gripping his cane tightly. “When the dwarf went over the line, his Storybrooke memories were restored. Belle has no memories beyond the expected world dump.” His nostrils flared when the former mayor didn’t offer any further explanation.

“What did you do?” he barked, forcibly slamming the tip of his cane on the floor.

The former mayor didn’t even flinch, as she was used to the pawnbroker’s outbursts.

“That’s none of your concern,” Gold snarled, still glaring at Regina. His eyes suddenly snapped to Emma. “The medical records are quite clear. Belle is exhibiting none of her diagnosed psychosis.” If she had gone back to the documented semi-catatonic state, he could’ve worked with that, but with this current situation, he hadn’t a clue of where to begin.

“I think it is,” the sheriff said, crossing her arms. She wasn’t going to be intimated by him or by anyone else. “Since it’s illegal and all,” she drawled.

“You would,” the former mayor said with a disgusted sneer.

Irritated, Emma asked, “That paperwork just magically appeared in her files, too, didn’t it?”

“Yes,” the pawnbroker said gruffly with a frown.

Regina raised an eyebrow. That was definitely the wrong thing to say to Emma Swan.

“I think it is,” the sheriff said, crossing her arms. She wasn’t going to be intimated by him or by anyone else. “Since it’s illegal and all,” she drawled.

“You would,” the former mayor said with a disgusted sneer.

Irritated, Emma asked, “That paperwork just magically appeared in her files, too, didn’t it?”

“Believe what you will, the fact remains that it’s on file,” the pawnbroker said, suddenly calm as he rethought this interaction. It hadn’t gone how he envisioned. As was par for the course, he’d planned to provoke Regina and manipulate her into doing his bidding. Obviously, the savior refused to cooperate.

The sheriff’s fingers dug into her sleeves. “What are you playing at, Gold?”

Wincing, Regina wanted to scold Emma for stepping right into the imp’s twisted game. The savior was too impulsive to play this game of subtlety.
“Playing?” Gold asked with a growing smile. “I assure you, my only concern is getting that delinquent, Killian Jones, off the streets.” He paused for a moment, sending a wicked look at the former mayor. “Of course, if you’re unwilling to bring him to justice,” he said, trailing off as he looked back up at Emma, “I’m sure I can find more capable and enthusiastic parties to fill the role.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Emma snapped, standing as she dropped her hands. She hated when he started talking in vague terms and riddles.

Chuckling, the pawnbroker stood and bent around the sheriff. He pulled his half completed incident report towards him and grabbed a pen. Signing his name at the bottom with a flourish, he dropped the pen back on the desk. Facing the sheriff, he gave her a quick once-over. “You’d do well to remember that you’re now expendable.”

Knowing where this was going, Regina merely tilted her head and blinked, her eyes never leaving Gold. *Breadcrumbs*, she thought.

Instantly, Emma took on a rigid pose as her nostrils flared and her hands fisted. This guy really knew how to get under her skin, and it drove her nuts! “I’m still the sheriff, Gold.”

“Yes, but for how long?” the pawnbroker asked as he ambled around his chair and toward the open office door. Looking over his shoulder, he said, “Remember who put that star on your belt, Dearie.”

“I was elected,” the sheriff said through gritted teeth and narrowed eyes. Why was she constantly repeating herself?

In that moment, the former mayor keenly noticed two things. One, Gold’s self-satisfied smile almost slipped and his pupils dilated ever so slightly. Two, Emma had coiled enough magical energy around her to blast the imp through the jail cell walls, if she had known how to use it properly.

However, the pawnbroker recovered quickly. “With no small amount of help from me, if you’ll recall,” he taunted, flashing a devilish grin. Lingering in the doorway for a moment longer, he finally started walking away. “Elections aren’t that far off, Dearie.”

Emma’s lips curled as she watched the infuriating man leave the station. Once he was out of sight, she stomped back around her desk and snatched up his incident report.

“Don’t,” Regina cautiously warned her.

“What would it matter? I’m sure he’s got more than enough to cover the damages to his car,” the sheriff said with pursed lips. The desire to shred the form was almost overwhelming and would undoubtedly be satisfying.

“It matters because Gold does everything with a purpose,” the former mayor said, glancing back down the hall. She was relieved when Emma put the incident report down.

“So why did he come in here, then?” the sheriff asked, leaning back in her chair and resting her boots on the desk corner. “I’m sure once he finds Hook, he won’t waste any time enacting his personal brand of justice.” Her lips curled around the word mockingly. She started spinning one of her pens. “What do a bunch of fairytale characters need a sheriff for, anyway?”

Frowning, Regina watched Emma descend from her fury. “Equality of justice,” she offered, opening the firearm binder.
“What do you mean?” the sheriff asked with a groan, tired of all the word games. She let her head roll back so she could stare at the ceiling, as if it would provide her with all the answers she sought.

Opening her binder to the correct page, the former mayor readjusted her reading glasses. She glanced over their rims and said, “As we discussed before, factions are forming within Storybrooke, and you would be prudent to realize that one group’s idea of justice won’t be the same as another.” When no response was forthcoming, she started to read, believing Emma was done with the topic.

“So,” Emma started, rolling her head to look at Regina, “you’re saying that Gold wants me to either step up or let someone else take over.”

“More or less,” the former mayor said in agreement, never looking up from her reading. There was more to it, she was certain.

Fishing a tennis ball out of one of the desk drawers, the sheriff started tossing it up in the air. After a few minutes, she said, “I thought my job as savior would be over. You know, after the whole breaking-the-curse thing.”

“Simply because you completed a task, doesn’t necessarily mean your work is concluded, Miss Swan,” Regina said, turning a page.

Catching the ball, Emma rolled it between her palms. She replayed the conversation with Gold again and again in her head, desperate to divulge any deeper meaning. However, she only came up with more questions. Glancing over at Regina, she bit her lip but decided against asking anything further.

While lost in thought, her ears adjusted to the silence. She could hear the light traffic outside, the soft ticking of the clock on the wall and the gentle rustle of turning pages. Lazily blinking a few times, Emma continued to watch the former mayor read. It was becoming a habit. Why this couldn’t have been the Regina Mills she met a year-and-a-half ago, she had no idea, but if she had, she wouldn’t have stayed.

~SQ~

END OF PART 2
Chapter 3

PART 3

Following Regina up the creaky, narrow stairs leading to Archie’s office above Neighbor’s Five & Dime, Emma found herself hesitant to leave the man alone with her. Yeah, she knew the former mayor didn’t kill Dr. Hopper, but that didn’t waylay her unease. Maybe she was just apprehensive, if not a bit morbidly curious, as to how Archie was going to react to Regina’s presence.

Standing off to the side, the sheriff watched as the former mayor knocked on the closed office door and waited for it to open. She raised an eyebrow at the sniffing and prancing of nails just on the other side. Vaguely, she heard Archie telling the ever-present Pongo to settle down and move back.

Eventually, the door opened wide, revealing a smiling Dr. Hopper and a sitting Dalmatian.

Emma immediately relaxed. The town shrink wasn’t going to need therapy after his ordeal.

“Regina,” Archie greeted warmly. Stepping to one side, he gestured for her to enter.

Stepping into the door way, the sheriff was surprised when Dr. Hopper frowned upon noticing her. She quickly looked between Archie and Regina. The latter was affectionately being welcomed by Pongo—that is, if his wagging body was any indication.

Biting her bottom lip, Emma realized for the umpteenth time that the dream catcher hadn’t provided the whole truth, and maybe, Gold had purposely led her astray. With a sigh, she fought against a threatening bout of sadness upon realizing how much the Dalmatian actually liked Regina, and apparently, the feeling was mutual as she watched the former mayor rub the base of Pongo’s ear.

Clearing his throat, Archie glanced briefly at Regina before saying, “Your presence really isn’t necessary, Sheriff.” He didn’t want to assume, though, he couldn’t help but draw a few conclusions. Turning back to the former mayor, he added, “Unless you want—.”

“Um, no. Yeah,” Emma stammered, suddenly uncomfortable, her eyes shifting between everyone again. “I’m just going to wait outside.” With that, she backed out of the office, closing the door behind her. She bowed her head and mentally kicked herself. She could’ve handled that better.

Unzipping her coat, she pulled out her ear buds and cellphone. Plugging in, she scrolled through the various screens and started her music playlist. She slid down the wall and sat on the floor. It was about twenty songs later, listening to the playlist one-and-a-half times, before the door opened again.

Stopping the music and pulling out an ear bud, the sheriff weakly smiled up at Dr. Hopper.

“Would you mind coming in for a few minutes, Emma?” Archie requested with a gentle smile.

“Okaaay….” she drawled before standing up. However, the sheriff was not prepared when Dr. Hopper placed a chair out in the hall by the door. She immediately searched the former mayor’s face for any idea of what was happening or what to expect.
“It’s nothing to worry about. I just wanted to talk to you privately for a moment,” Dr. Hopper said easily. He still had that therapist smile on his face.

Archie’s reassurance didn’t sit well with Emma. It reeked of a trap. Almost overwhelmed with the desire to bolt, she watched as Regina gathered her coat and purse.

“Dr. Hopper,” Regina acknowledged in passing. She pulled the door closed behind her.

Swallowing, the sheriff hid her nervousness by flopping down on the leather sofa. Hearing Pongo sigh, she glanced over at the Dalmatian on his little doggy bed in the corner. “What did you want to talk about?” she asked finally.

“I won’t keep you long,” Archie repeated as he sat, sensing Emma’s unease. “However, I admit I’m a bit concerned about your . . .,” he paused, crossing his legs as he settled, “unique situation.”

“So, she told you,” she said, blowing out a heavy breath.

“How does that make you feel?” he inquired, settling his legal pad on his knee.

“Fine,” the sheriff shrugged. “We vaguely talked about it this morning.” That had been a heck of a surprise, Regina asking permission. She grinned, but her mirth faltered upon noticing Dr. Hopper’s pursed lips.

Scribbling down some notes, Dr. Hopper asked, “Is there anything about your current situation that bothers you?”

“Besides the lack of privacy?” she snipped, rolling her eyes. “The only alone time we get is when one of us is in the bathroom.”

“So, your prolonged exposure has been unpleasant?” He stopped writing and observed Emma very intently. “You’ve been fighting?”

Uncomfortable, Emma shifted, sitting up straight. “Is that what she said?” she whispered. Shaking her head, she quickly added, “No, we haven’t been fighting. We’ve been getting along pretty well, actually, which is rather surprising considering everything.”

Nodding, Archie wrote down a few more notes. “Take me through one of your typical days,” he ordered, linking his hands on top of his pad.

“Um, well, we wake up and get ready,” she started to explain. “After breakfast, Regina usually packs the lunches before we go to the station. I work at my desk for a few hours before David comes in, and we leave.” Shrugging, she added, “We walk around downtown to see if anyone has changed their mind about wanting assistance before meeting Henry at the bus stop and heading back home. Regina teaches me about my magic before dinner, and afterwards, we chill out in front of the TV or with a book for an hour or so.”

“Who fixes breakfast?”

Emma pursed her lips in thought before saying, “We usually do our own thing, but Regina made us veggie omelets and toast today.”

Nodding, Dr. Hopper jotted down another note, his suspicions becoming clear. “Who cleans up the kitchen?”

“Regina.”
“What are you and Henry doing?” He glanced up while readjusting his glasses.

“Talking, if he decides to hang out,” the sheriff easily supplied. “He usually just runs up to his room.” That was when it hit her. “Oh,” she sighed.

But Archie ignored her, wanting to drive the point home. “Who prepares the lunches?”

With a huff, Emma admitted, “Regina.”

“And dinner?”

“Regina,” she said, dropping her head back against the sofa. “I get it, Archie. I get it.”

Smiling, Dr. Hopper wrote down a few more notes, saying nothing for a few moments. “Do you have any other concerns about your new relationship with Regina?”

Taking a deep breath, the sheriff glanced around the room. “I guess,” she said lightly. Locking gazes, she said, “I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Meaning?” he prompted.

“Regina has a temper,” Emma supplied, arching an eyebrow. “She should be pissed beyond belief about this, but she isn’t.”

“Why do you think that is?”

Shaking her head, she asked, irritated, “How am I supposed to know?” Crossing her arms, she slouched, feeling petulant, and glared at Archie. But she couldn’t hold onto the false anger with him. “She should be angry at me,” she said softly. After the truth of their situation had been brought to light, she would’ve expected the wrath of the former mayor to end her once and for all, but it never came.

“Your lives are intimately entwined now, more so than merely sharing a son,” Dr. Hopper gently reminded, hoping to probe Emma to continue.

Hearing him echo Regina’s words rattled the sheriff. She shook her head with slight confusion. “I can deal with the anger, the bitchiness and even the mob boss tendencies.” Her eyes darted to the closed door. “I don’t know how to deal with her.”

“How does getting to know Regina now make you feel?”

Opening and closing her mouth several times, the sheriff shook her head. “I don’t know.” She rested her chin in her palm. “I have so many questions but no clue how to ask any of them.”

From his bed, Pongo gave a heavy sigh.

Turning, Emma glared at the Dalmatian. “So sorry to bore you,” she grumbled.

In response, Pongo lazily wagged his tale three times. His eyes shifted between Emma and Archie
before returning back to the door. He sighed again.

Facing forward, the sheriff leaned back and drummed her fingers on the armrest. “Mary Margaret and David are convinced that Regina is scheming or plotting.” She couldn’t keep the patronizing, dramatic tone out of her voice.

“Do you think Regina is planning something?” Dr. Hopper asked after writing down a quick note.

“I’ve been with her twenty-four-seven for over a week, Archie.” She rolled her eyes. Shaking her head, she added, “The only thing she plans is what to fix for dinner.” Taking a deep breath, she continued, “I’m just finding it harder to reconcile who everyone says she was and who I knew she was with who I’m seeing now.” She paused. With a furrowed brow, she asked, “Does that make any sense?”

“Yes.” Archie was quite pleased with Emma’s progress. He glanced at the clock and realized this had gone on much longer than he’d expected. Racking his brain, he desperately tried to figure out a way to guide Emma without betraying Regina’s trust. “People do change.” He paused and softly added, “Don’t you believe they can?”

Emma wanted to argue that wasn’t true. People just pretended to change, spewing half-truths and boldfaced lies. Yet, she was living proof that wasn’t always accurate. With a resolute sigh, she nodded and agreed, “Yeah, they do change. I changed.”

“But?” he prompted.

“It’s hard.”

“Yes, it is,” Dr. Hopper said, standing as he glanced at the clock. “I think I’ve kept you both long enough.”

“Okay,” the sheriff agreed. She hastily stood and zipped up her jacket. Stepping around the sofa, she stopped by the armrest and turned back to Archie. “What should I do?”

Tilting his head curiously, he regarded her for a brief moment and asked, “What do you think you should do?”

Emma gritted her teeth. “Archie…,” she whined, but she quickly pulled herself together. Running her hands over her face, she decided to go for broke. “Unintentional or not, I did this to us. I didn’t just take away my freedom but hers as well. And she’s been acting like nothing’s happened, cooking me dinner, teaching me how to use my magic. It’s like we’ve been friends all this time.” She pointed at the door before tossing her hands up in the air. “Nobody would react like that to this.” She gestured wildly between herself and where she assumed Regina was sitting on her chair out in the hall. “I got sent to jail for someone else’s crime and I was pissed for a very, very long time.”

Sighing heavily, Archie slowly closed the distance between him and Emma. His voice was still soft, almost a whisper, but his eyes held a great sadness. “No matter how large or small, we all have our problems, Emma. The challenge is dealing with and recognizing them for what they are without societal labels.”

Confused, the sheriff pursed her lips. “So what, this is Regina’s way of handling our situation?”

Nodding towards the door, Dr. Hopper answered, “Perhaps she’s making the best of a tough situation.”
“That’s messed up,” she automatically replied.

“Regardless, don’t we rely on our experiences?” he inquired, watching Emma very carefully and hoping she’d pick up on his clues. He couldn’t risk telling her outright, not again.

With a nod, the sheriff walked over to the door and opened it to see Regina reading. When the former mayor glanced up while closing her book, Emma cleared her throat and asked, “Are we coming back next week?” She quickly turned back to Archie, waiting for a response.

“I’ll be more than happy to keep Thursday afternoons clear,” Dr. Hopper smiled brightly, stepping into the doorway and glancing between the two women.

“Very well, if it’s convenient,” the former mayor acknowledged, slipping on her coat.

“Okay, good,” Emma said, picking up Regina’s purse and returning the chair back to the office. Offering the purse back, she looked at Archie and cheerfully said, “Thanks again.”

Frowning slightly, the former mayor’s eyes narrowed slightly at Archie. “Good afternoon, Dr. Hopper,” she said simply before turning around and heading down the stairs.

“See you later, Archie.” The sheriff waved as she followed Regina.

Shaking his head, he went back into his office, all the while hoping Emma wouldn’t overdo it. He glanced at Pongo and said, “Next week’s session should be very interesting.”

The Dalmatian sighed and stood. After a long stretch, he trotted over to one of the windows, hopped up and rested his paws on the sill to peer out. His tail wagged upon seeing Regina and Emma walking towards the school bus stop.

~SQ~

“Hot!” Emma yelled. Loading her clip with the heel of her hand, she thumbed off the safety and racked the slide. She lifted her arms, quickly aimed and unloaded the entire clip into the center of the target at the end of her lane.

“Clear,” she said, ejecting the empty clip and leaving the gun’s slide in the open position. Laying both on the bench, the sheriff reached over to her right and hit the target retrieval button. As the sheet slid forward, she took her ear muffs off. “That’s how you’ll handle your weapons while at the range. Any questions?”

“Damn, Emma,” Ruby muttered, looking at the fifteen small holes. Most were within the ninth and tenth rings while a few strays dotted around the eighth.

Clearly impressed, Regina’s eyebrows went up as she shared a bemused look with the wide-eyed waitress.

“Granny would love to practice down here with her crossbow,” Ruby gushed as Emma exchanged the target for a fresh one.

Shaking her head with a half-smile, the sheriff asked, “Who wants to go next?”

“I will,” David said, stepping around the women and into the small booth with his daughter.

“Alright,” Emma said, standing off to the left side. Putting her ear muffs back on, she watched the deputy very closely.
Pulling his gun out of his shoulder harness, David shouted, “Hot!” He lifted his arms, aimed and fired until his clip was empty. “Clear,” he said, ejecting his clip. After laying both the open gun and empty clip on the bench, he recalled his target.

Cocking an eyebrow as the sheet slid forward, the sheriff pursed her lips. She was surprised and a tad disappointed seeing the deputy’s aim was all over the target. Three shots out of fifteen were in the eighth ring but only two didn’t land within the black silhouette. “You really need to work on your aim, David,” she said, replacing the sheet.

“I’m a lot better with a bow,” David muttered, frowning as he studied his target. Of course, he hadn’t used a bow since before the curse. He just assumed the ability to aim would translate.

“Perhaps you should stick with melee,” Regina offered lightly, unimpressed. However, she was privately amused when Emma rolled her eyes with a smirk, and Ruby merely ducked her head, refusing to look at anyone as her shoulders shook with silent laughter.

After sending the clean target back, the sheriff took the two firearm novices through the basics. During her rather lengthy instruction, she had both women demonstrate their understanding at key intervals. Unsurprisingly, both got it without much fuss—in spite of the former mayor’s questions.

Ejecting the clip and racking the slide open, Emma returned both to the bench. “Alright, Regina, show us what you got.” She grinned while resituating her ear muffs.

David and Ruby shared a mildly concerned look.

Scowling, the former mayor stepped up to the bench. She glanced at the sheriff on her left before taking a resigned breath. “Hot!” she yelled as she deftly loaded the clip and took aim. The light pressure on the small of her back gave her pause before she finally refocused and pulled the trigger.

Emma’s brow furrowed as Regina lowered the gun with a speculative expression, but she chalked it up to mere curiosity about a new experience as the former mayor readjusted her grip and took another shot. She was pleased with Regina’s determination, even if she didn’t want to do it.

The remaining shots went off in quick succession.

“Clear,” Regina called, returning the open gun and empty clip to the bench.

His curiosity getting the better of him, David quickly hit the recall switch.

“Damn,” Ruby whispered, eyeing the former mayor’s sheet as it slid forward on the track.

Sharing a look, the sheriff and deputy both raised their eyebrows in great surprise. Not only were all fifteen shots within the black silhouette, but the very last shot had hit the heart.

“Okay,” Emma said, taking Regina’s target down and putting up a fresh one. “Ruby, you’re up.” Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the former mayor slip out of the booth while she quickly reloaded a clip for Ruby.

Rolling her shoulders, the waitress stepped up to the bench. Nodding briskly to herself, she mentally psyched herself up while picking up the gun and slamming the clip into place. She called out, “Hot!” After quickly unloading on the target, she returned the gun and empty clip to the bench.

David hit the target recall switch.

“Very impressive, Miss Lucas,” the former mayor commented as the target started sliding forward
The sheriff’s and deputy’s jaws dropped as the bullet holes came within focus for them.

“Thanks,” Ruby grinned, quite pleased with the compliment from Regina.

Sharing a glance with David, Emma continued to stare at the waitress’s target. All fifteen shots were within the eighth ring. “You’ve never shot a gun before?” she asked, still staring.

“Nope,” Ruby said, shaking her head. “I never really messed with Granny’s crossbow, either.”

“I imagine, given your unique skillset, you’d be particularly adept with moving targets,” Regina said appreciatively.

The waitress studied the former mayor for a second before asking, “You mean like skeet shooting?” At Regina’s nod, Ruby tilted her head. “I’ve seen it on TV.”

Glancing back at the latest target, the former mayor smirked. “You’ll just have to remember to shoot the clay pigeons and not chase them.”

David scowled, while Emma snickered, as a somewhat amused Ruby dramatically rolled her eyes. “Funny,” she mumbled.

“Alright,” the sheriff said, bringing everyone’s focus back to her. Handing the waitress her target, she explained, “I expect everyone to practice at least once a week, and I’ll want to see your targets.” Glancing at everyone, she nodded and said, “I guess that’s it.”

“I think I’ll stay and practice for a little while longer,” the deputy said, stepping up to the bench.

“Alright, just don’t forget to lock up,” Emma instructed as she reloaded her gun and stowed it in the concealed carry holster nestled against her lower back. She followed Ruby and Regina towards the exit. Stopping, she lingered in the doorway for a moment and said, “Only use one box of practice rounds a week.” At David’s nod, she pulled the steel door closed, and like the other two women, she pulled off her safety equipment.

Wanting to enjoy the rest of her Saturday off, the waitress quickly put everything away in the storage cubbies by the gun range door. The slight echo from the deputy’s shots could just be heard. “I’ll see you later, Emma.” As she plowed up the stairs, she added, “You too, Regina.”

“See, that wasn’t so bad,” Emma commented, following Regina up the steps.

“No,” the former mayor said in a contemplative tone. It wasn’t something she necessarily enjoyed, but it felt nice being included.

“It shouldn’t take too long to work out your aim,” the sheriff said as they reached the top of the stairs. She walked into her office and took their coats off the rack. Handing over the former mayor’s, she asked, “Do you really think Ruby would be good at tracking multiple targets?”

“It would stand to reason,” Regina answered, pulling on her coat. “As a werewolf, her senses and reflexes are incredibly precise. She simply requires the confidence to embrace her abilities.” She retrieved her purse from under the desk.

Settling her bulky sheriff’s jacket, Emma carefully considered the former mayor’s words. “I guess having half the town wanting your head kind of zaps it out of you, huh?”
“Indeed.” Regina stepped out of the office and waited for Emma to finish locking up.

Casually, the pair walked out of the station. The sheriff’s thoughts were running a mile a minute. “Do you…,” she started, then stopped, thinking it was silly. However, when she opened the door leading outside for the former mayor, she asked, “Do you think magic could stop a bullet?” She bit her bottom lip against the brisk wind and her own idiotic question.

Regina stepped out into the wind, unaffected by the cold. “It’s certainly possible, but I imagine it would require a great deal of focus.” Her mind whirled with the technicalities of completing such a feat.

As they walked towards the Beetle, Emma timidly inquired, “Do you think I could learn?” That would be beyond awesome.

Waiting for the sheriff to unlock and open the passenger side door, the former mayor easily said, “I believe you could with practice.” Climbing into the car, she considered how to further bolster the sheriff’s floundering confidence in herself, or more accurately, her magical abilities, without over doing it.

“Cool,” Emma said, starting the car and driving them back to Mifflin Street.

~SQ~

While Regina was in her en suite, Emma looked through the piles of books under the left side of the bed. She sighed when the prickling sensation started. Grabbing a stack, she dragged them back to the armchair in the corner by the bathroom door.

This was the only time they had alone. She was determined to relax and enjoy it.

“What are you doing?” Henry asked, flopping onto his mother’s bed. He lay on his stomach with his bare feet swinging in the air.

Looking up, the sheriff frowned and hoped she didn’t get blamed for the dislodged decorative pillows. “Just looking for something to read,” she said, looking back down at the books.

“You’re being nosey,” the boy accused, smirking knowingly. He rifled through the constantly changing books many times.

“Maybe a little, but I’m also looking for something to read,” Emma said. Her brow furrowed at some of the titles and subject matter: biographies, history, science. What was the most surprising were the few science fiction and fantasy novels in the mix.

Holding up a hardback, she looked at a woman with fiery electricity coming out of her hands and flames behind her. “Really?” she muttered, opening the cover and reading the summary on the flap. “It’s a series,” she huffed and returned the book to the pile. “How long does it take her to read all of this?”

“About a week or two, if nothing’s going on,” Henry said as he crawled across the bed towards the left nightstand. Stretching down, he grabbed a few magazines. “She reads really fast,” he added, flipping through one of them.

“I’ve noticed,” the sheriff sighed. There wasn’t anything there that was grabbing her interest. Leaning to see what the boy was looking at, she asked, “She has magazines?”

“Yeah, but they’re mainly about cats, dogs, horses or sometimes computer stuff,” the boy said,
frowning. They were never anything cool. “Or clothes catalogs,” he added in a bored tone.

“Oh, toss me a few of those catalogs,” Emma said with a smile. When a few were finally slid her way, she leaned back against the armchair and casually flipped through the pages of things she’d never be able to afford. After a minute, she glanced over the top of her catalog. “Henry, do you like cats?”

“Yeah,” the boy answered absently, turning a page. “The strays outside are nice—except for Mr. Tingles. He likes to swipe at you.” He stopped swinging his feet and looked at Emma. “I’m allergic, though.”

The sheriff’s brow furrowed. Regina names the strays? she asked herself. Shaking her head, she asked, “What about dogs?”

“I like Pongo,” Henry admitted, flipping through a new magazine. “We talked about getting a dog, but Mom said it wasn’t going to happen until I stopped leaving my shoes on the stairs.”

Emma smirked. She’d seen the kid leave his sneakers and backpack all over the house. “Does your mom like animals?”

“I guess,” the boy said, shrugging his shoulders. “She gets a lot of animal stuff in the mail.” His brow furrowed as he said, “Old Thunderbolt down the street likes her, and he doesn’t like anybody.”

Nodding, the sheriff reevaluated the rather impersonal but tasteful décor. However, the new information made it all seem so much warmer. Startled out of her reverie by the sound of the shower, she decided to go for broke. “Henry, Regina and I were talking the other day.” She paused when he glanced at her with suspicion. “She said you used to have friends.”

“They weren’t really my friends,” Henry said in a low voice.

Pursing her lips, Emma debated whether or not to drop the subject. “Cecil Salter asked about you the other day.”

During one of their afternoon walks downtown, the pair had been scoping out the repair progress of the town and offering magical aid to those who asked. Things were almost back to normal, and now, it wasn’t anything the construction crews couldn’t easily handle.

Sitting up, Henry glared at Emma. “He was only my friend because of the curse.”

“I don’t think it worked that way,” the sheriff said and shook her head. Seeing he was about to argue, she added, “If it was, people wouldn’t have been so afraid of your Mom.” She wasn’t dumb. She noticed how people isolated Regina during the curse. Of course, she had thought that was because the former mayor was a total bitch, but now, she wasn’t so confident in the truth of that assessment. “Just think about it, okay?”

“Okay,” the boy said, flopping back on the bed. He grabbed one of the pillows and tossed it up in the air.

Frowning, Emma watched Henry play with the pillow. It was a tad nerve-racking watching it fly up and appear to spiral out of control, almost hitting a bedside lamp once or twice. “Henry, knock it off. You’re going to knock something over.”

Confused, the boy stopped and looked at the sheriff. “Fine,” he said, climbing off the bed and leaving the bedroom.
The sheriff sighed and stared out into the hall. This whole parenting thing was a lot harder than she thought it would be, especially with the kid around all the time.

~SQ~

Covertly, the sheriff observed the former mayor’s passive features in the reflective surface of the closed elevator doors of Storybrooke Hospital.

“This shouldn’t take too long,” Emma supplied easily, knowing Regina had to be bored out of her mind. The woman read scientific journals and could watch the History Channel for hours.

“Of course.”

Annoyed by the former mayor’s continued bland complicity, the sheriff frowned as the elevator doors nosily opened. Stepping onto the floor, she nodded briskly to the charge nurse manning the floor’s main nurses’ station. She stopped before reaching Mendell’s room and asked, “Do you want to come in?”

“I don’t believe that’s necessary, Sheriff,” Regina responded, taking a seat in a waiting chair just outside the door. Settled, she pulled out her reading glasses and book. She’d been getting a lot of reading done lately and would have to order more books soon.

“Okay,” Emma sighed, knocking on the door before lifting the door latch. “Mr. Mendell,” she called, stepping into the room. She left the door open, hoping Regina would eavesdrop, and maybe later, she’d get her spin on the situation.

The fact that Greg Mendell was the catalyst for many of her recent woes wasn’t lost on her, either. And to top it off, David had been chomping at the bit to deliver the stranger’s ticket, but she’d quickly nipped that doomed interaction in the bud, especially after the whole Hook fiasco. Besides, she wanted to go on a fishing expedition, and she didn’t trust her deputy’s finesse.

“Sheriff,” Greg reservedly greeted, putting his iPhone face down on his tray. “What can I do for you?”

“I was hoping I’d hear from you,” the sheriff said, taking out her notepad and pen. “I take it you haven’t remembered anything else about the accident.” She searched his face.

Slowly shaking his head, he lied, “I’m sorry, but no, I haven’t.” He’d seen that fireball, and after talking with the woman with amnesia, he knew she had too. Problem was, nobody would believe them.

“Alright, that simplifies things on my end.” She offered a forced smile and paused for a moment before rifling in another pocket of her sheriff’s jacket. “Well, I’ll just give you this, then.” She took a few steps forward as she pulled out an envelope with Storybrooke Sheriff’s Department letterhead on it. “This is your fine for texting while driving and for speeding.”

“Speeding?” Greg gushed, snatching the envelope. His hands fumbled with pulling out the enclosed documentation. He huffed upon seeing the amount of the fine.

“I have three witnesses attesting to the fact that you were, indeed, speeding, Mr. Mendell.” Emma dragged out his name and relaxed slightly at the man’s honestly panicked reaction. “Now, you can either pay the fine down at the courthouse or you can go through the proper channels to contest the speeding charge. However, everyone’s a bit preoccupied with the upcoming mayoral election. I don’t—.”
His head snapped up, and with complete surprise, he inquired, “Mayoral election?”

Narrowing her eyes briefly, the sheriff shifted her stance and slid her notepad back in her coat pocket. “Yes, mayoral election,” she confirmed, slightly irritated about being interrupted in the middle of her spiel. “Like I was saying, everyone’s a bit distracted with the election, and since the ADA is running, I haven’t been formally informed by his office of any state charges.” She paused and firmly added, “Yet.”

“Of course, Sheriff,” Greg absently acknowledged, already forgetting about the fine.

“It may require you to come back to town if it goes to trial,” Emma said as a seemingly friendly reminder. “Though, if the ADA is elected, any criminal case could be transferred to Machias.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he nodded, putting the papers on the tray.

“That wouldn’t be a problem, would it?” she asked with a tilt of her head.

“Worried I won’t pay up?” Greg smiled, but it never reached his eyes.

“Well,” the sheriff drawled, “this is a small town out in the middle of nowhere special, and you are from out of state. So, I’m sure you can understand my position.”

“Absolutely, Sheriff.”

Emma wanted to punch the condescending smile off his face. She knew he was up to something beyond skipping out on a fine, but what? Damn, she had too much on her to-do list right now.

Greg grinned. “My car won’t be ready for a few more days. So, I may just stay in town for the rest of my vacation and see the sights.” He leaned back in his bed, feeling good about his latest plan. “It’ll give my body time to recuperate for the long drive back to PA.”

“A wise decision, Mr. Mendell,” she nodded her farewell and turned to leave.

“Oh, Sheriff Swan?”

“Yeah,” Emma answered, turning back to Greg again.

“If you don’t mind me asking, what happened to the previous mayor?” he asked with honest curiosity.

With a sassy smirk, the sheriff replied, knowing the former mayor could hear her, “She stepped down to enjoy her twilight years.”

“Oh,” he said, obviously disappointed. “Thank you.”

Turning away, she walked out of the hospital room and closed the door behind her. Her fishing expedition had some unexpected results; specifically, Greg Mendell wanted to stay in Storybrooke. However, the question was why. She waited for Regina to put away her glasses and book before heading towards the elevator.

After the elevator doors closed, the former mayor gave her a brief once over and asked, “Did your conversation with Mr. Mendell go well?” She picked up on the sheriff’s rising tension.

“Yeah, I just have a lot to think about,” Emma answered, glancing at Regina. Why my parents can’t ask things like that, I’ll never know, she mused. They’d all but jumped her when she talked to Mendell the first time. Rolling her lips, she said, “He’s planning on staying in town and seeing the
“That could prove problematic,” the former mayor scowled, understanding the implications of an unwanted outsider.

“Especially since he’s interested in the mayoral election,” the sheriff sighed, dragging her hand down her face. “Oh, I so don’t need this right now.” She leaned on the side of the elevator. “I hoped to scare him out of town with a hefty fine and possible criminal charges.”

“Perhaps you were too indirect,” Regina smirked, her amusement reaching her eyes.

Snorting, Emma pushed off the wall as the doors opened. She followed Regina out saying, “Unlike you, I didn’t come out with guns-a-blazing. I was quite suggestively subtle.” Despite her pride, she dejectedly shook her head. “No, he’s here with an agenda, but I have no idea what it is, exactly.”

“Maybe I could be of assistance in that regard, I am quite skilled with a computer. I could look into who he is,” the former mayor offered. As they stepped through the automatic doors leading outside, she rolled her eyes at Emma’s amused disbelief. “If you don’t want my help, that’s fine.”

With an exaggerated sigh, the sheriff zipped up her coat while debating how to spare Regina’s feelings with minimal carnage. “I’m sure you have some decent computer skills,” she said, unlocking the passenger side door of her bug and opening it. “However, I have a unique skillset that includes some nifty software, and I didn’t come up with much of anything on Greg Mendell.” As Regina climbed in, she shut the door and hurried over to her side of the car, the cold sea air chilling her to the bone. Getting in, she started the car and waited for the engine to warm up. Glancing over, she shrugged and said, “No offense, but you didn’t even check the kid’s deleted e-mails.”

Pursing her lips, the former mayor cocked an eyebrow and said, “Just because I could do something, doesn’t mean I would or should.” Pausing, she looked forward, her expression becoming neutral. “His privacy was very important to him.” Maybe not the best parental move, but she’d been grasping at straws.

Emma bit her lip as she put the car into gear. Driving through the parking lot, she drummed her fingers on the cold steering wheel. “Alright,” she said with resignation, looking both ways before pulling out onto the main street. “Show me your mad computer skills.” She grinned broadly at Regina’s indigent harrumph. “So, what are we doing now?”

“Grocery shopping,” Regina replied, annoyed. She came to this world when home personal computers were just gaining momentum, and Apple had released the first graphical user interface. Crossing her arms, she glared at Emma Swan and was determined to prove she knew a thing or two about this world’s technology.

Groaning, the sheriff slouched and drove them to Storybrooke’s largest and only actual grocery store.

~SQ~

Pulling out a grocery cart, Regina dropped her purse in the child’s seat and pushed it towards the produce. Catching Emma’s slight pout, she stopped and asked, “Do you want to push the cart?”

“No,” Emma mumbled, scuffing her toe on the tile. “I don’t want to grocery shop.”

Sighing, the former mayor continued onward with a sulky sheriff in tow. “It has to be done, Dear.”
"I know," Emma said, defeated, stuffing her hands in her pockets.

Selecting a few red onions and pods of garlic, Regina moved on to gather a nice selection of potatoes, a few tomatoes, grabbed a bunch of green bananas and eventually stopped in front of the apples. She crossed her arms and turned to face Emma. "What is it?" she demanded.

Startled, the sheriff’s eyes widened slightly. "Nothing," she reflexively responded. She glanced around them; the produce section was thankfully still empty, only a lone stock boy lingering by the lettuce. When her gaze returned to the former mayor’s, she swallowed as her shoulders slumped. "I’m broke," she finally offered.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Regina questioned softly, sensing the embarrassment rolling off Emma in waves.

The sheriff bit her bottom lip. "I can’t help pay for anything," she mumbled, waiting for the cruel laugh or scathing comment. After all, people lesser than Regina Mills had crushed her fragile ego just for asking for a candy bar.

"Ah," the former mayor said. Yanking a plastic produce bag off the roll, she selected a few apples and dropped them in the bag. She spun the bag and deftly tied it off. Dropping it in the cart, she gently said, "I wasn’t expecting you to, Miss Swan." No matter what world or people, financial matters were delicate things. She walked away with the cart, considering the topic done.

"Well, I should," Emma said, a little louder than she intended. The stock boy actually looked over at them. Huffing, she caught up with Regina by the citrus. "It’s just that," she paused and rubbed the back of her neck, "I feel guilty." Damn, she felt incredibly guilty about several things regarding Regina.

Realizing the sheriff wasn’t going to let this go, the former mayor ignored the sad citrus selection and pushed on to the leafy greens. She picked out a bundle of spinach, sighing as the idiotic mister chose that moment to kick on as it was signaled by badly simulated thunder. She flicked the bundle a few times before stuffing it into a plastic bag. Sometimes, this world infuriated her.

"You don’t care," Emma accused, crossing her arms. She felt stupid, and that made her angry. To top it off, she’d felt like they’d made some real progress this last week, like they’d at least entered the awkward friend-of-a-friend territory.

Placing the spinach in the cart, Regina gripped the cart handle. "I didn’t say that," she said through gritted teeth, pushing the cart down a few inches. She considered the herbs.

"Saying nothing is the same thing," the sheriff countered. They may work well together, cohabitate reasonably well considering everything, but something was missing for her. She actually missed socializing.

Slapping the cart’s push handle once with her palm, the former mayor turned and glared at the sheriff. In a low tone, she said, "I didn’t see the point of dragging out an obviously distressing issue for you in public." Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and turned away. "Just drop anything special in the cart, Miss Swan. We’ll deal with it later."

"Alright," Emma answered, feeling slightly better. She glanced around the woefully vacant produce section and caught the eye of a bored cashier who had obviously been watching them. However, once the cashier realized the sheriff saw her, she turned around, pretending to be straightening her work area. With a heavy sigh, Emma followed Regina towards the next aisle. "So," she started, looking at a section of melons as they passed, "why doesn’t Storybrooke have a
“Most of the local farmers sell directly to the store,” the former mayor said, trying to concentrate on shopping. Before turning down a dry goods isle, she pointed to a large sign hanging predominantly over the produce area. It said ‘We’re proud to support Storybrooke farmers by buying local produce!’

“Oh,” the sheriff mouthed. She’d never before noticed the sign. Of course, she avidly avoided grocery shopping. When it was a solo affair, she was in and out of the corner market within ten minutes. “So, why didn’t we wait for Henry?”

Putting a few bags of pasta in the cart, Regina rolled her eyes. “Apparently, you haven’t had the pleasure of shopping with him.” She moved down and grabbed a few bags of rice. Her pantry stores were terribly low, and if Emma kept eating like she had been the last week, she’d seriously have to rethink the portions.

Chuckling, the sheriff continued to walk beside the former mayor. “He keeps asking for stuff, huh?”

Rolling her eyes, Regina handed Emma a few bags of dried beans. “Or sneaking things into the cart,” she added, watching the sheriff study the bag of beans. “It’s for chili,” she supplied.

“I love chili,” Emma said with a smile. Putting the beans in the cart, she explained, “Mary Margaret made chili once. It didn’t turn out so well, and Granny’s isn’t much better.”

“That’s because it’s from a can,” the former mayor smirked, continuing on to the next isle.

Moseying along with Regina, the sheriff smiled. She did, however, cock an amused eyebrow at the small cluster of gawking cashiers and stockers. They’d been getting quite a bit of varying looks since this whole adventure began. As they headed down the cereal aisle, she shrugged. She couldn’t help the smirk as Regina grabbed a box of cereal, glanced at Emma and wordlessly grabbed a second one. They continued shopping in relative silence. The sheriff would occasionally add something to the cart, pop tarts, energy drinks, chips, etc.

Passing a Hostess display, Regina watched Emma drop a box of Twinkies in the cart. Casually, she continued onto the next aisle while saying, “If you like Twinkies, you’d better stock up.”

“Why?”

“They’re going out of business,” she supplied and shook her head when four more boxes promptly found their way into the cart. The former mayor lifted a speculative eyebrow.

“Come on, they last forever,” Emma gushed, rearranging the contents of the cart. “I’ll pay you back when I get paid.”

“Miss Swan…,” Regina started with a sigh, moving the cart down the aisle.

“I mean it,” the sheriff said, contemplating grabbing another box of Twinkies but was interrupted by the prickling sensation. She trotted towards Regina. “It’s just after moving and helping Mary Margaret get her jeep repainted, my savings was used up.” She stopped and narrowed her eyes. Crossing her arms, she asked, “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

Slipping a whole chicken into a plastic bag and dropping into the cart, the former mayor went about selecting another chicken. “There’s a chicken farm in Storybrooke, too.”
“Don’t change the subject,” Emma hissed. “You spray painted her jeep.”

Adding the second chicken, Regina tilted her head and innocently said, “I didn’t realize there was a topic.”

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff followed the former mayor down the refrigerated meats section. “That was awful petty, you know,” she grumped as they passed the beef, the shelves stocked with beautiful steaks, plump roasts and glorious hamburger.

“We’ll get beef and pork from the butcher,” Regina supplied, unimpressed with the quality of the mass produced food this world thrived on. Glancing briefly at Emma, she shook her head. She didn’t have to explain her actions, but she did anyway, if only to make life easier. “Perhaps it was petty and juvenile, but I now understand the thrill of graffiti.”

Surprisingly, the sheriff let out a short bark of laughter. She cleared her throat to compose herself. An elderly shopper several aisles down had thrown her hand on her chest and leveled a startled glare at them, or more accurately, at her. Softly, she said, “Your inner vandal aside, it was still mean.”

“Yes,” the former mayor smirked, her voice taking on a low, smoky quality. She looked Emma right in the eye and drawled, “I also could’ve done worse.” She pushed the cart down to the dairy section and picked up a few packages of string cheese for Henry’s lunches.

“True,” Emma agreed. She reached for a package of sliced cheese.

“Don’t get that,” Regina said, curling her lip in disgust. “The deli has better quality.”

“But this is cheaper,” the sheriff hesitated for a moment but eventually put the package of American cheese back.

“It’s also a few chemical bonds short from plastic, much like margarine.” The former mayor said, continuing towards the deli. Quickly, she placed her order after a brief inquiry to Emma’s preference.

While they waited, Emma glanced around and fidgeted with the sale signage on top of the refrigerated case. “Like I was saying earlier,” she started, pausing to make sure she had Regina’s attention. “My savings got used up, and shortly after getting back here, I had to lend David a couple hundred bucks to fix something on his truck.” Frowning, she added, “It pretty much cleaned me out.” Usually, she didn’t have problems saving money, but then again, she didn’t usually have friends, either.

“You don’t need to explain, Miss Swan,” Regina said gently.

“No,” the sheriff shrugged, watching the deli man slice the Black Forest ham. “But it’s the polite thing to do,” she finally admitted, remembering her impromptu session with Archie. Flashing a mischievous glance at the former mayor, she suggested, “Of course, if you feel guilty about it, you would reimburse me for the paint job.”

Amused, Regina merely arched an eyebrow and lifted her chin. Taking the order off the counter, she thanked the deli worker who acknowledged with a nod and a smile.

“I thought not,” Emma mumbled good-naturedly as Regina pushed the cart past her toward the registers. She trotted in front and started unloading the cart. Wordlessly, the cashier began checking them out. “So what’s for dinner?” she asked shamelessly.
“You just ate lunch,” the former mayor quipped, opening her purse and fetching her billfold. She wouldn’t admit it, but having help with the grocery shopping was nice for a change, even if the sheriff chattered endlessly.

“It was a sandwich and a handful of chips,” Emma countered, still putting items on the belt. With the cart finally empty, she pulled it down to the bagging area and started packing up the scanned items in paper bags. “Yeah, I know I also had a banana and a chocolate chip granola bar, but it’s not going to last forever.”

Uncertainly, the cashier glanced between the two women. She didn’t know if she should call the manager over or not.

“May I remind you that you also ate my granola bar and the last cheese stick,” Regina said, pulling out several large bills. She patiently waited for the checker to finish.

“You weren’t going to eat them,” the sheriff grumbled, loading the cart with the packed bags.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor asked, “And precisely how would you know that?”

Packing the second to the last bag, Emma merely shrugged as she explained, “They were just sitting there.”

Lightly clearing her throat, the cashier softly relayed the total. She fiddled nervously with her name tag.

Paying the unsurprisingly higher than usual grocery bill, the former mayor harrumphed while handing over the money. There was no point in arguing the logistics of saving snacks for later.

With the conversation already forgotten, a discarded circular caught the sheriff’s attention. Holding it up, she said, “We should get some pudding.” She pointed to the buy two get one free ad for Jell-O products.

The cashier paused in her counting, looking curiously between the two women. Tentatively, she handed over Regina’s change.

Glancing up from putting away her money, the former mayor simply said, “I made pudding yesterday.”

Dropping the flyer, Emma asked, packing the last bag, “Oh, really? Where is it?”

Stowing her billfold in her purse, Regina sighed. “I stashed it behind the practically empty jar of caramel sauce you noisily slurped down the other night.” She had quickly learned that living with Emma Swan required hiding food.

Subconsciously licking her lips, the sheriff grinned as she remembered her homemade sundae. “Yeah . . . that was really good,” she sighed in appreciation but mentally kicked herself for not grabbing another jar.

With an almost silent gasp, the cashier’s eyes widened in stunned shock. She quickly schooled her features to what she must have thought was a neutral expression.

However, the former mayor had caught the reaction, and she ever-so-slightly curled her lips as a plan formed. “I wouldn’t know, Dear,” she said smoothly to Emma. “I wasn’t offered the opportunity to partake.”
Sighing dramatically, Emma put the last paper bag in the cart. “I promise to save some for you next time.” She stepped to the side, allowing Regina to push the cart towards the exit. “What flavor?” she asked, catching the cashier’s too-attentive look. She hated it when people were nosey.

“Pistachio,” Regina said with a smirk and a quick quirk of an eyebrow.

With a rather suggestive moan, the sheriff smiled adoringly at the former mayor. “My favorite. I’m allergic to butterscotch, just so you know . . . ,” she paused and drawled out, “for future reference.”

“Duly noted,” Regina said over the cashier’s sudden coughing fit behind them.

“Thanks, Terri!” Emma called as they exited the store. When the automatic doors slid shut, she looked over her shoulder to see the cashier still watching them. “That was pretty sneaky, Regina. You know she’s going to jump to all kinds of conclusions.”

Unconcerned, the former mayor purposefully pushed the cart to the lone yellow bug in the small parking lot. “Nothing new, I’m sure, Miss Swan.” She ignored the sheriff’s perplexed expression as she waited for her to open the front trunk.

Shaking her head, Emma loaded their groceries into the car. She flashed Regina a cheeky grin. “I guess now would be a good time to mention I’m almost out of gas.”

The Beetle had been running on fumes for the last two days. Slamming the trunk shut, the sheriff lost all her bravado as the former mayor returned the shopping cart to the front of the store. Climbing in and starting the diesel engine, she winced at the intensity of the vehicle’s full-body rattle. It was in desperate need of a tune-up, but she didn’t know anyone in town who worked on diesel engines.

“I suppose all this clattering is a testament to this deathtrap’s construction,” Regina sneered, getting in the car and fastening her seatbelt. Looking at Emma, she added, “It’s truly amazing it hasn’t left pieces of itself littering the roadways.”

Shaking her head, Emma shifted into gear, dropping the noise level slightly. “It hasn’t been this bad in a long time, but I haven’t found anyone in town who works on diesel engines.” Pulling out of the parking lot, she headed towards the only gas station in town that sold diesel fuel.

“Perhaps we could ask Mr. Salter to look at it.” At the sheriff’s puzzled look, the former mayor explained, “His boats have diesel engines. I realize there’s a significant size difference but I’m sure the general mechanics are quite similar.”

“I don’t think he’d do me any favors, Regina,” Emma said dejectedly, glancing at the fuel gauge hovering over the E. The man didn’t possess the friendliest personality.

“No,” Regina admitted a tad softly. “However, he owes me a favor or two.” With that, she quietly gazed out the window, taking in all the quaint comings and goings of Storybrooke’s residents.

The rest of the ride to the gas station was made in comfortable silence. Again, the sheriff couldn’t shake the new and contradictory feelings developing for the former mayor. It was becoming increasingly difficult to reconcile her with the woman she’d been at odds with since her arrival. Emma’s analysis was cut short, however, when she pulled up to the pump, and a wad of bills was wordlessly handed to her.

Shyly, Emma eyed the cash and said, “Twenty bucks should cover it.”

“It’ll be two weeks before your next paycheck, Emma.” A sharp retort titillated the tip of Regina’s
tongue, but she held it, aware Emma didn’t want to take the money. “Besides, I still expect you to pay for our occasional lunch out.”

Snorting, the sheriff gently took the offered cash and climbed out of the car. She pulled out her wallet while walking into the service station to pay the attendant. Her eyebrow rose at the amount of cash she stuffed in it. *What the hell type of lunches is she expecting*, she thought before handing the elderly man working the counter twenty bucks for Pump No. 3.

Filling up in short order, Emma and Regina were finally on their way back to Mifflin Street, each silently pondering this new and strange relationship in which they found themselves.

~SQ~

With the back of her gloved hand, Emma Swan wiped at the sweat rolling across her forehead and barely stopped it from dripping into her eyes. It was unseasonably warm for an early spring day in Maine, and she had stripped down to her tank top nearly thirty minutes ago. Glancing over her shoulder, she frowned at Regina and Henry sitting a few feet away in the covered gazebo situated along the back fence of the yard. Henry valiantly pretended to read his assigned chapter for class while Regina outright ignored her, doing the New York Times Sunday crossword. She turned and glared back at David. The former mayor’s helpful hints had stopped after her father threw a hissy fit almost twenty minutes earlier.

“Come on, let’s go,” the deputy ordered, raising his sword. He was obviously enjoying himself, even though his usually pale face was beet red.

“I’m tired. We’ve been at this for almost an hour,” the sheriff said weakly as she tossed her blade on the ground and walked over to the gazebo.

“Emma,” David scolded, lowering his sword. “No one’s going to give you an iced tea break on the battlefield.”

Ignoring her father and grabbing Regina’s glass of iced tea, she downed it in several gulps and disregarded the former mayor’s narrowed glare over her reading glasses. She shook the glass of ice at Henry. “Hey, Kid, go grab us some more, please?”

Sighing dramatically, Henry dutifully marked his place in his book, bolted across the yard and into the house. On the way, he decided to just grab the whole tea pitcher. Emma was going to drink it all, anyway.

The sheriff took the opportunity to drop into the boy’s now vacant seat. “I think my toes are pruning,” she whined, wanting to stop with the melee training.

Shaking his head, the deputy realized that his daughter could perhaps use a break and silently worked through various stances in the middle of the yard, ignoring both women.

“Lovely imagery,” Regina muttered, more irritated at her crossword than Emma or David, at the moment.

“Why did you talk me into this?” Emma asked, watching her father practice several wide swings out in the yard.

“Me?” the former mayor scoffed, tossing her paper onto the small glass table between them and taking off her glasses. “This, Dear, you agreed to all on your own.” She gestured to the fool fighting an invisible enemy on her lawn.
“Don’t remind me,” the sheriff muttered, rolling her shoulders. “I think you’re right. That sword is too heavy.”

Spying Henry slowly walking across the yard with an almost full glass pitcher, Regina sighed. “Well, I suppose you’ll have to get used to it,” she parroted David’s earlier decree, rolling her eyes. “My arms are going to fall off, especially after pushing that beast of a lawnmower yesterday.”

Emma shifted in her seat and dropped her head onto each shoulder in turn, desperate to stretch the aching muscles. “Why don’t you hire a yard crew?”

“She likes gardening,” Henry said knowingly as his nose wrinkled in disgust. Carefully, he set the pitcher down. “I brought you a clean glass.” Wiggling a plastic wrapped glass full of ice out of his bright blue hoodie’s large, front pocket, he carefully peeled the wrap off and slid it to Regina.

“Thank you,” the former mayor said fondly, refilling the two glasses. “Would you mind fetching another glass for David?”

“Okay,” the boy said with a smile and jogged across the yard, giving his grandfather a very wide birth.

As soon as her glass was full, the sheriff downed half of it. She happily sighed as she was finally feeling hydrated again. Contently, she pivoted her feet side-to-side on her shoe’s heels.

Sipping her own tea, Regina cocked an eyebrow at the sheriff and seriously inquired, “What did Henry do?”

“How did . . . ,” Emma began before trailing off. Blinking, she shivered from the cooler temperature under the shaded gazebo. She briefly considered brushing the question off but thought better of it. “I only just found out before David got here,” she said quickly. “Apparently, he got detention last week and forged your signature—which he somehow got caught for and got another detention.”

“Whatever for?” the former mayor asked absently, watching Henry come back out of the house with two more glasses.

“I don’t know. I couldn’t weasel it out of him before this whole fiasco got started,” the sheriff gestured towards the deputy who now walked towards them.

“Break’s over,” David said firmly, his sword resting on his shoulder.

“Okay,” Emma said, drinking her tea.

Sensing the impending battle of wills, Regina put her down. “Maybe we should try something different?” she asked, standing. She pursed her lips as father and daughter looked at her with very similar expressions, much like the head tilt exhibited by confused dogs. When Henry came up to her, she took the glasses and quietly asked him to retrieve something else from the house.

Groaning, the boy dramatically rolled his head and eyes as he once again ran inside.

Filling the two glasses, the former mayor politely offered one to the deputy, which he hesitantly accepted. “Wielding a sword alone may not be your forte, but sword and shield may prove more enlightening,” she explained as Henry burst out of the house with his plastic Captain America shield.
Dutifully, he ran up to his mother and handed over the toy. “She’s not going to break it, is she?” he asked. It was almost a whine.

“No, Dear,” Regina smiled, gesturing for Henry to take her seat as she handed over his glass of tea. She glanced expectantly at the sheriff.

“How exactly is a plastic shield going to stop that?” Emma said, pointing at David’s sword. Downing the last of her tea, she stood and picked up her own discarded sword. Obediently holding out her left arm to the former mayor as instructed, she watched as the toy shield was strapped onto her forearm.

“Remember what we discussed the other day?” Regina asked, stepping away from the sheriff. “About the nature of your magic?” she added.

Firmly setting his glass down, David huffed and said, “This is about learning to fight with a sword, not magic.” He took several bold steps toward the two women.

Henry slouched down in his seat. Would it have been too much for everyone to get along for just a little while?

Turning, the former mayor glared at the deputy. She caught her son’s worried expression and managed to curb her sarcastic retort. Taking a deep breath, she faced Emma and calmly explained, “Offense isn’t where your strength lies.” She lightly tapped the plastic shield. “The very nature of your magic drives you to protect and defend.” Looking to Henry, she gestured for the boy to join them.

Standing next to his mothers, Henry glanced between them. He’d been wanting to help with Emma’s training but was afraid to ask, especially given his behavior at school. Something he still had yet to mention.

Guiding her son with her, Regina walked beyond Emma. “Now, protect us,” she ordered, stopping a few feet behind the sheriff.

“With a plastic shield?” she started to say but trailed off as she raised her left arm. The red, silver and blue plastic children’s toy was now a solid metal buckler. Tentatively, she tapped the flat of her sword against it. The scraping clang of metal against metal confirmed her suspicions. She glanced over her shoulder at Regina and Henry.

For his part, David stared at the toy turned buckler. He scowled as he raised his sword, signaling his readiness to begin. Magic had no place in melee.

Emma rolled her shoulders as she took that fateful step toward her father. As David hoisted his blade high into the air, she reflexively blocked his blow with the buckler, and immediately, she swung her sword at his midsection. He hopped backwards just barely able to parry her swing with his own.

“Very good,” Regina praised as the sheriff blocked another swing with the buckler.

Instinctively, Henry leaned into his mother, watching Emma and David fight. Their swords clashed loudly as their fighting intensified. He relaxed somewhat when Regina’s arm laid across his shoulders. When she took a step forward, he automatically walked with her.

“A shield can also be a weapon,” the former mayor instructed as the deputy finally managed to disarm the sheriff.
David’s swings were wide and powerful, his sword landing with surprising force against Emma’s buckler, but she held her position, blocking him blow for blow. Yet, she was unable to offer any counter measure to break his assault. Her confidence started to wane as she slowly crept backward, losing ground.

However, Regina didn’t move backwards with Emma. Once the sheriff was within arm’s length, she reached out, resting her fingertips between Emma’s shoulder blades and halting her movement. “Focus,” she whispered. She ignored Henry’s curious look. “Look for an opening during one of his arcing swings, and lunge at him with the shield.”

As if she’d been doing it for years, Emma executed the maneuver expertly. When David lifted his sword high, she charged him, ramming the buckler into his stomach. The deputy toppled backwards several steps and eventually fell onto the ground. As he scrambled to stand, the sheriff retrieved her sword.

“Very good,” the former mayor commended with a soft smile. She watched as the two fighters circled each other. “Now, do it again.”

With a sword in hand, Emma easily deflected David’s attack and knocked him back onto the ground. She grinned as she rolled her right shoulder, wincing through the pain. Her arm was incredibly tired.

“She’s tired,” Henry said, looking up at Regina for confirmation.

“Yes,” the former mayor agreed, watching as the sheriff started to favor the buckler more, and her sword tip began dropping lower with each swing.

“Is it because the sword’s too heavy for her?” he asked, observing his grandfather and mother duel. It was a little disturbing, how it reminded him of when they would verbally fight at Mary Margaret’s apartment.

“She has the strength,” Regina said absently while she studied the fighters. “She simply lacks the stamina.”

“I’ve got you now,” David taunted, breathing heavily. He swung low and from the side.

Emma blocked the hit but stumbled several feet to the side. Sweat was once again rolling down her face. She didn’t know what to do or how to exactly end this mock fight. Seeing David charge at her, she instinctively sidestepped his attack, but at the last minute, she realized Henry and Regina were directly behind her. She cringed as she tried to correct her movement and stay in her father’s path. However, it was too late.

The deputy charged past her. His eyes widened in shock as his blade was suddenly lunging directly for his grandson. Then, in the blink of an eye, it wasn’t. Confused, he slowly came to a stop and looked around. He exhaled heavily in relief at the wide-eyed boy clinging to the former mayor.

Henry blinked several times. He glanced between Emma and David. Finally, he looked up at Regina.

“Are you alright?” she asked softly, looking down. “Okay?” She vainly attempted to stroke down his cowlick, smiling at the boy’s nod.

“I think I’ll go sit down,” Henry muttered, slowly letting go of his mother. His gaze shifted between the two fighters, ensuring they didn’t start sparring again as he walked back to the gazebo. Taking a large swig of tea, he settled in one of the chairs and picked up his book.
Striding towards Emma, Regina eyed the sheriff with mild concern. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” the sheriff said with a hint of despondency, still watching Henry. She looked at the former mayor. “I think I’m done for the day.”

Before David could toss in his two cents, Regina gently touched Emma’s elbow. “Henry’s fine. He’s just a bit shaken.” She smiled weakly, hoping she was reassuring.

“I should’ve known he was behind me,” Emma whispered, fighting back the tears. Having the boy get hurt was the last thing she wanted, ever. She didn’t want to admit that she’d forgotten about him and Regina standing so close or that she was so angry with her father.

“That particular skill will come with further training and experience, Emma,” the former mayor promised. “He will always be safe with me,” she added solemnly. The sheriff may not completely believe her about everything else, but she had to believe in that simple truth.

“Henry will always be safe with his family,” David boldly proclaimed, invading the quiet moment between the two. “His family will always protect him.” He slapped his hand firmly onto his daughter’s right shoulder and squeezed.

Emma winced at the pain and shrugged his hand off of her. A shooting pain traveled up her shoulder and into her neck. She tried to shake it off, along with her residual anger. “I’m done,” she muttered, walking towards the gazebo. This had been a huge mistake.

Confused by his daughter’s brush off, the deputy hissed at the former mayor, “What did you do?”

Tearing her concerned gaze off her son and the sheriff, Regina gritted her teeth. Her eyes narrowed slightly as she said, “I did nothing. You were the one beating a novice down as if you were a Behemoth.” She recognized the flash of regret in his eyes, but she didn’t care. Mary Margaret could soothe his tender ego. She had more important people to whom to attend.

This wasn’t how David envisioned their sword lesson going today. It was supposed to be a grand time, bonding between father and daughter. He wanted to blame Regina for it, but logically, he knew she’d salvaged an already disastrous day. Maybe that’s what goaded him into trying to pick a fight with her.

Hearing Emma and Henry laugh, the deputy decided to relay his farewells. He promised to find his daughter a better sword with which to train. As he left, carrying both swords, David decided to ask Marco to make a couple of wooden swords. Maybe that way, he could start training Henry.

~SQ~

Standing in the middle of his bedroom, Henry held his detention slip in his hand. He had to take it in tomorrow signed by his mother, Regina Mills. Again, he wondered how Mrs. Shoemaker knew he had forged it. Also, it irritated him that she wouldn’t accept Emma’s signature. After all, Emma was his real mom.

Somehow, the thought felt strange as he glanced around the space that was very much his room. It felt totally different from the one he shared with Emma while at Mary Margaret’s. David never did let him come back here for any more of his stuff, opting instead to purchase new things. It was fine at first, but then, he started missing having his own space, his stuff—even Regina.

Hearing Emma and Regina talk quietly in the hall, Henry glanced over his shoulder and pursed his lips. This was all too confusing. The villains didn’t save the good guys. Yet, his mother had helped bring Emma and Mary Margaret back. He wanted to believe, but something deep inside told him it
was all a trick. It had to be one.

Gathering his courage, Henry grabbed a pen off his desk and slowly walked towards his bedroom door. He peered out in the hall and saw Regina sitting in a chair by the main bathroom door, reading. With determination, he stepped out of his room and sluggishly walked down to her.

“I need you to sign this,” he said docilely, holding out the detention slip and pen. His nerves settled somewhat when she wordlessly took the offered items. For a moment, he thought he was going to get off easy, until she looked at him.

“Are you going to tell me why you received a detention in the first place?” Regina asked with the pen poised over the parental guardian line. She sighed silently as a contentious expression settled across her son’s features.

“It doesn’t matter,” Henry snipped defensively, crossing his arms. The reason was plainly written on the slip and he didn’t want to talk about the first detention.

Taking off her reading glasses and letting them hang on their chain, Regina evenly said, “I think it does matter.” She waited for a moment and added, “I suppose I could call the school tomorrow, or Emma and I could just go—.”

“No!” the boy interrupted. “Please, don’t.” Panic overwhelmed him. “That’ll only make it worse,” he hurriedly added.

Flooded with concern, the former mayor reached out and affectionately stroked a hand down Henry’s biceps. “What happened?” she implored again.

“You wouldn’t care,” Henry spat, wrenching his arm away and taking a step back.

Ignoring the hurt, Regina pouted slightly as she dropped her arm. “Of course, I care,” she whispered. Hadn’t she at least proven that much? “Is someone at school harassing you?” she asked, turning in her seat to face her son.

Confused by his mother’s reaction, the boy slowly shook his head, saying, “No, it’s not like that.” He sighed and swallowed.

Anguish washed over her, but this was her son. She would do or endure anything for him. Quietly, she asked, “Would you rather talk to Emma about it?” She loathed verbalizing the question, but things were different now.

Surprised, Henry’s mouth fell open. He vehemently shook his head. “I don’t want her to know,” he stammered, looking into his mother’s watery eyes with his own. Instinctively, he wiped the back of his hand across his eyes. Warriors don’t cry, at least, that’s what David and the dwarves said.

Regina reached a hand out to the boy. When he instantly reached out, she cupped his hand between both of hers. “Please talk to me,” she gently implored, her voice low and comforting. Many of their problems could have been avoided if he had just kept talking to her.

“You’re going to be mad,” he weakly admitted, stepping closer.

“Maybe, but I promise to listen,” she smiled softly.

This was his mother, he realized as he remembered her saying those very words to him when he accidently broke something, purposely colored on the walls, pushed another kid down too roughly on the playground, lost something or even gave something away. In spite of all of this, he still felt
betrayed by her.

Watching Henry and sensing his inner turmoil, Regina sighed as she released his hand. She sat up, linking her hands on her lap over the book, detention slip and pen. “What happened?” she prompted.

Swallowing, the boy took a deep breath. “I got in a fight with Bobby Eccleston,” he finally admitted. “He was saying some stuff about Emma.”

“What sort of stuff?” Regina asked, covering up her surprise. She didn’t expect this to be about the sheriff. She tried to remember who Bobby’s parents were.

“He called me names . . . .” Henry trailed off. Lowering his voice, he seriously said, “He said Emma was just highway trash.” He watched his mother closely.

“But what happened to warrant a detention?” she asked tightly. Bobby was the son of Ronnie Eccleston, one of Albert Spencer’s goons.

“I pushed him and he just laughed at me.” Rolling his lips, he dropped his gaze. “I tried to hit him, but I missed. Everyone started laughing. So, I shoved him.” He took a long breath, trying to push away the tightness in his throat. “He fell down but kept laughing and pointing.” That was when he looked up, his eyes full of unshed tears and a hint of shame. “That’s when Mrs. Shoemaker and Mr. Weaver showed up.”

Understanding, Regina’s expression softened. Her son wanted to be the brave hero so badly. She decisively signed the detention slip. “You’re going to be twelve soon,” she commented, handing Henry the paper and pen. “And as you continue to grow up, you’re going realize that life can be very complicated and quite unpleasant at times.” Best to prepare him for the impending storm, she thought.

Uncertain and curious, the boy asked, “What do you mean?”

“You can’t allow yourself to be so easily provoked.” Pointing at his head, she smiled and continued, “You’re a very clever boy, Henry. I’m sure you could’ve resolved the situation without violence.”

His brow furrowed as he whined, “But Bobby made me so mad. It wasn’t right for him to say those things.” He also didn’t understand why no one else jumped in to defend the savior. After all, she saved them from the curse. Shouldn’t they be grateful? Shouldn’t they be happy he brought her to Storybrooke?

“Did lashing out at him make your actions right?” Regina asked, frowning.

Frustrated and slightly angry, Henry scrunched his face. He wanted to say yes and that he was protecting Emma’s honor. Yet, a part of him didn’t quite believe it because fighting was against school rules. He must’ve taken too long to answer because his mother gave him that disappointed sigh.

“Since you can’t answer that question,” Regina started, turning in her chair and putting on her reading glasses, “no TV or video games for a week.” It wasn’t like he had had much opportunity during the last week with her and Emma monopolizing the living room.

Frowning, the boy considered appealing to Emma, but then, he realized he’d just have to explain everything to her. “Fine,” he sighed long-sufferingly. He watched his mother for a few moments before turning around. Once in his doorway, he stopped, looked over his shoulder and asked, “Are
“You mad?” He didn’t quite understand why it was suddenly so important to him.

Surprised by the question, she quickly schooled her features and shook her head before saying, “No.” When nothing further was said, she returned her focus to her book, watching Henry slip back into his room out of the corner of her eye. Sadness settled in as she fought back the tears because she didn’t dare hope.

That was when Emma Swan burst out of the bathroom in a fresh tank top and sushi pajama bottoms, proclaiming, “I feel so much better.” After a beat, she asked, “So when’s dinner?”

Her woes forgotten, Regina shook her head, closing her book. She was momentarily caught off guard to find that she was happy for the distraction that the sheriff provided.

~SQ~

An hour after dusk, Cora Mills, eloquently dressed for this new world, finally dared to venture back into Storybrooke Cemetery. Just over a week ago, she had felt an impressively strong magical disturbance radiate throughout town. Curiosity over the cause and minor concern for her daughter’s well-being had urged her to return that night, but upon her arrival, the residual magic had proven too potent to devise the originator or the intention of the spell.

Walking towards the Mills mausoleum, she scowled. Her daughter obviously hadn’t learned anything. The sorceress turned away and scanned the graveyard. Zoning in on the epicenter of the spell, Cora slowly approached and felt the lingering threads of magic.

It was a very powerful spell—that much was obvious—one that Regina would certainly never be capable of casting, but the spell had directly affected her daughter. Cora’s eyes narrowed in assessment as she mentally checked off the few proficient casters in Storybrooke.

Her eyes widened in shock but quickly narrowed to slits as she realized Emma Swan had cast the spell. Although her interaction with the daughter of Snow White was brief, the sorceress had gotten an adequate sense of the girl’s magic, enough never to forget it. Emma would certainly pay once Cora’s plans were complete.

Following the magical threads across the cemetery to the brick wall by the street, Cora noted that the trail faded away down the road, heading into the forest. Her brow furrowed in confusion as the situation didn’t quite add up. Glancing back over her shoulder and glaring at the point of origin, she frowned as she suddenly understood the implications of the spell. Ever since that night, she’d continually observed Regina and Emma together.

“Damn you, Rumpelstiltskin,” she cursed.

By using Emma Swan, the imp hadn’t necessarily broken their deal, but what could he possibly gain from their bonding? Needless to say, her quandary would require further research into the spell and access to Rumpelstiltskin’s library. It would appear Hook would still be useful, after all.

Smiling, and with a simple roll of her wrist, Cora disappeared in a cloud of dark purple smoke.

~SQ~

Unable to get comfortable, Emma flipped and flopped on her chaise-lounge bed for what felt like an hour. She rolled her head to the side and looked at Regina in her large, soft bed. Staring up at the ceiling, she huffed and grumbled again about her father’s overzealous training. In order for her neck and shoulders to stop throbbing, her feet had to hang over the end, which made them swell and ache—not to mention her knees and lower back. Giving up, she tossed her blankets off and
stood up. Sheepishly, she approached the bed.

“No,” the former mayor said sternly, turning a page in her book.

“Aw, come on, Regina,” the sheriff whined as she pouted and slouched. “I ache all over, and that thing isn’t comfortable,” she added, pointing to the chaise. She wanted to cry but didn’t think tears would get her anywhere.

Pursing her lips, Regina glanced over at the hapless Emma Swan. She could see bruises starting to form on her bare arms, more notably the left. Having watched a majority of the training session, she knew Emma had to be incredibly sore, and sleeping on the lounge chair certainly wouldn’t help her in the morning.

“Please, Regina?” Emma asked softly, tapping her knuckles on her thighs.

“Fine,” the former mayor grunted, turning back to her book. The last thing she needed was Emma’s constant whining or being harped on by her parents for mistreating their precious child. “But stay on that side of the bed,” she ordered, turning another page.

“Thank you,” the sheriff sighed in great relief as she lifted the flat sheet and climbed onto the extraordinarily soft-yet-firm mattress. After settling down in her newfound heaven, she glanced at her bedmate and noticed Regina’s growing tension. She placed her right hand over her heart and with great fervor said, “Fear not, sweet lady! I will not molest you. I am but a humble jester, and you? You are too far above me!” If that didn’t work to lighten the mood, she’d blame the super cocktail of multiple extra strength Tylenol and ibuprofen she took before her shower.

Completely befuddled, Regina dropped her book on her lap and stared at Emma who merely blinked in return. Finally, she asked with interest, “You watch musicals?”

A large grin spread across the sheriff’s face. “Yeah, one of my foster families was into them big time.” She frowned when the former mayor said nothing further and simply went back to her book. Feeling as if the moment was gone, she considered leaving well enough alone while accepting the small victory of sleeping on the bed. However, watching Regina, her curiosity got the better of her, and timidly, she asked, “Do you like musicals?”

Hesitating, the former mayor’s fingers briefly toyed with a page corner. “A few of them, I suppose,” she admitted reluctantly.

“I always liked Love Me or Leave Me,” Emma said, rolling on her side to face Regina. Making eye contact, she smiled softly and continued, “On our birthdays, we’d order pizza, bake a huge cake and watch a musical of the birthday kid’s choice.”

“Sounds nice,” the former mayor thoughtfully whispered, looking forward. She immediately shook off the encroaching melancholy. Her birthdays had always been miserable and full of merciless ridicule.

“It was a good family,” the sheriff agreed, flopping onto her back. She rested her hands on her stomach and idly drummed them. “They made a real effort to make everyone feel included and appreciated.” She sighed and again wished she could’ve stayed with them longer. Maybe she wouldn’t have gotten into so much trouble or ran away. She blew out a heavy breath, remembering the home after with the sleazy uncle always sleeping on the sofa.

Taking off her glasses, Regina closed her book and put both on the nightstand. She lightly inquired, “Are you done with the light?”
“Yup,” Emma yawned, nestling down in the bed. Pushing the unwanted memories aside, she closed her eyes and vaguely felt Regina situate herself. However, after an unknown amount of time her eyes popped open; she was still wide awake. “Damn it,” she muttered. Looking over at the back of Regina’s head, she stage whispered, “Are you asleep?”

“No,” the sheriff immediately responded. “I can’t sleep.”

“Do you have to use the restroom already?” the former mayor growled, partially sitting up and glaring over her shoulder.

“Count sheep,” Regina said as she repositioned her pillow, smacking it a few times.

“That doesn’t work,” Emma sneered, unimpressed with the idea. “So, what musicals do you like?”

Sighing heavily, the former mayor carefully weighed her options. She could ignore the sheriff’s prompt for conversation—which was happening with alarming frequency—and suffer through hours of pouting as well as a moody disposition tomorrow. Or, she could entertain the asinine discussion. “I like *Sweeney Todd*.”

“The one with Johnny Depp and the cannibalism?” Emma asked, disturbed. Her eyes widened as she stared at the back of Regina’s head and quickly contemplated moving back to the chaise, given her bedmate’s moniker.

“No, Miss Swan,” Regina drawled, rolling onto her back. She glanced over and was somewhat amused by Emma’s slightly horrified expression. “The one starring Angela Lansbury,” she clarified.

“Oh,” the sheriff mouthed as she visibly relaxed. Blinking a few times, her brow furrowed as she dryly said, “It still had cannibalism.” She smirked at Regina’s soft chuckle and added, “Any others?” After a beat, she added, “I’ve always liked *Pillow Talk*.” Strangely enough, it was slightly reminiscent of her life at times.

“A Doris Day fan?” the former mayor asked curiously, watching the sheriff’s face in the low light.

“Eh,” Emma answered with a shrug. “Some, but I mostly like her later ones.” She waited for a few more moments before prompting, “So?”

*Les Misérables.*

“Why am I not surprised?” the sheriff muttered, rolling her eyes. “You’re one of those people” She didn’t wait for a response and said, “I just don’t understand how you can be sad and happy at the same time. It happens every damn time, no matter what version.”

“It’s life,” the former mayor weakly explained, staring up at the ceiling.

Clearing her throat, Emma twisted her lips in thought. She eventually asked, “Did you manage to get anything out of Henry about his detention?” When the boy had popped into the bedroom while Regina was in the shower, she had tactfully tried to pry an explanation out of him, but he’d brushed her off. It kind of hurt her feelings.

“Yes.”

Frowning while studying the former mayor’s profile in the dark, the sheriff prompted, “And?”

“He said…,” Regina paused. A year ago, she would’ve reveled in this situation, but now, she was
simply concerned for her son. “He didn’t want you to know.” Albert Spencer had been careful in setting his traps.

“Yeah, I figured that when he wouldn’t tell me,” Emma grumbled. She wanted to push Regina for information, a hint or something.

Hearing the frustration and pain in the sheriff’s voice, the former mayor took a deep breath and offered a bit of clichéd reassurance. “I’m sure he’ll tell you when he’s ready.” She silently repeated the mantra that everything was different now.

“Your social skills aside,” Emma quipped with an easy smirk, “you’re very patient with him,” she continued seriously. She didn’t know if she could’ve handled being on the flip side of things—handled being hated by Henry.

“I try,” Regina responded, rolling onto her side, facing the closet and away from Emma.

Watching the former mayor turn away, the sheriff’s brow furrowed as she felt torn. Again, she wondered what the hell had happened to her. This was supposed to be a bonding moment. If they couldn’t bond over the son they shared, then what was to become of them? But then again, they didn’t really share Henry, did they?

Wracked with uncertainty, she opened and closed her mouth several times. She sighed, unsure of what to say and whether or not to say anything at all. Finally, she rolled onto her side, facing Regina. “I want to ask your opinion on something,” she said softly, giving the former mayor the choice to completely ignore her.

“What’s that, Miss Swan?” Regina sighed, choosing not to stop the tears.

“I think Henry should start seeing Archie again,” Emma blurted out. She tensed waiting for the whiplash fury, but it never came, just a long exhalation. “Here’s the thing, he doesn’t talk to anybody, and that’s not good.” She played with the top of the sheet, relishing in the smoothness of the material. “If he had someone, I wouldn’t be so worried, but he doesn’t play at recess. He doesn’t ask to go to friends’ houses. He doesn’t do anything but hang out in his room.” She stopped and swallowed. When she had talked to Mary Margaret about this, the school teacher had been quick to explain it away as Regina’s fault. “It’s like pulling teeth to get him to hang out with us.”

“He doesn’t want to be with me,” the former mayor dismissively explained. Her pillow was wet now. She wasn’t stupid. She’d noticed how the boy would linger with Emma if she was busy and not a part of the conversation.

“Trust me; I’ve seen plenty of kids who don’t want to be with their parents,” the sheriff grumbled, adjusting her pillow. “He just doesn’t know what he’s feeling right now.”

“He won’t take too kindly to your suggestion,” Regina replied, knowing exactly how the forthcoming situation was going to end. “I won’t put him through that again,” she said with far more determination than she felt.

“That’s why I’m going to tell him,” Emma decreed, followed by a yawn. She blinked a few times and realized she was sleepy. “Good night, Regina.”

“Good night, Emma,” the former mayor said softly. She lay awake for at least an hour before exhaustion finally claimed her. Tomorrow was not going to be a good day.

~SQ~
“No!” Henry shouted. He stood under the arch between the foyer and dining room, imperiously glaring at Emma, as much as an eleven year-old in slightly too large, plaid pajamas could. “I’m not crazy.”

“That isn’t what I said, Kid,” the sheriff tried to clarify. She took a step forward to close the distance between them, but she stopped when that damn prickling sensation started. Glancing over her shoulder, she stepped backwards. Regina must still be at the kitchen island, making their lunches. “I never said you were crazy.”

“That’s a lie,” he cried, shaking his head. “She put you up to this, didn’t she?” He pointed angrily at the kitchen. “She made everyone think I was crazy.” Tears welled up in his eyes. Was this why his mother had been so understanding about the detention? “But it was all true, I was right.”

“You know what?” Frustrated, Emma dragged her hands down her face. Anger was starting to set in, and she barked, “I talked to a lot of people in town about you and your mother. You know what they said?”

Scowling and breathing heavily through his nose, the boy shook his head.

“No one said you were crazy. As scared as they were of your mother; they thought it was good that she was getting you help because you seemed so sad.” Pointing out towards the general direction of downtown, the sheriff continued, “There are a lot of people who see Archie for a lot of different reasons.”

“Only because of the curse,” he spat, accusing. “She’s planning something, and you’re falling for it.” He’d overheard his grandparents’ whispered conversations enough to know it was true.

Dismayed, Emma’s mouth fell open, but her anger flared. “So what, you think I’m stupid?” This was something that always set her off. Since she was unwanted, there must be something wrong with her, right?

“No, Emma, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that...,” Henry stammered before trailing off, suddenly unsure with the rage in Emma’s eyes. He’d seen her mad before but never directed at him.

“I’m the adult. You’re the child,” the sheriff gritted out through clenched teeth. Stopping herself and closing her eyes for a few moments, she held up her hands and shook her head. She took several long breaths before finally speaking again. “You’re going to see Archie, and that’s final.” Turning, she stomped towards the kitchen. “Go get ready for school, we’re driving you today.”

Wrapping the last sandwich in cellophane, Regina glanced up when Emma stormed into the kitchen, pulled out a stool and unceremoniously perched on it.

Groaning, the sheriff dropped her head on the cool marble and said, “That could’ve gone better.”

The former mayor pursed her lips but said nothing. She just continued to pack the lunches.

“I’m impressed you got him to go the first time.” Emma said, resting her chin in her palm.

“The impression is mutual.” Regina explained, dropping a cheese stick into each brown bag. She hesitated for a moment and added a second one to Emma’s. “And multiple promises that the sessions would remain confidential between him and Dr. Hopper.”

“Where’d he get the idea that therapist equals crazy, anyway?” the sheriff asked, grabbing the last cheese stick from the Chucky Cheese package. She opened it, ignoring the former mayor’s scowl.
“It must’ve been pretty upsetting,” she said around a bite. “I’ve seen plenty of therapists, but I never felt like I was heading to loony town.” She started pulling the string cheese apart. Emma found it surprisingly easy to talk to Regina when she knew that she didn’t have an ulterior motive or wasn’t trying to kill her.

Tossing away the trash from her food prep, Regina went about putting the various sandwich makings away. “I suppose where children learn most of their information—the school yard, the internet or television.” She poured herself a cup of coffee from the press. Staring into the black liquid, she didn’t know what else to say.

Emma continued to pull apart her cheese. “Well, I guess we’ll have to see how things pan out.”

The pair fell into a comfortable silence, neither feeling judged by the other. It was nice.

Slowly creeping away from the kitchen door and back into the foyer, Henry had eavesdropped from the dining room. If he’d been caught, he would’ve used the guise of packing his backpack. Its contents were conveniently scattered across the table from a late night of finishing his homework. As quietly as possible, he ran upstairs to get ready before they started yelling for him to hurry up. As he dressed, he decided to once again elicit Archie’s help in exposing the Evil Queen’s plan. His mother would become good one way or another.

~SQ~

Out of the corner of her eye, Emma Swan noticed the large double doors down the hall swing open, revealing her parents. She groaned as they walked down the hall holding hands.

Hearing the sheriff’s abject groan, both Ruby and Regina turned to look at Emma. The part-time deputy was getting drowned in her paperwork responsibilities and had decided to come in during an off-morning at the diner. Unexpectedly, the former mayor had inquired if she could help. It was probably out of sheer boredom. However, Ruby’s face had been priceless. After a shrug from the sheriff, the pair had diligently worked for the last hour at Ruby’s computer. It wasn’t entirely smooth sailing, as there were a few snippy exchanges and staring contests, but for the most part, they seemed quite comfortable with each other—even if it was pushing each other’s buttons.

Standing up from her desk, the last thing Emma wanted was to be caught alone in her office with her parents, especially after her fight with Henry. She tried to slip out of her office before the trap was sprung. And she almost made it, too. Her butt was almost in the witness chair next to Ruby’s desk when….

“Emma, could I talk with you privately for a moment, please?” the school teacher asked in a smooth, sweet tone. She didn’t even wait for an answer, just waltzed right into the office.

“Okay,” the sheriff drawled, sharing a puzzled looked with the waitress and former mayor. When the deputy didn’t follow and her mother closed the office door, she knew she was in for something spectacularly stupendous. She watched as David dropped in her almost-occupied seat. “What’s up?” she asked, distracted.

“I’m concerned about you,” Mary Margaret cooed in what she hoped was a motherly tone. Casually, she pulled off her coat and draped it over the back of a visitor chair—a clear sign that no one else was invited to join.

Instantly, Emma found the situation too suffocating. She walked around her desk and sat down in her chair. “What’s to be concerned about?” she casually asked. Watching the three at Ruby’s desk, she didn’t trust David not to push Regina’s buttons.
Sighing, the school teacher frowned. “All the time you’re spending with Regina.”

“She’s not that bad,” the sheriff said with a shrug, trying to blow it off. She gave her mother a soft smile.

“That’s probably what she wants you to believe,” Mary Margaret said, glancing over her shoulder at the three people around Ruby’s desk. However, her gaze fixated on the former mayor. “She’s manipulative,” she whispered. She frowned when Ruby laughed and David’s lip twitched at something Regina said.

“What politician isn’t?” Emma snorted, still unconcerned. She shuffled the papers on her desk into a single pile.

Whipping her head around, the school teacher snapped, “Emma, you need to take this seriously!” She didn’t like her daughter’s flippant attitude. “She’s a threat,” she proclaimed, sitting down in the empty chair.

Emma noted it was the one in which the former mayor usually didn’t sit. “I know how much of a pain she can be, but she’s trying to change for Henry,” the sheriff countered, glancing at Regina who was intently watching Ruby navigate a series of screens on the computer. “Henry makes her want to be a better person.” That’s love, she thought.

“It’s not enough,” Mary Margaret refuted solemnly, shaking her head slowly. “She’ll never change.”

“Not as long as people keep that attitude,” Emma said flatly. Her nostrils flared as she tried to contain her anger. She’d been dealing with the same crap all her life.

“Why are you defending her?” the school teacher whispered imploringly. She leaned forward, resting a hand on the desk.

“Just stop,” the sheriff demanded, grinding her teeth. “We’ve been down this road before, and you know where we ended up?” She paused and harshly jabbed her stack of papers with her index figure. “Here! And you know why? Because when I asked you to back off, you kept drilling and badgering until we had no choice but to go to Gold for help.”

“All the evidence pointed—,” Mary Margaret tried to interrupt. Her soulful eyes wide were and her voice tender.

“No,” Emma said, shaking her head. “We took a magical dream catcher’s vision from a dog at face value.” Her eyes became watery as her hands curled into fists. “Archie was tortured for days, but somehow, he ended up at the apartment.”

That was when former mayor looked over her shoulder and locked gazes with the distraught sheriff. In a blink, Emma realized she wasn’t so alone and that this miserable conversation could end, if she wished it. That was enough to give her an empowering boost of self-confidence.

Calmer and still starring at Regina, the sheriff continued, “I did something horrible, Mary Margaret.” Slowly turning her head back to her mother, she swallowed down the lump in her throat.

“Oh, Honey,” the school teacher cooed, wanting to comfort her daughter. “I know it hurts. Regina took my…” she trailed off as Emma shook her head. Confused, she furrowed her brow as she tried to devise where she went wrong.

“I’m not having this conversation with you,” Emma said with finality. She grabbed her and
Regina’s jackets off the coat rack. “No matter how much you bad mouth Regina, we’re still connected, Mary Margaret, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” With that, she walked around her desk, opened the door and walked out to hand Regina her coat.

Wordlessly, the former mayor stood and took her jacket. Slipping it on, she cautiously glanced between the three. She and Ruby shared a long look before she stooped to pick up her purse.

By the office door, the sheriff made an exaggerated sweeping gesture with her arm, signaling for the school teacher to exit. Reluctantly, Mary Margaret grabbed her coat and moved to stand behind the deputy.

Taking the hint, Ruby hastily logged off her computer and gathered her stuff. “Oh look at the time!” she exclaimed with false cheer. “I told Granny I would stop by during the lunch rush.” And then, she bolted towards the door with a blanket goodbye. She’d deal with the fallout later.

Locking her office door, Emma silently cursed Ruby for running. Of course, she was doing the same thing. But wasn’t Red Riding Hood best friends with Snow White? It didn’t matter. As she stomped down the hall towards the exit, she pushed all thoughts of her parents out of her mind.

Regina followed a few steps behind the agitated sheriff. Before passing the corner into the hall, she glanced back over her shoulder. She frowned at the tears streaming down Mary Margaret’s face. Turning away, she exhaled slowly and gradually caught up to Emma. It was going to be a long day.

“Emma,” the former mayor snapped, gently cupping the sheriff’s elbow and guiding her to a stop in front of the still closed Storybrooke Library. “What on earth did she say to you?” She’d been following the raging bull that was Emma Swan for the last twenty minutes. Townsfolk were avoiding them and not simply because of her.

Glowering, Emma merely scowled in response, shaking her arm free. “It doesn’t matter,” she hissed, turning away. She was slightly embarrassed.

“I think it does matter,” Regina countered evenly as she watched Emma start to pace in front of the locked double doors of the library. Sighing, she said, “If you don’t want to talk to me, then let’s go to someone with whom you will talk. I’m sure we can arrange some degree of privacy.”

Resuming her pacing, the sheriff shook her head and ran her hands through her hair. “I’ll talk to Archie on Thursday.”

Pursing her lips and crossing her arms, the former mayor scoffed, “That’s several days from now. I refuse to deal with your and Henry’s mood swings simultaneously.”

“Damn it,” Emma cursed softly. Spinning around, she pointed at the former mayor and asked, “Why couldn’t you’ve been like this before?”

Confused by the accusation, Regina asked, “Like what?”

Waving her arms in a wild gesture at the former mayor, the sheriff hastily exclaimed, “Like this!” She blew out a heavy breath. “Since this whole bond thing started, you’ve been calm, understanding, polite…. You’ve been downright nice to me.”

Narrowing her eyes, the former mayor slowly shook her head. “Things are different now,” she explained. She wasn’t a fool. Each’s survival was dependent on the other, and she knew she benefitted more from it.
Emma’s shoulders slumped as she remembered what Archie implied during last Thursday’s impromptu counseling session. With pleading eyes, she looked at Regina, and with great sorrow, she said, “I’m so sorry, Regina.”

Taken aback by the heartfelt apology, the former mayor quickly schooled her expression. “As am I,” she whispered. It wasn’t easy being a prisoner, especially in a cage of your own making.

Before anything else was said, there were several loud bangs and crashes from around the corner. Instinctively, Emma trotted towards the source of the ruckus with Regina gradually falling back behind her. “I told you to stop wearing heels,” she grumbled before rounding the corner into the alleyway between the library and an office building. “Hey!” she shouted at a group of boys.

One of them cried, “Run!” sending the group lurking in the alley into chaos as all of them bolted.

The sheriff took off into a sprint, and she was about to grab one of the punks when she was overcome with agony. She cried out, dropping onto her knees. “Damn it, Regina,” she grunted, struggling to stand. Gradually, the pain dissipated, leaving only the annoying prickling sensations. Grimacing, she finally rose to her feet with a snarky remark about appropriate footwear on her tongue. She turned with a snarl, but all her anger disappeared when she saw the former mayor kneeling next to a beaten boy. It was Nickolas.

“It’s alright,” Regina said. She glanced at Emma before turning back and asking, “Do you think you can stand?”

Hesitantly, the boy nodded, and with help, he stood shakily, leaning heavily against the wall. His fingers dug into the former mayor’s arms when he noticed the sheriff.

“It’s only Sheriff Swan,” Regina gently explained, looking between Emma and Nickolas.

“I know,” the boy said, his voice rough. “She sent me back to him,” he accused with unveiled hatred. When the startled sheriff stopped in her approach, he turned back to the former mayor and spat, “I’m not going back.”

“I didn’t know,” Emma tried to explain. Her heart broke upon seeing the cuts on his face and bruises on his exposed arms. She bit her lip, realizing he was only wearing the same baggy t-shirt from over a week ago. Now, it wasn’t just too big but smattered with dirt. “Let us take you to the hospital, they’ll get you patched up,” she suggested, taking another step towards him. “We can photograph your injuries, start a criminal report—.”

“No!” Nickolas shouted, pulling away from Regina. He pointed at Emma saying, “No one cared before, and no one cares now.” His so-called friends had turned on him. Even his own sister didn’t standup to their father for him. The townspeople just ignored him. He flinched as Regina loosely wrapped her scarf around his neck.

“We just want to help,” the former mayor softly assured. Hesitantly reaching out, she slowly laid a gentle hand on the boy’s biceps, her grip light and unrestricting. “The Sheriff thought she was doing the right thing by reuniting your family. No one could’ve known.”

Swallowing, the sheriff looked between the two. She took another step toward them and then another. “Let us help, Nickolas,” she pleaded. Honestly, she had thought she was doing the right thing.

The boy kept his eyes on the former mayor for a few seconds longer before finally looking at the sheriff. “I know how it works, you know.” He paused and licked his chapped lips. “I did research
on a computer at school.” Looking down, he added, “Before I got suspended for not having a complete uniform.”

“We can fix that, if you want.” Regina smiled softly, ducking her head to catch Nickolas’s gaze.

At first, Emma bristled at the suggestion, but then, she remembered what it was like to live in uncertainty and not trusting anyone. “Yeah, I’m sure we could talk to the principle or work something out.” She smiled softly, hoping they were building trust.

“I’ll think about it,” the boy stammered, glancing between the former mayor and sheriff.

“Alright,” Regina said, straightening and dropping her hand.

“You know where to find us if you change your mind,” Emma hastily added, standing next to the former mayor.

Briskly, Nickolas nodded and jogged down the alleyway, his new red scarf flying behind him. He turned a corner and disappeared.

“I hope we did the right thing,” Emma muttered, following Regina out of the alleyway. Stepping out onto the sidewalk, she shivered from a sudden cold burst of wind as she glared across the intersection at Tillman’s garage. “I so want to arrest him.”

“No favors, Miss Swan,” the former mayor casually reminded her, fighting a similar impulse. She flipped up her jacket’s collar while saying, “Unfortunately, the altercation with the other boys—.”

“Yeah, I get it,” the sheriff gruffly interrupted, blowing hot air in her cupped hands. She so totally got it. “What’s with the temperature drop, anyhow?”

Rolling her eyes, Regina smirked and replied, “We watched the Weather Channel last night. Don’t you remember all the speculative conjecture about a possible northeaster?”

“Damn New England weather. Sometimes I really do miss Florida.” Walking back to Main Street, Emma commented, “I’m starving.” She thrust her hands into her jean’s front pockets.

“Our lunches are back at the station,” the former mayor reminded, sliding her hands in her coat pockets. The wind tossed around her hair as she squinted in the bright afternoon sun.

“We can eat them tomorrow,” the sheriff said with a shrug. She gestured to Dave’s Fish ’n’ Chips. “He’s been nice enough to look at my car,” she said, nodding to the blue building next to Gold’s pawnshop. She relaxed as Regina wordlessly fell into step beside her as they crossed the street.

As they reached the other side, Regina said, “You’re paying, Sheriff.”

With an easy—albeit amused—nod, Emma glanced at the former mayor under the guise of pulling her windblown long, blonde hair out of her face. She was relieved that she had an ally in something that was personally important to her. And how evil could someone be when they were concerned over a child’s welfare, a child that wasn’t their own? She pursed her lips, trotting in front of Regina to open the door. She smiled softly at the simple thank you she received in return. Sliding into the booth opposite from the former mayor, the sheriff wondered who exactly Regina Mills was because no one seemed to have the complete picture.

~SQ~

Sheriff Swan crossed her arms as she glared down at Dr. Whale sitting behind his large office desk.
She wanted to punch that smug expression right off his moderately attractive face. Damn, how the hell he got Mary Margaret to sleep with him, she had no idea—unless it involved a lot of alcohol. “Why not?” she demanded.

Smirking, Victor idly played with an expensive silver pen. “Because I don’t care,” he smoothly explained. “Helping you holds absolutely no benefit for me.” He chuckled darkly before continuing, “Why do I care if this world discovers a town full of fairy tale characters?” Pointing at himself, he added, “I’m normal. Besides, only the ones with abnormalities will be of any interest.”

Emma’s brow furrowed as she considered what he’d just said. Then she paled, realizing that people like Ruby were in possible danger. “You’re a prick,” she spat. Trying to talk to him for the last twenty minutes had gotten her nowhere.

“I’ve been called worse,” the surgeon said with a shrug of his shoulders. His eyes had a hard glint when he said, “We should’ve let him die.” Dismissively, he waved his hand at her. “Then the humdrum drama of the royals fighting for power wouldn’t be such an issue.”

The sheriff took a quick step forward, but she sharply turned around in agitated frustration. As the prickling sensation lessoned, she stomped towards the office door, yanked it open and slammed it shut. She stayed in front of it, fuming.

“I take it Dr. Whale was less than helpful,” the former mayor lazily inquired, closing her magazine and returning it to the pile on the nearby end table.

Taking a calming, deep breath, Emma shook her head. “Maybe I can get Ruby to talk to him. I mean, it worked last time.” She pulled out her cellphone but hesitated. “Or,” she started, looking at Regina, “you could give it a go.”

Cocking an eyebrow, Regina considered the request. A sassy smirk spread across her face and she asked, “Is this to be one of those good-cop-bad-cop scenarios?”

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff said, “Sure, just don’t overdo it.” A part of her questioned the wisdom of letting the former mayor have a go at bullying Dr. Whale, but then again, he’d brought this onto himself. Glancing over her shoulder to the receptionist’s desk, she asked, “Where did Sally go?”

“My reading of magazines made her nervous,” Regina explained as she stood and immediately headed inside Dr. Whale’s office. She was actually eager to be of use, even if it was just throwing her weight around.

Emma sported a cocky grin the moment she saw Victor’s shocked face. And then, she second guessed herself again, but it was too late now.

“Regina,” the surgeon stammered, rising from his chair. The Evil Queen was still a queen, after all. “What brings you here?”

“Calm yourself,” Regina ordered, walking toward the desk. She gracefully sat in one of the two visitor chairs and crossed her legs. “The Sheriff says you declined doing her a favor.” Her arms elegantly draped over the chair’s arms.

Dr. Whale’s eyes immediately cut to the sheriff and scowled. “Yes,” he admitted. Focusing on the former mayor, he said, “And why should I keep a healthy Mr. Mendell detained in the hospital another day?”

Emma scowled as Victor posed the exact same question as earlier.
“Because,” the former mayor drawled in a low tone, “it’s in your best interest.” She dropped her chin and glared at the surgeon. “This isn’t an issue open for debate. You will detain him.”

His nostrils flared as Dr. Whale bristled at the obvious order and sneered, “You don’t have any power—.”

Immediately, the desk slid to the far right of the room, blocking a door leading into the main corridor of the hospital. Startled, Emma had reflexively jumped backwards. She looked up to see Regina standing mere inches from a very frightened Victor.

“Are you sure about that, doctor?” the former mayor whispered. She tilted her head but didn’t move away.

Emma swallowed. Her attention was briefly pulled to the large windows on her left as a strong gust of air blasted against the glass. She watched as Victor pressed himself flat against the wall, desperate not to touch or further provoke Regina.

“Alright,” the surgeon relented. He cleared his throat as the former mayor took several steps back. His hands smoothed down his lab coat as he asked, “What am I supposed to tell him?”

Disinterested, Regina turned away and moved towards Emma. “Lie,” she ordered. Over her shoulder, she added, “You’re good at that, aren’t you?”

“Yeah,” Victor replied with a grimace, pushing away the rising guilt. “I can’t keep him any longer than Friday.” He glanced at Emma. “He’ll get suspicious if it drags out for too long.”

Nodding, the sheriff explained, “Like I said earlier, I just need him contained until the town meeting is over.”

Standing up straight, Dr. Whale confidently said, “Consider it done.”

“Okay.” Emma smiled, relieved that one disaster had been successfully diverted. Turning, she walked out of the office but stopped to look back when Victor spoke again.

Taking a bold step forward, Dr. Whale decided to take a chance. His voice was hoarse as he apologized, “For what it’s worth, I am sorry, Regina.”

The former mayor stopped in the doorway, staring straight ahead with an indifferent expression. Curiously, the sheriff watched them, her gaze darting back to the surgeon before staying on Regina.

“There has to be some way to return me home. I have to get back to my brother,” Victor pleaded, taking several more steps. It had been his sole reason for bringing Daniel back.

Turning partially, the former mayor narrowed her eyes and dropped her chin. She slowly tilted her head to glare at Dr. Whale and inquired, “What were you doing in the Enchanted Forest?”

Blinking, Victor shook his head. He briefly glanced at Emma. “I don’t understand,” he answered.

Regina scowled, taking a slow breath. “The curse didn’t transcend realms to bring you here,” she clarified.

Shifting from foot to foot, the sheriff’s gut told her to break this up, but her curiosity was getting the better of her. Henry had seemed so surprised by Dr. Frankenstein’s presence. Another gust of wind against the windows briefly grabbed her attention.
When no answer was forthcoming, the former mayor harshly said, “That means you were in the Enchanted Forest.” After a beat, she demanded, “Why?”

Honestly, the surgeon hadn’t expected this…. He swallowed and opened his mouth several times before he could say, “I was looking for more hearts.”

Fury enveloped Regina, but she contained it, for the time being. “For your experiments?” she asked flatly.

Another gust of wind smacked against the window. Seriously? Emma thought. However, shattering glass was the least of her worries. Regina looked ready to go nuclear. She wracked her brain for some way to defuse the situation.

However, Dr. Whale spoke. “Yes,” he admitted. Seeing the former mayor’s rage bubbling to the surface, he unconsciously took a step back. “I’m getting closer!” he nervously exclaimed. “Daniel was a—.” He never got to finish his sentence as he suddenly found himself pinned to the back office wall.

Slowly raising her hand, the former mayor dragged the surgeon up the wall, knocking off framed pictures and degrees. She took no comfort from the sound of breaking glass as she battled between killing him and making him suffer.

The sheriff’s eyes widened in shock. “Regina,” she said calmly. “Regina, let him go.” Another gust of wind slashed against the window, but this time, the glass cracked. “We need him,” she gently reminded.

Regina’s lip curled, only half hearing what Emma was saying. “I’m labeled evil,” she snarled. “But this pathetic excuse…..”

“Yeah, I know he’s a womanizing bastard, and he’s hurt you, deeply,” the sheriff said, focusing solely on the former mayor. “But unfortunately, we need him alive.” She nervously glanced at Dr. Whale. “Please.” She didn’t know what made Regina drop Victor, but the moment it happened, she whispered, “Thank you.”

Pursing her lips, Emma swallowed down the lump in her throat at the sight of Regina’s tears. She watched at least two of them fall before turning to Victor. Briskly walking towards him, she roughly helped him to his feet, grabbed his shirt collar and slammed his back into the wall. If she was surprised by her rage, she didn’t show it. “I don’t know what the hell happened between you two, but I would strongly suggest you don’t cross her.” Frowning, she aggressively smoothed out the surgeon’s rumpled coat and shirt.

These weren’t new feelings. The sheriff knew exactly what they were, but for Regina Mills? Turning around, she wordlessly followed the former mayor out into the waiting area and closed the office door. Giving Regina a moment to compose herself, she tried not to demand answers or an explanation.

Dr. Whale merely nodded as he watched both women finally leave his office. He glanced around and weakly stumbled toward his desk. Pulling open a drawer, he grabbed his flask and took a long swig of whiskey. Not for the first time, he tried to forget about the force of nature that was Regina Mills.

~SQ~

Switching off her bedside lamp, Regina settled down and welcomed sleep after such a trying day.
Her eyelids were heavy, and she felt exceedingly emotionally exhausted. When Henry arrived home after his detention, he had been a whirlwind of activity and questions surrounding her. Yet as much as she’d enjoyed it, she knew it was just because he was grounded from TV and was apparently still mad at Emma. Hopefully, tomorrow would be a better day. Vaguely, she registered her bedmate shifting and tugging up the duvet. She didn’t even care that Emma had invited herself to sleep in the bed again.

“So,” the sheriff started then paused. Carefully, she asked, “Are we going to talk about what happened today?”

“I’ve been reading for almost an hour and you wait till now to ask a question?” the former mayor snapped. Her eyes opened and she glared at the ceiling.

Rolling onto her side, Emma explained, “I wanted to give you a chance to relax.”

“I was relaxed,” Regina quipped, unmoving. If Emma would just stop talking, she could still easily drift to sleep.

Sighing, the sheriff frowned and said, “Regina, come on, I know Whale hit a nerve.” She shifted the blanket around her shoulders.

“And, apparently, so did your mother,” the former mayor rebuked. Sharply, she turned her head and said, “Quid pro quo, Emma.” She smirked at hearing an exaggerated huff.

“Fine,” Emma grumbled. Pursing her lips, she searched Regina’s face in the dim light. “Mary Margaret was just complaining, as usual, but she was taking it up a notch more than she has lately.”

“Extolling the magnitude of my ample vices, no doubt,” the former mayor said flatly, looking back up at the ceiling.

“Yeah, she tried to go there, but I basically told her to shove it,” the sheriff easily supplied with a soft, half smile. She rolled her lips before saying, “I don’t respond well when people tell me how I should feel, or think or what to do.” Was she actually sharing her feelings—because this felt a lot like sharing to her.

Confused, the former mayor shifted onto her side, facing Emma but saying nothing.

Taking a fortifying breath, Emma continued, “A part of me wants to hate you.” She valiantly ignored the flash of anger in Regina’s eyes and trudged onward. “But I know that’s the easy thing to do.” Especially after I’ve gotten to know you better, she thought.

Grinding her teeth to keep from reacting, Regina intensely furrowed her brow as she decided to see where this was going. So, she stayed perfectly still.

“After the whole Enchanted Forest thing, I realize I actually like who I am. Yeah, my childhood wasn’t great, and it royally sucked most of the time. But I was free, and that was something kids with parents didn’t have,” the sheriff said. She’d resented how Mary Margaret tried to affectionately smother her, or David always assumed she’d just do what he said. At the lack of a response, she quickly stammered, “I think we both deserve a real chance at getting to know each other.”

Pursing her lips, the former mayor couldn’t quite believe what she’d just heard. She briefly pondered how much of this was spurred by Emma’s harbored guilt over their predicament. Tentatively, she asked, “You do realize this won’t be a very popular decision?”
Emma gave a one shoulder shrug. “I was never popular, and besides, it’s my choice.” Her intuition was paying off. A few funny quips titillated her tongue, but she didn’t want to cheapen their moment.

“Alright,” Regina agreed and rolled onto her back. They essentially shared a single life. So, getting along was obviously in their best interests. She glanced over at Emma, who just offered her a goofy smile.

But the smile quickly faded when the former mayor looked away. “You don’t have to share, if you don’t want to,” the sheriff said, supplying an easy out. She absently pushed a stray piece of hair out of her face.

Still staring at the ceiling, Regina took a few moments to collect herself. Then, after a slow exhale, she freely shared, “Rumpelstiltskin introduced me to Dr. Frankenstein shortly after I agreed to become his apprentice.”

“There’s a whole lot of wrong in that sentence,” Emma mumbled. She winced upon realizing how her comment sounded.

With a noncommittal sound, the former mayor agreed, “Hindsight being what it is, I suppose so.” She carefully thought about how to continue her story, as she didn’t permit herself to languish over her past. “I was beyond desperate, and circumstances being what they were, I believed them.” The entire situation never failed to enrage her. She cursed her naivety because she should’ve seen through the lies. “I had honestly thought Rumpelstiltskin wanted to help me.”

Quickly connecting the dots between Frankenstein’s call to fame and Gold’s scheming nature, the sheriff quietly asked, “Gold found Whale who told you he could bring Daniel back to life?” She couldn’t quite grasp the concept of loving someone that much.

“He failed, of course—whether from nefarious design or honest botchery, only he can ascertain.” Regina felt herself sinking. She took a ragged breath and hoped it didn’t sound too shaky.

“You gave up?” Emma whispered, finding it hard to believe. Her brow furrowed in intense concentration. There had to be more to it than just massive clinical depression. “So what, he decided to bring Daniel back, now?”

Nodding, the former mayor swallowed against the tension in her throat before saying, “He hoped to barter for passage home.” Gold had taken great delight in sharing that particular tidbit, scoffing at her obvious inability to complete such a feat.

“That’s really messed up,” the sheriff said. It was crazy, but when dealing with fairytale characters, she had learned that logic flew out the window a long time ago. “So, what happened to Daniel?”

“I had to kill him,” Regina answered flatly. A single tear rolled across her temple, disappearing into her hair.

Mentally overwhelmed, Emma was conflicted on how to respond whilst bombarded with such a multitude of feelings. Finally, she weakly explained, “David acted like it was no big deal.” Mary Margaret, on the other hand, had been totally floored by the news. Whether that was sympathy for Regina’s plight or simply David not telling her was anyone’s guess.

“Of course,” the former mayor blankly acknowledged. She had pounded on that idiot to get him to listen to her. She had begged, really. What did it matter if Daniel killed her? Everything was already lost. And again, here she was cast adrift, alive and alone.
Biting her bottom lip, the sheriff deliberately edged her hand towards Regina under the sheet. Any supportive gesture could easily blow up in her face, and she could end up back on the chaise lounge. Gradually, she laid her fingers on Regina’s biceps and gave a slight squeeze, slightly surprised by the amount of toned muscle. After a few moments, she slowly pulled her hand away, as leaving it felt too intimate. Then, because Emma Swan typically avoided extremely emotional issues like the plague, she lightly joked, “I wonder if Dr. Whale likes his newly decorated office.”

Despite herself, Regina darkly tittered as a small smile tugged at her lips. “Indeed,” she murmured. “Especially with the improved view from his desk.” Surprisingly, she felt a little lighter as sleep started to claim her. Yawning, she rolled on her side, facing the sheriff, and sluggishly said, “Good night, Emma.”

“Night, Regina,” the sheriff replied softly. After today, she again doubted her ability to navigate the complicated and convoluted world of her parents—not that this one was any easier. She just understood it better. Watching the former mayor sleep, Emma had more questions, and after tonight, she might finally start to get some real answers.

~SQ~

Patiently waiting at end of the pier, a magically disguised Hook casually lounged on a fiberglass box on the dock. He idly gazed out into the dark harbor whilst eating a rather delectable sandwich from a shop in town. He knew better than to be late. He also knew better than to criticize Cora for being late. Or else, he would be sleeping on land again. Taking another bite, he hummed contently, listening to the gentle sounds of the wharf. The food of this world really was something. The variety alone was almost enough to quell his quest for revenge.

“Eating again?” Cora quipped, appearing from a dissolving cloud of dark purple.

Swallowing his bite, Hook rejoined, “Do you ever eat?” The truth was, he hadn’t seen her eat once since their arrival. Not that he cared.

Ignoring his flippant attitude, she strode to stand next to him, and with a gesture of her hand, she transported them out onto the Jolly Roger.

“Thanks, Love,” Hook said. He was glad to look like himself again, but Cora’s glamour did have its uses. Watching the sorceress stalk about the deck of the ship, he continued to eat his sandwich. “Learn anything of import?” he casually asked before stuffing the last bite of sandwich in his mouth.

“Regina still hasn’t left the Savior’s side,” Cora answered while magically scanning the vessel. Content that no one had managed to locate the invisible ship, she deftly waved her hands before her, and a large table for two appeared next to the mast. And with it, there was enough food for at least four ravenous people.

Wordlessly, the pirate stood and pulled out a chair for the sorceress. Once she was delicately perched on her seat, he poured her a glass of an obviously fine blush wine from a crystal decanter. Filling his own goblet, he inquired, “How goes your search for Rumpelstiltskin’s library?”

Enjoying a sip, Cora scowled, putting her glass down. She proceeded to prepare herself a plate. Oh, how she hated serving herself. “It doesn’t,” she snapped, cutting a slender piece of breast meat from the roasted chicken. “Clearly, he hasn’t brought his collection with him.”

“Or you simply can’t find it,” Hook supplied with a charming smile as he held over a bowl of roasted vegetables. As Cora gracefully spooned out a serving, he suggested, “Maybe he has a secret
lair, much like the Queen’s rooms under the mausoleum.” That had been an ingenious, if slightly macabre, find.

“I was quite thorough in my searches.” The sorceress meticulously cut her food. With great precision, she would pierce a single item no bigger than her thumb nail, and with the prongs downward, she would elegantly bring the food to her mouth. “He must be relying on his memory,” she said distractedly. It also meant he had narrowed his magical knowledge to specific subjects.

The pirate found the entire process of etiquette fascinating and infuriating at the same time. Pursing his lips, he took a long swig of wine. “Well, it’s to your advantage that I’m enjoying the chase and haven’t yet tired of tormenting the illustrious Dark One.” His smile was broad and cheeky.

“Yes, how goes your puerile antics?” she asked before taking another bite.

“Simplicity is often the breath of life,” Hook countered. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. He readily disregarded Cora’s glare. “They’re working, aren’t they?” he asked with a mischievous glint. “That bucket of flour had him livid for hours.”

It had only cost him forty dollars to bribe a pair of young, inspiring delinquents to covertly rig a bucket of flour over the side door of Rumpelstiltskin’s shop. If he’d just looked above, the crocodile could’ve easily spotted the prank. It went without saying that the whole scenario had been quite a show. Rumpelstiltskin had angrily gimped to the sheriff’s office, providing the sorceress a generous hour of access to his home and shop.

Curious, Cora asked, “How precisely did you convince those children to aid you?” She took a small sip of wine.

“It’s amazing what a few bits of paper currency will get you here, Love.” The pirate leaned to his left side and plucked a small purse off his belt. Placing it on the table and opening the flap, he pulled out a large amount of money. “Some things never change,” he supplied.

~SQ~

On the night of the mayoral debate, the Storybrooke Town Hall was at capacity and brimming with loud townsfolk. All of them were vying to be heard simultaneously by speaking over each other.

“Order!” shouted Ms. Ginger, banging a gavel against its sounding block. “I said order!” The lieutenant-mayor huffed as people finally started to settle down in their seats and along the walls. She glanced to each side, checking that the other council members were ready to proceed. Satisfied with only a slight murmur amongst the crowd, she hesitantly put the gavel down and began explaining the order of business and directions for the debate.

For the most part, everyone accepted the procedural rules. The only other upset was over the limited time for the open forum, but people quickly calmed down easily enough after the gavel was smacked down a few more times.

Stepping through the set of large, propped open double doors, Archie closed his umbrella, shaking off a bit of rain, and scanned the gallery. He couldn’t deny the tension hanging in the air as the four candidates for mayor were introduced. Easily, he spotted Regina and Emma sitting on a bench along the wall towards the front. Henry wiggled between them. He quickly made his way towards them, ignoring the curious looks of Mary Margaret, Marco, Mother Superior and the dwarves as he passed their group. It wasn’t as if anyone thought to save him a seat.

Catching movement out of the corner of her eye, the former mayor noted Dr. Hopper’s approach.
She gently nudged Henry to stand and scooted next to the sheriff when it became apparent he wished to sit with them.

Sitting, Archie quietly said, “Thank you.”

The boy frowned and looked imploringly at his mothers. He didn’t want to sit on one of their laps. Wasn’t he too old for that now?

Smirking, Emma casually pointed to the floor next to her. The kid was young, he’d deal.

Rolling his eyes, Henry dramatically sulked and ungracefully dropped onto the tile floor, which was at least clean. As he tried to focus on the boring proceedings, he again wished he’d brought his backpack. However, he didn’t quite understand what was happening. The Savior broke the curse. Shouldn’t she or her parents become the rulers of Storybrooke? Weren’t most of these people from Prince James and Snow White’s kingdom anyway?

Shifting for the umpteenth time, the sheriff blew out a large breath as she felt her brain melting. The bench was comfortable enough, and at least the body heat radiating off the former mayor took the chill out of the room for her. She glanced over at Mary Margaret, surrounded by her posse, and fought the urge to roll her eyes at her mother’s doe-eyed look whenever David was speaking. It really was grotesque.

To top it off, she didn’t even want to be there. It wasn’t required, but Regina had politely asked. Strangely, she found she couldn’t say no. Of course, it was coupled with Mary Margaret’s persistent pestering to present a unified front in support of her father. There had been a whole conversation about that particular conundrum, too—running for mayor while still a deputy. She still wasn’t convinced the whole thing was a good idea.

However, Emma quickly refocused on the debate after Albert Spencer loudly proclaimed, “That’s a lie!”

There was a murmur throughout the crowd as the lieutenant-mayor raised the gavel, hitting the sounding block several times and calling for order.

“My apologies,” the lawyer said, bowing his head towards the town council. He cut a glare at the deputy and smirked darkly. Everything was going exactly as he planned.

Leaning towards each other, the town council whispered amongst themselves. Ms. Ginger held a permanent scowl as Mrs. Frost prattled on about something or another while pointing between Albert Spencer and David Nolan.

Partially turning, Emma whispered to Regina, “What’s going on?”

Not bothering with a reprimand, the former mayor distractedly and quietly explained, “Mr. Spencer took offense to Mr. Nolan citing his princely experience.” She tried to read the town council members’ lips, but it was to no avail. They were too closely huddled. She also couldn’t help but wonder why Ms. Ginger or Mrs. Frost took their names off the ballet.

“But he is a prince,” Henry supplemented in a stage whisper. His grandfather was Prince Charming.

The sheriff pursed her lips as the council resumed the proceedings. She rested her elbows on her knees and interlaced her fingers. Naturally, her gaze scanned the crowd.

Mrs. Frost leaned forward and spoke into her microphone, “In the public’s best interest and with
the council’s permission, I shall forgo my scripted question for you, Mr. Spencer, and ask an obviously more pressing one.” Pausing, she took the quiet audience as a positive sign and continued, “Why exactly do you feel that David Nolan, your son, misrepresented his experience?”

“Because he is, in fact, not my son but James’s twin brother,” Albert easily responded. Not once did his gaze falter from Mrs. Frost. Once the shocked whispers from the townsfolk started to die down, he added, “After James’ untimely death, I was profoundly afflicted with grief, not only for the loss that my wife and I had experienced, but for our kingdom’s future as well.”

With an impassive expression, Regina studied the whispering crowd as they talked amongst themselves. Some were in heated debate, while others waited with quiet acceptance, much like the council members. Several reporters from the *Daily Mirror* were hastily jotting down notes. As the gavel struck the block, she refocused on the council. She’d been right. Albert Spencer had effectively cast doubt on the venerable Prince Charming. It wouldn’t be enough for him to win but certainly would make victory difficult for David.

“Given this unexpected development, we shall extend each candidate’s closing statement to ten minutes,” Ms. Ginger said with great authority. “It will not impact the time allotted for the open forum,” she added before anyone could protest. Turning to the next council member, she inquired, “Are we ready to resume?”

Hanging her head and glancing briefly at the former mayor, Emma turned to check on Henry. The boy was undeniably distraught over the slanderous news against his Gramps. Did Henry even understand the implications of it?

Looking up, she once again scanned the crowd, this time looking for potential problems. Most of the excitement over the event had waned, but Mary Margaret and the dwarves’ unyielding support for David remained steadfast. *So, she knew*, she thought, watching her mother. Was this why Mary Margaret insisted she back her father? Could David possibly talk himself out of this?

As it turned out, David couldn’t quite escape Albert’s methodically laid out trap. Sure, the deputy used part of his closing to justify his actions. For instance, he attempted to explain why he broke the deal between himself and King George while still pretending to be Prince James. He heavily played on the True Love he had with Snow White and attempted to capitalize on their daughter breaking the curse. But surprisingly, the deputy’s words failed to rally the town behind him or, for that matter, the lawyer. Actually, the townsfolk started to seriously consider the rhetoric of Mitchell Herman, who was Sean’s father, and Janet Thatcher, Dr. Thatcher’s wife.

“It seems your prediction was correct, Regina,” Archie whispered, leaning towards her and ignoring the frown from Leroy.

“It would appear so, Dr. Hopper,” the former mayor remarked with a slight frown. She focused on the other two candidates who had some potential, despite one being a former king and the other a low-born noblewoman.

Before the open forum was to begin, a ten minute recess was called to the session. While people milled about talking amongst themselves, various and distinct groups started clustering throughout the gallery. Regina took note of each one. There were the elderly with whom she thought she saw Widow Granger. Then, there were the animal folk. Several were talking with Widow Lucas and Ruby. Occasionally, the waitress would glance over her shoulder at Ms. Blanchard with an almost torn expression. The third notable group, other than the splintered cells of nobles, consisted of the disenfranchised, aka the peasants.

Curious, the former mayor tilted her head as a line, of which Helena Granger was first, began to
form down the aisle. It seemed that several representatives from each major group stood in the queue.

*Oh, this should be interesting*, the former mayor thought, a tad gleefully. The experience would surely be eye-opening for the three kings. No longer would the serfs be content with merely surviving.

There were the usual questions. Would funding of some of the more favored programs continue—such as the downtown beautification project or the no-kill animal shelter or the urban garden parks? Would the hospital and nursing homes receive additional funding for updated equipment? What about a physical therapy wing for the hospital? When could a vocational school be built? It was clear that the general public was greatly invested in their future in this world. This was especially obvious when someone asked David Nolan why it was so important for him to return everyone to the Enchanted Forest; of course, he floundered.

Time was running out, and things had progressed smoothly to that point. That is, until Nathan Flint, a mouse previously known as Jacques, stepped up to the microphone. He worked as a janitor at the town hall and honestly liked his job. However, he was best friends with Billy—the same Billy who had been sweet on Ruby Lucas and brutally murdered by Albert Spencer’s goons.

Nervously, Nathan swallowed as he glanced down at his six-by-nine notecard one more time. His eyes cut over to Dr. Hopper, and he smiled briefly. His gaze lingered on the former mayor and sheriff for a moment, offering them both a firm nod. Facing forward again, his voice was strong and confident as he spoke, “Animal folk and peasantry alike, we will no longer remain on the fringes of a society solely controlled by royals and nobles. Life in Storybrooke has taught us that everyone has value, and all our lives have meaning, no matter how small. None of us will allow you or anyone else to take that away from us anymore. So, my question is, how are you going to deal with that?”

As a few people nervously coughed and a few chairs squeaked, the gallery remained deathly quiet. The young janitor waited a moment before taking a step back, believing his words failed. However, as he turned his back on the candidates, several people started clapping, and as he walked back to his seat, he held his head high because almost everyone had joined in the applause—that is to say, everyone who wasn’t a noble, with the exception of Mary Margaret, Regina Mills and, most notably, Mitchell Herman.

Unfortunately, none of the candidates were given an opportunity to answer the highly unorthodox question from Nathan as the time for the open forum ran out. Or maybe, that was a blessing. The reporters from the *Daily Mirror* had instantly loved the question and quickly approached the candidates, making quick promises to speak with the town council members at a later date.

“Come on,” Emma said, standing up and motioning for Henry and Regina to follow her. “Let’s get out of here.”

Wordlessly, the former mayor, her son, and Dr. Hopper followed the sheriff out a side door, bypassing the incredibly excited crowd, and walked towards the parking lot.

After zipping her jacket and stuffing her hands in the front pockets of her jeans, Emma kicked a stray pebble off the sidewalk. She tried not to shiver at the cold night air or miss the radiating warmth from Regina. She did, however, notice the reporter, Gene Gatsby, hurrying towards her, crying, “Sheriff Swan, just one quick question, please!”

The former mayor tried to subtly hurry the sheriff along to her Beetle, but Mr. Gatsby was practically running for them.
“Oh crap,” Emma muttered, realizing they couldn’t make it to the car without outright running. Although hilarious, it wouldn’t really be professional. She pleadingly glanced at Regina and muttered, “What do I do?”

Henry’s brow furrowed as he looked between his mothers. This was a new development. He curiously glanced at Archie, who didn’t seem so surprised.

“Tell him you have yet to make a decision and will agree to do an interview later,” the former mayor hissed, stepping away from the sheriff to stand next to her son and Dr. Hopper.

“Sheriff, what did you think of the mayoral debate?” Gene asked, trying to catch his breath. He flipped over a couple of pages in his notepad.

“It was a lot to take in,” Emma stammered. Quickly, she regained her confidence and added, “I’ll have to think on it.”

“Of course, of course,” the reporter nodded, jotting down a few notes. “Do you have a preferred candidate?” His eyes were bright as they darted between the four people. Luckily, he caught them all under a lamppost, giving him enough light to write.

Frowning and slightly irritated by the whole situation, the sheriff crossed her arms, her hands instantly missing their warm pockets. “I don’t think it’s ethical for me to announce my—.”

“Emma!” shouted Mary Margaret, waving to her daughter. “Come join us for the photo!” She took a few more steps towards them.

Adamantly, Emma shook her head. “I can’t right now.” She took a step back. “It’s late,” she automatically apologized to Gene. “And it’s a school night—way past Henry’s bedtime.” And Regina’s, she thought.

“Oh, of course,” the reporter blankly responded, digging in his coat for a business card. “Give me a call at your earliest convenience. Everyone will want to know what the sheriff has to say about her father running for mayor!” With that, he turned and trotted towards the school teacher, obviously looking for an interview.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” the sheriff said, sliding the business card in her pocket and ushering everyone towards the car. She was exhausted and mentally burned out. “I’ll give you a ride home, Archie,” she offered, unlocking the passenger side door.

“That would be greatly appreciated, Emma,” Dr. Hopper said, watching as Regina and Henry climbed in the back seat. He smiled to himself, climbing in and fastening his seatbelt. There was hope for this family yet.

~SQ~

END OF PART 3
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

**Author's Note:** Since we don't have a complete understanding of how one becomes a sheriff or deputy in the State of Maine, we're taking some obvious liberties, just like they do in the show. Also, we fleshed out a bit of Emma's backstory while working with what we know. Nothing too extreme, just something to explain how she got to where she was in the pilot.

**Thank You:** We would also like to extend heartfelt thanks to everyone who has taken the time to read, to follow, to favorite, to leave kudos, and to leave a review for our story. Your interest and enjoyment is quite inspiring and greatly appreciated.

~SQ~

PART 4

"Your handwriting is still deplorable," the former mayor said, glaring at a barely legible incident report. She readjusted her glasses in a vain attempt to better read the document.

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff continued filling out another form, a complaint about a hoarder on Pine Tree Lane. She sheepishly glanced over the brunette's latest outfit that finally included functional footwear, even if they were five hundred dollar Prada loafers. "It's not like anyone actually reads them," she mumbled.

With a huff, Regina put the report on top of Emma's file pile. "This special election is taking far too long." She had suspicions that Mrs. Frost was perhaps stalling the proceedings, maybe even working with Albert Spencer. During the debate, the lieutenant-mayor, Ms. Ginger, seemed quite ready to pass the reins on to someone else. She again wondered what could've persuaded either woman to remove their names from the ballet and perhaps dissuaded others from being added.

"Who do you think will be elected?" the sheriff asked conversationally. She signed off on her report with a flourish and dropped the form on the pile for Ruby to file later.

"It's difficult to say," the former mayor said, taking off her glasses. As she folded them, she retrieved their case out of her purse. "However, your endorsement will probably swing quite a few voters."

"I can't endorse anybody. That's unethical," Emma stated flatly. She'd been annoyed by Mr. Gatsby's none-too-subtle hints for an interview after the debate. Handing his card to her last night was one thing, but did he really have to call this morning?

"No one will accept that excuse," Regina smirked, sitting back. She was starting to enjoy their conversations of late. Although ineloquent at times, she appreciated Emma's sharp and candid wit.
"Excuse?" the sheriff repeated, frowning and dropping her forehead on her desktop. She groaned in frustration. To top it off, her parents had been particularly annoying the last few days before the debate. She could've blown the whole thing off if not for them calling and texting. "It's the truth," she said, her words muffled.

"That's not what everyone's been whispering every time we walk into Granny's," the former mayor calmly explained, tilting her head curiously. She paused before adding, "The politics of the Enchanted Forest region were simplistic, at best. Everyone assumes you'll pick your father and that you just don't want to admit it, that being the fair thing to do."

Lifting her head and resting her chin on her palm, Emma sighed. "That's unethical too, isn't it?" Certainly a father-daughter team in a small town municipality created all types of legal and moral issues, not just bad movies.

"Not to the royals, however, those who've embraced the ideals of democracy may have issue with the entire situation," Regina explained. Young Nathan's short speech during the open forum had been quite clear. "And as we already know, Mr. French has already taken offence."

"I don't know what to do," the sheriff quietly admitted, not looking at the former mayor but blankly starring at her desk calendar. All of this was outside her scope of experience. "I'm screwed no matter who I pick," she stated with a hint of despair, looking at Regina.

"Not necessarily," the former mayor replied. Leaning over, she pulled out the folded main section of the day's Daily Mirror from her purse. "But before making any decisions, it certainly wouldn't hurt to further evaluate the candidates." Noting Emma's disbelieving look about the paper, she rolled her eyes skyward and sighed heavily. "For the last time, I didn't tell Sidney to print that story." She leaned forward and dropped the paper on the desk.

Slowly, the sheriff pulled the folded newspaper towards her and opened it, revealing a large black-and-white photo of all four candidates, their spouses and the town council. "Mayoral Debate a Success!" the headline read. The subheading said, "Surprising questions leave the candidates in a tight spot." She snorted and continued to glance through the front page articles.

Glancing down the hall, Regina spotted Ruby carrying a somewhat large box into the station. Curious, she stood up and joined the waitress at her desk.

"Hey, you'll never guess what I found at Storybrooke Sporting Goods," Ruby grinned, setting the dusty cardboard box on the desk with a heavy thunk. Its contents quietly rattled. With great excitement, she pulled open the folded flaps and exclaimed, "Clay pigeons!" She picked up a disc and handed it to the former mayor. "Mr. Hamilton said he might have a trap or two in storage. He'll let me know after the weekend."

"You certainly didn't waste any time, Miss Lucas," the former mayor commented with a soft smile. She handed the target back, and with a perplexed look, she inquired, "But why bring them here?"

The bed and breakfast where the waitress had a room in the basement was much closer to the sporting goods store than the station.

Refolding the flaps, Ruby had a sheepish look as she explained, "If Granny finds them, she'll ask a million questions until finally Googling it. Then, she'll want to try it, and we won't have anything." The bed and breakfast where the waitress had a room in the basement was much closer to the sporting goods store than the station.

"What the hell!" Emma shrieked while hastily flipping the newspaper to another page. It was amazing she didn't rip it.
Both women immediately turned. The waitress sighed knowingly and commented, "You didn't tell her about the articles."

Nodding, the former mayor sat down in the witness chair by Ruby's desk. She gracefully crossed her legs while casually saying, "I thought it would be better for her to read it for herself." In her defense, she had hinted to Emma during breakfast that she should look at the paper.

"Probably," Ruby muttered, dropping down onto her chair and turning on her computer after unzipping her jacket. Noticing the absence of the ever-present high heels, she sassily smirked, "No more heels, huh? I was wondering why you seemed shorter."

"The Sheriff has decreed these to be my *work* shoes," Regina said, rolling her eyes. After the incident with Nicolas, she finally relented and dug several pairs of rarely worn flats out of the back of her closet. Regina was quite amused by it all, especially by her cashmere dress socks.

Not too surprisingly, she and Ruby settled into an easy conversation, which seemed to be happening more frequently. Their topics were gradually becoming less cliché and awkward as they learned about their shared interests. The waitress didn't fully understand how this had happened, but she ran with it. Weirdly enough, she was actually starting to like Regina—not that she'd ever personally met the infamous Evil Queen. However, she thought it best not to mention Mary Margaret or tell Mary Margaret about their camaraderie. Ever.

Occasionally, the pair would glance over at Emma, still grumbling as she continued to read the newspaper. They idly chatted until the phone rang, which Ruby cheerfully answered and effortlessly assisted the distraught citizen. Leaving the waitress to her work, Regina slipped into the sheriff's office, grabbed her laptop bag, and took over the unclaimed desk by the windows. Zoning everything else out, she continued her hunt for information on Greg Mendell—after all, she had something to prove to Ms. Swan.

Every once in a while, Ruby would glance at Regina and wonder if she'd ever get that proficient with computers. Sure, she knew her way around them but to remember all those shortcut keys? The former mayor hardly used the touchpad.

"Hey, Ruby," David greeted with a bright smile, coming around the corner into the main office area. He glanced briefly at Regina, saying nothing to her. After hanging up his leather jacket, he settled down at his desk.

Pursing her lips, the waitress glanced between the two. Sooner or later, something was going to break. She just hoped she wasn't around for it.

Hearing her deputy's voice, Emma's head shot up from reading the paper. Her eyes narrowed at his obnoxiously cheerful demeanor. Gritting her teeth, she stomped over to his desk, ignoring the two arguing townsfolk marching down the hall into the station.

"Sheriff!" one of them called out, hoping to grab the woman's attention.

"One minute," Emma briskly answered before slapping the newspaper on David's desk. "What the hell is this?" she demanded, resting her fisted hands on her hips.

Confused, the deputy shifted in his seat and briefly looked at the paper. "Today's paper," he supplied, not understanding.

Spotting the two distraught gentlemen, Ruby jumped up from her seat and approached them. "How may I help you?" she politely inquired, looking between the two men. However, the newcomers
seemed distracted by the argument going on across the room between Emma and David.

"Deputy Lucas," Regina said, snapping her laptop closed and rising from her seat. "May I suggest relocating Mr. Bridges and Mr. Fletcher to the interview room until Sheriff Swan is free?" Things were perilous enough in Storybrooke without people realizing the unrest that existed within the Charming clan.

"Good idea," Ruby immediately replied. She gestured for the two men to follow her as she walked towards the storage/evidence locker/interrogation room. "The room's just over here, gentlemen. I'd be happy to take your statements."

Both men looked at each other before slowly following the waitress, occasionally looking back over their shoulder, their curiosity peaked.

Snatching back the paper, the sheriff hastily opened to the appropriate page and jabbed at the offending quote. Trying to calm down, she breathed heavily through her nose.

Leaning forward, David reread the quote and sighed. "We didn't mean anything by it, and it's obviously not what we intended," he said softly, catching a glimpse of their audience. When he looked back at his daughter, he knew she didn't believe him. "Paraphrasing gets tricky."

"It's a direct quote," Emma countered, feeling hurt enough to punch something. "From Mary Margaret," she added, crossing her arms. Shaking her head at the deputy's gaping mouth, she turned away.

Quickly standing up, the deputy gently grabbed the sheriff's biceps, forcing her to look at him. "We weren't expecting to be interviewed. It all sort of took us by surprise, and we got swept away," he said, smiling weakly.

Roughly yanking her arm free, Emma shook her head and almost growled, as she said, "That's not good enough."

Sluggishly, Mr. Bridges and Mr. Fletcher entered the interview room where Ruby waited, impatiently holding the door open for them. But once they were inside, the waitress quickly shut the door and started asking them questions.

Pointing at herself, the sheriff continued, "I'm your daughter. You're supposed to support me and encourage me—at the very least, back me up." Her eyes were watery. She couldn't hold in the hurt as she said, "I didn't even know you were running for mayor until Stephen Doggle told Regina." She took a step back, holding her hands up when David reached out for her again.

Desperate to explain, the deputy had reached out to his daughter. He thought if he could just hug her everything would be okay. "I made that decision long before you and Mary Margaret even got back. A lot happened while you were away—."

Pursing her lips, Regina glanced at the interrogation room window. Mr. Fletcher was avidly watching Emma and David while Mr. Bridges prattled on to Ruby. She glanced around. There was nowhere to go. So, she sat back down and opened her laptop.

"And you didn't tell either of us a damned thing," Emma righteously accused, her voice echoing in the office space. She had wanted to believe and trust in her father so badly. With hints of distressed sorrow, she asked, "Or was it saved for pillow talk after you two got done screwing each other?" Quickly, she stepped back again, saying, "I don't even care. I have a job to do, and so do you." Turning, she caught the former mayor's gaze and nodded towards the observation room.
Regina simply stood up and followed. Before rounding the corner into the hall, she caught David's heated glare at them both. Quietly closing the door behind her, she stood next to Emma behind the one-way glass, looking into the interrogation room. The problem between the men was thankfully an uncomplicated one.

". . . his damn cow!" cursed Sam Fletcher, pointing at his neighbor. "It trampled my fence."

Rolling his eyes, Dean Bridges nodded and explained to Ruby, "I had her tied up in the yard and she got loose. It wasn't like it was intentional." He was just glad someone was listening to him. "I only turned my back for a few minutes, and she managed to chew through the rope."

"What was a cow doing in your yard, anyway?" Fletcher demanded, crossing his arms.

"I told you, you nincompoop!" Bridges spat, glaring at his annoying neighbor. "My boy's trailer got a busted axle on his way to the vet. I was keeping her until he could hitch another to pick her up."

"Yeah, right," Sam scoffed, rolling his eyes.

Slapping the table and startling the two men, Ruby effectively stopped another bout of bickering. "This seems pretty straightforward," she commented. "I'm not sure why you had to come in." She quickly wrote down some notes on the incident form. "Since you were responsible for the cow at the time, Mr. Bridges, you are responsible for the damages—."

"Ha!" Sam merrily taunted, interrupting the waitress.

Getting red in the face, Dean instantly became flustered and stammered at Ruby, "Now, I already offered to repair the section of fence that the cow tore up." He jabbed his finger into the table top. "But I am not paying to replace the entire thing!"

The waitress cocked an eyebrow and looked to Mr. Fletcher. "Really?" she asked snarkily, not quite believing.

"It's a reasonable request," Sam said, shrugging his shoulders. "The cow managed to bend several line posts in an integral section. The whole structural integrity of the fence has been compromised."

Rolling his eyes, Mr. Bridges sneered, "Rust compromised that fence a long time ago."

"Did you happen to bring any pictures of the damage?" Ruby inquired, looking between them. When they simply shook their heads, she sighed and stood up. "Wait here," she instructed, stepping out of the room. She walked into the observation room and handed Emma the incident form.

Reading it over, the sheriff shrugged and handed the form back. "This seems pretty straightforward to me. Each of them needs to provide a statement, and cite Mr. Bridges to replace only the bent line posts."

"Alright," Ruby said, turning to leave.

Emma and Regina watched as the waitress explained what was required in their statements and how the situation was going to be resolved. Mr. Bridges was quite content, given that he'd already offered to do exactly what the sheriff ordered. However, Mr. Fletcher was a tad irritated that a "dirty troll" got away with destroying his property, but nonetheless, he followed Ruby's instructions.

"Don't tell me, Mr. Bridges is an actual troll," the sheriff deadpanned, raising an eyebrow. She...
looked at the former mayor expectantly.

Nodding, Regina faintly shrugged. "He is, and the cow probably was left unattended for so long because of his IBS." She paused and added, "It's not widely known that trolls suffer from it, and that it's predominantly the reason they live under bridges." She tilted her head and looked at Emma. "It's more sanitary."

Unsure how to respond, the sheriff's face contorted into several different expressions. She cleared her throat and rejoined with, "Not for the people who live downstream."

"Quite," the former mayor replied, watching the three people through the glass. "It's a chronic condition and makes them tetchy on a good day." After a few minutes of silence, she tentatively asked, "Do you want to talk about the newspaper articles?"

"Not really," Emma quickly countered. She exhaled heavily and added, "But it's messed up." Her mouth twisted as she desperately willed herself not to cry.

"Despite what Albert Spencer said, you are qualified to be sheriff," Regina said seriously. She slowly turned to face Emma but made no other move. Her brow furrowed as she confidently said, "I would've never allowed it if you weren't, Emma."

Immediately, the sheriff's gaze snapped to the former mayor's and intently studied her. She broke eye contact and looked down at her shoes. Shuffling her feet, she said, "That means a lot, Regina, considering you hate me."

"I don't hate you," the former mayor corrected. She pursed her lips for a moment, weighing her next words. "I was afraid of you." It had cost her a great deal to say it. She wrapped her arms around herself and faced the one-way glass.

Glancing over at Regina, Emma watched her for a few moments before lifting her head up as she resumed watching Ruby work. She swallowed and nervously murmured, "Thank you."

~SQ~

Closing the door to his room at the bed and breakfast, Greg Mendell breathed out a sigh of relief, dropping his duffel onto the full-size bed. He glanced around and appreciated the dim atmosphere. It suited his mood. Then, he pulled his cellphone out of his coat pocket. Scrolling through his short list of contacts, he called Her.

"Hey," Mendell said when she picked up. "Are you free to talk?" He listened as she rattled off what seemed like a hundred questions. It made him smile. "It's all good." Paranoid, he lowered his voice and moved over to the window overlooking downtown. "I think I found it," he said with a huge grin, his eyes scanning the horizon.

"Yeah," Greg responded to her excitement. "When do you think you can get up here?" He tried not to growl at her answer. "Fine," he grunted, leaning on the window frame. "I need you to transfer some money into my traveling account." He pursed his lips in thought. "About five grand should cover it." He listened to her talk for a few moments and walked back to the bed.
"That's interesting," he commented, unzipping his duffel and pulling out yesterday's newspaper. Opening it, he searched the large photo for any familiar faces. He didn't find any and tossed the paper on the bed to read later. "No, I didn't find her yet, but I will. Is the trailer ready to go? Good, good."

Greg's eyebrows rose in surprise as he continued to listen. "A trigger?" he snorted amused. *This is like a bad TV show,* he thought. "Did HQ specify where or what it could be?" Walking towards the door, he explained, "My car's still being worked on, waiting on a part or something. So, my mobility is pretty restricted at the moment."

"Of course," Mendell smiled, his eyes brightening. "I'll be careful." He paused for a moment and added, "I'm going to do some exploring until you get here." His brow furrowed as he listened to her. Then, he sneered, but the look quickly faded as he said, "I love you, too."

Ending the call, Greg returned the phone to his pocket and glanced around the room one more time. If this was going to be home for a while longer, he was going to need a few more supplies from his car. Hopefully, they were still in his trunk and undamaged. Opening the door and locking it behind him, he left to start his real work.

~SQ~

Slamming shut the driver's side door, Sheriff Swan stared over the roof of the cruiser at the former mayor. "I still don't understand why you wanted us to take this call," she grumbled, still highly annoyed. "We could be home learning magic or watching TV." Or just relaxing, she thought.

Regina rolled her eyes as she stepped onto the sidewalk. As she waited for Emma to join her, she sighed. "You're far too emotional for any magical training," she explained, again.

Practically stomping onto the sidewalk, Emma firmly responded, "I'm *not* emotional. I'm perturbed." As Regina raised her eyebrows and tilted her head with a slight smirk, Emma immediately pursed her lips and harrumphed, heading towards the reported address.

"Same difference, Dear," the former mayor commented, following. She glanced up at the sky and noted the thickening, greying clouds creeping overhead.

"Whatever," the sheriff mumbled, knowing the former mayor was right. She looked around for any sign of the alleged noise disturbance. Stopping in front of a large, rundown Victorian-style house, she tilted her head and listened. "I'm not hearing anything." Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary.

The pair climbed a small set of steps up to the house's front porch. Emma pressed the doorbell with a scowl firmly in place, wondering if this was another false alarm. However, her annoyance was quickly forgotten when a rather tall, muscular man with light brown hair in a hairnet wearing a severely faded and stained t-shirt, washed-out jeans with a few rips around the knees, heavy, black boots and a very clean, frilly pastel apron answered the door.

"Yeah?" the man grunted, narrowing his hazel eyes suspiciously. "What seems to be the problem, Sheriff?" When his gaze drifted to his right and instantly recognized the former mayor, his mouth gaped slightly before he spluttered, "Your Majesty, err Madam Mayor?" He quickly pushed the
screen door open and gestured for both women to enter, bowing slightly. "Please, come in."

"Thank you, Monty," the former mayor said graciously, stepping over the threshold.

Confused, albeit highly amused, Emma followed Regina inside, smirking as several grown men hurriedly fumbled about, straightening up the place. Not that it would do much good, the place wasn't filthy, per say, just old, in need of some serious TLC and perhaps some furniture that wasn't found on the curb.

Monty Elmwood quickly took off his apron and hairnet. Passing them to a lanky Bruce Farmer, he quickly whispered something and pointed towards the kitchen.

A rather surly looking Bobby Milton with a long salt-and-pepper ponytail and a predominately round belly opened his mouth to address Regina but stopped himself, snapping his mouth shut. His brow furrowed in intense consideration. Wordlessly, he gestured to a wingback armchair that someone else had hastily covered with a plush maroon blanket to hide the stained upholstery. "Forgive me," he said, his voice a low, rumbling timbre. "I'm uncertain as to the proper protocol for addressing you, Your Majesty."

Emma would've laughed if the room wasn't full with so many rough-looking men, even a few teenage boys. There had to be at least fifteen of them cramming into the living room or leaning in from the various doorways, blocking every avenue of escape. Suddenly, she started to feel very uncomfortable. She glanced at Regina as she dropped down onto the sofa, next to the former mayor.

"Back up," ordered Monty at everyone, taking a tea service from Bruce and carrying it to the coffee table. "We shall address Her Majesty as we always have, Bobby—with respect," he said firmly, gently placing the tray on the table. He glared over his shoulder at the loiterers, sending them all scurrying from the living room.

The sheriff frowned, watching this Elmwood guy prepare the former mayor's tea. She couldn't get over his precise and fluid movements. How did he know what Regina liked in her tea, anyway?

"I apologize, Ma'am," Monty explained, sliding a homemade cookie onto Regina's saucer before passing it to her. "We've been quite," he paused and glanced at Emma before continuing, "anxious to resume our service." Wordlessly pouring another cup of tea, he politely offered it to Emma.

Offering a slight smile in thanks, the sheriff accepted the cup and took a tentative sip. She shuddered at the bitterness and proceeded to spoon sugar into her brew.

After a sip, the former mayor firmly reminded, "We've already discussed this, Monty." Frowning slightly at Emma, her gaze shifted back to Monty as she lightly inquired, "Has the new arrangement been unsatisfactory?"

"Of course not, Your Majesty," Elmwood stammered, sitting down on a mismatched sofa across from the sheriff. He was slightly put off by his queen's composed demeanor. His eyes cut to Emma, and he sighed. Her presence certainly made this conversation unnecessarily difficult. Squaring his shoulders, he boldly stated, "We're concerned about recent developments."

The sheriff grabbed a cookie and promptly ate half of it. "These are really good," she complimented while chewing and pretending not to be listening. But of course, she was.

"Thank you, Sheriff," Monty replied out of politeness, growing annoyed by Emma's mere presence. "I baked them myself," he stated brusquely then paused and added, "from scratch." No manners, he
thought, frowning.

If there was a message in his words, the sheriff blatantly ignored it while nodding her appreciation for the treat as she finished her cookie and promptly took another off the tray.

Sighing, Regina took a sip of her own tea. "Then what, precisely, are your concerns, Monty?" she asked before nibbling on her own cookie. They really were quite good.

"Forgive me," he said, bringing his gaze back to the former mayor. He softly explained, "I don't feel comfortable discussing such matters in the sheriff's company." Watching out of the corner of his eye, he saw Emma swipe another cookie. He scowled and narrowed his eyes. She was just like Bobby.

Setting her cup and saucer on the coffee table, the former mayor frowned and glanced between the two. Her eyes cut across the room, catching several others still lingering. She pursed her lips, realizing she had to tell them. These were some of her most trusted and loyal guards—several of whom had been with her since the wedding, like Monty Elmwood. Leaning back, she linked her hands over her lap, weighing her options and their consequences.

Looking between Regina and Monty, Emma finished her last cookie and downed the rest of her tea. Who were these people? Was Regina going to tell them? She swallowed at Elmwood's piercing glower. How were they going to react to it? Not well, she mused.

"There has been an unforeseen development," Regina explained, not looking at anyone directly but simply staring at the tea service. This had to be handled delicately.

Listening to his unusually calm queen, Monty waited, locking his gaze onto the sheriff. He didn't know what was going on; however, he figured it had something to do with Emma Swan or her family. He leaned forward, ready to expel the offensive interloper upon the order.

Frowning under Elmwood's heated glare, the sheriff's brow furrowed. Uneasy, she shifted in her seat, catching the curious looks from the guys around the dining room table in the next room. "Um," she rasped, glancing around again with wide eyes, "it was a total accident."

Not appreciating the declaration, Monty immediately tensed, his large hands gripping the ripped fabric of his jeans. Still, he waited.

Sighing and momentarily ignoring Emma, Regina calmly said, "Inadvertently, Miss Swan magically bound us."

Swallowing, Emma pressed herself back against the sofa already planning a countermove but Monty didn't budge. He didn't even blink, which was rather unnerving.

"Please elaborate, Ma'am," Elmwood respectfully requested. His magical knowledge may be limited, but he wasn't a fool. He would always wait for his queen's order.

"As the sheriff stated, it was an accident on her part," the former mayor replied. She leaned forward, refreshing her cup of tea. Fixing it, she continued, "She was tricked by Mr. Gold." She ignored Monty's low, soft growl. His hatred of the imp was well known.

"What exactly does this mean?" Monty asked. His eyes moved back to his queen, his gaze full of compassion. He had hoped this place would bring her peace.

"It means," Regina drawled, "that we're tethered to each other with a grand distance of twelve feet." She met his gaze and knew he understood the ramifications.
Solemnly, Elmwood nodded as he accepted her words as truth, but he clearly didn't like it. If she could've freed herself, she would've done it by now. Emma Swan was apparently a fool, much like her parents.

Relief washed over Emma as she watched Monty back down, but she still saw the accusations in his eyes. Who is he? she wondered again. Relaxing slowly, she sheepishly smiled and grabbed another cookie. She deserved it.

With a scathing comment resting on his tongue, Elmwood ignored the urge to say it and turned his attention away from the sheriff. Nothing would come from provoking his queen's anger. He asked, "What would you have of us, Your Majesty?"

Regina pursed her lips. "Drop the titles," she remarked, sipping her tea. She was tired of having this conversation with them. "There are no royals here."

Smirking at the former mayor, Monty scoffed, "The mayoral debate proves otherwise."

Amused, Regina cocked an eyebrow, looking at Emma over her tea cup. "That may very well be the case. However, old world values won't stand unchallenged for much longer." The board was set and the game was already afoot. She'd be damned if she was going to lose this time. "And there's another avenue of authority to ensure equality."

Quickly, the sheriff looked between the former mayor and Elmwood, her apprehension returning. "Wait, what?" she asked slightly confused. "I'm just the sheriff."

"Exactly," agreed the former mayor. "In this world, that position offers you and those under you a considerable degree of autonomy." Finishing her tea, she returned her cup to the service. "Why do you think people are so interested in your choice for the new mayor?"

"Yeah," Emma scoffed, rolling her eyes. "The mayor will still control my budget and can easily make my life hell." She pointedly glared at Regina.

"Then pick someone who will give you what you want," Monty supplied, understanding. If the ideas of democracy appealed to him, then it must certainly appeal to others—and not just the animal folk.

Shaking her head, the sheriff said, "That's not how it's supposed to work." She grabbed another cookie.

Regina sighed, slightly exasperated. "Being raised in this world, you of all people should understand the occasional necessity of the behind-the-scenes dealings and under-the-table maneuvering." She rubbed her left temple. In another life, she had painfully learned these lessons. After all, a kingdom under her rule prospered in spite of her being labeled evil. It was how she held onto half of Leopold's kingdom after being banished by Snow White. "You've certainly witnessed how one group can easily overpower others."

"But," Emma started then stopped and finished her cookie. She looked down at her empty hands. Part of her realized Regina was right. People did it all the time. She sighed, feeling despondent. "I don't know who to pick."

"Perhaps you should ask yourself who you don't want, first," the former mayor gently suggested. Her choice to pick someone other than David had to be her own idea.

Confused, Monty's brow furrowed, looking between the two women. This was a queer turn of events, Regina demonstrating great patience in guiding Emma. However, he would always respect
his queen's wishes, even if that meant tolerating Emma Swan.

Suddenly, the tranquil silence of the neighborhood was assaulted by a wailing electric guitar, drums and, eventually, a bass guitar. The entire house shook as the tea service rattled on top of the coffee table, although no one could hear it over the noise.

"That's probably why you were called," shouted Monty, standing. He motioned for the two women to follow him towards the back of the house. Casually, he pointed for Bruce to clear the coffee table.

_Yup_, Emma thought as she walked through the kitchen, feeling the vibrations through the floor. This was why five people called about a noise disturbance in the middle of the day. Upon exiting the back door, she laughed at the handful of guys playing in the garage. She watched as Monty walked up to them and pointed behind him, drawing their attention to her and Regina. She frowned, however, when they stopped and Regina clapped. Dogs were barking in the distance.

"I can appreciate all music," the former mayor easily supplied, sparing an amused glance at Emma's surprise.

Shaking her head, the sheriff turned back to observe as the garage band stowed their instruments. "They don't have to stop playing," she called out. "Just turn it down so the houses don't shake." She'd have to research the appropriate decibel levels for the suburbs. Maybe she could get the former mayor to do it. "This is Maine, not LA. People aren't used to earthquakes," she added cheekily.

Chuckling, the drummer gave Emma a punch-line drum fill, amusing everyone. The musicians dutifully made some adjustments to their equipment and started playing at a much more tolerable level for an in-town garage band. The music was still rather loud when standing in the driveway a few feet from the garage. Emma felt the vibrations in her gut, but it was more than an acceptable volume level. Nodding at Monty, she grinned and gave a thumbs-up. This would work and keep everyone happy—or so she hoped as she got into the band's tune.

"It's about time someone came out here!" bellowed Theodore Johnston, stomping up the driveway while carrying his chihuahua. His eyes immediately locked onto the sheriff. "I've been calling for months about these hoodlums." He angrily pointed at the garage.

Taking a step towards his bastard neighbor, Elmwood's nostrils flared, but he stopped when the former mayor gently touched his arm. He scowled but obediently stepped back. His eyes shifted toward the sheriff, not trusting her.

Pursing her lips, Emma moved to halt Theodore's approach. She calmly said, "The situation is under control, Mr. Johnston. There's really no reason for you to get involved."

"It's _not_ resolved," blustered Theodore, pointing at the garage with his free hand. "These people are a menace. I demand they be relocated." He stopped and glared at Monty. "Or jailed," he added.

By this time, the musicians had stepped out of the garage and were standing behind Regina and Monty.

Smiling, the sheriff continued, "I realize their practice has been a little loud in the past, but I've talked with them. I think we can reach a happy medium."

"They make noise all blasted day," barked Johnston. He cuddled his dog against his chest. Looking down at the chihuahua, he cooed, "Duchess has gotten an ulcer from their unholy racket." He
scratched the dog under her chin.

Emma's eyebrows shot up. She hated chihuahuas. Hearing someone snort, she glanced over her shoulder.

The bass guitar player, who had short sandy blonde hair, snickered and said, "Maybe if you didn't treat the dog like a fashion accessory, she'd have more confidence and not twitch at every twitter of a bird."

Theodore's face turned bright red as he breathed heavily through his nose. "Duchess is a delicate creature," he proclaimed. "Of course, a social delinquent like you wouldn't understand the complexities of caring for such a being." He absently nestled the dog under his chin.

Seeing the guitar player take a step forward, the sheriff immediately stepped between the two, holding her hands up. The chihuahua air-snapped and growled at her hand. Frowning, she said, "There's no reason for anyone to get worked up." Looking between the two men, she added, "A complaint was issued and it has been resolved."

"So you're going to relocate them?" Johnston asked, eyeing the weather-worn house with distaste. He considered the prospect of buying the property, bulldozing it and expanding his garden.

"No," Emma replied, facing the idiot with the dog. "They haven't done anything wrong." Technically given the town's noise ordinance, the band could rock all they like between the hours of 6 am to 10 pm. She elaborated, crossing her arms, "As a courtesy, I simply asked them to turn it down. They agreed; end of story."

"I see," sneered Theodore. He was clearly disappointed as well as angry. "Well," he sniffed haughtily, "I suppose I'll simply call your father." With his threat made, he turned on his heel and sashayed down the driveway. "He'll certainly know how to deal with these ruffians."

Angry, the sheriff gritted her teeth and stomped forward, but a gentle grip on her elbow gave her pause. She turned and saw the former mayor shaking her head. With a long sigh, she glared at Johnston until he disappeared around a corner.

"Man, what a douchebag," commented the sandy haired bass guitarist, walking towards the garage.

"Diego," snapped Monty appalled, his eyes cutting towards Regina who just rolled her eyes.

Emma snorted, resting her hands on her hips. "No arguments here," she said with a smirk.

After a shrug, the drummer grinned and explained, "Mr. Johnston may just be worried about his carnival glass collection. It's housed in an antique curio cabinet, and the houses in this neighborhood do have very uneven floors."

"When the hell were you in his house, Alex?" asked the lead guitarist with a scowl, grabbing the drummer's arm and dragging him towards the garage.

Monty rolled his eyes skyward, sighing heavily.

Flinching at his brother's tone, Alex allowed himself to be pulled away. He waved at the former mayor and sheriff before saying, "I helped Mrs. Johnston carry in groceries a few times. She's super nice."

Intrigued, the sheriff's gaze darted around, watching everyone.
Both were in the garage when Alex's brother ordered, "I want you to stay away from the Johnstons, Alex."

Unable to contain her amusement any longer, Emma chuckled and shook her head. She smiled as she asked Regina, "Who are these people?"

Looking at Elmwood fondly, the former mayor gave him an honest smile as she answered, "Some of my most trusted guard."

Just as the sheriff was about to ask another question, the band started playing again, and Bobby Milton came out of the house with a handful of cookies.

"It's still hard to believe Theodore's actually married to a woman," Bobby commented, joining the three in the middle of the driveway. He stuffed an entire cookie in his mouth and offered some to Regina and Emma.

"Thanks," the sheriff eagerly acknowledged, taking two. "These are so good," she cooed, before taking a bite. She smirked as the former mayor easily accepted one.

"I hope you left some for the others," Monty scolded, knowing the cookies were more than likely already gone.

As if a peace offering, Milton offered the last cookie to Elmwood. "As soon as Bruce put the tray down, they were gone." He smiled.

Taking the cookie, Monty shook his head and muttered, "The more things change…".

Quickly finishing her second cookie, Emma decided to go for broke. "So, you're all guards?"

Bobby harrumphed. "Guards," he disgustedly scoffed, shaking his head. He brushed the cookie crumbs off his belly. The term was demeaning.

Rolling her eyes, Regina elegantly gestured towards Monty and formally introduced him. "Montague Elmwood, my Captain of the Guard." Pointing at Bobby, she said, "My first lieutenant, Robert Milton."

Immediately, both men snapped to attention, clicking their booted heels together, and gave the sheriff a slight bow. It was rather comical from two guys in stained t-shirts and ripped jeans.

Listening, Emma could easily sense the pride Regina had in these people. She effortlessly rattled off the names of the three jamming in the garage: The base guitarist was Diego Flores. The drummer was Alexander Sirtis, and his older brother, Jason, was the lead guitarist. They obviously meant a great deal to her and vice versa.

And in typical Emma Swan fashion, she blurted out the first question that came to mind. "If you're her guards, why didn't you save her from that mob when the curse broke?" Mary Margaret had sworn that Regina didn't have any allies in Storybrooke. She also had accused the Evil Queen of taking all of the hearts from those who served her. Instantly, she regretted asking.

"Oh, brother," Bobby muttered, rolling his eyes as Monty scowled. He absently drummed on his belly to Alex's beat. "Well, you'd already gotten there and whisked her away to the jail." He shrugged, glancing briefly at Monty.

The sheriff nodded, taking note of the intense staring contest between the former mayor and Elmwood. She wouldn't think a queen would tolerate such behavior, especially an evil one. "I
promised Henry I'd make sure she was okay," she explained, glancing between everyone.

"What's done is done," Regina solemnly intoned, turning away from Monty and walking down the driveway, signaling the matter closed. She hadn't always dealt with the consequences of her life very well. She was still alive, but certain pains refused to leave her, which continually clouded her judgment.

Emma was quick to fall into step beside the former mayor. Curiously, she looked over her shoulder at Monty and Bobby, studying their reactions to the sudden departure.

"We shall not abandon our posts, Ma'am," Elmwood called out over the music. Preparing for a fight, he lifted his chin and squared his shoulders as his queen stopped. Thrice she had offered them their freedom, and each time, they remained.

The sheriff skidded to a halt, avidly watching the former mayor's profile. Her brow furrowed as she attempted to discern what was going on or going to happen next. It was strangely exciting.

Her gaze dropping down to the cracked asphalt of the drive, Regina took a slow breath. She half turned and looked back at her captain. If he hadn't yet, she knew Monty would never leave her. Death would take him first. She searched his eyes. Without looking, she knew Bobby felt the same and, undoubtedly, so would the others. She still, after all this time, didn't understand it, but she would honor it. Slowly bowing her head, she signaled her acceptance, turned away again and resumed walking.

Confused, Emma quickly looked between the former mayor and the two men. She tilted her head and pursed her lips as she again pondered these guards. Questions came to mind as she discovered even more contradictions between what she was told and what she knew versus what she'd learned about Regina Mills. All of it was going to make her head explode.

Elmwood and Milton seemed very pleased, if their grins were anything to go by.

"Miss Swan," Regina called when the prickling sensation started. She looked over her shoulder and gestured towards the cruiser. "If you're ready to leave...," she trailed off as Emma jogged towards her.

Out of the corner of the sheriff's eye, a guy wearing a jean jacket leaning against the railing of the front porch caught her attention. Slowing to a walk, she squinted to examine the large graphic on the back of his jacket. It consisted of three nested squares with white outlines broken into quarters and flames rising from a white bar above them. In the center, and overlapping the quartered squares, was a bird with its wings extended in flight. It looked like maybe a raven or a crow. The entire thing was encased on a solid black field with a banner above that read 'Storybrooke' and another banner below which read 'Crows Guard.' It reminded Emma of the sort of heraldry she'd seen in movies.

Rounding the corner onto the sidewalk, Emma snorted when she noticed a couple of motorcycles parked on the street. "How'd I miss that?" she mused, getting into the cruiser and fastening her seatbelt. She smirked at Regina and said, "Storybrooke has a motorcycle gang."

"Yes," the former mayor agreed dryly, looking at Emma. Cocking an eyebrow, she returned the smirk. "You've been sheriff for a year-and-a-half, now, and you just noticed. Why am I not surprised?" she baited.

Starting the car, the sheriff rolled her eyes and muttered, "Whatever."
"Okay, I can do this," Emma told herself as she softly repeated the words. With her eyes squeezed shut, she stood with her feet shoulder-width apart and her hands in tight fists at her sides. She concentrated on focusing her magic, feeling it coiling around her. "I can do this, I can do this..."

"Sometime today would be preferable," Regina quipped, standing directly across from Emma with her arms crossed. She rolled her eyes at being shushed. Sighing, she walked over to the gazebo and promptly sat down, crossing her legs. She fished out her leather gloves from a pocket while looking up at the dark cloudy sky.

An unseasonably late winter storm was creeping towards Maine at a snail’s pace. And still, none of the meteorologists would predict its course, opting just to warn the coastal states to be prepared for a wintry mix. It was highly infuriating, as was watching Emma Swan attempt to transform into anything.

With a bored sigh, the former mayor crossed her arms after putting on her gloves, knowing she wouldn't be able to sit on the cold metal chair for long. Occasionally, a breeze would pick up and cause her to shiver. She flipped her coat collar up. Then, she noticed Henry coming around the side of the house, jogging towards her.

With only a light blue hoodie to stave off the cold, the boy glanced at the sheriff curiously as he passed her. He came to a stop beside his mother and said, "The timer for the chicken went off. I turned off the oven like you asked."

"Thank you," Regina responded, still glaring at Emma.

"What's she doing?" Henry asked, turning with his brow furrowed.

"Nothing, at the moment," the former mayor snarked. "Nor for the last forty minutes, for that matter," she dryly added.

"Damn it, Regina," the sheriff snapped, her concentration broken. "I'm trying!"

"Doubtful. You heard Henry mention chicken and, as usual, your stomach took over," Regina explained with a disgusted tone and a dismissive wave of her hand. She smiled, though, as the boy giggled. She'd missed that sound. However, the mother and son moment was not appreciated by all.

"I don't know what I'm doing," Emma whined in her defense. She was frustrated, tired and hungry. To add insult to injury, she hadn't had the best day, either. Her father had been sulky since their argument the other day at the station. Mary Margaret had been blowing her phone up with texts, calls and voice mails. It was highly annoying, not to mention stressful.

"I tried—." Once again, the former mayor attempted to offer assistance. She had also tried to explain to Emma that she wasn't quite ready for this particular subject. The savior could hardly maintain a flaming sword, for crying out loud!

"I know," the sheriff snarled, cutting the former mayor off. She started pacing the length of her magical tether.
Henry looked between his two mothers. "What's the lesson today?" he softly inquired, not wanting to unintentionally provoke them into a fight. After all, they were quite good at that when left to their own devices.

Pinching the bridge of her nose to stave off an impending headache, Regina held the pressure as she answered, "Transformation." She hadn't even wanted Emma to attempt magic, given her high emotional state for the last few days, but the sheriff had doggedly insisted, sitting protecting Henry from Cora. Lowering her hand, she noted the boy's silent question and clarified, "It's the ability to change in appearance or even species."

Instantly, Henry's eyes lit up. "So, Emma could be a dog?" he asked excitedly. The idea of having a dog that wouldn't make a mess in the house was awesome. "Like a Golden Retriever?"

"Yes," the former mayor answered, highly amused by the boy's rather innocent, if not timely, suggestion. Her gaze cut over to the sheriff who was glowering.

"Come on, Emma, do it. We can play fetch!" Henry suggested. He scoured the hedge for a stick. Chuckling softly at the sheriff's stricken expression, the former mayor rose, asking, "May I assist you now?" She understood Emma's desire to decipher the process on her own, but self-tutelage could easily lead one astray.

"Okay," Emma relented with a defeated shrug. She listened as Regina again explained the transformation process. It was frustrating being so dependent, knowing that she wouldn't truly understand until Regina guided her magic as she had with the flaming stick last week.

"I shall demonstrate," the former mayor said before being swallowed by a plume of purple smoke.

Waving her hands to try and disperse the cloud, the sheriff heard a meow. She looked down to see an all brown cat with deep gold eyes. "Regina?" she squeaked and instinctively reached down to pet the animal. However, her hand stopped at the low growl. "Okay, okay, no touching," she chuckled.

"Is that Mom?" Henry asked, returning to his mothers after finding a suitable stick in the side yard. Suddenly, the brown cat was enveloped in another purple fog, revealing Regina. "Did you adequately observe the process?" she immediately asked.

"Yeah, I think so," Emma answered unconvincingly. She was starting to feel inadequate—especially since Regina made it seem so simple. And she didn't want to mention that she was still having difficulties seeing the magic. That was like Lesson One stuff.

The former mayor pursed her lips, sensing the sheriff's doubt. "Would you permit me to transform you?" she asked.

With a very skeptical expression, Emma nodded then frowned when Henry excitedly suggested a dog again. Before she could suggest another animal, however, the former mayor did a small gesture with her hand, and Emma found herself surrounded by purple. She panicked briefly before her vision cleared and she was able to see Henry and Regina again.

For a brief moment, the sheriff wondered why they were taller than her. That was when she looked down and saw two golden, fur covered paws. If she crossed her eyes, she could see a large black nose at the end of a long snout. "Damn it, Henry!" she cursed.

Of course, all the former mayor and the boy heard were a few grumbling barks.
"See the stick, Emma?" Henry asked, shaking it before her. "Go get it!" he shouted, throwing the branch across the yard. He frowned when the dog didn't move and jogged off to retrieve it himself.

The Golden Retriever gazed up at Regina with imploring amber eyes. "Change me back," she pleaded. It manifested as a slow tail wag and a soft whine.

Knowing she shouldn't but unable to help herself, the former mayor covered her mouth with her hand to hide a very amused smirk. However, her eyes clearly signaled her mirth as the dog started barking at her.

Having grabbed his stick, the boy walked up to Regina and asked, "Why is she just standing there?"

The former mayor cleared her throat as she dropped her hand and replied, "A very good question." She made a vague gesture and suggested, "Maybe you should try moving around a bit and get familiar with a different body."

Huffing, the Golden Retriever hesitantly lifted a front paw. She twisted to watch herself lift a rear paw. This process continued and the dog felt quite accomplished until she heard Henry laughing at her. "Knock it off, Kid," she demanded, but her irritated barks only made him laugh more.

"Go on, keep trying," Regina instructed with an encouraging tone. "You're doing quite well." It wasn't an easy task.

Sighing, the dog did as she was told and gradually started walking around the pair, her movements uncoordinated and jerky. It was akin to a puppy or a dog walking in booties.

"Why are her legs going up so high?" Henry snickered. He snaked his hand into his mother's coat pocket and pulled out her iPhone. Entering his birthday, he quickly pulled up the camera and snapped a few pictures.

"She's relearning to walk," the former mayor replied, watching as the Golden Retriever now proudly pranced around them in a wide circle. She smiled as the dog found a more natural gait and eventually started running.

_This is kind of fun_, Emma thought as she zoomed around, having a grand time. She'd expected the experience to be restrictive, to feel less, somehow, but in fact, it was quite freeing. Is this how Ruby felt during wolf's time?

Stowing his mother's phone in his coat pocket, the boy laughed and waved the stick at the dog. "Here, Emma, go fetch" he ordered, throwing the stick across the yard.

"No, Emma!" Regina cried, but it was too late. The Golden Retriever was already in pursuit of the branch as it sailed through the air. She tried to run after the dog but a sheering pain struck her hard in the chest, causing her to stumble and groan.

Releasing a heartbreakingly sharp yelp, the dog collapsed onto the ground almost twenty feet away. She valiantly attempted to crawl towards the former mayor, desperate to stop the pain.

"I'm so sorry," Henry cried out, watching his mothers limp and crawl towards each other. He ran between them unsure of what to do or who to help.

Within the safe distance from each other, Regina waved her hand and released Emma's form. The residual effects of the pain lingered as she helped Emma to stand. "Are you alright?" she asked, her voice strained.
"Yeah," the sheriff responded hoarsely, nodding with tears in her eyes. She glanced over at the boy and offered a weak smile. "Not the smartest idea, Kid," she smirked in spite of her heavy breathing.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, looking down at the ground.

Emma put her hands on his shoulders and gave him a sincere smile. "Hey. It's not your fault. Okay? I guess I got too carried away." She ducked her head a little to catch his downcast eyes. "I'm the one who's supposed to pay attention to where I'm going."

"We all need to be more aware of our limitations," the former mayor said, brushing off the incident. If the boy's expression was any indication, he was punishing himself enough. After readjusting her jacket, she picked bits of grass off the sheriff. "Are you ready to try again?"

"Um, don't you think that was enough excitement for one day?" Emma narrowed her eyes at Regina, pondering her angle. She briefly glanced at Henry's hurt expression and sighed. "Okay, what's next?"

"I'll guide your magic through the process," Regina answered, her hand gently cupping Emma's left bicep. She instructed, "Envision the animal you wish to become."

The sheriff nodded. Wondering when she started trusting the former mayor so effortlessly, she tried to shake the wayward thought out of her mind.

"Focus, Miss Swan," the former mayor lightly scolded, sensing the erratic magic.

"Right. Sorry," Emma mumbled. Briefly, she searched Regina's eyes, and coupled with the now familiar sensation of their mingling magic, she found herself relaxing and responding to the gentle directions. As her eyes drifted closed, she ignored the shift in physical sensation, focusing instead on the absence of Regina's hand on her arm.

"Nicely done," the former mayor praised. She paused before saying, "Miss Swan." She cleared her throat at Henry's snicker.

"Swan," the boy giggled, pulling out the iPhone again. This time he was videoing.

"Huh?" Blinking, the sheriff looked around and took notice of Henry. "Not cool, Kid," she fussed, but of course, it came out as a loud honk. The sound startled her, and she instinctively flapped her wings. "Oh my god!" she exclaimed, honking wildly.

And, that was it. Regina couldn't contain the laughter any longer, nor did she try to hide it.

Henry took several steps back to get both his mothers in frame. He smiled. It had been a long time since he heard his mom laugh so much.

Naturally, Emma wasn't amused. "Stop laughing," she demanded, stretching her neck out. "It's not that funny, damn it." She spread out her wings and flapped.

To the former mayor, the swan's honks came out loud and strangely indigent, causing her to laugh even harder, especially when Emma's wings started flapping. She pointed at the distressed water fowl and said to Henry, "Emma's a swan princess." With that, all dignity was thrown out the window as she snorted with laughter.

Of course, Henry giggled in response, still recording. His happiness ebbed, however, when the swan ambled towards him. Its head swayed back and forth like a snake ready to strike. "Ah, Mom," he called. "I don't think she's happy."
"Of course not, she turned herself into a swan," Regina quipped as she delicately wiped at her eyes. As if realizing her son had her phone for the first time, she asked with a devilish glint, "Are you taking pictures of this?"

Suddenly more annoyed by the former mayor than her son, the swan turned away from the boy recording and hissed menacingly at Regina, purposefully waddling towards her.

Henry chuckled as he watched Emma's tail. However, his mirth disappeared when the swan started nipping at Regina's pants. He kept recording.

"Stop it, Emma," Regina scolded the swan, taking a step away. "You're going to put a hole in my pants." This, of course, did nothing to dissuade the bird from its mission. She gently attempted to push the swan's head away but its long neck merely snaked around her arms, grabbing a glove instead. "Ow!" she cried as a glove was roughly ripped off her hand. "Give that back," she demanded, trotting across the yard in pursuit of the bird.

Now, Emma was having fun as she bobbed and weaved around the yard. Her long neck helped to keep the captured leather glove just out of Regina's reach.

The phone shook as Henry tried not to laugh as his mother chased a slightly muffled, trumpeting swan across the back yard, yelling. He was also glad to be recording it for posterity—or blackmail. "No, don't come over here," he laughed as the swan tried to use him as a shield. Quickly, he backed up into the gazebo.

With Emma distracted by the boy, Regina managed to snatch the glove out of her mouth with a victorious, "Ah ha!"

Of course, Emma took offense to this sneak attack and loudly proclaimed her displeasure with a series of honks.

"Inelegant as always, Miss Swan," the former mayor said cheekily after inspecting the leather glove for damage. Slipping it back on, she asked, "Would you like to transform back, now?" She watched as the swan moved its head up and down. "Then do it," she instructed.

The swan flapped her wings repeatedly and honked at Regina.

"I don't think she knows how, Mom," the boy supplied, walking around to the side of them.

"She does," the former mayor affirmed, glancing at Henry and frowning. "You're still recording?" she asked tentatively.

"Yup," Henry smiled. As soon as this was all over, he already planned to bolt to his room and copy the videos off the iPhone. This was definitely going on YouTube—Facebook at the very least.

"I don't know how to change back," Emma whined in a series of honks. "Change me back!" She hated this transformation crap, although it did have its perks. She did get to hear the former mayor laugh.

Sighing, Regina refocused on the swan and could sense Emma's rising distress. "Calm down, Emma." She smirked as the bird resettled her wings. "Now, it's exactly like dispelling a flame..."

For the life of her, the sheriff tried to follow the former mayor's instructions. She really did, but she was distracted by this overwhelming desire to preen. It only further frustrated her. Listening to Regina speak, she settled down on the ground and tried again. She could do this. She would do this. Vaguely, she registered Henry saying something. Then, she felt Regina's hand and the
connection between their magic. When she opened her eyes, she knew she was human again.

"Give me that phone," Emma barked, lunging for the boy, her arms open wide to grab him. However, she didn't account for sitting cross-legged on the cold ground and she ended up falling flat on her face.

Regardless, Henry proved too quick and bolted for the house, laughing gleefully.

"I think that's enough for today," Regina said with a smile, offering a hand to Emma.

Readily accepting the help up, the sheriff brushed herself off while muttering, "I guess we should be glad he doesn't really have friends." She frowned as her stomach growled. "How long before dinner?" she asked, following the former mayor towards the house.

"Not long, Miss Swan," Regina smirked at Emma's groan. "Too soon?" she baited.

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff good-naturally grumbled, "Never would be too soon." She grinned at the former mayor's soft chuckle.

~SQ~

The novel was really getting interesting, as the plot spanning three books was finally coming together. Regina quickly turned the page and frowned at seeing the end of the chapter. She briskly flipped through the pages, scanning the length of the next one. Glancing at the clock, she pursed her lips while gauging her degree of sleepiness. She could possibly finish the next chapter, but more than likely, Emma would strike up a conversation as soon as the light went out. Looking over at the back of her bedmate, she quietly contemplated reading the next chapter but thought better of it. She closed her book, stowing it and her reading glasses on her nightstand.

Not thirty seconds after the light was off, Emma uncertainly asked, "Mind if we talk for a bit?" She knew Regina was tired. Heck, she was exhausted, but she needed to talk about her decision.

"What's on your mind?" the former mayor quietly responded, starring at the ceiling. She knew it was going to happen.

Sighing, the sheriff rolled onto her back and turned her head to study Regina's profile. "I'm going to endorse Mitchell Herman for mayor."

"A sensible choice," Regina agreed. She was voting the same. "But?" she prompted.

"I don't know how to tell David," Emma admitted, feeling accountable to anyone was still alien to her. On several levels, she didn't like it. "Or Mary Margaret," she added.

"You could always text them," the former mayor offered, not particularly caring.

Dragging a hand down her face, the sheriff groaned. She wouldn't admit the same thought had crossed her mind. Instead, she said, "Not helpful, Regina."

"Tell him the same way you just told me," Regina supplied. It was a simple solution, but she knew all too well how a little well-played guilt from parents worked.
Playing with the blanket, the sheriff muttered, "Easier said than done." She mentally made plans to call Gene Gatsby in the morning. Looking at the former mayor, she asked, "Do you really think people will vote for Herman just because I say I am?"

"Yes," Regina answered, rolling onto her side to face Emma. She'd been trying to bring the topic up since the blowout at the station. "You're in a very unique position. Your involvement in this misguided community of unique characters encompasses multiple groups."

Snorting, Emma rolled her eyes, saying jokingly, "Good and evil." Henry and her parents had mercilessly to drill the concept into her head. To her, it seemed that's all they cared about, what column you were in.

The former mayor frowned. In a slow drawl, she replied, "No, I was insinuating more along the lines of rich and poor, animal and human, peasant and noble, even the elderly and disabled." She paused and added, "Mr. Flint's words and sentiment were important the other night."

Biting her lip, Emma wished the bed would swallow her. "I'm sorry," she said. Her mouth opened and closed, wanting to say more but not knowing what.

"Don't be," Regina whispered, her gaze staring blankly over Emma's shoulder. Clearing her throat, she continued, "The wishy-washy rhetoric is shouted so loudly and vehemently that everyone believes it at some point." She had no doubt Emma would've mindlessly fallen into the same trap if not for their current predicament.

Her brow furrowed for a moment, but the sheriff decided to leave the matter alone. "Would you be willing to sit in during my interview with that reporter, Gene Gatsby?"

"Do you believe that's wise?"

"I've already been accused of being unqualified by Albert Spencer and unduly influenced by malevolent forces by my own parents," Emma explained. She could deal with Spencer's two-bit opinion. No, it was her own supposedly loving parents who had deeply cut her. "To top it off, Gold basically told me I'm replaceable." She searched Regina's face, her eyes having long ago adjusted to the dim light. I feel like I'm drowning, she thought.

With her eyes starting to feel heavy, the former mayor weakly sneered, "That imp simply enjoys stirring the pot." It was a hard and painful lesson, but she had finally learned it, albeit too late to save herself.

"He can stir his pot all he likes as long as I'm not in it," the sheriff grinned, taking solace in Regina's cavalier attitude.

"Are we done talking?" Regina asked, relaxing. Her eyes closed in anticipation of going to sleep.

Biting her lip, Emma almost felt guilty. "Not quite," she started and then paused before adding, "I need to borrow three thousand dollars." She also tried not laugh at Regina's now wide eyes or her own nervousness.

"I beg your pardon. Do I look like an ATM?" the former mayor sniped, sitting up. Glaring down at Emma, she demanded, "What on earth for?"

Apprehensively, the sheriff swallowed. She absently drew a pattern on the sheet. "An old friend of mine is in a really bad way." Quickly, she held up a hand and cut the impending criticisms. "He helped me out a lot while I was living in Florida."
Regina's brow furrowed, but she waited for Emma to continue her story.

"After I completed my probation in Phoenix, I moved to Tallahassee," the sheriff continued, watching her hand repeatedly draw an intricate pattern. She was sharing willingly, and it was scary as hell. "I was interested in criminal justice, but out-of-state tuition was insane, even with financial aid. So, I applied for a receptionist job at the local police academy." She cleared her throat and nervously rolled her lips. "Frank was a nice guy. He saw I was interested in the training and suggested I sign up for the course. One thing led to another and he pulled some strings to get me in-state status at TCC."

"Alright," the former mayor agreed, cutting off Emma's story. Looking away, she straightened her pillows and blankets. "We'll take care of it in the morning." Whatever had happened obviously meant a great deal to Emma if she was asking for money, especially after the reaction in the grocery store the other day.

Beyond relieved and surprised, the sheriff smiled broadly. "Thank you, Regina. I'll pay you back." She absently rubbed her stomach, working out the knots and ignoring the former mayor's harrumph. Glancing down when she heard a low growl from her stomach, she asked, "Since you're awake, mind if we go downstairs for a snack?"

Flabbergasted, the former mayor twisted back around and glared at the sheriff. "You ate half a chicken, Emma." And with that, there went her hopes for chicken salad.

"But—."

"And half a bowl of mashed potatoes," Regina added, disgusted with the lack of leftovers. She had hoped to make potato cakes later in the week.

"Those were so good, too. Way better than the dehydrated stuff," Emma grinned, rubbing her tummy, which loudly agreed.

Sighing, Regina tossed her covers back and put on her slippers. "Very well, we better feed that bottomless pit you call a stomach or I'll never get any sleep."

Scrambling out of the bed, the sheriff turned on her bedside lamp. "Just consider this practice for when Henry hits puberty."

Groaning, Regina walked around the bed and muttered, "Half a chicken."

Emma easily followed Regina downstairs and into the kitchen for her much deserved snack. Things were really starting to look up.

~SQ~

Knowing this evening was going to end in a spectacularly horrible fashion, Regina followed Emma up the creaking stairs leading to Mary Margaret and David's apartment. She already knew she was going to be blamed, but she smirked anyway. It would be worth it just to see their expressions when Emma told them. If she tells them, she thought darkly, picking up on the blonde's nervousness. She stopped on the final landing.
Half way up the final set of stairs, the sheriff softly coaxed, "Come on, Regina," understanding the brunette's trepidation. Turning, she whispered, "The sooner we get in there, the sooner we can go home and watch *Game of Thrones.*" She flashed an encouraging smile.

"We can go home and watch it now," the former mayor countered. This unexpected and certainly unwanted event had been sprung on her right before she started cooking dinner. "I was going to make meatloaf," she added softly. Henry loved her meatloaf.

Sighing, Emma trotted down the short flight of stairs in front the apartment to the landing where Regina stood. "It's just one dinner," she said with pleading eyes. "We had a civil dinner at Granny's two weeks ago." She smiled encouragingly, gently cupping the brunette's biceps and hoping the gesture was comforting. "That went well."

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Regina dropped her eyes. Things could be worse. If she was honest with herself, she had to admit that the blonde had been quite accommodating since this all started. She glanced up when Emma started speaking again.

"I get it," the blonde whispered, fearing an eavesdropper. "I really do, but staying out here isn't going to get this over with any faster."

"Very well," the brunette said with resignation. Her eyes took on a hard glint as she added, "Just for the record, I hate surprises."

Nodding, Emma's smirk morphed into a grimace as she walked up the stairs and into the apartment. Any notion of not telling her parents she was going to endorse Mitchell Herman went right out the window. Regina would kill her.

"About time you two decided to come in," quipped Mary Margaret playfully, pulling a large, covered casserole dish out of the oven.

Placing down the last set of silverware, Henry hopped over to his mothers and grabbed each of them by a hand, dragging them both towards the table. He pulled Emma to her usual spot, sitting across from him and next to his Grams. "Mom, you can sit here," he said, pulling out the mismatched chair on the end. "I sit right here," he happily explained, sitting down across from Emma.

Pausing, David glanced up from his task of pouring ice water into glasses. He frowned slightly but tried to push his feelings aside. The boy was just excited to have a family dinner.

"I hope everyone's hungry," the school teacher boasted with a smile as she carried the casserole dish over, putting it in the center of the table. "I made Emma's favorite," she explained, lifting the dish's lid. "Tuna noodle casserole."

"Yum!" the blonde exclaimed, reaching for the serving spoon and Regina's plate. She dropped a reserved serving on the plate and gave Henry a similar portion. The boy didn't care for it, and she figured neither would his mother. After heaping some onto her own plate, she passed the spoon to Mary Margaret. "Ruby said you went back to work this week," she said conversationally. "Did the kids miss you?"

"Well, you know," Mary Margaret started explaining her day, a one-sided conversation focusing solely on her daughter and husband.

Mostly ignoring the conversation going on around her, the former mayor attempted to decipher the ingredients of the casserole and carefully scooped up a small bite. The base was rich and creamy
with a hint of metallic flavor, obviously from a can of cream of mushroom. The egg noodles and peas were just bearable, but why the peas were even in it, she hadn't a clue. However, the longer she chewed, the more she was done. She swallowed her bite and quickly took a sip of water. That was when she spied Henry picking out the bits of tuna and only eating the peas and noodles. Glancing at Emma, she saw the blonde practically shoveling it into her mouth. No discerning taste, she mused, unsurprised.

Not really interested in his grandparents’ boring conversation, Henry watched Emma eat and wrinkled his nose. There were times he thought she'd eat anything. Glancing at his mother, he couldn't help but smile. He watched as she would eat a solitary pea while inconspicuously pushing it all around her plate, hunting for the chunks of tuna.

"How is it, Regina?" Mary Margaret asked, taking a bite from her own plate. She knew this wasn't the most ideal meal, but it's what she could easily fix for five people on short notice, given her current financial situation.

Startled out of the meticulous dissection of her dinner, the former mayor looked up to see everyone looking at her. She took a slow, deep breath and dragged out her chewing. After swallowing, she diplomatically offered, "It's quite unique."

Luckily, that seemed to be an acceptable response as the school teacher instantly sported a broad grin. "I'm glad you like it," she assumed. "It's one of our favorite meals." She looked at David and asked, "We have it once a week, maybe?"

"At least," he answered, scooping up another bite. "Of course, I prefer your version with the cheddar cheese and carrots." He smiled at his wife as he chewed.

Regina's stomach seized at the mention of the additional ingredients, but she trudged onward, seeking out the bits of tuna.

"Everything is better with cheese," Emma happily interjected, scooping out another serving for herself. She glanced at Regina and Henry in slight question, shrugging when both subtly shook their heads.

As dinner continued in relative silence, Henry started to slouch in his seat and absently poked at his food. Things weren't going as well as he had hoped, either. Maybe dinner at Granny's was a fluke. Maybe he could get a sandwich at home. He glanced from Emma to Regina. Noticing his mother's sympathetic look, he smiled at her.

Downing the last of her water, the sheriff pushed her plate away slightly and leaned back in her chair. "That was good," she praised while patting her stomach.

"Are you sure you don't want more?" David asked, serving himself another scoop. "Usually, you devour the entire thing." Not that he minded having leftovers for lunch the next day.

"Nah, I'm good, thanks," she replied, glancing around. Clearing her throat, Emma said, "There's actually something I need to tell you."

"You can tell us anything, you know that," Mary Margaret said, patting her daughter's hand.

Carefully weighing her words, the sheriff briefly glanced at the former mayor before saying, "I'm going to endorse Mitchell Herman for mayor."

"Oh," the school teacher weakly commented in puzzlement.
Pushing onward, Emma continued, "After the debate, Gene Gatsby pushed me for an interview." She paused long enough to scratch her head. "I delayed until I was sure."

"This is your doing," the deputy accused in a menacing grumble, glaring at Regina. He firmly put down his silverware.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor scoffed, "Of course." She took a slow, deep breath and coolly met David's heated glare.

Henry shifted uncomfortably between the two. However, his eyes quickly darted between everyone at the table.

"Why?" Mary Margaret asked in a slightly whiny tone, drawing everyone's attention. After a few blinks, she seemed to mentally shake herself and firmly said, "I think it's important, now more than ever, that we demonstrate a unified front as a family. The people will find great comfort in it."

David nodded as he further signaled his agreement by taking his wife's hand resting on top of the table. Henry's brow furrowed in concern as Regina pursed her lips, belaying any snarky retort, and Emma sighed as she shook her head.

Believing she could change her daughter's mind, the school teacher pushed onward with her rhetoric of family, perseverance and fairness. She wrapped up the impromptu speech with, "You're the Sheriff. After the election, your father will be the Mayor, and in a few months, I'll run for city council." She paused and smiled broadly. "And then, we can start focusing on what's important, like going home."

Emma dropped her forehead onto the palm of her left hand. "Did we attend a different debate? Because I'm pretty sure David fell kinda flat on that particular selling point." Standing up, she paced around in a large circle. "Look, I'm not against you running," she said directly to her father. "But I think it's pretty clear what the residents of Storybrooke want."

"What do you mean?" David asked, not waiting for an answer before plowing ahead. "They want a lot of things, Emma, but mostly, they just want to go home. They want their lives to go back to normal."

Several expressions crossed her face before the sheriff simply crossed her arms and bit her lip. Finally, she slowly said, "You and a few others may want to go back to the Enchanted Forest and to the way things were, but I think that a majority wants to stay here in Storybrooke."

"But that's just temporary," Mary Margaret interjected dismissively. "Once the beans are ready, everyone will be happy to go back home and to the way things are meant to be."

"Back to what exactly?" Regina asked in all seriousness. With her piercing gaze first on David and then on the school teacher, she added, "Feudalism and poverty riddled with disease and hardship?"

"It was a simple life, but it wasn't horrible," the deputy said in defense, believing his words. "The people were happy." He narrowed his eyes at the former mayor. "Or they were until you took it away."

"These people aren't simple country bumpkins anymore, Shepherd," Regina easily countered, affecting boredom with the conversation. Her words would make no head way with them or any royal for that matter. She turned to Emma with a raised eyebrow, her point proven.

"Regina's right."
Quickly standing up and turning to face her daughter, Mary Margaret hissed, "You agree with her?"

Taking a fortifying breath, Emma tried to explain. "Look, this isn't cut and dry." She pointed at the apartment door. "People were asking about a rehabilitation wing and updated equipment for the hospital. They asked about funding for parks and the animal shelter." Dropping her hand, she added, "They even asked if the plans for a downtown beautification project and vocational school were still going to continue." She shook her head and softly continued, "Those aren't the concerns of people who want to go back. They're invested in building a life here." Clearing her throat, she added, "That's why I'm going to endorse Mitchell Herman."

"Is that why you and Regina went to see him the other day?" David asked evenly. His gaze slowly shifted between his wife and daughter.

"David," the school teacher warned. "Don't."

Ignoring the protest, he pushed on, "After you went to the bank."

"Of all the idiotic…," Regina huffed, rolling her eyes. She'd told Emma that Leroy was following them.

"You're spying on me?!" Emma asked, unbelieving. Quickly, she looked at Regina. "Leroy?" she prompted. At the former mayor's nod, she ran her hands down her face and kicked herself for calling Regina paranoid.

"Technically, we were having the dwarves watch Regina," Mary Margaret quickly explained, taking a step toward her daughter.

"I'm watching Regina," the sheriff said, pointing to her herself. "Or have you forgotten all about that?" She pinned a hard look at her mother, stopping her approach. First, their comments in the paper and now, this!

"We haven't," David said, standing. He walked around to stand next to his wife. "That's why we're having Regina watched." Supportively, he laid a hand on Mary Margaret's shoulder. "It's for your protection."

Absently, the school teacher laid a hand over her husband's. "You don't know what she's capable of, Emma."

An overwhelming sense of sadness washing over her, the sheriff shook her head. "And apparently, neither do you," she said with great disappointment. Looking to Henry and Regina, she ordered, "Grab your coats, we're leaving." She was relieved when Henry instantly sprang into action and Regina followed suit.

"Emma," Mary Margaret sighed, reaching for her daughter.

Shaking her head, Emma walked around her parents and took her coat from Regina. Nodding towards the door, she slipped it on but stopped in the apartment doorway. "If you'd had asked, I would've told you," she said weakly. After a breath, she partially turned around to see her parents. Grabbing the doorknob, she added, "We visited Mr. Herman because I had a few questions. I needed to make sure he was going to follow through with his promises." And after that, she pulled
"Why didn't you tell them the truth?" Henry asked, standing on the next landing with his mother. He looked between them as Emma slowly walked down the stairs.

"It wouldn't have mattered," the sheriff said, passing her son and the former mayor. "They wouldn't have believed it anyway."

Glancing up at his mother, Henry followed Emma down the stairs. None of this made any sense. Regina was helping Emma's friend. Wasn't that a good thing? It had to count for something, didn't it? After all, an evil queen wouldn't help anybody, right? He had to figure this all out and fast.

~SQ~

"Regina."

Wincing ever so slightly, the former mayor slowly lowered her newspaper just enough to begrudgingly make eye contact. "Emma's inside," she offered in a surly tone before raising the paper back up to reading level.

Glancing through the large glass window of the tiny post office and seeing Emma waiting in line, Mary Margaret was momentarily torn, but before she lost her nerve, she promptly sat down next to Regina, ignoring the cold from the bench. "Actually, I wanted to speak with you," she supplied, shivering slightly.

"I can't imagine why," Regina dryly commented, turning the page. Out all of the blasted times to run into Snow White it had to be the one time, outside a bathroom, she had to herself.

"I wanted to apologize for last night," the school teacher started before being quickly cut off.

"You're not going to go away, are you?" the former mayor asked in a bored tone, closing and folding the newspaper. Dropping the paper to the side, she took off her reading glasses. "I'm not the one you offended last night." Looking directly at her unwanted companion, she said, "If you want to fix your relationship, do it without involving me." Then she proceeded to stow her glasses in her purse.

"Well, that's sort of difficult given the circumstances, don't you think?" Mary Margaret huffed irritably, wondering why she was even bothering. Her step-mother was never going to change.

Regina stood up, ready to join Emma inside the post office. A catty retort was on her tongue as she moved to walk away, but she was quickly overcome by a sudden wave of vertigo. Stumbling backwards, she dropped back onto the bench.

Concerned, the school teacher tentatively touched the former mayor's arm. She quickly glanced inside to check on Emma and was relieved her daughter appeared fine. Her brow furrowed in confusion as she gently asked, "Are you alright?"

"Obviously not," Regina rasped, too disorientated to shake off the unwelcome hand as she tightly gripped the bench.
"What can I do?"

"Just give me a moment," the former mayor snapped, lowering her head. She closed her eyes and focused on her breathing. Slowly, the sensations ebbed, and the grip she had on the bench loosened. It was almost tolerable when she was struck with another, more painful bout. She couldn't contain the slight whimper that escaped.

"Oh!" the school teacher said with surprise, blinking several times. Her world was suddenly all topsy-turvy.

As Emma came out of the post office, it stopped. "I hate going to the post office," she grumbled, folding her delivery confirmation and insured mail tickets into her wallet. Sliding it into her back pocket, she said, "Sorry that took so…." She trailed off, noticing Mary Margaret for the first time. But then, she asked, "Are you two alright?"

Taking a deep breath, Regina nodded and stood, instinctively resting her hand against her stomach. "Yes," she paused before walking past Emma. "I believe your mother wished to speak with you." She stopped just at the edge of their limited range which happened to be next to the damnable yellow car's passenger door.

The sheriff quietly watched the former mayor walk away and sighed. Waiting, she crossed her arms and turned back to the school teacher. "What do you need?" This was really getting old, and the last thing Emma wanted to deal with was her mother getting Regina all riled up.

"I don't need anything," Mary Margaret said, standing and pushing her discomfort aside. "I wanted to apologize."

"Really?" Emma smirked. Nodding in the direction of Leroy's pickup halfway down the block, she said, "You can start by calling off the surveillance."

"You have to understand, it's for your own safety," the school teacher cooed with a soft smile. She took a hesitant step forward.

Shaking her head, the sheriff turned around and walked towards her car. "We'll talk about this later, after you call off your dogs." With that, she nodded for Regina to get in and drove away. She glanced in the rearview mirror and saw Mary Margaret still standing outside the post office.

"As much as I loathe to interfere—," Regina started.

"Then don't," the blonde snapped, clearly not in the mood. She drove them to Henry's school. It was almost time to pick him up. Pursing her lips, she wondered why Mary Margaret wasn't still at work.

Rolling her eyes, the brunette continued, "She's not going to stop nagging until you forgive her."

"Forgive her?" Emma snorted in disbelief, turning the car around a street corner. "Doesn't it bother you that she has her cronies tailing us everywhere?" It felt suffocating and she hated it.

"Of course," Regina freely admitted, looking out the passenger window. After all, it wasn't a new feeling, just an old one. "At least it gives you a valid reason not to interview any of the dwarves for the new deputy position."

Frowning, the sheriff asked with slight concern, "You think they would apply?"
"If Miss Blanchard told them to, they undoubtedly would, but as sheriff, you have absolute hiring authority, especially in the absence of a mayor," the brunette easily explained. As Emma parked the car, she continued, "Although Ms. Ginger is fulfilling the role of acting-mayor, she doesn't have the authority to outright reject your selection, outside of budgetary concerns, without calling the city council for a vote."

"Huh," the blonde said with a smile as she parked the car outside the school. Shutting off the engine, she glanced at Regina. "Guess that's how I ended up as Graham's deputy."

"More or less," the former mayor said, pulling her current book out of her purse.

Drumming her fingers on the wheel, Emma sheepishly asked, "Why don't you apply?" After all, she already knew Regina's answer.

Regina simply harrumphed as she opened her book to the marked page. "I think not," she said finally, cutting a glare at the blonde.

"Probably not my best idea, huh?" the sheriff smiled, leaning back in her seat more comfortably. A few moments of silence passed, and after listening to several page turns, she softly inquired, "Any ideas about who would be good for the position?"

At first she was miffed that Regina brokered a deal with Herman for her endorsement. Emma had planned on giving it freely and with no strings attached. However, the willful brunette easily pointed out the former king would've been highly suspicious if nothing was asked in return—certainly since the sheriff was voting against her own father. Of course, all he really agreed to was not cutting the Sheriff Department's budget. This would essentially leave anything more expensive than office supplies solely dependent on fundraising. A hurdle, Regina had assured her, which would be easier to overcome with Mitchell Herman as mayor as opposed to any other candidate.

"I'm sure your parents will have many helpful suggestions," the former mayor offered after a small sigh. Was she not going to get any peace today?

"Yeah," Emma sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of." At the sound of the first bell, she knew they'd only have about ten more minutes of alone time for the day until Henry went to bed. "You seem awful calm after dealing with Mary Margaret," she commented, watching the kids exit the building and head towards the row of buses. When the brunette said nothing, she looked over and asked, "What did she say?"

"I already told you," Regina said, closing her book with a snap.

Rolling her eyes, the blonde said, "Well something happened because you both looked pretty nauseated." She paused and asked, "You're okay now, though, right?"

"Yes," Regina softly replied while considering the new information.

"Was it me? Because I didn't feel anything," Emma asked, turning back to the school at the sound of the second bell. "I didn't do anything magic-y, did I?" Her magical ability made her nervous as it was. She really didn't want to deal with any accidental occurrences.

"No, it wasn't you. However, Cora may now be aware of our connection," the brunette explained. This certainly complicated things, but mostly, it made them vulnerable.

Glancing at the former mayor, the sheriff took a deep breath and frowned. "I'm guessing that's not a good thing."
"I think she was attempting to transfer the bond onto your mother," Regina said, searching for Henry amongst the children hurriedly exiting the school. She smiled, watching her son look both ways before crossing the street.

"Is that possible?" Emma asked, starting the car.

"Apparently not," the brunette supplied, getting out of the car and flipping the seat forward for Henry. She almost missed the whispered "good" from Emma.

"I'm hungry. Can we go to Granny's for dinner?" Henry asked, slightly out of breath as he climbed onto the backseat, settled and buckled his seatbelt.

"Not tonight, Kid," the sheriff answered as the former mayor sat back down. "Your Mom promised me meatloaf." She flashed a smile at Regina and snickered at the expected eye roll.

~SQ~

It was dark when Rumpelstiltskin reluctantly left Storybrooke Hospital after another fruitless visit with Belle. This was the worst one yet. And if her uncharacteristic outrage had been any indication, it would be his last unless he could somehow restore her memory. How did Regina manage this? he pondered. She shouldn't have been able to make adjustments to his masterfully crafted curse. He most certainly didn't believe she had the skill.

"You do prefer your companions young, don't you?" an unfamiliar female voice asked as a figure stepped out of an employee entrance onto the sidewalk, a few paces behind the pawn broker.

Scowling, Gold firmly pressed his cane into the cement as he slowly turned around. The unrecognized nurse was quickly enveloped in a plum of purple smoke to reveal Cora. "We've already made our deal, Dearie," he said brazenly, turning to walk away. He was in no mood for her taunts and conniving words.

"Yes," the sorceress agreed. "I'm just reevaluating my options and looking into a few contingencies." Unsurprised that her admission stopped him in his tracks, she smoothly informed him, "It would appear that things were misrepresented."

"Unlike other people, I honor my bargains," Gold coolly replied before he started walking away again. He refused to get drawn into an altercation with her. Why did her betrayal still sting after all these years?

"I know you, Rumpelstiltskin," Cora darkly jeered. "You wouldn't soil your own hands unless absolutely necessary." She smirked with satisfaction and was completely unconcerned by his heated gaze when he once again faced her. A strange softness overtook her features as she whispered, "You always were afraid of the inevitable price."

"I'm in no mood for your games," he hissed, forcibly grinding his cane into the concrete of the sidewalk. "So spare me your pathetic taunts."

"Then stop playing your own," the sorceress snapped, lifting her chin defiantly. "Emma Swan has the magic potential of a potato. Yet somehow, she managed to bind herself to a suitably powerful
magic practitioner via an arcane spell from another realm." She paused and tilted her head. "As if I wouldn't figure out it was you who supplied the spell. Tsk, tsk, Rumpel, you're getting careless."

"What do you want?" he asked in a growl. His patience was wearing thin.

Cocking an eyebrow, she answered, "You know what I want, but you've taken that from me." She chuckled softly. "Now, I'm going to return the favor." And then, she disappeared in a cloud of purple smoke.

Panic momentarily seized Gold before he transported to Ms. French's hospital room. When the red cloud dissipated, he saw Cora standing over an unconscious Belle, who lay oddly on the bed. "Get away from her!" he warned, forming a fireball in his free hand.

"Temper, temper, Rumpel," the sorceress said mockingly. "I may not fully understand the . . . technology of this world," she continued, gazing down at the sleeping woman, "but I'm fairly certain it wouldn't react well to fire," she taunted before quickly waving her hand over Belle's head. "There," she said, quite pleased as a purple mist seeped into Belle's head. "All better."

"What did you do?!" Gold roared. The fireball in his hand grew in intensity.

In the midst of a staring contest, the pair ignored the sound of footsteps rushing down the hall towards Belle's room. As one young nurse finally reached the door and peered inside, she immediately popped back out with a squeaky, "Oh!" But she was quickly shoved out of the way as an undaunted, older nurse marched into the room.

"I don't care what's going on, but take it outside," the nurse barked with a sharp accent. She immediately went to Belle's side, checking her vitals. "Visiting hours are over," she firmly said, glaring at Gold. Her gaze shifted to the unknown woman across the bed and continued, "This poor girl needs rest."

"Of course," Cora smiled demurely as she gracefully dipped her head. Turning to Rumpelstiltskin, she said, "A pleasure as always, Rumpel." Then, she disappeared in a swirl of purple.

Relieved that Belle appeared fine, the nurse turned her attention to Gold. "Put that fireball out before you set off the sprinklers," she admonished, straightening Belle's covers. When she was finished, she frowned upon seeing Rumpelstiltskin still in the room. "I think it's best if you leave now, Mr. Gold."

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Potts," he said quickly and left. Arguing with Belle's charge nurse wouldn't help anyone, especially him. He cringed over what Cora could have possibly done.

~SQ~

Frustrated, Emma sighed as she ended the unexpected call with Ruby with the push of a button. She carefully balanced her cellphone on her flannel pajama-covered knee as she slumped down in the wing-backed chair. Glancing at the master en suite's closed door for the umpteenth time, she frowned. Regina was taking longer than usual preparing for bed tonight. Usually, the brunette moved with elegant and practiced purpose, but ever since the post office, she'd been increasingly sluggish. She didn't even make any snarky comments about tonight's episode of The Walking
Suddenly, the door opened and the blonde reflexively smiled. "Hey," she greeted softly. "Are you okay? Do we need to go to the doctor?" She tried not to wince at her own over eagerness.

Slightly startled by the open concern, Regina regarded the sheriff curiously for a moment before preparing to turn back the bed. "I'll be fine," she replied. As the blonde quickly went to her side of the bed, she quietly added, "Thank you."

The decorative pillows were quickly removed and the bed turned back. Emma sighed in relief as she settled in bed, thankful that the day was finally over and also that the former mayor hadn't yet sent her back to the chaise lounge. She fiddled with her phone for a minute before picking up a catalogue. Glancing over at her bedmate, her brow furrowed. "Not going to read?" she asked softly, watching the brunette's back.

"No."

Wordlessly, Emma dropped the catalogue in the basket under her nightstand and turned off her light. She pulled the comforter up before settling down to stare at the ceiling.

"You didn't have to turn off the light," Regina supplied, looking over her shoulder at Emma.

"It's okay," the sheriff shrugged. Again, she asked, "Are you sure you're alright?" She didn't know how to describe it, but the former mayor seemed less vivid somehow.

Pursing her lips, a sassy retort titillated the tip of Regina's tongue but she held it. "As I said, I'm fine. I'm just tired," she explained again, turning to face the closet. Her eyes burned with every blink. But as she closed them, she knew sleep would come easily that night.

"I realize you're exhausted, but I should tell you this now rather than later," Emma started to explain, fidgeting with the soft hem of the cream colored blanket. After a deep breath, she added, "Gold and Cora had a little discussion in Belle's hospital room tonight. After a deep breath, she added, "Gold and Cora had a little discussion in Belle's hospital room tonight." She continued when Regina rolled onto her back and looked at her questioningly. "No one is really sure what it was all about, but while you were in the shower, Ruby called and was pretty upset. She said Belle wasn't non-Belle anymore but someone named Lacey."

The former mayor frowned as she glared up at the ceiling. This was very problematic. Suspecting the blonde's unasked question, she said, "Cora must have given Belle her cursed memories."

"Is that bad?"

"Well, it certainly puts her at a distinct disadvantage since everyone else already had their memories restored," Regina answered evenly, her mind becoming slightly fuzzy as she struggled to stay awake. "Obviously, Gold doesn't know yet." Or he's busy plotting his retaliation, she thought darkly.

"Yeah, Ruby says the charge nurse kicked him out of her room twice today," Emma supplied, staring up at the ceiling. "He'd really upset her today, something about a teacup breaking." She turned her head towards the too-quiet brunette and debated whether or not to push for more information. "So..." she prompted, her voice betraying her anxiousness. "If they break into a brawl down Main Street, how exactly do we break up a fight between a wolverine and a badger?"

"A good question," the former mayor answered in a whisper as her eyes drifted shut and sleep claimed her. A magic-fueled duel between her mother and Rumpelstiltskin would devastate Storybrooke.
"I guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it," the sheriff said, rolling onto her side to face the brunette. She frowned slightly, realizing Regina had fallen asleep. Searching the brunette's face for a moment, she easily rolled over and grabbed the small snack bowl of grapes from off the nightstand. It was the only snack Regina would allow Emma to have in the bedroom.

Popping a red, seedless grape in her mouth, the blonde chewed and watched the dancing shadows of branches from the tree outside the window moving on the ceiling. She ate another grape before she looked back at the brunette and listened for the soft, regular breathing. Considering everything, she had to admit that things were going quite well between them—all three of them, actually. Archie's advice was paying off.

"I still can't shake this feeling of impending doom," Emma said, lying on her back across the entire length of the leather sofa. Her head was flat on one of the throw pillows while her socked feet hung off the opposite armrest. She was thankful that Archie had a fire lit.

"Why do you think that is?" Dr. Hopper asked, making a note on his legal pad. He still wasn't sure if helping both women back-to-back was a smart idea, but it seemed to be working thus far.

"Hell, I don't know." The sheriff drummed her fingers on her belly. She sighed. "No, I do. I still feel guilty." She paused to gaze into the flickering flames. "Only you, my parents, Henry, and Gold know what's really going on. No one else does."

"And that bothers you?" he asked.

"Doesn't it you?" she snapped, turning to glare at the therapist. "I put us in this situation, and no one can get us out of it." Swallowing, she stared back up at the ceiling. "And Regina just, she just rolls with it." She cringed inwardly, wondering how whiny she sounded. "She doesn't talk about how she feels. She just takes care of Henry and me."

"Do you want her to discuss her feelings with you?" Archie carefully prompted, thinking Emma was making some real progress.

"I...," the sheriff started then abruptly stopped and frowned.

"Do you talk about your feelings with her?" he asked after a few long moments of silence.

"Not really," Emma grudgingly admitted. This therapy stuff was depressing. "It's a shame you can't give me any hints, like insider trading." She flashed a hopeful grin at Archie.

"If I'm not mistaken, that's illegal," Dr. Hopper easily parried, ignoring the sigh from Pongo. However, he still considered her request, as it had possible merit. After scribbling down a note, he asked, "Do you think you know yourself fairly well?" well aware that Emma Swan was not an overly sharing person.

"Yeah. Well enough, I suppose."

Nodding, Archie pushed his glasses back up his nose. "How would you like to be treated if the roles were reversed? How would you feel if Regina had cast the binding spell on you?"

"I doubt she'd ever do something that stupid," the sheriff instantly replied and bit her lip. After a beat, she added, "I'd be pissed." She was still waiting for the bout of uncontrollable, inevitable anger.

"Wasn't Regina angry?" he continued.
"Yeah, but it was different," she explained as she sat up, sitting crossed-legged on the center cushion. "She was resolved."

Glancing at the clock, Archie flipped back the turned pages of his notepad and put it on his desk. "If you want Regina to open up to you, it's going to take patience and a fair amount of work on your part." He pinned Emma with a pointed look. "Try being actively conscious of her likes and dislikes. Get involved with her hobbies—involve her in yours. Talk to her about whatever you feel comfortable discussing, and include her in decisions that will impact the both of you." He smiled and added, "This will take time, of course, but eventually, you'll notice a difference."

With a cocked eyebrow, Emma smirked, "This sounds a lot like relationship counseling." Should she tell him that she didn't do relationships?

"In a way," he agreed. At the soft chimes of the small mantel clock, he stood up. "You're doing well, Emma."

Pulling on her boots, the sheriff said, "Thanks, Archie."

Eating the last grape, Emma glanced over at Regina and couldn't help but feel like she was missing a lot of the puzzle. Yet somehow, Archie was guiding her away from self-destruction. She leaned over and put her snack bowl back on the nightstand. After settling down to sleep, she listened to the brunette's quiet, even breathing for a few minutes. She twisted to look over her shoulder at her sleeping bedmate.

"You don't make any sense," she whispered, laying her head back down on her pillow. I would totally hate my guts for all of this crap, she thought. Exhaling heavily, she tried to slow her overactive brain, but it wouldn't co-operate. "Mary Margaret thinks you're the devil incarnate," she whispered. "For a while, I believed her, but now…. I just don't know anymore."

~SQ~

"I really hope people are smart enough to stay home," Emma muttered, gripping the police cruiser's steering wheel. She tried to relax but kept feeling herself lean forward, peering past the relentless wipers fighting off the increasing barrage of snowflakes on the windshield. It was going to be dark soon, and they still had no idea where Henry was.

"It would appear we finally lost our shadow," the former mayor commented to the sheriff whilst she held her cellphone to her ear, eagerly waiting for Ruby to return. Watching the scene unfold in the half frosted side mirror with slight amusement, she observed Leroy's ever-present truck slide into a shallow ditch on the side of the road. When the cruiser failed to slow down or stop, she raised an eyebrow, turned to Emma, and asked in surprise, "Aren't you going to stop and help?"

Glancing again in the rearview mirror, the blonde shook her head as the grouchy man easily climbed out of his truck. His booted feet slipped on the wet road while he fought to maintain his balance. She saw him kick a tire as he pulled out his cellphone. "Nope," she said with a satisfied smirk. "He's not hurt and that four-by-four can easily get out of that ditch." Serves him right, she thought. Again, she peered into the mirror and saw Leroy pull a large bag of kitty litter out of the metal tool box behind the cab. "He's fine," she said, focusing on the road ahead. She listened as the
brunette resumed talking with Ruby.

"Given the intensity of the snowfall, Miss Lucas can't track Henry," Regina said after ending the call with the waitress. She scrolled through her contacts. All of them were already searching, useless, or unavailable.

"Why would he just run off?" the blonde asked. Her brow furrowed as she slowed the car down to make a turn. The snow was starting to stick to the road. "He was only going to Granny's for a hot chocolate. The bus stop is on the same freaking block."

Since the storm wasn't supposed to start until late in the evening, everyone had thought they had plenty of time to prepare. Storybrooke Academy had already planned on a half day then sending the kids home after lunch. But by the time their day had begun, it had already started snowing. It was light, at first. So when Henry called from the school office, Emma and Regina were responding to calls and patrolling the outskirts of town. Both easily agreed to pick the boy up from Granny's. It wasn't until Mary Margaret called Emma's cell (which was responsibly passed to Regina) an hour later asking about Henry, did they realize the boy wasn't where he'd said he would be. Now, those available were searching for him while his two mothers carefully drove back into town.

"It's not as if it's a new behavior," the brunette quietly said, looking out the mostly fogged-up passenger window. However, this time she was with the blonde, and Storybrooke wasn't as safe. Her brow furrowed in thought.

Emma sighed heavily. There wasn't a whole lot she could say without starting a fight. After all, she had perpetuated said behavior. "Are we sure he's not at the arcade?"

"The arcade didn't open today because of the storm," Regina distractedly answered as she searched through her purse. Not finding the vault key, she instantly grabbed her cellphone again and called David.

Keeping her eyes on the road, the sheriff listened to the rather terse conversation. After the former mayor hung up, she asked, "What's your vault?"

"The mausoleum in the graveyard is where I stored magical trinkets I brought over." Pausing, the brunette looked over and continued, "I thought it best to send someone there just in case Henry decided to return and snoop."

"Okay," Emma drawled, realizing there was more to the story. Not wanting to get into that right now, she asked, "Shouldn't we just, I don't know, Apparate over there?" She chanced a glance at the former mayor, knowing the Harry Potter term would irritate her.

"You don't know how and I can't, yet," Regina replied, looking straight ahead. She explained, "Transporting halfway across town right now wouldn't be advisable."

"Great," the blonde grumbled, readjusting her grip on the steering wheel. She knew the former mayor was worse off than she had claimed last night. It was going to take at least thirty minutes to get to the graveyard at this rate and another ten to the house. Suddenly, she asked, "Can't you track him with magic?"

"Unless you have some of his hair, no, I can't," the brunette said. She felt weak, and it was a feeling she loathed.

Slowing the cruiser down to make a left turn onto a back road, Emma decided that a shortcut back
into town was necessary, and this heavily forested road just happened to pass by the cemetery. It would cut their travel time in half. She sighed heavily as she readjusted her grip on the steering wheel.

"He's so grounded," the sheriff muttered as the cruiser hit a large pot hole. She gradually reduced her speed to prevent skidding as the car rolled over more sections of broken asphalt.

"Definitely," the former mayor agreed, bracing herself.

~SQ~

"Henry?" David called, slowly descending the stairs into the vault. He glanced around, dusting the snow off his coat. He frowned at the additional trunks and crates scattered throughout the vault's hall. It looked like someone was moving in. "Henry!" he called again, making his way through the clutter. As he searched for his grandson, he wondered how the boy had managed to get in here again. After his initial discovery of the place, he and the dwarves had attempted to empty the vault, but the casket above wouldn't slide for anything. Pushing open a heavy door, he sighed with relief when he saw Henry. "What are you doing here?"

Looking at his grandfather, the boy simply turned back to the books lying across a large wooden table. "I was looking for clues," he answered, slowly turning the page of a very old book. The pages felt funny.

"Clues for what?" the deputy asked, walking up to the table. His eyes searched the covers as he idly flipped through a few pages of one that he could actually read.

"Can you read any of this?" Henry asked, focusing on another book. He turned a couple of pages, focusing hard on the strange illustrations and intricate diagrams, wishing for something in English.

"No," David quietly admitted, taking the book away from the boy and putting it on the table. "What are you doing here, Henry? Everyone is worried sick."

Looking up at his grandfather again, Henry tried to explain. "I'm trying to figure out Mom's plan."

"Plan?" the deputy asked with a cocked eyebrow. "Her plan for what?" He picked up his grandson's backpack and quickly ushered him towards the exit.

"I don't know, but she has to be up to something, right? Isn't that why you ordered the dwarves to follow her?" the boy asked in response, studying all the crates and trunks again. "Where did all this stuff come from? It wasn't here the last time."

"I don't know, Henry," David followed him up the stairs as he pulled out his cellphone. Before he hit the send button, something shiny on a trunk caught his attention. It was a gold engraving of the initials CM. "Cora," he muttered, urging Henry out of the mausoleum with a bit more urgency.

As soon as they were both out, the doors clattered shut and a solid click was heard. Curious, the deputy tried to open the doors, but they were somehow locked, now. He took a few steps back and called Regina, knowing Emma was driving.
Answering her phone, the former mayor barked, "Did you find him? Is he alright?"

Struggling to hear her deputy's reply over the phone, the sheriff relaxed at the brunette's sigh of relief. She blew out a heavy breath as she readjusted her grip on the wheel. It was already dark, and the headlights reflecting off the snow made it even more difficult to see.

"Yes," Regina responded tightly. She pursed her lips. "Of course Cora would store things there, it's her vault."

Emma chanced a quick glance at the brunette, her eyes quickly returning to the road. But she did catch the confused look.

"No, those weren't there before...," the former mayor's voice trailed off as she pondered on the new information. She was quickly brought back to the present by the deputy's demanding tone. "I have no idea what she's planning." Grinding her teeth, she said, "Please keep an eye on Henry until we can pick him up. Thank you." Swiping her thumb across the screen, she dropped her cellphone back into her purse.

"Henry's alright?" the blonde asked gently.

"More or less," Regina tersely admitted, adjusting her scarf. "Apparently, he thinks I'm scheming with my mother."

Emma smirked and scoffed, "Like you have time for that." Rolling her lips, she glanced at the brunette and seriously said, "He'll come around." She flashed a quick smile as she was drawn in by the hopeful gaze. Before she could say anything further, the car suddenly shuddered hard to the left and then immediately to the right as she over-compensated by reflexively jerking the wheel. The tires, unable to gain purchase, slid across the icy road. Repeated loud thuds drew her attention fully forward. "Shit!" she cursed as a deer wildly thrashed across the hood while she attempted to regain control of the swerving vehicle.

The beast's frantic hooves beat against the windshield, causing it to crack and splinter. The sheriff gently pressed the brake as another deer attempted to jump the cruiser. However, the beast failed, landing on top of the other animal. They wrestled each other across the cold, wet metal of the hood. This time, a hoof broke through the glass, swinging violently and connecting with the side of Regina's head, knocking her unconscious.

Instinctively, Emma covered her face from the flying glass and blood. A hoof slammed into her arm. She cried out in pain. Her body instinctively lurched backward, causing her foot to bend awkwardly, slipping off the brake and onto the gas. Suddenly, the weaving cruiser raced forward, the momentum forcing the struggling deer further into the car's cockpit. Glass, blood and flailing hooves were everywhere.

Finally, one of the deer managed to get its footing and scampered out into the woods. The second deer, no longer encumbered, gained purchase by slamming a hoof against the steering wheel. That's when the front right tire hit a large, iced-over pot hole. As the deer leapt to safety, one of its hooves bumped the wheel hard to the right, causing the cruiser to spin and slide into a slight ditch,
crashing into the tree line.

---SQ---

Walking into Granny's, Leroy scowled in annoyance as he stomped his snow-covered boots on the doormat. He walked up to the counter and plopped down on a stool. It had taken him over twenty minutes to get his truck out of that ditch—no thanks to the Savior or the Evil Queen. He drummed his fingers on the formica, waiting to order a stiff drink to warm him up.

"Grumpy," called Mary Margaret, coming out of the restroom. She glanced around the diner and was relieved Henry was still sitting in his booth. As she approached the dwarf, she asked, "Where are Emma and Regina?"

"Don't know, Sister," he grumbled, turning to face her. "They ditched me." When the server finally walked up to him, he quickly placed his order for a tall beer. "Why?" After all, if they had driven all the way into town on Route 6, they should've been here long before him. He had planned on giving Emma a what-for. "They must've had another call." Storms always made people crazy, he mused. Damn it, he was determined to enjoy a nice malt beer before braving the cold again to catch up to them.

"Not that I know of, but David's on a call now, something about an obstructed exit by the nursing home." The school teacher frowned as she glanced over her shoulder at Henry who seemed not to be paying attention, quietly working on homework. She frowned as Leroy took a long sip of his beer.

"Well, that's all taken care of," boasted the deputy as he walked into the diner. Smiling, he sauntered towards Mary Margaret and planted a quick kiss on her lips. "Everyone is on standby, so we should be okay." He smiled brightly, feeling accomplished. But he frowned upon noticing his wife's concerned look. "What's wrong?"

"Regina and Emma aren't here yet," she answered softly, glancing over at Henry again. "Maybe they went by the vault first," David supplied easily, sitting down next to Leroy. He pulled out his cell and dialed Emma. When he got no answer, he tried Regina with no answer, either.

"Maybe that pit of Hell doesn't have good cell reception," the dwarf snickered, sipping his beer.

"David," Mary Margaret whined slightly, flashing him pleading eyes, "something could've happened." She placed a hand on his forearm before asking Leroy, "Where did you lose them?"

"A mile before Old Cemetery Lane on Route 6," answered the unconcerned dwarf. Maybe he'd order something to eat.

"David!" she implored, hoping he would take immediate action. "That road goes directly past the graveyard. What if they took a shortcut?"

The deputy frowned and glanced outside. The snowfall was so heavy he could barely see the buildings across the street. Turning back to the school teacher, he reassuringly said, "Okay, it'll take me a few minutes to get the truck warmed up."
"Better take a couple bags of kitty litter, just in case," Leroy helpfully suggested, sipping his beer.

"We'll take your truck, then," David said, hopping off his stool and slapping the dwarf's shoulder. "Come on." He zipped up his coat and headed out the door.

"Dang it," Leroy muttered, taking one final swig of his beer. He had almost finished it—almost.

~SQ~

END PART 4
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: We tweaked Ruby's werewolf curse just a little for the sake of our sanity. Don't worry; it's nothing drastic or character altering. Also, there's a small tweak to the Flynn storyline. Again, it's nothing major but nonetheless necessary due to our curse mechanics established earlier in this story. A few reviewers had questions regarding Regina's and Henry's behavior. Please be patient, all will be made clear in due time. Also on a broader note, remember that this is Storybrooke and things don't necessarily happen as they would in the real world.

Update Note: Part 5 took some time to post as we've experienced a sudden and totally unexpected death in the family back in February. Attending services resulted in a road trip half way across the US amidst bad weather and upon returning home, I was struck with a severe sinus infection followed by my first UTI – ever! It was not pleasant. My co-author/beta has been swamped at work and personnel issues. Although Part 6 is completely planned out, we have absolutely none of it written. So, we humbly ask for your patience and thank you for your understanding.

Thank You: Again, thanks for all of the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. Your interest/comments/questions mean a great deal to us and we like hearing from you.

~SQ~

PART 5

The snow storm had nearly stopped when Mary Margaret ran into Storybrooke Hospital's Emergency Room with David, Ruby and Leroy on her heels. "Where is she?" she called out to a cluster of hospital personnel loitering by the ER registration desk. Receiving no immediate answer, she spurred onward looking for her daughter and feeling as if she should've demanded to ride in the ambulance with her. But then again, there wasn't actually room in the vehicle with the frantic paramedic.

"Ma'am," one of them called out as the school teacher rushed past the counter, "you can't just go back there without registering!" He threw his hands up as the other three ran past him into the trauma center. Quickly, he picked up a phone and dialed hospital security. Royalty or not, they wouldn't jeopardize anyone's health.

Ignoring the currently unimportant man, Mary Margaret pushed through a heavy set of double doors, rushing into a large, rectangle room with a nurses' station in the center and open exam areas along the walls. She sighed in relief upon seeing Emma and Regina in adjacent trauma bays. The pale blue curtains typically used to separate the two nooks were drawn back and a baffled Dr. Whale stood between the two unconscious, injured women. "Thank goodness," she exhaled.
heavily, slowing to a walk as she approached.

Turning, Victor shook his head and said, "No." He pointed to the ER waiting area. "All four of you can't be back here." Leroy and Ruby faltered for a moment before lingering between the nurses' station and the doors as the doctor refocused on his patients.

"She's \textit{my} daughter," the school teacher protested as if that explained everything. She took comfort from David's hand on her shoulder subtly holding her back.

"Which doesn't exactly do her any favors at the moment," Dr. Whale snapped, glancing between the monitors again and intently watching the electronic readouts for several long seconds. "Okay, they appear stable now." He nodded to an obviously frazzled male nurse and ordered, "Take Swan to x-ray and use the portable x-ray unit on Mills. I don't want either of them moved anymore then absolutely necessary."

Taking a bold step past his wife and dropping his hand from her shoulder, David interjected, "No, you can't." As the nurses stared at him, he desperately tried to think of an excuse, but he had nothing other than exposing their secret. He frowned as the staff resumed carrying out the doctor's orders.

"Is that your unbiased medical opinion?" scoffed Victor as he pushed past the deputy on his way to a laptop on the nurses' station counter. He logged into the hospital system and swiftly entered his orders for each patient.

"Victor, please," Mary Margaret distraughtly whispered, watching helplessly as Emma was being rolled away. She moved to stand next to the doctor, nervously wringing her still gloved hands. Feeling as if she didn't have any other choice, she finally buckled under the stress and hurriedly said, "They're magically bound to each other. They can't be separated!"

"Dr. Whale!" several nurses cried out as alarms sounded. Simultaneously, Regina and Emma suddenly went into convolutions, a return to their physical state upon their initial arrival to the ER.

"What?" Dr. Whale mumbled, staring confusedly at the school teacher before hopping back to the former mayor's bed. He glanced over his shoulder at the sheriff. "Bring her back!" he snapped, gesturing wildly between Emma and the empty trauma bay. "Check her stats," he ordered while watching the readings on Regina's monitor. Heart rate and blood pressure were dangerously elevated. Checking for any other identifying symptoms, he struggled over what drug cocktail would actually help or if he could do anything. Magic was such a pain in the ass.

Deftly, the doctor checked both of the brunette's pupils with a pen light and then moved to repeat the test on the blonde. He took note of their pronounced sweating and the raised surface temperature of their flushed skin. "Both pupils are dilated but responsive to light," he dictated before standing between the two women, shaking his head again. \textit{This is most peculiar}, he thought, considering the additional signs of a severe pain response.

"They appear to be stabilizing, Doctor," the male nurse shakily commented after reattaching Emma's leads to the monitoring equipment. "Again."

Victor exhaled heavily. "Increase the rate of their saline drips." He paused and added, "Give them thirty milligrams of morphine every four hours. They're going to need it." God, he needed a drink. Slowly, he walked back to the laptop. "Just use the portable x-ray unit on them both." He had wanted to process them faster, but obviously, that wasn't going to happen. Entering more instructions into the computer system, he occasionally glared at David and Mary Margaret. "So," he started, closing the laptop. "You chose \textit{now} to share their little secret."
"I didn't have a choice," the school teacher gushed, wanting to get closer to Emma, but the doctor blocked her path. "It wasn't my secret to tell."

"Oh, I'm not faulting you for telling," Dr. Whale drawled out, studying the four interlopers. He easily assumed only the Charmings were in-the-know. Briefly, he glanced over to check the nurses' progress with his patients. Turning back, he cocked an eyebrow and continued, "What I'm calling into question is why you waited until now to tell someone. They endured an ambulance ride in that state." He pointed angrily at the unconscious women. "I'm sure the distance between the two vehicles easily exceeded fifteen feet. Hell, bringing them here in the bed of pickup would've been more humane." Not to mention less nerve-wracking on the poor paramedics.

"We—we…," David stammered as his gaze drifted to Emma. His only concern had been for his injured daughter. The blood splattered throughout the cruiser's cockpit had deeply rattled him. And honestly, her connection to the Evil Queen had been the last thing on his mind. It had felt like an eternity before the ambulances arrived with their snowplow escort. Thankfully, the ride back into town went much faster. "We panicked."

"Well, if you wanted to observe the boundaries of human pain, I say we have an excellent opportunity here," Victor smiled mockingly, not caring to spare anyone's feelings over this stupidity. Sure, his methods were unorthodox, but he didn't actually torture people, not directly and certainly never intentionally—except once.

"You're horrible," Mary Margaret gasped, stepping back. Tears welled up in her eyes.

Snorting, Dr. Whale chided, "It's too late to play the innocent here, Mary Margaret." As his gaze drifted back to Ruby for a brief moment, he sighed and refocused on the school teacher and deputy, "It's going to be several hours before either of them will wake up. So, get out of here before I order security to toss you out." Then, he simply walked away and began talking with the x-ray technician.

Gently, David guided his wife back towards Ruby and Leroy. "It'll be alright," he softly consoled, draping a reassuring arm over her shoulders.

"What the heck was all that about?" Leroy asked, confused. He noticed that two hospital security guards had just entered the room and headed straight towards the doctor. Quietly, he listened as Mary Margaret explained how several weeks ago Emma went to Gold for a locator spell in order to find Regina and, ultimately, how Emma was cruelly tricked. However, as to why Gold did it, no one knew. Leroy glanced around David to watch the hospital staff care for the two women. "Ten to twelve feet isn't a whole lot of wiggle room," he muttered with a grimace. "What happens if one of them dies?"

He frowned, remembering how Regina stopped the police cruiser from crushing Emma.

"No, it isn't," the school teacher admitted with a slight scowl. She glanced over her shoulder and watched as Dr. Whale spoke with two hospital security guards. Both looked strangely familiar. She sighed as one took a sentry position between the two beds while the one with short, sandy blonde hair walked towards them.

"I'm going to have to ask you all to leave the immediate area," the young man said politely, making eye contact with everyone. "You'll also need to register with the ER clerk before you may revisit a patient in triage."

"Of course," David replied with a curt nod, ushering his wife towards the waiting area.

"Miss Lucas," the security guard called out after the group started moving away. "Dr. Whale asked if you could speak with him at your earliest convenience."
"Um, sure," Ruby said with a shrug, breaking away from the little group. She casually stepped around everyone and headed towards Victor, who was now clustered with a pair of nurses on the other side of the room. It appeared to be a rather intense conversation if the doctor's scowl was any indication.

Looking over her shoulder as she waited for Leroy to open the door, Mary Margaret pondered over the sandy blonde's familiarity. It was then her eyes dropped to the name tag on his uniform. 'Flores' it read. Her eyes widened as her husband guided them through the double doors.

"Flores," the school teacher silently repeated the name again and again as they headed towards the exit. Her eyes widened as recognition hit her along with the frigid wind when the pneumatic doors opened. Walking with David to the passenger side of Leroy's truck, still haphazardly parked under the ER entry's awing, she glanced around and took in the serenity of everything covered in snow. However, she couldn't shake the feeling of dread. Members of Regina's guard were in Storybrooke.

~SQ~

Adjusting her scarf to better protect her face from the wind, Mary Margaret glanced around the empty, snow-covered streets of Storybrooke. There was a surreal sense of peacefulness as her boots crunched the freshly fallen snow under the blanket of grey sky. Looking over her shoulder, a loud scraping noise and a low rumbling drew her attention to the far end of the street in time to see a snowplow roll past. Sighing, she carefully climbed the stairs leading to the nunnery.

Opening the doors, she loosened her scarf and soaked in the radiant warmth within the vestibule. She shivered as she stomped the snow loose from her boots. Glancing around, she spotted Mother Superior exiting a side chapel. She quickly walked down the center aisle. "Blue," she greeted happily.

"It's quite cold outside, Snow," the nun stated, meeting the school teacher in the middle of the nave. She frowned slightly. "What could be so important for you to brave such weather at this early hour?"

"It's not that bad," Mary Margaret said with a smile. She was a lot tougher than she looked. Why did everyone always seem to forget that? "But my reason for seeking you out is important." She paused and had to fight back the tears. "Something horrible has happened. Emma's been in an accident."

"That is most unfortunate," Mother Superior agreed with a frown. Tilting her head, she asked, "Are the princess's injuries so life threatening?" Of course, she had already heard about the mishap and had prepared herself for this visit.

"Dr. Whale doesn't seem terribly concerned," the school teacher answered as she wringed her gloved hands. "But," she stopped and licked her lips, "there was so much blood," she added in a whisper, locking eyes with the nun. Clearing her throat, she asked, "Maybe you could help with their healing?"

Offering a solemn shake of the head, Mother Superior explained, "I'm afraid we can't offer any assistance at this time." She primly clasped her hands in front of her.

"Why not?" Mary Margaret implored with large round eyes. "We need Emma."

"Although I'm not disputing the necessity of the town's sheriff, we mustn't forget the bigger threat," the nun paused and narrowed her eyes. "Cora," she supplied with a slight scowl. "Just the other day, she attacked someone."

~SQ~
"Yes, I heard. She gave Belle her cursed memories," the school teacher absently said. She looked over the nun's shoulder at the altar. Lazily, her gaze returned to the nun. "I thought we had a plan to deal with Cora."

"We do," Mother Superior agreed, lifting her chin slightly. "However, preparations are taking longer than originally anticipated, and the necessary amount of fairy dust hasn't yet been mined." She gave a reproachful look. "And we have to consider the safety of innocent bystanders to this feud and take appropriate precautions."

With a furrowed brow, Mary Margaret nodded. "Yes, of course." This wasn't going how she expected. How critical was a single pinch of fairy dust? Emma only had a broken wrist and a sprained ankle. Regina's injuries were worse but…. Her eyes widened in semi-realization, but certainly the Blue Fairy wouldn't be so exclusive—especially to those in need.

"I know," the nun sighed, misreading the school teacher's reaction. "We're all vulnerable as long as Cora, among others, remains in Storybrooke." She gestured for them to walk towards the large, double doors. "I realize this is difficult, but we must remain diligent and have faith that Emma will be fine. I'm sure Dr. Whale is doing everything he can to facilitate the princess's recovery."

Narrowing her eyes, Mary Margaret stayed a half-a-step behind Mother Superior. "Yes, of course, Blue," she emotionlessly agreed. "What would you suggest we do?"

Stopping in front of the doors, the nun offered a wide, broad smile. "We continue doing what we have been doing, Snow. We mine enough fairy dust to immobilize Cora and contain her in a cell if necessary. However, we shouldn't expose our plan too soon. We need to wait until the beans are ready." Her head tilted and brow furrowed as she lightly inquired, "Have you heard anything about the beans?"

Shaking her head, the school teacher pursed her lips. She couldn't really argue against the nun's unwillingness to help Emma and Regina with the looming threat of Cora. How could she put the safety of all the people of Storybrooke above a simple convenience for her daughter? "Not lately, my plate has been pretty full."

Pulling open one of the doors, Mother Superior simply nodded. She said nothing further as she gestured for Mary Margaret to leave. "Good day, Your Majesty. Please let me know if I can be of any further assistance," she said before closing the door.

The loud clanging of the door closing rang in Mary Margaret's ears. Carefully walking down the steps to the street, she pondered whether or not she was asking too much from the Blue Fairy. Maybe she was being selfish. It couldn't have taken much, though. A simple wave of her wand with just a pinch of fairy dust would end Emma and Regina's suffering. Really, how much was required to stop Cora?

She readjusted her scarf when she reached the still snow-covered street. The eerie peacefulness didn't seem as comforting as before. Sighing, she trudged her way home to pick up Henry. The boy had been nearly inconsolable since the accident. And the more she heard the crunch of snow under her booted feet, the more she blamed Regina. That woman's darkness had cast a long shadow over her life and family for long enough, and she was sick of it. But what could she do about it?

~SQ~

"Hey, Rubes," Emma softly greeted with blurry, tired eyes as she turned down the volume of the television. She glanced over the bedrail at the still unconscious Regina in the next bed before saying, "What's up?"
"Same old, same old—besides the latest town drama," the waitress said with a smile as she held up the latest printing of the *Daily Mirror*. Sitting down in the visitor's chair next to the head of the sheriff's hospital bed, she asked, "I bet you can't wait to get out of here, huh?" She glanced around the dreary room.

"You have no idea," the blonde said, shifting for the umpteenth time as she tried to get comfortable. "But I don't know how functional I'm going to be with my right wrist broken and hobbling around on a sprained ankle." She looked over at the former mayor again. "And with her fractured ribs…," she trailed off.

"Yeah," Ruby agreed, loosening her scarf. Clearing her throat, she asked, "Did you both see Henry this morning? He's been jonesing to come up here." As soon as Granny's opened, Mary Margaret had brought the boy in for breakfast. Whether it was to distract the boy or her friend, Ruby wasn't entirely sure. "The snow stopped sometime early this morning, but Elmwood's snowplows managed to get all the primary roads cleared and salted in time for the next storm," she explained. "A lot of stuff is staying closed."

Running her left hand down her face, Emma huffed and rolled her eyes. "Yeah, they were here first thing." Henry's expression, his frequent glances at Regina and how he hovered between the two hospital beds still bothered her. Looking at the newspaper, she said with a forced grin, "Good thing Regina's not awake to see you bring us a paper."

With a snort, Ruby unfolded the newspaper and held the front page out to the blonde, flaunting the headline, "The People's Sheriff Stands with Herman," as she waved it at her. "You're going to love this," she said with a smile and was totally unsurprised when Emma snatched it from her.

"Wow, he didn't waste any time," the sheriff muttered, glancing over the article. She was relieved that most of it went exactly as Gatsby had promised. Opening the newspaper across her lap, she quickly scanned the rest of the article, which was surprisingly quite lengthy. "He certainly has a way with words."

"Well, he was a town crier," the waitress chuckled. Pointing at the paper, she continued, "But this has already made some real impact, Em." She nodded towards the former mayor. "You and Regina working together for the last few weeks and now this." She pointed at the paper and added, "People are excited."

"Excited, how?" the blonde asked uncertainly. Weren't her parents like the Champions of Good or whatever? She folded the paper closed and studied the article's oversized photo. It was from this last Thursday evening after the family's therapy sessions with Archie, and as such, they were on their way to Granny's for dinner. But Mitchell Herman had spotted them and took the time to say hello. *How convenient*, she thought.

"Don't worry, it's mostly good excitement," Ruby said with a grin, waving off Emma's concerns. She sobered a bit before saying, "Of course, the magical tether thing between you two is proving a bit more problematic."

"How did…," the sheriff started, searching the waitress's face. "Mary Margaret didn't say anything about anyone knowing," she weakly added.

"Well, let's just say she didn't have much of a choice," the waitress awkwardly supplied in a quiet voice. She looked out the frost covered window for a moment. "Whale was livid that nobody told the paramedics at the accident." Catching the blonde's gaze again, she said, "All of this is causing a real mess for your parents."
Blinking, Emma stuttered, "Wh-what?"

Gesturing towards the newspaper, Ruby answered, "People expected you to pick David. So when you didn't—well, it started all kinds of juicy speculation." She leaned back in the chair. "Some theories are wilder than others, and nobody knows what to make of any of it." She frowned.

Sighing, the blonde slumped down in her bed. Well, that certainly explained her mother's odd mood this morning. "Why? What's going on?" she asked softly, looking sideways at her friend.

"Well, from what I've heard at the diner just from this morning" the waitress drawled, staring up at the ceiling as she considered which tidbits to share first, "apparently, the Small Business Owners Association of Storybrooke has voted to endorse Mr. Herman. Stephen Doogle says it has more to do with you and Regina helping repair Main Street than their political preferences. Spencer isn't happy about that, naturally. But there was some sort of falling out between him and Moe French. I don't know any of the details yet, but David got a call this morning. The Game of Thorns was trashed pretty bad last night." She drummed her fingers on the armrest. Suddenly, she added, "There's a big hubbub on the Storybrooke Academy's PTA forum about the school's curriculum being unbalanced and the nobles demanding their kids receive better accommodations and resources. It all has a lot of people on edge."

Frowning, the sheriff interrupted, "So, how did everyone find out about our magical situation?" Swallowing, she intently watched her friend. She'd deal with the political mess when the former mayor was awake to help her navigate those minefields.

"When you two were having seizures in the ER," Ruby explained bluntly. "With all the blood in the police cruiser, David and Mary Margaret didn't know what to do and didn't know if they should move you." She rolled her eyes. "This is all secondhand from Leroy by the way. I arrived on scene later with the paramedics."

"How is the cruiser?" Emma asked, cringing. She'd just gotten it back not too long ago.

"Looks like it hit a deer and lost," Ruby smirked, shifting in her seat. "I don't know much about repairing cars, but Tillman said it would take a few weeks to fix."

"We hit two deer, actually," the blonde quickly corrected. "And have it taken to Milton's."

"Wow, okaaay," the waitress drawled, unsure if she wanted to ask. When the sheriff didn't say anything further, she decided to let it go. "And you have around fifty applications and resumes for your new deputy position."

"Seriously?" the sheriff asked, curling her lip. "I didn't expect that many people to be interested." She shook her head.

"You're kidding, right? A deputy is a hot ticket job in this town's economy," Ruby smirked, standing up. "Well, I'm going to get out of your hair. I just wanted to check on you two. See if you needed anything." She trailed off, looking at Regina. "I'm going to go see Belle or Lacey or whoever she is before she's released."

"They're releasing her?" Emma's brow furrowed. Was that safe?

Shrugging, Ruby walked towards the door. "They can't hold her anymore. I'm just going to let her know she can stay at Granny's before Gold comes and swoops in." She missed her friend terribly. With her hand on the door handle, she looked over her shoulder and with a mischievous smile said, "Let me know if you need anything. I imagine Regina is going to be a bear when she wakes up."
"Okay, thanks, Rubes," the blonde said with a smile. However, she frowned as the door slowly closed. Taking a deep breath, she looked at the sleeping brunette and said, "I hope you wake up before it snows again because I really want to get the hell out of here."

~SQ~

"I didn't realize you made house calls, Archie," Emma said cheerfully as Dr. Hopper hesitantly walked into her room. Actually, it was Regina's guest room, but it was officially hers now, especially after discovering the increase to their tether. She was still confused about how or when that happened but nonetheless happy about it. She glanced down the hall before shutting the bedroom door, making sure Mary Margaret was going back downstairs with Henry. She readjusted her sling's shoulder strap as she walked to the bed. The damned thing kept pinching her.

"Forgive the intrusion, but I heard you were both released from the hospital this morning," Archie said, moving towards a chair by the window. Settling in the seat, he continued, fumbling a little over his words, "I just wanted to let you know that I'd be more than happy to assist you, Regina and Henry with whatever you may need." Clearing his throat, he added, "I wasn't coming by for a therapy session." He paused and flashed a nervous smile. "Unless you feel like you could benefit from one."

Facing him as she sat on the corner of the bed, sprained ankle extended toward her pillows, she smiled sheepishly. "Maybe later." She tilted her head and lightly asked, "But could I ask your advice on something?"

"By all means," he nodded, relaxing into the chair. His eyes drifted to the door and back as he connected some of the dots.

"It's about Henry," the sheriff quickly clarified. "He's been super-sleuth secretive lately, and his hot-and-cold attitude with Regina is enough to give anybody whiplash." After taking a deep breath, she said, "I don't know if you've heard, but he snuck into the vault the other day."

"Yes." Dr. Hopper nodded knowingly, pushing his glasses back. "I've heard."

Scratching her neck, Emma rolled her lips and reluctantly made eye contact before getting down to it. "Here's the thing. Sometimes Henry stays with Mary Margaret after school when Regina and I have stuff to deal with or whatever—which is totally cool." She stopped and sighed. "But afterwards, he'll sometimes sport this punk attitude for a while." Rolling her eyes, she added, "Or for days, and he won't really talk to either of us." Absently, she rolled her right shoulder before slouching and settling her cast on her knee. "It's weird because we all get along the rest of the time." She frowned and corrected herself, "Most of the time." Tilting her head, she asked, "Does this make any sense?"

"Actually, yes," Archie easily answered. Even though he long suspected this conversation was coming, he needed to tread carefully. "His behavior is not all that uncommon for a child from a broken home." Seeing her skepticism, he immediately launched into an explanation. "When one parent or that parent's family is openly antagonistic towards the other parent, the child can feel conflicted or pressured to conform to a similar mindset. Typically, the side with the greatest presence or support wins out."

Looking down, she swallowed. Her left hand pushed her hair back before her gaze drifted to the window next to Archie. After a moment, she said, "I thought seeing you again would help." She pursed her lips and scoffed, "He's still clinging to that book like it's gospel." The fairytale stuff was usually the reason behind his attitude.
"Well, it's safe for him," he softly agreed with a compassionate and understanding expression. Opening and closing his mouth several times, he finally shrugged and slowly shook his head. "He did draw great solace from the fairytales before, and it did bring you into his life." He smiled softly.

"Yeah," the sheriff sullenly agreed. "The book can't possibly be wrong," she muttered sarcastically. Her eyes focused on Dr. Hopper. "What happens when it leads him into danger again?" she questioned with a scowl. It was bound to happen eventually because the boy believed too much in the simplistic ideals of good and evil. "Like with the mines or sneaking off again?" She bit her lip and looked down.

Taking a very slow breath and releasing it, Dr. Hopper could only offer Emma a sad, sympathetic smile. "Hopefully, he will have both of his mothers to guide him." He frowned when the statement failed to bolster the sheriff.

"I don't know what to do," Emma whispered, kicking herself for not noticing what was right in front of her. With watery eyes, she searched Archie's face. "He lied to us." At his cocked eyebrow, she immediately clarified, "He lied to me." Even though she hadn't necessarily encouraged this behavior in Henry, she hadn't stopped it, either, and now, it was biting her in the ass.

Nodding, he leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees while interlacing his fingers. "You're in a unique situation, Emma," he said softly, keeping eye contact. "Take advantage of it and use it to reestablish the parameters of your relationship with Henry." He paused and firmly continued, "And with Regina."

~SQ~

"Regina!" Emma hissed in frustration. "Take the damn pill." She shook a tiny paper cup, rattling the pill inside.

Lying on her left side, the brunette leaned heavily on the pile of pillows against her back, glaring up at the sheriff from her prone position on the bed. "No," she said with a hard scowl. Her gaze drifted back to the closet door as she attempted to will the pain away.

"Why the hell not?" the blonde practically whined, slamming the paper cup with the painkiller on the nightstand, crushing it slightly. She carefully extracted the bottle of water from her sling, quelling the desire to angrily throw it at Regina. When no answer was forthcoming, she sighed and started pacing the length of the bedroom. "I know you're hurting."

Reaching for the bottle of water, former mayor struggled to twist off the cap before indulging in a long swallow. She eyed the paper cup disdainfully. "I don't like how these drugs make me feel," she finally admitted. "The dissociation is greatly unsettling." At another time in her life, she may have easily fallen into the pseudo bliss these pills provided, but now, she didn't have the luxury.

"Yeah, they can do that," the sheriff said, sitting on the other side of the bed. Quietly, she said, "You could always heal us."

"I can't—not yet, anyway." Regina reached for the paper cup and looked inside at the inconspicuous, white pill.

"Still wonky from Cora's failed transfer?" Emma asked out of concern. She smiled softly as the other woman took her medicine.

"No, I'm having difficulty focusing because of all the medication being shoved down my throat,"
"Do you need anything else?" the blonde asked, glancing at the clock. "Mrs. Potts will be here soon." Pausing as she remembered to call Ruby soon, she asked, "Any special requests for dinner?"

"What are my options?" the former mayor asked with loathing. She didn't care for eating out, but generally did so out of simple convenience and Henry's enjoyment. However, they didn't have much of a choice at the moment.

"Anything Little Red Riding Hood can deliver, but she'll only hit one place," the sheriff said with amusement. "We can get something from Granny's, Dave's Fish 'n' Chips, Storybrooke Pizza Co. or that little Chinese place on Kings Way. Everything else is still closed because of the snow." Clearing her throat, she added, "Mary Margaret offered to cook us something."

'I'd rather starve," Regina sneered, remembering the tuna noodle casserole and the vile metallic taste of the cream of mushroom soup that had dominated it. Glancing towards the window, she asked, "Have you asked Ruby if she likes her own personal Iditarod?"

"No," Emma chuckled, imagining Ruby frolicking in the snow. "But she has seemed extra chipper lately." Reaching over the hill of pillows, she patted the brunette's hip. "Come on, get up," she instructed, ignoring the groan. "Mrs. Potts says you need to start moving around more." Hearing knocking, she stood up and limped down to Henry's room. She poked her head in his room and said, "Hey kid, someone's at the door. Go check it, would ya? It's probably the nurse."

"Fine," the boy sighed as he got off the floor, leaving behind his toys. Darting past Emma, he zipped down the stairs to answer the door.

Making her way to the railing, the blonde looked down to see Mrs. Potts happily greet Henry, which he politely returned. The boy was a perfect gentleman as he offered to take her coat. She was surprised, however, to see a guest. "Hey, Alex," she called down with a pleasant smile, not missing Henry's quizzical frown glancing up at her. "What are you doing here?" She wanted to go downstairs so badly, but even though their tether currently extended her range enough to sleep in the guestroom and use the hall bathroom unhindered, she couldn't quite make it downstairs yet.

"Hello, Sheriff Swan," Alexander greeted, unzipping his jacket and walking towards the coat closet.

"Oh, I hope you don't mind, Sheriff," Mrs. Potts said, looking up with a slightly concerned expression. "Alexander was kind enough to shovel my driveway this morning, and I asked if he would be willing to help me here today. I thought we could use the extra muscle to maneuver Miss Mills downstairs today."

"Guys, please, it's just Emma." Shaking her head, Emma grinned and immediately countered, "But really, it's fine. I just gave cranky-pants her pill, so she should be sufficiently compliant for you this morning."

"Well, here's to small favors," the nurse quipped good-naturally as she started walking up the stairs. She rattled off a series of instructions to Alexander. The drummer simply nodded, not blinking an eye at the growing list of chores.

The sheriff just stood there as Mrs. Potts disappeared into Regina's bedroom and as the young man rustled around in the linen closest before heading back downstairs with a pile of pillows and
"What's he doing?" Henry asked curiously, watching the drummer for as long as possible. He moved to follow him.

"Leave him alone, Henry. He's just helping," Emma explained, gently redirecting the boy towards his bedroom. She didn't really want to get into who Alexander Sirtis was—not yet, anyway.

Sighing, Henry dropped back down on the floor of his room, resuming his imagined scenario between the various action figures. He frowned as his mother sat down at his desk and turned on his computer. "What are you doing?"

"I'm going to check my e-mail," she answered.

"Don't you do that on your phone?"

Moving the right-handed mouse over to the left side of the keyboard, Emma pursed her lips. "It's kinda hard with only my left hand," she quipped. As the machine was finishing its startup, she looked around the room. "Why don't you have a TV in here?" She would've loved a television in her room.

"I could have a TV or a computer," Henry explained, deciding he didn't care if Emma used his computer. He was grounded from it, television and gaming consoles for the next month, anyway. "Not both," he sighed in that obvious way where he thought he should have both. If the rumors were true, Bobby Eccleston had both in his room. "For my next computer, I want a laptop." His mother would let him use her laptop when he was in bed sick and wanted to watch a movie.

Shaking her head, the blonde awkwardly clicked icons and hen-pecked her way into her e-mail as the boy's adventurous monologue faded into the background. Sadly, the only thing of note was a message from Frank, who was very surprised and quite thankful to hear from her after so long. With great determination, she started to type a reply.

"Emma, what does Mrs. Potts do in Mom's room?" Henry asked, looking at Emma over his shoulder. "And why does she go in and out of the bathroom while you're in the shower?"

Opening her mouth, she quickly snapped it closed, thinking really, really hard. "Well," he sighed in that obvious way where he thought he should have both. If the rumors were true, Bobby Eccleston had both in his room. "For my next computer, I want a laptop." His mother would let him use her laptop when he was in bed sick and wanted to watch a movie.

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Opening her mouth, she quickly snapped it closed, thinking really, really hard. "Well," she drawled, swiveling in the chair, "Mrs. Potts is a nurse, and she helps people who can't quite take care of themselves."

Narrowing his eyes, the boy tilted his head. "You need help taking a shower?" He hadn't needed help since he was six. And wasn't Regina even older than Emma?

"Right now, we do," Emma lifted her sling slightly to emphasize her point. "But I don't have it nearly as bad as your mother does." She winced as soon as the words came out, and Henry looked down. She didn't meant to be so blunt with him, at least not with this. The poor kid couldn't even look at the healing bruise and cut Regina sported over her left eye. "She'll be okay," she softly consoled. "It's just going to take some time before it doesn't hurt so much." Just breathing, she tacked on mentally.

With a quiet "Okay," Henry went back to playing but with much less enthusiasm. He thought about what Emma said and decided it required further investigation. Hearing Mrs. Potts call for Alexander, he looked towards his bedroom door and again wondered about the stranger. That's when the nurse knocked softly on his door and asked Emma if she was going to take a shower. She gimped out of his room, warning him not to snoop in her e-mail. Sighing, he frowned as he rolled
onto his back, holding a Captain America action figure up in the air. And not for the first time, he wanted to be a hero.

After Emma finished in the shower and sent her e-mail to Frank, Henry watched as she carefully walked down the stairs behind Mrs. Potts. However, it was Alexander carrying his pajama-clad and robed mother downstairs that caused the scowl on his face. He trailed behind and entered the living room in time to see Regina being gently laid on the sofa.

"Where's my nest?" the blonde asked with a sassy smirk, pulling a blanket over Regina who was quickly drifting off. She ignored the chill in the air but wistfully glanced at the fireplace.

The nurse scoffed, looking at her watch. "I need to go check on Helena and Anton." She looked between the drummer and the sheriff. "Will you two be alright?" she asked, knowing full well who the young man was. But did the sheriff?

"Yes, Ma'am," Alexander immediately nodded, placing a pillow on the coffee table in front of what would become Emma's chair. He turned, grabbed an extra blanket draped on the back of the sofa and placed it on the overstuffed chair's arm. All the while, he casually told Mrs. Potts to be careful, to have a good day and to call him if she required any further assistance.

When the front door closed and the nurse was gone, Emma flashed a guilty smile and said, "You don't have to do all of this, Alex. You can go if you have other things to do."

Looking at the sheriff with a bit of uncertainty, the drummer explained, "It's really not a problem, Emma." He paused as his brow furrowed. "Unless you feel uncomfortable, but neither of you should really be left unattended."

Biting her lip, the blonde glanced to Regina, out the window, to Henry and finally back to Alexander. "I guess you're right." She smiled as he smiled.

Nodding, the young man took a step back and gestured towards the fireplace. "I'll start a fire." And with that, he was gone to fetch some firewood from the back patio.

Raising an eyebrow, Emma picked up the remote control and settled down in her chair, resting her sprained and swollen ankle on top of the pillow. *I could get used to this*, she thought, glancing at Regina to make sure the television wasn't disturbing her. She was about to remind Henry that he was still grounded from television, but the boy was already gone. Sighing, she brought up the guide and flipped through the channel listings.

~SQ~

Watching Alexander shovel the driveway in front of the garage from his mother's bedroom window, Henry pursed his lips in deep thought. He glanced up at the grey sky. School was closed again tomorrow, and the weather forecast called for more snow this evening. He was quickly losing all hope of ever finding out who this guy was in the Enchanted Forest. Or why he was hanging around the house all day.

Losing interest in the shoveling, the boy walked out to the stairs and listened. He could easily hear the television, and if it was quiet, he could make out his mothers' talking. His mom was finally coherent enough to sit up, and Emma didn't waste any time striking up a conversation. It was boring stuff, mostly about the upcoming election, the applicants for deputy or whatever was on the TV.

He drummed his fingers on the railing, thinking. With an idea, he bounced down the stairs. "Hey,
"Mom," he called, loud enough to be heard over the television. Turning the corner into the living room, he asked, "Can I go play outside? Alex is still shoveling the driveway." He could see her carefully consider his request, and he was honestly surprised she didn't just outright say no. But her glazed-over eyes, despite Emma's dubious expression, gave him hope.

"Put on your snowsuit and boots," Regina finally relented, knowing he wouldn't be outside long, if he even managed to get the gear on by himself.

"Okay!" Henry bolted back upstairs.

"Um, is that a good idea?" the sheriff asked tentatively. She searched the brunette's face, wondering if this was a drug-influenced decision she needed to veto.

"There's still plenty of light." Shaking her head, the former mayor smiled and softly said, "He'll probably just spy on Alex until he gets too cold or bored."

Chuckling, the blonde snuggled down in her chair under her blanket and believed Regina was right. The kid had been pre-occupied with the young man's presence today. Noting the time from the grandfather clock, she absently told the brunette, "It's time for your pill." She ignored the annoyed glare.

With his snow gear on, Henry dutifully presented himself for his mothers' inspection, and after their approval, he happily bounded out the front door. Once free, he sleeked around the left side of the house, opposite from the driveway. He crouched under all the windows until he reached the back patio. Hiding behind a snowbank, he watched as Alexander brushed the snow and ice off the Mercedes and the Beetle.

This went on for about ten minutes and Henry was starting to lose interest. He gazed out into the backyard and considered abandoning his mission for a romp through the pristine snowdrifts. The snow was deep and posed the perfect scenario for building a fort. However, he heard Alexander's cellphone go off, shattering his daydreams of snow tunnels and caves.

"Hello," the drummer answered, walking towards the side door leading into the mudroom. He was completely unaware of the boy skillfully creeping over the snowbank and towards the corner of the house to eavesdrop. "Yes, Sir, I've been here all day," he said, looking out at the rest of the snow-covered driveway. "The queen's in-and-out of it but the sheriff seems alert. But their mobility is severely impaired, Sir. I don't feel comfortable leaving them unattended for long. It took Emma ten minutes to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich."

Henry frowned, wishing he could hear the other person. He ducked down as Alexander turned, facing his direction.

"I've just cleared off their cars and was about to pull them into the garage." The young man paused before asking, "Would it be possible for one of the plows to clear the driveway?" He pursed his lips briefly before smiling. "Thank you, Sir." And he promptly hung up and disappeared into the house.

Quickly, Henry climbed over the snowbank and hurried up to the front yard. He slipped past the hedges just as Alexander came back outside. Crouching, he peered through the leafless shrubs and watched as the drummer started his mother's car then opened the garage door. It took a few minutes, but eventually, both cars were in the garage before a snowplow truck pulled into the driveway. It took no time at all for it to clear the snow which was then pushed down the road, sprinkling sand along behind it. Finally, the large truck came back, stopping at the end of the driveway. Henry watched as a very large man wearing a Storybrooke Department of Transportation
jacket and black beanie climbed out of the cab.

"Are you alright here?" Monty asked, walking up to Alexander.

"Yeah, thanks for plowing the driveway. That would've taken forever," the drummer smiled. He gestured towards the house. "Would you like to come in? I'm sure they would be happy to see you."

Curious, Henry tilted his head as the large man seemed to consider it. So both of his mothers knew these people, and strangely enough, these men seemed to care about them. The Savior he could understand but the Evil Queen?

"Maybe another time," Monty said softly. He knew the Queen wouldn't be too appreciative of visitors during her convalescence, but Alexander was different—always had been. "Don't forget to lay out some salt." Turning back towards the truck, he ordered, "Call if anything changes."

"Yes, Sir," the young man replied before heading inside the garage as the other climbed inside the snowplow's cab.

Henry looked between the house and the truck. As the snowplow continued to idle, he scurried from his hiding place and quickly climbed up the small access ladder into the truck's dumping bed, landing in course sand. He frowned as he tried to brush some of it off, but it was useless. Suddenly, the vehicle lurched forward, and the boy sighed in relief. Smirking, he nestled down to enjoy the ride. At last, he would be getting some answers.

~SQ~

As the truck continued down the streets of Storybrooke, the boy would occasionally peer over the side to see where he was going and watched as they passed house after house. It wasn't a part of town he was overly familiar with, but he was sure he could get home easily enough. The truck eventually slowed to a gradual stop before it jerked into reverse and backed up into a narrow driveway.

Henry winced at the loud beeping and peered through the crack along the dump truck's heavy tailgate. His eyes narrowed as an outside light was turned on and another stranger appeared. This new guy was short with a rounded belly protruding from under his heavy coat.

Shutting the truck off, Monty climbed out of the cab. He smiled upon seeing Bobby. "Stop worrying; Alex said everything's fine."

"Alex always says everything is fine," Bobby countered as he rolled his eyes. "Is he going to stay over there with them, then?"

"He's going to try, I believe." Elmwood answered, pulling off his large gloves and stuffing them into his respective coat pockets. "Has Jason reported in yet?"

"Yeah, still no sign of the witch," Milton grumbled, kicking at a chuck of snow with his booted foot. "But Diego did manage to swipe the vault key off of David." He flashed a huge grin.

Pressing harder against the side of truck, Henry frowned and wondered why they wanted the key to Evil Queen's lair. Did they want magic?

Walking towards the back steps, Monty ordered, "Recall Jason." He stopped and looked up. "All this snow is probably driving him crazy." Turning back to Bobby, he added, "Station someone to watch the graveyard. We don't need a repeat of someone else slipping into the vault." He walked
up the stairs and opened the door.

Following, Milton hesitantly asked, "Shouldn't we just have someone tail the boy?"

Henry could hear the large man laugh but he couldn't make out anything else they were saying. Waiting for a minute, he carefully climbed out of the back of the dumping bed. He peered around before moving to crouch beside the house, slipping into the shadows. When the outside light switched off, he jumped and looked around wildly.

After a minute, he moved from window to window, but all the ones along the driveway were too high. As quietly as possible, he tiptoed up onto the front porch and peeked into the windows. He sneered at how rundown the place looked. However, he saw a few guys watching television and a few others playing a game at the dining room table. He couldn't hear anything, though. Finally, he observed the large man from the snowplow heading upstairs.

Getting off the porch, Henry decided he'd better head home. Deep in thought, he considered everything he learned—which wasn't all that much. These new people were very diverse with a wide range of ages and ethnicities. He hadn't realized the racial diversity within the Enchanted Forest. They seemed very worried with his mothers' safety and awfully concerned with the vault. And, they were hunting for Cora. Maybe there was some mention of them in his book. He stopped to look both ways as he crossed the street, even though there was no traffic.

Knowing that he needed to hurry home, Henry looked between the long stretch of road and the woods to his right. If he walked along the snowplowed road, he'd risk getting seen and, more importantly, caught. If he cut through the trees, not only would he be much closer to his own street but he could come up with a believable cover story for not staying in the yard. Looking up at the darkening sky, he frowned briefly as a snowflake drifted down onto his nose before he headed into the trees.

His breath came out heavy in large puffs of warm, moist air as he trekked across the snow of the forest floor. He didn't think the snow would've been so deep amidst the trees. He'd already fallen and tripped several times, and he had to crawl over two separate snowdrifts where there were large gaps between the trees. This walk through the strip of forest was turning out to be a lot harder than he'd thought it would be. Looking up at the sky again, he sighed. It was starting to get dark, and he was sure his mothers had called for him by now.

A snap in the distance grabbed his attention. Startled by the sharp noise in the too-quiet woods, Henry looked around. Seeing nothing, he continued home, vainly trying to pick up his pace. As another snap sounded closer this time, it propelled the boy to move even faster. He tried to run but tripped over a snow-covered log. Face planting in the snow, his limbs flailed in his struggle to get up and away from whatever was approaching. He finally managed to sit up on his knees as he roughly brushed the snow off his face with his sand-covered, gloved hands. Hearing heavy breathing, he pried open his eyes to see a very, very large dog sitting in front of him. No, it was a big, brown wolf with almost glowing gold eyes.

The wolf's lip curled as it snarled, its piercing gaze looking the boy directly in the eyes.

"Um," Henry whispered, unsure of what to do. He didn't have any weapons or means to protect himself. He was exposed, vulnerable, and no one knew he was there.

Slowly, the wolf stood on all four paws and lunged forward. It snapped the air, flashing its very large, white teeth.

"Please don't eat me," the boy whispered and tightly squinted his eyes shut.
Suddenly, and rather loudly, the wolf snorted as it shook its head and then barked.

Henry's eyes widened and he gasped, "Ruby?" His relief was short-lived as the wolf continued barking at him. "Shh, be quiet," he hissed. "Someone is going to hear you."

Wolf-Ruby growled and huffed as she slowly trotted around the boy. She gently, yet firmly, took Henry's right forearm into her mouth. Waiting for him to stand up, she proceeded to guide him out of the woods, taking him towards home.

Once they were on the street, Henry said with a smile, "You can let go, Ruby. I can walk okay now." He frowned as the wolf grumbled around her hold and tugged him onward a little faster. Sighing, he didn't have any choice but to go along with the wolf. He briefly thought if someone saw him than they may try to rescue him.

But that hope died out when the old man who owned the tobacco shop saw them. He sat in his rocking chair on his front porch wrapped up in a blanket, smoke curling from his pipe. Curiously, he watched as the boy and wolf walked up the center of the street. When they were directly in front of his house, he called, "That's a new spin on a boy and his dog!" He cackled at his own joke, coughing a bit as he tried to catch his breath.

Henry hung his head in embarrassment as wolf-Ruby grumbled, trotting forward a little more briskly.

By the time they reached Mifflin Street, the boy was shivering and very tired. His shoulder and sweaty feet hurt. However, he didn't know if it was because of the cold or because wolf-Ruby had dragged him by the arm across town.

"Thanks for helping me home, Ruby," Henry cheerfully said, trying once again to remove his arm from the wolf's mouth. However, he only received a growl in response as he was tugged a little more forcibly towards the front door. "Please, Ruby," he whined. "I'm already in trouble."

Huffing, wolf-Ruby guided the boy all the way up to the door and sat. She pinned the boy with a sharp sideways glare as she shifted her gaze back-and-forth between the door and him, knowing he would bolt if she let go.

Sighing, Henry accepted his fate and knocked softly on the door. Hearing the low growl, he sighed before knocking again, much louder. "Okay, okay," he muttered in defeat.

~SQ~

Emma snorted herself awake. Immediately, she searched the dimly lit living room as she rubbed her eyes. By this time, the only light was coming from the television and the low-burning fire. She stretched and rolled her neck while checking the time on the TV, smiling at Regina's soft, quiet breathing. She was surprised to discover she'd been asleep for over an hour. Carefully, she stood and stretched. That's when she heard the knocking on the front door.

Shuffling towards the foyer, the blonde smirked at seeing Alexander passed out on the floor in front of the fireplace. His socks were lain out to dry over the fire screen. Poor guy, she thought as she limped towards the door. She descended the steps before flipping on the porch light. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the vague, distorted shape of Henry through the decorative glass panels flanking the front door.

Opening the door, she said, "Did you lock yourself out, kid?" Her eyes immediately went wide at the scene before her. Henry, in his now dirty snowsuit, had his arm firmly in the jowls of a giant,
brown wolf. Blinking, her brow furrowed. "Hey, Rubes," she greeted hesitantly and with a bit of hope. Because she really, really hoped this wolf was Ruby.

The sight of the tail wagging, sweeping the freshly fallen snow, was overwhelmingly relieving. Stepping to the side, the sheriff opened the door wider and gestured for them both to come inside. Only when the door was closed did the wolf release Henry and transformed into her human self. It was really quite fascinating, watching the brown fur morph into clothing as paws became hands and feet.

After the shift was complete, Ruby shook as if settling her clothes on her body. She then proceeded to smack her lips loudly as she scowled. "Polyester tastes nasty," she commented to no one in particular before turning to Henry. "Are you going to tell her or am I?" She crossed her arms, still actively moving her tongue around inside her mouth, but her eyes relayed her anger. Shuffling drew her attention away for a moment as she glanced into the living room, seeing Alexander pull on his dried socks and noticing Regina zonked out on the sofa. Looking back to Emma, she gently surmised, "I guess you didn't know he was gone?"

"Um," the blonde scratched her head as she felt her face flush. "He asked to go outside. Regina and I thought he'd just spy on Alex and play in the snow for a little bit." Watching as the young man walked towards him, she added, "We must've passed out before Alex came back inside from shoveling the driveway."

"My apologies, Emma," the drummer stammered, glancing briefly over his shoulder at the sleeping former mayor. "I didn't realize the young prince had gone out." This was not good.

Cocking an eyebrow at the new title, Emma scowled as her eyes dropped down to the boy in question. She easily assured the young man. "It's not your fault. I should've made sure you knew he was outside." Yanking the wet beanie off the kid's head, she casually dropped it on the floor. "Could you guys help him get out of this thing?" She gestured at the dirty snowsuit. "What the heck were you doing, Henry? How did you find dirt in all the snow?"

"It's sand," the boy absently corrected. Sheepishly, he continued, "I climbed in the back of the snowplow." He avoided eye contact with Emma while pulling at the sleeves of his snowsuit with Ruby's help. They were going to find out, anyway—might as well as come clean.

Alexander's head whipped up from loosening the boots' laces and pulling free the suit's pant legs. His eyes widened as he stared into Henry's eyes. "I asked Monty to plow the driveway over an hour ago." He looked up at the sheriff. "I cleaned up the rest of the driveway and salted it before coming inside to warm up."

"Really, Alex, it's okay," Emma said more reassuringly than she felt. The guy was probably scared of Regina's reaction. Shoot, she was afraid of Regina's reaction. Groaning, she dragged her left hand down her face. "Henry," she sighed, "we just talked about running off the other day. It's why you're grounded."

"I know," the boy replied with a pout. He half-heartedly lifted each booted foot as Alex pulled them off. "I'm sorry."

"I'm starting to get the impression that you're only sorry you got caught," the blonde grumbled, taking a few steps away. Watching Regina sleep on the sofa, she knew this entire situation was her fault because she helped facilitate this behavior in Henry during the last year. She had thought it was a game, stealing the boy's affections. Now, it was biting her in the ass.

Cocking an eyebrow, Ruby studied Emma's stiff back as she helped Henry out of the wet, sand-
covered snowsuit. Focusing on the boy, she said, "You're soaked through, maybe you should go take a shower."

Henry looked from one adult to another before taking the out and darting up the stairs. His throat was tight as he fought back the tears; he was in so much trouble.

"Come right back down here as soon as you're cleaned up," the sheriff demanded as the boy disappeared into his room. He was so grounded, again.

"I'll cleanup this mess," Alex said, gathering up all of Henry's snow gear off the foyer floor. He took it down the hall towards the mudroom and debated whether or not to call Monty.

Blowing out a long breath, the blonde once again faced the brunette and asked with a half-smile, "Would you like some hot chocolate to get the taste of polyester out of your mouth?"

"That would be great, thanks," Ruby returned brightly and easily followed Emma into the kitchen. "Wait," she said, stopping and looking over her shoulder briefly. "I thought you could only be like twelve feet apart."

"That was before the accident," the sheriff explained, filling up the kettle and setting it to heat on the stove. "Once we got back here, I realized, for whatever reason, I can now go, like, forty feet." She opened the cupboard and pulled out three mugs. "It's kind of nice because now I don't have to wake Regina up every time I have to pee, and I get to sleep in my own bed."

"Your own bed?" the brunette repeated, smirking. She sat down on a stool at the island as she raised an eyebrow. "So where have you been sleeping?"

"So with her in the living room, I have free range of a lot of this floor," the blonde continued, ignoring the question. She opened the pantry and pulled out the canister of hot chocolate mix. Of course, Regina's cocoa made from scratch was divine, but she didn't want to be bothered right now.

"Is the tether longer because of the accident?" Ruby asked, pointing for Emma to drop another scoop of mix in her mug. She rather liked the novelty of someone waiting on her.

They both looked over as Alexander silently walked down the hall from the mudroom back to the foyer with a broom and dustpan.

"We're not entirely sure. Of course, Regina hasn't really been with it." The sheriff snapped the lid back on canister before going to the spice cupboard and finding the ground cinnamon. "The pain meds have knocked her for a real loop," she explained while impatiently waiting for the water to boil.

"Well," the waitress shrugged before saying, "you both should heal faster than the average bear since you have magic."

That's when Alexander slipped inside the kitchen with a quiet, "Excuse me," before pouring the contents of the dustpan into the trash. Without another word, he headed back towards the mudroom.

Tilting her head as she watched the young man slip out, Emma drummed her fingers on the marble of the island. "Regina said she couldn't heal us."

"Pain does seriously mess with magic," Ruby agreed, wiggling her fingers at the side of her head. "If I'm hurt, it's almost impossible for me to transform, especially from wolf to human."
Both women watched as Alexander headed back out to the foyer, again—this time with a wet Swiffer mop in hand.

Hearing the kettle starting to whistle, the blonde turned off the stove and filled each mug with steaming water. "How's that work, anyway? I thought you only changed during the full moon." *I should've made Henry clean up his mess,* she thought, sprinkling cinnamon on her hot chocolate. She went to the refrigerator and grabbed the whipped cream.

Suddenly uncomfortable, the brunette rolled her lips as she studied the pattern of the marble countertop. "Ever since the thing with Albert Spencer went down, I've been working extra hard to regain control of my transformations. Even in the Enchanted Forest, I could only shift during wolf's time, but here, I learned to change whenever I want." She paused and shrugged. "I don't know. Magic seems different here."

"Kind of like the werewolves in *Underworld?*" Emma asked for clarification, shaking the whipped cream canister. Regina hated the stuff but had bought it for her. After spraying on a thick layer, she passed it and a spoon to her friend.

Before the waitress could answer, Alexander stole in to throw away the used, wet Swiffer pad.

"Would you like some hot chocolate?" the sheriff asked lightly, pointing to the full, untouched mug. She smiled at the young man's honest delight.

Putting down the mop and leaning it against a cabinet, the drummer said, "Thank you." He immediately took the clean spoon and scraped the crusty ring of the cocoa mix off the inside of the mug.

Smirking, Ruby lazily stirred her drink. "Yeah, but I'm not one of those funky human-wolf hybrids." Sometimes she did wish she had more heft, though . . . and opposable thumbs. Those would be real handy. She quietly sipped her hot cocoa. Looking over at Emma, she asked, "What are you going to do about Henry? I found him in the woods between Mulberry Street and Forest Lane."

Alexander simply blinked as he raised his mug to his lips. After a sip, he supplied, "That's near the house."

Shaking her head, the blonde idly used her own spoon to scrape the ring of cocoa powder mix off the side of her mug. "He's grounded again for sure." She nodded towards the young man before taking a sip. "I guess he wanted to know who you were, Alex, and why you were helping out." In retrospect, it wasn't her smartest move brushing off Henry's curiosity, but she was just so happy to have someone here helping. She didn't want the boy's questions scaring the drummer off.

"I don't think we've met, Alex," the brunette said with a bit of allure, licking the remnants of her hot beverage off her lips. Her eyes raked over his muscularly lean but lanky body.

Smirking, the sheriff took pity on the clearly uncomfortable young man. "Well, it turns out that Storybrooke's very own MC consists of Regina's former guards." She took a larger swig of her hot chocolate and carefully gauged Ruby's intrigued expression. Wanting some more cocoa, she refilled the kettle and put it back on the stove. "I don't know all the details, but they seem very protective of her." She glanced at the drummer sideways.

"Uh yeah," the waitress responded in a somewhat awed tone, looking between Alexander and Emma. "There's a reason Snow White never gained control of the Winter Palace. During the entire campaign, Snow's forces were never able to infiltrate the boarders of the Dark Forest—ever."
"And it's going to stay that way," Regina said in a gravelly voice, appearing in the doorway to the hall. She tiredly rubbed her face. "I take it dinner isn't here, yet." She shuffled forward to the island, looking at Ruby.

Emma smirked at the waitress's befuddled expression. It had taken her a while to get used to a sleep-rumbled, robe-clad former mayor, too. She smiled as Alexander immediately moved to her, offering a steadying hand and silently gestured towards the other stool. She frowned, noting Regina's eyes were still slightly unfocused. "I forgot to call Ruby with our order and something came up," she quickly interjected, sparing the waitress.

"No, thank you, Alex," the former mayor said softly as she affectionately patted the young man's arm before moseying towards the fridge. "Please, enjoy your drink."

Wordlessly, the drummer returned to his spot on the other side of the island and drank his hot chocolate. His eyes mostly followed Regina but would nervously flick to the waitress and sheriff. He recognized the atypical behavior from his queen, as did Emma.

With a furrowed brow, Ruby looked around at everyone, finding the current situation very weird and oddly touching at the same time. "I was just about to go…," she trailed off, standing up and downing the rest of her drink.

"Hold on, Rubes," the blonde instructed, turning off the heat under the whistling kettle. "Something happened," she said directly to the former mayor.

With her right hand on the door handle of the fridge, Regina instantly turned to Emma and hurriedly asked, "Is Henry alright?" Her grip squeezed a little tighter. Maybe she shouldn't have allowed him to play in the snow. But he'd always loved the snow and had already been cooped up inside for the last few days.

"Yeah, he's fine," the sheriff said, offering a weak smile. She distracted herself by fixing another mug of hot chocolate. "He's in the shower now. It seems he had a little adventure today while he was outside." Wordlessly, she offered to refill Ruby and Alexander's mug. Both of which were declined.

Opening the door with a wince, the former mayor carefully retrieved a bottle of water. Every time she moved, she hurt. She closed the door and searched everyone's expressions. As she opened the water, she guessed the situation by asking, "He didn't stay in the yard, did he?" She didn't quite know how to feel about his repeat transgressions so close to one another. Absently, she rubbed her temple, taking another drink from the water bottle.

"No," Emma answered, sprinkling cinnamon. She swallowed and took a deep breath. "It turns out he hitched a ride in the back of a snowplow over to Alex's house."

"I see," Regina drawled, setting her water down on the corner of the island. Her hand stayed around the base of the bottle. She stared blankly at the island counter. A feeling of hurt settled in her chest, but her was mind was too foggy to process. Heck, she was distracted by the sound of the sheriff putting whipped cream over her hot cocoa. And she was oblivious to the drummer and waitress sharing a quick look.

"Ruby found him cutting through the woods and brought him home," the blonde quickly added. "And Alex had absolutely no idea he was outside." She slowly rolled her right shoulder, trying to resettle the support strap. Weakly, she admitted, "I fell asleep."

"How coincidental that he's been developing this particular skillset since the beginning of your
affiliation," the former mayor said evenly, blinking as some of her anger managed to bubble through the haze of pain killers. Glowering at the sheriff, she squeezed the water bottle, and it made several loud crackling, popping sounds in the all too quiet room.

Looking down, Emma's shoulders sagged, and she bit her bottom lip. She chanced a glance at Ruby who shifted in her seat uncomfortably while Alexander pretended not to be paying attention.

Sighing heavily, Regina picked up her water and turned to go back to her place on the sofa. She was exhausted from her little sojourn to the kitchen. "As I'm not in the proper frame of mind to adequately contend with Henry's continued disobedience, I leave this latest parental dilemma in your hands." She touched the doorjamb for balance while disappearing around the corner.

The young man immediately followed, casting a sympathetic but doleful look at the sheriff.

"It's almost time for your next pill!" the blonde called after noticing the time on the stove's clock. "Damn it, Henry," she softly cursed, sipping her hot chocolate. Her eyes drifted back to her friend. "What am I going to do?"

"Don't look at me," the waitress exclaimed, raising her hands up. She shook her head. "The kid has been a handful ever since he moved in with David." She pursed her lips at the memories of Henry's mischievous and sometimes unintentionally hurtful behavior over the last several months.

Snorting, Emma rolled her eyes. "We," she said, gesturing between the living room and herself, "talked to him about his bad decisions the other day." Huffing, she added, "Well, I did most of the talking, but obviously, it didn't take." Looking skyward, she grumbled, "Why is this parenting stuff so hard?" How could the boy not understand that Cora was dangerous?

Seeing Henry standing in the doorway to the hall, Ruby slipped off her stool. "I'll just go grab dinner." As she left, a sad, disappointed expression flitted across her face while glancing at the boy.

"Ask Alex what he wants, would you?" the blonde called after the waitress. She pointed at the stool and was relieved as Henry wordlessly sat. Gathering her thoughts, she rinsed and put the used crockery in the dishwasher. "So, why'd you do it?" she asked, closing the dishwasher. Turning, she ignored the puppy-dog eyes. "Why'd you run off again?" When no answer was forthcoming, she started putting the hot chocolate fixings away. Hit with a strong sense of déjà vu, she frowned. "You know what, I don't think I really care at the moment."

"I wanted to know who Alex was and why he would help Mom," Henry admitted in a rush, a little upset that he wasn't going to get any cocoa.

"Well, did you ask him?" Emma forcibly closed the pantry door. "He's been here all day." She scowled at her son. Damn, he could be hard headed like Neal, and remembering the boy's father did nothing to improve her mood.

"I asked you. You didn't tell me," he whined, his fists pressing into countertop. Why was she being so difficult? Why wouldn't she listen to him? Mom would've at least listened to him! He was unsettled at his own realization. And as he noticed several distinct emotions cross Emma's face, he knew he must've voiced it out loud. As a very confused look stayed on her face, he weakly added, "No one tells me anything."

"That's your problem, isn't it?" she quietly questioned. She avidly searched his face. Rubbing her forehead with her left hand, she took a very deep breath. "Henry, sometimes people keep stuff to themselves for pretty good reasons, and you sneaking around demanding to know everything isn't going to make you any friends." She paused to gather her thoughts. Thinking they'd revisit their
previous conversation about him running off, she added, "When trust is broken, it has to be earned back—"

"No one cares that she lied to me," the boy adamantly interrupted. His eyes took on a hard, determined look.

"About what, exactly?" Emma asked in exasperation.

"About the curse," he quickly countered, licking his lips and nibbling at them worriedly.

Scratching her face, she took a long, hard look at Henry. "Kid, you've got to move past this…." She again felt justified in sending him back to therapy.

Frowning, he looked down at the counter feeling overwhelmed and not really understanding why. It wasn't fair. This wasn't how the story was supposed to end.

"Look, she didn't know you knew about the curse," Emma said softly but firmly. Pointing to her herself, she continued, "Because I was the one who told her, and she was totally surprised." She turned and took the kettle off the stove. Moving to empty the remaining water in the sink, she idly wondered how things would've played out if he had asked Regina about the curse. "Why don't you try talking to her about it?"

Henry scowled more at his own frustration than Emma's suggestion. He tapped his knuckles on the marble a few times. "I'll think about it," he muttered, knowing that phrase usually worked on his mom in the past.

"Good," she replied a little too cheerily, happy this whirlwind of a conversation had ended. "Now, for your punishment," she said, meeting the boy's gaze and taking small comfort in his dramatic head roll and groan.

~SQ~

"David, I'm pulling up to Regina's now. I'll talk to you later, love you," Mary Margaret said with a smile before ending the call and tossing her cellphone into her purse. Slowly, she pulled her Jeep Grand Wagoneer into the relatively snow-free driveway. Hopping out of her car, she quickly retrieved a pot of chili from the backseat floorboard and briskly walked towards the house. She smiled friendly enough at the two men loitering under the breezeway between the house and the garage, sharing what looked like a cigarette. Without a fuss, she entered the house. Stomping her booted feet on throw rug in the mudroom, she quickly transversed the short hall and slipped into the kitchen. Upon seeing her daughter, her smile became genuine again. "Hey, Emma, I didn't think you'd still be up after your doctor's appointment this morning."

Startled by her mother's sudden appearance, the blonde closed the pantry door. "Hey," she greeted, wandering toward the large pot being placed on the stove. "I just got a new cast," she explained lifting her right arm slightly. It hurt but was bearable.

"That's a good thing, right?" the brunette inquired as she turned on the stove. "I made chili for everyone," she stated proudly as she adjusted the gas to the desired temperature for reheating.

Emma deflated slightly at the mention of chili, remembering her mother's last attempt at making it. Maybe she could pawn it off on the guys Monty posted around the house. "Well," she said, feigning interest in the chili by lifting the pot lid, "I don't have to wear a trash bag when I shower anymore." She flashed a goofy smile while putting down the lid. "I've been downsized to a store bag!" She pointed at her right arm. The fresh cast was only half the size of the old one. No more
"Oh, Emma," the school teacher sighed, shaking her head. She tentatively reached out and touched the sheriff's right hand. "Do the pins hurt?" The idea of little pieces of metal purposely put inside her baby was nightmarish. Of course, her daughter's flippant attitude about the whole procedure didn't help.

"Not too much right now," the blonde replied nonchalantly with a shrug. She didn't want to give her mother a cause to linger. It always set Regina in a snit.

"Good, good." Mary Margaret looked around the kitchen. Finding a large spoon stored with several other utensils in crockery on the counter, she went about stirring the chili. She casually asked, "Where's Regina?"

Cocking an eyebrow, Emma resumed her search for a snack, this time in the refrigerator. "She's in the living room, torturing Henry by playing a video game."

"Regina plays games?" the brunette asked with a funny look on face. She put the spoon down and replaced the lid on the chili. She frowned with keen remembrance of begging her stepmother to play with her when she was still a child.

"Yup," the blonde answered, closing the fridge and grabbing an apple out of the fruit bowl on the counter. After a satisfying bite, she chewed until she could talk. "We played Mexican Train for several hours last night." She took another bite. "They wanted to play Skip-Bo, but I told them no." She wiggled her right hand's fingers. Any card game was a pain right now.

"Don't you think you're getting a little too…," Mary Margaret started, then paused to collect her thoughts. She took off her gloves. "I don't know, comfortable with this situation." She couldn't deny how content her daughter had seemed since things had settled down after the accident.

Taking another bite of apple, Emma regarded her mother very carefully. They'd been getting along fairly well during her convalescence. After she swallowed, she asked in an even tone, "What do you mean?" If she could get comfortable, shouldn't she? They were stuck like this, after all—till death, right?

"I'm probably just overreacting, but there's been talk amongst certain circles about the true nature of your partnership with Regina," the school teacher hedged gently, not wanting to unduly upset her daughter. She took off her heavy coat and draped it over a stool back. "Not everyone believes you're bound by a magical tether and that perhaps your relationship revolves more around the... romantic." Holding her hands up, she immediately cut off any impending outrage by her daughter. "It doesn't have anything to do with Regina being the Evil Queen, not really anyway, just more with her being a queen and you being a princess."

"What the hell, Mary Margaret?" Emma exclaimed around her bite of apple. "So, are you telling me that the Enchanted Forest is homophobic?" Of course, that would explain the chip on Mulan's shoulder, but the warrior wasn't from the forest. Or was she?

"No, that's not it at all," the brunette smiled warmly, glad her daughter seemed willing to hear her out. "A majority of people accept that love comes in many guises—True Love, especially—but Royals are sometimes required to make sacrifices for the greater good of the kingdom." She watched Emma warily. "Marriage has always been a means of maintaining peace throughout the kingdoms. The joining of two houses by blood has solved many problems over the centuries."

Narrowing her eyes, the blonde stared at her mother for a long moment before saying, "Well, this
isn't the Enchanted Forest or medieval Europe or whatever." She shook her head and took another bite. "Not that I'm surprised," she muttered, vaguely remembering snippets from a long ago college history class, from the History Channel or maybe from some movie…. Swallowing, she didn't hold back her ire. "So, is that how the royals justify being assholes? Is there some sort of socioeconomic guide to bigotry?"

"Emma!" Mary Margaret hissed in a scolding tone. Hiding her honest surprise, she turned to check on the chili again. It smelled like it was starting to burn. "Every world is plagued with intolerance on some level, but the people of our world take great comfort in the hope of finding True Love." She paused and smiled wistfully before adding, "The hope of finding happiness is a powerful thing."

The blonde wasn't having any of this destiny nonsense. "Don't tell me you agree with those assholes over at the school." She still couldn't believe that the principal caved and permitted the development of a nobility curriculum. It effectively segregated the children.

"It doesn't matter what I believe—."

"Bullshit," Emma almost snarled, tossing her apple core in the trash. "Those people are just pissed off that they're not getting their way with the mayoral election." Royals were for the greater good, yeah right. She pointed angrily at her mother. "You're a royal," she accused.

It was no secret that David was tied in second with Albert Spencer in the paper's election polls. And the sheriff wasn't dumb. She saw the disappointed and yearning looks on her father's face that silently asked her why she didn't endorse him. A part of her believed they would blame her for his loss.

"As are you and Mitchell Herman," the school teacher snapped back, slamming down the pot lid. She turned and faced her daughter with hands on her hips. "You endorsed him, and he wouldn't let Sean see Ashley." Her nostrils flared as she continued, "For all intents and purposes, he sold Alexandria to Gold."

"It wasn't like I had a lot of options," the blonde sneered, rolling her eyes. She crossed her arms and immediately regretted it. The pain was sharp and slightly nauseating, but she didn't show it. "At least he's being reasonable and trying to embrace this world's mentality. He even made Sean get a job at the cannery. It's not like they can live off taxing the peasants, and he knows it." With enough experience of being a meal ticket, she wouldn't wish that fate on anyone and sure as hell wasn't going to treat another person like one. Unable to keep her arms crossed, she let them drop to her sides and tried to ignore the deep ache in her right wrist.

Shaking her head, the brunette pleaded, "Don't you see, Sweetheart? That's part of the reason why we can't stay here. That's why we have to go back to the Enchanted Forest. It's where we belong." All of this strife was unnecessary and hurtful for everyone. Reaching out, she took a step towards her daughter. "It's who we are."

"I can't live like that," Emma said, shaking her head and taking a step back. Her right wrist bumped into the edge of the countertop. She yelped and cradled the cast to her chest.

"Oh, Honey," Mary Margaret cooed. Instantly, she tried to pull her daughter into a hug, but the blonde pulled away, shaking her head.

"I think you should leave now," a baritone voice instructed from behind them.

Whipping her head around to face the interloper, the school teacher wasn't expecting to see the
intimidating form of Montague Elmwood. She swallowed, noting how his broad, muscular frame filled the doorway. "Monty," she greeted softly. Hearing running water, she turned to see Emma at the kitchen sink.

The blonde splashed cold water on her face, valiantly refusing to get sick. "Just go," she rasped. "I'll text you later."

Monty lifted his chin and turned sideways. His message was clear.

"Alright," the brunette sighed, grabbing her discarded apparel. Quickly, she fastened her jacket and slipped on her gloves. She was acutely aware of Monty following her down the short hall into the mudroom and finally outside. Fuming all the while, she now allowed herself to get mad. Almost to her jeep, she spun around and stomped back towards him. How dare he force her away from her own daughter!

Clearly indifferent to her approach, he merely crossed his arms and watched with piercing grey eyes. His cropped, light brown hair moved in the breeze. He stood an imposing figure in the frigid cold in only a flannel, button-down shirt and faded jeans.

Scowling, Mary Margaret demanded, "What happened to you? You were one of my father's bravest and noblest soldiers. How could you serve her?" She pointed angrily at the house, no longer concerned with keeping her voice down.

"You should leave, Princess," Monty repeated the order, turning back towards the house. Using her childhood title was all the respect he would afford Snow White anymore.

"Don't walk away from me!" she barked with regal authority, seizing her opportunity for answers. "I am your queen."

Anger flared as he spun around to face the woman he had come to loathe. "You are not my liege," he gritted out of clinched jaws, unfolding his arms. However, his fists remained tightly curled. Luckily for her, he made no move to close the distance between them.

Seeing the passion of undying loyalty in his eyes, the school teacher was confused, if not conflicted, by it. "Has she taken your heart?" she whispered in pity.

"I am of free will and clear mind," Monty intoned, lifting his chin defiantly.

Mary Margaret frowned at the pride she heard in his voice. "This doesn't make any sense." She shook her head. "That woman is responsible for killing hundreds of people. Entire villages murdered and yet, you choose to blindly follow her."

"Don't mistake my devotion to Her Majesty for blind obedience," he quietly corrected. Facing her fully, he decided to entertain this conversation, but he remained mindful not to betray his queen's confidences. "Death was unavoidable, but some were offered a choice."

"A choice," Mary Margaret scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Death by either sword or axe isn't much of a choice. She killed people for being kind to me." There was no coming back from murder, and now, Regina was magically tethered to her daughter, tainting her.

Tilting his head slightly, Monty regarded her curiously for a moment. "And you believe yourself above the mantle of a killer?" he questioned. "You sought refuge amongst those people. You allowed them to welcome you into their homes." He almost felt sorry for her sheltered naivety. He thought the years living as a wanted criminal amongst the common folk beyond the Dark Forest would've shattered her privileged worldview. But clearly, he had anticipated far too much. Probing
further, he asked, "What did you expect to happen after she sent a huntsman to kill you? Those people didn't die for their kindness. They died because they disobeyed a royal decree by harboring a known and wanted fugitive."

With a furrowed brow, she answered, "I didn't think she'd aimlessly kill people." She continued in a condescending tone, "Of course, she did kill my father." Pausing briefly, her anger flared again. "He was a good man. He didn't deserve to die." The pain over the loss of her parents bubbled up from deep inside her. Tears welled up in her eyes as she unflinchingly met Monty's scrutinizing gaze. "My parents were good people, and they ruled their kingdom fairly and justly."

"Then, Princess, you truly had no idea of what happened within your own home," he replied. His voice took on a cold, hard edge. Turning away, he walked towards the side door and placed a foot on the steps. Opening the door leading into the mudroom, he paused and looked over his shoulder at the school teacher, saying, "You shall not enter this house unannounced again."

Taken aback, Mary Margaret balled her fists at her sides. Her anger flashed as she immediately replied with, "You won't keep me from my daughter!" Watching as the door closed, she roughly wiped at the hot tears streaming down her cheeks with the backs of her gloves and ignored the ever present guards with their accusing stares. She quickly got in her jeep and drove away, all the while praying something could be done to free Emma and save her from that monster posing as a woman.

Monty, who was far less emotional after the short and heated discussion, pursed his lips and gritted his teeth as he returned to the kitchen. His first opportunity to put that privileged, coddled princess in her place had been squandered because his queen, who had teetered on the brink of madness for years, had requested Snow White be left alone for Emma's sake. He sighed and realized he shouldn't have even engaged her in conversation. He vowed not to do so again.

Upon seeing the distraught sheriff, his eyes shifted between her and the kitchen windows behind her. "Damn it," he whispered. This was exactly the type of situation his queen had expressly warned him about.

Suddenly, Henry bound into the kitchen, sliding in his socked feet across the tile in front of the fridge. "Just grabbing a soda," he needlessly said. Yanking the door open, he quickly spotted the red can of Coke and snatched it. "Mom's getting ready to kill a dragon!" He slammed the door shut. The contents on the shelves rattled as he bolted back out to the living room.

Cradling her casted wrist to her chest with a small Ziploc of ice, Emma whispered, "Is it true?" She swallowed then cleared her throat. "What you and Mary Margaret were talking about?"

"Partly," Monty answered uneasily, finding it hard to read the blonde. Twisting to look down the hall and, not seeing the boy, he took a hesitant step further inside the kitchen, keeping the island between them. "You have to understand, she's not the same person anymore." He glanced around the room. "This place," he nodded towards the living room, "that boy, has been good for her."

"Yeah, I get that," she admitted, biting her lip. When she saw Elmwood visibly relax, she firmly asked again, "But, is it true?"

"I shouldn't even entertain this conversation," he grudgingly said, noticing something indistinctive in the sheriff's green eyes. His posture went rigid again, debating whether or not to simply walk away.

"Look, I know how to read between the lines." Emma jabbed her left thumb over her shoulder, pointing at the driveway. "And that outside just raised a bunch of red flags."
"I cannot betray her trust," Monty whispered not wanting to be overheard. And if he was honest with himself, he was conflicted.

"And I'm not asking you to, but I need to know the story, the whole story." She stopped and shook her head. "I'm working with only half a playbook here, Monty." She needed to hear the things people didn't think she needed to or the things they didn't want her to know.

He seriously considered the sheriff's request and he almost decided to throw caution to the wind. However, his sense of duty ultimately won out. Frowning, he quietly explained his decision, "As beneficial as it would be to help you understand her, it's not something I can share in good conscience." And then, he left to check on his men and to warn them against responding to any similar demands from the blonde.

Watching Monty leave the kitchen, Emma mentally cursed herself. She had thought they were developing a nice, working relationship. After all, he no longer looked at her in disdain, at least. Sighing, she walked around the island to the fridge and grabbed a Coke. She put the can on the counter, popped it open and drank a third of it. "I don't know what to do," she whispered into her can's mouth before taking another swallow.

Again, she was faced with a serious choice, one that had far-reaching consequences. The easiest and tried-and-true solution was simply to run. She almost ran away from all of this before Henry ate that turnover. She huffed in annoyance. Things were far too complicated and she hated it. She hated that it wasn't simple. She hated that she couldn't blindly follow her parents' lead. She hated that she found herself really liking Regina in spite of everything.

Taking another swig, she frowned as she stared off into space. Her mind drifted back to that day in the hospital, the day that changed the whole kit and caboodle. She thought about Henry dying and how she had kissed him, saving him with True Love's kiss. She thought about how utterly distraught Regina had been in the hospital supply closest and in Henry's hospital room. Then, she thought about the former mayor's astonished relief when the boy woke up. There was something more about the moment, but she couldn't put her finger on it. One thing she knew for sure, though, everything wasn't as it seemed, and no amount of wishing would make it simple.

"What on earth is that smell?" Regina asked, entering the kitchen from the hall. Without pause, she went to the stove and turned it off. She removed the lid and warily stirred the chili. She poked the bottom, feeling large clumps of it stuck to the bottom of the pot.

"Oh crap," Emma said, snapping out of her daze. Her bag of ice fell onto the floor. Carefully, she stooped to pick it up. "Mary Margaret dropped off some chili a little while ago."

"I didn't realize she was here," the brunette commented as she sniffed the contents and tentatively took a small bite from the spoon. She frowned, noting the beans were severely under cooked and a burnt flavor had already permeated the dish. "I don't know if we can salvage this."

Shrugging, the blonde wandered over to the stove. "No big deal, I was just going to pawn it off on the guys anyway." She smirked, wondering if the guards would've feigned praise or fed it to the stray cats.

Looking over her shoulder at Emma, the former mayor quietly asked, "Is your mother still here?" She strained to listen for anyone else's presence in the house. She despised the idea of an unescorted Mary Margaret wandering around her home.

"No," the sheriff said, chuckling. "Monty chased her off a little while ago."
Sighing, Regina returned the utensil to the spoon rest and the lid to the pot. She would have to discuss what happened with Monty as soon as possible. It was only a matter of time before the infuriating woman once again became a nuisance.

Clearing her throat, Emma shyly said, "Thanks for letting her come over here and visit." She flashed a bashful smile. "It can't be easy with all of these people invading your privacy."

And, oh boy, were there a lot of people in and out of the house since the accident: Mary Margaret, David, Archie, Ruby, Alexander, Widow Granger, Anton. And then, there were all the Crows Guard members milling around outside, guarding and patrolling the property. Emma was honestly surprised how nervous they made Regina, especially considering they were all her former guards.

With a noncommittal sound, the brunette glanced forlornly at the pot of chili. It wasn't suitable for a dog at that point. She walked over to the refrigerator and searched the various Tupperware containers. "Where's the rest of Anton's chicken and dumplings?" she asked, frowning. That had been quite enjoyable.

"I gave it to Jason when he came in for a break last night." The blonde tried not to wince upon hearing the soft, sad sigh. She knew Regina was tired of eating takeout but their last attempt at actually cooking something turned out to be an all-around disaster with her broken wrist, Regina's impaired mobility and Henry's general unwillingness. "I can call Ruby or have one of the guys go grab something," she suggested.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor said in a light but scolding tone, "They're not your personal errand boys, Miss Swan." She grabbed an apple out of the fruit bowl and a paring knife from the block. "Besides, Ruby's bringing sub sandwiches and Lord of the Rings tonight." She absently sliced off a chuck of apple and put it in her mouth.

"Lord of the Rings, huh? Isn't that like a home movie for you?" The sheriff smirked, clearly amused with her joke.

"I'm not talking to you," Regina said before cutting another bite off the apple and walking out of the kitchen.

Emma snickered as she followed, her previous woes forgotten. Teasingly, she said, "Hey, you can't eat that in the living room. Those are the rules." She grinned when Regina glared at her, standing in the archway to the room in question, eating her apple.

"Mom, hurry up," whined Henry from his place on the floor. He sighed as she took another slice of apple. "Can I play for you?" he asked brightly.

"No," the brunette said around her bite. She swallowed and nodded towards the television. "I'll be dead, on fire, chased by sabre cats or some other manner of unpleasantness in five minutes." She smirked at her son's dramatic sigh and floor roll.

Laughing, Emma walked around Regina and stepped over Henry. She sat down in her chair, the smile never leaving her face. Picking up the video game box and reading the back cover, she half listened as mother and son chattered about the game. Eventually, Regina disappeared and returned back to the sofa, resuming the game—much to Henry's relief and excitement.

This, Emma thought as she watched Henry try to point to something on the screen without blocking Regina's view. This is the Regina Mills I choose to believe in.

~SQ~
"It's bloody cold," Hook complained, not for the first time, while he warmed his hand by the fire. His gaze darted around the masonry walls of the vault under the mausoleum. It had a simple elegance to it but was still very much a sorceress's lair.

"I can send you back to your ship," Cora threatened, turning a page in one of the books she had liberated from Rumpelstiltskin. She wouldn't be distracted now. So far, her plans were on task as the Dark One was sufficiently pre-occupied over Lacey, and he hadn't yet noticed several books missing from the hidden library in his shop.

Taking a slow breath, he decided it was best to remain silent and took a swig of rum from his flask. The current accommodations were outright homey in comparison to the *Jolly Roger*. Staying aboard the ship moored in the harbor with no provisions or supplies only offered further exposure to the biting cold that had gripped Storybrooke. *At least I don't have to sleep in a coffin*, he mused. Frowning at the fire, he realized how much he hated the snow, ice and cold. He was also getting tired of waiting, but he couldn't rush someone like Cora. Not without an angle.

"Have patience, the storm has passed and once the beans are ready, we'll proceed precisely as planned," the sorceress said in an inpatient, condescending tone. Her eyes rescanned the same page twice upon finding the spell that would return her daughter to her side. However, her smile was brief. Looking up, she narrowed her eyes, saying, "As long as you keep your end of the bargain."

"I take it you found what you were looking for?" the pirate asked, moving towards the large table, his curiosity momentarily outweighing his desire for warmth.

"Yes," she answered in an appreciative hiss. Moving her hands over the open pages of the tome, a purple mist formed, and as it dissipated, a small, ornate scroll was revealed. "This will give me back my daughter." Carefully, she took the curse in her hands, unrolled it and read the ancient language of an almost forgotten magic.

"How?" he asked, peering at the strange scribbling.

"This will make her love me," Cora snarled joyously. Rolling the scroll, she tucked it safely away in pocket hidden within her cloak. She needed time to prepare the spell and to gather ingredients. There were so many preparations, as Rumpelstiltskin would not be easily played.

Confused, Hook absently commented, "I thought magic couldn't force one to love another." He had seen magic do both amazing and horrifying things, but he'd always heard love was beyond magic's control.

"There are ways," the sorceress vaguely supplied, standing for the first time in hours. She gracefully moved to the fireplace and stared into the flames. Her prize was within her grasp.

The pirate shuddered involuntarily. Not for the first time, he questioned this alliance, but his desire to kill the Crocodile and his lack of a better option left him without a choice, at least a more desirable one. "Don't worry, Love." He smiled, pulling out a small vile from an inside pocket of his leather coat. "This will kill him."

Turning, she eyed the muddy liquid with disappointment. "Poison?" she scoffed. "You think mere poison can kill the Dark One?"

Having the upper hand in this relationship for once, he decided to revel in it. "This isn't just any poison. This is a magical poison that can kill *anything*." He grinned as his associate continued to study the vile.
"What's the antidote?" Cora asked. She magically examined the liquid and found it strangely intriguing. It was completely natural and not from any world she'd encountered. Her sharp gaze jumped back to Hook.

"There is none," the pirate smirked, tucking the vile back inside his coat. "None that Rumpelstiltskin will be able to brew in this world, at any rate." At least, not without his help, and there was still no guarantee that the possible cure he had hidden away would even work in this world. Of course, the sorceress didn't need to know about those things. He needed an insurance policy, after all.

"I'll need his heart for my spell." She looked almost worried, glancing between his breast pocket and his face. "What will it do to his heart?" she probed as anger bubbled under the surface of her words.

"Make it stop beating," he replied flippantly with a roguish smile. Shaking his head, he said, "I can adjust the dosage for the poison to take as long or as little time as you require, Love." His eyes took on a hard edge as he continued, "I humbly request that I deliver the blow."

Cora smiled as she turned back to the fire. "I believe that can be arranged."

~SQ~

Hearing the loud clanging of pots, Emma's attention was momentarily diverted from the conversation with her father. From the dining table, she worriedly looked over her shoulder towards the doorway leading to the kitchen and waited. Obviously, Regina was trying to cook something again. Holding in her sigh, she was about to go investigate when the familiar footfalls of Jason came jogging up from the basement stairs. Only when she heard the vague mummers of conversation did she refocus on her father.

"He's still in town?" she sighed, flopping back and slouching in the dining room chair. She had hoped her last conversation with Greg Mendell, accompanied by a big, fat ticket, would've chased him out of town well before the snow storm hit. "Great, just great," she muttered, drumming her fingers on the table. It was just something else to add to her growing list of problems.

"Well, it's probably nothing," David said. He leaned forward, crossed his arms and rested his elbows on the edge of the table. "According to Michael, he didn't get his car back till right before the storm. Since then, he's just been wandering around taking photos, doing the typical tourist thing."

Chuckling, she skeptically asked, "So what are the tourist traps in Storybrooke?"

"Well . . .," he drawled, not really sure himself, "Happy saw him at the wishing well the other day." "Isn't that like magic central?" Waving off any forthcoming answer, the sheriff's attention was drawn by Henry's shouting to the large windows overlooking the backyard. Smirking, she watched as the boy ran past wearing his snow gear. He darted back and forth, dodging incoming snowballs. It was nice hearing him laughing and screaming as Alexander gave merry chase.

"They seem to be hitting it off," the deputy commented with a soft smile. It was good his grandson was developing a friendship, even if it was with one of Regina's former guard.

"Believe me, it was a rocky start," Emma retorted. Reaching for a stack of papers, she pulled out a few pages that were held together by a green paperclip. "Out of curiosity, do you happen to know a Karl Puma or Jackson Hart?"
"Can't say that I do," David said, feigning disinterest, but he had a pretty good idea of why she was asking. "Why?" He casually tried to take a peek at the resumes and applications. Maybe Mary Margaret would know them.

"Just a few people I'm considering for the new deputy position," she supplied offhandedly, shuffling the files back under her growing pile of paperwork. She really liked Karl. But if she told her father, she feared he'd automatically disapprove and push for Leroy again. "How have things been at the station?" she asked.

Smiling, he said, "Nothing major, just some random stuff related to the weather." His brow furrowed as he continued, "I did pick up Nicholas Zimmer a few nights ago trying to break into the school." He paused and pursed his lips before adding, "I didn't charge him with anything. I just dropped him off at home."

Biting her bottom lip, Emma merely nodded, knowing her father thought he was doing the right thing. "Did you talk with Mr. Tillman?" she subtly asked, playing down her interest. She'd been worried about the teen.

"Ava answered the door. It was late, so I didn't see the point in bothering Michael," the deputy replied with a shrug. "He's been really busy lately with his towing business." Frowning, he reconsidered the haphazard state of the boy's dress and unkempt appearance. Something wasn't quite right, but he didn't know how to word his concerns.

Nodding, she hid her relief. Maybe Nicholas had gotten away unscathed. She looked out the window again, wondering how the teen was fairing with the cold and snow. Clearly, he was surviving and was quite clever.

"I don't want to lie down," Regina firmly protested, leaning heavily on Jason's arm as he gently guided her across the foyer towards the living room.

Turning and watching, Emma smirked and stifled her chuckle by covering her mouth with her left hand. Her eyes met David's fleetingly before he turned around, also.

"I know, Ma'am," the lead guitarist said flatly. His gaze darted into the dining room as they shuffled past. "I'm fully capable of stirring a pot of soup, Ma'am." Irritation towards the sheriff rose in his belly as their eyes met.

"I know you are," the former mayor dejectedly sighed as they crossed the threshold into the living room. "This is highly inappropriate. You're a guard, not a nanny."

"I really don't mind, Ma'am," Jason said assuredly as he continued to guide Regina to the sofa and helped her get settled. He prayed she would stay put this time.

Catching the soft chimes of the grandfather clock tucked away in the study, Emma called out towards the foyer, "It's time for a pill!"

Facing his daughter again, the deputy tilted his head and quietly asked, "Does this happen regularly?" He never thought he'd see the day that someone handled the Evil Queen.

Nodding, the sheriff's shoulders shook as she regained her composure. "Often enough—the pain pills are still throwing her for a loop." Her amusement faded when Jason breezed into the foyer. She could tell he was pissed. "It's usually not so bad if she naps for an hour after taking a pill," she explained to her father.

"You told me you would watch her," the lead guitarist grumbled as he walked into the dining room
and past the pair on his way to the kitchen. It would take at least twenty minutes to settle the
queen. And since the potato soup needed tending, he lost out on his own nap, at least until
Alexander came back inside.

"I was!" Emma whined, twisting to track the guard. After sending Henry outside to play, she'd left
Regina dozing on the sofa with Food Network playing low on the television. That typically
pacified the high woman. And to her credit, she did try to coax Regina out of the kitchen before
David knocked on the front door. "She went all Iron Chef with her Ginsu knives." She quickly
added, "You know how she gets."

Stopping in the doorway, Jason whipped around and snapped, "I know precisely how she gets, and
you should have fetched someone." He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and said, "My
apologies, Sheriff." His gaze was still hard, even though his tone was neutral. "I shall see to the
soup and ensure Her Majesty is properly settled." Then, he disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Crap," the sheriff muttered. She slumped further in her chair, once again facing her father.

"Do you want me to go talk to him?" David asked, starting to rise from his seat. He wasn't sure
what he possibly could say but he would try.

"God, no," she sighed, gesturing for him to sit back down. "It'll be fine," she said, shaking her
head. Again, she underestimated Regina's stealth.

"Why hasn't Regina healed herself or you?" the deputy asked, tilting his head. His gaze dropped
down to his daughter's cast. Of course, he was fully aware of Mother Superior's refusal. But he
honestly thought the former mayor would've mended them both by now—unless her dark magic
meant that she couldn't do healing.

Blowing out a heavy breath, Emma ran her hand through her hair. "Well, as I understand it, pain
and magic don't mix very well and, apparently, neither do manmade narcotics." She pursed her lips,
staring at the polished surface of the dining table. Hesitantly, she glanced at her father and asked,
"Do you know anything about healing magic?"

Shaking his head, David leaned back in his chair. "Not really, I've only had experience with
potions, and those were hard to come by." Poisons were a dime-a-dozen but true restorative magic,
that was a different story. He only knew of one place, Lake Nostos, and that almost killed him.

"Yeah," the sheriff drawled. "We're healing faster but Regina said since the magical atmosphere of
Storybrooke is super thin, it's taking longer for our bodies to draw in the necessary energy." She
shrugged, unsure if she was explaining it correctly. "I'm not sure I understand the logistics of all of
it, but my wrist has been healing twice as fast." Rolling her eyes, she added, "Whale's been creepily
obsessive about it." Damned fool wanted them to come in once a week for x-rays.

"And Regina?"

"Yeah, her, too," Emma vaguely replied, thinking about the former mayor's list of sustained trauma
from the x-rays. Her gaze lifted in time to see Jason walk across the foyer. She'd seen enough
medical TV dramas. She'd definitely got the better end of the deal as far as injuries from the
accident were concerned.

Looking over his shoulder, the deputy caught a glimpse of the lead guitarist's retreating back. "So,
the Crows Guard...," he started but trailed off.

"What about them?" she prompted, tilting her head to the side. She liked them, at least the ones she
actually met. Of course, she and Monty were still having difficulties.

Shrugging, he said, "I'm just curious about them, that's all. They've managed a low profile, even with all the excitement in town." He paused, drumming his fingers as he searched her face. "Your mother says you've taken a real liking to a few of them." The fact was, he didn't know any of them or anything about them and that made him nervous.

Smirking and rolling her eyes, Emma was touched by her father's concern. "They're not all that bad," she explained offhandedly. Best to down play their assistance.

David's expression turned serious. "But how are they going to stop Cora?" If they had a plan, maybe they could all work together to end the threat.

"Cora?" she repeated confused.

"You've said yourself that she's here for Regina. What happens when she comes to collect?" he inquired, scowling.

"I never asked," the sheriff answered. Her mind fumbled with the question. She had almost forgotten about Cora lurking in the shadows.

"Well, you should let us know as soon as you find out," David commanded with a quick nod while mentally bristling at the idea of his little girl being exposed to the enemy. It was bad enough she had to live with another one. "Maybe Monty and I could work out something together. Get the fairies input."

Emma simply stared at her father, unable to argue. Sulking at yet another reminder of the complications in her life, she reluctantly said, "I'll see what I can find out."

"Thanks, Honey," the deputy said, pushing his chair back and standing up. "I'd better get back to the station." Taking his coat off the chair back, he slipped it on and rolled his shoulders to settle it. "Mary Margaret was wondering when Henry could come over again. We miss him," he said, buttoning his jacket.

"He's grounded," she said sternly, gathering her papers and shuffling them into a file folder. "He was lucky to go play outside today."

"Oh, okay. I'll see you later then." David affectionately slapped his daughter's left shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze before he turned around and left the house.

When the front door closed, the sheriff sagged in relief. She'd been dreading this meeting ever since Mary Margaret's blowup with Monty. At least he didn't mention the election, she mused. Walking into Regina's office, she dropped her folder on the desk she'd commandeered for sheriff's business. For the last few days, she'd used the home office as an interview room. Her gaze drifted over the leather tomes and statuary on the bookshelves on her way out.

Closing the door behind her, she glanced across the foyer into the living room and noticed Jason wasn't hovering over the now sleeping former mayor. She turned the corner to the short hall and slipped into the kitchen. It was time for some damage control.

~SQ~

Reclining against a pile of pillows in her bed, Regina cycled through a series of browser tabs on her laptop. She scowled as her gaze dropped off to the side and down to the latest edition of the *Daily Mirror*. The front page outlined the reasons behind the election day pushback. Apparently, two
people were stepping down from the city council, effective immediately—Mrs. Frost and Martin Shoemaker, both of who were retiring. However, Mrs. Frost was certainly an unexpected development as she was a stout supporter for Albert Spencer with clear connections to the small business owner's association.

Tabbing over to her e-mail, she searched for the latest gossipy missive from Stephen Doggle. She skimmed the contents again and sighed. Mrs. Frost's eldest daughter was pregnant, and as such, she proclaimed her avid interest in being a devoted, full-time grandmother. Regina almost felt sorry for the poor fool who had been snared by the conniving family. Briefly she considered who the affluent man could be but quickly pushed it aside. She had expected Sarah Frost to try and claim her mother's coveted council seat. But Stephen didn't mention who was running.

Clicking to compose a new e-mail, Regina quickly typed up a personal message to Mr. Krzyszkowski from the courthouse. The record keeper always did love a bit of juicy gossip. She'd just sent the e-mail as Emma lightly knocked on her partially open bedroom door. She looked over expectantly as the door was opened wider.

"Hey, I was just seeing if you were still awake," the blonde said, crossing the threshold. Her checking on Regina, who was usually already asleep, had become a bit of a nighttime routine and was conveniently excused by borrowing the laptop. She stepped to the side of the bed and glanced down at the paper. Pointing, she said, "This soap opera just keeps getting better."

"Indeed," the brunette absently agreed, looking out the window. The street lights illuminated the snow-covered ground. Involuntarily, she shuddered as her thoughts continued to focus on the empty council seats. At least the struggle for power hadn't escalated to violence, but it was only a matter of time with these fools.

"Are you cold? I can get you another blanket." Emma asked, stepping towards the hall.

"No, thank you, I'm fine," the former mayor said, gesturing for the sheriff to join her. She winced as she shifted the laptop off to the side. "Have you heard who's running?" she asked, nodding at the newspaper.

Picking up the paper, the blonde sat and shrugged. "Nope." She paused and sheepishly asked, "Have you?" After a beat, she added, "My parents haven't uttered a peep about it." And that had her worried.

"Well, that certainly supports one theory," the brunette grumbled, rolling her eyes.

Leaning back onto the mound of pillows, Emma grunted, "Mary Margaret's going to run." She dragged her left hand down her face. Smiling, she turned and said, "Maybe she won't ask for an endorsement." Her smile quickly turned to a frown as her brow furrowed. "Or maybe she's going to guilt trip me into giving an endorsement."

Regina laughed but abruptly stopped with a tight grimace. Holding her right arm tightly across her chest, her right hand splayed firmly against the left side of her ribcage. Swallowing, she breathed slowly through her nose and spoke carefully. "The town charter only bestows moderate power to the city council," she explained, ignoring Emma's guilty look. "The effectiveness of the two people filling the position is what's crucial here. I can almost guarantee the nobility will push for someone of import and, at the very least, someone easy to control or influence."

"You know, I'm getting real tired of these royals and their upper echelon cronies," Emma grumbled. She rolled her eyes at Regina's raised eyebrows and added, "I know words."
"I never said you didn't," the brunette commented softly. With a soft smile, she said, "However, you do realize you are a royal."

"Yeah, Mary Margaret and I got into that the other day," the blonde said, picking up the thin newspaper and tightly rolling it. She lightly smacked her cast with it a few times. "I don't see why it's a big deal, though."

Pursing her lips, the former mayor weighed her words carefully. She narrowed her eyes as Emma repeatedly hit her cast. "Regardless, status is measured and it's always important. As a member of a royal house, your elected position as sheriff, coupled with the general public's favorable esteem for you, means a great deal." She snatched away the newspaper and tossed it on the other side of the bed.

"This has to do with Gold threatening my job, doesn't it?" the sheriff asked, pouting. She scratched her nose and stared up at the ceiling. "Or those different groups at the mayoral debate all liking me?"

"Yes," Regina answered, perking up slightly. Maybe the hardheaded blonde was finally getting it.

"I can't deal with this," Emma groaned, rolling off the bed and standing up. She walked around the bed and retrieved the rolled-up newspaper. "This is totally messed up," she started, tapping her chest with the end of the paper. "I was never popular. Hell, I hardly had any friends and I still don't."

"No indication as to who wrote it?" Regina asked, bringing the laptop tray back onto her lap. "Not necessarily," the former mayor sighed, drumming her fingers on the laptop chassis. "I was hoping to determine who had written the accursed thing."

"Where are they?"

"Henry and I burned them," the blonde replied. She was puzzled by the brunette's slightly defeated look. "They didn't really explain anything. They just implied everyone living happily ever after and all that jazz." She tilted her head and studied the lounging woman.

"No indication as to who wrote it?" Regina asked, bringing the laptop tray back onto her lap.

"Nope," Emma said, climbing back onto the bed. She lay on her left side and watched the computer screen. "Why? Isn't it kind of a moot point now?"

"But I didn't really break it, did I?" the blonde countered, frowning. "Storybrooke is still here." She carefully crossed her arms still hitting the paper against her arm. "We were supposed to go back to the Enchanted Forest."

"How do you know that?" the former mayor asked with a furrowed brow and narrowed eyes.

"Storybrooke is still here." She carefully crossed her arms still hitting the paper against her arm. "We were supposed to go back to the Enchanted Forest.""
conversation, but there really wasn't much of a choice.

Immediately flopping onto her back, Emma groaned and covered her eyes with her left arm. "That is not what I want to hear right before bed, Regina."

"Unfortunately, it's something you need to hear," the Brunette said, raking her eyes over the blonde's prone form before turning back to the laptop's screen. She pressed a few keys. "I've determined Mr. Mendell's true identity."

"True identity?" the sheriff scoffed, lifting her left arm off her eyes. With a furrowed brow, she asked with more interest, "Wait, you found something on him?" Her eyes searched Regina's face. Allowing herself a moment of self-satisfaction, the former mayor cocked an eyebrow and smirked. But then, she cleared her throat and said, "You're not going to like it."

Rolling her eyes, Emma simply prompted, "I never do, so just spit it out." The guy was probably another fairytale character, anyway. Maybe he had some vendetta against one of the royals—everyone else did.

"His real name is Owen, son of Kurt Flynn of New Jersey...." Regina trailed off and watched the blonde before she continued, "I met them in nineteen-eighty-three, days after we arrived here."

The blonde's eyes slowly widened. She sat up on her elbows as her mouth fell open. "Wait a minute, that means they were here in a cursed Storybrooke." Reaching and leaning over, she turned the laptop towards her, scanning the current page. "Fully-aware people from this world," she muttered. Looking up at brunet, she asked, "How is that even possible?"

"They were backwoods camping within the town's borders when the curse hit. As far as I can guess, it must've been some sort of loophole that Rumpelstiltskin didn't adequately account for," the former mayor explained. Her gaze never left the computer screen. Clearing her throat, she continued in an even tone, "Needless to say, the situation quickly escalated, and the Flynns made a rapid departure from town."

Unsurprised by the revelation, the sheriff snorted as she briefly imagined a Regina from twenty-nine years ago who was, perhaps, still very much the Evil Queen mentioned in Henry's book. She clicked on another tab in the browser. "It says here that Kurt Flynn went missing in the spring of eighty-four." She narrowed her eyes at the former mayor.

"I didn't kill him if that's what you're implying," Regina snapped. She grabbed the laptop and turned it to face her, ignoring Emma's pout. Entering a series of keyboard commands, she brought up another document displaying Kurt Flynn's financial information for the period in question. "He wrote checks and used credit cards until the summer of eighty-four, and then, the financial trial just stopped." She manipulated the keyboard again and brought up phone records. Pointing to a phone bill for a New Jersey address, she said, "Obviously, he kept in contact with his son while he was here in Maine." She highlighted an outdated Maine exchange number to illustrate her point.

"Okay, so why was Kurt even coming back here?" Emma asked, choosing to believe the evidence and Regina this time. "Could he still be in Storybrooke?"

Furrowing her brow, the Brunette seriously considered the question, but eventually, she shook her head. "Doubtful. I'd have found him by now. Besides, he'd be seventy-nine years old."

Sitting up, the blonde shifted to sit crossed-legged and catty-cornered from Regina. "I guess it's a good thing you and Greg haven't crossed paths." Slouching, her elbows pressed into her knees, she
muttered, "Guess we're going to have to keep it that way, not that it's terribly hard at the moment."
She flashed a goofy smile but quickly dropped it when Regina scowled. "Yeah, yeah, we need to
find out why he's here. Believe me, I get that."

"It's more than that, I'm afraid. With Cora on the loose, it's only a matter of time before he
witnesses and possibly records something magical or out of the ordinary," the former mayor said,
closing the laptop lid. She left her hand resting on the device. "Or finds something," she whispered,
her eyes meeting Emma's, "if he hasn't already."

Groaning, the sheriff rolled backwards. Her head hung off the edge of the bed. The increase of
pressure was sort of nice for a moment. Lifting herself back up, she eyed the brunette for a

"If your citation didn't persuade him to leave, any further brash behavior will only cement his
doubts. He'll know he's in the right place." Carefully, Regina reached for her bottle of water and
pain pills off the nightstand. Twisting the cap off the prescription bottle, she gently knocked out a
pill, saying, "First, we need to find out exactly why he's here." She quickly swallowed the white
pill and chased it with another sip of water. "If he's looking for his father, we need to find Kurt
Flynn first." She started adjusting the pillows around her.

Getting up, Emma silently helped the brunette settle in bed. Her help wasn't necessary anymore,
but she found it calming. It was nice being needed for something so domestic. She frowned at her
own thoughts. Watching Regina lay on her left side and wrap around a body pillow, she removed
the laptop, tray and newspaper from the bed. "Mind if I borrow this?" she asked, holding up the
laptop.

Looking over her shoulder, Regina said flatly, "You do most nights." Smirking at Emma's
embarrassment, she settled back down and softly sighed at being covered with the blankets. She
couldn't remember the last time she'd been truly pampered beyond mere necessity.

Finished with her fusing, the sheriff walked around the bed and picked up the laptop. "I'm just
going to look over your info," she said softly. "Maybe we can brainstorm tomorrow after Henry
goes to school?" Tomorrow was going to be a busy day with Storybrooke Academy reopening, and
she didn't want to keep Regina up any later than absolutely necessary. At least, that's what she
promised Alexander.

"That's fine, Emma," the former mayor automatically replied. After a moment, the bedside lamp
went off. "You can stay if you want," she said softly, staring at the closet door. Her ears strained to
listen for Emma's steps on the carpet but she frowned when the woman stood in the doorway,
blocking the light from the hall.

"Get some sleep, Regina," the blonde said, pulling the door mostly closed. She hesitated for a
moment, her hand hovering over the doorknob. A part of her knew the prickly brunette liked her
company at bedtime. How many times had Regina indulged Emma's crazy conversations since
their forced cohabitation? Yet, what started out as a means to irritate had quickly become a means
of bonding. But she wasn't brave enough to exactly test that theory head-on. She didn't want to ruin
it.

When Emma's shadow left the doorway and the hall light went out, Regina sagged into her mattress
and sighed. Despite of all her bluster and complaining, she missed the bedtime chats with the
blonde. She found them strangely soothing and reminiscent of things she never had the good
fortune to experience. Key amongst them was a true friend like the ones mentioned in the countless
books she's read. Of course, those few exceptions never lasted very long and ended horribly,
whether by her hand or someone else's—even the supposed friend.
No, she thought. She wasn't meant to have friends or even a family. And if her current circumstances and past experiences were anything to go by, she wasn't going to have any, either. As she felt the drug dragging her to sleep, she decided as long as she was a part of Henry's life it would be alright. After all, what choice did she truly have?

~SQ~

END PART 5
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note: Although Part 5 was rather slow, however necessary, we’re pretty content with the overall foundation established thus far. So, the ebb-and-flow of the plot and action will pick up slightly in this part and into the next. A friendly reminder, this is a slow burn story, as disheartening as that may be to some readers. Also, various aspects of their bond will continue to be explored, and as such, the reader will learn about it alongside the characters. As far as the questions/concerns regarding Henry’s behavior, we realize he’s not necessarily a favorite. However, the flip-flop attitude isn’t without reason as the Neverland arc remains crucial to Henry’s development, especially in regards to his relationship with Regina and even Emma. Also, it’s not our plan to make Mary Margaret and David the bad guys, either. They’re just trying to do the right thing.

Future Updates: No matter how the show continues to play out, we will continue our story! Be advised, however, that Part 7 will be delayed due to our participation in the SQ Big Bang.

A Special Thank You for all your well wishes in addition to all of the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. Taking the time to express your interest, comments, questions and critiques means a great deal to us. We like hearing from you, even though we don’t always reply, and we consider all of your suggestions.

~SQ~

PART 6

Cora halfheartedly glanced over the public service announcements posted on the bulletin board outside of Town Hall. *What a waste of power,* she thought in criticism of her daughter’s squandered former position. *Why waste money on ensuring useless pets are spayed or neutered?* Idly readjusting her scarf and her slightly wind-tousled auburn hair, she finally spotted her quarry exiting the building.

With a soft smirk, she insouciantly observed as Gold gimped down the sidewalk on the other side of the bulletin board, heading towards his car. Though his dealings with the townsfolk were of no concern to her, she was delighted to see that whatever business had been conducted inside, it obviously hadn’t gone his way.

“Hello, Rumpel,” Cora casually greeted as she slowly stepped around the bulletin board.

Stopping abruptly and taking a slow breath, Gold coolly responded, “Cora.” He turned to face her, reveling in the sound of his shoes grinding scattered salt into the concrete sidewalk. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” he prompted, frowning at her new attire. He hadn’t recognized her when he exited the building, and for that matter, he hadn’t sensed her, either.
“Oh, I just wanted to say hello.” Flashing a deceptively amiable smile, the sorceress calmly closed the distance between them, stopping just outside of arm’s reach. She removed her sunglasses as she now stood with her back to the sun. “I thought we could perhaps have lunch,” she stated with a slight tilt of her head, the hint of a devious smirk playing at the corners of her mouth.

“Another time, I have a previous engagement,” the pawnbroker immediately replied. He found himself hesitating as he began to turn away, deciding he should spare a few minutes for a bit of banter in an attempt to ferret out more of her intentions. “Tired of hiding under your rock?” he jeered with a narrow glare.

With a soft tsk, she folded her sunglasses. “Really, Rumpel, you’re losing your touch,” she admonished with mild disappointment, holding the folded eyewear in clasped, gloved hands in front of her. Breaking eye contact and frowning in slight distaste, she said, “While this town’s accommodations leave much to be desired, I’m making do. It has been a long time since I’ve seen so much snow,” she admitted, looking around at the snow-covered scenery.

After a moment, he prompted, “Again, what do you want?” This brazen approach in the broad light of day did peak his interest, but he was determined not to show it.

Cocking an eyebrow, Cora looked sideways at him. “To the point, then,” she sighed as she dropped her sunglasses in a front pocket. “Did you really think I wouldn’t figure it out?” she asked, pinning him with a hard glare. “You purposely tricked Emma Swan into casting that binding spell on Regina, and I want to know why.”

“My reasons are my own,” Gold snidely supplied, knowing his refusal to answer would only further frustrate her. He smirked as he wasn’t disappointed. Lowering his voice, he sneered, “Let’s call it just compensation for your breach of contract.”

“Enslavement to that worthless savior of yours and her maladroit family isn’t recompensing you, Rumpelstiltskin,” the sorceress coldly countered through clenched teeth.

“How would you know, Dearie?” the pawnbroker inquired, flashing a sinister smile. “I can see the future,” he announced with a flourish of his free hand. Bored with the conversation, he turned around and started to leave. He was already late for his lunch date with Lacey.

Rolling her eyes, Cora laughed mirthlessly. “Yes, your astonishing fortune-telling skill has been incredibly helpful in finding your son,” she taunted sarcastically. Still, Rumpelstiltskin continued walking away, she scowled. This wasn’t as easy as she had expected. “Off so soon to the young bosom of your consolation prize?” When that failed to garner a reaction, she tittered darkly, “I’m sure Lacey will find Hook’s particular charms entertaining while you’re toiling over your potions.” She smirked in triumph when he stopped walking. “Oh, are you having problems recreating it? Tricky thing, trans-morphism.”

Gritting his teeth, Gold instantly created a fireball in his free hand. Pivoting on his cane, he whirled his entire body about face as he flung the projectile towards his intended target. Before the spell exploded and scorched across empty concrete, he found himself scowling at a dissipating cloud of purple smoke.

“You’re getting slow in your old age, Rumpel,” Cora taunted from behind before throwing her hands out in front of her. The action released a concussive blast, propelling the pawnbroker across the wide walkway and tumbling into the snow. “Of course,” she smirked, “Maybe you weren’t ever really that talented.” She laughed merrily, disappearing in another cloud.

That time, Gold was ready for her reappearance. The moment her form materialized off to his left,
he pushed his wrist upward in a claw-like motion, twisting it sharply. Thick, dark roots ripped up from under the snow-covered ground and wrapped around his former pupil. “You had such potential,” he derided as he stood up.

“They say it’s a poor student who can’t surpass her teacher,” the sorceress goaded, unconcerned with the vines coiling and tightening around her body. She waited until the pawnbroker’s gaze met hers before flashing a menacing smile and adding, “Let me show you what I’ve learned since our last lesson.” After an intense snap, the roots crumbled to ash, sending a massive cloud of dark grey out and away before being caught in the gentle breeze and scattering across the pristine snow. Quickly, she formed one fireball and then another, launching them consecutively.

Gold caught the first lobby and effortlessly sent it and the second careening back. He snarled when they both missed and instead careened into the front of Town Hall. One smashed thru a window, setting something inside on fire while the other scarred the pale yellow siding. Creating a spectacle was not something he had intended. Yet, as his anger continued to flare, he parried and attacked without any further thought than bringing the insufferable woman down. “I should’ve killed you a long time ago!” he roared, throwing out a wide shock wave.

Seeing the distortion rolling towards her, Cora couldn’t compensate in time to avoid a tumble across the hard, mangled ground. “Why didn’t you?” she called out prior to launching a massive upsurge of flame and dirt with an aggressive wave of her arm. It slammed into the front of the building, sending debris everywhere when Rumpel managed to sidestep it. She smirked as she stood, hearing the chorus of screams in the distance. Releasing ravaging destruction always had a certain appeal. Frowning, she realized she’d lost sight of the cowardly imp.

“You amused me, Dearie,” the pawnbroker whispered in the sorceress’s ear from behind her. He gleefully chortled as he disappeared in a puff of red smoke. Reappearing a few meters away, he elegantly rolled his wrist, and the earth undulated around him.

While Cora remained unaffected, Town Hall couldn’t withstand the strain on its foundation any longer. At first the building shuddered and groaned, followed by a loud cracking before a giant fissure splintered throughout its facing, breaking it. Huge chunks of the structure collapsed, exposing the rooms within to the outside.

“It was quite entertaining watching your dreams crumble to dust under the weight of your own ambitions,” Gold coolly taunted, standing haughtily on the last piece of untouched sidewalk. His gaze hardened as he pinned his foe with an unwavering glare. “You barely escaped the ruin you brought upon King Xavier’s kingdom, but you won’t escape my wrath if you cross me again.”

“You believe everyone’s a fool,” the sorceress countered, unmoved by Rumpelstiltskin’s jeering tongue. “But you’re the biggest jester of them all.” Thrusting her hand up, she made a quick slicing motion before rolling her wrist.

Suddenly, Gold found his feet rising up as the concrete slab was slid out from under him. His back connected hard with the ground. Instinctively holding his hands up, he narrowly missed being crushed, squeezing his eyes shut as he dissolved the section of sidewalk into tiny bits of sand and gravel. Snarling, he clambered onto his feet once more. However, he was astonished that Cora was nowhere in sight—he had expected some gloating from her after that last volley.

Hearing sirens wailing in the distance, he glanced over the destruction spread out around him. Storybrooke’s Town Hall was fully ablaze, and the beautiful, park-like grounds around it were utterly devastated. Through the haze of smoke and fire, he spotted Regina’s beloved apple tree left unharmed in the midst of the ruin and allowed himself a moment of curiosity.
Quickly moving towards his car, Gold had no desire to be interrogated by the acting-Sheriff. Despite Cora’s involvement, his part of the magical damage wouldn’t go without blame, even if he did spin the tale in his favor. No, he didn’t have time. This altercation pushed up his timetable exponentially, and he could no longer wait for events to unfold naturally. Emma and Regina were taking too damn long.

~SQ~

Several hours after nightfall, Greg Mendell effortlessly slipped out unnoticed from the laundry room nestled between Granny’s Bed & Breakfast and the diner, a small backpack on one shoulder. Pulling on a black beanie, he smirked as he silently trotted down a poorly lit alley, making his way towards the closed Storybrooke Public Library. *These morons are so gullible*, he thought as he rounded a corner, confident he wasn’t followed. Everyone was too busy gossiping about the fire at Town Hall to pay any attention to the stranger in town.

Who were these greenhorns kidding with their rookie surveillance? Greg had spotted his tail the moment they’d started. Of course, there was still Deputy Nolan to worry about, but thanks to the sheriff’s timely accident, the amateur spies had slacked off, which presented him the perfect opportunity to break into the library. HQ had sent the order several days ago—well before he submitted a video of a man and woman tossing what looked like fireballs at each other outside of Town Hall. That had certainly been eye opening.

Greg moved around the back of the buildings until he found the back service entrance to the library. With no CCTVs to worry about, this was almost too easy. After one last quick look around, he reached up and easily shattered the caged, dim light bulb over the door. He blinked several times as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Slipping off his backpack, he unzipped the largest pocket and pulled out a small jimmy. He was just about ready to get to work when….

“That’s not going to work,” a soft, young male voice said from the shadows by the dumpster further down the alley. Having spotted the stranger while rummaging through the trash a few buildings down, the boy had become mildly curious and crept closer. Before the guy put out the light, he recognized him as the outsider who’d been wandering around town with a camera and cellphone. It had gone on for days with a few of the dwarves always following him.

“Might as well come out,” Greg hissed, pretty sure it wasn’t the deputy. That oaf was too brash for any sort of finesse that involved hiding in dark alleyways. If he squinted, he could just make out the slender outline of what he assumed was a teenage boy in a thin coat two-sizes-too-big and a red scarf looped around his neck.

“Why do you want in the library?” the boy asked, unimpressed as he took several more steps forward. “Only thing in there’s books.” Of course, there was that apartment on the second floor where Belle used to live prior to losing her memories. Now she spent all her free time at the Rabbit Hole with Mr. Gold or other men. But he wasn’t going to mention it because that’s where he’d been squatting since the weather turned bad.

“None of your business,” Mendell immediately countered, glaring at the scruffy teenager. He thwacked the slim crowbar against his leg. It was too late to hide it and too late to chase the boy off. Yet, at the look of things, the teen wouldn’t be much trouble. His brow furrowed under his beanie as he asked, “What are you doing out this late, anyway? Isn’t there a curfew?” He remembered reading something about it in the paper while in the hospital.

“Only matters if you don’t know who to avoid,” the boy answered with a shrug. He turned around. This guy was boring. What was exciting about breaking into a library? Over his shoulder, he said, “That slim jim isn’t going to work. The sheriff upgraded the locks a few months back.”
Greg looked down at the jimmy in his hand and back up. “Hey, kid,” he called softly into the dark alley. “Want to make a few bucks?” He smirked as he heard the teenager halt. This was a calculated risk he had a feeling would pay off.

“My name’s Nicholas, and how much?” the boy inquired. Sure, he knew this was wrong, but he wasn’t going to go running to David Nolan just to be dropped off at his father’s house again. He might’ve gone to Sheriff Swan and Mayor Mills if they weren’t surrounded by Crows Guard.

“Fifty dollars.”

“Make it a hundred,” Nicholas countered. The food in the apartment was almost gone. He needed to restock soon. “And I want half now.”

“Look, Nick, I didn’t bring my wallet,” Greg sneered, crossing his arms.

Sighing, the boy rolled his eyes and considered passing on the cash. Then he felt little whiskers tickling his ear, poking out from under his red scarf. He reached up and absently stroked the rat sitting on his shoulder and hiding under his coat. “Fine,” he answered. “But if you don’t pay up, I’ll slash your tires.”

Chuckling, Mendell stooped down to put the slim jim back in his bag. “Alright, no need to get hostile.”

“Whatever. Wait here,” Nicholas ordered before jogging around the corner and disappearing.

~SQ~

Glancing at the clock on the microwave, Regina held her bottle of prescription painkillers in her hand. It was almost time for her next pill. Gripping the bottle tightly, she scowled as the plastic bit into her palm. Things were spiraling out of any semblance of control, and she could no longer afford the luxury of these pills. With a resolute sigh, she put the bottle down on the counter.

“Hey,” Emma greeted, walking into the kitchen and opening the fridge. “Have you taken your pill, yet?” She reached in and grabbed a coke. Placing the can on the island, she popped it open and took a hearty swig. All the while, she watched Regina’s back.

“No,” the brunette answered firmly with a definitive edge in her tone. She didn’t turn around.

“Do you want to take it with a sip of this?” the blonde asked tentatively, placing the can closer to Regina on the island. She’d noticed how the other woman stole sips of soda from Henry, occasionally indulging in one herself.

“No, thank you,” the former mayor replied flatly. She looked down at the bottle. Why Emma was being so considerate, she didn’t know. Any other time, the pills were practically shoved down her throat. These thoughts, however, only served to irritate her further.

Rolling her lips, the sheriff silently drummed her fingertips on the marble countertop. She really didn’t want to prod but concern compelled her. “Are you okay?” she asked. “I know it can’t be easy hearing that your office went up in smoke.” But it wasn’t hers anymore, was it? The election was steadily creeping closer in spite of the parade of delays.

Moreover, it had been extremely unsettling how a lazy afternoon in front of the TV morphed to one fraught with drama. Ruby had called in full panic mode, relaying how Gold and Cora had apparently broken out into a magical battle in front of Town Hall. Thankfully, no one was seriously injured, the building and surrounding landscape the only thing that were damaged. However, the
perpetrators themselves were nowhere to be found, at least not during David’s initial search—not that it would do any good despite all the big talk.

“The building is inconsequential,” Regina said gruffly. It was just a building. It didn’t matter and certainly not anymore. She gritted her teeth, glowering at the pill bottle. These last few weeks since the accident—since their binding—she had allowed herself to become too comfortable and complacent. And as such, they were vulnerable and weak. It was only a matter of time before Cora went after Henry, forcing her, and subsequently the sheriff, into submission.

Smirking and rolling her eyes, Emma snorted lightly as she muttered, “Sure.” She reached for her soda and took another swig. “Seriously though, you’ve been distant all evening.” The silence between them felt oddly tense. Pursing her lips, she walked around the island and reached for the painkillers, assuming Regina was simply having trouble opening the prescription. It wouldn’t be the first time.

Snatching the bottle, the brunette moved around the island and opened the refrigerator. “I’m not an invalid,” she snapped, reaching in for a bottle of water.

“What’s going on?” the blonde asked, putting her soda down. Her brow furrowed as she quickly added, “I never said you were.” Carefully, she crossed her arms, mindful of her still tender wrist, but at least the pins were out at last.

Glaring at the sheriff from across the island, the former mayor opened her water. “I can take care of myself, Miss Swan,” she said sharply before taking a sip. “I was doing so long before you showed up and took over my life!” Twisting the cap back on, she slapped the bottle on the island counter.

“I didn’t—!” Emma started to counter but quickly snapped her mouth shut. She knew when she was being baited, but why? “Where is this coming from?” she asked as neutrally as possible, dropping her arms to her sides.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Regina replied automatically with a soft huff, glancing away. She didn’t want to talk about her feelings. Her grip on the water bottle tightened. It crinkled under the pressure.

Confused, the blonde shook her head and whispered, “This isn’t you.” Sure, it’d been a steep learning curve, but for better or worse, she was starting to figure the feisty woman out. Or so she’d thought. And they’d been getting along! She was damned if she was giving up on any hard won progress.

Rolling her eyes but refusing to meet Emma’s gaze, the brunette scoffed, “Apparently, you don’t know me as well as you think.” She wanted to brood. She felt the need to brood. A tumbler of apple cider whilst glaring into a crackling fire sounded quite therapeutic. Honestly, it wasn't her fault the blonde stumbled in here during one of her moods. Her former guards knew well enough to give her space.

Glancing down, the sheriff sighed and turned around to grab her coke off the counter behind her. The truth of Regina’s statement had stung more than she’d ever thought it would. Taking another drink, she mulled the situation over. Quietly, she asked, “Is this because we’ve been doing all sheriff-y stuff?”

“Everything isn’t about you, Miss Swan,” the former mayor grumbled, making eye contact.

Since their binding, that was all they did day-in and day-out—sheriff duties or sheriff training. It
was even beginning to grate on Emma’s nerves. It also didn’t help that lately they only really talked about magic, the seldom television show, Henry, or Storybrooke’s current political drama. However, it wasn’t until after the accident with the deer that the blonde believed she was consistently connecting with Regina on a more personal level. Sure, they had their moments before, but the pain medication probably had a lot more to do with it than the sheriff’s sparkling personality.

“Uh huh,” Emma acknowledged before draining the dregs of her soda, knowing she’d hit a nerve. “Well, it kinda seems like it is, doesn’t it?” she asked before crushing her can and tossing it in the recycle bin inside a cabinet.

“Don’t flatter yourself,” Regina said dismissively, crossing her arms. Even idiots could take a hint. Leaning back against the counter, the blonde crossed her arms in unconscious mimicry and pointedly asked, “What’s really bothering you?”

“I beg your pardon?” the brunette responded with a narrowed glare. She was further annoyed by the persistent questioning.

The sheriff held her smile in check. “I’m not buyin’ this attitude. If you just want to pick a fight, I’ll take you down to Granny’s because I’m sure Leroy will go a few rounds with you,” she mildly taunted. Actually, going to Granny's sounded like fun, not that Alexander or any of the Crows Guard would go for it.

“You think I’m having a temper tantrum?!” the former mayor fumed. She fully faced the island, pressing her palms flat onto the cold surface.

Cocking an eyebrow, Emma smirked and cheekily replied, “Well, it sorta looks like it.” Her amusement, however, was short-lived.

“Has the fact that Town Hall was completely destroyed escaped you?” Regina sneered. Her voice was low and rumbly as she continued, “We’re vulnerable. And as long as I take these pills, our safety is further compromised.” She picked up the bottle and slapped it on the counter. Shaking her head, she squeezed her eyes closed for a moment before adding, “We can’t protect Henry.” She tightly squeezed the bottle again in frustrated anger.

Instantly, the blonde leaned across the kitchen island. Hesitating for only a split second, she reached a hand out and lightly touched the back of Regina’s hand. “Hey, I get it. I really do, but you can’t just stop taking the pills cold turkey. Sure, we’re healing a hell of a lot faster, but the trauma you sustained—”

“I’ve endured worse,” the brunette supplied flatly, hiding her surprise over Emma’s touch, which was happening more frequently. At the other woman’s frown, she reflexively tilted her head.

Sighing, Emma dropped her head and pulled the pill bottle out of Regina’s grasp. “You need to take a pill,” she instructed gently, standing upright. She locked gazes and said, “Working as a bails bond person, I’ve had a cracked rib or two. You’ll heal faster if you’re not in constant pain.” Holding the prescription up, she softly added, “Please.”

“Have you heard anything new regarding Greg Mendell?” Regina asked casually, ignoring the bottle and the request. “I assume he’s still in town.” As far as she was aware, a few of the dwarves were supposed to be tailing him.

Frowning, the blonde shook the pills. “Regina,” she warned, but she quickly regained her
composure by closing her eyes and counting to ten. “Okay,” she said resolutely, putting the bottle down. She dragged her left hand down her face. “You’ve got to stop obsessing.”

“Obsessing?” the brunette seethed as her fists curled. “This isn’t some hobby to occupy my time.”

“Bad word choice,” the sheriff muttered, looking upwards. She considered simply walking away and cutting her losses in the getting-along department. This was almost as bad as when Regina found Mary Margaret going through the kitchen cupboards.

“Has it not occurred to you that Mendell may have seen or possibly recorded the incident at Town Hall?” The former mayor took another sip of water, hiding the growing discomfort in her left side. “We have yet to figure out if his little venture here is merely some sort of vendetta,” she added a tad more calmly, “or if he’s working for or with someone.”

Nodding, Emma had to agree with the assessment, even if it screamed paranoia. “What do you want to do?” she asked. Quickly shaking her head, she didn’t wait for the brunette’s answer. “Mary Margaret says Mother Superior has Leroy's posse working extra hours in the mines ever since we hit those deer. Not to mention, we should probably keep you on the down-low as long as possible. So, we're kinda light in the surveillance department unless one of the Crows Guard can do it.”

“Doubtful,” Regina supplied, looking over Emma's shoulder and out the kitchen window. Monty wasn't going to appreciate having another task on his plate or having to work so closely with David. “They've been focusing their efforts on Hook and my mother.”

“Really?” the blonde prompted. As this was news to her, she wondered why she hadn't heard anything about it, but then, she remembered the clash between Elmwood and Mary Margaret. The former Captain of the Guard hadn't been as chummy lately—not that they were exactly friends to begin with.

“Cora's presence complicates matters immensely,” the brunette explained as she slowly refocused on Emma. “A direct confrontation in broad daylight is not her usual style. As I’ve mentioned before, she's here for something other than mere reconciliation.” But what could it be?

Scratching the back of her neck, Emma offered a weak smile. “In the Enchanted Forest, Cora seemed pretty pumped to get to Storybrooke, to you.”

Regina shook her head and with a level expression, said, “No, she wants something else.”

Biting her bottom lip, the blonde blew out a heavy breath. “So, do you think this is all connected somehow? You know, with Cora showing up, Gold tricking me, and Greg driving into town?”

“Doubtful, but it’s a safe assumption that Gold has something my mother wants. The question is what?” The brunette’s gaze drifted over Emma’s shoulder again as her eyes lost focus.

“Well, that explains where you go,” the sheriff mumbled, smiling at Regina’s perplexed expression as their gazes met. Quickly, she grabbed the prescription bottle and opened it to knock out a single pill. “Since nothing’s going to get done tonight,” she explained, holding up one of the white, oblong pills on her palm. “Humor me and take one last pill for the night.”

“Last pill?” the former mayor dubiously questioned, glancing between Emma’s face and her hand. “You do realize this is where we started.”

Rolling her eyes, Emma smirked. “A compromise,” she easily answered, knowing the perfect solution. “Like how you got me to try the saag paneer.” She flashed a bright smile. Despite despising spinach and most leafy greens, she’d fallen in love with the spicy, creamy dish. “Take
this pill and I won’t nag you about them again until bedtime tomorrow.”

With a narrowed stare, Regina plucked the painkiller from the sheriff’s palm and swallowed it with a drink of water. She was far from pacified by this latest deal, although she was more willing to work with the proposed compromise.

The blonde relaxed immediately as she twisted the cap back on the prescription bottle. She would take any victory she could get at this point. Between dealing with hiring a new deputy, her father as acting-sheriff, Greg Mendell and everything in between, she just wanted something to go her way. Taking a deep breath and looking off to the side, she idly played with the pill bottle. “Look, I’m sorry if I’ve been pushy.” And she was, at least a little bit.

The brunette simply cocked an eyebrow but smirked as Emma rolled her eyes.

“I am,” the sheriff drawled out. “It’s just that everything has gotten so complicated.” Her shoulders slouched as she continued, “With Henry, my parents, you and the townies, I just feel like everything’s been turned topsy-turvy, you know?” She looked at the brunette with big, green eyes.

The former mayor’s brow furrowed. Her brooding may have been narrowly averted, but that didn’t mean she was in a sharing mood. And if she didn’t want to talk about her feelings, she sure as hell wasn’t going to stand there listening to the blonde talk about hers. She turned to walk out of the kitchen.

Opening her mouth to continue her somewhat practiced monologue, Emma frowned and asked with a hint of surprise, “Wait, where are you going?” They were having a moment, damn it.

“Away from you,” Regina answered. She stopped in the middle of the foyer, looking between the office and the living room. There were no words to express her current frustrations with everything. And she had nowhere to go to escape any of it.

“Now wait a minute,” the blonde said, exiting the kitchen with the bottle of painkillers in hand. She held her ground in the short hall.

“I’m going to bed,” the brunette announced, heading towards the stairs.

“What if I’m not ready to go to bed yet?” the sheriff asked, crossing her arms with a huff. She winced slightly as she put too much strain on her injured wrist. Watching Regina slowly climb the stairs, her brow furrowed as a strange sensation washed over her. It reminded her of a limb falling to sleep. Her eyes widened as she stumbled forward. “Regina,” she hissed, her tone laced with urgency.

Unaware, the former mayor failed to stop in time before the searing pain struck. Gripping the handrail with her left hand, her right instinctively pressed into her ribs. Only a heavy breath escaped as she dropped down on to the steps, leaning her head against the balustrade.

“Holy crap,” Emma whispered, breathing heavily. She stood bent over with her hands on her knees several feet from the base of the stairs. Taking a few more deep breaths, she caught Alexander’s worried gaze from the living room. She waved him off as she straightened up. Shaking her head and blinking a couple times, she stiffly walked up the steps, stooping to pick up the brunette’s bottle of water that had fallen. She eased herself down next to the other woman and commented, “For the record, I’ve haven’t missed that.”

Regina ignored her as she focused on breathing. Gradually, she released her white-knuckled grip on the banister.
“Didn’t you feel the prickle?” the blonde asked gently, offering the water. It had been awhile since they’d had an incident with their distance restraints.

Taking the bottle, the brunette sighed. “No,” she replied before taking a drink. Surely at this point she didn’t have to spell it out.

The sheriff looked around, assessing what exactly happened. “This doesn’t make sense,” she muttered. More clearly, she speculated, “It’s like our leash got retracted.” She pursed her lips at her own analogy. A dull, throbbing ache settled throughout her body as she absently massaged her right wrist. “Like a zip lead,” she said, scrunching her face.

“Obviously,” the former mayor agreed, carefully pulling herself up. Well, if she wasn’t in the mood for guiding the blonde through another lesson of magic logistics for the umpteenth time, she certainly wasn’t in the condition to do so now.

“But,” Emma started then abruptly stopped. Following the brunette, she decided to remain quiet, not wanting to irritate the brunette any further. Leaving the other woman to settle for bed, she pulled the bedroom door partially closed before cautiously moving towards her own room. She got several feet inside the door when that damn prickling ticked up and down her spine, like a colony of angry, biting ants moving under her skin.

Sighing, she grabbed her pajamas off the back of the door and changed. When that was done, she hung her casual clothes behind her bedroom door. She frowned as she silently slipped back into Regina’s room and eased into the bed.

“What are you doing?” the brunette demanded, unmoving. Feeling the bed shift had startled her awake.

“Going to sleep,” the blonde replied with a bite in her voice. “Since, you know, I can’t sleep in my own bed. Again.” She contently snuggled down in the mattress. This bed was so much more comfortable than the guest room.

“Fine,” the former mayor retorted. She didn’t really care at this point. She just wanted to go to sleep. “Stop wiggling.”

Opening her mouth with a sassy remark, the sheriff turned her head to glare at the back of the brunette’s. Then she remembered trying to sleep with cracked ribs in that old travel trailer she’d rented right next to the railroad tracks. So she huffed and closed her mouth. Her mind instantly refocused on their apparently elastic tether. How could it have changed so quickly? What had happened?

“Seriously?” Emma snapped, rising up onto her elbows. “We got whammied with the megawatt fire ants because you’re pissed I made you take another pill?”

“Miss Swan,” Regina growled not opening her eyes.

“That’s so not cool, Regina,” the blonde scolded, flopping back down. She winced at the soft hiss. “Sorry,” she sheepishly muttered, glancing briefly at her bedmate. “Still…,” she added.

The brunette debated whether or not to just ignore Emma but her better judgment won out. After all, the last thing either of them needed was another reduction in personal space. “Your deductive reasoning aside, you obviously missed the point,” she stated flatly. She stared blankly at the closet door.
“Believe me, I got the message,” the sheriff grumbled, glaring at the ceiling. The ambient illumination from the street lights and the flood light on the corner of the garage lit the room nicely. She’d missed sleeping here. With the guest room facing the backyard, it was darker and lonelier. “You rather be a badass and suffer.”

“Hardly,” the former mayor scoffed. She frowned as she realized the adrenaline spike from their latest incident was fighting the pain medicine. Carefully, she situated herself on her back. She turned her head and saw the blonde watching her. Looking up at the ceiling, she swallowed as she was unsure how to explain without feeling exposed. “The binding spell,” she started, paused and rolled her lips. “It’s not going to be affected by our fickle moods swings or emotional impulses.” Taking a slow breath, she added, “The only way to truly impart changes to the tether would be on a fundamental level.”

Biting her lip, Emma mulled this over for a few minutes. Every once in a while, she’d look over at the brunette and see her still awake. “I just didn’t want you to suffer,” she finally said, even though she didn’t really understand what had shifted in the brunette. With great hesitation, she asked, “Don’t you trust me?”

“It’s not that simple,” Regina answered. But no, she had learnt not to trust anyone who flittered close to her heart, and Emma had gotten dangerously close lately. Her growing desire for a true friendship with the mother of her son would only end in pain. It always did. Yet, there were those few exceptions….

Blowing out a breath, the blonde rolled onto her side, facing the former mayor. “You gotta help me understand here, Regina,” she said quietly. Flashing a slight smile, she added, “I’m sure we both don’t want to start going to the bathroom together.” That would just be awkward.

With a roll of her eyes and a twitch at the corner of her mouth, the brunette gave a short snort in agreement. She remained quite because she didn’t know what to say other than what was already said. For a while, her growing frustrations gnawed at her, and she was starting to feel trapped again. But when Emma’s hand lightly touched her arm, she found their eyes meeting. What was with the touching? Emma Swan didn’t touch people. She rarely instigated hugs with Henry.

“Look, here’s the thing,” the sheriff started when they looked at each other. “I’m not one to talk about . . .” she paused and quickly added, “emotional stuff.” Absently, she stroked her thumb across Regina’s arm. “And I realize there’s a lot I don’t know about all this Enchanted Forest drama or magic, but that’s okay.” Looking past her bedmate, she studied the shadows moving along the wall, saying, “Because, we can work through all of that stuff together as a team.” It felt good to finally say it.

Hearing the words but not quite believing them, the former mayor cocked an eyebrow and rebuked, “I distinctly remember you referring to yourself as something of a loner.”

With a short hum and a half smile, Emma shrugged one shoulder and said, “Well, thank Mary Margaret for breaking me in during our oh-so-fun trip to fantasy land.” She watched as the brunette turned back to stare at the ceiling. “Since we’re on the topic,” she quickly added, “it means a lot to me that you put your beef with her and David on the back burner.”

“It’s not as though I have much of a choice,” Regina muttered with a hint of spite. Her anger flashed, swirling under the surface. Yet, the sheriff’s soft stroking and the non-judgmental appreciation quelled it. The feeling was strange but not entirely unwelcome. Could she share with Emma?

The blonde smiled and realized that maybe Archie was right. Of course he was right, she scolded
herself. “Things will get better,” she said, squeezing Regina’s arm one last time before letting go and rolling onto her stomach. Yeah, this bed was so much more comfortable. She yawned as she adjusted her pillow. “We’ll do something fun and non-sheriff-y soon, I promise.” She closed her eyes. “G’night, Regina.”

“If you say so,” the brunette sighed, shifting back onto her left side. Emma’s idea of fun might be entertaining to a degree or not. She tried to get comfortable again. With a heavy exhale, she waited for the drug in her system to drag her asleep. “Goodnight, Emma.”

However, sleep didn’t come quickly for the sheriff. She listened to the quiet sounds of the house at night. If she strained, she could sometimes hear Alexander, Jason or one of the other Crows Guard moving around downstairs. Naturally, her mind wondered over all the problems that plagued this strange little seaside town. And if she was brutally honest with herself, she didn’t want to face them because, for the first time in forever, she felt safe. How strange was that?

But the tether shortening, what did that mean? Sometimes getting any sort of information out of the former mayor was like pulling teeth! Everything was given in tiny tidbits. Damn, it was exasperating.

For over an hour, Emma replayed the evening over and over again in her head. She was missing something that was right in front of her. As she rolled onto her back, she must’ve jostled the bed too much because Regina let out a soft whimper. Without hesitation, she reached over and caressed her hand down the woman’s back several times. She smiled tenderly as the brunette relaxed.

As she continued to mull it all over, events from the last few months played in her mind’s eye again and again. Feeling her rising exhaustion, she hoped she’d just drift off. However, that didn’t happen, either. She was too upset over only having Regina’s partial trust.

Groaning into her pillow, she curled up in a fetal position, mangling her pillow into submission. Ugh, she was so frustrated with everything! If Regina was ticked about something, why didn’t she just flat out tell her? The brunette didn’t have any qualms expressing herself with her sassy one-liners any other time. Looking over at the still sleeping woman, she buried her face in her pillow again.

God, I’m an idiot, she thought as another epiphany hit. It had been Emma repeatedly not listening to the brunette that ultimately impacted their tether. That, she realized, was going to take some time to fix since the former mayor obviously felt like she was being managed. And rightfully so given the constant presence of fussing Crows Guard, Henry’s none-too-subtle running commentary about heroes, the ever looming threat of Cora’s true objective, her parent’s revolving visitations, the seemingly never-ending drama of Storybrooke, and the damn binding spell Gold tricked Emma into casting, but it was the pills that finally wore Regina down.

Sighing, the sheriff stretched out on her side and hugged her pillow. She rolled her lips as she listened to Regina’s soft snores. “A fundamental change,” she whispered before finally nodding off.

~SQ~

“Then it’s decided,” David stated from behind the kitchen island, looking around at the eight people gathered in main area of the studio apartment he shared with his wife. All of them were members of the War Council back in the Enchanted Forest. “We’re going to focus all our efforts on Cora’s capture.”

“I think that’s best,” Mary Margaret agreed, sharing an affirming look with Leroy, Doc and Granny
who sat across from her at the dining table. After glancing at the clock, she said, “It’s late. Let’s get together and come up with a plan after we’ve had some sleep.”

“What knows, maybe locking that witch up will give you a bump in those dumb polls the newspaper prints,” the grumpy dwarf said, flashing an amused smile. He stood up and pushed his chair back under the table. “And maybe things can get back on track again.”

“Here, here!” Doc happily agreed, following suit.

However, Ruby wasn’t as enthused with the sentiment. Wrangling Cora without Gold, Regina or even Emma’s help was a recipe for badness as far as she was concerned. She caught Archie’s eye from across the apartment and knew he felt the same. Their concerns were valid but, as usual, out voted 3-to-6. She slowly stood from her perch on the stairs and grabbed her jacket off the coat rack by the apartment door. She passed her grandmother’s coat over to her.

“We’d better strategize a good trap because I don’t think this town can survive another show like today,” Widow Lucas huffed, slipping on her jacket. She wanted to get back to the diner and check on things. Lacey had saddled up to the counter right as she was leaving for this emergency meeting. Damned if that girl wasn’t smooth at getting free tequila shots out of the wait staff.

“Aye,” Marco agreed, pulling on his hat before opening the door. “People are still feeling the strain from the giant.” He waved goodnight and followed Granny and Ruby out the door. Pausing on the steps to the first landing, he turned back around and called out to Archie, “Do you feel up to getting a bite to eat?”

“I shouldn’t leave Pongo for too long,” Dr. Hopper replied. He worriedly checked his cellphone for any missed messages or calls. Seeing no notifications, he sighed with relief. “Maybe he’s sleeping for a change,” he muttered, dropping his phone back in his coat pocket. If he left the Dalmatian unattended for too long, he had a tendency to get into trouble.

“That’s fine. We can grab some spaghetti to go from the Pizza Company,” Macro suggested, resuming his descent down the stairs.

Granny harrumphed. “I make excellent spaghetti,” she interjected, cutting a soft glare at the two friends. As far as she was concerned, all of her food was better. Really, the only reason people ate elsewhere was because her diner was busy.

“Perhaps, but your stroganoff is awful,” Macro countered with a jolly laugh. He did enjoy pulling the old woman’s chain.

“Come on, Doc,” Leroy said, walking out the door. “Let’s go get the boys; we got time to work an hour or two in the mines.” He affectionately slapped his dwarven brother’s shoulder as they walked out together. “Maybe we can pull Anton away from his flowers for some real work!” They both laughed.

Mother Superior, who had remained mostly quiet during the meeting, lingered behind the others and softly closed the apartment door. She turned around, clasping her hands in front of her. “Forgive the further intrusion,” she started, meeting Mary Margaret’s curious gaze, “however, I have news you may be interested in hearing.” Her eyes drifted briefly to David, still at the kitchen counter.

“We always have time for you, Blue. You know that,” the school teacher smiled brightly. She sat up a little straighter in her chair. “What is it?” she prompted, glancing at her husband.
“I may be able to dissolve the bond between the Savior and the Queen,” the fairy intoned.

“You can break their tether to each other?” the deputy asked excitedly, moving around the counter and towards his wife.

“But Regina said it couldn’t be broken,” Mary Margaret countered skeptically. Her eyes briefly locked with her husband’s as he squeezed her shoulder. Reflectively, her hand moved to cover his. Her former stepmother was many things, but a liar? And to lie about something like this? No, she didn’t believe it.

“She’s correct,” Mother Superior admitted with a sigh. “This particular spell cannot be broken by any magic known to the fairies but I may be able to remove the Savior from it by transferring her connection to another.” She saw the hope in their eyes and relaxed. It might not be so hard to convince them after all. “It would effectively dissolve their bond,” she added.

“How?” David asked eagerly, sliding into the seat next to his wife. He took her hand and squeezed it.

“It’s not without risk or consequence, but I have reason to believe it will work,” the fairy explained. If the royal pair agreed, it would certainly simplify things for everyone. “The process, however, may not be particularly pleasant for all parties concerned.”

“What sort of consequences?” the school teacher immediately asked, looking sharply between the two. Her brow furrowed as she continued, “Because if there’s the slightest chance that it could harm Emma—.”

Shaking her head, Mother Superior interrupted, “Like with any magic, it’s a calculated risk, but the effect on the Savior should be minimal.”

Taking a slow breath to quell his excitement, the deputy inquired, “So, how are you going to free Emma?” He smiled.

Raising her chin, the fairy looked David in eye and said, “By neutralizing the Queen’s magic.”

“Is that even possible?” Mary Margaret asked with a hint of confusion. “When we captured her before, we barely got Regina into the enchanted cell before the fairy dust wore off.” She distinctively remembered Blue’s hovering presence, warning that fairy magic could only suppress the Evil Queen’s magic for so long. It had forced the issue of a speedy execution.

The fairy nodded, knowing full well she didn’t have the necessary squid ink to lace with the dust. “It would take an exorbitant amount of dust to adequately subdue her.” She paused, “I doubt she would be a willing participant. However, I am confident we could succeed.”

Husband and wife shared a long meaningful look. But it was the school teacher who spoke first. “I don’t know,” she said uneasily. Shaking her head, she continued, “Taking away Regina’s magic seems a bit extreme.”

“Would you rather leave our daughter shackled to her?” David immediately countered. As far as he was concerned, the Evil Queen had terrorized his family long enough, and he would gladly be done with her. Yet, why his beloved still harbored affection for the woman was beyond him.

“Of course not!” Mary Margaret snapped, pulling her hand away and leaning back in her chair. “It’s just that with Cora around...,” she trailed off, unsure how to voice her apprehension regarding the older sorceress and leaving Regina defenseless. She dropped her hands onto her lap and sighed.
“With Cora contained and the Queen without magic, you would be free to bring justice to Storybrooke and enjoy your family,” Mother Superior supplied. She smiled softly, catching David’s gaze. “But your decision doesn’t need to be made quickly, your majesties. This matter can wait until you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Blue,” the deputy said, nodding his appreciation and effectively dismissing her. He reached out and took one of his wife’s hands. “Let’s concentrate on capturing Cora and go from there, okay?”

With one last look between her husband and the fairy, Mary Margaret nodded and with great reluctance, agreed.

~SQ~

Hours later, as the morning sun lit up the bedroom, Emma groaned while burying her head in her pillow. “It’s too early,” she mumbled, blindly pulling the covers over her head. She tugged roughly when she encountered resistance.

“You can’t have the entire blanket,” Regina hissed, yanking back her share. She winced at the sharp pain the action caused.

“Huh?” the blonde said, raising her head and blinking. She squinted at her bedmate before giving up and face planting into her pillow.

Carefully sitting up on the side of the bed, the brunette looked over her shoulder at Emma and asked, “Are you alright?”

Immediately, all the thoughts from last night zipped about in her foggy mind, and the sheriff rolled onto her back into the center of the bed, taking up as much room as possible. “Yeah, I’m up,” she whispered with her eyes still closed.

“Clearly,” the former mayor quipped as she slowly rose and shuffled into the en suite.

Emma took the opportunity to stretch before pressing the heels of her hands against her burning eyes. She felt like she’d only gotten about three hours of sleep. Hearing the toilet flush and the sink, she forced herself to sit up. Her eyes having finally adjusted to the sunlight, she peered out the window and muttered, “Another beautiful day in Storybrooke.” She must’ve blanked out for a while because next thing she knew, a dressed Regina was staring at her with a perplexed expression.

“You look awful,” the brunette commented with a slight frown, taking in the other woman’s haggard appearance in spite of just waking up.

“Good morning to you, too,” the blonde replied, rolling out of bed. “I didn’t sleep well last night.” She automatically assisted with making the bed.

Holding in a sigh, the former mayor fluffed her pillows before fetching the decorative ones piled on the chaise. “No?” she asked, knowing what was coming.

“Yeah,” the sheriff replied, dropping down onto the empty chaise. She watched the brunette arrange the little pillows. The guest bed only had one ornamental pillow. It didn’t feel nearly as cozy. “Yeah,” she repeated. Glancing at the clock on top of a tall dresser, she realized she needed to say her peace before Henry woke up and everything focused on him getting ready for school. The boy still didn’t like Jason or Diego taking him. Clearing her throat, she refocused on Regina. “Um, you probably don’t want to talk about this first thing, but I figured it out.”
“What’s that, Dear?” the brunette asked, slipping on the house shoes she kept stowed under the bed. She missed her heels, but those were truly out of the question until her ribs healed.

“About the tether,” Emma answered, looking at her hands. “And I did notice how hard the pills hit you,” she admitted, pausing to meet the former mayor’s gaze. She didn’t know if she had the courage to do this, but she pressed on anyway. “I do pay attention, Regina,” she said, rolling her eyes. Holding up her hands in surrender, she stalled any impending retort. “And I promise I won’t nag you about them anymore.”

The corner of Regina’s mouth twitched before she questioned, “Even at bedtime?”

Unable to stop the broad smile, the blonde acquiesced, “Even at bedtime.” She felt herself relax and pushed onward. “So anyway, I thought about it last night, and I get it.” With a tight smile, her soulful eyes searched the former mayor’s. This sharing felt so weird but completely right—even if she didn’t understand why. “But I really am worried about your health.”

Perching herself on the end of the bed, the brunette weighed the blonde’s words. She was touched by Emma’s qualms, but part of her was still apprehensive.

Taking a deep breath, the sheriff bit her bottom lip. “I admit there were perks to you being high as a kite,” she added, flashing a grin but quickly sobering. “Like how we got to know each other better. That has to count for something, right?” To her surprise, she found the brunette pretty funny when her dry wit wasn’t directed at her. “It was kinda nice seeing you not so . . .” she trailed off and tentatively finished, “reserved.”

With a scoff, the former mayor carefully crossed her arms and quipped, “I was just easier to handle.” Better to conceal her feelings on the matter because she’d found the blonde more than tolerable.

“Well,” Emma drawled, glancing away. She had been right. “That depends on your perspective.” Clearing her throat, she continued, “Since we’re going to be together for our foreseeable futures, wouldn’t being friends be a good thing?” She pursed her lips, understanding she needed to be specific here and not be derailed by the brunette’s sass. “I mean I could be a real bitch and make all our lives a living hell.” She raised an eyebrow and smirked.

“Of that, I have no doubt,” Regina said dryly, refusing to make eye contact. The idea of a friend, while quite tempting, was terrifying. “I suppose it would be mutually beneficial.”

“Okay. Good,” the blonde nodded. She knew she couldn’t push the issue anymore as she rested her elbows on her knees. “I won’t try to manage you, at least not on purpose,” she quickly said. Her eyes searched the former mayor’s for a moment before dropping back to the floor.

This degree of open honesty was totally unexpected by the brunette. She’d predicted at least several days of whiny, sullen behavior before they could make any real progress in their discussions. But here was Emma Swan deftly hitting the proverbial nail on the head with striking accuracy. Now unfortunately, she owed her an explanation. One she didn’t necessarily want to share nor could delay any longer given what happened last night. It wasn’t mere speculation anymore.

“You have been paying attention,” the former mayor said lightly, looking out the window. Her hands played with the hem of her cardigan. She quietly asked, “Are you familiar with Newton’s Third Law of Motion?”

“What?” the sheriff asked, looking up with a furrowed brow. What the hell did physics have to do
with anything right now? They were having a bro moment, talking about friendship.

“For every action, there’s an equal and opposite reaction,” Regina clarified, raising an eyebrow expectantly. She looked at the blonde. “In rudimentary terms, at least.”

“Yeah, okay.” Emma sat up, rubbing the back of her neck. “Regina,” she whined, closing her eyes, “it’s way too early for science debates.” During one of their snowed-in days, she learned exactly how much the woman enjoyed learning, and she would never watch another episode of *How It’s Made* again.

Rolling her eyes, the brunette continued, “From what I can recall and, for lack of a better example, the law adequately illustrates the characteristics of our binding.” Seeing the confusion, she cautiously explained, “When the emotional facet of our bond strengthens, the physical aspect loosens and vice versa.”

“Wait, what?” the sheriff breathlessly inquired as it clicked. So, she’d been sort of right. This instantly pissed her off, and her face contorted with indignation. But that was quickly followed with a drawn out groan as she flopped onto her side on the chaise. “You didn’t tell me all of this because…,” she trailed off and sighed. “Because you thought I wasn’t taking you seriously and that I was just keeping you pacified with narcotics.”

“Well, you were rather pleased with our increased distance,” the former mayor agreed without venom. She looked back out the window. “And I had expressed my displeasure over the medication several times.” She smirked. However, she dropped her amusement and explained, “I wasn’t positive about this until last night.”

“Yeah, I remember some of your zingers,” Emma commented flatly before she pursed her lips. She could read between the lines. “I meant what I said, Regina. I wasn’t trying to corral you.” Her brow furrowed with slight curiosity as she pondered how someone could misconstrue caring for manipulation.

Regina nodded in acknowledgement as she caught the sheriff’s searching eyes. She still had her trepidations, but Emma’s call for a mutual friendship was worth something. Wasn’t it?

Clearing her throat, the blonde rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling. “So, I thought you didn’t know much about the spell,” she probed. She wasn’t sure how much longer the former mayor would entertain her.

“Not enough,” the brunette answered with a slight shrug of her shoulders. She regretted the motion. “It’s more of an educated guess between what I vaguely remember and my observations.” It was the best she could do. “Miss French might be more willing to elaborate on our situation, if she had her memories.”

“Belle has magic?” the sheriff asked, perking up with interest. This was news to her.

“No, she knows about the philosophies and various histories of magical disciplines—at least to a degree,” the former mayor explained. Of course, the extent of practical knowledge the girl had obtained from Rumpelstiltskin’s vast library was unknown. “The meager tomes I brought with me, as you saw, only had a few ambiguous references. Most of them weren’t even about the same invocation.”

“Oh,” Emma weakly muttered, glancing at the door when she heard a soft knock.

“Come in,” Regina instructed, unmoving. She was going to need Tylenol soon.
“Mom, Emma’s not in her room,” Henry said, rubbing his left eye as he walked inside the bedroom. “Oh,” he said, stopping when he noticed his other mother lying across the chaise. “What are you doing in here?”

“Talking,” the blonde smirked as the boy rolled his eyes. Well, talk time was over. She stood and stretched.

“What are you talking about?” the boy asked with a small smile, looking between his mothers.

“Don’t you have to get ready for school?” Emma countered, crossing her arms.

“Fine,” Henry said, sulking. He slowly headed back to his room.

~SQ~

Loitering in the parking lot on the side of Storybrooke Country Bread, Nicholas sat with his back to the building. He frowned as he watched Greg Mendell walk out the front of Granny’s Diner and turn left once he hit the sidewalk. His eyes narrowed upon noticing the small box the man carried. What could possibly be of value from a closed library? If the package was either book shaped or sized, he wouldn’t care, but he’d been all over that library. He didn’t find anything of value that would fit in a roughly five inch by five inch square box.

“Hey, Nicholas.”

The teenager scowled up at his sister. “Go away, Ava,” he muttered, turning back to watch Mendell.

Sighing, Ava tossed a very stuffed backpack at her brother’s feet. “I packed you some clothes,” she said irritably before looking away. “And a few sandwiches,” she added in a gentler tone. Her eyes shyly met his.

“Thanks,” he whispered, pulling the backpack to his other side. He didn’t trust his sister not to grab it and taunt him with it. Peering back down the street, he barely spotted Mendell going into the post office.

“What are you doing?” the girl asked, looking down the street. Her brow furrowed when she didn’t notice anything.

“Don’t worry about it,” Nicholas said, standing up. He slipped on the bag, rolling his shoulders to settle the new weight. His pet rat took offense to all the moving, climbing out of a large pocket and onto his shoulder.

Gasping, Ava took a step back. “Ew, gross!” she hissed, clearly offended. “Where did you find that?”

Rolling his eyes, the teenager affectionately stroked the rodent. “It’s okay,” he whispered before glowering at his twin sister. “What do you care?” He wasn’t mad at her, just disappointed.

“I’m sorry, Nicky,” she cajoled, reaching out to him. She tried not to wince when he yanked his arm away. His reaction grated her. ‘I was afraid, too,” she bit out through her clenched teeth. Sighing, she quickly added in a happier tone, “But he’s been better. Father was talking about how much he missed you the other day.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Nicholas grunted as he idly stroked the rat’s long tail that looped around his neck.
“Maybe you could come back home,” Ava suggested tentatively. She missed her brother and loved her father, despite his issues. It was just that she didn’t know what to do about it, and her patience was wearing thin.

“No, I don’t think so,” the teenager said dismissively with a snort. When he saw Mendell exiting the post office, he moved to follow him, but his sister suddenly moved to grab his arm. “Don’t touch me,” he snapped, jumping out of her reach. “I’m fine. I don’t need your help.” The rat hissed at his sister.

Rolling her eyes, the girl huffed in annoyance. “Look, this isn’t like when we were cursed. You could really get hurt living on the street.”

“I’ve done just fine on my own,” he said proudly. Pointing at himself, he said, “I can take care of myself. I don’t need to be with a man who doesn’t want me.”

“Father does love you,” she cried, raising her voice. She didn’t understand why her brother being such a jerk. Didn’t he believe they could get through this together as a family? She did.

“No, he tolerates you because you look like mother,” Nicholas spat, stepping forward and roughly pushing his sister back. “He left us in those woods, Ava. He didn’t want to take care of us after mom died, just like he doesn’t want to take care of us now.”

“That’s not true!” Ava shouted, stomping her foot. “He loves us!” He had to or all those months wandering through the forest were for nothing. It made her so angry just thinking about it.

“You have a funny idea of what love is, then,” the teenager retorted with a sneer. He looked her up and down with a disgusted gaze. “You’re no better than him.” Turning to walk away, he wasn’t expecting to be shoved, but he managed to keep his balance.

“This is the Evil Queen’s fault,” the girl proclaimed, as if that would solve everything. “She broke up our family.” Every night she told herself that. She had even told her father that to break him out of one of his sour moods.

“Really?” he scoffed, rolling his eyes when he faced her again. “She didn’t make him abandon us in the middle of that forest over half a day from home.” He stood up straighter and waved his hands at her. “You’re just someone to clean his house and fix his meals.” Absently, he adjusted the red scarf. Softly, he said, “I’m not going back to him, Ava—ever.”

The girl watched as her brother walked away from her. Shaking her head, she wiped angrily at the tears rolling down her cheeks, and not for the first time, she wondered what had happened to her family. They had been so happy. Or had she just refused to really examine their lives?

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“If I remember correctly, you promised me something fun and non-sheriff related.” Regina said in a dry and disinterested tone. She glared at the blonde sitting catty-cornered to her left at the dining table.

“You want to be caught playing video games all day, again?” Emma snickered, pulling out cleaning implements and solutions from her gun bag. After putting everything on an old hand towel in front of her, she passed another towel over to the former mayor. She smiled, adding, “Because the kid’s expression yesterday was pretty priceless.”

Taking the ratty dishtowel and spreading it open in front of her, the brunette softly admitted, “I don’t know if I feel terribly comfortable doing this in the dining room.” She pursed her lips when a
Taurus 709 SS 9mm with a bright yellow, cable gunlock was placed in front of her. Using a gun in the range or knowing the sheriff had her service weapon holstered was one thing. But cleaning one in house was slightly off-putting.

“This’s as good a place as any,” the blonde reiterated. She understood, she really did, but Regina needed to get over this hurdle. Gently, she reminded, “We’ve talked about this.” She paused and relaxed at the brisk nod. “Okay,” she sighed before explaining the process of unlocking, breaking down, and cleaning a handgun.

Happily, the sheriff proceeded to rattle off everything she remembered about firearms. It was sort of fun, unlike when she’d trained David. That whole situation had left her tense and uncomfortable. Maybe it was his lack of significant progress at the shooting range. But with Regina, she found herself unintentionally sharing stories of her and Frank in Tallahassee, Florida. And all the while, the brunette effortlessly learned how to properly dismantle, clean and reassemble both the Glock and Taurus. Then, as the former mayor became visibly comfortable with firearms in her dining room, Emma suggested how she’d like to teach Henry gun safety. It wasn’t something either woman took lightly, but Regina respected the necessity of it—especially since guns were now a permanent fixture in the home.

“See, that wasn’t so bad.” The blonde smiled as she started repacking the supplies in the gun tote. She had started demonstrating the gunlocks when there was a knock at the front door. “Maybe when you feel up to it, we’ll go to the range and try out some badass skills.” She flashed a goofy smile before getting up to answer the front door.

Rolling her eyes, the brunette continued inspecting the Taurus. She had to admit the experience was quite informative, but she had her reservations about stopping bullets with magic. Intuitively, she snapped a lock into place on the Taurus and reached for the Glock.

“Well, this is certainly unexpected,” Kathryn Nolan said in a surprised voice as she entered the dining room. She cocked an eyebrow as Regina put the handgun back down on the dishtowel. Breezing to the table, she sat down cattycornered to the former mayor’s right, assuming the invite. “Of course, you always did enjoy your toys,” she flashed a rather disarming smile as she settled herself.

“Kathryn,” Regina greeted, glancing at the sheriff. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Ma’am?” Alexander queried from the kitchen doorway. He had been lounging in the basement library studying when he heard the knock on the front door. His gaze cut to Emma and back.

“We’re alright, Alexander. Thank you,” the former mayor said, catching the drummer’s concerned look.

“Yes, Ma’am,” the young man nodded before backing into the kitchen. He proceeded to empty the dishwasher, keeping an ear on the three women.

Kathryn Nolan hummed, whether from amusement or agitation was unclear. She stared at the kitchen doorway for a moment longer before refocusing on Emma and Regina. “I suppose you’re wondering why I’m here,” she said neutrally.

“I have an idea,” the former mayor said, cocking an eyebrow. With or without the Crows Guard, she wasn’t without her informants. “However, I’m a tad surprised,” she admitted, resting her gun oil smeared hands on the dishtowel.

Taking a deep breath, Kathryn cut a glance at the sheriff. “Yes, you would,” she mumbled. She’d
had hoped to catch them unawares and have some element of surprise with her request. “Father was always impressed with you.” She smiled, pulling a folded piece of paper from her purse. “He found you quite shrewd for one so young.”

“King Midas only cared because I didn’t price gouge,” Regina sneered, focusing on the flower centerpiece on the table. Her gaze slowly hardened.

Looking back and forth between the two, Emma cleared her throat. “So, what brings you by?” she asked with a touch of nervousness. She’d seen the former mayor light things on fire with far lesser glares.

“Oh mother,” the former princess sighed as she opened the folded paper. She pushed it across the table towards the sheriff, explaining, “She’s running for City Council.”

Regina tittered darkly, rolling her eyes. “And you’re surprised by this?” she inquired. “The shepherd runs for mayor—promising things he has no ability to deliver—and their daughter’s the sheriff.” Narrowing her eyes, she said, “It’s a play for power.”

“Wait, Mary Margaret and David wouldn’t do that,” Emma interrupted, leaning forward. She glanced between the two former royals and frowned. “They just want to help keep everything fair.”

“Please,” Kathryn scoffed, crossing her arms. “Every Royal, nobleperson and member of the gentry has been scrambling for some sort of foothold in Storybrooke since the curse broke.” She turned to the former mayor. “If David and Mary Margaret win, things are going to get ugly very quickly.”

“I agree,” Regina nodded.

“Time out,” the sheriff interrupted, making the classic T gesture with her hands. Once she had their attention, she asked, “Aren’t they like, the most loved people in the Enchanted Forest?”

“Wow,” the former princess gaped at Emma. She’d really thought living with the Evil Queen would’ve quickly tempered that illusion. Licking her lips, she smirked at the former mayor before refocusing on the sheriff. “Yes, they share a True Love,” she drawled, “which makes them akin to celebrities in our world. It’s astoundingly rare considering how obsessed people are with it.” She shrugged and halfheartedly added, “The mere hope of True Love nearly killed the Old Religions a couple of times.” Nobody ever wanted to discuss the darker side of love.

With a furrowed brow, the sheriff bounced between the former royals. Her eyes widened at the mention of religion. “True Love’s a religion?” she squeaked. And she thought the multitude of Christian denominations was a lot to swallow.

Regina sighed, looking down for a moment. “You’re overwhelming the poor girl.” She met the mischievous gleam in Kathryn’s eyes. “Why don’t you get to the point?” Emma falling into the hero-complex her parents had inadvertently created for themselves and their zealot followers wasn’t something with which the brunette wanted to contend. Henry was bad enough.

“Fine,” the former princess said with a slightly relieved tone. “I want to make a deal.”

“Wrong address, Dear,” the former mayor smirked, rolling her thumb and forefinger together. “Gold’s pawnshop is on Main Street. You can’t miss it.”

“What kind of deal?” Emma questioned with a tilt of her head. “Because you wouldn’t come here for just anything,” she commented. She wasn’t completely politically inept.

“No,” Kathryn admitted softly. Her gaze drifted to Regina and hardened. “You dragged me into
your vendetta against Snow White, twice, when I never wanted anything to do with her or her 

prince. But,” her voice softened to almost a whisper, “I can empathize with your motivations.” She 

smiled softly. Losing Fredrick to her father’s own curse had hurt a great deal. And if the rumors 

she had heard over the years were true, she could hardly even imagine Regina’s torment.

Shifting nervously, the sheriff frowned as she watched the exchange. She didn’t understand why 

the former mayor didn’t say anything. Instead, the brunette remained unnervingly neutral.

“However, that doesn’t mean I forgive you for using me to frame Mary Margaret,” the former 

princess stated firmly, pursing her lips. “As far as being kidnapped goes, it wasn’t a horrible 

experience,” she added nonchalantly, playing it down. It was part of being King Midas’s only child 

after all. “I was sufficiently unaware of a mass majority of it.” Yet if she ever crossed paths with 

Sidney Glass, she was going to give him a good pop in the nose or maybe a sharp knee to the groin.

“It was Gold’s scheme to utilize the insipid love triangle,” Regina said flatly, hiding her 

uncertainty. Where was Kathryn going with this? Truth be told, she’d originally wanted a murder-

suicide—clean and simple with no drawn out trial or pesky investigations.

“That doesn’t help your case any,” Kathryn huffed, scowling as her eyes searched the former 

mayor’s face. Strangely, a part of her wanted to forgive her friend. She wanted to believe she had 

actually gotten to know Regina Mills.

Okay, I think we’ve gotten a little off track,” Emma said, leaning toward Regina but maintaining 

eye contact with Kathryn, not liking the turn of the conversation. “Why don’t you just tell us what 

you want?”

“Very well,” Kathryn agreed, visibly relaxing a bit. Looking between the two women, she 

confidently proclaimed, “I want your collective endorsement for my candidacy for City Council.” 

She smirked at the almost identical perplexed expressions. “I happen to know that Mary Margaret 

hasn’t asked you—.”

“Seriously?” the sheriff snarled, her anger building as she pointed across the table at the woman. 

Were all of the fairytale royalty jerks? “If you think you can just come in here and guilt trip—.” 

This was preposterous.

Immediately, the former princess held up her hands. She hadn’t expected this type of reaction from 

Emma Swan. “No, that wasn’t my intention,” she backpedaled. “And you brought it up!”

Both missed Regina’s flabbergasted expression as she glanced between the two blondes. She didn’t 

even care when Emma pressed her oily hands onto the lovingly polished surface of the table as she 

stood up. Blinking, she shook her head slightly as both blondes continued to yell at each other.

“You came here with an agenda!” Emma accused, raising her voice. Using the guise of friendship 

to curry a favor was just low in her book. Regina deserved better than that.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Sheriff,” Kathryn warned, refusing to back down as she also stood. 

She might only be a law student, but she wasn’t going to take any flippant attitude from Emma 

Swan, her parentage be damned. “I’m here because I want to help.”

Spotting Alexander out of the corner of her eyes, the former mayor waved him off. “Ladies, 

please,” she said while calmly gesturing for them to sit back down. “Why do you want the 

Sheriff’s endorsement, Kathryn?” she probed, pinning the woman with a tense glare.

“From both of you, although hers alone would be quite helpful,” the former princess admitted,
frowning at the sheriff. “As I mentioned, Mary Margaret’s running. Mitchell Herman tactfully suggested I run against her given the slew of Letters to the Editor in the paper since the debate.”

Immediately, the sheriff turned to the former mayor. “Letters?” she asked. Usually the former mayor kept her up-to-date on the political dramas happening in town.

Nodding, Regina quickly generalized how that portion of the newspaper had become a political medium for the less affluent citizens of Storybrooke—much like the open forum after the mayoral debate. “Since Town Hall was essentially demolished, the election has been moved forward.” How many times had Election Day been moved now?

“It’s this Saturday,” Kathryn interjected. Sighing, she faced the former mayor and said, “This doesn’t leave me a lot of time, but I really need to know today.”

“What’s wrong with Mary Margaret winning?” Emma asked, slouching in her seat and crossing her arms.

“Read the paper,” the former princess rebuked tersely, rolling her eyes. With a hard look at the sheriff, she explained, “It would be a disaster! Moe French has been railing about a monopoly on the municipality ever since David started campaigning for mayor. He’s fit to be tied now.” Her gaze drifted to the former mayor as she continued, “And since Mary Margaret posted flyers, his camp of discontent is growing dangerously fast.”

Understanding, Regina nodded. It was the proverbial powder keg, one that could easily be manipulated into a weapon. “Do you think they’d riot if things don’t go their way?”

“Whoa, riot?!” Emma exclaimed, sitting up straight. One sheriff, two full-time and one part-time deputy wasn’t enough to stop a horde of unhappy citizens. Did they even have tear gas?

Ignoring the sheriff, Kathryn nodded. “Under the right leadership, they’d make things very difficult for a lot of people. Thankfully, Moe and Albert aren’t exactly on speaking terms.” She shrugged.

“What’s your offer?” Regina inquired with an unwavering gaze.

“You’re taking this seriously?” the sheriff scoffed at the brunette. Surely her deputy would’ve informed her about disgruntled citizens. “David hasn’t mentioned anything about unhappy people —,” she started.

Giving Emma a disgusted look, Kathryn interrupted, “I don’t have anything to offer up front, but I can promise to continue your agenda.” She smiled, knowing this would catch the former mayor’s interest.

“Oh yeah, brilliant,” Emma laughed mockingly. She turned to Regina and said, “A promise? This is totally a bad Lifetime movie.”

Regina narrowed her eyes at the sheriff. What was going on with her? Everything had been pretty pleasant between them until Kathryn Nolan’s arrival.

“What’s your problem?” the former princess demanded. She had played nice with Emma Swan long enough.

“My problem,” Emma said, pointing at herself before turning the finger at Kathryn, “is you coming in here hoping to take advantage of people.” During their magical repair walks downtown, some people had tried some shady negotiations. But unlike now, Regina hadn’t had any issue shutting them down.
“How the hell am I taking advantage of anyone?” Kathryn was floored by the open hostility. “I came to propose a mutually beneficial deal.”

“Yeah right,” the sheriff sneered, rolling her eyes. “Now you say you’ll maintain the no-kill animal shelter or offer subsidies to the downtown beautification project. But we both know as soon as you get that seat, you’re going to do what you want.”

“How dare you!” the former princess gasped, completely offended. Her eyes flashed dangerously. “I happen to support those causes—the same as Regina!”

Standing up, Regina gestured towards the kitchen. “Emma, may I speak with you in private.” It wasn’t a question as she purposely walked away from the table.

Not replying, Emma glared across the table for a second before finally following. She walked in to see Alexander sitting at the island and the former mayor washing her hands at the sink.

Drying her hands, the former mayor hissed, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Huh?” The sheriff blinked a few times before glancing at the drummer.

Alexander pursed his lips and went back to his physics homework. He had a test in a few days that he needed to pass if he wanted to graduate this spring. Besides, if his liege wanted him to leave, she would’ve sent him away by now.

“It’s a reasonable arrangement,” Regina said, hanging the dishtowel back up. She pointed at the sink. “Wash your hands. You’ve gotten gun oil all over the table.”

“Oh, your precious hard rock maple,” Emma grumbled, doing as she was told. “My problem,” she whispered over the running water, “is your friend waltzing in here thinking she’s going to get something for nothing.” As she dried her hands, she continued, “She’s playing you, and I don’t like it.”

Shaking her head, the former mayor crossed her arms. “Your mother has a very good chance of winning that council seat.” She couldn’t stop from grinding her teeth. “We should be lucky she’s not running for mayor.” Everything would crumble at that point.

Tossing the hand towel on the counter, the sheriff threw her hands up in the air in an exaggerated gesture. “Just because you can’t stand Mary Margaret doesn’t mean she’ll do a bad job.” She saw Alexander nervously wave his pencil back and forth.

“Have you been listening at all?” Regina seethed, slapping her hand down hard on the kitchen island. The vein in her forehead bulged. “This isn’t some popularity contest, Miss Swan. There are serious consequences beyond my general displeasure if your parents win.” Looking down for a long moment, she composed herself. “Gold threatened your position. He tricked you into binding us together.” She locked eyes with the blonde. Rubbing her temples, she turned away. This mess was entirely too complicated to walk anyone through it in five minutes. “There are much more nefarious forces at large than Kathryn Nolan’s weak attempts at playing the guilt card or my revenge against your mother,” she hissed, turning and pointing at the dining room. Her hand coiled into a fist as she dropped it.

Concerned, Emma whispered, “What are you talking about?” Sure, she’d seen the brunette worked up but never to this extent. She shared a quick glance with Alexander, who was clearly worried. “Look, I’m sure this whole Greg Mendell thing will blow over.”

Sighing, the former mayor shook her head. “The Enchanted Forest wasn’t the idealistic magical
paradise of friendship and rainbows that Miss Blanchard or that storybook would have you believe.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” the drummer softly interjected, offering the brunette a bashful smile, “if you knew the right places.”

The sheriff was both intrigued by Alexander’s informal behavior and Regina’s heartfelt acceptance of it. Usually the young man stayed on the side lines but was always respectful. She still wasn’t clear on his relationship with the brunette.

“But I like it here better,” he added with a slightly more confident voice. Looking at Emma, he said, “A lot of people do.”

“If you won’t trust me, at least listen to the people,” the former mayor said, giving the drummer a brief but affectionate smile before turning to the blonde again. “You were there at the mayoral debate. You heard their questions and concerns.”

“I—,” Emma stammered. Cutting herself off, she frowned in frustration. How could Regina still think she didn’t trust her? Didn’t she realize how monumental it was for her to let someone touch her guns? Sighing, she dragged a hand down her face. “Gold was just being an ass.”

“It’s never that simple with Rumpelstiltskin,” Regina said through clenched teeth. Why was this so hard for people to figure out? Wasn’t the Dark One moniker enough of a warning?

Hanging her head and suddenly tired, the sheriff decided to concede to the former mayor. It was just easier, and this was obviously important to her. She just didn’t completely understand why, and that was what frustrated her. “Look if this means that much to you, I’ll agree to support Kathryn.”

She looked up with a slight smirk and wanted to say that she did trust Regina. It was the former princess she doubted.

“Good,” the former mayor nodded with relief. Pleased, she briskly exited to the dining room and started talking with the former princess. The other woman was very excited.

Before the blonde moved to join them, Alexander quietly said, “You made the right choice.” His eyes slowly met the sheriff’s. His queen had good instincts when she was not overly consumed by emotion.

Not knowing how to respond, Emma simply nodded and joined the former royals back at the dining table. She only partially listened as she finished packing her gun tote, and they chatted while waiting for Gene Gatsby. Apparently, the newspaper reporter was on standby for Kathryn. It all seemed awfully convenient and didn’t sit too well with the blonde. But Regina was convinced this was for the best, not that the sheriff necessarily understood what other nefarious forces were at work other than Albert Spencer’s greed, her father’s princely status or Moe French’s sanity. However, she hoped this wouldn’t further irritate her parents, at least not too much. She cringed at the memory of Mary Margaret’s disappointed stare and David’s slightly pouty frown.

“I can see you’re not happy about any of this,” Kathryn said softly as the sheriff walked her to the front door. Gene had left right before Jason and Diego brought Henry home. She glanced over her shoulder at Regina who was talking to the boy in the dining room about an upcoming party at school. “Just so you know,” she looked back at her escort, “I’m willing to forgive her.” Catching Emma’s gaze, she added, “She just has to apologize and mean it.”

Instead of answering, the sheriff simply trotted down the stairs and opened the front door wide. She pursed her lips as the former princess slowly made her way down the steps. But she frowned
when the other woman stopped in the doorway, looking at her.

“I don’t know what your issue is with me, and frankly, I don’t give a damn. But, you’d better get your head out of your ass and start paying attention,” Kathryn said in a low, firm tone. “You’re the sheriff, which means people depend on and look up to you.” After a beat, she added with a dose of disdain, “Maybe you could start by getting Nicholas Zimmer off the streets and arresting that bastard called his father.”

That was it. Emma scowled and fixed a heated glare at the former princess. “I’ve been on medical leave,” she growled. How could this conniving woman not think she wanted to help the teenager? It was insulting. “I’m sure my deputies have the situation under control.”

Cocking an eyebrow, the former princess tilted her head and asked, “Are you sure about that?” She crossed her arms. “Because Jim has caught Nicholas sneaking around the school three times since he’s been expelled.” Leaning forward, she whispered, “Do you have any idea where Nicholas has been staying—especially during that blizzard?”

“David caught him trying to break into the school one night,” the sheriff supplied, knowing better than to mention her deputy dropped the teenager off at home afterward. She was floored by the open concern. Damn, this woman was going to give her whiplash, manipulative one minute and caring the next. “Like I said—.”

“Yes, yes,” Kathryn mumbled, waving off the impending statement. “The sheriff’s department has it all under control.” Stepping across the threshold, she glanced across the foyer before looking back at Emma. “For your sake and that boy’s, I hope you’re right.” She left without another word.

Emma watched her walk to the sidewalk before slamming the front door. How dare she criticize her for not doing her job! Like she didn’t know about Nicholas or didn’t care. She stomped up the steps, glaring at the polished wood floor. Seeing insanity expensive Prada loafers, she looked up but didn’t remove her scathing glower. “I don’t like her,” she grunted, crossing her arms.

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“I’ve noticed,” Regina replied dryly. Her brow furrowed as she put her hands in the pockets of her cardigan. “Why?” she probed. When no answer was forthcoming, she sighed. “Kathryn’s as neutral as they come while still having political clout.” Her gaze swept over the sheriff’s rigid stance. “She’ll make our life easier.” Unlike your mother, she thought darkly.

Shaking her head, the blonde wasn’t sure how to rearticulate her mistrust in the former mayor’s only friend. Or was it ex-friend or potential friend? She looked around the foyer, breathing heavily through her nose. Finally, she asked, “You honestly don’t think she’s, you know, guilt tripping you?”

Astonishment flashed across the brunette’s features. Emma was still upset over Kathryn. “You’re still—,” she trailed off, blinking. She pursed her lips. “No one’s ever….,” Suddenly, this interaction seemed terribly intimate.

The sheriff slouched as she looked down and sighed. With raised eyebrows, she chanced a glance up, the corner of her mouth twitching. “Regina,” she said softly, shoving her hands in her jean’s pockets, “I just don’t want her or anyone else to take advantage of you,” she finally admitted.

Floored, the former mayor swallowed. Not too long ago, her initial response would have been something snarky, bordering on belittling, because guilt didn’t faze her, not anymore. But now, she didn’t know what to say. This honest kindness was surprising. “Thank you,” she replied gently, relaxing her stance. When the blonde smiled, she couldn’t help but return it. Before she could say anything further, however, there was a loud clang in the kitchen. She cleared her throat and said,
“We’d better go rescue dinner. The boys requested macaroni-and-cheese.” Then she walked towards the kitchen, moderately relieved for the distraction.

Emma took a deep, calming breath and slowly followed the brunette. True, she could’ve handled the whole Kathryn thing better, but she did the right thing by challenging the former princess’s motivations. Perhaps Regina having a friend outside the Crows Guard, Henry or herself was a good thing.

She stopped dead in her tracks, just shy of view from the kitchen. Am I friends with Regina? She pondered that for a long moment. She listened to the laughter, the teasing and the bits of various conversations. Unshed tears threatened to fall. Focusing on Regina’s voice, she smiled. All those people in that kitchen were a family. She absently wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. She didn’t know how the Evil Queen had gained such loyalty, but it meant something.

“Emma!” the brunette called. “Stop lurking in the hall and come help before these buffoons ruin dinner with their canned cheese!”

“But it’s so good,” Henry laughed, knowing his mother hated it.

“We can always use Velveeta,” Diego helpfully suggested, holding the bright yellow box up.

“When did that get in my refrigerator,” Regina huffed, curling her lip in disgust. But she smiled as everyone laughed.

Turning the corner, the blonde waltzed into the kitchen and allowed the moment to wrap around her. This was what she had been missing all these years. Stirring the roux, she jumped in and out of conversations. Henry was happy. Jason, Diego and Alexander were jovial. And Regina was as relaxed as Emma had ever seen her. It was during that moment she decided she was indeed friends with the former mayor of Storybrooke and the motorcycle club that obviously loved her. And it was okay because, together, they created the best macaroni-and-cheese ever.

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Unable to get comfortable, Emma shifted in the driver’s seat for the umpteenth time. She couldn’t help but jerk the steering wheel as she adjusted herself again. But no matter what she did her jeans chafed. This was the last thing she needed.

“What on earth is the matter?” Regina snapped as the beetle resumed a smoother course. The swerving wasn’t necessarily that bad, but she was still tender to sudden movements. Soon, her suffering would be naught as the narcotic painkillers were almost fully expelled from her system, and she’d be able to heal herself.

Scowling, the blonde irritably replied, “My jeans are too tight.” She tried not to blush as she felt the other woman looking at the offending garment. Embarrassed, she admitted, “I had to lie down on the bed to button them this morning.”

“You could stand to gain a few pounds,” the brunette dismissively commented, looking back out the passenger window. She enjoyed gazing out on the passing blur of forest.

“Hey, I like how I look,” the sheriff said defiantly, frowning at the road ahead.

“Emaciated?” the former mayor asked lightly with a raised eyebrow, but she didn’t turn away from the window. “This realm’s obsession with unnatural beauty is distasteful with its airbrushing and absurd diets.”
“I don’t look. . ,” Emma trailed off, looking down at her skinny, jean clad legs. Did she? Sure, she was slim, but she wasn’t boney. “I’ve got muscle, you know.” She flexed her right arm but given her leather jacket, the movement didn’t showcase the prized tonal definition in her arms. “My guns are smokin’,” she drawled out, bobbing her head to an imaginary beat.

“Clearly.” Regina smirked, slightly amused by the blonde’s antics. Her smile broadened as the sheriff flashed a big, goofy grin at her. Sobering, she faced forward again as they drove deeper into the forest towards the edge of Storybrooke. “At least you’ve finally gained some weight,” she said flatly. “I was concerned that perhaps you had been spending too much time with Miss Lucas.”

“You can call her Ruby, you know,” the blonde said, rolling her eyes. She had overheard the same conversation between said pair no less than three times during the past couple of weeks. “And what does that even mean, anyway?”

“I was beginning to think you had contracted a tapeworm,” the brunette answered. She pursed her lips at the lengthening pause. “Your impression of a plague of locusts through my pantry was quite convincing.”

Snorting, the sheriff shook her head, muttering half to herself, “Because she’s a werewolf.” She snickered again before clearing her throat. Her voice took on a mild scolding tone. “That’s not very nice, Regina.” She paused before adding, “I’m sure she keeps up with all her shots.” Laughing at her own joke, she lightly tapped the steering wheel.

“Indeed,” the former mayor said, smirking, silently pleased over the blonde’s mirth, but that didn’t stop her from glaring at the blonde. “Alexander had to run to the grocery store four times in the last two weeks.” More chores were the last thing the young drummer needed.

“Yeah, he was pretty miffed about the Cheetos,” Emma said before noticing the pointed stare. Sighing as she flipped on her blinker, she slowed down and turned the car onto a freshly graded dirt road. “I’ll make it up to him.” She spotted Ruby waiting by a cattle gate. Parking and shutting off the engine, she climbed out and asked, “Where’s your car?”

“I wolfed over here,” the waitress explained, walking over to the beetle. “Thankfully, I was able to drive everything over last night when Granny sent me out for ding dongs.” She rolled her eyes. “She knows something’s up. She’s been watching the Outdoor channel for days. Her grandmother’s passive-aggressive behavior was so annoying.

The sheriff laughed while the former mayor had the good sense to merely cock an eyebrow. Nothing got past that old woman.

“It’s not funny, Emma,” Ruby scolded, crossing her arms. “You think I like sleeping in that damp basement? Granny smells and hears everything. I can’t have anyone over without a running commentary afterward.” Sometimes, she missed her cursed life when her grandmother didn’t have enhanced werewolf senses.

“Okay, okay,” Emma smiled, popping the trunk. She bent over, grabbing a folding camp chair, a small duffle containing safety gear, and a long, soft gun bag with the words Storybrooke Sheriff’s Department in big white letters on it. She shook her head at the waitress’s enthusiastic clapping, slipping the carry straps over her shoulder.

In a matter of minutes, Ruby had led them out into the empty meadow where she’d setup the clay trap. She held the gun case and duffle while watching the blonde unfolded the camp chair for Regina. “Tommy said it’d be fine practicing out here as long as we pick up after ourselves and that the terra cotta shouldn’t be a problem. It’ll breakup when he tills the field to grow alfalfa.”
Shrugging, she pointed and added, “He also said the town border was through those trees.”

Emma and Regina nodded, both knowing that only empty pasture, fields and forest lay beyond Storybrooke’s boundary. Livestock inherently stayed away, perhaps sensing the magic.

And so, the sheriff began her demonstration of a standard Mossberg 500 that she had borrowed from the Sheriff Department’s minute armory. She may have sidetracked herself a few times by fan-girling over some the modifications available for the pump-action shotgun but quickly reined herself in as Ruby and Regina shared several indulgent looks. The waitress occasionally interrupted with questions pertaining to specifically skeet shooting, but other than that, everything went pretty smoothly from stance to aiming to reloading. Finally, after passing out the safety gear, they were ready.

Emma helped Ruby adjust her grip on the fore-end and resettled the butt of the stock against her shoulder. “Okay, whenever you’re ready,” she prompted, moving over to the trap. Rotating the thrower back into position, she loaded a clay pigeon and took hold of the launch rope.

“Just remember to shoot and not fetch, Dear,” Regina dryly commented from her camp chair. Sighing, the waitress pursed her lips upon hearing the sheriff’s snicker and yelled, “Pull!”

The dusty orange target sailed up into the air. Tracking the pigeon was a lot easier than Ruby had expected. Lining up her shot, she pulled the trigger, the recoil easily absorbed by her body. She grinned as the clay disc exploded into tiny pieces and dust as it fell to the ground.

Turning around, Ruby was beaming as she exclaimed, “That was awesome!” ready to do it again. Her elation died a little when she noticed the former mayor’s knowing leer. “Oh, be quiet,” she mumbled, rolling her eyes and turning away. She pumped the gun. So what if, for a split second, she had wanted to chase the clay pigeon and catch it? Frisbee was a sport, too!

“She was going to chase it, wasn’t she?” Emma asked Regina. Not concerned about the trap, she’d been watching her friend’s stance and reaction to the shotgun firing. During that split second after release, she had noticed a subtle shift, as though the waitress was going to bolt forward into a run. It wasn’t much, just a slight raising of the back heel. At Regina’s nod, she chuckled and loaded another pigeon.

Frowning, Ruby prepared herself and yelled, “Pull!” She grinned as another target shattered. She called out three more times before pausing. “This is so much fun!” she enthused with much glee, reloading.

“How about I get a turn?” the sheriff inquired, reaching for the shotgun.

Reluctantly, the waitress agreed to take turns, even though operating the trap wasn’t nearly as entertaining. She was surprised, however, that Emma’s personal best was three out of five after a few rounds. So, when there were only a handful of clay pigeons left in the box, she glanced over her shoulder at the former mayor and asked, “Regina, think you could levitate a few of these?”

Looking up from her book, the former mayor smirked, glancing at Emma before saying, “Wanting a bit more sport?” She marked her spot and dropped the book on top of the duffle next to her chair.

The blonde scoffed, narrowing her eyes at Ruby. But concern filled her gaze as she scrutinized Regina stiffly rising from the camp chair. She pursed her lips and was about to suggest they just pack up, maybe check if any of her missed targets were still intact. “Are you sure you feel up to it?” she asked, taking a step towards her. Ever since the former mayor tapered herself off the pain
meds, she’d been privy to the unsuccessful attempts of performing magic. The last thing anyone needed was Ruby needling Regina about her magical incompetence. Besides, she’d already made that mistake. It hadn’t been pretty.

“I won’t know unless I try, will I?” the former mayor said in a clipped tone, walking over to the box. There were three targets. She absently flexed her gloved fingers. Glancing at Ruby, she asked, “Ready?”

The waitress nodded before facing away and prepared herself for a challenge. She didn’t expect anything less.

Taking a slow, deep inhale, Regina focused on her magic, concentrating on how her magic finally moved unhindered through her body. Gone was the recent disconnect from it. So, one by one, the clay pigeons slowly rose out of the tattered cardboard box and into the air. They hovered for a moment over Ruby’s head before shooting out at remarkable speeds.

At first, all three traveled together in a wide arc across the meadow. Ruby fired, aiming for the center target. But her shot missed as the second clay pigeon zoomed to the left while the first and third continued their slow arc across the field.

Growling, the waitress pumped and lined up another shot. She focused on the pair. However, the lone target quickly altered course, zooming directly towards Ruby. With practiced ease, she instantly shifted focus and fired. The clay pigeon shattered well before the debris reached them. Reloading, she immediately dispatched another target, but the last one was proving more evasive. She only had two shots left. As she continued tracking the clay pigeon, it turned invisible.

“That’s cheating!” Emma scolded, crossing her arms and glaring at Regina reproachfully.

But Ruby simply shushed the sheriff. Suddenly, she swung to the far right and fired. She laughed upon seeing the spell broken as the target crumbled down to the ground. “That was so much fun!” she cheered, holding the shotgun up in triumph.

“How the hell—?” Emma stammered not believing her eyes. She blinked repeatedly as the last of the terra cotta dust drifted away. “Did you like hear it or something?” She turned and faced the waitress.

“Nah, my hearing isn’t that good.” Ruby pulled off her earmuffs and explained, “I smelled it.”

“That should have been obvious, Emma,” Regina chuckled as she slowly moved her right hand down her left side. A warm gold light formed between her gloved hand and her coat. Her eyes drifted closed at the sensation of relief, and she sighed softly. Keeping her eyes closed, she took several long, deep breaths and hummed contently.

“You know if you were hurting that much, we could’ve waited,” the sheriff said quietly, taking the gun from the waitress. She pulled back the shell release and removed the last shell. Out of habit, she visually inspected the chamber and magazine before stowing the shotgun back in its case. “We didn’t have to do this today,” she added, zipping the case closed.

“There was no reason to stop your sheriff-y fun,” the former mayor said teasingly. She easily moved to fold her camp chair and slide it back in its carry case. Noting the waitress’s inquisitive expression, she said, “She promised me non-sheriff related entertainment, but all we’ve done for the last few days is tinker with her firearms.” Pulling the draw cord tight on the folding chair’s tote, she frowned at the blonde, raising an eyebrow and adding belatedly, “Which seem to be multiplying.”
“I have two personal handguns, Regina, and one service weapon,” Emma shook her head, smiling. They’d had a similar conversation the other day after she brought out her revolver. “Stop complaining and help pick up these wads and shells since you’re all healed now.” She bent over grabbing the ejected casings. As she reached for another, it disappeared in a little puff of purple. “Sweet!” she proclaimed, dropping the few in her hand with the others now in Ruby’s cardboard box. Jogging out into the meadow, she bent over and held up a wad, asking, “Would you mind gathering these, too, please?”

Exaggerating her head roll, the former mayor did as she was asked. She did relish the flexing of her magic muscles; it felt much like a really good stretch.

“You’d make a killer busboy,” Ruby chuckled as she stowed the safety gear.

“I think not,” Regina said with distain as she rescued her book from out of the tote. She slid the paperback into a front pocket of her coat. Crossing her arms, she gestured towards the trap and asked, “What are we going to do with that?”

“Um,” the waitress looked over her shoulder, “I don’t think it’ll fit in the trunk.”

“Not unless the legs come off,” the sheriff supplied, joining the others. She grabbed the gun case and camp chair, sliding the straps over her shoulder. “We can come back for it,” she suggested, walking towards the beetle. Taking a deep breath, she realized that she felt really good. This had been fun, hanging out with friends and shooting stuff.

Pursing her lips, the former mayor watched Emma walk away before turning back to Ruby. “Where do you want it?”

Scooping up the cardboard box, the waitress grabbed hold of the duffle’s handles and stood. She looked at Regina for a second before conceding, “I guess there’s no point in hiding it any longer.” She shrugged with a sad smile. “Granny’s gonna smell the gun powder on me. So, I guess in the garage.” There was no way she’d be able to change clothes, let alone get a shower, before her grandmother cornered her.

“Very well, envision the space,” Regina commanded as she gently cupped Ruby’s left biceps. With a simple flick of her wrist, the trap disappeared in a swirl of purple. Hopefully, it rematerialized where the werewolf wanted it.

Grinning brightly, the waitress offered a happy, “Thanks!” As they repacked the car, she asked, “So, you guys wanna go grab lunch?” She looked hopefully between the two.

“Well,” Emma drawled, slamming the hood closed. She looked over her shoulder at the former mayor and said, “I did promise to take you to Granny’s and let you go a few rounds with Leroy.”

With a harrumph, the former mayor climbed in the back seat of the beetle. “You’re buying,” she said, settling. She smiled slightly at Ruby’s apparent amusement.

“I always buy,” the sheriff grumbled, getting into her car. Starting the engine, she backed up and out of the corner of her eyes, she casually studied Regina. Gone were the strained expressions. Once heading back into town, she said to no one particular, “We’ll have to try this again. It was a lot of fun.”

“Even though you sucked,” Ruby commented with a snicker. “It was fun, but next time we’re going to have to bring Granny.” She slouched in the passenger seat, dreading the inevitable conversation. “She’ll want to use her crossbow.”
“Simply tell her she’ll have to pick up the bolts afterwards,” Regina offered distractedly, looking out the small side window. Little streaks, like blurred strings of bright light would sometimes draw her attention, forcing her eyes to dart around. It was a strange sight for such a thin magical atmosphere. She dismissed it as another side effect of the narcotics.

For a split second, the waitress perked up but immediately deflated. “Nope,” she drawled. “She’ll just make me do it.”

“It would satisfy your desire to fetch,” the former mayor said wryly, still preoccupied.

“Sounds about right,” Emma chuckled, dragging her eyes off Regina in the rearview mirror. “So,” she said cheerfully, deciding to change the subject. “How’s Puma doing?”

“Karl’s great,” Ruby replied with a wide smile. “He’s a quick study, and people seem to really like him.” Looking at the blonde, she added, “I think you made a good choice.” She coughed lightly before continuing, “Of course, it doesn’t hurt that he’s easy on the eyes.”

“Deputy Puma does cut an impressive figure,” the former mayor commented, still distracted by the streaks of magic. Questions formed in her mind, but she had no means of seeking information—not without a price.

Nodding with full agreement, the waitress elbowed the sheriff who just rolled her eyes and smirked. “Of course, he thinks we should wear uniforms,” she admitted deadpan, knowing the reaction.

“Not going to happen,” Emma growled, glaring at the road.

“Miss Swan dislikes authority,” Regina needlessly explained, facing forward. She caught the narrowed glare in the rearview mirror and smiled softly. It wasn’t as if it were some deep, dark secret.

Confused, Ruby glanced at the former mayor before focusing back on the sheriff. “But you are the authority,” she countered, shaking her head. The next few days at the sheriff station were going to be interesting. “Anyway, I like Karl. He’s actually helpful and doesn’t pile all of his paperwork on my desk.”

Emma sighed. She really didn’t want to get into work politics now, not after such an enjoyable morning. And her father hadn’t been necessarily pleased with Karl Puma as the new full-time deputy. She had never suspected David might harbor prejudices against the animal folk, if his remark about Puma being better suited as a forest ranger was any indication. “I don’t want to talk about work,” she grumbled. It was bad enough they were going back tomorrow.

“Don’t want your vacation to end, huh?” the waitress chortled, taking far too much delight from her friend’s crossness.

“Vacation?” the former mayor sneered, crossing her arms. Her sharp gaze met the sheriff’s in the rearview. But at noticing the fondness in the blonde’s eyes, her scowl softened and eventually disappeared. She huffed quietly, looking out the side window again.

Ruby pursed her lips as she noted the silent exchange. It almost appeared they’d become friends. She supposed it was bound to happen sooner or later, but honestly, she’d expected them to kill each other by now. She frowned, looking out the passenger window. How’d that happen? she pondered. Pushing such thoughts aside, she’d resolve to analyze Emma Swan’s contentment in Regina Mills’s presence another time. And the first thing out of her mouth was, “I saw Gold and Lacey on a date
“Seriously?” the sheriff questioned, shaking her head. “Can’t we talk about something less, I don’t know, disturbing, like the weather?” Was a relaxing day too much to ask? Besides, she didn’t like Lacey. Not that she knew Belle well but the bookworm was preferable to the lush.

“It’s overcast,” Regina offered deadpan, “with a chance of rain.”

Ruby snickered and added, “Like it’s been for the last week.” She twisted in her seat so she could see the former mayor. “Was it Cora’s plan to turn Belle into a horny alcoholic?” This question had plagued her for a while.

“Wow,” Emma drawled, shaking her head. She was beginning to have serious regrets about arranging this outing or driving Ruby into town.

To her credit, the former mayor weighed her response carefully and stayed conscious of the werewolf’s feelings. Normally, she’d simply assume the full responsibility the Dark Curse, and so, the idiocy of the masses blindly applying blame for their woes was deemed nothing of consequence to her. But this wasn’t that straight forward, certainly since she found herself growing rather fond of Ruby Lucas. “Cora merely applied the memories the Dark Curse was meant to provide Miss French.”

“Meant?” the sheriff prompted, slowing the car down as they rolled into Storybrooke’s suburbia.

“Yes. Under the original parameters of the curse, Belle should’ve been Lacey for the last 28 years,” Regina confirmed.

“But she wasn’t,” the waitress stated. Rolling her lips, she said, “She was in the mental ward in the hospital with no memories of herself or Lacey.” Her eyes narrowed as she continued watching the former mayor. “When she fell over the town line, she had no memories of either personality.”

“You did something,” Emma interjected quietly. Her eyes met Regina’s in the mirror. “When Gold came into the office that day . . .,” she trailed off as her brow furrowed in concentration, trying to remember exactly what was said.

Sighing, the former mayor looked down at her hands. “Honestly, I didn’t think the potion would actually work.” She looked back out the side window. “She had such a beautiful mind,” she whispered, losing herself in the passing of manicured yards. If Belle French had any magical potential, she would’ve been a sight to behold.

“What didn’t you think would work?” Ruby eagerly asked. She gripped the side of the passenger’s seat.

“I can’t restore her memories, Ruby,” Regina replied coolly, bypassing the question. This was exactly what she had hoped to avoid when she offered Belle the nullifying potion in the first place. “True Love’s kiss will restore her memories, but by any other means, it’s infinitesimal at best. We simply don’t have the proper ingredients to concoct a potion.”

“Oh,” the waitress mouthed, facing forward. She’d hoped there was some way to bring her friend back.

Stopping at a four-way intersection, the sheriff asked, “Why Belle?” She glanced around before turning. “What’s so special about Belle?” There had to be a reason, right?

“Her linguistic skills were absolutely astonishing,” the former mayor answered, almost wistfully.
She absently studied the houses and yards, spotting little changes from after the curse broke. “I didn’t want to risk irreparable damage.”

Emma and Ruby shared an intense look. Both were clearly confused and anxiously curious about the current topic. The beetle was quickly pulled into a parking spot just around the corner from the diner. The engine was turned off, and both women twisted around to look at Regina.

Frowning, the former mayor glared between the two when they failed to exit the car. She was about to threaten them with magic or just teleport out when she noticed their open expressions. “What?” she snarled, feeling cornered.

“You wanted to spare Belle,” the sheriff smiled. This was huge, wasn’t it? During the height of the Evil Queen’s rage, the woman had still cared enough to want to help someone.

“Don’t read into it,” Regina snapped, crossing her arms. “My intentions were far from altruistic.”

“So, why was she in your dungeon?” Ruby asked, raising an eyebrow. She hedged her bets that there was a lot more to this situation. Maybe it was something that could help Belle.

“Knowing my reasons won’t bring her back, Ruby,” the former mayor replied gently, shaking her head sadly. It was obvious the werewolf harbored feelings for the bookworm. Her gaze drifted and focused on Michael Tillman’s garage sign. “I required her unique skillset,” she started plainly, her voice low. “Rumpelstiltskin casted her out in spite of their mutual affections,” she explained. “I orchestrated a test of sorts, and before she returned to him, I apprehended her.” Meeting the werewolf’s gaze, she said, “She stayed in my dungeons until the curse was cast.”

“Wait, if Gold loved her, why’d he kick her to the curb?” the sheriff questioned. Love was huge to these people—religion worthy. She couldn’t image any of them just throwing it away.

“Because she could have broken the Dark One’s curse, leaving him powerless,” Regina answered, shrugging slightly. She watched Ruby closely. “The love they share is true,” she whispered, remembering the rage of denial the imp spiraled into afterwards.

“That doesn’t explain—,” the waitress stammered, facing forward. She crossed her arms and slouched in her seat. She knew they shared a True Love all too well. “So what, you gave her a potion to counteract the curse?”

“No, the nullifying potion contained her memories and kept them from being influenced by the curse. And since Belle didn’t have an identity, she wasn’t assigned an alter ego,” the former mayor clarified, praying she didn’t have to repeat herself again. “When the Savior here broke the curse, the resulting magical wave reversed the potion’s effect—until she fell over the town line.”

“But I thought you gave everyone their false memories,” Emma commented. She shared a curious look with Ruby who turned back around.

Rolling her eyes, Regina stared upward. “As flattered as I am by your gross misconception of my capabilities, world building on such a scale as Storybrooke would be beyond a monumental task for a single practitioner—or even several talented ones. After all, it took Rumpelstiltskin three hundred years to create it.” Dropping her gaze and focusing on the building in front of them, she pursed her lips and continued, “I simply accepted the base parameters outlined by the Dark Curse, making what adjustments I could where I could.” A long moment passed before she sighed and looked between the two women, asking, “Are we done?”

“So you’re saying it was Gold’s intention to turn Belle into a bitchy party girl?” the sheriff asked.
At the werewolf’s scowl, she offered an apologetic smile.

Surprised by the rather intelligent question, the former mayor was pleased. The blonde had been paying attention during their typically one-sided conversations about magical theory. She bit her lip, weighing how best to simplify things. “Rumpelstiltskin will argue that intentions mean nothing until he’s gold in the face. However, it impacts everything to a degree. It has to, given the fundamental base of magic being emotion.”

Looking at Regina then at Emma, Ruby glanced around outside, watching a few people walk down the sidewalk. “That makes sense,” she said. So, it was up to Gold to save Belle from Lacey. She shuddered, remembering the incident with Whale outside the Rabbit Hole. Did the Dark One prefer Lacey?

Slowly, the trio climbed out of the beetle and walked towards Granny’s Diner. The waitress sighed when the sidewalk sign for the diner came into sight. Smirking, Emma suggested Dave’s Fish & Chips for something different. It was just across the street. The brunettes easily agreed.

As they crossed the street, Dr. Hopper and Pongo exited door leading up to his office above the Neighbor’s Five & Dime. The Dalmatian barked happily upon recognizing Regina. He pulled hard against his lead with his tail wagging. “Pongo, sit,” the therapist commanded. He was relieved that Pongo actually plopped his butt down, tail moving a mile a minute as the three women approached them.

“Hey, Archie,” Emma greeted, stepping up on the sidewalk. She absently patted the dog’s head, noticing his attention fixed on Regina. “Hey, Pongo,” she added.

“Hello, Sheriff,” he returned. “Regina, Ruby. I hope your day’s going well.” He smiled fondly. His eyes kept drifting down to Pongo. The dog wiggled with excitement.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Hopper,” the former mayor said with a small, genuine smile. Looking down at the Dalmatian, she fondly rewarded him with several long strokes across his head.

Pongo panted, clearly happy to be greeted.

As the four conversed on the sidewalk, the group occasionally drew the attention of pedestrians and shopkeepers. It was a surprising scene to say the least, especially when all five walked together towards Dave Salter’s restaurant. Of course, stranger things had happened in Storybrooke, but that didn’t mean people liked it.

“This is like the start of a bad joke,” Regina said, nodding her thanks to Archie for holding the door. She waved her hand over Pongo. A small purple cloud dissipated to reveal the red vest of a service animal in training. “Behave or else you won’t be given further liberties,” she told the dog conversationally.

“Oh?” Emma prompted, standing next to the former mayor. She could swear Pongo seemed proud to be inside the restaurant. There weren’t many businesses in Storybrooke that allowed pets. She frowned at that realization, given the whole animal folk thing.

“Yes,” the former mayor said, facing the sheriff. “A werewolf, a sorceress and a princess walk into a restaurant with a therapist and his dog,” she stated humorously, tilting her head. She was confused by Ruby and Archie’s expectant faces.

The waitress frowned when Regina failed to continue the joke. “You need to work on that,” she said, following Cecil Salter to a round table by the window.
“She doesn’t joke,” the sheriff explained in a mocking dour tone. She flashed a bright grin as she patted the seat next to her. “I’ll come up with something.”

Archie chuckled as he helped Pongo to settle under the table. The dog did enjoy people watching. He smiled bashfully at Emma’s frown. “I mean no offense,” he said.

“Yes, offend,” Ruby interrupted, taking the menus from Cecil. She briefly wondered why the boy wasn’t in school. “She can’t tell a joke to save her life.” She passed the menus around. At the blonde’s wounded expression, she rolled her eyes and added, “You get the timing off every time.”

Regina chortled in agreement, putting her menu down. It was a fish and chips place. What was there to decide?

“You too, huh?” Emma scowled at the former mayor, folding her arms on the table. “You laugh when I tell Henry jokes.” She shifted in her seat as the waistband dug into her lower belly. Her jeans should’ve stretched by now.

“Probably because you get the timing wrong,” the waitress reiterated with a broad smile.

The group’s banter was light and friendly. Although it created a pleasant atmosphere, some of the other patrons were confused by it. But they knew better than to start something, especially after Dave Salter sat at the table for a little while. That really threw Emma. Even though the guy gave her car a tune up for a fair price, she didn’t actually think he’d talk to her socially. Well, he was mainly talking with Regina and Archie, but still, he was at their table.

 Apparently, Cecil had a doctor’s appointment late this morning and didn’t want to go back to school. However, the good news was the hospital’s pediatrician was finally making headway in regards to Cecil’s treatments. It would be an uphill battle, but there was hope. Emma wasn’t entirely clear on what ailed the kid, making a mental note to ask Regina about it later.

Shortly after Dave left the table, Ruby sighed. “Guess I’d better go start my shift.” She rose and sauntered over to the counter, manned by one of Cecil’s handsome older brothers.

Emma shook her head as she continued to dredge her fries in ketchup. No doubt the waitress was fishing for a date this Friday night.

“Yes, I must be going, as well.” Archie smiled and thanked everyone for the company. After giving his money to Cecil, he and Pongo left without much fuss.

Ruby twirled past the table on her way out the door, whispering about the upcoming date. She also thanked the pair again and whisked herself across the street to Granny’s.

After getting a refill of sweet tea, the sheriff sat in silence, looking out the window. She continued to finish her fries. Opening her mouth, she turned to say something to the brunette but stopped. She reached over and plucked the book from the former mayor’s hand. “Seriously?” she questioned with a smirk, clearly amused.

“Excuse you,” Regina frowned, reaching for her book. Her eyes narrowed when the blonde kept the book out of her reach.

“How to Destroy the Universe: And Thirty-four Really Interesting Uses of Physics,” Emma read the title aloud and chuckled. “Well, this explains the looks.”

“I’ve only been reading for the last ten minutes,” the former mayor said in her defense, huffing. It was not as though she could miss the gawking stares or the accusing looks. “While you’ve been
“I haven’t been sulking,” the sheriff said, giving the book back. “Why would I even be sulking?” Crossing her arms, she leaned on the table and poked at her fries.

The former mayor hummed, uncertain she even cared at the moment. She asked anyway, “What’s wrong? You were fine until the others left.”

Biting her lip and averting her eyes, Emma felt stupid. So, she just slowly shook her head. She scowled when Regina picked up her book and resumed reading.

Arching an eyebrow, the brunette spied the dirty look and said, “Tell me or don’t, I refuse to ferret for information on this matter any further.” Besides, she’d already offered the sheriff several solutions. It wasn’t her fault they were all turned down.

The blonde slumped in her seat and pursed her lips. “I’m sorry if making you sit in the car makes me uncomfortable.” She paused and took a deep breath. “I appreciate your willingness to let me go out but you’d hate it. And the more I think about it, the more I’d hate it too.” Her lip curled up in a sneer. Knowing the inevitable why was coming, she added, “Because my friends also happen to be friends with my mother.” Looking at the former mayor, she explained, “Which was fine until the curse broke.”

“People can maintain multiple friendships,” Regina sighed. Every week, they revisited this same conversation. She didn’t blame Emma. She was just tired of talking about it. “Didn’t you have fun with Ruby today?”

“Yeah but—.”

“Then what are you afraid of?” the former mayor interrupted. She knew exactly what the underlying issue was, but the sheriff needed to realize it for herself. When the blonde looked away, she sighed and stood. “Come,” she said, putting her coat on and sliding her book in her pocket. “Let’s go home and resume your magical training.” One way or another, she had to get Emma’s confidence levels up.

“Okay,” the blonde replied, standing to go pay for their lunch. It had been awhile since they had fooled around with magic. She’d been enjoying it, too. Maybe it would help calm her mind before a full day at the station tomorrow.

~SQ~

It was a beautiful sunny day in Storybrooke with the scent of spring in the air. The sky was a vibrant blue and dotted with big, fluffy clouds. Archie smiled widely as he and Pongo walked down the sidewalk towards Storybrooke Academy. A sense of relief washed over him. The much talked about Election Day was finally here. And all of this bickering and infighting could finally be put to rest, hopefully. Glancing down at his Dalmatian companion beside him, he said, “Come on, Pongo.” The dog’s tail merrily wagged as they continued their way towards the school.

When they turned the corner onto the street leading to the academy, Archie frowned at the large amount of people gathered outside the school today. “It’s okay, boy,” he said softly at Pongo’s whine. They slowed down their pace, looking at all of the campaigners and booths across the street from the gated schoolyard. It appeared no one was going to give up until the bitter end.

He nodded to a few passersby, perusing the booths. A demanding bark from Pongo drew his attention from some of the political paraphernalia of Mary Margaret and David’s shared table.
“Shush, Pongo,” he insisted, patting the dog’s head. He barely managed to hear one of the dwarves explaining that the Charming couple had already left, having voted first thing. That’s strange, he thought. Wouldn’t they benefit from mingling with the people? He frowned as he moved on, having already seen info sheets.

Pongo barked again with his tail wagging vigorously. But this time it was more of a happy greeting.

As the Dalmatian pranced a bit, Archie looked up to see Widow Granger being guided by Anton. “Good morning,” he said with a fond smile to both.

“Morning, it may be, but the good remains to be seen,” the widow scowled before smiling and stretching a hand outwards. As the dog happily nudge his head and muzzle into Granger’s palm, she whispered, “Hello, Pongo.” And she proceeded to affectionately pet him while still grasping onto the giant’s elbow.

“This is most exciting,” Anton commented, looking around at all the people. “I’ve never seen so many people in open discourse over choosing new leadership.” His brothers had never entertained such ideas.

“Yes, I’m sure it’s quite a fascinating experience for everyone,” Archie agreed, glancing around. Refocusing on them, he questioned, “Have you already voted?”

“Thankfully, yes,” Widow Granger sighed, patting her coat where an annoyingly cheerful woman had put an ‘I voted!’ sticker. “Unfortunately, we arrived during all the fanfare.” She rolled her blind eyes. “All the pandering speeches full of promises none of them have any intention of keeping.”

“Helena,” the giant scolded. He frowned down at his friend. “It’s important to embrace this world’s customs. You told me that yourself.”

“Yes, yes,” the widow grumbled. She couldn’t fault her friend too much, however. He was young and naïve. All in all, the experience was rather refreshing. It had been a long time since she ventured this far from her yard.

“I can imagine listening to everyone could be very tiring,” Archie easily supplied. He didn’t get to speak with the herbalist much, but he knew she preferred her solitude and her plants.

“Yes, I know,” Anton apologized to his older friend but nodded at Dr. Hopper. He was well aware he’d kept Helena out much later than she’d preferred. He also didn’t expect the election to be this exciting. “Let’s go have an early lunch, and I will take you home,” he promised, planning on listening to the election chatter from Storybrooke’s one-and-only A.M. radio station while he tended to the seedlings in the greenhouse.

“Finally,” Widow Granger huffed. A bright smile stretched across her aged face. “I want to finish my audiobook today. The plot’s taken an unexpected turn.”

Both told Archie and Pongo goodbye before ambling down the street. He watched them for a moment before shaking his head. Of course, he’d witnessed stranger friendships forged over the years. When Pongo bumped against him, he decided to resume their walk and check out the rest of the booths. His mind was already made up, but it wouldn’t hurt to look around a bit. Maybe he’d pick up some free pens.

Most people brushed right past, not paying them any attention. Archie was used to this behavior as
was Pongo. But it always felt nice when someone nodded or uttered a quick hello in passing. Sometimes, he wished he was more important in the scheme of things.

Getting in the line wrapping around the outside of the school building, Archie pulled out the red service vest Regina had created for Pongo the other day. It escaped him why he had never thought of this before, training the Dalmatian as a therapy pet. From the calls he had made to the hospital and nursing home, everyone seemed to like the idea. It might also temper the dog’s energy levels.

However, he hadn’t cleared Pongo’s presence while voting and fretfully frowned when Deputy Puma, wearing a Sheriff’s Department jacket and baseball-style cap, headed in his direction. He nervously pushed his glasses back up his nose. “Deputy Puma,” he casually greeted when Storybrooke’s newest police officer stopped next to him.

Now, Karl Puma was a tall man, several inches taller than Archie, with the lean muscular build of a professional swimmer, a deep baritone voice and dark skin. His hands were large, but his heart was even bigger. And his cool exterior belied the powerful aura of his presence. He was a force to be reckoned with and well respected amongst the animal folk, peasantry and nobility of Storybrooke. Coupled with his willingness to learn, serve and protect everyone, it was why he had been hired by Sheriff Swan.

“Good morning, Dr. Hopper,” Karl greeted, letting the dog sniff his hand before petting him. “Hello, Pongo.” He smiled as he scratched behind the Dalmatian’s ears.

Pongo grumbled with appreciation. He promptly sat and offered Puma his paw.

Laughing, the tall deputy had to squat to accept the dog’s shake. “Nice to meet you too, Pongo,” he said. His gaze casually glanced over the red vest. Standing up, he commented, “I heard some chatter about Pongo training as a therapy dog.”

“Yes,” Archie timidly replied. “It was suggested by a friend. I did some research and thought we’d both enjoy it.” He smiled, quite aware of the strange duel dictum of interacting with the animal folks of the Enchanted Forest. Those cursed to be non-human whether temporarily or permanently were typically shunned by humans and animals. “Is there a problem, Deputy?”

Flashing a large grin, Puma shook his head. “Not at all, Dr. Hopper,” he easily answered, his amber eyes glancing down at Pongo. “As long as his vet records are up to date, we shouldn’t have any problems.” He reached out and gave Archie’s biceps a hardy squeeze, saying, “If you run into any problems taking him anywhere, just give the station a call.”

“Thank you, Deputy Puma,” Dr. Hopper smiled. He had worried about bringing Pongo today. And he almost hadn’t, but it was such a lovely day to be cooped up in the yard.

An hour later, Archie and Pongo exited the school’s cafeteria, both content with their experience at the polls. However, it was short lived as the loud shrill of the fire alarm sounded, startling everyone still for a moment. Organized chaos erupted around them as the pair hastened to exit the school.

“It’s okay, boy,” the therapist muttered, hoping to soothe the distressed dog. Both knew the sooner they were outside, the better. Suddenly, there was some yelling from behind them and a loud bang, like doors being slammed against the wall. Archie stopped and turned as Pongo whined.

Ronnie Eccleston barreled down the hallway, carrying one of the black ballot boxes, Deputy Puma in hot pursuit.

“What on earth?” Archie mumbled, watching as Ronnie and Karl bolted around a corner.
Pongo barked urgently, pulling against his leash. He twirled and pranced as the men disappeared from sight.

“It’ll be alright, Pongo,” Dr. Hopper said reassuringly. Gently, he guided the Dalmatian towards the exit. “We need to get out of here so the firefighters can check the building.” Sometimes he wondered why he bothered explaining things to a dog.

Huffing, Pongo casually glanced up at Archie and down the hall where the two men went. His tail hung low and slowly wagged as people hurried around them. He peered around all the moving legs. With neither man in sight, he happily continued outside.

~SQ~

Glancing around the graveyard nervously, Ruby stood in front of the Mills’ family mausoleum, fidgeting with the cuff of her jacket. She didn’t like this plan. No, scratch that, she really didn’t like this plan at all. Not for the first time, she wondered what she’d done to piss off her grandmother because when the War Council had convened to devise a plan to lure Cora out into the open and apprehend her, she didn’t expect Granny to volunteer her to masquerade as Regina or herself as Emma, for that matter.

“Stop fidgeting, girl.”

The Regina doppelganger scowled down at the supposedly unconscious Emma Swan. “Aren’t you supposed to be quiet?” It was so weird hearing the former mayor’s voice every time she talked or seeing the sheriff act like her grandmother. *Totally trippy*, she mused, shuddering.

Huffing, Emma’s double opened an eye, saying, “For goodness’s sake, get in character. Despite what I look like, this ground isn’t comfortable at my age—especially with a crossbow jabbing me in the ribs.” She closed her eye.

“Alright, alright,” the visage of the former mayor sighed, pulling an enchanted playing card out of her coat pocket. She looked at it and again pondered why the Queen of Hearts was Cora’s calling card. At least, that’s what the Blue Fairy had told them. She stooped and dropped the card on the other side of her grandmother. Standing back up and crossing her arms, she waited.

A minute passed, then two, before a puff of purple smoke appeared several feet in front of Emma’s twin.

“Regina,” Cora greeted, quickly taking in the scene before her. She knew immediately this wasn’t her daughter. Besides the cloying presence of fairy magic, she instantaneously picked up on the missing intricacies of her daughter. Did these fools really think she’d fall for this tripe? “This is an unexpected surprise,” she commented, playing along for the moment to find out what their game was.

“Mother,” Regina’s look-a-like flatly returned. She paused and glanced down at the Emma doppelganger. “Given that the town is busy with their election,” she said, meeting the sorceress’s gaze, “there’s something you should know.” Ruby’s hackles went up, and she knew in her gut that the older woman wasn’t deceived.

“What’s that, Dear?” Cora prompted with a soft smile, dropping her chin slightly.

“It’s a trap,” the former mayor’s twin proclaimed, taking a big step back as the pretend sheriff rolled over and shot her crossbow.

“Oh, I know, wolf,” the sorceress laughed as she disappeared in a plume of smoke. The bolt sailed
through the smoke unhindered and lodged itself up in a tree.

“Damn,” Emma’s mirror image cursed, trying to get onto her feet. She gladly accepted Ruby’s help. However, both soon found themselves being tossed forward and tumbling across the ground. The crossbow was thrown even further away.

“Did the two of you really think you could mislead me?” Cora taunted as she loomed in front of the mausoleum. She stood with her hands on her hips and raised her chin. “Far better than you have tried and failed.”

“Not really,” the glamour of Regina honestly answered, getting back up. She took a defensive stance between the sorceress and her grandmother. Sensing the rising anger within the older woman, she had no clue what prompted the drastic shift, but it was enough to cause her to hesitate.

Suddenly, David shouted, “Now!” and all hell broke loose.

Four fairies popped out of their hiding places and sent four large multicolored blasts of sparkling fairy dust zooming towards Cora. Yet, just as they were about to impact, the sorceress raised her arms, halting the twinkling balls of magic. Then with a dramatic flick of her wrists, she sent the spheres careening back to their makers, each either hitting a fairy or tombstone in a spectacularly glittery fashion.

“Fools!” Cora bellowed as she incinerated an incoming arrow.

The Regina look-a-like growled and lunged forward, believing the raging woman too distracted to stop her attack. However, Ruby found herself being raised into the air as belts wrapped themselves tightly around her body, immobilizing her. Her eyes widened in fear as she met the sorceress’s hard eyes.

“Bad dog,” Cora scolded with a sneer. Without further thought, she sent the nuisance flying away. Werewolves were always such a waste of potential.

“Ruby!” Emma’s double shouted as she scrambled onto her feet and limped towards her granddaughter. She winced as Regina’s doppelganger slammed into the hard ground, rolling several feet down a small hill.

“This ends now, Cora,” David proclaimed, brandishing his drawn sword. He stood with his wife and dwarves flanking his sides with their own weapons drawn. The fairies remained behind them all. “Make it easier on yourself and give up peacefully.”

“Give up? Why on earth would I want to do that?” the sorceress asked with amusement. Her gaze turned cold as she said, “I still have so much to do.” Thrusting her hands out, she released a wide, concussive wave, pushing the pathetic do-gooders away. She caught movement out of the corner of her eye. Her lip curled as she watched the false Emma fumbling to remove the belts from around the glamour of Regina. Reason told her it wasn’t her daughter, but the sight still nettled her. Gritting her teeth, she twisted her hand, making the belts tighter. She smirked at the sound of a cry from her daughter’s visage.

“Enough, Cora,” Mother Superior commanded, walking out from behind the mausoleum with her blue wand poised. “You will terrorize these people no longer.”

Turning only partially and cocking an unimpressed eyebrow at the Blue Fairy, Cora smirked. “Your paltry tricks are nothing, Reul Ghorm.” Suddenly, her right hand shot up, stopping the descent of David’s sword. She made a simple gesture at the challenging fairy, ripping the blade
from the deputy’s grasp and sending it speeding towards Mother Superior. Snapping her fingers, she laughed as it barely missed, and the blue wand appeared in her hand. She gained great amusement from the collective gasp. Without another thought, she broke the wand in half, letting it and all the fairy dust contained within fall to the ground. She flashed a very satisfied smile as the two wolves’ appearances were restored. “Anyone else?” she inquired, glancing between the other four useless fairies.

Each of them averted their eyes and took a step back, hiding behind the bewildered dwarves who wordlessly lowered their pickaxes a fraction.

“This was rather disappointing,” the sorceress intoned, bored. She hadn’t expected this little charade to play out so quickly. She had thought they would at least offer her a bit of sport. With a sigh of indulgence, she effortlessly burned another arrow before it could reach her. “Really, Snow, haven’t you learned anything by now?” She pinned Mary Margaret with a truly malicious grin before disappearing in a cloud of smoke.

“I told you, we should’ve used guns,” Leroy grumbled from behind Mary Margaret. “That witch wouldn’t be able to stop seven shotgun rounds.”

“We didn’t want to kill her,” the school teacher sighed, facing her friend. This had been an utter disaster. They hadn’t even gotten Cora on the ropes. “We agreed to lock her up.”

“Well, a little maiming wouldn’t have hurt,” the unhappy dwarf countered. He shared a look with his brothers who nodded in agreement.

Rolling her eyes, Mary Margaret observed as Mother Superior bent to pick up her broken wand. She walked over to her and softly asked, “Can you fix it?”

“In time,” the fairy said after a long sigh. “It would appear I have grossly misjudged Cora’s capabilities here in this world.” She slipped the broken pieces into her cloak.

“Ya think?” Ruby asked in a snarky tone, stomping past everyone. She hurt all over where the belts had cut into her. “I told you this wouldn’t work.”

Joining the others, Eugenia crossed her arms, watching her granddaughter leave the graveyard. When Mary Margaret moved to follow, she put a hand on the girl’s shoulder, saying, “Leave her be.”

Unsure of what to do, the school teacher pursed her lips, but she heeded Widow Lucas’s advice, letting her best friend go. Turning, she smiled softly as her husband rejoined them after retrieving his sword. She took his hand as the group slowly walked towards the cemetery’s gate. No one said a word. However, their moment of quiet reflection was interrupted as four motorcycles roared up to the gravel parking lot beside the graveyard’s entrance.

Monty Elmwood and three other members of the Crows Guard parked their bikes. The former Captain of the Guard glowered at the obviously thwarted group as he took off his riding goggles and helmet. His bike creaked as he got off it. He stalked to the gate, blocking the exit.

One of the guards hung back as he checked his watch. Holding a walkie-talkie to his mouth, he spoke into the device, “Mobile base requesting sound off. Over.”

“Monty,” David cordially greeted. He squeezed his wife’s hand. There wasn’t a whole lot he knew about the Evil Queen’s former guard. He’d only met Graham briefly during an escape and knew that Mary Margaret had exchanged heated words with this man a while ago.
“Deputy,” Elmwood said flatly. He took a slow breath, catching the narrowed gaze from the princess. “What’s going on here?” he asked, glancing around as if he didn’t already know.

“Red One, clear. Over,” crackled over the walkie-talkie.

“None of your business, bird brain,” Leroy snarled, snatching his pickaxe back from Doc. The fact that the captain only glimpsed at him for a second infuriated him further. He was a dwarf to be reckoned with!

When no one else offered an explanation, Monty dragged his gaze over the group while he spoke, “Because it would seem that you lot attempted to apprehend Cora and failed.”

“Red Two, also clear. Over,” came clearly through the speaker.

“I invited you to be a part of this, Monty,” David explained for everyone’s benefit. “It was you who refused to share information.” It was true. He’d contacted the man shortly after his last meeting with Emma about sheriff’s office business. Their meeting hadn’t gone as well as he had hoped.

“Yes,” Elmwood nodded. “And I told you that without any sort of anti-magic weaponry or defensive gear, this would be reckless,” he replied, shooting a heated look towards Mother Superior. Even though his anger flared, his voice stayed calm as he refocused on David. “This is exactly why I declined.” His men were stretched thin trying to cover Storybrooke while guarding the queen. He pointed at the deputy. “Cora’s going to be ten-times harder to track, now.”

A very static-y “Red three, clear. Over,” came through the device.

“Well, maybe if you had worked with us, this wouldn’t have been an issue,” Mary Margaret piped up. How dare he criticize them for even trying! “We could’ve captured her.”

Monty held the princess’s gaze for a long moment. “Yeah, a great boon if you’d managed to pull this off, today of all days,” he said flatly.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Widow Lucas huffed, putting her hands on her hips. Normally, she wouldn’t nose herself into a conversation between royals, but Monty Elmwood was just a guard.

“Red four, clear. Over,” sounded from the walkie-talkie.

Raising an eyebrow, Elmwood smiled and opened his arms wide. “It’s election day,” he boldly pronounced. Dropping his arms, he turned and shared a light laugh with his men. However, when he faced the defeated, ragtag group again, he’d lost all his false merriment. “Snow White and Prince Charming carting the captured witch down Main Street would be a grand thing—enough to call off the election all together.”

“Don’t you dare make a mockery of this, Montague,” Mary Margaret hissed, taking a step forward. She adjusted the grip on her bow. “Cora is dangerous.”

“I know exactly what that woman is capable of, Princess” Monty agreed, his voice low. He paused and searched the group again. His gaze lingered on the Blue Fairy once more. “Why else?” he prompted and stopped, tilting his head and returning his attention to the Charmings. “A desperate act of heroism on Election Day serves nothing but to circumvent the will of the people in your favor.” He glanced around the graveyard beyond the group. “Though with everyone at Storybrooke Academy voting, no one would bear witness to your debacle if it should—and did—fail.” Flashing a malicious grin, he said, “No harm, no foul, right?”
The guard held the device up to his mouth, saying, “Mobile base to Red five and Red six. Report your status. Over.”

“People want that witch gone,” snarled Leroy. He took a step forward, but two of his brothers pulled him back.

“Really?” Elmwood queried with mock surprise; this wasn’t worth his time. His face hardened again. “Most people weren’t aware of her until Town Hall,” he supplied. Crossing his arms, he smirked and said, “However, given Her Majesty’s acquittal of Dr. Hopper’s murder, people are rather curious why the Sheriff’s Department failed to identify the deceased.” Turning around, he walked back to his motorcycle. As he sat and put on his helmet, he added, “Of course, this is all old news, now.”

“Red six, clear. Over,” eventually came over the small speaker.

“What are you talking about?” David asked, following the Crows Guard out of the cemetery. The others were right behind him.

“Red five, report. Over,” the guard demanded into the walkie-talkie, heading towards his bike.

“After your appearance at the polls this morning, Albert Spencer attempted a rather unsuccessful coup of his own.” Elmwood explained, taking no satisfaction in their collective surprise. He put on his riding goggles. “Thanks to the Crows Guard, Deputy Puma was able to ensure everything proceeded without further incident.” He flashed a big grin before rolling his motorcycle backwards. “It’ll be in the papers tomorrow.”

“What are you talking about?” the deputy asked with a touch of worry. He reached into his pocket to check his cellphone. Certainly Puma would’ve called him if something had happened at the polls. No missed calls or text messages.

“Sir,” the guard with the walkie-talkie interrupted. “I haven’t gotten a sound back from Red five.”

“Damn it,” Monty cursed. “Order all available to Red five, now!” In that instant, his bike’s engine roared to life, and he shot out onto the road with three of the Crows Guard on his tail. Bits of gravel and dust billowed behind them. The final guard rushed the command into the walkie-talkie before speeding to join the others.

“What the heck was that about?” Leroy asked, perplexed. He had to admit that those motorcycles sure did look cool. Bet they were fun to ride, too.

“No idea,” Widow Lucas groaned, rubbing her lower back.

“If you would allow us, Your Majesties,” Mother Superior said, walking around and stopping in front of Mary Margaret and David. She delicately adjusted her cloak. “I believe we shall return to the convent.”

“Yes, of course,” the school teacher agreed. She smiled warmly at the fairies. “Thank you so much for your help.”

“We are at your disposal,” the fairy replied, bowing her head slightly. The other fairies followed suit. All of them shuffled into the nunnery’s van without much fuss and drove away.

“Another attempt at capturing the witch is going to take a lot more fairy dust,” Doc fretted, shifting his weight uncomfortably while looking at his brothers. He took no solace in their nods. What he really wanted was to go take a nap or maybe enjoy a pint of ale. However, he figured that wasn’t
going to happen for several hours.

“Yeah,” Leroy drawled. With his pickaxe resting on his shoulder, he moseyed towards his beat up truck. “Better get a few hours of digging in before Blue starts breathing down our necks.” They liked to work, but dang if Mother Superior hadn’t become a pain in the ass. He couldn’t really blame her, not now at least.

Watching the dwarves climb in the bed of truck, Eugenia headed towards her car. “I’ll see you later.” She climbed in the little hatchback and pulled the seatbelt across her. There was a lot to do at the diner since the back room was being decorated for any post-election day celebrations. After all, there wasn’t anything they could do here.

The Charmings waved and watched their friends drive away. Holding hands, they walked over to David’s truck. He opened the passenger door for his wife before moving around and getting in himself. Mary Margaret scooted across the bench seat, tilting her head to rest on David’s shoulder. The pair sat there for a long while, staring over the short brick wall at the roof of the Mills’ mausoleum. They had been so hopeful.

“Herman’s going to win,” the deputy said, defeated.

“You don’t know that,” the school teacher replied, taking her husband’s right hand between hers. “Stranger things have happened.”

“We both know that Monty was right, Snow. Capturing Cora was our Hail Mary, and we blew it,” he sighed. They had foolishly risked their friends’ lives.

“Well, at least Mitchell is fair and just,” she said with as much optimism as she could muster. It wouldn’t be ideal, but they’d make do. As long as her family was together, she’d be okay. She frowned and murmured, “I can’t believe Albert tried to overthrow the entire election.”

Chuckling, David kissed the top of his wife’s head. “I’m not surprised. He hasn’t been happy with anything since the curse broke, and somehow, I doubt he’ll give up.”

“Then it’s a good thing you work for the Sheriff’s Department,” Mary Margaret cooed, lifting her head to kiss the man she loved dearly.

~SQ~

END PART 6
Author's Note: We apologize for the delay of this installment as we've taken time from this story to work on Future Legend and other life things, like jobs, physical injuries, and surgeries. My beta is also slow, but to be fair, she has had a very eventful life/job. In fact, she has started a new job, and it has a very grueling training phase. Please note that things start to get a little heavy for our characters as the plot moves forward. Alas, I've heard the readers' cries for some accursed fluff. I tried to incorporate something, but Regina and Emma just aren't there yet. Patience is a virtue and good things come to those who wait.

Special Note: We don't watch the show. In fact, the last episode we actually watched was s03e11: Going Home and since then, we've only caught glimpses from Tumblr posts. It's a shame because this show had so much potential, but that's why there's fan fiction, right?

Thank You for all of the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. A few reviews in particular have been quite awe-inspiring and followed by gleefully evil cackles! We really do appreciate your opinions/suggestions and are immensely pleased that our readers are enjoying our story as much as us.

~SQ~

PART 7

Peering down the hall from his partially opened bedroom door, Henry strained to eavesdrop on his two mothers in the master bedroom.

"More folding and less dancing would be most helpful, Emma," Regina mildly scolded with a slightly raised voice as she continued to fold sleepwear and undergarments. She didn't bother hiding her amused smirk as the earbud-wearing blonde shimmied and shook beside the bed to whatever was playing on her iPod. She was unable to identify the upbeat song from the sheriff's incomprehensible singing. Dropping folded underwear on top of Henry's pile, she randomly pulled out a pair of red, bikini briefs from the laundry basket. She deftly spotted a hole along the waistband and tossed it in the discard pile at the foot of the bed.

"Hey, those are still good!" Emma whined, rushing over to rescue her favorite red panties. She quickly folded them and put them on top of her pile.

Catching the blonde's gaze, the brunette rolled together a pair of white socks and flatly said, "They have a hole along the seam of the waistband." Some things just weren't worth the time to repair.

"They're comfortable," the blonde countered, crossing her arms. A pair of plain black, cotton high-cut briefs were draped over her left arm.
"And you can purchase more at Walmart," the former mayor absently responded, quickly folding another garment and dropping it on a pile.

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff lazily folded the briefs before grabbing something else out of the basket to fold. "There's nothing wrong with shopping at Walmart," she mumbled, watching the other woman out of the corner of her eye. There was no way around it. She despised wash day.

"I never said there was," Regina said, narrowing her eyes. She rolled together another pair of Henry's socks before saying, "You're not getting out of helping this time."

"Fine," Emma drawled in a dramatic sigh. Laundry would always be one of her least favorite things. With a slight grimace, she continued moving to the beat of her music, but now, she was at least actively helping.

There was very little in her clothing that required gentle or specific care, aside from her leather jackets. Underwear was typically dropped, unfolded and unsorted into a box on the closet floor while everything else was hung. It was both simple and efficient, especially for bugging out. Her stuff was colorful and fun, cute even, as opposed to her more stylish, utilitarian outfits. However, she was disappointed in Regina's bland but vastly superior quality undergarment selection. It all just seemed kind of tame and boring given the brunette's business-style wardrobe when compared to her past Evil Queen persona.

When the basket contained only the former mayor's trouser socks, Emma gathered up her clothes and danced her way to her room. She'd given up attempting to match the other woman's socks after the second time they did laundry. Talk about annoying. "Kid, come get your clothes!" she called as she shimmied down the hall and into her room. The bedroom door slowly drifted shut and closed with a soft click.

Shaking her head with a soft smile, Regina began the methodical procedure of matching her socks—a pet-peeve if there ever was one, pairing equally stretched and worn socks together. So lost in the process, she never noticed that her son had slipped into the room. She instinctively flashed a warm smile at him but sighed softly at his pensive stare down at his pile of clothes. As she started putting her garments away in her dresser, she reminded him, "If you're still uncomfortable with Emma folding your underwear, you can always fold them yourself."

Henry bit his lower lip. Sure he was embarrassed, but he just wasn't motivated enough to actually fold them himself—especially since Emma's box-in-the-closet system hadn't gone over very well. Yet, he was also too self-conscious to rummage through his mothers' panties since both moms outright refused to wash his stuff separately. Slowly, he gathered up his clothes, careful not to unfold them.

Forcing herself not to grind her teeth in awkward frustration, the former mayor cringed internally at the prolonged silence. She detested that her relationship with her son was still strained and fractured in spite of everything. Foolishly, she'd hoped things would've gotten at least a little better by now, but no real lasting progress had developed between them. The boy had even become increasingly distant with Emma. That, however, probably had more to do with his grounding and his other mother's surprisingly firm enforcement of it.

She briefly glanced over her shoulder and quietly studied her son. Well familiar with the intense look on his face, Regina had no means to ease the boy's obvious confliction. She turned away and worried fleetingly on her lower lip. He wouldn't talk to her, she knew that much. But as she was about to offer him an easy out, something strange happened. Or more accurately, she felt something magical emanate from Emma's room, which wasn't entirely surprising. The blonde was prone to magical experimentation in her room. But that was usually at night and inevitably
followed by a soft knock on her bedroom door.

Henry took a deep breath. "Mom," he started, pausing when he looked up at her.

Absently, the brunette rubbed her left temple and blankly stared at the wall facing the sheriff's bedroom. Thin magical threads were weaving around and through the house. She could feel the impending migraine forming, but whatever she was sensing was flitting in-and-out of her perception. *It's Emma screwing around again,* she told herself. Still, this felt too advanced.

"Mom?" Henry asked with growing concern. He called out to her again when her eyes flashed a bright purple. "Are you okay?" he prompted, after a nervous swallow when she still didn't look away from the wall. Hesitantly, he moved towards his mother. "Mom?" he repeated uncertainly as her blank gaze turned towards him.

With a quick blink, Regina reached for her son and ushered him into her en suite. "Quickly," she simply instructed, gesturing towards the porcelain, claw-foot tub. Leaving Henry here wasn't ideal but clearly necessary. Briskly, she moved towards the exit, but before closing the small double doors behind her, she firmly stated, "Stay in the tub until someone collects you."

Before he could protest, the boy heard the soft click of the doors and watched as a weird shimmer covered them. He quickly climbed out of the bathtub and cautiously reached out to examine the doors. Before his fingers made contact with the wood, he saw the flicker and felt the odd rippling effect react to his touch. He tried the doorknobs out of curiosity with no luck. Looking around the spacious bathroom, he hopped over to the windows only to realize he couldn't open them either.

"Dang it," he muttered, glancing around the room.

~SQ~

Stripping out of her grass stained clothes, Ruby stormed into her bedroom in the basement of her grandmother's bed-and-breakfast. She abruptly stopped, catching her tousled reflection in the small mirror on top of her battered dresser. Grass was in her hair and dirt streaked across her face. She growled as she spotted a large tear in her shirt along her torso. Pulling the ruined garment over her head, she flung it across the room and winced at the action. She glanced down at her left biceps to see an angry contusion. That's when she noticed another on her left forearm, right biceps and right forearm. Quickly, she checked herself, removing the rest of her soiled clothes. She stood before the cheap, full-length mirror hanging on the outside of her bathroom door in only her underwear and released a shuddering, silent sob.

At first, it had felt awkward, looking like Regina. The dwarves' obnoxious running commentary didn't make her feel any better about donning the visage of someone who was, quite frankly, becoming a tentative friend. Then Cora appeared, almost instantly realizing it was a trap. However, the waitress had been caught off guard by that split second of unexplainable hope that desperate people sometimes feel—that split second where a mother was still needed by her child. Ruby had seen that look before from her own mother.

A growl rumbled low in her throat as the waitress caught the unmistakable flash of gold in her eyes as she ground her teeth. Then with widening eyes as a sudden realization dawned on her, she scrambled for her cellphone. Her hands shook as she found Emma's number and hit dial. When there was no answer, she called Regina. Still no answer. She bit her lip, trying desperately to remember the house number. She even tried to remember the Storybrooke Department of Transportation number.

"Damn it," she whispered, snatching her dirty clothes off the floor and hastily putting them back
It had been a bad plan from the start, and she knew it. She had told them. And now, Emma and Regina were going to pay the price for their screwed-up plan to capture Cora.

~SQ~

Emma looked at the folded laundry in her arms and pursed her lips. Typically in the past, she'd just drop it in the cardboard box on the floor of her closet, but now, she used the tall-boy dresser across from her bed. As the song changed, she bopped her head along to the new tune and casually stowed her folded underwear in the drawer.

As she pushed the now full drawer closed, she felt an odd and confusing sensation. She pulled her iPod out of her pocket and stopped the music. Slowly, she set the device and the earbuds on the dresser. Her brows furrowed at her thoughts. For the first time, she didn't have to hide her stuff. She didn't have to hide herself. And the notion of a forever home was nice.

"So, you can be trained," mocked Cora. She picked up a small horse bauble from the console table beside her and idly examined it.

Startled, Emma whipped around to find the sorceress sitting in the winged-back chair across the room. She swallowed and quickly glanced at the closed bedroom door. She didn't know what she hoped for more, for Henry not to walk in or Regina to know she needed help.

"Please, have a seat," Cora instructed. With a subtle roll of her wrist, she forced the sheriff to sit on the end of the queen-sized bed. She stared at the blonde for a long, silent moment before saying, "It astounds me how one family can be so problematic." Frowning, she put the trinket back down.

"Yeah, well, that's our motto: if you can't beat 'em, annoy 'em," Emma retorted, irritated as much as she was worried. Her eyes darted around the room, assessing.

The smell of fear was truly intoxicating. "Aren't you spirited? I think I'm going to enjoy this," Cora cooed with a dark, mischievous glint in her eyes. She linked her hands on her lap.

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff tried to sound disinterested in the crazy sorceress who probably wanted to filet her alive. "How about you just tell me why you're here?" There had to be a reason, right? She needed to stall for more time.

Annoyed by the pointless display of bravado and stalling tactic, Cora scowled and narrowed her eyes at the captive blonde. "Oh, you don't know?" she prompted. Her face brightened. At the slight hint of Emma's confusion, she offered a dark smile. "How utterly delicious," she said in a soft purr, mostly to herself. "Division amongst the ranks makes this so much easier—if a tad disappointing." She sighed.

The casual, one-sided conversation was starting to freak the sheriff out. With a hard look, she snapped, "Lady, just spit it out. What is it with you fairytale types and the grandiose posturing anyway?" Seriously, it had to be a thing. Good or bad, it didn't seem to matter.

"Manners, Dear," Cora retorted sharply, catching the blonde's subtle flinch, a weakness she would fully utilize. In a hard yet even tone, she continued, "It never hurts to be cordial. You obviously didn't receive a proper education."

"Yeah, well," Emma sighed. She totally had this whack job's number. Laying her most defiant glare on the sorceress, she cocked a half grin and taunted, "What I do have is a GED and a give 'em hell attitude. That's more than enough to take down bitches like you." Usually, it was.

Sheer maniacal joy graced Cora's stern features. "Let's test that theory, shall we?" she asked with a
smirk. With an elegant roll of her wrist, she magically flung the sheriff face first into the ceiling. She let the blonde fall onto the bed on her back.

Instinctually, Emma quickly rolled off the left side of the queen-sized bed, using the momentum from her bounce—not that it did her any good because the next thing she knew, the bed was flung against the windows, blocking one of only two possible exits. Of course, she didn't have time to really consider her options as she continued her erratic flying around the room like a ping pong ball. The word tilt came briefly to her mind as her gut slammed into the front of the tall boy dresser. Her grip was the only thing holding her upright as she struggled to draw in some air. Damn, she hurt and couldn't focus on anything but the pain.

"Disappointing," scoffed the sorceress, losing interest in her prey. "I, at the very least, expected something." She casually observed her opponent's defeated posture. It was difficult to believe this inferior caster magically entrapped her daughter. The so-called savior couldn't even manage a simple deflection spell.

The sheriff was too busy trying to catch her breath for a pithy comeback. Hell, she was too busy trying to stay conscious, but mistakenly, she hastily rasped, "Whatever, lady." Stupid brain, she thought as she squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for the next rollercoaster ride through Hell. It didn't come. Instead, she heard a loud, crackling bang followed by a deep thud. She glanced to her right and saw an extremely pissed Cora pushing away from the now dented bedroom wall.

"Stop this, Mother!" Regina sharply commanded from the broken doorframe, the bedroom door hanging on by only one twisted hinge. It had taken her longer than she expected to dismantle the magical barrier encircling Emma's room. "You should leave." Her hands fisted tightly at her sides. She didn't have a plan.

"You were raised better than to interrupt, Darling," the sorceress sneered, unconcerned by her daughter's untimely interruption. She made to flick her wrist but was promptly flung back into the wall.

"Emma, move!" the former mayor snapped in a strained snarl, her hands held straight out in front of her. When the blonde failed to move, her gaze drifted off of her mother, proving to be a costly mistake.

Stunned and surprised, the blonde tried to push away from the dresser, but she was flung off her feet and across the room, yet again. She landed with a heavy thump on the floor, just shy of landing on the broken pieces of the armoire. Wincing, she struggled to stand up. That was when she realized her left ankle and right wrist were sprained. She also realized her rescuer was wrapped in belts and suspended in midair.

"Tsk, tsk, Regina," Cora admonished with bored disdain. After all these years, her daughter had learned absolutely nothing. "Perhaps," she said, taking a position between the two women, "you're the one in need of a lesson." Twisting her hand slowly, she tightened the belts, but she scowled at the elicited gasp. Maybe the years of pain and misery had finally managed to toughen her daughter. That was something she could mold, if only Regina would understand.

"Get away from her, you bitch!" Emma roared. Having finally got on her feet while mommy-dearest was distracted, she grabbed a table leg from the busted bedside stand. She rushed the older woman, swinging her make-shift club with all her might to land a blow right in the middle of the sorceress's back.

Cora cried out in pain and surprise as she stumbled forward. Instinctively, her unfocused magical hold on her daughter tightened the belts again, this time forcing a loud, aggrieved cry from Regina.
Angry at being caught unawares by the mongrel savior, Cora arched her arms in a wide-sweeping gesturing which pushed the sheriff back across the room and sent the former mayor tumbling out the bedroom door.

"Regina!" the blonde cried, scrambling onto her feet. Her heartbeat thrummed loudly in her ears as she moved to find the brunette. She panicked at the deafening clatter of breaking wood and glass.

"You hurt my daughter!" the enraged sorceress bellowed. Her face contorted into a livid snarl as she stomped towards her wounded prey. She was many things, but she also knew the limits of effective conditioning.

"No," the sheriff countered low and even. Without even thinking, she balled her right hand into a fist and sharply punched it out in front of her. It didn't even register that she had somehow landed a magical, concussive blast on the crazy woman. However, she didn't stop to think, either. She kept fighting as tears pricked the corners of her eyes.

Surprised by the blonde's raw ferocity, Cora staggered backwards. The only thing she could do was deflect the onslaught of blow after furious blow. She could feel her magic waning as the encounter in the graveyard and Regina's snaring had severely strained her reserves. Finally, she saw a gap and took advantage of it. She returned her own volley, landing the savior flat on her back.

Emma didn't stay down. She threw both hands out in front of her, shoving the sorceress out of the bedroom, down the short hall, and past the broken banister rail. Propelled by adrenaline, she hobbled out to the staircase where she witnessed the last lingering traces of purple smoke. She swallowed and glanced around her. That was when she saw Regina.

~SQ~

With a plume of swirling smoke, Cora appeared on the front walkway of her daughter's house. Taking a deep breath, she glared at the savior through the circular window over the main door but quickly lost sight of the blonde. Her contemplation, however, was cut short by the rumble of approaching iron horses. Unimpressed, she cocked an eyebrow as members of the Crows Guard surrounded her.

"Hello, Captain," she greeted rather cordially as she assessed the situation. Magically exhausted, something she hadn't felt in a long time, she needed to stall her escape. "It's been a long time."

"Not long enough," Monty countered, putting the kickstand down on his bike. He knew this woman and exactly what she was capable of. And he also knew that she was stalling and why, so he took his time dismounting his motorcycle and removing his riding helmet. "I don't believe Her Majesty is receiving visitors at the moment."

"No," the sorceress countered flatly, "I imagine not." She watched the other four riders follow the captain's lead.

Slowly pulling off his riding goggles, Elmwood casually flipped open a saddle bag. Anger bubbled under his cold exterior. "I implore your ladyship to accompany us to the sheriff's station so that we may clarify a few misunderstandings," he said with as much diplomacy as he could muster. Carefully, he stowed his gear in the bag.

Haughtily raising her chin, Cora returned her focus back to the captain of the guard, seeming to once again ignore the others. "No," she replied confidently. She wasn't stupid. These fools had a plan. But these men were beneath her and wouldn't be the ones to apprehend her.
"I thought you might say that." Monty smirked as he pulled his hands from the saddle bag, donning a pair of black, leather gauntlets. "But I'm not giving you a choice," he added darkly with a tone of finality.

Chuffing with mock amusement, the sorceress smirked, eyeing the stout gloves. "Quaint." She did pause, however, when the other Crows Guard pulled on their own pairs. Catching the faint hint of magic emanating from the leather armor, she focused on the strange embroidered adornments and frowned. "But those won't help you," she derided. She must be tired if she missed these mundane enchantments.

The Crows Guard moved in unison. Slowly, they encircled the witch, knowing they would only get one shot—an extremely risky maneuver with no means of containing the sorceress.

Pinning the captain of the guard with an annoyed, hateful glare, Cora scoffed, "You think you can capture me?" She laughed haughtily, almost manically. Her magic reserves had restored themselves. "You don't have the will." And with that last threat, she thrust out her arms, releasing an omnidirectional blast.

However, the guards were left unaffected as the concussive wave passed around them, stripping the leaves from the shrubs on the edges of the manicured property and shattering the ground floor windows of the house. They continued their steady encroachment, unfazed.

Trying again and failing, the sorceress fumed at the five men and their accursed charmed gauntlets. Her focus once again fixed on the embroidery. That's when she recognized the infuriating enchantment as old paladin magic from Britannia. How? she pondered briefly before her anger flared. The men were a mere fifteen feet away from her, their caution making them slow. But she wasn't finished, yet.

If she had been in a praising mood, she would have commended them for their resolve. And if there were another few Crows Guard present with some sort of suitable containment method, they might have very well succeeded in capturing her. She flashed a dark grin at Elmwood and said, "Not this time, Captain." With a sharp stomp of her foot, the ground undulated beneath them. She cackled as everyone dropped onto their hands and knees. A wicked gleam graced her features as she fixated on Elmwood. But before she could taunt or unleash her fury, a large wolf leapt through the bare shrubs and sank its teeth into her right arm.

Cora's cry of pain quickly morphed into a scream of rage. Adrenaline fueled her magical surge as she bashed the beast upside the head with her magically enhanced fist.

With a high pitched yelp, the reddish brown wolf released its damning hold on the sorceress. It vigorously shook its head while stepping backwards.

"Foul beast," Cora snarled, flicking her wrist in the general direction of the creature. As the wolf went tumbling into the Captain of the Crows Guard, she cradled her wounded limb. She didn't have long to reverse the effects of a werewolf bite. Without delay, she disappeared in a cloud of purple.

~SQ~

Emma had made it to the top of the stairs when she noticed Sidney Glass running up the staircase towards Regina. "Stay away from her," she ordered, hastily accelerating her decent. It hurt like hell, but she reached the wounded brunette just as the reporter was trying to unfasten the belts.

"Do something," he hissed at the sheriff with pleading eyes. His hands shook as he fumbled with the buckles, wincing and hesitating every time the former mayor grunted.
The rumble of motorcycles caught the blonde's attention. She craned her neck to peer out the circular window to see Cora, Monty, and several other Crows Guard having a standoff in the front yard. "Shit," she whispered. Looking down at Regina, she spotted the growing pool of blood staining her blouse. "Shit," she repeated. Firmly tapping the brunette's cheek with her fingers, she wasn't encouraged by the sluggish response. "Regina, you have to stay awake." Awake meant alive, right?

That's when the sheriff and reporter looked directly at each other and in unison said, "You have magic. Do something!" And both went slack jawed.

"You don't have magic?" Emma asked in slight shock. "You're a freaking genie!" Really, how could the genie from the bottle not have magical powers? She ran a hand down her face.

Getting a second belt unfastened and freeing Regina's legs, Sidney simply explained, "I lost the ability to perform magic when I was freed from the lamp." He frowned when the sheriff cursed again as he fought with another buckle. "But you have magic," he said, feeling like he was stating the obvious.

"I—I can't help with this!" the blonde said in a panic, gesturing wildly and ignoring the burn of injuries. She worried her bottom lip as she looked at the brunette's unfocused eyes. "A papercut, maybe a scrapped knee, but . . . I don't know how to handle this." Her throat felt impossibly tight. Regina was going to die. They were going to die.

Regina's focus was waning and her strength failing. It was getting harder to breathe, and the room seemed to be getting darker. She struggled to speak. "Try," she rasped—after all, if she died, Emma died, and who else could protect Henry?

"Focus, Emma," Sidney gently instructed, still trying to unfasten the same belt. He may no longer have magic but he did remember how to use it. "Draw the magic into yourself and concentrate on what you want it to do." He released a heavy sigh after finally removing another strap, but he hesitated before working on another. The next one was around the brunette's upper body and may have actually been slowing the bleeding. Then again, a fast, painful death was better than a slow one, right?

"Wait, she'll bleed out," the sheriff said, grabbing the reporter's hand as it gripped the buckle. "She needs a doctor." That's when the house violently shuddered. Hearing the shattering of glass from downstairs and seeing the large window beside them crack, she instantly shielded the former mayor with her body.

"She won't make it if you don't do something," Sidney hissed, glancing at the destruction around them. He'd heard tales of children of True Love. They were supposed to be capable of astounding magical feats—if they lived long enough.

Large tears threatened to roll down Emma's cheeks as she shook her head. She took Regina's right hand into hers and squeezed her eyes shut. She willed herself to concentrate. She willed herself to heal, but nothing happened. Twice, she went through the basic process of prepping and collecting her magic, just like she was taught and just like she practiced. Each time, nothing happened but she kept pushing. "Help," she whispered, staring hard at the dying woman before her.

That's when the magical surge hit and suddenly, everything was clear. The former mayor was aware of her concussion, cracked left humerus, punctured lung with broken ribs, and split right femur. One broken rib was resulting in an open fracture which slowly stained her blouse with blood. She wasn't going to make it without immediate assistance, but the savior simply didn't have the depth of knowledge to restore her. Nonetheless, she felt an undeniable pull to live, and although
the sheriff couldn't heal her, she was sustaining her with raw magic. And that made all the
difference between life and death.

As the magic continued to flood her senses, the brunette became aware of the blonde's injuries: the
cracked clavicle, the sprained wrist and ankle, the torn ligaments, the multitude of abrasions, the
bruised ribs, and a mild concussion. Clearly, Cora hadn't wanted to kill. After all, her mother
couldn't control her own daughter if she was dead.

Just as the reporter released the last belt buckle, Emma's brows furrowed when Regina's hand
squeezed hers. She opened her eyes to see the brunette take a deep, ragged breath through her
mouth. Oh god, she thought. Then the dying woman released a shuddering exhale and everything
was enveloped in purple.

~SQ~

Emma softly shut Regina's bedroom door. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead on the cool
wood of the white door. "We need a break," she whispered, enjoying the brief moment of peace.
Hearing several voices downstairs, she sighed. Taking a careful step back, she was surprised the
hall and stairs were already cleared of debris. Well okay, she wasn't that amazed because there had
to be nearly 20 Crows Guards quietly buzzing around the property by then—almost half of them
women. That certainly hadn't been an expected development.

Making her way down the stairs, the blonde listened to the people talking in the dining room.
There was Monty, Sidney, Alexander, Ruby, and one of the female members of the Crows Guard.
She pursed her lips as she heard them plan new watch rotations and mention permanently pulling
other guards from their jobs. Walking across the foyer, she stopped in the threshold of the dining
room and crossed her arms as she said, "Regina's not going to like it."

"Her Majesty doesn't like a great many things," replied the female Crows Guard, looking up at the
sheriff with a level gaze. She was diminutive with a gravelly voice, short, auburn hair and steely
grey eyes. A large, jagged scar slashed across the woman's face, starting over the left eye, crossing
the bridge of her nose and ending at the curve of a square-ish jaw. "However, current
circumstances being what they are....," she trailed off, cutting a glance at her queen's son sitting
quietly in the corner. She couldn't bring herself to refer to him as prince, yet.

Monty scoffed with a hint of irritation. He pointed at the map of Storybrooke spread out on the
table. "We're too vulnerable here."

Breathing heavily through her nose, the female guard gruffly said, "We have our orders." Then
without another word, she turned on her heel, nodded at Emma as she passed, and left the house.

"Who was she?" the blonde asked, walking up to the table to stand beside Ruby. She wasn't tired
enough to sleep yet, despite everything, and she wanted to feel useful. She looked down at the
map, shoving her hands in her pockets.

"She gives me the creeps," Alexander mumbled, shuddering as he watched the front door.

"As well she should," grumbled Monty, still glaring at the map. He didn't particularly care for
pulling the unpredictable woman out of reserves, either. Looking at sheriff, he supplied, "That was
Thane Anne McCormac, our Scout Grandmaster."

"She's an assassin," whispered the drummer. With wide eyes, he looked over his shoulder at the
kitchen door. "Diego and Jason call her the Calvary." He just expected her to pop out at any
moment.
"She's not an assassin," corrected Elmwood with clear frustration. He frowned at Henry's shocked expression. "Great," he muttered. Clearing his throat, he took a deep breath and focused on the blonde. "Given events, I've activated the remaining Crows Guard in Storybrooke."

"Activated?" Emma prompted. She quickly glanced at Ruby. This was all starting to sound a tad too military for her tastes.

"Yeah," the waitress supplied with a rueful smile. "Apparently, there's a whole platoon of them." Things could've gone a lot better with Cora's capture with that many trained people in the graveyard.

"Wait," the sheriff said, looking between the captain and the deputy. "Do all of the Crows Guard have those anti-magic gauntlets?" If they did, that would be huge! They would finally have a fighting chance.

"More or less," Monty answered with a frown. He didn't like sharing tactical information in front of the werewolf. It was bad enough with the daughter of Snow White in the mix. "And before you jump all over my ass, I told your deputy that unless Cora could be contained, there was no point in going after her." Crossing his arms, he added, "Now, everything's gone to Hell." He dragged his hand down his face before turning to Alexander. "Take the boy to his room and make sure he stays put," he ordered.

"Hey!" Henry protested, popping onto his feet. He wanted to be a part of the planning. "I can help."

Sighing, the captain scowled at the blonde. "He's a target," he simply stated. He kept his opinion over the child's usefulness to himself. "He should be secured, and the less he knows, the better."

"Come on, Henry," the drummer gently instructed. "Let's go finish our homework." He scooped up his discarded backpack as he guided the boy towards the stairs. "Watch your step," he said as they started up the staircase.

Emma silently watched as the two boys headed upstairs. She didn't necessarily feel comfortable letting the kids out of her sight, but Monty had a point—especially about Henry. At least Alexander understood the truth and consequences of the situation.

After a moment, Sidney spoke, "The werewolf bite should keep Cora busy for a while." He looked around at the others with a nervous expression, careful not to look at the captain for too long. "It'll take some time for her powers to return."

"Here's to small favors," Elmwood grumbled, glaring back down at the map. Even if he could eventually convince his queen to relocate, he had to find a strategically defensible location.

"So, what's the plan?" the sheriff asked, sharing another look with Ruby. "I mean, this isn't just about a mom building bridges with a daughter—not with that last visit." She sighed, looking between Monty and Sidney. "Regina thinks Cora's here for power." That late night conversation had cut deep, hearing the unyielding belief that a mother cared nothing for a child.

"We need to keep Regina away from that psycho," growled the waitress as she pulled out a chair and sat down at the table. Biting Cora had been rather satisfying. She absently rubbed her hands over her biceps as she scowled at the map of Storybrooke.

"Agreed," Monty quickly replied, liking the werewolf a little bit more.

"No, Cora isn't here to reconcile," the reporter quietly confirmed. He rubbed the back of his neck. "I think," he started but paused for a long second. "I think she's gunning for the Dark One." His
eyes locked with the captain's. "I haven't had much luck tracking her, but I've been watching Mr. Gold." He smiled and pulled a USB drive from his tattered blazer's interior pocket. "I have pictures," he added, offering the device to Elmwood.

"Maybe we should let them have at it," Emma huffed, slouching. She was tired of this entire situation, all the push and pull of this and that. Frankly, it was exhausting. She wanted a normal life. Frowning, she realized normal now meant folding laundry, having a constant companion, and practicing magic.

"And have another Town Hall incident?" countered Elmwood with disdain. "Whether or not that woman's after the Dark One's powers doesn't change the fact that she also wants her daughter." He pinned the savior with a hard, determined expression. "That isn't going to happen." Never again, and definitely not on his watch.

"You're right. You're right," the blonde quickly backpedaled, raising her hands. "I'm just too tired to focus, I guess," she admitted, rubbing her hands over her face.

"I guess so," Ruby agreed, smiling weakly at her friend. "Especially after that massive healing spell." It had been amazing feeling that rush of relief wash over her battered and bruised body. When the purple cloud faded, she was as good as new.

"Yeah." The sheriff pursed her lips and looked down at the carpet. Biting her lower lip, she stuffed her hands back in her jean pockets. "I kinda didn't do it."

Before anyone could ask, Sidney said, "No, she didn't." His eyes searched the blonde. There was no possible way this inept neophyte could've possibly channeled her magic into such an advanced spell. Shaking his head, he immediately explained, "You bridged your magic, circumventing the complications of painful injury and lack of know-how. That's how the Queen cast the healing spell."

"So, that's a good thing, right?" the waitress wondered out loud. This magic stuff was always confusing and convoluted with too many rules.

"Well," the reporter replied as he took on a grim expression, "it really depends." Shrugging, he added, "Covens spend years, decades even, training themselves to open their magic to one another. But you," he pointed at the blonde, "did it without training or thought."

"Get to the point, Mirror," Monty snapped. He had enough work to do without listening to the prattling of a mad man—a mad man for whom he was now ultimately responsible.

"Yes, well…," Sidney stuttered, holding his fisted left hand to his lips while his right cupped his left elbow. His eyes darted between the three around the table. "This new ability isn't something that should be shared with others—ever," he finally said, opening his left hand. "Whether or not this is a side effect of Rumpelstiltskin's binding spell remains unclear; however, the Blue Fairy won't like you sharing your magical powers."

"With the Evil Queen," Emma huffed, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms. Couldn't anyone move past this, already? Didn't they have better things to worry about?

"No, with anyone," the reporter quickly clarified.

"Let's keep this information in house," Elmwood ordered, folding up the map. He tapped the folded paper on the tabletop. Looking at the werewolf, he asked, "Can I trust you?"

Raising an eyebrow, Ruby shrugged and easily countered, "Yeah." After all, the sheriff was her
friend and the former mayor, well, she was one, too. "Regina's my friend." She ignored the looks of surprise. "If a witch and a werewolf can't have each other's back, who will?" she asked offhandedly, not wanting to make a big deal out of the fact that Snow White's best friend was turning into a double agent.

"The queen isn't a mere witch," Sidney quickly corrected with a soft chuckle. "Everyone uses the nomenclature of magic practitioners as synonyms, but in fact, each term is actually attributed to a specific region or realm." Back in Agrabah, he had been a scholar of magic long before a jealous colleague imprisoned him in the cursed oil lamp of a deceased jinn. "And each has its own hierarchy."

Releasing a long-suffering sigh, Monty turned to the waitress and nodded his head towards the reporter. "Would you be kind enough to escort Sidney to the house? Bobby and the others can keep an eye on him for the time being." He didn't want to entrust the werewolf this soon, but his options were limited for the time being. Even with the additional Crows Guards, resources were stretched thin.

Glancing at the sheriff, Ruby got up and pushed her chair under the table. "Sure," she drawled, heading towards the front door. Pausing in the foyer with the reporter in tow, she called out to the blonde, "I'll text you later."

Once they were gone, Emma pursed her lips and shot the captain a pointed stare. "So," she started, shifting her weight to her left foot, "when were you going to mention that my genius parents had a plan to capture Cora?"

Sighing, Elmwood tossed the map on the table and put his hands on his hips. "About a week ago, the deputy approached me with his plan," he supplied, meeting the sheriff's hard gaze. "I didn't think they'd actually do it."

"Where were they going to put her?" the blonde prompted, noting the captain's tired expression.

"The mines, I guess," he said, scratching his hairline. "Besides excavating fairy dust, the dwarfs have been building a set of cells." Searching her face, he asked, "You didn't know about any of this?" He found it a little hard to believe.

"No," she quietly admitted, looking down. "This is so stupid." Running her right hand through her hair, she shifted her weight onto her other foot. Not only did her parents provoke a magical badass, but according to Puma, Albert Spencer attempted to rig the election. Tossing her hands up in the air, she asked in exasperation, "Why'd they go after Cora, anyway?"

Tilting his head, Monty considered his response but quickly spoke the truth. "It would sway the public in their favor." He could see she was instantly about to reject that notion but stopped. His brows furrowed in contemplation.

"Yeah, sounds about right," Emma grumbled. Her gaze cut off to the side for a long second before resting back on the captain. "If I ask you something, will you give me a straight answer?"

Narrowing his eyes, Elmwood frowned slightly but easily replied, "If I give you an answer."

"Fair enough," the sheriff said, lifting her chin and tilting her head. There were so many things she wanted to know, but one thing weighed more heavily on her mind than most. "Tell me about Graham."

"The huntsman?" the captain clarified in a low voice as his eyes hardened. "What about him?"
Even in death, the fool further served to chafe him.

Taking in the rigid posture, she decided to be quick with her question and not spare any feelings. "Were Graham and Regina . . . lovers?" Roaring laughter was not what she expected. Her face scrunchin in confusion, but then the laughter stopped.

"No," Monty supplied in a flat even tone. His expression was dark. "That didn't start until after we arrived here—until well after Henry was adopted." He took a step towards the sheriff and was pleased when she took a step back, although he didn't show it. In a clipped tone, he questioned, "You believe the huntsman could've loved you?" He searched her face and watched her body.

Adamantly shaking her head, Emma hissed, "No!" She swallowed as her mouth went dry. "I was just wondering if anyone sane loved her," she supplied. This wasn't going very well. The last thing she wanted was to get on this guy's bad side. "Because Sidney's a few enchiladas short of a full Mexican platter."

Turning his back to the sheriff, Elmwood remembered the turmoil-riddled day the huntsman came into their lives. The king had died only a few days prior, and the nobles hadn't wasted any time clamoring for power. All were ready to seize the throne from the weak widow or naïve daughter.

Montague Elmwood, senior officer of the Queen's Guard, stood steadfast and proud in Her Majesty's antechamber before the door of the queen's mother's vault. He understood the place to be an inherited burden of magic, and he didn't envy that encumbrance. If certain parties were to learn of its existence or of Her Majesty's magical abilities, there would be a different battle on the horizon than the one presently raging.

Neither he nor the two trustworthy guards stationed on either side of the doors flinched when the shouting started. His queen was quick to anger since the passing of the king. When she called for them, the two guards quickly entered and carried out her command, dragging the utterly stunned huntsman to her bedchamber. However, Elmwood remained and waited for her to exit. He caught the flash of surprise at his presence, but he made no move or mention of it. Quietly, he watched her busy herself and fiddle with inconsequential things. Her hesitancy gave him hope.

In a bored tone, the queen coolly critiqued, "Don't you have better things to do?" She moved to walk past her most favored knight, not really wanting to hear what he had to say because she already knew it.

With a surprising mix of gentleness and vast determination, the captain partially blocked her path but did not move to touch her. "Your welfare and wellbeing will always take precedence, Your Majesty," he said with all the affection he felt for this woman. He frowned when she looked away. But he pushed onward, knowing he needed to quickly make his point. "Don't become what we loathe—"

The slap was sharp and undeserved. But he would take a thousand more if it meant diverting her from this particular darkness. Keeping his head bowed and turned away, he waited for her next move, her next outburst, but when he heard the strangled breathing of restrained tears—a sound he'd become all too familiar with since her arrival at the castle—he knelt before the queen, knowing she hated seeing him subjugated. "I will not abandon my post, Your Majesty," he reminded her. And he would do so again and again. "I am here to protect and serve at your pleasure."

"I'm sorry," she hoarsely whispered as she knelt before him. Hesitantly, she tenderly stroked his wounded cheek as tears fell. "I don't know if I can do this," she rasped.
Closing his eyes in that moment, the captain knew his queen could one day be healed if he remained diligent. After all, this woman only wanted to be free. He knew she cared nothing for power, politics, or prestige. But the plot to attain her freedom had been hijacked. The king's death was the means to a far greater end than a mere woman's release from a loveless and lonely marriage filled with despair and torment. And the guilt of his involvement in convincing her to remain as queen and to help only grew.

How could she leave others to suffer fates far worse? But the road would be long and difficult. "Your loyal forces move to establish your reign, Your Majesty." He opened his eyes and looked into her watery ones. "Under your banner, this kingdom will be made clean again." Pausing, he carefully continued, "We must be cautious and not repeat dark travesties." That was the last time Regina cried in his arms.

Taking a deep breath through his nose, Monty once again faced the questioning blonde. "There are many kinds of love, Emma," he said softly. His eyes scanned the woman before him. "Her Majesty was adored but not in the way she needed most." Knowing the question before she asked it, he continued, "The huntsman had grown to honestly care for her, but it wouldn't have been enough—then or now."

"And you?" the sheriff tentatively asked with a weak smile.

Elmwood blinked as confusion, surprise and then, laughter crossed his face. "No," he answered with a soft chuckle. He saw where this was coming from, even if the woman didn't. Sobering, he softly explained, "My love for Regina is that of a brother."

"If you and Graham and Sidney and all the Crows Guard cared for her so much, why'd you let her become that Evil Queen everyone goes on about?" Emma spat, staring the captain down. Seriously, what the hell? "She's miserable all the time, and I don't know how to fix it." Her anger faltered and left her drained. Suddenly frustrated, she groaned and ran her hands through her hair. "I see glimpses of this amazing person, and it's so frustrating."

With a sad look, Monty nodded, "She's had a hard life." He took a slow breath as he glanced away. One of the delicate, detailed illustrations of a flower adorning the walls caught his attention. "She drew these," he said as he remembered.

"Really?" The sheriff cocked an eyebrow, twisting to look around at the boring artwork of flowers and animals. It was literally all over the house. "I thought it was just some high-class, home décor crap," she muttered, taking a step closer to the pencil drawing of flowers in the corner. "You're not pulling my leg, are you?" she asked with suspicion, casting a quick glance over her shoulder.

"No," Elmwood weakly countered. He frowned when he couldn't quite remember when she had stopped her illustrations. Hearing the soft chimes of the grandfather clock, he sighed. "Excuse me, Sheriff. It's late, and I still have much to do." Then, without another word or glance, he left the house.

Emma exhaled heavily as she cursed herself for letting the opportunity slip. When would she get the chance to grill Monty again? But the events of the day had finally caught up with her. So, she slowly made her way back upstairs. A gust of wind violently rattled the tarps covering the downstairs windows and she sighed. Tomorrow was going to be a long day.

~SQ~

Emma Swan did not want to go into work today. That much was evident as she fuming stomped all the way down the hall towards the jail cells. When she had gotten off the seven-o'clock-in-the-
freaking-morning call with Puma, she cursed rather aggressively in semi-hushed exuberance. The events from the previous night flashed back in Technicolor splendor, and it had her seeing red all over again. Her eyes cut over her left shoulder, making sure the exhausted brunette was keeping up. They desperately needed a break. Scowling as she neared the interview room door, she said with surprising gentleness, "I'll be right back."

Regina said nothing as the blonde aggressively yanked the door open and forcibly closed it, causing the door's window to shake. Normally, she'd delight in the pending conflict amongst the Charmings, but there were more pressing matters with which to contend. Slowly, she walked past the observation and interview rooms and stopped when she saw Jefferson sitting on a cot in one of the jail cells. The rakish world jumper had certainly seen better days. Leisurably, she approached the cell. Her heels clicked softly on the tile. But she stopped just out of reach of the bars. "It's not too late," she whispered, knowing what tortured him. She'd already pieced together what had happened from Emma's seething. She was unsurprised; this was all going to happen sooner or later.

The Mad Hatter glared sharply at his . . . his mind waivered as he didn't quite know what or who this woman was to him anymore. Frantic, he looked away, fisting handfuls of his black hair. "She doesn't want me," he whispered in a sad whine. "She tried to push me over the line," he whimpered, repeating 'over the line' several times as he rocked back and forth.

The former mayor scowled. She didn't have the patience or fortitude to deal with his foolishness today. "Why she loved you is beyond me," she snipped, glancing over her shoulder at hearing the interview room door being yanked open. Of course, her comment had the desired effect.

"Don't talk about her!" Jefferson roared, jumping off the cot. His right arm snaked between the bars as he made an angry swipe at his visitor.

"Hey!" Emma's voiced boomed, echoing across the small office area of the station. "Settle down!" she ordered, trudging into her office with David on her heels.

Breathing heavily through his nose, the Mad Hatter gripped the bars. His lower lip trembled as he pleaded with this woman who had been his devil and his angel. "Fix this," he pleaded. "I can't lose her, too." Catching a glimpse of blonde hair, his gaze drifted past his tormentor. "Grace."

He smiled, his woes immediately forgotten.

Partially turning, Regina watched the teenager. She could see the girl was conflicted, but time was running out for any sort of hopeful resolution. "You had three decades to work this out, Jefferson," she stated flatly with great finality. Looking back at the distraught world jumper, she continued, "I can offer you no solution or solace, save one." She paused and waited for him focus on her. "Tell her."

"I can't," Jefferson sobbed, sagging onto the ground. The crushing weight of his guilt was too much. His failure had cost him too much.

"Regina," Emma softly called from her office door. Once the brunette glanced at her, she gestured for her to join them. After offering a weak smile, which was not returned, to the watchful teenage girl, she wondered what the book got wrong this time.

Just as the former mayor was about to enter the office, Paige timidly asked, "You knew my mother, Ms. Mills?" She took a tentative step forward, casting a speculative peek at the occupied cell. She'd never met someone who knew her mother, aside from her father. Of course, she'd been surprised to learn he'd been friends with the queen.
With a quick glimpse at the sheriff, Regina answered with a simple, "I did." And she swept into the tiny office and past the deputy, taking her usual seat in front of the desk—the perfect example of elegance and decorum. It was arduous.

With a long sigh, Emma pulled the door shut and flopped down in her office chair. She observed as Ruby gently coaxed the girl back into the interview room with her parents. Casually and, she suspected, needlessly, she outlined the situation. "So apparently, Jefferson has been harassing Paige and her family since the curse broke." Looking between the former mayor and her own father, she said, "And it got so bad that the girl thought her best option was to push her birth father over the town line."

"Maybe if we award custody to Jefferson, he'll calm down," David offered, sitting in the other chair. "He just seems to miss his daughter." How could any parent not get that? "They've been apart for a long time."

"That isn't under the Sheriff's Department's purview," Regina quickly corrected with a hard glare at the deputy. "It's for the courts to decide." The United States legal system wasn't perfect, by any means, but it had proven to be better than a biased decree based on a royal's whim.

Leaning across the chair arm towards the brunette, David scowled and, through gritted teeth, snarled, "The last time that girl saw her father was when he rode away with you." Really, how much more chaos was this woman going to cause?

Indifferent, the former mayor simply cocked an eyebrow in response.

"Okay, let's stay on topic here," the sheriff cut in, knowing there was a lot more to the story. She firmly tapped her fingers on her desktop. "It's obvious the girl doesn't want to go with him." Looking through the glass at the man in the cell, she pointedly asked, "How dangerous is he?" Her own experience with him notwithstanding, she wanted at least one second opinion.

"He hasn't caused any other trouble," the deputy answered with a shrug, relaxing his posture. He pursed his lips and, after a moment, added, "Though, he's not very popular."

"I imagine not, especially without the hat," Regina interjected. She ignored the shepherd's barely tolerant expression. "He'll merely exacerbate the situation with his daughter until someone does something." She looked down at her hands on her lap.

Rubbing the back of her neck, Emma huffed. "So, we have to deal with this now." She linked her hands and leaned her forearms on the desk. "What's his backstory?" she asked, glancing between her deputy and consultant. Even the Disney version of the Mad Hatter didn't paint a happy picture.

"We spoke briefly while you were in the Enchanted Forest. He just wanted to reconnect with his daughter," David easily supplied with a shrug. The mad man was less than helpful, but that was beside the point. "Apparently, he's a world jumper that got caught in the curse."

"Is that what he told you?" the former mayor scoffed with a hard look at the shepherd. "And you believed him?" She rolled her eyes. Reluctantly, she spoke, "We were acquaintances." Taking a deep, silent breath, she returned her focus to the sheriff. "Rumpelstiltskin introduced us shortly after I was married to the King."

"Okay," Emma drawled, dreading whatever messed up Enchanted Forest drama that was being dredged up. But the wording and timing wasn't lost on her, and she had to wonder if Jefferson was part of team Gold back in the day. "How do we fix this?" She needed to help one of these fairytale land kids because, with the reports of Nicholas piling up on her desk, she wasn't feeling very much
like a savior.

"We can't fix it," Regina quickly answered with a hint of impatience. "It's all in Jefferson's head." She scowled, focusing on random office supplies littering the desk. "He swore to tell Paige how her mother died." Pausing, her expression softened as she explained, "It was to be his way of honoring his wife's passing, but he hasn't been able to do it."

"So, what? We order him to get therapy?" the deputy weakly suggested, expectantly looking between the two women. They had to do something, but hearing the Evil Queen mention her marriage to Snow White's father distracted him and raised a lot of questions. His wife only made vague references to those six years before the king's death. However, the sound of raised voices in the hall caught his attention. When he spotted Mary Margaret leaving the interview room, he got up and exited the office.

"She isn't going to help the situation any," the former mayor hissed at Emma, glaring out the partially open office door. Like salt in a wound, her irritation rose further at the commotion. She could hear Mary Margaret's whiny voice now: How could you, Regina? Why, Regina? Frowning, she attributed her irrational flash of anger to fatigue.

"Damnit," the sheriff cursed under her breath. "I should've let Puma deal with this crap," she added in a huff. Standing, she pursed her lips and glanced over at Jefferson eagerly watching everything unfold. "So," she started, dropping her gaze to the seated brunette, "why's it such a big deal for him to tell Paige how her mom died?" Typically parents tried to spare the kids the gory details.

With sad eyes, Regina said with honest regret, "He failed to save her." She studied the teenager huddling beside her adoptive parents.

"Oh," the blonde mouthed as her gaze once again drifted between father and daughter. And it all started to make sense. "How'd she die?" she asked, absently.

"Horrifically," was all the brunette offered as she stood and smoothed out her clothes.

That was when the school teacher stomped towards the small office and yanked the door all the way open. Glaring daggers at the Evil Queen, she demanded, pointing back at the clustered family, "Care to explain why the last time Paige saw her father was when he left with you?"

Raising her chin, the former mayor met Mary Margaret's heated gleam head on and, with a slight smirk, easily replied, "Not to you."

"Regina," Emma sighed, tossing an irritated look at the contentious woman. She used her body to almost forcibly usher her mother out of the office and away from the door. As Regina slipped around her and away from the growing group, Emma's brows furrowed as she scrutinized Mary Margaret. "How'd you figure that out so fast?" she prompted.

"I was in the Observation room," the school teacher quietly admitted, all the while following the former mayor's movements.

"That is so not cool," the sheriff snapped in a low voice, glaring between her two deputies. Ruby appeared completely surprised, but David just met his daughter with a stern look. Seriously, what was the point of all the department training?

"She left me in Wonderland!" Jefferson shouted from his cell, pointing at Regina. He hoped to capitalize on the feud between Snow White and the Evil Queen. "The Queen of Hearts chopped off my head!" Quickly and less aggressively, he looked at his daughter and, in a more subdued tone,
added, "It took years to make a new hat."

"It obviously didn't take," the former mayor sneered with her arms crossed, glaring at the looming idiot in his cell. Deciding to circumvent the flurry of questions, she explained, "I was owed a favor, and I collected." Her tone lost its bite as her eyes drifted to the teenager's hopeful face. She looks so much like her mother, she thought with sadness.

Emma weaved her way to Paige. "You have questions." At the teenager's nod, she gestured to the lunatic in the cell and said, "Let's go get them." She flashed a hopeful smile and was relieved when the girl slowly moved forward. If Jefferson wasn't going to talk, she had a hunch Regina would.

Having closed the space between herself and the former mayor, Mary Margaret softly asked with great curiosity, "Why'd you go to Wonderland?" Her heart fluttered when brown eyes filled with honest concern met her own.

NO, no, no, no! "The Evil Queen killed her!" Jefferson shouted, jumping up and down with a white knuckled grip on the jail cell bars. He saw a way! Everyone always blamed the queen. His Gracie would be with him again. Snow White and her Prince Charming would see to it.

Suddenly, there was a loud, echoing crack as Regina took a foreboding step towards Jefferson's cell. Sparks rained from overhead as the fluorescent lights in the ceiling shattered. Tiny bits of glass and plastic sprinkled downward. Everyone startled. A few cried out in surprise as the bulbs in the desk lamps and computer monitors burst into flames.

"I know what carnage I wrought, and you will not lay Ida's death upon me!" Regina seethed, laying a fiery, hateful glare on the Mad Hatter. She took another menacing step towards the cell and took great satisfaction at occupant's reaction.

Jefferson immediately blanched and propelled himself up against the back wall.

But any further terror was waylaid by Emma's gentle touch. Carefully, she ghosted her fingertips over the back of the former mayor's fisted left hand. "Hey," she said softly. Her eyes searched the profile of the other woman's face, hoping she was reaching her, all the while wondering what memory had set this reaction off.

"Ida?" the school teacher whispered, knowing the name. Her gaze moved from the terrified Jefferson to the frightened Paige and back. Then, it clicked, and her face took on a pained expression, understanding Regina's rage.

The sheriff smiled as the former mayor looked at her, but she frowned at the seemingly infinite depth of sadness. As she watched, a large tear escaped the corner of Regina's left eye; she, without thought, gently swiped it away with a thumb. Her mouth opened to ask a question, but the brunette fainted. "Whoa!" she exclaimed, easily catching and cradling the woman. "Ruby," she ordered, nodding towards the other jail cell.

The waitress instantly hopped into action, unlocking and opening the cell door.

Watching her daughter settle her stepmother down on the cot, Mary Margaret took a deep breath and proclaimed, "Regina didn't kill Ida." She fixed the Mad Hatter with a strict expression. "Why would you lie about that?" she demanded incredulously. Shaking her head, she didn't wait for a response. She opened her mouth but paused when her husband laid a hand on her left shoulder.

David simply shook his head.

"Everyone blames the Queen," Jefferson whispered in his defense, studying the former mayor on
the other cell's cot. He drew his knees up against his chest as tears rolled down his cheeks. "I'm not strong like her." Chancing a gander at his daughter, he knew he'd lost her. Maybe Regina had been right all those years ago, after all.

"Will you stay with her and watch Fruit Loops over there?" Emma quietly asked Ruby. At the waitress's nod, she exited the cell and walked over to Paige. She held the teenager's attention for a long moment before saying, "I can't let what you tried to do slide." She paused and was impressed by the girl's quick nod. "But I can't let his harassment go, either," she explained, glancing at the girl's parents. "So, while I'm working on my report, I strongly suggest you sit down with the deputy and file a criminal trespass warning."

"Of course," said Elias Moser, the father, looking lovingly at his wife and daughter. "Paige is a good kid," he offered with a watery expression. Pressing his lips in a tight line, he laid his hands on the teenager's shoulders and gave an affectionate squeeze.

"What's going to happen, now?" the mother, Vera Moser, quickly asked in a hushed voice. She looked around the sheriff at the royal couple and then to the prone queen. Should she mention the queen had been the family's benefactor since Jefferson's disappearance? Would it really make a difference? With a pensive expression, she stroked her daughter's hair. "I want what's best for Paige," she quickly said.

"That depends on what the ADA has to say," Emma explained. Albert Spencer was another issue on her growing agenda today. Thankfully, during the far too-early phone call, Puma had agreed to track the man down and bring him in for questioning.

Flashing a bright smile, Mary Margaret easily supplied, "I'm sure everything will work out."

The sheriff was caught off guard by the hard look in Mrs. Moser's eyes as she cut her gaze in Snow's direction. Raising an eyebrow, Emma cleared her throat and said, "I'll contact you with any developments." It wasn't like she had to worry about them skipping town.

"Very well," Mr. Moser said with relief. "I'll be back this afternoon to file that criminal trespass warning." He gently ushered his family towards the exit.

However, Paige lingered for a second, curiously glancing around the room. She bit her lower lip as her gaze lingered on the queen before leaving with her parents.

Once the doors swung shut, Emma turned around, faced her parents, and crossed her arms. She opened her mouth, ready to lay into both of them, but stopped when she remembered Jefferson cowering in his cell. Instead, she said, "We need to talk." Then, she briskly moved into her office.

Sharing a quick look, David and Mary Margaret followed their daughter. Her father immediately launched into a dialogue once the three were inside the more private confines of the office, justifying why he allowed his wife to be in the observation room. Of course, the sheriff wasn't having any of it and told him he was going to be written up for it. He bristled at the reprimand but reluctantly agreed not to do it in the future. However, that didn't mean he was done discussing the larger issue.

"We need to be able to protect our people," the deputy explained. Making a wide gesture with his arms, he continued, "That's why I ran for mayor and your mother ran for city council."

"People are doing just fine on their own," Emma growled in frustration. "When are you going to get it—your lives are different here." She looked imploringly between her so-called parents. "You're a teacher," she said, pointing at Mary Margaret. At her father, she added, "You're a
sheriff's deputy." She put her hands on her hips. "If you don't like it, do what everyone else does, go to school or enroll in some sort of training program. Kathryn's studying law online." Dropping into her office chair with a huff, she added, "Not everyone wants to go back to the Enchanted Forest." She didn't.

"We understand that," Mary Margaret sharply clarified. After the election results, she didn't have a choice but to understand. Nonetheless, that didn't mean the other royals were going to accept the changes lying down. "We only want to help."

"Do you?" the sheriff asked abruptly, leaning forward. Her hands were curled into tight fists on top of her desk. "Because that stunt you pulled last night almost got us killed." She wildly gestured between herself and the still slumbering queen.

"We didn't think—" David started but was cut off.

"Exactly, you didn't think about the consequences of that woman's actions for a long time—." She pointed to the jail cell behind her.

"That isn't true," the school teacher snapped. Her posture instantly went rigid. "We've dealt with the consequences of that woman's actions for a long time—." She pointed to the jail cell behind her.

"Just stop," the sheriff moaned, unmoving. "Don't prove Jefferson right." But how, exactly, was Cora opening a can of whoop-ass Regina's fault?

Mary Margaret bristled at the dismissive insinuation. "You need to stop and listen," she demanded, jabbing her finger aggressively at the desktop between her and Emma, her patience finally hitting its limit. She frowned when her daughter glared at her with blatant defiance. "What Albert Spencer pulled at the election will happen again. Maybe not by him, maybe not at another election, but definitely by another royal scrambling for a foothold." Sighing, she closed her eyes, and when she reopened them, she gave her daughter a tender and caring expression. "We only wanted to stall the struggle for power and restore some semblance of structure so everyone could be happy."

"Keep Storybrooke peaceful," the deputy needlessly added. "We only want to help, Emma."

The sheriff looked at one parent's face then the other's. "Seriously?" she prompted. "Restore some semblance of structure," she repeated slowly. Then, she scowled, her lip curling more the longer she thought about it. "Like that new fascist curriculum at the school?" she asked in disgust.

Rolling her eyes, Mary Margaret heavily sighed. "Emma, we talked about this...."

"Yeah," the sheriff snorted, leaning back and slouching. "I've heard the comments. Moe French thinks the animal folk should only complete grade school. And before Mrs. Frost stepped down from the city council, she wanted half days for all the peasant children so they could help their parents at work, just because she didn't have a maid all day." She frowned as she glanced at the jail cells. Relief washed over her as she saw Ruby helping Regina sit up. Immediately, she got up, but she stopped in the office doorway. Without turning and, in a low tone, she gave her parents a final warning. "We live here, and as long as we live here, I will enforce the laws of this land, not any other."

After watching their child check on their past nemesis, husband and wife shared a long, meaningful look.
"Could she be right?" David quietly asked his wife. "Should we take a step back and let everything run its course?" He wasn't one to give up, but things had become increasingly complicated since the curse was broken.

Shaking her head ruefully, Mary Margaret turned away and observed her daughter with her best friend and stepmother. "Oh, I know she has a point, David, but she doesn't know the whole story." She pursed her lips as Emma helped Regina to stand.

"We could talk to her," the deputy gently suggested, following his wife's gaze. "Explain things. I know she still has questions."

"She doesn't want to talk to us," the school teacher replied, dropping her forehead onto her husband's right shoulder. "She's too wrapped up in her own guilt." Her beautiful daughter had such a loving heart, and it was being wasted on the Evil Queen. It broke her heart.

David wrapped his arms around the woman he loved. After a long moment of silence and a heavy exhale, he kissed the top of her head and quietly proposed, "Maybe we should revisit the Blue Fairy's solution."

"I don't know," Mary Margaret answered. "It's risky." It would leave Regina vulnerable, but her daughter would be free. It seemed like an acceptable, if not equivalent, exchange.

"Yes," he agreed, pulling back so he could look at her face. "But wouldn't it be worth it? We'd have our daughter and grandson with us as a family." Cupping her cheek with his right hand, he gently stroked his thumb over her skin. "We could finally be happy," he whispered, knowing she'd understand.

Looking up into her beloved's eyes, she was conflicted, but what other choice did she have? Sacrificing Regina's magic was a small price to pay for her daughter's life, freedom, and any future happiness. She nodded.

~SQ~

Michael Tillman didn't think anything of a person walking into his garage. He simply assumed it was just another customer paying a bill or scheduling service with Ava. As whoever it was neared, he didn't acknowledge the newcomer. He just kept working—that was, until he was forcibly pushed away from the car and his back slammed into a tool chest not two feet away. He was surprised to see one of the Storybrooke Academy's gym teachers. "Jim?"

The other man's face twisted into an angry scowl. "I should beat you senseless," he seethed. His fists were tightly curled at his sides. "But Kathryn doesn't need any bad press." Maybe if he told himself that enough, he'd heed his own advice.

Slowly, Michael straightened up, readjusting his grip on the ratchet. "What's going on, Jim?" he asked jovially, flashing his best friendly smile.

Without hesitation, Jim landed a right hook into Tillman's jaw. "I should beat you senseless," he seethed. His fists were tightly curled at his sides. "But Kathryn doesn't need any bad press." Maybe if he told himself that enough, he'd heed his own advice.

Slowly, Michael straightened up, readjusting his grip on the ratchet. "What's going on, Jim?" he asked jovially, flashing his best friendly smile.

Without hesitation, Jim landed a right hook into Tillman's jaw. He adjusted his stance to land another blow, but he didn't expect the coward to take a swing with the ratchet. Feeling the biting blow of steel against his abdominal muscles, he rallied his rage and quickly overpowered the bastard mechanic, such was the famed fury of King Midas's favored knight. Holding Tillman in a head lock, he furiously punched the man again and again in the stomach until the ratchet fell onto the ground, and he was practically holding the other man up. Roughly, he shoved him away, breathing heavily.
Michael dropped onto his hands and knees on the cold concrete, gasping for air. Winded and in pain, he rolled onto his side, whimpering as he curled into a fetal position.

"If you ever touch your boy again," Jim warned, wiping the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, "I'll do more than rough you up." He started walking away, feeling at least slightly better. Now, if only he could get Nicholas off the street.

"I'll report you!" the mechanic cried out, wiping the tears off his cheeks as he struggled to stand.

"Yeah, you do that," the gym teacher sneered, unconcerned as he left the garage. "I'm sure the Sheriff wouldn't mind getting a few good licks in, herself."

~SQ~

*Things really haven't been going well,* Mary Margaret thought to herself as she purposely hiked through the empty forest behind Storybrooke Academy's athletic fields. She sighed, focusing on the loud crinkle and crunch of dead foliage. The overcast day impeccably fitted her current mood. Absently, she adjusted the strap of her quiver and the hold on her recurve bow. The private archery range wasn't too much further.

After returning from the Enchanted Forest, the school teacher decided she needed to hone her archery skills. It had started out as a hobby, a way to blow off some steam, but now, it was a necessity. By luck, she found her trusted bow from her bandit days hanging in Storybrooke Sporting Goods. After a little haggling with Mr. Hamilton and with David's help, she had set up a hidden target in the woodland beyond the school—a series of thickets that no one ventured into.

And right now, she really needed to blow off some steam. Seeing the red-and-white bullseye amidst the trees, Mary Margaret smiled as she reached into her coat pocket. She didn't stop walking as she cautiously glanced around. Content that she was alone, she inserted earbuds before starting a playlist on her pink iPod nano. She was still briskly moving towards the target as she notched and released her first arrow. It was quickly followed by another, and then another, and another.

The angry, energetic beats of her music motivated her movements. But as the song changed, so did her pace. The school teacher entertained a fantasy of her own making as she ducked and dodged from tree trunk to tree trunk. All the while, she expertly fired arrow after arrow.

Once her quiver was empty, Mary Margaret stood ten feet from the target. She sported a satisfied smile. All the arrows had landed true in the center ring's bullseye. A few shots had splintered other arrow shafts. She still had it, and it felt good. Sliding her arm through her bow, she settled it across her body and carefully extracted the spent ammunition. Frowning, she cursed her exuberance as over half the shafts were now splintered or cracked. She, of course, could reliably repair the fletching or nock. She could even craft a crude broadhead in a pinch, although they weren't pretty. However, she never had managed to master the perfect arrow shaft.

Holding a particularly bad arrow in her hands, she shook her head and mumbled, "This is going to cost." There was only one fletcher in Storybrooke. The fletcher's prices were pretty reasonable, and her craftsmanship was exceptional. It was just that the personal coffers of Snow White and Prince Charming were severely lacking in expendable funds.

Letting her music play, the school teacher decided to take the long way home. David would get frustrated if he realized how quickly she finished at the range, and being the thoughtful husband he was, he'd find some way to procure more arrows—a luxury they couldn't afford right now, no matter the benefit. So with a quick look around to get her bearings, she decided to take a detour to
the Toll Bridge and head home from there. Along the way, she discovered something strange.

Her brows furrowed when she noticed it out of the corner of her eye about 200 yards out. There was something large, shiny, and metallic peeking through a tight cluster of pines. Slowing her pace and lightening her step, she circled the trees in a wide birth, hoping not to alert anyone to her presence. A travel trailer, she mused when she got a clear view.

"Hello?" Mary Margaret called out when she was roughly 10 yards away from the trailer. When she heard nothing, she decided to inspect the odd setup. Obviously, there were no utility hook-ups out here in the middle of the woods, and there weren't any mounted gas tanks, fire pits, or grills.

As she approached the trailer's single door, the school teacher avidly searched the campsite. She noted a single set of boot prints in a small patch of mud but, other than that, nothing else of note. But, she did spot shallow ruts in the mud that couldn't have been tire tracks. Her lips pursed as she considered why someone would even bother parking a trailer all the way out here.

Reaching for the latch, she discovered the door was indeed unlocked and slowly pulled it open. She popped her head inside and frowned at the dated décor. "Hello?" she called into the trailer while stepping inside. With no one home, she decided to snoop and maybe get some answers. After all, Storybrooke didn't need any more surprises.

There were some white papers on a folded-out kitchenette table. She casually flipped through half the stack of typed pages. They were filled with written descriptions of the town, and towards the bottom, she spied the corner of what could have been an illustration. Moving on, she checked a few cabinets and discovered the trailer wasn't stocked with provisions, either. Whoever set this place up obviously didn't expect to stay here long, so, she didn't bother to check the back bunk or wet bath.

Returning her focus to the papers, Mary Margaret studied them in greater detail. She scanned page after page. Something wasn't right. These pages were filled with recent events, the accident at the town line, the incident at Town Hall, and even the capture attempt at the graveyard. Her curiosity got the better of her as she stared at the pages in confusion. The words well, death curse, and Regina caught her attention, and she wasted precious time reading those specific typed notes.

Halfway through, she heard something outside and swiftly crouched down, peering out the windows. Someone was watching the town and possibly watching her at that very moment. Quickly, she shuffled the pages into a single stack, intent on taking them with her.

"You shouldn't be here," a man said, sotto voice, coming from the back of the trailer.

Startled, Mary Margaret reacted with deadly precision. She rolled away, notched one of the remaining good arrows and sent it flying at her target. However, she frowned when she heard a distinctive thwack. The shadow lurking in the short hall simply exhaled. She quickly readied another arrow. "Who are you?" she demanded with authority.

Pulling the arrow out of his left shoulder with a grunt, August Booth scuffed his boots on the floor indecisively before he stepped into the light. "August," he answered flatly, tossing the arrow at Snow White's feet.

The school teacher's eyes blinked several times at the giant, wooden marionette before her. It was too bizarre. "What happened to you?" she whispered in amazement. She lowered her bow and returned both arrows to her quiver. Who would do this? Why?

Sighing, the writer took the stack of papers from the table. "That's a rather lengthy story," he replied dryly, tossing the documents on the back bunk. He could tell from her searching gaze he wasn't going to be getting rid of her any time soon. "Let's just say my field trip didn't quite work
"I don't understand."

"You don't have to," August quipped, pointing at the door. "You need to leave and tell no one that I'm out here." He had too much work to do before he could safely reveal his presence. At the very least, he had to redeem himself in some measure or justify his father's actions. "Please."

Mary Margaret couldn't look away. "But," she started, moving her lips. Rubbing her forehead, she sighed. "Emma said you took her to the well," she flatly stated, still transfixed by the inordinate amount of detail in the wooden face and perfectly sculpted hair. "She said you tried to tell her about the curse."

"I did," the writer admitted sadly. When he blinked, his eyelids made a clicking sound. He hated it, remembering it from before he was made flesh and blood. "I failed." He turned away and looked out a window.

"She looked for you," she admitted as her brows gradually furrowed and her gaze slowly hardened. "You came from outside Storybrooke," she intoned, not liking the dots she was connecting. "You knew about the curse." Taking a bold step forward, she sharply demanded, "How? Who are you?"

There were enough problems with which to contend. She didn't think she could handle another complication.

With sad eyes, August turned his head, ignoring the squeak of wood. He weighed his limited options carefully. "I'm Pinocchio," he answered in a soft exhale.

Immediately, Mary Margaret's jaw fell open. She took a step back and shook her head. "No," she gasped, unbelieving. Geppetto's son was only a boy of 7 years when the curse was cast, and he wasn't made of living wood. "How did this happen?" she pondered, mostly to herself.

Looking down at the fine grain of his hands, the writer considered the question. "My current condition is on me," he elucidated, moving his fingers. His dexterity felt limited since the change from flesh to wood, but was it, really? Facing his visitor, he added, "The Queen's curse didn't do this." He raised his hands, twisted them at the wrist, and wiggled his fingers.

Reaching out and linking her hand with one of his, the school teacher shook her head, saying, "It doesn't matter what you look like." She smiled. It was bright and warm. "Your father has missed you so much," she proudly proclaimed. Oh, the joy of their reunion would surely warm so many tattered hearts.

"No," he countered, extracting his hand. "He can't know." Stern in voice and expression, he added, "No one can know I'm out here."

"But your father—"

"Especially not him," August interrupted, shaking his head. The fervent motion caused his neck to squeak as the wood rubbed. He groaned as he dropped down at the small table. Summer was going to be hell as his body swelled. "Promise me," he whispered, "you won't tell anyone." Maybe exploiting his personal turmoil would be enough to evade certain questions.

Dropping onto the built-in sofa across from the writer, Mary Margaret placed a reassuring hand on Pinocchio's knee. "Geppetto misses you," she softly cooed with a small, sad smile. "He would be so happy to see you again." Someone should be happy, she thought.

"No," the writer said with great finality, locking gazes with her. His father would never stand for
his behavior in this world. "I'm not ready to face him," he weakly added as the voice of the Blue Fairy chanted brave, true, and unselfish in his head.

"Maybe we can help," the school teacher suggested helpfully. After all, if outsiders could enter Storybrooke, that left Pinocchio with a very lonely future. "We could ask Mother Superior or approach Gold. If Emma's feeling reasonable, maybe we could coax Regina—"

"I'm the only one who can fix this," he snapped, glaring at his former homeland's monarch.

"Why are you making this so difficult?" she snipped back as she leaned away, removing her hand. She eyed August for a moment before clarifying, "I only want to help."

Unable to slouch or shrug, August reclined back in his chair. Okay, maybe this was going to work. "It's going to be dark soon," he softly replied, staring at the table top.

Mary Margaret pushed up her coat sleeve and glanced at her watch. "Shoot," she muttered. With no flashlights or torches, her options were limited. David and she were supposed to meet Mother Superior in about an hour. Standing up, she slowly moved to the door. She paused with her hand on the latch. Looking over her shoulder at the writer, she promised, "I'll be back, and we'll fix this, August." With that said, she left and jogged out into the dimming forest.

He stayed at the small table and watched until Snow White was out of sight. Standing, he glanced around his quaint little home and decided he'd better move the trailer. It was only a matter of time before she had more questions and would return wanting to help. Opening a closet, he grabbed a black hoodie and pulled it over his head, leaving the hood up. He then grabbed his leather jacket and a pair of black leather gloves. It was chancy slipping into town this early to borrow a truck, but he had to take the risk. He needed to relocate.

~SQ~

Enjoying the comforts of his room at the bed and breakfast, Greg Mendell was vigorously typing an e-mail on his laptop when his cellphone rang. Quickly finishing his sentence, he glanced over at the phone and smiled when he saw the caller ID displayed Her. He answered with an easy, "Hey." Listening for a few moments, he smiled and said, "Yeah, I found someplace. Trust me, it'll be perfect."

Absently, he shuffled through a stack of photos on the desk next to him and picked up a picture of the old cannery on the far end of Storybrooke's harbor. "It's close to downtown but off the beaten path. No hiking boots required, and no one will hear the screams," he quipped with a dark smirk. As he listened, his gaze drifted to look out the window. A bright yellow Volkswagen going down the road caught his attention. Pushing open the sheer curtain, he watched the car until it was out of sight.

He frowned before asking, "So things are going well with Neal Cassidy?" He paused and scowled. "Can you get away long enough to bring me the trailer?" Not liking her answer, he sighed and gruffly explained, "It's going to take time to set up the mobile lab equipment." Pursing his lips, he listened for a few minutes before saying, "Yeah, I found her. Did HQ send the inhibitor cuff?"

A broad smile spread across Greg's face as he leaned back in his chair. "Great, bring it with you," he needlessly ordered. He listened for a few more minutes. "I'll be careful. Call me when you head out. Yeah, I love you, too." A fond smile graced his lips as he hit end on the cellphone. His mission was almost complete, and soon, he'd be able to move forward with his life.

Shaking off his wistful ponderings, Greg resumed his report to his employer.
Reclining in an office chair with booted feet propped up on the corner of her desk, Ruby Lucas tossed a tennis ball up into the air and caught it, over and over. She exhaled heavily as she glanced at the wall clock for the umpteenth time. Two more hours here, then she had to work at the diner until close because one of the part-time waiters called out sick again. It was the second time in so many weeks the same privileged punk had called in. Day after payday, too. See if Granny puts up with it, she smirked to herself.

After another few minutes, her gaze dropped to the big, empty space on top of her desk. She tried not to dwell on the missing computer monitor and the woeful absence of the internet. Thankfully, Regina quickly ordered replacements. Then again, that didn't help her current boredom. Maybe I'll get a smartphone, she thought as she considered her funds.

With Emma and Regina in a meeting with Mayor Herman and Puma meeting with the acting-ADA regarding Albert Spencer, Ruby and David were left to run the office. And since she was only a part-timer, she didn't have to work nights. That brought a small smile to her face.

Hearing the door open down the hall, Ruby dropped her feet and stowed her ball. She remembered Emma's stern words about appearing busy even if they weren't actually doing anything. So, she pulled a random file out of her desk drawer and pretended to read it. Why did it have to be another report about Pongo escaping from his yard?

"Deputy Lucas?" Ava Zimmer prompted as she slowly approached the deputy's desk.

"Ava," Ruby hesitantly greeted, hiding her surprise by closing the file. She wasn't expecting Michael Tillman's daughter to waltz in today. Actually, she wasn't expecting anyone. Hadn't Storybrooke reached its crime quota for the year?

"I want to file a missing person's report," the teenager cautiously stated. She nervously glanced around the office while fiddling with the end of her scarf. Her father would be livid if he found out she came here.

"Okay," the waitress drawled with a slow nod. She refiled the report on Pongo in her drawer, rolled over to the row of filing cabinets, and opened the drawer labeled forms. Hunting for the correct one, she casually instructed, "Have a seat." She could handle filling out forms. Nervously, she worried on her bottom lip as she realized this was technically going to be a runaway report. She covertly glanced over her shoulder at the teenager.

Doing as she was told, Ava sat down in the chair beside the deputy's desk. She looked over her left shoulder and frowned. "I thought Mr. Jefferson was here," she commented with a hint of relief. She and Paige weren't friends, and she really didn't want to get mixed up in another family's drama.

Rolling back to her desk, Ruby took a deep breath. "He was released yesterday," she explained, grabbing a pen out of a Granny's Diner to-go cup. She quickly scanned the form, re-familiarizing herself with the questions. Yeah, the missing person form could easily double as a runaway report.

"Oh," the teenager quietly mouthed. She looked down at her hands and nervously wrapped a few tassels of her scarf around a finger. "Will this take long?" she asked, turning to check the time.

"It shouldn't," the waitress reassured with a warm smile. Licking her lips, she started filling in sections of the form. "I'm just filling in some basic info, like your name and address," she stated, outlining the procedure. Experience proved that it helped people relax. "Okay, who are you reporting as missing?" She hovered her pen over the appropriate box.
"Nicolas Zimmer." As the name left her lips, Ava felt so much better. She swallowed and added, "He's my brother, and I haven't seen him for at least two days."

"Is that unusual?" Ruby casually inquired, entering in the appropriate information. She waited on the girl to continue. Since resuming the deputy gig, she quickly realized people liked a waitress remembering their favorite meals at a diner but at the sheriff's office, the illusion of anonymity went a long way.

Sighing, the teenager shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "No," she rasped, sucking on her bottom lip. "Ever since he left home…," she paused as her throat tightened. "Ever since he left home," she repeated with slightly more confidence, "some kids have been giving him a hard time." Wiping at the corner of her eyes, she swallowed and took several long breaths. "I know he found some place to hang out, but I haven't seen him." She bit her lower lip, looking away.

"Hey, none of this is your fault," the waitress said softly. She lightly tapped the butt of the pen on her desk. Consoling kids wasn't her thing, and it wasn't like she had a shining example in her grandmother. Taking a deep breath, she continued with the next applicable question on the form. "What was the last thing you saw Nicolas wearing?"

"A dark brown Carhartt jacket about 2 sizes too big, a white t-shirt, a grey sweatshirt, blue jeans, a navy beanie and a red scarf," the teenager easily answered. Her father had been looking for that coat for days. The other clothes were stuffed in the backpack she'd given him—except the red scarf. She didn't know where he'd gotten the scarf.

For the next few minutes, the pair fell into an easy question-and-answer rhythm. That was until Ruby reached the special notes section on the form. "I have to ask," she said slowly. "Can you think of any reason why Nicolas would leave home?" It was a loaded question, to be sure, but she had to cover all the bases if they wanted to help this kid.

"Like you don't already know," sassed Ava with sharp tongue. The whole town was whispering about it. Naturally, this lead to a lull in her father's workload, which didn't help matters.

Grimacing, the waitress softly sighed. "We've been watching Nicolas," she gently explained.

"Then why haven't you helped him?" the teenager snapped, glaring angrily at the unhelpful deputy. This town was full of hypocrites.

Ruby bristled at the girl's tone. She looked away so she could school her features. "You think we don't want to?" she prompted, locking gazes. Her eyes were hard but compassionate. "If he keeps getting in fights, we can't document his injuries." She paused to take a deep breath. "We can't press charges." Seriously, this town wasn't equipped to deal with wayward children. "We need evidence of abuse," she added softly.

Looking away, Ava swallowed several times as her throat tightened. They had been a happy family during the curse and for a little while after it broke. Yet slowly, that all changed. "He'll know," she whispered with a hint of fear.

"Your father won't know you talked," the waitress promised. She thought about offering a comforting hand on the shoulder, but the girl looked ready to bolt. Anxiously, she lightly tapped her pen on the paper.

Biting her lip, the teenager looked straight ahead and, with a soft voice, said, "He was different after Mama died." She took a deep breath and added, "And after the curse broke, everything went bad." Looking down, she idly toyed with a tassel on her scarf. "Father became angry. He wouldn't
talk to us for days, and then one day, he shoved Nicolas to the ground." She quickly wiped at her eyes. "I told Nicolas not to fight back. That this would all blow over." Closing her eyes, she shook her head and whispered, "But I was wrong. It got worse."

Remaining quiet and still for a long time, Ruby focused on breathing through her nose. She felt her anger bubble deep within her belly, but she pushed it down and focused on helping. "Okay," she said, vigorously writing in the appropriate sections. "That helps." If it didn't, she'd knock some heads together until it did. Maybe she'd call Regina later.

Turning the form to face the girl, she smiled, offering the pen. "I just need you to sign by the X," she explained in a clipped tone. It was supposed to be signed by the teenage boy's legal guardian. But maybe it would give the girl a sense of accomplishment and, at the very least, prove she came to the sheriff's office.

Hesitantly taking the pen, Ava asked, "What happens next?" She glanced over the document, checking for mistakes. Nervously, she fidgeted with the pen.

"Well if you sign, I can pass this along to the sheriff, and we can start looking for Nicolas." Ruby outlined the various avenues of procedure, the routine of recitation further calming her inner wolf.

~SQ~

After parking the Wagoneer along the sidewalk in front of 108 Mifflin Street, Mary Margaret and David shared a meaningful look. They linked their hands on the empty seat between them, listening to the distant cries of playing children and songs of chirping birds. The idyllic Sunday afternoon clung onto the sun's warmth like a promise for the coming summer.

"Ready?" the deputy prompted softly, caressing his rough thumb over the back of his wife's softer hand. He understood her trepidation, but they were doing this for their daughter. If he could've gotten away without involving his beloved, this unfortunate business would've already been done. But, apparently, preparations took time when extracting a practitioner's magic.

Taking a deep breath, the school teacher nodded firmly as she tightly squeezed her husband's larger hand as she looked straight ahead. She saw Mother Superior cross Mifflin Street about a house away. "Yes," she replied with much more conviction than she actually felt. Releasing her True Love's hand, she climbed out of the driver's side of her jeep and retrieved a casserole dish from the backseat floorboard. It was another one of Emma's favorites, frosted ribbon loaf.

Once the group of three were together and exchanged sober greetings, they walked down the sidewalk to the mouth of the driveway. The garage door was open, revealing Emma, Alexander, and Henry in the spacious, organized area talking around a medium-sized worktable. Squaring her shoulders and forcing a smile on her face, Mary Margaret took the lead, almost hugging the casserole dish to her chest. She slowly moved forward between the parked Mercedes and Volkswagen. The conversation of the trio inside the garage was almost clear when a member of the Crows Guard stopped them in-between the cars.

Bruce Farmer, a tall, lanky man, was the senior guard currently on duty, and he took his position very seriously. When Diego Flores trotted around the back of the house to the causeway between the house and garage to speak with him, he was ready to release a terse reprimand, but the bass guitarist had reported a valid suspicion, spurring him to impede the visitors' entrance to the garage.

"Hello, Bruce," Mary Margaret cheerfully greeted the typically quiet man who was once in service to her father. She casually glanced around him as she shifted the dish to one hand to wave at her family inside the garage, getting their attention. "I brought a casserole," she paused for a moment,
nervously biting her lip. "We wanted to apologize for the other day." She looked Farmer in the eyes, hoping her sad, hopeful gaze was convincing enough.

Crossing his arms, Bruce merely frowned as he quickly assessed the three unwelcome guests and scanned the horizon. His eyes narrowed at the Blue Fairy.

"Grandma, Gramps!" Henry called from the garage, waving. "Come see my science fair project!" After all, weren't apologies a good thing? He glanced between Alexander and Emma, not understanding the sudden tension in the air.

Shaking her head, the sheriff sighed at the kid's exuberance. She wasn't in the mood to deal with her parents, but another set of hands would get this due-tomorrow monstrosity finished faster. When Farmer turned and deferred to her, she was surprised and just half shrugged. If Mother Superior came out here with her parents, then maybe they really wanted to apologize. At the very least, they were making an effort. She pursed her lips. Regina wasn't going to like her quiet afternoon of solitude being interrupted again.

Stepping aside, Bruce allowed them to pass and enter the garage. His eyes followed them as he kept a discrete distance. Subtly, he signaled Diego, still standing under the causeway, to resume his patrol.

"Hey," Emma greeted the three with an upward nod. She refocused on the drummer as he resumed showing the boy how to strip insulated copper wire with a wire stripper.

"What's going on here?" Mary Margaret asked with great interest and a tad too much cheer. She passed the casserole dish to her husband while avidly searching the worktable.

"Alex is helping me build a saltwater lamp!" Henry explained. He hopped over to a stack of printed pages on a long workbench running along the entire back wall of the garage and brought over one of the project's blueprints.

"Helping is a bit of an understatement, kid," the sheriff lightly scolded, watching the drummer work. She heavily leaned on the table with the heels of her hands. "If your master plan is to build one of these in class, you better pay closer attention to what Alex is showing you." She cocked an eyebrow and smirked.

"I know. I am," the boy quickly countered with a dramatic eye roll. He immediately moved around the table and watched Alexander. Every once in a while, he would point at something and ask a question, but his attention was split between the school project and his grandparents.

Once she thought Henry was fully engaged with Alexander, Emma took a few paces back. As predicted, her parents moved with her. She pursed her lips as Mother Superior remained passive, staying at her mother's left flank, her father on the right. "So, why are you really here?" she prompted, taking the project's outline from the school teacher and tossing it on the workbench behind her. "Want some more school fun?" she added with a hint of sarcasm. Henry had told her about some of his classroom's restructuring.

"Like I said, we want to apologize," Mary Margaret repeated in a softer voice. Really, how many times did she have to say it? She frowned at her daughter's continued disbelief and cast a quick glance at her husband. "We miss you, Emma," David added with a soft smile, resting his free hand on his wife's shoulder. He truly did miss their special moments that belonged to just the two of them. "And Henry." It was frustrating how the talking and joking all came to a grinding halt at Regina's presence. "We just
Taking and releasing a deep breath, Emma crossed her arms as she leaned back against the bench. "Yeah well, I'm not the one you need to apologize to," she said in a low voice. Apparently, this was going to be the same old song and dance. She pinned her mother with a hard, dark glare. "Regina almost died," she quietly intoned, letting the words hang as she looked over her mother's head at Henry. Remembering the boy's horrified face at the blood and destruction still rattled her. "By some magical miracle, she healed herself," she added, cutting a glance at the rather contrite Blue Fairy. After a bit of prolonged silence, she dropped her head and quietly expounded, "Look, if Regina's okay, I'm okay. I can't make it any simpler." Pushing away from the workbench, she stepped around her father and picked up some foam board leaning against a box of art supplies. Louder, she said in a teasing tone, "We still have a lot to do because someone procrastinated with his science fair and social studies project." She didn't want to deal with serious issues anymore.

"Emma," Henry whiningly drawled, covering his face with his hands in embarrassment. "I said I was sorry." Homework had taken a backseat to his investigations, and now he was paying for it.

"You're lucky Alex saved our butts with this Philippine salt lamp thing," the sheriff chuckled as she pawed around in the toolbox for a box cutter. "Because Regina's getting ready to ground me," she reminded her son of his mother's stern threat. Finding the box cutter, she pointed it at him, saying, "You better pass."

Dramatically, the boy rolled his head, and as he sat down on a stool, he muttered, "Whatever." It was his turn to build the saltwater lamp. He tackled the task with great determination because he needed to know what was going on with his mothers and grandparents, and he couldn't eavesdrop if people kept talking about his projects. However, he wasn't going to be privy to anymore conversation because his grandparents and the Blue Fairy left the garage. He frowned.

As the three silently slipped out of the side door of the garage and walked towards the house, Alexander moved over to Emma and gently asked her, "Are you alright?"

The sheriff stared out the side door's window. "Yeah," she sighed. Looking back at Henry, she swallowed and considered calling Archie tomorrow. Maybe the psychologist could work them in for an extra session this week. Sure, the kid acted like everything was normal, but was it really? She met the drummer's concerned expression and, not for the first time, pondered how an evil queen could foster such a sweet young man. "Yeah," she repeated more confidently and smiled. "Regina wouldn't kill them on sight." Pausing, her brows furrowed, and she nervously asked, "Right?"

Smirking, Alexander shrugged and nonchalantly said, "Nah, suffering's more satisfying." When Emma laughed, the tension in his shoulders melted away. He smiled.

"I can... I don't know how to explain it, but I can sort of sense when Regina uses her magic," Emma admitted in a serious, hushed tone. She intently watched the drummer's face, not entirely sure what she expected from the young man. "Is that normal?" she prompted because she'd been a little nervous to mention it the former mayor.

Pursing his lips in thought, Alexander carefully considered the question. It wasn't often someone asked his opinion. "Some people are sensitive to magic, so I guess not," he suggested. When Henry called his name, he dutifully returned to the work table.

Nodding to herself, the sheriff felt somewhat relieved by the drummer's response. She continued working on constructing a presentation board. When that was decent enough, she decided to color some of the printed diagrams. She grabbed a pack of colored pencils from the art supply box and
sat down on another stool at the long workbench. Some mindless entertainment would do her good. Of course, it wasn't the type she wanted but just about anything would do after the last few days.

As Alexander checked his work, Henry watched Emma color. His gaze drifted to the side door then over his shoulder to look out the opened garage door. He couldn't understand why everyone was so upset with his grandparents and the Blue Fairy coming by to apologize. It was just the forces of good doing a good thing. And now, everyone must realize they needed to work together to capture Cora, right?

"Why don't you prep some of the components? Strip the wires and cut the foils to size. It'll cut down on your presentation time and your classmates won't get bored," the drummer helpfully suggested. He started putting some of the tools away and tidying the worktable. "And it'll be less stuff to carry," he added, flashing the boy a warm smile.

Nodding, Henry started striping another set of wires and, naturally, his thoughts drifted. He remembered the moment he was let out of his mother's bathroom, and his brows furrowed. Sure, the house had been torn up, and everything in Emma's room was destroyed—but that was Cora's fault. She had done those things, and she had hurt her own daughter. Frowning, he remembered the blood stains on his mother's ripped blouse and the spots of blood on the foyer stairs. It didn't make any sense why the good guys needed to apologize for something a bad guy had done.

~SQ~

Lazily, Regina turned the page of the book lying across her lap and took a leisurely sip of her cider. The sweet, tart taste and the slow burn of the alcohol was a calming balm to an eventful week. She glanced over the rim of her reading glasses at the woefully dormant fireplace. Hopefully, there would be a cold snap before the weather rolled headlong into spring, and she could enjoy one more fire. Resuming her reading, she didn't pay any heed to the shuffle of footsteps coming from the kitchen, believing it was just the three she had banished to the garage.

A little over an hour ago, Henry had sheepishly slunk into her office and quietly stood by her desk as she worked on her personal financials. She just thought he had wanted to ask for a sweet treat, an hour to play video games, or something else trivial that went against his grounding. However, when Emma had moseyed in with her hands shoved in her front pockets and, a moment later, Alexander lingered in the doorway, she had known something was seriously amiss.

The deal was for every hour Alexander assisted with the science fair project and social studies report, Henry was grounded for another week. The boy protested, of course, but Regina simply reminded him of the extent of the drummer's responsibilities outside of the house, which led to Emma's professed compensation for Alexander's assistance. It also helped that the drummer honestly wanted to help.

Thus, Regina wasn't concerned by the noise coming from the kitchen or the soft footfalls across the hall, heading towards the study. She might have reasonably chastised Emma and Henry, but she wasn't a tyrant to deny them breaks. No, it wasn't until she heard the all-too-familiar voice of Mary Margaret calling her name that she had reason to pause.

Frowning, the former mayor cut her eyes over to the open door, and once a hint of the school teacher appeared in the doorway, she flicked her wrist. The door sounded with a resonating slam. The strangled, startled yelp from the other side was quite satisfying. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath and another long sip of cider. When she heard a knock, she firmly instructed, "Go away."

Trying the doorknob, Mary Margaret was surprised the door was still unlocked. She quickly
entered and defiantly strode into the room. "We're here to apologize," she said in a huff. She stopped in front of the sitting brunette and crossed her arms. Nervously, she chewed on her lower lip.

"Apology accepted," Regina replied, rolling her eyes. Refocusing on the book on her lap, she idly turned the page and added, "Your daughter's in the garage." Vaguely, she was aware of David entering the room. "Go away," she slowly enunciated, hoping the annoying couple would leave. But when no one moved, her gaze raised to see a mixture of sadness and hesitation in the school teacher's eyes.

"We're not here for her," David said in a low voice as he slowly entered the room. His large frame physically blocked the smaller Blue Fairy from Regina's perspective in the wingback chair across the room, and while the fairy remained against his back, his aura masked her presence.

"I am sorry," Mary Margaret said softly. She shifted her crossed arms and tightly hugged herself. Turning, she took a few steps away.

"For what?" Regina asked in confusion, glancing at the deputy as he slowly stepped closer. She closed her book, focusing on his unusual body language. Something wasn't right. She set her tumbler on the console table and moved to stand. She needed to put some distance between them.

However, before she could get up, David abruptly sidestepped to the left to reveal Mother Superior and an incoming cloud of sparkling fairy dust which hit Regina square in the chest. He launched into action, quickly pushing a small couch and coffee table to the far side of the room. Then, he bolted to the dining room and retrieved an armed chair from around the table.

At the same time, the school teacher rushed to each window, pulling the heavy, dark drapery closed. She pushed other pieces of furniture to the edges of the room. Then she hastily pulled long lengths of golden cord from her coat pockets, draping the pieces across the coffee table.

"You idiots," the former mayor rasped as she fought to remain conscious. She struggled to stand, but her eyes wouldn't stay open. Really, where were they going to take her? She spied the glint from the gold cords and sneered, "You wouldn't," before slumping unconscious in the wingback chair.

"Quickly," the Blue Fairy calmly urged, intently watching the Evil Queen. She held another dose of the sleep dust in her left palm. "She's resisting." With her right hand, she regally removed her repaired wand from her robes.

The deputy trotted back into the study and placed the dining chair in the middle of the room. He scooped Regina up under her arms and roughly moved her from the wingback chair to the dining chair, knocking off one of her shoes in the process. Then he and his wife hurriedly secured their nemesis with the golden cords.

"Quickly," Mother Superior repeated unnecessarily, returning the leftover sleep dust to a dark green velvet pouch. Then, she poised herself, ready to begin as soon as their majesties were clear. There would be no room for error.

"Do we have to use them all?" Mary Margaret whispered as her husband tied a cord around Regina's chest. Wasn't a cord around each ankle and wrist enough?

"We're not going to get another chance," David reminded her as he tied the last knot. Stepping around the chair with the unconscious woman, he guided his wife back towards the door, hastily shutting it.
Raising her wand, the Blue Fairy centered herself. Her left hand and wand completed a series of intricate movements as she recited an ancient incantation before she thrust the wand directly at the former mayor's chest. A stream of sparkling dust was released and encased the still unconscious woman. Then, just as quickly, the fairy dust dispersed and fell onto the floor, its mystical sparkle and magical light dimming. "Most unusual," she muttered, getting ready to try again.

Mary Margaret held onto her husband. She took little comfort in his strong embrace or the kiss he placed on top of her head. Unable to look away, she watched as the fairy dust encased Regina again, this time accompanied by a sizzling sound as the dust appeared to seep into the former mayor.

Regina awoke with a snarling roar. She pulled violently at her bindings. The searing pain of the infecting fairy dust burrowing into her fueled the rising rage, but she couldn't bring forth her magic. Without it, she couldn't expel or absorb the contaminant. Her face contorted in agony. "You are fools if you think this will save Emma," she growled, beads of sweat already forming on her brow.

"What are you saying?" the school teacher asked, taking a tentative step forward. But her tight grip on her husband's hand remained, anchoring her in place.

"Snow," David warned, unwilling to let her go any closer.

"We are connected," the former mayor snarled. Her heated glare fixed on the blue gnat in front of her. "But you still don't understand that, do you?" She breathed heavily through her nose, nostrils flaring. "Or you just don't care." Squeezing her eyes shut, she fought against the bindings again. Maybe if she could break the chair?

Mother Superior repeated the incantation and sent another, longer bout of fairy dust at Regina. Her face pinched in concentration. She was surprised by the degree of resistance the Evil Queen was affording, given her magic was contained. However, when the restrained woman released a piercing scream, she knew the spell was working. "It's only a matter of time now," she reassured her companions as she lowered her wand.

"I didn't think it would be this . . . painful," the school teacher whispered. She couldn't take her eyes off of the thrashing woman. Tears welled up in her eyes. "This isn't right."

"Someone is going to hear her screams!" David called over the angry snarls. Releasing his wife, he cracked open the study door and peered outside but couldn't hear anything. He wasn't prepared to deal with a squad of guards. Luckily, the ones he'd seen around the house didn't appear to be armed.

"Do not worry, Your Majesties," the Blue Fairy said, intently watching the progress of her spell work. "I took precautions," she admitted. She frowned as small bits of fairy dust dropped onto the floor, dimmed like before.

"What do you mean?" Mary Margaret demanded. She quickly moved to the fairy's side.

"What?" the school teacher questioned, grabbing the fairy's arm. "No!" she cried, looking between her stepmother and her husband. "We didn't agree to torture!"
"Snow, we did agree to this," the deputy said, moving to his wife. Gently, he took her smaller hands in his and kissed her knuckles. "We agreed," he repeated. "This is our only option to free Emma and get our family back." He reached out and stroked her face.

The Blue Fairy eyed the Evil Queen with livid disdain. There was darkness oozing from the woman before her. And it would seem that same darkness was hindering her spell's progress. She pawed through her robes and removed a small, white velvet pouch. Dipping the tip of her wand into the fairy dust within, she gave a sad sigh, and as she discarded the empty bag, she said, "I had hoped it wouldn't come to this, but I'm left with little recourse."

"How convenient for you," the former mayor rasped, panting through the pain. Her reserves were dwindling, but she'd be damned if she just gave up. "You're no better than her," she hissed, meeting the fairy's gaze. She smirked at the trembling sneer, but her gloating didn't last.

~SQ~

Halting her coloring, Emma sat upright from her hunched over position at the long workbench. She swallowed uncertainly and then belched. "Dang," she mumbled, rubbing her stomach.

"Ew, Emma," Henry commented, scrunching his face in disgust. He exhaled heavily as he resumed writing the report for his social studies assignment.

"Excuse me," the sheriff hastily added with a frown. She absently rubbed her chest, not that it did any good. "I think I have heartburn," she explained, turning to face the two boys. Suddenly, she felt very warm.

Chuckling, Alexander raised an eyebrow and smiled at Emma from his spot at the worktable. He lightly scolded, "Maybe it was the six chili dogs at lunch." He immediately refocused on laying out the graphics on Henry's presentation board. He didn't mind helping, but he didn't want to waste his entire Sunday evening.

"Oh, those were so good," the sheriff replied with a pining sigh before making a pained face. She swallowed and licked her lips. If they were the culprit to her current woes, they were worth it. But this degree of gastrointestinal payback was kind of late for lunchtime revenge. She bit her lip and attempted to self-diagnose again. Peering through the side door, she spotted Bruce scowling at the house. Taking a deep breath, she slid off the stool and gathered the pages she had finished coloring. She put them on the corner of the table and gestured to the house. "I'm going to go grab a drink and maybe something to settle my stomach. Do you guys want anything?"

With orders for sweet tea, Emma left the garage and walked up to Bruce Farmer. "Hey," she greeted, following his intense glare. "It seems pretty quiet in there. No screaming or smoke," she lightly joked.

"Indeed." Farmer's watchful gaze never wavered. None of the other guards posted around the house or property reported any unusual activity. The only strange thing was the drapery pulled in the study, but that wasn't too out of character, given the queen's desire for privacy.

Pursing her lips, the sheriff still wasn't sure how to interact with this guy. She could never tell if he liked her or what. Clearing her throat, she was hit with a tight twisting in her gut. "I, ah," she paused to swallow, "was going to fix the boys some tea. Would you like some?"

Bruce finally looked at Emma and nodded. "I will assist you," he offered kindly. His eyes searched her face and he asked with gentle concern, "Are you feeling alright?"
"Yeah," the sheriff answered. Her brows furrowed as she tugged at the collar of her shirt. She was really starting to sweat. "I think I have heartburn," she supplied, stepping towards the side door.

"Must be the six chili dogs," Farmer commented with a slight smirk as he followed her inside. He walked slowly, straining to listen for her majesty or the three unwelcome guests.

"Yeah, yeah," Emma retorted, trotting down the short hall and slipping into the kitchen. Quickly, she opened the cabinet with all the various medicines and grabbed the bottle of Mylanta. She popped the lid off and downed a giant gulp right out of the bottle. Catching the guard's surprised expression, she didn't care to gloat at finally getting a reaction out of him. She just said, "Don't judge me." Then, she took another swig. She was contemplating finishing the bottle when it was taken away.

"Perhaps you should give the medicine a moment to work, Sheriff," Bruce said firmly yet softly as he took the bottle of Mylanta and put it on the island. Appeased by her nod, he quietly went about fixing four glasses of iced tea. When he turned around from returning the tea pitcher to the refrigerator, he observed the blonde splashing water on her face at the kitchen sink. "Is there anything I can do for you, Sheriff?"

"No," Emma huffed, drying her hands and face with the dish towel. The relief was only temporary. Her face pinched in agony as it felt like something was spooning out her insides. "I'm going to go find Regina," she said, defeated. This wasn't tolerable. Walking past the concerned guard, she belched again and groaned. She was dying. She was sure of it.

Glancing around the living room, she turned to the closed door of the study. She pursed her lips because that seemed rather odd, but then, she thought maybe they didn't want Henry to overhear anything. So, she walked up to the door and knocked softly. She reached down and started turning the knob, knocking again as she opened the door. "Hey, Regina, I know I promised to leave you alone but—"

Her jaw fell open at the sight before her. Her eyes darted between the stunned expressions of her parents and the Blue fairy. As her gaze swept the haphazard state of the room with all the furniture pushed against the walls, her focus eventually landed on the slumped former mayor tied to a dining chair in the middle of the room.

"We're almost finished," stated Mother Superior, returning to her task. She faced the bound Evil Queen and raised her wand. "Remove her," she ordered David, tilting her head in Emma's direction. She was too close to be denied now.

"Emma, we can explain," Mary Margaret pleaded, quickly moving to her daughter. "We're doing this for you." She hesitantly placed her left hand on her daughter's right biceps.

Watching the doorway, David remained still, hoping none of the guards were in the house. They just might pull this off, after all. He swallowed as his attention drifted to his daughter.

But all the sheriff saw was her friend tied up in the chair. Her lips trembled as the twisting in her belly transformed into rage. Jerking her arm free, she angrily snarled at her mother, "What the fuck are you doing?" She stomped towards the fairy, not caring about the sparkling dust swirling in the air.

"Saving you!" the school teacher cried as the Blue Fairy flicked her wand at Regina. She winced at the hoarse scream escaping her stepmother.

"We're breaking the binding spell," David clarified, trying to pull his daughter back and out of the
"It's for your own good." However, his attempt was cut short as Bruce Farmer grabbed his right shoulder, spun him, and promptly punched him in the face, causing him to stumble back a few paces.

"You will unhand the Princess and release the Queen," Farmer ordered, wrestling the deputy out into the foyer. He shoved the disgraceful man into the living room. The sound of breaking glass didn't faze him as he hurriedly moved back towards the study. But he was grabbed from behind and forced to resume the struggle to subdue the infuriating Prince Charming.

"David!" Mary Margaret called out when she heard the breaking glass. She looked between her daughter and husband. Deciding, she rushed to grab her daughter's hand. "Emma, wait." Her fingers were almost laced with her child's when she was suddenly, violently thrown across the room.

An omnidirectional concussive wave emanated from the incensed savior. It didn't stop within the confines of the study. As the blast traveled out beyond the walls of the house, it left everything unharmed save for three people. As the magical wave traveled, it quickly lost power; by the time it reached the unaware boys still working diligently in the garage, the wave was nothing more than a warm breeze that rustled their papers.

The school teacher's back slammed hard against a bookshelf before she dropped to her hands and knees on the hardwood floor. She looked at her daughter with hurt, surprised eyes. "Emma," she whispered.

At the same time, Mother Superior was thrown back against the dark, wood paneled walls. The force of her hit caused pictures and knickknacks to rattle, tilt and fall from their hangers and shelves. Still, she held fast to her wand. She looked up at the Savior with wide, startled eyes. "We're doing this for you," she said with sincerity and an eerie calmness.

Whilst David was knocked off his feet, he'd managed to drag Bruce down with him. The two men rolled and wrestled across the floor, beating one another each time one threatened to slip away.

"Stay away from her, you bug," Emma growled, glaring hatefully at the Blue Fairy. Quickly, she turned and focused on the former mayor, reaching her in three long strides. She gently stroked the side of the brunette's head. "Hey," she rasped, inspecting the damage. It hurt seeing her in such a haggard, disheveled state, but it was the streaks of blood that infuriated her. "I'm going to untie the ropes," she explained, hoping the other woman was still conscious. After a moment of struggling with one cord, she quickly moved to another. "Ugh, why aren't these untlying?" she snarled, kneeling next to the chair. She moved to get scissors but stopped when Regina spoke.

"The spell," the former mayor started to say but had to pause to catch her breath. Her mouth was dry. "The spell hasn't finished." The sense of disconnection from everything was disorientating and made it extremely difficult to focus.

Whipping her head around, the sheriff demanded, "Stop the spell," pinning Mother Superior with a scathing look. When she received no response, Emma turned back to the brunette. "How do I stop the spell?" she asked, still hopeful. When no answer was forthcoming, she took a deep breath and attempted to dispel the enchantment within the golden cords. She remembered Regina telling her she was good at that, a natural.

"That's beyond your current abilities, Savior," the Blue Fairy supplied after watching the woman try three times. She turned to Snow and explained, "It's only a matter of time before the Evil Queen's magic is purged."

"That's what this is about?" Emma hissed, unbelieving. She stood between the bound former mayor
and the others. "You wanted to take away her magic?" she questioned. She couldn't believe it. "Why?" she demanded, her hands curled into tight fists.

"It'll free you from the binding spell," Mary Margaret quickly interjected. She pointed at her stepmother. "She lied to you." Please understand, she prayed.

Shaking her head, the sheriff scowled and softly said, "It doesn't matter." The desire to punch something was becoming harder to resist.

"How can you say that?" the school teacher pleaded. She glanced at Mother Superior for some sort of guidance but received none. "We love you, Emma. We're only trying to help."

Squeezing her eyes shut, tears gathered in the corners of Emma's eyes as her lips twisted in emotional frustration. "This is wrong," she stated with severe finality in a low voice. With more force, she added, "This isn't what good people would do." Opening her eyes, she saw the Blue Fairy approach Regina. "I said stay away from her!" she roared as she thrust out her left hand at the fairy.

Without further warning, Mother Superior was sent through the wood paneled wall and across the foyer. She landed in an ungraceful heap at the base of the short stairs by the front door. Her wand was left on the study floor.

"Emma!" Mary Margaret rebuked her daughter, beyond shocked by her reaction. Her brows furrowed in confusion. This wasn't how things were supposed to go. "Get a hold of yourself."

"Seriously?" the sheriff snarled with contempt, turning on her mother.

The fairy crashing through the wall was enough of a distraction to enable Farmer to gain the upper hand in his fight with the deputy. He quickly pinned the man to the hallway wall with an elbow pressing into his throat. "Don't move," he ordered in a low, dangerous tone. It was only a matter of time before one of the others noticed his absence and searched for him.

Hearing the side door open, Bruce saw Henry and Alexander enter the house from the corner of his eye. The boys were laughing and talking about the school project. Still, he didn't waiver from his hold on David. He simply ordered, "Hold."

The drummer heard the order and immediately reached out for his young charge. Pulling the boy back against him, he quickly adjusted his hold to ensure he didn't slip away. "Wait, Henry," he said calmly, trusting the orders of his superior.

"Gramps?" Henry questioned, not yet concerned with Alexander holding him back. "What's going on?" He was confused. Then he heard his Emma's angry voice coming from the study.

"Who needs enemies with good guys like you?" Emma asked with a great deal of sarcasm. She pointed at the bound woman. The twisting in her gut kept getting worse, shortening her fuse. "This isn't the goddamned Middle Ages, Mary Margaret. We don't torture people because we want our way."

"Stop," the school teacher countered with equal force. "I didn't know." She paused and caught Regina's gaze, amazed to find her still conscious. "I didn't know," she repeated in a softer tone.

"You didn't ask," Regina replied. Her voice was quiet and raspy. Blood continued to drip from her nose, and she felt the warm, sticky substance oozing out of her ears. Of course, she'd read about magical castration but never suspected she'd go through it herself. "Emma's fate will be worse," she added, closing her eyes. The pain was flaring again. She could feel every speck of fairy dust
burning inside her, cutting. Was the spell reaching completion? "I'm sorry," she whispered, only loud enough for the sheriff to hear.

"I know," Emma answered, letting the tears fall freely now. She couldn't help but feel like she was being sent away, unwanted, all over again. The agony raging in her chest couldn't be ignored any longer. "I'm scared," she admitted, feeling sick. Dropping her gaze to the floor, she heard her mother whisper her name, but it was the quiet, "Don't be," from Regina that gave her hope.

And then, there was a wave that dwarfed the sheriff's earlier one. It rolled out in all directions with unrelenting speed, and in its wake, it left only utter silence. Gone was the soft tick-tock of the grandfather clock, the low hum of the refrigerator, the cries of playing children, the barking of dogs, the chirping of birds, or the distant roar of traffic. And no one heard the Crows Guard rush into the house. Everyone looked around in shocked awe.

With wide eyes, Regina gasped, tossing her head back involuntarily. The pain, the disconnection, the golden cords, and the fairy dust, it was all gone. And all of the noise of the world returned. With a heaving chest, she slumped in the dining chair and shakily, she pushed her disheveled hair back. She took a deep breath, followed by another, before she looked at the sheriff. Blinking with tired eyes, she asked, "How do you feel?" Because she had to know.

Licking her lips, Emma smiled with relief. "Yeah, I'm good," she replied although she wasn't entirely sure why she was being asked. "Yeah," she repeated. Pausing, her brows furrowed and she went to her friend's side. "Are you?"

"I don't know," Regina answered with rising doubt. The spell had reached a successful conclusion. She had felt it. But when she opened her palm, she conjured a fireball before the idea to do so had fully formed in her mind. It didn't make sense, should have been impossible.

"Abomination!" shouted the Blue Fairy, drawing everyone's attention. She scrambled to her feet, frantically searching for her wand, only to see it lying on the floor inside the study. Her heated gaze landed on Snow White through the hole in the wall. "You should've executed her when you had the chance," she seethed. Her eyes darted back to her discarded wand. Her face contoured into an ugly sneer, and she quickly exited through the front door. Wand be damned. She could get a new one. For reasons unknown to her, the spell had failed.

"What the hell was that about?" the sheriff muttered, turning back to the former mayor who had dispelled the fireball. However, her attention was diverted when her mother entered her peripheral vision. "You should go," she instructed in a cold tone, refusing to look at Mary Margaret.

"Please, Honey, let us explain," Mary Margaret whined, reaching for her child. She was surprised when she was grabbed by the arm and dragged out into the foyer. "Emma!"

"No, I don't care," Emma snapped. She pushed her mother towards the front door. "I don't want to hear you justify torture." Noticing Bruce restraining her father, she stomped over to them and yanked David away, pushing him towards his wife. Facing them both, she hissed, "You're my parents. All I hear Henry talk about is how good you both are and how the savior needs to follow your example." She stopped and took a deep breath, her anger settling in further. "Did you even consider how this would affect me?" It was clear they didn't give a shit about Regina.

"You would be free," the deputy quickly supplied, opening his arms. "We just want you to be happy."

"Happy," the sheriff repeated skeptically. Shaking her head, she fixed her parents with a hard gleam as she angrily jabbed herself in the chest. "I did this to us and we're both paying the price for it. If
you wanted me to be happy, you wouldn't pull this shit." Was it too much for her parents to be supportive?

"Gold's responsible," the school teacher easily corrected, not caring for her daughter's tone. She took a bold step forward. "He tricked you, Emma. All of this somehow plays into his plans." Of that much, she was absolutely certain.

"So blame him!" Emma shouted. She thrust her hands into her hair. Everything felt so intense. That's when her father's deputy's badge caught her attention. Her face contorted in disgust. Holding out her hand, she quickly barreled towards him, demanding, "Give me your badge."

Startled, David blinked as he absently reached for the object clipped to his belt. "What?"

"Give me your badge," the sheriff forcefully restated. When the shiny, silver-and-gold star was in her palm, she inquired, "Do you have your service weapon?" At his nod, she quickly pocketed the badge and gestured for him to give her the gun.

"Emma, what is this?" Mary Margaret questioned, watching the exchange with confused interest.

When the Glock was in her hands, Emma insured the safety was engaged, easily ejected the magazine, and removed the round in the chamber. She slipped the magazine and bullet into her other pocket and tucked the firearm in her back waistband. Looking her father straight in the eye, she flatly said, "You're fired."

The former deputy stared at his daughter in disbelief. His jaw hung open as he blinked.

"Emma," the school teacher scolded in a biting tone. She scowled and moved between her husband and daughter. "This is unacceptable," she started but was quickly interrupted.

"No," snapped the sheriff. She pointed back at the study. "What you three did in there is unacceptable." Closing the space between them, she got in her mother's face and said, "And I will charge you all to the fullest extent of the law."

Perplexed by her daughter's hostile reaction, Mary Margaret raised her chin and defiantly said, "Fine, we'll see what Mayor Herman has to say about this." She glared at Bruce Farmer when he snickered.

"For fuck's sake, Mary Margaret, this isn't a goddamned monarchy!" Emma snarled. She gritted her teeth, and her hands curled into fists. Pointing at the front door, she dared her mother. "Go on and cry to your subjects. I'll have a warrant for your arrest by morning."

Surprise flashed across the school teacher's face as she whispered, "You wouldn't." She took a step back, bumping into the comforting support of her husband. Turning, she looked up at him and asked, "Can she do that?"

"She's the sheriff," Regina stated, leaning heavily against the threshold to the study. She had observed the drama unfold, barefoot and unconcerned with her appearance. Pursing her lips, she carefully watched the bane of her existence as she said, "Unfortunately, in this world, she can't demand reparations for the abuses done unto her."

"We didn't abuse our daughter," David snapped, gripping his wife's shoulders. It was a move to keep himself, as well as Mary Margaret, in check.

"You can't hide behind your idiotic ignorance this time," the former mayor said in frustration, stepping towards the banister separating the foyer entry stairs and the short walkway to the study.
She gripped the railing. With a piercing gaze, she accused, "You were willing to emotionally lobotomize your own daughter." Streaks of light filled her vision, and she squeezed her eyes shut briefly in an attempt to block it out. She shuddered and felt light headed.

The sheriff watched as a drop of blood dripped from Regina's nose and splashed onto the light, hardwood floor. Her lower lip trembled as rage flared deep in her belly. As several Crows Guard moved to attend their queen, she once again turned on her parents. "You would strip Regina of her magic when she's the only person who can stand up to Cora or Gold," she accused in a low voice.

"You have magic," Mary Margaret quickly justified. A sinking feeling hit her hard in the gut when her daughter looked at her with eyes so full of hate. She glanced at her stepmother.

"I don't know how to use it!" Emma roared. The house shook in response. She threw her hands in the air. "I don't know how to control it." Tears threatened to fall once again, and she spun in a circle, taking a few steps away from her parents. She turned abruptly, quickly closing the gap between them. "And you'd take away my teacher."

"There are others who can teach you about magic, Emma," David explained with a soft expression. He'd never seen his daughter this raw. Nervously, he tightened his grip on his wife's shoulders.

"Mother Superior?" the sheriff scoffed with condescension. "No thanks, I'll pass on the torture chamber tutorial." Crossing her arms, her nails bit into the flesh of her biceps.

"She's the Evil Queen!" the school teacher retorted, almost shaking as her anger finally rose to the surface, furiously pointing at the weakened woman in question. "She knows nothing but cruelty. She's the reason we're here." Why was this so hard for her daughter to understand? She reached out to cup Emma's face, but when her hands were roughly shoved away, she slapped her instead. For a long moment, she glared at her daughter's turned face, but slowly, she sobered as she realized exactly what she'd done. "Emma," she pleaded softly with regret.

Emma's nostrils flared as fuming, hot breaths filled her lungs. Her lips curled into a dreadful and resentment filled snarl as her fists dropped to her sides. She had yet to turn her head back towards her parents. When her rage was almost at its pinnacle, she heard Regina whisper, "Breathe." And she did. One deep breath turned into another, and gradually, with each exhale, she felt better.

By the time she regained control of her emotions, she saw Bruce Farmer and Diego Flores dragging her uncooperative parents out of the front door. There were some shouts, demands and struggling as they were forced across the yard. But as she watched her mother and father get in the Wagoneer and drive away, she felt a tremendous amount of relief. She continued to take deep breaths.

"Emma?" Henry nervously prompted from the entrance to kitchen. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Alexander on his cellphone. His gaze drifted across the foyer, surveying the damage. He spotted his mother and an unknown Crows Guard round the landing going up the stairs. "Is Mom okay?" he asked timidly.

Licking her lips, the sheriff sighed and wondered how long the boy had been in the house. "Yeah."

"Okay," the boy said softly, intently studying his blonde mother. Opening and closing his mouth several times, he eventually managed to say, "I thought they wanted to apologize."

Sighing, Emma's shoulders slumped. "So did I, Henry." Her gaze roamed around the room and stayed on the gaping hole in the wall. I did that, she thought with a frown.
"I will see the young prince to bed," Alexander announced as he tucked his cellphone in his back pocket. Gently, he guided Henry towards the stairs. "Lieutenant Farmer will secure the house and property, Sheriff Swan." Thankfully, he'd spoken with Bobby on the phone and not the captain. He dreaded tomorrow.

The formal speech startled the sheriff from her musings. Clearing her throat, she simply said, "Okay." Really, what was she going to do? She didn't move until she heard the soft click of Henry's bedroom door closing. With a groan, she rubbed her face and decided she'd better go to bed before Monty Elmwood came barreling in like a raging bull.

~SQ~

It wasn't until the streaming water became tepid did Regina finally exit the shower. Drained and exhausted, she slowly prepared herself for bed. She was surprised when she entered her bedroom to find it empty. At the very least, she had expected to see Emma Swan in the room—if not a brooding Monty Elmwood. She pursed her lips and grabbed her robe off a hook on her closet door. She loosely tied it closed and donned her slippers.

When she stepped out of her room, she listened to the silence and peered over the banister. Turning, she noted Henry's closed bedroom door. Then her attention was slowly drawn to the muffled cries of someone in the currently-under-construction guestroom. She frowned and cautiously walked down the hall. Gently, she pushed the newly installed door open.

Although the debris from the altercation with Cora had been cleared away, there were dents, cracks, and holes in the drywall. But the remaining pieces of furniture and décor were salvageable. The winged-back chair was still by the windows, but the small console table was gone. The tallboy dresser was relatively undamaged, nothing a little TLC and elbow grease couldn't buff out of the wood. Yet, the unmade mattress and boxed-springs laid forlornly on the carpeted floor as the bed frame was trashed, along with the room's knickknacks—a few of which had belonged to Emma. And there the savior sat with her knees drawn up against her chest, her face hidden by freshly washed blonde hair and folded arms draped on top her knees at the end of the bed amidst the woefully empty and damaged room.

Regina observed the blonde for a long second before slowly approaching her. With every step she took forward, it seemed the sheriff curled more into herself. The compassion she reserved for those special few bubbled to the surface with unexpected urgency. It was with watery eyes that she tentatively reached out a reassuring hand, placing a feather-like touch on top of the blonde's left shoulder.

Apparently, that was all it took for Emma to launch herself at the brunette. She quickly stood and wrapped her arms around the other woman in a fierce hug. Both hands held fast onto fistfuls of bathrobe with a white-knuckled grip, her forehead firmly plastered against Regina's neck, hiding her face and her shame.

Startled by the sudden movement and overwhelming emotion, Regina's brows furrowed as she glanced about the empty bed. Sluggishly, she gradually returned the gesture, albeit with far more gentleness. When her hands firmly laid against the sheriff's shaking back, she was rewarded with a wetness along the collar of her pajamas. She took a shuddering breath and relaxed into offering comfort—something that she'd relearned by loving Henry.

Softly, she whispered vague words of support and security, hoping to ease the other woman's worries and woes. But it only seemed to make things worse. When it was clear the platitudes weren't getting through, she easily cradled the back of Emma's head and stroked her back. Her thumb moved back-and-forth against blonde hair as she simply said with gravelly tenderness,
"Thank you." And as she leaned into the embrace, she realized that she meant it.

Unbeknownst to either woman, Monty Elnwood observed the exchange from down the hall. He had heard a door open from the dining room, and when it didn't shut, he cautiously moved upstairs to investigate. As he rounded the landing, he caught a glimpse of his queen's back as she headed towards the guestroom. To see Emma Swan so distraught was poignant, but to see his queen so openly caring was past heartwarming. He hadn't seen such behavior from her since Ida. Pursing his lips, he slowly, quietly headed back downstairs.

When Emma woke in the wee hours of the morning, she realized two things. One, she was warm and snuggled under a pile of blankets. And two, her left hand was interlaced with Regina's right. Slowly, she lifted her head and looked around the familiar bedroom. She frowned as she didn't remember getting into this bed last night. In fact, she vaguely recalled slipping into her once-upon-a-time bedroom and sitting on the bed. Her brows furrowed as embarrassment threatened to overwhelm her as she recollected bear-hugging the brunette. Carefully, she attempted to extract her hand but stopped when Regina's thumb started to absently caress her captive knuckles.

Peering through the darkness, she studied the former mayor's face as she slept on her back. Her head propped up on pillows and tilted slightly in her direction. As she heard the soft, barely present snores of sleep, she relaxed and nestled back down in the covers. Her throat tightened as she closed her eyes again and bit her lip, drawing safety from the hand holding hers. As her mind drifted, she heard the soft promise Regina had made to her several hours ago, "I've got you."

~SQ~

"I believe congratulations are in order," Gold mocked from his seat in a darkened corner, taking delight in startling the distracted fairy. It'd taken some careful reconnaissance and a few hefty bribes, but over the last 24 hours, his suspicions regarding the previous evening's events were confirmed.

"How did you get in here?" Mother Superior demanded. Frightened by his unexpected appearance but determined not to show it, she wasn't in the mood to deal with the Dark One. "I'd thank you to leave."

"Then you'll be sorely disappointed," he mildly taunted as he slowly stood. With slow careful steps and firm taps sounded by his cane on the old, creaky wood floors of the nun's office in the nunnery, he walked over to the large window overlooking the courtyard. "I'm sure you'd come to this realization later rather than sooner. However," he paused and looked over his left shoulder at the vile woman, flashing a broad grin, "I want you to fully appreciate the fruits of your labor." His eyes twinkled as he released a high-pitched giggle.

"What are you talking about?" the fairy loathed to ask. Masking her rising frustrations, she glided across the room and primly sat upon a small sofa. It was true, she hadn't expected failure, and she certainly hadn't expected Regina Mills to have already been bound. But why hadn't she sensed it sooner? How could she have missed it all these years? And more importantly, how was the woman still practicing magic?

"You know exactly what I'm talking about!" Gold snarled with a hard look. He took a deep breath. It was imperative, at this point at least, that they were both on the same page. "You have finally delivered a decisive blow to Cora, albeit a tad late." Looking away, he turned to face the window again. But he didn't gaze outside; he focused on the Blue Fairy's reflection in the glass. "And against us as well."

"She bound her own daughter's magic?" Mother Superior whispered in honest shock. Such a thing
among natural born magic practitioners was virtually unheard of, except in the most extreme and
dire of circumstances.

"Oh yes," he answered, hiding his knowing smirk. "All that darkness and evil you've sensed oozing
off of Cora's spawn," he softly taunted with a dash of glee, "that was the binding spell." He
watched as the insipid woman slowly connected the dots. "Placed on poor Regina before she was
even born," he lamented in a soft, singsong tone.

Her eyes darted around the room before finally resting on the Dark One's back. "But Regina cast
your Dark Curse," she tried to rationalize it all. "She kept all of those people captive within the
borders of the Dark Forest." She frowned. Certainly the bastard was playing another mind game
with her and hoping for her to doubt her sensibilities, the truth.

"She did cast the curse," Gold agreed and scornfully added, "after a great deal of prodding."
Clearing his throat, he continued, "Like you, I can't speculate on the matter of the Dark Forest." He
still didn't quite understand how Regina had pulled that bit off. It had escalated their falling out, his
permanent banishment from the Evil Queen's domain. "And don't forget the death curse she
absorbed at the well, Dearie."

"Why are you telling me this?" Mother Superior snapped, losing her patience. She stood, taking a
more aggressive stance to remove this vile creature from her presence. This had to be a ruse. It had
to be because, if it wasn't, she'd made a huge, and perhaps costly, mistake and, in the process, done
an immeasurable disservice to an innocent.

Sighing, he turned again and faced the annoying fairy. He smoothly replied, "I'm doing this town a
favor."

"You're doing yourself a favor, you mean," she haughtily corrected. Narrowing her eyes, she
demanded, "What are you planning?"

"It's one and the same," Gold countered. He tightly gripped the handle of his cane. "Let me spell it
out for you, Dearie." Pausing for effect, he said, "Stay away from Cora. And you'd better endear
yourself to your precious Snow White because I think you're on the Savior's no fly list."

"You're not telling me anything I don't already know," hissed the Blue Fairy, losing patience. She
didn't like this one bit.

"Then let me tell you something we both don't know," he said, finally heading towards the door at
an agonizingly slow pace. He rested his hand on the wrought-iron door latch and paused to weigh
what he was about to say. Peering over his shoulder, he continued, "We don't know Regina's true
capabilities."

Stunned, Mother Superior took a step back at the surprisingly honest admission. Her legs bumped
into a chair and she quickly sat down. "Is that why you bound her to Emma?" she meekly
prompted.

With a shrug, Gold readjusted his hold on his cane. "Finally using that age-addled brain of yours,"
he quipped but nodded. He fixed a hard gleam at the slack-jawed woman. No longer in the mood to
lend a helping hand, he left, leaving behind a clearly distraught fairy.

~SQ~

END PART 7
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: As we’ve mentioned before, we don't watch the show which I believe to be a blessing at this point. Also, I wish to clarify that the parts shouldn't be considered episodic and as independent entities won't always follow a traditional narrative arc, making the development of the parts for our benefit. On another note, my beloved co-author has taken a more active role with this story, meaning two things: One, Part 9 may be posted a heck of a lot sooner; and two, there's more fluff.

Thank You for all of the fantastic reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. We work hard to update every quarter.

~SQ~

PART 8

As Emma Swan descended the stairs from the second floor of 108 Mifflin Street, she scowled and absently readjusted her baggie sweater to stave off the chilly, spring morning leaking in from the tarp-covered windows. She surveyed the destruction from the foyer, recalling all the other bits of damage throughout the house. Glancing over the scattered dents in the drywall from Bruce and David's struggle, her eyes focused on the Mother Superior-sized hole in the wall between the study and foyer. She crossed her arms and huffed. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Alexander with his backpack slung over his shoulder and grumpily asked, "Why doesn't she just fix this?" She turned fully towards the drummer, spotting Regina emerging from the short hall that led to the kitchen. "Aren't you going to fix this?" she restated.

"No," the former mayor simply replied, trying not wince at the piercing echo of Emma's voice in the foyer. Her migraine made everything excruciatingly intense. Taking a slow breath, she closed her eyes and absently rubbed her left temple.

"Why not?" the sheriff almost whined, missing Regina's pained expression. Frowning, she poked her head across the threshold of the living room. She looked around again, noticing the broken coffee table was still on the living room floor, and the tipped over sofa had knocked over a potted plant and console table. Keepsakes and picture frames had been tossed about the place. No Crows Guard were in sight, either.

"Economics," the brunette said flatly. Slowly, she opened her eyes and briefly pondered what she was going to do with herself today, given her condition. She was silently relieved Emma appeared none the worse for wear, but hearing the soft chimes from the grandfather clock, she turned to Alexander and gently scolded, "You're going to be late."

Glancing between the two women, the drummer nodded. "Yes, Ma'am." He quickly disappeared down the hall, slipping out the side door and down the driveway. His offer to skip school had been firmly denied. Of course, he really didn't want to be around when Monty returned.
"What does economics have to do with you fixing the house with magic?" the blonde prompted before Alexander even got out of the house. With furrowed brows, she pursed her lips and faced the former mayor. Her expression softened as she noticed the tightness around Regina's eyes, prompting her to gently ask, "Are you okay?"

"Migraine," Regina supplied before turning to head back into the kitchen. She remembered that herbal tea headache remedy Widow Granger had sent over a few weeks ago. Prepping the tea kettle, she couldn't help but notice the sheriff had followed her. "Magic is not a fix all," she elucidated.

"Well, no," Emma reluctantly agreed, keeping her voice down. During her lessons, she had quickly learned that magic could be a royal pain in the ass. She glanced over her shoulder before fully entering the kitchen. She paced the length of the island, shoving her hands in her jean pockets, teeth worrying her lower lip. "I just thought you'd be tired of all the foot traffic."

Loading the tea infuser with tiny, dark, dried leaves, the former mayor explained, "Our consternation aside, it facilitates the town's rather limited economy." Waiting on the kettle, she closed her eyes and focused on the cool crispness in the air.

"Okay," the sheriff drawled, nodding. She sort of got it, especially after spying the e-mail correspondence between Regina and Stephen Doggle. Apparently, a few members of the Chamber of Commerce were getting concerned with the town's post-curse state of commerce, or rather, its lack thereof. "Isn't there a town hall meeting about that coming up?"

"There's no town hall," the brunette quipped, catching just the hint of a whistle from the kettle. She quickly turned off the burner and moved to steep her tea. "Mayor Herman will certainly be in for a treat," she muttered, a devious grin briefly lighting her face. The newly-elected mayor already had his hands full with filling Albert Spencer's position without sparking interest from the Washington County District Attorney's office. "Thankfully, this isn't an election year," she sneered, remembering the pointless conversation she and Mitchel Herman had fielded with the self-inflated state official in Machias. It also helped that Storybrooke was considered well off the beaten path.

"Yeah," the blonde sighed, watching the steaming liquid slowly turn a dark, green-black. She scrunched her nose at the wafting scent. "That stuff stinks," she hissed, taking a step back. "I hope it tastes better than it smells." 

"If it works, I won't care," Regina said, removing the infuser. Carefully, she cupped the warm mug with both hands and brought it up to her lips. She inhaled deeply, hoping for the added benefit of aromatherapy from the potent, earthy fragrance. Her eyes drifted closed and she blew softly across the hot liquid.

Emma fidgeted. She didn't know what to do with herself. Right now, her world felt entirely too small and lonely. "What's the plan for today?" she quickly asked, curling her lip in disgust as the brunette sipped the smelly tea. Of course, she had sheriff-type stuff she could work on from home, but the study was a disaster. And her bedroom. And the living room.

Trying not to wince as the bitter bite of herbs lingered on her taste buds, Regina frowned. She didn't feel capable of placating or entertaining anyone at the moment—even Emma or Henry. "As long as I'm left alone, I don't particularly care," she grumbled into her mug. A comfortable silence hung in the air between them as she slowly drank the tea. Only a few minutes into the warm beverage, she felt sleep pulling at her. "I believe I may retire to the den," she stated, focusing on the blonde with drooping eyelids.

"Alright," the sheriff acknowledged. She stood in silence as Regina finished her tea. Idly, she
closed the jar of tea leaves and returned the canister to the appropriate cabinet, watching Regina disappear down the stairs that led to the den.

~SQ~

It was a sunny and warm midafternoon when Monty Elmwood slowly descended the stairs into the finished basement of her majesty's home. With no natural light seeping through the drawn curtains of the cellar windows, the large, gloomy den with its dark cherry walls had a cool, foreboding air as soft, haunting classical music played from a console record player across the room. His booted feet tread quietly across the lush, deep red carpet. As he moved around a plush, dark brown leather sofa, he spotted his prone queen in an extremely rare state of relaxation.

With her left arm draped over her eyes, Regina lay on her back swaddled in a royal blue cardigan, a pale blue cotton blouse and khakis. Her white, cashmere-socked feet with ankles crossed were propped on the sofa's armrest. She made no move to acknowledge her uninvited guest.

So patiently, the commander of the guard stood at parade rest and waited for the music to stop. His gaze drifted over the multitude of bookshelves lining the walls filled with a thirty-year collection of books, movies, and music. The large, flat panel television and pool table had made the secluded room a favorite among the guards since the curse broke. As he heard the soft click of the record player, the arm reset and the turntable stop, he looked expectantly at his queen.

"Stop your brooding," the former mayor grumbled, moving her left arm to rest her hand on her stomach. She idly fiddled with a button on her cardigan. "What time is it?" she quietly inquired.

"Almost three, Your Highness," Elmwood answered quietly. When she raised her right hand, he easily assisted her upright. He stepped back, allowing her room to resettle herself on the sofa. "Was your respite satisfactory?" he queried softly. Of course, he'd only allow her to delay the impending conversation for so long, but he wouldn't push if she was still ill.

Leaning heavily against the armrest on her left elbow, Regina took a deep breath as she looked up at her commander. She pursed her lips as she tucked her feet under her. "Yes, thank you," she replied. "Despite the stampede," she added with a slight edge.

Monty frowned and realized that explained the oddly sedate atmosphere when he arrived. "I talked with the sheriff, Farmer, and the others on duty yesterday," he said with a hint of displeasure.

"Oh?" the former mayor interjected simply, lazily blinking. Her massive headache had subsided but had left her feeling drained. Or was that a side effect of the tea?

"Yes," Elmwood ground out, face contorted into a stern scowl.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she could feel the frustration and anger rolling off him. "It wasn't their fault," she started, knowing Bruce had probably been demoted. "Who would've thought the blue mosquito had it in her?" she asked with a dismissive wave of her hand. Her gaze drifted off to the side, tracing the shelves of books.

"Those people should've never been allowed inside this house unescorted," he snapped. But he quickly turned away to reign in his temper. He took several deep breaths before he partially faced his queen. "Your security is paramount," he intoned. They both knew what was potentially at stake back in the Enchanted Forest, past the borders of the Dark Forest. Both knew what would happen if the protective, magical barrier was to fall.

Surprised by the intensity of his reaction, Regina tilted her head as she stoically regarded him. "Am
I to be punished for wanting a *sliver* of alone time?" she pondered with a slight glower. Every day, she was surrounded by people. Her cherished, peaceful isolation of the last three decades was gone, never to return. Groundhog Day be damned—her time during the curse, although not what she'd expected, had been therapeutic in its own, odd way.

Monty diverted his gaze again and dropped his head. "No, Ma'am," he offered respectfully. His eyes drifted around the room and he smirked. The lesser willed would've crumbled under Rumpelstiltskin's Dark Curse, but his queen had continued to blossom under cruel adversities. "Apologies," he said, fully facing her and bowing gracefully.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, the former mayor felt the weak remnants of her migraine flare. She hated the pomp and circumstance. Her mother had gluttonously devoured the boring protocols of state and gentry, ad nauseam; her father had merely accepted it as a fact of life. Now, it was her life, will she or nil she.

"May I present my recommendation?" Elmwood flatly prompted, deciding to move the conversation along. Although he managed to stall his smirk, he couldn't help but cock an eyebrow at her curious glance.

"Very well," she responded with a mixture of trepidation and interest. With softly furrowed brows, she rested her chin on her left palm and waited. After all, her commander did have a talent for surprising her. "Out with it."

Lifting his chin and squaring his shoulders, he took a deep, silent breath and confidently stated, "I believe Sheriff Swan should be inducted into the Crows Guard."

Raising an eyebrow, Regina darkly quipped, "As a reward or punishment?"

"Both." Pursing his lips for a brief second, Monty honestly explained, "With further training, the sheriff could be a capable asset." He frowned at the expected eye roll but continued, "I trust her with your safety." Last night's events had proven a great many things he had long suspected.

However, it was a single word that commanded the former mayor's sincere consideration. She made no attempt to respond as her unfocused gaze drifted away. Finally, she softly inquired, "Who would train her?"

Elmwood hid his relief as he answered, "McCormac." He further relaxed at the slow nod.

Looking the captain straight in the eye, she waited a moment before saying, "See to it." She closed her eyes after his brisk nod, ignoring his quick exit. No doubt, she would hear of it all later from a battered and bruised savior.

~SQ~

"I didn't believe there to be a cure for a werewolf's bite," Hook commented before taking a long swig of rum from his dented and favored flask. The burning helped dull the rancid smell from the salve the sorceress applied to the cursed wound. Of course, it wasn't as if the musty air of the underground vault helped matters. "It's healing fast," he added, not that he cared. With casual disregard, he crossed his booted feet on the corner of the old harvest table, warily eyeing the magical tomes spread about the surface.

"There's a cure for everything," Cora needlessly replied, only mildly irritated by the idiot pirate's presence. "It's only a matter of knowledge and power." She continued to carefully dab the ointment before rewring her arm in a silver-threaded scarf. Once done, she slowly moved her hand over
the bandage, releasing a minuscule amount of magic. "It will be healed long before the first full moon." She had been lucky.

The pirate pondered their current quandary, idly rolling the dregs of rum about the flask. Thus far, he'd been very patient, as he enjoyed toying with the Dark One, but the tensions amongst the factions in town were teetering toward explosive. "So," he drawled with feigned disinterest, "what's the plan? Lay low?"

"No," the sorceress replied, gazing into the low flames within the stone hearth. "As soon as I've fully healed, we move forward with the plan." At this, the sloshing stopped; she wickedly grinned, never turning away from the flickering flames. "You'll have your revenge on the Dark One, and I'll have his power." She cut a sharp glare at her coconspirator. "We will not be afforded another opportunity," she stated with finality.

Flash a rakish smirk, Hook dropped his feet to the stone floor with a sharp slap. "No worries, Love," he said boastfully. Standing, he swaggered over to the hearth. "The devil will have his due," he intoned darkly, downing his last drink of rum. "He won't even see me coming."

Cora returned her glowering gaze back to the fire, hiding her rising concerns. It wasn't the Dark One she was worried about out maneuvering, after all, she'd done so many times before. What troubled her was the Blue Fairy's success in breaking the binding spell—a spell she'd previously thought had slowly eroded over the years, allowing Regina's magic to leak through. "You'd better be right." For the first time, her daughter was a wild card, and that worried her.

~SQ~

"Oh my God, Regina. This is so good," Emma enthusiastically mumbled around a bite of her second helping of lasagna. Her eyes shut in appreciation as she hummed in quiet pleasure. The warmth of the rich dish was a welcome respite from the crisp chill in the air caused by the lazy thunderstorm outside.

Smirking at the blonde's rapture, Regina was drawn out of her silent contemplation, amused at the exaggerated bliss on display. "I'm glad you like it, Dear," she replied, sharing a broad smile with Henry who sat across from Emma, giggling silently at his mother's antics. She idly resumed caressing the lip of her half full tumbler of cider. The sense of family was a welcome salve. She took a slow, deep breath, surprised at the depth of her contentment with the moment.

Emma grunted in satisfaction as she washed the pasta down with a sip of water. "Seriously," she added, turning to the former mayor, "I don't think I've ever met anyone who can cook like you do. You should go on Chopped or something. You'd win, hands down." She flashed a toothy smile before scooping up another bite. Left to her own devices for much of the day, she desperately needed this evening to be light and good-humored.

"I'm flattered that y—." The doorbell cut off the rest of Regina's response, causing both women to frown and direct their attention toward the foyer. Guests were most unwelcome at the moment.

"Who braved the platoon to get to the door?" the sheriff mused as she stood, tossing her cloth napkin on the table. She was still smiling about dinner when she opened the front door; however, one look at the person on the small, covered porch, and her good mood instantly soured. "What do you want?" she scowled, crossing her arms. So much for a pleasant evening.

"I'd like to come in," Mr. Gold evenly countered, managing to keep a straight face. Dark One or no, he still got wet from the rain, just like everyone else. "That would be the polite response when someone arrives on your doorstep in the rain."
Emma's frown deepened, but she stepped aside so he could enter. She watched as he set his umbrella in the stand by the door. "Okay, you're inside, now. What do you want?" she prodded.

Sneering slightly at the lackluster manners, the shopkeeper replied, "If this is how you treat all of your guests, it's no wonder your parents looked so haggard the last time they left here." He spotted the fire in the savior's gaze.

"They overstayed their welcome," came Regina's clipped response as she joined them in the foyer. Even with arms crossed and hips cocked to one side, she didn't really cut her usual imposing figure in a cardigan and house shoes. Then again, she knew Rumpelstiltskin's game was wordplay.

Henry slowly slipped out of his seat and slunk towards the foyer, determined to not be left out of the loop, again.

"Your manners are slipping, Dearie," the imp chided his former student, clucking his tongue. He quickly assessed her and decided to duly curb his impulse to yank their chains. "When did offering a nice cup of hot tea to callers on such a damp day go out of style?"

Flashing him a wide, toothy smile that dripped disdain, the brunette retorted, "That rule doesn't apply to crocodiles." Her eyes glinted in triumph as she watched his jaw muscles flex in response. It was a small victory, but she'd take it. For whatever his reason, she realized he was playing nice, and that put her on edge.

Gold shifted his grip on his cane as he directed his attention back to the sheriff. "I'll get right to the point, then. I'm here to collect on your favor owed."

"If you'll recall, Sheriff, that was an entirely separate deal, paid in full. It's none of my concern if the results aren't to your liking. After all," he spread his hands in a placating gesture, keeping his tone light, "you never specified what type of tracking spell you wanted." He was mincing words, and the coiling of magic in the air was a clear warning to tread carefully. His gaze briefly drifted back to his former apprentice.

The blonde's mouth became a hard line, her hands forming into fists at her sides.

Seeing Emma about to snap at Rumpelstiltskin's not-so-vailed taunt, Regina breezed down the short steps, placing a gentle, staying hand on her friend's upper back. Her gaze, however, remained fixed on their visitor. "To what favor are you referring?" she asked for clarification, wanting to prevent another incident in her already decimated home.

"I simply assisted the sheriff in preventing a wee babe from being separated from her mother," he replied with a dark titter. His eyes never left the blonde's; however, the casual touch between the women did not go unnoticed, and he filed it away to be contemplated later.

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"A separation you orchestrated, no doubt," the brunette responded, dropping her hand and re-crossing her arms. "Fine," she sighed in resignation, ignoring Emma's large, sad eyes looking at her, "what is it that you want in return?" She couldn't very well broker a counter-deal until she knew all the details. Why did no one listen to her? She pursed her lips, desperately trying to keep Henry in her peripheral vision.

Raising his chin slightly, Gold turned towards the former mayor, and stated, "I want Ms. Swan to
do what she does best and find someone for me." This didn't have to be difficult.

Interest piqued, Emma looked askance at him. "Who?" she asked curiously.

"My son." Ignoring the blonde's shocked expression and the brunette's perplexed one, he continued, "He's in Manhattan, but I'm unsure of his exact location. You're to find him and bring him back to Storybrooke with you." Pausing, he reached into his coat pocket and produced a thick envelope. Handing it to Emma, he added, "I'll cover all of your expenses, of course." He could be generous.

Nonplussed, the sheriff took the envelope out of reflex, unable to wrap her mind around the idea that Gold had a son, let alone one somewhere in this world. "Does your son have a name? If I decide to do this, I need something to go on." She softly tapped the flat side of the fat envelope of cash against her palm. Good money, she thought, figuring she'd eek out another few grand.

"His name is Baelfire—Bae." Gold paused, reaching into his other pocket. He handed the brunette a tattered, braided wool bracelet, simple but well executed, and a small, plain wooden box. "He made this for me before he disappeared. You should be able to use the compass to track his location once you're in New York."

In obvious disbelief, the blonde silently mouthed Baelfire three or four times. Her face scrunched up in disapproval, but she thought better of making fun since the father's name was Rumpelstiltskin.

Inspecting the enchanted compass inside the box, Regina cut a narrowed stare at the shopkeeper and questioned, "How do you know he's there or that he's even alive?" Too many pieces were in play, and she didn't like it. She refused to be manipulated by this man, again.

"I have my sources," the imp responded elusively, not meeting his former student's searching eyes. He could feel her magic weaving around them with, as yet, undetermined intent. It wasn't something he'd ever experienced before, and that concerned him. "I expect you ladies won't run into too much trouble with the task." Snagging his umbrella from the stand, Gold turned to leave. As he stepped out the door and opened his umbrella, he added over his shoulder, "I wouldn't tarry too much before leaving. Things won't stay quiet for long."

Emma forcibly pushed the door closed. She winced at the loud slam and the brunette's disgruntled sigh. "Sorry," she quickly whispered. Her sad eyes went unnoticed, however, as the former mayor was already returning to the dining room. Without thought, she followed, idly playing with the envelope of money.

"Mr. Gold has a son?!!" Henry excitedly asked, hopping back into his seat at the dining table. During the conversation, he had naturally snuck much closer.

"Apparently," Regina answered sternly, signaling her displeasure over the topic and her son's eavesdropping. She gracefully returned to her own seat, setting the bracelet and compass beside her. Her gaze focused intently on the remaining amber liquid before taking a quick drink. She didn't need this complication.

Emma also returned to her seat at the dining table, her mood clearly soured. Thankfully, the boy took a clue from his mothers' tight expressions and left the newfound knowledge alone. She dropped the envelope between herself and the brunette before quickly scooping up a too-big bite of food. Unceremoniously, she shoved it in her mouth. Her eyes drifted closed despite the dish having cooled during Gold's unwanted call. It still tasted delicious and served as a necessary comfort. She sighed heavily through her nose. As she took another bite, she felt the brunette's gaze on her. She...
swallowed and darkly quipped, "Since we're leaving town, I guess I don't need to leave any leftovers." As the former mayor chuckled lightly, the tension in the sheriff's shoulders disappeared.

"I suppose not, Miss Swan," Regina offered with open mirth before once again sipping her cider. Seeing the warm, beaming smile on the blonde's face directed at her, she felt something she hadn't felt in a long time—wanted. And how strange that her mood shifted at its presence.

~SQ~

Henry fidgeted nervously in the front passenger seat of the yellow beetle. They'd been driving on Route 9 for a couple of hours and were almost to I-95. His eyes searched the blurred landscape, occasionally glancing over his left shoulder at his dozing brunette mother in the backseat. They'd switched spots 30 minutes outside of Storybrooke, and she'd been sleeping ever since.

"She's fine, Kid," Emma assured the boy for the umpteenth time since crossing the town line. And like the other times, she ignored his disbelieving look. She quickly glanced in the rearview mirror, checking for herself. "Have you talked to her, yet?" she quietly prompted.

"No," he answered, slumping in his seat. He leaned heavily against the car door, putting as much distance as possible between them. "She'd just lie," he mumbled. Or not, he considered with a scowl.

Pursing her lips, the blonde tightly readjusted her grip on the steering wheel. That's when the car lurched slightly, backfiring. "Oh, come on!" she cried when the event repeated. Quickly, she checked all of the gauges as the car continued to shudder. The needles bounced wildly for a long moment as she turned on her hazards and expertly guided the slowing beetle toward the shoulder, watching with dread as the instruments all dropped to zero and the engine died. "Nooo," she painfully whined, edging the vehicle partially into the grass.

The sudden falter of the engine, followed by the bump and growl of the tires crossing rumble strips served to wake Regina from her nap. Blinking twice, she took in their current situation with a hint of amusement. "I dare say—" the brunette started but was cut off.

"Don't," the sheriff darkly ordered. Once the car rolled to a complete stop, she heavily dropped her forehead onto the steering wheel. That's when the tears started, and the blonde's hands released the wheel, falling hard against the front of her seat in defeat.

Regina felt her triumphant I-told-you-so moment greatly tempered by Emma's obvious distress, sobering her mirth instantly and triggering her fledging compassion. She reached between the seats and placed her hand on her friend's shoulder, giving it a light squeeze of support. "I'm sure we can find a repair shop nearby that can get it patched up. We'll be on the road again soon enough," Regina encouraged gently.

The blonde head rocked side to side against the steering wheel. "It won't matter. Salter told me that he barely got her working the last time." She took a shuddering breath and wailed, "It was her last hail Maryyyy...," before beginning to sob in earnest. Everything else from that point was a blur. She was only vaguely aware of Regina speaking to someone on her cell phone and discussion of a tow truck prior to being guided out of her baby and put into some oily-smelling truck.

A couple of hours later, they were in Bangor, Maine, sitting in the waiting room of Bennett Auto Center when they got the news that the car was a lost cause. "Emma," the former mayor said softly, gently placing a hand on the blonde's shoulder. "You should say goodbye." Hiding her relief, she watched the distraught woman shuffle out of the repair shop and over to the dead beetle.
"Are you sure they can't fix it?" Henry asked, worry causing his brow to scrunch up as his eyes followed his blonde mother.

Sighing, Regina shook her head in regret. "I'm afraid not. The manager advised the current engine has been rebuilt so many times, and the parts are so old that it would need an entirely new engine. Also, the rear axle has the beginnings of a small crack, and the exhaust system won't pass inspection without a new catalytic converter." She glanced down at Henry before returning her attention to Emma. "There's more, but it all means that it's not worth the repairs anymore."

"How are we going to get to New York?" he questioned, looking up at her in confusion.

Smirking slightly, the brunette succinctly replied, "We get a new vehicle. Wait here a moment, Henry, while I check on Emma."

"Okay," the boy agreed quickly, perusing the automobile magazine on his lap with newfound interest.

Regina slowly strolled out of the waiting room, hands firmly in her coat pockets, eventually coming to stop at the blonde's side. She remained silent for a moment, gauging her friend's grief and receptiveness. "I'm sorry about the car. I know it meant a great deal to you," she offered quietly.

"Thanks," Emma sniffed, her hand making aimless circles on the car's hood. "It's dumb, I know," she said with a self-depreciating grin. "I just…. This car has been the one constant in my life. Hell, I even lived in it for a while." Staring pensively into the rear window, she finally admitted, "I guess I'm afraid that if I lose the car, I'll lose the memories, too." She gave Regina an embarrassed, sad smile, tears threatening to spill over her eyelashes.

"It's not silly to want to keep memories close, even when they cause you pain," the brunette empathized introspectively. Shaking off the sudden melancholy, she caught Emma's eyes and declared lightly, "I suppose there's nothing for it, then."

"Huh? What do you mean?" she queried, puzzled by her companion's tone.

Pursing her lips and shrugging slightly, Regina continued, "Since we have to leave the bug behind, it seems we will need to procure you a new vehicle."

The sheriff blinked in surprise at the matter-of-fact statement, her initial excitement quickly drowned out by the reality of her financial situation. "Yeah," she muttered despondently. "Like that's going to happen anytime soon."

Unsure what had caused the blonde's sudden shift in mood, the former mayor tilted her head to the side, trying to get a better look at Emma's downturned face. "What's wrong? I had thought the prospect of a new car would have elicited some enthusiasm."

Giving Regina a pained grimace, she replied, "That would be great if I could afford it. I'd be doing good to pay for bus tickets, right now. It's not like I can use the money Gold gave us," she added bitterly, kicking at the loose pebbles on the asphalt.

"Well," the brunette began, relaxing in understanding, "we'll just have to make it a joint purchase." Seeing the narrowed stare directed at her, she realized Emma's pride was going to be a larger hurdle than she'd originally thought. This was going to take a deft hand; thankfully, she had many years of politics under her belt to draw upon. "As I see it, it's an investment. A new vehicle will have all of the modern safety features your old car was lacking, making it a good choice, bearing in
mind we have Henry. Besides," she concluded offhandedly, "I'd been considering the idea for a while. What better opportunity than now?"

Emma stood in brooding silence for several moments, glad Regina was giving her time to think about the proposal. While she knew the brunette was only trying to soften the blow to her ego, she also heard the truth in her words and knew that she was sincere in her offer. Pressing her lips together tightly, she finally nodded in acceptance. "Alright. But I get to choose the kind of car I want, right?"

Regina felt the worry in her chest loosen a little at Emma's acquiescence. Glad to see the blonde beginning to perk back up, she retorted in a reasonable tone, "It has to be practical for all three of us."

Waving her hand in playful indifference as she began walking back to the building, the sheriff shot back, "I'm picking the color."

"I have final say," the former mayor asserted, following with a wide smile.

~SQ~

Despite the sharp crispness of a light breeze, the bright midafternoon sun shone warm and high above in a cloudless blue sky. However, the echoing crunch of dead leaves and twigs was deafening as Mary Margaret led Ruby and Marco through the thick woodlands beyond the athletic fields of Storybrooke Academy.

"Where is she taking us?" Marco finally asked the wolf once his beloved queen was out of earshot. Whatever the purpose of this expedition, it would certainly be worthwhile, but the interruption to his work was still mildly irritating. He was already behind schedule on a few time-sensitive projects.

"No idea." Ruby replied with a shrug. It wasn't an entirely truthful answer. She knew why they were going into the woods, just not for whom, specifically. Absently, she adjusted her red-and-black knitted beanie and resettled her gloved hands in her jacket's pockets. She pursed her lips as she glanced sideways at her hiking companion. The woodworker wasn't necessarily one of her favorite people, but right then, he was preferable company to the trail-blazing Mary Margaret. Her gaze drifted back to the horizon as she ambled along.

Earlier that morning, the waitress had no sooner tied an apron around her waist and flipped over the open sign hanging in the front window, than Mary Margaret had rushed in and was sitting at the counter in Granny's Diner, asking her to run off with her; and long story short, there was an important stranger in the woods behind the school. Ruby had easily refused, reminding her friend of her extra shift at the Sheriff's station the night before, which immediately rolled into working at the diner until after the lunch rush. She had casually suggested informing Puma, but that had been adamantly rejected. Unfortunately, nothing had dissuaded her friend, who had promised to wait until the waitress was free. Damnit, this afternoon was supposed to have been hers! She'd been looking forward to sleeping since 3:30am. Alas, here she was, following a long-ago queen through the woods.

"Hurry up!" called Mary Margaret with an encouraging wave. She kept moving onward, spotting the familiar-shaped thicket only twenty yards ahead. Her gaze avidly searched the surrounding trees for a green fletched arrow she had placed in a tree trunk about twenty feet above the ground. After her last visit, she'd used one to mark the location of the trailer, just in case. She knew this was a good thing; the town needed something to celebrate, and what could be better than reuniting a father and son? Spotting the arrow, she shouted, "We're almost there!" launching into a jog. With
a grin on her face, she trotted around the wall of brush to find—nothing.

Slowly, the school teacher walked to where the travel trailer had obviously been parked. She squatted to examine the muddy, washed out tire tracks. Her gaze followed them away from the camp site, and she knew they would eventually lead them to the gravel service road that cut through the forest on the far end. "Darn it," she cursed and huffed in agitation.

"What?" Ruby questioned, rounding the tangled wall of overgrown brush. She looked around and could tell someone had camped there, if the sections of rammed earth were any indication. "Who was here?" she prompted. Her eyes traced the soot-covered stones of a well-used fire pit, the four shallow impressions a camp chair's feet had pressed into the mud beside it, and a pig trail between the pit and where a trailer had been. How did anyone miss this? She had run through these woods a lot during the last few months. With a frown, she crossed her arms, and her eyes jumped between her two companions. At least the woodworker was just as baffled.

When there was no immediate answer to the wolf's request, Marco pressed for a response. "Your Majesty, why did you bring us all the way out here?" He was too old to wander the untamed woods. His talents lay with advice and craftsmanship.

Standing up, Mary Margaret turned toward her trusted companions. She took a deep breath and gently answered, "Pinocchio." Shaking her head, she added with sadness, "I'm so sorry, Geppetto."

"Pinocchio?" the woodworker repeated in surprise. A smile crept across his weathered face at this most unexpected and pleasant surprise. "Where is he now?" Excitedly, he looked about the site for some sign of his son, anything.

"I don't know," the school teacher replied in defeat, not noticing the older man's delight. She bumped her glove covered fists against her thighs. This wasn't going how she'd hoped. Her people needed a victory. She needed a victory.

Having moved toward the fire pit, Marco spotted a small, whittled bird, its white pine beak poking out from under some leaves. His heart felt heavy as he bent over, brushed away the dead foliage, and picked up the slight wood carving. With love, he examined his son's work, and he felt pride at noticing the subtle intricacies of a blue bird. His throat was choked with emotion.

Ruby crossed her arms and debated over what she should do. On one hand, this was sweet, but on the other, this was totally messed up. She pursed her lips and casually walked over to her old friend. "So now what?" she solicited softly, gesturing to the daydreaming woodworker fondling a little piece of wood.

"I guess we wait for Pinocchio to come out of hiding," Mary Margaret sadly supplied, keeping a watchful eye on the old man.

"Maybe the Crows Guard can help track him down," the waitress suggested helpfully. She might not care for the sanctimonious craftsman, but she did feel bad for him. Sure Granny pissed her off from time to time, but she would miss the cantankerous old hag if she disappeared.

"No," the school teacher ordered with resolution, shaking her head. She continued in a dismissive tone, "We shouldn't involve them any more than we have to." Truthfully, at this point, she wasn't sure if any of the Crows Guard would even talk to her, let alone help. Maybe if she could convince Emma . . ., but she and her daughter didn't have the best relationship, at the moment.

"Why not?" pleaded Marco. Overhearing their conversation, he moved towards the two women. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but this is my son. We've been separated for far too long." He lovingly
stowed the blue bird away in the breast pocket of his coat. "Would you not search for Princess Emma?"

As her heart swelled with pain and regret, Mary Margaret turned watery, soulful eyes upon the woodworker. "I'd do anything for Emma, Geppetto, and I know you understand that. But this situation is different." She paused and vaguely gestured at the empty camp site. "He doesn't want to be found."

"Didn't you tell Pinocchio you were bringing his dad?" inquired Ruby. Her confusion was clear, but her sheriff's deputy trained mind was not liking the dots she was connecting. "You didn't tell him," she clarified, taking a step away. Her face contorted into a look of disbelief.

"No, it wasn't like that," the school teacher protested. Quickly, she added, "He asked me not to bring Geppetto." She pursed her lips and thought better of sharing that she wasn't supposed to return at all. As her eyes drifted across the site, she pouted and realized August didn't trust her. Since the tire tracks were washed out, it was pretty obvious he had moved before the rain rolled through town. She released a heavy, frustrated sigh.

"Why would my boy not want to see me?" Marco implored as tears gathered in his eyes. "He's been alone all this time," he muttered. The hand resting over the whittled blue bird in his coat dropped to his side as a tear finally rolled down his cheek.

"A seven-year-old is living in the woods, alone, and you don't want to ask the Crows Guard for help?!" the waitress screeched in newly heightened worry. She sniffed the air adamantly as she moved around the camp site, hoping to catch a scent of the boy. "Why didn't you just drag him back to town?" she called from across the camp site. For that matter, how did the boy drive a truck pulling a trailer?

Irritated, Mary Margaret rolled her eyes at the wolf's antics. "You really think I'd leave a child in the woods?" she scoffed, mildly offended. "He was an adult," she clarified, throwing her hands up, "only a few years older than Emma, which was strange." As she shifted to stand with arms akimbo, she paused, mentally recapping her conversation with August. Tilting her head, her eyes jumped between the waitress and woodworker. "He also said his condition wasn't because of the Dark Curse." That had boggled her mind, but magic stuff usually did.

"What condition?" Marco beseeched. Old fears rushed upon him as if the curse was rolling in towards him and his boy all over again.

"I don't understand how it happened or worked out," answered the school teacher. A puzzled look twisted her features before she elaborated, "But, he's wood." She crossed her arms, focusing on the woodworker. "He was a real boy before the curse brought us here, but now, he's wood—a giant man-sized puppet."

Ruby stopped dead in her tracks. Listing her head to one side, she studied her old friend and uttered, "Huh?" Needless to say, her search for a scent ended. She couldn't track a wooden puppet-man who lived in the forest.

However, it all made sense for Marco. He released a heavy sigh, slouching as both relief and guilt weighed on his shoulders. He nodded to himself and quietly stated, "I know how." Looking skyward, he let the warmth of the sun bathe his face. He smiled and said, "He made it."

"Made it?" pondered Mary Margaret, stepping closer to the old man. She glanced over her shoulder at a wide-eyed Ruby. "Made it where?"
With a broad grin and arms wide, the woodworker joyously replied, "He made it here!"

"Okay," drawled the school teacher. She quickly prompted, "How did he get here?" If there had been another way to escape the curse, why didn't she know about it?

"Oh," the waitress muttered to herself and nervously rolled her lips. Something was about to go down.

Suddenly, Marco realized his mistake, but it was too late to backpedal or feign ignorance. So, he decided to face his monarch's wrath with dignity. "I put Pinocchio through the wardrobe," he stated without remorse. The slap that immediately followed was completely unexpected. Tenderly, he touched his stinging cheek but didn't face his queen.

"Snow!" admonished Ruby. She rushed to the woodworker's side, placing a hand on his arm, and scowled at her friend. For crying out loud, old people were frail. Sure, she'd wanted to deck Granny a few times, but she would never do it.

Unchecked tears rolled freely down Mary Margaret's cheeks as she obstinately shook her head. "Only one person could go through the wardrobe," she flatly and needlessly restated.

Patting the wolf's hand, Marco looked upon the red, tear stained face of his beloved queen. "It pained me, Your Majesty, but I had to ensure my son stayed safe." He spread his arms wide, passively forcing Ruby to step away. "As a parent, I'm sure you could understand—"

"You separated us," the school teacher seethed. "We could've been together." Her eyes were full of fire. "Emma was going to save us all. She has saved us all." Shaking her head, she turned her back on her trusted advisors and balled her fists. "She didn't have to be alone," she growled. Her own guilt over her daughter's childhood slapped her across her heart. "You had no right," she intoned with all the royal air she could muster.

"Yes, I did," the woodworker shot back, raising his voice. "My son has just as much worth as your daughter." He raised his head in clear defiance. Although he loved his queen, he loved his son far more.

Ruby's wide eyes shifted between the two, opting to stay out of it.

"Maybe in this world," Mary Margaret acquiesced. "But then and there, he did not." It was a hard truth but a truth, nonetheless. She took a slow, deep breath which was followed by another, and then another. Finally, she continued with all her formal grace, "You were one of my most trusted council, Geppetto. If you had concerns, you should have brought them to me. I would have listened." With regal steps, she closed the space between them, and firmly, she cupped his hands with hers while saying, "I would've helped you and Pinocchio."

The wolf's mouth fell open as she glanced around herself, searching for something intangible.

The poignant, empathetic gaze and the kind words he so completely believed were too much. As shame washed over him, Marco shed tears of contrition and turned his head away. He had no right to look upon such a loving queen. "Forgive me," he rasped through his tightening throat. "I have failed you."

"No, Geppetto," the school teacher soothed as she would an upset child. She laid a comforting hand on his shoulder. "You've given me something amazing." She smiled brightly at the weeping man, waiting for him to look at her. When their eyes met, she explained, "Now, more than ever, I am determined to reunite our broken families and return everyone back to the Enchanted Forest."
Quickly flashing a confident smile to the waitress, she added, "We'll have peace and prosperity across the entire kingdom, and everything shall be as it was meant to be."

As the woodworker thanked his illustrious monarch, Ruby sucked on her upper lip and wondered when the hell she had crossed into the Twilight Zone, but then again, the geezer always was Snow White's yes man. As Marco offered his arm to Mary Margaret, she watched the two walk back towards the school, already brainstorming about their new social movement, Journey Home. Obediently, she trailed behind and listened. Every once in a while, she offered the noncommittal acknowledgement. She couldn't wait to tell Monty and Emma about this!

~SQ~

"I don't know…," Emma murmured uncertainly. She stood in the middle of the Quirk Chrysler Dodge Jeep dealership, rows upon rows of vehicles surrounding her, hands in the back pockets of her jeans, hips cocked and head tilted slightly, a look of intense concentration on her face.

Regina rolled her eyes with a good-natured huff, keeping an eye on Henry as he gamboled around the large lot, the boy having grown bored with the car buying process over an hour past. "It's not a terribly difficult choice, Emma. Selecting a color should not be such a protracted decision."

Glancing over her shoulder, she gave the brunette a wry smirk. "I know you want black, Regina, but I really like the blue one," she finished with a slight whine.

Tired of the indecision, her feet and lower back beginning to ache, and the day starting to wane, the former mayor determined it was time for an intervention. Grasping the blonde's shoulders from the back, she turned her around to face the vehicle behind them. A chuckle escaped her as she smirked with satisfaction at the resultant wide eyes and gleeful, "Shiny!"

Emma stepped forward to run her hand over the hood of the charcoal gray Dodge Charger. "Can I…," she hesitantly asked the amused salesman, who nodded and unlocked the vehicle for her. She slipped into the driver's seat, hardly noticing Regina join her in the passenger's seat. The sheriff took in every detail of the car's interior, muttering happily about the advanced gadgets and features as she touched everything.

"Look, remote start! That'll be perfect during the winter. And lots of cup holders…," she trailed off as she began playing with the different storage compartments. The sheriff turned her attention to the seats, running her hands slowly over the supple, black leather, eyes closing as she inhaled deeply of the new-car scent. Blindly reaching up, her right hand found the steering wheel, fingertips leisurely bumping over the stitches in the leather there, a small sound of pleasure escaping her at the luxurious, sensory experience.

Regina's brows rose high on her forehead while she observed her companion's almost sensual appraisal of the vehicle. Licking her lips, a wicked smile crept over her face as she alleged in a husky voice, "Why, Emma, I never realized you had a leather fetish. I can leave you two alone, if you'd like."

Snapping out of her reverie, the blonde flushed a deep pink, stammering, "Oh! Um, I just…." She leaned her forehead on the steering wheel, letting her hair hide her furious blush. "I'm never living this down, am I?" she squeaked.

A throaty laugh erupted from the brunette as she shook her head in negation. "Never, Miss Swan." Ignoring the embarrassed groan from the blonde, she stepped out of the vehicle and turned to the salesman, who hastily snapped his mouth shut upon seeing her attention on him. "We'll take it," she said, suddenly suspicious.
The lanky young man cleared his throat awkwardly under her intense scrutiny, shifting subtly on his feet. At the former mayor's narrowed eyes, he did an abrupt about face and moved briskly toward the offices at the center of the lot. "If you'll follow me, I'll get the paperwork ready," he belatedly told them, half turning and nearly tripping over his own feet. Recovering, the nervous man doubled his pace away from them.

Regina caught Henry's attention and waved him toward the office, indicating they were about to head inside, making sure he started in that direction. When Emma shut her door and joined her, the brunette grumbled, "I think our young salesman was enjoying the show you were providing just a bit too much."

Emma snorted in dismissal, casting her a sidelong glance. "Yeah, well, you with your porn star voice talking about leather fetishes probably didn't help matters any."

Stopping short, Regina stared at the blonde in shock. "Excuse me?" she exclaimed breathily, her voice low and dangerous. "Porn star voice?!"

Rolling her eyes as the brunette just reinforced her point, the sheriff turned around, hands on her hips as she gave her friend a disbelieving look. "Like you don't know," she scoffed.

"No, I don't know. Please, enlighten me," Regina snipped testily, stepping closer.

The blonde's eyebrows shot up as she realized that the former mayor wasn't simply playing ignorant. "Seriously?" she asked in wonder. For the second time in as many minutes, Emma found herself wishing it was possible to die of mortification. Instead, the increasingly irritated gaze pinning her to the spot was demanding an answer. "Look," she prevaricated, "that poor kid is barely out of his teens, and between me acting like an idiot and you unleashing that tone on him, it's probably a miracle he could walk back to the building without embarrassing himself."

"What tone, exactly?" the brunette maintained, unwilling to move until she had a satisfactory answer. She wasn't sure what Emma had been insinuating, if anything, but she felt off-balance by the conversation, putting her on the defensive.

"Oh, my god, Regina. Just let it go!" she implored, knowing it was futile. Once the stubborn woman latched onto something, she was as tenacious as a bulldog. "Fine." Emma conceded in defeat, just wanting to end the conversation at this point, regardless of how much humiliation it caused her. "You have this tone…. Sometimes, your voice drops and gets all raspy and smoky, and it sounds really, really sexy, okay? Hence, the porn star voice comment." Ducking her head and refusing to look at the former mayor, she mumbled, "I'm sorry."

Regina blinked several times, nonplussed by Emma's bluntness, as well as her explanation. Swallowing nervously, she responded, "Thank you for your candor, however unexpected the description was." She resumed the trek to the office, the blonde hesitantly falling into step beside her. Pausings with her hand on the door, the brunette leveled her gaze on the sheriff, uncertainly inquiring, "Do I really sound like that?"

Sensing the change in her tone, Emma smirked and said, "Yeah. You don't need magic to bring your opponents to their knees, she thought. Placing her hand over Regina's, she opened the door and breezed past her friend, gratified by the startled expression on her face.

~SQ~

Pacing back and forth across the width of his modestly-sized room at Granny's Bed & Breakfast, Greg Mendell gently tapped his cellphone against his left palm. He'd been waiting for his partner to
check-in for the last half hour, and he was quickly losing his patience. He checked the clock for the umpteenth time. It was 35 minutes past eight o'clock. Then suddenly, his phone rang.

He didn't even check his caller ID before he answered and barked, "Where have you been?"
Breathing heavily through his nose, he listened to woman on the other end and gritted his teeth. He continued to pace. "Cassidy's a waste of time," he snapped. "We have more pressing issues. Regina left Storybrooke with the sheriff and her brat." As he listened, his steps gradually slowed until, finally, he stopped. His gaze blindly traced the floral pattern on the area rug as he listened. "Uh huh," he grunted in agreement.

Hearing a nose outside, Greg quickly moved over to the window and subtly pulled back the sheer. He frowned as a cluster of pedestrians milled down the sidewalk, singing boisterously. "I didn't think she could leave, either, but apparently, we were wrong," he admitted, finally recognizing the dwarves. "Did you get that latest video I sent you?" Rolling his eyes, he stepped away from the window, letting the curtain fall back in place, saying, "I'm sorry I didn't get all the scientific measurements, but it was kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing. It was the best I could do."

He rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand. "We might've hit another snag. The private security at the house has kicked it up a few notches." Stepping over to the table, he shuffled through a short stack of file folders. He opened one labeled House and sighed at the photos of various Crows Guard. "I need you here. I can't monitor her house 24/7." His brow furrowed as he listened.

"No," Greg growled. He adjusted his grip on the phone as he switched ears. "I'm too close. HQ has given us the green light to move forward. So, we need to actually move forward, and we can't do that unless the lab—" A dark grin spread across his face as he said with false sweetness, "Thank you." The woman on the other end ranted in his ear.

Rolling his eyes, he stared up at the ceiling. "I'm sorry," he acquiesced. "I realize this hasn't been a picnic for you, either, but it'll all be worth it. I promise." Smiling softly, he sat on the edge of his bed before flopping back. "Love you, too." He ended the call, and as he bore an unseeing stare into the plaster ceiling, he tasted victory.

~SQ~

Emma followed Regina and Henry into the hotel room, tired from being in the car all day and just ready to stretch out for a bit. She managed to make it a few blind steps into the room before registering what she was seeing and coming to an abrupt halt, making the bellhop step around her to bring the luggage the rest of the way inside the suite.

Regina tipped the man generously then turned an amused smirk on the blonde gawping at her environs. They could have easily stayed in a smaller suite, or even a standard room, but the brunette had wanted to make the trip something of a mini vacation for them, Henry especially. "Close your mouth, Dear. You are not a codfish." She spared a quick glance at Henry, who was dashing around, checking out every room and making enthused exclamations at each new discovery. "Love you, too." He ended the call, and as he bore an unseeing stare into the plaster ceiling, he tasted victory.

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Shaking her head, Emma muttered, "I thought we were going to be in a regular room. There is no way Gold's money is gonna cover this." She blinked a few times, regaining her bearings, and turned her gaze to Regina in time to catch her sly grin. "You're paying for this," she realized. "Why?"

The brunette dipped her head slightly, self-conscious at being called out on her extravagance. "I thought it would be nice to spoil ourselves a bit. Henry's never been to New York, and I wanted to
"Regina, this is too much," the blonde protested, gesturing at their expansive surroundings. "You really shouldn't have gone through the trouble—"

"It was no trouble," Regina cut her protest off quickly. "A little luxury can be nice on occasion." Stepping forward, she picked up her suitcase and headed the opposite direction from Henry's room. "Why don't we finish inspecting our accommodations?" she suggested gently.

Belatedly, Emma grabbed her bag and trailed after her friend, stopping as soon as she entered their bedroom. A king-sized bed blanketed with crisp, white Italian linens and a large, tufted headboard covered with a velvety grey material dominated the large room. Soft grey carpet spread under her feet, complementing the linen colored walls, mustard yellow curtains and lamp shades. A white tray ceiling, polished nickel fixtures, and sycamore and ebony table and nightstands finished the welcoming look.

Regina had placed her suitcase on the foot of the bed and was busy unpacking her clothing, shuffling it into the dresser under the wall-mounted, flat screen television. She eyed Emma surreptitiously as the blonde dropped her bag in a soft grey chair and moved toward the bathroom. A large smile spread across her face at the astonished squawk of, "Holy shit!"

If the bedroom had been warm and inviting, the bathroom was cold and stark with bright white upper walls and large mirrors behind the double vanity. Black-and-white marble—more white than black—covered the floor, lower half of the walls, deep soaking tub, separate glass shower enclosure, and vanity area, even the doorframe. The theme of polished nickel fixtures continued into the austere sanctuary, including the heated towel rack hanging near the toilet.

"Oh my god," Emma breathed reverently. "I think one of these mirrors is a TV!"

Having placed Emma's clothes in the dresser, as well, Regina joined her in the doorway to the bathroom. "Mm. I believe you are correct. Care to check the kitchen?" she offered, heading for the foyer.

"There's a kitchen, too?" the blonde squeaked, hot on the brunette's heels.

Regina's indulgent laughter carried through the suite as she led them into a kitchen replete with sleek, modern cabinets in a white that almost seamlessly blended into the walls. All the comforts of home were present—refrigerator, microwave, small espresso machine, oven and flattop range—set off by the reflective black countertops and under-cabinet lighting.

The blonde stared at the adjacent living room with its hardwood floor and plush grey print rug, velvety couch, and chairs. Aside from the soft grey walls, the rest of the design closely matched that of their bedroom. Emma turned around slowly, trying to take in everything, including the spectacular view the large windows provided of Manhattan.

She turned a reproachful glare on Regina and asked, "How much is all of this?"

The brunette glanced out a window, avoiding the piercing green eyes as she responded airily, "The cost is inconsequential. The whole point is to enjoy a little pampering while we're here." She walked back to their bedroom, peeking briefly into Henry's room on the way, satisfied when she saw him sprawled out on the bed, already watching the television.

"Regina," Emma grumbled unhappily, following her, not done with the conversation. "If it's not a
big deal, why can't you just tell me?" she cajoled as she came to a stop beside their bed.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor finally met the blonde's unrelenting stare. Releasing a deep breath, heavy with exasperation, she admitted, "The suite runs a little over $2,500 per night."

Emma dropped unceremoniously onto the edge of the mattress, not sure she had heard her friend correctly. "You're joking, right?" she demanded.

"No, I'm not," Regina replied firmly. At the blonde's mild cry of dismay, she threw her arms up and challenged, "Why is this a problem? I have the means to easily accommodate us here for several years, if I wished it. I should be allowed to indulge myself and my family when the opportunity arises." Done with her outburst, she glowered at Emma defiantly, her features softening as she noticed the watery eyes blinking back at her out of a shocked face. Crossing the space between them, she crouched in front of the blonde, set her hands on the jean-clad knees and asked gently, "What is it?"

Swallowing hard, the sheriff croaked, "No one's ever…. You called us a family. Did you mean to include me?" She slanted her head forward, not wanting the brunette to see the tears she couldn't keep in check.

Exhaling sharply at the uncertainty lacing the quiet question, Regina felt an unfamiliar tug on her heart. It was somewhat akin to the pain she'd experienced when a younger, warmer version of Henry would come running to her with a wet face and skinned knee, crying because someone had pushed him down in the schoolyard. Tenderly grasping Emma's chin with her thumb and forefinger, she tilted the blonde head up enough so she could look her in the eye. The fear that radiated from that miserable gaze unlocked something inside the brunette, and she brought her left hand up to tuck a few strands of golden hair behind an ear.

"Look at me," she kindly ordered when the sheriff tried to glance off to the side. Regaining eye contact, Regina used her thumb to carefully wipe away one of Emma's tears. "You're Henry's mother, too, and you're my friend. It may not be very conventional, but yes, we're a family," she enunciated decisively, determined to make the skittish blonde understand their evolving dynamic, even as she struggled to comprehend it herself.

Emma drew in an erratic breath, biting her lip to prevent a muffled sob from slipping out as she realized that her internal lie detector hadn't so much as blipped during Regina's declaration. Gentle fingers moved across her cheeks, removing the moisture that had marked them. Finally, she confessed with a wavering voice, "Every family I've had always sent me away."

Regina's hands cupped the blonde's jaw, sliding down to grip her shoulders as she stood. "Well then," she reassured shakily, "it's a good thing I'm possessive of those who are dear to me." She was startled when Emma wrapped her arms around her waist and pressed the side of her face into her stomach, but she recovered quickly, letting her palms rest against the blonde's trembling back, making soothing circles while her friend cried herself out. Tilting her head back, the brunette stared up at the ceiling, blinking back tears of her own and wondering just when she had grown so soft.

~SQ~

Their first two days in Manhattan had been a whirlwind of activity from sun-up to sun-down, filled with tours of the Empire State Building, Ellis Island, the Intrepid Sea, Air, and Space Museum, and the National Museum of Mathematics, to name a few. The concierge had even arranged for a tour of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, complete with a chauffeured ride in one of the hotel's iconic black-and-white pedicabs. That had been a unique experience that the blonde was sure none of them would soon forget. Emma had to admit that Regina's hotel choice really was perfect for
Henry, especially since he was currently with a hotel-appointed babysitter while they were out in search of Gold's son.

Her favorite excursion, however, had been their picnic in Central Park. The hotel's custom bicycles, the gourmet picnic basket, and illustrated bike map had made the outing seem effortless, and they had been able to enjoy the moment without worrying about any of the details of planning. The blonde smiled to herself as she recalled the way Regina had laughed, so carefree and infectious, the sound brighter than the sun that had dappled the ground around their blanket spread under the trees. It had cemented the idea of family in Emma's mind, watching the brunette smile so openly and seeing Henry temporarily free of all the resentment and distrust he usually directed at them. It had also made her long for more.

She couldn't remember the last time she had been so happy, but it was all tangled up in her head. The feeling of contentment and safety she had when in the brunette's presence was as unsettling as it was welcome, and she knew she'd have to sort it all out sooner rather than later. The sheriff found she was a bit melancholy as she trailed after Regina, compass and bracelet held firmly in the former mayor's hand as she navigated the city streets like a native New Yorker, the crowd sensing the power and purpose in her steps, unconsciously parting around them. Emma chuckled, remembering the way the brunette had strutted into Bergdorf Goodman like the queen she had once been, the arranged personal shopper greeting them immediately and treating her like royalty. Her friend had snapped out her preferences like commands, her haughty attitude and critical eyes demanding the staff do nothing less than their best to accommodate her.

Regina risked a quick look over at Emma and queried, "What's so amusing?"

"I was just remembering the look in your eyes when we walked into Bergdorf Goodman this morning," the blonde replied. "You were so in charge, that poor girl didn't know what hit her."

The brunette smirked and responded casually, "When it comes to shopping, I have exacting standards. It was also a pleasant change to be waited upon, again," she added conspiratorially.

"Yeah, well, when you barked at her for bringing the wrong color skirt, she nearly fell over her own feet trying to move fast enough," Emma chided her, ruining the stern tone in her voice with the giggle at the end of her statement.

Wincing slightly, Regina admitted, "Perhaps I did get a bit carried away." Her brown eyes lit with glee as she considered her purchases. "It was, however, entirely worth it. Thank you for allowing me to get you that pantsuit and coat," she said, distracted with the compass.

The sheriff grimaced slightly and acknowledged, "I still don't know where the hell I'm going to wear the suit in Storybrooke."

"Mm. We'll think of something, I'm sure," the brunette commented. After a beat, she continued, "And I apologize for pushing you so hard over it. I never meant to make you feel like a Barbie doll." She flinched at the memory of Emma's hissed outburst in the dressing room.

Settling her hands more firmly in her jacket pockets, Emma conceded, "I shouldn't have gotten so bitchy about it. It's just . . . you keep spending all this money on me, and I don't like owing anybody."

Regina's head whipped around to stare at the blonde in disbelief. "You don't owe me anything. I've already explained my financial situation to you—"

"I know. I know," the sheriff groused. "You discovered the stock market and got in on the ground
floor of companies like Apple, IBM, Google, Amazon, blah, blah, bonds and CDs, blah, blah." Face scrunched in resentment, she blurted, "Ridiculous fortune or no, I'm not going to be a kept woman."

The former mayor's steps faltered briefly at the last comment, and she struggled to regain her composure. "I . . . that's…" she stammered, trying to gather her suddenly swirling thoughts. "Emma, that's the furthest thing from the truth. Honestly, it's been an extraordinarily long time since I've had the opportunity to indulge myself so thoroughly, and I wanted to share it with you. Henry won't let me spoil him anymore, and well, you're important to me," she finished quietly.

Raising a skeptical eyebrow as she continued walking, Emma asked, "You're telling me that you're not expecting anything from me in return?"

Regina blanched at the implication, and her voice was thick as she warbled, "I'd never do that." Clearing her throat, she expounded more calmly, "It's been decades since I could just be myself, not the dutiful daughter, not the queen, nor the mayor." The brunette felt grateful for the anonymous crowd flowing around them, the busy noises of the city filling the air and somehow making their conversation both less and more intimate than she'd intended.

"You have no concept of how refreshing that is," she continued, gesturing vaguely at their surroundings. "The fact that you haven't attempted to pass judgement on me these last few months is a large part of that. So, no, I don't want anything from you in return." Glancing at the blonde who was pacing silently to her left, steadfastly staring at the concrete under their feet, she concluded in a glum tone, "I don't know how else to express my appreciation. I suppose, I'm not very good at being part of a family."

Emma sighed heavily with relief, understanding and frustration warring within, her emotions and thoughts a jumbled mess when it came to the woman beside her. Reaching out and grasping Regina's hand in hers, she said, "You're in good company, then."

Regina squeezed the hand in hers, feeling a smile pulling her lips upward. She was so caught up in the light feeling that she almost missed it when the compass needle turned to point the direction from which they'd come. "Oh! I think we just passed it," she exclaimed in surprise, doing a quick about-face and hurrying back to the building the instrument indicated.

The sheriff looked up at the apartment building in question. "You sure?"

"That's what the compass says, Dear," Regina responded with a shrug. She led the way into the lobby, stopping in front of the intercom with its list of names and numbers. "I suppose it would have been too much to expect him to use his given name in this world," she muttered sourly.

Emma snorted in agreement. "No, but look there," she indicated number 407, the only apartment without a name attached to it. "That's our guy. I deal with people who don't want to be found, and those are the sort of folks who don't put their names on intercoms." She pressed the appropriate button and announced, "UPS package for four-oh-seven."

When there was no response, the former mayor snarked, "Perhaps you should have said FedEx."

Rolling her eyes, Emma began pressing all of the buttons until she heard the distinctive buzz of the inner door being unlocked. "Bingo," she whispered triumphantly, snatching open the door before it could lock again, holding it open for Regina to precede her. After calling for the elevator to tie it up, they headed silently up the four flights of stairs in search of their target.

Regina checked the compass as they stood in front of the door and nodded to indicate they were in
the right place. Her eyebrows shot up in surprise when, after a quick check of the doorknob, the blonde squatted in front of the door, pulling a small, rolled up lock picking kit out of her jacket. She watched in fascination as, after a few deft movements, the lock clicked open, and Emma was standing smoothly, tucking the black leather case back into her coat. "My, my, Sheriff. What an interesting skillset you have as a law enforcement officer," she murmured appreciatively.

The blonde flashed her companion a saucy smirk and a wink before turning the doorknob as quietly as possible. As soon as the door began to swing open, she heard the loud crash of someone on the fire escape. "He's running," she grumbled, rushing to the window. She caught a glimpse of a man of medium build in faded jeans and a gray hoodie frantically rushing down the metal stairs. "Damnit!" she swore, slapping her hand on the windowsill.

The brunette scowled as she realized the bond would make it impossible for them to chase him in such a packed city. "Well," she huffed, "let's look about and see if we can discover anything about our elusive quarry."

Nodding, Emma turned around, eyes scanning the room. "Just leave your gloves on," she cautioned. "Since he ran, I'm guessing he's not the type to go to the cops about a B&E, but better not risk it." She noticed Regina heading to the bookcase in the corner, so the blonde headed over to the nightstand. As she got close, she glanced up at the wall and saw it, a dreamcatcher. It perfectly matched the one in her memory, and she felt the breath catch in her throat at the similarity.

Hearing Emma's gasp, Regina turned around to see her friend's face drained of all color as she stared unblinking at the dreamcatcher. "Emma?" she asked with concern, stepping close and putting a hand between her shoulder blades. "You look like you've seen a ghost. Are you alright?"

The warm hand on her back and quiet words helped pull the blonde from her reverie. "Yeah. I just . . . it just reminded me of someone." Regina's silent support prompted her to add, "It's a lot like the one Neal had."

"Henry's father?" the brunette questioned in astonishment.

"Uh, yeah. But that's impossible," she muttered. Then, with a firm shake of her head, she proclaimed, "Like you said, I'm just seeing ghosts. It's just a stupid coincidence. Come on, let's keep looking for any info about Gold's son. Maybe we'll find something with a name on it," she opined, forcing herself back into business mode.

~SQ~

"I can't believe we didn't find anything helpful in that apartment," Emma bemoaned. She was irritated that after all their trekking around Manhattan, they had still come up with nothing of use.

Regina leaned back against the kitchen counter, picking another strawberry off of the fruit platter resting between them. "Perhaps we should consider attempting a late-night reconnaissance of the apartment. He has to sleep sometime," she suggested.

"Maybe," the blonde allowed, grabbing a bottled water from the refrigerator. The quiet rattle of the suite's doorknob brought them both to a standstill. Furrowing her brow and wondering if someone had the wrong room, she cast an uneasy glance at the brunette, set her water down, and headed over to the door. There was a second, louder rattle, followed by a conspicuous click and whir as the lock disengaged. When the door eased open on well-oiled hinges, she was shocked to see Neal Cassidy standing before her. "Neal?" she choked out in a strangled whisper.

"Emma?" came the equally shocked response. "You're the one who broke into my apartment?" He
moved a few feet into the suite, closing the door behind him and forcing Emma to back up in order to maintain the distance between them.

Hearing the distinct sound of an unfamiliar, masculine voice, Regina silently moved to stand by the kitchen door, out of sight of the foyer, but close enough to step in if necessary. It looked like their quarry had come to them and was familiar with Emma. She strained to hear their conversation over the sounds of the television slipping through Henry's closed bedroom door.

Shaking her head, Emma whispered, "I didn't know it was yours. I was looking for someone…." She trailed off hesitantly, eyes narrowing as stared at her ex-boyfriend. Straightening her spine, she continued conversationally, "My client is trying to locate his son, and thought I might find him in Manhattan. It's weird because the trail led me to your apartment, but," she paused, flashing him a suspicious look, "I'm looking for someone named Baelfire. You wouldn't happen to know the guy, would you?" Accusation laced her tone, and she smiled in satisfaction as his face paled and panic slid behind his eyes.

Neal froze, the name settling low in his stomach like a ball of ice. Eyes wide, he swallowed hard and rasped harshly, "What are you talking about?"

Anger was rising strong and fast, and Emma advanced toward him a step, alleging, "You're from there. You totally played me. You and Rumpelstiltskin, and I fell right into it." Face twisting with righteous indignation, she took another step closer, nearly shaking as she tried to keep her voice down so as not to alert Henry. "Did you know the whole time?" she hissed. "Was it some kind of sick game, keeping me in the dark about who I was, where I was from? Did you ever care about me at all?"

"That's not…. I didn't know who you were when we met. Believe me, I wouldn't have gone near you if I had," he admitted clumsily, wincing when he realized how that sounded.

Giving her head a sharp shake, she cut him off. "You know what, it doesn't matter, anyway. I came here to find Rumpelstiltskin's son, and I did." Glaring at the man who had let her take the fall for a crime she didn't commit and then left her to rot in prison, she could only bring herself to feel contempt and betrayal; after a decade, there were no soft feelings left hiding in the corners of her heart. "I made a deal with your father to find you and take you back to him, and that's what I'm gonna do," she proclaimed.

Horrified, Neal grabbed Emma's wrist, adamantly demanding, "What? You made a deal with him?"

"Yeah. And I'm going to honor it," she ground out, trying to tug free of his grip.

Seeing her determination, his fingers tightened in fear as he refuted, "No! You don't have to." Looking at her with desperation, he pleaded, "You can tell him you didn't find me. I came here to hide, to get away from him. I'm not going anywhere he is."

Eyes filled with disbelief, the blonde yelped when his grip grew painful. "What the fuck, Neal?! Let me go!"

At Emma's pained cry, Regina stormed into the foyer, eyes hard and glinting with a sharp edge of danger. "She said let go," she snarled, taking several steps towards Gold's wayward son. Instinctively, her right hand curled into an open claw, manifesting a fireball that cast menacing shadows on her livid features.

"What the hell?!" Neal exclaimed, letting go of his ex-girlfriend and jumping back. His head whipped back and forth between the two women as he quickly backed toward the suite's entrance.
His back slammed into the door, the distinctive tingle of a magic barrier buzzing along his nerves and causing him to squeeze his eyes shut as he realized he was trapped. "Shit," he muttered, gradually opening his eyes.

"Regina," Emma whispered with soft concern, quickly closing the distance between them. Gently, she cupped the brunette's left biceps. "It's okay." She paused with uncertainty, even as she was drawn in by the former mayor's intensity. "He didn't hurt me," she explained hopefully. "I'm okay. It's okay."

As the fire gradually flickered to a small flame, Regina's gaze drifted to the blonde's calm and caring expression, drawing on it to help ground herself and reign in her increasingly volatile magic. Clenching her jaw, she refocused on the man still against the door.

"I meant no disrespect," Neal offered, slowly raising his hands in a hopeful gesture of surrender. He'd never been fond of magic and had a healthy respect for the damage it could do, but this woman before him had it practically oozing out of her pores. And if her expression was any indication, he wasn't much longer for this world.

"You broke into our room and proceeded to manhandle Emma," the brunette sharply accused. She wanted to stay angry, but magical tendrils of soothing reassurances were slipping from Emma's staying hand, which had yet to be removed from her arm. Regina's brow furrowed as she hid her consternation, glaring at the imp's son.

"I'm alright, and we did sneak into his place, first," the blonde interjected as a means to hopefully defuse the situation. She remained facing the brunette, ignoring Neal at the novel sensation of Regina's magic lapping against hers in agitation.

"At your insistence," Regina snipped with minimal bite. Her jaw twitched as she swallowed and cast a glance at the woman next to her. As she looked into big, green eyes and felt their magic mingle and reach an accord, the fire finally left her, wavering out of existence. She sighed in a mix of resignation and release then felt her knees weaken at the sudden, thrilling surge of their combined magic.

Smirking as relief washed over her, Emma flashed a lopsided grin and trembled slightly in response to the magical feedback. She gave Regina's arm a reflexive squeeze of encouragement, her thumb stroking through the fabric of the emerald silk blouse. "Yeah, I know," she agreed, cheekily adding, "I also know your inner vandal liked it." Seeing the reticent mirth briefly light up brown eyes, the blonde felt a rush of warmth slide through her and spill over to the brunette through the bond.

Neal's brow furrowed. As many times as he had daydreamed about their reunion, this was a far cry from anything he had ever imagined. But who was the dark-haired sorceress? Then, as he watched the silent exchange happening beneath the words being said, it all made sense, and his heart deflated.

"You broke into someone's house?" came the incredulous demand from behind the two women.

"No," the blonde snapped, finally letting go of Regina's arm as she whirled around to face Neal. Perplexed by this new development in their bond and the prolonged touching, Regina had to mentally shake herself and push it all aside to focus on Henry's intrusion.

Neal's eyes cut to the now open door leading to the suite's smaller bedroom, surprised to see a young boy in jeans and a sweater looking at everyone with confusion. "Who's this?" he asked,
relaxing enough to lower his arms.

"He's our son," Regina announced with cool courtesy.

Surprised, Neal's gaze darted between the two women. "What?"

Fixing him with a disdainful glare, she responded acerbically, "Did I stutter? I said, he's our son."

Wandering further into the room, Henry asked curiously, "Is that Baelfire?"

Emma hurried over to him, putting her hands on his shoulders, and tried to usher him back into his room. "I need you to stay in your room for a little longer, okay? Come on."

Neal quickly took stock of the boy's features and approximate age, growing suspicious, especially with Emma so desperate to hide him away. "Wait. How old are you?"

The blonde shot a panicked look at Regina, loudly ordering their son, "Don't answer that."

Understanding where this was going, the brunette seconded Emma's concern. "Do as Emma said and go back to your room," she requested calmly, moving in their direction.

"Kid! How old are you?" Neal insisted, angry that they were trying to avoid the question.

Jerking away from Emma, Henry darted to the middle of the foyer. "Eleven!" he blurted. Keeping his distance from both of his visibly agitated mothers, he demanded, "Why is everyone yelling?"

"Damn it," Emma cursed under her breath, looking to Regina for way out of this mess.

Realization hitting fully, Neal frowned at the blonde, challenging, "Is this my son?"

Confused, Henry shook his head and said, "No. My dad was a fireman. He…." the boy faltered slightly, seeing the pained look on Emma's face. Turning to her, he finished uncertainly, "he died. That's what you told me. You said—"

Voice quiet, Neal persisted, "Is this . . . my son?"

Defeat caused the sheriff to slump as she admitted with resignation, "Yes." Her eyes met Regina's, seeing her own fear reflected in the brown depths.

Shocked at the admission, Henry backed away from them, shaking his head in denial. Turning, he bolted into his bedroom, the door slamming shut with a resounding thump.

"Henry!" Emma pleaded, starting after him. She came to an abrupt halt when Regina caught her right wrist and pulled her up short.

The brunette stepped close to her friend, resting her left hand in the middle of her upper back. "Don't," she advised gently. "Let him have a moment to process." Seeing the despondency in the green eyes beseeching her for direction, Regina's right hand relaxed its grip on the blonde's wrist slightly to slip down and clutch her hand supportively. "There's nothing you can say right now that he won't twist around." Left hand sliding down Emma's back to rest just above her waist, she added sadly, "Trust me."

"I'll go talk to him," Neal announced, heading across the suite for the boy's door.

The blonde opened her mouth to protest, stopped by the slight shake of her friend's head. Sighing dejectedly, she instead called out half-heartedly, "Leave the door open."
Crossing her arms over her chest with a huff, Regina cocked her hips and sent an irritated glower in Neal's direction. "As much as it pains me to admit, if we can't convince him to come back to Storybrooke with us, Henry's acting out will only escalate."

"How do you figure?" the blonde grumped. She was slouched against the doorframe to the kitchen, arms crossed as she eyed their son seated on the living room couch, talking animatedly to Neal.

Regina sighed in exasperation. "You know as well as I that we'd wake one morning to discover Henry's taken a bus back to New York to find his father. After all, he ran away to Boston to be with you." Pursing her lips in a faint pout, she grumbled good naturedly, "And we see where that got us."

Grimacing at the brunette, Emma countered, "And then Neal will let him down, and he'll realize I lied to protect him." Her eyes suddenly lit up as she pointed out, "You saw his apartment. He doesn't have a lot going on here." Switching her focus back to Henry, she theorized, "From the looks of it, he'll probably be moving on soon. Problem solved."

"Careful, Ms. Swan. You're beginning to sound like me." Tilting her head, the former mayor considered her statement more carefully and realized that Emma was as defensive and prickly as she had been when the blonde had arrived in Storybrooke. She chuckled darkly at the thought, finding the situation aggravating but not without humor.

"What's so funny?" she demanded, arms uncrossing warily as she finally gave Regina her full attention. "Neal is out there filling our son's head with who knows what kind of crap, and we're just going to let him because it's all part of some unknown plan Gold has," she blurted in frustration. Smirking, the brunette raised an imperious eyebrow and observed, "And yet, here we are. If it weren't for the fact that this impacts me, as well, I'd call it poetic justice." She waited a beat for the blonde to connect the dots.

"Really?" she asked in disbelief. Seeing the mischief lurking in the brown eyes avidly watching her, she teased, "Well, it's a good thing I know you're not that petty anymore, Madame Mayor."

Shifting forward slightly so she edged into Emma's personal space, Regina flashed a taunting grin and rasped, "Aren't I?"

The blonde felt her mouth go dry at the brunette's husky tone and close proximity. Fortunately, the moment was interrupted by Henry running up to them, a hopeful look on his face. "Neal wants to take us to get pizza! Can we go?" he asked expectantly, looking between his two mothers.

They glanced briefly at each other, silently picking up on the other's reluctant acceptance. "Sure, Kid," Emma agreed, following him back into the main living area, hyper aware of Regina close on her heels.

Over the years of wandering several worlds, Neal Cassidy had learned that sharing a simple meal could betray a lot about a person. So, as he shared a supreme pizza with his son and the boy's mothers, he observed in subtle fascination as Emma Swan picked half the black olives off her pizza slice and promptly deposited them on Regina's, after which, the blonde started stealing pepperonis from the brunette's own plated slice.
"Stop that," the former mayor lightly scolded with an amused smirk, tapping the back of the sheriff's offending hand. The domesticity spilling over from their home life was soothing, and satisfying, if Neal's pained expression was anything to go by.

"What?" Emma questioned around a stolen pepperoni. She pouted ever so slightly. "You usually say they're too greasy and pick them off." Had she just screwed up? Quickly, she bit her lower lip in sudden realization of what she had just done in such a public place and with present company. Her eyes cut around the pizzeria, eventually stopping at a chewing Neal. She frowned. Who gave a shit what he thought?

"I'd like to try at least one, Dear," the brunette explained, softening the reprimand. She deftly, with a plastic fork and knife, removed a glistening pepperoni from her slice and dropped it on the edge of the blonde's plate.

"Mom, it's pizza!" exclaimed Henry, finally noticing the not-so-unusual behavior. "Don't use a fork and knife," he whined slightly, clearly embarrassed. His gaze darted around to see if anyone else noticed. However, he frowned when he saw a guy in a suit-and-tie eating a slice with utensils. So, it was normal? His face scrunched in pondering as he took another bite.

Chuckling as she picked up her prize, Emma pointed at the small pool of grease on the boy's plate with her other hand. "Let her be, Kid." She smiled when he quickly readjusted to eat over his plate, avoiding dripping on his clothes and, thusly, a fussing brunette mother. However, the blonde frowned as a napkin was thrust in front of her face. She accepted it without hesitation and looked down, muttering, "Aw, man," as she dabbed at the offending stain.

Neal lifted his own slice to his mouth and took another bite. He tried to process the complex mixture of rambling feelings. Of course, he was happy that Emma was, well, happy. During the course of the group's light, inconsequential conversation in the dimly lit, pseudo wood-paneled pizzeria, he'd marvel at her contentment. He'd must've been a little too transparent in his appreciation, though, because when his eyes drifted to assess her companion, his mouth went dry and his heart skittered a few beats as their gazes met. The message was perfectly clear; stay away from Emma.

This, of course, made the brunette sorceress even more of a mystery. How did his adorably awkward Emma end up with someone like her? It was clear Regina was cut from a different cloth. She exuded casual refinement and easy sophistication in an outfit that cost more than most New Yorkers' rent. And here she was, eating a slice of greasy pizza off of a paper plate with plastic ware, sitting in a laminated, plastic contoured booth next to a woman sporting an open-knit sweater with a tank underneath, blue jeans, calf-high combat boots, and a red leather jacket. However, any further speculation was cut short as his son piped up next to him.

"So, Dad, how'd you and Ma really meet?" Henry asked, out of the blue, around a mouthful of pizza. His seemingly innocent eyes bounced around the adults at the table and was confused by everyone's reactions. Not wanting to be lied to again, he immediately added, "I know I was born in jail."

In that moment, Neal just wanted to vanish, but when he looked up to catch his ex-girlfriend's gaze to offer her silent support, he was astounded to witness her openly pained, forlorn expression directed at Regina. His eyes dropped down to their linked hands on the tabletop. That's when he realized two things: one, he'd still been holding a torch for Emma; and two, he'd never have another shot with her. "Well…," he started hesitantly, looking back at his son.

Emma shifted uncomfortably. The moment the boy had blurted that damn question, she had wanted to bolt, but instantly, there was a reassuring hand over hers, keeping her in the booth. She allowed
herself to be lost in the warmth and soothing sensation of a stroking thumb. Her lip trembled as she realized Regina was in her corner. She wasn't alone, and that made her heart ache. Seeing nothing but acceptance in warm, brown eyes, she decided it was going to be okay. *I can do this,* she thought, sitting up straighter in the booth.

"Not the coolest way to ask, Kid," the sheriff started, pinning her son with a sharp glare. When the brunette lifted her hand away, she easily recaptured it, dropping their linked hands on the bench between them. "But Neal and I met when I was 16 and tried to steal his car."

The former mayor curiously eyed the blonde for a long moment. Again, she relaxed as their magic mingled and conversed in tentative caresses. It would've been disturbing if it wasn't so lulling. Why was this even happening?

"The beetle," Henry guessed before taking another bite of pizza. His eyes darted between the adults. "Wow, you had that car a long time," he added around his bite.

"Yeah," Emma acknowledged, pursing her lips. How many times did they have to tell him not to talk with his mouth full?

"You still have it?" Neal gently probed with a hint of excitement, a small smile creeping across his face.

"No," the boy answered after swallowing. "It died on the way to New York," he easily supplied, stuffing an extra-large bite in his mouth, smiling at the exasperated sigh from his brunette mother.

"How prophetic," Regina icily mused, idly blotting her mouth with a paper napkin. She ignored Neal's scowl. Instead, she took pride in the blonde's quiet snicker. Feeling permissive, she didn't stop her son from slipping another slice of pizza off the tray.

"So, I guess you broke up because Ma went to jail, huh?" Henry theorized as he studied his dad, swinging his feet under the table. He was so intent on his father that he totally missed how his blonde mother curled into herself.

Neal, however, did not. "I . . . I can't remember. It was probably some silly misunderstanding," he stammered unconvincingly. His gaze met the brunette's knowing, burning one, and looking away first, he turned back to his son. "But, it was a long time ago, Henry." He tried to brush the whole thing under the rug, trying to save face and all the while hoping the kid would move on.

"Very convenient," Regina muttered darkly. Her tolerance for Gold's lost son was quickly evaporating. How dare he diminish Emma's suffering to justify his selfish desire to be seen in a good light by Henry. Her magic flared, and she felt a gentle squeeze from the woman still holding her hand.

"You're coming back to Storybrooke with us, right?" Henry hurriedly asked. He'd been wanting to know for a while but hadn't mustered up the courage to ask until then.

"Yeah, about that," Neal started. He paused as he rubbed the back of his neck with his right hand. "I got responsibilities here. I can't just drop everything and leave." He purposefully refused to look at either of the women. "I have a job, bills to pay. You can understand that, right?"

"Whatever," Emma scoffed with contempt. She was completely unsurprised by his admission. Pursing her lips, she slumped back in the booth. Her thumb idly caressed the hand still held captive by her own. "You're going," she flatly stated with a hard glint in her eyes. "You owe me that much."
"Emma, come on," Neal whispered, leaning forward. His eyes pleaded for her to understand. "I left for a reason."

"This isn't negotiable, Mr. Cassidy," the former mayor smoothly interjected. Her voice was level and calm, but the desire to throttle the man was slowly rising. "She owes Rumpelstiltskin a favor." Cocking her head to one side, she added, "I'm sure you're familiar with your father's bargaining tactics."

Taking a deep breath and opening his mouth, Neal held the brunette sorceress's gaze for a long time before he finally exhaled and appeared to literally deflate. "Yeah," he begrudgingly admitted. His eyes dropped down to his partially eaten slice of pizza. Smiling ruefully, he looked at his son and said, "Guess I'm heading to Storybrooke."

"Yes!" Henry cheered, celebrating with another bite of pizza.

Content with watching television in the master bedroom of the hotel suite, Emma sat cross-legged on the foot of the king-sized bed and took an absurdly large bite of cold pizza just as Regina exited the bathroom. The semi-shimmery glint from the recently purchased grey Adriana tank nightgown drew her attention. She swallowed her bite before it was properly chewed and felt the burn. Her eyes hurriedly assessed the garment, and she frowned. Opening her mouth, she took another bite of cold pizza. She muted the television during the commercial but never took her eyes off the former mayor.

"I trust you understand that this behavior won't be returning home with us," the brunette stated with a pointed stare at the open pizza box lying on the bed. She didn't wait for a response, just continued preparing for bed. A sharp hiss escaped her lips as she twisted wrong while turning back the covers on her side of the bed.

"I told you not to wear those heels," the sheriff quietly reminded. She took another bite of pizza before closing the box and moving it to the dresser. The brunette's high heels had been a hot argument the other morning. Slipping into the en suite, she washed her hands and brushed her teeth.

"I remember." Sighing, Regina settled against her hill of pillows. She willed her calves to relax as she retrieved her book and reading glasses from the nightstand. When the television clicked off, she looked at the blonde over the rim of her glasses and said, "I thought you needed to decompress."

After stopping at Neal's apartment so he could pack a bag, Emma had become restless. It wasn't until after Henry had gone to bed, the hotel room had been secured with magic, and she'd taken a hot shower that the blonde had been content enough to happily munch on her leftover pizza in front of the television. That, of course, allowed the former mayor time to prepare for bed.

"Roll over," Emma gently instructed as she sat on the end of the bed, next to Regina's feet.

"I beg your pardon," the brunette whispered. Instinctively, she curled her legs up and allowed her book to lay open against her chest. "Whatever for?" she prompted with a hint of concern, her eyes rapidly assessing the woman at her feet.

Flashing a bright smile, the blonde readjusted herself to sit cross-legged and perpendicular to the former mayor. This wasn't the response she'd expected. Patting the mattress, she easily explained, "Roll over and lie on your stomach. I'll massage your calves." She held up a bottle of lotion she'd
swiped from brunette's toiletry bag.

Slowly, Regina considered the offer. Her eyes darted between the sheriff’s open expression and the dancing bottle of lotion. "Okay," she softly acquiesced, stowing her book and glasses on the bedside table. She trusted her friend, and the notion did sound heavenly.

As the former mayor carefully situated herself, Emma bit her bottom lip. Something just seemed off. So, as beautifully toned calves were presented to her, she popped open the lotion and squeezed a healthy dollop on her left palm. "This might feel cold," she warned before touching the leg. She started gently, at first, focusing on rubbing the soothing lotion into smooth skin. Her eyes intently focused on the rigid lines of Regina's back. She frowned. This was supposed to be relaxing.

_This was a mistake_, the former mayor immediately thought when the cold lotion and a warm hand touched her calf. Her own hands, securely hidden under one of her pillows, pulled at the extravagant linens as she buried her face in the downy bedding. She desperately tried to control her breathing, but her racing heart was pounding in her chest, its loud thundering beats rushing in her ears. A split second before she about to recoil, Emma broke the tension.

"I always wished someone would rub my calves after a long day, but somehow, I'd end up rubbing everyone else's," the sheriff offered freely. She was careful to keep her fingers below the knee and well away from the hem of the nightgown. Letting her hands work their natural magic, she continued chatting and observing the brunette. "Remember Frank? His wife would get these killer migraines. You know, the ones that hit right in the back of the skull," she rambled, kneading the knotted muscles. "Anyway, they'd invite me over for dinner most nights, and one night, she asked if I wanted to help her out." She smiled at the memory, keeping a close eye on the slowly relaxing back. "I didn't know what I was getting myself into, then, but three nights a week, she'd tutor me in massage therapy." She let out a short laugh. "Their kids started calling me the masseur's masseur. Talk about a tongue twister."

Regina listened as the blonde prattled on about her life. Strangely, the stories warmed her and settled her fears. She wasn't sure how long the blonde rubbed her calves or how long she talked about Frank in Tallahassee, but her body calmed into the ministrations of hands she had learned to trust. She sighed heavily and contentedly, her hands no longer holding a death grip on the pillow and her body sagging into the mattress.

"See, I got magic, too," Emma quipped with a broad smile. "Seriously though, what do you have against sneakers?" Their eyes met when the brunette turned her head. "They'd give your pantsuits a dash of sporty flare." She grinned as the emerging laugh lighted her soul.

"You're ridiculous," the former mayor chortled, rolling onto her side to face her friend, her amused gaze searching the blonde's face.

Flopping down beside the brunette, the sheriff settled her head on the same pillow and teased, "You could even color coordinate." She beamed at the resulting laughter. "Order custom dye jobs."

Regina rolled her face back into her pillow and just laughed. It was deep, and powerful, and something she hadn't had in a very long, long time. With sleepy eyes, she wistfully gazed at the blonde and quietly stated, "You're funny."

Seeing the familiar signs of sleep in brown eyes, Emma used her dexterous toes to pull up the sheet. She delicately tucked the brunette in, whispering, "I know. Good night, Regina."

"Night, Emma," the former mayor slurried slightly as she slipped further into sleep. Something akin to peace settled across her features, and she enjoyed the best rest she'd had in years.
However, Emma Swan bit nervously at her lower lip, still studying her friend's face. Her eyes watered at the realizations she had made that night. To add to her growing confusion, after days of sensing Regina's magic mingle, dance, and play with her own, this was the first time that the magic had receded since the bond had been implemented.

~SQ~

Their kiss was sultry and rough. It didn't feel right to have her fevered lips moving so amorously over his own or her nails biting into his neck. In fact, it was wholly wrong, but Gold decided, in that moment, he'd take it. He needed it. So, while the Savior was off doing his bidding, the Dark One lost himself in the cursed personality of his beloved Belle—Lacey. This wasn't the first time it had happened, and it would likely not be the last.

Naturally, he had better things to do than finger his vexatious love in the alleyway behind the Rabbit Hole, but if he didn't see to Lacey's needs, she'd find fulfillment elsewhere. That particular thought always pushed him to be a little more forceful in his ministrations, which the brunette greedily relished. The husky gasping and moaning in his ears prompted him to become more daring in his fondling. Of course, he wasn't immune to her attentions, either.

Gold growled when he was forcibly pushed away. His eyes flashed darkly as he stumbled, quickly regaining his balance with his cane.

Lacey laughed. She licked her lips and pulled the pawnbroker back against her by his tie. Wrapping her left leg over and around his right hip, she bucked against him and husked in his left ear, "I want you in me."

Grabbing a fistful of hair, he yanked her head back and darkly promised, "That can be arranged, Dearie." He sneered at her startled gasp and possessively claimed her lips. His heart pounded in his ears as she writhed against him. The moment was delicious but was distastefully interrupted as some common drunkard stumbled and weaved down the alley towards them. Yet, as lithe hands pulled at his hair and clothes, he paid no mind. He was in his moment. It wasn't until a sharp, pointed hurt pierced the fog of lust that he registered the drunkard beside them.

Gold let out muffled cry of agony against Lacey's lips. Releasing his grip on her, he dropped a tentative hand to his side and felt the warmth of blood seeping into his clothes. This didn't make sense. He couldn't be wounded by a mere blade. Then again, why weren't the powers of the Dark One instantly healing him?

Startled and frightened, the brunette hurriedly wiggled free from between the pawnbroker and the brick wall. "Gold?" she questioned as the man fell heavily against the building. Upon seeing a man brandishing a hook covered in blood, silhouetted by street lamps, she quickly turned and ran, her heels echoing amongst the buildings. This wasn't her fight.

"Tsk, tsk, Crocodile," Hook chided before kicking away the pawnbroker's cane. He chuckled in satisfaction as it skittered further down the alleyway, and his nemesis dropped to the ground. "Never trust a whore," he added, flashing a rakish smile. Casually, he removed a white handkerchief from a pocket inside his black, leather buccaneer coat and idly cleaned his hook.

"I'll kill you," Gold bellowed, trying to stand and failing. His anger flared as he thrust out his left hand with an elegant flourish, but nothing happened. He repeated the gesture, still with no result. He gritted his teeth and groaned as a searing pain overwhelmed his senses. The poison had already started its lethal work.

"Aye, you can try, Demon," the pirate mocked with clear amusement. His gaze studied his victim
and smirked. "I found a way to kill you," he intoned, tossing the bloodied handkerchief down at the pawnbroker's feet. Crouching, he looked the dying man in the eye and whispered, "Milah didn't have to die. You could've let us go." His eyes took on a fiery gleam as he continued, "And Baelfire didn't have to suffer at the hands of Peter Pan."

"What?" the pawnbroker rasped, fighting the waves of burning pain as it thrummed with each heartbeat. "What are you saying?" He reached for the standing pirate captain. However, his attempt was for naught, as he received a swift kick in the gut. He curled into himself and whimpered.

"You're still a coward," Hook spat with venom. He landed another blow. Poised for another strike, he paused, the fire having already left him. His duty was done, his vow for vengeance accomplished. Now, he could finally move on with his life. But first, he needed to disentangle himself from the sorceress.

As the pirate turned and started to walk away, Gold coughed and pushed himself upright. He snarled at the back of the retreating figure. "I won't be thwarted so easily, Sonny-boy," he taunted. When Hook failed to respond, he roared, "You're a dead man—DEAD!"

~SQ~

Regina sat in quiet contemplation of recent events as she watched Henry huddled with Neal by the jukebox across from their corner booth at the roadside diner where they had stopped for a late lunch. She had been successfully ignoring the blonde fidgeting next to her, attempting to put off the inevitable questions she knew were brewing. The brunette had been confused and unsettled by the changes in the magical bond she and Emma shared, as well as the resurgence of feelings she had thought long since wrung from her; she did not feel up to helping someone else understand that which she could not explain. Her hopes of continued, relative peace were quickly dashed.

"So…," the blonde began, unable to contain her curiosity any longer. "Maybe we could talk about what's going on with our magic?" she asked as she stared resolutely at her hot cocoa.

A slow sigh escaped the former mayor. She did not want to have this conversation, especially in such a public space, lacking the anonymity of Manhattan's sidewalks. Perhaps if she remained silent, her boothmate would give up.

"You realize we're not gonna have another chance to really talk for a while, right?" the sheriff gently prompted, casting a quick glance toward the jukebox.

"I don't have any answers," Regina quietly admitted. "I know, on rare occasions, magic can be bridged between multiple individuals for very brief periods, but I've never heard of . . . that degree of mingling."

Emma's brows scrunched in consternation. "That's putting it mildly." She snickered as she was suddenly struck by an amusing impression. When the former mayor raised a questioning eyebrow, she only shook her head, embarrassed by the direction her thoughts had gone. Regina's intrigued head tilt and open expression finally impelled her to blurt, "It felt like our magic decided to get together for a little afternoon delight."

The brunette's eyes widened in shock as she stared in dismay at the woman sitting next to her. An uncomfortable silence hung between them while Emma wished she could sink through the floor and keep going as the brunette continued to gape at her. Then it started, low and nearly silent at first, building to a throaty chuckle that warmed the blonde and caused her to blush further.

Regina enjoyed the blush on her friend's cheeks, a mischievous twinkle sparking in her brown eyes.
as she quipped, "Well, that's certainly a first."

The blonde cracked up in spite of herself, joining in the infectious mirth. Playfully leaning in and bumping their shoulders together, Emma wagged her eyebrows and retorted, "Popped your cherry, huh?"

A deep flush spread across Regina's face before she dissolved into unbridled laughter, tears forming as her merriment pealed through the diner and drew amused glances from the handful of other patrons. Glancing up, she noticed Neal and Henry standing beside the booth, directing looks of worried confusion at them.

"Are you two okay?" Neal inquired.

Emma sniggered and gasped, "Oh, God," as she held her sides and tried to get her laughter under control.

Regina's eyes met hers at that moment, and biting her bottom lip, the brunette snorted at the double entendre. Unable to help herself, she flashed a saucy smirk and responded with, "I'm flattered," setting them both off, again, the tension sliding from her muscles as she laughed.

Neal eyed them warily and slowly guided Henry back towards the jukebox, muttering, "I'll never understand women."

Once they had finally calmed down, Regina cleared her throat and offered, "Thank you," the smile in her voice evident.

"For what? Embarrassing myself, again?" came the snarky reply.

Grinning, the brunette shook her head and said, "For keeping me grounded these last few days." Her tone switched to one of seriousness as she twisted slightly in the booth to look at Emma. "I'm sure you've noticed that my magic has been more unpredictable lately. Truthfully, I don't even know how it's working outside of Storybrooke. It shouldn't be."

The sheriff shrugged in a self-deprecating manner, unsure of the direction the conversation was headed. "It's not that bad. I mean, you're probably just on edge because you're in unfamiliar territory." She smiled reassuringly and added, "You'll be fine once we get back home."

"You don't understand. I nearly incinerated Neal," she hissed intently, pinning the blonde with a look that conveyed her worry as the tension crept back into her shoulders. "There was no conscious thought involved, just a fireball in my hand. You know that magic has to be willed, directed, to take shape. If it weren't for our bond, the ability of your magic to temper mine...," she trailed off, staring down into her lap as she tried to gather her swirling thoughts and emotions.

Not knowing what to say, Emma waited in silence, intently observing the brunette's expression for any clues and feeling far out of her depth. She watched a look of agony cross Regina's face and linger there as large brown eyes filled with tears caught her gaze again.

Unable to maintain her composure any longer, Regina's voice faltered as she whispered, "I don't know what's happening to me. I—"

Any further discussion was cut off as the waitress arrived with their food. The former mayor quickly wiped at her eyes, attempting to pull together her tattered poise before the boys made it back to the booth. As Henry and Neal slid into their seats across from them, the brunette felt the comforting warmth of Emma's fingers intertwining with hers under the table. Refusing to relinquish the unexpected, but much-needed grip, Regina nonchalantly ate her chicken Caesar
salad with her left hand while listening to the others discuss the merits of Emma's new car.

~SQ~

Leaning back in the driver's seat, Emma tapped the steering wheel in the uncomfortable silence that had descended after lunch. She had continually refused to relinquish the driving to Regina, still reveling in the joy of owning a new car. A quick glance in the rearview mirror assured her that Neal and Henry were still okay in the backseat, though she wasn't comfortable with the way Henry seemed to be cozying up to the man.

"So," Neal started, finally breaking the hour-long quiet, "how did you two meet?" His curiosity was getting the better of him, as Emma had been extremely tight-lipped since he'd gone to their hotel room, and Regina unnerved him in the extreme.

Scowling, the blonde was about to tell him it was none of his business when Henry piped up from the back.

"I found her!" he exclaimed proudly.

"What?" the sandy-haired man questioned in confusion.

Henry grinned and twisted in the seat to face his father, happy to have a new and willing audience. "After Emma gave me up, Mom adopted me. Then I got this book that had stories about Fairytale Land—"

"It's called the Enchanted Forest, Dear," Regina corrected tiredly from the front passenger's seat. At Emma's glare of betrayal, the brunette shrugged indifferently, realizing that Neal was going to find out the details, eventually. They might as well let Henry feel like he was contributing; it could help curb future, unwanted outbursts.

Henry nodded in thanks. "Right, the Enchanted Forest. Anyway, I realized that the people in the book were real people in Storybrooke and that they had been cursed," he continued enthusiastically, oblivious to Regina's wince, something Neal caught, though, as he was observing the two women in the front as much as he was his son. "I went online, found Emma, then went to Boston and brought her back to Storybrooke. Eventually, she broke the curse, and everyone got back their memories from Fairyt—, um, the Enchanted Forest," he finished proudly.

Emma released a silent huff of relief. That wasn't as bad as she'd expected.

"Your mom helped Emma break the curse?" Neal asked for clarification, glad the kid was so eager to talk.

"What?!" Henry laughed in surprise. "No! Mom cast the curse. She's the Evil Queen. Emma's the Savior. She broke the curse when I died and she kissed me," the boy said matter-of-factly.

Regina's breath caught at the reminder, her eyes slipping shut in shame, eliciting a worried glance from Emma. The former mayor felt her escalating emotions trigger an equally strong surge of chaotic magic, and she struggled with the effort to keep it from lashing out at random.

Horrified, Neal stared at Henry, sparing a quick look at the two women before demanding, "You died?!"

"Yup," Henry affirmed. "Mom made a poisoned apple turnover to give to Emma, but I ate it to prove that the curse was real. I kinda died," he added hesitantly, starting to realize how hard it might be for his mothers to hear that part of the story.
Regina's left hand shot out, seeking support, landing on Emma's knee and squeezing tightly, nails catching on the weave of the denim as unbidden tears rolled down her cheeks, anguish written on her every feature. She gave a silent hiccup when the sheriff's right hand left the wheel to rest on top of hers, thumb stroking the side of her wrist.

"But Emma kissed me and broke the curse, and that woke me up!" the boy added brightly, still focused on his father. "Then, Emma helped protect Mom from the town until things settled down again." He gave Neal an expectant look, waiting for his reaction.

Surreptitiously eyeing Emma and Regina, he asked Henry, "Emma helped protect Regina after she killed you?"

Henry made a face and admitted, "Well, she wasn't trying to kill me. That was an accident."

"Uh-huh," came the skeptical reply as Neal observed Regina turn her face to the passenger window, hand still gripping Emma's leg.

"Now my moms work together at the Sheriff's office. They even helped rebuild the town after a giant came through and tore things up," the boy responded.

Neal sat back in surprise. "A giant?"

"Yeah. He's a nice giant, though." As an afterthought, Henry added, "He's normal size, now."

Feeling completely overwhelmed, Neal prompted, "Your moms work together now to make the town better?"

Sighing heavily, Henry nodded slowly. "Emma moved in with Mom a few months ago. They go everywhere together."

"Oh, she did?" the man queried, his eyebrows climbing his forehead in disbelief.

Leaning forward, the boy said conspiratorially, "They even share a room. They're inseparable," he stage-whispered.

"Is that so?" Neal finally turned his full attention to the women in the front seat.

Hearing the insinuation in his voice, Regina attempted to snatch her hand away from Emma's knee, only to have the blonde grasp it tighter and put it back on her leg with authority, sliding it up to her thigh. Giving her an incredulous stare, the brunette's eyes widened slightly as she cut them quickly to the backseat and to Emma, once more. The encouraging smile she received in return left her even more confused and wondering what the sheriff's game was. Then she felt the grip on her hand shift so they were palm-to-palm, the desperate hold drawing her attention to her friend's face. The final piece clicked into place when she caught the rapid glance back at Neal followed by Emma's puppy-dog eyes.

Realizing Emma wanted Neal to get the erroneous impression, the former mayor relaxed back into her seat, a heavy sigh escaping her. It had been one thing when Neal had the wrong idea simply due to their closeness. It was an altogether different proposition to knowingly mislead him. Although she wasn't sure why she was going along with it, Regina clenched the blonde's hand in kind, stroking her thumb over the back for good measure. Feeling the tension leave Emma, the brunette seriously pondered what she had just gotten herself into, having the faint sensation that she had, in some way, just sealed her fate.
Thirty minutes later, and Emma was still steadfastly avoiding Neal's gaze each time she had to check the rearview mirror. Surprisingly, Regina had kept hold of her hand, even shifting them to rest more comfortably on the center console. The sudden ringing of her cell phone startled the blonde, and she released the brunette's hand, immediately missing the warmth. Belatedly, she realized that their magic had been twining together between their palms, and a quick peek at the woman beside her confirmed her suspicion as she caught the puzzled look on her face.

Scrambling for her phone, Emma muttered, "I knew I should have gotten the Bluetooth synced up before we left the diner." Finally grabbing her phone, she was stunned when Regina took it from her.

Swiping to answer the incoming call, the former mayor held it up to the blonde's ear while admonishing, "Keep your eyes on the road. It's Ruby."

Eyeing Regina, she finally acknowledged the person calling her name on the other end of the line. "Hey, Rubes. What's up?" Face creasing in dismay, she demanded, "Hook stabbed him?"

"Hook!?" Neal interjected from the backseat, sitting forward.

Waving at him to be quiet, Emma listened to the rushed response, her stomach dropping as Ruby continued. "He's supposed to be the Dark One. Can't he heal himself?"

"Wait. The Dark One? What's happening?!!" Neal demanded, reaching for the phone. His grab was halted by the death glare Regina shot in his direction.

There was a short pause before Emma assured, "No. We're already on our way back." Her foot pressed down on the accelerator pedal, causing the engine to rumble as she promised, "Three hours, maybe less." Nodding unconsciously in agreement, the sheriff cut an appraising glance at Regina. "Yeah. Considering the circumstances, she might…. Okay. We'll meet you there. Call us if anything changes."

The brunette ended the call and joined the others in looking expectantly at the blonde. Taking a deep breath, she informed them, "Hook stabbed Gold and poisoned him, somehow." Seeing Neal chomping at the bit and Regina's resultant edginess, she quickly elaborated, "He can't heal himself, and Whale doesn't have anything that can help. They're hoping you can mix up some kind of potion once we get back." Directing the last at Regina, she grimaced, not wanting to tell her the rest.

"What do you mean, poisoned? Did they say what he used?" Neal interrogated, unable to contain himself any longer.

Ignoring the man's outburst, the brunette sarcastically groused, "Why do I have the impression there's more?"

"Because you're right," Emma admitted. "Apparently, Cora healed faster than we expected. She's using the distraction Hook provided to go after Gold's dagger. Mary Margaret thinks she wants to use it to control Rumpelstiltskin."

"Damnit, Mother!" Regina cursed, smacking her hand down on the center console in frustration, her magic filling the car with static electricity. There was a loud crack as a lightning bolt struck the lane next to them, chunks of asphalt flying up around the vehicle.

Henry whipped his head around in wide-eyed astonishment to gaze at the hole in the road, exclaiming, "Wow!"

Nearly jerking the car off the road to avoid the strike, Emma yelped, "Hey—watch it! New car!"
Upon seeing the brunette's stricken expression, she once again covered Regina's hand with her own, reassuring her, "It's okay. We'll get there in time." In time for what, though, the sheriff had no idea.

Neal had also turned to check out the new pothole and gulped down the sudden lump in his throat when he saw the damage. The magic strike had left a gaping crater the size of a semi in the middle of the highway. Carefully easing back into his seat, he fixed a wary gaze on Regina, wondering what had caused Emma to side with the temperamental woman. A few awkward moments later, he finally asked, "Could someone please tell me why Hook is in a cursed town with my father? And who is Cora?"

Emma filled him in on Hook and Cora's arrival in Storybrooke and the initial chaos that had ensued. "We really weren't sure why Hook came here, but now, it seems like he's been after Gold this whole time. I guess Cora was a convenient ally."

Regina snorted indelicately. "It's more likely that he was convenient to Mother's purposes." Looking over her shoulder at Neal, she explained acerbically, "In case you weren't following, Cora is my mother, and she will stop at nothing to acquire the power she desires. The fact that she's attempting to obtain the dagger implies that her goal is to become the Dark One. Mary Margaret is fooling herself if she thinks otherwise," Regina scoffed.

Emma paled considerably at the thought. "That's so not good. Regina, we can't let her get that dagger," she insisted, increasing their speed, yet again. "No offense, but she makes Rumpelstiltskin look like a saint."

"Agreed," conceded the former mayor. "However, we'll be of little assistance if we have an accident en route," she gently chided, indicating the speedometer, the needle having crept up to 85 miles per hour.

Peering at the dash, the blonde reluctantly nodded and eased off the gas a little. "Okay. No more lightning bolts and less speeding," she bargained.

Returning to an earlier question, Neal queried, "Did they say anything about the poison Hook used?"

"Ruby said that Gold told them there wasn't any cure for it in this world, but she didn't say what it was, exactly," Emma supplied with an apologetic wince.

The brunette sneered, "And they expect me to conjure up a cure-all with, what—gall of goat and slips of yew?" She rolled her eyes and muttered darkly, "Though, there's certainly no shortage of baboon's blood."

"Huh?" the blonde grunted, completely baffled.

"Eloquent as ever, Dear," Regina consoled her, patting her hand fondly.

In spite of the situation, Neal chuckled. Seeing the brunette's icy stare directed his way, he cleared his throat and suggested, "If Hook supplied the poison, and my father doesn't think there's a cure for it, then it's probably Dreamshade."

Angling her head to the side, Regina searched her memory for the vaguely familiar word. "Dreamshade is a plant, isn't it? But I don't recall ever hearing of its presence in the Enchanted Forest."

"That's because it's only found in Neverland," he replied. "It's also the only place to find the cure."
"Wonderful," sighed Emma. "Just what we need—more complications. This is turning into the quest from hell," she snarled, drawing an amused smirk from Regina. She really wanted the bad guys to take a week off, for a change.

~SQ~

Smiling in triumph, David extracted the Dark One's dagger from its clever hiding place. "We did it," he said with awed exuberance, passing it to Mary Margaret. He wrapped his left arm around his wife's shoulders and led them towards the stairs of the clock tower. However, he was brought to an abrupt halt as a cloud of indigo smoke filled the space around them, clearing to reveal Cora and Hook, conveniently blocking the exit.

"You're too late, Cora," Mary Margaret asserted haughtily. "Good has won, just as it always will." Finally, a win she could celebrate.

Cora curled her lip at the holier-than-thou attitude the girl before her exuded like an unpleasant smell. "I think it's time you learned a very important lesson, dear Snow. It's power that wins the game, not good or evil." She waved her hand as her face split into a menacing smile and a confused Johanna appeared beside her. Plunging her hand into the servant's chest, she ripped out her heart, holding it aloft as she merrily offered, "Your choice." She relished in the gasping, pained cries of the old woman.

Mary Margaret took an aborted step forward, David catching her arm. "Leave her out of this! It has nothing to do with her." Her voice was thin and high as she strained against her husband's grip. Tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. This wasn't fair.

Laughing, the sorceress darkly retorted, "Of course she does." She roughly rubbed her thumb across the bright red heart. The power was electrifying.

Johanna pressed her hands tightly over her chest, entreating her one-time charge with a wheezy, "Don't do it, Snow. Whatever they want, just don't." She wasn't worth it.

"Look out!" Hook shouted as he saw David reaching for his sword, relieved when the sorceress sent it flying across the room. The blade was imbedded high and deep in a rafter.

Aggravated by the unnecessary drama, Cora gave the heart in her hand a slow squeeze, watching in detached satisfaction as the old servant dropped to her knees in pain. "Enough," she commanded. "Surrender the dagger. You know you'll do the good thing. After all, that's what your mother always wanted, wasn't it?" she taunted in a sing-song manner. Oh, how she had loathed Eva.

Eyes growing wide in dawning comprehension, Mary Margaret shook her head and accused, "It was never the Blue Fairy." Anger closely followed, full understanding of a betrayal from long ago crossing her round features, and she finally put all of the scattered pieces together. "You gave me that candle. My mother was never sick, was she?"

"Oh, she was quite sick," Cora confirmed with a devilish smirk.

Shaking in rage, the young brunette tried to lunge across the space separating them, nearly dropping the dagger as David wrestled her to a halt. "It was you!" she cried. "You killed my mother!" she spat vehemently as hate clouded her mind.

Giving her an indulgent look, the sorceress countered sweetly, "Actually, the candle would have worked. You could have saved her, Snow." She petted the servant's heart with false affection. "But, you were too weak," she sneered, squeezing the organ to elicit a strangled gasp. A twisted grin
graced her face as she looked skyward, tapping a manicured finger against her deep red lips. "Now," she pensively pondered, "I wonder how many people would have willingly sacrificed themselves to save Queen Eva."

Having calmed slightly, Mary Margaret's brow furrowed in confusion. She shook her head, and as her vision blurred with tears, she asked, "Why? You knew I wouldn't use the candle. Why did you take her from me?"

"To make my daughter the queen. Why else?" Growing bored with the conversation, Cora straightened and in a hard voice demanded, "Now, hand over the dagger."

Backing up a few steps, the young woman shook her head, refusing, "No. Not again. I'm not letting you win this time."

The sorceress turned a pitying look on the woman before her as she gave Johanna's heart another, longer squeeze. "How many connections to your mother remain?" she taunted. "Not many, I'd wager." Loosening her grip, she watched as the old woman at her feet sputter and pant frantically at the small respite. "The dagger, Dear," she reminded them.

"Stop!" Mary Margaret pleaded in defeat, unable to stand by and let her old friend be tortured any longer, tossing the dagger onto the floor between them. Her round face shone with her tears as she cried, "Let her go."

Cora used her magic to summon the dagger to her, victory dancing in her dark eyes. "Such a good girl," she patronized her while waiting for Hook to drag Johanna to her feet and hold her steady. She pushed the heart back into the handmaiden's chest, and Hook shoved her in the Charmings' direction.

David's features were twisted with bewilderment, and he asked, "If you could summon the dagger with magic, why not do it immediately? What was the point of all of this?"

Amused, Cora turned her cold gaze on the couple before her and smirked ominously. "The point? Why, it's to ensure you understand your role in what's to come." Her eyes flashed with menace. "Your fear makes you predictable."

Defiant again, now that her old friend was safe, Mary Margaret lifted her chin and boldly proclaimed, "The only thing coming is Emma. She found Rumpelstiltskin's son and is on her way back at this very moment. She knows about your plan, and she'll stop you," she finished with self-righteous determination.

Hook dropped his scornful expression at her words. "What? She found him?" he muttered under his breath, conflicted at the sudden bit of information. Did the boy know about Hook's role in his father's eventual demise? His mouth worked but no words came out. The pirate cursed and whirled to face Cora. "You said she'd never find him, Witch!"

Cora sniggered at him, tired with the tediousness of their alliance. "You all disgust me. You've let love make you soft, so easily bending to the will of others when someone precious to you is threatened." She scoffed derisively, "That is the exact moment you should be ruthless. There is no place for such feeble goodness in power."

"You're wrong," Mary Margaret countered gently. In silent, rebellious protest, she interlaced her hand with David's. "Love is strength."

Narrowing her eyes for a brief moment, Cora suddenly beamed, and with a subtle wave of her
hand, sent Johanna flying through the glass face of the clock tower into the open air outside. "Love is weakness and will be your undoing," she jeered as the sickeningly wet sound of a body hitting pavement reached them. "You see where good gets you?" she ridiculed, clutching the dagger in a white-knuckled grip. Yet before her triumphant exit, she stiffened at the sudden massive force of magic rolling into town, causing the air around them to spark and spit like a thousand firecrackers. Recovering quickly, she pasted the smile back on her face and disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Time was running out.

Taking advantage of Mary Margaret's wail of despair and David's need to comfort her, Hook rushed out of the exit, heading for his ship. He hadn't counted on the Savior finding Baelfire. As he boarded his vessel, he yelled in outrage at the injustice of the situation, viciously kicking the bulwark. Cursing at the resultant pain, he slammed his hook against the gunwale, embedding it two inches into the wood. Suddenly, everything was a complete mess, and his revenge on the crocodile was leaving a bitter aftertaste on his tongue.

~SQ~

End of Part 8
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Wow, another part! Yay for co-authors who are wonderful spouses. Several important plot points are revealed and/or explained in this part. Some other plot points will tease and tinkle, but remember, everything has a purpose. And all will be clarified in due time. We have a plan! Please note that several scenes are happening concurrently and/or in quick succession. So, there's a bit of overlap there, but it shouldn't be too confusing. Lastly, did you enjoy the fluff in Part 8? If not, I'll tell my co-author no more unscripted fluff and keep a tight lid on such things until later, much later.

Thank You for all of the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. Your feedback inspires us to write faster. We like reading your theories and speculations.

~SQ~

PART 9

As the Charger rolled across the town line, the air in the vehicle grew thick with static electricity, everyone's hair beginning to stand on end. Emma's gaze cut to the woman next to her, taking in the clenched fists, tightly closed eyes, and the way her body was shuddering slightly. She felt the bond suddenly flare, Regina's magic pushing hard against her. "Oh no," she muttered. They'd already had one close call on the highway. She had to get her out in the open—fast. Quickly braking and slamming the car into park, she whispered, "Hang on, Regina," and hurried out of the vehicle. The blonde rushed around to the passenger's side, flinging open Regina's door and fumbling with the seatbelt before finally pulling her out of the car.

Regina felt the magic of Storybrooke hit her like a blow to the solar plexus, and she gasped as it rushed into her almost viciously, stealing her breath and tensing her muscles. She was drowning in the amount of energy flooding her, feeling the air start to crackle around her as the excess tried to find an outlet to keep from frying her synapses. Only vaguely aware of the cool rush of air when her door opened, or the frantic hands tugging at her seatbelt, the brunette allowed herself to be drawn from the vehicle, too overloaded to resist the manhandling.

Emma slipped her left shoulder under her friend's right arm, holding her tightly to support her weight while moving them several yards away from the Charger, worried about Henry and the new car. The blonde maintained her hold on the former mayor, feeling the magic forming rapidly, uneasy with the strength of it as it seemed to probe at her edges, seeking a weak spot. Then, it peaked, brilliant purple sparks erupting around them as Regina's magic finally broke loose, writhing chaotically in a building electrical storm, with them in the center. Lightning burst in the darkening clouds above and chained out in the direction of town, snapping up the oxygen and creating dazzling flickers in its wake.

Regina panted under the force that was coursing through her. She felt like her body was trying to
drag in every erg of energy about her only to release it again when it found no place to settle within her. The temperature dropped several degrees as all heat quit the area, their breaths leaving them in heavy puffs of white mist, frost materializing on the pavement. The brunette mutely observed ice crystals form on Emma's eyelashes. Absurdly, she wondered how she could be so cold since the environment had seceded its warmth to her, fueling the growing storm. If not for the blonde's strong arms, she would have already collapsed under the onslaught.

Thunderclaps boomed overhead as several bolts of lightning struck the ground nearby, one crashing into a tree and catching it on fire. The former mayor shivered violently from the sudden cold and the vast amount of power she was channeling. Her eyes glowed violet as the magic began to consume her, and panic clawed its way to the surface as the idea formed that she might not be able to control the tempest. She shifted in the sheriff's arms, twisting in an attempt to escape, trying to push her away. Features distorted with anguish, she ordered, "Let me go. I can't control it."

Shaking her head adamantly, Emma adjusted to the brunette's struggles, managing to wrap her up in a bear hug, refusing to relinquish her hold on the other woman. She stared into terrified eyes and insisted, "No! I'm not leaving you." The sheriff felt Regina's forearms, trapped between their bodies, push against her chest. "We're in this together," she declared through teeth gritted against the little shocks that were lighting her skin.

"You'll only get hurt!" the brunette yelled over the thunder, fear increasing her struggle to break free and causing a spike in the magical storm. She jerked at the distant sound of electrical transformers exploding in the town, her bare fists clutching traitorously at the collar of Emma's red leather jacket. Tears of frustration and hurt tracked down her face as she started to accept that she didn't have the strength to fight this. She was going to die and take Emma with her because of the damned bond, and Henry was going to grow up without either of his mothers and no one to protect him.

Regina released a shriek of fury and grief as everything she had gained over the last two months was about to disappear. The storm raged around them in a frenzy, her feelings whipping the chaos to a fever pitch. Emma cringed, and her heart broke a little at her friend's wail of raw emotion. She wanted to help so badly, but all she could think to do was to keep the brunette clasped as closely as possible and let her know she wasn't alone.

And in that moment of despair and pandemonium, their bond awakened, galvanized into action, its elegantly cruel design at last fully revealed. The brunette watched in fascination as Emma's magic left the blonde in a blue fog, wisps wrapping Regina in a gentle caress of diffuse light and smoke that seeped into her skin. She permitted herself to take a clean breath of air, a brief instant of calm that lulled her into relaxing the faintest bit, the storm suspended in a pregnant pause.

Then the pain found her. Soft tendrils of blue became sharp scourges against her flesh, flails that arced outward, wrenching back the purple streaks of her own magic. Regina was caught in a spasm as she felt Emma's magic claim dominion over hers, plucking the turbulence from the atmosphere and savagely driving it back into her shaking body. There was a fleeting thought of betrayal until she saw the dismay in green eyes, a sick understanding reaching her as the bond did its job. She couldn't stop the scream that ripped from her throat as the cold was aggressively burned away with a current of cerulean power that scorched her bones. The conquest was violent and merciless as her magic was forced into submission, as she was made to surrender wholly or be ripped apart.

Emma stared in horror as her magic leapt out of her and wrested control of the brunette and her power. It happened without her volition, the bond almost a separate awareness, demanding obedience for her unwilling role in the furious coup. "Regina!" she cried out in alarm when it assaulted the woman in her arms. Frantically, she tried to grasp at the blue threads of her magic,
feeling it continually slip from her metaphysical fingers. The blonde sucked in a deep breath when their eyes managed to meet, stunned at the forgiveness that shone back at her from the amethyst irises.

The complete trust in that gaze helped ground the sheriff, panic receding just enough that she could actually think instead of simply reacting. Emma forced herself to consider long hours of training with the woman in her arms, how she had stressed protection and defense as her strongest abilities. Regina's scream was encouragement enough to change tactics. So, instead of trying to fight the bond, she let her instincts guide her and concentrated on how she felt at that moment. Her fear and worry were at the forefront, but the fierce protectiveness she bore for the brunette quickly followed. She latched onto it. That was going to be what saved them both.

A few heartbeats passed without change, and Emma was beginning to doubt herself when she noticed the subtle shift in the bond. It seemed to slow, no longer brutally attempting to dominate Regina's magic, settling to quiescence over the span of several interminable seconds. At last, the blonde's magic was her own, again. She was amazed to find the former mayor still conscious, watching her with disquieting eyes that still glowed brightly. Her power was gentle and lulling, once more, coaxing and weaving through the brunette's magic as it seemed to be doing with increasing frequency. Able to speak again, she worriedly asked, "Are you okay?" knowing the question fell far short of conveying the extent of her concern.

Regina released a sob of relief when Emma finally mastered the bond and brought an end to the torture. She nodded and clung desperately to the sheriff as she gasped and sagged against Emma, utterly spent, the energy around them gradually calming as their magic continued to intermingle. She exhaled shakily as the remnants of the storm reversed course and fell into the her like an implosion, leaving nothing but silence in its wake. Leaning her head on the blonde's shoulder, she trembled as the loose power rushed back into her body, cushioned by Emma's magic. She let golden strands blanket her face while she inhaled deeply of the minty shampoo and felt the, now soft, blue coils tenderly soothe the rawness that buzzed along her nerves.

Selfishly, the former mayor stayed in the warm embrace, content to breathe in the scent of the woman holding her while she found her center and let her power fully settle. She heard the quiet sigh as Emma finally relaxed against her, the blonde's magic sliding against hers until they merged for a split second. It was similar to the moment in New York when the blonde had prevented her from immolating Neal. But this was warmer, an unexpected burst of brightness in her chest that stunned her with its clarity. Snapping her head up, she locked gazes with Emma, seeing the same sense of astonishment reflected in her large eyes. Quickly, she looked away but remained in the blonde's supportive hold as she straightened and turned to see the Charger safe under a magical barrier. A relieved grin pulled at her lips, and she commented hoarsely, "It looks like your protective magic has fully manifested."

Wide-eyed, Emma nodded absently. "Uh, yeah." She paused to gather her disordered thoughts, wondering just what was happening to their magic. Not comfortable with the heavy silence and wanting to get to the bottom of things, she blurted, "What the hell was that?"

"My best guess is that I was overwhelmed by the magic of Storybrooke," the brunette replied, skirting the alternate reason for the blonde's question. She was quiet for a few beats, eventually saying, "And if I'm not mistaken, we've just discovered the true purpose of the binding spell."

Emma winced apologetically, babbling, "I'm so sorry, Regina. I didn't mean to—"

"It wasn't your fault, Emma," she cut her off, a soft smile gracing her features as she looked at her friend. "I felt the way the bond reacted. You brought it to heel, mastered it instead of letting it
master me.” Her smile faded and venom laced her words as she added, "However, I do believe a chat with Rumpelstiltskin is in order."

Catching the cold glint in eyes that were once again a dark brown, the blonde grumbled, "Convenient that he's been poisoned."

"Oh, I'll just have to cure him so I can give him the thrashing he deserves," Regina snarled, starting toward the car with slow but steady steps. Chuckling darkly, she added, "We wouldn't want him to die prematurely. It would ruin all my fun."

Deciding the brunette was well within her rights to exact some vengeance on the devious imp, Emma only grunted in agreement, touching the bubble protecting the car and watching it shimmer out of existence.

The back doors opened, and Neal stepped out, leaning on the top of the door, face white in shock. Henry scrambled out and ran to his mothers, coming to a confused stop before them. "Are you guys okay?" he asked tremulously, looking between the two, unsure whether he should hug them or keep his distance.

They solved the mystery for him by pulling him into a joint hug, Emma feeling him nuzzle his face against her stomach as Regina crouched and pressed her hands into his small back, resting her cheek on his dark hair. "We're alright, Kid," the blonde reassured him warmly.

The sound of running feet slapping against the pavement pulled their attention around, and they looked up to see Diego Flores hurrying toward them. "Your Highness," he panted harshly, struggling to regain his breath. "I saw the storm. Are you well?" the anxiety in his voice was thick, and it was a welcome reminder to the former mayor that she had allies in Storybrooke.

"Well enough," she replied, studying the heavy stubble on his normally clean-shaven visage. "What are you doing this close to the town's border?" she queried, apprehensive about what his presence this far out could mean.

"I've been camping here, waiting for you to return." Glancing briefly at Henry, he informed them, "Cora has the Dark One's dagger."

Emma shifted nervously on her feet, having hoped that they'd have a little more time before this particular turn of events. "That's just freakin' great," she exploded, throwing her arms up in the air. Was it too much to ask for a break on this trip into insanity?

Pursing her lips, Regina stalked to the driver's side of the Charger, sliding into the seat and closing the door before anyone else could react. She put the window down and asked Diego, "You have your bike, I presume?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he said sharply. "I'll lead the way," he stated, jogging down the road without further ado.

The others belatedly clambered back into the car, getting knocked back in their seats as, at the sound of a motorcycle engine revving, Regina hit the gas hard enough to peel out, leaving skid marks in their wake.

~SQ~

Regina brought the car to a stop in front of Granny's Diner with a sharp screech of brakes, simpering at Emma's squawk of indignation over the rough treatment of her new car. "It's okay, Baby," the blonde cooed as she got out of the Charger, stroking the hood lovingly. She scowled at
the brunette who had come around to the passenger side and was blatantly leaning against the front fender.

"Maaaa," Henry whined in embarrassment, rolling his eyes as he closed his door, sharing a long-suffering look with Neal over the trunk.

Ruby had been waiting outside of the diner with Monty for their arrival, and while she wasn't too fazed to see the four Crows Guards' bikes playing motorcade, she was surprised to find Emma get out of the dark gray vehicle and not the expected, yellow beetle. "What happened to the bug?" she asked, feeling it was a very important question that superseded the current situation.

Henry made a face and supplied, "It died on the way to New York." Using his thumb to indicate the man who had come to stand beside him, he added in the nonchalant way only an eleven-year-old could, "This is my dad. He's Mr. Gold's son."

Ruby's eyebrows climbed her forehead, her nonplussed expression turning to Emma. "Really?"

"Yup," the boy affirmed with a big smile, rocking back and forth on his heels, full of energy after the extended time in the car.

Regina shifted against the car irritably, cutting a disgruntled glare at Neal as he placed a hand on Henry's shoulder and grinned down at the boy.

Emma made a small noise of protest and muttered, "Regina, I swear if you scratch the paint on my car before it's a week old…."

Snorting with amusement, the brunette snarked, "You're more likely to scratch it with the rivets from those jeans you paint on every morning than I will with my Ralph Lauren trousers." She settled more firmly against the car, placing her hands on the hood on either side of her hips as she enjoyed the chance to tease her friend.

Wide eyes darting between the two women, Ruby queried, "So, Emma, how did you swing such a nice ride?"

The blonde draped her left arm across Regina's shoulders, pulling her in close and, with an upward tilt of her chin, stated, "I got me a sugar momma."

The wolf blinked at the wicked smirk gently tugging at the corner of the brunette's lips and her complete lack of protest. "Sweet!" she complimented in a care-free tone, knowing by the arch of Regina's eyebrow that she was going to be in trouble later.

Clearing her throat, and pointedly ignoring Monty's glower, Regina brought them to the matter at hand, starting with the biggest threat to the town. "Does anyone know where my mother is?"

Wrinkling her nose, Ruby shook her head. "No, sorry. Once she got the dagger, she just poofed out in a cloud of smoke."

"How long ago was this?" Regina demanded, easily taking charge of the conversation.

Monty eased forward, replying, "That was approximately the same time you entered Storybrooke. Most of the Crows Guard have spread out around town in key locations. We've had no word of any sightings, as of yet."

Hitching a thumb in the direction of the school where several blocks of the town were without power, the wolf questioned, "Any idea what that storm was about? It knocked out a couple of
transformers."

Shifting her weight uneasily, the blonde tersely responded, "We had an incident."

"What about my father?" Neal finally interrupted, tired of waiting for others to decide he was important.

"Oh!" Ruby indicated the pawnshop behind him and said, "He's in the back of his shop. Mary Margaret and David are with him."

At Neal's confused look, Henry explained, "Snow White and Prince Charming." He paused as he suddenly realized something. "Hey, all of my grandparents are in one place!" Smiling enthusiastically, he grabbed Neal's hand and began to lead him to the pawnshop. "Come on, I'll introduce you."

Emma snatched her son's free arm, effectively halting his progress. "Not so fast, Kid. You need to stay here with Ruby and Alexander," she told him, turning him around to face the diner and the young Crows Guard coming out to meet them. "Neal can manage his little reunion on his own."

Henry groaned and tried to go limp in his mother's grip. He would have succeeded, too, if his brunette mother hadn't moved to flank him and caught his other arm. Raising her brows, she crouched in front of him and gave him a no-nonsense look. "Henry, this isn't a request. My mother and Rumpelstiltskin are dangerous at the best of times. Right now, with the power of the Dark One at stake, they're doubly treacherous." Holding his shoulders in a firm grip, she stressed, "We need you to be somewhere safe, and right now, that's not with us. Do you understand?"

Reluctantly, he nodded. Regina stood and released him, crossing her arms over her chest as she watched him dejectedly march into the diner in front of Alexander. Letting out a deep breath, she turned her attention back on Ruby. "I trust I don't need to remind you to keep him here," she stated, seeing the young woman sober instantly and shake her head. As the wolf turned to go inside, the brunette added softly, "Thank you," receiving a quick backward glance and grim smile in return.

Emma glanced at her car and its proximity to Gold's shop. "I think I better move the car," she mumbled, sure that it was going to get damaged if it stayed where it was.

Regina held up the keys and slipped around the vehicle. "I'll move it," she offered. Flashing a toothy grin at Neal, she sweetly suggested, "Why don't you take Baelfire to get reacquainted with his father?"

~SQ~

Emma led Neal across the street to the pawnshop, stopping briefly to greet Jason, who was standing in front of the door, arms crossed over his chest, gauntlets on full display. "Hey."

Jason smiled and relaxed a tiny bit as the sheriff approached. "Hi, Emma. Glad to have you back." He genuinely liked the blonde and was relieved to once again have the stabilizing influence she and the queen, as a pair, seemed to have on the town. "David and Snow are inside with Rumpelstiltskin, right now." He gave the man beside her an appraising stare. "Is this his son?"

"Yeah. Neal, this is Jason. He's one of the Crows Guard," she added unnecessarily.

Baffled, he asked, "My father included a motorcycle gang in his cursed town?"

The guard reached out and gave Neal's hand a firm shake, assessing him for a potential threat to the former mayor. "We were the queen's personal guard in the Enchanted Forest. Her Majesty brought
some of us with her when she cast the curse," he explained with a grim smile.

"Ah," Neal grunted, suddenly warier of the man before him. "Well, it's nice to meet you. If you don't mind, though," he pointed to the shop's door, "I'd like to check on my father."

Raising an eyebrow, Jason sidestepped, allowing him to pass, nodding at Emma as she followed.

The sheriff stepped into the gloomy pawnshop and frowned at the sight of David and Mary Margaret in the back room. Sighing with resignation, she trudged forward, muttering, "Let's get this over with."

Upon seeing her daughter, Mary Margaret's face lit up, glad she was safely home. She darted forward, hands coming up to give her a hug but was stopped short by the scowl the blonde leveled at her, face falling as she realized this would not be a happy reunion for them. "Emma," she pleaded with sad eyes, stumbling back as her daughter brusquely moved past her into the back room.

David turned to her, asking quickly, "Did you see the storm when you came into town?"

"We had an incident," Emma ground out irritably, refusing to look anyone in the eye.

As soon as Neal stepped inside, his heart began hammering hard in his chest with equal parts dread and anticipation. Try as he might to deny it, a part of him still cared about his father and was worried about losing him permanently. Eyes falling to the prone figure lying on the cot, he found his throat choked with all of the unresolved feelings he'd kept shoved to the side. For the first time since that damned dagger had come into their lives, his father looked frail and small, seemed to be an ordinary man. It shook him.

Gold looked up at the commotion and stared at the scruffy young man standing reticently in the doorway. Though he'd grown and matured, Rumpelstiltskin had no trouble identifying him as his son. Quietly, he said, "Bae, you came back for me."

Neal grimaced at the soft tone, not wanting to fall into old habits of giving his father the benefit of the doubt. "No, I came to make sure you didn't hurt her," he retorted, indicating Emma. "I've seen what you do to people who break deals."

Rolling her eyes at the immediately hostile attitude, the blonde groaned, "Neal….

He waved off her mild censure, a little put out by all of the extra people in the room. "Emma, I got this," he muttered.

Gold observed the interaction between the savior and his son with narrowed eyes, suspicion creeping to the forefront. "You know each other…. You two know each other. How?" he ordered, wondering what they were playing at.

Emma tried to deflect the question, scoffing, "You sent me to find him. I found him. What else is there to know?"

"No, no, no. Stop it!" the imp yelled, halfway sitting up in his bed, ignoring the pain from his wound. "You're lying. How do you two know each other?!" he demanded, spittle flying in his frenzy.

Neal grew very still, glaring at the man who was once his father, disappointed, but unsurprised, to see this side of him, again. He debated not telling him anything, letting him stew and wonder, but he knew his father too well for that. Rumpelstiltskin wouldn't stop searching for an answer, and
eventually, someone would end up hurt. "Henry's my son," he announced somberly, ignoring Emma's horrified look.

Expression going slack, Gold whispered, "Henry is…," trailing off as he tried to process this new information.

Mary Margaret and David stared at their daughter, shocked by the revelation. "Emma, is this true?" David asked, stepping close and putting a hand on her shoulder.

Shrugging off the touch, she whirled on Neal, fuming, "What the hell? You just go and tell him without talking to me first?"

"He would have found out, anyway," Neal rejoined. "It's better this way. You saw how he reacted. It would have just gotten worse the longer we waited to say anything," he implored her.

Face contorted in rage, Emma stormed forward, shoving her ex hard into the wall, and barked, "Fuck you, Neal." She stomped out of the shop, anger coming off of her in waves as she slammed the door open and strode onto the sidewalk, just barely avoiding running into Jason. She was furious. The one person in town who she absolutely did not want around Henry had just been given cause to see him.

Mary Margaret and David hurried out of the shop after her, catching up with her on the sidewalk. "Emma!" Mary Margaret called out, glad when her daughter stopped. "Is it true? Is Gold's son Henry's father?" she questioned the blonde's back.

Regina had been talking to Monty outside of Granny's Diner, catching up on what little news there was of her mother, when she felt the hot spike of fury reach her through the bond. Her eyes automatically went to the pawnshop, worry filling her when Emma barreled outside. Seeing the Charmings trailing behind, she cut short her conversation and moved to join the blonde.

Turning abruptly, the sheriff glowered at her parents, pissed off that they couldn't just let it be for five minutes so she could get her thoughts together. "Yes," she hissed. "Is that what you wanted to hear?"

A huge smile burst across Mary Margaret's face, and she grasped Emma's upper arms with a happy squeeze. "But that's wonderful, Emma! Don't you see, Henry can have a family," she enthused.

Jerking out of her mother's grip, she countered loudly, "Henry has a family!" Her green eyes held a deep pain as she ranted, "That bastard is the reason I had to give up Henry in the first place, and you think it's fucking wonderful? Goddammit, Mary Margaret, family isn't about blood, it's about actually being there for each other, even when everything is going to shit around you."

She felt Regina's presence strengthen behind her, felt a warm hand pressing firmly into her lower spine and the light brush of a wool coat against the back of her left arm. "But you wouldn't know anything about that, would you, since you left me to die from exposure in the middle of the fucking forest. And then you pull that shit last week, trying to magically lobotomize Regina, to hell with what it would do to either of us?" Her heart dropped when Regina's free hand clutched her left bicep at the painful reminder, and it just made her madder. "Lady, if that's your idea of family, I want no part of it," she spat, stepping into her parents' space.

Focusing watery eyes on their daughter, Mary Margaret and David both started to protest, "Emma, no. That's not—"

"Save it!" the sheriff cut them off sharply. Taking satisfaction in the distressed expressions on the
faces before her, she smiled cruelly. "You may have given birth to me, but I don't have any parents." The resulting gasp was more rewarding than she'd imagined it would be. She paused at the odd sensation of her anger being teased from her through the bond and allowed herself to calm slightly, casting a quick glance at the woman beside her. "I have Regina and our son. That's all the family I need," the blonde claimed. Turning from the others, she placed her right hand over Regina's left, still holding tightly to her arm, leading each other away for a few steps before disappearing in a cloud of purple.

~SQ~

"Wow, it's crowded in here," exclaimed Henry as he entered the diner. He smiled at the few people who looked at him, but most everyone ignored him. Guided by Alexander, he weaved his way through the crowd of people to a booth in the back, but when he saw Bruce Farmer and another Crows Guard sitting there, he stopped.

"Go on, Henry," the young drummer instructed, gently nudging the boy forward. He flashed an encouraging smile but understood the boy's hesitation. Some of the Crows Guard had duplicitous feelings regarding the queen's adopted son.

Noting his lieutenant's scowl, the Crows Guard that Henry didn't know looked over his shoulder at him and got out of the booth. He left through the side door without a word, his instructions clear.

With a nervous swallow, Henry slipped into the booth, sliding over all the way to make room for Alexander to sit next to him. He smiled weakly at Farmer's scowl.

Looking at the young guard, Bruce asked, "You understand your orders?"

"Yes, Sir," Alexander nodded with the utmost seriousness.

"Good," Bruce simply stated. He resumed scanning the room, watching. However, when he saw the dwarves push their way inside, he sighed. Things weren't going to stay peaceful for long. And when one of the part-time waitresses decided to finally stop at the booth, he frowned at the girl. He'd been sitting there for twenty minutes.

"Granny says you have to order something or leave," the waitress droned and sighed. She softly tapped her pencil against her order pad. Today was supposed to have been her day off.

Alexander blinked a few times when his superior deferred to him. Clearing his throat, he ordered a basket of fries and two strawberry milkshakes. Hopefully, the treat would keep his young charge occupied and content while they waited things out. Quietly, he started asking the boy about his trip to New York.

~SQ~

"So, what happens if Gold dies?" Emma asked, keeping pace with the brunette as they headed towards the docks of Storybrooke Marina. She shivered against the brisk wind blowing in off the water. "Before Cora can take his powers," she amended, pulling her hair out of her mouth. The blonde was still madder than hell, but Regina was letting her have her space. It also helped that the brunette's magic had been constantly grazing against hers with a steady tenderness since they had left her parents.

"What do you mean?" Regina countered distractedly. Her eyes swept the landscape, magically searching for the Jolly Roger. She was trying to be as thorough as possible, but time was of the essence. The thin magical atmosphere of Storybrooke seemed somehow more, like she'd been
living in a semi-desaturated world, and now, everything was in technicolor splendor. She found it disconcerting, seeing the thin threads of power glowing more prominently, brighter.

Sighing, the sheriff bluntly explained, "Would his powers stay in the dagger and be unusable?" She looked down at the cement walkway with a furrowed brow. Noticing her companion had stopped, she paused and turned towards her. "We'd be left with a fancy paperweight?"

"It wouldn't be that simple," the former mayor scoffed, dismissing the suggestion with a wave of her hand. Slowly lowering her hand, she frowned, considering. "It couldn't be," she added speculatively. Thoughtfully regarding the blonde, she opened her mouth then closed it again, only to finally snarl, "If anyone gets to kill the imp, it'll be me." She recommenced her search with renewed vigor.

"I was just asking," Emma sulkily clarified as she resumed following the brunette. Her sharp eyes looked around for any likely hiding places. A few times, she attempted to reach out with her magic, but it kept moving to the other woman. She couldn't decide if it was trying to pet or corral the former mayor's magic. The earlier light show made her hesitant, echoes of the brunette's scream still ringing in her ears.

When they reached the end of a long, wide, wooden pier, Regina crossed her arms and glared out across the gray waters of the harbor. "Damnit," she cursed softly.

"What?" the sheriff inquired, looking around. She held her hair out of her face. "How do you hide a big boat, anyway?" There was a smaller marina a couple of miles down the coast, but it was in poor repair and populated by alcoholics. Needless to say, that's where Leroy lived. Once she thought about it, she reflected that they might have better luck moving the search to the second marina, instead.

"With magic," the former mayor replied with clear agitation. She pointed to a spot in the middle of the harbor. It was quite clever, actually.

Squinting, the blonde could just make out the subtle magic obscuring the moored vessel. "Huh." She absently took the brunette's hand as she mentally prepared herself to teleport.

"What are you doing?" Regina questioned, glancing between confused green eyes and their linked hands. Rolling her eyes, she wove her free hand about in a graceful gesticulation. A cloud of purple appeared off the end of the dock. Extracting her hand from the blonde's grip, she gestured to the end of the pier.

Moving forward and peering over the edge, Emma frowned at the rowboat and groused, "Why can't we just apparate to the damn boat?" With a surprising amount of coordination, she sat on the edge of the pier and carefully lowered herself into the waiting, rocking, too tiny rowboat. "Really? Not even a motor?" she grumped as she cautiously turned to help the former mayor down.

"I can't teleport us somewhere I've never been, Emma," Regina explained, accepting the other woman's assistance. She settled on the seat opposite the rowing station and smirked as the blonde pushed them away from the bearing pile. "We might end up impaled on the rigging or merged into the deck."

The sheriff made a disgruntled face and started to row. "Again, no motor," she repeated, falling into the easy rhythm of rowing. She grinned as the former mayor rolled her eyes.

"And lose the element of surprise, Sheriff? Tsk, tsk, and here, I thought you were a clever tactician," Regina mildly teased in a low, throaty tone. She cocked an eyebrow, but didn't look at
Emma. It was bad enough that she could see her big, goofy grin in her periphery.

"I got skills," the blonde quipped. A smile stayed on her face as she heard the soft hum in reply.

It took about fifteen minutes to cover the intervening distance. As they got closer to the boat, the sheriff adjusted her rowing technique, keeping it fluid and smooth to minimize the sound of the oars connecting with the water. Taking advantage of the situation, her gaze avidly searched the other woman, who was focused on the boat ahead. Questions titillated the tip of her tongue, but she thought better of asking any, right then.

Estimating that they were close enough, the brunette waved her hand in the general direction of the ship. Gradually, the cloaking spell encasing the vessel faded away, revealing the famed Jolly Roger. She was staggered to see so much residual magic radiating from the ship's hull. As the blonde maneuvered the rowboat alongside the port-side rope hanging ladder, Regina frowned, realizing her mother wasn't onboard. She quickly reached for the rope and started to climb, easily vaulting the gunwale, her eyes scanning the main deck. It reminded her of David Salter's brig, Star Strider.

Suddenly, there was a sharp whack behind her. Emma screamed, followed by the sound of something hitting the side of the ship with a solid thud. Regina spun around, instinctively reaching for the remaining rope of the ladder. However, she was caught off guard by a hard backhand across the face. She stumbled back several paces but managed to keep her footing, ignoring the slight ringing in her ears. Glaring at her assailant, she seethed, "Hook."

"It's respectful to ask for permission before boarding, Love," the pirate taunted, flashing a brilliant smile. With more flourish than necessary, he raised his sword and lunged at the brunette. Before his blade tip could pierce her abdomen, he felt ropes twining about his wrists and torso as he was snared by the rigging of his ship and raised into the air. He raged against his bindings but knew it was pointless, calming quickly. This was to be a game of wits.

"Emma!" the former mayor called as soon as the ropes were moving, hurrying back to the port side of the ship. She looked over the railing and saw the sheriff struggling to climb the now skewed rope ladder, boots squeaking and slipping from condensation on the outer hull. With a sigh of relief, she reached down and helped the blonde make it onboard. Then, with her friend safe, she turned back to her prey. "Where's Cora?"

"That, I do not know," Hook replied lightly with an air of disinterest. "She absconded with her new treasure, and I haven't seen her." His gaze drifted to Emma. She was a still a sight to behold, memory hadn't led him astray.

"You idiot, you were supposed to kill her, not join forces with her," Regina sharply rebuked, crossing her arms. She ignored the blonde's curious expression. "And while you licked her boots, did it not occur to you that aiding her to become the Dark One was a bad idea?" Really, how many idiots would she be forced to deal with?

Unconcerned with the entire affair, the pirate's gaze lingered on the blonde as he huskily said, "I tried, Love, but she didn't have a heart to begin with." He trailed off and became enthralled with his own fantasies. Why were the good ones so appealing?

"What?" the former mayor demanded abruptly, bristling at his lack of fear. Had she lost her touch? Had she really gone that soft? When no answer was immediate, she sneered and twisted her wrist to tighten the ropes.

"Oy!" Hook cried before he started laughing. "Is this how you like it, Swan?" A roguish smile
crossed his face, and a devilish glint twinkled in his eyes. "Hard and rough?" Turning his smirk on Regina, he added, "Miss having something to ride? I'd happily oblige a princess." Any further taunts were cut short as he was immediately raised ten feet higher and unceremoniously dropped onto the deck.

"Regina," Emma hissed, placing a hand on the brunette's forearm, a furious blush working its way across her cheeks. Worry spread as she took in the hate brewing in the former mayor's glare, the flexing jawline and pulsing vein in her forehead. In that moment, she missed New York.

"He'll live," Regina promised, unwavering in her loathing. If these two had some dalliance while in the Enchanted Forest, it wasn't her business, but the bastard would treat Emma respectfully.

Groaning, the pirate rolled on the deck, testing his bonds. He grunted in frustration, and snarled, "Aye, I plunged my hook into her chest, to no avail." Eventually, he stopped his struggling and looked up at the two woman looming over him. He almost liked it. "I cooperated to live." For some reason, seeing the blonde touch the queen irritated him. When Emma met his heated look with her own, he leered.

Feeling the warm coil of magic slip around her like an affectionate cat, Regina calmed slightly, the desire to throttle the man successfully subdued, for the moment. She turned to the sheriff and contemplatively stated, "She doesn't have her heart." Unspoken questions were left hanging in the air. How long had Cora been without a heart? Where had she hidden it?

"That's a good thing, right?" Emma prompted, not dropping her hand but readjusting her touch. She briefly studied the man tied up before asking him, "Where's the antidote for the poison you used on Gold?"

"There isn't an antidote," Hook scoffed bitterly, rolling his eyes. "That's why I used it on the Dark One."

"You wouldn't carry a poison like that without an antidote," the sheriff countered with a prominent frown. They were wasting time, she realized, scowling as she noticed his persistent appraisal of her crotch. "Toss him around a little more," she suggested to the former mayor. They could search the entire ship for days and not find the antidote.

"With pleasure," Regina purred, both surprised and delighted by the blonde's duality of character. She raised her hands, sensing the excited titter of Emma's magic. This was going to be fun. Perhaps she could turn it into a mini training exercise for her pupil.

"What?!" the pirate exclaimed. Shock framed his face as he finally caught the blonde's gaze with his own. What was this? He'd thought she was good. As he was once again lifted into the air, his eyes shifted back to the queen. However, any scathing remark was soon lost as he found himself thrown overboard.

Valiantly, he struggled to swim to the surface, but he only seemed to sink lower in the chilling depths, despite his best efforts. When the air was almost burned from his lungs, his body surged upward, yanked gasping and sputtering to the surface by the ropes. Then, without delay, he was hoisted over the gunwale, his gut slammed into the mainyard. He fell back, landing hard on the deck in a sodden heap, the rigging finally releasing him.

After a bout of coughing, Hook rolled onto his stomach. "You contemptuous, bitch!" he snarled, standing. His anger fully manifested as his face contorted in rage. "You broke our arrangement. You were supposed to aide me in killing the Dark One." He stormed forward, shaking his hook. "You left me to your mother's clutches."
"Please," the brunette jeered, unconcerned with his threats. Her eyes darkened and her chin tilted downward as she slowly stalked towards the angry man. "If you couldn't kill an old woman, do you really think you could kill Rumpelstiltskin?" Angling to the side, she moved to flank him, taking predatory delight in the opportunity to play with her catch.

Instincts kicked in, and the pirate become very still, breathing heavily through his nose. His attack would have to be swift and decisive if he wanted to overcome the queen's magic. "This," he taunted the blonde, "is what you align yourself with?" His eyes cut away from his sweet Emma and resumed following the circling queen. "She'll devour you."

Smirking, the sheriff crossed her arms and leaned against the bulwark. This was payback. She was, although she'd never admit it, a little thrilled seeing Regina terrorize the pirate, the wicked gleam in her eyes doing something to her insides. "Where's the antidote?" she repeated, watching the scene unfold before her. How many times while in the Enchanted Forest had she wanted to punch him in the face?

"Right here," Hook catcalled with a wink and an air kiss, grabbing his crotch with his right hand and giving it a hard shake. He'd intended to tell her to suck it but instead found himself forcibly thrown against the mainmast. Crying out in pain, he breathlessly taunted Regina, "You already missed your chance to partake. But I'm open to a little ménage à trois, if that's more your style." He laughed before he was violently flung across the main deck.

Regina's chest heaved. She breathed harshly through her nose as rage and disgust festered just beneath the surface. How could Emma entertain being touched by the brute? The last vestiges of lunch wanted to revolt from her stomach at the sheer thought. So, she closed her eyes to keep the rising bile at bay, and that's when she felt the soothing concern filtering through the bond. With a flick of the wrist, she recalled Hook from across the ship, another elegant roll of her hand lashing him to the mainmast.

"Nay!" the pirate shouted, aggressively struggling against the ropes. Suddenly, he became very nervous. His brow furrowed as the blonde talked softly to the brunette. Again, she was touching the wretched witch. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but his Emma's soft smile suitably quelled the queen. Perhaps his lady love was being tricked and needed to be rescued. The notion caused his heart to hammer in his chest. Yes, he could play the hero and win the damsel. He imagined his reward to be quite fitting from a dishonored princess. Taking a deep breath, he freely offered, "Only thing that staves off the effects of Dreamshade is the remedial spring waters of Neverland." He looked between the two women. "That's the only cure."

"Where?" Emma demanded, turning. Her eyes glinted with fire. She was really tired of his shit.

"My cabin," Hook answered hurriedly. "There's a small chest wedged under the desk. Inside, you'll find a black canteen." He breathed heavily as he watched the queen walk away. He didn't want to reveal too much of his hand too quickly, but he had to know. His gaze once again fixated on the blonde. "Did you find Baelfire?" he inquired softly, before she fully turned away. He was astounded at how much it hurt to say the boy's name.

"Yeah," the sheriff hesitantly replied. "He's with Gold, now." She didn't miss the raw hate flitter across the man's face. Pushing her curiosity aside, she followed Regina to the stern. "You seem to be pretty familiar with this ship," she commented. Her thoughts drifted back to Hook's supposed mission to kill Cora. Nervously, she chewed on her lower lip and inquired, "What was that about a deal to kill Cora?"

"It's a standard brig, but it appears to have been constructed with enchanted wood," the former mayor explained, stopping briefly before the captain's cabin. Studying Emma for a long moment,
she continued, "As to our arrangement regarding my mother, that is, perhaps, a story for another
time." She slowly waved her right hand before the door, eyes tracing the doorframe in search of
traps when nothing happened as the door simply swung open. Cautiously, she crossed the threshold
and spotted the small trunk. Regina placed the chest on top of the desk, unlocking it with practiced
ease. She summoned a dark glass vial and proceeded to pour some of the healing waters into it.

"What are you doing?" Emma asked impatiently. She looked over her shoulder and out the door.
Leaving Hook unattended, tied up or not, made her nervous. She'd be much happier with him
behind bars. There were still those criminal mischief charges she could use to arrest him.

"Insurance," Regina responded. Quickly, she secured the caps, passing the canteen to the sheriff
and stowing the tincture in her coat. Then, she started checking the myriad of vials within the
medicinal chest.

"Is this the best time to be shopping?" the blonde hissed, stepping closer and keeping eyes on the
doctor. "And isn't that stealing?"

"He's a pirate," the brunette huffed, pausing long enough to give Emma a scrupulous glare. "He
probably stole it," she elaborated with slight amusement. "Besides," she added as she resumed her
search, "we don't want a repeat of events." Examining a vial carefully wrapped in a wool-lined
leather pouch, she found her prize of Dreamshade. Sadly, there wasn't anything else remarkable in
Hook's little treasure chest.

The pair made their way back to the main deck to find the pirate gone.

"Damn it," the sheriff cursed, seeing the tangle of empty ropes. "How the hell did he get free?"
Spotting a frayed bit of rope under a mounted cleat, she muttered, "He's got game. I'll give him
that." She looked back at her friend, slightly impressed with the pirate's ingenuity.

"He's of little consequence at the moment," Regina countered, walking to the port-side railing. For
a brief moment, she watched Hook struggle with rowing and toyed with the idea of springing a leak
in the boat, but Emma's presence curbed the mischievous impulse. Turning, she held out her hand,
and she smiled when Emma reflexively took it. "We have a heart to find."

~SQ~

Bruce Farmer only half listened to the two boys, who were almost finished with their snack, talking
across from him. His stern gaze continually observed the milling mass of people currently hanging
out at Granny's Diner. Like these people didn't have better things to do with their lives than watch
natural casters battle for supremacy. He frowned.

"Why are we just hiding in here? We should be doing something," someone in the crowd
complained loudly.

"Yeah!"

Farmer harrumphed.

"Hey, settle down!" shouted Ruby from behind the counter. She glared at everyone in the diner.
For a long moment, there was precious silence. I don't have time for this, she thought, starting to
fill another drink order at the soda fountain. The chatter resumed at a more normal level. Hearing
the bell at the pickup window ding, she checked to make sure one of the waitresses moved to
retrieve it. She didn't miss the distinct jingle of the bell at the main entrance, and she saw Puma
enter. "Oh, thank, God," she muttered. If the tall, muscular black man in a deputy's uniform didn't
calm these people down, nothing would do it.

"Kind of crowded today," Puma teased, sliding up to the counter, squeezing between two people sitting on stools. His eyes scanned the room. When they landed on Bruce Farmer, he gave a small nod. "Any word?" he probed upon noticing Henry Mills in the booth with the Crows Guard.

"Emma and Regina are back in town. They're looking for Cora, now," she explained, putting drinks on the counter for a waitress to serve.

"Hopefully things won't drag out for too long," the deputy commented flatly, scrutinizing the diner. His sharp eyes assessed each and every occupant. "I don't think this town can take any more excitement." He focused in on a booth across from him and narrowed his eyes. The dwarves were plotting something.

"I'm telling you we should take matters into our own hands," hissed Happy, glancing conspiratorially between his brothers. "We should step up." He forcibly jabbed his pointer finger on the tabletop. "We can't trust the animal folk to keep us safe." His heated gaze slipped over to Deputy Puma at the counter.

"I don't know," interjected Doc. This all seemed way out of their depth. He shifted uncomfortably. "I think Deputies Puma and Lucas have been doing a fine job in the Sheriff's stead." He couldn't blame anyone for having a side job. Heck, he'd wished he'd had a side job other than filling out online surveys for pennies on the dollar.

Dopey grinned, "Yeah, we can grab some fairy dust and lock all the magic users in the mines." He excitably bounced up and down on the booth's bench.

Flustered at the suggestion, Doc adamantly shook his head. "Nope, can't do that. We already inventoried the latest haul." He nodded with finality.

"We didn't transport it, yet." Grumpy corrected. His hard eyes zeroed in on the two Crows Guard and Henry in the back booth. "First, we need to get Snow's grandson away from the Gestapo." He slipped out of the booth and stomped his way over to the Crows Guard.

"Hey, Leroy," Henry easily greeted after finishing a sip of his milkshake. "Whatcha doin'?" he asked, reaching for another fry.

"Dwarf," Bruce stated evenly.

"How about you hand over the boy," Grumpy ordered, placing a hand on the table's edge. He leaned on it heavily, getting in the guard's face.

"Those aren't my orders," the lieutenant countered, unfazed, meeting the dwarf's glare. Certainly, the volatile little man wasn't stupid enough to start something. That's when he noticed the other dwarves crowding behind their comrade.

"This ain't no kingdom, and the Evil Queen doesn't rule here," the grumpy dwarf taunted with a smirk. His chest filled with pride as his brothers cheered him.

"The Queen is the boy's legal guardian," Bruce informed them. Slowly, he exited the booth and loomed over the gathered dwarves. "We have been entrusted with Henry's safety."

"Put the rabid bitch down!" shouted someone from across the diner.

"You fools; the Queen's the only one who can stand up to the Dark One!" called another.
"The Evil Queen's mother is going to kill us all," cried another.

"Why hasn't Snow White saved us?" pleaded another customer.

"We're doomed!" someone bellowed before running out the front door.

"Hey!" Ruby shouted, moving towards the door. "He didn't pay," she snarled as she pushed people out of the way. However, her pursuit was cut short when Ava Zimmerman entered the diner.

"Ava?"

"Deputy Lucas," the young girl whimpered. Her red-rimmed eyes immediately cut to Puma.

"Deputy Puma!" she called, trying to catch her breath. "I need help," she rasped. "It's Nicholas and Dad. They're fighting." Fresh tears pooled in her eyes.

Immediately, Puma was next to Ruby, asking, "Where?"

"The shop," Ava answered, swallowing a sob. The next thing she knew, both deputies had bolted out the door. She only hesitated for a second before following them.

Bruce Farmer was distracted for only a second because he, like many of the Crows Guard, had been concerned over Nicholas Zimmerman. However, his moment of weakness had been a grave mistake as the dishonorable dwarves took advantage of Ava's plea for assistance. A hard fist connected squarely with his jaw, causing him to stumble backwards a few paces. Anger fueled him as he reflexively responded with his own upper cut. However, he missed his intended target and popped Doc right in the nose.

Doc yelped in surprise and pain. He tried to step back but bumped into a curious bystander, who fell into someone else.

Chaos erupted in the diner.

Grumpy was ready for a fight. He pulled back his fist to knock Farmer, again, but was suddenly pushed over with a sharp kick on his left thigh. Losing his footing, he stumbled to his right, falling into a table. His ungraceful landing sent food and cutlery everywhere. "What the hell?" he muttered, dragging himself up.

"You little shit," cursed Happy, having witnessed Alexander attack his brother. Immediately, the hot-headed dwarf launched himself on the young Crows Guard.

With wide eyes, Henry scurried under the table, barely escaping the tussle on the bench. He watched legs and feet move across the floor. Panic snared him as the shouts and crashes increased. Then, suddenly, he saw a clear shot towards the diner's side door. He didn't pause. He didn't look back as he bolted out from under the table. His small size allowed him to bob and weave around the fighting and away from the yelling.

No one noticed when he ran out the door.

~SQ~

Gold startled awake from this fitful nap. After a shiver, he nervously glanced around the back room of his pawn shop, pondering where the draft that woke him had come from. Then, he registered the raised voices coming from the front. The Charmings, his son, and one of the annoying Crows Guard were arguing. Aside from some irritation, he remained mostly apathetic, as their attempts to protect him would ultimately prove worthless.
"Are you cold?" Mary Margaret asked kindly from the doorway. She gave him a warm, sad smile as she moved to a large cupboard on the left side of the room, remembering she had seen another blanket folded inside it. "Let me get you a warmer blanket." Lifting the small, wrought iron latch, she opened the double cabinet doors wide, reached in, and retrieved the plaid blanket. That's when she noticed it, the same enchanted candle from her childhood. Memories overwhelmed her, and she thought she would weep from her freshly tilled sorrows. Cora had killed her mother, and she had been too weak to save her.

With a furrowed brow, the pawnbroker watched the brunette's back with new interest. It was clear she recognized the candle, but how? He immediately formulated a plan of coercion. "You've seen that particular enchanted candle before, I take it," he prodded delicately.

"Where did you get it?" the school teacher demanded in a disbelieving tone. She'd given it back to the Blue Fairy.

"Trinkets sometimes find their way to me," he supplied, shifting and trying to get a better view of the woman. "Where have you seen it?" That's what he really wanted to know.

"I promised I'd never tell," she answered without thought or hesitation.

Sensing a prime opportunity, Gold idly mentioned, "It could be a useful tool. It could solve two problems with one price." He moved to capitalize on a desperation other than his own.

"How's that?" Mary Margaret pondered. She shifted the blanket to her left arm, and with her right, she reached out and caressed the candle. It still felt unearthly, both hot and cold, both alive and dead.

"Cora doesn't have her heart," the pawnbroker elaborated in a low tone so as not to be overheard. "She'd removed it well before Regina was born," he added, hoping to appeal to Snow White's bleeding heart.

"No heart?" the school teacher mused quietly. She laid her hand beside the candle. Her thumb tersely tapping the bottom of the cupboard. "She couldn't love her," she rationalized with a sad frown.

"What's worse than losing a mother's love?" he probed with false remorse. "Not having one," he added. He released a long sigh. "I never knew my mother," he admitted, weaving his lies with truth. "What I wouldn't give to know her face or hear her voice." He smirked as he watched slight shoulders slump and shake.

"Cora killed my mother," she gushed through fresh tears. Balling her right hand into a tight fist, she dropped her head, squeezing her eyes shut. Why did this hurt so much?

Yes, Gold had heard such rumors. He waited to see if his seeds would sprout.

Clutching the blanket to her chest, Mary Margaret sighed softly as she closed the cupboard, its latch lowering with a sharp click. Leaving her free hand firmly on the cabinet doors, she looked at the dying man on the cot behind her. "Cora doesn't have her heart," she repeated quietly. She was only vaguely aware of the three men arguing in the front of the shop.

"She hasn't had a heart for a long time," Gold reiterated, watching the virtuous woman. It was a long shot, but a gamble he was willing to take. After all, the poison slowly killing him was from Neverland, and he needed every advantage he could get.

"Why do you even have that evil thing?" the school teacher questioned, placing the blanket on a
chair, dropping her hands, and turning towards the dying man. "It shouldn't exist," she hissed in anger. The anger wasn't over the magical item but, rather, over her inability to save her own mother. Now, the Dark One, not the Blue Fairy, was asking her to use the candle. "If I didn't save my own mother, why the hell would I save you?" she spat, her own self-loathing coloring her words.

The pawnbroker weakly shrugged, the action pulling at his wound. "Saving it for a rainy day," he quipped lightly, despite the severity of the situation. He eyed her for a short moment and added, "And, our interests are aligned, now." His expression turned hard and his voice cold as he explained, "I'm the lesser of two evils, Dearie. It's either me or Cora. You choose."

She shook her head as her hands curled into tight fists. Cora's admission of killing her mother played through her head, again and again. Fresh tears pooled in the corners of her eyes. When would the pain stop? Throwing her head back, she stared blankly at the ceiling and rasped, "I'll do it." One deep breath filled her lungs, then another. "But if I curse her heart, how do I get it back inside her?"

"That's the tricky part," he admitted, hiding his surprise. Even though the do-gooder woman agreed, it didn't mean the venture would pay out, or she wouldn't change her mind. He gave her a gentle smile and, with practiced ease, said, "At least young Henry will know you tried to save his grandfather."

"Family is important," Mary Margaret recited with conviction. She lowered her gaze and fixed the dying man with a pointed stare. "It's the only thing that matters." After everything she'd endured over the years, if she could go back, she'd save her mother without a doubt or a regret. "I won't make the same mistake, again," she promised.

Relief settled across Gold's tired body. He merely nodded as he rested his eyes. Each time, he feared it would be his last, but now, he had someone of untarnished good character in his corner fighting for him. The chips were once again stacked in his favor.

The school teacher raised her chin from the sudden burst of confidence blooming within her chest. She had options. She wouldn't fall victim to the whims of sorcery again. Her movements were fluid and precise as she snatched the blanket from chair, unfolded it, and draped it over the now sleeping man. Upon hearing his snores, she smiled fondly. Maybe darkness wasn't that evil, she considered. The Dark One had never led her astray, thus far.

The voices in the front of the pawn shop rose sharply, startling her. Sighing, she quickly moved to shush them, all the while formulating a plan to leave the shop without drawing suspicion. She believed the Crows Guard would pay her no mind.

Upon her return to check on Gold, after telling David she was going to fetch more blankets from home, she noticed the cupboard door she'd been in earlier had apparently unlatched and swung open. She slowly walked from the front of the shop to the back, leaving the men to their strategies. It wasn't terribly uncommon for simple iron latches to pop with the weather changes. Growing up, she'd wakened many a night with her wardrobe wide open, its pitch black interior foreboding whilst she was alone in her chambers. Yet, as she got closer to the threshold, the sudden temperature drop caused her alarm. Once inside the back room, she saw the side door of the pawn shop was wide open. Rushing over, she moved to close it, believing it convenient circumstance. However, when she spied Henry running down the alley with the candle in his hand, she bolted after him, slamming the door behind her. "HENRY!" she shouted, giving chase.

Anne McCormac cursed when she saw the queen's son running down the alley away from her. "For fuck's sake," she cursed softly, lifting her radio from her belt to her mouth. "Red nine," she
growled for dispatch. "The brat's escaped. Someone get out here and grab him!" Releasing the toggle, she watched the school teacher give chase to the boy. Cocking an eyebrow, she was rather impressed with Mary Margaret's speed. "You're not going to catch him," she muttered, considering tripping the boy with an arrow, but if she maimed him, it wouldn't go over very well.

"Red seven, all available personnel diverted to situation at Granny's. Remain on mission. Stay in position!"

"Get someone on him now!" Anne snapped into her radio. "He's heading towards the Toll Bridge." She was going to beat Farmer senseless for this screw up. "Fuck," she hissed, snapping her radio back on her belt. She didn't have time to alert Monty to the development, since the bastard had refused to take his radio, not wanting Charming to hijack the plan. As it was, they'd only have one shot at slowing down Cora, so chasing little boys wasn't on her agenda for the day.

A loud clang and shout from Tillman's Garage caught her attention. Looking between the runaway prince being chased by Snow White and hearing Michael Tillman threaten his son, she made a choice and jogged towards the mechanic's shop. She prayed to Razikale that the princess wouldn't screw things up.

~SQ~

Once outside the diner, Sheriff Deputies Ruby Lucas and Karl Puma ran full tilt towards the mechanic's shop, leaving a tear-streaked Ava lagging behind them. They ran past the still quiet pawnshop and shared an apprehensive look. Would they have enough time before the shit hit the fan? Regardless, they were going to try; they were going to save that boy.

Motioning for Puma to go around back, Ruby listened to the heated conversation as she slowly, silently crept between the two cars in the garage bays toward father and son in the back. She needed to play this smart because running in with fangs bared would only make life in town more difficult.

"You little shit!" Michael Tillman roared from the back of the shop. He grabbed his son by the shirt collar, tearing it, and shoved him into a workbench. "Now you're stealing from me?"

Nicholas hissed as the edge of the table slammed into the middle of his back. He glanced around, looking for a weapon or a way out. Realizing he was cornered, he returned sad, petrified eyes to his father.

"You just wouldn't stay away," the man seethed, further triggered by the boy's expression. Picking up a wrench, he pointed it his son. "And here you are, again, sucking the life out of me." He closed the distance between them and bashed the wrench on the bench, his face mere inches away from the boy's.

"I didn't do anything to you!" Nicholas shouted with tears running down his face, trying to understand why his father hated him so much. "What did I ever do to you?"

"You were born!" Michael bellowed. He backhanded the boy, sending him into a tall, work chest toolbox. The years of backbreaking work came rushing in. He had chopped tree after tree, year after year. He had been ripped off by the log mills who only wanted rare woods. His meager funds had gone toward his children. The boiling rage overflowed, and he raised the wrench. "You took my wife, and I was left with you."

The boy cowered, crouching and covering his head with his arms, but the blow never came down. Instead, there was a low growl and a loud crash. He peeled his eyes open and saw Deputy Lucas
fighting with his father. Panic instantly settled in, and he bolted toward the open garage doors. However, before he could make it outside, he was wrapped in a fierce hug by his sister. He struggled for a second but soon stopped. Tears flowed anew.

"It's okay, now, Nicholas," Ava whispered, holding onto her brother with everything. "I'm so sorry," she added as fresh tears escaped. With dark satisfaction, she observed as Puma hoisted a semi-conscious Michael Tillman onto his feet. The soft rumbling tones of Deputy Puma's voice reciting the Miranda Warning was like a soothing lullaby.

Puma shoved the mechanic out of his shop. His sharp eyes cut to a Crows Guard in the alley. "You could've done something," he criticized, meeting her flashing eyes. Hadn't the queen's guard been a stabilizing force these last few months? "The boy didn't have to suffer.

"We're not deputies," Anne McCormac retorted flatly with a hard frown. "Vigilante justice doesn't jive with this land's laws." She crossed her arms. Sure, she had wanted the slit the bastard's throat the first time she noticed a bruise on the boy. She and Monty had had this very conversation several times, but she heeded her commander's wisdom. "You know as well as I do that if we had interfered beyond civic duty, there would've been a war."

Ruby popped out of the shop and placed a comforting hand on Ava's shoulder. Looking between Puma and McCormac, she sighed, "Karl, we talked about this." Everyone wanted to knock the shit out of Tillman.

Puma grunted, half dragging and half escorting the mechanic to the patrol car parked in front of Granny's Diner. "I'll take him in and start processing," he called over his shoulder. Sometimes politics just pissed him off.

"He won't hurt you, again," Ruby promised with a soft smile.

"Why was he so mean?" Nicholas pled, still hugging his sister. He wiped angrily at his eyes with his left hand, refusing to let go. "Everything was great until the curse broke, until we remembered." That's when things had started going bad. It was small things at first, but as Ava tried to placate him more and more, his father's anger grew.

Unsure what to say, the part-time deputy took a deep breath. She rolled her lips and shook her head. "We'd better get you to the hospital," she ordered. Looking up, she realized the squad car was already gone.

"Bobby will be by with his car in a few minutes," Anne called as she turned and headed back to her post. She clipped her handheld radio back on her belt.

At least one mess got taken care of today, she thought. Hearing the wolf call out a thanks, she absently waved as she disappeared down the alley.

~SQ~

A swirl of indigo smoke announced Cora's arrival in the center of the street in front of the pawnshop. Seeing the two Crows Guard outside the door, their damnable gauntlets catching the light from the setting sun, she sighed in irritation. She was done with the posturing and feints, ready to be finished with the whole drawn out affair. Knowing she'd have to attack the guards indirectly, she effortlessly shifted the sidewalk beneath them, knocking them both off of their feet. Then, she wrapped one up with a nearby lamppost, the metal creaking as it bent and twisted tightly around the guard.

Jason Sirtis had regained his footing and was rushing toward the sorceress, determined to catch her
before she could do any more damage, giving the others time. Cora, in anticipation, levitated a metal trashcan from down the street, flinging it at the back of the young man's head, knocking him out cold. He crumpled, face first, across the pavement. As she sauntered toward the front of the pawnshop, several arrows whirled past her head from different directions. The fletching of one tickled her nose.

Scowling, the sorceress stopped and raised her left hand, halting another volley of arrows from raining down around her. She quickly twirled her wrist and sent the arrows back to their places of origin. A bubble of delight tickled her sensibilities as the archers yelled and scrambled to dodge their own arrows. Some were successful, others left exposed, and still others wounded. One by one, she deflected attack after attack, picking them off with ease. She laughed in merriment. It had been a long time since she'd enjoyed herself so thoroughly. That was, until a black shafted arrow with bright red fletching pierced through her cloak.

Cora's sharp eyes tracked the new danger back to its source. She sneered at the diminutive female archer, Anne McCormac, standing fifty feet away with her bow drawn. When another black arrow was released, she smirked while waving her hand, but she had to quickly sidestep in order to miss being shot in the chest. She had no time to recover as another arrow immediately came at her, followed by another, and then another. Snarling at the realization she couldn't control these peculiar black arrows, she cast a protective ward around her, taking a deep breath of satisfaction as the other guards' arrows bounced off the energy barrier. It almost sounded like rain.

However, Anne didn't let up. She slowly stepped forward, releasing arrow after arrow. Her deadly aim was true, the enchanted arrowheads lodging into the magical shield surrounding the sorceress. She could see the rising frustration and anger. Just a little bit longer, she told herself, but she was quickly running out of her special anti-magic arrows.

Four guards swiftly slipped up behind a distracted Cora, carrying a large mesh net imbued with magic especially designed to ensnare magic users. Once they were close enough, they raised and tossed the trap over the sorceress.

However, Cora spun and saw the incoming trap just in time to teleport away. The opened-mesh fabric failed, falling freely through the plume of purple smoke onto the asphalt, along with the cluster of black arrows. She reappeared on the other side of the four fools. Quickly, she turned the tables, using their own tool against them. She rolled her wrists and pinched her fingers together, controlling the magical net and wrapping the four in it. And with an exaggerated shove, she propelled the ball of guards towards the annoying archer.

With wide eyes, Anne tried to dodge, but she was clipped by a flailing arm and sent tumbling across the street. Her head hit the ground hard, rendering her unconscious.

Smirking, the sorceress turned her attention back to the pawnshop. She made a yanking gesture, and the main door was ripped off its hinges. She strode confidently inside, sealing the building with magic. Undoubtedly, there were more Crows Guard lurking in the shadows. She rolled her eyes upon seeing David, Neal, and Monty brandishing their swords at her. It wasn't even going to be sporting, as only the commander had any anti-magic gear.

David took a bold step forward and gestured with his sword, demanding, "Stop right there, Cora. We won't let you go any further."

She laughed at the false prince's audacity. "How quaint that you think a sword is going to slow me down." Eyeing the enchanted gauntlets, she chided, "Even with those damned gloves, you can't stop me." Suddenly, she thrust her arms upward and above her head, making everything that wasn't bolted down levitate. She sharply twisted her hands at the wrist, and the room became a tornado,
items swirling around her. As things broke, they continued spinning in an increasing lethal vortex of debris.

The three men were helpless to stop the assault. Broken pieces of glass and wood sliced into their clothes and skin. They were thumped with books, boxes, candlesticks, and everything else that cluttered the shop; but, it was the furniture that did the most damage. A chair leg smacked Neal upside the head, sending him spinning to the pass-through leading to the back of the shop. He crumbled in a heap along one side of the doorway. Monty was ultimately pinned under a heavy storage cabinet against the far wall. And David was sent tumbling backwards when a smaller display case slammed into his gut. His back hit the storefront window so hard that it cracked, but the magical barrier prevented him from breaking through it.

Stopping the magic, Cora casually made her way towards the back of the shop. "Excuse me," she said demurely, stepping over the Dark One's unconscious son.

Unbeknownst to her, Neal was fighting to stay aware. His ears rung, and his eyes burned as his body revolted against moving. He could only listen and hope someone showed up in time to stop the power-hungry sorceress.

"A vision told me about you, told me this day would come," Gold said contemplatively as he shifted. He hissed, unable to sit up without assistance. And trapped in his prone position, he watched as the woman he had once loved breezed across the small room. "But it didn't tell me everything," he continued with a reserved sadness. "Didn't tell me what I really wanted to know."

Sitting on the edge of the cot, Cora idly straightened the man's clothes and blanket. "And what's that?" she asked curiously. After all, going in right for the kill was bad form.

The pawnbroker didn't want to ask, not in his moment of utter weakness, but he had to know. It had consumed him for so long. "Did you ever love me?" he whispered.

"Oh, Rumpel," the sorceress softly cooed, reaching out and gently stroking the side of the dying man's face. "Why do you think I had to rip my own heart out?" she questioned, tilting her head. "You were my weakness. You are the only man I ever truly loved." With a smile that didn't reach her eyes, she explained, "I even bore your firstborn daughter."

"Regina," Gold rasped. It was impossible. Slowly shaking his head, his face contorted in anger. Neal's eyes shot open, but the adrenaline boost wasn't enough to push his body to action. That woman had had a child with the Dark One? He shuddered at the prospect, and his mind, instead, focused on having a sister. Emma's girlfriend was his sister.

"Yes, Darling, even when you held her in your arms, you never realized she was yours," Cora elucidated with a distinct tone of pride. She easily pushed back his unruly hair.

Momentarily awed by the sheer diabolical cunning, the pawnbroker looked at his former apprentice with new respect. He had to know, had to understand. So, he quickly probed, "Is that why you bound her magic? To hide her from me?" However, his appreciations quickly morphed to dark amusement as he tittered, "I found her anyway, Dearie."

Familiar with his games, the sorceress allowed the injured man his self-perceived victory. After all, she would be killing him in short order, taking the Dark One's power as her own. And since she had her own questions regarding their daughter, she decided to share a bit more. "Even in your weakened state, I know you can feel it, the sparking and crackling of raw power under the surface," she elaborated, holding his contemplative gaze with hers. "Imagine having that growing inside
you," she hissed, remembering the fear when she had first felt Regina's magic bloom inside of her.
With a tired sigh, she removed the Dark One's dagger from her cloak and continued, "It took layer
after layer, but I finally managed to contain her magic and hide her potential." The last binding had
been wrapped around the unborn baby the day before her birth. With a white-knuckled grip, she
held the dagger and spat with utter disbelief, "Then you went and bound her to that pathetic excuse
for a princess."

"Kept her from your clutches, didn't it?" Gold taunted. His eyes fixated on the dagger and how the
dimming light glinted off of it, watching as it was raised into the air above his chest.

~SQ~

Appearing outside the family mausoleum in the graveyard, Regina faltered in her purposeful trek.
She hadn't expected the double doors to be wide open and the secret entrance to the underground
lair, beneath her father's sarcophagus, to be exposed. Cautiously, she glanced around as she slowly
approached the vault. She frowned because too many people had breached the magical sanctuary
lately. She needed to fix that.

"Is Cora here?" Emma whispered, looking around but staying at the brunette's side.

"No," the former mayor answered, somewhat relieved. But who else would be there with
everything that was happening?

The pair slowly descended the stone stairs, keeping their footfalls light. Heated whispers that
morphed into whiny screeches echoed from deeper within, but the voices were still unrecognizable.

Frowning, Regina deftly navigated the dimly lit hall. Her eyes glanced around, apparently her
mother had done a bit of housekeeping as the trunks and crates that had appeared upon her arrival
had all been relocated. However, as they reached the room towards the end of the hall, the
intruders had stopped talking. She watched as the sheriff readied her service weapon. When the
blonde gave her a curt nod, they stepped together around the corner and into the room. Both
women gasped, "Henry?"

Before moving to holster her gun, Emma surveyed the room for any other threats. It had a large,
long table covered with books surrounded by heavy, wooden chairs and a massive stone hearth to
one side. She spotted wooden boxes and trunks in various stacks along the walls. Mary Margaret
and Henry stood next to a tall, open chest full of drawers. As she stowed her weapon, she stuttered,
"What are you—? You know what, never mind." She'd deal with her son's escape from Ruby and
Alexander later, but her mom's presence was completely mindboggling.

The former mayor bristled upon noticing the baroque box the school teacher was holding. She
snarled, taking an intimidating step forward, "You have no right to be here and no right to that!"

Offering a soft smile, Mary Margaret allowed her relief upon seeing her daughter to settle her
nerves. "I was going to give it to you," she started. Her expression shifted to one of sadness as she
continued, "Cora can't love you, you know. She never has because she doesn't have her heart."

Like an offering, she slightly raised the tiny chest.

"Your point," Regina demanded, narrowing her eyes. The notion that her mother may not have her
heart changed things, but she couldn't dwell on that, at the moment. There were more pressing
issues at hand.

The school teacher sighed softly. She cradled the ornate box against her body. "With it, maybe she
can," she reasoned with a soft voice. With expressive eyes full of sorrow, she repeated, "Cora never
loved you.” Her tone turned wistful as she continued, looking down at the small chest with awe, "What would happen if she had her heart back?” Suddenly with a bright, joyful expression, she gushed with enthusiasm, "Imagine real love. You'd have a mother and a start on making a family Henry could be a part of.” She extended her arms, freely offering the heart.

Unmoved by the declaration of potential happiness, the former mayor dropped her chin and glowered at her nemesis as she flexed her hands. Then, with cold confidence, she stated, "I have a family." That truth empowered her in a way she hadn't felt in nearly forever.

Emma couldn't stop the lopsided grin from spreading across her face. Her eyes went watery at the heated admission. However, her friend looked ready to snap. She placed a hand on the brunet's lower back as she stepped forward, calmly asking her mother, "What are you even doing here?” Her gaze dropped down the tiny box in her mother's grasp, prompting, "Wait, what's in the box?"

"Mother's heart," Regina quickly supplied, unmoving. She remained fixated on the woman in front of her, unable to look at Henry, willfully ignoring the boy's involvement, for the moment.

With a furrowed brow, the blonde blinked a few times. She squinted and pondered, "How'd you know about that? We just figured it out." She regarded her mother expectantly.

Mary Margaret shrugged, and with an offhanded tone, she replied, "Rumpelstiltskin suggested we could use it to stop Cora."

"Did he, now?” the former mayor drawled, further unconvinced by Snow White's altruistic motivations. No one running an errand for the Dark One was innocent. Softly, she tittered cheerlessly and slowly shook her head as she smirked. "And what, pray tell, did he suggest?” she queried, her interest slightly peaked.

Lowering the box, the school teacher was marginally confused by the distrust and delay. "We actually didn't get that far,” she quickly admitted. Her gaze dropped down to her grandson briefly before explaining, "We just came to fetch it."

Emma scowled at the boldfaced lie. To hear it from her mother, with her son standing right next to her, made her stomach drop. She grimaced at the whipping lashes of the brunette's magic against hers. Unable to ignore the boy's presence any longer, she reprimanded, "You were supposed to stay with Ruby, Kid. What the heck are you doing here? Do they even know where you are?” God, Ruby and Alexander had to be worried sick. Monty would be seriously pissed. Her face blanched as she wondered what the hell had happened to afford him his escape.

"I wanted to help!” Henry pleaded, looking between the three women. Why was this taking so long? Why hadn't they gone to stop Cora, already?

Gesturing wildly with aggravation, the sheriff snappily hissed at the boy, "This isn't helping.” She shook her head and rolled her lips as it was obvious the child wasn't comprehending. Instead, she shifted her focus to her mother, demanding, "Why would you even bring him here? He's safer with Ruby and the Crows Guard." How much more secure could you get than a werewolf and trained guards with anti-magic gear?

Squeezing her eyes shut before making herself to look at her son, Regina's face turned hard. Why couldn't he understand that this wasn't a game? "We'll deal with this display of insubordination later," she intoned forebodingly, further dismayed by the boy's open resentment. Returning precedence to the pressing problem at hand, she imperiously held out her hand for the box containing Cora's heart. There was no satisfaction when Mary Margaret easily handed it over, but she was slightly troubled with Henry's disappointed look. Again, that would have to wait.
When the familiar hand was offered, the blonde instantly took it and moved between her mother and the former mayor. She held Regina's hand tightly while gripping Mary Margaret's biceps. Needlessly nodding at her son, she wordlessly instructed the school teacher to take the boy's hand in her own. Then, without further ado, the four were teleported from the vault onto the sidewalk in front of Granny's Diner. Once the purple cloud cleared, Emma let go of her wobbling mother first, slowly allowing Regina to extract her hand from her own.

Mary Margaret's and Henry's eyes were comically wide. Clearly, this was the first time they'd ever been teleported.

"Oh, thank God!" Ruby Lucas exclaimed, running from around the side of the diner. Alexander Sirtis and Bruce Farmer were close behind her. She gestured wildly at the restaurant's front entrance as she excitably explained, "The Tillman thing blew up, and there was a mini riot in the diner." She dynamically shook her head and, with clear censure, said, "I'm so sorry, Regina, he slipped out."

However, the former mayor currently had bigger problems than the incompetence of others. She leveled a hard glare at Bruce, who had the good sense to cast his eyes downward. Her gaze drifted over the clearly distraught young drummer. She pursed her lips at seeing Alexander's split lip and bruising eye. She outright refused to look at the wolf's sad, puppy-dog expression. Casting her feelings aside, she quickly turned and strode across the street towards Gold's Pawnshop. The second her heeled foot touched the sidewalk, she knew her mother was already there.

Emma grabbed ahold of Henry's shoulders and put the boy directly in Alexander's grasp. She sternly told her son, "We'll deal with you later." Sighing, she noticed the former mayor purposefully striding toward the pawnshop. Her eyes widened at the destruction that Cora had clearly wrought in her wake. She hurriedly trotted after the other woman, calling over her shoulder to Ruby, "It'll be alright!"

~SQ~

Bored with their little game, Cora sneered, adjusting her grip on the dagger's handle, "All your hard work is about to come undone, Rumpel. Your legacy as the Dark One will soon be forgotten." A sense of accomplishment bloomed in her chest. "I don't recall the Dark One ever being a woman," she pondered aloud. Flashing a bright smile, she insisted, "This should be quite thrilling." As she was ready to strike the fateful blow, she felt a sharp pain in the center of her spine, followed by a strange sensation emanating from within her chest. She blinked once, twice, and then feelings overwhelmed her as she stumbled to rise from the cot. Finally standing, she shakily turned, saw her daughter, and her heart sang. Her mouth moved, but no words came out. With watery eyes, she dropped the dagger on the floor and reached out for her darling child. "I'm sorry," she whispered with total devastation, stumbling backwards and bumping into a wall. Gradually, she sunk to the floor, unable to hold herself up any longer. She just wanted to hug her darling baby.

Regina was numb as she observed the woman before her come undone. Uncertain what to think or what to make of the gambit of emotions speedily crossing her mother's face, she stooped and picked up the Dark One's dagger. She idly studied the artifact of power, not understanding the allure of it. But her eyes returned to her crying mother. She frowned.

Cora never cried, ever.

There was too much going on, too much to keep track of, and damn, Emma was worried about Regina. She wasn't sure how the former mayor had traversed the junkyard that was now the pawn shop, but she somehow kept up. When she spotted a wide-eyed Neal slumped in the passage to the back room, she instantly moved to help him up. Thankfully, the bulky guy got his wits about him
and started moving of his volition. She thrust the canteen of spring water in his hands and shoved him toward his dying father.

Mary Margaret and David rushed into the room, catching the end of all the excitement.

"Just a sip," Neal instructed, helping his father drink from the canteen.

Monty stood in the doorway between the rooms. His eyes drifted to rest on his queen's back.

Almost everyone waited with baited breath, wondering whether or not the healing properties of the water would work against the poison. After another sip, it started to work; and although still weak, Gold knew he would make a full recovery.

There was a collective sigh around the room, each for different reasons.

"You'll need to keep this with you," Neal explained quietly, slipping the canteen's strap over his father's head. He wasn't sure how this was going to work without an ever-flowing source of the spring water.

Frowning at the woman who had killed her mother, Mary Margaret hurriedly suggested, nervously wringing her hands, "We need to do something with Cora." There was no telling what the manipulative woman would do now that she had her heart. Her gaze lingered on Regina, and she was concerned over the brunette's lack of emotion.

"The cells in the mines," David stated, rubbing his left shoulder with his right hand. "We can put her in there." He glanced around the room for consensus, pursing his lips as a few Crows Guard opened the side door of the pawn shop.

Monty raised his hand, halting their full entry. His watchful gaze returned to his queen.

"Hold on, shouldn't we see what happens, first?" Emma asked with honest concern, standing in the center of the small room. She rolled her lips as she adopted a confused expression, watching Regina and Cora. This wasn't the heartfelt reunion she'd expected, although the older sorceress was crying a river. But the former mayor seemed completely detached from it.

"Emma, she just tried to kill Rumpelstiltskin and take the Dark One's power," the school teacher beseeched with frustration. "She can't be trusted," she added with a tone of finality. Someone had to take the lead. Why not her?

"But she has her heart, now," the sheriff whispered, not taking her eyes off mother and daughter. Briefly, she cut a heated glare at her own mother. "Can we not give them a minute?"

Stepping around his wife, David reached out and gently rested a hand on his daughter's shoulder. "She killed Mary Margaret's mother," he explained in a quiet murmur, for her ears only, hoping it would bring clarity.

Well, shit, the blonde cursed. Just what she needed, another feud. She glanced over her shoulder at Monty who merely shrugged before focusing on the former mayor again.

Cora gently massaged her chest over her heart with her right hand. "I'm so sorry," she rasped to her daughter before finally passing out.

Oddly touched, Gold's eyes moved from his ex-lover to his former apprentice, his daughter. His gaze lingered on the dagger held firmly in her grip. That was when he noticed something strange happening. A thin, black tendril seeped out of the blade and coiled around the brunette's hand,
sinking into her skin. "Best to lock her up and throw away the key," he absently commented as he observed another vine snaking out of the dagger.

Pulled from her reverie, Regina scowled and superiorly looked down at the imp. "The same could be said about you," she intoned. All this work to save him. It infuriated her, just like Whale's auto-perceived goodness. Would these do-gooders work so hard to save her life? She grounded her teeth as she realized they probably would not. She wasn't blood. She was evil and, unlike the Dark One, not beneficial. Her eyes drifted back to her mother, and despair pushed at her chest. So much had been lost because of her blood ties to that woman.

"If you wouldn't mind, I'll have my dagger back," the pawnbroker demanded, still distracted by the thready wisps of magic leaking from the dagger. What was happening? He met her gaze and was strangely disheartened by the disdain in her eyes.

Emma nervously shifted from foot-to-foot. The room seemed to be in some bizarre sort of stalemate that had everyone on edge. Between Monty's heavy breathing through his nose behind her, Neal's death grip on his father's arm, her parents clinging to one another, and the other Crows Guard huddled in the side exit, she didn't know what to do with herself, but she'd support Regina, regardless of her next move.

Inspecting the coveted artifact, the former mayor pursed her lips. It was time for answers. "Answer me truthfully," she instructed Rumpelstiltskin, raising the dagger up in front of her, a visual reminder of her power over him. "The binding spell you tricked Emma into casting," she continued, returning her sharp eyes to the Dark One, "were you aware of its true purpose?"

"Not completely, but I had a good idea," Gold answered without hesitation or resistance. Things were spiraling out of his control. Another tendril escaped, caressing his daughter. However, it was the flash of violet eyes that produced the most disquiet within him. Her power awed him, but it was the untapped potential that alarmed him in equal measure.

"Why?" Regina demanded in a low voice. The imp never did anything without a reason. If she had learned nothing else over the years, she had definitely learned that lesson. She would not be out maneuvered, again.

Pressing his lips together, the pawnbroker shook his head. Again, he didn't even attempt to fight the command, believing everyone should know the danger amongst them. "You should be dead, but you're not," he finally explained in a rush. Magic kept slipping out of his dagger in miniscule amounts. It shouldn't have been possible! That was his power.

"That's helpful," Emma muttered, rolling her eyes. She crossed her arms, cocking her hips to one side.

Mary Margaret's mouth fell open as she gasped, connecting the dots. "The death curse on the Wishing Well." She looked up at her husband. "The one all the fairy dust was used for," she needlessly explained. Perhaps they should've discussed it with the Blue Fairy.

With a furrowed brow, David tilted his head in confusion. "Wasn't it just canceled?" he queried.

"You can't cancel a death curse," Gold snapped at the shepherd's idiocy. How he and Snow White had True Love was beyond him. At least, they had served their purpose. "She absorbed it," he drawled, slowly dragging his stare from the couple to his dagger. "She sucked in all that nasty destruction, and was none the worse for wear." His eyes once again met his daughter's. Would it make a difference if she knew? Would she even care? He looked away as he wondered if she'd ever forgive him for his dark role in her life. He despised the sentimental weakness inside himself.
"That used all of the fairy dust in the mine," David mentioned, not quite understanding how magical dust equated to death. "The dwarves had to dig for weeks before finding another dust vein."

Rolling her eyes and not really caring about the fairies at the moment, Emma raised her hands up, silencing everyone. She looked the pawnbroker in the eyes, and asked, "So, what? You thought binding us would, what? Fix it?" She wasn't entirely sure what she was asking or trying to find out.

Despite not being questioned by the one holding the dagger, Gold knew he needed to tread carefully. He shrugged and flippantly admitted, "It would at least give me an advantage." And it had, but the sheriff hadn't snapped the rebellious former mayor to heel as he had expected and intended her to do, under the helpful guidance of her parents, or course. He also hadn't expected the Evil Queen to take captivity so well, either.

Horrified and completely flummoxed, Mary Margaret tilted her head and sharply inquired, "What could you possibly get out of that?" Too many nights she'd spent her hours awake, trying to unravel the sneaky little man's motivations for hurting her daughter. She'd had dealings with him before, but nothing this damning.

The pawnbroker sat up with his son's help, already feeling a hundred times better in that short time. With his body free of the poison, his magic began repairing the damage that had been done to him. He also keenly felt the magic being drained from the dagger. "That's my business, isn't it?" he snapped, his mood fluctuating to a less accommodating one. "Now unless you intend to control me," he started, glaring pointedly at the woman holding the dagger, he held out his hand expectantly and requested with blatant demand, "I'd like my dagger back."

With a narrowed stare, Regina regarded the imp with a critical eye. He knew, she realized, that Emma, as the caster of the binding, would be able to control her magic—to what extent would be anyone's guess, but she hoped never to find out. She lowered the dagger and idly studied the magical artifact. The tension in the room solidified her decision. With surprising skill and ease, she fluidly tumbled the dagger around her hand, spinning it 180 degrees. Then, brandishing a rakish smile, she offered the handle to Neal, saying, "Here, he's your responsibility."

Neal blinked at the unexpected movement and was slightly impressed. Hesitantly, he opened his hand, slowly extending it to receive the dagger. "Wait, uh, why me?" he questioned when the pommel was forcibly tapped into his palm. Never before had he held the Dark One's dagger. It was surprisingly light.

Dropping her hand, the former mayor regarded Baelfire with newfound curiosity. Her instincts had been correct. She pursed her lips to hide her emerging, satisfied smirk. Laying responsibility for his father on him would suitably distract him from Henry and, thusly, spare her and Emma from another imbecile parent. "You are his son, and whether we like it or not, we all have our crosses to bear," she stated with sharp insinuation. She glanced briefly at the idiot Charmings still clinging to each other. Rolling her eyes in mild irritation, she turned to face her ever lurking protector, and instructed him, "Please see Mother to her new accommodations in the mines, and set a guard."

Nodding briskly, Monty acknowledged with a deep, "Yes, your Highness." He motioned for the loitering Crows Guard to enter and gather the queen's still unconscious mother. With practiced ease, the guards carried out their orders. He paused in the exit for a long moment, looking over his shoulder at his queen and then, at Emma, before finally leaving.

Gold shifted restlessly. He wanted these people gone. "If that concludes our business, I'd like to speak to my son, alone," he gruffly demanded. His boy holding the dagger was only a mild relief. At least the magic had stopped oozing out of it. Peering around the milling crowd, he looked for
Sighing, Neal lightly admonished his father, "Papa, be nice." With more confidence, he reminded, "They just saved your life." He didn't really understand why, but maybe his father had changed, despite the dark power coursing through him. Perhaps he'd stay for a bit, after all.

Hearing the word papa whispered in such a soft, gentle male voice made Regina's stomach turn. She scrunched her face in revulsion. Quickly, she turned and bolted out the side exit, hoping the rush of cold, fresh air would quell the rising bile.

Emma looked between the somewhat endearing scene of father and son and the former mayor's lightening quick exit. Her brow furrowed as she pondered the brunette's disgusted expression. However, she easily followed suit and left the pawn shop, huffing in frustration upon noticing Regina halfway to Granny's Diner.

"Emma, please wait!" called Mary Margaret, rushing out of the shop with her husband on her heels. Slumping her shoulders, the blonde slowed, her steps exaggeratingly loud as her boots slapped the pavement. "Can we not do this right now?" she whined, turning slowly to face her parents. "I have a kid to yell at." And Regina to check on, she thought. She pushed her hair back away from her face.

The school teacher took her daughter's willingness to stop as a positive sign. Taking a deep breath, she softly intoned, "I realize things have been strained between us." Tears tickled her eyes. Affectionately, David rested his large hands on his wife's shoulders, blurtling, "We miss you." There was so much he wanted to say but didn't know how to begin.

"We just want to make things right," Mary Margaret gushed, clasping her hands together. She held them tightly against her chest, knowing her daughter wouldn't necessarily appreciate a hug.

"You're important to us," the former deputy added. He paused and looked over his shoulder at the pawn shop, seemingly lost in thought. "I think we all learned how strongly familial bonds connect us."

Blinking rapidly, Emma looked at her parents with mild shock. She rubbed the back of her neck with her left hand. Somehow, their loving expressions dented her defenses, and that, coupled with her rising need to check on Regina, pushed her to simply placate them. "Look, everything is so super complicated, right now," she groused, taking a step back.

Nodding with clear understanding, the school teacher took a deep breath of relief. "We know you have a lot on your plate," she admitted with clear acceptance. "But please know, we're here for you and Henry," she added, placing her right hand over her husband's on her left shoulder. "Let us help you. Let us make up for everything," she pleaded softly but firmly.

"I need to check on Regina and Henry," the sheriff mumbled before quickly turning around and trotting across the street. What the hell was that? She bit her lip as she felt surprisingly conflicted. Reaching the main entrance, she stopped and watched the former mayor through the glass as she tenderly inspected Alexander's black eye and split lip. A warm smile crossed her lips as she pulled the door open.

"That didn't go quite as well as I had hoped," Mary Margaret commented gruffly as her daughter darted across the street away from her parents. She silently hoped Emma would turn around or come back, but alas, it was not meant to be.
Lightly massaging his wife's shoulders, David kissed the top of her head. "Well, it didn't go quite as bad as it could, either," he said, attempting to console her.

"True, but it's a step in the right direction," the school teacher bubbled cheerfully. She couldn't stop the smile from spreading across her face. Maybe Archie was right. Right then and there, she decided to make another appointment with the town therapist.

~SQ~

Emma stood in the hallway outside of Henry's open door and took several long, deep breaths, trying to center herself before going in to have a much-needed talk. She was equal parts mad and disappointed with her son, but she refused to make Regina the bad cop on this one. The blonde knew she needed to get a handle on this behavior, soon, or Henry was going to be leaning more toward nature than nurture. And she really liked the way the former mayor had raised him.

Stepping through his door, she saw him look up from the large book of stories that had started them on their current path. She eased the door closed and sat down on the side of his bed, mouth set in an expectant but grim line. "We need to talk, Kid," she began without preamble.

Frowning down at the pages of his book, Henry sighed heavily and grumbled, "I'm grounded again, aren't I?"

"Kid, you were never ungrounded." The blonde put her left hand in the middle of the page he was staring a hole through, trying to get him to look up at her. "Why'd you run off? I thought we talked about this? I thought you understood," she finished, her voice pained as she remembered the very real danger he kept running into headfirst.

Henry finally looked up, expression earnest as he whined lightly, "I just wanted to help."

Frustration had won the war in her head and was beginning to bleed through into her tone when Emma asked, "How is getting yourself hurt or killed helping? This fairytale stuff is serious business." Making sure she caught his gaze, she intoned gravely, "They aren't playing around, Henry."

"It's just because things haven't worked out like they were supposed to," he replied glumly, shaking his head as he looked at his blonde mother with sad eyes.

"How were things supposed to work out?" she questioned, wanting to understand her son's motivations, hoping it would help her find a way to curtail his actions.

Breaking eye contact, the boy looked down at the book in his lap, idly picking at the edges of the cover. Eventually, he muttered longingly, "We were supposed to be a family in the Enchanted Forest."

Emma sat back with a small huff, proclaiming, "Kid, I read the same storybook. There was nothing there about us being a family, just a prophecy of me saving the day." Taking the book, she closed it and placed it on his desk, perching lightly on the desktop and crossing her arms over her chest. "And, I hate to break it to you, but I haven't exactly done a bang up job."

Henry brightened and gave her a winning smile, exclaiming, "You've been great, Emma!" Face scrunching slightly, he added, "You just haven't figured out how to master evil forces, yet."

The sheriff winced at the phrasing, tired of the boy only seeing good and evil, not reality. "Henry… Well, since there are still evil forces to stop, maybe you shouldn't be running away," she reasoned with him, eyebrows raising pointedly as her expression turned stern.
The boy griped, "But I just wanted—"

"To help, I know," Emma cut him off shortly, "but that ain't gonna fly, anymore. You're grounded." Gesturing around his room, she began to list all of the prohibited items. "No television. No computer. No games. Nada. You get your homework, comic books and electric lights."

"That's not fair!" he blurted, shooting upright from his slouched position at the head of the bed.

Pursing her lips and tilting her head down, the sheriff pointed out, "Yes, it is, and you're also going to have one of the Crows Guard follow you around everywhere." She was done with him slipping away every time they took their eyes off of him. "What's not fair is that because you can't mind us and behave, one of the Guard is going to have to give up their free time to shadow you, now."

Seeing the firm set of her jaw, he fell forward dramatically, moaning, "Maaaa….

Emma had had enough. Irritated that he wasn't taking things seriously, she barked sharply, "Don't." Pointing her finger at him, she said, "You broke our trust, Henry. Now, you have to earn it back."

Face flushing with anger, Henry shot back defiantly, "What about her? She broke my trust, first! Doesn't that—"

The bedroom door flew open and bounced heavily against the wall. Startled, Emma whipped her head around to scold the intruder, but she was flummoxed upon seeing the former mayor stalk into the room.

"Where did you get this?" demanded Regina in a low, clear tone.

Henry's eyes immediately dropped to the candle but quickly darted back to his brunette mother's livid look. Never had he seen her so mad, particularly at him. Reflexively, he swallowed and quietly answered, "The pawnshop."

Clenching her jaw, the former mayor's grip on the deadly candlestick tightened. "Did that imp give this to you?" she gritted out. Once she registered the adamant shaking of her son's head, she turned around and took several steps away. Her magic was churning, precariously close to bursting from her.

"Regina?" Emma cautiously interrupted, remaining still. She'd seen the bright purple flash of the brunette's eyes. After the stray lightning bolt on the highway and the mega storm earlier, she didn't know what to expect.

One deep breath led to another deep breath, and Regina turned back toward her son and his blonde mother. She held the candle out in front of her, and with less anger, she prompted more calmly, "Do you know what this does?"

With a quick nod, Henry explained, "I overheard Grandma and Gold talking about it." He cast a nervous glance at Emma. "He wanted her to use it on Cora to save him." He paused before hurriedly adding, "She didn't do it, though!" A weak smile turned the corners of his mouth, but as he held his mother's gaze, it disappeared. He looked away. His brow furrowed as he studied the books on his desk. His focus zeroed in on the spine of his fairytale book. Fueled by a flash of anger, he hopped off his bed and stomped toward his brunette mother.

"Henry," Emma warned, reaching for the boy. She missed him as he rushed past her. For the first time in a long time, she was worried how the former mayor would react to the boy, but she trusted her gut and waited.
"Why are you mad?!” shouted Henry. "We were trying to stop your mother." He stood in front of her, hands clenched into little fists at his sides as he breathed heavily through his nose.

"Henry," Emma repeated with wide eyes. Had the boy listened to nothing she said?

Regina felt the air suddenly more difficult to breathe as her son's words fully registered. Throat tight, she asked in a strangled voice, "And how did you propose to do that?"

Gaze falling to the candle like an admission of guilt, Henry shrugged and, without looking up, said, "Good always wins."

The brunette saw the flash of something in Henry's eyes and felt her gut twist in response. Glancing quickly at Emma to see her ashen face, she swallowed hard. Trying to maintain an even tone when she wanted to scream at the injustice of it all, she asked quietly, "According to whom? Sometimes good isn't always right."

The boy snapped his head up in surprise, a hint of betrayal in his expression. "Of course, it is!" he protested hotly.

Regina crouched in front of Henry, putting herself closer to his eye level. Still clutching the candle in her right hand, she draped her wrists over the end of her knees and maintained his gaze, saying, "Sometimes the good thing is the wrong thing to do." Deciding an example would be the best way to explain the concept, she began, "A building is on fire. You hear someone screaming for help. So, you run in and realize there are two people who are trapped. One person is unconscious and difficult to reach, while the other cowers in the corner near the door but appears capable of saving themselves." Making sure he was following her, she continued, "Saving either of them is good, but saving the one who could walk out under their own power, instead of the one who can't, is wrong." As his eyes started to slide away, she caught his chin with her thumb and forefinger, gently forcing him to look at her as she concluded, "Doing the right thing is a lot harder than doing the good thing, Henry."

"The hero should be able to save both," he replied, unsure why they couldn't see that possibility.

Emma sighed softly, cheeks beginning to warm as her frustration slipped back. "Kid, come on. That's not realistic."

"Neither is magic, but it's here!" Henry retorted with a scowl, pulling away from Regina, resentful at being double-teamed by his mothers.

Closing her eyes briefly to gather her thoughts, the former mayor focused on her son again and reminded him, "The world isn't black-and-white, and neither is magic. It's a spectrum of grey, and we are but shadows moving amongst shadows. Our choices are what determine our paths, Henry."

Tilting her head to the side as she studied the recalcitrant boy before her, she changed tack and queried, "Would you say all lives are of equal worth?"

Feeling like he was on surer footing, Henry agreed, "Yes."

Nodding, Regina posed a new scenario. "If you had to choose between saving Emma and Archie, who would you pick? You can only save one, not both," she added quickly, watching the blonde shift restlessly behind him.

"Emma," he blurted immediately.

"Why?" she asked softly.
As if it were the most obvious answer, he said, "She's my mom."

Tone thoughtful, Regina clarified, "So, Archie has less value to you," making Emma flinch.

Brow furrowed in bewilderment, he protested, "No. He's my friend."

"But you would save your mother over your friend," she prompted him. Dark eyes filled with worry, she suggested, "Is that good?" The former mayor despised having to approach such a sensitive topic in this manner, but she remembered that callousness flashing in her son's eyes and pushed through.

Uncertainty settled over Henry's face as he admitted slowly, "I don't know...."

Standing again, the brunette tenderly cupped his cheek in her left hand. "My mother's life isn't worth less than another's," she admonished, her tone low and caring.

"But, she's evil. She's done bad things," Henry objected, pleading with her to just understand.

Regina's heart broke, realizing the same could be said of herself and wondering if, secretly, her son felt she deserved to die, too. The skin around her eyes tightened at the thought, and her voice contained a clear warning when she stipulated, "Perhaps, but you are a child. You haven't earned the right to make such judgements."

Exasperated by the dismissal, he alleged, "But Grandma was going to do it! Why couldn't I?" Frown firmly ensconced on his face, he insisted, "I just wanted to help."

Back going rigid, Regina blanched in fury, fingers curling into her palms, nails pressing hard enough to draw blood. The sound of the thick candle snapping in her grip shook her loose from her stunned paralysis. "Alexander!" she called loudly. Not waiting for a response, she yelled, "Watch Henry. He's not to leave your sight until we return."

Emma's stricken expression melted into one of alarm as she jerked away from the desk and moved toward her friend. "Wait. What?" she stuttered, unsure what Regina was planning but figuring it was going to end badly.

Grabbing the blonde's arm, Regina waved her hand, and the pair was engulfed in a cloud of purple smoke. As soon as they rematerialized, she released her hold on Emma and thrust her left hand out before her, magic forcing open Mary Margaret's apartment door. Her boot heels thundered across the old floorboards as she strode inside.

"Hey!" shouted David. He rushed toward the two women; however, he quickly found himself immobilized by iridescent, purple coils that had wrapped around his body. He pointlessly struggled against the bindings. With pleading eyes, he stopped and whispered his daughter's name.

Shaking her head, the sheriff wasn't sure what was going on or what had triggered the former mayor, but, she would let things play out.

"Regina," Mary Margaret gasped from behind the kitchen island. Her gaze briefly checked on her husband and daughter. "What can I do for you?" she prompted confidently. Yet, that sureness wavered slightly upon noting bright flecks of purple in the former mayor's irises. In all her years knowing the other woman, she had never witnessed such emotional rawness from her.

Holding up the broken candle, Regina hissed, "How did this end up in our son's coat pocket?"

Mary Margaret winced at the sight of the enchanted candle, unsure how she could explain things
without totally setting off the volatile woman. Her tone took on a slightly pleading quality as she repeated, "Regina."

"How?" the former mayor demanded, taking another step closer. Her breaths were harsh and fast as she tried to reign in her temper enough to keep her magic in check. As much as she might want to blast the girl before her into oblivion, Henry would never forgive her for it, and it was debatable how Emma would take the loss of her parents. Her eyes were dark pools of obsidian as she glared at her old nemesis.

"Henry stole it from Rumpelstiltskin's shop," the school teacher admitted quietly, eyes flicking down briefly, shame starting to creep into her voice. Her grandson had only wanted to do the good thing.

Emma moved from the doorway to stand next to Regina. Planting her hands on her hips, she asked suspiciously, "How did he know about the candle?" The kid couldn't be that good of a sneak. If he was, they were in trouble when he developed an interest in girls.

Focusing on her daughter, Mary Margaret explained, "He apparently overheard us talking about it in the shop." Steadfastly, she shook her head, and quickly added with sad eyes, "I didn't know he'd slipped away from Ruby or the Crows Guard. I didn't see him hiding." Fussing with the tea towel on the counter, she whispered, "Gold never said anything." Did Rumpelstiltskin know? she pondered with a frown.

This, of course, did nothing to dissuade the former mayor from her query. "So, that justifies your intent to use it?" she questioned. Again, the sniffling Snow White had laid the blame on someone else. How many times would she have to endure this folly?

"I stopped Henry from using it, from darkening his heart!" the school teacher beseeched. Clearly stricken, she couldn't fathom why the former mayor was attacking her so vehemently. Cora wasn't dead. Henry hadn't darkened his heart, and neither had she.

Regina's eyes narrowed. Her voice was hard and cold, possessing an ominous quality. She vehemently retorted, "But, you were going to use it yourself. You wanted to kill Cora, and Henry latched onto your shining example of exalted piety and goodness. Our son was going to kill someone because you thought it was a good idea!" How did this girl not understand? Had she truly learned nothing?

"Yes!" Mary Margaret snapped back, moving around the kitchen island, her eyes alive with fire and anger. "I wanted to kill Cora," she clarified with all the passion in her soul. "She killed my mother!" she barked in justification. Wasn't she entitled to retribution? Isn't that what Regina had been seeking all those years?

"What?" the former mayor prompted. Her head tilted in confusion, and for a brief moment, the fury settled within her. Cora had killed Queen Eva. With a furrowed brow, she regarded the school teacher skeptically. "Whatever for?"

Taking a deep breath in realization at the reaffirmation, Mary Margaret knew then, although she'd always suspected, that her stepmother had no knowledge of the grand scheming of Cora Mills. So, it was with fond tenderness that she slowly repeated, "Cora killed my mother," concluding after a quiet breath, "so you could be queen." In that split second of rarely witnessed vulnerability, she observed the tempestuous storm rage within brown eyes. She swallowed thickly as the flecks of purple seemed to brighten and connect with quick, thin, flashing streaks, almost like lightening. It was quite unsettling. She took a quick step back, bumping into a stool at the counter.
"Regina?" Emma uttered. She didn't know what to do or think. The soap opera drama was well beyond her depth, and without the brunette's guidance, she felt something she hadn't in a long time, lost. Her gaze cut between brunette's rigid back, David's shocked expression, and Mary Margaret's look of concerned fear. Tentatively, she eased her magic towards the former mayor, testing and hoping for the older woman to come back to her and, more importantly, back to herself.

This is absolutely insane! Regina thought, letting her emotions roil as her body trembled with pure rage. Her fingers curled into the broken candle, pressing, the ancient wax oozing between her digits. As she felt her magic coil within her, absorbing the residual potential in the now useless enchanted candle, she realized just how much magic was at her fingertips, more than ever before.

Grinding her teeth, she stared through the hapless girl before her. Cora's quest for power and Snow White's disillusioned ideology of the world had stripped her of her freedom, ruined her, and cast her into darkness. And now, after she had managed to claw her way into the twilight of liberty, she was forever bound to Emma Swan, granddaughter to the bastard she tried every day to forget. Yet, in the same moment she cursed the blonde, her emotions settled within her as she sensed the tenderly faltering, hopeful touch of the sheriff's magic, and she realized Emma needed her. Emma wanted her.

Refocusing on the woman before her, the former mayor opened her hand, releasing the candle. However, before it hit the floorboards, the enchanted artifact dissolved into a flurry of purple sparkles. "If we're resorting to quid pro quo," she declared in a low, heavy tone, "let me remind you that I've yet to kill your first love." Her eyes cut to the restrained shepherd to her right.

David swallowed nervously. His eyes darted between the three women. He'd confronted the Evil Queen many times before, but this instance was different. Now, he realized she'd been holding back all along.

"Like I didn't suffer enough at your hands," Mary Margaret countered sharply. Anger overrode her fear. Her eyes flashed with a hateful gleam as she took a bold step forward, fists balled at her sides. How dare she!

Dismissively, Regina rolled her eyes, refocusing on the temper tantrum unfolding before her. "That's comparing apples to depravation," she coolly refuted, crossing her arms. Her gaze idly dragged over the school teacher who was practically buzzing with exasperation. Unimpressed with the declaration, she distantly continued, "At least I was honest with my feelings, Dear. I may have tried to kill you outright and barrage you with strife, but you sabotaged my entire life."

Emma winced. The truth in their words was like a punch in the gut. For the first time, the magic between them felt sour, and it left her feeling sick. She looked away, casting her gaze downward. Her thoughts drifted to their all-too-short trip to New York, and as her mind's eye replayed that telling massage, she redeployed on the conversation with new found strength.

"I tried to help you!" the school teacher cried in frustrated outrage, stomping her right foot. Why couldn't they move on from this? Not for the first time, she silently implored the older woman to at least try to understand. "I didn't want you to lose your mother," she rasped in torn aggravation. How was being her stepmother really that bad?

Cocking an eyebrow at the undignified outburst, Regina tilted her head to one side. She drummed her fingers on top of her arm as she tiredly assessed the grown woman before her. "And yet," she started but stopped, switching to a husky, sarcastic timber, "you try to take her from me now." Her brow furrowed as her eyes narrowed and flashed violet with sudden clarity. "You little bitch," she snarled in a low, deadly voice. Taking a long, quick step forward, she uncrossed her arms and flexed her hands. "You wanted to keep me for yourself," she accused. Selfish brat.
"What?" Mary Margaret rasped, jumping backwards. Bumping into a stool hard enough to knock another over, she feigned confusion. Her gaze flitted between her husband and daughter, both of whom had very different expressions. David was the epitome of understanding and love, while Emma's eyes were wide with disbelief.

Scowling, the former mayor raised her chin. She took no delight in extracting that particular tidbit, but now, the truth was out between them. Her breaths were measured as she flatly stated, "Your father was the king," Hate for the abhorrent man threatened to break her delicate control. So, she fixated on the clueless daughter. "You said yourself he was looking for a mother for you," she paused and continued with dripping distain, "and you found one and couldn't let me get away." A spoiled child, someone she'd trusted, had betrayed her.

"That's not it at all!" the school teacher quivered with too much practiced sincerity. Unable to meet her stepmother's hateful glower, she flinched under Emma's confounded expression. David's understanding and warm eyes did nothing to cushion her forbidden truth. Brushing her hands down the front of her sweater, she crossed her arms and defiantly repeated with her head held high, "I didn't want you to lose your mother."

"No?" Regina countered. Even now, when past malicious intent had been revealed, it was so blindly denied. She screwed her eyes shut. At least her mother didn't have a heart. Her face contorted into a savage snarl as her hands clawed at her clothes, aligning appearance with inner turmoil. With fire and venom, she seethed, "You went from happy for me and Daniel to ecstatic that I was marrying your father so quickly, I'm surprised you didn't have whiplash." How could a singular person push her so close to the edge?

Meekly, Mary Margaret whispered, "You said he'd left." She never knew. Why did Regina lie to her? Tears gathered in her eyes. Oh, God, what had she done? She covered her mouth with her hand, stalling a gut wrenching sob. I'm so sorry, she chanted in her mind, but she couldn't make herself say the words aloud.

"He did, in a coffin," the former mayor snapped, reopening her eyes. She was unmoved by the lame display of repentance, as it was too little, too late. Her chest heaved under her now rumpled shirt. "Mother killed him because you couldn't keep a secret." Daniel had been her one light whilst under Cora's thumb after their move north from the Southern Kingdoms, and a child's selfish desire had taken that from her.

"I was a child!" the school teacher implored, as if that explained everything. Tears fell freely, now. She struggled to breathe as her heart suddenly felt too large within her chest. "Why can't you understand that?" she whined. They'd been happy, for a time. She remembered those days with such fondness; she used to wish for their return constantly.

"And so is Henry!" Regina bellowed, condemning the imprudent woman before her. Ruefully shaking her head, she took a deep breath and frowned. Things had certainly gotten off track. She allowed steely resolve to click into place. "I will not let him turn out like you," she promised with utter loathing. She'd saved Snow White numerous times, both willingly and unwillingly, but that was done. Now, her efforts were for Emma and Henry.

Mary Margaret was clearly conflicted. She didn't know how to react to the sudden shift in topic. What did Henry have to do with her supposed past gaffes against her stepmother? With a furrowed brow, she haughtily demanded, "What does that mean?" She wiped angrily at her tears.

In an instant, the loft apartment seemed to almost ice over; and with a tone just as chilling, the former mayor warned, "It means stay away from our son, Miss Blanchard." She was done with this, with this woman, and with this entire situation. She was emotionally frayed and bone tired, and if
not for Emma and Henry, she'd burn them all. So with an elegant ease, she turned on her booted heel, freed the hapless shepherd from his bonds with a flick of her left hand, and extended her right to Emma as she stalked towards the still open door. Relief washed over her as the blonde took her hand without hesitation. Not wanting to linger on the warm, soothing strokes of their magic combining, as it now did every time they touched, she immediately rolled her left hand and teleported them home.

They appeared in Henry's room.

Seeing her son safe and sound on his bed, his nose buried in a comic book only made Regina more tired. Her scanning eyes took in Alexander's slumped form as he studied at desk. Yet, he immediately straightened upon noticing his queen's return.

"Your Highness," the young drummer greeted, standing. His brow furrowed at the weak smile and the subtle, dismissive gesture of her hand. He glanced quickly between Emma and Henry before the queen left the room. Something had happened.

Startled by his mothers' return, Henry quickly sat up on his bed, comic book tossed aside. His keen eyes avidly observed his brunette mother, but he frowned when she said nothing to him. Bossily, he interrogated his blonde mother, "Hey, where did you go?"

Before releasing the former mayor's hand, the sheriff gave it a good squeeze, hoping to elicit some sort of response: a return squeeze, a sorrowful look, even a bashful smile. But there was nothing. Slowly, she lowered her hand as she watched the brunette leave the room and head downstairs. "Not now, Kid," she quietly told her son, biting her lower lip.

After a slow, deep breath, she propelled herself forward, out of Henry's bedroom, and started down the stairs. Her feet had just hit the landing when she heard the soft click of the study door closing. For some reason, she didn't want to leave Regina brooding alone. Frustrated tears welled up in her eyes. She was halfway across the foyer when Monty gently stopped her.

"Hold on, Emma," Elmwood commanded quietly. He laid a firm hand on the sheriff's biceps, and suggested, "Let's give her a moment." His gaze darted towards the closed door. He was touched by the woman's open concern.

"A moment?" the blonde scoffed, trying to keep her voice down. The house felt eerily quiet without the bustle of guards. "Are you kidding me?" she criticized, roughly pushing his hand off her. But she instantly regretted it. Running her hands through her hair, she shook her head and forlornly lamented, "I don't want her thinking she's alone." She turned large, sad green eyes upon the commander.

Releasing a heavy exhale, Monty firmly reassured the distraught sheriff, "She knows she isn't." Of that, he was absolutely certain. He may not have been able to be what his queen had needed, but he remained secure in his support of her. Content that the blonde would allow Regina her solitude, he relocated to the den. It was going to be a long night, and he hoped to grab a brief respite.

Emma aggressively stuffed her hands in her jeans' pockets. Torn, she glanced between the closed study door and the open door leading down to the den. She bit her lip and dropped her head. Her long blonde hair obscured her view of the rest of the house. It helped her to think. Then, sliding her phone out of her back pocket, she quickly googled a word that hung in her memory from the night's conversation, depravation. She frowned as she realized it didn't quite mean what she had thought it meant, having confused it with deprivation. She had no doubt that Mary Margaret had gotten it wrong, too. Stowing her phone back in her pocket, she bounded down the stairs to the den.
Hearing the thundering steps, Monty, who had just sat down on the plush, leather sofa, pursed his lips as the sheriff stood before him. "What are you doing?" he asked, not hiding his confusion. At least, she hadn't run into the study as soon as he had left.

The two Crows Guard at the pool table merely spared the blonde a brief glance but listened for their commander's order.

Crossing her arms, Emma regarded the large man sitting before her with intense scrutiny. "You and I are going to have a talk," she replied easily before pausing. Her eyes searched him, studied him as she tried to establish a baseline reference. Monty Elmwood was not an easy man to read, except for his fierce protective ness of Regina. All the Crows Guard wore that on their sleeves.

"Alright," Elmwood acquiesced with a tilt of the head. Wordlessly, he gestured for her to continue. This behavior only confirmed his suspicions on several counts.

Relieved and surprised, the sheriff understood she had to be selective with her questions and not drag things out too long. "What was it like in the castle?" she asked, starting with something relatively safe and a bit obvious, for the most part. "Mary Margaret says life was great, but Regina hints at a different story."

"It depends on who you ask," he deflected, deciding to test the blonde's resolve.

"I'm asking you," she drawled. Her eyes narrowed as she pursed her lips. Somehow, she got the impression he was challenging her.

Acknowledging the distinction with a soft hum, Monty relaxed into the sofa. "Life as a castle guard was interesting," he supplied and easily added, "pay was respectable." He watched the woman who would one day, if he had his way, become the queen's personal bodyguard and something more, as well, he suspected. "When Queen Regina arrived, I was assigned to the queen's guard," he elaborated, curious as to where the sheriff would take their conversation.

It was refreshing to the blonde to hear someone talk about Regina's time as queen in a positive light. "What was that like?" she pondered, relaxing her stance a little.

"Most of the time, the Queen was easy to work for, didn't have unreasonable expectations, and was never cruel for cruelty's sake," Elmwood answered without hesitation. He linked his hands on his lap.

Nodding, Emma mentally shuffled her new information with what she already knew. "So, roughly translated, she had her reasons for the things she did," she deduced. That was good to know, since everyone carried on about the Evil Queen this, the Evil Queen that. At least Regina wasn't branded a criminal right out of the gate.

"In a nutshell."

So, with a few basic questions under her belt, she decided to go fishing. She wanted to know things that others may have deemed unimportant. Without missing a beat, she probed, "How old was she when she married Mary Margaret's father?" Everyone knew age had a lot to do with someone's frame of mind.

A firm scowl settled across Monty's features as he remembered the day Regina arrived at the castle. There was a sharp edge to his voice as he answered, "The wedding was two weeks after her seventeenth birthday."

Although not necessarily surprised, given the medieval lifestyle of the Enchanted Forest, Emma
was quietly growing concerned over where this was all undoubtedly heading. "Seventeen? Wow. Okay...," she trailed off, letting her arms fall to her sides. It was one thing having reservations, but having something validated was totally different. Clearing her throat, she softly solicited, "How old was Mary Margaret?"

Raising an eyebrow, he was ready to measure her response as he replied, "The princess was thirteen at the time."

"Hold up," the sheriff coughed, raising a hand. She swallowed as the implications bubbled toward the foreground. "She's only four years younger than Regina?!" she squeaked in utter surprise. Biting her lower lip, she cast her eyes away, focusing on the rows of books, movies, and music. "Yes."

Shaking her head, she rubbed the back of her neck, muttering, "I'm know I'm gonna regret asking this, but..." She trailed off, regaining her composure as she firmly stood with hands on hips. "What about the king?" she demanded. "How old was he?"

Elmwood surmised the next minute, and he wanted the blonde to impress him with her responses. Flatly, he elucidated, "The king was fifty-nine years old."

"Holy shit!" Emma cursed, unable to remain still any longer. She threw her hands up in the air and paced around in a tight circle. Her mouth went dry as she husked with wide eyes, "He was over three times her age? That's... that's...." She didn't have words. She couldn't imagine letting someone that old touch her when she was seventeen, let alone marry them. "Fuck," she whispered.

Content with the emotional response, Monty decided to push the soon-to-be recruit a little further. He ideally explained, "It wasn't uncommon for older men to marry younger women in the Enchanted Forest, especially if it was a second marriage." He did not, however, adequately prepare for her outright anger.

The sheriff spun about to face the commander and animatedly sneered, "Older would put him in his mid-thirties, tops." She shivered with disgust, squeezing her eyes shut. "This puts him in grandfather territory," she hissed, her stomach churning. "Fuck!" she whined. "She was just a girl...." Her desire, her not-so-new need, to protect the prickly brunette flared, but she was too late to save her and that hurt.

"Indeed," he agreed, fully understanding the blonde's mixture of rage and despair on rampant display.

"Goddamnit, Monty!" Emma cursed, picking up the small, glass candy dish on the coffee table and tossing it across the room. It shattered against the far wall in an extremely satisfying and spectacular fashion. Peppermints littered the carpeted floor, and the other guard members stopped pretending to play pool. She shook her head and clenched her fists. "That is some seriously messed up shit," she seethed, trying to calm herself. Sharp eyes locked onto the commander, she rallied her anger, glaring. "How the hell could anyone justify that kind of...?" Her words failed her as rage once again overflowed. This time a bookshelf was the victim.

- SQ -

It had been a couple of hours since they'd returned home, and Regina was still firmly ensconced in the study. Deciding that she couldn't let her friend stew any longer, Emma quietly rapped twice on the door, waiting to hear the muffled, "Come in," before entering. The room was dark, the flickering light from the fireplace doing little to illuminate the space. Gently pushing the door to
The brunette was sitting in the middle of the sofa, a full glass of apple cider resting on the coffee table before her. The sheriff considered that her friend looked rather vulnerable in her navy slacks and stockinged feet. The white, button-down shirt that had been so crisp that morning was now wrinkled and nearly untucked from her pants. It seemed almost impossible that just that morning they had been in New York City as dawn had crested the horizon. Over sixteen hours later, they had encountered changes that would undoubtedly ripple through their lives for months to come.

Regina's dark eyes flicked up briefly when the blonde entered the room, but she said nothing as she approached the couch. She had heard Emma's outburst from the den and the subsequent, impromptu 'redecorating' that had ensued. The former mayor had a fairly good idea of their conversation, having caught the angry shout of, "She was too fucking young to be forced into a shit marriage!" It simultaneously warmed and tore at her to know someone cared enough to be that mad on her behalf. Not for the first time since the bond had been activated, she wondered what it would have been like to have had Emma Swan standing up for her all those years past.

As it was, she released a slight sigh when the cushion dipped to the right of her as the blonde came to sit beside her on the sofa, shoulder lightly touching hers. The silence was comfortable as they sat next to each other, staring into the flames and listening to the wood crackle. At some point, Regina leaned forward and captured her tumbler of cider in her left hand. She took a slow sip, enjoying the alcohol flowing down her throat, leaving behind a faint burn and sweet aftertaste.

"Been a hell of a day, huh?" Emma murmured, finally breaking the quiet that had settled between them.

Letting out a quick bark of laughter, the brunette sardonically replied, "That's an understatement." With a wry smirk, she passed the glass to Emma, who took it with a raised eyebrow. "You look like you could use a drink, as well," she explained.

"Yeah," she agreed. Grumbling cynically, she added, "I could use the whole damn bottle," and took a hearty swig. Blinking a little, the blonde took a second, smaller sip before handing the drink back. "Crap. I forgot how strong that stuff is," she wheezed.

Regina chuckled sincerely, mirth spreading through her. Curling her legs up onto the sofa, she leaned into Emma slightly, taking another swallow of the cider. "This is from my twenty-year vintage," she supplied. "Pace yourself, or you won't make it upstairs," came the teasing warning.

Emma smiled softly, eyes twinkling as she retorted, "If that's the case, then that was a mighty full glass for you to be hoarding all to yourself."

"Mm," the brunette hummed noncommittally in response. "I was hoping you'd want to share," she admitted faintly, sipping the amber liquid again before passing it to the blonde.

"Good. We can get drunk together," the blonde said flippantly, only half joking and knocking back a mouthful of the alcohol.

Snorting in amusement, the former mayor abjured, "Yes, because that's the sort of example we want to set for Henry," voice wavering on his name. Thoughts of the candle and Henry's determination to use it on her mother rose up, chilling her to the core. Her son wasn't supposed to be this way. He was meant to be sweet and kind, and he was never, ever to have entertained the idea that doing bad things should be punishable by death. She let her head rest on Emma's shoulder, permitting herself that small comfort, shifting in tandem as the sheriff returned the glass to the coffee table. A warm, dry hand found hers, pressing their palms together as fingers
intertwined and held tight.

Emma remained quiet as Regina leaned against her side, content to offer support the only way she knew how, at the moment. It wasn't right that their son had changed like he had, and she didn't really know who to blame. She supposed they could blame themselves, two women who had been hurt and betrayed many times before. Were they too damaged to raise their son, give him what he needed? But when she thought of Regina, all the blonde could think was that Henry was a miracle the brunette had molded into reality from the nothing the sheriff had given them to start with.

A few minutes passed before the sheriff realized that the shoulder of her shirt was damp from the brunette's silent tears. Resting her cheek on the dark crown of hair, she let the moisture that had gathered in her own eyes edge over her lashes. Tentatively, she allowed a little magic to slip from her and into the former mayor, hearing the shaky exhale of relief from beside her. She had kept a tight reign on it when she'd initially taken the brunette's hand in hers, unsettled by how, ever since the storm, her magic automatically tried to seek out Regina's power at the slightest touch. The effects of the day wearing on her, she let herself slip into a light doze.

Regina closed her eyes as Emma's magic eased through her in a faint trickle. Even though it was tinged with sadness and worry, it was relaxing and familiar, a balm to the raggedness of her emotions. Part of her realized she should be more concerned with how much she was beginning to need this kind of contact from the other woman. However, as she drifted into a surprisingly peaceful slumber, she knew that it was because she had come to trust Emma implicitly, and she was comfortable with that.

Having not heard anything for a long while and no footsteps on the stairs, Monty went in search of his queen and the sheriff. Checking the study, he was surprised to find the pair asleep on the couch, light snores reaching him in the doorway. Emma was leaning back on the sofa, head tilted to rest on top of Regina's, mouth slightly open. The queen was pressed against the blonde's left side, head nestled into the crook of her shoulder, their clasped hands resting on the brunette's thigh. The big man carefully closed the door and took up station along the wall outside the study, smiling contentedly to himself.

~SQ~

End of Part 9
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: We're on a roll! My co-author is making some corrections to previous parts. Please note the edits will not change the story or plot in any way, as it's her perfectionist showing. We appreciate your constructive critiques and speculative theories; they are always welcome. We've been careful and decisive with our development of our mythos for magic, and if you've enjoyed the progress, thus far, you may continue to enjoy our reveals regarding the Blue Fairy's backstory, the Dark One's origin, why the dwarves hatch from eggs, etc. On another note, we don't include every conversation or event. We like to leave some of the more common rationales to be inferred by the reader. Isn't part of the fun drawing conclusions from observations?

Special Note: Also, since we've had a few comments about the possible white-washing of Regina, we feel that we need to address that now. We fully intend to embrace Regina's Latina heritage (or the Fairytale Land equivalent) in a positive and meaningful way, which will become very apparent as the story progresses. However, while most people assume that her Latin roots are only from Prince Henry, we feel that they come from Cora, as well. Her family's mill was in King Xavier's kingdom, a Latin kingdom. Since we doubt they had the money to buy into the mill but were, rather, native to the area for several generations, we believe that Cora has a heavy Latin ethnic heritage. It is important to remember that while a person's observable physical traits are their phenotype, a person's genotype (which is passed on to their offspring) is much, much more involved, allowing for diverse characteristics to be seen in their children or even skip a generation or more. There is an excellent example of this in the case of Sandra Laing of South Africa. You can read more about her at: theguardian/2003/mar/17/features11.g2. But the bottom line is that we see Regina as Latina and will be celebrating that in the chapters to come.

Thank You for all of the comments, reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. We're excited to hear your insights, critiques, speculations, and questions. It helps us gauge whether or not we're telling our story the way we're meaning for it to be told.

~SQ~

PART 10

"I have not missed work," grumbled Emma Swan, forcefully tapping the end of her pen against a stack of reports, all of which she needed to read and sign by the end of her shift. She scanned the top document and frowned. Of their own accord, her eyes drifted up and looked past Puma and Lucas, who sat in the visitor chairs. She pursed her lips as she watched Regina typing away on her laptop at a desk in the bullpen.

Snickering softly, Ruby teased her friend in a quiet sing-song tone, signing her timesheet with a
flourish, "Someone has gotten spoiled." She took a quick peek at the wall clock and settled back in her chair, enjoying her slow day. Maybe she could get her blonde friend alone, and maybe she could get a bit more info about the blonde's new car.

"Things will get back to normal, now," Puma stated firmly, not looking up from his clipboard as he continued writing. His job hadn't been hard, so far, but being on call twenty-four-seven was rough. Damn, he couldn't wait till the next day, his first day off in a week.

"Really, have you seen our normal?" the sheriff asked with a sigh. Leaning back in her creaky office chair, she tossed her pen on the desk and happily added, "At least we can hire another deputy." She smiled at the looming but neat stack of reports on her desk. The additional deputy had been a huge win and would definitely make life easier for the entire Sheriff's Department.

"So, another round of applications?" piped the waitress, silently considering tossing her hat in the ring. Granny had more than enough help with all the high schoolers looking for part-time jobs. And her grandmother had been fair, splitting the hiring between the kids who really needed the extra cash for their families and those just looking for some pocket change.

"No," the blonde groaned, remembering the last run of applicants. She sure as hell didn't want to interview all seven dwarves, again. Bashful had been a freaking nightmare. Shuddering at the memory, she nodded to herself before saying, "I'm going to offer it to Jackson Hart."

Damn, Lucas thought, slouching in her seat. She had been getting used to the idea of full benefits.

"Good choice, he's very level headed," the deputy approved, signing his timesheet. He carefully removed the document from his clipboard and placed it on top of his boss's growing pile, flashing a broad smile before sitting back. Absently, he tucked his pen in his shirt's breast pocket. "When it counts," he quickly added.

Ruby, on the other hand, wasn't as professional. She sputtered and snickered into her hand, and when she was no longer able to keep her amusement to herself, she gushed, "Unless you call him Bambi." She giggled some more, and once she managed to compose herself, she quickly warned, "Better tell Regina not to say dear around him."

Entering the sheriff's office with a thick file folder, Regina inquisitively asked, "Who shouldn't I say dear to?" Of course, she was already aware Emma was going to offer the new deputy position to Jackson Hart. Her eyes dropped down to the untouched stack on the desk, and she sighed to herself, offering the folder in her hand to the sheriff.

Clearing her throat, the blonde casually took the folder with a sly smile as she answered, "Bambi, apparently."

A deep, baritone chuckle filled the small office as Puma stood and graciously offered his seat to the former mayor. His dark eyes sparked with mischief as he straightened his uniform. "She warned you," he clarified, moving toward the office door. Then, his sharp eyes fixed on the sulky man in one of the jail cells. In a low and rumbly voice, he flatly inquired, "So, what's the news on the Tillman front?" Just looking at the man infuriated him.

Emma drummed her fingers on the office chair's arms and sighed. That had also been on her plate this morning. Damn, it had been a long day, and it wasn't even lunchtime, yet. "The new ADA, Agwé Dejean, will be by later to discuss options," she answered, taking on a strictly business tone. "For now, Kathryn and Jim have volunteered to look after Ava and Nicholas," she added, knowing the question was coming. Shrugging, she lightly concluded, "The kids seem okay with it." Even if it wasn't ideal, it was the best the town could do, at the moment.
Crossing her arms, Ruby awkwardly prompted, "Where are we going to put Tillman?" She twisted and looked through the office window to glare at the worthless man. "We can't leave him in here," she scoffed. It was bad enough she had to bring him two meals a day from Granny's.

"That's definitely a problem," the sheriff shook her head, sitting upright and propping her elbows on the desktop. Suddenly, she felt tired and slouched. "Storybrooke doesn't have a proper holding facility or trained personnel, and the psych ward in the hospital is only a temporary measure." That had been a huge fight between David and she, in the beginning. No, the Sheriff's Department couldn't ask, let alone expect, nurses and doctors to look after perfectly sane and uninjured criminals. And to top it off, Sydney Glass had escaped from the ward unaided and was currently hiding out amongst the Crows Guard.

"Request one," Regina simply supplied. She knew if they could convince the city council, Mitchell Herman would call for a bond vote, and then, with a sizable down payment, Storybrooke First Bank would simply approve the city's loan.

"Yeah," the blonde scoffed, rolling her eyes. "Fun times with paperwork and convincing Mayor Herman and the city council, but what do we do when the other cell is full and there's somebody else to lock up?" She pointedly looked at the former mayor.

"Magic one up," Ruby helpfully suggested. She twisted in her seat and started pointing across the room. "Take out the janitor closet, move those filing cabinets, and maybe make the cells a little smaller, all done!" She turned a beaming smile on the other brunette. When she manned the station and the hours seemed to drag on forever, she entertained herself with ideas of remodeling.

Clearly not impressed with the suggestion, the former mayor merely cocked an eyebrow at the part-time deputy and quipped, "Why don't I just build a prison while I'm at it?" Did no one understand how time-consuming and energy-sucking such an endeavor would be?

"That would save us a few headaches," Puma replied easily. He nodded to himself, once again seeing the merits of a magic user working for the Sheriff's Department.

Gla\rning at the man, Regina countered with a flat, hard, "No." Although, she was impressed with the panther's quick thinking.

Emma smirked, and in a mocking tone, she relayed, "It's about economics." She knew if the brunette wasn't going to use magic to fix her own house, there was no way in hell she'd renovate the Sheriff's Department.

However, Ruby seriously considered her boss's sassy retort. She pursed her lips and turned back around in her chair. "More jobs, less time to drink, I support it," she said to the room. Cash flow was becoming a real issue for some families. Looking at the blonde, she pointed adamantly at the discarded pen on the desktop. "You better start filling out those request forms and brushing up on your PowerPoint skills," she warned, grinning. "And practice your public speaking."

"Damnit," the sheriff cursed, slumping in her chair. She pouted at Regina before turning to Puma. "Any leads on Albert Spencer?" With all the chaos, lately, Team Sheriff could really use a break.

"A few but nothing concrete, yet," the deputy relayed, straightening his shoulders. He sighed softly, letting his frustration show. "Surprisingly, he's remained off the radar, not that it's been difficult, lately," he added. His eyes dropped to the stack of reports on the desk, signaling that Cora and Hook hadn't been the only goings-on in Storybrooke.

"Did he fall down a well? Storybrooke's only so big!" the blonde exclaimed, covering her face with
her hands. That was another thing Herman had harped about during their phone call that morning. Apparently, those phone calls were going to become a weekly thing.

A sly, saucy smirk graced Regina's lips as she courteously inquired in a soft voice, "Should I find Lassie?" Cutting an impish gaze at the part-time deputy, she answered herself in mock disappointment, "Oh, never mind."

"Ha ha," the waitress delivered flatly, leveling a hot glare at the former mayor, but her faux non-amusement was short lived. A bubbly chortle escaped her throat at Emma's giggle and her mask shattered at Puma's snort. So, as she shook her head, she offered with a limp wave of a hand, "I tried sniffing Spencer out, but the trail went cold."

"Poor Timmy," the brunette remarked with a hint of wistfulness. The reports had been extremely dull; so, she had to find her entertainment somewhere.

Blinking and somehow managing to keep a straight face, the deputy turned to leave the office. "On that note, I'm going on patrol," he stated, walking to his desk and retrieving his coat off the back of his office chair. He quickly made his way down the hall toward the exit.

"Coward!" Emma called after the retreating man. "You could help me with these forms." A half smirk settled across her face.

"I don't get paid the big bucks," Puma called back and waved before exiting the double doors at the end of the hall.

Dropping her smirk, Ruby took on a serious tone. "Yeah, don't say buck around Hart, either."

How sensitive was this guy? "Should we, like, not talk to him at all because you do realize you're giving this one all the ammunition," the blonde pondered, pointing at the former mayor.

"I do find venison rather . . . tasty," Regina interjected. This was turning out to be a good day. Certainly, cracking the dashing panther's stoic exterior had been quite diverting. The waitress was too easy.

Outright laughing, Emma covered her eyes with her left hand, and whimpered, "Oh, my God, please stop." The puns weren't even that funny, but the former mayor's dry delivery made them so.

Lucas had given up on any pretense of composure and allowed herself to simply laugh. "Yeah, no, don't say that," she instructed, shaking her head and still chuckling. Straightening abruptly, she asked, "Wait, was that a sex joke or a crack about cannibalism?"

Smirking, Regina's widened her eyes in mischievous delight and teased sweetly, "Is the big bad wolf concerned about competition?" Her tongue briefly wet her lips as she winked, husking with wicked glee, "I don't bite, much."

The sheriff snorted and deadpanned, "Do I have to worry about you two mauling the new guy?" There was a slight pause before she snickered and shamelessly added, "Guess we should hide the buckshot." Then, one of the double doors opening down the hall drew her attention, and she bit her lip when Paige Moser started toward them. Taking a deep breath, she pushed all the fun aside, stood up, and moved to meet the girl just outside her office. "Paige," she greeted.

"Sheriff Swan," the girl replied. Her gaze nervously glanced around the small station, finally landing on the former mayor. "May I speak with Ms. Mills, please?" Despite the conviction in her voice, the girl's hands trembled.
Turning, Emma noticed Regina was already stepping out of the office and guiding the teenager toward the interview room. She shoved her hands into the front pockets of her jeans as the door softly clicked closed and chewed on her lower lip. Sighing, she was relieved she didn't have to deal with that particular mess and that Jefferson had already been moved to the hospital's psych ward. She pivoted on her booted heel, and her gaze briefly caught Michael Tillman's, who quickly looked away. Frowning, she went back to her office chair.

"So, is Henry grounded for life?" Ruby drawled, needing to distract herself from the private conversation in the next room. Since Paige had attempted to push her biological father over the town line, there had been all kinds of speculation and rumors over the girl's biological mother's death. She frowned and darkly wondered, "Am I grounded for life?"

Distractedly, the blonde quietly answered, "Yes, to Henry. No, to you." She paused and looked up with a sad smile. "But you might want to comp Regina's salads for a while." It wasn't as if the former mayor blamed the waitress, far from it, actually, but it would help solidify their blossoming friendship. Not a lot of people, aside from the Crows Guard, showed Regina they cared.

"That I can do, but seriously, I thought you guys nipped his Houdini act in the bud," Lucas mused, her brow furrowed in confusion. Surprisingly, Mary Margaret had been rather closed-lipped on the whole affair; usually, her friend couldn't wait to share.

With a heavy exhale, Emma pretended to organize the already sorted papers on her desk. "So did I," she huffed in annoyance, picking up her pen. "And apparently, having a new parent means you don't have to pay any attention to any other parent," she added through gritted teeth, angrily tapping the pen against the file folder.

"That kind of backfired on you, huh?" Ruby questioned, understanding that both mothers were at their wits' end with the boy's behavior.

"Big time. I'm really getting a taste of my own medicine," the sheriff grumbled, tossing the pen back on her desk. She leaned back in her office chair and ran her hands down her face. "It sucks," she started but stopped, abruptly dropping her hands. Looking her friend in the eye, she gently explained, "I swear Regina's a saint for not killing me that first year." Oh, she had a lot to talk to Archie about during their next session.

Chuckling, the waitress arched an eyebrow, knowing she needed to tread carefully. So, in the vein of keeping things light, she idly bantered, "Well, she must've gotten over it because, hello, new car." She flashed a broad smile and waggled her eyebrows. However, her curiosity peaked when she noted the blonde's slight blush. "Wow, this is a minefield! Pushing those thoughts aside, as well, she decided to focus on something safe, something concrete, the new car. "Seriously, though, how did that happen?"

"The bug died," Emma slowly replied. She cleared her throat and quickly expounded, "I cried, and next thing I know, we're in a car lot." Shrugging, she felt slight embarrassment at proclaiming Regina her sugar mama in front of Granny's, of all places. Her gaze hesitantly met her friend's, and she steeled herself for some teasing.

However, Ruby merely stated, "You must have powerful tears." She wasn't really surprised by the former mayor buying the sheriff a new car. Since she'd gotten to know the reclusive Regina Mills, not the professed Evil Queen persona, that behavior made sense, as the woman was very giving.

"Eh," the sheriff grunted and shrugged, attempting to brush off the entire situation. She mindlessly straightened her pencil cup and tape dispenser. "It may have something to do with me moaning over the all leather interior," she weakly suggested with a wry smile, hoping Ruby would just drop
it. She wasn't ready to share the intimate details of the New York trip, yet.

"Uh huh," the waitress drawled, observing the blonde's fidgeting. She could smell the apprehension rolling off of her friend. It both confused and intrigued her, but she decided to let it go, for now. "So, when do I get a ride?" she easily prompted, noting the utter relief in green eyes.

With a wide grin, Emma quickly replied, perking up at the idea, "Anytime, but you'll have to fight for shotgun."

~SQ~

Regina closed the door to the interview room and gestured to one of the chairs at the table, waiting for the girl to settle before taking the seat beside her. "What can I do for you, Dear?" she asked, turning her body toward her, pretty sure she knew why the girl had come to see her.

Paige fidgeted in her seat, staring at her hands in her lap as she said, "Ms. Mills, I…. You said you knew my mother." Her gaze briefly flicked up to meet the former mayor's. Hesitantly, she asked, "Do you know how she died?"

The brunette clasped her hands together and rested them on the table, straightening fractionally in her chair. "I do," she allowed softly, unwilling to divulge any additional information until asked. The child deserved to know the truth, but she had to want it badly enough to ask the right questions.

Face scrunching slightly at the short answer, Paige followed up with a quiet, "How did she die?"

Instead of answering, Regina questioned, "Do your parents know you're here?" At the quick nod, she clarified, "Do they know why you're here? What you planned to ask me?" It was a courtesy she'd want if Henry had gone to someone for answers about her own past. And while no one might afford it to her, she could damn well be kind to the couple who had cared for the girl these last few years.

"Yes. I told them I wanted to know, that I was old enough. They said that they didn't really have any details, and I would have to ask… my father." Scowling, she shifted back in her chair, her arms crossing over her chest in petulance. "He refused to tell me anything." Her lips turned out in a slight pout as she added, "When I told my parents, they said that you would be the only other person to ask."

Pursing her lips faintly, the former mayor stated flatly, "I see. Did they say anything else?" She wondered if the Mosers had explained just how much of a benefactress she'd been to the cobbled together family since Jefferson had been lost to Wonderland.

The girl shrugged noncommittally. "Mama said that you knew my mother and father when you were the queen." She hesitated a moment, chewing on her bottom lip in indecision before finally inquiring, "How did you know them?"

In spite of wanting to maintain a cool façade, Regina's lips curled up a little at the girl's earnestness. "When I became queen, your father was a milliner of the highest esteem, his designs greatly sought after by much of the nobility. You were just a few months old when I first met your parents at court." She catalogued the girl's features, seeing much of Ida in the young face. The dark, almond-shaped eyes, especially, reminded her of the carefree woman she had met decades ago.

"They went to court?" Paige squeaked in surprise, never before having heard the information. She
edged forward in the chair, leaning forward, eyes wide in wonder.

Laughing lightly as she warmed up to the girl, the brunette affirmed, "Yes, indeed. Your parents were well thought of, at the time. They were very elegant and dashing, wearing the newest fashions and setting trends that swept through the aristocracy like wildfire. Your mother was a lovely woman, kind and always smiling." Regina's own smile slipped a little as she thought of Ida, resplendent in a stylish ball gown and laughing over some insipid joke. Then, she remembered how the woman had looked in death and had to suppress a shudder, smile leaving her completely.

Noticing the change in the woman next to her, the girl pressed, "Please, Ms. Mills, tell me how she died. My parents never met my mother and say that my father wouldn't tell them what happened." She saw the way the brunette looked at her, like she was seeing a ghost, and recognized it as the same look her father would sometimes send her way. It confused and annoyed her that no one seemed to take her seriously. "I don't understand how someone's death could be such a secret. Why can't anyone tell me anything? I deserve to know," she pleaded. Her gaze was steady as she looked at the former mayor, her frustrated expression demanding answers.

Regina took a deep breath, centering herself and deliberating just how much to divulge to the young girl. Her age and maturity level were important and would determine the degree to which she would need to edit the story. "How old are you, Paige—thirteen?"

"Yes, Ma'am," came the instant response, an eagerness seeping into her tone as she realized that her long sought-after answers were finally in reach.

The brunette nodded once, coming to a decision. "Very well, I'll tell you." Holding up her index finger in warning, she stressed, "Understand that it is a hard, ghastly truth, and you may wish you had never asked this of me." The coming conversation should never have originated from her. Had Jefferson not been such a colossal coward, she would not have been left with the onerous task of breaking a young girl's assumptions about the world. She hated this and despised the milliner even more for leaving it to her.

The girl frowned at her lap before looking up in determination. "I need to know. Tell me, please."

The former mayor angled herself in the chair to better face the girl, meeting her eyes to gauge her reaction as she spoke. Her voice was soft and low, tone even and warm in an attempt to cushion her words. "You were perhaps three when your mother was kidnapped by, what many believe to be, a particularly rough group of bandits. She was missing for six days, and no ransom was ever demanded." Seeing thick lips pressed into a tight line as the girl listened intently, she continued gently, "I'm sorry, Paige, but her body was discovered in cesspit on the seventh day."

Paige gasped quietly at the last admission, letting the information sink in for a minute. At last, she queried tremulously. "What did they do to her?"

Regina sighed through her nose, swallowing back the rising bile as she recalled the woman she had once considered a friend. "You mother had been beaten savagely and... cruelly used by the men who took her." Her eyes slipped closed briefly, face tightening in pain at the memory of a bloody and bruised visage staring up at her from the surrounding filth, almost unrecognizable through the damage. Looking at Paige, once more, she nearly gasped as, for just a moment, the image of Ida's battered face seemed to be superimposed on that of her daughter's. Her gaze on the girl was watery as she struggled to set aside the horrific memories.

The girl considered what that meant. Her eyes filled with tears, she said, "You mean they raped her." She paused, thinking about the crime dramas she watched on the television and how that knowledge impacted the new revelation of her mother's fate. "Do you... do you think she suffered
much?" she asked, voice small and sad.

Reaching out with a hand that, she was proud to note, barely shook, Regina cupped Paige's cheek and gave her a sorrowful smile. The brunette let her pain spill over her lashes and shook her head regretfully, murmuring sadly, "Oh, Sweetheart, they had her for six days. I know she did." Seeing the child's face begin to crumple, she placed her free hand on a small shoulder, squeezing with gentle reassurance. "I'm truly very sorry for what happened to your mother," she whispered, her voice cracking the tiniest amount.

That little kindness sent the girl pitching forward into Regina, seeking comfort from the woman who had been honest enough to tell her the truth. As warm arms wrapped around her, Paige cried for the mother she didn't remember and the father she had lost to madness. The former mayor held the teenager for several long minutes, stroking the dark blonde hair and rocking back and forth with her. Surreptitiously swiping at her own tears, she forcefully banished the images that had been recalled during the telling and carefully pulled back a bit. With the practiced ease of a mother, she tenderly wiped away any lingering tears on the girl's face and asked gently, "Would you like us to give you a ride home?"

Sniffling and accepting the offered tissue, Paige nodded and requested, "Yes, please." But instead of getting up, she leaned back into the brunette's warm embrace, resting her cheek on the offered shoulder, again. "Maybe in just a little while," she warbled, relieved when kind arms enveloped her, once more.

"Alright." Regina acquiesced, resuming the slow drag of her fingers through honeyed locks. Evil Queen she may have once been, but the brunette's maternal instincts were strong. So, she simply hummed a soft tune and let the girl cry herself out in her own time, providing her with what comfort she could. After the tears had stopped for a while, she stilled and tenderly prompted, "A little better?"

"Yes, thank you," Paige sniffed, gradually sitting back up. A quick glance up assured her that the former mayor wasn't trying to rush her out the door. The confirmation that the discussion had been difficult for the woman before her was oddly comforting. It was nice to know that someone besides her father felt hurt over her mother's death. It made it feel more real to her, somehow, no longer just some vague blip in her history.

A little shaky, Regina stood, gently drawing the girl to her feet, and wrapped an arm about her shoulders, leading her into the hallway. "Wait here, just a moment," she instructed quietly with one last squeeze of the girl's upper arm. Striding into the bullpen and catching sight of the sheriff, she moved closer, calling out, "Emma? I informed Paige we'd take her home."

Turning her head, Emma noticed the red eyes, the surrounding skin crinkled slightly at the corners from stress and wondered just what, exactly, had happened to the kid's mother in the Enchanted Forest. "Sure," she replied, standing from her chair and grabbing their coats and her keys while Ruby moved to her own desk. She handed Regina her coat, and quietly, while she shrugged into her jacket, she inquired, "What did you tell her?"

Dark eyes filled with a haunted look as she buttoned up her coat, she rasped, "Enough." Her face paled suddenly, and her knees wobbled, hand reaching out automatically to grasp the blonde's nearest arm. Her body wavered slightly before she steadied herself and attempted to regain her composure.

"Hey," Emma cautioned, catching the brunette's elbows in support. "Are you okay?" Worried green eyes searched her friend, roving over the stricken face, trying to figure out what had caused the uncharacteristic stumble.
"No," Regina admitted, shaking her head once. "But I will be, shortly." Giving the sheriff a tight smile, she straightened her spine, squeezing Emma's arm quickly in gratitude before releasing her. "Let's get Paige back to her parents. Then, perhaps a glass of cider would be in order," she murmured confidentially, gaze flicking up to meet the blonde's concerned one.

The weary tone coupled with the unexpected rawness in the former mayor's voice prompted the sheriff to agree immediately. "Sounds good. A fire would be nice, too," she noted, falling into step beside her friend as they walked toward Paige and the station's exit.

"Mm," came the content hum in response. Yet again, Regina was struck by the odd effortlessness with which she and Emma now communicated. It should have set her on edge, but instead, she found that she craved the deeper connection they had forged over the past few months. A faint smile edged up the corners of her mouth as the brunette reflected on how happy their unconventional little family had made her.

~SQ~

Opening the door and triggering the bell overhead, Neal Cassidy stepped inside his father's pawnshop. "Papa?" he called, looking over the completely restored shop. Any sign of yesterday's skirmish was already gone.

"In back, Bae," Gold distractedly replied to his son. He crossed his arms and glared at the useless potion sitting on the worktable before him. All of his attempts, thus far, to make a permanent antidote to the Dreamshade poison had failed.

The night janitor entered the back room. His shoulders slumped slightly upon noticing the chemistry setup on the table with an untouched potion in front of his father. "Looks like you've been busy," he commented softly, uncertain as to his father's mood, pushing long forgotten memories away.

"I was, but I've hit a bit of a snag," the pawnbroker sighed, turning toward his boy. His gaze searched him, and for the first time in a long time, he felt contentment. Now, if only he could restore Belle's memories, his world would be just about perfect.

Still uneasy with magic and all its trappings, Neal could only imagine his dad's current irritation. He remembered from his youth that it didn't take the Dark One long to master something, but the failures were met with raging anger. "You need to be careful, Papa," he said, glancing around the work area and seeing the leather canteen off to the side. It wouldn't take much for the remaining water to be depleted. He didn't know how he felt about that dilemma, yet.

"You don't think I know that?" Gold snapped, his lips curling into a snarl. When his eyes met his son's, he released a heavy exhale and shook his head. He quietly apologized, "I'm sorry. I'm just frustrated." This situation had not been part of his plans.

Nodding, the janitor thought it best to let it slide, this time. He pulled out a small stool from under the table and inquired, "Why don't you ask for help?" If the good guys came to his aide, maybe he wouldn't be so isolated, anymore. Maybe it would mean that he wasn't so dark.

A mirthless laugh escaped the pawnbroker's mouth. "Who would help me?" he demanded in a low, foreboding voice. He quickly yanked another stool from under the table and sat. Idly, he toyed with the bottle of worthless potion and silently fumed over the wasted resources. His supplies were dangerously low.

Blinking, Neal sat up a little straighter and thought he might have overestimated the Dark One. A
long, uncomfortable silence settled between them. Finally, he suggested, "What about Regina?" His intense gaze studied his father carefully. "She has magic," he needlessly added.

"That would be a good as signing my own death warrant," Gold countered with sadness. Looking out the window, he pursed his lips and chuckled. "A talented apprentice she may have been, but helpful? I think not." He didn't trust her, not after everything, but he knew she had the talent to save him.

Clearly surprised, the janitor tilted his head and leaned forward. "Wait, she was your apprentice? And you never once thought she could've been your kid?" he questioned in a rush. He couldn't believe any of this. His father knew everything.

"No," the pawnbroker drawled, narrowing his eyes at the outburst. Apparently, his son had been awake for Cora's dramatic revelation. Dismissively, he added, "As you like to point out, frequently, I can be wrong." He remembered how his son had fought so hard to keep the newly minted Dark One on the straight-and-narrow in the beginning. A part of him wondered if his son would take up that mantle, again. Would his son want to? Or more importantly, would the Dark One tolerate the insolent behavior?

Not sure how he felt about his dad's answer, Neal slouched and let his eyes follow the lines of the tubes and beakers of the chemistry lab. He quietly inquired, "How much water did you use in trying to make a cure?"

"Barely a dram," Gold replied in a low rumble. Three-quarters of a canteen wasn't going to last him forever. Until he permanently cured himself, he was vulnerable.

The more he thought about it, the more the janitor warmed up to the idea of having a sister. With his son and his fiancé, his life had never been so full of potential love and belonging. "Well, if she was your apprentice, maybe she could help," he restated, pushing his previous suggestion. "Two heads are better than one, right?" he added with a rakish smirk. He pushed aside the thoughts of other potential apprentices, trying not to consider if any ended up either dead or cursed.

Bristling, the pawnbroker was clearly annoyed, but he was also touched by his son's concern. "Bae, she won't help me," he responded in a low, sad voice. A part of him knew he would never have a familial relationship with his daughter, not after the pain he had caused her, had let befall her.

"Because you tricked Emma into casting this bond thing on Regina?" Neal asked sharply. Shaking his head, he didn't wait for a reply and immediately demanded, "Why would you even do something like that?" Huffing, his brow furrowed as he recalled Emma and Regina's coupley behavior in New York. Things weren't adding up. "Is the bond like some weird, magical handfasting or something?" he pondered quietly, his eyes searching his dad's face.

"Handfasting?" Gold mumbled after opening and closing his mouth several times. He blinked rapidly, looking pointedly at his son. "What are you talking about?" Nuptials? The Dark One didn't do nuptials.

Rolling his eyes, the janitor tilted his head. A few moments passed before he asked, "Emma and Regina are a couple, aren't they?" It was the only thing that made sense. People forced together typically didn't get along with one another, and as far as he could tell, they got along pretty damn well.

Curiosity won out over ridicule. "What makes you say that?" the pawnbroker questioned tightly.

"It's kind of obvious," Neal scoffed, crossing his arms. He shifted on the stool, letting his legs
spread further apart. "I know Emma, and she's suddenly, weirdly domestic. And that's something I never thought I'd see," he easily explained. His Emma had been wild and unpredictable, while this Emma was calm and settled.

"How's that?" Gold asked, moving the useless potion off to the side. He idly organized the various ingredients littering the worktable in an effort to appear unconcerned by the conversation.

"You know, couply stuff, like holding hands, whispered conversations, all the touchy-feely stuff," the janitor answered with a shrug. He watched his father fiddle with the various odds and ends still on the table.

Softly, almost with a sense of wonder, the pawnbroker whispered, "Really. I hadn't expected that quite so soon." When strategizing the various, possible conclusions to his manipulations, he had considered a wide variety of results, but the pair falling in love had been extremely low on his predicted outcomes. It was not an undesirable one, just unprecedented considering everything he knew about the two women.

Neal narrowed his eyes, putting the puzzle pieces together. "So, they're not a couple," he stated in bleak disbelief. His head dropped into his hands as he reined in his irritation. Looking at his father, he cried, "Papa, what did you do?"

"What I had to do," Gold snapped, glaring at his son. The boy always had had problems seeing the bigger picture.

"Alright," Neal acquiesced not really buying the flimsy excuse. "Explain it to me," he prompted, standing up from the stool. He paced across the room twice before asking, "Did you feel threatened by Emma, what with her being the savior and all?"

"Hardly," the pawnbroker scoffed, turning on his stool to track his son. "True Love is quite powerful, but nothing I can't handle," he said with a dismissive gesture before crossing his arms.

"So, it's Regina, then," the janitor quickly surmised, stopping his pacing. His father was afraid of his own daughter. That, of course, begged a lot of other questions.

"Don't be foolish. She's hardly anything to worry about," Gold answered weakly. He didn't want to admit it, but he didn't want his son interacting with Regina any more than necessary. However, there was the issue of Henry being Neal's son and all the other unforeseen consequences of that entanglement.

"Uh huh," Neal jeered, as he wasn't buying what his father was selling. "What is it about her that threatens you so much?" he probed softly. He wanted his father to open up to him, trust him. It would be the only way they could even begin to salvage their relationship.

A sneer curled the pawnbroker's lips. "She doesn't threaten me," he gritted out, anger flashing in his eyes.

Not backing down, the janitor shook his head, placing his hands on his hips. "I know you. You only react like this when you're scared," he taunted, hoping to push his father into answering his questions because he wasn't as calculating when mad.

Standing up, Gold rose to the challenge, leaning on the worktable. "I'm not scared of my own daughter," he seethed. His breaths were heavy as he held his son's eyes. In an instant, something in him shifted; he couldn't be upset with his boy. He dropped back down onto his stool.

"Then, why haven't you told her?" Neal said in a rush, wanting to understand. Shaking his head and
dropping his hands to his sides, he continued in a level voice, "You created this curse to find me, and you expect me to believe that family is suddenly not important to you?"

Releasing a heavy sigh, the pawnbroker covered his eyes with a hand for a long moment before dragging the hand down his face. "It's not that simple, Bae," he intoned with great sadness.

"Like hell it isn't," the janitor snapped, turning in a tight circle. There wasn't much room to pace in the shop. "You can't have a relationship with one child and not the other," he elaborated on his wounded feelings. "It's not fair to me or her." They had had so little family at home. After his mother had left, followed shortly by his two great aunts' deaths, it was just the two of them in that tiny, poor village.

Somewhat offended and highly confused by his boy's admission, Gold looked at his son with wonderment and trepidation. "You only found out yesterday, and you want bring her into the fold?" he scoffed not moved in the slightest by the emotional appeal. "She's a wild animal, Bae. You'd do well to keep your distance," he ordered darkly.

Snorting, Neal adopted a disappointed expression. "Yeah, well, that's not likely to happen since she adopted my son, is it?" he prompted, sounding disgusted. As the silence dragged on, he shook his head and walked to the window. He crossed his arms, watching his father's reflection. "Did you plan that, too? Was that part of your sick scheme?" he questioned in a subdued voice.

"I knew Henry was the savior's child, but I didn't know you were the father. I couldn't have known. There's no possible way I could've known Neal Cassidy was you," the pawnbroker pleaded at his son's back. He reached toward the other end of the worktable, grabbing his cane.

Dropping his head, the janitor slid his hands into his hair, taking several deep breaths. He sighed before turning to quietly say, "That doesn't make it better." His brow furrowed as he was still unsatisfied with the answers. "Why, then? Why bind Emma and Regina?" he firmly demanded with a determined gaze.

"You know why. You heard it yourself," Gold countered, standing and taking a step toward the window. "She absorbed a death curse," he whispered, looking out. "It shouldn't be possible," he added, feeling the intensity of his son's eyes.

Frowning, the janitor simply refuted, "Anything is possible with magic. So, try again." The gods knew he'd seen enough strangeness to last him multiple lifetimes.

"She shouldn't have been able to do it," the pawnbroker reluctantly shared. It was too much like admitting a flaw or weakness, leaving him feeling exposed.

"So, it's about power," Neal sneered, rolling his eyes. He blew out a frustrated breath and pursed his lips, mumbling, "We're back to this, again." Glaring at his father, he walked across the room as he jeered, "The Dark One can't be outdone."

Shaking his head, Gold turned, leaning heavily on his cane as he clarified, "You don't understand, Bae. She's unnatural." He gestured toward the cot with his free hand. "You heard Cora," he hastily reminded him. "Regina's magic had been inhibited since before birth, and it still leaked through!" Such cases were virtually unheard of, even in the ancient days amidst the followers of the old religion.

With furrowed brows, the janitor pondered, "So, the binding on her magic broke—"

"Thanks to the moronic Blue Fairy, yes," the pawnbroker interrupted. He tapped his cane forcibly
on the wood floor. That had been a mistake on the blue gnat's part, as she obviously didn't know Cora had bound her daughter.

"This is totally not making any sense," Neal huffed in agitation. Was his father being purposefully obtuse and difficult? "What does the Blue Fairy have to do with Regina's magic?" he asked, tossing his hands up in the air.

Despite the situation and topic, Gold smirked at his boy's animated nature. It propelled him to easily provide an explanation, "Emma's loving parents decided to magically castrate Regina in an attempt to break the bond." Pausing, he tittered darkly before continuing, "As if anything could break a spell which utilized a phoenix feather." He scowled at the Blue Fairy's sheer incompetence. How such an inept creature had lived so long was beyond him. "It's amazing they didn't lobotomize her in the process." But it should have, and that amount of fairy dust should have left the brunette writhing in withdrawal pains for hours, as addictive as it was.

"A phoenix feather?"

It was easy to forget how much of a magical novice his son was sometimes, but the pawnbroker effortlessly offered, "A phoenix is the embodiment of renewal. As such, whenever someone messes with the bond, it will only become stronger." He shrugged with casual nonchalance and displayed a wicked smile. "I had to ensure it would stick."

Shaking his head, Neal knew his father obviously missed the point of his question. So, he took a deep breath and repeated, "Again, why would you do that to someone?"

Gold bristled as he tapped his thumb against his cane's handle. Rolling his lips, he grudgingly admitted, "Because I have no idea what the limits are to Regina's true magical potential."

"And that scares you," the janitor needlessly clarified. He had been right.

"Yes," the pawnbroker hissed, "and if that doesn't scare you, it should." His daughter had cast one of the most powerful curses of their land with her magic tempered. Shaking his head, he dropped his eyes to the floor as he whispered, "Bae, her power could surpass mine."

"Is that why Storybrooke's magic went haywire when we crossed into town?" Neal questioned in a gentle tone, trying to make sense of yesterday's events. He needed to know as much as possible about his sister. He needed to decide if he should grab Henry and run as far away from Storybrooke as possible.

Looking up, Gold's eyes aimlessly shifted about the room, deep in thought. "That was her?" he pondered aloud, carefully moving back to his stool. Quietly, he rambled, "I hadn't anticipated her power would grow so quickly." That was a rather distressing disclosure, and one for which he was not adequately prepared. He sat back down, keeping a firm grip on his cane. "I joined them because I had hoped Emma Swan would learn to control Regina," he plainly stated. In the scheme of things, it was a kinder fate than others he'd considered. He rested his chin on top of the cane's handle.

"Control?" came the incredulous response.

"The binding spell is from an old world where magic was exalted and feared. It's meant to establish dominance over a natural caster, keeping them compliant and docile," he enlightened. Closing his eyes, he allowed himself to consider how his plans would have differed had he known Regina was his child.
"A slave," Neal clarified, not quite believing what he was hearing.

"In a way, yes," the pawnbroker answered, focusing once again on his boy.

"That's cruel, even for you, Papa," the janitor sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. He realized his father was different but still very much the same man he'd known as a boy.

Not one to accept full responsibility, Gold frowned at being blamed. "Regina isn't innocent in the scheme of things. Some would say she had this coming," he said as a means of defending his choices. His daughter had bloomed into a beautiful monster, just like her parents.

Laughing breathlessly, Neal realized he'd made the right choice all those years ago, and by his father abandoning him, he'd actually saved him. "No one should be a slave," he countered in a low, deep voice. Over the years, he had heard too many stories and witnessed too many tragedies. He didn't want that for his family.

"Why do you think I kept the dagger hidden?" the pawnbroker whispered in awe at his son's staunch conviction.

Shaking his head, the janitor swallowed the growing lump in his throat. "And yet, you made your daughter a slave. That should never have happened, not by her own father's hands," he condemned his father, vowing to be a better man. Turning, he marched out of the room and headed toward the front door, and in that moment, he decided to get to know his sister and make his own choice, despite what everyone else thought, even his own son. His hand gripped the doorknob and he paused, feeling the Dark One's eyes on him. "You're not getting your dagger back, either," he vowed before yanking the door open and leaving.

~SQ~

Casually skimming the *Daily Mirror*, Regina primly sat with her legs crossed at the wrought iron bistro set on the back patio, enjoying the afternoon sun in relative peace. Every once in a while, she'd look up over the top of the paper when Emma cursed, and she would smirk with clear amusement because the sheriff was getting up off the ground, again. *Typical Anne*, she thought, refocusing on the article she was reading.

Emma Swan had underestimated the diminutive Anne McCormac. The second in command of the queen's guard was a force to be reckoned with. She'd entered King Leopold's service disguised as a man at fifteen and had luckily befriended Monty Elmwood, who had been surprised to learn McCormac's secret. Then, as Queen Regina assumed the throne, the feisty, auburn haired castle guard was rewarded for her loyal service, and because of her unique skill set, she was made the scout grandmaster. Despite her small stature, Anne was a remarkable fighter, quick and agile, and a proficient killer; and now, she was assessing the sheriff's potential to be the queen's personal bodyguard.

"Goddamn it!" the blonde cursed as she stood up, not bothering to brush the grass off her very blemished blue jeans. She rolled her shoulders to loosen her sore muscles and resettle her green shirt, discolored from all of her close contact with the lawn. Regina wasn't going to be happy about the stains.

"Stop screwing around, Swan, and hit me," Anne tersely scolded, crossing her arms. She watched the recruit with a keen eye, analyzing and assessing her strengths and weaknesses. "Have you ever been in a fight?" she mocked, tilting her head.

Confused by the question, Emma rubbed the back of her neck with her right hand. "Yeah, nothing
big, though," she answered with a shrug. "It was just the usual posturing with a few quick punches and kicks."

"Show me," the scout ordered, taking a threatening stance.

"But," the blonde started and stopped. She glanced over her shoulder at the former mayor who was reading the newspaper. "David said—"

"Show me," Anne demanded with more bite. She took an abrupt step forward and moved to engage her student. However, she missed by a mere centimeter, which made her smile. "Good," she praised softly. "Now, hit me," she sharply instructed. The incoming onslaught was okay for a hodgepodge of fighting techniques, typical street fighting. The hits were light, easy to block, but more importantly, they had precision.Chuckling, she taunted lightly, "We're not playing patty cake, Swan." That must've done it because the next thing she knew, she was flat on her back on the ground. A warm chortle rumbled out of her throat. "That's better." Now, she had something to work with and mold.

"What's Kathryn doing here?" Emma pondered, watching the blonde councilwoman walk toward Regina from the driveway. Suddenly, her feet were kicked out from under her, and she face-planted into the grass, groaning. She was going to hurt that night.

"Never take your eyes off your opponent," the scout stated sagely with a cocky half smirk. "Now, we start your training."

Rolling onto her side, the sheriff looked up at the pint-sized terror, and squeaked, "What have we been doing for the last thirty minutes?" She was not comforted by the resulting, husky laugh.

Across the yard, Regina looked up upon hearing Anne's amusement and saw Emma sprawled out, once again, on the ground. She smiled as she shook her head and folded the lifestyle section of the paper. Hearing footsteps, she turned to her right and saw Kathryn Nolan walking across the patio.

"Good afternoon, Regina," the councilwoman greeted with a smile, honest warmth in her voice. The two women sparring across the way caught her attention. She smirked and nodded at the former mayor's gesture to sit. "Thank you," she acknowledged. She continued with a bit of mirth, "Well, the sheriff's certainly being put through the paces."

Humming in response, the brunette readily agreed, "Anne does enjoy a challenge."

Nodding at the newspaper on the table, Kathryn smiled and said, "Good, you read the paper." She paused as she pulled out the local section, and added, "That's actually why I stopped by." Tapping a manicured nail on a particular article, she elaborated, "Journey Home has become quite the social movement."

"Snow never did know when to leave well enough alone," Regina sighed, rolling her eyes. She frowned slightly and was only mildly curious as to the reason for the blonde's visit. It wasn't as if she didn't get at least one call a week from the woman or a few e-mails from the mayor. "Why is this a concern of yours?" she inquired quietly.

"It's a town concern, Regina," the councilwoman corrected with just a hint of frustration. She kept her focus on the former mayor whose attention was split between her and the thrashing happening across the lawn. "Faction lines haven't blurred enough, yet," she continued, pursing her lips. "Any progress made since the election will be brushed away by this Journey Home nonsense." With a wave of her right hand, she rolled her eyes, indicating her exasperation with the situation.
"It seems as though the damage has already been done," the brunette sighed, suddenly tired. She pulled her gaze away from Emma and Anne, silently dreading the impending request that was no doubt coming. Tilting her head in mock interest, she softly added, "I don't know what you expect me to do about it." Honestly, she was a consultant for the Sheriff's Department. The woman sitting across from her had more political clout than she. Of course, she had been out of touch, given events of the last few months.

Shaking her head, the blonde flashed a kind smile. "You have more sway than you think, Regina," she explained with clear respect. Shifting in her seat, she rolled her lips and briefly glanced away. She didn't like putting everything on the table, but she remembered her father's dealings with Queen Regina of the Dark Forest and his admiration for the young monarch. How the usurper had held a majority of King Leopold's kingdom after being captured in battle, almost executed, and eventually exiled from Snow White's mish-mash realm, she had no idea, but this woman's lands had stayed strong. Any royal had to respect that degree of loyalty and power. Clearing her throat, she clarified, "With Emma endorsing Herman, the animal folk working in the Sheriff's Department, and the Crows Guard's neutralizing presence, the sheriff standing by your side carries serious weight." And, then, with a hint of awe, she added, "You crafted the sheriff into a true nonaligned, a figure anyone and everyone can support."

Raising an eyebrow, Regina regarded the other woman with veiled curiosity before huffing, "Emma Swan makes her own choices." She looked away, feigning disinterest. Sometimes she wondered what people thought of the supposed alliance between the evil queen and savior, not that it mattered.

"Of that, I have no illusions," Kathryn chuckled softly with a dismissive wave of her hand, enjoying their dance. She pushed on, adding, "But you guided her." Pausing, she shook and dropped her head before refocusing on the former mayor. "She couldn't have navigated the royal political minefield so deftly without help." She lowered her voice as she continued, "People know, Regina. A majority of the citizens like it here in Storybrooke." Stopping, she waited until the other woman met her eyes before she went on. "I do. I have Jim, and here, we can just live. No kingdoms. No weight of responsibility or duty on our shoulders. We're living. We're free to pursue our dreams. Hell, I may become the next ADA." She laughed, relishing in her true contentment.

The brunette hadn't expected this degree of open honesty. Her brow furrowed slightly in quiet contemplation. Had the citizens actually reached some sort of accord with the Dark Curse? Could she salvage some type of life out of this whilst bound to Emma Swan? Schooling her features, she looked away again, gazing across the yard with unseeing eyes. Flatly, she demanded, "What would you ask of me?" Because that was what it always came down to, someone wanting something.

Surprised by the question, the councilwoman felt as if a huge weight had been lifted off of her shoulders. "Continue this path, convince the sheriff to find and arrest Albert Spencer," she quickly answered, feeling hopeful. "I think you'd agree if we could make an example out of King George for breaking the laws of this land, the other royals will start toeing the line."

"Indeed, however, the city will need to approve the sheriff's proposal for a new jail," the former mayor countered, turning to face her guest. She cocked an eyebrow and waited expectantly, anticipating an instant refusal.

Things had to change for Storybrooke to grow and survive, and adjustments had to be made to accommodate the diverse, displaced peoples living within the borders of the cursed community. As time had passed, Regina Mills had repeatedly found herself as a consultant to Mayor Herman and had, on numerous occasions, enlightened him on a myriad of topics, the latest being that the local judicial system couldn't use exile as a punishment since nearly every citizen would lose their
memories upon crossing the border. This had been one of the mayor's lengthiest calls, to date. Thankfully, he had understood and embraced reason, but there were a few holdouts on the city council feeling pressure from their royal constituents.

All of this was quite strange for the evil queen. Although her kingdom had been contested by Snow White's claim to the throne, she had maintained profitable and cordial diplomatic relations with quite a few realms within the Enchanted Forest and regions beyond, even after her subsequent exile. Regina had expected to shift economic gears by focusing more on self-sufficiency and offshore lands. However, she had lost no significant trade. If only she had had peace, she would've driven Snow White into financial ruin, dragging down the mindless masses who had blindly followed her.

Nodding, Kathryn had expected the request, and unbeknownst to her reclusive friend, she had forged a close alliance with Mitchell Herman. Her father would've been proud of her political prowess. "Catch Spencer, and the rest will fall into place. I'll make sure of that," she said in response. Of course, she'd read the sheriff's proposal and had easily spotted the brunette's deft hand. She smiled brightly and reached out to clasp the other woman's hand, fondness lighting her eyes. "I'm glad we had this chat, and next time, we'll do it over lunch," she offered, squeezing the hand captured in hers before letting go and standing. Looking across the yard, she released a breathy laugh, and said, "I'll leave you to your spectacle."

Regina frowned as she refocused on Anne and Emma across the yard. The new penitentiary facility would be a huge win for the Sheriff's Department. And by stuffing King George in a cell, there would be an even bigger win in stabilizing the shifting dynamic of the populace. Her eyes drifted closed as she took in a deep breath, her expression relaxing. For the first time in months, she truly believed everything was going to work out.

"Your Highness," Monty greeted his queen softly, hesitant to disturb her moment of solitude. He had passed Princess Abigail halfway down the driveway. The royal was pleasant and neutral enough to suspend his suspicions and earn a respectable salutation, but he was curious as to the reason for her visit, fully aware the two spoke over the phone frequently.

After a slow exhale, the brunette turned her head toward her commander, and quietly ordered, "We need to find Albert Spencer and arrange for a very public arrest." She paused and shrugged before adding, "We at least need to make a show of the Sheriff's Department taking him in." Her gaze dropped as she looked past him, watching a stray cat travel along the hedges.

Elmwood flashed a rare, broad smile as he stood at parade rest. "I believe that can be arranged," he supplied. Noting her open curiosity, he explained, "Someone has detained him in a secluded section of the mines." Frowning, he continued, "He hasn't been too forthcoming with information."

"Really?" the former mayor drawled, resting her chin on the palm of her right hand. She didn't recognize the cat. "The wayward king refuses to reveal his captor," she mused softly. Since the election debacle, the man hadn't lacked for enemies, or disgruntled friends for that matter, and she knew he would be easy to manipulate. A man's pride was typically his undoing. She pondered for a moment, watching the new feline groom, and quietly hatched a plan to ensure the Sheriff's Department would receive their laurels for the arrest, relaying them to Elmwood.

"As you command," he responded with a respectable bow as Emma and Anne approached. Looking up at the two women, he scowled and prompted, "Finished already?" He checked his watch. There was still plenty of daylight left.

Rolling her eyes, McCormac acknowledged her liege with an elegant bow. "Your Highness, it'll take some work, but I think I can salvage our newest recruit." She flashed a crooked smile, eyes
crinkling with mirth. Her clothes were also free of any dirt or stains.

Regina smirked, sharing in her guard's open amusement, her gaze darting to and searching the blonde. She pursed her lips at the large, green and brown blotches smeared across the woman's clothes.

"Hey!" Emma protested as she dropped into the other bistro chair. "I did okay, today." She slouched, crossing her arms. Pouting slightly, she rolled her lips before smiling back at the brunette. "Seriously, we should deputize the Crows Guard," she smirked.

Releasing a loud harrumph, Monty crossed his muscular arms in defiance. "We serve at the queen's pleasure and at her discretion," he gruffly informed the sheriff, fixing her with a hard stare. He was starting to like Emma Swan, but he wasn't about to make it easy for her.

With eyes wide, the blonde held up her hands and shook her head. "I was joking, geez." In that moment, she knew the stern commander was teasing her, and in agreeing to join the guard, she knew she had made the right choice, for herself and Regina. Her gaze drifted to the former mayor, and she relished in her newfound anchor, again. A mischievous grin crept across her face, and she stage-whispered, "Tell them to let me deputize them, Regina."

And the brunette laughed heartily as Monty snorted and Anne rolled her eyes, walking away. Regina smiled fondly at the sheriff and shook her head. Softly, she gently chided with an open smile, "You're ridiculous." Her eyes held warm affection for the other woman.

Emma beamed, seeing that warm twinkle in brown eyes, her grin now baring teeth. She was drawn into the playfulness of their magic, bouncing and hopping between them like an excited kitten. Then, biting her lip, she glanced away as a blush threatened to spill across her cheeks. "Hey, look," she instructed, pointing at the cat sitting beside the hedge, still feeling the former mayor's eyes on her. "I don't recognize that cat. Is she new?"

Humming in response, Regina's attention drifted back to the tortoiseshell surveying her yard. "Neither do I," she responded softly, reminding herself to get the live trap out of the garage's attic. She felt herself relaxing, again. "We'll have to trap her and take her by the veterinarian."

"I have another matter to discuss with you, Your Highness," Elmwood interrupted, frowning slightly. When his queen's eyes met his, he continued, "Both Bruce Farmer and Alexander Sirtis have been sentenced militiae mutatio for two months."

"I see," the brunette commented, her lips forming a hard line. Of course, she understood, but she didn't have to like it.

Monty kept his sigh in check, knowing his liege favored the younger Sirtis brother. "I've adjusted the duty roster to cover their temporary absence," he elaborated unnecessarily. Feeling his phone vibrate, he slipped the device from his belt and, receiving a permissive nod from Regina, checked his message. With a scowl, he bowed his head and excused himself.

Once the commander was around the corner of the house, Emma asked with a worried inquisitiveness, "Bruce and Alex got in trouble? It wasn't their fault the kid ran off." She studied the former mayor's profile.

"No, but they did allow him to slip away," Regina explained in a patient tone. Her gaze drifted up to the bright blue sky, not a cloud in sight. "It was their job to protect Henry, to watch him," she started, turning back to her friend. "Regardless of the circumstances, they had a job to do and failed. Now, they face the consequences of that failure."
With a furrowed brow, the sheriff quickly countered, "But Alex is just a kid. He hasn't even graduated from high school." How the young drummer went to school, did his homework, watched Henry, and did whatever other Crows Guard duties he had was beyond her.

"You're confusing norms, again, Emma," the former mayor gently reproved. "In this world, he's perceived as a young adult, finding his way in the world, but in the other, he's a man with responsibilities." Her gaze searched the other woman's for a long second. "Alexander carries a lot of weight on his shoulders, being assigned to a prince only adds to the pressure." Monty had hesitated naming the drummer as Henry's primary guard, but the pair had gotten on so well that she had thought it would make things easier on her son.

Slouching in her seat, the blonde mumbled, "Henry's not going to be happy." She saw the sad, despondent look ghost across Regina's features and sighed. After a thick swallow, she tenderly inquired, "Has he tried to talk to you?"

The brunette scoffed, clearly irritated. "About what?" she sneered in annoyance, glaring out across the lawn. "We haven't had a proper conversation since he was ten." She didn't mean for all the bitterness to creep into her voice, but she was so angry with herself. She was tired of the monosyllabic answers, the cool look in his eyes, and his physical distance. He'd always been such a loving boy, so tactile in his affections. The trip to New York had brought a brief reprieve from those particular heartaches, at least until Neal had entered the picture, but now, back at home, she felt his emotional absence even more acutely.

"He's upset you didn't tell him who you really were," Emma blurted hurriedly, deciding to bite the bullet. She rolled her lips, and added, "That you didn't tell him about the curse."

"Too little, too late I suppose," Regina remarked offhandedly, waving her left hand dismissively. She caught the blonde's pained look and sighed heavily. Resting her clasped hands on her lap, she stared blankly forward, perfectly impassive. She opened her mouth to say something else, but words didn't want to come out. Her plan for them before the savior had arrived in Storybrooke still felt like defeat.

But, the sheriff waited.

"He was such a happy boy," the former mayor rasped wistfully, eyes still facing forward, subtly wringing her hands nervously. "I knew he would outgrow the town, one day. So, I experimented with the mechanics of the curse and made plans." Her watery eyes cut to the woman next to her as she admitted, "I even bought a house in Bangor."

"Wait, what?"

Taking a deep, slow breath, the brunette looked up at the blue sky and swallowed the heavy lump in her throat. "Gold told Henry that he was adopted, which brought a storm of questions I was not prepared for nor willing to answer," she replied, shaking her head. "I tried, but he never seemed satisfied." Pausing, she huffed and watched one of her regular stray cats mosey toward the new one still sitting at the hedge.

"So, he stopped hanging out with his friends after the school book fair," the blonde inferred with dark mirth. "And instead of moving to Bangor, you stayed here so Henry could see Archie." She shook her head as a pang of guilt settled in her chest. "Then, I showed up," she mumbled, releasing a heavy sigh.

Not wanting to wallow in the past, Regina shrugged and flatly intoned, "What's done is done, Emma." She watched the two cats chase each other in and out of the hedge, running down the
length of the lawn with tails up in the air. Their play brought a small smile to her face.

Shifting in her seat, Emma bit her lip and wondered aloud, "Aren't you going to try?"

"Try?" the former mayor prompted, frowning after the cats had disappeared into the woods behind her house. She looked at the other woman with a puzzled expression. "Any attempt to earn his affections will not be well received," she retorted with minimal ire. What the hell did Emma think she had been doing all this time? "You don't think I want to fight for him?" she scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest and glaring at the sheriff. Her anger flared as her desire to fight roiled within her. "After his little adventure, last week, I think his opinion of me is quite clear."

"Regina, he's just confused," the blonde whined. She reached out toward her friend, feeling the magic automatically slinking from her, but the other woman abruptly stood, taking several steps away. "He loves you."

The brunette winced and shook her head. Everything had been fine, and it had been a good day. Pursing her lips, she flexed her hands a few times, unsure what to do with herself. She sensed the sheriff's magic in the background, keeping a cautious distance, and she was thankful for it.

"I'm sorry," Emma said, disguising her hurt feelings. "I was just trying to help."

"I realize that," Regina sighed, glaring at the grass. Her eyes cut to the blonde, but her body didn't move, remaining rigid. "Whether or not he absolves me of my sins in his mind is inconsequential because I love him, and I will endure his caustic judgements." She looked forward, once more. Sorrow hoarsely laced her voice as she said, "Since our binding, at least I get to see him every day, again." And being the fighter that she was, she turned to face her companion straight on while stating with absolute certainty, "I will not abandon him because my feelings are hurt." She lifted her chin, wanting to make her stance clear beyond a doubt. "There are two gifts I continually strive to give Henry, roots and wings." Pausing, she studied Emma's watery expression, and concerned, she tentatively caressed her magic against the blonde's. Softly, gently, she murmured, "We shall see how he utilizes them."

"Okay," the sheriff whispered. Because, really, what was she going to say to that? As she watched the former mayor walk toward the garage, she wiped angrily at her treacherous eyes, and the more she fought back the tears, the tighter her throat constricted until it was almost impossible to breathe. She threw her head back and gulped in air with sobbing breaths. She cried, and hiccupped, and cursed.

Barely making it inside the safety of the garage, Regina was relieved that none of the Crows Guard were tinkering on their bikes. She closed the side door with a loud thud and collapsed back against it. Her chest heaved with ragged breaths as tears streamed down her face. She hadn't meant to be so brutally honest and expose her vulnerable heart, but gods, Emma wanted to fix her relationship with Henry so badly. She'd felt it for weeks, now, and it meant the world to her. Even in that moment of unbounded sorrow, she could sense the other woman's—.

Her eyes widened in sudden realization. No, she told herself, shaking her head. It was a misguided sense of longing because Emma wanted be a part of a family. Emma only felt that way because she had found somewhere to belong with her, Henry, and the Crows Guard. She squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. Emma deserved better than her.

So, licking her lips, Regina pushed herself away from the door and wandered further inside the three-car garage. She frowned, thinking of how she could subtly remind the blonde to be more cognizant of pushing her magic, and emotions, to her, but she was drawing a blank. Instead, she pulled down the stairs to the attic and went searching for her live trap.
Ruby Lucas nervously rocked back and forth from toe to heel as she waited for someone to answer the front door of 108 Mifflin Street. She glanced around, as it had been a while since she had last visited, and spotted a few loitering Crows Guard in the driveway. When one met her eyes, she smiled and gave a short wave. She bit her lip as the guard gave her a chin-up nod. Finally, the broad, white door opened wide to reveal Jason Sirtis. "Hey, Jason, how's it going?" she questioned, quickly slipping inside.

"Good afternoon, Miss Lucas," the guitarist greeted with a soft smile. However, he kept his interactions strictly professional and befitting a queen's guard. "Fine, thank you. Her Highness and Lady Emma are waiting for you upstairs in the master bedroom," he supplied, closing the door and locking it.

"Okay," the waitress drawled and acknowledged with a nod before she trotted up the winding staircase. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Jason cross the foyer, and not for the first time, she pined over his handsome, younger brother who was still in high school until spring. When her foot reached the top of the stairs, she called, "Emma? Regina?" She sniffed the air and noted there were far fewer scents on the second story.

"In here, Ruby," Regina casually replied from the chaise in her bedroom, dog-earing a corner of her catalogue before turning the page. She paid no mind when the wolf slinked into the room. Hesitantly crossing the threshold, Ruby quickly scanned the inner sanctum of the evil queen and was rather disappointed. She pursed her lips at the clean, yet muted, color scheme with tastefully classic décor. "Um, I got your text. Cryptic much?" she supplied, stopping to stand next to the sheriff who sat cross-legged on the end of the queen-sized bed.

A broad smile spread across Emma's face as she looked up at her friend. "Yeah, I have some bad news," she answered, picking up a magazine from off the bed. She held it out to her part-time deputy as she explained, "We need to start wearing uniforms."

"What?" the waitress blurted, taking the offered publication and flipping through page after page of bland, utilitarian clothing. She paused and sneered at a particularly ugly ensemble. "Like what Puma wears?" she asked for clarification, wrinkling her nose. "Those are hideous," she declared, resuming her appraisal of the clothing. Stopping, she tossed the catalogue back on the bed, and with her hands on her hips, she whined, "I'm only part-time." She'd quit right there, right that instant, if she didn't like the extra pocket money so much. It was how she kept Granny placated with DirecTV, among other things like ding-dongs.

Chuckling softly, the former mayor appraised the two women by the foot of her bed and flatly stated, "It's a moot point, Dear. The city council decided last night. It was unanimous." She couldn't fault the decision when she actually approved of it. With the Sheriff's Department representing a unified front both visually and politically, things were bound to stabilize in Storybrooke.

"Damnit," Ruby hissed, crossing her arms and jutting her hips to one side. She sighed softly before pouting, "So, I had to come all the way over here for you to tell me this." Scowling, she glared down at her boss.

"No," Emma drawled, picking up on her friend's ire and dropping her grin. She wasn't happy about it, either, but at least the city council had given them the option to select a uniform instead of assigning one, which would have been absolutely horrible. Quickly glancing over at the lounging brunette, she elucidated with only a hint of excitement, "We have to pick one." She tried to be
excited over it, but she really wasn't.

Frowning, the waitress quickly demanded, "What do you mean pick one?" If the blonde thought this was how she wanted to spend her precious off-time, she had another think coming. She had a chore list twenty items deep at the bed and breakfast.

Rolling her eyes, the sheriff stood and headed toward the walk-in closet. She gestured for her friend to follow her. "I thought you'd like to help us decide on the new uniform," she explained, walking inside the luxurious closet. "But we could stick with something just as fugly as Puma's," she quipped with a mischievous smirk, looking over her shoulder at the trailing brunette.

However, as she entered the room of full of pretty things, Ruby's annoyance evaporated as her eyes caressed over all the beautiful clothing on display, and she cooed in utter delight. Idly, she reached out and lightly touched the soft, silky materials of blouses, blazers, skirts, dresses, and trousers.

Then, her eyes fell on the blonde's meager selection of clothing off to one side, not even coming close to filling the generously allotted section. She smiled with a hint of sadness but good-naturally tutted, "You need to up your wardrobe game, Em." Although the light-weight sweaters didn't look that bad, the collection of tanks and skinny jeans clashed against the cashmere, silk, and satin.

"Whatever," Emma grumbled with a pronounced pout, crossing her arms and gesturing to the three uniforms hanging one of the rods. "Anyway, we've narrowed it down to three options: solid black, khaki and green, or khaki and black."

The waitress forced herself to focus on the task at hand. "Those are real winners," she muttered, reaching out and touching the stiff material. Sighing, she scrunched her face while saying, "Well, let's get this over with. So, I'm modeling scratchy poly-wool blend all afternoon?" This wasn't how she had wanted to spend her afternoon. She wanted to be doing something fun or getting something done, even if it was just renting a movie and painting her nails or completing a few things from her never ending to-do list.

"Feed me what?" Ruby countered, unable to keep the sassy smirk off her face. "You were just complaining about the chemistry lab set up in the kitchen," she needlessly reminded her favorite blonde. She pushed the first two uniforms out of the way to look at the third. None of them looked appealing on the hanger, especially next to the rest of the closet.

"Don't tell me you didn't smell the Guinness beef stew and the bread bowls in the oven," remarked Regina from the chaise. She was almost finished with her catalogue and would be forced to actively endure the civil servant fashion parade. Why had she let Emma talk her into helping?

Moving to the doorway, the waitress cocked her head at the former mayor. "Well, yeah," she started but stopped to sniff the air again. "But I didn't want to assume I'd be getting any of it." Boy, did it smell good. She loved warm, fresh bread and soft, tender meat, then, dipping the bread in the leftover juice. She almost shuddered with excitement.

Smirking devilishly, Regina closed her magazine, resting it against her stomach. She tilted her head to one side and silkily praised, "Oh, the wolf's housebroken."

"Har har," Ruby dryly retorted, shaking her head and rolling her eyes. Immediately, she flashed a toothy grin and said, "Granny made sure I had appropriate wolfy manners. I only bite when asked." She was warmed by the other brunette's soft, deep chuckle. Taking a deep breath and basking in the scent of food, she turned around and looked forlornly at the three uniforms. "So, I have to change into these?" she prompted, moving to take one down and examine it more closely.
"Nope, that's what she's here for," supplied Emma, again donning a broad grin, happy Regina was in an accommodating mood. She bit her lower lip while focusing on the uniforms, lightly, playfully stroking her magic against the other woman's.

Clearly confused, the waitress regarded the blonde for a moment before asking, "Regina's going to model them?" Somehow, she didn't believe Regina Mills would ever wear a uniform, but that woman could probably make a potato sack look good.

"I think not," the former mayor quickly and fervently countered. Shifting on the chaise after discarding her heels, she curled her legs under her and smoothed her blouse. "Let's get this over with, I have plans with a book and a tumbler of cider this evening." Sundays were supposed to be her day, an arrangement easily agreed upon early on between herself, Emma, and the Crows Guard.

Laughing at the prickly prodding, the sheriff explained, "No, she's going to help move things along and maybe save us a few hundred bucks."

"Okay," Ruby drawled as she was suddenly surrounded by purple smoke. "Wait, what?" she startled. But as the magic cleared, she smirked, exclaiming, "Oh, cool!" She glanced at the blonde beside her before moving to the full-length mirror at the end of the closet. The khaki and green wasn't bad, but it wasn't great, either. "I don't know," she hesitantly muttered. Turning, she frowned and disdainfully added, "I look like a forest ranger." Then, she focused her full attention on her boss and snickered, "That doesn't do anything for your hair."

Releasing a heavy sigh as she checked herself out in the mirror around her deputy, Emma reluctantly agreed, "Yeah, not so much with this one." She glowered, realizing her part-timer actually looked good in the first uniform.

"Well, step out so I can see," Regina instructed, as she was curious. After all, if she was going to magically dress them, she was going to get some kind of a show. She smirked as the two women exited the closet. Easily, she capitulated in a low tone, "I am going to have to look at you all day. I should have a say in this."

"Oh, my God, it's like trying on things for Granny," the waitress admitted with a little giggle. She strutted out into the bedroom with the sashay and grace of a runway model, completing the walk with a twirl.

However, the sheriff was not amused. She stomped out sulkily. "See? Satisfied?" she queried in a dramatic huff, raising her arms halfway and dropping them. The palms of her hands smacked against her thighs. Upon seeing silent signal to turn, she groaned and slouched, but she did as she was instructed. "Oh, my God, this is going to be just like trying on those suits in Manhattan," she melodramatically complained.

"Hmm. I see what you mean, Ruby," the former mayor commented contemplatively, ignoring the blonde's tantrum and the agitated frolic of her magic. "Fine," she agreed before enveloping the pair in another swirl of magic.

Looking down at herself in a khaki and black uniform, Ruby nodded with satisfaction. "This is kinda sharp, but a tie? Really?" she pondered, cocking an eyebrow at the other two women. Like the unisex uniform wasn't emasculating enough?

"That's supposed to be for dress," Emma remarked with a frown, playing with her own tie. It already felt too tight, although she knew it wasn't. She slowly wandered back toward the mirror. "I don't know," she sighed uncertainly. "Maybe?" She fidgeted, tucking her hair behind her ears.
"That would be acceptable," Regina finally decided, approving of the clean, crisp lines of the black trousers and tie as well as the black pocket flaps and epaulettes on the shirt. Of course, she was partial to black, anyway. "Ready for the last one?" she inquired, saving what she thought was the best for last.

"Hit me!" the waitress agreed with glee, finally getting into the process. Once the purple cloud dissipated, she looked down and grinned at the all black uniform. "I'm a ninja," she quipped, striking a pose she had seen on television. Her hand bumped the brim of a hat, and her focus quickly shifted as she readjusted it on her head. "Oh, a hat!" she cooed. Anything other than a hairnet was a welcome change.

Exiting the closet, the sheriff had a dubious expression. "I don't know about the hat, Regina," she nervously admitted. Of course, she knew she looked good in hats, but any uniform with a hat made her uncomfortable. It reminded her of her days running from the law.

"It's quite fetching," the former mayor simply stated after quick appraisals of both women. Both appeared as serious civil servants and exuded the expected level of authority. And if the women seemed this sharp, Karl Puma and Jackson Hart would certainly toe the line quite nicely.

Quickly agreeing, Ruby put in her two-cents with a simple, "Yeah, I vote for this one." She continued to appraise herself in the mirror, running her hands over her hips and posterior.

"Do keep in mind, Emma, the khaki shirts would be more likely to reflect light at night and give your position away to any criminals," Regina clarified her selection, hoping to waylay the doubt ebbing off of the blonde. She watched her friend closely, silently admiring the way the uniform accentuated her athletic physique.

Defensively, Emma scoffed with a dramatic roll of the eyes, "It's not like we have a huge crime rate, here." She crossed her arms and cocked her hips to one side, glaring down at the still sitting brunette.

"Well, there has been a rash of power-hungry megalomaniacs, lately," the waitress supplied, still fiddling with her uniform.

"Well, I guess that's it, then," the sheriff relented with a sigh, taking off the hat. She looked down at herself. Her eyes crept over to the former mayor and reflexively returned a soft smile as she fingers drummed along the hat's brim.

Content with their choice, Ruby took an akimbo pose and promptly inquired, "So, we're going to eat, now. Right?" She inhaled deeply and sighed with contentment. Stew and bread filled her nostrils, and her mouth watered in anticipation. She could already tell it was going to be better than Granny's.

"And there go those manners," Regina retorted with dark amusement, uncurling. She effortlessly slipped into her heels, stood, and sauntered out of the bedroom, leaving the sheriff and deputy in their new uniforms.

"Hey, aren't you going to change us back?" Emma called, tossing her new hat on the bed. She released a breathy chuckle at the rich, wicked laughter coming from the stairs.

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Neal stood at the end of the driveway, stymied by the zealous Crows Guard blocking the path. Seeing the sheriff step out of the garage, he called, "Emma!" hoping to garner her attention and get
Hearing her name, Emma turned and sighed at the sight that greeted her. Dusting her hands on her jeans to get rid of any remaining crumbs of cat food, she waved at the guard as she approached, grudgingly saying, "It's okay. He can come in." She really didn't feel up to dealing with her ex right then. There were so many things left unsaid and unresolved between them, and she really wasn't in the mood for navigating the emotional minefield of their past.

The janitor trotted up the drive toward the blonde. With one last glance over his shoulder, he chuckled, "Those guys mean business."

"You should meet some of the ladies," Emma replied, snorting at the understatement. She rolled her shoulders, remembering the bruises and soreness she'd earned from her most recent match with Anne. The feisty woman had really stepped things up since she'd started training her.

Eyes widening at the implication, Neal shook his head in quiet refusal. "Um, maybe not." Shifting nervously on his feet, he decided to get to the point of his visit. "So, where's Henry?"

"Grounded till he's fifty," she retorted sourly. She shoved her hands into her coat pockets and looked up at the house, a scowl settling on her features. The reminder of the boy's behavior caused her mood to darken further, and not for the first time, she wondered if he'd managed to get all of their capriciousness combined.

Wanting to diffuse the tension, he joked, "Wow, sounds serious."

Emma fixed her ex with an unfriendly glare, not missing this side of the man. He had always tried to make light of serious situations. Even if it was just a defense mechanism, the blonde found it annoying. Narrowing her eyes, she barked, "It is, extremely so."

Neal hung his head briefly, reaching up to rub at the back of his neck, the gesture giving away his nerves and irritation. "I was hoping to get to see him, maybe work something out," he suggested in an attempt to keep things cordial.

Releasing a heavy sigh, the sheriff reluctantly advised, "We'll need to talk to Regina." She did not want the man in Henry's life, sure that he would carry on, true to form, and run off as soon as he discovered being a parent was a lot harder than it seemed.

He nodded in acknowledgement, having already figured out that he'd need to convince both women that he wanted to do right by his son. He'd also realized, in the short time that he'd seen the two women together, that Emma often deferred to Regina when it came to Henry. "That's cool. I get it," he agreed easily.

Surprised by the quick acceptance, she told him, "He's grounded, Neal. He goes to school. That's it." Hoping the list of restrictions might dissuade him, she added, "So, if you want to visit, it'll have to be here, and no TV, no computer, no video games—"

Neal's eyes widened as he considered the litany of lost privileges. "Geeze, what did he do?"

Emma muttered darkly, "Doesn't stay put." When she heard Neal's chuckle, she snapped, "It's not funny, Neal. He's going to get himself hurt or killed pulling this crap." She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him, as if challenging him to deny the seriousness of the matter.

Knowing it wasn't a good idea to keep antagonizing the blonde, he conceded, "Okay, okay." Quiet for a moment while he thought, he finally asked, "Do you want me to talk to him?"
The sheriff eyed him warily, but decided Henry's fascination with his father could possibly be worked to their advantage in this way. They'd tried nearly everything short of corporal punishment, and that was off the table as far as both mothers were concerned. "I guess at this point it wouldn't hurt, but—"

"Got to talk to Regina, first," he finished for her. He could play nice and follow the rules when he wanted to, and right then, it suited him immensely. His relationship with his own father was in shambles, but he sure as hell could put himself out there to be a father to his son, if the boy's mothers would let him take that role.

Not sure if he was working an angle or being serious, the blonde remained dubious about his apparent easy-going manner. "You could've called to discuss all of this," she suggested, subtly prodding for a motive.

Grimacing, Neal admitted, "Yeah, I needed to take a break." He shoved his hands in his coat pockets and stared pensively in the direction of downtown. It seemed that, while his father had made some positive changes, he was still, at his core, a man frightened by the prospect of losing control of a situation.

Emma let loose a quick bark of laughter. It appeared they were all having parental issues. "Dad getting on your nerves?"

"You could say that," he muttered, shaking his head at the absurdity of their situation. Not wanting to get into the subject of his father, he redirected the conversation. He'd been wondering what she'd been up to the last ten years, and decided it was as good a time as any to ask, "So, have you been okay?"

The sheriff frowned, squaring her shoulders. Immediately, she went on the defensive and demanded harshly, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Holding his hands up in surrender, Neal backpedaled, the confidence and fire in the woman before him foreign to their past interactions. While he didn't know what had happened to her since he'd left her, he did know that the Emma Swan of the present was not someone to tangle with lightly. "Nothing, I was just wondering if, you know, you've been doing alright."

Emma crossed her arms over her chest, leaning back on her heels slightly in an effort to prevent herself from lashing out. Her voice was tight as she bit out, "Yeah, well, you don't get to ask me shit like that. We're nowhere near that."

Letting out a frustrated huff, he implored, "I'm trying here, Emma. I want to make it right." He knew how badly he'd screwed up when he had abandoned her, and his conscience was pushing him to make amends. The janitor had a firm understanding that he needed to work things out with his ex if he wanted to be a part of Henry's life.

"You can't, so don't," she snapped, so over everything. Her fingers pressed hard into her biceps as
her protective nature flared. Without much thought, she accused, "And we'll be left picking up the pieces after you leave, so don't be getting Henry's hopes up."

"That's not fair," Neal immediately countered, hiding his hurt feelings. He'd only known about his son's existence for maybe five days, literally.

Unmoved by the man's lackluster rebuttal, the sheriff hissed, leaning forward, "Don't whine to me about what's fair." Damn, she had thought she'd moved on from all this crap, but the wounds were still deep and raw. She blinked repeatedly, turning away, not wanting him to see her cry.

"Look, I didn't come here to fight," the janitor lamented with clear honesty. He truly didn't want to make Emma's life difficult. "I just want to get to know my son," he added softly, hoping she would believe him.

And hearing the truth in his words, the sheriff pursed her lips and looked down at the concrete. "Whatever," she mumbled, still unwilling to forgive. Eventually, she would, but not today.

He looked at the side door and took a deep breath. Knowing this entire situation wasn't going to get any easier, he decided to bite the bullet. "So, I have it on good authority that you and Regina aren't a couple," he stated as neutrally as possible. Yet, he couldn't quite hide his curiosity when he quietly asked, "Why'd you pretend you were?"

"Who told you we weren't?" Emma instantly questioned, partially facing him and cocking an eyebrow. It was important to know who he'd been talking to about them.

"Papa," Neal replied with a shrug. Who else was he going to talk to? Tilting his head and avidly assessing her stance, he continued, "He also told me about your . . . situation." He paused for a long beat and softly added, "I didn't know you were magical." Because if he'd known back then, he would've kicked her out of his car and driven far, far away.

"Seriously? Are you getting judgy about this? Cause you're not allowed to have opinions about surprises, Mr. Son-of-Rumpelstiltskin," the blonde snarled. Her anger and righteous indignation bloomed to full wrathful glory as all the pain and hurt she normally shoved into the proverbial forgotten-corner-of-things-she-didn't-deal-with was suddenly illuminated.

With a deeply furrowed brow, he silently counted to ten before saying in a level voice, "You didn't answer my question. Why'd you pretend to be a couple?" He covertly glanced over his shoulder to see a few Crows Guard intently watching them, and he had to wonder if she was baiting him.

The sheriff pursed her lips, but surprisingly, she dispassionately answered, "I don't know. Maybe I wanted you to back off a little." Her gaze shifted from mad to hard.

"What do you mean?" the janitor simply prompted.

"Please, like you don't know," the blonde scoffed, rolling her eyes. She turned and faced him, keeping her arms crossed. "You've been giving me these sad eyes since New York," she elaborated with a disapproving look.

"What? No, that's not it," Neal stammered. His mouth worked endlessly, but words failed to come out. Finally, he blurted, "I'm engaged!"

Releasing a short, sharp bark of laughter, Emma shook her head in disbelief. She pinned her former lover with a dark glare and ordered, "Then, act like it and back off." She'd fallen into that trap once, being the other woman, never again.
Unable to keep his own antagonism in check, he bristled at the insinuation. "You know what, I was just trying to be friendly," he explained, his voice full of hurt and irritation. "I was trying to reconnect," he hurriedly added.

"The only reconnection I want with you is my foot up your ass," she refuted in a verbal lightning strike.

With eyes blown wide in utter shock and surprise, the janitor couldn't help but take a step back. He shook his head as his mouth worked for a moment. Eventually, he managed to whisper, "Damn, you've changed."

"Well, life's been a bitch, and I was just starting to get a handle on things when, bam! All this crap lands in my lap," the sheriff more calmly explained, feeling as if her ex was finally taking her seriously. She rolled her shoulders, letting her arms drop to her sides, and in a more conversational tone, she continued with guilt lacing her words, "Now, thanks to your father's games, I've managed to screw up somebody else's life."

Well, damn, Neal knew exactly how that felt. "I'm sorry, Emma. I really am," he consoled, wanting to reach out and offer some sort of comfort, but he thought better of it. So, he sighed heavily and enlightened, "When I left the Enchanted Forest, Papa and I were supposed to go together, but he let go of me and let me slip away." He wanted her to know that she wasn't alone.

"I'm not going to be a shoulder for you to cry on, Neal," the blonde retorted, shaking her head. "You've got a fiancé for that." Yeah, she got what he was trying to do, and deep down, a part of her appreciated it. "I've got enough family drama to deal with. I don't need yours, too," she needlessly clarified. She didn't owe him anything.

Despite himself and their situation, he flashed a boyish smile and with open mirth, said, "I'm sure, daughter of Snow White and Prince Charming." It was rather amusing, considering all their late night fantastical conversations about their parents.

"You're an asshole," Emma responded, seeing that mischievous twinkle. She looked away, unable to stop the breathy chuckle from escaping, a sharp pang of remembered fondness sweeping through her. Damnit, why does he have to be funny? she cursed to herself, unable to hold onto her anger.

However, neither were afforded any further opportunity to examine their emotional breakthrough. A loud bang sounded from inside the white house, and instantly, all the windows opened, releasing a horrible smell. A pale pink cloud slipped out the kitchen windows.

"REGINA?!" the sheriff called out, running full tilt into the house. She was only vaguely aware of Neal and a few Crows Guard following her through the side door. Waving her arms to disperse the sick, sour smell and pink smoke, she quickly slipped down the short hall and into the kitchen, loudly demanding, "What is that smell?"

Neal skidded in, hot on her heels; however, the giant chemistry setup taking up the entire island caused him to pause. Him eyes darted around, tracing the connecting glass tubes and bubbling liquid in beakers under open flames. Impressed and clearly intimidated by the complicated setup, the man blinked as his gaze swept across the kitchen. There were small crates, boxes, vials, and ingredients scattered all over the counters.

Sighing, the former mayor glared down at the ruined potion. "Yes, I'm fine," she distractedly replied, lifting the Florence flask from its stand with a set of tongs. She rolled the contents about and frowned. "That was a miscalculation," she answered with irritation, depositing the glassware on a cooling rack. She had heard Emma arguing with her ex in the driveway, used to the sour
resentment that flowed through the bond when he was around. However, the sudden flash of affection for the man had felt like a slap and caused a hard knot to settle in her stomach, startling her into bumbling the potion.

"Wow, okay, Mr. Wizard, are you still trying to make that memory potion?" she inquired, spotting a paring knife with leafy, green herbs on the cutting board beside the other woman.

"Yes," the brunette answered tersely as she picked up a pen and jotted down a series of notes in a notebook. When she finished, she glanced up to see everyone still lingering in the doorway, and upon seeing Neal, she frowned. "I don't require an audience," she muttered, continuing her work.

"Any luck?" Emma prompted. She slipped around the island to one of the stools. The resulting glare made her smile as she pulled out a seat. "Just asking," she commented as she sat. "I'm guessing it's not going so well."

Accustomed to interruptions and ceaseless questioning, Regina continued to work, internally calculating adjustments. "You would be correct," she absently responded. Pausing, she looked over the rim of her glasses at the loitering Crows Guard in the doorway. When they started to leave, she explicated, "Although I loathe to give that imp any degree of satisfaction, Belle's unique skillset could prove useful." She simply didn't have enough time to dedicate to researching the bond, not with Emma's job and training and whilst taking care of her and Henry.

"Who's Belle?" Neal asked, looking at his ex.

Snickering, the blonde bit her lower lip before answering, "Your dad's girlfriend."

"I thought that was Lacey," the janitor added. His eyes darted between the two women as his face contorted, wondering if he was being played. After all, meeting his dad's lover had been an eye-opening moment.

With amusement lacing her tone, the brunette looked up, met the man's gaze, and easily clarified, "Lacey is Belle's cursed alter ego." She was mildly surprised how unlike Rumpelstiltskin the wayward son seemed, the mother's influence, perhaps?

"It's a long story," the sheriff quickly interjected, dismissing Neal's confusion and impending question with a wave of her hand. She had more important details to work out. With a broad gesture at the contraption on the kitchen island, she demanded, "So, how long will this thing be in here? It's been a couple of days, already."

"As long as necessary, Dear," the former mayor answered, resuming her tinkering.

"Dang it, sandwiches, again," Emma muttered with a pout as she slouched. It wasn't as if sandwiches were a bad thing. Sandwiches had been a staple in her day-to-day nutrition, as had been prepackaged foods, but living with the brunette, she'd gotten used to a more diverse culinary experience. Who knew chicken could be prepared a million different ways?

Sighing, Regina casually offered, "I promise I'll make you more lasagna as soon as this is put away."

Content to watch Regina work, the sheriff rested her chin in her left hand. This was easier. This was better, she decided. "Apparently, she's super smart and has some crazy eidetic memory
superpower," she explained, observing as ingredients were grinded.

"I'm impressed, Emma, that's such a big word for you," the former mayor teased, flashing a playful smirk at the other woman. She carefully brushed the powder from the pestle into an Erlenmeyer flask and reached for the rack of test tubes with various colored liquids.

Biting her lower lip, the blonde rolled her eyes and grinned. She was itching to touch something but knew better. So, she huffed in mock annoyance and chided, "Yeah, yeah. You're not going to blow up the house or anything, right?" With half of the first floor in some state of repair, if they lost the kitchen, Emma would be devastated.

"It was a simple mistake," the brunette restated a tad sharply. Suddenly, her face felt flush, and she stopped in her preparations, pinning the sheriff with a hard glare. "We don't have butane burners in the Enchanted Forest," she explained in justification, bristling at the perceived insinuation of her failure. She felt criticized in front of her former mentor's son, but the playful coiling of Emma's magic with her own soothed and grounded her. Licking her lips, she swallowed and slowed her movements, and softly further elucidated, "I didn't expect the solution to come to heat so quickly. Sleeping curses are not nearly as volatile, it seems."

Pursing his lips, the janitor wasn't sure how to interpret their interactions; they weren't supposed to be a couple, but he pushed all that aside. He did have his own agenda, after all. "So, you're good at this stuff?" he asked, noddling at the chemistry lab on the island.

Blinking in surprise, Regina halted her actions and looked up at Henry's father. Her eyes narrowed ever so slightly as she assessed the reason for his continued presence. Truth be told, she'd expected him to ask to see Henry or at the very least, drag Emma away to further harass her. "Well enough, I suppose, but Rumpelstiltskin could attest to that," she answered flatly.

"Yeah," Neal nodded, smiling softly. His mirth evident as he met his sister's subtle, questioning gaze. "He burned down our house a couple of times, early on," he easily admitted, and he thought he would honestly like to get to know her better.

"Did he, now?" the former mayor prodded with clear delight. A devious smirk spread across her face. "Interesting," she muttered, returning her focus to the task at hand. Maybe another day she would extend social pleasantries to Neal Cassidy, but not today. There was simply too much to do, too much chaos milling about the town. So, with a slightly bored tone, she questioned, "Is there a reason why you two are still in here?"

"No—"

"Yes, actually," the janitor interrupted his ex-girlfriend, stepping closer to his sister. However, the hard glint in her eyes stalled his approach. He slouched and shrugged, ignoring Emma's dramatic groan. "I was hoping we could discuss visitation with Henry while I'm still in town," he explained with a hopeful expression. Yet, when the windows all slammed shut, he startled and wildly glanced around the kitchen.

"He's grounded," Regina firmly stated, taking off her reading glasses. She reassessed the scruffy man before her, and she knew his type. Her eyes cut to the blonde and back.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Neal nodded, knowing better than to underestimate this woman's protectiveness. He flashed a charming, or what he hoped was charming, half smile and causally agreed, "Emma mentioned something like that, but I'd really like to get to know him." Pausing for a breath, he made a wide, open gesture at the house, and offered, "And if I need to do it here, that would be totally fine."
Careful to keep her expression neutral, the former mayor cocked an eyebrow and turned to the scowling sheriff who merely shrugged. The hostility rolling off the other woman via the bond was almost tangible. Obviously, the two former lovers had some sort of love-hate dynamic to which she would undoubtedly be subjected. Thus, she decided to take the diplomatic approach, and quickly acquiesced, "I'm sure we could work something out."

The janitor's grin was instantaneous. "That means a lot, thanks!" he gushed with a mixture of relief and joy. Catching the blonde's glare, however, he decided to get to his other point of business and fished a medium-sized vial from his coat pocket. "I do have another reason for coming by today," he started, putting the vial of Neverland spring water on the corner of the island. "I know Papa will never ask," he added.

In that moment, an out of character reaction from Regina immediately piqued Emma's interest. The brunette had winced and looked away when Neal said Papa. Concerned by the visible discomfort, the sheriff slipped closer to her friend. She narrowed her eyes at Henry's father as she recalled something similar happening in Gold's shop. However, she kept her mouth shut as he continued talking.

"But he hasn't had any luck crafting a cure. I was wondering if you could help," Neal finished, pointing at the vial on the marble countertop. It was a huge favor, one he didn't necessarily have the right to ask, but love did strange things to people. Through it all, he still loved his father.

Her anger flaring, Emma straightened and stomped around the island. "Oh hell, no," she barked. She reached for her ex's coat collar, snarling, "That bastard—."

"Rumpelstiltskin is a master potion maker," Regina interjected, choosing to ignore the blonde's tirade. Although she didn't understand where her friend's fury was coming from, exactly, she appreciated the other woman's magic protectively circling her own. It was soothing, keeping her in the present. "And, you expect me to believe he can't concoct a curative potion. He's already cured."

Picking up the vial of spring water, she narrowed her eyes at her son's father, demanding, "What are you playing at?"

Holding his hands up in surrender, the janitor took a reflexive step backward, knowing he had to play this smart. "Nothing, really," he quickly answered. Sighing, he dropped his hands and laid it all out on the table. "Please, I wouldn't do anything to jeopardize any relationship I could have with Henry," he rasped, letting his anxiety slip through. Rubbing his face, he shook his head and started again, "It's just that he's my father, and that canteen only has so much water in it. And eventually, it will evaporate, run out. Then, he'll die." He wasn't big on playing the emotional card. In fact, he'd only used it on his father during the early days of the Dark One; but Regina was his sister, and that meant something to him.

The former mayor held the man's gaze for a long moment before finally relenting with a heavy sigh, "Very well." She turned her focus onto the glass vial of water. Her instincts told her to cast him out and protect her family, but there was something familiar about him. Was he that good of a thief to finagle his way into their lives only to strike when they least expected it? She frowned.

"Seriously?" Emma cried in hurt surprise. Damn, she wanted to break something. Her heated gleam darted between the two brunettes in the kitchen.

"You think after all that work to save his miserable life I'm just going to let him expire?" Regina snapped, bristling as the blonde's magic squeezed and grated against hers. Her eyes flashed dangerously. "No, I stand by what I said, if anyone gets to kill him, it'll be me," she decreed, straightening already perfect posture.
Neal blinked at Emma's outburst and Regina's wrathful declaration. Rolling his lips, he nervously squeaked, "Thanks?" If his sister was willing to help despite her obvious loathing toward their father, then, maybe she was more bark than bite. He caught the time on the microwave and cleared his throat. "I hate to drop this on you and leave, but I have a phone date to keep," he expounded, breaking into a bright, boyish smile when his eyes met his sister's. "I'm going to invite my fiancé to Storybrooke." Why did he just tell her that?

"Do you believe that's wise, Mr. Cassidy?" the former mayor quickly countered with evident concern in her tone. "This town has proven rather unpredictable, lately," she hurriedly added. Another stranger in town was absolutely the last thing any of them needed.

"We're getting married," the janitor proudly proclaimed. It felt good saying it out loud to someone who might care, eventually, if he played his cards right. He puffed his chest out with pride as he continued, "I don't want to keep secrets from the woman I love, and if that means I have to dredge up my past, then I'll do what I've got to do." And he could've almost sworn he saw approval in his sister's brown eyes, and it felt good.

"You've got to be shitting me," Emma groaned. All her pain and hurt came bubbling to the surface, and she felt betrayed and abandoned all over again. She shook her head, turning away from the others, hoping to hide the threatening tears.

"Emma," Regina rasped with a furrowed brow, intently watching the other woman whose emotions were all over the place.

"We'll talk later, Emma," Neal offered, casting a sad expression at his ex. He sighed when she said nothing. So, moving on, he refocused on his sister and valiantly attempted to reclaim his good mood, saying, "I'll call tomorrow, and we can hash something out." Turning around, he took several steps out of the kitchen, stopped, turned around, and with honest sincerity, he added, "Thanks, Regina." Then, he left the house.

The former mayor tilted her head in quiet contemplation. Neal Cassidy was certainly intriguing. Emma Swan, however, was not impressed with the older, mature model of her former lover. And once the side door slammed shut, she made her opinion known. "Thanks, Regina," she mockingly hissed, crossing her arms and falling back against the kitchen counter.

"Really, Miss Swan," the brunette mildly reprimanded, rolling her eyes as she labeled the vial and stowed it in a small wooden box, swaddled in a velvet cloth. Her magic lashed about like a whip, wanting to obliterate something; however, Regina's was in the metaphysical way. She agitatedly drummed her fingers on top of her arms. "That prick couldn't run away fast enough from me, and here he is, gushing all over his fiancé. And here you are, 'You want to see Henry? Sure! Let's make a friggin' spreadsheet!'" It hurt, damn it. She angrily wiped at her right eye.

"I'm obviously not going to get anything done," the former mayor lamented, deciding to stop for the night. Again, she removed her reading glasses and turned off the burners. She'd need to retrieve more butane cartridges from the garage.

"And you know what's worse, you letting him see Henry," the sheriff loudly shared, her nostrils flaring as she allowed old wounds to color her words. Standing upright, she put her hands on her hips as she continued her tirade, "You tried to run me out of town like we were in an old western,
Wounds and rage and betrayal and the myriad of other feelings that were manifesting as a hurricane around the blonde were not new to the brunette, and she'd weathered far stronger and darker impulses. Collecting herself while securing loose ingredients into their proper storage containers, she kept her tone and words measured. "If you'll recall, you didn't ask, did you?" she prodded, briefly pinning an icy glare on the woman beside her, hands still moving small, cloth bags and bottled tinctures. "You barged into it like a bull in a china cabinet," she reminded, closing a lid with a sharp clack as polished hardwood met polished hardwood. "Maybe, just maybe, if you had demonstrated some civility, an iota of decorum, we could've avoided a majority of that unfortunate unpleasantness," she countered darkly, finishing with her task. Of course, she couldn't know with any absolute certainty it would have been different, but she wasn't the type to dwell on what ifs.

Flustered and perhaps a tiny bit embarrassed, Emma deflated, immediately casting away all her fire. She slouched, sliding her hands in her jeans' pockets. "I would've thought you'd be on my side," she weakly admitted. She thought she'd have an ally in this with Regina.

The sudden shift of mood was disorienting, and for a moment, Regina looked vacantly at the blonde. She blinked and forced herself to focus as she stammered, "I…." Closing her eyes and shaking her head, she slowly walked over to her friend and firmly clasped the blonde's biceps. Gently, she explained, "This isn't about sides, Emma. This is about doing right by our son." She let a small smile curl her lips as she affectionately squeezed the strong arms. "If he wants to spend time with his father, so be it. I shall not repeat my past mistakes with Henry." Holding the sheriff's gaze, she released her and turned when she saw green eyes relax in understanding.

"This is going to end badly," Emma reiterated, watching as the brunette locked the small boxes and crates, moving them to one section on the kitchen counter. "Either Neal or his fiancé will break Henry's heart, and we'll be left to deal with the fallout," she grumbled, toeing the hardwood floor with her boot.

"Is this honestly just about Henry?" the former mayor hesitantly questioned as she proceeded to clean the kitchen counters. Food always made the blonde feel better.

"You, too?" the sheriff whined in frustration, glaring at the floor. She scowled and huffed as she crossed her arms, again. "Jesus, I'm not in love with him," she growled, grinding her teeth and falling back against the counter. "Between Neal's sad, puppy-dog eyes, Mary Margaret practically planning our nuptials, and now you—"

"What?" Regina prompted, halting her motions of wiping down the counter. An amused expression crept across her face as she threw away the used paper towels and stowed the cleaner. "The longing looks I've witnessed, but your mother…." she trailed off, chuckling softly as she moved around to the refrigerator, pulling out a series of small Tupperware containers and baggies.

"It's not funny!" snapped Emma with a pronounced pout. She gripped the edge of the counter, pressing heavily on her palms. Her eyes avidly watched the other woman move about the kitchen, collecting a plate from a cupboard and a knife from the silverware drawer.

"It's typical Snow White," the brunette said with clear mirth, as if it explained everything. She quickly retrieved two slices of bread from the breadbox and deftly began construction of a roast beef and swiss sandwich.

"Whatever," the blonde muttered, edging closer to the snack.

Shaking her head, the former mayor sighed, "Don't pout, Emma." She continued making the
sandwich, careful to tailor it specifically to the sheriff's preferences of extra mayonnaise and pickles with the lunchmeat laid in an alternating pattern for maximum, even coverage. "Of course, I hold no illusions that you harbor romantic feelings for Neal, but that wasn't what I was attempting to ask," she elaborated, skillfully slicing the now complete sandwich in half. Truthfully, she didn't want to know.

"Oh," was the response as the plate of yumminess was placed in front of the sheriff.

"Hmm," Regina responded, washing her hands. As she dried them, she continued, "I realize he's hurt you, and I recognize this will be difficult for you." She returned the tea towel to its hook and casually collected the sandwich makings, returning them to the fridge. "Believe me," she added, giving the blonde an empathetic look, "I share your frustrations. But Emma…," she paused with her hand holding the refrigerator door open. Her eyes searched for something hidden. "If you allowed yourself to trust me, maybe you could afford Neal a chance, not for yourself but for Henry," she finished, pulling out a can of Dr. Pepper from behind a cup of celery stalks. She closed the fridge door before putting the soda next to the blonde's plate.

"Fine," Emma replied around a mouthful of roast beef. She took another large bite as the brunette left. "I hate it when you're right," she whispered into her sandwich as she popped the can open.

~SQ~

David Nolan slowly walked down the hall toward his previous place of employment. Uncurling the rolled-up newspaper in his hands, he, once again, studied the front-page photograph of his daughter, the sheriff, overseeing Deputies Puma and Hart leading Albert Spencer into the Sheriff's Department. His lips pursed into a firm line as he noted the unusually large number of citizens who happened to be present for the event. Folding the paper, he reached out and pulled open one of the double doors leading to the bullpen. He immediately spotted a Crows Guard sitting in the visitor area in the hall. Their eyes met for a second, but the guard simply went back to whatever he was doing on his cellphone.

Rounding the corner, he quickly scanned the large, open room. His gaze locked on the reading Albert Spencer who reclined on a cot in the second jail cell. Then, he saw Jackson Hart working at his desk. Regina was typing on her laptop at Ruby's desk. Their gazes met for a few seconds, with no pause in her keying, but he couldn't quite discern the meaning behind her expression. And finally, his eyes fell on his daughter, sitting behind her desk in her office.

Taking a deep breath, he pushed onward and knocked softly on the glass, and when her eyes met his, he smiled. "Can we talk?" he asked with just a tiny hint of hesitation.

"Um, sure," Emma answered, sitting up and shifting in her chair. Her eyes quickly assessed him as she gestured for him to sit in one of the visitors' chairs. Then, she quickly minimized her computer application and shuffled the documents strewn across her desk into a single pile. "What's up?" she prompted, spying the folded newspaper in his hands.

"I wanted to talk to you about this," David replied, opening the newspaper. He flashed the article but didn't move to give it to her. Leaning his elbows on his knees, he blankly stared at the photo. "Score one for the Sheriff's Department," she quipped. The rumor mills were abuzz with the timely apprehension of the deceitful royal. Most of it was in their favor with only a few dissenters.

"The article says you're going to petition for a holding facility," the animal shelter staffer commented, not reacting to his daughter's attempt at humor. He fidgeted with the paper for a long
moment, and finally, he looked up and asked, "How did you find him?"

"An anonymous tip," she replied, frowning. She sighed and leaned forward, resting her elbows on the desk. "I can't officially talk to you about sheriff's business," she gently reminded him. So, she bit her lip and waited for the other shoe to drop. Of course, her father showing up there a few days after the article confirmed her suspicions.

Nodding, David simply said, "You know I've been looking for him for a while." He maintained eye contact.

"Yeah," Emma responded. She tilted her head, wondering where he was planning on taking this. "He's been rather closed-lipped about where's he's been hiding." She shrugged, hoping he'd take the hint and drop it.

"Is there going to be a trial?" he quickly questioned, his voice tight and quiet.

"Well, that's up to the ADA and Spencer's lawyer," the sheriff casually supplied. Her brow furrowed when she added, "In the interest of Storybrooke, there's a good chance this could be settled outside of court."

"So, he'll get away with it?" he snapped, standing up. He tossed the newspaper onto the chair. With his hands on his hips, he glared at Spencer in his cell.

"Whoa, Nelly. That isn't what I said," she explained, pushing away from her desk. The last thing she needed was for her father to attempt to assault a prisoner in her station. "He broke state law, David. If Dejean doesn't handle this carefully, some nosey-body from Augusta could be rolling into town, and we don't want that." Damn, she had enough problems with Greg Mendell twiddling his thumbs in his room at Granny's, and despite having a hefty citation hand delivered, the annoying prick had simply gone to the make-shift town hall at the community center to pay his fine.

Hanging his head, David crossed his arms before turning around. "I know that," he grumbled. Glaring down the hall, he shook his head. "Things aren't going as I had hoped," he admitted.

"They seldom do for anybody," Emma agreed, drumming her fingers on her chair's arms. She glanced through the partial glass wall to look at Regina who was still typing away on her laptop. Any bone she might've tossed her father was quickly forgotten as frustration bubbled to the surface, but she held herself in check.

"I can't stand looking at him," he admitted, slipping his hands inside his jean pockets. His shoulders naturally straightened and fell back. Once again, he was the confident young king. "I'm not proud of everything I've done, but—."

Tossing both hands up, the sheriff made an abrupt halting gesture. "Whatever is about to come out of your mouth, I don't want to hear it," she quickly interrupted. When it looked like her father was about to continue speaking, she sharply ordered, "No, David." She took a slow, deep breath and calmly explained, "Spencer has been very tight-lipped about who wrongfully imprisoned him in the mines. So, as the Sheriff, if I learn who left him handcuffed with nothing but a bucket and a blanket, I'm going to toss their ass in jail." Her anger flared as she stood and pointed at the two, currently occupied jail cells. "And as you can see, we don't have any vacancies, right now."

David took a step forward, leaving only the old, wooden desk between him and his daughter. "Emma," he rasped. Of course, he had known better. The mere idea of looking at that man every day in the jail would've killed him. "I had—," he tried again.
"Nope," Emma interjected, shaking her head. Seeing his dejected expression, she pursed her lips as her anger flared. "This isn't the Enchanted Forest. We don't take justice into our own hands in this world, David," she intoned. If the Crows Guard could resist doling out vigilante justice, why couldn't her own parents? A quick glance at Regina brought her frustrations with her father to the surface, yet again. "And yet, some people still go unpunished," she reminded him tersely.

His shoulders slumped again. This wasn't what he'd anticipated. "Yes, of course, you're right," he quietly relented.

Teeth worrying her bottom lip, she looked through the glass and across the bullpen to the man reading a book and effectively ignoring them. Snippets of an earlier conversation with Regina flittered in her mind, and if her assumption as to why her father was here was true, then, the brunette's guess had been right: Albert Spencer would rather submit to the animal folk than David Nolan. It was a win-win, and one, Regina suspected, that would be craftily wielded during negotiations between the lawyers, as the intern ADA was animal folk himself.

Taking a deep breath, David took several steps toward the office door. He stopped at the threshold and turned around, "We do miss you," he said softly. Waiting for his daughter's gaze to meet his, he prompted, "Maybe we could have dinner sometime soon?" His eyes drifted off to the side, stopping on the former mayor. "We should find some common ground."

"Maybe," Emma simply answered. "I'll run it by Regina and let you know." At her dad's quick nod and even quicker exit, she pondered the request for a long moment. Maybe things were finally looking up.

~SQ~

After losing nearly fifty dollars to Jason Sirtis and Diego Flores at the pool table in the den, Emma had called it quits and headed back upstairs, muttering how she'd been hustled. She stood in the foyer for a long moment, considering her options for the lazy Sunday afternoon. Stuffing her hands in her jeans' front pockets, she glanced toward the living room and considered possibly watching something. But, it was Sunday, and nothing would be on. Her gaze bounced up in the general direction of Henry's room, but she didn't want to deal with the boy's moodiness. That's when she heard the soft clink of glass from the kitchen. Slowly, she approached, calling, "Regina?"

"Yes, Emma?" the brunette answered out of reflex, focusing on the orange liquid bubbling in a beaker. With easy skill, she extracted a small portion of the liquid with a pipette.

Standing in the entranceway, the blonde questioned, "Are you going to be doing that all day?" She was bored, and between all her scheduled activities, she didn't know how to handle free time, anymore. Of course, in the beginning, when their range had been extremely limited, she and Regina had done things together. She'd grown to like it, and now, she missed it.

"More or less," came the offhanded answer. Was one day to herself and her own projects too much to ask?

Sighing, the sheriff pulled out a stool and sat, carefully avoiding the plethora of equipment and magical spell and potion components. "It's Sunday," she whined slightly, resting her chin in her left palm. "You know, the day of rest," she grumpily elaborated. It was fascinating to watch the brunette work, but her brain could only handle so much nerdy, magic mumbo-jumbo.

Looking up from her notes, the former mayor glared at the other woman over the rim of her reading glasses. "Your point?" she drawled, knowing full well the blonde was bored. Her eyes immediately returned to the simmering liquid, and she frowned. Nothing was working, and she was
wasting ingredients she couldn't easily replenish.

Emma huffed in annoyance. Sitting up, she gestured at the contraption on the kitchen island. "You've been messing with your chemistry set for a week. If we're not at the station, I'm training with Anne, and if you're not outside with us, you're in here doing this," she ranted in a quick gush. A pouty frown spread across her face as she crossed her arms and slouched. "To top it off, I haven't had a decent meal in forever," she droned somewhat. Suddenly, her gaze brightened as she looked at the brunette and hastily suggested, "Let's go out."

"What?" Regina prompted, pausing in her examination of the latest result and looking at the blonde. Turning the burners down, she slowly removed her glasses and closed her notebook. Obviously, this wasn't going to be a quick kitchen drive-by for a snack or beverage.

"Oh, my God, I can't take this anymore," Emma exclaimed, dropping her head back theatrically. Her arms fell to her sides as she stared at the ceiling. "We go to work. We train. You try not to blow up the house," she listed, covering her face with her hands. "I'm bored," she muttered behind her palms. Dropping her hands onto her thighs, she glared at the former mayor. "Let me spell it out for you," she stated pointedly. "I need to do something different."

Chuckling softly as she was mildly amused by the dramatics, the brunette casually asked, "And what do you suggest?" She'd been aware of the blonde's rising restlessness; however, she was surprised it had taken the other woman so long to actually say something. Perhaps she should reward the sheriff for good behavior.

Eyes bright with excitement, the blonde perked up and practically wiggled in her seat, quickly requesting, "Let's go to the diner, or Dave's, or go get Chinese. I don't care, just something.

"Henry's grounded," the former mayor quietly countered, straightening her glasses and pen on top of the notebook.

"That's why he's not going," Emma easily retorted, hopping off her stool and pushing it under the island. "Come on, turn off your burners," she instructed with a broad smile. Winking, she added, "It's been a while since we stirred up trouble."

With a breathy chuckle, Regina began cleaning up her mess. She sighed dramatically for effect and with mock reluctance, agreed, "Very well." Quickly, she tidied her workspace, stowing the delicate instruments and ingredients. When she looked up, the sheriff, who was already wearing her red leather jacket, was holding her charcoal peacoat up and open by the collar. A soft smirk slid across her face as she turned and slipped her arms in the sleeves. She bit her bottom lip as Emma cleared her throat after running her hands over the yoke. "So, where are we going?" she asked, following the blonde to the Charger.

"La Tandoor!" the sheriff jovially exclaimed, bounding down the short steps and over to the passenger side of the car, opening the door. She smiled as the brunette slid into the cockpit. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two Crows Guard, who had been hanging out in the open garage, climb on their bikes, adjusting their helmets and gloves. One spoke softly into his hand radio.

"Oh, it has been a while," the former mayor said with warm delight as the blonde slipped behind the steering wheel. It was no secret she loved Indian food, nor was it a secret that Henry intensely disliked it. So, as the car pulled out onto Mifflin Street, she didn't feel guilty for leaving her grounded son at home with her guard. However, she did frown when she realized that neither of them had told the boy where they were going, but again, that was another benefit to having her trusted guard stationed at the house.
"I thought you might like that," Emma beamed as she turned onto another side street, her eyes catching the two motorcycles trailing behind them. In a matter of minutes, the tiny motorcade had made its way across town as there was virtually no traffic on an early Sunday evening. However, as the Charger pulled into a prime parking spot in front of the restaurant, the sheriff spotted a few couples milling down the street, holding hands, and she contemplatively observed them.

Breaking the silence, Regina sheepishly remarked, "I forgot my purse."

"We're good," the blonde quipped, opening her door. "I've got my wallet," she explained, getting out of the car. As she closed the door, she noticed the two Crows Guard crossing the street.

"No," the brunette barked sharply as she exited the vehicle, her low tone easily reaching the two men in the middle of the road. "You will wait outside," she commanded, firmly closing the passenger door. She was thankful when they didn't raise a fuss and simply returned to their bikes.

Meeting the other woman on the sidewalk, the sheriff quietly said, "That wasn't very nice." Her gaze darted back to the bikers. They did try to be as unobtrusive as possible, but it was still strange. Her parents didn't have any steadfast guards following them around. Or was that another job of the dwarves?

"Who ever said I was nice?" the former mayor retorted, walking up to the restaurant's door. Sometimes, she just felt trapped, and it was no fault of the Queen's Guard. It was simply reminiscent of days better left forgotten.

Jogging to beat the other woman to the door, Emma flashed a bright smile as she pulled it open. "Yeah, yeah, you're not fooling me," she teased, following her friend inside.

From there, it was the typical rigmarole when dining out, and as usual, they were largely ignored by other patrons. Their conversation stayed on standard topics and was rather light for the most part, but it was always fascinating to the sheriff how the brunette relaxed in the subdued lighting when out in public, almost as if the darkness protected her.

Therefore, it was with great reluctance that the blonde broke their little bubble of normalcy. "So, I was thinking," she started, waiting for the inevitable quip that never came. A fond smile curled the corners of her mouth as she watched the other woman eat.

Regina hummed in response as she took another bite of her lamb rogan josh. The spicy food bestowed a strange sense of contentment upon her, reminding her of better times during her childhood. Before the lonely estate in King Leopold's kingdom and before Danial, she had a much different life growing up in her father's homeland amidst her royal cousins.

"Yeah," the sheriff said, unable to stop the creeping smile. "Archie got me thinking that we should maybe go visit our parents," she relayed, feeling bad for potentially ruining the brunette's evening. Of course, there was no way in hell she'd ever mention the fact her father had suggested dinner.

"Well," the former mayor drawled after swallowing her bite, "it's been a while since we tested our range." If the savior wanted to visit her parents, although she didn't understand why, she wasn't going to stop her. She valiantly tried to hold onto the blissful feeling elicited by her dinner.

The blonde's jaw dropped at the casual acceptance. Then, the actual words hit her. "Come on," she whined, stabbing her fork into her curry. "Don't leave me alone with them," she hissed before angrily scooping up a bite and shoveling it into her mouth.

"Why must I suffer?" the brunette demanded, using a piece of naan to sop up some of the stray
sauce on her plate. The warm bread with the rich sauce kept her mood sedate.

"Solidarity!" was the expectant response.

Rolling her eyes, Regina scrunched her nose as she lightly countered, "I think I'll pass." She took another bite of saag paneer and allowed her eyes to drift closed in culinary bliss. It was rare to find food she enjoyed eating out in Storybrooke. Of course, since the memory portion of the Dark Curse broke, there had been a few pleasant surprises popping up in town, namely the Indian and Sicilian restaurants. If only someone sold a decent empanada, she'd be truly content.

"Please?" Emma pleaded, leaning forward. She maintained a hopeful look as she explained, "Archie said it was important to try and find some common ground." Seeing she wasn't getting anywhere with logic, she added in an irritated huff, "Besides, Mary Margaret's not going to stop nagging me until we do."

"Get a new cellphone number," the former mayor helpfully suggested. She was all too aware how the blonde would grumble and quietly curse her phone. Idly, she poked at her food, debating whether to continue eating or take it home. It was always so much better the next day. Maybe she'd indulge in some kheer.

Snorting, the sheriff looked down and pushed her food around her plate. "Not that I haven't considered it, but…," she started but trailed off.

"If you're wanting to do this for Henry, the best thing would be to keep him away from Miss Blanchard, considering recent events," the brunette offered with mild distaste, putting down her fork and wiping her mouth with her cloth napkin. She'd rather her son have absolutely no contact with his grandparents from either side, but that wouldn't be feasible forever. Frankly, she was surprised that they'd gotten away with it for so long. That was proof enough she'd struck a critical nerve with Snow White. She frowned at this realization. Obviously, Henry was taking a back seat as the Charmings were too preoccupied with their crumbling relationship with Emma, and Gold was too distracted by his son and Lacey. It should have made her happy, finally having their son all to themselves, but it didn't because her little boy was miserable.

"Okay, fine," the blonde relented, putting her own silverware down. She crossed her arms and flopped back in her chair, deciding to bite the bullet. "I think you should go see Cora," she freely admitted.

"No," the brunette's answer was immediate and broached no argument. What the hell was the sheriff thinking?

Rolling her eyes at the icy glare, Emma tilted her head. "One of us has to have some kind of normal relationship with our parents," she remarked in a flat tone. She couldn't help but believe that the sheer brilliant, red brightness of Cora's heart had to mean something.

"And you believe that to be me? You've met my mother," Regina retorted darkly. Her lips curled into a soft snarl. The notion was completely ludicrous. She hadn't missed the woman in 43 years, why would she start, now?

Leaning forward and pushing her plate out of the way, the sheriff rested her elbows on the table, re-crossing her arms. She adopted a sad expression as she tried to clarify her reasoning, "Yeah, but she didn't have her heart. Didn't she take it out before you were born? Wouldn't that skew her personality or something?" She rolled her lips and swallowed. She was stuck between not wanting to pressure her friend into something she wasn't ready for and not wanting her to miss an opportunity to reconnect with her mother. After all, didn't all kids want a meaningful relationship
with their parents? Upon further contemplation, she realized that it hadn't turned out so well for Ava and Nicholas, and she began to second-guess herself.

The former mayor bristled at the prospect of approaching Cora, of exposing any type of weakness to the woman. It churned her stomach; yet, she was mildly intrigued by Emma's theory. Would a heart make that much of a difference? Looking away, she detested herself for quietly admitting, "Perhaps." After everything, she was still weak.

"Aren't you curious?" the sheriff questioned softly in a gentle tone. She was all too aware of the older sorceress's cruel potential and the possible brutalities she might have bestowed upon her daughter. So, she gave Regina a long minute before adding, "She's locked up, alone, in a cave. That's no way to live."

Eyes full of fire latched onto blonde's. "It's no less than what she deserves," the brunette snarled through gritted teeth, her tone low and dangerous. Curiosity over whether her mother was now a different person was one thing, but lamenting Cora's current predicament was beyond her at that moment.

Letting a slow, lazy smile spread across her face, Emma gazed at her friend with understanding. "Well, if nothing else, she's a captive audience, and you can yell at her," she easily suggested with a shrug. "Get some stuff off your chest. That'll definitely be therapeutic," she added with a hint of enthusiasm, smile widening.

"Are you planning on doing the same with your esteemed parents?" Regina pondered, feeling some of the tension seep out of her. More and more, the blonde's smiles had that effect on her.

"Eh," the sheriff replied, making a face. "I've yelled at them a lot, lately," she added in a deadpan tone. Dipping her head and looking through her eyelashes at the woman across from her, she flashed an impish smile. "So, I'm just going to see how things go." She wanted to reach over and touch the other woman, but her hands weren't on the table. So, after a quick inhale, she graciously bargained, "I'll let you pick who we see first."

Cocking an eyebrow, the former mayor pursed her lips in an amused half smile. Her voice was tight as she said in a low, gravelly tone, "I get to orchestrate my own torture. How refreshing." Taking a sip of her ice water, she maintained eye contact, and putting her glass down, she promised, "I won't forget this."

"What?" the blonde startled, sitting upright and blinking.

Tutting and shaking her head, the brunette idly caressed her water glass as she mockingly accused, "Bribing me with Indian food, you know it's a weakness."

"Hey, I use what I got," the blonde said with a toothy smile, all but admitting guilt. She just hoped none of this blew up in her face because Regina Mills knew how to hold a grudge.

~SQ~

End of Part 10
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

**Author's Note:** Some things remain the same while others are totally different, but I think you'll like where we are taking things. Also, I should come clean and admit that we watched Season 6. Why? Because of Queenie, of course! In for a penny, in for a pound and all that. We still have issues with the character development, plot, and whatnot; however, Regina/Queenie are just too delicious.

**Thank You** for all the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos.

~SQ~

PART 11

Regina let out a huff of exasperation as a few wayward strands of hair fell in her face, yet again, as she held the pipette poised over the vial. She needed to add exactly nine drops of the birch decoction to the cooling infusion of orange and ginger, but her increasingly unruly hair kept blocking her sight. Jutting out her jaw, she forced out a hard exhalation, succeeding in blowing the dark locks out of her eyes. Carefully, she squeezed out the last three drops and put the pipette back in its beaker. The brunette lifted the vial, giving it a gentle swish to mix the liquids and watching for the expected color change. After a few tense seconds when nothing happened, she sighed and set the failed potion back on the rack.

Deciding to try including a bit of parsley, she pulled the cutting board closer and began to chiffonade some of the green herb she'd set aside for that purpose. It was her sixth attempt to make a potion to cure Gold of the Dreamshade poisoning. With Neal's recent offering of spring water, she had gotten a bit bolder and used more of the reserve she'd originally pilfered from Hook's canteen. Right then, however, she was cursing her liberal use of the precious liquid, unsure if she'd be able to salvage the freshly completed potion.

She was almost finished cutting the parsley when Henry, fresh from school, came bursting into the house, dropping his backpack inside the foyer with a loud crash and startling her. "Damn," she cursed as the razor-sharp knife nicked her finger when she jerked at the sudden noise. Regina held her hand up, turning slightly to get better light, shocked to see that the knife had sliced through the tip of her left index finger, leaving the little flap of tissue hanging on by a small bit of skin and nail. The pain flared, at last, and she hissed, cursing again when she realized she'd bled into her newest effort at a cure.

The brunette hurried to the sink, right hand cupped under her left to keep from leaving a red trail across the floor. Rinsing her finger, she took another peek at the damage before the blood welled back up to obscure the wound. In a matter of seconds, she'd healed the nearly severed fingertip and washed her hands clean. Irritated that she would have to start all over, again, she grabbed some paper towels to wipe up her mess. One look at the counter had her stopping in her tracks. The potion had turned a pale green, the color of success. Eyes wide, Regina hesitantly stepped closer,
picking up the vial and staring in wonder at its contents. She'd done it. Rumpelstiltskin had his cure.

Her giddy laugh of triumph drew Emma into the kitchen, curiosity pulling her from the foyer as Henry raced upstairs. She watched Regina throw away some paper towels before returning to the chemistry setup on the island. The blonde settled across from her, observing as the other woman poured liquid from a beaker into a graduated cylinder, bent over slightly to ensure the correct measurement was obtained. Catching a glimpse of black lace as the brunette's blouse fell forward, she quickly averted her eyes to her friend's face and her look of concentration as she eyed the glassware. "What's got you in such a good mood?" she asked, fighting back a light blush.

Glancing up at the blonde, a broad smile lit up Regina's face while she poured the measured liquid into a clean vial. "I do believe I've just completed Rumpelstiltskin's cure," she replied, tone pleased as she indicated the vial of green potion. Taking the opportunity to teach her student a little more about potion making, she elaborated, "The infusion of ginger and orange made with the spring water is the base, a basic mix for fighting infection. This is a birch bark decoction," she continued as she let nine drops fall into the vial, "used for protection, banishing, and purification. And lastly, we add the catalyst." A quick look at her workstation confirmed she didn't have her athame handy, so she retrieved the hastily discarded chef's knife in its stead. With a practiced motion, she made a small cut on the pad of her recently healed left index finger and let three droplets of her blood fall into the mix.

"Regina, what the hell?!" Emma exclaimed, grabbing the wounded hand and reflexively healing the small cut, almost missing it as the potion in the vial swirled around the red beads before turning green and stilling. Eyes wide, she stared at the two identical vials, dumbfounded. "Do you usually use blood in your potions?" she asked skeptically.

The brunette chuckled upon seeing the blonde's rather dismayed visage. "No, not often, and I've never used my own blood in a potion before. However," she said, "Henry startled me when he came in, and I accidentally cut myself. When a little of the blood dripped into the first vial, I was sure it had been ruined. Instead, it appears to be exactly the catalyst that was needed." She had poured the potions into two small bottles while she'd talked and was considering them with a proud grin. "I'll keep the extra bottle here, but we can call Neal and have him come pick up his father's cure. As loathe as I am to help the imp, I want him fully whole when I mete out justice for the bond," she finished, a brief glint of anticipation flashing across her face.

Emma felt a frown settle on her lips as she pushed back from the island and focused on her feet. "Yeah," she muttered quietly, thinking about how the former mayor had been disparaging the spell more than usual since their return from New York. No, it wasn't right that she had been tricked into casting it, and the darker implications of the bond made her feel even more guilty for her part in their situation. In spite of that, she couldn't help but feel a little rejected by the recent vehemence the brunette utilized when discussing the bond. She had finally started to feel like she belonged somewhere, had a family of sorts, and she had thought that Regina felt the same way. Right then, though, it seemed like their time in Manhattan had just confused things more, not been the balm she'd originally considered it to have been.

Regina had just finished loading the used glassware into the soapy water filling the sink when she noticed the wave of sadness and uncertainty rolling through the bond. Brows furrowing in concern, she started around the kitchen island, her friend's forlorn expression making her reach out a tentative hand to cup one of her biceps. "Hey," she invited, "what's wrong?"

"Nothing," the sheriff denied, shaking her head and trying to take a step back, refusing to look up.
Tightening her grip just enough to hold the other woman in place, the brunette retorted, "Don't lie to me, Emma. I can feel how upset you are, I just don't know what caused the sudden change in mood." Using her free hand, she placed two fingers under the blonde's chin and tilted her face up until their eyes met. "Tell me what brought on this melancholy," she gently coaxed.

A pout edged across Emma's features as she considered not answering the former mayor. But she knew the tenacious woman rather well at that point, and there would be no avoiding the discussion. "It's just, you've been really harping on the negative side of the bond a lot since New York. And I know it sucks, and it's my fault we're in this situation to begin with, but I thought things had been going pretty well, lately." Breaking eye contact to stare at the wall past the brunette's shoulder, she added timidly, "I thought we were friends, a family."

That was not what Regina had been expecting, at all. Nonplussed, she took a moment to gather her thoughts before replying. Giving Emma a soft smile, she affirmed, "We are. While there have been quite a few good changes resulting from our unique situation, the fact remains that I vehemently despise having something like this forced on me. My autonomy is incredibly important to me."

Letting her hand fall to the sheriff's shoulder, she continued, gaze serious as she impressed her feelings on her friend. "Rumpelstiltskin took away my ability to consent to being joined with the bond, and that, more than anything else, infuriates me. He had no right to remove my choice, and it's certainly not the first time he's done it. Do you understand, now, why I'm so upset?" she asked, tilting her head slightly and carefully studying the face before her.

"Yeah," Emma rasped, having gone a bit pale when the implications of Regina's words struck her. Wrapping her arms around herself, she backed out of her reach, head hanging forward as she sucked in a ragged breath. "I get it. I forced this on you, invaded your life." Her voice grew shaky and higher pitched as she finished, "And now, my magic can apparently take control of yours and just rip into you and…. Oh, God," she choked out, horrified as she clutched her own sides and hunched further into herself, remembering those awful moments at the town line when the bond had finally sprung fully to life.

Dark eyes grew impossibly larger as the former mayor caught on to the sheriff's train of thought. "No, Emma. Don't you dare think that of yourself," she scolded sharply. Stepping back into her personal space, her hands moved to cup the blonde's cheeks tenderly, managing to regain eye contact in the process. "It wasn't your fault. Do you hear me?" she asked firmly, ducking her head to hold her forlorn gaze. In a much gentler tone, she soothed, "Oh, Emma, I forgave you for casting the spell a long time ago because I knew this wasn't your intent. You're just as much a victim in this as I am." She pulled Emma into a tight hug, the blonde's arms trapped between them. Never before had the brunette wished so fervently that she could push her emotions through the bond the way the sheriff could, knowing it would ease so much of her friend's hurts. Quietly, she murmured in her ear, "Hush, now. I need you in top form if we're going to trounce Rumpelstiltskin for taking this from us," she teased.

Emma released a watery laugh and relaxed in the brunette's arms, letting her cheek rest on the warm shoulder. Allowing herself the moment of comfort, she inhaled deeply, drawing in the combination of scents that were Regina: the laundry detergent they used, the perfume that was a heady musk, and something that was unique to the woman herself, spicy and earthy and oh-so-intoxicating. When the last of her tension had melted away, she felt Regina give her one last squeeze and begin to pull back, arms slowly leaving her.

Regina assessed the blonde's expression as she released her, reaching up at the last minute to brush some of the golden strands out of the pensive face and tuck them behind her ear. "Better?" she inquired hopefully.
Nodding with a shy smile, the sheriff admitted, "Yeah. Thanks." She shrugged self-depreciatingly as her hands migrated to her jeans' back pockets. "Sorry, I—"

"No more apologies," came the light admonishment from the brunette, accompanied by a raised eyebrow. Smiling slightly, she gestured toward the back door and suggested, "Why don't we go practice on your shields before dinner?"

Grateful for the obvious change of topics, Emma rolled her eyes in good-natured complaint. "I thought you said I was doing really well with those?"

"You are," Regina replied, holding the door open for her. "But I'll be happier when you're able to deflect every fireball I throw your way, not just most of them," she continued, hand lightly skimming the blonde's shoulder blade as she followed her outside.

~SQ~

Grey clouds were rolling in for a late afternoon rainstorm when Emma and Regina traversed the stairs to Dr. Hopper's office above Neighbor's 5 and Dime. The dust had settled from all the previous week's excitement, and life in the sleepy town of Storybrooke had returned to its mundane routine which included, much to Henry's dismay, a return to everyday life and responsibilities.

Knocking on the psychologist's door, the brunette observed as the blonde hung back, lingering by the top of the stairs. The soft tapping of Pongo's claws on the old wood floor pulled her attention back to the door. Reflexively, she smiled upon hearing the breathy woof and quiet shushing. Then, when the office door opened, Pongo stood in the middle of the doorway, wiggling with sheer excitement. His tail wagged a mile-a-minute, tongue hanging out to the side of his open mouth. His eyes were bright and expectant. "Hello, Dr. Hopper. Pongo," Regina gently greeted, reaching a hand out to stroke the Dalmatian's head. A smile graced her face as she scratched the top of the dog's left ear, his head tilting into the caress. She ignored Emma's snort of amusement.

"Good afternoon, Regina," Archie easily replied, gesturing for the former mayor to enter. He cast a quick glance at the sheriff, ready to offer a chair and a fond hello, but the other woman merely waved before dropping down at the top of the stairs, popping in earbuds. He frowned but pushed his concerns aside for later.

Settling in the center of the worn, leather sofa, the former mayor smiled as Pongo sat next to her, resting his muzzle on her knees. She firmly stroked the top of his head before slowly rubbing her thumb between his eyes.

"How are you doing today, Regina?" Dr. Hopper softly inquired, watching. His brow furrowed slightly as he observed Pongo relax into the petting. And not for the first time, he pondered how the Dalmatian always reacted positively to the former evil queen. He hid his contemplations behind pushing his glasses back up his nose.

Leaning back, she crossed her legs and clasped her hands on her lap. "As well as can be expected, under the circumstances," she answered coolly as she focused on Archie, ignoring the dog's disgruntled huff.

"A lot has happened since our last session," he prompted gently, tilting his head. His fingers idly readjusted their grip on the pen he held poised over a clean, yellow, legal pad. At the rather indelicate snort of obvious agreement and eyeroll, he couldn't truly refrain from smirking, and thus, he decided to push onward. "Is there anything in particular you'd like to discuss, today?" he asked.

Pongo sighed and retreated to his bed.
Regina pinned a steely look on the psychologist. She frowned, as if the cricket didn't know what had transpired. Snow White was involved, after all. She spoke with a sharp edge, her words succinct. "Oh, for instance, Henry's compulsion to run away and be the hero, the capture of my mother and the consequent return of her heart, the complete and utter lack of any semblance of privacy with the Crows Guard milling about, Emma's short-temperedness since Neal Cassidy's reappearance in her life and wanting to co-parent Henry, or how about how the triad of do-gooders attempted to magically castrate me?" she elucidated in quick and clear succession, her ire rising with each item. Yes, a lot had happened since their last session, and she was curious which one he would subtly guide her toward, first.

"That's quite the litany," Archie responded with a soft smile. He had to admire her strength of will and her sense of self. It was remarkable, considering what he'd managed to reconstruct of her life. "Where would you like to begin?" he prodded, not wanting to lead her in any particular direction, but Regina Mills had proven quite difficult to gauge, despite her willingness to participate in these sessions.

So, a test, then, the former mayor thought, narrowing her gaze at the man across from her. Taking a slow, deep breath, she looked out the window, and with a sad, soft smile, she answered, "In the scheme of things, Henry's my biggest concern." She paused and looked down at her hands. Trusting the cricket again had been a slow process, but regarding her son, she knew he'd have his best interests at heart. So, she continued, letting the tiredness slip into her voice, "He insists on knowing everything, and when we refuse to divulge information, he seeks it independently, heedless of the danger he's putting himself in."

Dr. Hopper pursed his lips, unsurprised by Henry taking precedence or the boy's nosiness. The latter had been a recurring theme during their sessions. "Henry's a curious boy," he admitted with great fondness.

"Curiosity is one thing," she barked, her eyes hard as she glared at the small fire burning in the hearth. She closed her eyes and shook her head. "This is a misguided sense of heroism that is leading him to paths better left unexplored," she immediately explained her indignation.

"What do you mean?"

Regina's gaze snapped to the psychologist's, crossing her arms. Really, she had to spell this out for him? "He was willing to kill my mother to save Rumpelstiltskin because he's family," she clarified, her tone hard and cold. Even though she loathed to acknowledge it, she added, "My mother is no less his family than that imp." With blood relations came expectations, but over the years, she'd learned family transcended genetics. Monty, Anne, and the rest of her personal guard had taught her that.

"Tell me what happened," Archie instructed. Obviously, the grapevine didn't quite know what had happened that day.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor hatefully sniped, "Snow White happened." She pursed her lips and briefly contemplated her words, focusing on the small, flickering flames. "Suffice it to say, Henry latched onto her delusional rhetoric about good and evil, and he took her plans at face value, consequences be damned," she explicated before pausing to swallow. Her throat suddenly felt impossibly tight. After a deep inhale through her nose, she continued in a heavy, thick tone, "He was willing to kill my mother because she'd done bad things." She stopped and met the cricket's eyes. "It begs the question of what he truly thinks of me," she added, sharing her true feelings. Of course, saying the words had done nothing to alleviate the weight on her heart.

"That's…. How?" Dr. Hopper had absolutely no words and was instantly flummoxed. Had things
with Henry really spiraled that far out of control? Slowly shaking his head and tapping his pen on his legal pad, he valiantly pushed his own feelings and concerns away to be dealt with later, needing to focus on Regina. He couldn't shake the bubbling sensation of failure.

At the cricket's distress, she relaxed slightly, letting her arms unfold, and as her hands dropped onto the sofa, she looked back out the window. Her tone was matter-of-fact as she briefly described the sequence of events, "Rumpelstiltskin had convinced Snow to use an enchanted candle, essentially taking a life and giving it to another. Apparently, Henry overheard her agree to this deal and decided to play the hero and do it himself." And yet again, she decided heroism was overrated. She'd fulfilled the role of hero herself several times, pre- and post-curse, and look where that had gotten her.

"Obviously, he didn't," he stated. Clearly, the town folk didn't know what had precisely occurred that day, and the Charmings were keeping a tight lid on things. Was it for Henry's sake, or was it for their own?

Abruptly drained, Regina shook her head, still looking out the window. "Miraculously, Snow eschewed her own plans of vengeance in favor of averting Henry from becoming a killer," she answered the man's unspoken question. To kill in the heat of battle was one thing but to kill with intent was another, and such decisions, well, not many individuals could shoulder them.

"Cora having killed Queen Eva did come as a bit of a surprise," Archie supplied, watching the woman across from him carefully. She'd both frightened and astonished him multiple times during the course of their meetings.

"Hmm, it does make this whole affair a bit too Hatfields and McCoys for my tastes," the former mayor responded with a tinge of amusement coloring her voice. It was all so predictable, the ebb and flow of revenge, retaliation, and justice. A weak smile teased at the corners of her lips. At least her evil rampage across half the Enchanted Forest had had a purpose.

Surprised by the reference, Dr. Hopper chuckled softly, pushing his glasses up his nose, and agreed, "So, it seems." He sobered quickly, however, questioning, "How are you dealing with Henry regarding this?"

"Emma and I have both talked with him, and we've grounded him for the foreseeable future," she replied, returning her keen gaze back to him briefly. She linked her hands on her lap and stared with heavy lidded eyes into the fire. "He hasn't taken the new restrictions lightly, but I honestly don't know that he fully understands the gravity of the situation," she explained, drawn out of her dark musings.

"He's a very bright child," he offered with a hint of pride in his tone. "I'm sure, eventually, he'll understand." However, there was now a seed of concern for young Henry, and it forced an uncomfortableness to settle within him. "You mentioned Snow," he quickly continued as he adjusted his position. "What role did she play in this, exactly?"

"Other than her fraudulent image as a pillar of goodness?" Regina scathingly asked, still glaring at the flames. A hard scowl etched across her features as she admitted, "I think if Henry hadn't been there, Snow would've followed through." She released a low, self-deprecating laugh. "It's utterly ridiculous. The petty part of me should be ecstatic that Snow was going to darken her heart, and yet, all I can feel is disappointment, both in her and Henry," she darkly admitted. Her tone was heavy and sharp. The familiar weight of pain from a lifetime ago was creepily returning, and she feared for the first time that all her hard-won healing would be undone.

Archie furrowed his brows as he sensed something much deeper at play, but he hadn't the slightest
idea what. "That's a step in the right direction," he said, deciding to focus on the positive aspect. "You're not letting your anger cloud your judgement," he lightly and tactfully offered his praise, not that it was ever sought.

"I want to relish in her despair but not if Henry's the price," the former mayor clarified. She gritted her teeth. Huffing, she crossed her arms and glared at the psychologist. "It doesn't help that I empathize with her drive for vengeance," she growled in frustration. A moment passed, and she looked at the fire again, sighing, "I've become unaccountably soft."

Flashing a warm grin, Dr. Hopper questioned, "Is that such a bad thing?" After all, there wasn't anything wrong with being soft, gentle, or merciful, and once more, he pondered why Regina Mills believed such characteristics were undesirable or, more accurately, weak.

"Perhaps not," she relented, understanding his point. "But considering the Blue Gnat's violation at Snow's behest, I would certainly be justified in burning the convent to the ground," she pointed out. Her fists curled tightly against her arms as she sneered, "And, yet, here I sit like a dog brought to heel."

That had certainly been a surprise. Truth be told, he hadn't thought it was possible, extracting someone's magical capabilities. "Well, I'd say you've shown remarkable restraint," he openly admired, offering a fond smile.

Unimpressed, Regina cocked an eyebrow and snipped, "Do I get a cookie for good behavior?" She looked out the window, again, wondering why she even bothered, but she pushed those dark thoughts away. The cricket only wanted to help.

"Unfortunately, all I have is dog biscuits," Archie softly said with a gentle smile, fearing he may have overstepped with his admiration. He was so staggered by the evil queen's lack of retribution that he hadn't stopped to consider the inferences of the Blue Fairy's actions. And that inspired more questions, which he quickly wrote down on his pad.

Glancing down at the sleeping dog by the fire, the former mayor smirked and lightly joked, "It would be unfair to Pongo." A full smile formed as the Dalmatian woke briefly at hearing his name and lazily wagged his tail.

"Earlier, you mentioned a lack of privacy. Is it the bond or something else?" Dr. Hopper prompted when he lowered his pen.

Happy for the change in topic, she easily answered, "I've grown comfortable with Emma; however, the bond has finally revealed itself to be a form of control." She hoped the good doctor would use this new information to further assist the sheriff. The blonde's mood swings had been rather grating of late.

"Control?" he asked, obviously confused. Being tethered to each other was one thing, but being controlled by the person one was bound to was a completely different situation. He hurriedly jotted down a series of notes.

"Yes, in Rumpelstiltskin's infinite wisdom, he seemed to think leashing me to the savior would finally break me. He didn't count on Emma's innate need to protect," Regina enlightened the psychologist. "No, it's my guard," she clarified with a tired sigh. "They're everywhere. It's almost like being back in the castle." Pausing, she pinched the bridge of her nose between the thumb and forefinger of her left hand, and after dropping her hand, she continued with her eyes still closed, "I had become accustomed to my solitude." Again, she stopped and lost herself in the flickering flames. She quietly added, "However, Montague takes the recent threats to my safety very
seriously, and there will be no dissuading him in this." There wasn't a day she wasn't thankful for Ser Elmwood and his unwavering belief in her. She only wished it didn't have to come at the expense of her privacy.

Dangerous curiosity sparked within as Archie carefully considered the brunette's shrewd words. During their sessions, he couldn't help but be fascinated by the emerging impression of Regina and her judicious wordsmithing. It was like an image coming into focus, but he couldn't force it.

"Couldn't you simply request more space?" he inquired dutifully.

"There are certain drawbacks to being a queen, having an overzealous guard being one," the former mayor intoned imperiously. Throughout her life, she'd been fortunate to experience the full gambit of castle life, from one extreme to another. She wouldn't trade Monty's protectiveness and care for anything. In fact, he was one of the few individuals she'd willingly die for, certainly the only man besides her son.

"They seem to genuinely care about you," Dr. Hopper replied warmly.

Locking eyes with the psychologist, she let a candid smile grace her lips and brighten her eyes. Her emotions were leaking through more frequently whilst with the cricket. Whether that was a good thing or not, she reserved judgement. "That's what makes it tolerable," she countered with honest affection. She had known her guard cared about her before, but now, she could allow herself the luxury of fully experiencing it.

"Let's come back to Emma. You mentioned you felt comfortable with her," he commented, scanning his notes briefly. Glancing over and meeting his patient's curious eyes, he prompted, "Would you like to clarify what comfortable means, specifically, to you?"

Regina lifted her chin ever so slightly, silently assessing the man's angle. She knew he was fishing, but for what, she wasn't entirely certain. Warily, she responded in an even tone, "We're friends. Shouldn't one feel comfortable with friends?" Her eyes searched him and watched for any sign of duplicitous intent.

"That is the general idea," Archie easily countered, knowing he would always have an uphill battle with the former mayor. It was her way, and he'd come to respect that. "You and Emma have come a long way over the last several months," he added, leaning back in his chair. It creaked quietly.

"Why do you think that is?" he wondered aloud.

Sighing softly, the former mayor slowly stood and moved over to the window, watching the lazy, midweek afternoon. "Must we continually talk in circles?" she apathetically questioned. Hearing the soft thump-thump-thump of Pongo's tail hitting the side of his bed, she smiled ruefully to herself. Sometimes she wished she'd gotten a dog.

"Well, you could answer the question," Dr. Hopper suggested in a purposefully neutral voice. It wouldn't be the first time she had stonewalled him. His gaze systematically assessed her posture, observing no abnormal points of tension.

"I have, repeatedly," she huskily snapped, glaring over her shoulder at him. She huffed at his open expression and turned toward the window, again, watching him in the reflection of the glass. For a moment, she allowed her magic to reach out to Emma, feeling her contentment hiding a layer of soft apprehension.

"No," he bravely countered. "You've avoided it, repeatedly."

"One would think with a Dalmatian, you'd be better at connecting the dots," Regina quipped with
mild amusement. Her focus drifted to Pongo's reflection, lips curling with honest mirth, and then, she pondered what to fix for dinner that night, frowning. She'd forgotten to get something out of the freezer, and the guards had polished off her stockpile of quick meals.

With a breathy chuckle, Archie dropped his gaze, took off his glasses, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Although she could be frustrating at times, he found himself appreciating the queen's dry wit more and more. "My job is to help you make the connections," he gently advised.

"Job well done, then," the former mayor gruffly praised, pursing her lips. She crossed her arms, drumming her fingertips on her arm. "I don't see the necessity of sharing," she offered after a long pause. The situation with Emma was different, delicate, and absolutely daunting. Looking over her shoulder, she judged the ginger-haired psychologist speculatively, considering her options.

Meeting the calculating gleam, Dr. Hopper responded with his own pointed expression. "Regina, we've talked about this," he gently chided. "If you want to use me as a sounding board, you must talk to me," he deftly reminded her, keeping his voice firm and level. "I need to be on the same page."

Confidence in others was a difficult concept after so many perfidies, but she managed to elucidate, "Yes, well, it's damned uncomfortable." It was the nicest way she could say it. There were few she'd extend second chances to, and yet, here she was, discussing behavioral possibilities with a chirping cricket. She'd rather burn Storybrooke to the ground than betray Emma.

"And I can appreciate that," he said, holding her gaze. Each week, he was surprised and impressed by her self-awareness. He was also staggered that she had unfailingly returned. "If you're not ready to share something, that's fine, but I do think the changes in your relationship with Emma should be addressed."

Narrowing her eyes, Regina fully faced him. Her voice was low and warm as she chose her words carefully. "We've developed an easy routine to which I've grown accustomed," she finally answered the question. "Our interactions are both complex and effortless, and I find it comforting." She took a deep breath, forcing her hands to remain still.

"That's excellent," Archie happily commended with a fond smile. However, as the pause lingered on, his brow furrowed, and he prompted, "But, why the apprehension?"

Cocking an eyebrow, the former mayor rolled her eyes, her exasperation causing her stance to relax. She coolly replied, "My experiences run counterpoint to those of most others." She dropped her arms and moved back to the sofa, sitting on the end closest to the window and furthest from the doctor. "Good things seldom last," she reiterated, primly smoothing her blouse and trousers before crossing her legs. Staring into the fire, she added in a soft voice, "And Emma is a very good thing. She deserves better than to be tethered to me." She didn't believe anyone could argue against that point.

"I'd have to disagree," Dr. Hopper quickly countered, noting the flash of skepticism. It was a rare treat to surprise Regina Mills. "I'd say Emma's learned quite a bit being with you these last few months," he stated fondly. "She's grown as a mother and, more importantly, as a person." He paused and carefully gauged her reaction before adding, "You've instilled a sense of strength in her." That was something he had noticed right away once the dust had settled.

Twisting and turning her emerald ring, Regina idly looked down at her hands. She listened to the soft ticks of the clock and the crackle of the dwindling fire. Her voice was low and slightly disgusted, "It's so cliché that I'm loathe to admit it." She rolled her lips and sighed. Looking up, she met the man's inquiring guise, and wistfully admitted, "She's inspired me to be better." Her eyes
were drawn back to the flickering fire, and an old mentor's smiling face came to mind. He'd inspired her to be better, too. *Emma would like him,* she thought.

"Well, it sounds like you've helped each other, then," he cautiously interjected. It was rare to see the former mayor retreat into a happy memory.

Regina looked up, then, and curtly nodded. A small smile graced her features, but her eyes were laced with sorrow. "I suppose that's what families do," she softly intoned.

"Yes. Yes, it is," Archie agreed, wondering.

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Emma sat slouched low on the sofa, arms crossed defensively over her chest and glaring across the space at Archie. She knew she needed to be there and that there were things she should discuss, but at that moment, all she really wanted to do was indulge in a good sulk.

Realizing that the sheriff wasn't going to kick things off on her own, Archie compassionately observed, "So, I understand Henry's grounded."

Snorting with derision, the blonde grumbled, "Not that it matters. He's just going to run off whenever he feels like it," she added, waving a hand in the air in resignation.

"I'm sure he thinks he has good reason," the bespectacled man offered, not unkindly, attempting to get her to open up.

Emma scoffed, shaking her head slowly. "I don't know what to do, Archie. We've talked to him, grounded him. Now, the Crows Guard have to babysit him twenty-four-seven, and you know that has got to be zero fun for them." She shifted forward on the sofa, propping her elbows on her knees, hands dangling between her legs. Sighing heavily, she groaned, "At first, it was cool. We were sticking it to Regina. Now, it's totally not cool." Using her fingers, she ticked off his latest transgressions with increasing irritation. "He's snuck across town, going through the woods. He's slipped into the vault, and that place is no picnic. And his latest trick was stealing an enchanted candle from Gold so he could kill his other grandmother!"

Archie leaned back in his chair, honestly surprised at Henry's recent adventures. Yet again, the cricket wondered if he'd somehow failed his young charge. Had he missed something in his previous sessions with the boy? Was this behavior something he could have prevented? Pushing his own concerns to the side, he allowed, "He's been busy."

"The kid needs to cool it," the sheriff groused, straightening slightly. "I can't tell who he got his stubbornness from, me or Regina." A faint grin quirked her lips up at the thought of the brunette before disappearing as she continued, "But he just can't get it through his thick skull that this isn't a game. Of course, it doesn't help that Neal's on scene, now, and he's the new, favorite parent." Her tone had turned mocking and bitter as she focused on her ex-boyfriend.

Sensing the change in her demeanor, the psychologist prompted, "How did Neal react when he found out about Henry?"

Emma sneered at the memory of Neal sitting in the Manhattan suite, face animated as he chatted with Henry. "Oh, he was flippin' on top of the world. He's all up into it like, 'I want to spend time with my son,' and it doesn't help that Regina's all like, 'Okay.'" Flopping dejectedly back against the couch cushions, she lamented, "I didn't get that type of welcome."

"Well, maybe—," Archie began, only to be sharply cut off by the blonde.
"I don't want to talk about it," the sheriff barked. Closing her eyes briefly to regain her composure, she held up an apologetic hand and explained more calmly, "Regina's already fussed at me, and I know. I know, damnit!" She ran a hand over her face and huffed quietly, "I just want to vent."

The cricket gave her an encouraging smile, glad that Emma was letting go of her aggravations instead of keeping them pent up as she usually did. The woman was, on occasion, harder to crack than Regina when she wanted to hold onto her grievances. "That's good, get your frustrations out."

The blonde blurted with a raised voice, "Neal left me. He set me up, then, left me in jail, knowing I was supposed to be this savior. He knew about this world," she fumed, gesturing at the window and the town outside. "He could've helped me. Instead, he ran away, the coward," the sheriff spat, remembering the wrenching feeling of being abandoned, yet again. "I found out that I was pregnant with no way to keep Henry. With Neal gone, there was no one to help. Don't get me wrong," she interjected, fixing the psychologist with a sincere stare, "I couldn't ask for a better mom than Regina for Henry. She gave him everything I could've ever wanted for him. But Neal took part of that choice away from me."

Nodding, Dr. Hopper scribbled down a short note on his legal pad. He quickly prompted, "Go on."

A deep scowl settled on her features as she pushed herself off of the sofa and began pacing the width of the small office, her anger and resentment making her body as restless as her mind. "And now, he's waltzing in like it's okay, like he's entitled. It's not okay, damnit." There was a short pause while she stopped in front of the window, arms wrapped around her waist as she collected herself. Emma could feel her magic thrashing wildly inside her and knew Regina was most likely getting a good dose of her vexation through the bond.

"God, I was such an asshole that first year." After a few breaths, the blonde continued in a near whisper, "I thought it was a game, undermining her authority, and it was fun. It was Henry and me against her, and I liked that. We bonded over it, but then, it changed." Head hanging in shame, she confessed ruefully, "It wasn't about Henry, anymore. It was about getting the upper hand."

Archie decided it was a good time to interject, feeling that the sheriff was beginning to descend into a self-deprecating spiral that would be difficult to pull her back from if she was allowed to stew any longer. "It takes a lot to recognize one's mistakes," he praised gently, watching as her shoulders sagged in response.

Emma nodded faintly, finally turning back around and retreating to the couch, again. "Yeah, it was a big freaking mistake because she loves him. And I completely ignored that. I didn't want to see it." Her fingers tangled in blonde locks when she ran frustrated hands through her hair. Yanking her hands free, she bemoaned, "She baked a cursed apple turnover to put me to sleep because she loves Henry. As pissed off as she was at me, she was willing to let me sleep eternally across town, where Henry could still visit me, because she didn't want her son to go through the pain of losing his birth mother."

The sheriff let her head fall back against the sofa as she voiced the realization that had been her turning point. It had been the defining moment all those months ago that had made her stop and truly look at Regina, made her want to understand the woman. "She could've just killed me, but she didn't. It's twisted, don't get me wrong," Emma acknowledged with a wry grin, "but I kind of see where she was coming from. And after meeting Cora, it makes a whole lot of sense."

"Oh?" the cricket pressed gently. Of course, he had garnered from Regina some awareness of the particularly dysfunctional mother-daughter dynamic that existed between the former mayor and Cora. But he was pleasantly surprised to realize that the reticent woman had opened up to Emma about her upbringing.
The blonde snorted loudly, commenting, "Cora's a piece of work, and to grow up with that type of mother…. Wow." She shook her head in lingering admiration for her friend's strength of will and character. "She makes some of my foster families seem warm and fuzzy. Then, Mary Margaret gushing about how sweet Regina was when they first met, and she wonders why Regina changed." Her eyes suddenly flashed as she recalled her conversation with Monty a little over a week before. Anger and frustration rolled off of her as she exclaimed, "Four years, Archie, four years older than her stepdaughter. That's messed up."

Dr. Hopper shot the blonde a startled look, unsure how the conversation had taken such an unexpected turn. Trying to reorient his thoughts, he stammered, "It wasn't—."

There was an unfamiliar sharpness to Emma's glare when she growled, "No, don't even. I don't care if it was common. It's pedophilia," she finished, her lips curling back in disgust at the medieval attitudes that seemed to have prevailed in the Enchanted Forest.

Pen scratching off the edge of the legal pad in shock, Archie stared at the sheriff, blue eyes wide. Utterly taken aback, he rasped, "I don't know if I'd go that far."

Leaning forward, she exploded, "That bastard was three times her age, and she'd just turned seventeen! I don't know about the Enchanted Forest, but here, that's statutory rape, at minimum, and would get someone put on the sex offender registry." Emma felt a brief spike of fear that she was betraying Regina by discussing the situation. Then, she remembered that the gossip surrounding a new queen would have included the girl's age. The thought that so many people would have condoned such a marriage made her stomach turn. "And it was Mary Margaret's fault she had to marry the sicko. No wonder she was pissed and cursed everybody. If I had to lay under some old, fat pervert, I'd come undone, too," her voice broke slightly, hot tears of sympathy welling up.

The ensuing silence sat heavily in the office, Archie processing Emma's outburst while she collected herself. He carefully took in the way her head hung forward, hair obscuring her face as she surreptitiously wiped the corners of her eyes. After a couple of minutes had passed, he swallowed back the lump in his throat and offered, "Well, since you put it that way…."

"How did no one put this together, before?" the blonde asked, her tone calm and even, once more. The cricket shrugged sadly and said, "He was a king," knowing it was a poor excuse but the unfortunate truth.

Emma barked out an unamused laugh and accused, "That's not a reason."

A deep sigh left the psychologist who was finding it increasingly difficult to reconcile the standards from his old life with the world in which he currently resided. "It was a different life, Emma."

The sheriff jeered, "So, you're telling me that if I had stayed in the Enchanted Forest, instead of being stuffed in a magical tree trunk, I'd have been sold to the highest bidder?" Her intense gaze dared the man to deny it, the agitation within her spoiling for a fight. "That is how life worked for most royals," he acquiesced with a forlorn expression.

Flinging her arms out in exasperation, the blonde derided, "Snow White fell in love with her Prince Charming and married him. Yeah, they were separated by the curse, but she was a teacher. Regina could have made her the town whore or a garbage collector. Now, they're together, again, and living blissfully unaware of others' problems. How is that having her happiness taken away? How
does that even compare to what Regina went through?" Her arms crossed defensively as she leaned back into the cushions and snarled petulantly, "Screw it, I'll take my independence and high self-esteem over being a princess, any day."

Eyebrows high, Dr. Hopper observed softly, "You seem rather protective of Regina." He narrowed his eyes in consideration, contemplating the fierce display of indignation Emma had shown in the former mayor's defense.

Emma retorted hotly, "Someone has to be!" There was a short pause while her thoughts circled around to a bleak conclusion. Her tone was melancholy when she added, "I'm beginning to think no one in this town ever really knew her, except the Crows Guard."

Archie pushed his glasses further up the bridge of his nose, body relaxing again since the worst of the blonde's outburst seemed to be over. Head tilted to the side, he inquired, "How's that?"

A small smile turned up the corners of the sheriff's mouth, her mind focusing on all the little things she'd learned about the brunette over the past few months. "She's crazy smart, funny in that dry wit sort of way, caring—she feeds stray cats, for crying out loud. That prickly exterior hides a sweet, sensitive person. She was a different person in New York. It was nice," she murmured, the smile now a full-fledged grin as her eyes unconsciously focused on the spot where Regina was sitting on the other side of the wall. "She seemed so comfortable. We did normal things, like bike rides, museum tours, and picnics. We went shopping, for Christ's sake. She made going to the Museum of Mathematics fun! How the hell can math be fun?"

"It seems you enjoyed your time in New York quite a bit," he remarked softly, not wanting to break Emma's reverie. There was something lurking under the surface of her words, and the psychologist thought that it would be worth pursuing—cautiously.

Warmth spread through Emma's chest, and letting out a short puff of air, she divulged, "It felt like family."

Seeing that they were finally getting to the heart of the matter, Dr. Hopper couldn't prevent the smile that edged across his face. "Oh?"

The sheriff grimaced weakly, saying, "I haven't connected with my parents like that, and I don't know if it's me, or them, or what. But those few days with Regina and Henry were some of the best I can remember." Her tone was wistful, gaze still concentrated on the wall by the door. Eventually, she shook off her pensive attitude and flippantly informed him, "I even got a car out of the trip."

Archie smirked at that, adjusting to Emma's rapidly shifting moods, knowing that it was simply her way of creating some space around feelings that made her uncomfortable. "A new car?" he questioned, having been surprised to see the new vehicle and curious as to the rumors surrounding it.

"It died a spectacular death." Sighing, the blonde bemoaned, "The axle was cracked, among other things, so it was a lost cause. I had it for over ten years, and who knows how long Neal had it. Obviously, I was upset," she stated dryly. However, her tone lightened considerably when she concluded, "Then, Regina came to the rescue and bought me a new car."

The psychologist leaned back in his chair, crossing his legs as he considered the disclosure. "A new car?" he asked, wondering if she truly understood the significance of Regina Mills, of all people, purchasing her a new vehicle.

Emma grinned broadly, perking up as she thought of the car in question. "Sweet, huh? I've never
had anyone buy me something new. It was always thrift shop stuff and hand-me-downs."

Archie fixed her with a speculative look and remarked, "You seem pretty comfortable with her buying a new vehicle for you. I know in the past, you've been uneasy with borrowing money from Regina." He vividly recalled the conversation regarding the loan for paying back an old friend. The blonde had spent two full sessions discussing that decision before she had come to terms with it.

"Yeah," she agreed sheepishly, thinking back on her previous talks with the cricket. "We've talked about money a lot, you know, Regina and I. Obviously, some homes were better than others, but there was always someone to share with. It was hard having something that was just mine," the sheriff explained with a shrug. She had stilled considerably and was sitting Indian-style on the couch, appearing relaxed for the first time since the session had begun. "For Regina and Henry, it's the opposite. Both of them are very giving."

Blinking rapidly, the redhaired man replied, nonplussed, "That's certainly a different perspective on Regina. Most would claim she takes."

"I've been on the receiving end of that, too, and she can be super manipulative and a hard ass," Emma concurred with a chuckle. "But sometimes, she uses her influence for nice stuff, like the car, the new playground in the woods, or making sure the animal shelter stays no kill." Her smile was back, full and wide and completely unconscious on her part as she discussed Regina. "We came to an understanding a while ago. We both get that it's about trust and being willing to accept help when it's needed. She knows my issues and my ego and didn't make a big deal out of it. She made it sound sensible, a soft sell. She's really a heck of a politician," the blonde concluded, a hint of pride in her voice.

Archie jotted down a few quick notes as she spoke, only following her last comments with a thoughtful, "I see."

Oblivious to the psychologist's speculative expression, Emma rambled on happily, "Then, she got me a new jacket and a suit while we were there, not that I have anywhere to wear the suit." She made a face, thinking fleetingly of the dressing room argument, saying, "I was kinda uncomfortable with that, at first. But she didn't have any ulterior motives, and it made her happy."

He suppressed a smile, waiting for the sheriff to take that next step in unravelling her feelings regarding the former mayor. Deciding to give her a judicious nudge, he offered, "Her happiness seems important to you."

"She deserves to be happy," the blonde stated firmly. A small frown brought the corners of her mouth down, her brow furrowed as she asked, "Shouldn't we care about the people who are important to us?" Her question hinted at the need for validation, as if she wasn't quite sure she was allowed to feel so intensely for someone who had been termed the evil queen.

And there it is, Archie thought. "Of course, we should, Emma," he confirmed, ensuring he caught her gaze to impress upon her his sincerity.

Emma's expression cleared, and her gaze drifted back toward the door. There was an unmistakable fondness lacing her voice as she confessed, "The bond may have forced us together, but I'm kinda glad. It gave me a real chance to get to know her." Giving him a quick shrug, she said longingly, "It's been nice to be a part of something permanent."

~SQ~

Every step closer to the mine entrance sent a fresh wave of apprehension through Regina, her
muscles tensing involuntarily and pace faltering until she was standing still, staring into the dark opening in the ground as if it were the entrance to Hell itself. Her mother was down there, so, the allusion wasn't too far off point; the woman had been her own personal devil for the entirety of her life. Reason told her that Cora was locked up in a magic-dampening cell, unable to cause any physical damage. The problem lay in the fact that her mother didn't need her magic to destroy her, more than capable of picking her apart with words alone and leaving her a devastated wreck. Cora's voice was what she heard in her darkest moments, hissing cruel barbs—she'd never be smart enough, strong enough, pretty enough, never enough.

Emma was several feet into the mine before she realized that her companion was no longer with her. Turning, she saw the former mayor standing frozen outside the entrance, fear flashing in wide eyes, stuttering breaths quickening by the second. The blonde hurried back to Regina's side, recognizing the beginnings of a panic attack and honestly surprised to see the usually composed woman starting to come unraveled. Placing her right hand between Regina's shoulder blades, her left found the brunette's hand and clasped it in a reassuring squeeze. "Hey," she began softly, tone soothing, "it's okay. You don't have to go down there if you don't want to."

That simple touch grounded Regina, bringing her back to herself as Emma's concern and affection rushed through the bond like a swift-moving river. Sucking in a deep breath, she forced her anxiety down and tightened her fingers around the blonde's. "No," she stated definitively, straightening her spine and squaring her shoulders. "You were right. I need to do this." Nodding slightly she affirmed, "I can't avoid her forever, regardless of my preferences in the matter. Time to exorcise a demon," she all but growled as she marched into the void, past the two Crows Guard at the mouth of the mine. Their escort, Bruce and Alma, lingered back by the motorcycles and car.

Regina stalked forward, stopping before the small chamber, hands clasped primly in front of her, posture rigid and perfect, chin held high, the textbook picture of a queen. The guards posted outside the cell gave her a respectful salute, fists clenched above their hearts, heads bowed. Accepting their fealty, she waved a hand carelessly and ordered, "You are temporarily dismissed." The pair snapped to attention once more and filed out toward the entrance.

Recognizing that the former mayor had her neutral mask firmly in place and would most likely be alright, Emma stuffed her hands in the back pockets of her jeans and mumbled, "I'll give you two some privacy." Ducking her head, she beat a hasty retreat, following on the heels of the guards, tossing one last, worried look over her shoulder.

Then, it was just mother and daughter, staring at each other from opposite sides of the enchanted bars. The silence that stretched between them grew heavy and thick while they carefully observed each other. Cora's black pantsuit was smudged with dirt and had permanent creases worked into the material. Her hair was slightly disheveled and hung limp around her face which was drawn and haggard; the woman had obviously seen better days.

The former queen took in the contents of the cell for the first time, finding herself simultaneously appalled and pleased with the sparse accommodations. A metal cot with a thin mattress was pushed against the far wall of the cave, a cheap, plastic garden chair and table nearby, adorned with a plastic cup and bowl. Further inspection revealed a privacy screen which, she presumed, hid whatever means they'd supplied the witch with to take care of personal matters. It was somewhat barbaric but better than the cells Regina had kept in her own dungeons back in the Enchanted Forest. The petty part of her was practically chortling with smugness, and she didn't fight the haughty smirk that crept over her lips.

Cora shifted her body language to match her daughter's, but her eyes held a softness that Regina's lacked. Smiling faintly, she broke the quiet and praised, "I see you established a personal guard."
They seem very loyal."

Regina kept her tone light and professional, replying, "With them, I've been most fortunate." She vividly remembered her mother's advice on her wedding day, shortly before she'd banished her to Wonderland. Sudden comprehension haunted her; she had done exactly as her mother had suggested, after all, forming a personal guard, raising tributes where necessary, and there had been no doubt, in the end, who had held the power in her kingdom. The knowledge stung.

Although her daughter had sought her out, her continued silence spoke loudly of her disinclination to be there. She wondered what had prompted the headstrong woman to visit if she was so loathe to speak with her. In an attempt to further the conversation, Cora commented on the queen's guard, "Their enchanted gauntlets are an old magic, old as Elvish."

A slight crease formed between Regina's brows as she considered the woman before her. "Some would argue older," she supplied tightly, wondering if there was a reason for her mentioning the gauntlets. Her mother was as careful a wordsmith as Rumpelstiltskin, a purpose behind every phrase.

Tilting her head in contemplation, Cora asked with careful politeness, "Where ever did you find someone to do such extensive work for you?" From the brief interactions she'd had with the guards to that point, she could tell that the enchantment on the gauntlets was strong and resilient. They were rather unique items, the handiwork of an especially talented individual with a deft hand for the craft. She was curious where her daughter had encountered a master enchanter in the Enchanted Forest.

"I did it myself, Mother," Regina bristled, shoulders shifting, irritated by the perceived slight to her abilities. She had spent years honing her natural ability and remembered grueling hours bent over a workbench, stylus glowing white-hot over metal as she traced rune after rune until her fingertips cracked and bled into the designs. The former queen had poured literal blood, sweat, and tears into each and every pair of gauntlets that her Queen's Personal Guard, castle guard, and officers wore to protect themselves and her. They were precious gifts, directly from the queen, that their owners cherished as the formidable weapons they were.

Cora's head snapped back slightly in astonishment at the unexpected revelation. Where had Regina learned such an intricate skill? Their old teacher had taught them both many things, but she knew that Rumpelstiltskin did not enchant items. He traded them for favors, yes, but he never created them. It was an intriguing development in her daughter, one that would bear more observation. Recovering her composure, she complimented, "Well, it's quite impressive, Darling. You always did have such potential."

Regina narrowed her eyes at the conciliatory tone and demanded, "Is that why you bound my magic? Were you worried that I would one day be powerful enough to exceed your abilities?" Face nearly cracking under the force of her plastic smile, she sneered derisively, "I know what your power means to you."

Her expression falling, her mother sighed regretfully and offered, "Regina, surely you know I've only ever wanted what was best for you." It was the truth, too. With her heart beating in her chest once again, Cora realized that she had gone about raising her daughter in all the wrong ways, no matter her intentions.

"No," the former mayor snapped, "you wanted what was best for you. I never wanted the power. I just wanted to be free to find my happiness." A dangerous heat crept through her body as her anger flared at the thought of the injustices she had suffered at her mother's hands. Her rising ire came out in a low growl, "You ensured I would have neither when you trapped me with the king."
Confused by the sudden fury directed at her, Cora was sharper than intended when she rebuked, "He was a weak man, and you have a sharp mind. You should have been ruling the kingdom much sooner."

A mirthless laugh escaped Regina before she could censure herself. A hint of sadness tinged her words as she retorted, "He was stronger than you can imagine. I freed myself from him as soon as possible." Eyes turning hard, she vowed hotly, "I will never be owned, again."

"As if you're not owned by Snow White's brat," her mother scoffed, old patterns reasserting themselves as her daughter's willfulness made itself known. It had always been a source of great pride and consternation for her, the fact that her child fought so hard against being controlled.

Catching the subtle hint of possible knowledge, Regina bit back a sharp retort and willed herself to calmly inquire, "What do you know about my magical bond with Emma?"

Cora deflated a bit at the reminder of her daughter's plight and sighed in resignation. Lazily waving a hand about, she admitted, "Not much, I'm afraid. I have found a few, vague references but nothing definitive, other than a name for it—the Caitiff's Trammel."

Regina pondered the appellation and its etymology, attempting to puzzle out the spell's underlying purpose. "The Prisoner's Hindrance," she muttered somberly. Mulling it over a moment more, her gaze darkened as she mused caustically, "Or, perhaps the Captive's Shroud would be a more suitable approximation." It made a sort of perfectly perverse sense; after all, the bond essentially forced the eventual death of the slave's will to the master's when they exerted their control. The former queen was suddenly glad Emma had given them privacy. She did not need the sheriff feeling even guiltier about their situation.

"Regina, really. There's no need to be so morbid," she replied scornfully, lips pursed at the overly dramatic reaction. Steering the conversation to more productive avenues, she supplied, "My books and research notes should still be on the table in the vault. Of course, if I'd had more time and free access to Rumpelstiltskin's library, I might have managed to find out more." Her voice carried a note of hopeful question as she attempted her most sincere smile.

Ignoring the none too subtle hint, the former mayor asked pointedly, "Do you know the origin of the spell?"

With a gentle shake of her head, the older sorceress acknowledged, "I know that it's not from our world, which makes it that much more difficult to study." She paused to take in the way her daughter's shoulders drooped almost imperceptibly at the news. Although she was relatively sure of the response she'd receive, she suggested slyly, "We could attempt to transfer it from you to someone else."

Scoffing, Regina taunted, "If I'm not mistaken, you've tried that already and were unsuccessful."

Cora's lips pressed into a thin line of consternation, irked at being reminded of her failure. "I was interrupted by the pirate," she excused the situation. "There's nothing to say it won't work with a bit more effort."

"No, it's not worth the risk," her daughter replied in a clipped tone. The idea that Emma could be hurt in the attempt was enough to prompt her quick answer. However, part of her fear was incited by the possible loss of their comfortable intimacy, and it was that realization which made her breath hitch in her chest. Regina didn't want the bond to be broken. What is happening to me? she wondered to herself in dismay.
The little catch in Regina's breathing didn't go unnoticed by her mother, whose eyes narrowed in keen observation of the woman before her. There had been no mistaking the quick flash of longing on her daughter's face, and she finally began to consider Hook's early insinuations as to the true nature of the relationship between the two women. "Such concern for the woman who tried to take your son away from you," she drawled sweetly with just a hint of condescension.

"We've found a middle ground," Regina alleged stubbornly, chin coming up in silent challenge at her mother's intimations. Deciding to change the subject and attempt to get as much information from the recalcitrant woman as she could before they were reduced to barbed insults, she inquired calmly, "What do you know about restorative memory potions?"

Cora let the question hang in the air for a few moments, hoping to make the girl squirm as she had done when younger. Regardless of how much she loved her daughter, how overwhelming the emotion seemed to be with her heart returned, the Queen of Hearts couldn't simply break nearly two decades of habit overnight. It was only when the former mayor began to turn away that she broke the stalemate and confessed, "The same as you, no doubt. Without a proportionate catalyst relative to the degree of loss, it won't work."

Regina pinched the bridge of her nose in exasperation, the first and only sign of weakness she'd concede in front of her manipulative mother. Her frustration bled through in her voice as she sniped acerbically, "You made things unnecessarily difficult by giving Belle her cursed memories. The amnesia I could have worked with, but this…," she trailed off with a deep sigh, hand gesturing aimlessly at the empty air.

And suddenly, Cora knew what her child was planning, immediately recognizing the desperation in the dark eyes. She took an involuntary step toward the bars, breaking her composure as she warned, "Even if you do manage to restore her true self, Rumpelstiltskin is too possessive of his knowledge, Regina. He won't trade power for a girl, no matter how much he professes to love her." She and the imp were the same in that, their innate desire for power and the need to be above others too often blinding them to the collateral damage they left in their wake.

Rolling her eyes in disdain, Regina jeered lowly, "That sounds eerily familiar, Mother." As much as she wanted to believe that the return of Cora's heart would change her, she was much too cautious to permit herself to fall for the troubled look in her mother's eyes.

Cora ignored the cutting retort and cautioned, "A moment of True Love is the only thing that could possibly work to return her memories. I'm sorry, Darling, but unless Rumpelstiltskin decides to elucidate us as to the origins of the binding spell, we'll stay in the dark." There was little else she could say to remind Regina of the Dark One's duplicitous nature, though the girl should have been wary from having apprenticed with him, as well. The conniving woman simply didn't know what her old master had been thinking when he'd given the savior the Caitiff's Trammel, and that set her on edge more than she would admit.

Regina understood that was the sum total of information she'd get out of her mother for the time being. A shark-like smile curving her mouth, again, she quipped sarcastically, "Well, as enlightening as this conversation has been, I have more pressing matters to which to attend." That time, she didn't hesitate as she turned to leave, getting several feet away before her mother's voice called out to her, once more.

"Regina," came the uncertain hail. "You will come see me again, won't you?" Cora queried, hating the needy trace coloring her tone.

Without pausing her stride, the former queen tossed a glib, "In time, perhaps," over her shoulder as she disappeared around the curve in the tunnel.
Slowly, Regina Mills meandered down the sidewalk, trailing a few steps behind her constant companion. She sighed softly when the sign for Dave's Fish 'n' Chips came into view. Her shoulders tightened as she pursed her lips, fighting the urge to grit her teeth, and she knew if she didn't relax, she'd end up with a headache in addition to her already souring mood. She hadn't wanted to come, and it was a small consolation that Emma hadn't, either. Yet, a deal was a deal, especially since she had already visited with her own mother.

Somehow, the pair was now walking side-by-side. Her eyes cut over to the blonde, and her brow furrowed at the intense expression. Rolling her eyes, she silently cursed herself and her weakness for Indian food. Then, the former mayor glimpsed over her shoulder, spying two Crow's Guard, Alma Chavez and Jason Sirtis, trailing far behind them. *Monty would not be pleased,* she mused with the hint of a raised eyebrow. She glanced across the street to notice two more, Bruce Farmer and Lài Qingzhao, sitting on Granny's Diner's front patio, and she frowned. When Emma opened the door to Dave's, she spotted the last two of her personal guard, Diego Flores and Irene Smith, sharing a table in the front corner by the window. Her eyes narrowed as Diego flashed a warm smile and waved. As she slipped off her coat, she shook her head. The commander had followed through with his threat from the other night, calling the Queen's Guard into service. She was headed toward their table when Emma's voice made her pause.

"Aren't you going to sit with me?" Emma asked from a booth on the other side of the restaurant. As previously discussed with Elmwood, it was in perfect alignment to the guards' position.

"Must I?" the former mayor quipped a tad sulkily. She tilted her head as the other woman deflated slightly. Without waiting for a reply, she moved to the occupied booth. Yes, she had become unaccountably soft if she didn't rage at the unwanted presence of her Queen's Guard or resist the pouty expression of a certain blonde.

Sighing heavily, the sheriff watched her friend. "Come on, don't leave me on my own," she whispered, biting her lower lip. Then, as Regina slipped onto the bench next to her, she grinned and happily intoned, "They might win me over, and then where would you be?"

"Very well, but you owe me," the brunette relented in a low voice laced with amusement. She took a slow, deep breath as her eyes drifted around the fisherman-themed eatery, absently accepting the large, two-sided, laminated menu. Her visit with Cora the other day had left her feeling off-balance and that unnerved her. For the first time in a long time, she was comforted by the guards' subtle presence.

"Yeah, yeah," the blonde teased, knowing her friend didn't want to be there. Heck, she didn't want to be there, but she had made a deal. "So, what are you going to get?" she prompted, trying to keep things light as she scanned the menu. It had been difficult keeping the other woman's impending bout of brooding at bay. Hearing the dramatic sigh, her eyes never left the menu as she smirked.

"Good evening, my name's Jack. I'll be your server tonight." A waiter, who wasn't one of Dave Salter's sons, stepped up to their table, asking, "May I take your drink order, ladies?"

"Coke!" Emma immediately chirped.

"Guinness, please," Regina said, passing the menu back to the blonde.

"Short or tall?" Jack questioned, not bothering to write anything down.

"Tall," the former mayor replied, ignoring Emma's raised eyebrow. If she was going to suffer
through this, by the gods, she was going to drink.

"Do you want to order now, or are you waiting for someone?" the waiter inquired. His gaze drifted to the empty side of the booth. It wasn't too unusual, just a tiny bit strange for these two to sit next to each other.

Looking at her watch, the sheriff hesitated briefly before saying, "We'll order now." She didn't want to be stuck with her parents any longer than necessary, especially if things went south. "I'll have Dave's Fish Basket," she drawled, deciding against trying the nightly special, suspiciously coined Ocean Meat Tacos. What the hell is ocean meat? she pondered to herself, wondering if anyone had ordered it.

"I'll have the same, please," the brunette interjected. She felt resigned to her fate. Hopefully, she'd have at least one beer down before Mary Margaret and David made it through the door.

"Alright, I'll bring your drinks out shortly," Jack said, and with that, he was gone.

Fidgeting with the various condiments, Emma casually commented, "A beer? I'm shocked. What about your image?" Her gaze darted to Diego and Irene.

"What about the survival of your parents?" Regina darkly countered. She watched the blonde fiddle with sugar packets and the labels on bottles. Her eyes drifted up to study her companion's face. By all outward appearances, the other woman appeared calm, if somewhat bored, but the nervous flickering magic slinking against her own told a different story. She took another deep breath, forcing the leeching, anxious energy to settle.

"Good point," Emma agreed. She returned the bottles to their original places. Then, their drinks arrived. Dropping a straw into her beautiful Coke, she nonchalantly remarked before taking a long drink, "You seem pretty worked up." When her eyes met the brunette's, she winced, putting down her cup. "Okay, okay, no more dumb commentary," she quickly added. There was a long moment of silence as she repeatedly stabbed her straw into her beverage, knocking the ice around in the plastic glass. "So, what do you want to do tomorrow since we have off?" she asked, desperate for conversation.

Enjoying a long, slow swig, the former mayor licked the remnants of the bitter brew from her lips and returned the frosty Guinness glass to the tabletop. "You could always use some more training," she suggested, relishing the warm feeling in her stomach. Yes, the beer was an excellent idea. She took another, larger, drink, tipping the glass at Irene when she caught her eye.

She was not amused, but Diego was.

"Magic training?" the sheriff prodded hopefully. She shook her head and muttered, "I need a break from Anne." The fiery, tough-as-nails second-in-command was a force of nature. Absently, she rubbed her right biceps which was still bruised from the other day's session with staves.

A low, rumbly chuckle emerged as the brunette agreed, "I suppose." She idly caressed the sweating glass with the fingertips of her right hand. Quietly, she added, "I'm not having much luck with the memory potion." Of course, she hadn't attempted, yet, to add her blood to the concoctions, as that peculiar development still needed further investigation and intensive testing. However, she shifted away from her darker thoughts. Tonight was going to be taxing enough on its own. "Maybe a respite would be helpful for me, as well," she mused, considering her preferred scenario of hiding away in her study. She quietly observed Emma playing with her plastic straw wrapper, tying and tugging on it. After taking another hearty swallow, she stated, "You seem rather tense, Dear."
"Yeah, well, it hasn't been all sunshine and lollipops since we got back from Manhattan," the blonde grumbled, staring at her almost empty cup. She sighed heavily, rolling her head from one shoulder to another. Sheepishly, she glanced at her friend and admitted, "I don't really want to be here."

Not surprised by the revelation, Regina nodded before simply asking, "Then, why did you agree to meet them?" She watched her friend closely.

"Because Mary Margaret won't let up until I at least try to make an effort," Emma huffed in agitation. She crossed her arms on top of the table, dropping her head on them. "God, she's relentless," she exclaimed in frustration, her declaration muffled by her position. Rolling her head to one side so she could see the other woman's face, she awkwardly continued, "And I figured if I was going to push you to talk to Cora, I couldn't not talk to my parents." Fair was fair, right?

Whether it was the goofy look on the blonde's face or the beer warming her belly, the former mayor wasn't entirely certain at this point, but she did know she trusted Emma. So, she smiled fondly at the other woman and raised her glass to her. "Company meet misery," she teased in a serious tone, nearly finishing the remaining half of the beer in a long gulp.

The sheriff laughed. It was loud, and pleasant, and warming. "Yeah," she agreed, straightening. "I'll take that over being the pot to your kettle," she quipped before sucking down the dregs of her Coke. She stabbed at the ice with her straw. "Parents suck," she huffed. "I thought they'd be great, but reality's a bitch slap," she explained her new outlook and was only slightly repentant.

"Hmm," the brunette agreed, softly chortling as she took another sip of her woefully dwindling beverage. Where was their food? Did they need to raise the fish from eggs?

Honestly surprised, the blonde rested her jaw on her open palm, leaning on her elbow. "You seem pretty calm, considering everything," she quietly said, eyeing the woman beside her.

"One of us has to be," Regina quickly retorted, narrowing her eyes at the staff lingering by the counter. While their waiter, Jack, was nowhere to be seen, the two Salter boys working the register had been quite busy with to-go orders.

With a furrowed brow, Emma uneasily demanded, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Rolling her eyes before looking at the blonde and tilting her head, the former mayor replied with just a hint of vexation, "What choice do I have? You're pushing enough nervous energy to make a sloth twitch." She knew it wasn't Emma's fault, necessarily, but the beer did help take the edge off her irascibility. She certainly didn't want to examine her increased consumption of alcoholic beverages over the last few months. If she had been tethered to anyone else, to anyone who didn't care about her, things could have gone terribly wrong for everyone in Storybrooke. Quickly, she finished her beer and faced forward.

"Pushing?" came the confused response.

Hearing the slight tremble in the sheriff's quiet voice, the brunette's expression softened. She placed a comforting hand on the blonde's arm and explained, "Your magic, Dear. It keeps spilling over into me, a side effect of the bond, apparently." This wasn't something she wanted to broach in a public place. After all, certain things would be better left unsaid.

Sitting up, the blonde twisted in her seat to face the former mayor. "Okay, Lucy, 'splain," she said in a horrible impression of Ricky Ricardo. But if anyone had asked Emma, she would have said that it was fantastic.
Regina rolled her eyes, surprised she hadn't given herself a headache, yet. She pulled her hand away as she pushed the empty glass toward the edge of the table. "Magic is emotion," she reiterated for the umpteenth time. It wasn't a difficult concept, but many non-magical beings had problems with it, regardless. "So, when your magic leaks through the bond, your emotions come through, as well," she elaborated, hoping the sheriff would connect the dots.

"Why isn't your magic leaking through?" Emma immediately questioned. Her brow furrowed as she added, "Is it because you have more control?" That was something she still had difficulty with during their training. Her magic tended to go full throttle or not at all, whereas, the brunette's demonstrations were perfect.

"No, Dear, it's because you are the control," the former mayor lightly chided. She kept her tone low and quiet, not wanting to draw any further attention to them. As it was, too many people knew about their unique situation. Her gaze cut to Emma and she frowned.

"Wait, what?" the sheriff prompted. The dots were coming together, and she didn't like the picture. Releasing a heavy exhale, the brunette gave her friend a weak smile. "It only goes one way, Emma," she responded in a soft tone, reassuringly patting the sheriff's knee. Instantly, she felt the dramatic shift from nervous to sad through the bond and their mingling magic. At seeing the downward cast expression, she was at a loss. They'd already talked about this, but she would give Emma time to process. She rolled her lips, removing her hand, as she was unsure what to say or how to ease to the other woman's worry.

Then, Jack whisked another round of drinks to their table. "Your food will be right out," he stated before disappearing with the empties.

"He took my straw," the blonde muttered, examining the rim of the plastic cup. She smiled when a puff of purple produced another straw. Taking a satisfying sip, she looked at Regina. "I was pissed off at my parents," she admitted, not like it was a big secret, "and, you took that," she elaborated, trying to understand this new layer. Of course, it only raised more questions and fostered quite a bit of concern. Her brow furrowed in deep thought, staring unseeing into her Coke.

"Precisely," Regina praised, smiling. If she treated Emma as an apprentice, it made the darker aspects of their situation easier to swallow, sometimes. "I couldn't send you calming thoughts like you can for me. I had to tease it out of you," she gently explained, praying her friend didn't feel violated.

A part of her feared what the sheriff could do with this power over her, or more accurately, what the sheriff could be forced to make her do. Power was, after all, only an illusion. She had learned that lesson a long time ago. And as demonstrated at the town line, her free will could be bypassed, her magic forcibly restrained, and if Emma honed her position as master, she could effectively wield her as effortlessly as a feather. However, she didn't believe, at that moment, the savior would ever do that, not without extenuating circumstances, but she'd been betrayed before by those closer to her heart.

"But I can feel when you're upset or in a good mood," Emma countered in a small voice. She could tell when the former mayor was withdrawn, angry, irritated, happy, or sad. She searched her friend's face for something but, exactly what that was, she wasn't entirely certain. "Your magic gets all jangly and harsh like it's pushing against me," she expounded, her throat tightening at the implications. "Or it gets all cuddly and slinky." It felt like cheating.

"That would be how the bond allows our magic to meet, the push and pull," the former mayor confirmed. Since the spell, the sensations had developed slowly over time and had become very
familiar to her, almost second nature. Clearly, the same was apparently true for Emma. "So, while I cannot push my magic nor my emotions to you, you can sense a vague echo of it on your periphery," she clarified, tentatively reaching out with her magic to the sheriff, wanting to illustrate her point. She was surprised to feel the savior's magic recoil from her, but the other woman was unable to mask her distress. However, she couldn't justify withholding her theories, and so, she explained, "This spell was most likely designed to be used by a non-magic user to control a mage, not to be used between two natural casters." A dark snigger escaped as she looked forward again and added with a half smirk, "A spell this insidious would not want the slave to have access to the master's power." She took a sip from her fresh beer.

Horrified by the mere prospect, the sheriff firmly gripped Regina's arm and quickly reassured her, "You are not a slave."

Although she was touched, the brunette didn't stop the mirthless, breathy chuckle that rumbled low in her throat, and in a deep voice, she intoned, "Of course, I am." She was a tool, an implement of destruction and terror.

Squeezing the arm ensnared in her grip, the blonde's eyes watered as she stammered, "I wouldn't . . . couldn't…. I can't…. No one should be used that way." This all felt so utterly wrong. She shook her head because she had no words. A lone tear escaped the corner of her left eye and rolled down her cheek.

Reaching up and, with a feather-light touch, catching the stray tear on her finger, Regina offered a sad, thankful smile. "I know," she whispered, lowering her hand. She hoped this beautiful woman never fell into darkness like she had. In that moment, as they held each other's gaze, she felt their magic coil and caress. The corner of her lips twitched as intense feelings bubbled to the foreground with bright clarity. Maybe Emma's feelings weren't so misguided after all, and she was struck speechless with the thought.

"Emma!" Mary Margaret called from the door, interrupting the tender moment. She hurried across the small restaurant, unbuttoning her coat. Slipping into the booth, she frowned briefly at the former mayor as they made eye contact before scooting over all the way, sitting across from her daughter. "Regina," she greeted with far less enthusiasm. She shrugged her coat off her shoulders and smiled happily as her husband sat down next to her. She was determined the dinner would go well.

"Hey," Emma replied, turning right in her seat. Her voice felt gravelly and tight. Every swallow was a battle as she quickly tried to compose herself.

Dutifully, Regina acknowledged, "Snow. Charming," before taking another draught of her beer. Gods help her, alcohol was going to be a crutch that night.

Jack popped over from the kitchen and simply asked the new arrivals, "What can I get you to drink?" He held his confusion in check, as Snow White and Prince Charming didn't typically frequent that particular establishment. He hoped there wasn't going to be any trouble.

The school teacher didn't miss a beat. She smiled brightly up at the young man and requested, "I'll have a half sweet, half unsweet tea, please." Then, she diverted her attention to the laminated menus stashed behind the napkin dispenser, passing one to her husband. She offered another to her daughter, frowning when she waved it off.

Accepting the menu from his wife, David eyed the former mayor's beer for a moment before deciding. "A bottle of Yuengling," he responded with a smile.
"Of course. Would you like to order now, or do you need a few minutes?" the waiter questioned. His eyes dropped to Regina when she took another sip of her beer.

"Oh," Mary Margaret quietly exclaimed. She looked to her daughter, asking, "Did you already order?"

"Yeah," Emma answered, shrugging. She crossed her arms and leaned heavily on the tabletop. "We got here early," she weakly explained, playing with the sugar packets once more.

"Oh, okay," the school teacher said, pouting at the menu. Looking up at Jack, she requested, "I'll have the Land Lover's Basket, please," and stowed her menu behind the napkin dispenser.

"Dave's Fish Basket," David ordered, passing his menu to his wife.

"Very well, I'll be right back with your beverages," the waiter informed them before leaving.

As soon as Jack turned his back, Mary Margaret immediately asked in a soft, soothing tone, "How have you been, Emma?" She missed her daughter so much. She had thought they'd made progress during their Enchanted Forest adventure.

"Good. Busy," the sheriff answered with a little shrug. She shifted in her seat, glancing at the brunette next to her. "I've been training, going to work," she shared. Finally meeting her mother's gaze, she added, "You know, the usual stuff." It wasn't like her parents didn't have their spies reporting everything.

"Training?" David interjected with a puzzled expression. He spared a quick glance at his wife. Suddenly, Jack returned with two baskets of food, placing them in front of the appropriate customers. "Can I get you anything else?" he asked, waiting patiently.

"No, thank you," the former mayor relayed after inspecting the contents of her fish basket and Emma's. There were sufficient condiments, for them at least. She frowned when the young man left the table. She'd need another beer, soon, given her Guinness was only half full. She picked up the bottle of malt vinegar and shook a judicious amount over her fries and fish.

Emma dove into her food with gusto, happy for the distraction. She reached for the bottle of ketchup as she responded to her father's earlier question, "Yeah, my magic lessons have taken a temporary backseat, but Anne's been training me with the short sword." Of course, her parents' surveillance team of dwarves couldn't scope out Regina's backyard without drawing unwanted attention; so, her doting parents wouldn't necessarily know about that. She slunk a hand toward the brunette's basket, stealing a particularly long, steak fry.

Somewhat surprised by her daughter's antics, the school teacher cut a hard look at Regina. "Is Anne a member of the Crows Guard?" she hesitantly probed, keeping her tone light and conversational. There were far more of the Winter Castle's guard in Storybrooke than she'd originally anticipated, and that made some residents a little nervous.

"Yes, you remember McCormac," the former mayor replied in an amused tone, playfully swatting at the blonde's hand as she attempted to abscond with another fry.

Shocked by the revelation about someone she personally knew and remembered, Mary Margaret blurted, "He's a woman?" She recalled the short, lanky guard with auburn locks and piercing blue-gray eyes, who was well read for a mere guard.

"She's always been a woman, Snow," Regina countered with indifference, scowling at the savior.
She watched with feigned displeasure as the blonde swapped a handful of the former mayor's French fries with her hush puppies. Mildly appeased, she softly grunted her approval before focusing on the brunette cattycorner from her. She judiciously ate a hush puppy, ignoring the frowning idiot opposite them.

Dragging her gaze from her stepmother to her daughter, the school teacher decided to try a different tactic. "Have you seen Neal?" she prompted with clear interest. Surely reuniting with her lost lover, the father of her child, would make for quite the romantic tale to tell their children, and certainly, Henry would be very pleased.

"Yeah," the sheriff answered around a mouthful of food. Receiving a sharp elbow in the ribs for her lack of table manners, she swallowed and glared at Regina. "He's negotiating terms for seeing Henry," she drawled as she dredged a fry through ketchup.

"Negotiating?" Mary Margaret questioned, bristling at the insinuations. She and her husband shared a quick look.

"Henry is still grounded, Mary Margaret," Emma reminded her. She shook her head, breaking a piece of fried fish apart to dip it in tartar sauce. "Just because his father has dropped into his life doesn't give him a free pass," she expounded.

_idiot_, the former mayor silently scolded Snow White, draining her beer glass. She sighed disappointedly as Jack was nowhere to be seen.

"Well, no, but I was just curious," the school teacher diplomatically retorted. She chanced a quick glance at Regina, who slid her empty glass to the end of the table. Tentatively, she pondered, "Have you gotten to spend any alone time with Neal?" Or was her stepmother screwing with that relationship, as well?

Emma stopped chewing as she looked at her mother. Shaking her head and swallowing her bite of fish, she blinked a few times before flatly asking, "Why would I want to be alone with him?"

Cocking an eyebrow whilst watching the counter for their waiter, Regina smirked and knew, without a doubt, the blonde was going to regret that particular question.

"He's the father of your child, Emma," Mary Margaret replied in a sing-song voice. Her face split into a broad and brilliant smile. Families belonged together.

"He's a sperm donor," the sheriff intoned lowly. Her anger started to bubble and boil. _How dare she_? she roared internally, grabbing her Coke and taking a long, hard drink.

A soft snort escaped the former mayor as a sassy smirk curled her lips. She couldn't quite hide her amusement. Her naughty gleam brightened when she met David's confused frown. It seemed a common countenance in recent days.

Sighing rather dramatically to mask her tepid annoyance, the school teacher rolled her eyes and lightly scolded her daughter, "That doesn't mean something isn't still there, Honey. He seems to honestly care for you." She smiled brightly.

Regina pulled her attention from her diligent watch for Jack and looked pointedly at Snow White. She cocked an eyebrow and pursed her lips in open appreciation for her political maneuvering. _Shame it'll never work_, she mused. Exhaling heavily through her nose, she looked back at the counter, her fingertips idly caressing the warming glass.

Slouching over her almost empty basket, Emma grumbled, "Doesn't matter. He's engaged,
anyway." Jesus Christ, she couldn't believe her mother had just tried to push her into Neal's arms. She stuffed another fry in her mouth to keep from gritting her teeth.

"Really?" David interjected after a long sip of his beer.

"Yup," the sheriff gleefully replied, cutting her mother off. "He's thinking of bringing her here." She looked the brunette across from her in the eyes, carefully enunciating, "So, it must be serious." Stuffing a bite of fish in her mouth, she relished in sinking her mom's love boat.

Leaning forward, Mary Margaret whispered, "Is that a good idea?" Did they really need more strangers from the outside world in Storybrooke?

Shrugging, Emma plainly countered, "Not my call." And I don't care, she added to herself. After all, it was Neal's choice.

The former mayor's face brightened upon seeing the waiter exit the kitchen. She nervously tapped the base of her empty beer.

Setting down the baskets of food, Jack prompted, "Can I get anyone anything else?" Instinctually, his eyes dropped to Regina's, who held her glass up with a pointed look. "Of course," he smiled, taking the unfilled glass.

Frowning, the sheriff leaned toward her friend, whispering, "Are you sure that's a good idea?" It was, after all, her third, tall beer.

"If I'm sitting through this, I'm drinking," the former mayor hissed, resuming her meal. A pleasant heat had settled in her stomach, and her joints felt blissfully loose. Her gaze met Diego's, making her smile.

The guard kept a stoic expression as Irene watched the room, his sole focus on the two sitting across from his queen.

"I was wondering if we could meet for dinner once a week," the school teacher shared as she passed various condiments to her husband. Perking up considerably, she happily continued, "It could be a family thing." Her eyes twinkled with hopeful anticipation.

"Yes, because it would be so cozy to regularly break bread with my stepdaughter and Henry's estranged father and his fiancé," Regina quipped. Her tone dripped with unveiled sarcasm. However, when she saw Jack, her eyes lit up.

Hanging her head and letting her hair fall forward, Emma rolled her lips, fighting to keep from laughing out loud. "I don't know if that would work," she easily countered, munching on the last of her fries. "Neal's been wanting to spend some one-on-one time with Henry." It was a simple and reasonable request.

"You're allowing that?" Mary Margaret grilled in such utter astonishment that she almost dropped her fork.

"Yes, we're allowing that," the former mayor distractedly retorted. She graciously thanked the waiter as he placed her beer on the table.

Holding up his empty bottle, David silently requested another lager, and when Jack disappeared, he quietly agreed, "Well, that's," he trailed off for a moment, casting an unsure eye at his wife, "good for Henry."
Food and company, once again, forgotten, Regina appreciated the beauty of the dark, ruby red liquid with its creamy, foamy head. She sighed contentedly as she brought the bitter brew to her lips. It was making the evening's torture tolerable.

Pursing her lips, the sheriff frowned and chewed slowly, looking between her parents. "I thought this dinner was supposed to be about you and me, not me and Neal, or Henry and Neal," she observed, reaching her limit with the topic of her ex.

"Of course," the school teacher cooed, reaching across the table to reassuringly pat her daughter's hand. "But we're just curious," she added conversationally. A delicate snort from the brunette diagonal from her caused her to glower.

Emma surveyed her woefully empty basket. Damnit, she was still hungry. She glanced at the small handful of French fries, the one hush puppy, and the half a piece of fish scattered in Regina's basket. Biting her lower lip, she braved another seizure attempt, reaching for more fries. However, her acquisition did not go unchallenged as the back of her hand was met with the sharp, metal prongs of a fork. She withdrew her hand in defeat.

David smiled at his daughter's playful attics. "I'd be happy to help with your melee training," he offered, hoping to bring the conversation to more neutral topics.

Making room in front of her, the sheriff leaned her crossed arms on the tabletop. She flashed a thankful smile at her dad. Graciously, she declined, "I think Anne's got it covered." Pausing, she was surprised at the tiny hint of guilt, and quickly added, "But, thanks."

Nodding, he didn't think too much of the refusal. "Well, if you ever change your mind…," he trailed off, resuming his meal.

Mary Margaret forced herself not to be jealous of the laidback comradery between her husband and daughter. Ever since the curse had broken, she constantly felt like they had an easier time connecting with one another. She sighed quietly into her tea.

"Yeah, sure," Emma muttered. Her brow furrowed in rising frustration as the safe surface discussions continued. They were supposed to be making headway into finding a workable balance, but so far, there had been nothing of substance exchanged. There were no apologies, no sharing of ideas, and no honest offers of help. It was starting to piss her off. So, she decided to make her displeasure known with a sharp retort, "Could you call off your stalker dwarves? That would go a long way toward building some goodwill."

"Perhaps, if they had a stealthy dwarf, they'd have done a better job," Regina quipped, taking a long swallow of her beer. Her eyes lingered on Snow White, waiting.

Gasping, the school teacher vehemently hissed, "What do you know about it?" She gripped the table edge tightly, leaning toward the dreadful woman.

"Enough," was the light response.

Huffing, Mary Margaret snapped her mouth shut, realizing her stepmother was baiting her. She took a long, calming breath and basked in the reassuring support of her husband's hand on her knee. "This isn't going very well," she finally admitted, slouching in her seat. She looked between her daughter and husband with large, sad eyes.

"You think?" the sheriff jeered, rolling her eyes. She gently nudged the woman next to her, pointing at her food, a silent instruction to eat. Some of the tension in her shoulders eased when the
former mayor wordlessly finished her fish and last hush puppy.

"We just want to be a family," David interjected with calm determination. He smiled at his wife before sincerely adding, "We're trying to meet you halfway, here."

That was not the right thing to say. "Are you?" Emma demanded, glaring at her father. Her eyes narrowed as she held his gaze. "Funny way of showing it by having us tailed for months," she sneered, trying to keep her voice down. Noticing only a few fries in the former mayor's basket, she decided to go for broke. "Anyway, I've been waiting for something, and it still hasn't happened," she admitted with disappointment.

"What's that?" the school teacher quickly asked, hoping to soothe her daughter's woes and wanting to bring her back into the fold. Her eyes drifted to watch the seemingly uninterested interloper, who was at the root of all their existing afflictions.

"Do I really have to spell it out?" the sheriff challenged in clear agitation, her voice loud enough to draw the attention of the milling customers by the register. She ignored them, glowering between her parents. "Seriously?" she prodded when no response was forthcoming.

"Tell us what you need," David stated with all the love and understanding he could muster. This was his baby. He would do whatever he needed to do for her.

"I don't need anything," Emma promptly snapped. Her head jerking toward the woman sitting next to her, she demanded decisively, "Regina deserves an apology." It felt good to say, to have it out in the open.

Well, then, so much for taking my advice, the former mayor darkly thought as she swiftly drained the remnants of her adult beverage, knowing nothing was going to come from Emma's outburst.

Casting her eyes downward, Mary Margaret was, once again, flooded with guilt over the events of that afternoon. She chanced a hasty glance at her stepmother, and she shivered at the memory of the mad cry that had been ripped from her by the Blue Fairy's spell. At the time, she had truly believed it was the right thing to do, a means of saving her daughter, but her experience with magic was limited, at best. She had to trust in the fairies' virtuous intentions. She had to try! So, swallowing the growing pain in her throat and anxiously eyeing the two Crows Guard in the corner, she quietly suggested, "I don't think now is really the time for—."

"Then, when?" the sheriff snapped in a livid hiss, spearing her parents with heated eyes. Her fingers were white from pressing into the tabletop. She leaned heavily against the table, nudging it forward a half-an-inch.

The rising tide of rage smacked aggressively against Regina's mind, but she instinctively signaled for her guard to hold position, her hand concealed under the table. For the first time, the savior's magic was piercing and cutting, thankfully demanding without command, as she felt a rising compulsion to do something violent. She was, of course, well acquainted with hiding such ire. However, it was not a feeling she wished for sweet, light Emma; and so, she endured the magical lashing, chiseling it away. And, in silent support, she firmly cupped the blonde's left knee under the table and gently squeezed. A thumb stroked absently over blue jeans, and slowly, the magic between them shifted from attacking to an agitated gentleness.

"Emma," David tightly warned in a hard tone. His eyes met his daughter's in open challenge. No one, certainly no child of his, spoke to his wife with such blatant disrespect.

"I'm done," Emma said with finality, scooting closer to the former mayor. She pushed the twisting
knot of hurt down as she gently gestured her intent to leave.

Sliding out of the booth with surprising poise, Regina effortlessly slipped on her coat. "Delightful as always, Snow," she flippantly heckled in a warm voice. She took a few steps away, keeping her focus on the blonde, covertly re-signaling for Diego and Irene to remain seated.

"When you two finally get off your high horse, look me up," the sheriff instructed through clenched teeth. She aggressively resettled her leather jacket across her shoulders. Pulling her wallet out of her back pocket, she yanked a few bills out, tossing them on the table. "Until then, just stay out of our way," she commanded, ignoring her parents' matching, startled expressions. She breathed heavily through her nose as she turned on her boot heel, and taking the former mayor's elbow in a solid grip, her confidence soared when the other woman easily moved with her toward the door. Then, as the door of Dave's rattled shut, she grumbled, "That was a total waste of time."

Looking over her shoulder through the restaurant's window, the brunette spied her guards rising from their chairs and the Charmings in a huddled conference. She flatly remarked, "Please tell me you're not surprised, or I may have to reexamine my assessment of you." Absently, she pulled on her black leather gloves.

"No and yes," the blonde sighed, reluctantly releasing her hold on Regina. She crossed her arms, glaring through the window, and was relieved her parents remained in the booth. "I still wish you had let me arrest them and Blue," she quietly seethed.

Heartened, but tired of having the same conversation, Regina tightly squeezed the sheriff's right biceps with her left hand, drawing the other woman's full attention. "It's not worth the trouble it would have engendered," she stated when their eyes met. Her lips curled in open affection. It was touching, having someone care enough to apologize for another's actions.

"Wouldn't decent people try to apologize?" Emma weakly questioned, aware she was pushing the issue.

Letting her hand slide down the blonde's arm, the former mayor's head tilted as a broad smile brightened her face, lazily clasping the hand captured in hers. "It's sweet you thought they might," she sincerely praised, unhurriedly releasing her friend's hand. "But, you continue to confuse this world's norms with the other's," she smoothly chided, arching an eyebrow in silent contest.

"That place sucks," the sheriff grumbled, missing the warm touch of soft leather.

"Hmm, the lack of indoor plumbing is especially bothersome," the brunette casually offered with a solicitous wink. A warm, fuzzy feeling tickled her sensibilities at the resulting nervous chuckle and bashful head duck.

Rolling her eyes, the blonde grinned. She stuffed her hands in the front pockets of her jeans and sarcastically commented in a very dry tone, "Knowing what leaves would make good toilet paper was not what came to mind when learning about my heritage."

Regina laughed. It was full and bright and electrified the air. She smiled unhindered at her favored companion. "But vitally important to avoid pesky rashes," she added with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes.

In that moment, Emma was captivated, forgetting everything, and as she observed her giggling friend, she wondered with amusement, "Are you buzzed?" Instantly, she winced, glancing over her shoulder at Bruce and Qingzhao across the street at Granny's.
Following the blonde's look, the former mayor sighed in mild irritation. "I'm, perhaps, a tad tipsy. I am not, however, inebriated," she replied with perfect enunciation, cocking a challenging eyebrow at her escort. However, she decided to embrace the spontaneity of the moment. She was, after all, very well protected. So, she smiled and took a step toward Emma.

"Uh huh," the sheriff smirked, finding this new layer of Regina Mills far too intriguing. A sense of pride washed over her as she realized just how much her friend trusted her, how much the Crows Guard trusted her if they weren't swooping in and sweeping them home. "Well, after half a gallon of beer, I wouldn't be surprised if you were a little," she teased, basking in their closeness.

"I'd pass your sobriety test, Sheriff," the brunette promised, lifting her chin in defiance. With practiced grace, she smoothly turned on her heel and leisurely strutted down the sidewalk, allowing a bit more sway in her hips. She was almost certain she could make it home, possibly. If not, she had Emma and the others.

"How about a hot fudge sundae, instead?" the blonde countered, forcing her eyes to look upward when her friend turned back around. Slowly, she moved forward, biting her lower lip and nodding her head back toward Granny's.

Quite pleased with the unexpected suggestion, Regina's eyes lit up as she dragged her teeth over her bottom lip. "With a cherry on top?" she asked huskily, popping the P. She closed the distance between them, waiting expectantly for an answer.

"Damn," Emma tittered quietly, completely drawn in by big, brown eyes. "Yeah, sure," she amended as she felt a blush warm her cheeks. Clearing her throat, she weakly explained, "Maybe it'll help sober you up a little."

Moving to link her left arm with the blonde's right, the former mayor rolled her eyes as she leaned against the other woman. "Again, I'm not drunk," she clarified, silently prompting her friend into motion. "Although, it's nice to know my favorite guard is here to escort me," she explained as they started across the empty street. Bringing her lips next to the blonde's ear, she confidentially whispered, "I'm just the tiniest bit unsteady."

Hot breath on her cold ear sent a shiver down the sheriff's spine and covered her body with goosebumps. Shaking her head, she swallowed and nervously snickered, "And you're definitely getting coffee with that ice cream." Yup, because she wasn't sure she could survive drunk Regina.

~SQ~

Bruce straightened in his chair when the door of Dave's Fish 'n' Chips opened, and his queen and the sheriff exited. He watched them have a brief discussion, the former mayor laughing and swaying slightly as the blonde looked on with a smirk. A small snort escaped the lanky guard when he realized that Regina was slightly inebriated. Pressing his lips in a thin line to hide his amusement, the guard noticed his companion observing the scene with wide eyes. While he didn't necessarily approve of the queen drinking to excess when in public, it wasn't his place to say anything. If nothing else, it would be a good learning experience for the two newest members of the Queen's Personal Guard, Qingzhao and Jason. He grunted softly in approval as Jason and Alma circled the diner to cover the back door.

Diego and Irene trailed behind Regina and Emma as they carefully crossed the street to Granny's Diner. They both shook their heads in long-suffering merriment when the queen stumbled a bit, the sheriff deftly catching her with an arm hastily crossing over her waist. If past experience served, Diego was sure that the evening was going to end with a giddy monarch on a sugar high. If Emma thought the suggested coffee was going to help matters, she had another think coming. It took a fair
amount of alcohol to get Regina intoxicated, but it always took an extraordinarily long time for it to depart her system, leaving her tipsy for hours.

"Oops!" came the startled exclamation as the former mayor righted herself. The brunette gripped more tightly to the arm linked with hers, quickly recovering and continuing to sashay toward the diner with her escort. Regina raised her right hand and gave the two guards seated at the bistro table a little finger wave and smile in passing. She successfully traversed the few steps to the door by leaning heavily on Emma, who held the door open for her as they entered Granny's.

Settling on a stool at the counter, Emma glanced around for Ruby, spotting her through the window into the kitchen. With a decisive smack of her hand on the countertop, she called out, "Two of your finest hot fudge sundaes!" While waiting, she checked over her shoulder to find Irene and Diego settling in the second booth from the door, halfway between the entrance and their monarch. The pair had managed to somehow make their presence felt while not being obtrusive or overbearing.

Ruby rolled her eyes and placed the order with the kitchen staff before flouncing out into the diner proper. "What's gotten into you?" she asked with a curious grin, arms akimbo and hips cocked to the side. One of her eyebrows raised in silent laughter as she watched Regina carefully sliding onto a barstool, her motions excruciatingly precise.

Emma smirked at the waitress and explained, "Too much Guinness in this one," pointing at the former mayor with her thumb. "Better pour a cup of coffee for her, too. She needs to sober up a bit before she tries to navigate the stairs at home."

Huffing out an exasperated breath, Regina retorted, "The coffee's not going to work. I'll just be an alert drunk."

The wolf blinked at the candid admission from the normally stoic woman. "Okay, wow. How much did she drink?" she interrogated the sheriff.

"Not enough," the brunette snarked, casting a sideways glance at her companion.

It was with wry amusement that Emma confessed, "We had dinner with my parents." Holding her left hand out, she waved it up and down, gesturing at Regina while shooting Ruby a meaningful look.

The deputy snickered and gave a sage nod. "Say no more." She turned her back briefly to fill a mug with coffee then slid it in front of the former mayor with a cheerful, "Drink up!"

Regina eyed the dark liquid dubiously for a long moment, brow furrowed. Suddenly, her expression cleared, and she gazed at Ruby hopefully, inquiring, "A shot of Bailey's, perhaps?"

Emma shook her head fondly and reproved her friend lightly, "No more alcohol for you, Missy."

"Spoil sport," Regina sulked, bottom lip poking out slightly. She shifted on her stool, crossing her legs primly as she tried to project an air of indifference. It might have worked, too, had her balance not been so precarious, almost sending her toppling off of the seat in the process. She clutched the edge of the counter with white knuckles, grateful and a little mortified to feel Emma's hand pressing lightly into her lower back to stabilize her. "May I at least have the cream and sugar?"

Sliding the condiments down the counter to the other brunette, the waitress turned her attention back on the sheriff. Recalling the faint scowl that had graced her friend's face upon entering the diner, she observed, "So, I take it dinner didn't go well."
Shrugging apathetically, the blonde sighed and groused, "As well as to be expected, I guess."

Regina smiled slyly, emptying a raw sugar packet into her mug. "She demanded reparations," she announced as she delicately poured in just a touch of cream.

Unable to wrap her head around her rather intoxicated friend's continued eloquence, Emma challenged incredulously, "You had a half gallon of beer. How are you not slurring?"

"Talent," came the succinct response, brown eyes half-lidded as she lazily stirred her coffee. The former mayor was feeling pleasantly fuzzy from the alcohol in her system, and she contentedly let Emma's emotions smooth over her in gentle waves. Her lips curled up at the blonde's amusement, even if it was at her expense, enjoying the way it made the warmth in her chest grow.

Ruby propped her forearms on the counter between the two women, leaning forward and looking at the sheriff expectantly before insisting, "So?"

Emma grimaced and lamented, "I wanted them to apologize to Regina for the whole magical lobotomy thing." She just could not understand why her parents couldn't bring themselves to express even the tiniest bit of regret for their actions. Just thinking about it ratcheted up her irritation, definitely not how she wanted to end her day. One glance at the woman beside her, and she felt her anger slipping away. Watching the oh-so-proper Regina Mills attempting to pass as sober when her compromised balance had her wobbling slightly on her stool every time she shifted made for humorous fare.

The waitress gave a slow nod of appreciation. "Bold," she approved. Tilting her head to the side in mock thought, she said, "I would've asked for a new car. Oh, wait," she mused, "you have one of those, already!"

Giving her carefree friend a withering glare, the blonde deadpanned, "Ha ha."

A wicked smile blossomed on Regina's face as she swiveled unsteadily on her stool to pin Ruby with a look full of wide-eyed mischief. "Yes, apparently, her sugar momma bought it for her," she drawled. Pursing her lips briefly, she pouted, "Speaking of sugar, where's my sundae?"

"Geez, hold your horses. It takes a minute," Ruby admonished, secretly delighted at getting a peek at the relaxed, somewhat sloshed, version of the former mayor.

Lowering her coffee mug from where it hovered in front of her lips, Regina stipulated, "I want extra cherries."

The deputy headed into the kitchen to fetch the requested fruit. Leveling a long-suffering stare at the blonde through the pass-through, she asked, "Why did you bring her here?"

Emma grinned unrepentantly and replied, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." Her mood was steadily improving as Regina's magic felt practically effervescent coiling around her.

Over at her booth, Irene was sniggering at the wolf and sheriff, enjoying their shocked reactions to the queen's antics. It wasn't often the put-together woman unwound to such a degree, though the beer she'd consumed was playing a large part in that, at the moment. "Twenty bucks says she'll need Emma to help her up the stairs," she proposed to her fellow guard.

Tilting his head to better assess the situation, Diego retorted, "There's no way she's making it to her room on her own two feet." Shooting her a devilish grin, he stipulated, "Make it fifty, Smith, and if I win, you have to be the one to carry her upstairs."
"Deal," Irene agreed with a smirk. She’d seen how much Regina could drink, and the woman had barely scratched the surface. She was going to be fifty dollars richer before the night was over.

Ruby sauntered back to the counter, setting down a bowl overflowing with cherries in front of the former mayor, waiting for the inevitable sass that was sure to follow. It never came.

Regina's eyes lit up with glee as she caught sight of the plethora of maraschino cherries presented to her. "Oh, stems!" she practically squealed, snatching one out of the bowl and popping the whole thing in her mouth. Her face fell into a neutral mask while she chewed thoughtfully. A moment passed before she reached up to puckered lips and removed a stem tied in a perfect knot, triumphant grin splitting her features.

The waitress stared dumbfounded at the woman before her. "You've got to be shitting me. How did you do that?" she wondered, picking the stem up from the counter where the former queen had set it down.

"Seriously?" Emma muttered, completely flabbergasted.

Peering coyly at the sheriff from under long lashes, Regina purred lowly, "Talent." She eased another cherry between her lips, the movement slowly seductive, the bright red of the fruit standing out starkly from the darker scarlet of her lipstick.

Emma swallowed thickly, fighting the warmth attempting to creep into her cheeks. Gathering her quickly scattering thoughts, she inquired, "Where did you learn to do that? Why would you learn to do that?"

Regina shrugged insouciantly, pulling another knotted stem from her lips. "It was boring growing up in a castle. My cousins and I would have competitions at dinner," she enlightened, thinking of pleasant childhood memories. She thought fleetingly of times spent splashing barefoot in warm surf and sand, chasing cousins through endless orchards, and playing hide-and-seek within a maze of stone, castle walls. Coming back to the present, she elucidated, "I can also drink an entire flagon of mead without pausing."

Across the room, Irene nudged her partner's boot with her toe. "You hear that, Flores?" she taunted quietly, "a whole flagon."

Whistling lowly at the surprising confession, Ruby observed with no small measure of admiration, "Damn, you were a wild child." The order-up bell rang, and she hurried to grab the sundaes. As she put the loaded desserts down in front of her two friends, she appraised the other brunette and challenged, "So, can you tie two together?"

Groaning in defeat, the sheriff reprimanded her, "Ruby, don't encourage her." However, her curiosity got the better of her, and after a beat, she queried doubtfully, "Hold up. Is that even possible?"

Noting the speculative looks they were giving her, the former queen smirked playfully and announced, "Let's find out, shall we?" Reaching into the bowl, she sorted through the cherries, judiciously pulling out two with the longest stems she could find. Tilting her head back, her eyes slid closed as she dropped the tiny globes in her mouth, then, straightened.

Emma stared in rapt fascination while the brunette's jaw worked carefully as she separated the fruit from their stems, chewing gently. When Regina's throat bobbed quickly to swallow the cherries, the blonde felt her stomach do an odd flip. Damn, that's hot, was her first thought, and the sheriff wondered when her mind had gotten so traitorous. No, she decided, I am absolutely not thinking of
Regina that way. It's just not…. Her brain came to a complete and utter stop when Regina gradually opened her eyes and directed a sultry smile at her. Then, her tongue slid past plump, ruby lips, and Emma felt a rush of heat suffuse her body.

Two cherry stems lay intertwined and perfectly knotted on the pink platform. Regina held her gaze as she slowly removed the knot from her tongue and placed it on the counter between them. There was no mistaking the desire that Emma was inadvertently letting slip through the bond, and combined with the undercurrent of caring that was a near constant, the former queen was feeling a bit intoxicated in more ways than one. She quirked an eyebrow as her mouth curled up in a smug smile, teeth catching briefly on her bottom lip.

Diego grinned fiercely as Irene dropped her forehead into her palm and let out a pained groan. "Gods be damned. I swear she didn't drink that much," she muttered sullenly.

Ruby leaned back against the prep station behind her, arms crossed over her chest and blue eyes wide as she gawked at her friends flirting. Her nostrils flared momentarily as the faint scent of arousal reached her across the counter. She barely contained her laughter when Emma was the first to break eye contact, and Regina's eyes flashed with something like victory. "Whelp, color me impressed," she quipped, breaking the lingering silence.

Picking up her spoon, Regina dug into her sundae, and pausing just before eating the cold confection, she cooed, "I'm very good with my tongue." She closed her lips around the ice cream, flipping the utensil over before deliberately gliding it out of her mouth, expression the epitome of wicked innocence.

Giving in to her amusement, Ruby chuckled while the sheriff shifted uncomfortably on her barstool. "Good to know," she acknowledged with a wink at Emma.

Emma hunched further over her sundae, avoiding both brunettes' eyes. Her hair fell forward, hiding the dark blush that bloomed across her face at Regina's blatant display of sensuality and Ruby's knowing gaze. She was beginning to regret her decision to stop at Granny's. The former mayor had been right; she was an alert drunk going on a sugar high. Just as her tension was starting to reach epic levels, the blonde was jolted out of her worries by a minor commotion at the guards' table.

"Why didn't you tell me she skipped lunch, today?!" Irene protested loudly. His resultant chortling only aggravated her further, and she complained, "Damnit, Flores, she's a lot heavier than she looks!"

Overhearing her personal guards' conversation, and knowing their penchant for making wagers about her behavior, Regina realized Irene had most likely just recognized that she'd lost whatever bet they had going, and possibly, a little dignity in the process. Seeing the normally stoic guard lose her composure started Regina on a giggling fit. After a few moments, it became apparent that she had fully hit the giddy stage of inebriation, her merriment not abating. It wasn't long before all three women were filling the diner with their laughter, and Emma basked in the exhilaration of her and Regina's magic twining between them with such joyfulness.

~SQ~

In the wee hours of the morning and well beyond the border of Storybrooke, Greg Mendell sat and waited in his car alongside Route 6, staring into his driver-side mirror. He spotted headlights cresting the hill down the empty country road and got out of his car. The cold bite in the night air invigorated him as he stepped around to lean against the trunk lid. Everything was finally coming together. Patiently, he waited for the mid-sized SUV pulling an eight-foot cargo trailer to park right behind him. A wide grin spread across his face as he saw Tamara Green, his girlfriend and current
partner, get out of the SUV. "Have any trouble finding the place?" he asked, straightening.

"Not at all," she responded, slamming the driver-side door closed. Meeting him halfway, she slipped into his embrace, wrapping her arms around his neck. "I've missed you," she whispered, kissing him deeply.

"I can tell," he teased, kissing along her neck and jaw. "How long do you have?" He looked in her eyes as he ran his hands up and down her back.

Tilting her head to one side, Tamara considered her agenda for the next few hours. "I told Neal I'd call him when I got close to the border. So, we have four hours or so," she answered, punctuating each sentence with a peck on the lips.

"Let's get the lab setup," Greg instructed with a resolute nod. However, he didn't release his girlfriend, keeping his arms firmly around her waist. A mischievous smile teased his lips as he quietly promised, "And I'll show you just how much I missed you."

After another searing kiss, they climbed back into their respective vehicles and traveled through the empty, quiet streets to Storybrooke Cannery Company on the far side of the harbor. The vacant warehouse, on the edge of the cannery's property, needed modest repairs and, as such, was only rarely used beyond storing equipment during the offseason. It, of course, smelled damp and fishy, but the structure provided a suitable base of operations, allowing the duo to work in private without the risk of interruptions or discovery. So, with little hassle, Greg Mendell's car and the unhitched cargo trailer were secured inside the building, and once the equipment was unloaded, both car and trailer were covered with heavy, canvas tarps just like the random pieces of stored cannery machinery. Then, all the cases and crates were relocated to a large, secluded office at the remote end of the warehouse. It was perfect.

Stepping up to a desk covered with notes, file folders, and photographs, Tamara spotted a large, black diamond sitting in a small, glass dish off to the side. She remembered it from the reports. Curious, she picked it up, saying, "So, this is the fail-safe device." It was lighter than she had expected.

"Apparently," Greg commented, walking up behind his partner. He rested his left hand on her right shoulder as he shuffled through his scattered pile of folders on the desk. Finding the one he was looking for, he flipped it open, jabbing a photo as he shared, "It was exactly where the Home Office said it would be." He chuckled darkly and added, "I had to kill a wraith dragon to get to it."

"Really? Another dragon?" she asked surprised, glancing at Mendell. She studied the various photos snapped by her partner's body camera during the retrieval. The beast was huge though strangely cartoonish with purple scales, glowing, green eyes, and ivory-colored horns. Hearing his rueful, breathy laugh, she refocused on him.

"It was all theatrics," he explained with a broad smile. Stepping away, he opened a black, equipment case on a side table and lifted a matte silver, futuristic-looking handgun with a two-inch-wide barrel. "The Hand Canon took care of that vile creature in one shot," he boasted, holding up his prized weapon. "Good thing, too. This thing has a hell of a kick," he added, offering the weapon to Green.

Taking the gun, Tamara smiled ruefully as she examined the firearm. She'd seen them in the supply depot. "Boys and your toys," she teased with a smirk, handing the gun back. Then, she wondered aloud, "Do you think it can take out the Dark One?"

Returning the weapon to the case, Greg considered the question. Finally, he shrugged, admitting,
"That lame dragon incinerated to ash." He nodded to the case as he flipped it closed, snapping the latches. "This bad boy can take out anything," he bragged. Facing his girlfriend, he rehashed their agenda. "Once you get the lay of the land, we'll move on to the next phase. We'll have to hit our targets fast. Regina has bodyguards, but they keep a pretty standard rotation and shouldn't be too much of a setback with the Tasers and tranquilizer darts."

"She's the one who killed your father?" she prompted delicately, reaching a hand out and affectionally stroking his left biceps.

"I don't know," he quietly admitted, but with a quick shake of his head, he frowned and gritted out, "But, I'm going to find out one way or another." His eyes glazed over as he fantasied about finally getting an answer.

"I know you've worked hard for this moment, Greg, but we've got to play this smart," Tamara gently warned her lover. Sometimes, she knew, he could lose sight of the goal. "We can't forget our mission," she reminded him, cupping his cheeks, her thumb lovingly stroking his face.

"I know, I know," Greg acknowledged, patting the hand on his arm. Nodding toward the desk, he leaned forward and shuffled another file folder. He flipped through a series of pages and photos in the file before stopping and pointing. "They're growing some sort of bean that'll cross worlds." He relayed their latest assignment, pushing the folder in front of her, "We've been instructed to send in samples and destroy the rest."

Sorting through the pictures and field notes, she questioned, "Are they ready to harvest?"

"Almost, we've been instructed to wait a few days before we make our move on the beans," he answered, flipping through another set of notes. "In the meantime, you have a loose end to deal with," he added with a heavy sigh as he pointed to an 8x10 picture of Pinocchio.

"He's wood," Tamara gasped in surprise, picking up the photo. A sneer crossed her face as she dropped it back onto the table. "That should be easy enough," she assured her partner. She knew just how to take the puppet out. "The Home Office speculated he'd sought refuge here when he started to turn, but they couldn't confirm," she shared.

Closing the file folder, Greg rolled his eyes. The files needed to be packaged and shipped back to HQ before they proceeded. "They should've just laid siege on this place and slaughtered them all," he grumbled, glaring at the mountain of evidence he'd collected the past few months. He snorted at how complacent the townsfolk had become to his continued presence.

"We are, Greg," she intoned, pointing at the fail-safe device. She smiled sweetly, looking at her boyfriend adoringly. "Why unnecessarily risk human life when that can do all the heavy lifting?" she prompted, leaning forward and planting a chaste kiss on his cheek.

"True," he agreed, smiling.

Glancing at her watch, Tamara sighed as she rolled her neck and shoulders. "I'll text you later," she informed, stepping back and fishing her car keys out of her coat pocket. "I need to get back to the border before the town starts waking up," she reminded her partner. Thank God she only had a few more days of playing the dutiful fiancé.

Quickly grabbing her hand, Greg firmly instructed, "Be careful, I've witnessed some messed up shit." And he was certain what he had managed to record was only the tip of the iceberg.

"I will," she promised, punctuating it with a quick peck on the lips. She flashed a saucy smile,
adding, "We'll get together after I get settled in."

~SQ~

End of Part 11
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Enjoy this chapter, dear readers, as this is the last one before the majority of the dreaded reader advisories begin. The plot starts snowballing from here on out; some elements are familiar while others are new. Also, have we mentioned this story is huge? We had to add an extra part before Neverland because there's just so much. Don't worry, we have this mapped out for a good, long while. It's more about finding the time to write than deciding what to write. Also, if you see your native language being butchered, please let us know so we can correct it. In addition, we're nursing a story blog on Tumblr; search for NCFN. It's nothing special, but we'll post sneak peaks and excerpts prior to posting an update. We may even share our ideas for little details for future parts.

Co-Author/Beta's Note: This little fucker of a chapter kept me up editing until after midnight. I think I caught everything, but damn if this one wasn't a pain in the ass. I knew I should have edited more as we went. Hopefully, you guys like it as much as I do. Happy reading!

Warning: Some violence (child abuse) contained within this chapter.

Thank You for all the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. We do enjoy hearing your thoughts.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~SQ~

PART 12

Ruby set down Regina's coffee and Emma's hot chocolate, hovering at the edge of the table, smirk firmly in place. "So, how's the hangover this morning?" she asked the consultant in a chipper tone.

"Good morning, Ruby," Regina acknowledged with a smile as she prepared her coffee. "I'm sure you'll be disappointed to know that I have no hangover, today. While you were under the impression that I was inebriated last night, I had most certainly not drunk enough to leave me in such a wretched state," she haughtily advised, brown eyes sparkling with merriment.

Eyebrows high in disbelief, the waitress teasingly rebutted, "Really? So, it's completely normal for you to practically make love to your dessert spoon?"

Blinking a few times at the surprising retort, the former queen turned a sly smile on the deputy and purred, "I assure you, had I made love to anything, as you so colorfully phrased it, there would have been no doubt."

Emma coughed as she choked on her cocoa, and Ruby helpfully patted her back and laughed at her
friend's reaction. "Take it easy there, Em. Regina can't help it if she's sex on a stick."

It was Regina's turn to splutter over her beverage and eye the werewolf dubiously. Quickly gathering her wits, she chastised with feigned indignance, voice low, "Really, Miss Lucas. Didn't your grandmother teach you how to properly address royalty?"

"Sure. She also told me not to flirt with the customers, but you see what good that did," she replied with a wink at the other brunette. Her mood sobered as she caught sight of a copy of the Daily Mirror on a nearby table. "Did you see the Journey Home article? It made the front page." A faint grimace crossed her face. "I sat in on the first couple of meetings, and I still can't wrap my head around the whole thing," she mumbled quietly, casting a quick glance around to make sure they weren't overheard.

Regina hummed sympathetically as she took a sip of her coffee. "Yes, Snow White's boundless optimism strikes again," she stated dryly from behind her mug.

Snorting in amused agreement, Emma commented on the newspaper article, saying, "They're not even their beans. They're Anton's beans." She paused briefly to consider her mother and her sycophants. "Are they going to buy some? How much does a magic bean run, anyway?" she questioned, brow furrowed.

"I assume one dried up cow," was Regina's sardonic response.

Laughing, Ruby shook her head and walked away as the pick-up bell sounded.

Emma smirked and quipped, "Well, don't tell Sam Fletcher that. He's still griping about Dean Bridges's son's damn cow." Giving her companion a meaningful look, she added, "I wouldn't put it past him to sneak her out of the pasture and try to barter her." The resultant delighted laugh and unchecked smile made the blonde grin, always happier when she got to see the brunette's softer side. Changing topics, she asked, "So, what's on the agenda today?"

Regina raised an eyebrow in a parody of surprise. "Aren't you the sheriff?" she queried pointedly. "I believe it's your job to decide what happens in your department."

"Yeah, but you ran the whole town for almost thirty years. I'm just deferring to your expertise," Emma razzed her, eyes wide with feigned guilelessness.

Letting out a good-natured huff, the brunette pointed a finger at the sheriff and warned, "Stay your apple-polishing. I got you caught up on your reports," she reminded her, a faint grin tugging at the corners of her mouth.

Nodding in agreement, Emma admitted, "And it's greatly appreciated."

Regina held up her empty mug, tilting it slightly in her friend's direction. "Enough to get me a refill?" she asked sweetly, batting her lashes lightly.

The blonde rolled her eyes at the playful request, enjoying the comfortable banter they had developed. "Yeah, yeah," she mumbled and took the mug, standing to head to the counter. As she was about to turn, she was jostled when a scowling Leroy sidled by the table.

A malicious gleam in his eyes, the dwarf sneered at the blonde, "Woof, woof, Sheriff." Shooting both women a dirty look, he continued past them to join his brothers at a table in the back corner of the diner.

Emma's mouth dropped open as she stared dumbly after the grumpy man. It took her a moment for
his words to sink in, but once they had, she inquired indignantly, "Did he just call me your bitch?"

Staggered, the consultant quietly confirmed, "That did seem to be his implication."

Face darkening with anger, her fists clenched tightly, and she snarled, "That dwarf's starting to push it."

Seeing the blonde gearing up to follow Leroy and start a fight, Regina effectively diffused the sheriff's temper with a simple question. "Would it truly be that bad?" she teased coyly, gazing up at her with a hint of a seductive pout.

Emma froze, caught off guard by the brunette's tone and coquettish expression. She stammered, "I . . . I don't know. No?" Face beet red and eyes slightly wild, she squeaked, "I'll be right back," and beat a hasty retreat to the counter with the empty coffee mug.

Regina smirked wickedly and leaned back in her seat, pleased with herself. It had been a while since she'd flustered the blonde quite so thoroughly, the previous night notwithstanding. Despite the swirling of Emma's embarrassment, she could feel their magic almost frolicking along the bond and wondered at the unusually carefree sensations filling her. It made her feel lighter, somehow, and she considered that she should tease the sheriff more often if this was the result. Her musings were cut short as the blonde returned with a full mug, setting it in front of her before sliding into her seat. "Thank you, Dear." Taking a long sip of the hot beverage, her eyes slid shut in bliss as she murmured huskily, "There's nothing like a piping hot cup of coffee on a cold morning. It helps warm up the evil in me."

"I think it's already warmed up," the sheriff muttered, cheeks still faintly pink as she avoided eye contact.

Chuckling lowly, the brunette gently chided, "Don't pout."

She was saved from coming up with a response when she glanced up as the bell above the door announced new arrivals. Hastily, she slid her cocoa and silverware across the table, got out of her seat, and proceeded to scoot into the booth next to Regina.

"What are you doing?" the consultant questioned, even as she automatically moved over to make room for her friend.

Releasing a heavy sigh, Emma whispered, "Neal just came in, and I think he has Tamara with him."

Shooting the blonde a perplexed look, she prompted, "And?"

"He might've mentioned introducing her to us," came the quiet confession, the sheriff worrying her lower lip with her teeth.

Regina narrowed her eyes and groused, "A little warning would've been nice."

Emma leaned close and hissed, "I didn't know he'd do it today." She straightened abruptly and plastered on a sickly smile as her ex and his fiancé approached their table.

Neal was beaming as he greeted them, "Hey, guys, this is Tamara, my fiancé." Turning to the dark woman beside him, he added, "Tamara, this is Emma and Regina, Henry's moms."

Tamara flashed a hesitant grin as she regarded the two women. "Hello," she acknowledged quietly.
The brunette gave her a halfway genuine politician's smile and said, "A pleasure to meet you, Dear."

"Hi," the blonde responded flatly, wincing when her booth mate subtly elbowed her in the ribs. Trying to appear interested, she asked politely, "Would you like to join us?"

Shifting uneasily on his feet, the janitor looked at his fiancé and shrugged. "It's up to you."

Tilting her head in consideration, Tamara finally nodded. "Thank you. That would be nice," she agreed as she slid into the booth opposite Regina, Neal settling next to her. An uncomfortable silence fell over the group until Ruby came to get everyone's orders.

"So, how are you finding our quaint, little town?" Regina inquired, sipping at her coffee as she eyed the newcomer warily. While she wanted to give the woman the benefit of the doubt, her years at court in castles playing elaborate games of political chess warned her that there was something false about Neal's fiancé. She would bear watching.

The dusky woman released a nervous chuckle and said, "It's interesting. It's a lot to take in, but I'm adjusting." She took Neal's hand in her own and elaborated, "Neal's been a great help. He even made me a cheat sheet." There was some fumbling in her purse as she glanced between the two women across from her, finally pulling out a paper with a list of names on it. Pursing her lips briefly, she began slowly, "So, you're the queen," pointing at Regina. Shifting her focus to Emma, she finished, "And you're the savior."

Emma was honestly surprised at the lack of the typical evil adjective and leveled Neal with questioning look and an arched eyebrow. He simply shrugged and shot them a self-conscious smile.

Tamara missed the silent exchange, busy studying the list as she glanced around the diner. Nodding in Ruby's direction, she whispered, "Is she the werewolf?"

That broke some of the tension at the table, and the rest of the conversation was pleasant, if a bit stilted from time to time, as their meals arrived and breakfast was eaten.

Regina waited while Emma exited the diner and held the door open for her. Tightening her coat around herself, she commented, "That was different."

Scowling as she shoved her hands into her coat pockets, the blonde trudged over to the Charger. "I don't trust him," she declared as she settled into the driver's seat, buckling her seatbelt after starting the car.

The brunette's eyebrows nearly climbed off her forehead as she asked incredulously, "You don't trust Neal?" Shaking her head in disbelief, she scoffed, "No word about the stranger, but you disparage Neal, whom I might add, you trust with our son."

Emma rolled her eyes and huffed exasperatedly, "Come on, like you don't know he's playing us, playing you." Her expression was dark as she drove through town to the Sheriff's Department.

"How so?" the consultant demanded, brows furrowing as her companion hit the stops harder than necessary, accelerating just a little too fast each time.

The sheriff shrugged roughly, fingers drumming on the steering wheel. "He totally skipped the whole evil thing. Like he hasn't heard that preached all over town," she jeered. Her past experience with the man had every instinct screaming that he had an ulterior motive for being so nice to Regina. It had put her on the defensive. "Ever since he brought over that vial of water, I've had this
feeling like he's angling for something—something other than spending time with Henry."

Reeling slightly from the casual reminder of her past, the brunette bristled, snarling, "You think I would fall for such chicanery?" The idea that the blonde would still see her that way after their difficult struggle toward understanding stung in a way that she couldn't define.

Swinging the car sharply into its spot in front of the station, she shoved the gear shift into park, cut the ignition, and exclaimed, "No! Maybe. I don't know!" She crossed her arms petulantly, then, directed a sideways glance at the woman beside her. One look at the betrayal swimming in those dark eyes had her uncrossing her arms and visibly deflating. "Look, that came out wrong," she apologized, placing her hand over the brunette's. "Neal duped me once—twice, really, if you count him knowing about all the savior crap. He could be running some con on us. I don't trust him, and by association, I don't trust her. So, I worry," she finished quietly, the about you left unsaid.

Regina relaxed at the waves of protectiveness rolling off of Emma and turned her hand over to grasp the blonde's. Giving the hand in hers a reassuring squeeze, she probed carefully, "Was that so hard?"

The sheriff grumbled a reluctant, "Yes," clenching her fingers briefly to punctuate her admission. They sat in comfortable silence for a few moments, interrupted only by the car's engine ticking as it cooled. Finally, she added, "Plus, Tamara pings my superpower."

"You mean your internal lie detector," the consultant stated flatly, better understanding her friend's discomfiture in light of this information.

Emma was frustrated with feeling like they were always one second out of synch with the curveballs being thrown their way. "Yeah," she confirmed with a nod. "She pings it and makes it all wonky."

Smirking at the term, Regina snorted. "Wonky?" Becoming serious, she pursed her lips lightly before agreeing, "I concur. Something does seem off with Mr. Cassidy's guest."

The blonde collapsed against her seat and muttered a relieved, "Thank God, it's not just me. So, what do we do about it?" she queried, shifting to watch the woman beside her.

The brunette tilted her head in concession. "What can we do about it? We only have aspersions to cast her direction, nothing concrete." Though her tone was deceptively mild, her eyes were filled with a simmering determination.

"So, we let Neal and creepy fake lady hang out with Henry in our house?" the sheriff challenged. Sighing heavily, she groused, "I had been hoping for a brilliant plan to uncover whatever diabolical plot she has going."

Regina arched an eyebrow, a small smile playing about her lips as she wryly deflected, "Sherlock Holmes I am not, Dear. I do need a bit more information to formulate a hypothesis. However, I doubt anything unseemly will happen with the Crows Guard milling about."

Chuckling at the thought, she snarked, "Monty's going to love this. Please let me be there when you tell him," the blonde requested with an impish smirk.

A rich laugh filled the car as the brunette reached for her door handle. Winking playfully, she teased, "Careful, Dear, your devious streak is showing."

~SQ~
Neal shoved his hands deeper into his coat pockets as he stood on the dock, contemplating the *Jolly Roger*. It had been literal centuries since he'd set foot on the ship, and he had to admit that a part of him was nostalgic for the easy comradery with the crew, if not the infamous captain. He was so lost in his memories, he didn't notice the dark figure approaching.

Hook strode quickly down the dock, a bag of produce hanging from his namesake, and came to a halt when he caught sight of the man loitering beside his ship. "Baelfire," he exclaimed softly in surprise.

"Hook," he greeted with a dismissive glance over his shoulder. Returning his focus to the *Jolly Roger*, he commented wryly, "I would've thought you'd be gone by now."

The pirate shook his head slowly. "Nay. Once I heard Emma had found you, I had to stay. I had to see you," he added quietly, eyes soft as he gazed at the man whom he had once hoped to call his son.

Whirling around to face the other man, Neal's brow furrowed in consternation. Anger had edged into his voice when he snapped, "Why? Our relationship was nothing but a lie." He sharply remembered the moment he'd found the drawing of his mother, when he'd realized that the man who had fished him out of the ocean was the same one who'd stolen his mother away from her family, from him.

"It wasn't!" Hook denied, dropping his bag and quickly closing the distance between them. His hand began to extend toward Neal, but fell back to his side in the face of the hard stare directed his way. "We were coming back for you, Bae. Milah loved you."

The janitor barked out a humorless laugh and sneered, "She sure had a funny way of showing it."

Hook sighed heavily, wanting to impress upon him how much his mother had really wanted him. "Milah was in a bad place when we met, and I . . . I regret my role in taking her away from you. But you need to understand, once she vanquished her demons, she thought of you daily," he explained earnestly, "and when you were of appropriate age, we were going to come for you," he concluded fondly.

"All I'm hearing is words, Hook. The same ones you fed me centuries ago," came the tired reply. He tipped his head back slightly, staring at the overcast sky, eyes squinting against the sun as it came out from behind a cloud.

A scowl crossed his face when Neal refused to listen to him. Irritated by the continued resistance, he snarled, "The seas are no place for children. Neverland should've taught you that."

Neal leveled the pirate with a cold glare and intoned lowly, "Neverland taught me I can't trust anyone." The island had been a literal hell for him during his stay with the Lost Boys. In hindsight, perhaps he would have been better off staying on the *Jolly Roger*, but he had been young and too sure of his own black-and-white view of the world to give Killian Jones a real chance. Done with heavy conversations for the time being, he began to walk away, eyes focused on the planks under his feet.

Unable to let him leave it at that and tired of the crocodile taking everything from him, Hook demanded imperiously, "You'd trust the Dark One, the man who killed your own mother?" Rumpelstiltskin had taken his love, his revenge, and the boy who could have been part of his family. He refused to let the imp ruin the possibility of a second chance at a relationship with the last vestige of his lost love, Milah.
Pausing with his back to Hook, Neal admitted tiredly, "I don't trust him, but I have to talk to him. It's a necessary evil. He's my father," he concluded with a resigned shrug.

"Don't lose sight of what he is, Bae. The man who was your father died a long time ago," Hook reminded him shrewdly, wondering if Neal was willfully blinding himself to the Dark One's true nature or if he was honestly that naïve.

The janitor whipped around angrily, sick to death of hearing about how horrible a person his father was. "I know that!" Yes, he was a monster, but he was still his father. Having discovered Henry, he suddenly had a better understanding of how easy it was to screw up father-son relationships. "And just because you loved my mother doesn't give you a free pass to be in my life," he shouted, some of the pain finally breaking free with the words.

The pirate took a step toward him and retorted hotly, "At least I want to be in your life. You've told me yourself how the crocodile let you go, let you fall through that portal." Pointing at himself with his right hand, he affirmed, "I kept you safe from Peter Pan, and we weren't even blood. I kept you safe because I loved you." Looking at the adult Baelfire standing belligerently before him, he was certain that he would always see the boy's mother in him and, therefore, would forever seek absolution until it was given.

"I was just part of your plan to get your revenge on my father." Fixing him with an expression of disdain, he muttered, "You don't know me."

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Hook murmured softly, "But I did once, and I'd like to again."

The confession shook Neal and left him feeling flustered and on suddenly uncertain ground. "I don't know," was his equally quiet response. Gathering himself with a deep breath, he set his lips in a firm line and did a quick about face, hunching over as he hurriedly left the docks, too many conflicting emotions swirling within him.

Hook watched Neal leave in silence. He stared after the man for several long minutes before he came back to himself, gathered up his bag, and boarded his ship.

~SQ~

It was almost pitch black outside when August Booth opened his eyes, strangely feeling inebriated, which shouldn't have been possible. After blinking a few times and moderately adjusting to the moonlight peeking in through the trailer windows, he tried to move, but his limbs felt extremely heavy. Then, he realized, he was tied down to the bed in the back of the camper. Panic flooded him as he fought against the bindings. The poor light and his dull sense of touch made assessing his situation nearly impossible. However, he heard breathy laughter. "Who's there?" he demanded with far more confidence than he felt.

"Hello, August," Tamara purred, removing her night-vision goggles. She fumbled in the dark for a brief moment, lighting a single tea light candle. The writer gasped, "Tamara?" straining to see the woman in the dim light. He never forgot a voice, especially that of a beautiful woman who screwed him over. "What are you doing in Storybrooke?" he hurriedly questioned, remembering her from Hong Kong months ago.

Assessing her engagement ring which she was sure had been stolen, Green girlishly teased, "Didn't you hear? I'm engaged to Neal," she replied. Sighing for dramatic effect, she continued in a sing-song tone, "We've been the talk of this magical town." Then, she laughed.
"You're engaged to the Dark One's son?" he asked in disbelief. Shaking his head, he couldn't believe how he had missed this development. He'd been so careful, so methodical. Something must have happened after he left Neal in New York City.

"So, it would appear," she responded in a bored tone. She crossed her legs after stowing the goggles in a tote bag by her feet. "How have you been, August?" she inquired, only slightly curious. She didn't think there was much intel to extract from him. "How long has it been?" she added, smiling to herself. "We haven't talked since Hong Kong." That had been quite the fulfilling mission.

Shaking his head, August blurted, "You killed the dragon, didn't you? You never needed his help," he whispered. Suddenly, he thrashed valiantly against his bindings. "Why would you do that?" he shouted, stopping his fruitless struggle. It was no use. Obviously, she had managed to get the drop on him while he was distracted with his writing by the campfire.

"Yes, I killed that vile beast," Tamara snarled, feeling triumphant. She leaned forward, her hands gripping her knees as she boasted of her victory, "It was surprisingly easy." Pausing, she tilted her head to one side before prompting, "So, does this make me a dragon slayer?"

Releasing a mocking bark, the writer tauntingly answered, "Hardly." Killing a feral dragon that ravaged the countryside was one thing, but killing a shapeshifting sorcerer, that was something else entirely. And he wasn't going to let her have that win. "How did you find Storybrooke?" he deflected.

Green was mildly disappointed that the puppet-man wasn't playing, but she decided to go down his rabbit hole. "It was simple, really," she replied in an uninterested tone, sitting back. Her gaze traced the simple lines of the camper as she continued in indifference, "We followed you, and given Kurt Flynn's very detailed reports, it wasn't that difficult."

"Who?" he rasped. The name didn't ring a bell, and he had no frame of reference. Not for the first time since his father shoved him into that wardrobe, he felt far out of his depth. "Who are you working with?" he asked because maybe, just maybe, he could get this information to the savior.

She considered her answer for a very long time. Until finally, she made a choice and responded with a whimsical retort, "Well, you're going to die, anyway." It was a matter of fact. Only one of them was going to walk out of that trailer. "You write stories," she stated, linking her hands on her lap. "How about I tell you one, hmm?" She took a deep breath, not really caring what he wanted, and launched into her own story. Her voice started off calm and steady as she began, "My aunts and mother had a very successful business, but something happened between them." She shook her head, remembering the very day everything turned sour. So many missed opportunities had been stolen from her. "One day, mother was healthy, and the next, she suffered a severe stroke." She pursed her lips as the injustice of it all. Her tone was hot as she continued, "It was hard, taking care of Mom, and of course, my aunts didn't help. They didn't care. We were alone."

The hate for those women she had called family boiled under her skin. Her voice was tight as she went on, "My aunts lived a very comfortable life while we struggled. I put mother in a state facility, a horrible place." Laughing at the irony, the muscles in her shoulders relaxed, and she shook her head, smiling briefly. "At my wits end, I swallowed my pride and went to confront my aunts. It must've all been part of their grand plan because when I entered their house, I learned they'd been practicing witchcraft," she spat with hate lacing her tone. She despised her heritage of twisted roots, tainted blood and wicked ways. "My own mother had been practicing with them for years," she snarled, feeling spittle fly from her mouth. "They'd sacrificed my mother's health for another prosperous year, and they would've used me for another if the Chantry hadn't saved me."

And
when she said her savior's name, she was once again calm and at peace with herself. She took a deep breath, relaxed, and knew within her heart her mission would succeed. Their world would be cleansed.

*That's a hell of a tale,* August thought as he recognized the madness in her words. There was nothing he could say to bring her back to reason. After all, it had taken him turning back into wood before he returned to his own mission. "The Chantry? Tamara, those people are crazy," he lightly chided her for falling in with them. Of course, he'd heard stories about them and had wisely avoided them at all costs.

"They saved me from a fate worse than death," Tamara snapped. She was a true faithful. She would never be dissuaded from her righteous path.

Releasing a heavy exhale, the writer questioned, "Did they save your mom?" It was a long shot, and it wasn't entirely unheard of for the Chantry to save what they considered an unworthy individual to garner favor with a potential servant.

"She got what she deserved," Green sneered, standing from the chair. Her fists shook violently at her sides. Through gritted teeth, she snarled, "She can rot in that nursing home." She paused, lifting her head high. Her voice took on a tone of admiration as she spewed the virtues of her new family, "The Chantry saved me from my aunts' evil magic. They showed me how I can save others from magic's tyranny." Calm, once again, settled throughout her being. "Of course, we can only save humans," she clarified, glaring down at the creature tied to the bed.

"I'm human," he whispered. He was real, damnit! Fear rattled his resolve as he tugged at his bindings. He'd just lost his way for a while, that was all.

A dark smile curled her lips as she bent over and slipped the tote's strap across her chest. "No, Pinocchio. I don't think so," she countered with no hint of remorse. Pulling out a small canister, she flipped open the spout and vigorously spread the liquid contents all over the camper's bedroom.

"What are you going to do?" August softly questioned. He had a feeling his time was coming to an end, and he would have to make a very important choice. His hands flexed nervously.

Dumping the last few drops on the foot of the mattress, Tamara spoke with pride and impending accomplishment. "We're going to extinguish all magic, but first, we'll destroy Storybrooke. The Chantry will make this world pure and good again," she stated with great satisfaction.

Shaking his head, the writer sharply retorted, "Good people don't hurt innocents." No one ever cared about the collateral damage.

"Oh, I know I'm good, but you are far from innocent," Green scoffed, tossing the empty canister into the corner of the small room. It landed with a muted thump. "You're a filthy, unnatural creature," she taunted. Picking up the tea light, she lifted the dim candle toward her face as she cruelly shared her preference, "If I had the means, I would transport you to the holding facility myself and let them chisel and sand you down, but alas, there's a larger plan in play." She truly did wish she had the time, but there would be opportunities for other discoveries to be made.

"What plan?" he whispered, almost afraid to push for an answer. Although, his sense of smell was also greatly diminished, he had a good idea about what was coming next.

She was quiet for a long moment. However, she didn't see the harm in the puppet knowing the fate of his friends. "The queen has a fail-safe device woven into her curse, and we have it. Once we finish our mission, we're going to end this town and everyone in it," she replied, staring at the
"Please, you can't!" August pleaded, pulling at the bindings. It was in that moment that he made his choice. He had to find and tell Emma what was happening.

Tamara chortled darkly as a smile of delight graced her face in the flickering candlelight. "We can, and we will," she promised. Slowly, she lowered the tea light to the mattress, but she paused right before the flame licked the damp spot. With feigned sadness, she quietly whispered, "It's a shame you won't be around to tell anyone about it." Then, she allowed the fire to ignite the liquid, and she grinned.

The old, dry mattress erupted into flames. Struggling with new vigor, the writer pulled and twisted against the chains, desperate to break free. As the fire tickled his limbs, he screamed. The last thing he heard before the roar of the inferno was her laughter as she left the trailer.

Getting out of the grey Charger, Regina's intelligent gaze swept the organized chaos before her, taking in the growing crowd of gawkers and the various emergency personnel. She pushed the passenger-side door firmly shut as she finally focused on Widow Granger's burning house. Storybrooke's two fire engines, already on scene, had contained the blaze and were slowly extinguishing it. She watched as Emma jogged over to Deputies Puma and Hart. Her jaw twitched as she suspected the fire was deliberate.

"Can't we do anything?" Jason quietly asked his queen, climbing out of the backseat of the Charger. He peered over the roof at Qingzhao, standing on the other side of the car. The two shared a sad look. Fire was never to be taken lightly.

"That poor woman," the younger guard whispered, closing her door. Quickly and quietly, she circled the rear of the vehicle, taking position behind the queen, her eyes continually scanning their surroundings.

Sighing softly, the consultant gestured at the flurry of people. "At this point, they have everything under control," she stated in a low tone, assessing the status of the structure. It was unlivable at that point, and more than likely, everything inside was beyond salvaging. Magic was a useful tool, but natural casters had to be very sensible of how they utilized and demonstrated their talents. Saving people from themselves always led to disaster. Readjusting her long coat, she moved toward the sheriff, her guards in tow.

Finishing with Puma and Hart, the sheriff redirected Regina toward Helena Granger and Anton, who were talking to the fire marshal. It was a very heated, one-sided discussion.

"I didn't burn down my own house," Helena snapped with a scowl marring her features. She stabbed her wooden cane forcibly against the asphalt. "I've lived alone with an open flame for over five decades," she seethed, not caring to restrict the volume of her voice. "I may be blind, but I'm not a blooming idiot."

As their paths converged, Emma couldn't hold back the smirk, and she quietly commented to her friend, "Whoa, she's feisty for a little old lady." Perhaps she had misjudged the doddering, elderly herbalist.

"She's a force of nature," Regina agreed, reveling in her old associate's indomitable spirit.

Flustered, Anton attempted to soothe his dear friend's distress. "Please, Helena, calm down," he
gently consoled, very concerned about her blood pressure. His eyes darted around them, smiling upon seeing the sheriff and the witch approach. "I'm sure the marshal is just doing his job." He would deal with the man's insulting insinuations later—treating him as if he were an incompetent caregiver.

Scrunching her face in disbelieving fury, the widow angrily snarled, "His job doesn't include harassing me." She poked at the marshal with her cane, getting in a few, well-placed jabs if his hisses were any indication. "Go put out that fire!" she demanded, raising her voice and her fist. "I have an aloe vera plant that's over twenty years old. Go save it." Her plants were her livelihood; if they were dead, well, her health didn't matter all that much.

"We'll speak again after I can investigate the source of the fire," the fire marshal repeated, taking a step back. He nodded to the sheriff and the consultant in silent greeting, quickly moving away.

Shouting after the stupid man, Helena yelled, "It started in the greenhouse!" Really, how many times did she have to repeat herself? That, right there, was why she lived alone in the forest. At Anton's comforting pat on her shoulder, she relaxed minutely and remembered there were a few exceptions.

"What makes you think that?" Emma questioned in full sheriff mode, her gaze darting between the herbalist and her live-in assistant. Absently, she reached inside the bulky sheriff's department jacket, pulling out a pad and pen.

Huffing, the widow realized the queen's apprentice wasn't much better. "Sheriff," she growled in greeting before barking, "because I know!" She waved her cane out in front of her, hissing in appreciation at the sudden scrape of shoes sliding across pavement.

"Helena," Anton gently chided, shaking his head and looking skyward. However, when the widow sighed in slightly less crossness, he looked fondly at his friend and smiled. He took her continued silence as an opportunity and quickly outlined events, "We were watching The Colbert Report when she heard a pot fall over out back. Then, shortly after, we smelled smoke." With eyes downcast, he shook his head in wounded astonishment, remembering the snaking, consuming flames. "I've never seen a fire spread so quickly," he quietly interjected, lost in the memory.

Feeling Helena's hand squeeze his, he cleared his throat, confidently looked at the sheriff, and continued his narrative, not releasing the hand. "I went to check, thinking a cat got trapped in the greenhouse, again, and by the time I got to the kitchen, the entire building was engulfed in flames." He met Regina's eyes briefly and added, "That's when I called the Fire Department and got us out of the house."

"Okay," Emma acknowledged, finishing her shorthand notes. She peeked over her shoulder and quietly probed, "Where were the beans?"

"In the damn greenhouse, you nitwit," Helena answered in a low growl, gritting her teeth. Lifting her cane, she boldly poked the woman in the chest. Huffing at the lack of response, she slapped it onto the asphalt. "The legume had just produced viable fruit," she clarified in a quiet but heated whisper. "We hadn't told a soul, and now, that beautiful plant is gone," she lamented. For lack of a better description, the plant had glowed with magic.

More upset at his friend's unhappiness than losing the actual plant, Anton cheerfully reminded her, "It'll be okay. We can start over." He affectionately squeezed her hand, keeping her from yanking it away.

"Shush!" the widow weakly scolded, shaking the hand holding hers. "We don't know who's listening," she whispered.
"A sensible precaution," Regina agreed. Of course, she'd maintained an observant eye on the surroundings but hadn't spied anything out of place or character. Glancing over her shoulder, she nodded at the quick shake of Jason's head. No, her guards hadn't noticed anything, either.

"We'll get to the bottom of this, Widow Granger," the sheriff promised.

"Ma'am!" Qingzhao hurriedly interrupted, pointing at a strange figure emerging from a neighbor's backyard. Its movements were jerky and uncoordinated. She squinted as she noticed odd, orangey patches smattered randomly over its body. "What the hell?" she muttered, unsheathing and extending her retractable quarter staff.

Responding to the guard's alert to Regina and waving for Anton to retreat with Helena, Emma instinctually reached around to draw her gun. She purposely repositioned herself in front of the brunette, keeping Jason's flank and trusting Qingzhao had the queen's rear.

Jason shifted forward, taking position between the possible hazard and the queen, his gaze avidly searching the darkness for more threats. With the rotating, flashing lights from the emergency vehicles, he briefly caught glimpses of the black, grotesque creature lumbering toward them. His face contorted in horror as he whispered, "That's a person. They look burned."

Trotting forward, the sheriff was about to call for a paramedic, but her stomach rebelled when she got a better look at all the black char. Bile rolled up her throat as a sickening sweet, woody odor titillated her nostrils. Her eyes went wide as she noticed how the orange spots seemed to shift and change hue. Whoever it was was still burning. "Fuck," she murmured. She couldn't stop herself from retching on the grass.

Seemingly unaffected, Regina quickly moved to Emma's side. She rubbed soothing circles on the coughing woman's back, studying the creature. How it was moving, let alone still alive, she had no earthly idea, but she did sense dwindling nature magic within it. But what was it—a nymph, maybe?

"Emma," the harsh hiss left the creature as it crumpled onto the damp grass.

"Holy shit," the blonde exclaimed, grabbing hold of the brunette's arm. How the hell did it know her name? Tentatively, she edged toward the supine figure, dragging Regina with her. Her brow furrowed as she mentally tried to reconstruct the burnt and misshapen face.

Lifting a blackened and charred hand, it repeated, "Emma."

Emma's mouth moved but nothing came out. Then, a flash of light hit the creature's face just right, illuminating a blue eye. The pieces tumbled together, and she squeezed the captive arm tighter. "August?" she rasped with trembling lips. "What the hell happened to you?"

The remaining bits of the puppet-man's mouth quivered before exhaling a croaky, "Tamara." Then, as his mandible went lax and hung partially open, his outstretched arm fell to the ground, landing on its elbow. The joint locked, keeping the forearm up in the air, but the hand listed forward. All the while, the embedded embers continued to consume the wooden body.

"August?" the sheriff whispered. Slowly releasing the brunette's arm, she dropped to her knees beside the dead puppet. Without thinking, she reached out and touched him, yanking her hand back from the intense heat emanating from the carbonized and still burning body. Protectively, she cradled her hand, looking up at Regina, and implored, "What do we do?" She felt conflicted about August Booth's role in her life, and she still wanted to talk to him about it. However, the man had been nowhere to be found since the curse semi-broke. "Can we save him?" she asked, not waiting.
for an answer to her first question. She didn't want him to die.

Reaching out with her magic, Regina moved around to the other side of Pinocchio. She pursed her lips, her eyes darting from the lump of firewood to the blonde's hopeful stare, her expression pleading. It was reminiscent of Henry at the wishing well. Old lessons from another magical mentor came to mind. "We can try, but I'll need your help," she answered as she knelt. Gods, help her, it was a long shot, but for Emma, she would always try.

Emma nodded, shifting uncertainly. She swallowed and prompted, "Okay, what do you need me to do?"

"Give me your hands," the sorceress quickly instructed. Immediately, she healed the festering burns emerging on Emma's palm.

Bristling slightly, the sheriff hissed, "Should we really be worrying about that, right now?!" She guiltily glanced down at the dead man, but the cooling sensation of Regina's magic was soothing.

"I need you to not be distracted," the brunette explained, quickly adjusting their hands. She turned Emma's hands palm down, pressing the backs of hers against the other woman's open palms. As their touching hands hovered over August, she closed her eyes, centered herself, and began the process of manipulating magic, drawing power from herself, the environment, and Emma. She could almost physically feel her friend's worry and hesitation through the bond and their mingling magic. Despite the tickling of frenzied emotions, the rush of power swirling through her was invigorating. Usually, moving large amounts of magical energy was straining and taxing, but at that moment, it was clean and smooth like a babbling brook. She slowly opened her eyes, and she saw all the converging threads of magic weaving around them.

Too on edge to focus on the delicate maneuvering of magic, the blonde quietly asked in a rushed voice, "What's the plan? What are we doing?" Her gaze darted between their glowing hands, August, Regina's face, and the two guards. She couldn't tell if it was working.

"I'm going to attempt to repair the damage and provide enough of a magical infusion to resuscitate him. Hopefully," Regina explicated, funneling even more magic into August. But, it didn't appear to have any effect on the deteriorating life force. "I need you to think of growing things, lush forests, anything along those lines," she instructed before coiling additional magic and pushing it into the living puppet.

Biting her lower lip, Emma nodded and refocused her efforts. "Okay, I can do that," she assured, closing her eyes to aid her concentration. "Anything else?" she inquired, feeling the sudden rush of added magic as Regina pulled it through her. She shivered at the new level of exposure, finding it euphoric.

"Don't choke my magic," the sorceress quickly reminded her apprentice. She could feel the blonde holding the magic against herself, wanting to bathe in the power. It was a thing most novices did when exposed to such vast amounts of mutable energy. When she felt the restriction ease, she hastily reiterated, "And I need you to send me everything you have. Everything." Their window for success was rapidly closing.

Working with another practitioner wasn't a new, albeit rare, occurrence to the brunette, but working with one she trusted was freeing. The sheriff's presence was a stabilizing element she'd never experienced in her spell work, but her mentors had trained her to fly solo. So, she pushed through the layered essence of Pinocchio, and she found the flickering spark of his soul, fighting deep within the dying flesh of the ancient, enchanted tree that composed him. However, it was quickly made clear that the magical infusion could only sustain the meager life, keeping him suspended in
his current state. It wasn't enough to revitalize or regenerate him.

She growled in frustration, as saving the puppet was realistically within her grasp, but Emma lacked the proper stamina. The blonde wouldn't be able to assist her for much longer. As she ran out of time, Regina needed to find a solution, and quickly. Coiling the threads of magic around her, Regina yanked at the steady flow supplied by the savior, eliciting a startled gasp, and she felt the other woman's belief in her tangled within her power. She felt Emma's light magic twining with her own dark energy, the sensation breathtakingly intimate and invigorating. Gods, the power I could harness through our bond if she let go like this all the time, she thought. There was a chiming through her very soul when their combined magic merged completely, and the brunette gasped as a liquid heat suffused her entire body. It was as if everything that made up Emma lived simultaneously inside her. The experience was so heartbreakingly exquisite, she nearly lost herself to it, momentarily forgetting where she was.

Shaking herself to refocus, Regina called even further magic to her, drawing it from the very ground beneath them. The smell of chlorophyll and wet soil filled her nostrils when the earth's natural energy surged through her. It was thoroughly exhilarating; never before had she channeled even half the power that she was in that instant. Then, with a breathy sigh and surprising strength, she plastered her naked hands directly onto August's smoldering chest, forcing all of the magic into him. She steadfastly ignored the bite of heat. After a long, agonizing moment, something changed, and the dim spark that represented the puppet's soul grew brighter and stronger.

But, it wasn't nearly enough. Regina pressed forward, utilizing the steady flow of power with deft decisiveness. As old lessons and forgotten knowledge returned, she weaved and molded the ancient magic of nature to reconstruct the wooden puppet's body, repairing and regenerating it to pristine condition. In a glowing purple-white light, Pinocchio was restored, and she felt the pulsing intoxication of creation magic flow into her, through her, and back out, again. It was beautiful and peaceful. She felt connected to something larger than herself, and yet, she was grounded within herself. She could give life or take it, a veritable goddess of the cosmos with the power of being itself at her fingertips. Nevertheless, the splendor of touching such primal magic was cut short as the clapping and cheers of bystanders brought her back to reality. Regina carefully withdrew her wounded hands from the now conscious Pinocchio who blinked up at them. Her head swam from power and the continued caressing of the savior's magic within her own. She realized that their magic had remained intermingled and secretly hoped it stayed thusly for a while longer. It was too beautiful to part with.

"Emma?" August whispered in a hoarse voice. His gaze focused on Regina, and he uttered in surprise, "Your Highness." Suddenly, his naked form was covered with a grey, wool blanket.

While Jason and Qingzhao gently cupped their queen's elbows, carefully helped her to stand, and slowly guided her toward the Charger, the sheriff gaped as Pinocchio peeked over the edge of the blanket. "Are you okay?" she questioned softly. A small smile spread across her face.

"I . . . I think so," the puppet stammered, blinking. Suddenly, all too aware of his nakedness, he held the blanket tightly against himself.

"What happened?" the blonde hurriedly probed, glancing up to see a scowling Jason inspecting the brunette's hands. She frowned at her friend's dazed state and the strange unresponsiveness of her magic through the bond.

"I don't remember," August quietly replied. He wanted to hide, to run back to his camper, but for some inexplicable reason, he was afraid to be alone in the woods. What was he going to do?

"Okay," Emma said calmly. She stood and waved Hart over. "I'm going to have Deputy Hart take a
statement. Then, he'll take you to Granny's." Running her hands through her hair, she added, "We'll figure out what to do next, later."

"Clothes, Emma, I need clothes," the wooden man nervously hissed. Then, he was abruptly encased in a cloud of purple and found himself blissfully dressed in black motorcycle boots, blue jeans, and a black hoodie. Accepting the sheriff's hand, he hoisted himself up and finally looked around, pulling his hood up. "How'd I get here?" he pondered aloud, clearly confused as he stared at the house fire. "How did Widow Granger's house catch on fire?"

When Hart joined him, the blonde quickly commanded her deputy to take August's statement and to take him straight to Granny's, with strict orders to stay inside his room. Greg Mendell was still on the loose. Then, she meandered to Regina, who leaned against the car between the two, flanking Crows Guard. "He doesn't seem to remember anything," she stated, glancing between the three of them. Her gaze caught the awkward position of the brunette's hands. "Did you hurt yourself?" she prompted, tenderly reaching to inspect. She gasped at the extent of the damage. Palms and fingers were mottled black-and-red, cracked, and bleeding with blisters starting to form. "Your hands," she whispered mournfully, ghosting her fingertips across the back of the brunette's hands. Tears blurred her vision as she struggled to restore them.

Regina observed with veiled fascination as the savior slowly mended her burnt hands, lovingly cupping one hand between her own, then the other, and washing them in a warm gold-white light. The heady mix of energies had departed her, leaving her tired and drained, otherwise, she would have already healed herself. Although it hadn't been her intention for Emma to even see the injuries, pride in her apprentice, clearly visible in watchful brown eyes, bubbled under her stoic surface. The process was slow and uncomfortable, but she quietly praised her companion's abilities. Staying against the car, her eyelids felt heavy as the blonde's magic wrapped her in warmth and something more. However, the more was easily overwhelmed with frustration. She smiled, eyes shut peacefully, and her voice was low and husky as she encouraged, "Breathe, Emma. You're doing fine."

Shaking her head, the sheriff couldn't stop a few tears from falling. She was sick of her friend hurting. But then, she felt herself tire, and her magic started to sputter, flickering in and out. "No, come on," she whined with trembling hands.

"Emma," Regina whispered, reaching up with her free hand to catch a tear. Why? Why does this remarkable woman have to care so much? While her companion's healing had been a bit shaky in execution, the blonde had cradled her hands with delicate attention, handling her more tenderly than even Anne ever had. It made her heart full to bursting, and she swallowed back tears of her own. She's going to be my undoing, she thought with a melancholy smile.

Qingzhao immediately hopped out of the way when she spotted Anne McCormac with a med kit duffle stomping over. She glanced nervously at Jason upon noting Anne's prominent scowl. Capturing her queen's free hand, Anne carefully moved the apprehended appendage. "Let me see," she firmly instructed. She absently waved Qingzhao toward her, gesturing for her to hold the Storybrooke EMT duffle. Expertly finishing the recruit's healing job, she rooted around in the med kit and proceeded to apply ointment before wrapping the hand in gauze.

Rolling her eyes, Regina boldly questioned, "Is that really necessary?" She relaxed in her guard's care. After noting the tension in Anne's shoulders, she scanned the scene for Jetta, and she found it peculiar that Helena's granddaughter was nowhere to be seen. Then, she spotted the tall, statuesque blonde sweeping around a cluster of bystanders as she purposefully barreled toward the herbalist and Anton.
"Yes," the scout grandmaster huffed, tossing an irritated glare at her sovereign. "You know it'll be tender and itchy for a few hours, even with the magical healing." She eyed the sheriff inquisitively before she carefully extracted the queen's other hand from the blonde's light grip, repeating the process. Thankfully, Jason distracted the sheriff long enough for McCormac to finish her job. "Well, my work here is done," Anne quipped, taking her duffle from the young guard. She nodded to the queen. "I'll swing by later to check on you." Then, she whisked herself back toward her ambulance, but upon noticing her wife with Helena and Anton, she changed direction and jogged over to them.

"Wait," Emma said, noticing Anne's Storybrooke EMT jacket. She looked at Regina, asking, "What the hell? How'd I miss that?" Tentatively, she touched the gauze on the brunette's right hand. "I didn't know Anne had magic," she quietly added.

Sighing, Regina straightened and carefully resettled her jacket. She subtly signaled for the guards to give them a bit of space. Then, once Jason and Qingzhao had moved out a respectable distance, she smiled at the blonde, taking hold of her caressing hand. "They do need to earn a living," she clarified, waiting for green eyes to meet hers. "It's not like we receive frequent domestic disturbance or assault calls for you to cross paths, often. You should also know that Anne was one of the medics to respond to our accident on Old Cemetery Road." She paused for a long beat, offering comfort by stroking her thumb back and forth over the hand in hers. "It's not widely known, but Anne has healing magic." She owed her life several times over to the feisty scout.

Taking a slow, deep breath, the sheriff nodded and acknowledged, "Okay." She swallowed the thick lump in her throat and accepted that Regina was going to be alright, that her friend wasn't disappointed in her. Feeling self-conscious, she gently extracted her hand, shoving both in the front pockets of her jeans. "I guess we need to go have a conversation with Tamara, then," she flatly stated, briefly dropping her gaze to the pavement. After all, there wasn't a whole lot for them to do there. She explained, "That was the last name August whispered before dying, right after I asked what the hell happened."

"Neal," the brunette sneered with a hard glare. Her eyes drifted to the house fire which was a significantly smaller inferno, her magic coiling and lashing in irritation.

"No, I don't think he's the issue," the blonde quickly interjected. The last thing they needed was an evil queen on the warpath, although, that would fix a lot of her issues. She couldn't hold back the amused smirk.

"You can't be sure," Regina easily countered, not looking at the sheriff. She was already berating herself for trusting Henry to the man's care. And, then, to learn that his fiancé was a lunatic who set people on fire did him no favors. She pursed her lips and grinned wickedly. She enjoyed setting people on fire. However, her victims had all deserved a fate far worse than what had befallen the hapless marionette.

Scuffing her boot on the pavement, Emma bit her lower lip, catching the intense gleam in her companion's eyes. "Look," she started, running a hand through her hair, "I just know that Tamara pinged my Spidey senses, but despite how pissed off I am at Neal, I trust my gut." She reflexively cupped the brunette's elbow like she'd witnessed Monty do on several occasions. "I'm pretty sure he didn't have anything to do with this," she added with conviction.

"Regardless, he won't take too kindly to you accusing his fiancé of attempted murder," the consultant warned, lifting her chin. She could feel the impending fight over Henry looming on the horizon. It appeared, despite all her progress, her biggest fear was about to come true. Emma didn't have a legal foot to stand on, but Neal, he had options.
"Hey, I can be tactful," the sheriff boasted. She stood up straight, flashing a confident smile.

Cocking an eyebrow, the brunette chuckled at Emma's posturing. "Really?" she drawled with a hint of amusement.

Rolling her eyes, the blonde trotted around the front of the car, saying, "Hush, you. Come on, let's get this over with." She waited until everybody got in before starting the engine. Her gaze cut to Regina as she buckled her seat belt, and she promised herself she wasn't going to fuck things up.

~SQ~

Regina stalked down the hallway of Granny's Bed & Breakfast with purposeful strides. Although she wanted to believe Emma's instinct that the man had nothing to do with the fire, her experience had been that most people were not to be trusted. And really, she didn't know the man from Adam. Her anger over the endangerment of lives and the destruction of property—not to mention all of the magic beans—had the magic rising in her hard and fast. As she raised her hand to simply blow the door off its hinges, she felt Emma clamp down on her arm, grip firm and unyielding. The hold was restrictive but wasn't doing anything to actually rein in her magic. The blonde wasn't attempting to control her, just calm her down, and she found herself infinitely relieved at the ire emanating from her friend, directed not at her but the situation. Feeling her body automatically relax into the grasp, she thought to herself, Gods, this is not the time to go soft and pliant at a simple, concerned touch.

What the hell have I gotten myself into?

Emma took advantage of Regina's brief distraction and banged loudly on Neal's door with her fist. She was royally pissed for a myriad of reasons. She had let Neal get close to Henry, hadn't discouraged him from bringing his fiancé into Storybrooke, and by extension, she had allowed a murderous pyromaniac into their lives and town. The sheriff was absolutely spoiling for a fight. Knowing Regina was just as livid as she helped in a perverse way. She was silently ecstatic with the thought that if she so much as hinted at the idea, the former queen would gleefully assist her in taking down Neal, Tamara, and anyone else they deemed a threat. It was exhilarating and a little disconcerting, if she was honest with herself. She pounded on the door again and yelled, "Neal! Open the fucking door!"

Jason and Qingzhao stood at the end of the short hallway, wary gazes flicking down the stairway behind them and ahead to their queen and the sheriff. The unusual situation had them on edge, alert for any potential trouble.

Yanking open the door, Neal greeting his visitors in his boxers and grey tank top, hair standing up at odd angles as he squinted into the dim light of the hall. "What the hell, Emma?" he groused, rubbing his face with a hand. "What time is it?"

The sheriff peered past him into the darkened room, eyes cataloging the familiar furniture and lighting on the empty bed. "Where's Tamara?" she demanded, hands on her hips as she glared at her ex.

Neal stared dazedly at the blonde, trying to get his bearings after the rude awakening. "She's an insomniac. Sometimes, she goes for a jog when she can't settle," he explained in a sleepy grumble.

Regina crossed her arms over her chest and muttered with contempt, "How convenient."

Shaking his head in confusion, he asked, "What's this about?" He blinked several times, opening his eyes wide as he attempted to follow the perplexing conversation.

Emma pursed her lips slightly, hoping his bewilderment was sincere. "There was a suspicious fire.
"I'm just following a few leads."

"Leads?" The janitor let his irritation show at the barely veiled accusation. "You think Tamara had something to do with this fire?" he scoffed incredulously, slumping against the doorjamb with practiced insolence.

Eyes narrowed while she assessed her ex's body language, the sheriff tried to use her lie detector to sniff out any subterfuge. "Possibly," she said with false indifference. Going into interrogation mode, she pressed, "Can you attest to her whereabouts, tonight?"

Neal scowled, and announced firmly, "We went to bed at ten and fell asleep around eleven."

"It's three a.m. now, Mr. Cassidy," Regina informed him ominously. Her eyes bore into his, her posture regal and foreboding as she brought to bear the full weight of her old, Evil Queen presence. She smirked devilishly when he actually cringed back a step, no doubt remembering the fireball she'd threatened him with in New York.

Ducking his head, he nervously rubbed the back of his neck and offered, "I vaguely remember her getting up around one."

The blonde snorted derisively, sarcasm dripping from her voice when she asked, "So, she's been on a run for two hours?"

"Unbelievable," Neal muttered under his breath. "She's probably at the marina and lost track of the time." He shrugged insouciantly, quipping, "She likes the water." Seeing the stiffening of Emma's stance at his flippant attitude, he bit back the next retort and placated, "This really isn't that weird. She goes to one of those 24-hour gyms. Look, I'll talk to her when she gets back, and we'll come down to the station, later."

Huffing in irritation, Emma realized that, although her ex was being purposefully obtuse, he didn't have any useful information. It was disappointing and maddening, and part of her wanted to shake the uncooperative attitude out of the man. Instead, she sighed heavily and warned, "Don't leave town," turning on her heel to leave.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Neal halted her with the quiet inquiry, "Where was the fire?"

The sheriff shared a knowing look with Regina and turned back around. Head tilted to the side attentively, she said, "Widow Granger's." Deciding to see if the information would garner a reaction, she supplied, "She and Anton were growing magic beans."

Neal's head bobbed back in surprise. "Wow." Frowning as the full implication of Emma's words hit him, he stepped into her space, indignantly contending, "And you think someone from this world decided to destroy magical beans she didn't even know existed?!!"

Emma felt her barely contained fury over the situation break loose from where she had carefully pushed it down. It caused her magic to surge to the surface as she leaned forward, poking an accusing finger into his chest and snapping, "It's awfully coincidental that crazy shit started happening right after she rolled into town."

"So, what?" Neal snarled heatedly, pissed off by the ludicrous idea that his fiancé was a suspect in an arson case. "You're going to trump up charges, to what? Get back at me?" Righteous anger had made him reckless, and he slapped the offending hand away as he went toe-to-toe with his ex. It was the wrong thing to do.

Emma's churning anger flooded through the bond and whipped the already tightly wound, dark
sorceress into a wrathful frenzy. In the space of a heartbeat, Regina had closed the distance between herself and Rumpelstiltskin's son, her right hand wrapping firmly around his throat as she slammed his back into the wall and lifted him so his feet dangled a good foot above the floor. "Keep your hands off of her," she growled lowly, eyes bright with the promise of pain.

The man kicked feebly at the woman holding him, only to feel the pressure against his windpipe increase, surprisingly strong fingers flexing in warning. " Fucking hell," he choked out, hands pulling frantically at the one tightening on his neck. There was real fear in his eyes as he stared down at his sister.

The sorceress moved in until she could feel the hot puffs of air as they escaped his reddening face. Her lips curled up in a cruel smile, teeth bared menacingly as she languidly rolled her head to the side, drinking in the terror that was coming off of him in waves. "You think having the Dark One for your father will protect you?" she cooed sweetly, patting his cheek harshly with her left hand. In the same, saccharine tone, she silkily threatened, "Understand that it won't keep your heart in your chest if you ever touch Emma, again. You see, Rumpelstiltskin may be powerful, but it's the poor student who can't surpass her master," she hissed, dark eyes widening with manic delight. It really had been too long since she'd indulged herself in a little harmless torture.

Emma had been frozen in place by the deadly aura that poured off of Regina as she terrorized Neal. The magic coming from her companion slithered over her in a darkly seductive caress that made the sheriff shudder before finally coming out of her trance. She quickly glanced over her shoulder, noting how unconcerned the two Crows Guards were. Stepping forward confidently, she placed a staying hand on the brunette's right biceps, her left hand pressing steadily into the small of her back. "Hey," she murmured softly, hoping to catch the woman's attention.

Regina's head twitched almost imperceptively in the blonde's direction, feeling tentative tendrils of pacification ease through their bond in an attempt to mollify her. She briefly considered ignoring it, wanting nothing more than to hurt the man who had dared to lay a hand on her Emma. Where the hell did that come from? She's not mine, she thought wonderingly, the idea startling enough to make her loosen her grip. As Neal dropped to the floor, Regina felt Emma's left arm snake around her waist and gently pull her backward a few paces, the sheriff's body flush against her back. The contact sent little shocks of their combined magic through her, and she shook faintly in the tender embrace.

Feeling the brunette go practically limp in her arms, Emma breathed a silent sigh of relief and held her companion until she straightened in her hold. She gradually relaxed her grasp and let Regina step away once she was sure the woman had calmed sufficiently and was no longer in danger of committing homicide.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Neal rasped as he collapsed back against the wall, carefully rubbing his bruised throat. He eyed Regina warily and flinched when the corner of her mouth turned up in a snarl. "I'm sorry," he quickly conciliated, too afraid to move under her unrelenting stare. As much as he had wanted to get to know his sister, she unnerved him with her intensity and the undeniable resemblance to their father's mercurial temperament. He was beginning to question his sanity at his self-imposed insistence on giving her a chance.

Regina's countenance twisted into a nearly animalistic sneer as she disparaged, "You'll forgive me if I don't believe you."

Neal couldn't help it. He squared his shoulders and jeered, "Well excuse me for getting defensive when someone concocts ridiculous allegations about my fiancé as retaliation against me."

A gleeful laugh escaped the former queen at the man's audacity. "The imp's whelp has a backbone,
at least," she purred, gratified by the challenge.

Emma edged between them and fixed her ex with a baleful glare. "Everything isn't about you, Neal." Her expression turned somber as she intoned quietly, "Someone nearly died."

He blanched and looked wildly between the two women. "Who?" he asked quietly, unsure he wanted to know.

Pursing her lips, Regina supplied reluctantly, "August Booth."

"August's here? Why haven't I seen him?" he insisted, disbelief etched on his features.

The brunette lifted one shoulder in an elegant shrug and told him, "He's been hiding in the woods."

A thought struck the sheriff all at once. Turning her full attention on her ex, she inquired, "Doesn't Tamara take jogs through the woods?"

Neal made an aborted step forward, better judgement bringing him up short as he cast a quick glance at his sister. He didn't know if Emma really thought his fiancé was involved, or if she was just trying to make his life hell. But one thing was for certain; he was sick of it. Moving back into his room, he stared her down and snarled, "This wasn't Tamara."

"Well, we'll just see where the evidence leads us," the blonde replied shortly. Not waiting for a response, she turned on her heel and strutted down the hallway and past the two Crows Guard, Regina following close behind. The quartet was silent as they made their way out of the bed and breakfast and climbed into the Charger. Slotting her key into the ignition, Emma started the car and twisted to study her friend in the passenger's seat. "So, what was that with Neal?" she queried, giving her a pointed look.

Regina smoothed out her slacks in a show of indifference and said matter-of-factly, "He was getting rough with you." She still wasn't completely sure just why her reaction had been so violent, but the suspicions chasing each other around her mind were all indicating an uncomfortable conclusion she wasn't ready to admit to herself, let alone aloud.

Emma opened and closed her mouth a couple of times before saying incredulously, "He just smacked my hand away. It's not like he threw a punch."

"Yes, well, if you'll recall, Dear, you have a nasty habit of pushing your emotions through the bond," the consultant explained smoothly. "You were practically seething with fury, and while I can temper my fair share of it, when it's combined with my own anger…." She trailed off briefly as she remembered the overwhelming slurry of rage that had burned through her. Lips curling in a wry smile, she finished with a hint of amusement, "Let's just say that the results can be quite volatile."

The sheriff slumped in her seat as she realized she'd done it again, let her emotions reach the point that they were affecting Regina. "Oh," she sighed dejectedly. "Damnit." Expression sheepish and apologetic, she said quietly, "I'm really sorry about that. I'm trying to get a handle on this." Would she ever figure out how to keep her magic under control?

Shaking her head fondly, Regina teased, "With great power comes great responsibility," reaching over to place a supportive hand on her friend's knee.

Emma's eyebrows nearly shot off her forehead at the statement. "Seriously? Did you just quote Spider-Man?" she asked, finally backing the car out and starting the trip back to 108 Mifflin.

The former queen smirked at the blonde's surprise. "You forget our son has a nearly unhealthy
affinity for comic books," she quipped. "However, the phrase most likely originated from a collection of decrees made by the French National Convention in 1793. It states, 'Ils doivent envisager qu'une grande responsabilité est la suite inséparable d'un grand pouvoir.'"

The sheriff furrowed her brows and requested, "Um, in English, please."

"'They must consider that great responsibility follows inseparably from great power,'" Regina translated.

For the umpteenth time, Emma was caught off guard by the brunette's seemingly boundless intelligence. "Why do you even know that?"

Tilting her head in faint concession, she advised, "It was a fascinating period during European history."

Emma smiled and taunted, "You are such a nerd."

Evil grin lighting Regina's expression, she admitted, "It was also delightfully bloody and violent." She really did appreciate the more savage historical eras. There was a pause as she considered for a moment then added, "It rather reminded me of home."

Amused by her companion's somewhat vicious tendencies, the sheriff just chuckled and shook her head. The brunette was an endless font of random facts and contradictions. And Emma found that she very much liked the unpredictability of the woman.

~SQ~

Mary Margaret's gaze drifted around her modest, loft apartment as she pursed her lips, observing her collection of close friends and casual associates. Sighing softly, she slowly folded the tea towel she had used to dry her hands, laying it on the kitchen island. The gathering marked the third Journey Home meeting, and it hadn't been as productive as she had hoped. Of course, everyone had assumed Anton's beans would have been their ticket back to the Enchanted Forest, but those had been destroyed. Thus, the group's expectations had taken a critical hit, but they still retained hope.

Smiling at her husband fixing a serving tray of coffee and tea on the other side of the kitchen, the school teacher silently told herself that everything would work out. She just needed to believe. Then, as she was about to return to the others still visiting around the dining table, she was approached by Mother Superior.

Stepping up to the breakfast bar, the Blue Fairy softly stated, "I have a matter I wish to discuss." She glanced over her shoulder, hoping they could move into the royal couple's sleeping alcove.

"What is it, Mother Superior?" David interjected, noticing the two women when he turned with the tray. With pride, he strutted across the open room and placed the serving tray on the dining table. He grinned whilst putting down the tray and nodded at the round of pleased thanks.

Taking a deep breath, the nun pursed her lips, taking on a pained expression. She had wanted this conversation to be private between the queen and herself, and she didn't need the shepherd prince's undue attention to a delicate discussion. Her gaze darted to Marco, who sat beside Archie at the table, briefly before returning to Snow White. "I fear for Pinocchio," she simply relayed. With soulful eyes, she expounded, "He was revived with dark magic."

"Emma helped," Mary Margaret quickly amended with a bright smile, moving around the counter. Although she hadn't been there, she still felt pride regarding her daughter's accomplishment. It had certainly boosted Storybrooke's faith in the Sheriff's Department and, to a lesser degree, them as the
sheriff's parents. "She has light magic," she added, looking at her husband across the room. "The purest of light magic, you've said so yourself."

"Be that as it may," Mother Superior grudgingly admitted in a tight voice, "he's experienced significant memory loss and has become rather reclusive." Her single visit with the puppet-man hadn't gone very well, and she was gravely concerned. She had been worried that the town's rightful rulers would be led astray by the evil queen's supposedly altruistic act, and she'd been correct in her assumptions.

"It's not like he can hang out at Granny's with Greg Mendell still lurking around town," Ruby Lucas interrupted from her perch on the metal stairs, leading up to what had once been Emma's room. She frowned at the fairy's answering scowl. Slouching, she thought to herself, He was reclusive before the fire.

"Which is understandable," the nun agreed, looking back at the school teacher. She centered herself, keeping her frustrations at the situation at bay. She didn't very much care for the notion of democracy. Too many people wanted to voice their opinions when it wasn't necessary. So, she would stick to the emotional pleas. "But Pinocchio has withdrawn from his family and people who care about him."

Frowning, Archie cleared his throat, patting his old friend's shoulder. He didn't want to betray the young man's confidence, but he had to stress August's wishes, even if it hurt the ones he loved. So, in a raspy, but firm, voice, he shared his professional opinion, "I've reached out to him, but pushing too hard, too quickly, may do more harm than good, right now."

"Yes," the Blue Fairy quickly agreed, maintaining an aura of serenity. She angled her body to address the entire room. "Pinocchio's situation needs to be handled with respect and with the utmost care, but we must remain diligent," she added, taking on a dire and serious tone. "His exposure to dark magic was extensive, and I fear it may impact his personality." She needed them to understand the true scope of their situation. Regina Mills was an abomination that only the savior could control, now.

"What do you mean?" demanded Marco, standing up. He shrugged free of supportive hands as he stepped away and around the table. Stopping a few feet from the fairy, he questioned, his voice shaking with concern, "What has the witch done to my boy?" His sweet boy had been all alone for the last three decades in a cold and magicless world.

Stepping between the woodworker and the nun, Mary Margaret was confused why Mother Superior would needlessly incite fear. Regina had helped save a life. Wasn't that a good thing? "Emma and Regina saved August's life, Blue," she said softly, but her tone was firm. "Don't you think you're overreacting a little bit?"

The Blue Fairy lifted her chin ever so slightly as her gaze surveyed the room. All eyes were on her, and they waited for her decree with baited breath. "I think you're forgetting just how toxic dark magic can be, Your Majesty," she responded with clear authority.

~SQ~

Regina moved away from the sidebar and smiled warmly as she extended a crystal tumbler of apple cider to Ruby before settling on the sofa next to Emma. She held out her other hand, letting the blonde pluck one of the two remaining glasses from her, leaning slightly against her friend so their shoulders brushed. The consultant felt the stress of the last few days leave her as the familiar caress of Emma's magic seeped into her. She had a quick flash of worry that she was becoming far too dependent on the other woman for such things, but the steady warmth of affection was too
heady to push away.

Taking a healthy sip of the cider, Ruby's eyes widened, and she stared at her glass in surprise. "Whoa, who'd have thought fermented apple juice would have a kick?!

Emma chuckled at the deputy's reaction and warned, "Yeah, watch that. I had a hangover for two days, once."

"So, how did it go with Snow and the eternal optimists?" the former queen inquired, raising her drink to her lips to hide her smirk.

Ruby sighed heavily and shook her head as she recalled the last Journey Home meeting. "Same old song and dance. 'We want to go home, but watch out for the evil queen.' Blah, blah, blah." Rolling her eyes, she added in a mocking tone, "This time, Blue was harping about how Pinocchio was exposed to dark magic, and he might start whittling himself into toothpicks."

Blinking at the morbid imagery, the sheriff deadpanned, "That's pretty specific."

Regina snorted indelicately and mumbled into her glass, "Fairies do tend to be rather theatrical."

"I'm seriously curious. What does Blue have against you, anyway?" The waitress leaned forward in her armchair, brows furrowed in consternation. She had no idea what the fairy's problem was beyond the usual grievances against the evil queen. It seemed kinda personal, really. "She whipped Marco into a frenzy, tonight. Archie's probably still talking him down," she finished wryly.

The consultant pursed her lips as she seriously considered the question. She honestly didn't know Blue's precise reasons for her vitriol, but she had a pretty good idea that it involved her ability to neutralize fairy dust and assimilate a death curse while walking away unscathed. "Apparently, having Cora for a mother was enough. When I was a child, I called to the fairies repeatedly. I just wanted to get away from her. I must have wished on every star in the night sky over the years," Regina murmured, tone rife with sorrow.

Lips pressed into a thin line, the deputy decided it was time to step up her game if she truly wanted to be Regina's friend. Taking a deep breath, she pressed gently, "What was she like?"

"Mother?" Regina asked, startled that Ruby would pursue the subject. Catching the woman's pale blue gaze, she studied her intently, wondering how deeply to trust her. Finally, she realized that she wanted others to know about Cora and what being her daughter had meant. After a fortifying swallow of cider, the former queen began, "She was horrible—controlling, manipulative, always demanding perfection and forever finding fault. My mother was a cruel woman who used emotional and psychological games to bend me to her will. After a fortifying swallow of cider, the former queen began, "She was horrible—controlling, manipulative, always demanding perfection and forever finding fault. My mother was a cruel woman who used emotional and psychological games to bend me to her will." Her gaze became unfocused as she remembered the darker aspects of her childhood. Emma's hand finding hers and interlacing their fingers as she squeezed tightly was enough to continue. "And when that didn't work, magical restraints or a good, old-fashioned caning would. I don't think Cora ever truly loved me. I'm not sure she knew how or even could without her heart," came the quiet admission.

Emma gazed at her warmly, green eyes wide with compassion as she reassured, "You deserved better than that. You still do." A subtle shift of her body and she pressed closer to her companion, purposely allowing her feelings to flow unreservedly through the bond. The hint of melancholy she caught in return made her ache to offer more support. She just didn't know what else she could do.

As she sat safely bathed in Emma's affection, Regina's darkening thoughts fell to a particular day amid her mother's multitude of abuses….
Regina ran through the slender halls of the old castle. Her leather-soled boots enabled her to dodge and weave around the working servants and meandering soldiers. Occasionally, she’d hear a brisk curse, but usually, it was a hearty chuckle at her daring antics. The door to the stairwell leading to the royal wing was in sight. She grinned triumphantly as she realized she would make it in time for tea. Mother hated it when she was late for tea.

Suddenly, she was yanked backward and lifted off her feet by the collar of her leather jerkin. She squeaked in surprise, and her limbs flailed to gain purchase.

"Whoa, there," said a deep baritone voice followed by a rumbly chuckle.

"Drusus," she whined, recognizing the soldier impeding her progress. "Please, put me down. I'm going to be late for tea with Mother." She twisted to look up at the grinning man with pleading eyes. "I still need to change my clothes."

Cocking an eyebrow, Drusus assessed the young lady's attire. He grunted and heaved the girl down the hall, smiling as she landed on her feet and broke out into a run. Lady Cora would not be pleased with her daughter's appearance, regardless if she was in a proper dress or not. He scowled and went about his duties.

By the time she had reached the top of the spiral staircase, Regina was huffing from exertion. She could feel beads of sweat roll down her back and the sides of her face, but that didn't stop the prideful smile from spreading across her features. None of her cousins had believed she would make it back in time. All she had to do was slip into her room, strip out of her leathers, and put on that ugly cote Mother had had made for her.

As she neared the door to their apartments, she slowed her pace, regaining control of her breathing. She carefully opened the heavy, wooden door and slipped inside the modest sized sitting room, edging toward the right and heading to her private bedroom. Their quarters were smaller than her cousins' parents' rooms, but her father was the youngest prince. So, the arrangement made sense to her, despite her mother's incessant complaining. She, being nine years-old, paid no mind to such frivolous pretenses. Her grandfather, the king, favored her just as much as his other grandchildren. So, what if her room was small? She was always outside, anyway.

"Boy," Cora snapped, turning when she heard the chamber door open. She frowned at the small boy, who was not carrying a tea service, as he continued toward her daughter's room. At his complete lack of acknowledgement, she scowled, "Are you deaf, Boy?" She swept around the settees and yanked the child back by his shoulder. Glaring angrily at the little whelp, her gaze met that of her own daughter. Shock quickly replaced her anger for a moment. "What have you done?" she gasped, shaking fingers reaching out and raking through her daughter's wild hair.

Blinking, Regina launched into her exciting explanation, "Matias dared us. He dared all—."

"He what?" the sorceress interrupted. She grabbed a fistful of hair. "That royal brat dared you to do what?" The crown prince and his pious wife were a constant thorn in her side. At every turn, they ridiculed and thwarted all of her careful, political maneuvering. It seemed their son was no different.

"He dared us to cut off our braids," she answered, her brow furrowing in confusion. She quickly pushed it aside as she continued, "You'd have been proud, Mother. I went first!" She glowed with satisfaction at her bold courage. All of the other girls had squealed and ran in fright as Matias and the other boys chased after them with hands on their sheathed daggers. Ignoring the rising pain from where her mother gripped her short, brown hair, she beamed, "I cut it off myself."
"You stupid girl," Cora snarled, dragging her daughter to her bed chamber. She roughly shoved her inside the room.

Regina stumbled forward but didn't fall. Hurt marred her expression as she turned back and faced her mother. "What did I do?" she demanded, standing her ground.

"That boy was making a fool of you, of me," the sorceress seethed. "And you let him!" Her fists curled as her rage built. She could feel the magic crackling under the surface of her skin.

"I only did what you constantly tell Father to do," she countered boldly. She was brave. She was strong. She was just as capable as Matias, and he was twelve. He had even said so himself and had praised her in front of his father and Grandfather. "Grandfather said I was smart to not let my sex dictate to my vanity," Regina boasted.

Cora bristled. Of course, that bastard Xavier would encourage such deviant behavior from her daughter. He would corrupt and malign her child. With a roll of her wrist, she magically called forth a quarter-inch thick, three-and-a-half-foot long rattan cane. She gritted her teeth as her daughter defiantly glared at her. "You are to do as you are told," she intoned, slapping the cane once on the top of the mattress. When the gesture failed to illicit fear, she barked, "Pull down your breeches and bend over the bed."

Regina turned away from her mother, loosening her belt. She tossed it and her dagger onto the mattress. Obediently, she pushed her leather trousers down and leaned on her elbows against the quilts. This was going to hurt. It always did when Mother did it. Yet, as she felt her mother yank her shirt up, she refused to give the crone any satisfaction. She was brave. She was strong. So, when the first blow hit the tender flesh of her buttocks, her face twisted in pain, but she didn't make a single noise. She was tough. Drusus had said so during their sword lessons. The second smacked across her upper thighs. The third landed high on her rear and elicited a small jerk, earning her a sharper whack. But, she breathed through the rising agony even as tears streamed silently down her cheeks.

Anger influenced the sorceress's wielding of the cane. As her blows continued, each hitting harder than the previous, she lost count, but when she spotted small smears of blood, she managed to stop herself. She disposed of the cane and cocked an eyebrow. A strange sense of pride settled within her as she realized her daughter hadn't cried out. Maybe she was brave.

Gripping the quilts, Regina's breathing was labored but quiet, and her flushed face burned. Her tears left cool, soothing tracks as they fell down her cheeks and onto the bed. Then, she was engulfed in an odorless, purple smoke, and her favorite leathers were gone, replaced with a dark green dress. The heavy material of the clean chemise clung to the raw wounds still marring her rump. Obviously, Mother wanted to make a point. However, Regina had already learned Cora ruled over her misery. She didn't need reminding.

"Come here, Darling," Cora instructed sweetly, moving over to the modest vanity by the small window. She idly picked up the silver-handled hairbrush. "I'll fix your hair."

Carefully pushing herself upright, Regina stood and moved with ingrained grace to sit at the vanity, keeping her discomfort hidden. She swallowed and stared straight ahead with unfocused eyes. She half-heartedly listened to her mother's idle chattering of things that didn't concern either of them as magic, once again, swirled around her, restoring her hair to its previous length. Then, she observed as her mother brushed it with false care and styled it into a fashionable braid for girls nearly twice her age.

"There," Cora cooed with pleasure. "Isn't that better?" she prompted, lightly stroking her
daughter's small shoulders. Absently, she plucked at imaginary lint. "The perfect, young lady."

"Yes, Momma," she dutifully responded. Her mother had erased all evidence of her courageous act, and she wouldn't be able to play with her cousins until she found her leathers. And that could take days. It was nearly as irksome as the bruising welts on her buttocks and thighs.

And later, alone, in the dark gardens at her grandfather's castle, she had gazed up at the bright stars and hoped with every fiber of her being that someone would rescue her. Her young wishes and personal sorrows and learned perfectionism had guided the path of her salvation through her will, her wits, and of course, the death of a king.

Shaking herself back to the present, she said, "In spite of the way she treated me, the fairies and Reul Ghorm never came. As for Blue, my studying under the Dark One seemed to have sealed her vehement aversion to me." Taking a small sip of her cider, she added with a sneer, "She's recently taken to calling me an abomination."

Ruby sat back in her chair, floored by the revelations about the woman she had come to consider a friend. Her voice was rough with emotion when she remarked quietly, "Abomination seems kinda harsh. I think she's got the wrong Mills."

"Hmm," the consultant hummed in appreciation of the sentiment. A beat later, her eyes sparkled with the recollection of forbidden knowledge. "I suppose it's somewhat connected to certain tidbits to which I shouldn't be privy."

The teasing statement perked the waitress back up, her mood shifting quickly at the prospect of some good gossip. Sitting up straighter, Ruby insisted excitedly, "You have dirt on the Blue Fairy? This, I've got to hear."

A chuckle escaped Regina as a devilish smirk knifed across her face. It really was a deliciously dark secret, the kind that could entirely overthrow Blue's standing in the Enchanted Forest, along with her hold on its people. "Let's just say, I know about the birds-and-the-bees when it comes to fairies and dwarves. And she's not too happy about that."

The blonde's eyebrows nearly shot off of her forehead in surprise. "You mean it doesn't happen the usual way?" When both brunettes shook their heads, she blinked, completely thrown. This was news to her.

"Wait, how do you know the details?" Ruby asked with a hint of skepticism. No one knew anything beyond the fact that fairies came from flowers and dwarves from eggs. Since working with her so closely, the deputy had learned that Regina had a wealth of knowledge in a seemingly endless number of subjects, but she couldn't help her wariness regarding any potentially damning information involving the fairies. Blue seemed too shrewd to allow anything that could damage her image to get out.

The consultant gave a faint shrug and elucidated, "Rumpelstiltskin wasn't always the most scrupulous in hiding all of his secrets." Gods knew the imp held a vast repository of information in the form of both books and artifacts. She had spent many an afternoon combing through his extensive library, pulling random tomes from the shelves to read upon her return to her castle.

Emma scowled down at her drink for a moment, trying to connect the dots. "So, you're the reason he's Mr. Wheel-and-Deal?" she queried, not sure if she was asking a question or stating a fact. For every tidbit she learned about Regina, it seemed like there were five more things hiding beneath the surface. The woman gave new meaning to complicated.
Pursing her lips in negation, she quickly put paid to that idea. "He was always like that. I was just good at ferreting out information." Her smirk returned full force in remembrance of the times she had managed to out-maneuver the Dark One. That had always been an exhilarating experience for her, the rush of possibly getting caught by her master making her blood sing.

Ruby and Emma goggled at her like she'd grown an extra head. Simultaneously, their expressions morphed into ones of extreme disgust, and they groaned, "Eww...."

Regina leveled a fierce glare at her friends and scolded sharply, "Not like that!" There was a pause as the former queen swirled the alcohol in her glass, contemplating the amber liquid within. "Although, he did try—often." She shuddered delicately at the idea, too many memories of being forced into compromising situations with the distasteful man rushing to the forefront of her mind. One, in particular, seemed to keep circling back around. No. I will not think of that, she thought, firmly banishing the recollection.

It was with even more vehemence that the other two women protested loudly with a chorus of gagging noises. The waitress half-slumped over the side of her chair, head hanging at an awkward angle and tongue lolling out in dramatic display as she feigned vomiting on the floor.

"Quite," Regina acknowledged, laughing at her friends' over-the-top antics. It was a level of acceptance she had never expected to receive from one person, let alone two.

Emma eventually grew serious, once more, and questioned somberly, "So, do we need to worry about Blue? Because she's already made one move."

Ruby righted herself with a grunt, leaning back over to retrieve her drink from the coffee table. "I'd like to say no, but dang, she's shady. She knew about Pinocchio going through the wardrobe instead of insisting an actual adult go with baby Emma." The wolf's upper lip curled back, and she practically snarled, "I mean, how does that work? Here, let's shove this newborn into a tree and hope for the best! That's messed up." Realizing how intense she was becoming, her eyes focused on her cider as she muttered, "Wow, this stuff is strong."

The sheriff waved a hand at her deputy and exclaimed, "That's my point exactly! And Mary Margaret's all like, 'Let me love you,' and shit." Her face had lit up at the prospect of having another ally in the fight against her mother's overbearing need to smother her with unwanted attention.

Tucking her right foot underneath herself, the former queen angled her body to better watch the increasingly animated debate unfolding in front of her. She cocked an eyebrow when the blonde's left hand that was clutching her glass came to rest on her knee, forearm draped along her thigh as Emma used her as a coaster. A warm chuckle escaped Regina, and she leaned sideways into the back of the sofa, content to let the others carry the conversation, especially since they both seemed to be edging just past pleasantly buzzed from the alcohol.

"And everyone's whining about going back," the waitress lamented indignantly. "Don't they realize we won't have indoor plumbing, or hot water for showers, or electricity, or even the freaking Internet? I love the Internet." Her eyes took on a faraway look as she justified, "It's where I buy half of my clothes." Sure, not being able to leave the town to go shopping was kind of irritating, but that was why things like parcel services existed. It also didn't hurt that the UPS driver was pretty yummy.

Emma drew her legs up to sit cross-legged, left knee pressing into Regina's thigh. Propping her right elbow on her own knee, she leaned toward the deputy and stressed, "Don't forget toilet paper! And tampons," she added belatedly. Both issues had been two of the biggest factors which had
contributed to her intense distaste for the land of her birth during her trip to the Enchanted Forest with her mother.

Ruby nodded vigorously in agreement and crowed, "Yes! Let me tell you, it sucks sticking blood moss—.

Shuddering violently at the reminder, the sheriff begged, "Please, just . . . don't finish that sentence."

"Well, there was a reason women wore red petticoats," Regina quipped, grinning at the blonde's discomfort with the subject.

Face screwed up in a mask of repugnance, Emma denounced the entire prospect of living in such medieval conditions. "Ugh. I don't think I could've grown up there." She fully realized that she was thoroughly spoiled with modern conveniences. While she was fine with roughing it for a little while, there was a line, and using moss as a substitute for feminine sanitary goods was it for her.

Regina tutted at her reaction and admonished, "You wouldn't have known any different, and besides, you're royalty." The former queen had to admit that there were definite advantages to being nobility, not having to wash bloody underclothes being on the list.

Frowning at the suggestion of royalty, the sheriff slumped and shifted more of her weight onto Regina's leg. "If being a royal means dealing with people like those bastards at Storybrooke Academy, I'll pass. They're still trying to force the animal folks' kids out and pushing for peasants to go half days." Her right arm wrapped across her stomach in an unconscious effort to keep her emotions in check. "It's elitist bullshit," she seethed hotly.

The wolf raised her glass in concurrence. "Hear, hear!" As she brought the tumbler to her lips to finish the toast, she noticed its empty status and murmured, "I need a refill."

Regina assessed the other brunette's body language and warned, "You're welcome to help yourself, but you'll be sleeping on the couch if you get another."

Ruby gave a loose shrug and stood from her armchair, swaying briefly while her equilibrium settled. "I wolfed over here," she noted casually as she poured herself another drink. Lifting the bottle slightly in her friends' direction in silent question, she set it back down when both shook their heads.

"Oh, God, a giant, drunk wolf meandering down Main Street." Emma started giggling at the humorous image that her mind conjured, not paying any attention when Regina removed the empty glass from her hand and placed it on the coffee table alongside hers.

The deputy sunk bonelessly into her chair, slouching low, long legs sprawled out in front of her, tumbler balanced on her flat tummy. "We need to give Granny a bottle of this stuff," she announced before sipping her cider. "She'd be out for days."

Emma chortled in disbelief, admonishing, "I don't think giving trigger-happy grandma a bottle of super-duper apple cider would be the best idea. The sheriff's office gets enough calls about Granny's giving people heartburn." There was no telling what would come out of that kitchen if the old wolf had access to Regina's homemade alcohol, not to mention the cantankerous woman had something of a hot temper and could wield a crossbow. No, that was a recipe for disaster.

Ruby tilted her head to rest on the back of her chair, focusing on the ceiling. "I keep telling people not to eat the chili. No one listens to me," she bemoaned, then, snickered because she always kept a
"Her chili could burn holes through concrete," the consultant snarked as she watched the wolf stretch out across from her. Feeling the cushions shift, her eyebrows rose when Emma scooted closer and reclined half against the couch and half on her. She smirked as she thought about the awful excuse for chili that Mary Margaret had brought over when they had been convalescing from the car accident. Burning it might have actually been an improvement. "Though, Snow's isn't far behind."

Scrunching up her nose, Emma settled her shoulder further into her friend. That stuff had been toxic sludge. She had no idea how anyone thought it could pass as edible. "You know, Bobby ate that," she commented to the woman beside her.

Regina settled her hand on top of Emma's arm, still resting on her thigh. Unconsciously, she began rubbing lightly along the soft skin under her palm, the warm comfort that had developed between them a constant balm to her senses. A soft chuckle left her as she alleged, "Yes, and he suffered from gastrointestinal distress for days."

A small shiver ran down Emma's spine as hot air puffed against her ear. It suddenly struck her just how intimate their position was, and she wondered what had possessed her to be so familiar. Maybe Regina's cider packed more of a punch than she had thought. Even so, she couldn't quite bring herself to move away. Trying to marshal her thoughts and get back on topic, she belatedly muttered, "It was burnt, and he ate it."

"Bobby also eats Granny's buffalo wings, and that stuff goes right through you," Ruby reminded them as she sat back up. Her eyes widened then narrowed as she took in the two women practically snuggling on the sofa. Her suspicions about the nature of their relationship had been growing over the last few weeks, but after the night Regina had tied over fifteen cherry stems into knots at the diner, she had been keeping a closer eye on her friends. It seemed to her that they might be taking tentative steps beyond friendship, at last.

The consultant wrinkled her nose slightly in distaste at the description. Still slightly tired from her magical resuscitation of August, she decided that it was late and well past time for her to turn in for the night. "On that charming note, I'm going to bed."

Emma looked back over her shoulder as the brunette shifted behind her, readying to get up. "But we're having a ladies' night," she pleaded, turning big, green eyes on her friend. She wanted her to stay. The blonde always felt more relaxed and at ease in her steady presence.

Rolling her eyes at her companion's attempt at puppy-dog eyes, Regina gave her forearm a squeeze and a pat as she stood from the couch. "Yes, well, you ladies may continue chatting." She turned back to Emma and absently brushed a few strands of golden hair away from her flushed face. Looking down at her fondly, she prompted, "Be sure to get Ruby a pillow and blanket from the linen closet, and don't wake me up when you come to bed."

"Yeah, yeah," the sheriff groused good-naturedly in response. Her eyes followed Regina from the room, tracing over her compact form and the sway of her hips. A small smile pulled at her lips as the woman disappeared from view.

Amused by the little bit of domesticity she had just witnessed, the waitress commented teasingly, "Bossy." Waiting a moment until Emma was focused on her again, she hissed, "You're sleeping with Regina?" unable to keep the grin off of her face. She was glad to finally say something. For months, the wolf had noticed their scents had been mingling more and more, and the only conclusion she had been able to reach was that they were having sex.
Emma nearly fell off the couch in her surprise at her friend's insinuation. "Not like that!" she squawked, flustered. Trying to regain her composure, she defended, "It's just easier sharing a bed since Alexander's been staying in the guest room and with the whole bond thing."

Ruby eyed her skeptically, not sure she believed the excuse. "So, no flicking the bean?"

The blonde felt her face heat and knew she looked like a tomato as she gaped at her deputy. At last finding her voice, she spluttered incredulously, "No! Holy shit, Ruby."

"Huh," the wolf huffed, digesting that information, "well, your clothes were in the closet. So, I guess that makes sense." Maybe she had read them wrong, but her instincts were screaming that something was going on between the two women. Staring at her almost empty glass, her tone was apologetic when she suggested, "I think I'm drunk. I never get drunk." Regina really needed to give better warnings about her cider. What was the alcohol content of the stuff, anyway?

The sheriff took a couple of deep breaths and let the tension seep out of her, realizing that Ruby hadn't been malicious in her probing. "Yeah, that's the good stuff." Serious gaze boring into the brunette, she quietly beseeched, "Please, don't tell anyone I'm sleeping with Regina. They'll get the wrong idea." It had been hard enough getting people to believe Regina had changed and wasn't secretly plotting some terrible vengeance on the town, but if they thought for one second that the savior and the former evil queen were sleeping together—never mind that it was completely innocent—, she was sure pitchforks and torches would feature in their near future.

A mischievous smirk settled on the waitress's features, and she suggested, "You know, Regina should tell Mary Margaret." She thought it was an excellent idea.

"Jesus, no!" the blonde exclaimed, panicky. "That might give her a heart attack." Sure, she wanted her mother to suffer some for the hell she'd been putting Regina through, but she didn't necessarily want instant death to befall the woman.

Ruby laughed and decided that she'd mention the idea to Regina in the morning. If her pixie-haired friend didn't get her head out of her ass soon, the former queen might actually tell her stepdaughter about their sleeping arrangements. "Well, she has been gunning for her heart this whole time," she drawled slyly.

Emma chuckled, then demanded with mock accusation, "I thought you were all Team Snow White."

She tilted her head from side to side as if she were weighing up the situation. "Eh, I'm starting to see the benefits of Team Evil Queen," she admitted matter-of-factly. The truth was, she honestly liked Regina and could concede that she had never really given the woman a chance. Edging forward in her chair, she whispered conspiratorially, "Plus, all the hotties in black leather are a nice bonus."

Slumping down into the cushions, the sheriff covered her face with her hands and bemoaned, "Oh, my God, stop. I have to sleep next to that hottie."

Nonplussed, Ruby blinked a few times while focusing on her friend. Well, at least I was right about the attraction, she thought to herself. "I wasn't talking about her," she elucidated, tone clearly indicating she thought the blonde was being oblivious. "I meant the guards."

Emma nodded slowly, realizing she was just digging her hole deeper. Muttering a quiet, "Oh," she peered at her empty glass on the coffee table. "Damn. Good thing I only had one."
"Lightweight," the wolf scoffed, continuing to nurse her second drink of the night.

Smiling as a recent memory surfaced, the sheriff said, "Seriously. You should see how many Regina can knock back." She vividly recalled having downed three glasses of the woman's cider and waking up the following morning with the hangover from hell; whereas, Regina had drunk twice as much and had been none the worse for wear. If she hadn't already known the woman was a sorceress, she'd have called witchcraft on that one.

Ruby bolted upright in a sudden rush, nearly sloshing her alcohol from its tumbler. "Oh, oh! We should setup a drinking contest at the diner between her and Leroy!" she enthused, beaming widely. Maybe she could quietly promote it and earn a little commission on the side.

Emma crossed her arms and pursed her lips in contemplation. "Huh, I wonder if she could drink him under the table." There was a very high probability that the consultant would win such a competition.

"Isn't he half way there, already?" Ruby quipped, snickering at her own joke.

Giggling along with her friend, the blonde seriously considered the ridiculous scheme. Regina had a wickedly playful streak that most people never got to see. "If the wager was right, she might do it," she admitted. However, a frown quickly formed when she remembered Regina's loyal bulldog. Huffing with exasperation, she groused, "Monty wouldn't let her."

The deputy waved a hand about dismissively and retorted, "She's a queen! She can do whatever the hell she wants." No one would expect the classy Regina Mills to have the fortitude to out-drink a dwarf. She'd make a killing.

It was an amusing thought. If nothing else, Regina would get a good laugh from the proposal. "Good point. We should ask her in the morning," Emma agreed. A large yawn interrupted anything else she was going to say, and she gave her friend a tired smile. "Sorry. I guess that's my cue to hit the sack." Standing, she carried the crystal glasses to the kitchen and returned shortly with a couple of pillows and blankets.

Ruby accepted them with a grateful smile, setting them down on the couch the blonde had just vacated. Unable to help herself, she waited until the sheriff was almost out the door before calling softly after her in a sing-song voice, "Night. Sleep tight. Don't let the evil queen bite!" The loud groan of "Fuck!" she received in response was reward enough.

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"Wait a minute," Emma interjected after observing Regina work nearly nonstop for the majority of the day, trying to concoct a memory potion. "Basically, what you're telling me is that you're making them a nice cup of chamomile tea?" It was silly. Why the hell couldn't they have done that themselves? "Well, Sneezy sure as shit could use some hot tea. If nothing else, the steam might help clear up his sinus issues."

Regina laughed for a good minute after that and had to stop her impromptu lesson while she wiped mirthful tears from her eyes. She had encouraged Emma to keep her company while she did her brewing, wanting her student to get an overview of potion making. It was fast becoming an interesting and entertaining experience for her, to say the least. "You're ridiculous," she chided, still chuckling as she shifted different items around on the island. She'd done this earlier using splinters she'd covertly taken from August's burned body, hoping that they would provide the necessary catalyst for the mixture to work, but it had been to no avail. It seemed she was going to have to use a different catalyst, one that she had yet to determine the reasons behind its efficacy. She didn't like
working with unknowns.

Grinning from ear to ear, Emma propped her forearms on the island and peered at the beakers and instruments assembled. "Alright. Teach me, Teacher" she chirped playfully before sobering. She was determined to pay attention to the mini lesson. She really did want to make the other woman proud of her, and the best way to do that was to learn what she was so painstakingly taking the time to tell her.

Seeing that her apprentice was actually applying herself for a change, Regina gestured to the large beaker of pale, amber liquid in front of her. "You are right about that being chamomile tea. We're using it as the base for this potion. Chamomile is good for relieving stress, and that's important when one's essentially changing another's personality. It will make it easier for the mind to accept the change."

Emma nodded, following along, so far. Pointing at the tea, she asked, "So what are the little blue bits floating around in there?"

"Those are forget-me-nots. And yes, they do exactly what you'd think—restore memories. I chopped up a few of the flowers and added them to the infusion." Noticing the way the blonde's brows furrowed, she explained, "An infusion is what most people think of as tea, boiling water then steeping herbs in it before drinking." Regina motioned to the liquid, again. "In this case, I placed the chamomile in a bit of cheesecloth when I steeped the infusion but left the flowers loose. We don't need them to ingest the chamomile buds themselves, but since the forget-me-nots are the more important ingredient, we want to leave them in the final mix."

Suddenly, the entire potion making process was starting to make a lot more sense to the sheriff. It was also kind of interesting. She watched quietly as Regina filled two vials on the tube rack from the beaker. "Okay. So, what's in this bottle?" she inquired, tapping a small, dark brown bottle nearby.

Regina picked up the item in question and removed the top before gathering up a pipette. "This is a rosemary tincture. Tinctures are extracts made with alcohol instead of a water base. They tend to be more potent and have a longer shelf life. I use my cider in all of my tinctures. And all of the water I used comes from the wishing well, boiled first for purification," she informed her, dipping the pipette in the bottle and drawing up some of the extract.

"What does the rosemary do?" Emma queried, leaning further over the workspace.

Carefully adding eight drops of the tincture to each vial, the sorceress said, "Rosemary has quite a few beneficial properties in spell work. The ones we're interested in today involve remembrance, to bring back the original personality, and banishment, to get rid of the cursed personality." Returning the pipette to the tincture bottle, she straightened, stretching her spine after being hunched over. "Eight drops go into the potion to emphasize transformation and renewal."

Emma watched the liquids slowly combine, the color darkening a bit and taking on the faintest tinge of green. "This is actually pretty cool," she commented, looking up in time to see her teacher pick up the small dagger that had been resting nearby. "Whoo! What are you gonna do with that?" she demanded worriedly, starting to get off of her stool.

Rolling her eyes in long suffering amusement, Regina soothed, "Relax, Emma. All potions call for a magical reactant to activate them. I tried using some splinters from August's body, but it didn't work." She sighed deeply and continued, "My blood is what caused the Dreamshade cure to catalyze. I figured it wouldn't hurt to try it, again." Off the blonde's continued, doubtful look, she assured, "It'll just be a tiny nick since I only need three drops."
"Fine, I guess," the sheriff huffed, reluctantly settling back on her stool. "It's just really weird," she muttered dubiously. She didn't like for her friend to be hurt, and for her to do it to herself, even something so minor for such a good reason, made her uncomfortable.

A soft smile curled Regina's lips when Emma's concern washed over her through the bond. It was endearing and reassuring to know such a little thing meant so much to her. Oddly enough, it helped settle her nerves in regard to using her own blood in a potion. Slipping back into teacher mode, she said, "This is the mount of Neptune," tapping her athame against the center base of her palm, just above her wrist. "It symbolizes the link between the conscious and unconscious mind, and since that's exactly what the potion needs to do, forge a connection between the two, that's where I'll be drawing the blood from."

Without further ado, she made a short line with the blade that she kept razor sharp. Regina barely even felt the blood well up through the cut as she held it over first one, then the other, vial, massaging out three drops into each. As she placed the dagger back on the counter and healed the minor laceration, both women watched the potions change from a medium amber to brilliant violet in color. "Well," Regina breathed softly, relaxing in relief and surprise, "that seemed to do the trick."

Eyes wide, Emma caught her wondering gaze and praised, "Damn, you're good. Hasn't Gold been working on this since Belle became Lacey? Even he hasn't managed this, yet," the blonde reminded her, amazed at the obviously positive outcome.

Regina's expression turned to one of disgust as she began bottling up the two potions. "Yes, well, I'm sure he's been too distracted by previously unexplored carnal pursuits with the girl to be doing much brewing, lately," she sneered in a scathing tone. The cold bastard was most likely having his way with her right that moment. It made the brunette's stomach turn to think of such staggering potential being wasted on its back.

"Wow. That's pretty harsh," the blonde began before considering it and adding, "but you're probably right." Her face scrunched up as she tried to keep the mental images from forming. "Ugh. On that note, I'm gonna go find someone to train with for a bit." As she started to leave the kitchen, she turned back to her companion and asked, "Do you want me to get somebody to get these out?"

Shaking her head, Regina told her, "No. I'll call Ruby and see if she'll take care of it." She watched as Emma nodded and headed for the back door, sure there would be at least a couple of Crows Guard around with whom she could spar. Taking a moment, she reflected on how much the sheriff had changed since the bond had been initiated. The woman had grown considerably, taking on more responsibility without trying to shirk it and not running from her problems but facing them head on. She was proud of her student and friend. And she recognized that Emma's growth had spurred her own. It was something that she found herself surprised by but for which she was entirely grateful.

It wasn't much later that the consultant was brought back to the present when Ruby breezed into her kitchen. Sometime during their drinks the previous night, the waitress seemed to have decided that she no longer needed to knock to enter the house. Regina wasn't sure which was more worrisome, the fact that her guard didn't stop her or that she found it amusing. She really had gone terribly soft if she was letting mangy dogs wander around her home.

"Hey. What's up? Your message said you had a special delivery." Ruby planted herself on the other side of the island, watching as the other brunette retrieved some glassware from the drying rack by the sink.

Regina finished putting away her beakers and test tubes in their containers, glancing over her
shoulder and explaining enthusiastically, "Yes! To use Emma's colorful phrasing, I've been playing mad scientist, again." Chuckling, she picked up the two potion bottles and walked over to join the wolf. "I believe I've completed the memory potion. Just test it on the dwarf, first, before taking the other to Belle," she cautioned, not wanting to risk the girl unnecessarily.

Ruby smirked as she carefully twirled the violet bottles around on the marble. "Uh huh. Someone worried about their abilities?" she teased, winking at the former queen.

Raising her eyebrows in indulgence, she retorted, "Perish the thought. Call it cautious optimism, instead." A grin spread across her face as she engaged in the playful banter, relishing the opportunity to relax around others.

"Have you given any more thought to our proposal?" the deputy inquired, thinking again about the possible windfall that such a competition could bring her.

There was a moment of confusion while Regina tried to place the reference. "Proposal?" Then, it hit her, and she rolled her eyes as she recalled their breakfast conversation. It had been rather pleasant to discover how well the wolf had integrated into the household's morning routine. She'd even folded up her blankets and stacked them neatly on the couch along with her pillows. "Oh, yes, the misguided attempt to loosen me up via public intoxication and cavorting with dwarves," she jeered with only the faintest hint of contempt.

Ruby grinned slyly and complimented, "You're a very lucid and articulate drunk." Flashing her a hopeful look, she prodded, "So?" A disapproving glare was the only response she received. "Think of it as a shift in optics," she cajoled sweetly.

Crossing her arms over her chest and canting her hips to one side, Regina rejoined, "You've already spun that pitch." She was truly coming to appreciate the younger Lucas woman and her perseverant attitude. She liked spirit.

Sighing heavily, the deputy tried again to convince her newest friend to loosen up a little. "Come on, it'll be hilarious. Leroy would totally pass out before you would," Ruby claimed.

Regina hummed noncommittally and demurred, "You paint quite the charming picture, Dear, but I think I'll pass." She really didn't relish the idea of a crowd of Storybrooke denizens seeing her mildly inebriated. She was well aware that she became far too extraverted and friendly under such circumstances. It was not something she wished to share with the town.

Realizing it was a losing battle, Ruby shrugged lazily. "It was worth a shot," she admitted with a cheerful smile. "If you ever change your mind…." Her voice trailed off as she grabbed the potions from the island and tucked them away in her coat pockets.

A throaty chuckle filled the air as the consultant shooed her out with a dry, "Don't hold your breath."

~SQ~

"Hey, Lacey," Ruby Lucas greeted with a small smile as her cursed friend entered the diner and saddled up to the counter in Granny's. She slowly sauntered toward the other woman. Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to relax as the weight of the potion, hidden in her apron, tapped against her hip. This had to be a soft sell. So, she leaned against the counter on the heels of her hands. Luckily, business was non-existent as they were between rushes, and her grandmother was busy in her office, checking the books and stock.
"Hey," the seemingly tired woman muttered, clearly not in a sociable mood. Being leashed to Mr. Gold would do that to a girl. She ordered a whiskey straight and rolled her neck. She didn't bother to adjust her short, royal blue, sequined dress as she crossed her legs, exposing beautifully smooth, toned thighs. She also didn't care that she was wearing the same outfit from the previous night's rendezvous with the pawnbroker. As an afterthought, she pulled a couple of bills from her bra, dropping them on the countertop.

Fixing the drink, the waitress suggested, "Want to try something new?" She put the tumbler down between them. Her eyes held the other woman's for a beat. Then, she watched her toss back her drink in one swift gulp, cocking a slightly judgmental eyebrow.

Slapping the glass on the smooth Formica, the seductress sighed and shrugged. "Sure," she answered, not caring that the woman in front of her was also a sheriff's deputy. She just wanted something to do because this town was so fucking boring. At least once she got Gold in bed, he kept her toe-curlingly satisfied, but she feared her feminine wiles were losing their effectiveness. Because if a grown man would rather play with a chemistry set and ignore the young, beautiful woman masturbating across the room from him, something was very wrong.

"Sweet," Ruby smirked, glancing through the pass-through to the kitchen, making sure Granny or the cook weren't around. Quickly, she slipped Regina's small potion vial from her apron and poured the contents into the empty whiskey glass. "Try this," she quietly encouraged.

Lacey frowned at the bright, violet liquid. She lifted the tumbler to her nose and sniffed. "What is it?" she questioned, raising a skeptical eyebrow. She wasn't into drinking industrial strength cleaning fluid.

"A friend of mine is trying out a recipe for a new kind of liquor," the waitress easily supplied. She shrugged and added, "She also makes her own hard cider." So, she bent the truth a little bit. It wasn't a complete lie.

With a shrug, the other woman made short work of the potion, swallowing it in one gulp. She held the empty tumbler in front of her face and frowned. "That was surprisingly sweet," she observed, putting the glass down. "It didn't taste like alcohol or apples," she stated as her expression contorted in confusion. Then, she blinked and scanned the diner, swiveling on the stool. When her eyes landed on the waitress, her face scrunched up as she whispered, "Ruby?"

Perking up, the deputy hurried around the counter to her friend. "Is it you?" she hurriedly probed, gripping the other woman's biceps. "Belle?"

"Yes, I think so," Belle replied absently, looking at her distorted reflection on the mirrored surfaces behind the counter. She turned to face the waitress, scowling. "What am I wearing?" she questioned, looking down. Suddenly, she was wrapped in a fierce hug. It knocked the breath out of her. When they pulled apart and their eyes met, she shook her head in disbelief. "Was . . . was I a prostitute?" she stammered with wide eyes.

"No?" Ruby answered with slight hesitancy. "I've only seen you with Gold," she quickly supplied with a weak smile. "Do you remember everything?" she gently inquired. If she did, it would be a blessing and a curse.

"That bastard!" she seethed, sliding off the stool. She furiously pulled at the skimpy dress. "I'm wearing sequins," she hissed, her anger rising. Reaching into the dress's built-in shelf bra, she retrieved a wad of cash from her cleavage and tossed it on the counter. "He paid me." She glared despairingly at the crumpled pile of bills. "He gave me money after we had sex," she added in a hushed voice. Looking up and meeting her friend's caring gaze, she lost it. Her lips trembled as
tears streaked down her cheeks.

"Oh, Belle," the waitress cooed softly, wrapping the smaller woman in a tight hug. She soothed her with gentle, caring words of friendship. Hearing the swinging door to the kitchen creak, she glanced over her shoulder and gave her grandmother a sad smile. Nodding to the wad of cash, she ushered Belle toward the back. "Come on," she instructed. "Let's get you a room. You can get cleaned up while I find you something else to wear."

Eugenia watched as the two girls left the diner for the bed and breakfast. Her lips pursed as she stepped over to the counter, gathered, and counted the money. She had no doubt the poor girl wouldn't want anything to do with it given everything, but she'd put it to good use for her. Tucking the cash in her cardigan's front right pocket, she made short work of the mess, bussing where Belle had sat. She picked up the small vial and smiled kindly. *Maybe Ruby's on to something,* she considered, tossing the empty potion bottle in the trash.

~SQ~

It was another uneventful day at Storybrooke's Sheriff's Department. The sheriff and two of her deputies casually discussed the rotation for next month. However, upon hearing one of the outer doors swing open, both animal folk simultaneously peered down the short hall to see Belle French purposefully strut toward the bullpen with a passive expression on her face but a sharp glint in her eyes.

Of course, it didn't take long for the news to disseminate around town that Belle was in fact Belle, again. No one really mourned Lacey's departure except the regulars at the Rabbit Hole, but there had been a few off-color jibes at Gold's expense. And up until that moment, Miss French had kept to herself in her room at Granny's.

As their first visitor of the day waved and continued past the sheriff's office, Puma commented, "She gets a lot of visitors for an evil queen." He faced forward, sharing a quick look with Hart, and watched his boss.

Ignoring the quip, Emma frowned as Belle stepped up to the visitor's chair beside Regina's desk. "Who put that chair there?" she pondered aloud, pursing her lips. She tapped the end of her pen vigorously against her legal pad.

Sure, she had talked to Regina about possibly taking on more responsibility. She was a consultant, after all, but she hadn't pushed the issue. She certainly wasn't going to force Regina to interact with the public. It was bad enough the brunette was still fielding conference calls with Mayor Mitchell Herman, having lunches with Kathryn Nolan, and dealing with random people popping into the sheriff's station with the odd magical issue.

"That was Ruby," Hart simply stated with a wry smirk, not bothering to watch Belle. Yup, for someone so supposedly evil, the consultant sure did get a lot of visitors. "I heard talk about the city council amending the town charter, adding a city manager position." Of course, there was always a lot of talk. "So," he started in his smooth, soft spoken voice, "you do realize it's your turn for the night rotation."

Dropping her head onto her desk, Emma groaned, forgetting about the conversation in the bullpen while she contemplated how the hell she was going to break it to Regina that they wouldn't be sleeping that night.

As she neared the desk, Belle was immensely relieved that the sheriff didn't intercept her, but she did find Ruby's description of Emma as a prairie dog rather apt. The blonde head had popped up
with curious watchfulness. Maybe her friend's casual hints that the savior had deeper feelings for the former queen held water. So, she stepped up to the desk and politely greeted, "Regina."

Glancing up, the consultant gracefully gestured to the chair beside her metal desk and closed her laptop lid. "Miss French, to what do I owe the pleasure?" she returned with easy pleasantness. Leaning back in her chair and linking her hands on her lap, she quickly assessed the younger woman with her magic. Clearly, the potion had worked. She frowned and considered it may have worked a little too well.

"Your memory potion," French stated as she settled in the visitor's chair, sitting forward. She crossed her ankles. Glancing over her shoulder to ensure the sheriff and deputies were still occupied in the glass office, she casually questioned, "Why did you make me take it before the curse?"

That confirmed it, then. "Tell me, Dear, how did you enjoy your stint as Lacey?" Regina responded, tilting her head ever so slightly. The bookworm didn't have any information about her that was too damning. Certainly, she knew nothing the imp could wield against her without considerable setup. It wasn't as if she had ever allowed the girl in her workshop.

Belle's brow furrowed, knowing she was being deflected. "It was horrible," she answered in clear, avid irritation. She shook her head, hoping to dislodge the images and feelings that accompanied her alter ego. "It was demeaning," she husked with rising frustration. "I was some cheap floozy, and I didn't very much appreciate it," she explicated, remembering she was in the presence of a queen.

"There's your answer," Regina returned with a quick hike of her eyebrows. Relaxing her posture, she shrugged and quietly added, "No one should be forced to be a whore." The word felt vile on her tongue. She hated hearing it. She loathed saying it. She was disappointed that the bookworm had had to experience it.

Shaking off her displeasure, French pursed her lips in thought. "So, if you didn't want me to be Lacey during the curse, who did?" she inquired. Truth be told, she already had a good idea who might have wanted her in such a position.

"What an excellent question," the consultant praised the query with a bright smile and a sultry, chipper tone. "Perhaps you should speak to your beau," she added in a more subdued inflection. "He is, after all, the one who gave me the Dark Curse." She was highly amused by the emotions flitting across the other woman's face.

"But why would he—?" Belle huffed in exasperation.

"I would think that's obvious," Regina countered with mild disinterest. The conversation was certainly affording her a keen insight into the Dark One's abysmal love life. Looking at her nails to feign indifference, she continued, "Even with his shriveled . . . dark heart, he's still a man." And she was all too familiar with the base nature of men.

French took a moment to process the information. She shuddered in realization as her perceptions of Rumpelstiltskin swiftly slanted toward an even more unfavorable estimation. Hanging her head, she shook it. "How did you know I would be Lacey?" she finally prompted, glancing up. She nervously wrung her hands in her lap. How did the curse work? Did it take hidden desires, twist them, and bring them forward? Did she truly want to be owned?

"My dear, you forget I apprenticed with Rumpelstiltskin for years," the sorceress easily reminded her. She pursed her lips but quickly rolled her eyes, dismissively adding, "I'm well aware of his
appetites." Gods, some things were better left unknown.

Startled into perfect posture, Belle blinked with wide eyes, gasping, "You and he…?" That was not something she would ever have foreseen, but stranger things had happened. Her brows immediately furrowed as she considered the pair would be rather striking visually and perhaps somewhat poetic as a couple.

Regina recoiled in revulsion as her body shuddered at the unwanted imagery. To this day, she still hated him for forcing her to drink that Concupiscent Philter after she had made it. "Gods, no," she fervently retorted, her nose scrunching in disgust, "but not for his lack of trying." She closed her eyes for just a moment, centering herself and pushing away unwanted memories. Quietly, she explained, her voice low, "However, it was a foregone conclusion that he would attempt to have you one way or another." That was what her experiences had taught her. She refocused on the bookworm and fondly stated, "You have an exceptional mind, Miss French. It would've been a travesty to jeopardize it." She was truly incensed her mother had gambled with such a beautiful mind.

Unable to stop the blush from blooming on her cheeks, French ducked her head and cleared her throat, but she wasn't one to be dissuaded with flowery words, even from stunning, evil queens. "Thank you," she managed in a tight, almost timid voice. Then, her eyes flashed with challenge as she added, "Even if you did keep me prisoner."

An approving smile spread across Regina's full lips. She did so enjoy Belle's company. "It wasn't all bad, was it, Dear?" she asked with faux sadness and a mock pout. Her eyes twinkled in mischief as she felt mentally titillated, encouraging the playfulness. "You had the run of an extensive library, most of the castle, and no leering master pawing at you," she idly listed the virtues of her hospitality. After all, not once, did the bookworm try to escape. "I'd say I did you a favor," she praised in a husky tone, smiling with a wicked glint.

And despite herself, Belle ducked her head, the blush darkening. She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her left ear as she subtly licked her lips. Even after all this time, she still found the queen a conundrum because she was professed as a scourge and hailed as a protector whereas the Dark One remained mostly an unknown mystery, luring the unassuming into murky waters. She cleared her throat, softly chuckling to cover up any embarrassment, and easily countered, "You could've just asked me to tutor you." That demand had certainly been a surprise.

Dramatically rolling her eyes, Regina surveyed the bullpen, sneering at the two men occupying the jail cells. She scoffed, her voice taking on a rumbly quality, "It's not as though you would have willingly said yes to the evil queen." She'd asked others for assistance, but time had been of the essence. Of course, it had been a bonus that Rumpelstiltskin had favored the young maiden.

"I might've, but we'll never know, now," French retorted with sharp intent. She stood up, smirking mostly to herself and at the amused gleam in her former captor-cum-student's eyes. Sure, she could scream and blame this woman for all of her misery, but she wasn't the only one to blame for her misfortunes. Her family and Rumpelstiltskin had hurt her in far more damaging ways. Taking several steps toward the exit, she stopped and looked back, asking, "Nǐ hái jídé nǐ de kè ma?"

"Dāngrán. Wǒ yǒu yīgè yǒuxiù de lǎoshī," Regina effortlessly returned. A slow smile crept across her face at the pride on display by her tutor before the other woman turned to leave the station. She, naturally, considered her next move in regards to Belle French. Opening her laptop and pressing the power button, she formulated a plan as she cheerfully called after the retreating lady, "Give Rumpel my regards." She snickered inaudibly at the exasperated sigh.

Yes, it would be smart to keep Belle in her corner, and she knew just the means to ensure that. Of
course, Rumpelstiltskin would undoubtedly make a play for the girl's affections, but she seriously doubted the Dark One's ability to cajole her back into his bed.

~SQ~

Rolling onto her back, Regina opened her eyes to a dark bedroom, only the dim light of a distant street lamp peeking through the drawn curtains. Staring at the ceiling, she forced herself not to look at the alarm clock on her nightstand. So, as she strained to hear the quiet movements of the Crows Guard, either in or outside the house, she was comforted by the soft breathing of her bedmate.

She looked over and smiled softly at the snoozing blonde. Long tresses of pale hair draped across half of the other woman's face. Without much thought, she reached over and gently brushed the stray locks back and away. She smirked at the quiet whimper as Emma snuggled further into her pillow. Then, she rolled onto her right side to face the sheriff and tried to go back to sleep, but peaceful slumber evaded her. So, with far more care than she'd ever admit, Regina got out of bed, damning the world when her eyes noted the time.

After a brief detour to the master en suite, the former queen breezed downstairs in a fuzzy, gray robe and slippers, not bothering with any lights until she entered the kitchen. She flipped on the soft, warm light over the stove and puttered about, fixing a cup of tea. A part of her hoped she'd fall back asleep in twenty minutes or so. Maybe she'd manage to doze for an hour in the study.

It was while she was steeping her tea at the kitchen island with her back to the short hallway, idly playing with the loose-leaf tea infuser, that something strange happened. She felt a sharp prick on the left side of her neck, and instinctively, she raised her left hand up to the pained area. But the rigid, cold touch of metal pressing hard against the muscled flesh of her neck confused and frightened her.

Thrusting her left elbow sharply backwards, Regina snarled as she connected with a soft abdomen. No, she wouldn't go docilely ever again. She grinned at the elicited pained grunt. Then, she started to twist, calling forth a fireball in her right hand with which to face her assailant, only to be distracted by the sharp sound of snaps securing a dark, brown leather cuff on her left wrist. The emerging fireball sputtered out of existence, provoking a fleeting instant of sheer dread. Quickly, she recovered and adjusted her stance, moving to repel the new threat. She used the island as leverage and shoved her entire body backwards, forcing both attackers to go stumbling back. Obviously, as one fell back into the stove with a sharp cry while the other hit the section of floor-to-ceiling cabinets with a grunt, they hadn't expected her to fight back. They were fools.

Listing heavily to one side, Regina's vision started to blur as she scrambled to put the kitchen island between them. Her uncoordinated movements knocked over her mug, spilling the contents across the marble top. All the while moving toward the knife block in the far corner, she tried to call out to the guards, but whatever had been injected into her bloodstream had already started to take effect. She stumbled, barely catching herself against the counter. Her anger flared as she reached up, yanking the emptied syringe from her neck and tossed it across the kitchen. It landed somewhere by the coffee pot. Her fingertips grazed the handle of a chef's knife when a black, cloth bag slipped over her head, forcing out a short yelp of fear at the loss of sight. But she twisted that spike of piercing terror into fury. Never again would she be taken.

With the last of her strength, she lashed out, but strong, masculine arms roughly wrapped around her from behind, bringing to mind her early nights with the king. As she was pulled away from the counter, she feebly struggled to get her feet under her, but she was too disoriented. All the hours of training with Anne were rendered useless by a drug-filled needle. Her slipper-covered feet knocked
into the lower cabinet doors with muted thuds as she lamely kicked. She tried to push aside memories of countless nights when the king’s guard had dragged her from her chambers, taking her to her husband. Without her magic, she was vulnerable. Her frustrated cry for help came out as an angry grunt as she reached up and around to weakly claw at the man's face. She took some satisfaction at eliciting a sharp hiss, feeling the telltale sensation of cutting flesh with her short nails, but her limbs went numb and felt unbearably heavy. Then, as her body tingled in betrayal, she cursed the gods because this was her home. She was supposed to be safe, but as the drug filled her with thick lassitude, it felt like she was back at the castle with him all over again. Monty, Anne, and Emma had promised she would be safe. No longer able to resist the damned narcotic, she blacked out, her hope fading, as well.

When the body in his arms finally went limp, Greg Mendell cursed in a heated whisper, "Jesus Christ, I thought the Propofol was supposed to act instantly." He started dragging the unconscious woman toward the side door of the house. For someone so small, Regina Mills was certainly dense and weighed a hell of a lot more than she appeared to.

Tamara snorted, rubbing the small of her back where it had hit the oven door's handle. "There're a lot of contributing factors to administering general anesthesia, Greg," she quietly reminded her partner. Without a proper blood workup, they would always run the risk of drugs failing them. She shuffled around him and his cargo to open the door. "At least the cuff worked like it was supposed to," she smiled, holding the screen door wide. She eyed the drugged woman with mixed feelings, knowing she'd fought for her life. But she didn't have time to feel worry about a filthy magic user.

"Fine, whatever," Mendell grunted, shifting his prize into a fireman's carry. He strained and huffed as he watched his partner run into the dark, going to retrieve the SUV parked down the street. A delighted grin crossed his face as he realized all his dreams were about to come true.

~SQ~

"Belle, please, be reasonable," Gold beseeched his beloved as he followed her to the front of the pawn shop. He leaned heavily on his cane, reaching out to her with his left hand. "I searched for you," he added quietly, lacing it with everything he felt for her.

And thus, their latest reunion wasn't going very well. He'd come into work early that morning, hoping to conduct a locator spell on the oddly elusive Lacey. His female companion hadn't returned any of his calls, and she hadn't been seen loitering about the bars. Both instances were odd. Though, when she had entered the shop not twenty minutes ago, he had been relieved and ecstatic that her memories had been perfectly restored. However, there was no one in town who could complete such a feat. It made him suspicious and paranoid. That had not been the proper frame of mind.

"Reasonable?" Belle repeated aghast. Her face scrunched in avid distaste and disbelief as she spun to face him. "Your curse turned me into the town harlot," she stated with hurt and fire. Squeezing her eyes shut, she added, "A whore, Rumpel." She tried to shake the memories of the repulsive things they did together, and the delight he took in them.

"Yes, I know what a whore is, and it wasn't my intention—," he tried to explain, attempting to close the space between them, again. He frowned as she quickly stepped back, shaking her head. Anger flashed in her normally compassionate gaze. "Oh, so I was to be your cheap trollop," she accused. Her small fists curled in frustration at her sides. She had thought Rumpelstiltskin was different from all of the other men in her life. She had thought he had simply lost his way. She had thought he loved her. But now, she understood her place in his life and wouldn't be fooled again. "You took me in an alley." She shuddered in utter revulsion. "I kissed Dr. Frankenstein and the
Sheriff of Nottingham! And my clothes, they were awful," she quickly lamented. "Don't get me started on the drinking. I was drunk at eleven a.m.!” she gushed, unable to withhold her disappointment in him or her alter ego.

"Belle, please," Gold whimpered with sad eyes. He hadn't meant for any of this to happen. He hadn't meant to consummate their love with Lacey. It had just happened that way because he had never suspected the Dark Curse to twist his sweet Belle so viciously.

Unfazed by his pleas, Belle paced the length of the shop. She wanted to throw something. Pivoting on her boot heel, she stomped back to her soon-to-be ex-lover. The glass of the display cases rattled under the force of her steps. "And your ex-girlfriend bestowed this wonderful personality on me," she seethed. Her tone sounded pinched from the tightness of her throat, but she refused to cry, again. "It makes me wonder what you really think of me," she pondered aloud, crossing her arms. Lifting her chin in defiance, she sassd, "The more I think about it, I owe Regina a huge debt of gratitude. She kept me out of your clutches—twice." She wanted to hurt him, and she despised herself for it.

With wide eyes, he bristled, straightening his posture. "She did have you!" he snarled, stabbing his cane hard onto the floorboards. He turned about, unsure what to do with himself, and balled his left fist, hitting the top of the nearest display case. "I'll make her pay," he vowed darkly, ignoring the pop of wood and glass.

"Really? That's what you're taking from this?" she bellowed in agitation. Huffing, she tossed her hands in the air, taking several steps away. "You're missing the point," she hissed, covering her eyes with her right hand. Why was she even bothering?

Startled out of his shady plotting, Gold quickly remembered his immediate goal. "She kidnapped you and locked you away," he reminded her, keeping his voice calm and level. "I searched for you," he repeated in an even softer voice, reaching out for her, again. Maybe if they just touched, he could help her to remember what they had once shared and how precious she was to him.

Holding her hands up and halting his approach, Belle regarded him with open disdain. "Well, she hid me in plain sight. I worked in her castle library until she cast the curse," she retorted, miffed, her glare burning. She took a deep, fortifying breath, and rebuked, "So, obviously, you didn't look hard enough." Her shame over her verbal lashing out was short lived. How often had he boasted about his power?

"She banished me from her kingdom," he countered sharply, too quick to lay blame on someone else. "I don't know how she did it," he admitted freely and somewhat distractedly. Wait, why hadn't he found Belle at Regina's castle?

His mind drifted back to the day he had tried to teleport to the Winter Castle after months of not seeing his apprentice. And no matter what he had done, he had kept finding himself along the outside border of the Dark Forest. Then, his face paled as he recalled the last time they had met at his Dark Palace prior to the casting of the Dark Curse, and how he had instructed her in advanced potion making. Looking up at the dark ceiling, he groaned and silently cursed himself. Why had he given Regina that potion?

Tired of the excuses, Belle rolled her eyes, hiding her confusion over the shift in his demeanor. "Well, you weren't her only teacher. I believe the queen knows more than you think," she blurted, realizing too late she probably shouldn't have shared that tidbit.

"Belle, what have you done?" Gold quickly questioned, refocusing on the situation at hand. "She's dangerous," he intoned, knowing exactly of what the woman in question was capable. After all, he
had created her. "You should stay clear of her."

"I've made no deals, Rumpel," she huffed mockingly. "Regina's interest in me was strictly academic. My affiliation with you was only a bonus to her," she added with a frown. Her keen gaze quickly assessed his body language, and her eyes narrowed as she realized he was hiding something from her. "She, somehow, protected my mind from the curse, and then, she reversed my cursed memories, not you. She spared me the humiliation of being Lacey," she clarified.

"She kept you locked in the psych ward for twenty-nine years!" he snapped, his ire rising. His daughter was no saint, but he realized, with dark mirth, his youngest did take after him.

Belle's laugh sounded empty and hollow. "It was the same day over and over again. I didn't remember it! No one remembered it," she responded with disappointment. "And truthfully, it was preferable to being your strumpet," she hissed. She was struck by the sudden desire to take another shower.

"She took away your freedom, locked you up," Gold continued passionately, trying to dissuade her mass misconception.

"No more than you, Rumpelstiltskin," she replied with fire, even though her voice was heavy with sadness. She almost wanted to hug him but immediately thought better of it. Instead, she dropped her head and shook it slowly. "I would lose myself in helping you find yourself," she explained, realizing her heart was done breaking. "I'm finished," she stated with true finality. "I can't be with someone who doesn't respect me." The damage to her soul was complete, and now, she was left with picking up the pieces.

His lower lip quivered as he felt her words pierce his tired, black heart. "I love you, Belle," he whispered, unable to shake the feeling of utter defeat. His shoulders slumped as he took a tentative step forward. Even now, he believed she was the one.

"I know that a part of you may love me, and I know you believe that you love me," Belle said in a gentle tone. Yet, her kind smile was full of sorrow. Her time with the Dark One had been both delightful and detestable. "But it isn't true, not really," she lamented with far less regret than she had expected. "You continually chose power over me, over us. I'm sorry. I'm done," she enlightened, managing to keep her voice level.

He hadn't felt heartache like this since Cora. "Please, I can do better. I want to be better," he meekly plead. The darkness and rage within him urged him to force her into submission, but he couldn't do that to her. And unlike Milah, he would always love Belle.

Taking several steps back, she shook her head, but she didn't fight back the prickling tears. She let them slip down her cheeks. "I can't trust you. It's over," she breathily mourned. But she knew this was the right choice.

The battle for his lover's heart was lost. Gold saw no direct means of rekindling what they had shared. His own devilish desires had claimed another victim in his quest to find his son. So, he vowed to grant Belle her space and decided to bide his time. They eventually came back; they always did. However, he imparted one last bit of insight. "Regina's no better than me, Belle. She will betray you," he cautioned solemnly. "It's a nasty habit of the queen's. She turned on her own council. She's violent and treacherous. I would know; I made her," he elucidated, hoping she would at least heed that advice.

Nodding, Belle appreciated the warning. She had lived in the queen's employ for years, but she also knew things no one else, save the Crows Guard, knew about Regina Mills. And she felt that
gave her a shield of sorts. "They got what they deserved," she replied in a low tone. "I'm not a pet, Rumpel," she added, turning around and heading toward the front door. "Despite what you may think, I do know what happens around me, and the queen never treated me badly." She stopped with her hand on the doorknob. Her brow furrowed as she considered her words, but she didn't feel rushed. She let the silence hang between them. "She restricted my freedoms, yes, but she never attempted to seduce me. She wanted me for me," she acknowledged with a strange sense of awe. It made her feel better about herself. The Dark One had initially wanted her to clean his home, but the queen had wanted her for her mind. Turning the knob and pulling the door open, she looked over her shoulder at him and relayed her own nugget of truth, "I think you've underestimated her. I think a lot of people in Storybrooke have." Then, with a watery smile, the left the pawn shop.

~SQ~

The bedroom door was suddenly swung open and slammed hard into the wall with a resonating thud, jolting Emma Swan out of a dead sleep. "What the hell?!" she yelled, floundering from under the blanket. Her arms flailed wildly as she rolled over, sat up, and snatched the discarded sheet over her flannel pajamas. "Monty?" she called as the man stomped across the bedroom, yanking all the curtains open.

"Where is she?" Elmwood demanded, storming toward the en suite. Quickly returning, he popped his head into the large walk-in closet before focusing on the blonde still sitting on the bed. His teeth ground as he waited for a response. If this was some sort of sick prank, he would most certainly post guards inside the house.

"Regina?" the sheriff quietly inquired with a furrowed brow. She absently rubbed at her left wrist, looking around the room. Uncertain how to handle the increasing fury of the Crows Guard commander, she hesitantly suggested, "Somewhere in the house?" She had been asleep until Monty had come barreling into the bedroom. How the hell would she know where Regina was? She searched the room with her gaze, not spotting anything out of the ordinary. Her eyes lingered on the reading glasses still on the brunette's nightstand and frowned. If Regina was up for the day, Emma knew she'd take her glasses with her.

A firm scowl marred the commander's features as he searched his queen's side of the bed. "No, we've checked the house, and the yard, and the garage," he informed the recruit. Dropping onto his hands and knees, he peered under the bed, finding only a stack of books. A small smile cracked his rising frustration as he realized some habits never died, but his memory merely incited further anger.

Crawling over to that side of the bed, the blonde watched as Monty rose from the floor. "What do you mean?" she questioned, blinking away her sleepy confusion. "She has to be here somewhere," she added as she ran a hand through her messy hair. "Did you try calling her?" she prodded, wincing at the man's glare. "Okay, dumb question," she admitted in a quiet whisper.

Elmwood had lost his queen, again. His throat tightened in self-loathing and fear for his missing monarch, but being the professional he was, he pushed through, focusing on breathing before he spoke again. He had a job to do. "There's a mess in the kitchen," he finally managed to share, his voice rough with worry and fire. After another long inhale followed by a controlled exhale, he prompted, "Do you know anything about that?"

"Only that Regina would never leave it," Emma answered, getting out of bed. Her mind was fully engaged, now. "Monty, what's going on?" she asked, absentely shaking her left hand. It felt like it had gone to sleep. "Something doesn't feel right," she muttered, rubbing her left wrist.

"That's because the queen is missing," Monty replied, standing rigid and straight. His fists curled at
his sides. The savior's parents wouldn't have made another move on the queen, not when the
princess and shepherd wanted so desperately to reconcile with their daughter. They certainly
wouldn't have had access to the equipment used to neutralize the posted guards. Any other
potential suspects were woefully limited—the Dark One and the Blue Fairy.

"What do you mean, missing?" the sheriff demanded, moving to stand in front of the guard. She
scratched at her left wrist. Worry laced her tone as she reminded him, "We can only be so far
apart."

They were wasting precious time. "Get dressed and come downstairs," he ordered, purposefully
leaving the bedroom. They were going to recover their queen and make her abductors pay severely.

In a whirlwind, the sheriff stripped out of her pajamas and rushed into the closet, yanking articles
of clothes off hangers and out of drawers. She darted into the bathroom, quickly brushing her hair
and pulling it into a high ponytail. With surprising speed and efficiency, she rushed through her
morning grooming and dressed in her well-worn, black combat boots, dark jeans, and a white baby
doll t-shirt under a hunter green Henley. So, within five minutes, she exited the master bedroom,
settling her light brown leather jacket on her shoulders, ready to do whatever she needed to bring
Regina home.

Henry hurried from his bed to his bedroom door, cracking it open when he heard his mother's door
click closed. The raised voices outside and the loud bang from his mother's bedroom had alerted
him that something was wrong. Of course, he was glad to see Emma leave the room, but when his
mom didn't follow, he frowned. Opening his door wider, he worriedly asked, "Emma, what's going
on?"

"Henry," Jason Sirtis calmly warned from his position by a window. The guard's gaze dropped
down to his brother, Alexander, who sat at the foot of Henry's twin bed.

The young drummer climbed onto his feet and went to usher the boy back into his room.

"I don't know, Kid," the blonde replied, spotting the two Crows Guards. She stopped in front of his
doorway, looking him in the eye. "Stay in your room," she instructed before heading downstairs.
"Listen to Jason and Alexander," she added for good measure, but she highly doubted the brothers
would let Henry out of their sight. Taking a deep breath before trotting down the stairs, she was
thankful when the boy's door clicked closed.

"Hey, Irene, what's going on?" she greeted the tall, broad shouldered woman, stopping next to her
in the short hall leading into the kitchen from the foyer. Her sharp gleam examined the scene
before her. Yes, there had obviously been a struggle, and while Regina had demonstrated a
mischievous tendency to occasionally troll her guard, she would never take it to such dramatics.

Pursing her lips, Irene Smith cut her eyes to the sheriff for a brief second. "Neal's fiancé and that
food blogger abducted the queen," she answered flatly. As her gaze swept the scene again,
something shiny by the coffee pot caught her eye, and with surprising agility for a large-footed
woman in boots, she weaved her way to the countertop appliance, deftly avoiding contact with any
potential evidence.

"Seriously?" Emma exclaimed ready to scold the guard for entering a crime scene. Had they called
the Sheriff's Department, yet? Would they? But as she observed the other woman weave around
the room, she zeroed in on what caught her attention by the coffee pot. She curiously inquired,
"Tamara and Greg know each other and are working together? And why the hell would they take
Regina?" Suddenly, Neal's possible involvement seemed more likely. Poor Henry, she thought.
Spotting the syringe but not touching it, Smith frowned and gruffly answered, "All of those are very excellent questions."

Then, Monty appeared at the other entrance to the kitchen, leading to the side door. He crossed his arms as he watched his guard work. "We're speculating where they could've possibly taken her," he informed the sheriff. He had just received word that Neal Cassidy was en route to the house, but Tamara and Greg were currently MIA. He flexed his right hand, crackling his knuckles, and demanded a report.

Emma Swan listened with a mixture of awe and dread as Irene presented a possible outline of Regina's kidnapping. The empty syringe behind the coffee pot definitely answered how Greg and Tamara had gotten the drop on a tired, distracted queen with serious mojo. "Has anyone called the Sheriff's Department, yet?" she asked, pulling out her phone. She frowned at Elmwood's hard scowl. "They can help," she gently insisted. At their skeptical expressions, she dialed, and holding the phone up to her ear, she quickly explained, "Puma and Hart can gather evidence, and maybe Ruby can sniff them out." The phone on the other end rang twice before Jackson Hart answered. She quickly stepped out into the foyer to talk to her deputy.

"Is involving the Sheriff's Department wise, Sir?" Irene whispered with clear suspicion. Her eyes cut between where the sheriff had disappeared to and her superior. Sure, she liked Emma Swan, most of the Crows Guard did, and she'd done well by the queen, thus far. However, the blonde was still a Charming, trying to reconcile with her parents, and that could prove to be problematic in the future.

Without showing any expression, Monty met his subordinate's gaze and simply stated, "She's tethered to the queen." They didn't have much of a choice. However, before he could expound any further, he heard the side door open and close. He pivoted on his booted heel to peer down the hall, and his lip curled menacingly upon recognizing a smiling Neal Cassidy. His guards had followed orders perfectly.

"Hey, Monty, I know I'm early," Neal greeted cheerfully. Glancing over his shoulder and out the window in the door, he started to ponder aloud, "What's going on—? Whoa!" The next thing he knew, he was being lifted by his coat lapels and slammed onto the hardwood floor, rattling that section of the house. He gasped and gulped, trying to catch his breath. His hands immediately latched onto the thick wrist at his neck.

"Where is she?" Elmwood snarled, his patience having worn thin. His large hand squeezed the trapped throat as he pressed his broad knee into the pinned man's chest.

Jogging from the foyer, Emma blinked in disbelief. "Holy shit!" she exclaimed into the phone. "Get here fast, Rubes," she ordered, ending the call. Slipping past Irene, she moved down the hall with no idea how she was supposed to subdue Monty.

"Who?" the janitor cried out in shock at the violent manhandling, vainly pulling at the hand around his throat. "I don't know anything!" he promised. Hearing Emma's voice, he tried to twist to see the blonde. Then, making eye contact as she got closer, he pleaded to his ex-girlfriend, "What's going on?" His wide eyes darted between the three people in the hall.

"Your fiancé took the queen," Monty growled, leaning down. His knee pressed harder against the whelp of a man.

"What? That's impossible," Neal insisted between winces and gasps. "Why would she do that?" he valiantly disputed, fixing a hopeful look at the sheriff. Was she going to just stand there while this bear of a man killed him?
"I don't know. You tell me," Elmwood countered with cold contempt. He lifted the man's head off the floor an inch and abruptly smacked him against the hardwood.

Grimacing at the strident pain, the janitor kicked his feet, his sneakers squeaking as they gained purchase and slipped on the polished wood. "Seriously, I don't know!" he cried out, his voice rising out of desperation. "She said she was going for her run," he quickly elucidated with wide eyes.

"Monty, he doesn't know," Emma softly interjected. If Neal wasn't released soon, the poor guy was going to piss his pants. She reached out to touch Monty's shoulder, but the straining muscles in his neck gave her pause. One punch would land her flat on her ass.

Turning partially, the commander weighed the sheriff's statement. "How can you be so sure?" he questioned. He couldn't afford to let a guilty man go, but he wasn't willing to alienate the blonde on a rash impulse.

"Superpower, remember?" the blonde smirked with a shrug, trying to appear as casual as possible. When Elmwood looked away, she bit her lower lip, surprised when he released Neal.

Grunting, Monty stood up and took a step back. He turned his heated gaze on Emma, intoning, "For both your sakes, I hope you're right."

Rubbing his neck, the janitor glanced between the three people standing over him. "So, Regina's missing?" he probed as he slowly stood up. Reflexively, he raised his hands when the two guards glared at him. So, yeah, that was what hate looked like, he darkly mused. After a quiet sigh, he turned to Emma and reconfirmed what everyone already knew, "But you guys are tethered. If she was too far away, you'd both be a blubbering mess."

"Don't I know it," Emma agreed with relief. "But I just have this weird ache in my wrist," she explained, holding up her left wrist. Everyone noted how it was red from her constant worrying at it. "And my chest," she quietly added, rubbing over her heart. That one was a new development.

~SQ~

END OF PART 12

Chapter End Notes

Because it just dawned on me that you can't plug the Chinese (Pinyin) into Google Translate (it wants to make it Vietnamese and ends up all kinds of wrong), I'm putting the English translations below.

Nǐ hái jìdé nǐ de kè ma? = Do you still remember your lessons?
Dāngrán. Wǒ yǒu yīgè yǒuxiù de lǎoshī. = Of course. I had an excellent teacher.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Action and whatnot contained within. Mostly nothing one wouldn't see on cable television. We're putting a graphic violence warning in effect. Yes, that means torture, but nothing worse than on Game of Thrones, possibly not even that bad.

Medical Note: Please be aware that extensive research was done regarding the trauma resulting from the use of restraints during seizures/convulsions and extreme electroconvulsive therapy. We were somewhat conservative in our depiction. Some description of damage from past trauma is included, as well. Also, while we did our best to make this as realistic as possible (i.e. not brushing off severe trauma like the show writers did), we are not medical experts and had to rely on previous medical courses and medical journal articles, for the most part. That being said, if you are an orthopedic doctor or other medical practitioner who has dealt specifically with this type of trauma, we would be more than happy to receive a private message regarding any errors we have made and the scientific basis of that reasoning. No pseudo facts need apply. If your arguments are sound, we will adjust the story accordingly to increase the realism.

Special Note: This chapter grew quite a bit as we were writing it. There will be one last part posted after this chapter before we get to Neverland.

Thank You for all the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. Usually, I don't reply to reviews. I'm an introvert, but Lain may start responding, especially via the blog at ncfn . tumblr . com or AO3. Please feel free to converse with us. It might take us a little bit to respond, especially given I just figured out how the Tumblr messenger works. (Hello, truestbelieverforever!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~SQ~

Part 13

The first thing she became aware of as consciousness slowly returned was the light pressure against her ankles and wrists. Regina noticed the light fog that clouded her thoughts dissipated quickly, and though her limbs seemed a bit heavy, she felt alert. Turning her head slightly, she observed that she was inside a factory—the old cannery, if the smell of sardines was any indication. The brunette tried to move her arms, but found resistance where she had previously detected pressure.

Raising her head, she saw the straps holding her down to the small, leather-padded gurney, a spike of fear and panic immediately dropping to her stomach. She jerked savagely at the fetters, pulling hard against the wool lined leather, to no avail. Her stomach clenched, nausea overwhelming her at the all-too-familiar sensations of being restrained. Regina choked back the slight keening sound
that had begun to work its way up her throat, panting heavily as she tried to calm herself. She had to think, not simply react, if she wanted to have any chance of freeing herself.

The second thing she discovered was the hollow, cold ache in her chest and the disorienting sensation of being somewhat disconnected from reality. In a flash, she remembered being pinned against the kitchen counter as something was wrapped around her left wrist and the sudden loss of magic that had accompanied it. The brunette realized that the odd emptiness which seemed to be creeping steadily through her being was the loss of her connection to Emma. Somehow, the bond was being blocked, and it hurt like hell.

Hearing approaching footsteps, she froze, forcing herself to relax, and closed her eyes until she could just see through her lashes. Anger rose hard and fast within her when Neal's fiancée, Tamara Green, entered the room and came to stand beside her, several items bundled in her hands, which were covered in blue, nitrile gloves. Regina covertly watched as the woman set multiple blood collection tubes on her abdomen, wrapping a rubber tourniquet around her upper arm and tying it off quickly. Tamara used her index finger to palpate the veins along the brunette's inner elbow before she opened an alcohol wipe, swiping it over the skin.

The dark-skinned woman opened a single-use collection needle and expertly guided it into Regina's vein. The former mayor kept her breathing even, careful not to betray her wakened state as Tamara collected six vials of her blood, eventually pressing a cotton ball over the insertion site and removing the needle. She released the tourniquet and held pressure over the tiny wound for a few seconds before gathering up all of her supplies. Glancing up as someone else joined them, she advised, "All done. I'll get this sent off to the lab with the rest of the data. I think the Home Office is gonna have a field day with everything we've collected so far."

Greg hovered in the doorway, saying, "I still have one thing that I have to do."

"Make it quick." Making sure she had everything, she moved toward him, reminding him, "We'll be getting our instructions soon and need to be ready."

Smirking slightly and glancing at the woman on the gurney, he assured her, "Oh, this won't take long."

They disappeared, and Regina allowed herself a deep breath, wondering what game these two were playing. She didn't bother to feign unconsciousness when Greg returned, pushing in a machine that was built into a black case. Her eyes took in the details of the machine, the switches and hookups, voltage meters and dials leading her to conclude that whatever it was, it was likely to mean unpleasantness in her near future. She was, however, intrigued as to why Greg Mendell, the food blogging, accidental tourist was involved with Tamara and what their connection was.

Greg noticed that she was alert and flashed her a smile, greeting her with a cheery, "Good morning, Regina." He paused and contemplated her a moment, asking curiously, "Which one were you? What fairy tale character come to life are you supposed to be?"

In that moment, Regina realized that Emma had been right, all along. This man obviously knew much more about their little town than he'd let on. As she was finally afforded the opportunity to study him up close, she could vaguely make out the similarities to the child she had met decades earlier. Concluding that he already had a fair idea of Storybrooke's unique situation, she decided to humor him, hoping it would have the added benefit of helping her find a way out. "I was the queen," she stated, but upon seeing his puzzled expression, she elaborated, "Snow White's stepmother."

Recognition relaxed his features. "Ah, the Evil Queen," he mused. "Those must have been your
guards we knocked out, then. You might want to consider hiring better help," he taunted with a grin. He watched her hands curl into claws and chided her, "Oh, don't bother trying to use magic. It won't work."

Regina narrowed her eyes, hating the feeling of helplessness that enveloped her at not having her magic. "What did you do to me?" she demanded, casting a suspicious glance at the cuff on her left wrist.

Greg nodded in approval as if she'd just performed an especially difficult trick. "That's right, that lovely accessory you're sporting keeps your magic from working. And before you ask, it's not magic." Leaning in, he announced gleefully, "It's science, and right now, it's counteracting every magical spark you try to produce."

Disdain filled her eyes as she mockingly praised, "How very clever of you. It seems you've thought of everything—bypassing my guards, blocking my magic." Inside, she felt sure that Emma was already trying to find her, had to be feeling same hole in the bond and, knowing the commander of her guard, had Monty fighting the blonde on how to go about searching for her. They were the ace up her sleeve, and the brunette had to trust that they would track her down, sooner rather than later. Turning her attention back on her captor, she complimented, "You've even found a nice, quiet evil lair to implement the torture of prisoners. I'm impressed." Her lips twitched up a bit at the irritation that crossed his features.

"Go ahead and be as flippant as you like," he dismissed her. His tone was filled with superiority as he continued, "Other people may think you're powerful, but to me, you're nothing but a filthy beast."

"And what are you?" Regina questioned, wanting to know how he saw himself.

Greg smiled indulgently. "I'm a simple man working toward a higher purpose."

Regina used her eyes to indicate her current predicament. "Is this part of your higher purpose?"

He turned his back to her and began connecting leads to the machine, tutting with amused conceit, "Oh, Regina, Regina, no, no, no. Call this my personal, side quest. You're here because of what you did to my father," he explained casually, pulling the cart supporting the machine closer.

Perplexed, the former queen furrowed her brow and murmured quietly, "Your father?" wondering how Kurt figured into her abduction.

Scoffing, Greg sneered at her and accused sharply, "Don't play dumb. Kurt Flynn, remember him?" he growled, attaching electrodes just above the ankle straps and to the inside of her elbows.

She stared at the man hovering over her and asked flippantly, "Should I call you Owen, then?"

He placed an electrode on each of her temples, hateful grin on his face. Bracing his hands on the gurney to either side of her chest, his eyes flicked briefly down her body as he said, "Hello, again, Madam Mayor."

Quirking an eyebrow upon catching the transient flash of want in his eyes, she purred suggestively, "Look at you, all grown up."

Greg ignored her insinuation and started connecting the leads to the electrodes he'd placed on her skin, saying conversationally, "And somehow, you look exactly the same as I remember."

"Antiaging curse," she shot back sarcastically. "Why, it was almost as if time had stopped."
Letting his gaze deliberately track over her form, he hinted menac-ingly "You've got a smart mouth. I might find a good use for that, later. But for now, why don't you tell me what happened to my father?" he ordered, slipping the last leads onto the electrodes at her ankles.

Blinking up at her captor innocently, Regina avowed, "Why, he left shortly after you did, of course." A pout pushed out her lips, and with a sweetly mocking tone, she inquired, "Didn't he go find his little boy, scared and alone in the big, cruel world?"

Snarling, he admitted, "Oh, he came back in a few days, but he wouldn't stop ranting about magic. He became obsessed with it." Greg's gaze grew distant as he recalled his father's single-minded fixation on magic. "He didn't eat, didn't sleep. He lost his job because he couldn't concentrate on anything else." A fraught expression contorted his features at the memory. "He left four months later, said he was coming back here, going to find out the truth." Greg checked the ankle straps, tightening them roughly as he ground out, "He never returned."

Regina was honestly startled by the pronouncement; however, she kept her response cool, watching him intently as she stated matter-of-factly, "Regardless of his intentions, he did not, in fact, return to Storybrooke. I never saw him again."

Greg harshly adjusted the wrist straps until they almost cut into her skin. "I don't believe you," he scowled.

"Be that as it may, it's the truth." She shrugged slightly, indicating her dismissal, surreptitiously eyeing the device she was certain was intended for use in electroconvulsive therapy.

Plugging the machine into the wall, he pointed out, "People don't just disappear, Regina."

Rolling her eyes, she condescended, "Contrary to what you might think, parents can and do forsake their children all the time. You've gone through all of this trouble for nothing."

"It's taken me a very long time to get back here, and I'm not leaving without my father," he informed her, coming to stand beside her, once more.

Regina laughed mirthlessly and snapped, "Get used to being disappointed. He left town after you did. Where he went after that, I wouldn't know." The brunette's ire was peaking at the prolonged buildup to the torture she knew was coming. She doubted that it could be much worse than the anguish that had been increasing with every minute the bond was blocked. Where once Emma's presence had taken up residence in her consciousness, there was an impression of gnawing hunger in its place. The pain was as much physical as it was metaphysical, and she wondered how long she would be able to withstand it, hoping that the blonde was alright and close to finding her.

"My father was consumed by his need to find answers. Sometimes, he'd go days before he'd remember I was there and think to see if we had food in the house. He abandoned me because of you and this damned town!" he bellowed, eyes blazing with hatred. Taking a deep breath, he turned on the ECT machine and methodically began flipping each of the switches as it warmed up. "No," Greg refuted, calmer, "he came back. He's here somewhere, and you're going to tell me what I want to know."

"I can't impart knowledge that doesn't exist," the brunette scoffed, feeling her muscles tense involuntarily when the machine filled the room with a high-pitched whine.

There was an ominous gleam in his eyes as he adjusted the main dial to a setting of two. "Oh, you say that, now, but you'll tell me, eventually." He hissed sinisterly, "It's just a matter of time."
"Is that supposed to frighten me?" she challenged, smirking at him contemptuously.

Greg fixed her with a look of mocking concern. "It should. This little machine is just one way we deal with maleficars." Voice dropping in warning, he expounded, "It really does pack a nasty punch. And if it doesn't do the trick, well, there are other means at my disposal." His tone was conciliatory as he added, "Of course, a lot of that depends on how cooperative you are." Straightening, he let his hand hover over the activation button and asked firmly, "Now, where is my father?"

Regina turned her head away with a snort of derision, settling her shoulders against the padded surface under her. Resolutely, she stared at the metal rafters and ductwork overhead, waiting for him to take the final step and begin the dance proper. There was less hesitation than she had expected, and then, electricity was coursing through her body with a sharp snap of heat. Gritting her teeth, she remained silent, the current no worse than what she'd channeled at the edge of town upon their return from New York. The brunette took no consolation in the fact that she had been right that the void where a piece of Emma should have been resting within her was far more painful than Greg's revenge.

~SQ~

The bell jingled as Mary Margaret rushed inside the pawn shop, her husband on her heels. Strutting purposefully toward the back of the store, she called out, "Gold?" She stopped at the antique cash register, wanting to barrel through the curtains to the back. Please be here, she mentally chanted, glancing nervously around the dark shop.

David frowned. Laying a gentle hand on his wife's biceps, he quietly questioned, "Are you sure about this?" He was eager to help his daughter, but involving Rumpelstiltskin seemed risky since he was the reason they were even in the mess in the first place. Of course, Emma hadn't even called them to let them know about the abduction. They had had to find out about it from Ruby. That had stung.

"We have to do something, David," the school teacher said, intently watching the covered archway. She could hear the pawnbroker moving toward the front of the shop. "They're connected," she reminded him. Taking a deep breath, she resigned, "If we lose one, we lose the other." To know that her precious child was forever bound to Regina was nearly unbearable, but she was determined to accept it. She wasn't going to lose her daughter, again. When she saw the curtains shift, she sighed, "Finally."

Stepping out into the front of his shop, Gold slowly moved to the main counter. "Charmings," he greeted flatly. He hadn't expected to see the royal duo anytime soon. "What can I do for you?" he asked with mild interest as he had more important problems of late.

"Regina's missing," Mary Margaret blurted, pressing against the display case. She quickly added, "We need to find her."

"I'm sure the queen will turn up, eventually," the pawnbroker dismissively stated. His assurance wasn't entirely convincing, but he doubted the eager Charmings would even notice. He did, however, drum his fingers over the handle of his cane, once. His daughter was missing, and that gave him pause.

"Gold, you know Emma is bound to her," David snapped, irritated by the lack of action or information. "The separation is driving our daughter crazy," he informed the imp, slapping his open palm down onto the counter. He needed answers, his mind contemplating scenario after scenario, each one darker than the previous. "Someone abducted her early this morning. The Crows
Guard are frantic," he said, curling his hands into fists.

With a furrowed brow, Gold tilted his head and explained in an annoyed tone, "They can't be separated, Dearie. That's how the spell works." He pursed his lips, unwilling to admit whom he was trying to convince. The mere idea of Regina being taken was slowly starting to gnaw at him. "I would've thought you'd figured that out by now," he sneered with a narrowed glower. If his daughter was in trouble, then, was Baelfire? Who else, besides Cora and his son, could possibly know Regina was his? That wasn't something his ex-lover would ever share. It was too damning.

"My reasons are my own," Rumpelstiltskin retorted, shaking free of the other man's hold. He had expected more from Prince Charming, having grown up as a poor shepherd. But power was an intoxicating crutch. Cora had been a shining example of that. Both had become deft at throwing their weight around, it seemed.

"David, stop, this isn't helping," Mary Margaret interjected, pulling her husband away from the counter and the one person who could possibly help them. For the first time since speaking with Ruby, she was wondering what price they would have to pay. Her heart hammered in her chest as she didn't know how much she would sacrifice for her stepmother.

"You'd do well to listen to your wife," the pawnbroker taunted with a smirk. Ignoring any further posturing from the shepherd prince, he refocused on the calmer spouse. "Now, what's this about our dynamic duo being separated?"

Squaring her shoulders, the school teacher dropped her hold on her husband and stepped forward, meeting the Dark One's curious gaze. "We have to help our daughter," she boldly stated, lifting her chin. "If that means helping Regina, we will," she added for her own benefit. "We need a way to find her." Then, the thought hit her. If only they had stepped up all those months ago and done what Emma had asked, maybe they wouldn't be there, in that moment.

"Not up for a rousing game of hide-and-seek?" Gold tittered darkly, masking his own rising disquiet. He knew if Regina didn't want to be found, even he would have a hard time of it. However, if she had been taken, there were a few avenues open for him to pursue. But would he be playing into someone's hands?

"Gold," David growled in warning, taking a step forward.

Partially turning and placing a calming hand on her husband's chest, Mary Margaret sighed. "Emma's suffering," she intoned with honest concern. And if she was hurting, her stepmother was hurting, and that didn't sit well, either. "Please, help us," she softly plead. When the pawnbroker limped away to the back, gesturing for them to follow, she shared a curious look with Charming, and quietly, the pair passed through the curtains.

Gold glanced around his work area, gathering this and that with some expediency, dropping the spell supplies on the large workbench. "I'm sure I could whip something up," he muttered. Trap or no, people didn't hurt what was his. He pawed around in a large cabinet, removing an ornate box. Carefully, he placed it on the table, and with a wave of his hand, unlocked the box, revealing
several tiny, amber, glass bottles containing a clear liquid.

"What is that?" David inquisitively probed. He didn't always understand magic, but he knew sometimes spell and potion components could be unusual or interesting.

"This," the pawnbroker answered, taking one of the bottles and returning the box to the cabinet, "is one of Regina's tears." Was it their blood relation that made his daughter's tears so effective in his spell work? He frowned as he moved back to the work bench and opened a small container. Carefully plucking out a golden, mustard seed, he dropped it in with the tear, resealing the seed container and setting it aside.

Horrified but too curious not to know, the school teacher couldn't resist asking, "Why do you have Regina's tears?" What use could tears be?

Pursing his lips, Gold flippantly responded, "They weren't in short supply, Dearie." His reasons, after all, were his own, and he didn't owe Snow White any explanations. Of course, that particular tear had probably been collected after one of Regina's bouts with King Leopold. Using it in a potion for his daughter was darkly twisted. "This spell, however, requires two tears," he explained, holding up the tiny bottle expectantly.

Looking between the vial in the Dark One's hand and his face, Mary Margaret incredulously asked, "You want one from me?" She pointed at herself, glancing briefly at her husband. This was not something she had expected. Suddenly, things had become much more daunting.

Dryly, the pawnbroker scoffed, "Nothing gets past you, does it?" He walked around the work bench, still offering the amber bottle to the now reluctant mother. Of course, he wasn't surprised by her hesitancy. "Now, dredge up one of those lovely, bleak memories of yours," he instructed, wiggling the vial between them. He was impressed by how quickly she succeeded in birthing a sad tear. A part of him wondered if it was a memory related to Regina, but he managed to keep his morbid prying in check. With practiced ease, he caught the tear in the little bottle and gently swirled the contents. After it shifted in color, he quickly placed a reducer in the neck and screwed on the cap, elucidating, "Perfect. Now, when you drop this into your eye, you will be connected to Regina wherever she is." He passed the tiny bottle to the nervous school teacher. "Whatever she sees, you'll see. Whatever she feels, you'll feel," he warned her, moving back to the other side of his work bench.

Relieved that they had something to help their daughter, David clasped a supportive hand on his wife's shoulder, squeezing. He smiled fondly as their gazes met. "How long does this spell last?" he asked in a gentler tone.

Keeping his expression neutral, Gold simply answered, "Long enough to lead you to her. And remember, you only need one drop in one eye." Aggressively waving them toward the front of the shop, he ordered abruptly, "Off with you, now." He didn't need them asking questions. Everyone had better things to do.

"Always a pleasure," Mary Margaret cast over her shoulder after stowing the vial in her coat pocket. They'd return to their loft apartment, use the potion, and go save Regina. Then, maybe, Emma would let them back into her life.

~SQ~

Tamara walked into the room, a smile on her face as she came to stand beside Greg and announced, "Everything's taken care of."
"Have you heard from the Home Office, yet?" he asked, wondering what the next step in their mission was going to be.

Shaking her head, the dark woman said, "No. How are things going with the queen?" she questioned sarcastically, looking at the woman in question.

Greg turned his attention back to his captive and grumbled, "You know, she's not exactly obliging. But that's all about to change. Right, Regina?" he queried in a chipper tone, turning the dial up to level three and activating it, again.

When the shock ended and her muscles relaxed, Regina smiled grimly. "You have no idea who you're dealing with," she told him in a hoarse voice, thinking she would enjoy getting her own licks in, once she was free. It had been far too long since she'd inflicted real pain on someone. And of one thing, she was sure; Greg would be feeling the full force of her wrath at the soonest opportunity. Briefly, she wondered if Emma would attempt to stop her or help her. If recent events were any indication, the former queen considered that assistance was a very real possibility. Her friend and apprentice had demonstrated a wicked need for retribution, on occasion.

"Actually, no, you have no idea who you are dealing with," he retorted confidently. They had the full force of the Home Office behind them, providing all the support they needed to complete their mission.

The brunette rolled her eyes and disparaged, "I see two fools who are in over their heads and cannot fathom that they are drowning." Snorting in amusement, Regina jeered, "Do you really think you can take a few vials of blood and unlock the enigma that is magic? Run your little tests. You won't find anything," she stated definitively.

Shaking her head, Tamara elucidated, "That's what you think we're here to do? The Chantry has already discovered magic's secrets." A fanatical gleam lighting her face, she explained, "Magic doesn't belong in this world. It's unholy. We've been sent here to cleanse the land of it." She crossed her arms and smiled forebodingly down at the woman on the gurney. "The prophet said, 'Magic exists to serve man, and never to rule over him.' But you, you're one of the worst transgressors I've ever seen. Twisting a curse that ripped apart two worlds and enslaving people to your desires? You're an abomination," she snarled hatefully.

Regina laughed in disbelief, pondering aloud, "What is this new penchant of everyone's for calling me an abomination?" She sneered at the obviously unbalanced couple looming over her. "You think you can destroy magic? Just the two of you?" she asked condescendingly, looking between them.

"What makes you think there's only two of us?" Greg asked insouciantly. "The Chantry is everywhere, Regina. After I left Storybrooke as a boy," he began, placing a hand on either side of her and leaning in close, "I was babbling about magic, about what I had seen and what had happened to my father. Most people wrote me off as crazy. But the Chantry didn't, and they found me," he concluded with an enigmatic smile.

The idea that someone would actively seek to destroy magic wasn't uncommon, but the possibility of a well-equipped organization dedicated to such a cause was worrisome. The thought caused the brunette to swallow hard at the realization that what she had assumed was a simple plot could be much farther reaching than just Storybrooke. Needing more information, she probed, "What is this Chantry of yours?"

"They are people who know that magic is real," Greg supplied easily. Grinning, he added, "They know that it doesn't belong in this world and are willing to do something about it."
Tamara expanded, "Their clerics spread the Chant of Light bringing the truth of the Maker to this dark, little world. They understand the need to keep apostates and maleficarum under control. Sometimes, you just have to kill the undesirables," she preached, triumphant in her superiority.

It was worse than she had thought. Her captors weren't just unbalanced, they were religious zealots attempting to further some sort of holy cause. Their Chantry made the True Love fanatics in the Enchanted Forest seem ridiculously tame. With a false confidence, Regina ridiculed them, "This little quest of yours—to cleanse the world of magic—it's not going to work."

Greg brought his face closer to hers, irked when she refused to flinch. Giving her a pitying look, he rejoined, "Of course it will. They've done it before, and they'll do it again. Do you think Storybrooke is the first time that magic has crossed over to our world?" he asked, pulling away from her and moving back toward the ECT device.

Tamara sneered, "Magic has been doing its damage for a long time."

"And people like us, we're here to stop it." Greg activated the machine again, watching with satisfaction as Regina stiffened in response. "Now, where is my father?"

After the shock subsided, the brunette ground out through teeth clenched in pain, "I already told you. I have no idea where he is."

Greg fumed, "And I told you, I don't believe you," hitting the button with a loud smack.

The pulse ended more quickly than some of the others, and Regina carefully drew in a deep breath. She would not give her wardens the satisfaction of seeing her pain so quickly, having endured far worse without flinching. Keeping an aloof mask in place with only a little effort, she chuckled darkly and rasped, "Is that the best you can do?" Her voice became husky as she jeered, "I've had better."

Expression rife with anger, he snarled, "Let's see if your sarcasm is intact after this." Turning the dial up a notch, he administered a more intense, longer shock.

Gasping in relief as the current ended, Regina gave herself up to the role and moaned throatily, "Mm. You've done this before." Her lack of response was enough to galvanize Greg into cranking the dial up to level five. The brunette's back arched hard when the shock hit her, and she groaned wantonly to hide the increasing agony. "That's more like it. Do it again," she whispered, licking her lips in a slow circle. Everything hurt, her muscles aching and trembling faintly, even when the machine wasn't actively sending electricity through her body.

Tamara watched with wide eyes, a hint of disgust on her face as she commented, "You are one sick freak."

Provoked to his limits, Greg bellowed, "This isn't supposed to be fun, damnit!" and held the button down far longer than he had before. He felt a thrill shoot up his spine as he watched his prisoner convulse until he removed his hand.

Regina took a moment to recover her breath, panting heavily but managing to smirk at her torturer. "Too late." Finally, she felt herself close to reaching her pain tolerance and wondered if she should be thanking or cursing her past for allowing her to withstand the torment for so long. Biting her bottom lip, she shifted suggestively against the table and husked in a strained voice, "Leather table, restraints, an audience…. If you wanted bondage play, you could have just asked nicely." Her smirk morphed into a wicked grin, promising, "You'll find I can be very accommodating."
That was too much for the man. She was supposed to be in excruciating pain by that point. *What the hell is she?* he thought. Upping the setting on the machine one more notch, he activated it twice in quick succession, determined to make her pay attention. "How's that, you twisted bitch?" he growled.

Loosing a deep groan in a valiant attempt to not scream, Regina had to wait to speak. Her nerves were raw, her blood feeling close to boiling. *On the bright side,* she reflected, *this is finally more agonizing than the bond being interrupted.* Aloud, she murmured, "Feels like . . . more." With a rough voice that practically dripped sex, she taunted between heaving breaths, "Why don't you . . . really show me . . . what you've got?"

Greg gladly obliged, administering two long shocks in a row, delighted when the former queen screamed at last, her body pulled into a taut bow. There was the satisfyingly loud pop of a shoulder dislocating, and Regina's cry shifted to something high and animalistic. "Now, we're finally getting somewhere," he declared with approval.

"She's one tough broad, I'll give her that," Tamara muttered, slightly impressed with how long the brunette had held out. After all, she'd dealt with her fair share of undesirables.

~SQ~

Rushing into the loft apartment, Mary Margaret quickly pulled off her hat and gloves. She haphazardly discarded the items on the dining table and unbuttoned her coat. Reaching into her coat's large, right pocket, she pulled out the small vial. Her lips pursed as she silently acknowledged the significance of this moment, staring at the liquid. She still, despite everything, loved and cared about Regina. Frowning, she wondered if it was guilt. She wondered what was wrong with her.

David slammed the door behind them and quickly pulled out a dining chair. "Sit," he instructed, leaning heavily on the back of the chair. He didn't want his wife to do this, to use Rumplestiltskin's potion, but they needed to help Emma. After his wife sat, he encouragingly rubbed her shoulders. "Are you ready?" he quietly asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be," the school teacher softly intoned, unscrewing the tiny vial with her left hand. Tilting her head back, she used her left hand to hold her eye open while maneuvering the small bottle with her right.

Diligently, the former deputy observed as a single drop fell into his wife's eye. He quickly recovered and resealed the amber bottle, setting it on the table. His eyes returned to his beloved.

"I wonder how long—," Mary Margaret started. Her words were cut off as her body revolted against her. She twitched and convulsed until finally it stopped, and her head fell forward.

"Snow!" David cried, moving around to kneel in front of her. He rested his large hands on her knees. When his gaze met hers, he was surprised by the wildness in them. He opened his mouth to ask another question, but he was helpless as she was taken by another seizure. "What the hell is going on?" he muttered.

Then, as the convulsions ceased, the school teacher passed out. Her head lolled to the right, and her body slumped in the dining chair.

Reaching up, the former deputy cupped his wife's right cheek, holding her head to look at him. "Snow," he called as his eyes searched her slackened face. "Mary Margaret!" he tried with a louder, firmer voice. Unaware of how long he remained in the same position, he held her and waited,
occasionally attempting to rouse her. He smiled when she finally released a quiet groan. "Snow," David rasped in relief.

Blinking, Mary Margaret pushed through the haziness. She was astounded at how much she hurt. "Oh, David," she whispered in awe. "It was horrible," she explained, resting her hands on his shoulders. Honest tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

"Where's Regina?" David prompted, not wanting to lose sight of the bigger picture.

The school teacher pursed her lips as her brow furrowed. After a long pause, her eyes met her husband's. "I remember seeing metal rafters and smelling fish," she said, making a disgusted face.

"The old cannery," the former deputy supplied, standing. He dutifully helped his wife to her feet. "Are you alright?" he questioned, noting her wobble.

"Yeah," she replied, grabbing her gloves and hat off the dining table. "We need to go," she ordered, gaining back some of her confidence. As they rushed out the door, she gushed, "It was absolutely awful, David." Truth be told, she wasn't entirely sure what she had felt while connected to Regina. However, she knew they needed to save her to save their daughter.

~SQ~

Emma ran full tilt into the mines, winding her way back to the cell where Cora was being held. Her eyes were wild with an intensity that bordered on insanity. She came to a skidding halt in front of the bars, right hand absently clutching the bandage around her left wrist.

Cora had stood expectantly when she had first heard the approaching footsteps, wanting her daughter to have returned for another visit. However, her expression went blank upon seeing the hapless blonde stumble into the small cavern as if the hounds of hell were on her heels. When Regina didn't immediately follow, her expression grew hopeful, and she asked, "Lost your shadow, Savior?" Perhaps her child had managed to free herself of the Charming brat, after all.

Hands braced on her knees as she bent over, Emma panted harshly, trying to catch her breath from her impromptu sprint. "We need your help," she wheezed, chest still heaving. The thought flitted through her mind that once everything settled down, she'd convince Regina that they needed to join Ruby on her morning jogs. Apparently, she was more out of shape than she'd realized.

In that moment, Monty, Aengus, and Neal burst into the open area, finally catching up to the frantic blonde. They had been caught off guard when Emma had surged from the Charger before it had come to a complete stop outside. By that point, they were almost as worried about the sheriff as they were about Regina.

"Why would I help you?" Cora snapped at the blonde. "After all, you're the one who entrapped my daughter." She was still livid about Rumpelstiltskin's role in lashing her child to the idiot before her. When she finally got out of her cell, she fully intended to make her former teacher's life a nightmare.

Not having the patience for a game of cat-and-mouse, the sheriff simply explained, "Because your daughter is missing." The admission, alone, had tears welling up her eyes as she attempted to straighten. With the bond interrupted, she couldn't seem to keep her emotions in check, and she felt fresh tears slip over her cheeks.

The Queen of Hearts was taken aback by the savior's emotional display and took a few moments to form words in light of the startling revelation. "You're tethered. How can you misplace her?" It
wasn't possible, but if her daughter's guards were there, then it had to be true. A spike of icy fear shot up her spine as she considered the new development. "Something is interfering with the bond. I can't feel her," Emma cried, sobbing in earnest as she tried, yet again, to reach out for Regina's presence and found nothing. "There's this hole, like a void, and it hurts like hell. I don't know how to find her." She rubbed hard at her wrist as she stared imploringly at the sorceress.

Neal chose that moment to step forward, asking, "Will you help us?"

Turning her head, Cora focused on the imp's son, eyes narrowing as she assessed him and found him lacking. "What interest do you have in this, Whelp?" she queried, curious in spite of her desire to remain aloof. Her child might be missing, but she would not let her enemies see her as weak. "I know she's my sister," he informed her, "and I've lived long enough without any family. I'm not letting anymore slip away." He hadn't exactly wanted to let that nugget of truth slip out, but he was done playing games and waiting out everyone's bluff. Neal wanted his sibling safe, and he was not going to let the arrogant sorceress's pride prevent them from finding Regina.

Emma spun around so quickly she almost toppled over, her tears ceasing instantly. "What the hell?!" she exclaimed incredulously, sure she'd misheard her ex. It had to be a joke, a sick, twisted joke. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Monty's and the other Crows Guards' expressions shift to one of shock. Obviously, this was news to them, as well. Face tight with anger, she jabbed an accusing finger into the janitor's chest and snarled, "Son of a bitch, that's why you've been kissing her ass."

Neal shook his head adamantly, holding his hands up in a placating gesture. "No! I really just want to get to know her and Henry." Hoping she could read the sincerity in his gaze, he looked her in the eyes and intoned, "I mean it, Emma. I honestly have no ulterior motives, here."

Stepping forward to diffuse the situation, Monty addressed Cora, "The queen was taken. Will you help the sheriff or not?" There was no time for the two ex-lovers to get into a quarrel over intentions. If Neal did, indeed, have a nefarious purpose for getting to know his queen, he would personally see to it that the man met an untimely fate, Dark One's son or no.

"Who could take a sorceress surrounded by guards?" Cora scoffed in derision. Seeing the slightly sheepish looks on the guards' faces, she challenged, "You're serious? You lost your queen?" Perhaps her child hadn't been so judicious in her choice of protectors, after all.

Still worrying at her left wrist, the sheriff admitted, "In their defense, Greg and Tamara got the drop on them, on all of us." Again, she felt terrible for not having realized something was wrong sooner. If she had, maybe they wouldn't have been in their current predicament. Maybe Regina would have been safe at home, not being held who-knew-where for some unfathomable reason. The tightness in her throat returned, and her eyes prickled with fresh tears.

Cora took in the drawn faces and furrowed brows of the others with quiet contemplation. "Well," she huffed, "their magic must be rather remarkable to usurp the Queen's Guard."

Neal absently corrected, "It was science, not magic. They had Tasers and tranq guns." Off her blank look, he clarified, "They fried them and knocked them out." It was easy to forget that not everyone in Storybrooke had cursed memories supplying them with the basic information on how their world worked.

The sorceress leveled them all with a heated glare and demanded imperiously, "And no measures
were taken to counter these attacks?" That settled it, the entire town was inhabited by imbeciles who, she was positive, didn't have enough common sense to get out of the rain.

Hearing Monty growl a warning, Emma quickly elucidated, "This is Storybrooke. Crap like this doesn't happen, or didn't happen." She waved her arms around spastically, concluding, "That's why this is such a big deal. Greg and Tamara took Regina right from under our noses, and we don't have any idea why. Who knows what they're doing to her!" Her voice had gradually risen in pitch until it was a near shriek, hysteria clawing its way to the surface.

"Get a hold of yourself, Girl," Cora snapped sharply, wishing she could slap the irritating blonde. "Panicking won't do Regina any good, and at the moment, you're our best chance of finding her. You need to focus." How had her daughter put up with the savior so long without throttling her and ending both of their misery?

Emma's face contorted with despair as she recalled all the times she'd reached out for their connection, only to find it gone. Plaintively, she whined, "I've tried. I told you, I can't feel her."

Sighing heavily, the sorceress lectured, "Stop focusing on her and focus on the void you mentioned."

The sheriff stared at her like she'd grown a second head. "But there's nothing," she reiterated. At the reminder of the missing piece of her that was usually occupied by her companion's presence, the blonde pressed her hand over her heart, feeling the painful ache of Regina's absence.

"Precisely, nothing implies a lack of something," Cora elucidated, watching the manner in which Emma rubbed at her sternum. "The bond isn't broken, you silly girl. It's been blocked. Focus on the place it should be." She was surprised when that seemed to calm the young woman and bring her back to the present. Wanting to move things along, she jeered, "Even you should be familiar enough with it by now."

The scathing tone was oddly familiar and comforting, reminding Emma of her friend when she was upset but trying to hide it behind caustic words. Allowing her eyes to close, the sheriff centered herself, quieting her mind and focusing on the empty sensation in her chest. It felt as though a part of her soul had been ripped away from her, leaving an odd echo in its place. "Okay . . . I think I've got it," she breathed softly. A slow smile spread across her lips when she realized, while she couldn't sense Regina or where she was, she could tell where she was not.

Cora nodded once in silent acknowledgement of the ease with which Emma accomplished the task once she set her mind to it. "Good, because the longer the bond is blocked, the worse your symptoms are going to be." Waving a hand in the direction of the small cavern's entrance, she scolded, "Now, go, and find my daughter while you can."

~SQ~

Tamara checked the display for the security cameras they'd set up to monitor the outside of the building. She started when Emma and Neal came running toward the cannery, followed closely by two large men in biker gear. "Time to go," she announced, popping her head around the Doorframe. "They found us."

Greg looked up in surprise, not expecting to be found out so soon. "Who?" he questioned with a puzzled expression.

"Emma and Neal," she huffed in response. She strutted to the old, metal desk and gathered the scattered hardcopies of their research on Storybrooke.
"Emma and Neal?" he repeated with a furrowed brow. "I thought that you took care of them during your jog," he accused with a scowl. His eyes trailed her as she, holding all their notes, trotted back to the doorway.

Worried, his coconspirator groused, "Yeah, so did I." She glanced out the door and down the hallway, wishing she could follow the group's progress. She shifted on her feet, already half-turned to leave as she admonished, "We need to go, now."

Shaking his head adamantly, he blurted, "No! I need more time with her." It couldn't be over, yet. He had to know what had happened to his father, where he was. And he was sure that the holder of all of those answers was lying behind him. No, he would not go, not until he had what he needed.

Tamara let out a frustrated breath, glaring at him, "Greg, if you get caught, this whole thing is blown—"

"We wouldn't even know about this town if it wasn't for my dad," he cut her off abruptly, backing toward the machine. "I'm not leaving until I find out where he is."

Irritation pressed her lips into a tight line, and she snapped, "Fine. Meet me at the rendezvous point when you're done." Casting one last glance over her shoulder, she hurried from the building, hoping to avoid running into the rescue team. There was a pre-paid envelope in her car. She just needed to stuff the files into a USPS drop box, and she'd be golden.

Greg returned his attention to the ECT machine, turning the dial to its maximum setting. Reaching into the case the lead wires had come from, he pulled out a new device, a metal rod approximately ten inches long and half an inch in diameter with a one inch metal ball at the tip. He plugged it into the front of the machine, which he pulled even closer to the gurney, and holding the wand by its insulated, rubber handle, he moved to hover over Regina. "It looks like I need to give you some extra incentive." He was gratified by the undeniable look of fear that flashed in the brunette's red-rimmed eyes.

After carefully setting the instrument just above his captive's head, he placed his hands on her shoulders, idly toying with the collar of her blue, silk pajama top. "It's just you and me, now, Regina." His fingers traced along the front edge of the shirt, sliding down to the top button, undoing it as he smiled maliciously. The rest of the buttons followed in short order, and he parted the material slightly, exposing her sternum and the inner curve of her breasts. "Now, I'm going to give you one last chance. Tell me where my father is."

Met with only stony silence, he picked the wand back up and announced, "Okay, time's up." Lightly, he set the tip of the rod to the center of her breastbone, fascinated by the goosebumps that rose up under the cold metal. He slid the device to his left, catching the silky material and bunching it around the rod as he gradually exposed her right breast. A threatening smile of equal parts hate and lust parted his lips and showed off his teeth as he tapped the probe against her nipple, circling it slowly.

Regina shuddered hard in revulsion, catching the sob before it could leave her throat, refusing to show that much weakness. The man standing over her was small and insignificant, and she was above him. She would not give in to Greg's game, had faced worse situations with steely grace, and she could do so again, if need be. However, she was not going to allow him to defile her, either. She would die, first. Gathering her dignity and determination about her, she commanded imperiously, "Wait."

Thinking he'd finally managed to break her, Greg demanded eagerly, "Where is he?"
The brunette almost cried as she realized she would have to push him to the point of no return. He wasn't going to let her go until he received an answer that suited him, and the truth wasn't working. She only hoped that the disruption of the bond would prevent Emma from following her into death. 

Inhaling quickly, she off-handedly responded, "Dead. I killed him the minute he returned."

"No!" Greg roared, slapping the button and running the probe over her clavicle, pushing hard against the bones as she seized and screamed. He would have smiled at the sound of her left shoulder popping out of socket had he not been so furious. "You're trying to trick me," he denied.

Regina yelled out her pain, her dislocated shoulders hitting the table hard, sharply protesting, as her muscles released from the spasm. "Don't believe me?" She paused to gather her scattered thoughts and swallowed dryly. Her memories of the morning had grown fuzzy and jumbled. Had it not been for the fact that Greg kept asking about Kurt Flynn, she would have been clueless as to the source of his fury or why she was strapped to a table. "Go see for yourself. I buried his body at your old campsite. I doubt he gets many visitors there," she spat with venom, goading him into further violence.

Greg slammed his hand down on the table next to her head, causing her to jerk at the sudden action. Spittle flying from his mouth, he thundered, "You're lying!" Raising his free hand from the table, he shoved aside both sides of her pajama top, completely baring her torso to the cold air. Then, he activated the machine, holding down the button as he slowly drug the wand across the top of her breasts, a continuous, electrical spark discharge visible between the metal and her skin.

The former queen screeched as her body arched rigidly, a sharp pain blooming in her right hip. Once the electricity stopped, she gasped frantically for air, feeling her thoughts go slightly dim. Smirking cruelly, she taunted, "His expression was . . . priceless when I . . . ripped out his heart." Her voice was a harsh rasp, throat raw, but Regina chuckled menacingly. "Almost, she thought, just a little more. Twisting the proverbial knife one last time, she mocked, "Poor Owen . . . all alone, now . . . with Daddy dead."

"You evil bitch!" he raged, pressing the probe hard on a nipple, and hit the button with excessive force.

A primal scream rose from her, ending on a hideous laugh that teetered on the edge of madness. The brunette had suffered enough hurt and anger in her lifetime and was ready for it all to stop. "Now go ahead . . . and kill me . . . I just," she paused to suck in a much needed gulp of air before saying, "wanted to see . . . the look on your . . . face when I—"

Greg activated the machine, moving the wand to her other breast, striking the nipple repeatedly, watching the electricity arc and relishing Regina's screams. "You feel that?" he asked, toggling the button quickly on and off. "That's the end of you, you fucking cunt." He ran the rod over both of her breasts and bumped it along her ribs as he depressed the switch, yet again.

Regina stiffened under a particularly violent seizure, and there was a horrible snap of her left arm breaking before she collapsed onto the gurney. She released a guttural moan, misery assaulting her on multiple fronts. The space where the bond normally rested in her thoughts and chest was brimming with an anguish that had increased exponentially over the last few hours. The brunette knew she had at least two broken bones from being restrained during the seizures, and yet, the pain radiating from her body had once again receded behind that caused by the loss of the bond. She would have preferred the purely physical hurts; she was used to that sort of trauma. The soul deep spike of ice suffusing her had no balm other than the return of the bond or her death. So close, now, she thought, feeling her breaths growing increasingly labored and heartbeat unsteady.

Sneering at her, he caught her gaze and thumbed the switch, running the probe over her nipples one
last time before pressing hard against her sternum. He leaned in carefully, trying to maintain eye
contact as he trailed the wand down to her navel, circling the indentation, lingering there as the
shock ended. "That's scary, isn't it?" he laughed, teasing the hot metal to the edge of her waistband
of her pajama pants, dipping just under the material and gliding it back and forth beneath the
elastic.

"No!" Fright sent adrenaline surging through her battered body, allowing Regina to briefly ignore
the pain as she tried to twist away, her terrified shriek resonating in the space around them. The
gurney rattled from her trashing, her blind panic preventing her from noticing when Greg withdrew
with the probe and activated the ECT machine. Her spine bowed backward once more, and she
finally fell back with a whimper, slipping into blessed oblivion.

Greg narrowed his eyes and muttered darkly, "Now, you're never going hurt anyone, ever again." His
fingers hovered over the button, ready to finish it since she'd passed out. He snatched his hand
back reflexively as gunshots echoed throughout the room, sparks flying out from the damaged
machine.

Emma rushed through the doorway, gun pointed at Greg Mendell as she shouted, "Don't move!"
Her glare drifted from him to the still form on the gurney, dread pooling in her stomach at the sight
before her. "Regina!" she exclaimed, immediately holstering her weapon and running to the
unconscious woman with Monty as Aengus and Neal chased after the bolting Mendell.

Entering hurriedly through the abandoned office, Mary Margaret and David appeared in time to
witness the brief skirmish. Charming launched after Neal and the Crows Guard while his wife
trotted to Regina's side. The school teacher trembled as she observed Elmwood reverently draw the
blue pajama top closed. Her keen gaze spotted the red, raw, angry wounds across pale flesh.
Tentatively, she started removing the leads from the electrodes. The damaged skin around the
adhesive pads churned her stomach. Her eyes continually darted to her daughter, and her heart
cringed at the falling stream of crocodile tears.

"Oh, God, Regina," Emma rasped, fumbling with the leather straps securing her friend to the
gurney. "She'll die if we don't get her help," she murmured, striving to avoid touching any burned
areas and trying to be gentle. The trail of inflamed welts traveling down the other woman's
abdomen left a heavy feeling in her stomach. What did that bastard do to her? she pondered with
both rising rage and fright.

Monty nodded, mentally categorizing potential injuries. His voice remained calm and his actions
efficient, yet tender. "We'll take her to the hospital," he responded, hoping to keep the sheriff
grounded. He was already strategizing his next move.

Struggling with the buckle around Regina's left ankle, the blonde was relieved when her mother
gently took over. "No," she shook her head adamantly, taking a step back from the gurney. Her
gaze fixed on the unconscious woman. She shifted from foot to foot. "The cuff has to come off,
first," she explained as she absently grabbed her left wrist with her right hand and squeezed the
bandage wrapped around it. It was becoming more difficult to focus through the haze. Even the
subtle infliction of pain had stopped helping. "It's killing me. I can't imagine what it's doing to her
since…," she trailed off and took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus on her breathing.

Swallowing down the growing lump in her tightening throat, she quietly added, "We'll take her to
Cora. She can get the cuff off, maybe heal her, and then, she goes to the hospital," she intoned,
slipping her brown, leather jacket off and, with her mother's help, draped it over the former queen.

Suddenly, a loud, piercing bang echoed throughout the cannery warehouse. Mary Margaret jerked
backwards with wide, startled eyes. Emma drew her service weapon, instinctively crouching. Her
focus alternated between the possible entrances. Monty leaned his large body across the width of the gurney and over his queen's torso, shielding her with his own. The trio waited with baited breath as they heard shouting and more gunshots.

"David," the school teacher gasped, taking several hurried steps forward. She was quickly halted by Elmwood's large hand on her shoulder. Her brow furrowed as she glanced at him, but she heeded his wisdom.

Eventually, they heard the thundering footfalls of people running up the metal stairs. Aengus was the first one to enter the old, abandoned office, followed shortly by Neal and David.

Trying to catch his breath, Neal leaned heavily on his knees. "He used a flash bomb and opened fire on us. He got away," he explained, panting through his mouth. His eyes darted toward his still unconscious sister. He swallowed before nodding and asking, "Is she gonna be okay?"

"Does she look okay?" Emma angrily snapped, holstering her gun as she stood upright. "We're taking her to Cora," she relayed, wiping at her eyes.

Mary Margaret started, "Is that really a good idea? I mean…," she trailed off, moving around the gurney to her daughter. Sure, things were rather despairing, but were they that desperate?

The sheriff whirled on her mother. "The bond is trying to rip us apart!" she growled in anguish, shoving her hands in her hair and pulling. The quick bout of pain barely helped her to regain some focus. "The cuff has to go before anything else can be done," she quickly reminded everyone. "Besides," she continued in more hopeful tone, "she should be able to heal her, too." Cora would help her only daughter, right?

Accepting his daughter's wishes, David moved around the loitering men with purpose. "I'll take her to the car," he stated with kind confidence.

"No," Elmwood interjected with a quiet, hard tone, brokering no argument, "I have her." With fluid and practiced ease, he tenderly scooped his wounded monarch into his strong arms, cradling her small body protectively against his broad chest. Feeling the flutters of a strong heartbeat thrumming through her, he cooled his rallying fury and stalled his self-loathing at failing his queen, again.

Watching Monty take swift action, Emma, with Aengus on her heels, descended the metal stairs with surprising speed and agility. The pair visually swept the main floor of the warehouse, jogging toward the blonde's Charger outside. She wordlessly tossed the keys to the guard and pulled out her cellphone. Opening the back passenger-side door, she dialed the Sheriff's Station and talked to Puma. Her orders were curt and succinct. All the while, she knocked on the truck lid, and once it popped open, she rummaged around for a blanket. So, by the time the commander reached the open passenger door and was settling Regina across the backseat with Aengus's help from the front, Emma was waiting to cradle the brunette's head on her lap.

The sheriff shakily caressed Regina's disheveled hair. She was only vaguely aware of Elmwood climbing into the driver's seat and that Neal had dropped into the front, passenger seat. The car smoothly sped out of the cannery warehouse parking lot. Later, she would learn Mary Margaret and David had driven ahead to the hospital in their old pick-up truck, and Aengus had stayed behind to call the other Crows Guard, waiting for the sheriff's deputies to show up to the crime scene.

~SQ~
"Quick, let her out!" Emma shouted, running into the antechamber of Cora's sequestered prison cell in the abandoned mines. Her chest heaved as she gestured wordlessly at the cage door. She watched as Regina's mother stood from her solitary chair and briskly stepped to the bars. Hearing the hurried footsteps echoing, she glanced over her shoulder, and repeated, "Let her out."

The Crows Guard currently safeguarding the queen's captive mother, Markus, jumped to his feet, fumbling to get the cell key off his belt. His eyes darted between the sound of footsteps down the tunnel, the sheriff, and the woman behind bars. There was a fleeting moment of sheer relief when he recognized his commander, but terror ripped through him upon noticing his unconscious queen. With only a slight nod for prompting, he quickly unlocked the cage door.

Monty knelt in the middle of the room with the quintessence of a loyal knight, and with liquid fluidity, he lowered his liege—still wrapped in the small blanket and the blonde's jacket—onto the dirt floor of the mines. His piercing eyes looked up to watch the older sorceress drop onto her knees beside her daughter. In his periphery, he noted the sheriff position herself by the queen's head.

Concerned only for her daughter, Cora's voice shook as she caressed Regina's tousled hair, beseeching, "What did they do to you?" Worry and fear propelled her to tug back the leather coat draped over Regina's abused body. Tears pooled in the corners of her sad eyes, planting the seeds of rage.

Pointing at the leather cuff on her companion's left wrist, Emma instructed in a hoarse voice, "Take that off. It's blocking her magic and the bond." She couldn't risk her friend's best chance by flying off the handle, yet.

The sorceress quickly fixated on the band, waving her right hand over the two-inch strip of dark, brown leather. Its magic was unfamiliar to her, but she felt confident in navigating the strange item. With each pass of her magic, another level of the puzzle was solved, and despite the progress, her frustration rose as she had to maneuver through layer after layer of enchantment. Finally, the snaps securing the accursed manacle popped open.

"Oh, thank God," Emma groaned, letting her head fall forward. She panted through the tight tension and aching pain lingering in her body, but slowly, she managed to even out her breathing, causing her eyes to drift closed. She swallowed thickly before looking up at Cora, asking, "Can you help her?"

Numbly, the Queen of Hearts nodded, silently observing as the bond reasserted itself with surprising brutality, almost as if it wanted to punish them, especially Regina. She perceived, magically, as a piece of the savior's soul coiled inside her daughter's and vice versa. It would be beautiful if it weren't so violating, she thought, watching helplessly as her daughter's body seized and convulsed. Refocusing on her task, she rolled her hands and released her magic.

After a few moments, the sheriff started to absently stroke the brunette's hair, smoothing it down. She'd heard stories about gangs using car batteries and jumper cables to torture people. And she knew, without a doubt, that Regina had survived something far worse. Clearing her throat, she roughly instructed, "Concentrate on the nervous system, first. Everything else can wait."

"I don't know what that is," the sorceress scowled, her eyes only darting from her daughter for a second. She gritted her teeth as she savagely gathered magic from around them, manipulated it, and funneled it into Regina. Her concerns were multiplying as she quietly admitted, "But the magic is being drawn deep." She'd never healed anyone with such extensive, invisible damage. Hot tears pooled in her eyes.

Having slipped in behind everyone else, Neal had remained quiet and out of the way. He knelt at
his sister's feet. "Yeah," he encouraged. "Push it into the tiny spaces with the little sparks, like static." His gaze swept the other three before he added, "The nervous system lets our minds control our bodies." If Cora had continually out-maneuvered his father, then, he knew she had some serious wits about her and could figure out what needed to be done.

"Next?" the sorceress rasped. Small beads of sweat had formed on her brow.

"Organs," the janitor quickly supplied. He'd worked in a few hospitals and picked up a thing or two about human anatomy along the way.

Nodding her understanding, Cora pressed onward, but the magic around them was quickly being depleted. She was straining to pull the magical threads to her. So, she drew, without any hesitation, from her own carefully maintained reserves. Her brows furrowed in confusion as she pondered, *How can organs be cooked inside a living body?* Of course, during her life, she had been cruel, but to cook someone alive was simply barbaric, even by her standards. "What did they do?" she whispered in a raspy quaver, a tear slipping down her cheek.

Monty's hard gaze narrowed as he considered the queen's mother.

Emma couldn't look away from Regina's face. Absently, she shook her head, angrily wiping at the tears in her eyes. She couldn't focus enough to assist, and her magic had felt sluggish since the bond had reasserted itself.

Ignoring the question, Neal offered, "Then, concentrate on the broken bones and any damaged tissues." He started to relax when some color returned to his sister's face. Biting his lower lip, he chanced a look at his ex-girlfriend.

Elmwood caught Cassidy's troubled expression and frowned. He shelved his concerns for another time as he surveyed his queen, again. Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched Aengus join them in the cavern.

As her magic started to wane and the feeling of complete helplessness waxed, the sorceress failed to contain her rising anger. She sensed a broken leg and arm, two dislocated shoulders, and a multitude of burns. "What did they do to my daughter?" she snarled, leveling a hot gleam at the commander. What were the point of guards if they didn't do their job?

"They hurt her," the sheriff interjected, running her fingers through Regina's hair, yet again. She lifted her watery gaze to Monty's and promised, "But we're gonna hurt them back." She took strength from his curt nod.

Then, the magic sputtered and finally stopped. Dropping her hands onto her thighs, Cora panted from exhaustion. Her eyes avidly swept across her still unconscious daughter. Sweat rolled freely down the sides of her face as tears streaked her pale cheeks. "I will find them and make them pay for what they've done," she decreed in a cold, hard tone, unsteadily standing. "No one damages my daughter!" she bellowed, trying to side step around everyone. However, her path was blocked by two Crows Guard, Aengus and Markus.

"No one but you, you mean," Monty snapped, remembering the assault at the house. Readjusting the jacket back over his queen, he jerked his head toward the cell and ordered, "Lock her back up."

"Unhand me!" Cora angrily demanded, yanking her arms away from the towering men. She eyed them with hostile disdain before turning back toward her jail cell, knowing she couldn't fight without her magic. "Do right by my daughter, Commander," she hissed, stepping behind the bars. The door clanged shut. Silently, she observed as the trio gently raised Regina from the ground. As
Neal and Monty turned and walked away, she slowly moved to the door, gripping the bars loosely. Then, she noticed Emma Swan lingering behind. She swallowed and waited for the savior to meet her gaze.

Absently rubbing her chest, the sheriff took a deep breath. The tension and painful aches were slowly subsiding. But Regina wasn't out of the woods, yet. She took several steps toward the exit, her eyes rising to meet the stationed guard's, and she stopped. She pursed her lips and looked over her shoulder at the woman in the make-shift prison cell. Her brow furrowed as she noted the difference between a heartless Cora and one with her heart returned.

This mother would move heaven and earth for her child.

~SQ~

Whale glanced over his shoulder as Emma slipped into the dark room, illuminated only by the lightboxes on the wall. Eying her briefly, he lightly scolded, "You shouldn't be in here, Sheriff." There was a bleak sort of resignation in his voice as he turned back to his task.

"Screw HIPPA," Emma announced, watching him clip x-rays to the lightboxes. The thought occurred to her that she had never seen any other doctors at Storybrooke's medical facility, and she couldn't help but ask curiously, "Are you the only doctor at this hospital?"

Smirking at the non-sequitur, he replied, "No, but the queen does deserve her privacy." There was a short pause before he looked at the blonde who had moved to stand beside him. In a quiet voice, he added, "I owe Regina that much."

Emma gazed at the film on display. The boxes were huge and exhibited three radiographs each: one x-ray of each shoulder, upper arm, lower arm, upper leg, and lower leg; three views each of the skull and pelvis, and one each of the ribcage and spine. It was overwhelming being surrounded by pictures of Regina's skeleton, surveying the damage being backlit for their viewing. "What did that freak do to her?"

Victor frowned at the x-rays, again, cataloging old and new fractures, alike. Finally, he remembered her question and presence, murmuring in response, "A number, that much is for certain. You really shouldn't be in here," he reiterated, a firmness creeping into his tone.

Huffing in irritation, the sheriff waved away his concern with a pointed, "Regina doesn't have anyone else to be her advocate, right now. So, you're just gonna have to deal with me. Besides, I know what broken bones look like, Doc." Pointing at a spot on the left forearm, she queried, "That's a spiral fracture, right?"

"Yes," he conceded, deflating slightly as the stark truth of her statement of the former queen being alone hit home, "and considering the amount of calcification, it looks to be roughly a decade old, maybe a bit more." Morbid curiosity getting the better of him, he started counting all the hard, white lines laid out before them. As the number climbed into the double digits and past twenty, he let out a low whistle of astonishment. "It's amazing she isn't crippled or deformed."

There was silence for a few moments until Emma lost track of her own count and gave up the endeavor. Instead, she focused on remembering where each of the injuries had been, wanting to reach out and caress the black and white images before her, as if it could soothe all of Regina's old hurts. "Can you tell how old all these breaks are?" She remembered something important, then, and demanded accusingly, "And didn't you see all of this when you x-rayed her after our car accident?"

Whale didn't flinch under her sudden glare, calmly explaining, "We only did localized scans of
trauma areas, then, just her ribs." Looking at Emma closely, he reminded her, "She was coherent when the paramedics arrived at the scene, Sheriff. It wasn't until the ambulance ride did she lose consciousness." Attention once again on the radiographs, he continued, "This time, she was missing for a five hour period during which she was forcibly abducted, strapped to a table, electrocuted, and who-knows-what else. I ordered a full body workup since there was a significant possibly she could have broken long bones, which she did." He pointed out a subcapital femoral fracture of the right leg and a transcervical humeral fracture of the left arm. "Your pit stop with Cora made a substantial dent in her recovery, probably saving her life, but there's a great deal more healing to be done." After an extended pause, he said, "I asked Deputy Puma about the ECT machine Greg Mendell used on her." When he was sure he had Emma's undivided attention, he somberly informed her, "She shouldn't be alive, Sheriff."

The sheriff whipped her head around to stare dumbfounded at the man next to her. "What do you mean?" She knew they had cut it close in rescuing Regina, but she hadn't thought—hadn't wanted to believe—that it had been as dire as Victor was implying.

"Most normal people would've succumbed to the fatigue and stresses of extreme electrocution as the heart and brain can't endure it," the doctor began patiently. "And the body, itself, can only process so much current before its natural, electrical impulses are disrupted. It's why we get burns and are essentially cooked alive when exposed to excessive amounts of electricity. If Regina had had access to her magic, I'd surmise that she had somehow managed to redirect the energy flow, but if that cuff really did inhibit her magic, she'd have had no way to metabolize the energy."

Emma considered that information for a moment, letting it sink in until she was sure she fully grasped his meaning. "So, what you're saying is the damage doesn't match the science?"

Lips in a tight line, Victor nodded. "Exactly, the sheer amount of current he used, it had to go somewhere. Aside from the nerve and tissue damage Cora healed, Regina sustained prolonged, direct exposure across her trunk, most notably her sternum." His pale, blue eyes were as serious as the blonde had ever seen them when he told her, "She should've died from a heart attack, or fried organs, or cascade neural failure. But she didn't. And I've got no idea how that happened." It worried him. He found it ironic that he, Dr. Frankenstein, the man who had searched so long for the secret to reanimation, the defeat of death, should be staring it in the face and feel only one emotion. He was unreservedly afraid.

Desperate to change the subject and not wanting to be confronted with how close her friend had come to death, the sheriff asked, "How many broken bones has she had?"

"A lot," Whale admitted, a heavy sigh escaping him as his eyes settled on the x-rays, once more.

The blonde fixated on the image of Regina's skull, noticing an anomaly on the right cheekbone. "Hey, Doc, am I seeing this right? Is that an old break?" She brought a hand up, tentatively pointing at the spot in question on the Waters view.

Whale hummed affirmatively, "Mm. That's a zygomatic arch fracture. And that," he said, indicating the eye socket on the same side, "is a lateral orbital wall fracture." Easing over to the right, lateral view, he gestured, again. "Condylar and mandibular body fracture on this side, as well. Mandibular angle and parietal fractures on this side," he elucidated, as he shifted to the left, lateral exposure. Tilting his head in professional contemplation, he concluded, "Those likely occurred at the same time as the full orbital blowout," pointing out the triad of breaks on her left cheekbone.

Emma slumped in defeat, muttering a horrified, "Holy shit. How is she even alive after all of that?" she wondered aloud, feeling a bit faint at the prospect of nine skull fractures, alone.
Eyebrows high in amazement, the doctor confessed, "I have no idea. All of the trauma happened in the Enchanted Forest. Considering the nonexistent medical knowledge there, she had to have had a very skilled healer on hand." His estimation of the former queen had risen greatly upon examination of her x-rays. It painted a completely different picture of the woman than the one he had always had of the evil queen. Gesturing to the pelvic radiographs, he enumerated, "You can see previous fractures to the superior and inferior pubic ramus, as well as the ischial ramus, a healed anterior sacroiliac joint opening, a transverse sacral fracture, and what appears to be external rotation/abduction force pattern fractures." Victor reflected that perhaps the king's death had been a form of justice, after all. "The newest breaks look to be just under a decade old, certainly no less than five years."

"But you've been here for twenty-nine years," she said, thoroughly confused by the timeframe.

He inclined his head in agreement. "Yes, but the curse prevented time from moving forward. Until you showed up," he taunted with a fleeting smirk. "Technically, physiologically speaking, our bodies have only been showing the passage of time for just over a year, now."

Mentally doing the math, the sheriff felt the puzzle pieces start to come together, and she didn't like the image they were forming. Her eyes narrowed, anger building anew within her as she scrutinized the pelvic x-rays, gaze bouncing between those and the skull radiographs. "This is…," she trailed off, at a loss for words to describe the travesty on display.

"Barbaric," Whale finished for her. He had never before seen so much trauma perpetrated upon one individual who was still a living, functioning member of society.

Emma physically shook herself in an attempt to banish the dark thoughts that were coiling in her mind. Breaking the heavy silence that had fallen over them, she cleared her throat and queried, "So, what's her prognosis?"

"Pain and lots of it." Victor didn't see any reason to sugar-coat things with the sheriff, so, he forged ahead with as much professional detachment as he could muster. "Even with magical healing, her muscles are going to be sore for a while, the bruising and burns will be tender, and the fractures are going to ache. She'll most likely have some nerve damage, but I won't be able to assess that until she's fully awake and cognizant." He sighed heavily before dropping, what he considered to be, the worst news of the day. "You might expect some posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms for a while, maybe a very long time." Indicating the wall of damning x-rays, he uttered darkly, "Hell, I don't know how she's not exhibited signs of PTSD, before."

Hanging her head, she whispered despondently, "Well, fuck." The blonde was ready to curl up in a corner somewhere and have a mini breakdown. The information she had just digested was overwhelming. But no matter how much she wanted to run from the enormity of the situation, she wouldn't. Regina needed her, would need her, and Emma would be damned before she walked away from the best thing she had ever found. Her expression grew haunted as she recalled that first, horrible hour after arriving at the hospital.

Emma had seen the extensive bruising when Mrs. Potts had been conducting the sexual assault exam. She really hadn't wanted to be there, but someone from the Sheriff's Department had had to be present. While it had been a difficult choice, she knew that the SANE kit needed to be done, just in case, and had figured Regina would have preferred her presence to any of her deputies. It was a decision seconded by Anne, who had hovered nearby the entire time. The x-rays had already been done, and both shoulders had undergone reduction. There had been swelling in both of her shoulders and marked bruising of her upper arms and the upper sides of her chest. The sight had made her stomach turn, especially when she had realized that her left arm would require setting
once the examination was complete.

What had nearly sent the sheriff into a blind rage, however, had been the dark contusions mottling Regina's right hip and thigh, the deep purple discolorations extending around to her buttocks and just above her waist. Emma had let her eyes linger on her companion's face, not having wanted to invade her privacy any more than had been absolutely necessary. But she had noticed the extreme care Mrs. Potts and Anne had taken in only maneuvering Regina's left leg while still managing to collect the required swabs. Mrs. Potts had taken photographs of all injuries and had retained the digital camera for later processing, the photos to be added to Regina's forensic medical record. The blonde had, then, stood by steadfastly when both women efficiently and gently wiped down the brunette's body and bandaged her burns. Diego had helped transfer his queen from the gurney to a hospital bed, assisting them when they had painstakingly dressed her in a hospital gown. Afterward, Dr. Whale had come in to set her humerus and femur, checking the bone placement with the portable x-ray machine.

Dual immobilization slings had been strapped to her torso to keep her shoulders and arms static, and her right leg had been placed in skeletal traction. Anne had vehemently stated that the two of them would be healing the femoral fracture and the soft tissues in Regina's right shoulder before she regained consciousness. Emma had wholeheartedly agreed that they should do as much as possible to alleviate her friend's pain. However, after looking over the radiographs tacked up to the lightboxes before her, the blonde realized that the immobilization might be more of a factor in Anne's insistence than the actual pain itself. The entire situation was beyond anything Emma had imagined possible upon first realizing Regina had been abducted. When she got her hands on Greg and Tamara, she was going to beat the life out of them and enjoy every second of it.

~SQ~

Emma heard the quiet moan from the hospital bed, and she snapped instantly to attention, setting her phone down behind her on the chair, edging forward in her seat. "Regina?" she asked tentatively, hoping her friend was okay, or as okay as she could be.

Monty looked over from his station just inside the closed door. He was immensely relieved that his queen was waking up as he watched dark lashes flutter open in fits and starts.

Regina tried to focus her gaze on the figure near the foot of her bed. Everything was blurry, and her head felt fuzzy and full of cotton. Her brow furrowed in pain and confusion as she realized that she ached all over. Whimpering softly, her eyes finally made out the commander of her personal guard. "Monty," she croaked, her voice rough and high, "I had a really bad night."

"Your Highness…," he demurred, moving closer. He realized that she was experiencing problems with her memories, as Whale had predicted. It could make the situation many times worse if her puzzlement lingered.

Closing her eyes tightly as she tried to remember what had happened the night before, the brunette quietly implored him, "How much damage is there, this time?"

Monty released a pained groan, begging in a whisper, "Please…." He despised hearing that particular tone in her voice, vulnerable and small and holding a slight tremulous quality.

A tiny mew escaped as the former queen attempted to settle into a more comfortable position, but nothing seemed to offer any relief, only frustration. She fought to remain conscious, but she was so drained. Why do I keep fighting? she sadly wondered. Sagging into the thin hospital mattress in defeat, she stared unseeing at the ceiling, trying to ignore the searing pain that burned in her right hip and left shoulder.
Emma hovered at the bedside, face pale and drawn as she hesitantly took her friend's right hand, relieved to feel the strong grip in return. In that moment, she was profoundly glad she had spent some of the intervening time healing the brunette's palms of the electrical burns. Her magic seemed to be erratic since the restoration of their bond, and it had taken her and Anne a couple of hours to do enough repair to the soft tissues of Regina's right shoulder and her right humerus to get her out of one of the slings and skeletal traction before she regained consciousness. Her left arm and shoulder would have to wait a little longer. The scout grandmaster was sleeping it off in a waiting room nearby. "Hey, Regina, it's Emma," she reassured gently. Brushing a few dark strands of hair away from the former queen's face, she soothed, "It's okay. Try to go back to sleep."

Regina turned beseeching, dazed eyes on the blonde and warbled, "Emma, I think he broke something, again." She grimaced as she shifted, and agony shot through her entire body. "It really hurts," she shared with a woeful sniffle.

Feeling her heart break completely, Emma tenderly stroked the brunette's hair and promised her, "You're okay, now. You're safe." She lifted watery eyes to look at Monty, surprised to see a few, stray tear tracks on his cheeks. The sheriff had lost count of how many times, that day alone, that she'd wondered just what Regina had endured before casting the curse.

"No one's safe from the king," the former queen murmured with such soft despair that the commander barely remained standing at his queen's bedside. She experienced a familiar rush of fondness as she watched fresh tears fall freely from her guard's eyes, knowing the exact moment when he shouldered the blame, thinking he'd failed her, again. His unwavering devotion over the years meant more to her than she would ever be able to express. Then, remembering Emma, a small smile tugged at the corners of Regina's mouth as she gazed up at the blonde and meekly requested, "Stay with me?"

"Always. I'm right here," Emma vowed, squeezing the hand in hers a little more tightly, stroking her thumb across the white knuckles. Angrily swiping at her eyes, she remained silent while Regina shifted, attempting, again, to get comfortable, and eventually drifted back off to sleep. Once she was sure her breathing had evened out, the sheriff hissed at Monty, "Tell me he died painfully."

Monty's eyes were hard when they met hers, old anger flaring in remembrance. "It would have been horrible," he affirmed.

Emma seethed under her breath, "It wasn't enough." Glancing down at the battered woman in the hospital bed, she realized that she wanted desperately to find Greg Mendell and make him pay for this, for bringing all of these old demons to light.

Nodding in complete agreement, the commander said simply, "No, it wasn't."

Taking a deep breath, she told him, "We should keep everyone else out. No one should see her like this." Getting the expected nod, she reluctantly released the hand she was holding and retrieved her phone. Walking to the corner of the room by the window, she dialed Ruby's cell phone. Once the line was picked up, she quickly reassured her worried friend, "She woke up briefly but was pretty out of it. She's sleeping, again." Pausing for moment, she responded sharply, "No. Pick Henry up at the bus, and keep him with you until I call." Consciously relaxing her tone, she added, "Once she's coherent, he can come see her." There were several beats while she listened to the deputy. "Damn. I'm glad Puma's taking care of the crime scene."

Shaking her head, she sidestepped the question about her own state. "Look, could you get a bag out of Regina's closet and pack it with a change of clothes? Get the softest, most comfortable things
you can find. She'll need everything." Sighing she reiterated, "Everything, Ruby, including shoes, something without heels." After a pause as she considered Regina's burns, she added, "Be sure to pack a camisole instead of a bra. Underwear is in the top drawer at the back of the closet. Her socks are in the second drawer down." Scowling faintly at the reply she received, she retorted, "No, I don't need you to send me pictures for approval. And bring her shampoo and soap from the shower." The blonde chucked at the wolf's protest. "I'm not gonna be the one to tell her she has to shower with the hospital soap…. Thought so." A smile reached her eyes briefly as she replied, "Thanks, Rubes," before hanging up the phone.

Emma walked back over to Regina's bedside, picking up her chair and moving it next to the railing. Setting it down softly, she sat and reclaimed the brunette's right hand in her own. Draping her left arm along the bed rail, she leaned her forehead against her arm and closed her eyes. Why was everything so damn awful? She just wanted another good day like in Manhattan.

~SQ~

Quietly closing Regina's hospital room door, Emma propped her forehead against the cool, wooden surface, peeking into the private room through the small, offset, rectangular window. Her eyes traced the brunette's body under several light and soft blankets. Closing her eyes, she bit her lower lip and inhaled deeply. Her nose tingled from the smell of antiseptics. Turning around in place, she leaned heavily against the door. She nodded to the stoic Bruce Farmer and Diego Flores, who stood sentry on either side of the doorframe. Down the hall, she spotted Anne McCormac stretched and passed out across the length of a visitor's bench seat, obviously sleeping off the drain on her healing magic. A soft ding from the elevator drew her attention down past the nurses' station. She sighed softly as Neal stepped out onto the floor and headed toward her. Pushing away from the door with great effort, she took position directly across the hall, using the wall as a brace. She silently observed as Diego slipped inside the room.

No one wanted the queen to wake up alone.

Neal casually lumbered down the wide, bright hall toward his sister's room and his ex-girlfriend. As he walked past and glanced at the sleeping Crows Guard, he pursed and rolled his lips. Closing the distance between the blonde and himself, he stuffed his hands in the front pockets of his jeans and joined her, leaning against the wall next to her across from the door to Regina's room. His gaze darted to Bruce before quietly inquiring, "How is she?" He swallowed and added, "How are you?"

"I'll live," the sheriff quickly and quietly countered. Sighing, she crossed her arms and looked down at her feet. "She's in a pretty bad way," she explained in a rough but quiet tone. "Between Cora, Anne, and me, we've healed as much as we can," she continued, "but it's not enough."

Shutting her eyes and shaking her head, she pressed her lips in a tight line and, with frustration, added, "It's never going to be enough."

Knowing any physical comfort wouldn't be welcomed, the janitor simply nodded and prompted, "What did the doctor say?"

"Dislocated shoulders, broken bones, burns, nerve damaged, you name it," she rattled off, looking up at the ceiling. She swallowed and shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut. Then, she let herself slide down the wall into a squatting position. "I thought fairytales were supposed to be happy." She gazed at former lover, her first best friend, and had to hide her surprise when he dropped down on the floor, sitting next to her. "I thought my life was messed up before Storybrooke, and now, I'm realizing how lucky I was to be shoved in a tree trunk," she hurriedly admitted because the weight in her chest was heavy. She rolled her lips, unable to stop the pooling tears. What would her life have been like if she had stayed in the Enchanted Forest? Would she have been blissfully unaware
of the misfortunes of others? Hell, what would her life have been like if her mother had come through with her? Would she have ended up in foster care, regardless, because her mother claimed to be Snow White?

Crossing his legs, Neal nodded in understanding. When they had first been together, she had wanted nothing more than to have a family, and during their time together in Manhattan, he honestly believed she had found and forged one in the most unlikely of places, his father's Dark Curse. He glanced briefly at the Crows Guard across from him. Neal considered that at least he had had a choice about whether or not to use the bean gifted to him by the Blue Fairy, and it had been his choice to tear his family apart, if not his intention. However, magic always seemed to play a different game with a different set of rules for each individual touched by it. His gaze drifted to the center of the hospital room door. "Papa always said all magic comes with a price," he gently reminded her.

"Don't quote that motherfucker to me," Emma snapped angrily, glaring at her ex-boyfriend. Her fists curled tightly on top of her jean-clad knees. She fumed for a long beat before she hotly demanded, "Speaking of, how the hell do you know he's Regina's dad?" Talk about a curve ball, she thought crap like that only happened on television.

Startled by the sudden rage, Neal dropped his head and blew out a heavy breath. "I overheard Cora telling him when she was trying to kill him," he quickly elucidated. His gaze cut down the hall to see it empty and back at the guard, who subtly narrowed his eyes at him.

"Heck of a reveal," the sheriff scoffed, letting her anger deflate. She brought her hands back to her middle, clasping them against her stomach and resting her forearms on her upper thighs.

"No, kidding," the janitor agreed, looking at the blonde. He tilted his head and continued, "I thought I had imagined it until I confronted Papa about it."

Staring blankly ahead with a furrowed brow, she huffed, "That's so weird."

"What?"

"You calling him Papa," Emma replied, meeting her ex's gaze. She held it for a long moment. Quietly, she questioned, "Do you think he knew?"

"That Regina is his?" Neal countered with his own question. Mentally, he reviewed the conversation he had had with his father and shook his head. "No, he didn't have a clue," he finally answered, believing it.

Darkly, she muttered as she faced forward again, "Why don't I believe that?"

"The Dark One is many things, Emma, but I know my father. He can't lie to me," he enlightened confidently. Silently, he studied the blonde's profile and his heart fluttered. "Besides," he interjected, disrupting his own thoughts, "he's a bit freaked out by Regina."

Catching Bruce's nearly imperceptible curiosity, Emma pursed her lips and quickly weighed her options. "What do you mean?" she probed in a level tone, turning to look at her former boyfriend.

Neal drummed the fingers of his right hand on the side of his bent knee. Holding her eyes for a beat, he eventually supplied, "Apparently, she absorbed a death curse." He wasn't sure exactly how much magical knowledge she possessed.

"Yeah," the sheriff drawled in acknowledgement. That was old news, and there hadn't been any special significance attributed to it by the townies, not from what she remembered, anyway. Those
first few days after her return from the homeland were a bit of a blur. "Henry convinced her to take it off the wishing well before Mary Margaret and I climbed out of it," she summarized with a hint of puzzlement. "She and Gold were convinced Cora was going to come through, first," she added before laughing softly. "That would've been a sight," she smiled more at her own imagining than the man next to her. "That woman scaling out of a dank, dark well," she finished with subdued mirth and a bright twinkle in her eyes.

The janitor blinked rapidly. He quickly looked between Emma and the shocked Crows Guard; at least one of them had some comprehension of the situation. Shaking his head, he gently scolded, "No one just removes a death curse." He waited a moment for the amusement to flicker out of her eyes and stressed, "It's death." Rubbing the back of his neck with his left hand, he looked down, then, up as he explained in a soft voice, "It should have killed her."

Swallowing, Emma looked away. She turned away from everyone, staring down the hall full of empty rooms with empty beds. Then, she felt Neal's warm hand on her left knee, and she shook her head, fighting back the threatening tears. No, she told herself, I won't cry here. Her throat was tight as she brushed all of her feelings away; she'd deal with them and their implications later. "Yeah, well, a lot of things should've killed her, and she's still kickin'," she bragged, forcing herself to smirk at Bruce.

Farmer simply nodded.

Frowning, Neal withdrew his hand and crossed his arms. He looked down the hall toward the nurses' station and sighed. Maybe his sister would be better suited to explain all of this to the savior. He wasn't sure how much time had passed, but after scratching his cheek, he quietly stated, "Papa's afraid of her." That meant something because the Dark One didn't fear anything. His father had single-handedly stopped the Ogre War.

Yeah, I get it, Emma thought with a hard scowl, fisting her hands. Her eyes slowly drifted to her former lover. Her best friend almost wasn't her best friend because of everything being so messed up. And yes, she had totally picked up on Gold's Sopranos' attitude. She wasn't stupid. She just didn't show her hand unnecessarily. Breathing through her nose, she counted to ten, and a question came to mind. "So, why the hell did he link us together?" she stiffly pondered aloud. That was the million-dollar question.

Meeting her angry eyes with his sad ones, Neal slumped forward and answered, "He's hoping you'll control her, keep her in line, or something." He pursed his lips and ground his teeth.

The sheriff's jaw dropped in utter disbelief. Her mouth worked, but no words left it. She simply shook her head and turned away, sharing a glance with Bruce. And suddenly, she was reminded of the pain pills after their car accident, and she remembered how Regina had fought her about taking them. "She's had enough control in her life," she intoned flatly, letting her head fall back against the wall.

"I'm not here to argue that, not after meeting her mother," the janitor easily agreed. "That still wigs me out," he added as he shuddered, hoping to bring a dash of levity. Of course, it had taken time for his father's appearance to alter, but he couldn't imagine a woman willingly having sex with him.

Softly, Emma inquired, "Are you going to tell her?" She licked her lips, still staring at the ceiling. "About Gold?" she amended.

"I want to, but I don't know how well that would go over," he answered after a moment. He stared down at his hands resting idly in his lap.
Emma sighed and finally let her butt hit the floor. Stretching her legs out in front of her, she visually traced the hallway handrail with her eyes. Her hands laid splayed out on her thighs. "She probably won't react too well, at first," she easily commented, smiling slightly at her friend's potential reaction. "I don't think she really likes him much, at all," she darkly clarified. She could almost hear Regina whisper in her mind, *He's a snake, Miss Swan.*

"What about the other side of that? Me being her brother?" Neal questioned lightly. He didn't want to push his sister, but he needed to know if being a family, beyond being Henry's father, was a realistic possibility. Even after all that time and all those years alone, he vividly remembered how his father had treated him, someone he loved; however, he really didn't want to contemplate how his dad could treat someone he considered to be nothing but a tool. Would Regina be resentful? Would she take it out on him?

Smirking, the sheriff rolled her head to the left and studied her ex's profile. She weighed her words carefully, not wanting to give him false hope or speak for Regina. "She doesn't seem to *dislike* you," she started. Forcing down her own bubbling resentment of Neal's reappearance in her life, she honestly clarified, "I think, if you keep toeing the line—especially about Henry, she'll come around to tolerating you." Then, she flashed a bright smile because her friend could hold a grudge.

"That sounds promising," the janitor retorted sarcastically with a frown.

"Eh, we didn't really hit it off when I first arrived in town, and I'm totally lovable," she explained jovially and with bright eyes. At least, she could joke with him. That much was getting better between them.

Dramatically rolling his eyes, he snorted in disagreement. "You took a chainsaw to her apple tree," he huffed in mock offense.

"Heard about that, huh?" Emma asked. She stared blindly up at the ceiling, again, a small smile curling her lips.

"Yup." Neal kept watching her face.

Swallowing thickly, the sheriff quietly said, "She's good people, Neal." And she believed that with every fiber of her being.

"I know," the janitor readily agreed. He took a deep breath before saying, "I see it in Henry."

~SQ~

It was sometime before Regina stirred again. Hearing a soft grunt of discomfort, Emma lifted her head. A small smile crept across her face. With quiet fondness, she greeted, "Hey, Sleepyhead."

"Emma?" Regina responded with a hoarse voice. Her brow furrowed in confusion when she realized she couldn't move her left arm. Glancing around the room, she pushed through the cottony fog of pain medication. Her eyes peered up at the IV drip on her left side and followed the tubes until they connected to the back of her left hand. Frowning, she struggled vainly against the black immobilization sling and wiggled the fingers of her left hand. "Why are we in the hospital?" she finally asked. Gods, she hurt, everything felt stiff and tight, and the room was far too bright.

She reached out with her magic to assess her condition, but that was a mistake, as she was met with an excruciating throbbing throughout her maltreated body. Before the Blue Fairy had unbound her, her magic had been difficult to wield and felt restricted, like sand through an hourglass. However,
after the botched Sacrament of Ataraxia, the magic had moved freely through her, and she had become hyper aware of it. She could even pull on the ultra-thin magical threads of a world that supposedly had none. And now, after whatever she had just gone through, she felt empty and raw, but her very essence craved magic.

"Yeah," the sheriff drawled, stalling for a second. She sat up a little straighter as she asked, "What's the last thing you remember?" Then, noticing her friend squinting, she stood up and quickly moved to close the window blinds.

"Going to bed," the brunette replied curtly. Shifting slightly on the thin mattress, she attempted to sit up. Wincing, she breathed heavily through her nose for almost a solid minute as pain induced nausea caused her stomach to roll. After she regained her composure, she opened her mouth to speak but, instead, released a pitiful whine. Blankly, she stared at the drab ceiling, both embarrassed and frustrated. "Henry?" she finally managed to say. Her gaze dropped to meet the blonde's, who had sat back down in the visitor's chair.

Nonchalantly, Emma pointed at the bed controls on the bulky, cream-colored, plastic bedrail. She gently caressed her companion's forearm as she assured, "He's fine. He's safe. Nothing has happened to Henry." She smiled softly at the confused look of relief and gave her friend a chance to process the new information. Sure, she appeared coherent, but obviously, there were still some memory issues at play. "So, you went to bed, then what?" she casually questioned, shifting into investigative-sheriff mode.

Seemingly ignoring the query, Regina retorted with her own question, "Are you okay?" She turned her head and examined the woman beside her as best she could without moving. Then, she glanced over the indicated controls and noted the blue button of a patient-controlled analgesic remote. She frowned as she turned to look back at the IV pole, spotting the small, electronic dosage device.

A sappy smile slipped across the sheriff's face. "Yeah, I'm good," she supplied. Of course, she'd have to share her own harrowing tale, but that would happen later. Right then, she needed a statement, something she could pass on to Puma and Hart for the case file. "But I need you to focus on last night," she stated, quickly redirecting the conversation.

Blinking, the brunette easily supplied, "I read." She paused, her brow furrowed. Holding the blonde's gaze, she added, "You were watching one of your procedural crime dramas. Henry was drawing in his room." She smiled briefly at the memory. Fondly, she recalled how Emma had held an intense look of concentration as she had tried to solve the mystery before the show's reveal, and how Henry had been lying on his stomach on the floor, his legs swinging and singing softly as he had colored. Her eyes drifted closed at the warmth of the reminiscences, and she allowed herself to bask in them. Good things were far and few between and should always be cherished.

"Good, good," Emma interjected, noting how the brunette appeared relaxed. So, she continued her questioning, "Did you get up at all during the night?" Silently, she waited as brown eyes refocused on her.

"No?" Regina answered with clear hesitation. She plainly remembered going through her usual nighttime routine, going to bed, and reading. But after that, she was drawing a blank. Her lips rolled as she tried to force herself to remember. She didn't like not remembering things, especially before bed.

The soft beeps of the monitoring equipment increased, and the sheriff frowned as she asked, "Do you remember going downstairs?" Helpfully, she added in a lighter tone, "Maybe to get a snack or a drink?" It wasn't too farfetched for brunette to dip into her secret chocolate stash when everyone else had gone to bed. From the corner of her eye, she caught the LCD digits of the heartate
monitor, and if the other woman hadn't been hooked up to the machine, she might have never noticed her duress. She softened her expression and affectionately squeezed Regina's forearm, hoping to elicit a calming reaction.

The hospital room door slowly opened, and both women immediately turned their heads to look at the intruder. Upon seeing Monty, Regina relaxed slightly but still remained on edge. Emma was reassured when the soft beeps somewhat slowed, and she shared a concerned expression with the commander.

"Your Highness," he greeted softly, bowing slightly. He stepped up to the opposite side of the bed but kept a respectable distance. Shifting to a parade rest stance, he observed the rising anxiety swirling in her eyes. He saw it in her darting gaze, her quick swallows, the tightening tension in her shoulders, and the nervous way she fidgeted with the hospital blanket with her free hand. He knew, then, that she was realizing she didn't remember what had happened that morning.

"Where are my clothes?" the former queen quietly inquired. She glanced between two of the people she trusted most. Needing to move, she, again, attempted to readjust herself, releasing a loud hiss accompanied by a sharp wince. As the silence dragged on, she searched the room for clues but found nothing. Then, she examined herself more carefully, noticing the redness and large blisters on the inside of her right forearm and the large, raw band around her left wrist, just above the IV port. Her right hip and left upper arm throbbed with the all too familiar, deep ache of broken bones, and her right shoulder felt like it had been stabbed.

The front of her torso seemed to constantly flare with a burning sensation that matched that of her left forearm which was trapped in the sling. There was also a confining stiffness around her right hip, and her hand reached down to trace the outlines of a medical, support brace under her gown. She wanted to rip the blanket off and shuffle herself over to a mirror. But given how fatigued she felt, that wasn't going to happen without help. Instead, tears of frustration welled up in the corners of her eyes as she pulled at the IV port on the back of her left hand. "I don't want any drugs," she whispered, tugging at the tape.

Immediately, Elmwood stepped forward. "You still need that, Ma'am" he quietly intoned. He gently stalled her fidgeting, uncoordinated fingers and met her gaze with affection.

Regina rolled her lips but dropped her right hand. "Take it out," she ordered, clipping her words. She glared pointedly at her commander.

"No, Regina," Emma snapped, drawing their attention. Her forcefulness surprised everyone. She pointed at the IV port, glaring at the woman in the bed. "You need the fluids, and a little pain medication isn't going to hurt," she explained, softening her tone. Smiling, she laid her right hand over the brunette's. "It's not forever," she added before clearing her throat. "Your body needs a chance to heal. You can't do that if you're hurting."

"I don't like how they make me feel," the brunette clarified. She twisted slightly to look at the digital readout on the PCA. It was just another type of control.

Stroking her thumb over soft skin, the sheriff acknowledged, "I know. I remember," she quietly reminded her friend. She smiled sadly when the brunette gazed back at her, nodding.

Stepping back from the bed, Monty watched the interaction play out. He was honestly surprised how effectively the new recruit managed the queen. Not many could derail her wrath or dissuade her willfulness with such care.

Emma shared a long, sorrowful look with the commander. She hated the entire situation. She hated
she had to do this to her friend. She hated she couldn't just heal Regina the rest of the way and be done with all of it. Besides her own magic not wanting to cooperate, Whale had needed to see the injuries to better assess the damage. More importantly, they had needed something to document for criminal charges. "Did you hear or see anything strange or out of the ordinary?" she resumed her questions, ignoring the ones that had been thrown at her.

Looking to her right, Regina couldn't quell the rising dread. "Emma, what happened?" she probed with a soft plea. She hurt, and she was tired. It reminded her too greatly of her time under her husband's control. All she wanted was someone to give her a straight answer before she lost her temper. And she could feel it simmering deep in her belly. She gripped the blanket tightly in her right hand, ignoring the bite of pain it caused. Apparently, she could add nerve damage to the mental catalog of her injuries.

"I promise I'll explain everything, but I really need you to try and remember. Okay?" the sheriff valiantly attempted to stall the coming tsunami. And damn, it was hard not to just give in when those big, watery, brown eyes looked up at her with such trust and fear and sadness. She squeezed the hand still in her grip, flashing a bright smile that didn't quite reach her eyes.

Shaking her head, the brunette quietly beseeched, "I don't even remember you coming to bed last night." Her gaze, once again, darted between the two people in the room. She absently fumbled with the blanket and her hospital gown. And as her agitation rose, she squirmed in the bed, ignoring the subsequent jolts of discomfort, the thin mattress rustling in the all-too-quiet room. She wanted, no, she needed to get up and out of her supine position, but her body betrayed her. She felt trapped, weak and vulnerable. New pain shot through her as she coiled magic within her, extracting it from the environment. The magic inside of her seared with prickling, raw anguish, but it reminded her that she was alive and in the present, not reliving some past torment. Pressing the heel of her right hand against her forehead, she hissed, "Was there another fire?" Why else would she be covered in burns?

"No, there wasn't a fire," Emma answered, looking at Elmwood for some sort of insight. She had felt the magic being sucked from the air, and it had left her a little dizzy and winded.

Monty nodded, silently encouraging the blonde to continue.

Once the magic settled into a tiny, hateful ball of agony within her, Regina sagged into the mattress, her meager energy reserves spent, leaving her exhausted. She turned her head and looked imploringly at her commander. "Monty, what happened?" she asked, frowning as he looked away guiltily. She swallowed and focused on the blank ceiling overhead. Something bad had happened to her. *What fresh hell have I just endured?* she wondered bleakly.

"I'm deferring to the Sheriff on this matter, Ma'am," Elmwood supplied a tad too late. His eyes were drawn to where his queen tugged and fidgeted with her blanket.

The brunette responded flatly, "I see."

Hanging her head, the sheriff let her blonde hair obscure her face. She tightened her grip on the bedrail while affectionately rubbing the knuckles of the hand in hers. Then, her shoulders drooped, and she dropped back in the visitor's chair, its wooden feet scraping across the linoleum floor as she stared at her distraught friend. The desire to override her obvious distress was almost irresistible, but she wouldn't disrespect the brunette's right to her emotions. Instead, she gently shared her own feelings of support and care. Then, after taking a deep breath, she opened her mouth to say something, only to close it. She tried again, and again, nothing coming out. Her own ineptitude, unbeknownst to herself, caused her to share even deeper emotions.
"Sheriff?" Monty prompted with concern. He watched as his queen squeezed her eyes closed, tears falling down her cheeks.

Love rolled over her like a gentle wave at low tide. Regina relished in its warmth, and she felt her anger and fear cooling. Her brow furrowed in puzzlement as she pondered how such a beautiful creature could have developed such decent and honest feelings for her. She was dark and twisted and wrought with hate, while her Emma was everything she was not, good and light and sweet. Gods knew she had a sweet tooth. However, she was no coward, and she wasn't one to hide from the brutal truth of life. "Either tell me what transpired or leave," she commanded in a dangerous tone, gathering herself for the inevitable blow that knowledge would provide. Regardless of the consequences, she would not tolerate being coddled.

"I don't want to contaminate your testimony," Emma quickly relayed, understanding what that tone meant. Even as snotty has Henry had been lately, he always obeyed that tone.

The brunette questioned, "Testimony for what?" Opening her eyes, she broke the trance of safety provided by Emma. She turned her sharp gaze onto her companion and pushed for further clarification, "Criminal charges?"

Unable to stop herself, the sheriff snapped, "Yes!" jarring herself out of her emotional quagmire. "That bastard needs to pay," she snarled. Wanting to hit something, she ground her teeth. Greg Mendell, who had been a thorn in her side for weeks, had hurt her family, someone for whom she cared deeply, and it pissed her off. She wanted to track him down and arrest him with excessive force.

"Who needs to pay for what?" Regina demanded in a low warble. Her expression became more stricken as the soft beeps of the monitoring equipment gradually sped up, a clear signal that her rising anxiety was seeping into the foreground. "Emma, I need you to tell me what happened, now," she commanded plaintively.

Elmwood paid particularly close attention to the blonde as he categorized her reactions to the queen's heartfelt pleas.

Settling into the familiar role of town sheriff, Emma started to explain, "Someone attacked the guards, taking them out with Tasers and tranq guns, and abducted you early this morning. They used some sort of cuff to cut off your—."

"Magic," Regina interjected. She closed her eyes, trying to recall more details, but nothing else came to her mind's eye. Disappointed, she weakly shook her head.

"Yeah, it also messed with the bond," the sheriff hesitantly continued. Of course, beyond her listless magic, she didn't feel any lasting effects from the binding spell having been interrupted, but she sure as hell wasn't going to forget it any time soon. "I, um, didn't know something was up until I woke up with, what I thought was, ingestion," she added, still feeling slightly ashamed she hadn't noticed the other woman was gone or at least in trouble. She stroked her thumb across the back of her friend's hand. "Then, you were missing, and I used the hole in the bond to find you at the old cannery," she quickly summarized. She thought it best to skim over Cora's assistance for the time being, but that was definitely something she would need to share, later.

The monitors' beeping increased as Regina examined her right hand and arm. It trembled slightly as she held it up before her face, dislodging Emma's hand. Now, with her full facilities about her, she could better surmise the extent of the other wounds hidden beneath her gown and blanket. "What did they do to me?" she pondered. Her voice lilted with fear and a quickly brewing anger. No, she wouldn't live like this again, never again.
Knowing Regina responded positively to facts, Emma pushed her own apprehensions aside and relaunched into the narration of events. "You were hooked up to a modified ECT machine and strapped to a gurney," she paused for a brief second. Her eyes darted to the commander before stammering, "Th...they, uh, it looks like they turned it up all the way." She swallowed, remembering Whale's medical commentary.

Dropping her arm back to the mattress and wincing at the resultant jolt of pain, the brunette pursed her lips and looked at the ceiling. "That explains the sore muscles," she confirmed, understanding the effects of electricity on the body.

"Yeah, you also broke a couple of bones and dislocated both shoulders from the seizures," the sheriff stated, keeping her voice level. Because, right now, if she stopped the storytelling, she might lose it, and that wouldn't be fair to Regina. She cleared her throat, and her volume softened as she added, "And there are contact burns from where you touched the rails on the gurney and, um, from a metal rod."

All color drained from the brunette's face as she repeated, "Rod."

Monty almost winced at the sharp coldness inflected in that single word. So, he couldn't really blame the newest recruit when she flinched.

Gritting her teeth and swallowing the large lump in her aching gullet, Emma gestured vaguely at her friend's abdomen. "They dragged it, the rod, over your chest and abdomen," she abruptly stopped her retelling of events. Her face twisted into a regretful expression as she didn't want to mention Cora, but there really wasn't much choice, at that point. After a quick breath, she resumed, keeping her voice low, "We took you to Cora before coming here. She's the one who got the cuff off, and she healed most of the severe damage before running out of juice." She lifted her right hand from the bed rail and rubbed the back of her neck. Dropping her eyes for a moment, she finished quietly, "When we got you here, considering visible wounds, I ordered a sexual assault kit be done." Rolling her lips, she looked back at her friend's face, and her heart broke.

"You think...?" Regina trailed off, frightened tears breaking over her lashes. She fisted the blanket and trembled, ignoring the burning ache in her tired muscles. Instinctively, she coiled and pulled magic in and around her, willing to endure the searing agony as a balm to her mental anguish. No, she didn't want the words to make sense. She didn't want to live through anything like that, ever again. She squeezed her eyes shut, slowly shaking her head in denial. Her lower lip quivered as old wounds bled, and timeworn feelings, once again, threatened to overtake her sanity.

"I don't know, but I want to nail the bastard to the wall," the sheriff quickly interjected with menacing promise. Moving her right hand to gently grasp her friend's free hand, she leaned over the rail and stroked Regina's soft hair with her left hand. "You're going to be okay," she swore, wanting it to be true, despiring the terror in her companion's eyes. With everything she had learned about the incredible woman, she had never expected to see her fall apart, not like that.

Elmwood could offer no solace to his queen, save one. Taking a silent step backward, he turned and left the room. His mission was clear. He would utilize every resource at his disposal until he had the results of the sexual assault kit. It would be the only thing that could possibly bring his queen peace, but regardless of the kit's outcome, the Crows Guard would scour Storybrooke until Greg Mendell was dragged before the queen for judgement.

Emma never noticed Monty had left the room. In that moment, her world was the crying woman in the hospital bed. She leaned forward, resting her forehead against brown locks, fingers gently caressing the nape of Regina's neck. Ignoring the bite of the bedrail into her stomach, she whispered soothing words of safety and pushed wisps of healing magic, letting it flow to wherever
it was needed most. However, it was the quiet and the stillness of Regina's sobs that unnerved her. They came and went in breathy, ragged gulps. How long and how hard had her companion suffered to learn to do so silently?

When the blonde leaned forward and Monty left the room, Regina had wanted to rage. She wanted to release her tidal fury upon the world and destroy everything she had built. She wanted the world to feel her pain, the consequences be damned! But then, she felt Emma. She felt her magic as it slid around hers, cushioning the burning rawness. She felt her gentle touches laced with friendship, care, and love; and in that moment, she was greedy enough to take it all because her soul needed it. She craved it desperately. So, the once evil queen clung to those feelings and the woman holding her as if they were rightfully hers, the only things standing between her continued reason and madness.

~SQ~

A distinctly petulant expression graced Regina's face as she clicked off the television with the controls embedded in the bedrail. "I want to leave," she pouted, releasing a heavy sigh as she stared at her companion seated beside the bed.

Grinning at the other woman's show of restless irritation, Emma reminded her, "Whale hasn't cleared you, yet. He wants a second IV bag in you to build up your electrolytes."

Regina glanced up at the offending IV bag and asked off-handedly, "Is this bag one or two?" Though she was in a more upright, sitting position, she was still having difficulty getting comfortable, and she discontentedly shifted for what felt like the hundredth time in the last thirty minutes.

"Two," the blonde supplied readily, wondering what she was thinking.

Eyes narrowing with sly mischievousness, Regina reached over with her right hand and unclamped the IV drip to let it run wide open. It felt good to do something to reclaim her independence, even if it was as simple as a minor rebellion against Whale's timetable.

Emma chastised lightly, "Is that a good idea?" Even though her tone was chiding, her eyes were bright with mirth, glad to see a glimpse of the Regina she was used to, not the defeated version who had clung to her earlier.

Rethinking her shrug with a grimace, Regina snarked, "I want out of here, and this is the most expedient route." Her grin was almost predatory, all teeth and false benevolence as she contemplated an attempt at talking Emma into helping her make a break for it before the nurses came back on their rounds.

Her fledgling plans were discarded when Whale knocked twice on the closed door before entering without waiting for permission. "Good afternoon, Regina. Nice to see you alert," he greeted chipperly. Seeing the clamp hanging loosely around the IV tubing, he snorted and commented with amusement, "That certainly didn't take you long."

"You don't honestly think I want to stay here one second longer than absolutely necessary?" Regina rejoined dryly as he stepped up to her left side.

Whale smirked as he pulled a small penlight out of his shirt pocket. "Not at all," he acknowledged cheerfully. "I just need to perform a simple, neurological exam to check your responses and gauge your progress." At her brisk nod, he began with the basic level of consciousness questions. "Please tell me your name, where you are, what time of day it is, and today's date."
Rolling her eyes, the former queen dutifully replied, "My name is Regina Mills. I'm in Storybrooke's hospital, and it's mid-afternoon on February 1st, 2013."

"Excellent," he murmured. It was with efficient professionalism that he performed a pupil check for equal dilation and had her complete a tracking test, followed by a hearing check. Nodding in approval, he held out the index fingers of each hand, placing them in her grasp, and had her squeeze to test for equal strength. He grunted when she gripped extra hard, apparently determined to cut off his circulation, regardless of the pain involved, if her wince was anything to go by. "All good there," he muttered, before moving to the foot of the bed. "I'm going to check for sensation, now," he informed her. "Let me know if you feel something." Grasping the edge of her blanket and sheet, he pulled them to the side, exposing her bare feet to the cool air of the hospital room.

Regina watched with silent trepidation when the doctor removed her covers, right hand reflexively clutching at the blanket. Warily, her gaze followed his every movement as he reached back into his shirt pocket, removed a small tuning fork, tapped it lightly against his other hand, and placed the end on the top of each of her feet. Her toes curled slightly in response to the vibration, and she struggled not to fidget with the blanket and give away her uneasiness. When Whale simultaneously ran the tips of his index fingers lightly up the bottom of her feet, she jerked her legs back with a surprised squeak, flinching at the pain that radiated from her right hip at the sudden movement.

Victor recoiled at her startled reaction and had the presence of mind to apologize. "Sorry. I should have warned you about that one." Clearing his throat awkwardly under the weight of her betrayed glare, he said, "Your basic neurological responses appear to be pretty good. Of course, there are still some mobility tests to do, but in light of your current injuries, those will need to wait until a later date."

"When can I leave?" she immediately demanded, tone harsh to cover up her discomfort at her response. She was done with being there. All she wanted was to get the IV out of her arm, the drugs out of her system, and a scalding shower to scrub herself clean, followed by a long, hot soak in her tub. Maybe, afterward, Emma would keep her company in the study. But that was dependent on whether she could convince one of her guard to carry her back downstairs. She was under no illusion that she would be able to navigate her staircase until her hip fully healed. And if she were honest with herself, it felt anything but that, at the moment.

Pursing his lips slightly, Whale told her, "Well, ideally, we should keep you overnight for observation." The glower she directed at him caused him to hurry forward with his next statement. "But since you have full-time assistance, I think we can let you go once that IV bag is empty." He paused for a beat, then, took a deep breath and gave her a quick run-down of her injuries. "I don't know how much the Sheriff told you, but you came in with a transcervical humeral fracture of the left arm, a bilateral, anterior dislocation of your shoulders, subcapital femoral fracture of the right leg, and extensive second-degree burns on your torso and arms."

"Thanks to the sheriff and McCormac," he continued, "the fracture in your hip appears to be healing nicely and is approximately six weeks post-break. Your arm, however, is closer to only being four weeks along in the healing process. So, you'll need to wear the immobilization sling and support brace for a few weeks." Checking to ensure she was paying attention, Victor emphasized, "Your bones are improved but not completely done knitting together, so, they will be achy for a while, yet. Minimal weight-bearing on your right leg since you can't use crutches or other mobility devices until your shoulder is better." Noting her pursed lips and bored expression, he warned, "I mean it, Regina. You need to take it easy for a couple of weeks."

Regina finally gave in to her anger over the situation, not appreciating the feeling of being condescended to in the matter. She snapped waspishly, "Damnit, Whale, I've had my fair share of
broken bones. I think I know my limits by now." Narrowing her eyes in contempt, she snarled, "I promise to be a good girl and avoid psychopathic torturers from now on." She felt Emma's hand come to rest on her right arm, and she forced herself to take a deep breath to calm herself. The blonde's soothing magic helped, but she was too on edge by the hauntingly familiar pains coursing through her body to allow herself to relax into the warm sensations the sheriff was pushing to her.

For his part, Whale froze, eyes wide as he caught a glimpse of the evil queen behind the dark eyes boring into him. Licking his lips nervously, he glanced briefly at Emma before adding hesitantly, "We also have the presumptive results of your sexual assault kit."

Emma watched as her friend paled considerably at his words. Stepping even closer, she slid her right hand down to grasp Regina's in support, cringing slightly as she was held with a white-knuckled tightness. She didn't miss the way the brunette's breath hitched sharply on an inhalation that was held in dreaded anticipation. Wanting to provide all the support she could, the blonde fed as much caring and comfort into the bond as possible, hoping that her presence would be helpful, regardless of the next words to come from the doctor.

"You'll be relieved to know that there were no traces of saliva, semen, or lubricants and no signs of tearing or bruising in the anogenital region," Victor informed her as gently as possible. "Aside from the burns to your breasts, there doesn't appear to have been any other sexual trauma." Unable to remain in the tense atmosphere any longer, he blurted, "Alright, then. All of your vitals appear good. Unless you have any complications, I'll see you in two weeks for a follow-up visit. A nurse will be in shortly for you to sign your discharge paperwork." Without waiting for a response, the doctor turned on his heel and fled the room.

As soon as the door closed behind him, the dam burst, a thick sob escaping Regina's composure and finding its way to freedom. The surge of relief engulfed her wholly as her worst fear was allayed. Heedless of her discomfort, she twisted in the bed as she pulled Emma closer with her good arm, dragging the other woman halfway over the bedrail and refusing to relinquish the death grip on her hand. Regina shook with tears of liberation and exhaustion as she pressed her face into the blonde's stomach, sagging further into the embrace when Emma's left arm came around to tenderly card through her hair. Then, she was trembling and overawed by the rush of love being unconsciously poured through their bond. It was too much and not enough, and Regina's starved soul hungrily devoured every bit of the light Emma gave her. Eventually, her breathing evened out, and she whispered, "Gods, I'm a mess," voice muffled by her position.

Smiling sadly, Emma ran her fingers through tangled, dark locks and placed her cheek on top of her companion's head, inhaling the smell of Regina's shampoo and sweat and finding it oddly comforting. "I think you're allowed, after everything," she teased lightly. Her left hand slipped down to rest solidly on Regina's spine, caressing up and down over the scratchy hospital gown.

"Overwhelmed," came the quiet reply. Sniffling into the dark green fabric beneath her cheek, Regina muttered, "I've ruined your shirt." She did not, however, make any move to pull away from the soothing hug.

Emma barked out a watery laugh and placated, "That's okay. I know you think my wardrobe choices are atrocious," she teased lightly. Her left hand slipped down to rest solidly on Regina's spine, caressing up and down over the scratchy hospital gown.

Chuckling into the blonde's stomach, she denied, "Actually, you wear your clothing quite well. I just think your wardrobe should flatter your figure instead of hide it." Realizing what she had just admitted, Regina mentally chastised herself. What the hell am I thinking saying such things? The
pain medication must be addling my mind, she thought. Even so, she found herself nuzzling further into the tear-dampened Henley, right thumb absently stroking over the back of Emma's hand.

The sheriff's breath caught in her throat momentarily at the admission, but she put it down to too much morphine and the emotional rollercoaster her friend had been through that day. Finally, she asked the one question she had been dreading most after the results of the SANE kit. "How much do you want to tell Henry? Because the kid is going to ask questions," she reluctantly said, breaking the little bubble of contentment that had surrounded them.

Regina sighed heavily and pulled back from the embrace, leaning against her pillows but retaining her grasp on Emma's hand. Her tone was weary and low as she conceded, "We tell him what we must. I was abducted and interrogated." Throughout everything that had happened between herself and her son over the last two years, she had unfailingly done all she could to spare him unnecessary knowledge of the world. He was only a child and had no need to learn about the cruelties that man could inflict on his fellow man, or woman. She was not about to change that policy.

Jumping on the brunette's wording, Emma asked, "Are you starting to remember something?"

Shaking her head, Regina admitted quietly, "I have flashes of someone yelling questions, but it makes no sense, right now." Her head hurt every time she tried to think about the events of the morning. The memories were hazy and consisted of tiny snippets of words and images, but there was nothing concrete enough to put together the full picture.

"Okay." The sheriff gave a slight squeeze to the hand holding hers, just then realizing that they were still physically linked. A faint blush colored her cheeks, and she ducked her head slightly to hide behind the curtain of her hair, missing the fond smile her friend sent her way.

Regina glanced around the room, cataloging the contents carefully. Her brows furrowed in slight confusion as she inquired, "Where are my pajamas?"

The non-sequitur gave the blonde pause, but Emma recovered quickly and released Regina's hand, stuffing her hands in her back jeans' pockets and shuffling her feet. With a sheepish wince, she told her, "Those were kinda ruined and had to be collected as evidence." Flashing her a soft smile, she added in a more upbeat tone, "I asked Ruby to pick up some stuff from the house."

As if speaking her name summoned the woman in question, there was a quiet knock at the door. The door edged open, and a dark head and pale, blue eyes peeked hesitantly around the edge. Then, there was a burst of color and noise as Ruby waltzed into the room, announcing, "I'm here! I made it." She gently dropped a small duffle at end of bed, just avoiding Regina's feet in the process. "You have so many pretty and soft things," she gushed as she gave the former queen a quick once-over, taking in her haggard appearance with silent understanding.

"Yes, Dear," Regina replied with a smirk. One could always count on the deputy to lighten the mood with a simple comment. At the moment, she couldn't have been more grateful for the young woman's chipper outlook. Taking the opportunity being offered, she quipped, "Hopefully, you didn't get too much fur on my clothes. Don't think I won't send you my dry-cleaning bill."

Shrugging lazily, Ruby easily deflected, "I don't shed that much when I'm excited." She paused a beat then added somberly, "But seriously, I have got to borrow that red dress." Happy to see smiles spreading on her friends' faces, she unzipped the duffle and withdrew a pair of knee-high leather boots with a surprisingly subdued heel of just under two inches. "I scored some comfy yet fashionable attire for your post hospital debut." She set the shoes down on the floor and lightly shook the bag, the rest of its contents rustling quietly.
Regina chuckled at the infectiously good mood and inclined her head in the direction of the IV bag hanging above the head of her bed. "As soon as this empties completely, I can feel more like myself. These hospital gowns are dreadful and scratchy." Her hand came up to rub at her chest, stopping short when Emma subtly shook her head in reminder of the still healing burns. She scowled in frustration, but lowered her hand back to her lap, short nails picking at a pull she had discovered in the blanket.

The deputy looked over at Emma, unhappily informing her boss, "I tried tracking them, but once they left the building, I lost their scent." It pissed her off that one of her wolf’s abilities was completely useless against a metal box on four wheels. "They must have used a car for at least part of their getaway."

Emma's eyes cut to Regina briefly, wondering how she'd take the news that they'd lost her abductors. Turning to Ruby, she flashed a grim smile and consoled her deputy, "I know you tried your damnedest, and Monty has the Crows Guard sweeping the town. So, unless they slip out through the woods, we'll catch them." In this one instance, the Crows Guard and the Sheriff's Department were in full accord, working together to catch Greg and Tamara. Of course, depending on who caught them first, justice might have interesting interpretations once they were apprehended.

"Do I ever get to find out who they are?" Regina asked tersely. Her gaze settled on Ruby, who shifted slightly under the intense scrutiny. However, the wolf didn't look away for almost a full minute, eyes finally flicking to the side and back, again. Even though she didn't think she could get the deputy to reveal her captors' identities, she felt a little buoyed by the idea that the werewolf had acknowledged her dominance. It was a nice boost of confidence after her ordeal, and whether the slip had been intentional or not, Regina was going to take it.

The sheriff pursed her lips and stared down at the floor, grimacing at the tiles as if the entire situation was their fault. Sighing heavily, she said, "Greg and Tamara are the ones who abducted you." When she lifted her head, her eyes were shiny with unshed tears, sorrow etched on every line of her face. "I'm so sorry, Regina. I knew something was off with both of them, but I didn't do anything about it. And look what happened." She gestured helplessly at the empty air, hands slapping down against her thighs. "They broke into our house in the middle of the night and took you right out from under my nose! They took you, and they hurt you…." Her voice trailed off with an ugly, strangled sound, tears starting to slide down her cheeks as she twisted her face away.

Regina's gaze softened, and, eyes never leaving the blonde, she addressed Ruby, "The bag is finished. Go get Anne, please."

One look between her two friends, and Ruby nodded emphatically, backing quickly toward the door. "Okay," she acquiesced quietly. Just as she opened the door, she added, "It might take me a few minutes to wake her up. She seemed pretty out of it when I came in."

Grateful that the deputy understood, Regina smiled at her retreating figure. Once the door slipped shut, she reached out for Emma with her good hand, her long fingers wrapping around the blonde's wrist and tugging her closer. The sheriff moved easily, if reluctantly, not wanting to hurt her friend any further by resisting her. It was something the brunette had been counting on, the deep-seated need Emma had to protect her. Finally, once she was hovering at the bedside, Regina patted the top of the bedrail. "Put this down, please." Her request was soft but firm, the same tone she used when they were working on magic lessons and the blonde was struggling.

Emma balked slightly, sniffing as she rested her hands on the rail and protested halfheartedly, "But I'll hurt you."
The brunette smiled gently and noted, "You're hurting, too." It seemed that little bit of empathy was all it took because, before she could blink, the bedrail had been lowered, and Emma was gingerly sitting on the edge of the thin mattress, expression miserable and hopeful all at once. Letting her hand cup the back of the sheriff's upper arm, she drew her closer, soothing her worried whine with a murmured, "It's okay. I won't break." Directing the blonde head to rest on her right shoulder, she felt some of the tension ease out of her when a nose nuzzled into the side of her neck. That's when the tears began in earnest.

"I'm sorry, Regina. I'm so, so sorry," Emma blubbered through her sobs. Her self-reproach floated to the surface and escaped in gulping bursts. "It's all my fault. I should've stopped them. I'm s... sorry," she hiccupped wetly.

Regina tenderly ran her fingers through long, golden tresses, hoping to soothe some of her companion's pain. "Shh. You couldn't have known, Emma." Wishing she could rock the woman in her arms, she settled for stroking down the back of her head and spine in one, long line, over and over again. "It's okay. You saved me. I'm right here," the former queen reassured her, letting Emma cry it out. "It's alright, Sweetheart," she whispered, "I'm here." Fresh tears pricked at her own eyes when Emma's right arm settled gently around her waist, under the sling on her left side, her left arm resting between them on their laps. Regina slowly, carefully, used the bond to tease some of the emotional turmoil from her friend. It didn't hurt as much as she had anticipated, so she continued to spool Emma's sorrow from her magic until the ragged breaths against her throat calmed, and the tears slowed. Several minutes later, when Anne's face appeared in the small window set in the door, she subtly shook her head, watching as her guard disappeared, once more. Leaving the hospital could wait a little longer. Right then, they needed each other. And Regina was going to do her damnedest to ensure her darkness didn't snuff out Emma's light.

~SQ~

Pacing the length of her cell, Cora wrung her hands as she glared over her shoulder at the solitary Crows Guard still manning his post by the small cavern's entrance. She observed as the guard continually checked a small, black handheld device, eagerly waiting for it to chirp at him. Sometimes he would slip around the corner into the mine's tunnels, out of sight. She, of course, didn't fully comprehend the magic of this world, its technology, but she wouldn't dismiss it after what it had done to her daughter, who was strong and so very brave.

She hugged herself tightly, staring blankly at the cell's bare rock walls with her back to the bars containing her. Her hands gripped the material of her dress as her eyes squeezed shut. And as her sorrow pooled in her eyes and churned heavily in her stomach, she recalled the cruelties she'd bestowed upon Regina by hand and by magic. She had been stupid and arrogant and naïve, and she was ashamed. Yet, she couldn't deny her pride in her child. So, in that moment, for the first time since her mother had died, she prayed to the old gods. She prayed to her mother's patron, Razikale. She pleaded for Regina to be made well, and then, she humbly sought forgiveness.

"Hold it right there," demanded the guard as he saw Greg Mendell and Tamara Green enter the small cavern containing the make-shift prison. Boldly, he stood his ground, reaching for his telescoping baton. Unfortunately, he didn't get much farther than that.

"No," Green countered with a deadly smirk. She lifted her Taser and fired. The yellow blast doors flew off as the ID tags and probes were ejected, and the tiny barbs embedded themselves into the guard's broad chest. Reflectively pulling the trigger, she chuckled as the man stumbled back and dropped to his knees in convulsions. Once he passed out, she released the cartridge, tossed it on the ground, and snapped another one into place.
Meanwhile, Mendell stepped up to the jail. He tapped the head of the pilfered dwarf's pickaxe on the bars. "Enjoy the show," he teased with a bright smile. Leaning forward, his expression turned sinister as he scraped metal against metal. "It'll be the last you'll ever see."

Cora ground her teeth, clenching her fists. She had watched the scuffle with feigned disinterest but was truly terrified by how such a large man was quickly dispatched. Obviously, the dark-skinned woman's magic was impressive, overpowering the guard's enchanted gauntlet with nary an effort. Then, it clicked, and she knew these were the people who had tortured her daughter.

"We don't have time for you to poke the bear," Tamara sighed, removing a large, black diamond from her coat pocket. She idly inspected it before setting it on the ground in the middle of the room, twisting its point into the dirt. "We have to stay on script," she warned. They couldn't afford any more distractions or improvisations to the plan. She had indulged her lover enough.

The sorceress wanted to snarl and berate the two idiots. She wanted to tear them apart limb by limb. She wanted to rip out their hearts and present them to her daughter. However, her eyes drifted back to the unconscious, possibly dead, Crows Guard. She wouldn't allow fear to control her. These people had savagely damaged her daughter, a capable and talented magic practitioner in her own right. She may be vulnerable and weak, but that wouldn't stop her from verbally skewering them.

Cora moved forward, raising her chin. "This cage won't protect you from my wrath," she promised darkly. Her eyes derisively judged the two vermin gracing her presence. "I'll make you regret being born," she taunted. She turned and strutted across her cell. Her dress flaring out dramatically.

"You fairy tale types are really something else," Green snickered, shaking her head. She took several steps away from the black diamond.

Mendell narrowed his eyes at the old woman. "Who are you supposed to be, anyway?" he prompted out of simple curiosity. Over the last few weeks, he'd watched this sorceress torment and terrorize the town, thwarting the heroes at every turn.

"Queen of Hearts," the sorceress replied with all the poise and airs of a true queen. Lowering her chin, she flexed her right hand. "Let me out, and I'll gift you with a demonstration of my prowess," she silkily suggested as her face twisted into a menacing glower.

Greg chuckled as he twirled the pickaxe's handle against his shoulder. Smirking, he briefly glanced over at his girlfriend before leaning forward to whisper,"Already had a show today." He closed his eyes, remembering how Regina had arched from the gurney. His voice was low and rough as he jeered, "I doubt you could outperform the evil queen." He closed his eyes, absently stroking the pickaxe's handle with his free hand.

"You depraved pretext of a man," Cora snarled in contempt. No matter the realm, men were vile creatures unworthy of the power they coveted so ravenously. "I owe you pain beyond the seven hells for what you've done to my daughter," she hissed vehemently. If magic was only a matter of will, she'd have buried them all in the mine.

"The evil queen's your daughter?" Tamara questioned, not quite believing it. Her brow furrowed in silent contemplation as she stared at the back of her partner's head. "How'd you miss that?" she probed.

"It doesn't matter," Mendell retorted, turning away from the woman in the cell. "They're all going to be joining the dearly departed, former mayor soon enough," he elucidated, focusing on the large diamond in the dirt.
"My daughter is of the tenacious sort," the sorceress cooed, leaning toward the bars. She gracefully strode across her small room and primly sat at her small table. "She'll disembowel you before the day is done," she added chipperly.

"Hate to break it to you lady, but Regina's dead," Greg snickered, meeting Tamara's eyes. Although, they hadn't found his father's corpse at the old campsite, he had agreed to move on with their mission.

A dark tittering filled the small cavern, and Cora delighted in their identical, shocked expressions. "No, Dear, my daughter is very much alive," she joyously corrected the buffoon. Lacing her linked hands on top of her lap, she flashed a wicked smile. "Her guards are searching for you as we speak."

"God damnit," Green cursed, rubbing her forehead with her right hand. Why had she let him sway her into capturing the evil queen? That was one complication they didn't need, right then. She paced across the small room, mentally adjusting the plan. "We can work with this," she said flatly. Gesturing at the fail-safe, she instructed, "Hit it, so we can get on with the next phase." It was only a matter of time before someone came to relieve the guard.

Readjusting his grip on the pickaxe, Greg scowled as he stared down at the diamond. "This thing is going to destroy Storybrooke," he stated, changing his stance and hold on the pickaxe. He didn't wait for a response. Lifting the axe over his head, he swung it down and missed. The pick's tip buried in the packed dirt. He grunted as he yanked it out before correcting his aim. This time, the pick connected with a sharp tink, but the diamond only fractured faintly. Again, and again, he swung and hit the black gem until, finally, it cracked.

Air and light swirled about the small cavern as visible magic sparked and crackled around the black diamond, rising above the ground about a meter. Then, the earth shook with such force that dust and dirt billowed around them, filling the air. Cracks splintered along the walls, ceiling, and ground, knocking loose small pebbles and rocks.

"Enjoy the show while it lasts!" Green jeered, covering her nose and mouth with the collar of her jacket. She turned to leave, sharing a prideful look with her partner. After Mendell tossed the pickaxe off to the side, she looped her arm with his offered one. The Chantry would be very pleased with their work. They only had one more thing left to do, kidnap Henry Mills.

Watching them leave, Cora stepped up to the bars and watched the diamond. It was beautiful. She gripped the bars and leaned her forehead on them. This was it. She was going to die alone and forgotten. Squeezing her eyes shut, tears slipped down her cheeks. She wanted a chance to reconcile with her daughter. She wanted the chance to be the mother she should have been for Regina. And again, she prayed to the god of mystery.

~SQ~

Regina, who was impeccably dressed thanks to Ruby Lucas, sat primly in a clean and well-maintained wheelchair. The small, front wheels of the chair creaked softly as it was slowly propelled toward the hospital's front entrance by her commander. She glared at the backs of the two Crows Guards, Diego and Irene, escorting her and Emma Swan out of the hospital. Turning her head sideways, she noted, again, from her periphery the presence of two other guards, Anne and Bruce, flanking their rear. "I'm not an invalid," she mumbled unhappily, facing forward with a frown, fussing with the immobilization sling still cradling her left arm.

The sheriff bit her lower lip, gracing the brunette with an indulgent smirk. "It's universal hospital rules, everywhere," she repeated with a soft chuckle. She ignored Elmwood's irritated grunt. That
had been a battle.

The pneumatic doors were triggered by Diego and Irene, revealing the Charger parked under the awning at the curb. Aengus, who had been watching the door, quickly climbed out of the cockpit and trotted around to the passenger side, fully opening the forward door. Then, Neal and Henry climbed out of the backseat. The young boy was ready to bolt to his mothers, but the janitor held the kid back by the shoulders, uncertain if his sister could withstand a bruising hug just yet.

Feeling torn about her son's presence, Regina quietly observed as the Dark One's son whispered something in Henry's ear. She noted her son's initial confusion, but she smiled at the boy's nervous attempt to be good and patient. A hug from her child would've been blissfully healing; however, she doubted her present constitution could handle it. She didn't want to make him any more apprehensive about touching her.

"Look, I even scored you curb service," Emma boasted with a bright grin as the group walked through the entrance.

Cocking an eyebrow, Regina smirked at her friend's ridiculousness but made no further comment. She waited patiently to be transferred to the idling car. Her eyes drifted closed when Henry timidly touched her left shoulder. Laying her right hand lightly on top of his, she idly caressed the back of his small hand, smiling at his very concerned face. She took solace at his mere presence.

As the guards flanked the Charger, surveying the immediate area, Monty moved with efficiency and full awareness of his surroundings. He locked the wheelchair, flipped the footrests up, and offered his left hand to his queen, who gracefully accepted it and lifted herself onto her feet. It was only because he knew her tells that he realized the true extent of her continued discomfort. He nodded once at his second-in-command, who returned it, as he maneuvered the queen toward the front, passenger seat.

Then, suddenly, the ground violently rolled and shuddered. Cracks fractured and splintered up the hospital walls and across the pavement and landscaping surrounding it. The glass in the automatic doors shattered. Car alarms shrieked and squealed all around the parking lot. Regina fell forward into Elmwood's protective embrace, her breathing labored as he cradled her against him, using his body to shield her from falling debris from the awning. The four Crows Guards tightly encircled Neal, Emma, and Henry as the sheriff pulled the boy to her chest, crouching down and hugging him close. Instinctively, she reached out to touch the brunette's back.

When the tremors stopped, Emma lifted her head and looked around. She peered into the hospital, watching as people zipped around the main corridor. Exhaling heavily, her eyes turned back to the brunette, knowing she was in no condition to be dragged around town. "What the hell was that?" she demanded, standing and nudging Henry into the car's backseat. "Since when does Storybrooke get earthquakes?"

"That wasn't an earthquake," Regina rasped unable, at first, to release her death grip on Monty's leather coat. She swallowed, then nodded her consent, allowing her commander to gently maneuver her into the Charger. After she was belted in, she quietly stated, "It came from the mines." The rolling blast of magical energy that had moved through Storybrooke had left her physically numb, and the magic had sliced into her, leaving deep metaphysical cuts throughout her magical conduits. It seemed that Mendell's particular form of torture was wreaking havoc on her body's ability to process magic.

Nodding, Elmwood secured the door and demanded the keys, which Aengus quickly supplied as he stepped back from the vehicle. Monty trotted around the front of the car and climbed into the driver's seat. Taking his queen into potential danger when she couldn't defend herself was stupid,
but he had no other choice. She was the only one who could help them deal with it.

Neal raced around the car, climbing into the backseat with his son. He buckled his seatbelt and gestured for the boy to follow suit.

Getting in the car, the sheriff slammed the door shut right as Monty sped out from under the awning. She twisted around, blindly grabbing her seatbelt, to see the Crows Guards run toward their motorcycles. Despite the situation, she smirked as Anne mounted a black-and-silver street bike, a H-D XR1000. "Okay," she exclaimed, struggling with her seatbelt as she was leaning side-to-side with the sharp turns of the Charger. "What the heck was that? And will I ever get to drive my car, again?" Finally clicking herself in, she glanced down to make sure Henry was secure. Then, she leaned forward as far as she could and lightly touched her friend's right shoulder.

"I don't know how anyone found it," Regina vaguely responded, slouching in her seat. Her body limply leaned with the car's movements. She couldn't focus, losing track of where they were in town, and the threads of magic twirling around them were readily becoming overwhelming to her ravaged senses.

"Found what, Regina?" Neal prompted. He ran his hand down his face. This wasn't how he wanted to go. This certainly wasn't how he wanted his son to go. Looking at the boy, he smiled fondly and clasped the boy's shoulder, hoping to reassure him with the gesture.

Fighting against the magic, the former queen squeezed her eyes shut, pressing the heel of her right hand against her forehead. Gods, it was nearly unbearable. Then, after a few labored breaths, she gasped out, "The fail-safe device." And to think, she had been proud of that accursed thing.

"Fail-safe?" Emma questioned not liking the sound of it. She briefly considered calling the sheriff's station, but her deputies would no doubt have their hands full. Besides, they couldn't offer any magical assistance.

"I embedded a fail-safe into the curse," Regina explained, dropping her right hand onto her lap. It was her escape route from Rumpelstiltskin's tailored hell, but she had never expected to use it. She wasn't even certain it would work, a gamble between sending everyone home or killing them all.

Impressed with his sister's ingenuity, although at a highly inappropriate time, the janitor flashed a mischievous smirk at Henry, saying, "That's such a Star Trek trope." He grinned as the boy weakly matched his smile.

"You two can bond over your geekiness later," the sheriff intoned, understanding what her ex was doing. "How do we stop it?" she hurriedly asked. They were almost to the mines. Damn, Elmwood could drive. When an answer wasn't forthcoming, she gently shook her friend's shoulder. "Regina?" she prompted, raising her voice slightly.

"I think she passed out," Neal supplied, looking over his son's head at Emma.

"Mom?" Henry called out, stretching forward, desperate for his hand to touch her.

Spotting the turn for the mine's access road, the sheriff unclipped her seatbelt and leaned forward, squeezing her right hand and arm between the front passenger window and its unconscious passenger.

Monty yanked the wheel, spinning the car into a sharp left turn onto a dirt road. Clouds of dust and bits of gravel flew out from beneath the car's tires. Quickly checking on his unconscious queen's state, he pushed the accelerator to the floorboard, trusting the new recruit to protect her.
"Shit," Emma cursed as Regina's head lolled back to the left. Swallowing, she absently rubbed her chest with her left hand as a weird taste bloomed in her mouth, tickling her taste buds. "Everything feels heavy and thick, like I'm swimming underwater with a hangover," she explained, looking over her son's head at her ex.

"That's magic," Neal easily answered. He pointed at a road sign before the car zoomed past it, turning onto the another, less maintained, gravel road. "It's being drawn here by Storybrooke's own WMD," he offered, glancing around at the forest. He couldn't feel or sense or use magic, aside from imbued or enchanted items, but he had learned to notice how magic visually impacted the world. And Storybrooke was slowly losing its vibrancy.

"We don't have time for your flippant jokes, Neal," the sheriff snapped, not appreciating the levity. She was too rattled. Everything felt abraded and uncertain, and with the added layer of danger, she had trouble concentrating. Then, she was slammed into the car door as the Charger swerved to the right, missing a rapidly growing tree that had instantly sprouted in middle of the gravel road. Her right hand, that had been lightly cradling Regina's head, smacked into the glass, and she hissed at the sharp jolt of pain. She twisted around and watched as the pine tree grew to the height of the other trees. The following Crows Guards easily maneuvered their motorcycles around it.

Startled by the snappy retort and the wheel jerking, the janitor was just as unnerved by the tree as Emma. "I'm not joking," he hissed defiantly, trying to mask his unease for their son's benefit. "Believe me, it's no easy feat tinkering with the Dark One's handy work, and having a back door is always smart. You know this, Emma." After all, he had taught her the pickpocket's tricks of the trade.

"Whatever," the sheriff snarled, leaning her forehead on the back of the passenger seat headrest. Absently, she stroked the brunette's head. She didn't have time for his shit, even if he had a point, but she didn't want to contemplate anything aside from surviving the next few minutes. Then, she and Regina were going to have a nice, long conversation about the Dark Curse and any other potential surprises.

~SQ~

END OF PART 13

Chapter End Notes

**Fixes:** So, we went back and fixed a few things in this chapter.

A very special thank you to the reviewer on FF.net who pointed out a minor inconsistency involving the Greg/Owen identity plot point.

Because Regina's a consultant for the Sheriff's Department in our story, we had begun using her new(er) title as an epithet instead of former mayor--it being more current for our narrative. However, since several readers expressed confusion over the use of consultant, we changed that, too.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: We hope you enjoy this chapter. It took a little longer than expected since work has been kicking our butts. We have a gazillion lesson plans to write because the state decided to change agency overlords.

Special Note: The Neverland portion of this story will be posted once the arc is completely written. Then, at that time, we'll decide how many parts we'll divide it into, and we'll post one section a week. That means we might not post an update for a month or two. That said, we'll be posting little excerpts and inspirations for the story and its characters on our Tumblr (ncfn . tumblr . com) in the interim to help tide you over.

Thank You for all the reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. It means more than we can say to see those lovely notifications pop up in our emails. We like the constructive criticisms we receive and hearing your perspectives on events. It doesn't always change how we handle things, but it always makes us take another look at our writing. And that's a good thing.

~SQ~

PART 14

Cora's head perked up at the sound of slow footsteps down the corridor. Her guard was still unconscious, and she was anxious for word about Regina. She was fully expecting to see another of her daughter's guards, so, when Rumpelstiltskin came ambling into the cavern, she was rather disappointed. She watched as his keen gaze took a cursory glance over the space, flitting over the downed guard and her own situation before settling on the fail-safe. "Come to witness your demise?" Gesturing to the glowing diamond, she felt a bit of pride, able to sense the magic pouring out of it, even from within her cell. "Not even a Dark One could escape that," she taunted with a grin.

Gold had taken in her abysmal accommodations with a certain amount of smug satisfaction. After all, he had been in a similar cell before and knew just how unpleasant it was to be cut off from one's magic and trapped at another's mercy. It was horrible, and he was delighted that the woman who had spurned him for power and hidden away his child was being treated to such a fate. Flashing a cocky smile in her direction, he said, "I wouldn't count me out just yet, Dearie." Stepping closer to the diamond, he leaned hard on his cane with his right hand and raised his left in front of himself. He let a little of his magic free, sending it out to interact with the device. As soon as the two magics met, a blast of white light filled the cavern, and he was thrown back against the rough, rock wall, cane landing a few feet away.

Head falling back in delight, Cora chortled loudly, enjoying the sight of the Dark One having been knocked on his ass. It was even more rewarding knowing that it was her daughter who had made such a magnificent device that could thwart Rumpelstiltskin. She continued to cackle gleefully as the imp struggled to his feet before retrieving his cane.
The humiliation of being tossed around was bearable, but what worried him was the device itself. It shouldn't exist; it was impossible. "How did a fail-safe device get worked into the curse?" he mused, carefully circling the diamond. He kept a little distance between it and himself, letting his magic assess it without actually attempting to make contact. After a bit, he speculated quietly, "It must've been an accident." Moving away from the glowing stone, he slowly approached Cora's cell, eying the downed Crows Guard as he passed.

She scoffed at his blasé dismissal, well aware that he had no idea how Regina had accomplished the device's creation. "That particular bit of spell work is far too complex to be anything other than designed, and you know it." Honestly, she couldn't have been more pleased with her daughter's ingenuity. Pausing to gauge his expression, she tilted her head and announced with a malicious grin, "It was added to your precious Dark Curse."

"Impossible," he bit out sharply, gritting his teeth in irritation. The curse had been complete as he had given it to her. There was no way to amend it. Regina's preferences, conscious or otherwise, would have had an impact on the curse as far as some personalities and socioeconomic statuses went. But she should not have been able to make drastic changes to his own personal wishes that he had woven into the curse. And she most certainly should not have had the ability to insert such a complex fail-safe device, especially one so powerful as to resist his magic. Scowling darkly, Rumpelstiltskin pressed his cane into the dirt as he addressed his ex-lover with a sneer. "You bound her magic. You know she couldn't have done this."

A slow, cunning smile curled her lips upward, and Cora relied, "Yes, and yet, our daughter cast a curse so powerful it devastated the Enchanted Forest." Her eyes sparkled with a secret knowledge, and she gripped the bars to her cell, leaning forward to get his full attention. "The aftermath was spectacular, and the destruction impacted every kingdom." It had been a shock to see the devastation the curse had left in its wake. Some areas of the Enchanted Forest had been ripped apart, as if massive earthquakes had remade the land, whereas others had suffered more from the political repercussions. All in all, Regina had managed to sunder the stability of an entire continent and cause ripples with unforeseen consequences in the others. Nodding at the diamond hovering before them like a dying star, she murmured, "Let's hope she's recovered enough to stop it."

Gold's gaze snapped up to hers, rarely seen confusion flitting across his features before he could school them. Frowning slightly, he inquired flatly, "Recovered?" Perhaps the Charmings had been correct when they'd claimed Regina had been abducted. The little nugget of worry that he had pushed aside earlier began to expand. He had assisted, at least, had not simply dismissed the do-gooders' concerns outright. Perhaps it had been enough.

"Yes," Cora began, tone dripping with scorn, "while you've been playing house with your maid, Regina was taken and tortured by the same fools who triggered this." She glanced off to the space behind the imp, vividly recalling the extensive injuries that had put her daughter on the brink of death. It had been so much worse than she had let on to the savior and the queen's guards. "I healed as much as I could, but I don't retain much stock in modern medicine." Her eyes were haunted when she looked back at him. Voice becoming cold and hard, she gripped the bars tighter and demanded, "You need to find them, Rumpel, and make them pay. You owe her that much." She couldn't change the past, and her actions were limited while she was imprisoned; however, the Queen of Hearts knew one very important facet of the Dark One's personality. His need for vengeance was outmatched only by his desire for power. And if he was willing to ruthlessly manipulate so many lives to find one child, then surely, he would seek out those who had harmed another.

Rumpelstiltskin glowered at her from the other side of the bars, jeering, "People in glass houses shouldn't cast stones." What right did she have to demand anything from him? She had stolen away
Slamming on the breaks and ignoring the chorus of grunts, Monty expertly guided the Charger to a sliding stop directly in front of the mine entrance. He unclipped his seatbelt, then, reached over to unfasten the queen's. Swiftly, he climbed out of the cockpit and jogged to the other side of the car, reaching for the passenger door handle. When he glanced over the top of the car to his right, he recognized the on-duty guard's motorcycle, Gold's black Cadillac Brougham, and the Charmings' old Ford F-Series pickup truck. What the hell are they doing here? he mused.

Feeling a little wobbly on her legs, Emma gripped the car door as she carefully slipped out of the backseat, raising her left hand to her forehead as her world tilted. Shaking off the vertigo, she was relieved to see Regina awake and alert, being lifted out of the car by the commander. The rumbling of motorcycles briefly drew her attention back down the gravel road as Henry climbed out behind her. "Stay with Neal," she instructed, grabbing the boy by the shoulders and forcibly directing him toward her ex, who was rounding the rear of the Charger. Once Neal physically had a hold of the kid, she turned back to Monty and Regina.

"Put me down," the former mayor demanded despite sagging into Elmwood's supportive arms. A soft, tentative touch on her left elbow drew her attention to the sheriff's concerned expression. She sighed, accepting the comfort from both. "We don't have much time," she stated with impatience, nodding toward the mine's entrance.

"Okay," Emma drawled, closing the car doors. "How do we stop it?" she asked softly, looking over her shoulder to see the other Crows Guard getting off their bikes.

"I . . . I'm not entirely certain," Regina stammered softly, meeting her friend's fearful gaze. "I wasn't even sure it would work," she admitted in a distracted whisper. Her eyes darted about them, catching the gleaming tendrils of glowing magic that seemed to be pouring out of the mines.

Theoretically, she'd designed the fail-safe as an alternative means of breaking the Dark Curse. Of course, at the time of its creation, she had had no idea if it would actually work, but now, the device appeared operational. However, the final result was still in question. Would the fail-safe collect the magic linked to the Dark Curse, erasing Storybrooke from the world and sending its people back to the Enchanted Forest intact? Or would it merely reduce everything to energy, dumping all of it in the old world in some spectacular fashion? Regardless, she knew Henry wouldn't crossover with them, and despite his distance and mistrust, she still loved him. She wouldn't leave him alone in any world.

"Mom, you have to stop it," Henry begged, slipping out of his father's grip. He slinked around Monty, glancing between his two mothers. When no one reacted fast enough, he zeroed in on his brunette mother, accusing, "You made the bomb. You should know how to disarm it."

"It's not a bomb," Regina corrected, bristling under her son's contempt. "It's a fail-safe woven into the curse," she added, squeezing her eyes shut. They'd watched enough science fiction and read enough comics together for him to know the distinction. And now, she knew any suggestion for Neal to take Henry over the town line would be met with more suspicion and distrust, like she was taking his family away from him.

"Whoa, Kid," the sheriff interjected, grabbing the boy by his coat collar. "One, I told you to stay
with Neal, and two, this is so not helping." She dragged him back to the janitor, passing him off with a pointed stare before heading into the mines with Regina and the Crows Guard. Sometimes, she really wanted to throttle that kid.

Immediately, Henry tried to pull away to follow. "Let go," he grunted. He needed to make sure his mom did the right thing.

"Hold on there, Kiddo," Neal suggested, frowning as he had to forcibly hold the boy back. "Let's give them a chance to check things out." When the struggling failed to stop, he turned his son to face him as he knelt, keeping a firm grip on little biceps. "Your mom didn't activate the self-destruct, Henry. She was in the hospital," he explained with a level tone.

"She shouldn't have even created it," the boy petulantly rebuked. He didn't understand how everyone was okay with it. He didn't understand how the Crows Guard were so fiercely loyal to the evil queen. They didn't seem bad.

Shaking his head, Neal let his head drop. "That's a conversation for another day," he sighed. His hands rubbed up and down the kid's arms. Looking his son in the eyes, he inquired, "Do you trust me?"

"Yeah," Henry said, hesitating just the tiniest bit.

The answer was a little more reluctant than he had hoped, but Neal took it. "Then, trust me when I say, we want your moms save the day," he clarified, flashing a bright smile. His expression turned serious as he added, "Laying blame doesn't help anyone during a crisis." So, his son was a bit of a hot head. He had thought he'd had all the answers as a kid, too.

"Okay," Henry weakly agreed. He allowed himself to be guided into the mines. His father's words sounded familiar.

~SQ~

Diego and Irene jogged ahead of the group as they moved through the tunnels, moving discarded tools, barrels, and crates as necessary. Why did the dwarves leave their junk everywhere?

As Monty briskly carried Regina with purposeful strides through the twisting tunnels of the abandoned mine toward her mother's personal prison, she absently rubbed her stomach, wincing at the pain it caused. The subdued lighting of the sparsely spaced, flickering oil lanterns reminded her of far distant, dire times. She sighed at her morbid recollection of living as Leopold's queen. Pushing the rising tremor of old memories away, the former mayor closed her eyes and pressed her forehead into her commander's shoulder, blocking out the streams of magic. She felt Emma's worried concern and magic gently wrap around her like a blanket, and she couldn't hold back the tears.

Elmwood quickened his pace along with the others.

Trotting into the antechamber of Cora's jail, Diego and Irene flanked the entrance. Their keen gazes expertly surveyed the situation. Of course, they were immediately drawn to the glowing diamond hovering in the center of the room, daunting in its promise of destruction. Then, their focus shifted to the old sorceress standing morose in her cell with a flummoxed Gold outside the bars, leaning heavily on his cane. The Charmings clung to each other a few feet away from the Dark One. And finally, they spotted their comrade, Markus, in a crumpled heap across the way.

Monty swiftly entered the room, gracefully stooping to gently lower his queen onto her feet. As
soon as Regina was standing, Emma slipped closer, looping a supportive arm around her waist. The trio slowly moved forward to the fail-safe. Anne, Bruce, and Aengus hurried in behind the others, having just arrived and passed Neal and Henry in the tunnels. The captain of the guard darted around them and moved to check on the unconscious guard, disgusted that no one had even tried to arrange him into a more comfortable position.

"He's still alive," the scout grandmaster stated after assessing the downed man's vitals. She pulled a knife from her boot and cut the two Taser wires a few inches from the probes, tossing the long tails away. "Markus should've woken up by now," she stated, sheathing her blade. She stood up and faced her queen. "He needs to be checked out at the hospital," she added, waiting for the command. Upon the expected, resolute nod, Anne snapped into action, ordering Irene and Aengus to help her with Markus.

"A hospital won't do him much good if he's dead," Gold bitterly criticized. They were all going to die because of his daughter's arrogance.

"No one's dying," Elmwood intoned, moving to stand between the Dark One and his charges.

"Emma," Mary Margaret cooed, reaching for her daughter with one arm, her other hand clinging to her husband's coat. She felt her own guilt and regret collide within her.

Ignoring her parents, Emma watched as the three Crows Guards carried their compatriot out of the room with practiced efficiency. As Bruce Farmer assumed Irene's position by the archway to the main tunnels, she spotted Neal and Henry and frowned. However, she was tugged forward when Regina stepped closer to the diamond of death.

Cora watched her daughter with wonder, knowing her child was in pain. "The people who took you activated that," she offered, nodding toward the fail-safe.

"How did they find it?" Regina mused to herself, leaning heavily against her friend. Her tired body was already rebelling. "How did they even know it existed?" she quietly muttered. Her gaze fixated on the mysterious gem as her mind raced on how to neutralize it.

"Regina, what have you done?" the pawnbroker chided. He took a step forward and pointed at the diamond. "That wasn't part of the Dark Curse," he clarified for those not paying attention, tone straddling the line between admonishing and proud.

Looking at her former teacher, Regina furrowed her brow. She didn't have time to weather his damning criticisms, and they were far from the last words she wanted to hear. She was hurt and tired, and there was no telling how long they had before the fail-safe reached critical mass, sucking them into oblivion or dumping them in some state or another in the Enchanted Forest. "It was meant to be an alternate, exit strategy," she admitted begrudgingly, pursing her lips. She stared down at the device and reached out her hand. The magic burned, but she pushed through the pain even as her hand started to tremble. She needed to know her options. "It was for a worst-case scenario," she elucidated.

"Regina," Emma whispered nervously. She adjusted her hold on the other woman, gripping her tighter but mindful of her injuries. When her friend sagged against her, lowering her arm, she quickly asked, "Are you okay?" She took little comfort from the slow pat on her forearm. Her gaze drifted back to the hovering gem. It was beautiful.

The old sorceress's brow crinkled as she observed the savior tenderly cradling her daughter, using her body to protect her. However, she shelved the moment for later analysis and asked, "Regina, how is it an exit?"
Traditionally, curses had to be broken in order to escape their torment, and that typically happened with True Love's Kiss or through some rare counter measure, if one existed; but those tended to be absurdly specific, as well as insanely difficult to find. Her daughter's workaround appeared to be an unexpected third option, a backdoor, much like a bean or world jumper's hat.

"You can't escape a curse with a trick, Dearie," Gold sneered, jabbing his cane into the dirt. "That's why they carry power," he continued, aghast at such a ludicrous notion. He slowly paced the length of the small cavern, spotting his son and grandson. Whirling around, he seethed as he pointed at Neal and Henry, "You brought them with you?" His glower landed on his former pupil and her commander. "Are you daft?" Quickly, he shuffled toward the archway, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out his car keys. "Here," he said, tossing the keys to his son. "Take the boy and run," he instructed.

"No," Neal responded, catching the keys in one hand. He wanted to say more, but the time didn't feel right. He didn't want to add to the weight on Emma and his younger sibling's shoulders. So, he handed the keys back and stroked his son's hair. He knew he had made the right call when Henry glanced up at him.

The pawnbroker shook his head. "Then, all of this will be for nothing," he moodily decreed, raising his hand to teleport his son and grandson to the town border. Maybe once they witnessed the destruction of Storybrooke, they would come to their senses and flee.

"No, Papa!" Neal scolded, stepping around his son. "We're staying," he added, taking a deep breath through his nose. "Families stick together." His eyes darted to and lingered on his sister pointedly. Smiling with pride when his father lowered his hand, he looked back down and met Henry's hopeful gleam.

"Fools," Gold muttered, turning away from the boys to glare at his daughter. "This," he said, pointing at the diamond, "is your doing. Fix it." Deep down inside, he found their situation rather poetic. His former apprentice had surprised him more often than not—not that he'd ever admit it—a true dark horse.

"You're the all-powerful Dark One; you stop it," Regina sniped, raising her chin in defiance. She wouldn't submit to his demands or games any longer. He had already taken too much from her. When he cast his gaze aside, she knew that he couldn't, and she was filled with a twisted glee at her accomplishment.

Emma released a shuddering sigh and hugged her friend. "Regina," she whispered in the former mayor's ear as her eyes drifted up from the glowing fail-safe, tears collecting in her eyes. She didn't want to die, not yet, not when she had just found a real home.

However, the old sorceress erupted into a cackle of delight. Her head fell back in merriment as she tittered, "Oh, he tried!" Shedding her pleasure, her expression turned hateful, voice dropping low as she continued, "And he failed." Oh, her beautiful daughter was truly a wonder, having surpassed even Rumpelstiltskin. At least she would die relatively happy. With mirth, she said, "His brilliant attempt landed him across the room."

David suddenly commanded, "You have to stop it." He pulled his wife against his chest, cradling her head under his chin, wild eyes darting around the cavern from one magic user to another. "Emma, if Gold can't stop it, maybe you can," he encouraged with inspiring faith. "You're a child of True Love," he quickly added.

"David's right!" exclaimed Mary Margaret. She looked up devotedly at her husband. Turning to face her daughter, she gushed, "You have the most powerful magic of all." And where were the
The sheriff looked between their impending doom, her parents, and the pawnbroker. The tried-and-true tagline of being the product of True Love didn't quite rouse her fighting spirit. She'd only just started her magical training, and their current situation was far beyond her.

"Are you trying to get her killed?" Gold scoffed, unbelieving. "Even if the savior had the expertise to handle that magnitude of magic, which she doesn't, she'd implode from exposure." Sometimes he didn't understand how some people survived from one day to the next. Plus, if the savior died, his daughter died, and that was something he wasn't ready to contemplate, yet. Although, his second born might wish for his death once she learned of her true paternity.

Then, the earth around them violently shuddered, again. The sparse, hanging lanterns swung on their hooks, their warm lights slicing back and forth like pendulums. Cracks zipped across the floor, walls, and ceiling with startling speed. As the dark became darker from dust filling the air, the fail-safe cast an eerie glow throughout the small cavern.

Burying her face in her husband's chest, Mary Margaret yelped in surprise as David shielded her from dirt and debris. Old fears of being buried alive were brutally reawakened. Husband and wife yearned to hold their child, and both turned to gaze lovingly at her. The former deputy wanted nothing more than to save his daughter. He fought the impulse to drag her and Regina to his truck and drive them to the town line. However, the school teacher silently vowed, if they survived, to do right by Emma and be the best mother possible.

Cora clung to the bars with a white-knuckled grip, staring at her unmoving daughter. She refused to believe that it was the end, and if they survived, she wouldn't waste another moment. She would earn back her child's love. She would prove her daughter was, and always had been, enough.

Losing his balance, Gold stumbled into the wall. He twisted, looking past the guards, and noticed Neal protectively holding Henry, crouching beneath a cross beam in the archway. And he found himself conflicted. Should he save those who could be saved, accept his fate, and condemn everyone else? Or, should he wait to see if his former apprentice and her protégé could circumnavigate their end. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. Unsurprisingly, his darkness made him selfish because he wanted to live, and so, he waited.

Bruce and Diego's attentions were equally split between their queen, their commander, the support trusses, the queen's adopted son, and her supposed brother. Trusting their sovereign without question, they would die for her without hesitation, but they had faith they would live another day. Over the years, they had witnessed their queen preform amazing feats with her magic, and they believed she would lead them into another tomorrow.

Shuffling forward, Elmwood wrapped himself around his queen and the sheriff. His squinting eyes pierced the dust cloud for signs of collapse and other possible dangers. Thoughts of his family flitted through his mind as he worried about them; however, he pushed it all aside because he had a job to do. He would guard his queen until the end. Silently, he signaled for Bruce and Diego to stay in position.

Emma held onto her companion with bruising strength. Memories of being stuffed by other kids into pitch, black root cellars, dank, dimly lit basements, and closets under stairs as cruel jokes filled her thoughts, but she wasn't alone, anymore. The woman in her arms, the man shielding them, the guards looking out for them, her son, and even her parents were proof of it. She was a part of something. She finally had her family, but she wasn't ready to die.

Amidst the chaos of magic and destruction, Regina stared into the blinding glow of the fail-safe,
and she relished in it. She took a slow, deep breath, filling her lungs to the brim. Tasting the magic on her tongue, she yearned for it, almost beyond reason. Her fingers moved ever so slightly as if caressing the threads of magic and light emanating from the device. She could practically feel them slip across her fingertips. But then, she felt the savior's powerful magic slide behind her own, hiding. Her Emma was afraid, and the feeling raced unhindered through the bond.

"Regina, we have to try something," the sheriff quietly begged in the former mayor's ear. Her throat felt thick; it burned when she swallowed. "Whatever you need from me, magic or otherwise, take it. Tell me what I need to do," she relayed with a rough voice. She tried to release her vice-like hold, but she couldn't make herself. I'll do anything, she thought.

Regina slowly shook her head. "I don't know what to do," she quietly admitted. Her eyes traced the streaking paths of magic as she leaned heavily against her friend. It wouldn't be long before the device released enough energy to cover Storybrooke and start the transference, in one form or another, back to the Enchanted Forest. She pressed the palm of her left hand hard to her forehead and breathed heavily through her nose. "I don't have the stamina, Emma," she whispered defeatedly. Her little boy was either going to be left alone or die, and neither were acceptable.

"Hey, talk to me. Let's work the problem," Emma gently instructed, biting her lower lip. She needed to get Regina's beautiful brain thinking. "Are we pushing or pulling?" she questioned, refusing to focus on her agitating panic. She was having trouble remembering her various lessons, and now, she wished she had taken her reading assignments more seriously. Glancing over her shoulder, she watched as Monty dropped his arms and stepped back. She flashed him a nervous smile.

Elmwood nodded at them with all the belief in the world shining in his eyes.

"Pulling," the former mayor answered, her brow furrowing. There was no way she could endure the pain of syphoning off that much magic, not in her current state. Gradually, she turned in her companion's arms. Resting her hands on the other woman's shoulders, her eyes locked with Emma, and she knew, even if the sheriff could somehow channel the energy out of the fail-safe, there was no time to explain how to redirect all that raw power. To compound the matter, the savior's own potential could, quite literally, blow up in their faces. She closed her eyes, blindly looked down, and tried to think of something.

When Regina moved, Emma readjusted her supportive hold, laying her hands on her waist. She rolled her lips as she racked her brain, but her worry and fear were squalling in her head, even as she knew it wasn't helping her friend. "Okay," she muttered, nodding. She avidly searched the other woman's face, trying to distract herself. "So, this is like pulling energy into us, like with the whole big tree with the long, long roots thing we did last week," she mused, blurting out the first thing that came to mind. That had been an eye-opening lesson. When Regina opened her eyes and lifted her face, Emma was dumbstruck by the vision she made.

"You're brilliant," the former mayor praised with a wide, bright smile. Beaming with pride in her student, she slowly turned, bracing herself on Emma. "We're going to try that," she clarified, maneuvering the sheriff's arms and hands.

Steadying himself with one hand on the wall, Gold cautiously moved back toward Cora's cell as he listened. He shared a curious look with his ex-lover that left both frowning. Neither of them had taught their daughter from that school of magic. This was someone else's influence, and that unnerved him.

Emma allowed herself to be manhandled. She quickly found her front pressed fully against her friend's back, careful to keep her chin off Regina's left shoulder. Bearing almost all of the other
woman's weight, she had to adjust her footing, spreading her feet shoulder width apart and sliding her left foot back a few inches, turning it slightly. Her arms were stretched out in front of her, looping under Regina's. So, with her companion's hands interlaced over the backs of hers, Emma allowed them to be guided to the glowing diamond. She swallowed apprehensively.

"Breathe, Emma," Regina commanded. She tentatively tugged on the sheriff's magic, and it felt like a cool, misty rain after a hot, cloudless day. "You're going to reach out and draw the magic into you, then, push it to me," she carefully instructed, focusing on her breathing. The comfortable cushion of the savior's magic wouldn't continue indefinitely, but she'd bask in the balm while it lasted. Feeling the hesitancy and apprehension through the bond, she easily reminded her student, "Don't hold the magic. Let it flow through you to me, just like with August."

Cora's brows furrowed as she tilted her head. She chanced another quick glance at the Dark One and was not encouraged by his flummoxed countenance. Either her former master was clueless, which she highly doubted, or it was something else impressively superb that surprised Rumpelstiltskin. Both were very rare feats, and she beamed with unbridled pride and anticipation.

"Just like with August," the sheriff repeated, mostly to herself. Inhaling deeply through her nose, she centered and grounded herself, opening herself to the magic bursting out of the fail-safe. She gasped aloud when it hit her like a snowball down her shirt. Her hands started to tremble as she felt full of power. Briefly, she panicked, her hands sparking and popping with tiny blue-white streaks and specks. It was too much. She dropped her forehead onto Regina's right shoulder. Feeling the strong, soft hands squeeze her own, she focused on the soothing strokes of thumbs across her skin, and she relaxed, allowing the magic to move unimpeded. Yeah, we can do this, she told herself, lifting her head.

"More, Emma," Regina demanded, knowing they weren't extracting nearly enough as rapidly as was necessitated. At first, the magic from the device that trickled to her after being insolated by the savior was quite manageable; however, the buffer was rapidly thinning, merely dulling the bite. Then, as the power slipped further into her raw, metaphysical pathways, it cut and burned just like at the hospital, but now, she couldn't afford to stop. She had to tolerate the process. "More," she repeated in a rasp.

Doing as she was told, the savior opened herself more to the tsunami of magic, and she bathed in the rush of energy. It was beyond incredible. Gradually, her fear and apprehension were replaced with assurance and calm because she wasn't alone. Through their bond, with the enormous influx of magic, she sensed Regina—truly felt her—for the first time, and she felt the slow-paced rhythm of her heart. She felt their heartbeats sync. She felt the warm, familiar caress of her companion's magic, so much more potent than ever before. And Emma knew she was safe. She was home. An almost physical impact of unfettered caring and affection filled her, and automatically, she released any residual hold she had on the energy she was drawing in, letting it flow directly to Regina.

Mary Margaret observed her daughter work magic with her stepmother. Like most people of the Enchanted Forest, she understood the basic principles and laws of magic, but she hadn't a clue about its ancient mysteries. She didn't know how it worked or why, only that it did work. That was why she depended so heavily on the Blue Fairy for guidance. However, what she and her husband were now witnessing went outside anything she could have ever imagined. And she recognized, without a doubt, that it was somehow very important.

As magic poured into the deepest recesses of her being, Regina's sense of awareness transcended the physical, tipping the scale from agony to pleasure. Her body hummed with the vibrancy of the entirety of the magic around her as all her pain was temporarily nulled. She held tightly onto Emma's hands as her legs trembled from fatigue, yet, she still yearned for more contact. Yanking
on their tether, she demanded it come faster, and the savior readily supplied. Her breath hitched as she leaned her head back, turning right to nuzzle her nose into blonde hair. Then, groaning from the continually and slowly mounting ecstasy, she felt herself lowered to the floor, still wrapped in the savior's embrace.

~SQ~

Squatting behind the camouflage netting strung low amongst a cluster of small trees and large bushes across from the mine's entrance, Greg Mendell and Tamara Green silently observed as the Crows Guard and company rushed into the abandoned mines. They counted nine people, including their target. Sharing a resolved look, they knew there weren't going to be any second chances. They had to play things smart.

"Son of a bitch," Greg seethed, moving to stand upright. He frowned as he ground his teeth. "How the hell is she still alive?" he pondered darkly, twisting a stun baton in his hands. Looking down at his lover, he pointed at the mine's entrance. "At the very least, she should be in intensive care—in a fucking coma!" he alleged heatedly, feeling as if he'd been cheated. He hated this freakish place and its people.

"That isn't what's important right, now," hissed Tamara, grabbing her partner's elbow. Glaring up at him, she tugged on him as she angrily whispered, "Get down. We need to wait." When he reluctantly knelt, she released him and rechecked her handguns. Their updated orders had been received a few hours ago, authorizing the use of deadly force. Besides, she only had one Taser cartridge remaining.

Ten or so minutes later, the duo watched as four Crows Guard emerged from the mine. A diminutive woman, wearing a quiver and holding a bow in her left hand, jogged out first and quickly scanned the area, heading toward the old Ford pickup and lowering its tailgate, before two tall, bulkily muscled guards exited, carrying a fourth, unconscious guard between them. The pair, a man and woman, moved quickly and gracefully across the loose gravel and dirt to the pickup. The unconscious guard's head hung limply, lolling side to side. As the little archer climbed into the truck bed, the two bigger ones effortlessly deposited the wounded man across the tailgate. Some orders were barked, and the two outside the truck darted between the Charger and a few of the motorcycles, gathering items from the saddle bags.

"I'll take out the archer first," Tamara stated in a soft whisper, not quite believing what she had just said. She pointed at the two brutes with their backs turned toward them. "You worry about the Viking wonder twins," she instructed, shifting on her feet. She rooted around in her right coat pocket, pulling out a pair of orange earplugs. After inserting each, she slid out a pair of sunglasses from an interior pocket and slipped them on. Then, she adjusted her grip on her gun and raised it, lining up the perfect shot on the small woman.

"With pleasure," Greg smiled, standing and passing his baton to his left hand. He strode out from behind the camouflage net and reached into his right pocket, pulling out a stun grenade. Tugging loose the pin with the fingertips of his left hand, he squeezed the lever with his right and cast the canister toward the guards, cheerily calling out, "Hey, there!" He pivoted on his heel, crouching while covering his ears and squeezing his eyes shut.

A resounding, loud bang and an intense flash of light disorientated the three Crows Guard, making their response sluggish and uncoordinated. Irene and Aengus stumbled backward, shaking their heads and vigorously blinking. Anne fell flat onto the bed of the truck. She instinctively reached for her bow, jumped to her feet, and notched an arrow, aiming at the now standing food blogger who brandished a stun baton. However, her training worked against her, leaving her vulnerable.
Before she could release her arrow, a gunshot rang out, echoing through the trees as the scout grandmaster fell back against the truck's cab. Her arrow was set free but missed its mark by mere inches, its broadhead piercing the ground. "Motherfucker," she hissed, trying to stay on her feet, and notched another arrow. She ignored the blunt pressure in her right thigh, quickly scanning the tree line for the source of the gunfire. But then, there was another shot.

A burning pain burst through Anne's right shoulder, and she heard the distinct crack of breaking glass. The shot had gone clean through her shoulder and the long windows of the Ford. Losing hold of her bow's string, she dropped the notched arrow. "You cocksucker!" she roared, lowering herself sideways into the truck bed but still gripping her bow. Looking over the unconscious body of Markus, she flipped the food blogger the middle finger of her left hand. His smug smirk pissed her off.

Immediately after the grenade detonated, Greg sprang into action, switching the baton back to his right hand. He rushed for the large female guard out of Tamara's line of fire. Pressing the switch, he activated the stun probes and forcibly pressed the device into the woman's lower back. He chuckled as he held it in place while she convulsed. Eventually, she fell face first onto the ground, and he kicked her hard in the side, taking out some of his frustration on the downed guard.

Then, the other brute of a guard managed to get his wits about him and made a move to engage Greg. But the man was quickly dispatched as two more shots cracked the air. In rapt fascination, he watched as the guard was shot twice, once in the right shoulder and again in the side of his head. The light in the Crows Guard's eyes dulled as his body dropped to the ground. Turning his attentions to the small, wounded woman in the bed of the pickup truck, Greg took a step forward and grinned at her obscene gesture.

Tamara ran out from behind the camouflage net. She tossed her sunglasses onto the ground and yanked out her earplugs, leaving them where they fell. "Come on, we don't have time to screw around," she ordered, heading into the mine.

Frowning, Greg scanned the spreading blood stains on the archer's jean clad right thigh and denim jacket over her right shoulder. A manic smile crept across his lips as he blew her a kiss before jogging after his lover. He easily caught up to his more cautious companion.

Nearing the section of the mine containing the Queen of Hearts' prison cell, the pair slowed to a creep, keeping their footfalls light. They strained to listen to the panicked conversation and heated commentary. Covertly peering around the corner, they shared a triumphant smile. Their target, Henry, was within grabbing distance, with only Neal by his side. The two Crows Guard in front of the father and son were too preoccupied to be of any immediate concern. Suddenly, the earth shook, and dust filled the air as the oil lanterns rocked on their hooks.

Tamara covered her head with her arms even as Greg used his body to shield hers. Once the shaking stopped, she waited with baited breath for everyone to come running out of the side cavern; but when no one came out, she angled herself to look around the corner, again, and formulated a plan. Knowing the kid was too nosy for his own good, she quickly, wordlessly shared her plan with her partner.

Nodding his understanding, Greg straightened and tucked his stun baton inside his coat, quietly zipping it up. He listened to the voices, and he delighted in their fear. As he snuck closer, his eyes darted between his target, a distracted Neal, and the two Crows Guard loitering just inside the small cavern. When he was within striking distance, he raised his right leg and slammed the heel of his foot into the back of the janitor's knee. As Neal tumbled forward with a startled cry and flailing arms, the food blogger regained his footing, hoisted the frightened boy over his left shoulder, and
ran just as a bean hit the dirt floor behind him. He laughed as he bolted for the exit. Henry's weak hits and shouts were music to his ears. If he couldn't have his father, then the spoiled brat wouldn't have any of his family, either.

Bruce and Diego reacted immediately. Both pivoted and rushed toward the assailants. However, they weren't expecting the queen's brother to barrel into them. All three men fell, but Neal, being on top, scrambled onto his feet first and launched himself toward his ex-fiancé, Tamara.

"Goodbye, Neal," Green sweetly taunted with a grin. Her expression twisted into one of scorn as she hatefully added, "The wedding's off." Then, she was gone, running after her lover and the kidnapped boy.

Confusion flitted across Neal's face as Tamara disappeared and the ground gave way beneath him. The brown dirt turned a familiar green of whirling energy. His arms floundered, trying desperately to gain purchase on anything to stop from falling further into the portal. His hands clawed at the dirt, but the earth continually gave way, loosening in large chunks under his assault. He felt himself being sucked into the churning gateway. Vaguely, he was aware of Bruce and Diego shouting his name, telling him to hold on, but there wasn't anything they could do. He was on one side, and they were stuck on the other. An angry, swirling mouth stood between them, ready to devour any who got too close.

Diego took several large steps backward and was about to take a running leap over the portal when Bruce grabbed his shoulder, shaking his head. He looked up at the low ceiling. No matter how athletic, the younger Crows Guard wouldn't get enough clearance to hurdle the portal. Then, he nodded toward the queen, reaffirming that she was always their primary priority.

At this point, Gold noticed something was amiss and limped over to the archway. His eyes widened when he realized his son's peril. He raised his hand ready to teleport his boy to safety when Neal finally lost his hold and fell, the portal closing behind him. "No!" he shouted, rushing through the archway. He slipped into the small pit created by the bean and blindly pawed around in the loose earth. "No," he repeated, weaker this time, not bothering to hide his tears. His son was lost to him, again.

Bruce and Diego shared a look. Their feelings were momentarily murky for less than a second, but the two guards dashed around the mourning Dark One, running full tilt through the mine to the entrance. When they made it outside, they spun around in the clearing.

"That way, you dick weeds!" Anne roared, pointing angrily to the east. "They ran into the trees. Irene's on their tail!" she yelled after them, leaning heavily on the truck's tailgate. The sight of three of her comrades incapacitated had enraged her. Looking down at the groggy Markus, who was beginning to come to, she muttered, "We're all going to be fucking drawn and quartered." She couldn't believe it; they had lost their queen and the queen's son in the same day. If the queen didn't kill them in her fury, Anne thought they just might do it themselves out of shame.

"Captain, you're bleeding," Markus slurred, blinking.

"Shut up," the scout grandmaster grumbled, yanking out the electrode probes from the Taser. She took pleasure from the man's grunt of protest.

Diego burst through the forest like a deer. In a matter of moments, he had caught up to Irene and passed her. Then, a few seconds later, he saw Tamara, Greg, and Henry. His muscles burned as he pushed himself, jumping over fallen logs and diving through thorny thickets. Seeing the glistening reflection of light on water, his smile faded as the three jumped into the large pond. He skidded to a halt on the thin, sandy shoreline, spinning around to search the horizon. He even trudged into the
freezing water, peering into its depths for some sign, anything to prevent returning to the queen empty-handed. With a heaving chest, he looked behind him as Bruce and Irene trotted out of the tree line.

"Shit," the captain of the queen's guard quietly cursed.

Huffing and trying to catch her breath, Smith leaned forward, resting her hands on her knees, and looked around, glancing between her comrades. "Where are they?" she asked. "Where did they go?" she added with rising concern.

Bruce pursed his lips and looked his subordinate in the eye, answering, "They had beans." Without another word, he turned and jogged back to the mine.

"Fuck," Irene whispered, following her captain.

Diego took one last look around before running after them.

~SQ~

Panting with exertion, Emma shivered from the hot, raspy breaths in her left ear. Goosebumps formed from the soft, whispery moan that followed, and everywhere Regina's body touched hers tingled. It was akin to the pins-and-needles sensation when a limb was just starting to fall asleep or touching a piece of grass to a low-voltage, electric fence. And, it was arousing as hell; her body responded to it gloriously. With Regina's warm, compact body reclining against hers, she could no longer stay standing. So, she knelt and leaned back, resting on her knees and the balls of her feet, her companion's bottom supported securely on the tops of her jean-covered thighs. Their arms were still stretched out in front of them, her hands cupped around the glowing diamond, hovering in the air and syphoning massive amounts of magic.

Regina arched into the sheriff, brutally clasping her hands in a white-knuckled grip, and groaning low in her throat. She was caught between heaven and hell. With each breath, her body reverberated with power that threatened to rip her asunder from sinew to synapses to her very soul. She wanted to surrender herself to the onslaught and let the mystical waves carry her away. However, she fought against the rampant, tidal currents of magic. Too many lives hung in the balance, some she cared for deeply, even loved. Regina buried her face further into golden tresses, pressing into the warm throat. She filled her senses with everything Emma, using her to ground herself, inhaling her familiar scent, tasting her magic on her tongue, feeling her skin against her palms and the heat of her body behind hers. It kept her in the present, but the former mayor found herself equally tempted to drown in the woman holding her.

Squeezing her already closed eyes more tightly shut, Emma blocked out everything else around them. She breathed rapidly through her nose, releasing her own low, rumbly moan at all the sensations rushing through her. Through the haze of her awareness, she remembered their magic's fleeting, afternoon delight in New York City. Despite the overwhelming nature of it, their current situation felt a great deal like that, just magnified beyond measure, especially with Regina's emotions joining the mix. It was visceral and sensual and strangely comforting. The odd familiarity of it made her smile, and her confidence swelled.

The magic pulsed and thrummed to the beat of Emma's heart as it coursed around and in and through Regina. It coiled deeper and deeper. Slowly, the power channeled by the savior was joined by other threads, and in that moment, just like with August, the former queen connected to something beyond the fail-safe, the earth around them, and the magic users within Storybrooke. Emanating from everywhere and everything, the threads' origins were infinite and
indistinguishable, but they all spooled to her. However, the colossal weight of magic wasn't restrictive or crushing. It was freeing, even as her body trembled under the blitz. And Regina took it all, relying on the security the bond facilitated.

Lost in his own emotional turmoil over losing his son to another portal, Gold sat slumped in the shallow pit until a small, single snowflake landed on the back of his dirt-covered hand. He stared dumbly, through blurring tears, at the tiny bit of ice crystal until another one landed next to it, quickly followed by third. Then, he saw his breath hang in the air in front of him. That, finally, disconcerted him enough to clamber out of the pit, feet slipping several times in the loose dirt. He moved as quickly as his wounded foot and cane would allow, and upon re-entering the small cavern, he squinted and shielded his eyes with his right hand. His brow furrowed as he pursed his lips.

His daughter reclined sublime on the besieged savior. The mythical child of True Love had been reduced to a mere conduit, funneling a phenomenal amount of natural powers to his child. While ice dusted everything, including Emma's hair and shoulders, nothing stuck to Regina's trembling form. As vibrant, violet-blue light blazed around their hands, they continued clutching, desperate and needy, to each other. Observing the magic interact with his daughter's body, his eyes traced the purple paths starting in her hands as they traveled up her arms and to her shoulders, disappearing into her neck and chest. He knew it shouldn't be possible because neither he, Cora, nor the Blue Fairy could manipulate that much power, not even together.

Shivering from the steadily increasing cold or, perhaps, the display of proficient control over awe-inspiring forces, Gold slowly crept along the mine wall back toward Cora's cell. As his fingertips grazed the rock, he was surprised by the collecting frost. His gaze darted between Montague Elmwood, Cora, and the Charmings. He noted their ice-speckled forms, and how everyone remained steadfast in their silent support. Stopping outside the bars, he held Elmwood's hard expression for a long moment and surmised that the queen's faithful guard dog knew something he shouldn't. But that would have to wait because he was distracted by his former apprentice.

"Rumpel, what have we done?" Cora whispered. With ice covered fingers, she gripped the bars of her cage, ignoring the bone biting stab of cold seeping into her hands. Her searching gaze darted between the Dark One and their daughter. She swallowed, letting her shoulders slouch. There was no possible way any two people could work that much power so easily, and one was a mere novice. "What will be her price?" she mused worriedly in a breathy murmur. Still, she couldn't deny her pride at her child's skill.

"If we survive, I'm sure we'll find out, soon enough," the pawnbroker retorted. His eyes focused on the magical current, and he shivered as a foreboding chill skittered up his spine. He considered his dalliances with other women during his tenure as the Dark One, not that there had been many about which to boast. Had he sired another child? Had they, too, developed into a proficient magic user of exceptional talent? If so, he had never heard of them. His gaze returned to the imprisoned sorceress, and he knew there was a reason his prolific visions had singled out her brunette daughter to him.

When Cora's eyes met his, looking upon him with unshed tears, something shifted inside of him. He reached over and laid his left hand over her right as she held onto the bars. His thumb stroked lazily over her soft skin before turning away, focusing on his daughter and the savior. Through the physical contact and with a little magic, he shared what he saw with Cora. It was dazzling, the brilliant streams of energy coursing out of the fail-safe via Emma, as well as the myriad of threads from Storybrooke and beyond converging into Regina. He wondered what futures he would scry that night, if they survived.
And then, Regina gasped and worked her booted heels across the dirt, drawing everyone's attention. Her eyes, violet from the magic, went wide with a hint of panic as she gulped hungrily for air, her head lolling against Emma's shoulder. She was filled to the brim with energy, and still, magic forced itself inside her, writhing, compressing, and shifting to fill all the empty spaces within her. She slowly lifted her head and stared at the device before her. They were stopping it. *Only a little bit more,* she told herself, acting on willpower alone. *Just a little longer...* She pulled on the threads of her own volition, bypassing the savior, who sighed and sagged in relief.

In that singular, infinitesimal moment where Regina interacted directly with the fail-safe, time stopped. The device hung suspended in the air. Everyone was locked in place, aside from the four magic users. Tiny motes of dust mingled with the snowflakes, suspended in midair, paused on a whirling, sparkling ballet of particles amidst the dimming radiance of the gem.

Crackling sparks and streaks of magic danced along the walls of the small chamber and connecting cell. Cora and Gold hopped away from each other, breaking their physical and magical connection, as they glanced around them. Moving to the center of her cell, the sorceress slowly spun around. She curiously watched as a spectrum of colorful, magical energy arched around them. Gold reached out to one of the streams, surprised when it went right through him as if he weren't there. He stared at his hand inquisitively. Turning, he observed how the magic simply slipped through the savior. None of it was meant for them. It was all for Regina.

Emma lifted her heavy head. Blinking away the fog of disorientation, she looked around with confused fascination. Everything seemed peaceful in the darkening glow of the fail-safe. Slowly, she lowered her hands, noting her companion's lighter grip. "Regina?" she whispered, gently allowing her concern to seep through the bond. Her eyes would dart away when a line of magic zipped too close. Feeling the former mayor sag into her, she looked around the small cavern to see her parents and Monty frozen in place as well as Bruce and Diego, stuck in mid stride, seemingly running toward them. With a furrowed brow, she looked over her shoulder to Gold and Cora asking, "What's going on?"

"Nothing that apparently concerns us," the pawnbroker elucidated, reaching out and allowing a strip of purple magic to move through his fingers.

Gasping, the older sorceress surged toward the bars. She stretched an arm through and pointed at her daughter. "Rumpel," she rasped, observing as thin tendrils of energy twisted around and slipped inside her child. "What is happening?" she demanded as her eyes traced the threads of magic which should have been impossible to see from inside her cell.

"I'm not entirely certain," Gold admitted flatly. It wouldn't do to display his rising fears.

"I don't think she's breathing," the sheriff relayed with a slight, panicked urgency. She quickly and carefully shifted her position to look in the former queen's distraught face. "Regina?" she repeated, gently stroking her cheek. She rolled her lips upon noticing her friend's watery gaze. "It's going to be okay," she promised, "You're okay."

Regina worked her mouth for several long seconds before she finally croaked out, "No." Her voice quivered as she looked worriedly around the room. She swallowed the aching lump sitting in her throat, watching the magic circle the cavern. She tried to stand, but her booted feet merely slipped across the ground. Whatever was happening, it wasn't finished. Then, suddenly, she curled into herself, keening in agony as the wandering energies simultaneously surged into her, seeking a new home.

"Regina!" the pawnbroker called out, taking a hesitant step toward his daughter. There was no possible way her body's threshold could contain any more.
Cora practically vibrated with frustration and anger-fueled dread, hissing "Do something!" With both hands, she clutched the bars separating her from her daughter, wishing she could rip them away to get to her.

Emma desperately tried to calm the woman in her arms. "I don't know how to help," she said with tears pooling in her eyes. She curled around Regina, trying to provide at least some sort of comfort. The fear she sensed through the bond rattled her, unused to feeling her companion's emotions. "Please," she plead quietly, "tell me what you need me to do."

With a deep, ragged breath, Regina capitulated to the unyielding and undeniable force. As it coursed through her veins, power permeated her cells and tethered itself to her essence. The mysterious magic saturated her in its glory, and upon its acceptance of her, her body jerked and shuddered in response. It terrified her, but Emma's presence gave her courage and steadied her.

All at once, time resumed. The device immediately reverted to its inert state, dropping to the ground with a muted thud. Its sharp, bottom point buried itself in the dirt. Bruce and Diego stumbled to an abrupt stop, looking around them, bewildered. Their chests heaved from the exertion of their chase. Irene barreled inside the area, surveying the scene with a grave eye. Monty surged forward with worry evident on his face. He knelt beside his queen and the sheriff. His concerned gaze moved back and forth between the two women as his hands hovered just a few inches from touching his liege. David and Mary Margaret blinked rapidly, clinging even tighter to one another in their confusion, and sluggishly shook their heads. The former deputy dropped his forehead onto his wife's crown, and the school teacher turned in her husband's arms, watching her daughter cradle her stepmother.

"Oh, shit," the sheriff cursed as sparks of magic popped and snapped all around the former mayor. She hissed as she continued to hold onto the quaking woman. Then, she sensed the bond wanting to rear its ugly head. "Regina, you gotta get a hold of yourself," she warned as her blossoming terror bubbled within her. Willing her magic to remain calm, she ground her teeth, forcing her negative feelings away, and instead, she focused on her companion. "You're going to be okay," she promised, again.

"You need to keep her calm," instructed Gold in earnest. The fingertips of his left hand fiddled agitatedly on top of his cane's golden handle. The muscles in his neck flexed as he watched tiny, purple lightening streak underneath Regina's skin. His mouth slackened as he observed her radiant, violet eyes, staring blankly at the ceiling as she took breath after ragged breath. He swallowed and explained, "She needs to finish metabolizing the magic, or she'll be just as dangerous as that diamond."

"Stroke her hair," Cora hurriedly offered, her eyes bouncing between the savior and her child. She pressed her face between the bars as her expression turned anxious. "That always soothed her as a child," she clarified in a gentle tone.

So, Emma did. She whispered soft words of encouragement and reassurances; all the while, she soothingly stroked and petted brunette locks. Slowly, she felt the trembling stop as the energetic atmosphere settled down. "Okay," she repeated, "you're okay. I've got you."

Love and caring lulled through the bond in gentle waves, luring Regina into a blissful state. Hovering on the cusp of nirvana, she breathed slowly and deeply as the rehomed magic settled within her, touching her in places she didn't think possible. She caressed the fingertips of her right hand over the back of Emma's that laid across her abdomen. Gradually, the crackle of energy ceased. Then, she felt the firm press of the savior's lips on the crown of her head. In her sedate state, she would've believed she'd imagined it if not for Mary Margaret's gasp, or the surge of
embarrassment that spiked through the bond. The jarring emotions wrenched her out of her beautiful peace. So, blinking hard a few times, she groaned softly, lifting her right hand to her forehead. She frowned and winced at the tenderness in her tired body, all her aches and pains made more profound by the ordeal. "Help me up," she commanded with a hoarse voice.

With practiced ease and surprising grace, Monty assisted his queen into a standing position. He glanced down at the sheriff, who flopped flat onto her back with a moan. However, the strong hold on his right forearm drew his attention back to his monarch. "Are you well, Ma'am?" he asked in barely a whisper. He had seen her work impressive magic, before, but nothing like what he had just witnessed.

Shuffling forward, Gold stooped to pick up the curious black diamond. It was unlike anything he'd ever come across before, yet, it was extremely familiar. Suddenly, the dreaded device was whisked away from his reach and into his daughter's hand.

"I think not," the former mayor intoned darkly, glaring at the imp. She ignored the slash of pain from accessing her magic and briefly studied the fail-safe before dropping it in her front, right pocket. "I think I'll hold on to this for safe keeping," she commented tersely. Yet, another item for the vault.

"But it wasn't safe where it was, was it?" Mary Margaret interjected. She didn't believe either Gold or Regina should retain such a doomsday device. "Maybe we should let the fairies keep it," she boldly suggested, stepping out of her husband's embrace.

"Are you daft, Girl?" Cora blurted, standing up straight and crossing her arms. She pinned Snow White with a hard sneer, but her gaze constantly checked on her daughter.

Regina's face scrunched in distaste at the mention of the useless fleas.

"Yeah, really," Emma interrupted, quickly scampering onto her feet. She angled herself between the pawnbroker and her friend. "Regina made it. She gets to keep it," she stated with fists clenching at her sides.

A soft smile crossed the former queen's face at the sheriff's fierceness on her behalf, and she wondered what she had done to earn such loyalty from her friend.

Pursing his lips, Gold paused for a moment. He assessed the savior's brewing magic and was surprised at the sheer force behind it. Gaze drifting to his former apprentice, he lifted his right hand, admitting passive surrender.

"Your Highness," Bruce announced, stepping forward and dropping to a knee before his queen. His report was too important to delay any longer. Diego and Irene quickly followed suit, flanking their superior.

Looking past her kneeling guards, Regina felt a rush of fear and anxiety through the bond and whispered, "Henry." She automatically took a step away from Monty and stumbled. Allowing herself to be supported by her commander, she glared at the three before her and demanded, "Where is our son?"

Keeping his eyes down, Farmer answered, "The boy was taken by Greg and Tamara." They had failed their sovereign, again, and he didn't relish the consequences.

"Then, you dispatched the rest of the guard to find him," the former queen stated in a low, dangerous tone, but she already knew the answer. There was a rush of nervous anticipation from
Looking up boldly, Bruce quickly corrected, "No, Ma'am." He took a deep breath and continued, "They took him through a magic bean's portal." His gaze drifted briefly to Elmwood.

The captain of the queen's personal bodyguard had agreed with Anne McCormac's, the Crows Guard's second-in-command and scout grandmaster, recommendation that a squad of guards should keep Widow Granger's property under surveillance, but the commander had only taken the suggestion under advisement, which had been a bone of contention between the two highest ranking officers.

"No," Regina lamented, collapsing against Elmwood. Her lips rolled as she bracingly held onto Monty's supportive arms. Terror threatened to overwhelm her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, fighting against the sheriff's panic flooding through the bond. She was of no use to their little boy if she couldn't keep herself together.

"They had more than one, then," the pawnbroker softly supplied, stepping toward the exit. Well, if it wasn't an already foregone conclusion who had burned down the herbalist's house, then, the use of magical beans was damning proof. "Bae fell through one trying to save the boy," he relayed soberly. Pride settled amidst his despair, knowing his son had learned from his own mistake.

"What?" Emma asked, looking around wildly. "How did they get past you?" she questioned, staring at Irene. She rushed forward to the tall, muscular woman, but she was halted by Regina's right hand on her left biceps, squeezing. "How did they get past Anne?" she prompted, turning to her friend. Her equilibrium was further thrown off when she discovered that she could no longer sense the former mayor's emotions through the bond. It seemed that it had only lasted for the duration of time needed for the magic to settle within Regina.

A few weeks ago, the scout grandmaster had stared down a powerful sorceress on Main Street with just a freaking bow. How the hell had a gun stopped her?

"Greg Mendell used a flash grenade as Tamara Green opened fire from cover. Aengus is dead," Irene answered, holding back emotion. She kept her eyes down. "Anne was shot in the right shoulder and thigh," she paused, ignoring the burning ache in her lower back, and added, "I was incapacitated with a stun baton."

The Crows Guard simply hadn't been prepared to deal with modern, technological weapons and tactics. Despite the hours spent researching, scouring the Internet, and evaluating civilian-grade items they could obtain, they had thought there was time to develop strategies against the very maneuvers Greg and Tamara had utilized against them. Of course, the queen's background check on Mendell, a.k.a. Owen Flynn, hadn't linked him to anything damning or having an accomplice. Most everyone in Storybrooke had assumed he was some guy looking for his long-lost father and that Tamara Green was, in fact, Neal Cassidy's fiancé.

Regina closed her eyes and lowered her head. They didn't have time to mourn Aengus. They had to act because Henry was missing and in the care of lunatics. Swallowing thickly, she let her right hand fall from the sheriff's arm. Ideas and plans were already swirling around in her mind.

"We have to do something," David ordered, looking around the small cavern, his voice echoing slightly. "There has to be some way to find them," he added as concern for his grandson grew.

"The problem isn't finding where Bae and Henry went," Gold snapped. He stopped his slow meander toward the exit. Sighing, he turned around, jabbing his cane into the dirt. "It's getting to them that's the problem," he explained, tossing his right hand up into the air and letting it fall
against his thigh. "We have no means of crossing realms," he further clarified. And if he didn't have the means or know of one, then, most likely, no one else did, either.

"There has to be something," Mary Margaret beseeched. She stepped forward, standing in front of her daughter. She looked between the three magic users in the room, meeting their eyes, but steadfastly ignoring Cora in her cell. "There's always a way," she intoned with unwavering hope.

In a low voice, the former mayor quietly countered with a cold glare, "Don't you think if there was a way to travel between worlds, I would've used it well before now?" If she had had a bean after the curse had broken, there's no telling what she would've done. She might have run away as soon as she realized her magic hadn't been working correctly. Perhaps she would have dropped the bean and shoved Rumpelstiltskin and all the Charmings through the portal. There was even a slim possibility that she would have attempted to save Emma after she fell through the hat, had Henry asked. If nothing else, she most certainly would have gathered up Henry and left as soon as her mother had rolled into town.

"No," the school teacher stated simply, meeting her stepmother with a hard look. She cocked her head in silent challenge.

"Snow," David hissed, reaching out and placing his large hand on his wife's shoulder.

At the same time, Emma warned, "Mary Margaret." She spun around and faced her mother. Hateful words titillated her tongue, but she sharply pursed her lips before turning to the Dark One. "Okay," she started, trying to ignore the silent, murderous rage radiating from Regina. "How do we figure out where Henry and Neal are?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips. Her sole focus was on the pawnbroker.

"I have my ways," Gold supplied, looking at the savior with a mischievous glint. His gaze drifted over Cora as he turned and started walking away. The lingering magic in the atmosphere was heavy and rich, and it ebbed and flowed off his daughter in waves.

"What can we do to help?" David questioned with a determined expression. His skillsets weren't applicable, yet, but he needed to do something. He needed to feel like he was contributing in helping his grandson and his daughter.

"Go with Gold," the sheriff flatly instructed, indicating the pawnbroker with a wild gesture of her right arm. "Make sure he doesn't do anything underhanded," she added in tired tone, rubbing her forehead with her left hand.

"What are you going to do?" Mary Margaret demanded even as her husband guided her after the pawnbroker. She frowned, glancing over her shoulder at everyone. Her brow furrowed when she received no response before they entered the short tunnel. "David," she sighed as she allowed him to help her cross the portal's shallow pit. "We shouldn't leave Emma. She needs us," she quickly explained, hoping her husband would agree.

"Don't dawdle, dearies!" Gold called from his position further down the long mine tunnel. He was almost to the first bend, but he had to slowly traverse the track ties. Normally, he'd just disappear in a cloud of burgundy smoke, leaving everyone scrambling to follow him. However, he needed a few moments to think, and the Charmings were far from taxing.

Back in the small cavern, Monty gracefully scooped his queen into his arms. He frowned with concern when she simply sunk into him, leaning her head against his broad shoulder with nary a protest or scornful comment. With an upward nod of his jaw, he silently ordered the other Crows Guard to move out, and he followed.
Emma rolled her lips and kicked at a few rocks, averting her curious gaze from the retreating guards' backs. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Elmwood with a strange sense of longing, wanting to have Regina in her arms. She wanted to be important. She wanted to protect the queen. Suddenly, she stopped and pursed her lips. *The queen? And what's with wanting to carry her? When did that happen?* she mused. Then, stuffing her hands in her jean pockets, she shuffled forward to follow, giving her head a slight shake to clear it.

"Emma Swan," Cora politely spoke. She waited patiently with her hands interlaced in front of her. When the savior halted and partially pivoted toward her, she sternly warned, "Rumpelstiltskin cannot be trusted." The Dark One was in an advantageous position, and she knew he would utilize it fully to his benefit.

"Yeah, Lady," the sheriff sighed as she headed after the others, again. "I got that," she muttered. Her eyes fixated on the brunette locks peeking over Monty's shoulder. "I figured that out a while ago," she sighed.

And as her daughter's defenders retreated from her sight, the older sorceress beseeched, "Protect my daughter, Savior." She flinched at the desperation in her voice as she sat down at the small table in her cell, staring blankly at the rock wall. No doubt the idiot girl was already in love with her child, even if she didn't know it herself. Regardless, she had to say the words. She had to ask, and for the first time in a long time, she believed there were good people. Tilting her head skyward, she closed her eyes.

~SQ~

With aching bones and burning muscles, Regina relaxed into Monty's protective embrace and allowed herself to be swiftly carried through the mine's tunnels. She ignored the gentle jostling as her eyes drifted closed, her right ear nestled firmly against his shoulder, his strong, rhythmic heartbeat and steady, sure footfalls providing her a small comfort. Both distracted her from the magic still churning and settling within her, going deeper than she had ever thought possible. As much as she needed to analyze the way it was permeating every cell in her body, she didn't have time. Swallowing her exhaustion and rising apprehension, she focused on her missing son. Her left hand slowly kneaded the soft fabric over her stomach. It trembled from the exertion, and as she breathed heavily through her nose, she worried on her lower lip. She had to find Henry. Even if he hated her, she had to know he was alright and that he was, above all else, safe. As the group burst out into the open air, she softly whimpered in protest against the brightness of day and turned her face fully into her guard's shoulder.

Darting around the slowing Elmwood, Emma cautiously reached out and touched the former mayor, her fingertips lightly caressing the other woman's shoulder. Frowning, she turned away and glowered at her dad's pickup truck. "Why haven't they left, yet?" she huffed quietly with irritation. Then, she spotted the cluster of Crows Guard milling around the tailgate. Her lips pursed when her eyes dropped and caught sight of a red, plaid blanket draped over a body in the bed of the truck. With a slow inhale, she glanced around the open area cluttered with motorcycles, her Charger, and her father's Ford. Realizing Gold's Cadillac was gone, she peered down the gravel road, spotting three heads through the rear window and swirling dust that trailed behind it. "Huh," she muttered, instinctually moving with Monty toward the pickup.

"Just get my gods forsaken bag!" Anne snarled from her perch on the tailgate. Her injured leg was stretched out along its width. As Jason bolted into action toward her bike, she sagged a bit, slouching, and when her sharp gleam landed on the group exiting the mine, she called out, "Rumpelstiltskin's up to something." Incapacitated and useless, she felt her irritation ratchet up another notch.
Hearing the scout grandmaster's ire, Regina smiled wistfully and lifted her head. "Isn't he always?" she countered, shielding her eyes from the daylight with her left hand. She cut a scowl at her commander as he continued to carry her toward the truck but remained silent. Her gaze shifted about with a hint of anxiety, tracing the multitude of invisible, colorful threads of magic. It was beautiful yet overwhelming, and neither Anne or Emma appeared to notice them.

"Magic users use magic, end of story," McCormac replied, watching Jason pull the med pack out of her motorcycle's left saddle bag. Her eyes darted back to her queen and superior; she wasn't surprised by Elmwood still toting the wounded monarch about nor by the hovering sheriff. However, her sovereign's lack of railing protest was quite telling. "The fact that the Dark One didn't just poof back to his shop implies there's something off with his magic, if how I'm feeling is any indication," she expounded, impatiently drumming her fingers along the edge of the tailgate. The atmosphere felt like a million ants were crawling over her skin, and it did nothing to improve her disposition. She had been shot twice, after all.

"At this point, Emma would be a better judge than I," Regina admitted, lowering her trembling hand. She looked expectantly at the savior and raised an eyebrow, waiting.

With everyone looking at her, Emma shook her head and pointed at herself. "Me? I can barely light a candle without supervision," she explained. She still remembered the frightening fury of Regina Mills when she had accidently lit the towels in the master bath on fire.

"You're selling yourself short, Dear," the former mayor gently encouraged in a fond tone. She held her companion's gaze for a modest moment and smiled as the other woman tucked her head, briefly hiding behind a curtain of hair and stuffing her hands into her jeans' back pockets. Feeling a rush of warmth encapsulate her heart, Regina itched to reach out and tuck her young apprentice's blonde hair back. Instead, she huskily added, "You're far more proficient than you're giving yourself credit for."

"Yeah," the sheriff drawled quietly, biting her lower lip. Somewhat embarrassed, she rubbed the back of her neck with her right hand, glancing up to look between Regina and Monty. Pursing her lips, she explained, "But I feel a bit tread on after being a magic super highway, kinda overstuffed, and everything is buzzy." She wiggled the fingers of her right hand beside her head.

"Well, use some of that excess juice and fix this," McCormac interrupted, gesturing at her wounds, one in her thigh and the other in her shoulder. Once Jason was close enough, with her good arm, she stretched and snatched the med kit from the guard's outreached hand. She flopped the soft-sided pouch onto the tailgate beside her and violently tried to open it.

Sighing softly, Qingzhao shook her head and hurriedly closed the distance to the scout grandmaster. "We have to remove the bullet, first," she stated, attempting to help. She tapped away Anne's fumbling hand as she carefully unzipped the med kit. "Shouldn't you be keeping pressure on your wounds?" she questioned, pausing in opening the pack.

"That's why I want the damn tweezers," Anne snarled with narrowed eyes. "I managed to stop the bleeding," she hissed. She tossed off the bloodied rags as proof, gesturing at her bullet holes with contempt.

"You can't remove a bullet by yourself," Emma exclaimed, twisting toward the feisty woman. Her eyes widened as her personal trainer tugged and ripped open wider holes in her pants around her injury. Quickly, she trotted over to the tailgate. "Does anyone else know First Aide?" she asked, looking around at the guards. That's when she spotted Alma and Diego, talking to each other and into radios, by the front bumper of the pickup. She watched as the pair jogged over to Elmwood and spoke in quiet whispers.
"Why not?" McCormac retorted with fire. Not caring or halting in her self-prep, she allowed Irene to assist with tearing her shirt over her shoulder while she efficiently pointed to items in the med kit for Qingzhao to pull out. Then, after she handed an iodine wipe to Irene, she met the savior's concerned, if not slightly panicked, expression, and she laid it all out for the recruit. "A bullet is certainly easier than an arrowhead, and I'm sure as hell not going to let Whale touch me," she clarified, wincing as Qingzhao squirted betadine in and around her wounds.

Crossing her arms and cocking an eyebrow, the sheriff didn't believe the scout grandmaster's tough act. "So, you're going to do it yourself?" she baited, jutting her hips to the right. Shit like that only happened in the movies.

A very self-assured grin graced Anne's strong features. "Are you offering, Savior?" she taunted in a low voice. Without missing a beat, she held out the unopened pack of sterile tweezers. She smirked devilishly as the recruit blanched, taking a quick step backward. If she had still been bleeding, she would have almost felt sorry for the sheriff.

"Stop acting like an ass," Bruce gruffly admonished, taking the pack, his hands donning blue, nitrile gloves. They didn't have time to cater to McCormac's twisted sense of humor. Casting a brief glance over his shoulder, he noted the queen's tired, distracted expression and the stoic, concerned one of his commander. He hadn't the faintest clue how they were going to cross realms to save the boy. However, he knew his monarch wanted results, not sympathy.

"Just get it over with," Anne demanded, shifting her posture. She gestured for a small leather strap tucked in one of the pouch's cubbies and quickly popped it in her mouth. It was going to hurt with Farmer poking and prodding around in her leg. Her gaze swept across the band of guards but stopped on Emma. In that moment, right before the tweezers dipped inside the bullet hole, she realized just how far the savior had to go. However, any further insight was preempted by searing pain. "Motherfucker," she hissed around the leather as she breathed through the pain.

Bruce didn't halt in his actions. He simply gripped the bullet with the tweezers and extracted it with relative finesse. Holding it up for McCormac to see, he pursed his lips, then, slipped his gloves off, leaving them inside out with the 9mm projectile and tweezers nestled inside. He dropped the items in a biohazard bag. Turning to the savior, he casually stated, "You're up, Sheriff."

Emma slowly stepped forward with a dumbfounded expression. She peered into the now bleeding wound, having never seen one in real life. "I'll try to be quick," she quietly advised, meeting Anne's steely eyes. Mending holes in flesh and broken bones, she had discovered, was a whole new level of complexity and concentration. The last time, she had utterly tapped out her magic to heal Regina, and that hadn't been a complete healing. There was still work to be done there. She swallowed and looked over her shoulder at the semi-aware woman in Monty's arms.

"The wounds are clean," the scout grandmaster stated, regaining the recruit's attention. With her good arm, she gestured at the bright blood slowly seeping out of her thigh. "Just focus on knitting the tissues back together, the magic and my body will do the rest," she instructed firmly. Surely the savior had basic life science knowledge, considering she grew up in this world. It wasn't as if she came from a world where modern medicine meant blood-letting and leeches.

Facing her trainer, the sheriff nodded with determination. She could do this. She could help someone she thought of as a friend, even if that so-called friend kicked her ass daily. So, she centered herself and willed her magic to calm. Then, she reached out her hands with palms down, hovering one over Anne's thigh, the other at her shoulder. After a slow inhale, she pushed the magic into action. A blue light shrouded the bullet holes, and several minutes later, both were gone, the flesh returned to its previous condition. When it was all done, Emma stumbled to the left
and was stabilized by Irene. "I feel kind of lightheaded," she remarked, blinking up at the tall, female guard's smirking face.

"Nice work, Sheriff," Anne praised, moving her arm. She quickly slid off the tailgate, and as Qingzhao repacked her med kit, she breezed over to her bike to pull out clean clothes. How she was going to explain another ruined set of jeans to her wife, she had no idea.

Clasping the savior's shoulder in a warrior's salute, Bruce squeezed while he shared a look with Elmwood. The queen's continued lethargy was becoming increasingly more concerning. However, his keen gaze followed his sovereign's line-of-sight, and he silently sighed. It was never easy losing someone, especially someone he had been grooming for the Queen's Guard.

"Prepare to move out in ten," Monty ordered in a sharp tone, launching the guards into a flurry of practiced and efficient activity. As everyone scattered, save Emma, he stepped up to the side of the truck bed. He trusted his people to take care of whatever needed to be done. That afforded him the opportunity to assist the queen.

Diego trotted over to the mine's entrance to update Markus's replacement, who was just now driving down the gravel road. Alma and Jason trudged through the perimeter of the surrounding forest, looking for anything Greg and Tamara might have left behind. Bruce and Markus cleaned out the cab of the Ford, sweeping out bits of glass and wiping off smears of Anne's blood. Meanwhile, Irene and Qingzhao spot checked all the vehicles for potential tampering. That left a dazed sheriff leaning against the truck, watching in wide-eyed astonishment as Anne stripped to her underwear and changed right out in the open.

While her guards attended to their duties, Regina's gaze lingered on Aengus's covered body in the truck bed. She absently patted Monty's broad chest. Then, she reached out, and as she gracefully rolled her hand toward the fallen Crows Guard, she winced and hissed, curling into herself. Her entire left hand trembled and sparked as magic weaved around it. At this point, she couldn't tell if the symptoms were from deactivating the fail-safe or the earlier torture.

"Your Highness?" Monty softly inquired, ignoring the biting sting of flickering magic, eyes rapidly assessing the woman in his arms. Out of the corner of his eyes, he noted Alma, Diego, Jason, and Irene moving toward them in unison, but he subtly shook his head, and everyone heeded his order, resuming their tasks.

Emma was immediately at the former mayor's side. She pushed off her own disorientation and delicately placed a comforting hand over her friend's, stroking her thumb over soft, warm skin. With an easy smile, she quietly prompted, "Are you okay?" Of course, she knew better, but she had to ask. She glanced around, biting her lip, and sensed the guards' apprehension as they worked.

"I'm alright," Regina rasped, her voice sounding rough and raw. The surge of magic through her body had left her feeling winded and disconnected from herself. Squinting, she looked about them, still surprised at the vibrancy of the magical threads. "Emma, you should cast the stasis spell," she instructed, indicating the shrouded body in the truck.

Blinking, the sheriff looked over her shoulder at Aengus and whispered, "I don't think this is a good time for a lesson." Healing Anne was not a problem, but messing with a dead body, that was where her confidence stopped. Plus, she was a bit tired from closing up the bullet wounds.

"Lessons in magic come when they will," the former mayor sternly reprimanded her apprentice. She remembered when a teacher of hers had said something very similar. Lifting her chin and fixing her student with a hard glint, she nodded toward the body and reminded in a gentler tone, "Now, we have much to do, and Aengus deserves more than we can afford him, at the moment.
Cast the spell, please."

Emma took a deep breath, and with an acknowledging nod, she pivoted and leaned against the side of the truck bed, ignoring the guards. Her eyes traced the contours, hills, and divots of the red, plaid blanket. Suddenly wrought with an intense sadness, she looked over her left shoulder, silently pleading for help. She couldn't mess this up, not now, and not when her magic felt so different than usual. She imagined it had to do with channeling so much power in such a short period, but she was leery of overtaxing herself.

"Think of capturing a moment in time, like a photograph," Regina helpfully instructed, observing as magic coiled and slinked around her companion. Slowly, her eyes met the savior's, seeing the palpable confusion and panicked hesitancy. Patting Monty's chest, she simply ordered, "Put me down." When her boots touched the ground, she stumbled forward and quickly melted against the sheriff's back, reversing their stance from earlier. "Close your eyes," she whispered in Emma's right ear. Her palms trailed along her apprentice's arms, cupping the backs of her hands. "Focus on your breathing and center yourself," she continued, watching as the magic moved with and through her.

"Okay," the sheriff responded softly, facing forward, again. She blew out a heavy exhale, taking comfort in the shared magical and physical connection. Effortlessly, she returned to her focused state. Having Regina so close made her pulse quicken, and her entire body seemed to go on alert, the skin on her hands tingling where they touched.

"Good," the former mayor praised in a low voice, sensing Emma's magic through the bond. "Open your eyes and look at him," she continued in a level tone. "You want to keep him as he is, now." With her own magic, she expertly guided and nudged her apprentice toward their goal. "You want to suspend the effects of time on his body," she explained, feeling her companion's power surge toward the surface. She quickly corrected her. "A little slower, it's a delicate process."

The magic swirled between them as the savior tempered herself, letting the energy unwind at a more sedate pace. Regina leaned hard on Emma, her head turned slightly to rest her cheek on the sheriff's leather clad shoulder. The former queen felt her breath hitch as her skin seemed to hum with excitement from the caressing blue wisps that surrounded them. When the spell was at last complete and activated, the tension that had been building along with the magic dissipated quickly, and both women released a shuddery breath in unison.

"Wow, that was . . . intense," Emma muttered in awe. She simultaneously felt both unbelievably relaxed and invigorated. Drawing her gaze skyward and interlacing her hands with Regina's, she absently curled her arms about her middle, pulling the former queen's arms around her. She felt more than listened to the deep breaths in her ear and relished her presence. Turning her head, she quietly probed, "How are you holding up?" When a response wasn't immediately forthcoming, she slowly turned and shifted from holding hands to cupping elbows, instantly missing the former mayor's warm touch.

"I'll be fine, Dear," Regina offered with half-lidded eyes, almost losing herself in the healing light of a child of True Love. But, she didn't have the luxury of savoring the balm of the savior's magic or honest affections. Looking over her apprentice's shoulder, she nodded at the preserved body, solemnly stating, "We need to take Aengus to the vault."

Slapping the side of the truck bed and startling everyone into action, Anne bossily bellowed, "You heard her. Let's go!"

Everyone launched into seamless, coordinated action. Bruce got behind the wheel of the truck as Markus hopped around to the passenger side of the cab, both ignoring the partially shattered windshield and blood splatters. Jason and Qingzhao climbed into the truck bed with Aengus's
body. At the same time, Anne, Diego, Alma, and Irene jogged over to their bikes, quickly donning their riding gear. And with the refined grace and elegance of a knight, Monty escorted his queen toward the Charger with slow, measured steps.

With furrowed brows, the sheriff glanced around, taking in the flurry of activity, and she wondered if she'd ever be a part of such a fluid team. She trotted around the commander and his queen, moving to open the front passenger door. Flashing a cocky grin, she cheekily asked, "Do I get to drive my car?"

Monty heard the soft snort from his sovereign and smirked as she patted his arm, silent encouragement to let Emma have her way. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out and tossed the car keys to the eager savior. He couldn't help but smile at her youthful exuberance as she caught the keys with a happy, "Yes!"

Tiredly, the former mayor chuckled as she settled herself in the passenger's seat, and even with Elmwood's practiced ease, she couldn't fully hide her rising discomfort. She needed bedrest and perhaps a couple of drops of laudanum. Without the supplemental healing aspects of her magic, her recovery was going to be long and difficult, but they had to find Henry. Once they had more than five minutes of respite, she'd have Emma make another pass at the worst of the remaining injuries. Her hip, in particular, was giving her the most trouble. Sighing faintly, she tilted her head back against the headrest as the sheriff smoothly pulled away from the mines.

~SQ~

Monty stood sentry in a threshold within his queen's vault under Storybrooke Cemetery, unable to render any real aid regarding magic or world-jumping. So, he kept a watchful eye on his sovereign, listening for any sounds of Jason and Qingzhao guarding the vault's entrance or of potential trouble, but he heard nothing. After Aengus had been safely nestled into a wall niche down the hall to await a proper funeral, the sheriff had received a text from her mother, alerting them that both Henry and Neal were presently in Neverland, a strange jungle archipelago ruled by an adolescent. Immediately after, the other Crows Guard had rapidly dispersed to oversee preparations for their queen's eventual departure.

Slamming a thick, magical tome shut, Regina furiously shoved it across the dark, smooth harvest table. It came to a skittering stop at the edge. Standing, she slowly paced the extended length of it with measured steps. Her bones ached from sitting for far too long. "Nothing!" she snarled, pausing long enough to carefully stretch her back and roll her shoulders. "There's nothing here," she whispered with irritation, glaring at the stone ceiling. Her body was battered, and her mind was exhausted. Leaning forward and pressing the heels of her hands onto the tabletop, she hung her head, eyes closing as she forced herself to think, letting the residual pain in her shoulders help her find focus.

"We can't give up," Emma worriedly intoned, nervously fingering the page corners of her own book. She didn't like this; Regina was the confident one, the planner. Shifting in the wide, heavy, wooden chair, she looked between Elmwood and the former mayor.

Unmoving, Regina replied in a cold voice, "I'm not giving up." Her eyes snapped open, and she glared across the table at the sheriff. "I'm madder than hell," she barked, jerking upright and instantly regretting it. She winced and waved Monty off as he shifted forward.

"There has to be something," the sheriff implored, rising from her seat. She moved around the table and helplessly watched her hurting friend stalk about the room. Her brow furrowed as she considered the facts, going back to what she knew. "So, Jefferson hasn't been able to make a new hat, and the new crop of super-secret beans won't fruit for a couple of months," she stated, counting
the items off with her fingers and glaring at them. "They can't be the only magical metro in town," she huffed.

A heavy, dark grief, an ache she willed herself to forget, bubbled up from deep within Regina, threatening to overtake her. "It took Rumpelstiltskin centuries to cross worlds, and he started in a land with magic," she quietly explained, letting her shoulders slump. Shaking her head, she straightened her posture, focusing on her breathing and her belief they were going to rescue Henry. She had to rescue her son.

"Think, Regina," Emma urged, flexing her hands because she needed to do something with them. She bit and worried on her lower lip. "You just cured an incurable poison and made a memory potion that even Gold couldn't put together," she brightly encouraged with a half smirk.

"What the hell do you think I've been doing?!" Regina snapped, not appreciating the impromptu pep talk. Her gaze skimmed the mostly empty room. Aside from the harvest table, chairs, and the stone hearth, only her mother's trunks littered one side of the modestly-sized room.

Following the former mayor's line of sight, the sheriff turned and inspected the various pieces of luggage. She slowly walked over to a large, open, steamer trunk and idly fingered a dark green cloak draped over it. Softly, she inquired, "Would Cora know of something?" And if she did, shouldn't she have told them before they left the mine?

"No, but I might," Regina distractedly drawled. She pursed her lips as she made her decision. It was a long shot. "Move all of this to one side of the room," she ordered, turning and leaving the room.

Taking a few steps after his sovereign, Monty frowned as his queen disappeared down the vault's long, bricked hall, eventually slipping into another small room, one he knew contained the inventory for her spell craft. He wanted to follow, keep her safe. However, he was given instructions, and he knew better than to disobey. So, he returned to the room and helped Emma move everything against a long wall. Both frequently glanced at the doorway, and when Regina returned, he scowled upon noticing a piece of charged gypsum in her hand. "Your Highness?" he questioned with concern, rushing forward to the queen.

"Here, let me help," the sheriff quickly offered, dashing forward and around Elmwood. She held out her hand to take the chalk as she started to kneel beside her friend.

After successfully lowering herself onto her knees, Regina waved the hovering pair off. She kept her eyes closed and breathed through her nose for a minute before responding. "I have to be the one to do this," she explained in a subdued tone. Leaning forward and placing her left palm flat on the cold floor, she started to draw an intricate design on the stone. It was a slow and highly uncomfortable process. Yet, it was their last chance to get to Neverland. "There's no guarantee that he'll show at all," she mumbled, shifting the chalk to the opposite hand.

As the intricate, circular pattern expanded across the floor, Monty stood obediently out of the way, silently reminding the sheriff to do the same. He caught the young recruit's gaze and understood her rising apprehension. When his sovereign dropped the chalk, muttering a faint curse, he quickly gripped Emma by her collar, holding her back. He met her heated glower and resolutely shook his head. They both watched in anxious silence as Regina continued her work with trembling hands. Somehow, the shapes were still drawn in perfect, swooping arcs and straight, interconnecting lines. When the circle was nearly halfway complete, he realized where he had seen it before…

Carrying a sealed message scroll nestled securely in his purse, Ser Montague Elmwood briskly strutted down the hall toward the queen's private chambers. His chainmail and gear clinked and clacked, the sounds echoing off the stone walls, as he approached the two guards, Diego and a
disguised Alma, stationed outside the suite's entrance. With a curt nod in silent greeting, he never broke his stride as the guards opened the doors, and as soon as he was through, they were quickly shut and secured, again.

He frowned when he noticed the queen wasn't in the outer sitting area by the hearth, which was her habit for that time of the day. On numerous visits, he'd observed her reading or knitting by the fire. He sighed upon noticing the doors to the bedroom were open, and he slowly moved toward them, steeling himself for whatever situation lay beyond the threshold. After all, the king had visited his wife earlier in the day.

Crossing through the archway and into the queen's bedchamber, Monty reached for his arming sword and, in mid draw, was frozen by magic. Breathing heavily through his nose, he scanned the room. The queen, loosely holding a piece of gray chalk, laid stretched out and unconscious on her left side on the stone floor outside a strange, circular drawing. Her robes fanned out haphazardly around her, but otherwise, she looked undisturbed. Elmwood's hateful glare burned into the two men who loomed over her as his rage boiled within him. Merlin was familiar, the old wizard who was a part of the King of Britannia's entourage. He stood beside the young queen outside the chalk circle while the other one, who was not recognizable, stood inside it.

"Wonderful, a watch dog," the unknown man sighed as he absently raised his hand. He didn't care to hear the ramblings of a worthless worm.

"He's not expendable," Merlin grumbled, hanging his head and covering his tired eyes with his wrinkled left hand. This was a complication, but he could work with it. He dropped his hand and carefully maneuvered around the sleeping Regina. Stopping in front the queen's favored guard, he held the warrior's eyes for a long moment. Then, in a firm voice, he demanded, "I suggest you listen and observe, Ser Elmwood, but you may never speak of this moment." With a roll of his wrist, he worked his magic on the knight, binding his knowledge of the meeting.

Crossing his arms, the stranger rolled his eyes at the wasted theatrics. He pressed his lips in a tight line and refocused on the woman before him. "This world is unworthy of her," he commented with sadness lacing his tone.

Monty slowly shifted his eyes from Merlin to the man in the chalk circle. He agreed with his sentiment, for the queen deserved a kinder, gentler life.

"Be that as it may, if Razikale falls to the taint, this Gate World falls and, potentially, all of those who are connected to it," the sorcerer replied, slowly walking back to the man within the circle.

"Yes, yes," the unknown one huffed in agitation. He exhaled heavily and tapped an impatient finger on his arm. "You're not telling me something I don't already know, Priest," he continued, saying the old wizard's title with disdain.

Reflexively, Elmwood struggled against the magic containing him, but it was for naught. He was trapped, and the queen was vulnerable. Exhaling heavily, he didn't know what to do. His eyes darted about him. Was King Arthur's wizard a disciple of Razikale? And what did that have to do with the queen?

"Regina must stay," Merlin firmly countered, crouching down to retrieve the chalk from the queen's open hand.

The stranger remained silent as he studied the woman's face, and his expression turned contemplative. "You should've mated her to your precious Arthur," he remarked without bite. Squatting down, he reached across the invisible barrier and idly ran his fingers through dark,
brown locks. With reverence, he breathily stated, "You will be truly magnificent, one day, should you survive." He allowed the hair to fall from his hand as he stood.

"That was my original plan," the old wizard admitted in a weary voice. So many tragic events could have been avoided if he had only known about Regina sooner. "But things didn't work out." He stowed the charged gypsum in a hidden pocket within his robes. Cocking his head, his expression turned pensive, and he muttered, "At least her parents have no idea of her true potential." Cora's agenda was problematic but amendable; however, the current Dark One's quest for his lost son was an insistent thorn.

Monty didn't understand exactly what the two men were discussing, but he understood the queen was important to them. His gaze dropped down to the sleeping queen as he realized these men were remorseful over her quality of life and were aware of King Leopold's treatment. It was a small solace to know others were aware of her plight. With hopeful eyes, he refocused on the conversation. Perhaps they could help. Maybe Merlin would implore his king to act. After all, the young Arthur was quite fond of Queen Regina.

"Thankfully, neither does her husband," the unknown man sighed. He glanced around the sparse room, trying to get a read on the young woman. There wasn't much he could tell other than she liked to read and had exceptional hand-eye coordination, if the needlepoint and sketches abandoned on the writing desk were any indication. "You leave far too much to chance, Priest," he lightly scolded, turning to face Merlin. "Razikale would decimate her own world for the dishonor that is to fall unto her child," he restated with an arched eyebrow. He normally didn't have to repeat himself with the old priest.

"But Razikale is sleeping and more of a grandmother to her," the sorcerer chuffed in mild amusement. Gesturing to the slumbering queen, he continued, "Regina's born of stolen magic with which you were entrusted by Asha'bellanar." It was risky, reminding one so powerful, kin or not, of a massive failure.

Confused, Elmwood impulsively attempted to ask a question, and he exhaled heavily through his nose in frustration. The implications of their comments rattled him. Did the queen have magic? And if she did, why hadn't she used it against the king? Did she not know? And what did any of this have to do with the old gods?

"What would you have me do?" the stranger snarled in exasperation. He pointed at the woman and exclaimed, "The sensible thing would be to kill her, put her out of her misery." Tossing his hands up in the air, he pivoted on his heel and paced within the confines of the too-small circle. "Lesser creatures will label her an abomination while her kin will forsake her," he hissed, meeting the old wizard's knowing gaze. "She'll be alone," he quietly added.

Meeting the heated glare with a flash of anger, Merlin scowled as his eyes turned cold. "Death is not an option if we wish to save ourselves as a species," he hissed, pointing vigorously at the queen. "She will pass her trials, and she will restore balance to this world, possibly others," he declared with finality. Ruefully shaking his head, he took a moment to collect himself, and chuckled. "After all, she did call you." He made a sweeping gesture at the summoning circle which currently contained his guest.

Monty didn't understand how their words exactly applied to his queen, yet, he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, he would serve and protect the young woman until his dying breath because he believed in the sentiment Merlin was sharing with the stranger. He believed Queen Regina would make a difference in Angevin, for she was strong and kind and noble. She was everything her husband was not.
"I cannot interfere in the affairs of this world," the unknown man sighed as his eyes traced the delicate and intricate patterns on the stone floor. It was extremely impressive for one so young and so untrained. Gazing at the beautiful queen, he casually remarked, "She may be kindred, but she has, yet, to navigate her long, dark journey alone."

Nodding in agreement, the old wizard promised, "I can counter the Dark One's influences well enough." He held his guest's stare while gesturing to the immobilized Elmwood. "And our knight here can assist with her day-to-day care," he continued, his eyes dropping down to the woman on the floor. With awe and wonder in his voice, he added, "She will ascend. I've seen it."

"You've seen it," the stranger mocked, rolling his eyes. He flicked his wrist in a dismissive gesture at everyone. "How a half-breed managed to develop Fate's Eye I'll never understand," he muttered darkly with a slight scowl. Suddenly, his mood shifted, and he threw back his head, laughing doarily. "You leave charge of a wee fledgling to a mere man," he accused with false delight. Then, dropping his head, he closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "How desperate have we become to enlist the help of men?" he pondered aloud.

Slowly turning back toward Elmwood and, once again, locking eyes with him, Merlin casually meandered to the guard. "His heart is true, and he believes in her," he intoned softly. "He'll always believe in her, even when she doesn't have faith in herself," he added as a warm, fond smile brightened his weathered face. Looking over his shoulder at his guest, he chipperly amended, "He's a Truest Believer."

What? Monty thought, holding the old wizard's gaze. He wasn't anything special. His older brother, Jean Luc, was Marshall to the king's army. And the queen was a fledgling what?

Scoffing, the unknown man tilted his head and looked at the old priest with disbelief. His mouth opened as he started to say something, but he quickly shut it with a soft pop. Finally, he flatly commented, "Razikale was feeling whimsical when she created this place."

"Your cynicisms have led you astray, Jareth," the sorcerer replied with a heavy tiredness. His shoulders slumped under the weight of his hopeful agenda.

"And your false sense of hope has left you vulnerable, Merlin," Jareth retorted. He pursed his lips and straightened his posture. "I've witnessed quite the array of depraved travesties in my years, and that girl will not recover," he stated with finality, pointing at the sleeping queen. "She will be broken and useless," he sneered, hating the waste of potential possibilities. Then, his expressed softened, and he took a quick step toward the barrier of the summoning circle. "If I take her away now, I could salvage something of a life for her," he added optimistically.

Merlin surveyed the slumbering Regina and sighed. He knew the price she was paying and the cost of it on her soul. Still, he reasoned, "If she leaves now, she'll never reach her true potential." Meeting his brother's curious gaze, he explained, "Yes, at the end of her trial, she will have been broken and grievously misused, but those adversities will not have been in vain. She'll be stronger for it." Flashes of his visions reignited his conviction. So, with passion, he promised, "She was born tainted, and yet, she will ascend."

"What have your crystals shown you, Priest?" Jareth questioned, eyes narrowed and warning in his voice.

With a broad smile, the old wizard answered, "Enough to risk everything on her."

All of this was too much for Elmwood. Merlin and the stranger were talking about an old god as if she was taking a midafternoon nap and as if the queen was of her bloodline, of their blood. His
gaze dropped down onto the slumbering woman on the stone floor. His heart swelled with hope and pride for his queen. Could she be as the men described? Could she be the child of a god? Could she bring the needed changes to Angevin? Then, fear struck his heart as he remembered Razikale from the old stories. She was not the forgiving sort.

Glancing between the three people in the bedchamber, Jareth crossed his arms and cocked his hips to the right. Arching an eyebrow, he forebodingly countered, "You're still a pawn of Fate, Priest, and yet, you gamble your world—our first young one in over a millennium—on an unknown." Holding his brother's gaze, he remained silent with both hope and dread. Finally, after several long minutes, he relented and agreed to the old wizard's earlier request. "I will not inform Asha'bellanar of her stolen magic. I will allow your game to play out, but," he pointed at Regina, "if she proves counterproductive to our cause, I will end her and you."

"By the time you realize she might, she'll be beyond your power, dear brother," the sorcerer replied with a satisfied smirk. With a hint of amusement, he observed as Jareth left, both he and the circle disappearing with nary a sign either was ever present. Turning back to the knight, Merlin slowly walked toward him. "You were lucky, Ser Elmwood," he said, rolling his wrist and releasing the man from his magical bindings. Somberly, he instructed, "I charge you to Regina's primary care. Guide her, help her, but do not mistake or dismiss her as a mere woman." Taking in the knight's serious expression, he continued, "Our world has been thrown in chaos by forces beyond our control, and I have been fighting a losing battle alone for far too long." He stopped, then, to move back to his young apprentice. "She may yet turn the tide," he added, locking eyes with Elmwood. "She will overcome the king's cruelty, and she will reclaim the darkness, if we believe in her."

There was something in the old wizard's eyes that made Monty believe, and as he looked down at his sleeping queen, he realized he wanted to trust in something better for her. Feeling the distinctive ripple of magic move over him, he easily sheathed his sword. "As long as it's in the queen's best interest, I will heed your council," he promised before stepping around Merlin and moving to retrieve the queen from the stone floor.

When the summoning circle was complete, Regina leaned back, resting on her knees and the balls of her feet. She closed her eyes and slowly rolled her shoulders, pivoting her head from side-to-side. Her tired, aching hands laid across the top of her thighs, her fingers twitching from overuse. Dropping the gypsum into her blazer's front right pocket, she raised her left hand and was grateful when Monty gently grasped it, his strong arm slipping around her middle and effortlessly hoisting her onto her feet. She wobbled for a moment, a hand firmly holding onto his forearm, but once she was steady, she re-entered the circle, taking careful steps between the delicate lines of chalk to the center. Then, she crouched, pulling a small athame from her blazer's left front pocket. Unsheathing it, she sliced deep into her right index finger, and once the blood began to flow, she started to draw a sigil in the center of the summoning circle.

"Regina!" Emma cried, completely surprised by the self-inflicted injury. She lurched forward, but was abruptly yanked back by her jacket. Roughly, she struggled against Elmwood but was unable to break free. She twisted and scowled at him.

Quietly, Monty explained, nodding toward the chalk circle, "It's part of the ritual." He observed as his queen struggled to stand and felt pride when she did. Of course, he didn't like seeing his sovereign drip her blood on each concentric circle from a freshly cut pinky finger, but neither of them could break the border of the spell to lend assistance. It was the way of such things.

The sheriff could sense the magic swirling around them, simultaneously being drawn into and emanating from the symbol drawn in Regina's blood. Her brow furrowed as she watched the former
mayor step out of the chalk circle and release one last drop of blood onto the outer most boundary. The design flashed a brilliant shade of purple, marking its activation. Frowning, she asked, "So, you're a real witch?" Somehow, up until that moment, the notion hadn't really registered with her because, aside from potion making, her friend hadn't done witchy-type stuff. At least, she didn't think Regina had, or had she just not thought of it that way? Then, she remembered what Sydney had said about Regina not being mere witch, but the names were used as synonyms by stupid people. And, oh, she was so confused, again.

Startled by the inflection of the inquiry, Regina looked over her shoulder at Emma with a slightly baffled expression. She held the other woman's gaze as she blindly retrieved a handkerchief and wiped the knife clean. "Magic is a commitment, not a lifestyle, Dear. It is, quite literally, blood, sweat, and tears," she offered in response, quickly pressing the cloth to her fingertips. Satisfied she wasn't going to bleed all over herself, she tucked the sheathed athame in her blazer.

Unable to stand it any longer, the sheriff reached out and caught Regina's right hand in hers, healing the small cuts. She gave the hand a gentle squeeze before letting go, unwilling to move away when she noticed the faint tremble work through her companion's frame. "So, is this like Supernatural?" Emma probed with uncertainty. "Are we summoning a demon?" She gestured halfheartedly at the floor. Taking a slow breath, she shifted her weight onto her left foot, putting her hands on her hips. Fairytale characters being real was one thing, but demons? That wasn't something she thought she was ready to handle just yet.

Monty snorted, and with derision lacing his tone, he scoffed, "It depends on who you ask." His eyes met his queen's questioning appraisal, but the wizard's old spell held strong. Despite his desire to stay honest with her, he was unable to share his experience from all those years ago.

"Is this supposed to contain it?" the sheriff continued, her eyes tracing the lines of chalk. "And don't we need salt or something?" she added, finally looking between the other two. She bit her lower lip and paced along the outside of the circle. The casual attitude of summoning a maybe-demon had her feeling a tad edgy.

Narrowing her eyes, the former mayor documented the sad look in her commander's expression. This wasn't the first time she had noticed the thin, spindling threads of an old, yet familiar, magic weaving around him. She tilted her head and examined the spell work. Pursing her lips, she realized she recognized the spell and its caster. That, however, was an issue for another day. "The chalk has bits of iron and salt worked into it. It'll suffice for containment purposes," she explained, refocusing on her nervous apprentice.

"Okay," Emma drawled, stuffing her hands in her jean's front pockets. "Do you have to say anything? How long do we have to wait?" she questioned. Her eyes darted around the room, looking for some sign of something happening.

"Not long," said a slightly deep voice in a mellow tone.

"Holy shit!" the sheriff exclaimed. She shuffled sideways a few steps, reaching for Regina. However, peering over her friend's shoulder, she spotted a smirking, debonair man with pale blue eyes that almost glowed in the dim light, short, spiky, copper-colored hair with light blue streaks, and, of course, a trendy goatee. She glanced at Elmwood, quickly noting his hard frown, and lowered her arms. Obviously, there was some history here.

Carefully turning around, Regina arched an eyebrow at her invited guest who stood mere inches from her. Their eyes met, and his sassy smirk blended into a smile of honest delight and fondness. Even though she was surprised by his proximity, she didn't show it, and she quickly took in his modern attire, a high-end, three-piece suit complete with heeled boots polished to a shine. "Good,"
she smoothly greeted. "You showed." Instantly, her posture shifted, exuding airs of her station, despite her continued and rising discomfort. She wouldn't show weakness, not to him, not when her son needed her.

"Of course," Jareth replied with affection. Scoping out his current locale and mildly impressed with the craftsmanship, he slowly spun around and subtly attempted to move around his caller but, unexpectedly, found himself unable to step beyond the confines of the summoning circle. Hiding his puzzlement, he refocused on the woman before him, cupping her face gently with his hands. His thumbs lightly stroked the soft, smooth skin of her full cheeks. In that moment, he felt her pain and was aware of her suffering. He could never abide her hurting in his presence, so he released a tiny bit of magic into her, hoping to alleviate at least some measure of her ails. Then, leaning in, he held her gaze, and he felt her essence, her soul free from her mother's bindings. It was superb. "My, my, how you've grown," he commented in a low, velvety timber.

Surging forward, Emma curled her fists and sharply warned, "Hey, Buddy." She didn't know who the hell this guy was, but she was going to make sure he kept his paws to himself. Yet, predictably, she was held back by Monty, his strong hands tightly gripping her biceps from behind. When his fingers dug almost painfully into her arms, she glared over her shoulder and saw his concealed distress. Her expression immediately morphed from anger to concern as she turned back.

"You are magnificent," the visitor whispered in reverence. Of course, he should have known better than to question his brother's visions. His gift, after all, was essentially flawless.

Blinking, the former mayor broke free from her trance, and as her eyes held his, she was struck by the boundless gentleness contained within them. She swallowed, pushing aside her curiosity, and in a hoarse voice, stated, "I need your help to save our son."

Jareth pouted ever so slightly as he slowly lowered his hands, caressing Regina's face along the way. As he hands fell at his sides, he stepped back and frowned. "I'm not in the business of giving children to parents," he explained with a dark smile. His keen gaze reappraised the two loitering behind their master. The Truest Believer he remembered, but the woman was new and different and... "Oh, how quaint, a child of True Love," he huffed in mild annoyance, rolling his eyes. Then, he noticed the magical bond connecting the two women. His eyes bounced back and forth between them, ultimately fixating on the savior. Anger bubbled low in his belly, and he released a low, deep growl. It echoed throughout the stone walls of the room. "You, Emma Swan, have a tiger by the tail," he snarled, stepping to the edge of the chalk circle. Straining against its magic, he sneered at his inability to break free. His features twisted in his quiet rage as he taunted, "You do know what happens to the lady with the tiger, don't you?"

"Um, have we met?" the sheriff nervously asked, shuffling backward and bumping into Monty. She took comfort when his large hands rested reassuringly on her shoulders.

"If we had, I wouldn't remember," the visitor jeered, staring her down. His lip twitched upward, revealing a sharp elongated, canine tooth.

The fear rolling off Emma was palpable through the bond, and childhood acquaintance or not, Regina wasn't going to let him intimidate her friend. "Jareth," she warned, her tone dropping. She slid between them, blocking his view of the sheriff, and she met his glower. Yet, when their eyes met, she was taken aback by the fast change in his demeanor. She tilted her head in curiosity.

"You mentioned needing my help finding your son," Jareth responded quietly, not wanting to discuss things better left unsaid, at least for the moment.

That time, the former mayor couldn't keep her brows from furrowing. "We know where he is, we
need help getting to him," she clarified somewhat distractedly. Her eyes darted over him, studying the threads of magic that slipped to and wound around him.

"Well, where is he?" the visitor countered with a hint of impatience, hoping to divert her critical assessment, but he couldn't withhold his own fascination of her. When he had met her as a little girl, all those years ago, he had easily sensed the remarkable potential for a human and had known she would accomplish great things. Yet, for Merlin's visions to be proven true and to personally witness an impossibility teetering on the verge of probability, he was beyond awestruck. Not even the oldest among them had foreseen her ascension.

"Neverland," she replied tersely.

"Ah, yes, the land of eternally pubescent boys," Jareth sighed, crossing his arms. The Fates are truly at work, he realized. He cocked his hip to the right and added, "It's a place best avoided, if you ask me."

The longer this creep stayed, the more the sheriff disliked him. "Not your choice, Buddy," she snapped, stomping forward a pace and peering around Regina. Her face twisted into a tight scowl as she realized she was hiding behind a woman who, just a few hours previous, had been tortured. However, there was something primal and darkly menacing about Jareth, and it chilled her to the bone. The fact that her companion seemed unfazed by the man left Emma feeling discomfited and slightly intrigued.

"Down, girl," the visitor purred mockingly. His gaze swept over Regina before slowly following a leisurely path from foot to head, holding her fiery gleam. "What do I get as recompense?" he huskily inquired, taking his caller's right hand in his left. Goosebumps danced across his skin as he raised the captured hand to his soft lips, caressed them over her knuckles while subtly inhaling her alluring scent. With a devilish smirk, he quipped, "I'm sure a queen understands the importance of a favorable exchange between both parties." Then, he kissed the back of her hand. His eyes drifted closed of their own accord.

Extracting her hand, Regina's face scrunched in appalled distaste. "My favors are not on the table," she icily rebuked. She would have slapped him if she hadn't been desperate for his help. Covertly, she rubbed the back of her hand on her blazer.

With an exaggerated pout, Jareth tsked. "Such a pity, but not quite what I had in mind," he clarified with a mischievous smile. "But it's certainly worth reconsideration at a later date," he easily amended, reaching both arms across the chalk barrier. He lightly took hold of the little-girl-turned-queen's hands in his own and guided her toward him. Then, once in the center of the summoning circle, he supported her tired body against his own and adjusted their position. As they swayed slowly to unheard music, he whispered with the utmost sincerity laced with hope, "Be my apprentice."

"What?" Regina gasped, blinking rapidly. She looked around and was slightly confused by how he had managed to coax her into the circle. Fear spiked as she realized her vulnerability. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Monty scowling and Emma raging against a barrier. Her brows furrowed in consternation when she realized she couldn't hear the blonde's colorful expletives. She turned back to Jareth with apprehension.

"They're fine. We're fine," the visitor quickly assured his summoner. "I simply provided us with a bit of privacy." He flashed a warm smile, guiding them into a graceful pivot so they both faced the pair outside. With glee, he finger-waved at the dutiful guard dogs. Then, after they danced a few more moments, he pleasantly commented, "You've improved, my dear. I'm impressed."
The former mayor allowed herself to be moved to the silent music. "Thank you," she replied with confusion clearly evident on her face. Shaking her head, she frowned as she said, "I don't have time for games, Jareth." It was risky, possibly incurring his wrath, but Henry was off world and alone with those lunatics.

Startled by the insinuation, Jareth tilted his head and held her gaze. "Who said anything about games? My offer is completely above board, and I take my craft quite seriously, I'll have you know," he elaborated on his proposal, his tone teasing at being insulted. Stopping their dance, he tenderly caressed her right cheek with the knuckles of his left hand. "Let me guide you. Let me be your teacher," he quietly beseeched, almost begging.

Regina eased out of his hold as her expression turned dark. "I neither need nor want a teacher," she retorted with a pinched brow. Still perplexed by his behavior and his offer, she continued to study his face as she added, "I need to save Henry." Pausing, she gathered her courage and asked, "Are you going to help or not?"

The visitor briskly nodded before a lazy smirk stretched across his face. "Perhaps there is something you can do for me, after all," he hinted, slipping his hands into his trouser pockets. "I'm listening," the former mayor replied dubiously, crossing her arms.

"There's an irksome creature in Neverland, a shadow. Kill it, and your trip there, for yourself and however many should accompany you, is duly paid," Jareth dictated his terms. It would be a simple task, even for one so young.

"Wait. You said our trip there. What about our trip back?" Emma quickly interjected. She frowned when she realized she was probably still talking to an invisible wall. Reaching out with her left hand, she attempted to touch the barrier, wondering if she could figure out how to dispel it.

Amused by the sheriff's antics, Jareth turned a wide, toothy smile toward her. "I'm only so generous, Savior," he flatly commented, having already lowered his little concealment spell. He arched an elegant eyebrow and slyly added, "I'm sure an opportunity will present itself." His eyes slowly returned to his potential apprentice.

And that was something Regina was willing to risk because being trapped somewhere with Henry was more appealing than not being with him or not knowing he was safe. "You get us to Neverland. I kill the shadow, and we're done," she reiterated, narrowing her eyes. "No other strings attached?" she added, arching a skeptical eyebrow.

Pulling his right hand from its pocket, Jareth elegantly rolled his wrist, and a palm-sized crystal ball appeared. It traveled around his hand and wrist as he twirled it with a graceful flourish. "That's it," he agreed, presenting the sphere to the former mayor.

"What's that?" the sheriff demanded, shifting to get a better look.

"It's a crystal, nothing more," the visitor answered, smiling when Regina accepted his gift. "It's also your one-way trip to Neverland," he clarified. He observed her in rapt fascination as she studied the artifact.

Looking up, the former mayor coolly replied in a level voice, "A pleasure." She quickly slipped their magic ticket into her blazer pocket with the chalk. Then, she observed Jareth blink away with a sweeping bow, the summoning circle burning away in a smattering of speckled purple. She held her hand out in front of her, watching the embers of fading magic float in the air like ash. A few bits stuck to her skin and were absorbed.
"Was that wise?" Monty boldly questioned in a quiet voice, moving around to stand at his queen's left side. His gaze briefly cut to the distracted sheriff, who was still watching the dissipating magics, as he hastily added, "Brokering a deal with the Goblin king?"

"Goblin King?" Emma blurted, spinning to face the other two. "That's a thing?" she pondered, wrinkling her nose in contemplation. After a beat, she shrugged, shook her head, and flashed a half-hearted smirk as she commented, "He did look a lot like David Bowie."

Choosing to ignore the sheriff's pop culture reference, Regina glared at her commander. Her tone was hard and sharp as she retorted, "What other choice did I have?" Sighing, she rolled her eyes and moved purposefully toward the hallway. "I have never heard of him being unfair," she vaguely elucidated, not really wanting to go into details about her knowledge base.

Elmwood fell into step behind his sovereign. Obviously, both of them had their secrets regarding Jareth. He released a breathy sigh before saying, "Be that as it may, I will not allow you—."

Whipping around, the former mayor snarled, seething at his arrogance, "You won't allow me?" The abrupt action sent a spike of pain down her spine and jolting through her hip, inciting even further rage. Her hands curled into tight fists, and she could feel the tiny pinpricks of magic dotting across her exposed flesh.

"Regina," Emma quietly attempted to cajole her friend. She glanced at Monty with sad eyes. It was never fun being on the receiving end of Regina's temper. Closing the distance between them, she reached out to cup the former mayor's biceps, but she thought better of it at the last second, retracting her hand.

"That madman took Henry, and I will do everything in my power to get him back," Regina promised, her lip curling.

Realizing his foolish mistake, Elmwood bent the knee before his queen, bowing his head in subjugation. "I have failed you, Your Highness," he humbly explained. His eyes darted to the sheriff, and he hoped the recruit would heed this very important lesson. Taking a slow breath, he carefully continued, "And while I plead for your mercy, I would be negligent in my duties if I allowed you to embark on your quest unattended."

There wasn't much that disquieted the former queen more than seeing her trusted and favored commander kneel. It reminded her of the darker days in Leopold's court when the King's Guard had continually ridiculed and humiliated her own guards. "Monty," she rasped, the fire of anger leaving her. She cut an uncomfortable look at Emma, for she hadn't wanted her to witness any of the Crows Guard like this. This type of obsequiousness was of the old world, not this one. To Emma, she was simply Regina. She did not want the savior to see her as the evil queen.

"Under my care, you've been taken, twice, and now, your son has been abducted, as well," Elmwood continued. He had heard the quiet dismay in his queen's voice. He knew she didn't want her old life here, but to him, to all the Crows Guard, her safety was paramount. She would forever be their queen, and regardless of the fact that their hearts were firmly ensonced in their own chests, they belonged fully to their sovereign. "I will not permit my shortcomings to herald the fall of all that you have built," he intoned with absolute seriousness. The hand resting on his knee clenched into a tight fist as he took a deep breath. And raising his head, he boldly requested, "Please, Your Highness, formally call your personal guard to service."

And with his request, Regina understood that the bell had been rung. She closed her eyes and cursed herself for bringing the Crows Guard with her. She should have left them and their families safe in Angevin. Dropping her head, she weakly shook it and sighed. All those months ago, when
she had started working at the Sheriff's Office as a consultant, she should have known they'd wiggle themselves back into her life, resuming their roles as protectors. Gradually, her curled fists relaxed, and she lightly touched Monty's left shoulder. She swallowed the lump in her throat, and with a rough, raspy voice, ordered, "See to it, Commander." Then, she turned and left, going to stow the chalk and athame back with the other supplies. The echoes of the past were bleeding more and more into the present, and she needed a moment to gather herself, find the inner strength necessary to keep her mask in place once she stepped back out of the vault.

Monty watched his queen depart, her slower footfalls echoing in the vault's hall. Then, noticing that the savior hadn't trotted after Regina, he looked up to find Emma holding out her hand. With a firm grip, he clasped the smaller hand and accepted the assistance onto his feet. They shared a quiet moment, and as Emma squeezed his hand before releasing it, he knew she understood her role as a Queen's Guard. A gratified smirk crossed his face as the recruit jogged after their queen, and he followed at a slower pace.

~SQ~

Emma pulled her Charger up to the town border, stopping a car length shy of the orange line painted on the pavement. She killed the engine and slumped back in her seat as she stared at the expanse of road ahead. A small part of her wanted to just say to hell with it all, kick Monty out of the car, and keep on driving. If Henry had been with them, she realized that she probably would have done it. Regina might have even let her. She did have that house in Bangor, after all. Actually, that sounded pretty damn good to the sheriff, something she should seriously talk to the former mayor about. Once they got Henry back, they could pack up their stuff, leave Storybrooke and its insanity behind, take their little family to a new place, and setup house. It could work.

Seeing her friend gazing blankly out the front window, Regina frowned slightly. She was getting all sorts of emotions through the bond: frustration, exhaustion, despair, and finally, a deep sense of hope and belonging. As much as she wished Emma would get better control over her feelings, she had to admit that the warmth that filled her sometimes was worth the discomfort of the more unpleasant sensations. A few minutes were passed that way in silence, the former mayor watching the sheriff watch the world outside. She heard the faint creak of leather when Monty shifted in the backseat, and she blinked away the growing melancholy before placing a hand on her companion's arm. "Emma," she gently prodded.

A brief puff of air left the savior's lips as she turned to the former mayor and asked, "Are you sure about this?" Her eyes tracked Elmwood as he got out of the car and opened his queen's door. "It has to be done," she reminded her over her shoulder, taking her guard's hand as he eased her out of the passenger's seat. A quick check behind the Charger confirmed Diego and Irene's presence, the two Crows Guard hovering beside their motorcycles, arms crossed. Once Emma was out of the car, Regina began slowly walking to the town line, the sheriff easily catching up with her. "We can't leave the town completely defenseless, not with the Chantry lurking on the fringes." Voice dropping, she muttered peevishly, "Whoever the hell they are."

The sheriff stopped a foot from the boundary, facing the outside world, and took a deep breath as she tried to settle herself. "Okay." Angling slightly toward Regina, she asked "So, how does this work? Is it kinda like what I do with the shields?"

"Regina considered for a moment before inclining her head in agreement. "Similar, just on a much larger scale." She looked over the remnants of the boundary she had originally erected around the cursed town. Though she still had no explanation why she could see this world's magic so easily, now, the former queen wasn't going to question it for the time being. After all, it was
going to make it that much easier for her to direct her student. The old barrier was almost nonexistent, threadbare with only the faintest hints of magic hovering in the air. "You're going to use the framework of the original to build upon," she explained. Sensing the stirrings of panic beginning to slip through the bond, she reassured her, "I'll help guide you." Her hand automatically came to rest on Emma's upper arm, rubbing up and down absently.

"Alright, got it," the savior muttered, nodding halfheartedly. "Just making a super duper, giant dome of protection over an entire town. No big deal." Her tone was heavily laced with sarcasm, and she pressed her lips in a tight line while she considered the job before her. After expending so much energy healing Regina, then Anne, and casting the stasis spell on Aengus's body, she expected to be completely drained; however, she felt oddly keyed up and ready for more. Still, she was unsure of her ability to accomplish the task her teacher had set for her.

The sorceress smiled fondly at her friend and encouraged, "You can do this, Emma." Wanting to put her apprentice at ease, her hand migrated over Emma's shoulder blade and dipped to settle on her lower back. Once she was sure she had the savior's attention, she instructed, "Find the edges of the old spell, first."

Closing her eyes momentarily, Emma concentrated on reaching out with her magic until she encountered a slight resistance in the atmosphere. "I think I found it. It feels . . . brittle." She opened her eyes, again, and glanced at her companion skeptically.

Regina grunted softly. The spell was barely intact, and the fact that any of it remained at all surprised her, considering she'd erected it using what little, residual magic had lingered as the curse had finished settling in. "That's because it hasn't been renewed in nearly thirty years. Focus," she admonished lightly, pressing her fingertips into the sheriff's lumbar vertebrae. Emma rolled her eyes at the tone that was more playful than stern. "Okay, okay." Huffing a little to shake off some of her uncertainty, she centered herself and inquired, "Now, what?"

"Recall how you feel when you're deflecting Anne's attacks," the former queen coached. "Remember the feelings of protection when you safeguard me from her." She could still sense her student's hesitancy, so she slipped her fingers under the hem of Emma's jacket and shirt to rest her palm directly on her skin, creating a stronger connection with their magic. Ignoring the shiver that made the flesh under her hand break out in goosebumps, she murmured quietly, "Take that and weave it into your spell work, into the edges of the existing spell's framework. The magic will do the rest."

The savior's eyes widened as her friend's magic skittered up her spine and seemed to ignite a low heat in her chest. Then, she saw it, the barrier spread out over them like an enormous dome made of glittering, gossamer filaments that winked faintly in the late afternoon sun. "Regina, that's freaking huge," she whispered in awe, momentarily distracted from the electricity racing along her skin.

Regina pursed her lips and scolded lightly, "Emma, you are quite capable of doing this." Indicating the border with a subtle lift of her chin, she prodded, "Now, get on with it." A fresh wave of worry and inadequacy from the sheriff rolled over her, and she gentled her tone, fingers absently stroking the warm skin beneath them. "Use some of my magic if you need to," she offered freely, knowing that some of her own confidence would most likely reach her apprentice along with her magic.

Silence hung between them for several long moments before Emma quietly asked, "I can do that?" She hadn't really thought about whether or not she could use Regina's magic, hadn't wanted to after the incident upon returning from New York.
"You've always been able to pull from me. You're the control," she reminded her with a grim smile.

Ever since the bond had fully activated, Regina had known that Emma had the capacity to simply rip her magic and her free will from her without a moment's notice. It had sickened her, initially, the idea that such power was in the hands of the granddaughter of the man who had once held complete dominion over her. She had spent the early morning hours of the first two weeks of the bond kneeling over her toilet, vomiting up bile until her throat was raw. Then, Emma had proven to be kind and caring and so damn earnest it had broken her resolve to keep her distance, and she had let her guard down. The savior had managed to worm her way into her tired heart, and she found she didn't mind one bit. Regina had accepted that her companion had control over the bond, over her. Surprisingly enough, it didn't feel like defeat; rather, it felt like sanctuary.

Emma's mind flashed on purple lightning, frost covered ground, and a heartrending scream that still had her waking in an occasional, cold sweat. She shuddered hard and found herself leaning into Regina's hot palm on her lower back. It was new, the increased contact and the utterly unselfconscious manner in which it was offered. She found it comforting and basked in the connection. "Won't it hurt?" she worried. The former mayor had been shying away from accessing her magic as much as possible since being tortured by Greg. The fail-safe had only seemed to have compounded the problem. The last thing Emma wanted to do was hurt her friend.

Regina released a faint sigh, quietly saying, "It isn't so bad when we're touching. In fact, it doesn't hurt at all," she confessed, forcing herself to meet concerned, green eyes. The amount of vulnerability she was willing to let this woman see astounded her. It made no sense. When she had been the evil queen or the mayor, she had never purposely exposed her weaknesses to anyone; yet, there she was, allowing the savior, daughter of her enemies, behind all of her meticulously constructed walls. With Emma, she could just be Regina, and there was an intoxicating freedom in that ability.

"Okay," Emma acknowledged, a soft, sad smile tugging up the corners of her mouth. Lifting her hands, she felt the energy of the barrier brush against her palms. Gradually, she fed her magic into the failing net, watching as it seemed to seep into the crisscrossing strands and spread outward. Thanks to her teacher's subtle guidance, Emma was able to push the magic where it needed to go, grinning when the oscillating colors of the web became more saturated and began emitting a slight glow. Then, the savior faltered as her reserves dwindled while she tried to maintain the power level she had been expending.

The slight dimming of the protective bubble alerted Regina to her apprentice's flagging stamina. Stepping even closer so that she was pressed to the sheriff's left side, she raised her left hand and tentatively slid it under the front hem of Emma's shirt, resting it lightly on her solar plexus. "Go ahead and take some of my magic," she directed, voice suddenly raspy. Clearing her throat, she elaborated, "I'm still carrying around far too much to be comfortable after disabling the fail-safe device."

Thrown by the delicate contact to her upper abdomen, Emma could only nod in acquiescence. She had consciously touched and been touched by Regina more in that one day than in the entirety of their previous association. Her skin tingled where hot hands flattened against her, and she could feel her chakras light up as her magic instinctively surged to find Regina's through the increased connection. It quickly found her companion's energy and twined with it in tight coils. The speed and effortlessness of it left her breathless. Slowly, so as not to cause her any discomfort, the sheriff started to tease the magic from the sorceress.

Regina's entire body came to life at the leisurely syphoning of her power. The energy trickled out of her and into Emma with increasing heat until a fire blossomed low in her belly. The unexpected spike of arousal caused the sorceress to dig her short nails into soft flesh and screw her eyes shut.
Swallowing hard at the sensation and struggling to push it aside, Regina exhaled unsteadily. "A little faster than that, Dear," she requested in a strained tone.

Emma took a deep breath and increased the speed of the power pull, transferring the magic directly to the barrier's grid. The glow intensified then flashed a brilliant white as the spell snapped into place, protecting the town, once more. "Oh, wow," she exclaimed quietly. Turning her head to check on her friend, she didn't miss the sharp hitch in Regina's breathing or the way her eyes were almost black, pupils blown wide.

"Good job," the former queen murmured, hands slipping from beneath the savior's shirt and falling to her sides as she took a step back. Gathering her composure, Regina grinned proudly at her student. She patted her arm before turning and heading toward the car, desperate for a bit of distance from the charged atmosphere. A brief glance over her shoulder confirmed Emma hadn't moved from her spot by the town line. "Come along, Emma," she called back to her friend, "we have a ship to catch."

Licking her lips nervously, the sheriff shoved her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, eyes focused on the orange line, garish against the dark road. The more they worked magic together, the more intense it seemed to get. She still felt like every nerve ending was humming with a quiet kind of satisfaction. Taking advantage of the opening for a change in topic, she asked, "So, Neverland. What's it like?"

As she flashed a thankful smile at Elmwood for opening the passenger side door, Regina glanced across the roof of the car at the sheriff. "I wouldn't know. I've never been there," she admitted with a slight tilt of her head. With that, she accepted her guard's hand as she lowered herself to the seat, pulling her legs in so he could shut the door.

Her feet finally uprooted themselves from the pavement, and Emma trudged to the Charger. She watched as Monty got into the backseat while Diego and Irene mounted their bikes and made quick U-turns, ready to get back to town. The sheriff scowled and grumbled with unenthusiastic sarcasm, "Great, a new adventure."

~SQ~

A steadily growing rumbling broke the silence on the winding Route 191 as it passed close to the Cutler Coast Public Reserved Land. A red blur appeared over the crest of a small rise in the two-lane highway. Suddenly, the vehicle braked with a squeal of rubber on pavement, coming to a halt in the early evening light filtering through the trees. Backup lights came on, brake lights went out, and the 1970 Pontiac Catalina convertible slowly reversed until the front bumper was perpendicular to a small, unmarked road that turned off to the right. The brake lights flashed briefly as the car was put back into drive and made a sharp right, headlights cutting through the gloom.

The convertible flew along the unlined backroad, taking the twists and turns at dangerous speeds. "Almost there," the passenger encouraged, looking down at the map in his lap. The light from his cell phone illuminated the black line leading to a red circle that had been made around a blank area on the coast. Storybrooke wasn't on the map, but the intelligence they'd received from the Home Office assured them that they would find the cursed town in that location. They would get to the sleepy, little town and finish the job they'd started just over a decade before. They would find the boy and take him to Pan.

"We should be getting close," the driver muttered, glancing over at his brother. "Any idea if—." His words were abruptly cut off as the vehicle slammed into an invisible wall.
The loud crunch of metal compacting filled the air, and the car rebounded off the barrier, ending up several yards back from the town line. Tread marks were etched on the pavement, outlining the convertible's path post impact, the back tires resting in the grass. Smoke and steam bellowed from under the crumpled hood, the engine pushed perilously far into the cockpit. A few more inches, and both occupants would have had their legs crushed. As it was, the young men sat slumped over, supported only by their seatbelts. The driver was bleeding from the forehead where his skull had connected with the steering wheel. Though his chest rose and fell, there was a slight hitch in his breathing. Glasses askew, the passenger appeared to be in better shape, aside from the way the dash pinned his legs to the seat. A small, teddy bear ornament swung from the rearview mirror as the sun slowly fell below the treetops, a lonely guardian to the unconscious men inside.

~SQ~

As Emma drove through town toward the harbor, she slowed a bit, glancing in the direction of Mifflin Street. "Shouldn't we swing by the house before heading to the docks?" Casting a sidelong look at Regina, she shrugged and elaborated, "You know, grab some stuff." She was sure they should pack at least some essentials before going on a new quest, and she was definitely starting to consider these crazy adventures quests. Her brow furrowed as she mentally ticked off a few things she really wanted to grab before getting on a boat to some jungle for who knew how long. A few changes of underwear and a toothbrush were at the top of the list. "What the hell do you take on a rescue mission to another world?"

Monty caught her eye in the rearview mirror before returning to typing on his phone. "Already taken care of, Sheriff," he informed her distractedly.

Eyebrows hiking up her forehead, surprise laced her tone as she said, "Oh, okay." The Crows Guard might not be Regina's errand boys, but they sure seemed to slip into the role easily enough. There was a pause as she considered the Sheriff's Department. She'd need to make sure her deputies were aware of her likely, extended absence. "I'll need to call the station." The sheriff was beginning to wonder if they'd ever settle down into a type of regular routine.

"Of course, Dear," Regina acknowledged, her eyelids growing heavy and drooping as they drove. The day's events were catching up to her, again, since the adrenaline was finally wearing off. Also working their way out of her system were the painkillers from the hospital. Honestly, the morphine had been lovely, but it made her feel a bit numb and too lethargic for her tastes. She mentally began preparing herself for the arguments to come with Emma and Monty about taking the pain pills from the hospital pharmacy that she knew the savior had stuffed in her pocket. They left her too out of touch with reality, her body taking forever to metabolize the damned things.

The Charger pulled up to the docks, and Emma quickly parked, stepping out only to be surrounded by a flurry of activity. "Wow, there's a lot going on here," she muttered as several Crows Guard bustled past with purposeful determination. There were guards carrying large, Yeti coolers onto the ship, followed by cases of bottled water, crates of fruit and vegetables, and a few other boxes with contents that she couldn't quite make out. Her attention was diverted from the organized chaos by the sound of masculine yelling. Scanning the area, her gaze lit on Hook attempting to intimidate Anne, jabbing his hook in her direction. The sheriff smirked and wondered how long it would be before the diminutive woman flattened the pirate to the ground.

Having caught sight of Emma, the captain shouted, "Sheriff!" and stormed toward the car. "These people are trespassing on private property," he announced in outrage, a sneer firmly fixed on his countenance. Then, with as much imperiousness as he could muster, he said, "I demand that they be removed, at once."
Montague scoffed and replied haughtily, "Your vessel has been commandeered by Her Majesty Queen Regina." He didn't budge when Hook stepped forward to stand nose-to-nose with the imposing guard. Sniffing in disdain, he added offhandedly, "Certainly my second-in-command has already informed you of this."

The captain was caught off guard by the calm demeanor and found himself floundering in the face of such quiet regard. Indignantly, he spluttered, "It's my ship, and this isn't her kingdom." Killian Jones hadn't bent the knee to a monarch in centuries and was not about to start that habit anew. His eyes drifted over Regina, taking in the way she held herself stiffly, gaze occasionally flicking to the Jolly Roger as it was loaded. Something of import had to have happened for the former queen to commandeer his ship.

Emma huffed with exasperation. She did not have time to deal with arguments about whether Storybrooke was a democracy or a monarchy. Henry had been abducted, Regina desperately needed to rest, and she had to do something to keep herself occupied, or she would fall apart. Nearing the end of her patience, she snapped, "Damnit, Hook. Henry and Neal are missing." The words tasted sour in her mouth. She immediately wished that she could take them back and undo the last eighteen hours at the same time.

"Neal and his boy are missing?" the pirate asked, shock making his eyes widen comically. Whipping his head around between the trio before him, he demanded, "How? Where are they?" So many years had passed in loneliness and regret, wanting a second chance to do better by the boy he had lost in his pursuit of vengeance. Perhaps this was his opportunity to make things right.

Pressing his lips in a firm line, Elmwood debated a moment before saying tightly, "Neverland."

"The pirate's correct." Gold limped over to the small group gathered at the fringes of the activity. His cane thumped along the wood of the docks, somehow splitting through the other noises. "Neverland is a very unforgiving place." His lips twitched slightly in satisfaction at the hateful glare the pirate directed his way.

"You've got a guide?" The Crows Guard were more than proficient on multiple fronts. Sailing a ship was well within their varied training.

Hook rolled his eyes at the guard's arrogance, willing to overlook it in the face of helping find Neal. "Be that as it may," he began, "you'll need someone who knows the land and its dangers. Peter Pan isn't someone to trifle with," he warned them. Those who underestimated the island and its inhabitants always ended up regretting it in the long run.

"The Dark One is going to help?" She shifted the two cases of bottled water in her arms as she scrutinized the imp dubiously.

Before a witty retort could be sent back, Mary Margaret ran up to the group, slightly out of breath as she came to a halt next to Hook. A bright smile broke across her face as she gasped enthusiastically, "We're coming, too!"

Elmwood tipped his head back in frustrated exasperation, grumbling under his breath, "You've got
"Oh, goodie," Anne groused. Shooting a glare at her commander, she intoned dolefully, "As if this shit show wasn't bad enough." She pointedly ignored the look of censure he threw her way and, instead, took pride in having coaxed an amused smirk from her queen. Feeling a light tug on the water, she frowned as David took the cases of water from her and marched toward the ship. An eyebrow shot up, and she grunted in pleasant surprise. *The shepherd might prove useful, at least,* she thought.

Emma privately agreed with the captain of the Crows Guard. She subtly edged closer to Regina and further from her mother. Based on the teacher's earnest expression and fidgeting hands, she was practically dying to reach out and hug her daughter. The sheriff wanted none of it and began to step away to call Ruby when she noticed a small group of people approaching the wharf. "Is that Dave Salter?"

The entire gathering turned as one to watch Salter, three of his sons, and his two daughters walking toward them. The bulky man drew up close and came to a stop in front of Regina. Immediately, he bent in a formal bow, his children following suit in well-rehearsed unison. Straightening, he looked his queen in the eye and solemnly declared, "Your Highness, we've come to volunteer our services."

A soft smile graced Regina's lips, touched by the continued support of the fisherman and his family. She was, however, rather stunned that he had brought all of his children with him, bar one. "What about Cecil?" she inquired gently, wondering where the boy was.

Dave grunted contentedly at his monarch's apparent interest in his youngest child. "Irene promised the guard would look out for the boy. He's a scrappy lad and can take care of himself," he stated, a hint of pride coloring his tone. His boy's club foot might have kept him from working the deck of a ship, but he was smart and resourceful. Staying with the Crows Guard for the duration of their trip off world might be just the thing needed to get Cecil recognized and into the queen's service. Blue eyes sparkled with satisfaction as he added, "This will be good for him."

Regina gracefully inclined her head in acknowledgement of Salter's offer of assistance. "Very well, Mr. Salter. I suggest you consult with Captain Jones and prepare to set sail."

"Aye, Your Highness." He gave her a brisk bow before nodding at Hook and following him on board the ship, children in tow.

Gold observed the entire exchange with quiet interest. He hadn't expected Regina to have any supporters in town beyond her guard. Curiosity titillated, he decided he would need to take a closer look at Storybrooke's residents upon his return from Neverland. The deck was beginning to appear stacked too much in his former apprentice's favor. Focusing on the more immediate problem, he pronounced sarcastically, "We may know where we're going, *Your Highness,* but how, pray tell, are we going to get there?"

Narrowing her eyes at his continued antagonism, the former mayor fixed him with an irritated glare. Teeth gritted in an effort to curb any scathing remarks, she finally replied, "I have it well in hand, I assure you." Pivoting on her heel, she slowly walked to the ship, struggling to maintain her careful posture. She was feeling every bit of the morning's torture with acute clarity, and Regina longed to allow Elmwood to simply lift her up and carry her onto the boat. However, she couldn't risk displaying any further weakness in front of her former master, let alone Hook. So, she took measured, deep breaths to manage the pain as she strutted confidently up the gangplank, Monty close on her heels.
A frown turned down the corners of Gold's mouth as he watched his daughter make her way to the vessel. Pursing his lips in consternation, he muttered depreciatingly under his breath, "I somehow doubt that." Deciding to play along for the time being and see if Regina had, indeed, managed to pull off the impossible, yet again, he moved to board the ship.

Mary Margaret started to follow the others but swiveled back around when she realized that her daughter wasn't with her. Brow scrunched in confusion, she called out inquiringly, "Emma?" wondering why she was lingering on the docks.

The sheriff held up her cell phone and informed her, "I've gotta make a call. You go ahead," she encouraged, glad for an excuse to keep her distance from her mother. "I'll catch up in a minute." She took in the way the teacher's expression clouded over faintly before she grudgingly nodded and turned away. Sighing, she went into her phone's contacts and opened her favorites, determined to call Ruby before someone else interrupted her. Then, she heard her name being called, and her head shot up, the snarl dying on her lips when she saw who it was.

Ruby was running down the docks toward her. Noticing the sheriff looking her direction, she shouted, again, "Emma!"

Tucking her phone back in her pocket, Emma grinned as her deputy came to a panting halt before her. "I was just about to call you," she said, impressed that the wolf didn't seem to be too out of breath from her apparent sprint.

"I want to help," Ruby announced, eyes bright as she took in two Crows Guard carrying the last of the supplies onto the ship.

Emma knew what her friend was asking and was grateful for the offer, but she also knew that the deputy could help best by staying in Storybrooke and keeping the peace in her absence. "Okay, I need you to keep an eye on things, here."

A pout formed on the wolf's lips, and she bounced in place slightly, trying to work out the excess energy built up from her run. "Let me come with you," she beseeched. Then, pointing at her nose, she added, "Super sniffer, remember?"

Shaking her head, the savior quietly told her, "I need you to help Puma and Hart, Ruby. The sheriff's station isn't going to run itself." There was no one she trusted more to make sure all hell didn't break loose between the increasingly fractured groups of fairytale characters that inhabited the town.

Ruby slouched and whined, "But—."

"You and the dwarves will help everyone feel safe," came the soft reply from behind Emma. Apparently having decided to wait on her daughter, Mary Margaret took the opportunity to join the conversation and stepped forward, putting a supportive hand on Ruby's arm.

Emma did a slight double-take at her mother's sudden reappearance. It unsettled her how the woman had managed to hover nearby unnoticed. "Yeah," she started, side-eying the teacher, "basically, I need someone I trust to make sure nobody tries to stir shit up. We've put a protection spell over the town. So, no one from the outside should wander in, again," she finished, feeling better by the minute that they had made that detour on the way to the docks.

The deputy shifted her weight to her other leg, subtly dropping her arm out of Mary Margaret's reach. "Are you sure that's all you need me to do?" She wanted to go with them and find Henry. She wanted Emma and, more importantly, Regina to know that they had friends who would do
everything in their power to provide whatever aid they needed. They weren't alone in this.

Smiling, she sheriff countered, "That's a huge ask, Rubes." She gestured toward the town and said ruefully, "Besides, these stuck-up royals aren't going to lay low just because Henry's missing. Someone's going to try something." It would be asking too much for things to go smoothly while they were away. Tensions had been high ever since the mayoral election, and even though some of the worst troublemakers were locked up, there were still plenty of dissidents hanging around. "If you get in a tight spot, ask Bobby for help." The Crows Guard would step in if it looked like things were getting too hairy for the Sheriff's Department to handle.

There was a brief pause before Ruby nodded and agreed, "Okay, I get it. I'll let the guys know what's going on." Giving Emma a hopeful smile, she reassured, "I know you'll find Henry. Just be safe out there." With a quick, parting hug, she bounded away, already making a mental list of who would be the most likely to take advantage of having so many of the town's heavy hitters out of the picture for a few days.

Mary Margaret scowled after her friend's retreating form. Looking back at her daughter, she intoned confidently, "Nothing will happen while we're away, Emma." She quickly fell into step with the sheriff as she headed for the ship, scurrying a bit to catch up with her long strides.

Emma shrugged insouciantly and scoffed, "Yeah, sure, but better safe than sorry."

Firmly touching the sheriff's arm, Mary Margaret drew her to a halt just shy of the gangplank. "Emma, the people of Storybrooke are good. Any one of them will help us find Henry and Neal if we just ask." Her tone was oppressively optimistic, her smile just a shade too bright as she tried to convince her daughter of the goodness of the townsfolk.

Sighing exasperatedly, Emma groaned, "I know you want to believe that, but people aren't innately good. Everyone is motivated by something." Thinking of all the hateful glares and sly remarks she and Regina had received during the last few months, she had no doubt that her deputies would have their hands full. "And with the big players out of the game, Mayor Herman might find keeping the status quo a little more difficult. You and David being gone isn't going to help keep your Journey Home group from getting too restless, either."

The teacher turned a hurt expression on Emma and questioned tremulously, "Are you telling us not to come? Emma, he's our grandson. We love him." She just didn't understand why the sheriff was so quick to suspect the worst of everyone nor why she was refusing to try to meet them halfway. Mary Margaret could acknowledge that she and David had made some mistakes in how they had handled the bond between their daughter and Regina, but she didn't think that meant they were horrible people. Surely, they had nothing on the evil queen's own misdeeds.

It was too much. Emma couldn't bear to hear Mary Margaret ready to follow Henry to another world to bring him back when she had sent her own daughter, a helpless newborn, to an unknown land without any sort of guardian. Crossing her arms defensively, she canted her hips to the side and snapped, "You don't know him. I barely know him."

"I was his teacher. Of course, I know him!" Mary Margaret blurted, affronted that Emma would think she knew so little about the boy. "I was the one who gave him the book that brought you here. We're family, and family sticks together when things get difficult," she pressed, parroting the sheriff's own words from a few weeks ago back at her.

Emma jerked her head up, glaring daggers at the woman before her. "Don't," she warned lowly. "You don't get to pull that family shit after what you've done." Taking a step forward, she clenched her fists at her sides to prevent herself from lashing out physically. She felt her anger at her mother...
reaching a boiling point and hissed, "You've made it very clear that you want to tear my family apart." A quick glance at the ship revealed Regina leaning against the gunwale, watching her with furrowed brows. The sheriff took a deep, calming breath and drug a hand down her face. Swallowing hard, she reminded the teacher, "Look, just because we share genetic material, it doesn't make us a family. If the kid wants you or Neal or me in his life, that's up to Regina. She's his mom." Her voice was raspy with emotion but firm.

Mary Margaret tilted her head to the side, tears welling in her eyes at being rejected, yet again, by her daughter. Unable to let it go, she tried to reason with her, persuading, "You gave birth to him. He's your son."

"I gave him up!" Emma admitted loudly as her frustration grew. It was like talking to a brick wall. Gesturing toward the town, she thought of the warm, comfortable home where Henry had grown up. "He's had a pretty damned good life," the sheriff proclaimed in exasperation. Honestly, she thought Henry had been a selfish brat ever since discovering he was adopted. The curse had only compounded matters, but Emma would have given her right arm to have a mother as devoted and caring as Regina had been to Henry. "Look, Mary Margaret," she continued with a sigh, "he's a kid, and kids want it all. He'll figure it out, eventually. I'm okay with how things turned out." Looking her mother in the eyes, she added confidently, "I got where I am on my own, and believe it or not, I like who I am."

Seeing her opportunity, Mary Margaret quietly informed her, "I liked the Emma I got to know before the curse broke." She reached out a hand to place it on Emma's arm but paused hesitantly just before contact. At the forbidding stare she received in return, she let her hand drop back to her side. Flashing her daughter a watery smile, she offered, "I'd like to get to know her, again." Perhaps she could mend things between them if she could just find the right angle from which to approach their relationship.

The sheriff rolled her lips in contemplation before grudgingly saying, "If you want to be in my life, you need to accept me and my choices, and that includes my friends." There, she thought with satisfaction, let her deal with that ultimatum. If her mother could get over the fact that she would have to get used to Regina being a part of her life, again, then maybe they could salvage something of their former friendship.

The teacher had a sinking suspicion what Emma was referring to, what she was expecting. Jaw tightening at the idea of her daughter being so close to her biggest enemy, she ground out, "You're friends with Regina." She could only imagine what sort of lies her stepmother was feeding her.

Emma smirked triumphantly, taking a perverse delight in making her mother so uncomfortable. "Actually, yeah, I am, and I like to think she's my friend, too," she shot over her shoulder as she sauntered away and onto the ship, at last. Vaguely, she heard Mary Margaret following behind her, both coming to a startled halt as the captain of the Crows Guard stomped past, a furious scowl on her face.

Anne came to an abrupt halt in front of Elmwood and growled menacingly, "I'd like to shove a corncob up your ass, but we can't have everything we want." Their argument had lead them up and down the length of the ship as the scout grandmaster had dogged her commander.

Voice a low warning, Montague snarled, "McCormac, the queen's immediate safety is no longer your direct concern." He needed his second in command in Storybrooke, needed to know that the town would be in one piece when they returned with the queen's son.

Leaning in close and tilting her head back to look him in the eyes, Anne hissed, "Her safety and that of the royal family is always my concern. I gave my oath, and I vowed to never leave her side. I
will *not* abandon her in a time of need." Too many times over the years, she felt she had failed her queen. Nothing was going to get in the way of her completing her duty.

Monty understood her loyalty, commended her for it, but he was too unsettled by recent events to be comfortable leaving the town without one of them. He reached out to place a reassuring hand on Anne's shoulder, only to have it shoved off roughly. Sighing, he stated, "I need you here."

Placing her hands on her hips, Anne scoffed, "Milton can handle things in Storybrooke." She refused to stay behind, not when there were others just as capable of helping out in town. Waving a hand in Emma's direction, she pointed out, "Hell, even the sheriff knows I'm going with you. She's already told her deputies to contact Bobby in case of an emergency."

"You hate sailing," Monty reasoned in one last bid to make her listen.

Anne smirked, realizing she'd won if he was trying to use seasickness to sway her. She did a quick about face and strutted over to the supplies stacked on the deck. Settling a crate in her arms, she looked over her shoulder before heading below deck and pointedly said, "And *that* should tell you something, Elmwood."

While Salter and his children worked with Hook and the Crows Guard to get the ship underway, the others gathered at the bow. There was some uncomfortable shuffling as old enemies attempted to keep some distance from each other. Irritated glares and half-formed snarls were exchanged until the silence grew too oppressive to ignore any longer.

Finally, David asked the question no one else had bothered with in the rush to get moving. "So, how are we getting to Neverland?" He was curious what the plan was. To his knowledge, Gold had not managed to find a way to cross realms without a curse or a magic bean to aid him.

Regina smiled toothily and announced briskly, "With this," retrieving the crystal ball from her pocket. It caught the remaining light from the sun, sinking low and red over the horizon, and reflected the sunset back at them. It was beautiful, and the power radiating from it made her bones vibrate every time she held it.

Gold leaned forward slightly on his cane, eyes darting between the sphere and his former apprentice. It felt like he'd had the wind knocked out of him, so great was his astonishment. "You made a deal with *him*?" he demanded, expression one of distaste. He had no idea Regina even knew of the Goblin King, let alone was well enough acquainted with him to procure a trip to another world for so many people. Eyes narrowing suspiciously, he taunted with a knowing smirk, "What did you have to trade for that bauble, I wonder?"

Bristling at the implication in his tone, the former mayor sneered, "Nothing nearly so crass as you're imagining." Expression turning haughty, she drew herself up straighter, ignoring the way her entire body protested the movement. "I don't recall you coming up with a better idea," she cooed in a falsely sweet voice, eyebrow raised imperiously.

"I told you," he ground out through gritted teeth, "I have no other means of crossing realms." It cost him more than he would care to admit to share that truth. The Dark One did not appreciate having any shortcomings put on such public display.

Mary Margaret watched the tense interplay between the two magic users and wondered where Regina had procured the crystal if even Gold was wary of using it. It set her even more on edge, and she asked with concern lacing her tone, "Will that get us back to Storybrooke?"

Shaking her head once, Regina solemnly replied, "No, this is a one-way ticket." Experimentally,
she rolled the crystal in and over her hand like she would occasionally do with her fireballs during idle moments. The magic it contained was seductive and, somehow, oddly familiar.

Brow scrunched uncertainly, David queried, "Hold on. If that's the case, how will we get home?" Yes, he wanted to find Henry, but he also wanted to get the boy and the rest of his family home safely. He definitely didn't want to end up stranded on some island in a strange world.

Regina gave the shepherd a hard look and stated definitively, "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Finding Henry is our first priority," she reminded them all. "Everything else is secondary to that." She didn't care if she had to spend an eternity in hell if it meant her son was safe.

"It's a risky move, Your Highness," Gold tsked, the censure clear in his tone. It was foolhardy to go into a situation without a plan to get out. Ordinarily, he would have already walked away from such insanity, but he'd just found his son after centuries apart. He was not about to let him slip out of his grasp, again. A malicious grin curled his mouth upward as he softly chided, "You're better than this, Regina. Always have an exit strategy. Or have you forgotten your lessons so quickly?" He tittered happily when her eyes widened in alarm.

Regina surged forward, a mask of fury hiding the flare of agony that accompanied the action. When her face was mere inches from the imp's, she snarled, "I've forgotten nothing you godsdammed bastard." She felt her magic rise to the surface, practically begging to be unleashed along with her wrath. Breathing heavily through her nose to staunch the pain, Regina countered, "I didn't see you stopping the fail-safe, my exit strategy," still fuming as she hovered in his personal space. She would not back down from her old teacher, not when she was fully cognizant that she had done something he could not.

Unconcerned by her proximity, Gold could tell the former queen was overflowing with magic, but it was equally obvious that using it would cost her dearly. Flashing her a crocodile smile, he murmured, "Magic comes at a price, Dearie, something I'm sure you're intimately familiar with." His grin spread as he watched her jaw clench, the vein in her forehead standing out in stark relief.

Stepping up to Regina's side, Emma placed a staying hand on her left biceps, squeezing gently to show her support and trying to soothe her through the bond. As much as she wanted to see her friend knock Gold on his ass, she was more worried about how pale the former mayor was getting. "Look, we'll figure out getting home after we get there and save Henry," she compromised, belatedly adding, "and Neal." Pinning the pawnbroker with a hateful glare, she snapped, "So, unless you have another option, save the commentary."

The pawnbroker bared his teeth in warning and jeered, "This won't be easy, Savior. Peter Pan is not to be underestimated." Of all the places in all of the worlds, his son and grandson had to fall through a portal to Neverland. He was not looking forward to dealing with the island's reigning miscreant. Then again, perhaps it would be an opportunity to lay old demons to rest.

The sheriff huffed in annoyance and retorted, "Yeah, well, neither am I, and neither is Regina." It rankled her to be dismissed so out-of-hand. And she hated the way he was goading the former mayor, pushing her further in her already exhausted state.

Gold's mouth quirked up in mirth, and he mocked, "She couldn't swat a fly if she wanted to." As someone who had spent countless hours observing his student, he knew her tells when she was fatigued and in pain. She didn't have the energy to mount an attack, let alone stop someone like Pan. "This isn't a game," he growled angrily, stabbing his cane into the deck as his frustration spilled over. He gestured sharply at David and Mary Margaret and sniped condescendingly, "Rushing in like fools won't win the day. This isn't one of your childhood tales, Savior." His patience for this farce was growing thin, and they hadn't even crossed into Neverland.
Emma scowled at the attitude. She was sick and tired of being told she wouldn't understand, that things were different in this world, as if bad things didn't happen every day. "Tell me something I don't know. Nothing's like the stories," she mumbled under her breath. The sheriff had seen enough growing up in the foster system to know that happy endings were few and far between. And after meeting and living among real, live fairytale characters, she felt sure that the brothers Grimm were probably closer to the truth than they knew.

Gold did not seem appeased by her grumbling response and warned ominously, "Neverland is where dreams become nightmares." These people had no idea what they were headed into, and he refused to be party to their demise when they ignored his counsel. No, once they were in Neverland, he would find Baelfire on his own. Whether or not he attempted to find Henry was still up for debate.

Regina directed a withering glare at the Dark One and slowly made her way over to the gunwale. Rolling her eyes at his predictable dramatics, she dismissed his concerns, flippantly rejoining, "Very poetic, Rumpel, but you forget yourself." She twisted the crystal around her hand for a few moments, enjoying its strange, tingling magic before projecting it into the water several yards in front of the ship. Turning back around to face her former master, she crooned darkly, "I don't cower before monsters; I brave them."

A silence fell upon the ship, then, as a shimmering distortion appeared above the water. The air seemed to grow chill around them as a whirlpool formed in the harbor, gradually drawing the ship in toward the center. As the Jolly Roger fell further into the portal, the waves became more turbulent, winds picking up and causing the sails to snap loudly as they suddenly went taut against their lines. The little group at the bow were blown backward, and Emma scrambled to catch Regina before she could fall, worried about jarring her recent injuries.

"Hold onto something!" came the faint yell, Hook's voice barely reaching them from the wheel, where he was fighting to keep some semblance of control of his ship.

The Salters and the Crows Guard were busily working the rigging and attempting to keep everything from flying apart under the gale-force winds while the others hurried to secure themselves to the nearest stable surface as best they could. David and Mary Margaret found a spot next to the bow to hunker down, the shepherd tying a length of rope around their bodies and lashing it to a bolt set in the bulwark, while Gold disappeared, presumably teleporting below deck.

Emma helped Regina over to the foremast, already securing them both with rope about their waists before Monty could make it over to check on them. She received a brisk nod from him as he continued past to help the others. The sheriff wrapped her arms around Regina as a wave splashed over the side of the ship, salt spray misting their faces. A guilty sigh left her when the former mayor whimpered slightly at the tight hold. "I'm sorry," Emma mumbled into her ear, loosening her grip a little.

The former queen only shook her head and clung to her companion more fiercely as the ship started to plummet through the portal. Emma's strength was the only thing keeping her upright in the face of the tilting vessel and rough waters. Pressing her face firmly against the sheriff's throat, Regina murmured, "Don't be. Just don't let go." She was safe in the arms that supported her, and the touch of her cheek to soft skin was dulling the sharpness of the magic that surrounded them. As they descended fully into the portal, Regina leaned into the protective embrace and found she couldn't imagine attempting this rescue without Emma by her side, bond or no bond to tether them to each other.

~SQ~
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

**Author's Note:** Welcome to our Neverland! While this particular chapter is fairly tame and only very briefly alludes to child abuse and sexual coercion, this is where shit gets real, and our story shifts to a very solid Mature/Explicit rating. Beginning with the next chapter, warnings will be in effect for graphic physical violence and graphic sexual violence. This includes, but is not limited to, depictions of abuse, nonconsensual sexual acts, and torture. Story tags will be updated when these elements start to crop up. Reader discretion is advised, especially for italicized (flashback) sections. We don't take the graphic subject matter lightly, and we strive to handle such situations with the utmost respect and care. Additionally, these story elements have been carefully weighed and haven't been interjected without purpose or meaning to our story.

Finally, we have strived to remove Christian influences from our Enchanted Forest. A different world means different gods and will affect cultural and societal mores and standards accordingly.

**Special Note on Warnings:** Due to the fact that some of the flashbacks (*always italicized*) include major plot points and are perfectly tame with no need for any warnings, we will be doing something different for the flashbacks. At the beginning of each flashback, we will post a content warning specific to that section only. Every flashback will have its own set of warnings, so you can decide which ones you feel you need to skip, if any, while not missing too many important elements. Any flashback can be skipped by scrolling to the next ~SQ~ separator.

**Thank You,** for being so patient with us while we worked out the Neverland arc. This section is so complex and full of twists that we wanted to ensure we had accounted for every detail possible before moving forward. Regular posting shall resume on (at the very least) a monthly basis. Kitty has recently started a full-time job, and Lain has both a full- and part-time job. This leaves less free time for writing than we've had in the past. We hope you enjoy, and remember, we love reviews!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~SQ~

**Part 15**

A swirling, green whirlpool formed in the shallow waters off the small island. Three heads broke the surface, gasping for air and spluttering out salt water. As she got her bearings, Tamara took quick stock of her companions. Greg appeared to be fine, already reaching for Henry's arm and hauling him toward the beach. She waded in behind them, relieved when she caught sight of the two Templars waiting for them on the shore.

The men were in lighter armor than usual, the leather and chainmail still too warm for the tropical island but better suited for the balmy climate than their typical heavy plate. As the trio slogged
through the surf to reach them, the knights eyed the boy with interest. They had gone through an unreasonable amount of trouble to locate and apprehend the child, but the Chantry had demanded it be done. Without him, their entire purpose for being on this Maker forsaken world would be for naught.

Tamara stepped up to the Templars and gave them a respectful nod, glad to see some familiar faces, again, after being so long on her mission. "Irminric, Gowreth, it's good to see you both," she said as she closed the distance between them.

"You, as well," Irminric Eremon replied with a faint smile. "I see you caught our quarry," he observed, indicating Henry who fidgeted sullenly in Greg's tight grip. "The Knight Commander will be most pleased to know your mission was a success."

Tipping her head in acknowledgement at the praise, she hoped it would be enough to finally gain her admittance to their order. It had been a long road, working with the Chantry and integrating into their culture, but it would be well worth the reward if she could, at last, seek service as a Templar. Falling into step with Eremon as he began trekking into the jungle, she asked, "How is Tavish doing? Last time I was here, he was complaining about the weather." A quick glance over her shoulder ensured Greg and Henry were behind them, Gowreth bringing up the rear.

A low chuckle fell from the Knight Corporal as he led the way toward camp. "Not much has changed, then. He's still moaning about the humidity eating away at the armor." He shook his head in amusement and added, "He's got the recruits rolling the mail about in the sand barrels every other day, paranoid that it's going to fall to rust as soon as he turns his back."

Greg scowled as he marched along behind his partner and the knight. He didn't like the way she was so chummy with the Templars on the island. The New York branch of the Chantry hadn't bothered him as much, but there was something about the searching looks this group gave him that set him on edge. They were too secretive, too furtive, for his tastes. He didn't quite buy the line that they were there mining for lyrium. If that were the case, why would they need the boy? No, there was something bigger going on than they were being told, and he didn't like it one bit.

Henry looked around his surroundings with wide-eyed wonder, trying to take it all in as he was marched along. He figured the two men who had met them on the beach were guards or knights of some sort, judging by their armor and swords and their strict, military bearing. The woman who had claimed to be his father's fiancé seemed to know where they were headed, but the man holding him didn't look very happy about being there. He didn't know what they wanted with him, but he was pretty sure that Emma and his dad were already trying to get to him. Grudgingly, he admitted to himself that his mom was probably helping, too. Regardless of anything else, he knew that his family would come for him. That's what family did, after all, find each other.

~SQ~

"Did we make it?" David asked with slight hesitancy, untying himself and his wife. Absently, he straightened his clothes as he glanced around in awe, his eyes squinting in the bright sunlight. He had never been on the open sea. Then, distracted by the noisy hustle of the trained sailors onboard, he watched in fascination as the ship was prepared to set sail proper. He listened as Dave Salter shouted out commands and watched as Hook surveyed the horizon with a telescope.

Leaning heavily against Emma, who still hadn't released her tight grip around her waist, Regina looked over her left shoulder at the shepherd and groused, "We're alive, aren't we?" She winced and squeezed her eyes shut as she dropped her head onto her friend's shoulder. Exhaustion from the last day had finally caught up with her. "Obviously, we made it," she continued in a more subdued tone. "The question is where, exactly, are we?" she pondered, lifting her head and gazing out into
the open sea. Her body tingled as the world's magic caressed her senses. Carefully, she straightened her posture and took a step away from the savior, making her way to the gunwale.

"I can't see any land," Mary Margaret commented, stepping into the middle of the main deck. She slowly spun around in a circle, peering off into the horizon.

Suddenly, there was the sharp clink of a telescope closing. Hook lowered the device and frowned. "That's because there isn't any," he remarked, trotting down the stairs from the quarter deck. "I'll need to consult my charts, but I'd estimate we're at least a few days out, give or take," he explained as he headed below to retrieve his navigation charts for Neverland.

"You couldn't have gotten us closer?" Emma called out, still hovering by the former mayor. Her eyes kept switching between the two, having Regina by the railing made her nervous. She subconsciously followed her and reached out to loosely hold the other woman's elbow. Her thumb stroked firmly over the joint.

"It wasn't my portal, Love," Captain Jones replied with a half snort. He nodded toward the ailing queen, jeering, "Perhaps you should confer with Her Highness." Then, he trotted down the ladder and disappeared below deck.

Whacking his cane hard against the planking, Gold purposely made his way toward his former apprentice. He straightened his suit as he snarled a stern reprimand, "You shouldn't have trusted him." He hadn't a clue what she was thinking, let alone how she knew of the Goblin King, but clearly, he had underestimated his star pupil's resourcefulness. He was also very curious as to what deal she had struck with Jareth.

"Oh, and you're any better?" the former mayor retorted darkly, glaring over her shoulder at him. Her hands gripped the rail tightly. When their eyes met, she bristled at the strange expression within them. No, she wouldn't be knocked off balance because Rumpelstiltskin was feeling nostalgic.

"We're here. That's all that matters," the school teacher interjected, stepping between the two magic users. She held her hands out, urging them to calm down. "We have to work together," she quickly reminded them, starting to feel ill-at-ease as she looked back-and-forth between the two. "We need to save Henry and Neal."

Regina restrained herself from tearing into Mary Margaret for her insipid, inspirational comments. She kept her breathing slow and measured as she waited for the Dark One to make a move. However, when her former master turned and walked away, she couldn't hide her confusion. The imp never missed an opportunity to ridicule her, but the quick squeeze on her elbow drew her attention back to Emma, whose soft smile quelled her swirling anger.

Thundering up the ladder, Hook burst onto the deck, holding a rolled-up map and a sextant. He quickly trotted back onto the quarter deck and weighed the map down on top of the wheel housing. "It's a quick calculation," he muttered, holding his hand up to the sun. He counted silently as he systematically dropped his hand downward. There were a few hours of sunlight left. "But, my best guess is we're a week out if we have a good wind," he continued, staring down at the map. He couldn't know for sure until nightfall, but the two stars visible during the day offered him a reasonable guess. "The good news—."

"There's good news?" Anne McCormac interrupted with a foul look. With hands on her hips, she watched the Salters and the other Crows Guard move around the vessel. She hated ships, and she especially hated ships on the ocean. But where her queen went, she would follow, always.
Narrowing his eyes at the despicable pirate, Gold challenged, "This is the fastest ship in all the realms, and a week is the best you can do?" He'd done his research on the famed Jolly Roger. Although small, it was quite the prize. His keen gaze met Salter's eldest boy's. He knew the expression of longing well.

"My ship may be made of enchanted wood, Crocodile, but it doesn't work miracles," Captain Jones replied with barely concealed venom. As Dave Salter joined him at the helm, he gazed down at his map. "Like I was saying, the good news is there's a small island along the way if we're where I think we are," he paused to point with his right hand at a small dot on the map in the middle of hundreds of nautical miles of water. "We can stop and restock fresh water and other supplies," he added, looking up to see that Prince Charming, Snow White, and the Crows Guard commander had joined them.

Looking between the three men, the shepherd nodded and proclaimed, "Sounds like a plan." His brow furrowed when Monty and Salter shared a quiet look. A hierarchy needed to be established, sooner rather than later, as well as an agreed upon leader. Looking over his shoulder, he glanced down at his wife.

Nodding at her husband's assessment, Mary Margaret scanned the weathered panel of paper. She'd only seen similar maps a few times and hadn't the faintest clue how sailors navigated the seas during the day. However, she decided to trust in the expertise of others and contribute her fair share. "What can we do to help?" she happily chirped, glancing between the men. She frowned when Salter snarled at his eldest daughter, demanding she train the land lovers.

Meanwhile, Regina had remained at the gunwale, content to let her commander and favored smuggler deal with the particulars of their seaward journey. "Well," she drawled as she slowly moved toward the ladder leading below deck, "since it seems we're on the extended voyage of the damned, I'm going to go take a nap." She couldn't remain standing any longer. A part of her feared she wouldn't make it to the cabin on her own. Gods, she hurt, and she was so tired. However, Emma stayed glued to her side, and she was quickly flanked by Bruce and Anne. Feeling secure and with an inane need to needle someone, she cheekily relayed, "Your cabin's ours, Pirate."

"Oy, it's my ship!" Hook shouted, storming toward the stairs to the main deck. But when two of Salter's teenagers blocked his path, he stumbled to a halt and frowned. His gaze quickly swept the people manning his ship and, with a huff, held up his hand and took a step back. He was captain of his ship in name only, it seemed. "Fine, fine," he relented, moving back to the helm.

Letting the Crows Guards assist the former mayor below, Emma flashed a bright smile at the pirate. "Dibs!" she called gleefully before hopping down the ladder-stairs.

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"The cabin has been made presentable, Your Highness," Bruce Farmer explained, pressing his long, skinny body along the bulkhead and opening the narrow door to the captain's quarters. Out of habit, his trained eyes swept the cabin for potential dangers. He nodded at Anne, who slipped away to fetch their commander.

"Thank you, Bruce," Regina replied, carefully walking past her guard. She raised an eyebrow at the lack of clutter and grit. Making her way to the bed in the corner, she idly dragged her finger along a shelf and was pleased to discover it was clean. She smirked, noting the fresh linens. Reaching the bed, she pressed her hand into the mattress. It, too, had been replaced with its modern equivalent.

Emma slid into the room. Her eyes darted around, taking in all the differences from her last visit to the Jolly Roger. She was suitably impressed with the Crows Guard's efficient spring cleaning.
"Nice," she muttered approvingly. As Monty entered, she shoved her hands in her front pockets and shuffled back a few steps. Her concern rose as the former mayor remained silent and still beside the high bed. Biting her lower lip, her gaze met the commander's.

"Alma shall return shortly with a stool of some sort," Farmer stated, placing his hand on the doorknob. He quickly assessed the tension in the cabin, and added, "I'll be posted outside the door if you require anything further." When his queen nodded, he took a quick, quiet step backwards and gently shut the cabin door.

Then, it was quiet aside from the sound of water lapping at the hull and distant shouting. The sheriff wasn't sure how long the three of them stood in silence, but it made her nervous. Rolling her lips, she anxiously commented, "I think I'm going to need a ladder to get into that bed." She chuckled, shifting her weight onto her left foot and ran her right hand through her wild hair. "Are you going to make it?" she lightly joked, watching her friend. She ignored Monty's narrowed glare.

With a sigh, Regina admitted, "I don't know." She turned and moved to the ornate writing desk. Pulling out and turning one of the chairs to face into the cabin, she maneuvered the seat between the desk and bed, its back against the bulkhead under the row of windows. Using the desk for leverage, she lowered herself and looked expectantly at her commander. She moved to cross her legs and hissed, carefully reversing the motion.

Monty frowned. This journey was going to be hard on the queen. A sea voyage wouldn't provide the necessary and restful convalescence his sovereign required. Turning toward the latest recruit, he opened his mouth to speak but was interrupted by a short, sharp knock. "Come," he instructed, swiveling back toward the door.

Carrying a small wooden crate of glass bottles, Alma Chavez briskly entered. The full bottles of rum rattled and clinked as she moved toward the bed. Then, with practiced skill, she proceeded to secure the crate to the floor beside the bed.

Emma crossed her arms. With a furrowed brow, her eyes darted between the Crows Guard and Regina. Didn't they notice how miserable she was, how much pain she was in? Half listening to Monty and Alma, she watched as her companion struggled to keep her eyes open. She gritted her teeth in irritation.

When Alma left, Bruce closed the door after her, and the commander turned toward his queen, offering his hand. The former mayor graciously accepted it and allowed herself to be guided toward the crate. With some assistance, she managed to settle on top the clean bedclothes.

After a few quiet moments of lying on her back, Regina rolled onto her right side, turning her back toward the room, and closed her eyes. It wasn't her preferred or the most comfortable position, especially for her right hip, but she felt safe enough. "Stop hovering," she slurred with mild annoyance. Then, she felt the gentle tugging of someone pulling off her boots followed by the soft weight of a crocheted blanket being draped over her. She hummed in appreciation and sagged further into the mattress.

The sheriff smiled as her friend relaxed. Hearing the door creak open, she whipped her head around and scowled at the intruder slipping inside. *What the hell does Anne want, now?* she angrily thought. She glared at the diminutive woman as she approached the bed, feeling Monty's firm grasp on her left shoulder that urged her backwards. Reluctantly, she did as she was bid.

"Your Highness," Anne whispered, reaching into her leather vest. She pulled out a small, brown vial. Unscrewing the cap to reveal an eyedropper, she quickly loaded it while inquiring, "How many drops?" as she leaned against the side of the bed.
"One," the former mayor answered, turning her head to the left and opening her mouth enough for the scout to deposit the medicine. She sighed as the bitter tincture hit her tongue. Sleep would overtake her soon.

Emma weakly fought against being pushed toward the door, not wanting to leave Regina alone. However, she didn't have much of a choice. There wasn't a whole lot she could do against a wall of a man like Monty. "I'll be back to check on you later," she promised as she was nudged across the threshold. At the soft hum in response and seeing Anne sitting in the chair beside the bed, she relaxed and willingly walked down the short hall toward the stairs. Before heading up, she looked over her shoulder and saw the commander right behind her.


Yeah, she knew that, she really did. She just didn't want to let Regina out of her sight. During her time working and training with the Crows Guard over the last few weeks, she believed any of them would lay down their life without hesitation before allowing any harm to come to their queen. What type of evil witch inspired that kind of loyalty?

When the pair emerged above deck, they blinked against the sunlight. While below, the mishmash crew had gotten the Jolly Roger underway. The Salters and Crows Guard functioned as a seamless unit, and Captain Jones couldn't look any prouder. After all, it had been a long time since he and his ship had had a proper crew.

Calling down from the helm to the commander, Hook praised over the sounds of wind and waves, "For soldiers, your men are quite at home on the water." He took a deep breath of sea air. Somehow, the ship felt lighter, faster, almost as if it was happy to be on the open ocean, again.

Elmwood faced Jones, raising his chin. "We have many skills, Captain," he responded, the threat plain. He ignored the startled looks from the Charmings, who were talking with Dave and his eldest girl.

"Aye," Hook readily agreed, catching the message loud and clear. Solemnly, he met the savior's eye and promised, "I will not hinder the quest for the boy. I give you my word." He frowned when the commander merely turned away, gesturing for Emma to go speak to Dave's eldest girl.

The sheriff joined the small group in time to hear Mary Margaret ask, "Where will everyone sleep?" She looked around, counting fourteen people and knowing there were six more below deck. She only knew about three cabins. Regina and Emma had commandeered the captain's quarters, and Gold had already sequestered himself in the officer's.

"Unless we drop anchor, we'll sleep in shifts," the brawny young woman answered. Signe's eyes were sharp like her father's, but her hair was strawberry blonde streaked with darker red. "There're two bunks in the officers' cabin and plenty of hammocks in the hold," she elucidated, surprised by the royal trio's casual acceptance.

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As a red-orange sun was almost below the horizon, the Jolly Roger sliced through the calm, grey-blue ocean at an impressive clip. Emma Swan had just finished swabbing the main deck, her last chore for the day. She wiped at her sweaty brow with the back of her left hand and sighed in relief. Letting her aching shoulders slump, she glanced around her, scoping out who was still above deck. She saw her parents talking with Dave at the helm, and Monty was returning from below. Pursing her lips, she bent over and picked up her bucket of now dirty salt water, tossing its contents over...
the starboard side.

Chuckling as he came closer, Elmwood commented in a low tone, "Next time, you might want to dump that off the aft." He smirked when the recruit's eyes widened as she cursed under her breath. He remembered her flummoxed and stricken expression as one of Salter's boys had cleaned the outer hull a couple of hours earlier. Briefly looking over his shoulder, he added, "It's alright. I don't think anyone noticed, this time." He paused and glanced up. Nodding skyward, he continued, "Except for Anne." He waved to his second and gestured toward the queen's cabin.

McCormac nodded and proceeded to skitter down from the crow's nest like a squirrel from a tree. She jogged across the main deck and slipped below into the lantern-lit lower decks.

The sheriff slapped her wet mop into the empty bucket. Glaring after the scout grandmaster, she huffed because she wanted to check on Regina. "Is she okay?" she asked quietly, facing the commander. Her hands nervously worked along the well-worn, wooden mop handle.

"She will be," Monty reassured. His patient eyes watched the recruit with veiled interest. "She just woke up. Anne went to assist," he explained, his head tilting ever so slightly.

Nodding, Emma bent over and picked up her bucket. She idly carried it and the mop back to the storage locker in the bow. Closing and securing the locker's lid, she turned to see the commander watching her. Her eyes darted to the open hatch, and she sighed, knowing she'd never make it. Besides that, Regina deserved her privacy. Then, she caught her mother's eye and hurriedly looked away, avoiding the fond smile directed at her, acting as if she hadn't noticed as she casually walked back to Monty. She leaned on her forearms against the gunwale as she inquired, "Do we have enough supplies for a week?"

She didn't know much about sailing and life without modern conveniences—using the bathroom had been an eye-opening experience—but she understood that, just like shelter, fresh water and food were necessities. And when your shelter floated atop of a freaking huge ocean, you took care of it. That was why the Beetle had lasted as long as it had, lots of love and maintenance.

"Fresh water might become an issue, eventually, but we'll make do," Elmwood answered honestly. He didn't see the point in sugar coating it for the savior. Thus far, he had been quite impressed with the young recruit. He turned his gaze to the horizon and watched the last sliver of sun dip below the skyline. It had been an extremely long day, having already slipped into late evening before they'd sailed through the portal into the midafternoon of another world.

The sheriff shivered, and she quickly retrieved her discarded jacket folded at the base of the mainmast. Slipping her arms into the sleeves, she returned to her spot and directly inquired, "So, that Jareth guy, you've met him before? How does Regina know him?" Her imagination had gone rampant whilst swabbing the deck, trying to figure out their connection. When no answer was forthcoming, she frowned and glanced up at the stalwart commander. "Okay, fine, keep your secrets, but I'm worried about Regina," she stated, hiding her hurt at his silence. She had thought they were developing a real working relationship.

After so much time, Merlin's spell still held strong. Elmwood was unable to impart any knowledge from the event he had witnessed many years ago. With sad eyes, he studied the recruit's profile, and he truly wished he could explain something about it to her. However, he could only agree with her, "As am I." Sighing, he continued, "She's exhausted, but she won't be dissuaded from finding the boy." Although Henry had been good for her, he still worried for his sovereign. "I understand the worry you have for your child," he started and stopped. Looking down at Emma, he waited for her gaze to meet his own. "But, we must pace ourselves. Stories of Peter Pan shouldn't be taken lightly," he intoned.
Holding the commander's gaze for a long beat, the sheriff nodded, signaling she understood. She got it. They were a hodge-podge group of enemies working together to save one kid from another kid who was apparently evil incarnate. Standing up straight, she wrapped her arms around her middle, both for comfort and warmth. Damn, wasn't Neverland supposed to be a tropical island? "I got that from Gold's rousing speech of doom, and I know we'll rescue Henry," she replied, letting her weariness seep into her voice. "That I don't doubt," she continued with confidence. Then, she halted, and all the sureness she had felt a moment before disappeared in a flash. She huffed and shook her head, saying, "But a week is a long time, and a lot can happen."

Monty clasped his new recruit's left shoulder. His grip was firm and strong as he squeezed encouragingly. "We must concentrate on what we can do, now, and try not to distract ourselves with things out of our control," he clarified.

"That's easier said than done," Emma countered flatly, but she took heart in Elmwood's words. She saw the belief in his eyes, and that gave her hope. So, as a small smile spread across her face, she nodded and said, "I'm going to go check on Regina."

Elmwood watched her until she disappeared. He looked up at the helm and spotted the pirate's lingering gaze following the sheriff. Smirking, he faced outward, again, knowing the queen didn't like to share.

~SQ~

"You've made remarkable progress since the hospital," Anne lightly commended as she carefully rotated her sovereign's left arm, reassessing her range of motion. When the queen had woken from her nap, Monty had done as the scout had requested when he had originally relieved her several hours ago, and fetched her. Her warm, slender hand gently supported the exposed shoulder as her other held and guided the motion of the arm. "You'll need to try to keep limber," she continued, letting her gaze drop to her queen's, who sat on one of the chairs from the writing desk. "It'll be hell if you stiffen up on this ship," she quietly reminded her, lowering the arm to a more natural position.

The corner of Regina's lip twitched as the scout pushed almost too far. She nodded and sighed as she was well aware of her physical limitations, pre- and post-torture. "What would you recommend?" she probed, content to let McCormac do her magic. As nimble fingers prodded and prodded her right hip, she winced and tightly shared, "That hurts."

"Nothing until your hip improves," Anne absently replied, focusing on the soft tissue damage around the ball socket. The purple-yellow-brown bruises peeked over the waistband of black fabric, but they did appear less pronounced. Unsurprised by the admission, she was about to slip a hand down the side of her queen's leggings when there were three, short knocks on the door. "Damnit, Swan," she muttered under her breath, standing upright. It was their signal for Emma. Quickly, but carefully, she straightened the queen's garments and helped her back into her soft, purple blazer.

Both women heard a muffled conversation through the wooden door. The former mayor frowned slightly when the sheriff didn't immediately burst into the cabin. Looking up at the scout grandmaster, she gently chided, "Emma doesn't understand royal protocols." Since the whole fiasco that was the bond had started, the savior had had unrestricted access to her, and now, her guards were going to change that fundamental aspect of their relationship. It was a facet she'd grown to find endearing.

Huffing and rolling her eyes, Anne crossed her arms. She pursed her lips and, in a low voice, countered, "Well, she'll have to get used to it." After all, Emma was now a recruit in the Queen's
Guard and would be expected to behave like one.

"No," Regina immediately rebuked in a warning tone. "You will not unduly restrict her access to me." Her expression turned hard as her eyes flashed with fire. Maybe if Emma wasn't a friend, maybe if Emma had been the dominating master Gold had hoped for, then she would have given into the Crows Guard's overzealous protections. But no, her Emma was a free spirit, and she wanted to keep her that way.

McCormac frowned for a split second but dutifully nodded, mentally recalling the select few who had such a privilege, herself included. "As you wish, Your Highness," she gracefully acknowledged, straightening her posture and bowing her head. She and Monty had high aspirations for the young royal, and the more comfortable the queen was with her, the better. "I'll inform the others during the morning briefing," she quickly added, taking a step backward toward the other side of the cabin.

"Thank you, Anne," the former queen softly replied, catching the scout's eye as she looked up. She was relieved by the quick acceptance. For reasons beyond her, at the moment, she needed the savior in her life, just as she was needed in hers. When a loud, single knock was heard from the door, she expectantly responded, "Come."

Opening the door wide, Emma smiled brightly, partly because the cabin was warm and partly because her friend was awake, sitting in a chair. "Hey," she greeted with a goofy grin. Her eyes darted to Anne messing with roll of canvas cloth in the far corner, and she nodded at her. However, her brow furrowed when the scout grandmaster just smirked before going back to her project. So, after closing the door behind her, she sassily teased, "You missed all the fun this afternoon. There was a sailing-for-dummies lesson and lots of cleaning. Mary Margaret made a chore chart." A warm smile spread across her face as she dropped into the other available chair. Immediately, she looked over her shoulder at Anne to ask if she wanted to sit, but the other woman was unrolling the canvas. Distracted by the scout, she added, "We need to talk."

"I'm not five," Regina retorted, rolling her eyes. "Tell your mother I'll do my chores when I get to them." She pursed her lips and narrowed a glare at Anne's back, wondering how Monty had let that slide. Stretching out her right leg and sitting most un-lady-like, she rolled her shoulders before settling against the chairback.

With a breathy chuckle, the sheriff slouched in her seat, unzipping her jacket. Her legs were stretched out straight in front of her. Idly, she pivoted her feet back-and-forth on her boots' heels, randomly changing the pattern. "No, this is something else," she casually corrected, glancing around at all the lanterns in the cabin. "Something Neal said this morning," she tentatively amended. She flexed her hands a few times before shoving them into her coat pockets.

The former mayor sensed the apprehension rolling off her companion in waves, as if the fidgetiness wasn't enough to clue her in to Emma's anxiousness. Her gaze searched the sheriff's profile, trying to determine what troubled her so. And as the long, awkward pause dragged on, she exhaled heavily and suggested, "Judging by your expression, it's obviously something unpleasant. I suggest you simply rip the Band-Aid off and get it over with, Dear." Thankfully, she didn't have to wait long.

Taking a deep breath, Emma squeezed her eyes shut and gushed, "Goldisyourfather." When she didn't immediately hear anything, she cracked her right eye open ever so slightly and peeked at the brunette.

A few seconds ticked by in stunned silence as the rushed statement hung in the air. "Excuse me?!" Regina angrily snarled, abruptly standing. The chair tipped onto its back legs but fell forward onto
all four, again. Like a bolt of lightning, all her hard-won physical relief from the nap was quickly lost. Her muscles coiled tightly in protest as her anger and magic churned and thrashed within her. Her fists trembled at her sides as she analyzed whether or not it was a possibility.

The sheriff's declaration had halted McCormac in her hammock installation. Her head whipped around, and she stared appraisingly at the savior. Monty had shared that tidbit with the other Queen's Personal Guard at the hospital, and she had been shocked at the revelation. Never would she have predicted the Dark One was the queen's father. She was rather impressed with the sheriff for stepping up and sharing the information with the queen so quickly. Then, her gaze flitted to her sovereign, and with rising concern, she probed, "Your Highness?"

Hanging her head, Emma deflated and muttered, "You would make me say it again." She took a deep breath and released it in a long, slow sigh. Putting her feet flat on the floor, she looked up at her friend, and she quietly explained, "Neal overheard Cora tell Gold that he's your father, and Cora confirmed it." The corner of her mouth twitched as she swallowed hard, her magic making her stomach turn over. "It was when they were in the shop, and she still had the dagger."

Memories flooded the former mayor's mind's eye. Everything she thought she had known about her father and Rumpelstiltskin was suddenly called into question, and she didn't know what to do about that. Did Daddy know? Strangely, it would explain so much. She gritted her teeth and screwed her eyes shut. As the rage within intensified, she felt the vein in her forehead bulge. Her face contorted into a silent snarl, breathing slow and heavy through her nose.

Slowly, the sheriff stood, glancing nervously over her shoulder at an obviously concerned Anne. She had thought she'd seen the epitome of the brunette's anger, but apparently, she was wrong. "Say something," she pleadingly whined, turning big, green eyes on her companion.

Then, Regina spun in place, eyes popping open. Her left arm swept in a wide arch, knocking the chair back and out of her path toward the cabin door. It tumbled against the bed as she stalked forward. Yanking the cabin's door open, she stumbled across the threshold, quickly righting herself. She continued her way down the short, narrow hall, not to be dissuaded, for she had an imp to disembowel.

She navigated the narrow passages, bracing herself against the wooden walls, and brashly peered into the other two, private cabins onboard. Each time, her anger flared and lashed when she found the quarters empty. Vaguely aware of Emma trailing her, she ignored the cautious, soothing magic of the savior as she hoisted herself up the ladder-stairs. The spikes of tearing pain from the exertion further fueled her rising fury. Stepping out into the late evening air, she ignored the biting, cold breeze and the brilliantly clear, darkening sky full of stars. Her glower easily targeted the Dark One within the lantern shadows at the forward, starboard bow, and nothing else existed.

Stalking toward her prey, Regina flexed her fingers. Magic coiled and slithered in and around her, eagerly waiting and wanting to be utilized. As Gold noticed her approach, he turned toward her. She flashed her teeth in a shark-like grin and took delight in his thinly veiled surprise. When only a foot remained between them, she raised her right arm and slapped the bastard hard across his face, taking satisfaction in his stumble and bleeding lip.

Gold staggered backwards a few steps. Leaning against the shipside, he wiped the pad of his right hand's thumb across the right corner of his mouth, feeling the slickness of blood. "What was that for?" he sternly demanded, pulling a handkerchief from an inside breast pocket of his long, wool trench coat.

"That was for not telling me," the former mayor explicated darkly, her voice low and deep. Her eyes were wild with a raw eagerness to destroy.
Emma surged forward, knowing her friend was about to lose her shit on the powerful bastard, but she was caught by her left elbow. She roughly tugged, trying to break free from Monty; however, when she glared over her shoulder, she saw it was Anne holding her back. The scout grandmaster subtly shook her head, and the savior took a step back. She looked forward and watched, vaguely aware of Monty standing at her right.

Frowning, the pawnbroker tilted his head and cocked an eyebrow. "You'll have to be a tad more specific, Dearie," he smoothly jeered, knowing full well to what his daughter was inferring. "There are quite a lot of things I keep to myself," he added for good measure. His gaze quickly assessed his former apprentice, and like always, he was duly impressed by her fortitude.

"You said I had so much potential, so much power," Regina retorted, mockingly using the words he had said to her decades ago. "It's why you were terribly eager to make me your apprentice," she continued, remembering his frequent visits and insistent urgings during her marriage to Leopold. Slowly shaking her head, her eyes drifted closed as her body shuddered.

Reflexively, Gold impishly quipped, "One does generally want a bright student, not a dunce who will waste precious time." He shouldn't have said that, but it was their dynamic. It was how they functioned. He taunted her, and she doled it right back. However, he truthfully hadn't known she was his, and that weighed on his dark heart.

Elmwood grunted, ignoring the curious glances of his second-in-command and the newest recruit. He had despised the Dark One's visits and secret lessons. Of course, he hadn't cared much for Merlin's interference, either.

Exhaling a heavy, shaky breath through her nose, the former mayor felt the eyes of everyone above deck watching them. She sensed Emma loitering at a respectful distance behind her, not doubting that Monty and Anne stood with her. Blinking several times, she pinned the creature who was her biological father with a hard glare. "You're the one who took all my pain and anger and nurtured it so very carefully, warping it into madness." She paused, sucking in the cool night air. Its chill helped quell the inferno within. "All those years, you kept dragging me down into darkness, promising my freedom and happiness would come if I'd just let you guide me," she intoned, her voice hoarse and tight. Her short fingernails pierced the flesh of her palms.

The savior shifted her weight from foot to foot, knowing Regina preferred to keep her life private, but she couldn't shield her friend from this. She had to let her face her demons. Feeling a gentle pat on her arm, she looked to her left and smiled weakly at the scout. She was doing the right thing here, even if she wanted to pummel his face repeatedly.

"If you're trying to flatter me, it won't work," the pawnbroker jibed with false bravado, leaning forward and holding his daughter's hateful gleam. With a broad smile, he distractedly worked the tip of his cane against the decking and recalled the time of which she spoke, her marriage to the King of Angevin.

"You're a bastard, Rumpelstiltskin, a twisted, freakish imp who cares nothing for the collateral damage done in the wake of your pursuit of power," Regina seethed, gritting teeth. The muscles in her neck flexed and strained under taut skin. Her shoulders felt like stone. Vaguely, she was aware of the blood leaving warm, sticky trails all over her clenched hands.

Tilting his head to the left, Gold judiciously kept his tone even as he replied, "I've been called worse, but I still don't know what we're talking about." It was a lie, and they both knew it. He idly tapped his left thumb on his cane's handle.

"Was this your plan the entire time?" the former mayor snarled, quickly losing what little patience
she had left. She jerked her hands open in a short, exaggerated gesture, absently healing herself. Small clouds of purple obscured them before gradually dissipating. As the crackling sting of magic coursed through her system, the sensation momentarily tempered her rampant wrath. Crossing her arms, she narrowed her eyes at her so-called father and righteously accused, "Using your daughter as a tool to find your long-lost son is a perverse way to show your affection."

Everyone stopped even the pretense of being busy upon hearing that announcement. Their eyes drifted to the pair arguing on the starboard bow. Anne and Emma glanced around, assessing reactions, while Monty kept his queen in sight because he didn't care what others thought. And while the Salters were surprised, the Charmings and Hook looked positively shocked.

With the words said with such vivid disdain, the pawnbroker's mask slipped ever so slightly. The sadness of his actions, again, yanked at the strings of his dark heart. His eyes softened, as did his voice. "I only found out when Cora told me," he explained. Then, pausing, his mood shifted, and he pointedly reminded her, "As she was trying to kill me."

Regina held her rigid posture, refusing to be detoured from her course of questions. "You claimed you knew me when I was little," she stated, cataloguing his micro-expressions. "Did you steal me from Mother then decide I was too much trouble and return me?" she demanded, shifting her weight onto her left leg. The rolling of the ship was readily draining her stamina, but she would cripple herself before giving him the satisfaction of seeing her suffer. So, when the bow crested a particularly high wave and dropped, she stumbled forward, almost falling into the shipside. She glared at the Dark One, now beside her, and angrily challenged, "Was I so worthless to you that you could throw me away twice?!"

Instinctively, Gold reached out and gently cupped her elbow, offering stabilizing support as the Jolly Roger sailed through the night. His back toward the others, he quietly plead, "Regina, please believe me." His soft expression and gentle words were only loud enough for his daughter. "I had no idea you were my child," he continued with regret, holding her gaze. Absently stroking the joint, he wondered why she wasn't wearing a coat. "Cora bound your latent magic to hide you from me," he elucidated with a wistful sigh. "She swore you were Henry's." And he had truly believed she was the daughter of the Prince of Edetani. The timing alone had seemed to prove it.

The former mayor pulled her arm free and braced herself against the gunwale. How dare he assume such familiarity with her after everything? Her chin lowered in lethal defiance as she deftly confronted in a deadly tone, "So, the all-powerful Dark One didn't know." She paused, taking satisfaction when he withdrew his hand. As it hovered in the air, she cheekily chided, "I thought you could see the future."

Emma's shoulders slumped, understanding her friend's pain and rage. They were both pawns to their parents' whims and desires. Damnit, Neal, she mentally cursed. She was going to kick him in the balls for forcing this on her. Regina didn't need this shit, now, not after everything else. Stuffing her hands in her coat pockets, she startled when she realized the former mayor wasn't wearing a coat.

Bristling, the pawnbroker stabbed his cane against the wooden deck. "It's not an exact science, you know," he countered with venom and a sneer. "Some things do slip through the cracks," he justified a little too easily. Releasing a heavy huff, he added in a more level tone, "You never displayed any magical potential till that day you called on me." If only he had known then, he lamented. Everything would have been different.

"Coward," Regina growled, inching forward. She leaned into his personal space. "You should have told me once you knew. I shouldn't have had to get it third hand," she hissed, tired of the games
"Yes, because manipulating you into casting the Dark Curse was a fantastic way to start a father-
daughter relationship," Gold retorted bitterly. He tossed his right arm skyward in exasperation.
Damnit, he was trying!

"Relationship?" the former mayor scoffed with a light titter. Then, she laughed, loud and
mirthlessly. Sobering, she darkly leveled in a low voice, "We have no relationship." She narrowed
her eyes as she questioned, "Or have you forgotten how I exiled you from my kingdom?" That had
enraged the Dark One to no end, banishing him, among others, from the Dark Forest.

"Oh, I haven't forgotten," the pawnbroker answered in a quiet rumble. Again, his mouth got ahead
of his brain, and he senselessly proceeded to provoke his daughter. "Quite a fancy piece of handy-
work, that," he jeered. He flashed an impish smirk as he continued in a gleeful timbre, "It seems
you take after dear old dad more than you know."

Tired of his foolishness, Regina pushed off the shipside and gimped her way back toward the
hatch. She ignored the curious and worried expressions of those around her. Then, she remembered
something, and her fury spiked, again. She straightened and whipped around, storming back toward
the man who had sired her. When his puzzled gaze once again met hers, she pulled back her right
arm and quickly popped him square in the nose.

Anne snickered and shared an approving smirk with the sheriff. She was pleased the queen still
remembered their lessons.

Gold stumbled back, not having expected such a forceful blow, but he managed to catch himself.
He gingerly held his handkerchief to his bleeding nose and demanded with a fiery glare, "What the
hell was that for?"

"That was for trying to bed me," the former mayor tersely responded with a very pleased smirk.
Despite the pain radiating down her arm and into her shoulder, she felt content with the inflicted
damage and lifted her chin with pride. Of course, as far as she was concerned, he deserved worse,
but this would have to suffice.

Done with the banter, the pawnbroker decided to put his former apprentice in her place and went
for the kill. "Well, a man has needs, as I'm sure you know," he reminded in a smooth, casual tone.
The corner of his lip twitched at the expected reaction. He almost felt bad for it.

Elmwood's hands curled into tight fists as he breathed heavily through his nose. Even so, he held
his position, despite the increasing desire to toss the imp overboard. This monster was no father.

The reference to her marriage tipped Regina over the edge, her fury blinding her to the effects
of the magic sparking and stinging her. "If I'm not mistaken, you had to resort to magic to get at my
cunt," she sneered derisively. Timber low and deceptively calm, she growled, "And even then, you
still didn't manage to fuck me." The longer she stared at him, the less she controlled her magic. It
roiled and coiled within her like a churning storm, ready to release its devastation.

During the argument, Emma had felt the rising, tickling prickles of the bond slowly activating. She
glanced around nervously, uncertain what to do. She didn't want to just interrupt and warn her
friend. The Dark One would use it to further provoke and taunt. So, taking a slow breath, she
closed her eyes and focused on her magic. She was determined not to control but to suggest and
distract, trying her best to keep the bond calm and quiescent. With it effectively subdued, she
slouched in quiet relief, ignoring Anne's curious side-eye because she had done it. She had
successfully prevented the bond from rearing its ugly head. However, her sense of accomplishment
was short-lived.

Tilting his chin downward and raising an eyebrow, Gold took on a contemplative expression. "As I recall, you were rather savage. It seems the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, Dearie," he gleefully taunted, flashing a toothy grin.

"Son of a bitch," the sheriff hissed in irritation, redoubling her efforts.

Regina closed what little space remained between them and, keeping her tone tight and clipped, she snipped, "You're a cocksucker, Rumpelstiltskin." Then, just as the former mayor was about to call forth and release her fury, she was wrapped in the comforting warmth of Emma's familiar magic slipping around her, gently holding and caressing her, reminding her the sheriff was there and that she wasn't alone. With supreme reluctance, she took a step back and worked to slow her breathing.

After tapping his right pointer finger on his chin for a few seconds, he helpfully reminded her, "Mm, no. I do believe that was your job." Then, his face morphed into a leer, and spreading his arms wide, he huskily suggested, "It's not too late to give it a go. Come to Papa."

Eyes wide in manic wrath, the former queen lunged forward with a loud snarl, lips curled back and hands crooked into claws as she reached for the imp's throat, magic crackling between her fingertips. She was thwarted as strong arms encircled her waist, carefully and firmly directing her away from the Dark One. Regina was ready to convey her rage onto her captor when golden curls were blown over her shoulder and across her face. Instantly, instead of fighting the embrace, she fell into it and allowed the savior to guide her away from her anger, physically and emotionally.

"Okay!" Emma said in a tone full of false cheer. "Let's go look at the water over here, away from everyone else," she brightly suggested, silently relieved but concerned at the lack of resistance. The sheriff pushed the questions raised by the confrontation aside for the time being, focusing on bringing her friend down from her murderous impulses.

Watching the scene from the helm, Mary Margaret frowned as she pursed her lips in deep thought. She hadn't heard everything said between the two magic users, especially the last of their conversation, given the noise of sailing, but she had caught the integral parts. "Rumpelstiltskin's Regina's father," she repeated to herself.

"That's . . . I don't have words," David responded. He observed as his daughter ushered Regina across the deck and away from Gold, Monty and Anne moving with them, shielding them. The shepherd watched as his daughter talked with the former queen and draped her coat around the brunette's shoulders. His stare turned thoughtful as she glanced over her shoulder, whispering something and glaring at the pawnbroker.

Captain Jones continued to hold the ship's wheel, holding their course steady. He kept his relief to himself. A magical battle was always a risky thing to witness, and he certainly didn't want to be on the sidelines of one whilst onboard a ship in the middle of a vast ocean. "One of them passed along good genes," he idly remarked. He wasn't blind or stupid, the former queen had an attractive body. "I'm guessing the mother," he quickly added. There were a few times, had Cora been willing, he'd have given the old witch a thorough cleaning with his womb broom.

"Hook," the school teacher scolded in a disapproving tone as she rolled her eyes. Did men ever grow up?

Snapping out of his quiet contemplations, the shepherd smiled and easily commented, "He has a point. Rumpelstiltskin was very scaly in the Enchanted Forest." His eyes drifted back to Regina and Emma. Then, seeing the softness in his daughter's eyes as she looked adoringly at the former
queen, he realized that he recognized that expression. His little girl was in love. No. That's not possible, he thought as cold dread filled him. Torn between wanting to see his daughter happy and appalled that the evil queen was the object of her affections, he wondered anxiously, How the hell did that happen?

Oblivious to her husband's sudden realization and resultant turmoil, Mary Margaret scowled at both men. "I'm not talking to either of you, right now," she grumbled, stepping away from the helm. Slowly, she moved down the stairs to the main deck. She debated approaching the cluster along the port gunwale, but then, she thought better of it and went below deck to the galley.

~SQ~

It had been over half an hour since her confrontation with Gold, and Regina was finally calming down, due in no small part to the excessive amounts of doting concern pouring off her companion. She was currently sitting on one of the chairs in their cabin, a blanket folded beneath her to provide a little cushion. Her body ached deep into her bones, and with her anger settling into low embers, she found herself as tired as she had been before her nap.

Noticing the slight slump of her queen's shoulders, Anne unfolded from her sitting position in the center of her hammock and deftly dropped to the deck. "Perhaps we should retire for the night. It's been a long day, and we could all use the rest." While she couldn't order Regina around, she could at least suggest she call it a day. The scout was worried the woman was going to collapse from fatigue.

The sheriff quickly caught on to the guard's train of thought and nodded a hasty agreement. "Sounds good." Standing from her own seat, she caught the exhaustion and strain that were clearly weighing on the former mayor. "How are you holding up?" came the soft inquiry as she shuffled over to their bags stowed under the writing desk.

Regina shifted to sit a bit straighter in the chair, forcing back the grimace as her right hip twinged with a painful reminder of the morning. Not wanting to worry her friend, she flashed a fond smile, the expression morphing to a frown when she took in the haggard lines around the sheriff's eyes. Reaching out with her left hand and catching Emma's forearm as she neared, she asked, "Are you alright?"

Emma hunched her shoulders in guilt, having hoped that Regina would have overlooked her discomfort. The sheriff didn't want to be another burden for her to fret over when she was still suffering the effects of being abducted and tortured. "I'm okay," she dismissed lightly, setting the suitcase on the bed and pulling out a set of silk pajamas. Placing the soft clothing in her friend's lap, she dug out a pair of fleece pants and a black tank top before replacing the luggage.

Brows coming together in slight consternation, the former queen sighed exasperatedly, "Emma." One look at the savior's tight expression, however, and she decided to let the matter be for the night. Anne was correct. They were all in desperate need of several hours of sleep. Conversation could wait until the morning. "Very well," she acquiesced quietly, glad when the scout slipped over to help her change.

A huff of relief escaped Emma as she turned her back to the other woman and began to strip, hearing the former mayor following suit. Once she'd finished changing, she folded her clothes and put them on the desk, asking, "Is it safe to turn around, yet?"

The brunette smirked and joined her, placing her own pile of clothing next to the sheriff's. "And people say chivalry is dead," she teased lightly. Suddenly, she was covering her mouth as a huge yawn rose up, stealing her next words. Instead, she advised, "I think that means Anne was right,
"Of course, I'm right," Anne sassed, moving back to her hammock to slip into soft, grey leggings and a long, navy sweatshirt. Her eyes took in the tight muscles in the sheriff's jaw and furtive glances in the former queen's direction. Perhaps the new recruit was not as hopeless as she had once thought. While not hovering over Regina, she was remaining close and keeping a watchful eye on her.

Emma snorted in amusement, flicking a wry grin at the guard who was settling in to her hammock. Then, her smile left her, and she pointed toward one of the chairs by the desk, muttering uncomfortably, "I'll sleep over there. You take the bed."

Looking at the hard, wooden chair, Regina retorted, "You'll never get any sleep on that. And I need you rested if we're going to be at our best to help Henry." Glancing at the captain's bed, she said, "We'll share. Besides, there aren't enough blankets to keep you warm, let alone comfortable."

"I'll be fine," the savior demurred. Jokingly, she wisecracked, "It can't be any worse than a park bench. Anyway," she added with a wince, "you need it more than I do. You're still not at a hundred percent."

Eyes wide in dismay at the thought of her sleeping on a park bench at some point, the former mayor rested her fingertips on the sheriff's forearm. "You need your sleep as much as I. We've shared a bed more often than not for months. Why are you balking, now?" she asked, honestly curious.

Shifting from foot-to-foot, Emma shrugged, finding the decking suddenly fascinating as she mumbled, "It's kinda tiny, and I don't want to…. You're not healed, and I don't want to hurt you," she finished lamely, unable to voice her real concerns, remembering Regina's haunted expression in the hospital at the mention of the rape kit. A quick glance at Anne revealed a searching gaze that she couldn't quite meet, sure the scout saw too much with her piercing, gray eyes.

Rolling her eyes in exasperation, the former mayor scoffed, "I'll be fine. Now, as you just pointed out, I'm not fully recovered, yet, and am exhausted. So, if you would be so kind," she trailed off, indicating the bed with a sweeping gesture of her arm.

The sheriff didn't argue further, sliding under the covers and pressing as close to the wall as she could, staring at the planks and trying to give the other woman as much space as possible. She felt the bed dip as her friend joined her, facing into the cabin. The covers settled after a few seconds, and she whispered, "Goodnight, Regina," into the bulwark, getting a quiet response in kind.

An hour later, and Regina was still awake, aching terribly from the day's ordeal. Has it been less than twenty-four hours? she wondered. The ship was surprisingly silent, save for a gentle creaking as it moved on the ocean, waves steadily lapping against the hull. She should have been sleeping, but even exhaustion wasn't enough to drag her under once the most recent dose of laudanum had completely worn off, leaving her feeling every movement acutely. And of course, Emma was shivering violently, making it that much worse. Moving her right leg to get it more comfortable,
her foot brushed against the sheriff's. She hissed in a breath at the icy contact, wondering how the woman could be so cold when she was a relatively comfortable temperature, herself.

Shifting onto her back, she looked over at her bedmate with a furrowed brow, flabbergasted that her companion could still sleep as hard as she was shuddering. Moonlight trailed along the inner wall of the cabin, catching on a layer of condensation that was no doubt contributing to the additional chill by the wall. The former mayor realized she'd never get any sleep if Emma kept trembling from the cold and sighed in resignation. Reaching across herself, she placed her left hand on the sheriff's left biceps and shook her gently. "Emma," she called softly, having to repeat it twice more before the woman roused.

"Huh?" Turning slightly, Emma sleepily regarded the former queen. "What is it? What's wrong?" she asked. Her worry was immediately followed by a shocked, "Shit, it's freezing!"

Snorting at the declaration, Regina muttered darkly, "And that would be what is wrong. Your shivering is keeping me awake."

Mortified, the sheriff questioned sheepishly, "Is it really that bad?"

"Normally, most likely not. Presently, your shaking is making everything hurt more," she admitted grumpily. A slight rustle from across the cabin briefly brought her attention to Anne. The guard had shifted in her hammock and was silently observing them with slit eyes.

Not wanting to cause her friend any more discomfort, Emma started to get untangled from the covers. "I'm sorry. I'll just—."

Frowning, Regina halted her with a hand on her arm, again. "What are you doing?"

"I'm gonna go sleep in a chair, like I should have done earlier," she replied ruefully.

"Oh, for…." Rolling her eyes, the former mayor shook her head against the pillow. "I didn't mean for you to get out of the bed. Just scoot closer and go back to sleep."

Emma, who was still trying to struggle free from the blankets, froze. "What?" she asked incredulously.

Nothing is ever simple with her, Regina mused to herself. "With my burns," she paused, swallowing thickly on the last word, before continuing, "I can't very well be the big spoon. Therefore, the most expedient way for you to thaw out would be to huddle behind me," she reasoned.

"Uh, won't that hurt you more?" the savior asked hesitantly. On the one hand, she was really, really cold. On the other hand, it seemed like a huge invasion of her friend's personal space, especially given her suspicions about the woman's past.

Sighing heavily, the former mayor snapped with growing impatience, "Are you intending to molest me in your sleep?"

"No!" Emma squeaked quickly, pulling even further away from her. Could this get any more awkward? she wondered.

Regina chuckled at the reaction and, shifting onto her left side once more, said, "Then I suggest you snuggle up and shut up, Dear." She was staring sleepily into the cabin, wondering if the sheriff was ever going to move, again, when she felt the mattress shift and a chilled body lightly curl up behind her. Huffing with amusement, the former queen inched backward a bit more until she could...
feel Emma's crossed forearms pressing against her shoulder blades and knees touching the back of her thighs. Bending her knees slightly, she rested the soles of her feet against cold toes that curled away before relaxing again. Settled and assured that Emma would warm back up, she murmured, "Goodnight, Emma."

A meek, "Night," was the only response.

It was another fifteen minutes, when her eyes were heavy and drifting closed to the sounds of her companion's soft snores that she felt it. What had been an increased warmth at the points where she and Emma touched, had grown to a faint buzzing sensation which expanded to encompass her entire body. Regina stiffened momentarily as hot tendrils of blue magic escaped the sheriff and glided over her like a caress, searching and coiling until all her hurts were found. The wispy touches sunk into her skin effortlessly, and the former queen was stunned when Emma's magic began to heal her. It trickled into her with excruciating tenderness, slow, and careful, and intimate in a way that stole Regina's breath from her lungs. The familiar affection in the savior's power rapidly lulled her into a deep slumber as her body eased into the woman behind her.

~SQ~

Mary Margaret barely squeezed through the galley doorway as Irene Smith exited. She stopped and observed as the Crows Guard climbed above deck. Her brow furrowed at the utter lack of manners. She was a queen or, at the very least to these people, a princess.

"Best get used to it, Love," Hook remarked, sitting down with a bowl of beef stew and a chunk of bread at the galley, long table. He inhaled the rich broth with gusto. Eating last was an insult since he was captain of the vessel, but with grub this good, he'd take it. He dredged a bite of bread in the stew before stuffing it in his mouth. Glancing up, he watched Snow White inspect the evening's offering. "The guard can cook," he commented, nodding to the Dutch oven hanging over the caged iron box of sand and hot coals.

The school teacher hummed in response. Curiously, she moved to the pot and carefully lifted the lid with a rod. She delicately sniffed and sighed at the waft of warm food. Her mouth salivated at the prospect of dinner, and her stomach growled. Then, hearing thundering footfalls, she looked over her shoulder to see her husband strutting into the galley.

"Oy, better be mindful of your steps, Mate," Captain Jones warned, nodding toward the floor. "It's never a good idea to piss off the crew sleeping in the hold," he clarified before taking another bite of stew. As he chewed, he glanced around for a tankard.

"Noted," the former shepherd acknowledged with a crisp nod. Stepping up to his wife, he asked, "What's for dinner?" He peered into the pot and smiled. Sailing was hard work.

"Beef stew and bread," Mary Margaret replied, hanging the lid off the rod on a hook to the side. She pointed to bowls nested on a nearby shelf and waited for them to be passed to her. One at a time, she ladled food into their bowls. Quickly, the pair settled at the galley table with bread and tankards of water across from the pirate, and the trio ate in silence until she demurely asked, "Will it really take a week to reach Neverland?" She didn't know how well Gold and Regina would cohabitate.

"We're in Neverland," Hook answered flatly. He continued eating and talked around his food. "It'll still take a week, give or take, to reach Pan's island," he expounded, dredging his bread through the remnants of broth. Stuffing the sopping bite in his mouth, he glanced between the two royals. "It'll be best if you both keep your heads down and do your part," he softly suggested. He could care less if these two, privileged nobles were tossed overboard, but the hostility directed at them meant less
"Haven't we?" David inquired, looking between his wife and the pirate. He had worked hard that day. In fact, almost everyone had worked hard.

"Aye, but most of this ship's crew is loyal to the Queen," Captain Jones explained, setting his empty bowl off to the side. He pulled a small flask out of his overcoat's breast pocket and took a healthy swig of rum. Pointing at all the foodstuffs lining the shelves, he added, "We're guests on their voyage, not the other way around." His knowledge of Pan's island—and a grudging respect that the ship was his—was the only thing keeping him onboard, but he needed to save Baelfire or, at the very least, his son.

"We're rescuing our grandson," Mary Margaret defended, sitting up straight. Her spoon hit the bottom of her wooden bowl with a sharp clack. "This isn't some political power grab."

"Best remember that, Love," Hook intoned gravely. Gesturing to the pile of dirty dishes stacked in a crate, he remarked, "We all have to earn our passage, us especially."

Lifting his chin and fixing the captain with a stern expression, the former shepherd proclaimed, "There's nothing wrong with an honest day's work, even on a pirate ship." He understood and respected hard work. Then, after glancing at his wife, he refocused on Hook and opened his mouth to speak, but he was quickly cut off.

"Aye, but you've grown accustomed to, shall we say, a position of authority," Captain Jones remarked, standing from the galley table. He pivoted, stepped over the bench, and dropped his wooden bowl and spoon in the crate. "I've seen it before, Mate. It isn't pretty," he warned before quickly leaving. Of course, the last thing he needed was to get sucked into any political drama amongst royals, and adding magic wielders to the mix only further complicated matters. However, he was stuck with them as his most likely allies. As he climbed the ladder stairs, he decided he'd simply make the most of it.

Watching Hook scamper out of the kitchen, the school teacher sighed as she dragged her last bite of bread across her empty bowl. "He's right, you know," she quietly stated. Her eyes swept around the visible provisions. Neither of them had properly prepared for this voyage, and they had nothing, other than their skills, to offer the cause. She frowned as she stared into her stew bowl.

"It'll work out," David promised. He laid his left hand on his wife's back, rubbing large, slow circles. A soft smile curled his lips, but he frowned when she looked at him. "It will," he restated with conviction.

Mary Margaret offered a weak smile before standing up. "These dishes aren't going to wash themselves," she sighed resolutely.

~SQ~

Henry clung to the seat of the small sailboat, watching as they passed yet another island. His curious gaze flickered over the others seated around the tiny vessel, and though it would linger on occasion, no one chastised him for staring. He didn't look at Greg too often. There was something about the man that gave him the creeps. While Tamara didn't set him on edge like the food blogger did, she was still pretty intimidating with her quick, sharp movements. She reminded him a little of McCormac, the auburn-haired scout in the Crows Guard.

The past day had been spent in preparation for this journey, and he had listened carefully to the conversations happening around him. Adults always seemed to forget that children could hear and
understand their discussions. He had overheard them talking about something called lyrium and had managed to figure out that they were planning to trade him for a large amount of the substance. Henry wasn't sure what it did, but the soldiers seemed keen to acquire it as quickly as possible.

Knight-Lieutenant Bettonis turned to Tamara and complimented, "Tavish was impressed with the amount of samples you obtained from the mage before your escape from that world. It is a shame that you weren't able to bring the actual maleficar, herself," he lamented with a frown.

"The bitch would be dead if it hadn't been for the damned sheriff," Greg snarled from nearby. His bitterness at the loss of his revenge was strong, and once this mission was over, he was going to go back to Storybrooke and finish the job. Glaring at Henry situated between a couple of Templars, he wondered, yet again, just what was so important about the boy.

Bettonis dismissed the heated response with a wave of his hand. "We have her blood. It's more than enough to make a phylactery." Shrugging slightly, he added, "It will give us plenty of time to find her later." He didn't like the man's obsession with this particular apostate. Thankfully, Tamara seemed to be more focused on the bigger picture. She truly had the potential to make an excellent Templar.

Henry startled at the vehemence in Greg's words. It dawned on him then, that these were the people who had hurt his mom. What did he mean that she should be dead? Was that why no one had let him see her in the hospital until right before she was released? As he stared with wide-eyed shock at the food blogger, Henry found himself becoming angry at the idea that someone would try to kill his mother. But even as the feeling grew, he felt conflicted for caring about the evil queen. His book said she had destroyed villages and killed so many people during her reign of terror. Even his grandparents and Blue thought she was a monster. She was bad and deserved whatever happened to her. How then, was he supposed to reconcile that with the woman who had made chicken soup when he was sick and tucked him in at night with a kiss and played board games and video games with him? Everything was so confusing, and he was jolted out of his reverie as the boat rocked abruptly over a larger wave.

As the waters became rough, dark clouds gathering above them, Bettonis ordered Eremon to usher all but essential crew below deck. They were nearing mermaid territory, and he had seen the look the boy had sent Greg. The Knight-Lieutenant didn't need any fights breaking out while they navigated the expanse inhabited by the treacherous merfolk. He had lost quite a few good men and a couple of ships before they'd learned how to deal with this section of ocean. He was not going to be thwarted from his promised promotion because of undisciplined civilians.

~SQ~

**Warnings:** Brief mention of child abuse.

*Breathless from the mad dash through the back stairs of her grandfather's castle, Regina shut her cousin's bedchamber door behind her and collapsed onto the floor. She turned her head to look at the young woman sprawled out on the flagstones beside her. One glance at her disheveled hair and sopping wet clothes had the fourteen-year-old dissolving into a fit of giggles, knowing she must look equally ridiculous. They had been playing with Matias and some of the other boys when they had stumbled in the sand and fallen into the surf, the waves rapidly soaking them to the bone. She still wasn't sure how they had managed to avoid everyone as they had snuck back into the castle.*

*Emiliana laughed along with her. Ever since she had begun following her younger cousin's example and had started standing up to her brother, Matias had stopped picking on her so much. It was nice to finally get a little respect from the young men of the court. Reaching out, she grabbed the other girl's hand and gave it an affectionate squeeze. Really, she admired the girl, always bold*
and fearless when confronted with a new challenge and completely unapologetic for being herself.

"I'm a mess! At least the salt will wash out of these clothes," Regina commented happily, glad for once to have been wearing lighter, linen breeches with her shirt and vest. "I don't think my leathers would have survived a dip in the ocean." Grinning broadly, she pushed herself to her feet and held out her hands, pulling the other girl up with her.

Shaking her skirts, Emiliana sent droplets of water flying everywhere. "It was refreshing, at least," she snickered, imagining the look on her maids' faces when they saw the state of her dress.

Regina was already shucking her shirt when she advised, "Come on, let's get out of these wet things and clean up. All that salt and sand gets itchy when it dries," she added, nose scrunching up at the thought. Her pants joined the growing pile of clothing, leaving her in only her smallclothes.

The crown prince's heir presumptive nodded her agreement and turned her back to Regina, requesting, "Help me out of my dress? I can't reach the buttons in the middle."

As nimble fingers made short work of the tiny buttons, Regina asked politely, "Do want me to get the corset, too? The laces will probably be impossible as wet as they are." She assisted her cousin with shimmying out of the soaked linen, tossing it to land off to the side with a loud splat.

"Yes, please," Emiliana assented, having grown to hate the steel and fabric cage around her middle. "You're so fortunate you don't have to wear one of these, yet. I absolutely loathe the dreadful things," she grumbled vehemently.

Tilting her head to the side as she worked at the stubborn knot holding the laces tight, Regina frowned slightly. Absently, she replied, "I don't know. Sometimes, I think it would be nice to wear one."

Laughing bitterly, the older girl informed her, "Trust me, there's nothing good about them. They pinch in the most uncomfortable places, and you can't really eat very much when wearing one."

She grunted as the knot finally came free, the stays beginning to loosen slightly. "And breathing can be a chore. Why, I don't know how I managed to keep up with you, today."

Tugging the laces loose, Regina reluctantly admitted, "I suppose." She moved around to the front and began working at the busk, unhooking the steel closure of the corset. "At least you have something for it to pinch," she muttered sulkily, eyes focused on her task.

Emiliana's brows furrowed as she stared down at her cousin. It dawned on her, then, that the other girl was referring to her figure, well on its way toward womanhood. Her eyes took in Regina's gently curving form, her hips having already rounded, breasts just beginning to fill out and gain some shape. Trying to cheer her friend up, she said with a shrug, "Breasts just get in the way. And they get terribly sore during your monthly cycle."

Regina at last removed the restrictive garment and grabbed the hem of her chemise, peeling it off the young woman's damp form. "Oh, I know all about that last part," she commiserated unhappily. That had been quite the shock to discover that not only did she have to be inconvenienced by bleeding every month, but her budding breasts would grow tender, too. Glancing down at their bared chests, she grimaced as she couldn't help but compare them. Without conscious thought, Regina's gaze lingered on her cousin's more ample bosom as she lightly worried her bottom lip, a look of longing gracing her features.

A small smile turned up the older girl's mouth as she took in the intrigued look she was receiving. It was flattering to be gazed at in such a way. Some of the men in the court would stare at her
similarly, but she always felt uncomfortable when it happened, like they were devouring her with their eyes. But this curiosity and yearning being directed at her was different; it made her feel attractive and wanted. Feeling suddenly bashful, Emiliana asked quietly, "Do you think I'm pretty?"

Startled, brown eyes darted up, and full lips parted in a moue of surprise. Expression shifting to a soft smile, Regina replied honestly, "You're absolutely breathtaking." She knew she had been obvious in her observations of the older girls and women and that her interest in the fairer sex was no secret. There was something about the curves of their feminine bodies that drew her in. Sometimes, she'd daydream about reaching out and touching what she was sure would be soft skin, and a little ball of warmth would settle low in her belly. None of the boys or men made her feel that way; she thought they looked rather preposterous nude. But the women were glorious, every last one of them, regardless of their shape or size.

Looking down at the floor between them, Emiliana offered conversationally, "Did you know that Grandfather has betrothed me to the Duke of Abdera's eldest son? The wedding is to be in six months, just after my sixteenth birthday." Her bare foot scuffed at the dark flagstones, not wanting to look up and see the disappointment on the girl's face.

Blinking in astonishment, Regina blurted out, "Fernando? But I thought he was an androphile." She was surprised the king would marry his eldest granddaughter to a man who preferred the company of other men. "It's a good political match, though," she supplied as an afterthought.

That got the older girl to chuckle and raise her head. "He likes both, actually. He even went so far as to reassure me that he would forgo taking a male concubine if I was too averse to the idea." Shrugging, she admitted, "I told him that I don't care either way, so long as he knows how to please a woman." She shook her head to dismiss the conversation, saying, "But that's not the point. I don't want the first time I'm touched by another to be done out of duty."

Seeing her cousin's suddenly coquettish demeanor, Regina felt familiar warmth flood her lower abdomen. She had witnessed many a heated liaison between staff in the back corridors and dark corners that abounded in her grandfather's castle. Heat bloomed throughout her body, and she flashed a wicked grin as she smoothly purred, "If I touched you, it would be for the sole purpose of pleasing you."

"I think I'd like it if you did," Emiliana murmured quietly. She ducked her head in embarrassment as a dark pink dusted across her cheeks, nervously tucking a wet strand of hair behind her ear. They were both of sufficient age to be considered women, and they were not sheltered from the realities of sex like many in the northern kingdoms were. Her cousin had always had a look of hungry reverence when watching the women moving about the castle, and it made her stomach flutter strangely to have that same expression directed her way by the already stunning young woman before her.

"So, you want me to be your first?" Regina queried with a sly smile, lightly running the fingers of her left hand down her cousin's right arm, tangling their fingers together. Giving an encouraging tug on her hand, she pulled the other girl closer, grinning when Emiliana looked up at her, again. Drawn in by big, doe eyes and a sweet smile, she raised her right hand, placing it lightly on Emiliana's sternum. She took a moment to admire the smooth skin, pale compared to the dark brown of Regina's hand due to her habit of sneaking away to sunbathe on the castle's roof.

Emiliana gasped, her lashes fluttering at the sensation of someone else's hand on her. Her eyes fastened on the deeply tanned fingers resting on her flesh as they gradually slid over to graze across the top of her left breast. Catching her bottom lip between her teeth, she breathed shallowly
until Regina was holding the soft mound completely, squeezing gently and eliciting a hiss from her.

Taking a step backwards toward the bed, Regina drew Emiliana with her, her expression turning as sultry as a girl on the cusp of womanhood could manage. "I'll make sure we both enjoy this," she promised with all the confidence of someone who was sure of her allure and comfortable in her own skin. A pleased grin split her face as her cousin followed willingly, stopping when they reached the side of the mattress. Regina took another look over the woman before her and decided that she certainly wasn't opposed to satisfying her sexual curiosity in this manner. Leaning in, she tilted her chin up and faintly brushed her lips across Emiliana's, eyes closing at the last moment.

They stood like that for a few beats, breaths puffing against each other's mouths. Then, Regina surged forward, again, pressing their breasts together as her arms encircled Emiliana and her mouth found hers. Her hands roamed the young woman's back before catching the waist of her smallclothes and pushing them over her hips and to the floor. Quickly removing her own, she urged her cousin onto the mattress, following quickly. The two girls fell into a tangle of limbs, sharing soft, sweet kisses that explored lips, and throats, and chests. Hands stroked over backs and bottoms, tangled in long hair, and held each other close. They were so caught up in the new sensations that they never heard the chamber door open.

"Emiliana," a sharp, feminine voice broke the air, "have you seen . . . Regina!" Cora stood thunderstruck in the doorway to the bedchamber, her mouth slightly open in shock as she took in the scene before her. The girls didn't have time to break apart before she stormed across the room and wrapped her hand around her daughter's hair and forcibly drug her from the bed. "What in the seven hells do you think you're doing, young lady?!" she demanded with a harsh jerk on the dark locks.

Tears pricked at the corners of Regina's eyes from the tight grip near her scalp. She knew nothing she said would begin to calm her mother's ire, so she opted to remain silent and unresisting. But when her mother wrenched her head back to look at her, standing nearly eye to eye, she straightened her spine and readied for a fight as adrenaline scoured through her. There would be no cowering in front of her cousin, no weaknesses for anyone to later exploit. She had never backed down from her mother, and she wasn't about to start now.

For her part, Emiliana scrambled off the mattress and hurried to Regina's side, wary of the rumors that her aunt was a witch but more worried by the murderous look in the older woman's eyes. "It's not what it looks like!" she exclaimed, wringing her hands in front of herself.

Whipping her head around to glare at the impertinent girl, she snapped, "Oh, no? So, I didn't just witness you and my daughter writhing together like a pair of cats in heat?" she enjoined.

"¡No, Tía! We were only kissing," Emiliana tried explaining, shifting from foot to foot anxiously.

Cora snorted in derision, grabbing Regina's upper arm and yanking her into the light streaming in from the window. Her gaze swept over the girl carefully from head to toe before turning her back around to face her cousin. "Does that look like evidence of kissing to you?" she scoffed, gesturing to the wet smear on the top of her daughter's upper thigh. "Or are you such a little slut that you defiled her with your mouth, too?"

"I'm the one who started it," Regina insisted, hoping to take the attention off the other girl even as she relished the scowl on her mother's face. "Besides," she continued with a saucy smirk, "it's not as if we have cocks to truly defile each other." If she was going to get a thrashing for her actions, she was determined that she would speak her mind and really earn each strike. When her mother only stared at her in dumbfounded silence for her insolence, she added arrogantly, "Though, if you had been just a few minutes later, I'd have probably been three knuckles deep in her cunt, maybe
had her tongue in mine. Do you think that would lower our selling prices, Mother?" Gods how she loved goading the hateful woman. Theirs was a continual dance of cruel barbs and sharp claws, each attempting to gain the upper hand over the other.

For a moment, everything was still, and then, Cora was in motion, her right hand coming up to lay a stinging slap across the girl's cheek. She jeered, "No daughter of mine will act like a filthy whore."

Stepping into her mother's space, Regina tilted her chin up defiantly and challenged in a low voice, "Prefiero ser una puta que una pinche bruja."

Exploding in rage, the sorceress raised her right hand and brought the back of it down forcefully on her child's face, heavy rings catching on skin, and she smiled with grim satisfaction as Regina's head snapped hard to the left. "How dare you speak to me in such a manner?" she hissed, tone laced with venom. The grin fell from her face as she noticed a few drops of red hit the floor.

Looking up, she saw Regina clutching a hand to her mouth, blood seeping between her fingers as her eyes welled with unshed tears. Cora blanched at the realization that she'd possibly gone too far in front of an audience. She'd always been so careful to not mete out punishment too harshly when anyone but her husband was around to witness it.

Without thinking of the consequences, Emiliana reached out and caught the sorceress's arm before she could bring it down on her cousin, again. It was a mistake. There was no warning as Cora whirled on the girl, snarling, "You little bitch!" The sound of skin meeting skin was loud in the room as Cora's palm connected with Emiliana's cheek. "Look what you made me do to my daughter!" she bellowed, her anger overflowing.

Hands covering her bloody mouth, Regina admonished, "Mother!" startled that she would dare lay a hand on the crown prince's daughter. It simply wasn't done, and beyond incurring the wrath of the girl's father, the king would be livid. Her mother had never been a favorite, only tolerated for the sake of her ability to spin straw into gold. She swallowed hard and tried not to think about the pain radiating from her upper lip, shuffling the tiniest bit toward her cousin.

Straightening suddenly, Cora composed herself with frightening speed and pointed at the pile of clothing on the floor. "Regina, gather your things," she commanded simply. She stood primly to the side, watching while the girl kept her right hand pressed to her lip as she angrily snatched up her garments, stooping by the bed to get her smallclothes, as well.

Emiliana was too stunned to speak as her cousin moved around the room with brisk efficiency, acting unaffected by the violence just wrought upon her by her own mother. She blinked when a cloud of purple smoke surrounded the pair as soon as Regina settled by Cora's side. Once they were gone, she looked around her room, taking in her sodden dress and undergarments scattered about, the rumpled duvet on the bed, and the bloody trail left behind. A quick glance in the mirror revealed a stark handprint on her left cheek, and she knew that, even had she wanted to stay silent for Regina's sake, the evidence left on her face was too damning.

The next morning, she discovered that her uncle Enrique had left the castle, along with his wife and daughter. No one had seen them leave, and while the furniture remained in their suite of rooms, all their personal effects had disappeared. Emiliana had sat on Regina's bed and cried for hours, her best friend and cousin gone without a word between them since their last, ruinous encounter. When the crown prince, Alejandro, had heard about Cora's actions, he had shouted at her grandfather that something had to be done about the evil sorceress. She didn't think they'd actually managed to do anything, though. Rather, she supposed Cora had somehow magicked them away before a consensus could be reached. The king had been furious upon learning they had
disappeared and had sent out messengers and knights to search for his son and granddaughter. Apparently, Xavier had had important plans for Regina that only he and Alejandro had known about, and both seemed almost desperate to get the girl back. Emiliana didn't know what they had intended for her, but she knew that it had to be worlds better than the future Cora would devise.

~SQ~

Hearing a whispered conversation and the soft sounds of people moving around the cabin, Regina tiredly blinked her eyes, sleepily murmuring, "Emma?" Her brow furrowed in confusion as she dazedly pondered why she had dreamed of her cousin back in her grandfather's castle. Then, she frowned, realizing the King of Edetani wasn't really her grandfather. Rolling onto her back, her stiff and sore muscles ached, indicating she hadn't moved much during the night, and she grunted with displeasure.

"Hey," the sheriff smiled brightly, stepping closer to the side of the bed. She fidgeted with the blankets, and gently suggested, "Why don't you go back to sleep?" Flashing an even broader smile as heavy-lidded, brown eyes peered up at her, she caressed wild brunette locks out of her friend's face. She worried on her lower lip for a moment before casually asking, "Did you sleep well?"

Anne narrowed her eyes at the nosy savior but remained silent. Of course, she had heard the quiet whimpers and breathy mumbles during the wee hours of the morning. However, unlike Emma, she had boundaries and respected them, but that didn't mean she wasn't worried or curious.

"Dreamed of Edetani and Emiliana," the former mayor slurred as her eyes drifted closed, but not before she caught a glimpse of the savior in her black leather, training gear. Unfortunately, she couldn't resist sleep any longer. It had been strange to dream of something she hadn't thought of in a very long time, something that vivid dream had brought back. It had almost been like reliving a memory. Maybe it was because her mother had reentered her life. Maybe it was a side effect of the torture or channeling the massive amount of energy from the fail-safe device. Or maybe it was her mind admitting she was sexually attracted to Emma Swan, a sensation that she hadn't felt in decades. But before she surrendered to peaceful oblivion, she managed to ask, "Stay?"

Emma hesitated. Glancing over her shoulder at the scout grandmaster, she explained, "I have to train, now, but Monty will be in here with you until I get back." She felt silly about her reluctance, but hearing the disappointment in the grumbled assent, muffled by the pillow, made her feel wanted.

McCormac watched the recruit at the queen's side. She observed the softer tones and the gentle touches and the worried glances. When Elmwood was admitted into the cabin, she met his concerned gaze and shrugged. "Come on, Emma," she softly ordered, stepping to the queen's bedside.

Frowning, the sheriff watched as Anne removed the same small, brown bottle from the inside pocket of her leather vest. What was in that bottle that Regina blindly accepted? Turning away from the murmuring women, she quietly asked Monty, "Who are Edetani and Emiliana?" Her lips pursed when the commander returned a perplexed look.

With the dose administered, McCormac resettled the blankets around her queen and quickly retreated from the small cabin. Three small women sharing sleeping space during the night was all well and good, but there was only so much close quarters she could endure.

"Edetani is a place, a southern kingdom of the Enchanted Forest," Elmwood replied, moving to sit in the chair beside the bed. His eyes swept over the sleeping queen. "She was born there," he added, looking up at the recruit. Nodding toward the open door where Irene stood outside, he
smirked and reminded, "Best not to keep Anne waiting."

The sheriff's attention drifted back to the woman in the bed, and her brow pinched in intense contemplation. It was odd to think of Regina living in some other world, let alone born in one. Slowly, she turned away and headed out the door, Irene closing it behind her. She couldn't imagine her Regina growing up in a medieval castle in some unknown place nor picture her wearing glamorous ballgowns like in Henry's book. No, her Regina read scientific journals and science fiction. Her Regina cared for stray cats and experimented in the kitchen. Reaching the ladder-stairs leading to the main deck, she looked up into the brilliant blue sky of an alien world and felt an intense desire to know everything about Regina Mills.

~SQ~

**Warnings:** None

*In the wee hours of a late fall morning, Regina jogged across the estate's beautifully manicured garden of dead grass toward a gate in the low, stone wall surrounding the house proper. Pulling her cloak tightly around herself to shield against the chilling wind, she glanced over her right shoulder to assure no one was watching her or following. The servants her mother had hired upon their arrival to Angevin had proven far too loyal to the gold they received in recompense of reporting her activities, and their diligence had made her life extremely difficult in the foreign kingdom. Nevertheless, she slipped unnoticed through the small garden gate, crossed the dirt trail that lead to the acres of fields planted with winter wheat, and bounded over the paddock's newly repaired fence, almost losing her cloak to the blustery morning wind. Then, sprinting across the hard, compact, dry mud, she slipped inside the field-side alley door.*

*She sighed upon entering the slightly warmer interior. It only took a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the dark interior. Heading toward Rocinante's stall, she shrugged her shoulders and readjusted her cloak. When the young colt's head swung over the stall's half door, she smiled broadly and affectionately cooed, "Good morning." She reached into a hidden pocket and pulled out a small, tri-color apple. "Here, this should help warm you up," she softly explained, offering the fruit to the horse.*

*Excitedly bobbing his head, Rocinante gently took the treat and promptly proceeded to eat it. His efforts echoed in the silence of the stables, and none of the other horses paid them any mind.*

*Regina leaned against a post as she firmly stroked the colt's muscled neck. Ever since her father had presented him to her several days ago, she had wanted nothing but to bond with him; however, her studies had kept her far too busy, much to her mother's preference. So, in the quiet of early morning, she whispered to him, "When spring comes, we'll go riding in the forest." She leaned forward and placed a firm kiss on Rocinante's snout. "It's a shame there're no beaches here. I think you would've enjoyed the surf," she added, stroking the colt's shoulder. The fourteen year-old sorely missed her grandfather's lands, two months in Angevin not nearly long enough to overcome her homesickness.*

*"Oh," came a soft, masculine voice from behind her.*

*Noting the horse was unconcerned by the new arrival, she turned with a broad smile and cheerfully greeted, "Hello, are you the new groomsman?" She extended her right hand, but frowned when the young man took a quick step backwards. Glancing at it and the stable hand's state of undress, she lowered her hand and with a straight face, softly mouthed, "Ah."

*"Your Ladyship," the very naked stable boy replied, hurriedly covering himself from view. He swallowed nervously as his gaze darted around the stables, and he silently cursed because there*
was nothing with which to cover himself. No one ever came out here, especially at this hour. "How may I serve you?" he squeaked, his cheeks flushing a bright red. Goosebumps dusted his exposed flesh, whether it was from the cold or the young lady's amused gleam, he wasn't too certain.

With a furrowed brow, Regina pursed her lips and shook her head. "My apologies for disturbing your rest," she stated, returning her focus to the colt. Why were these Northerners so prudish about their bodies? If a stable hand wanted to sleep naked in the hay, who was she to judge? "This was the first chance I've had to visit with Rocinante," she casually explained, keeping her delight over the visit in check. Then, she heard a familiar and friendly voice coming from the tack room, and she bit her lower lip.

"Daniel," the other male voice called out. "What are you doing? It's colder than a witch's tit out here."

A fresh, broad smile spread across her face as she raised an eyebrow, peering mischievously over her right shoulder at the stunned groomsman. "Daniel," she repeated in a pleasant timbre, knowing exactly what she had inadvertently stumbled into this morning.

Stepping out of the tack room, wrapped in an all-too-small wool blanket, Nathan shuffled from the relative comfort of his lover's sleeping quarters and into the open corridor of the stables. "Regina?" he gasped upon noticing his young mistress. "What are you doing out of the house at this hour?" he quickly questioned, hurrying across the cold flagstones on bare feet. This land wasn't safe for young maidens. He looked over his shoulder at Daniel. Nor was it safe for young, beautiful men, either. "Your Ladyship, we've talked about this," he gently scolded. "Life here is different than in Edetani."

"Nathan," she replied in a chipper tone, cutting the impending mother-henning short. She looked from her valet back to the naked groomsman a few feet away. When her gaze cut back to the hand servant her mother had assigned her, she cocked an eyebrow, having spied his own nakedness under the blanket. "So, this is Daniel," she expertly parried with a knowing tone. Looking over her shoulder, she tilted her head. "And you were doing more than sleeping, I see," she teased with a wink.

Blinking, the groomsman shook his head. "You're her valet?" he gasped in surprise. Muttering under his breath, he hurriedly trotted back toward the tack room.

Regina rolled her eyes. "I've seen plenty of cocks," she jeered with a smirk. Honestly, she had and not one had interested her. "Your lover is more skittish than a newborn foal." Raising an amused eyebrow, she teased, "Is he so shy when you're fucking his—."

"Hush, woman," the valet chastised, cutting her off and adjusting his blanket to cover his semi-hard penis. Sighing, he glanced over his shoulder before hissing, "I was having quite the pleasant morning interlude until you came to see your pony."

"Rocinante is not a pony," she countered with a hard scowl, reaching out to stroke the colt's neck. "He'll grow up to be strong and handsome," she praised the horse as if he could understand her. "And we'll be the best of friends."

When the horse bobbed its head, Nathan furrowed his brow, and not for the first time, he thought his young mistress was very peculiar. "Wonderful," he quipped, rolling his eyes. He caught her frown and sighed. "Forgive my shortness," he apologized with a curt bow.

"Does Daniel forgive it?" Regina sing-songed when she spied the dressed groomsman rushing out of the tack room carrying clothes. She smirked at the blushing stable boy as he handed a shirt and
pants to his lover.

Snorting, the valet proceeded to dress and, not for the first time, was thankful that his young lover kept an immaculate stable. Nathan considered that even though he was eighteen, Daniel was relatively naïve in regards to nobility and had absolutely no experience with the earthier attitudes sported by many in the southern kingdoms.

"Nathan," Daniel hissed, cutting his eyes to the young mistress. He swallowed nervously. They could lose their jobs, if not their lives, should she deem it.

"Please," Nathan huffed, tying his trousers. He rolled his eyes as he slipped on his rumpled shirt. "Trust me, this one's no more interested in a cock than I am a cunt," he explained with a rakish smirk. "How do you think I landed this position and, by extension, yours?" he questioned. Looking over his shoulder as he buttoned his shirt, he nodded to the young woman paying them no heed as she whispered to the colt. "Lady Cora sought me out because this lovely prefers the fairer sex," he explained, adjusting his collar and cuffs.

"Oh," the groomsman softly countered with only a hint of disappointment. He bowed his head, biting his lower lip. Although the valet was only four years his senior, he often felt terribly young in comparison. He had seen little of the world outside of his family's small horse farm and the handful of markets he had attended with his father and brothers. Nathan had charmed him at one such market two years prior, and when he had managed to procure employment for them both at the Mills's estate, Daniel had leapt at the chance to properly begin their life together.

With a sad smile, the valet stepped forward and cupped his young lover's cheeks. "I love you, you fool," he professed before placing a soft kiss on slightly chapped lips. Quietly, he told him, "It would be best to ignore the strike of lust for this one, Daniel. She comes from too high a station to bear us the family you seek, and her mother would sooner see us dead for even dreaming such ideas." Placing another quick peck on his lips, he lightly patted the other man's pale cheek. "Find another woman to woo," he warned before turning away. Strutting over to his young mistress, he sternly suggested, "Perhaps we should return to the house, Your Ladyship. Others will be waking, soon." His gaze assessed his charge's attire, and he sighed because she was in her leather garb, once more. "And if your mother catches you in that, again, she'll have me burn it," he warned. That was not a conversation he wanted to weather.

~SQ~

Slowly, Regina woke as her mind battled against the fog of sleep. Her limbs felt heavy as she sagged into the mattress, her arms wrapped around a pillow. Grunting, she squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in the soft down.

"Did you sleep well, Your Highness?" Monty asked quietly. His eyes traced the lump under the quilt before he turned toward the table and poured a tankard of fresh water. "Here," he instructed. "You should drink something."

Rolling onto her back, the former mayor turned her head to see her favored knight holding a cup of water as he sat at her bedside. His continued kindness and gentleness made her smile. Then, noticing the amount of sunlight filling the cabin, she asked in a hoarse voice, "What time is it?"

"Time for you to drink something," Elmwood encouraged, lifting the half-full tankard. After she propped herself up onto her left elbow, he passed her the cup and explained, "It's only been two hours since Anne and Emma left to train."

Surprised by how refreshing the cool water tasted, she gulped it down and handed the empty
tankard back to her commander. "Isn't two hours a little excessive?" she pondered, flopping back down on the bed. "I should get up," she muttered but remained still. Her heavy-lidded eyes stared blankly up at the ceiling. She vaguely registered water being poured while she absently shared, "I dreamed of Daniel and Nathan." Her brow furrowed in deep thought as her heart ached.

"Nightmares?" Monty gently prodded, patiently waiting. He rested the cup on his right knee, his thumb idly stroking the handle. Anne had mentioned the murmurs and restlessness throughout the night, and she had also mentioned the impact of the sleeping savior's magic on the queen and how it had soothed their monarch. While the report had confirmed a few of his suspicions, he was still greatly concerned. "Dreams?"

"Memories," Regina easily replied. Turning her head, she looked at her commander and softly smiled, forever thankful and always touched by his concern and brotherly love. "I'll be fine," she promised, knowing that he worried about her.

Elmwood scowled. Opening his mouth, he stopped himself and exhaled heavily as he weighed his words. Then, after clearing his throat, he calmly relayed, "You're healing nicely, and Anne is quite pleased." He held her gaze and sternly continued, "Although, we harbor some concerns."

And, there it is, the former mayor thought. "About?" she asked curiously.

"Your memories," he clarified, tilting his head when she looked away. He moved the tankard to the table before reaching out and lightly resting his hand over his sovereign's. Quietly, he added, "You've been talking in your sleep." His eyes traced her tense profile, and he continued, "You mentioned Edetani and Emiliana to Emma this morning. Anne's heard other things during the night, but she doesn't believe Emma's caught on, yet."

Absently, she lifted her right hand and touched the scar on her lip. "I—," she started then stopped, draping her right arm across her stomach. Regina swallowed and bit her lower lip, turning to look at Monty. "They're so real," she whispered. Her brow furrowed as her eyes sparked with intensity. "I could smell the hay in the barn." She frowned as she rolled toward the edge, tossing off the quilt and swinging her legs off the side as she sat. Fisting the sheet under her hands, she stared down at the floor. Her voice was soft as she admitted, "They're in order." Blinking, she looked up at her knight with a veiled, horrified expression and repeated, "They're in order." Instantly, her heart started thumping wildly in her chest, but the strong hand now clasping hers eased her down from her rising panic. The dreams were going to get a lot worse. Sliding off the bed, her bare feet hit the cool, wood deck in silence. "They're in fucking order," she growled in frustration.

"Yes, I think you've made that clear, Ma'am," Monty acknowledged with a muted smirk, hoping to ease her stress. When she glared at him, he smiled broadly, squeezing her hand before releasing it. Affectionate touches were far and few between but always significant. Then, he turned serious and expounded, "I assumed as much when you woke, mentioning Daniel and Nathan."

Regina ran her hands through her short, mussed hair. "The dreams aren't like normal dreams or nightmares," she whispered, her hands gripping the fabric on her shoulders. She faced her commander as she dropped her arms to her sides. "I can't control them," she explained, crossing her arms in an effort to push back her vulnerability.

Nodding, Elmwood quickly questioned, "So, they aren't like your lessons with Merlin?" He didn't always understand the realm of magic, but he fully understood his queen's rare, powerful gift. On numerous occasions, he had witnessed her single-handedly save and defend the kingdom. "Where he taught you to walk with the spirits?"

"It would appear not," the former mayor gruffly admitted. She stepped forward and reached for the
tankard. After several large swigs, she muttered into the cup, "Magic saturates everything here." She finished the water and placed the tankard by the pitcher on the table. Then, she moved toward the window and gazed out into the endless expansion of ocean, silently contemplating.

"Is it magic?" he asked, twisting in his seat. "Are the memories the result of some sort of spell?" He frowned and his gaze hardened as he realized the only other magic users onboard were Emma and Gold.

"It's magic. Of that much, I'm certain, but...," she trailed off. Cupping her right elbow in her left hand, she bowed her head and rubbed her forehead with her right. "I don't believe Emma would intentionally do something like this, even if she could, and Gold, well, there's no benefit to it," she explained, somewhat lost in thought.

"There was no benefit to binding you to the sheriff, but he did," Monty retorted darkly. At first, he did blame the savior, but now, he realized she was simply a pawn, always had been since even before her birth.

"Oh, I'm sure he thinks he has reasons for orchestrating it." Regina devilishly smirked at her commander as she proudly commented, "But I managed to shift his carefully controlled board in my favor." After all, she had stayed politically relevant without the curse or magic and expertly molded the savior into well-rounded public figure. Shaking her head, she continued, "The dreams don't feel quite natural, but they're definitely not a spell. They feel more like an insistent shove." She paused and hesitated for a moment before adding, "I think I've slipped into trance states, as well." The first time, she had thought she'd simply spaced out from exhaustion, but the second time had left a gap in time she couldn't ignore.

"Trances?" Elmwood prompted, rising from his chair. Dreams were one thing, something that happened when the body rested, but for some unknown assault on his queen to occur while she was awake, that needed to stop, immediately. His eyes searched his sovereign for any sign of visual injury. "It must be the Dark One," he urged, his hands curling into tight fists.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor dismissed the notion with an elegant roll of her right hand. "All powerful or not, Rumpelstiltskin may be able to temporarily induce such a magical phenomenon, but he couldn't maintain it, not for any prolonged period. He doesn't have the power reserves, and even if he did, this isn't his usual MO," she clarified, looking around the room for her bag. "I want to get dressed," she remarked as she moved toward the suitcase stashed in the corner. "Some fresh air will do me good, I think," she added, carefully stooping to retrieve the bag. She frowned as it was gently taken away.

"Is that wise?" the commander inquired, putting his queen's suitcase on the desk. He paused and looked over his shoulder at the woman making the bed.

"Yes," she answered with a sigh. "Physically, I'm feeling better today. As for the rest, I know you don't like it, Monty, but I can't stop it, not yet anyway," she explained as she tucked in the sheet and straightened the quilt. "We'll simply have to make do," she instructed, fluffing the pillows.

Unzipping the bag, Monty shifted through the articles of clothing, selecting a practical outfit and placing it on the bed. When his queen frowned at one of Emma's baggy sweaters, he intoned, "It's cold above deck today. Hook says we'll enter warmer waters in a day or so." So, in silence, he assisted his sovereign, and as they carefully maneuvered through the process of undressing and redressing her, maintaining the delicate balance of respectful propriety developed over the years, he casually inquired, "I suppose you'll have to share your past with Emma, then."

"I suppose I will," Regina agreed, slowly pulling the large sweater over her head. It wasn't the
sharing that bothered her. It was how it would potentially damage her relationship with Emma that worried her. As she tried to settle the heavy wool, she was grateful when she felt her commander gently tug and adjust the garment. Her shoulders already hurt from the exertion, and she winced as a spasm knifed through her right shoulder.

"Do you want me to fetch Anne or Emma?" Elmwood softly questioned. Magic was a powerful thing and could do amazing things, but the body could only endure so much trauma. And, unfortunately, his queen's shoulders had taken the brunt of it before.

"No," the former mayor answered as she breathed through the pain. "Anne will just want to put me in bed, and Emma will just fret, irritating Anne about what to do." Looking up at her knight, she smirked and cheekily commented, "Both are equally annoying, by the way."

"As you wish," he replied, bowing his head slightly. He didn't like to see his sovereign hurt, but he would always try and respect her wishes. That was something he hoped Emma Swan would improve upon in time, though she seemed to be doing fairly well, thus far. Holding out his arm, he waited for his queen to link her arm with his, and as her smaller body leaned against him, he softened his expression. "She'll understand," he stated, guiding them out of the cabin.

"I hope so," she responded. For the first time in a long time, she truly wanted to let someone behind her carefully constructed walls and allow them see everything in the hopes of being understood.

~SQ~

Meanwhile in Storybrooke...

Cora frowned as she paused writing in her leather-bound journal. Looking up from her seat at the small, plastic table, she observed as several Crows Guard carried in a small, wooden table and chair set. She primly placed her pen on top her latest entry before standing. Smoothing out her simple clothes, she waited for her visitor to arrive. Her lips twitched with nervous excitement. Had Regina returned? Who else in this dour little town would the loyal Queen's Guard serve so readily?

When Markus, who carried a silver tea service, entered the cavern, the sorceress pursed her lips and turned to check the small clock on top her table. She sighed softly as she faced the entrance of her prison. Her visitor wasn't going to be her daughter. So, upon hearing the soft shuffling of feet on the packed dirt floor, she squared her shoulders, straightened her posture, and lifted her chin.

"Hello, Cora," Widow Granger greeted as she was escorted into the antechamber by Bobby.

"Helena," Cora curtly returned with a watchful gleam. "To what do I owe the pleasure?" she sedately queried.

Allowing herself to be guided to the solitary chair just an arm's length from the cell's bars, the old herbalist gracefully sat and settled herself, idly smoothing out her coat. "Oh, I thought you'd enjoy a cup of tea," she brightly offered, pulling one glove and, then, the other off. "Thank you, Mr. Milton," she said, dismissing the hovering senior guard. "Markus and I will be quite alright," she tersely assured.

With a rumbly grunt, Bobby excused himself and strutted out of the cavern, sharing a brief look over his shoulder with Markus before he disappeared into the tunnels. He didn't think the queen's mother deserved visitors, but Helena Granger was dear to his sovereign and was allowed such privileges. That she could freely walk the Other Side also made her something of a respected enigma with those who still followed the old ways.
Markus dutifully prepared a cup of tea and paused. He glanced up as he was uncertain of how the herbalist preferred her hot beverage.

"A healthy dollop of honey will suffice, Markus," Helena instructed, noticing the hesitation after the water had been poured. Once her cup was passed to her, she inhaled the comforting aroma of her favorite blend. "Do you still take your tea sweet, Cora," she asked conversationally, "or has your sour disposition affected your taste buds after all these years?"

"A spoon of sugar and a squeeze of lemon, please," the sorceress requested. She turned and fetched her plastic, garden chair from the table and placed it before the bars. With well-practiced poise, she settled herself like a proper lady. When her jailer passed her cup through the bars, she imperiously nodded her thanks.

Looking between the two women, the Crows Guard quietly excused himself, and he moved to stand in the entrance of the tunnel. It wasn't his typical position, but the queen's favored healer had requested some privacy for their discourse.

"What's your endgame?" Widow Granger demanded abruptly, still holding her cup under her nose. The mine was dank and off-putting, but the rock teemed with residual power, her mind's eye sensing the phantom streaks of nature magic.

"You were never one for subtlety," Cora groused into her tea, savoring the humid warmth seeping upward. Her eyes drifted closed as she inhaled the earthy aroma.

"I don't have time for it," the herbalist quipped, taking a sip of tea. She hummed her appreciation for its preparation before continuing, "Nor do I care to repeat myself." Then, she paused to give her old acquaintance a moment. "In case it's escaped your keen notice, your daughter has locked you up and all but thrown away the key."

"A minor setback," the sorceress sneered in a low tone. She would not be a spectacle for the town's amusement. Primly, she rested her saucer and cup on her lap. "Regina will come to her senses, soon enough," she confidently promised.

"The queen has you exactly where she wants you," Helena replied, amusement lacing her tone. She took a slow drink as she weighed her words carefully. Tilting her head, her blind eyes fixed on the woman on the other side of the bars. "How often has Regina visited you since your arrest?"

"Twice," Cora immediately supplied, lifting her chin. Of course, one of those visits had been after her daughter's abduction, but Regina had to know she had helped her, that she had saved her.

Humming, the old hedge witch took another thoughtful sip before lowering her cup and saucer. "You did well by your child, Cora—this time," she seriously praised. Her brief check on the queen when Regina had still been unconscious in the hospital had impressed her with the extensive healing the Queen of Hearts had performed. The woman had such potential, and she squandered it on her cruel pursuit of power. Then, Helena's eyes narrowed as she curiously questioned, "But what are you expecting in return?"

"I expect nothing," the sorceress sniped with a hard scowl. She leaned forward, dangerously sloshing her tea within its cup. The old bitch had always set her teeth on edge on the handful of occasions she'd had to deal with her during her time in Angevin.

"Like hell," Widow Granger snapped. She took a slow breath as she ground her teeth. "Try again," she demanded softly, regaining her composure. It wouldn't do to get her blood pressure up.
Cora seethed. Her hands trembled ever so slightly with her rage, rattling the teacup and saucer on her lap. After inhaling deeply through her nose, she admitted through clenched teeth, "Of course, I would like to have a less antagonistic relationship with my daughter." She exhaled and her composure returned. "Satisfied?" she quipped cheekily.

"Yes, thank you," Helena easily responded, not fazed by her companion's short temper. After a quick sip, she continued, "But I'm curious as to how you see that happening." Her already wrinkled brow furrowed further as she idly ran her finger along the rim of her cup. "She's not dependent on you any longer," she offered, mostly to herself. "She's not dependent on anyone, for that matter," she added in a softer, gentler tone. Her old heart ached for the young queen, having been witness to so much of her grief over the years.

"The so-called savior seems to have rather thoroughly enthralled Regina," the sorceress countered in a measured tone. She had hoped after experiencing a husband's attentions her daughter would have grown out of her captivation with the fairer sex.

Snorting with perverse amusement, the herbalist decided to share her own observations. "Despite Rumpelstiltskin's grand machinations, the sheriff's the one on the leash, not the queen," she quipped with a faint smirk. However, after a beat, she sobered and cast her eyes downward. "She learned a great deal at King Leopold's court," she shared forebodingly. It really was a shame the queen had become so accomplished at the art of beguilement.

"Then, her time as queen served her well," Cora calmly retorted. A sense of pride bubbled within her, knowing her daughter was capable of great things. After all, she had only pushed Regina so hard because she knew the girl would forever rise to the occasion, often exceeding her expectations.

Widow Granger shook her head. Carefully, she placed her half full teacup and saucer on the small table beside her. "Being in that man's bed served no one, your aspirations aside," she darkly responded. Idly, she rested her left hand on the tabletop, and after a long moment of silence during which Cora's confusion grew almost tangible, she tapped her fingertips on the smooth wood surface. "Regina emerged stronger by virtue of her will alone, not through your harsh tutelage," she explained, not wanting to give away more than what was her right. Lifting her head up, a fond smile stretched across her face as she offered a tiny bit of insight, "There is a reason Angevin remains loyal to a foreign-born monarch."

Narrowing her eyes, the sorceress glared at the woman through the bars. "Leopold was weak," she insisted with open contempt. "Of course, she would subdue him and take his kingdom for herself," she pridefully remarked, taking a hearty swig of her cooling tea. Who was this woman to tell her about her daughter and her reign? She had completed extensive research on her quest to find Regina a suitable kingdom. Her decision had been simple when she recalled the man had been so easily malleable in her own hands until that insufferable brat, Eva, had ruined everything.

"That bastard was many things, but weak was not one of them," the old herbalist hatefully sneered. Blind eyes unerringly locked onto the caged woman. Suddenly, the coiling anger dissipated, and she linked her hands on top her lap. "If you ever hope to win your daughter's honest affections, you'd do well to learn of her time with him," she helpfully suggested. She did so for Regina because she could see value in a healthy relationship with her mother, even now. If only Cora could put aside the harsh critiques and see how remarkable her child really was, the queen would benefit from having such a strong ally behind her.

Rolling her eyes, Cora huffed ever so softly. "Yes, I'm well aware of Regina's distaste over his age and that her preferences have always laid elsewhere."
Helena frowned at the stupidity on display before her. How this woman stayed had alive and outmaneuvered the Dark One and the Blue Fairy was anyone's guess. Tapping her right thumb against her left, she pursed her lips and counted to ten. "The problem with sorcerers is they think they know everything," she enlightened in a flat voice.

"The problem with hedge witches is they think all life's answers reside in the bottom of their teacups," the sorceress remarked before draining the rest of her tea. She fought the impulse to throw the crockery at the old hag, but she couldn't bring herself to damage the china.

Not surprised but infuriated by the snarky retort, the hedge witch barely managed to curb her bristling anger. Why did Regina end up with such a dreadful mother? "By the gods, get your head out of your arse, Woman! The sooner you truly attempt to understand your child, the sooner you'll be in her life, again," she barked harshly, wondering if her advice would be ignored, per usual.

Blinking, Cora was taken aback by the stern outburst from the typically calm and collected woman. Never, in all the years that she had known her, had she witnessed a loss of control to such a degree. However, she would not back down from a challenge to her character, and she sharply demanded, "Why should I believe you actually care?" No one had ever cared about her beyond what advantage she could provide or what torture she could inflict.

"Unlike you, I care about Regina, and she deserves to be happy," Widow Granger heatedly snapped. She breathed heavily through her nose for a long beat before turning her head away. Why was she even there?

Standing, the sorceress lunged forward, teacup falling to the ground as she gripped the bars until her knuckles turned white. "I love my daughter!" she bellowed, thrusting every ounce of emotion into her plea. After an extended, silent disregard by the blind witch before her, Cora's shoulders sagged in defeat, and tears threatened to fall.

"Then, show it," Helena quietly urged, sensing truth in the other woman's words. She swallowed and turned her head back toward the cell. "Ask her why she killed the king," she helpfully suggested. If the idiot didn't take her advice, that wasn't her problem. She, at least, had tried but only the gods knew why.

Confusion creeping into her tone, Cora replied, "To take the throne, why else?" Her haughty demeanor faltered exponentially the longer her visitor remained silent.

The old herbalist breathlessly pondered, "You honestly haven't a clue, do you?" Shaking her head, she retrieved her leather gloves from the small table. Pulling one glove on, she tiredly commented, "You're either blinded by ambition or utterly daft." It was really a tossup at this point.

"I did well by Regina, made her stronger," the sorceress proclaimed with bravado. Had something happened? Had she miscalculated, somehow, all those years previous?

Roughly tugging on her other glove, Widow Granger bitterly retorted, "No, you most certainly did not." She pursed her lips into a hard scowl and slowly shook her head. Carefully, she stood and eased herself around the small table and chair. "The brew has turned bitter," she announced in a calmer and louder tone, signaling Markus with her desire to leave. "I think I'll take some fresh air to settle my stomach." When she heard the soft footfalls of the Crows Guard, she relaxed and reached out her right arm. "Markus, help me outside, would you?" she politely requested.

Watching the hedge witch leave, Cora was left with an uneasy sense of dread, and she couldn't help but wonder, what had she done?
Let's start with the Crows Guard/Queen's Guard. Yes, Regina is their queen and can order them to do just about anything; however, this does not mean she should. Monty is the Commander of the Queen's Guard. That means that, not only is he over her Personal Queen's Guard, he is also over every single guard in Regina's castle—hundreds of guards. And just as one wouldn't expect a VP to allow a new hire, office grunt to do whatever they please, regardless of policies and procedures just because the CEO is friends with them, Emma is not going to be able to say and do what she wants within her role as a recruit of the Queen's Guard. Emma knows that she is the low man on the totem pole. Regina is also cognizant of this and does not want special treatment for Emma aside from allowing her full access to her person. If Regina allowed Emma to disregard Monty and Anne's (Captain of the Queen's Guard and second in command) wishes when it comes to her training, that would be extreme favoritism. It would sow seeds of discontent and resentment among all the other guards and completely undermine the authority Regina has bestowed upon Monty and Anne by virtue of their hard-earned positions. Emma has to earn her way as a guard, meaning she trains when they want her to train and doesn't bitch about it. As Queen, Regina has the utmost respect for her guards; she placed them in their positions for specific reasons and trusts them to do their jobs. When Regina agreed with Monty to allow Emma to train, she understood that it meant dynamics would change some. As a friend, Emma has access; as a guard recruit, she does what she's told. Sometimes, the two things don't mix well, and if Monty or Anne make a call in a particular situation and Regina doesn't protest, it's because she agrees with them. Regina is not going to sabotage the system she helped put in place. These are the dynamics within our story.

Also, remember that it's been one day since Regina was kidnapped and tortured. Monty and Anne are going to go a little overboard initially because they are still upset over their failure to prevent it from happening. They were not expecting outsiders to come into Storybrooke and attack their queen, and they are kicking themselves for that mistake. Regina understands where they are coming from and is giving them a couple of days to calm down and relax a little, again. They've been with her for over twelve years (not counting the curse), and they have a great deal of history between them that helps inform her decisions in regards to their actions. She is not letting them walk all over her or control her. She's simply allowing them time to take a few deep breaths and realize they can step back a bit. Regina is more than willing to curb her guard when she feels there is a need or they are being disrespectful. Thus far, she does not.

The other point we want to address is in regard to Regina and Emma's relationship. We have had their relationship arc developed and plotted for months. It is pretty much set in stone, at this point. This is not the time for these two mothers who are worried sick over the well-being of their son to embark on a romantic relationship. Romance is the last thing on either lady's mind, at the moment. They will get there. Believe us. This is a SwanQueen story, and coming chapters will get back to having much more one-on-one interaction between our two leading ladies. Hell, Chapter 17 starts off with a fifteen (15) page scene that's just the two of them. But there is a shitload of setup that
is necessary for our story so that future elements will make sense. It's not just filler. We've said before that every element is carefully thought out and crafted to enrich the story and help tell our tale. This is still true. Our Regina is not the one seen in the show. Her past is vastly different, as is our version of the Enchanted Forest.

And lastly, we are writing this story for us. The fact that others are getting enjoyment out of it is an awesome bonus. But the fact remains that this is our story. We are writing it with the characterization and elements that we want to see and, as such, will not change or morph because some readers don't like or appreciate certain elements. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, and we're happy to hear them--as long as they remain respectful. That said, if a comment comes across as hateful and overly disrespectful, we will remove it. Because, full honesty here, we'd like others to like our work, but don't give two shits if they don't. Complaints and whining won't change our minds about what we've planned to do. Respectful and thoughtful comments (the vast majority of what we've received), even if they disagree with story elements, will always be welcome, however.
Chapter 16

Chapter by LainStardust

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: This where all the new tags start to come into play. Remember that there will be warnings before all flashbacks (in italics), and they will be separated from other scenes with our ~SQ~ separator. Sometimes, the sensitive subject matter doesn't begin until a certain point in the scene. When that is the case, it is noted in that particular, flashback warning. Please be aware that, outside of the flashbacks, the subjects of rape and sexual violence are discussed among the characters but are not described in detail. A brief synopsis of any major character development and/or plot points contained within the flashbacks will be included in the notes at the end of the chapter, so, if you decide to skip one, you won't be lost later on in the story.

Also, please be aware that the vast majority of the subject matter seen in the flashbacks have a great deal of personal significance to ourselves and/or family members and close friends. Nothing is here for shock value. We are asking you, dear readers, to be respectful of these experiences and pay attention to the warnings. If you are uncomfortable reading a section, skip it; we'll understand and respect that decision. We will not, however, tolerate rude or hateful comments regarding the scenes below as doing so lessens and demeans our and others' life experiences. Please be mindful of your own limits and heed the warnings scattered throughout the Neverland arc.

Special Note: While the Crows Guard won't be going away, they are not the heroes of this story. Yet, like anyone else, they have their occasional moments. Additionally, more OCs will be introduced and utilized as the story progresses. These types of characters allow us to tell the story we want to share and are necessary to move the plot along, at times. A story this long with just Emma and Regina, even if exceptionally written, would be boring as fuck. Nevertheless, Emma and Regina will have various degrees of interactions with these OCs, both separately and together, at some point. Often, good storytelling occasionally requires a bit of setup that may or may not involve the main characters. Just like when watching a TV show, when the arc has been resolved or the season ends or the focus and environment has changed, so, too, do the dynamics between the characters, and sometimes, new and/or supporting characters are brought forward for a bit. Considering we actually do know what's happening in future chapters, trust us when we say that this story will always be, at its core, Swan Queen driven and will have tons of romance between our two leading ladies (who will remain the leads). If you wish to discuss Emma's and Regina's story arcs with us, we would be happy to answer a few questions and maybe—possibly—hint at our plans for those wonderful characters; however, pitching temper tantrums and orating ad nauseam what you don't like in our story will not sway us to (1) interact with you, (2) take you seriously, or (3) consider your point of view, especially if you hide behind the "Guest" tag. We greatly enjoy respectful and insightful discourse but don't have time to appease ruffled feathers.

Thank You, as always, for all the comments, reviews, likes, favorites, follows and kudos. However, hateful and/or rude remarks will be removed. If any aspect of the story doesn't suit your tastes, it remains your prerogative to dislike it. And if you feel the necessity to share your distaste but can't do so in an adult and respectful manner,
Leaning forward and propping her hands on her knees, Emma gulped a lungful of salty, sea air. She swallowed and resisted the urge to lick her dry lips. Damn, Anne was kicking her ass harder than usual. She peered through the curtain of her blonde hair and watched the scout grandmaster inspect her long knife. Then, her eyes drifted to the hatch leading below deck and the potential safety of the captain's cabin. She sighed, knowing she should let Regina sleep.

"Come on, Swan," Diego Flores taunted from the crow's nest. "If you're not going to train, you'd better start scrubbing," he teased the recruit with a boisterous laugh. With his need to jeer satisfied, he resumed his observation of the horizon.

"Ass hat," she muttered good-naturedly, straightening and glaring up at the guard. Rolling her shoulders, she took a couple steps toward McCormac, but someone coming through the hatch caught her attention. She couldn't stop the lopsided grin as she saw Monty escorting Regina onto the weather deck. Instinctively, she took a step toward them, but her face quickly met the planks she had mopped the night before. "Ow," she whined, rolling onto her back, and glowered at the scout grandmaster. "What was that for?"

"Always pay attention to your surroundings and finish training," Anne scolded, flipping her knife in the air. "You can irritate the queen later," she added with a smirk as she took several steps backward. Watching the savior stand, she noted the improving, fluid motion, how she was using her arms less and less each time. She smiled at the determination in the recruit's eyes.

For another thirty minutes, Emma and McCormac clashed blades, arms, and legs around the main deck of the Jolly Roger, providing ample entertainment for everyone else. Of course, the sheriff ended up on her ass more often than not, but she remained a persistent and willing student. When the recruit successfully blocked a series of vigorous attacks and even made an impressive countermove, the scout grandmaster released her for the day and went to check on the queen who was sitting on a low storage locker on the forward, port bow.

Emma sheathed her short sword before wiping her brow. She flung off droplets of sweat and bits of sea salt. Pursing her lips, she moseyed over to the starboard gunwale and stretched, giving her muscles a chance to cool down after the exercise. She leaned on the heels of her hands against the rail and stared out at the seemingly endless ocean, noticing the slight curvature of the horizon. It was beautiful.

"It's pretty amazing, isn't it?" Mary Margaret commented, coming to stand next to her daughter. "I never thought I'd see an ocean so big," she added, peering over the rail. She lost herself, momentarily, in the rhythmic motions of the boat's emerging wake.

"You never sailed in the Enchanted Forest?" the sheriff questioned. She turned around and
surveyed the ship. Her gaze lingered on Regina for a long beat before she dropped down to sit, her back against the bulwark.

"Oh, I was quite content to live inland," the school teacher replied off-handedly, smiling down at her daughter. Glancing up at the large, fluffy clouds overhead, she continued, "Although, I can certainly see the appeal." Memories of state visits to other kingdoms and family vacations to the coast of Angevin flittered across her mind's eye. Looking over her shoulder at her stepmother, she remarked, "Regina always loved the ocean." She had rarely seen the woman as happy as when she had frolicked, utterly carefree, on the beach during their rare trips to Edetani.

Emma hummed in response. She could see a distant light of excitement in the former mayor's gaze when she looked out into the sea or up at the full sails. There was a wildness hidden in those brown depths, and it was captivating. Looking at her lap, the sheriff bit her lower lip and pulled her sheathed, short sword to rest across her thighs, idly tracing the delicate design on the hilt. Anne had told her it had been gifted to her by Jean-Luc Elmwood, Monty's older brother and Regina's Marshal, when she had agreed to infiltrate the castle and be assigned to the Queen's Guard. Then, the scout grandmaster had bestowed it upon her when she had agreed to join the Crows Guard. She felt honored, even if she didn't quite understand the full scope of the gift.

"Your melee practice was impressive. Your father said you've improved quite a bit," Mary Margaret commented, sitting beside her daughter. She glanced at the short sword before staring across at the scout standing beside Regina. "I still can't get over the fact that she's a woman," she muttered wistfully, shaking her head. All those years living in that castle, and she had never once suspected, only thought McCormac was small, much like Chavez. It left her wondering how many women her stepmother had employed as guards. When her daughter didn't say anything for a long minute, she turned her head and studied her profile. This was a lot harder than she had thought it would be, reconnecting with her child. Reaching out and placing her right hand on her daughter's left knee, Snow promised, "I want all of us to be a family, and we'll do whatever we need to do to make that happen."

Pursing her lips, the sheriff remained still. This shouldn't have come as a surprise, her mother cornering her, but she wasn't sure how to handle the constant neediness. She still carried so much anger and disappointment toward her parents, and the longer her mother's hand stayed on her knee, the more agitated she became. Slowly shaking her head, she started to bounce her left leg, a subtle cue to be released, and when her mother merely squeezed it, she nearly lost what calm she had remaining. She scrambled onto her feet, readjusting the short sword, and glared at the still sitting woman gazing up at her with wide, soulful eyes. "You want things to be okay between us?" she hissed, bending forward to keep her words soft and clipped. "You want me to try and have a relationship with you?" she continued, silently acknowledging to herself that she missed her mother's cursed personality. "Then, apologize to Regina, and not because I want you to but because you mean it," she demanded, leaning back and crossing her arms as she watched Mary Margaret stand.

Anger coiled within the school teacher. She was tired of hearing the same thing over and over again from her only child. She was tired of the insinuated exaltedness of her stepmother. Her eyes flashed in brilliant defiance as she stared her daughter down. When Emma refused to flinch, Mary Margaret gritted her teeth and lifted her chin. "Fine," she intoned before stomping across the ship. With her quarry in sight and finally alone, she briskly moved across the weather deck, calling, "No, don't run away from me," as she saw the former queen moving in the opposite direction.

Regina startled at the sudden abruptness in Snow White's demanding tone. Once her guards had taken their leave after some unnecessary fussing by Anne, she had decided to begin her slow lap around the main deck. It was an uncomfortable exercise but a necessary one; however, she did note
a distinct improvement since the previous day, no doubt thanks in large part to Emma's nighttime healing. Filing the observation for later consideration, she turned and faced the petulant woman before her. Gesturing around her, she mildly taunted, "We're on a boat in the middle of an endless ocean. Where am I going to run?"

"Why do you have to be so abrasive?" Mary Margaret groused, standing at her full height, arms akimbo.

Smirking and unable to resist, the former mayor casually retorted, "Why do you have to be so self-absorbed?" Her smile broadened as she blinked lazily at the fuming woman.

Shock flashed across the school teacher's face. Her mouth worked feverishly before she settled on a reaction. Crossing her arms, she huffed with muted irritation, "We need to settle this." She gestured weakly between them with her top hand. "I want to make things right between us," she added in a gentler and more complacent tone.

"Then, go swim with the fishes," Regina dismissively suggested, absently waving toward the water. She carefully adjusted her stance, leaning against the shipside of the forward bow.

Mary Margaret's arms dropped to her sides as she hesitantly reached out, observing her stepmother's careful maneuvering. She didn't want to fight, and her voice held a hint of a whine as she whispered, "Regina, I'm trying to apologize." And she truly wanted to try to put their past behind them.

"I didn't know what was involved in removing someone's magic," the school teacher explained. She shook her head, forcing down her rising frustration. Why did everything have to be so difficult between them?

"You didn't care to know because it didn't directly impact you," Regina countered, unimpressed by the admission. She gazed out at the horizon, focusing where sky and sea merged. She didn't care what Snow White felt for her or thought about her. Her mission was to save Henry; he was the only child to whom she still had a responsibility.

Mary Margaret closed the short distance between them. She laid a supportive hand on her stepmother's right biceps, and with as much love as possible, she beseeched, "I do care, and I didn't know it would hurt like that!" She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head, willing the mental images from her mind's eye.

"And what, pray tell, did you think would happen?" the former queen asked, her words clipped. Looking down at the hand gripping her, she sneered, "You'd flip a switch, and my magic would suddenly be gone?" Her glower cut to meet Snow White's confused expression. She shrugged off the hand on her arm. "It's not like pulling a fuse, Dear," she explained, standing upright and squaring her shoulders. "It's more akin to ripping the wiring through the drywall," she continued in a low, gravelly voice. Her fists clenched as she felt the distinct presence of her magic gathering beneath her skin. "I told you, as plain as day, the bond couldn't be broken, and yet, you put your own daughter at risk, anyway," she finished with rising contempt.

"Don't use her against me," the school teacher immediately retorted, matching her stepmother's hateful gleam.
"Why?" Regina scoffed lightly. "Can't handle the truth?" she challenged, her tone dropping low and quiet.

Mary Margaret growled in frustration as she firmly stomped her right heel onto the deck. Her voice continually rose with each word. "I'm trying to apologize, and you're being impossible," she accused. Then, she tossed her hands in the air and defiantly decreed, "I'm sorry, Regina!"

"Very well," the former mayor acknowledged, taking on a more relaxed stance, again. She crossed her arms and shifted her weight more firmly onto her left leg. "I accept your apology for Emma's sake, so she'll move on from this," she softly explained, leaning forward a bit. She held Snow White's perplexed gaze for a long pause before clarifying, "But things will never be right between us." And with her peace said, she turned to walk away, down the length of the ship.

Blinking, the school teacher's brow furrowed as she bitterly prompted, "Why are you always so hateful?"

"Apparently, it's the company I keep," Regina flippantly retorted with an elegant roll of her wrist. She smirked to herself, her right hand caressing the gunwale as she made her way toward Monty.

Tired of the woman's abuses, Mary Margaret stomped forward two steps, closing the distance. She roughly grabbed her stepmother's left arm and yanked her around to face her, not caring for the wince of pain she witnessed. With her hand clawing into the captured arm, she angrily declared, "Yes, I told a secret to Cora, and yes, Daniel was killed because of it. And I regret it, but I was twelve, Regina! Twelve! I think I deserve a little slack."

Wrath bubbled within the former queen as she lethally commanded in a slow, pointed drawl, "Let me go."

Surprised by the sheer emotion in the soft words, the school teacher's grip loosened for a sparse moment. Then, sense returned, and she tightened her hold. "No," she replied, lifting her chin and pressing her fingertips into muscled flesh. "Not until you tell me why you had to destroy my family," she demanded with superiority.

When her mother grabbed Regina, Emma almost bolted across the deck, ready to intercede. However, it was Alma's gentle hand on her shoulder and warm, understanding eyes that kept her stationary. She glanced around at the Crows Guard above deck and caught the other guards' measured looks as they remained professional. Monty loitered by her father on the quarter deck. Anne glared down from the crow's nest where she'd relieved Diego. Everyone was on edge. It was like an ultimate cage fight during the heyday of Paid Per View. When she relaxed, she felt a reassuring squeeze before the hand on her shoulder dropped away. She pursed her lips and briefly considered tapping into the bond or reaching out with her magic, but she thought better of it. No, she would trust Regina's judgement implicitly and let her mother dig her own grave. A part of her was disappointed, but not surprised, that her mother couldn't even do this one, little thing for her.

Reaching out with her right arm, the former queen grabbed hold of the insolent brat's left ear and squeezed a particular nerve. The whimpers of rising discomfort quickly led to ones of pain, and she grinned viciously. When Snow White reached up to weakly swat at her hand, she tutted and chided, "Fortunately for you, I'm in a benevolent mood." She squeezed again for good measure, relishing how the sniffling woman's knees buckled as she finally released her arm. This was nothing compared to the torment she'd endured.

"Regina!" David bellowed from the helm. He strode forward, heading toward the ladder-stairs, but was intercepted by Monty. The two men glared at each other in silent contest.
Ignoring the shepherd's posturing, Regina firmly stated, "You're in no position to make demands of me, Snow." She firmly held the ear as she watched tears pool in the corners of green eyes. Then, as she held her gaze for a long beat, she took a slow breath. "Telling Mother of Daniel, that I had forgiven a long, long time ago," she quietly admitted, laying to rest the orchestrated feud. Roughly, she released her hold on Snow's ear. Her eyes drifted to Emma, standing across the span of the ship, and she was heartened by the compassion in those bright eyes and the supportive emotions filtering through the bond. She sighed and looked back out into the endless expanse of water.

"What?" Mary Margaret gasped, absently rubbing her left ear. It was hot to the touch. She remembered seeing her stepmother use a similar hold on Jason and a young Alexander, as well as servants' children. "But the cursed apple?" she gushed in confusion. She glanced up at her husband who looked just as perplexed as her. "All those years I lived in the forest...," she trailed off. Suddenly, she was driven by an insatiable need to know the truth.

"My forgiveness of a spoiled, friendless child's mistake does not absolve you of your other trespasses, Dear," the former mayor quietly intoned. She had no desire to bare her soul to this thorn in her side.

"What are you talking about?" the school teacher demanded, reaching out and almost grabbing her stepmother, again, but the woman's icy stare made her retract her hand. The fear incited by the mere look fanned a flame of anger, and being unaccustomed to such heated emotions, Mary Margaret simply reacted. "I didn't do anything else to you," she snarled with loathing for her stepmother and herself.

Tilting her head and thoughtfully blinking, Regina considered the impassioned outburst. A bright, malevolent smile curled her lips. "No?" she tutted softly, turning to face the would-be queen directly. Perhaps this farce of a parley would be beneficial, after all. "That would explain why you spun the vapid fib of my jealousy over your beauty," she continued with a shark-like smile. Her voice lowered and she pouted her lips when she added, "Of course, you always did believe everything your father told you." Then, her expression and tone shifted to contemplative as she turned her eyes skyward and slowly tapped her chin with her right index finger. "I did try to move on, let you move on, but you felt compelled to follow your shepherd's rally to war, ravaging the Midlands in brutal dispute," she explicated before she crossed her arms and pinned Snow White with a piercing glare. Those losses had been completely avoidable.

"We won," Mary Margaret exclaimed as if that explained everything. "We captured you," she added, squaring her shoulders and holding her head high with pride. It had been their ultimate achievement and had resulted in the stabilization of their hold on King George's kingdom and castle until the Dark Curse.

Rolling her eyes, the former queen chastised, "Through trickery and scheming, yes, I was captured but not by valor on the battlefield, not in a way it truly mattered." She'd always been disappointed by her rival's battle tactics. She had expected more from the cunning bandit of the forests of Angevin.

"I showed you mercy," the school teacher whispered. She couldn't believe what she was hearing. She couldn't believe that, even now, her stepmother still goaded her. "We let you go!" she cried, tossing her arms out in an exaggerated gesture. She spun around in a circle. "Even in exile, you still managed to hold most of my kingdom," she said with evident confusion. Her eyes cut to each of the Crows Guard on deck, finally landing on Elmwood. What was she missing? How could someone so cruel and evil be so loved by those in her service?

Laughter danced on the wind and was carried over the sounds of waves breaking against the bow.
Emma Swan stood entranced. Despite the negativity of the topic and the impact these two women directly had on her life, she was utterly enraptured by the enigma of Regina Mills. And she knew, without a doubt, that if her mother would just stop attacking, Regina would accept a truce. The sheriff believed this with all her heart, and maybe that was why she kept turning her mother back toward the former mayor, hoping she'd eventually get the family she always wanted. Until the two made up, Emma knew she would always choose Regina's side.

"Your exile was a joke and held no lasting impression except to you," Regina retorted. She smirked upon noticing the widening cracks in Snow White's perfect façade of goodness. "That bothers you, doesn't it?" she taunted, leaning forward. Her eyes avidly searched the woman before her as she smelled fear. "I continued to sit upon the throne of your birthright while you were left to rule a lesser realm under false pretenses," she added with a devilish smirk. Feeling brazen, she moseyed around her quarry, whispering in her ear, "Or have you forgotten how your peasant army was slaughtered under your banner?" The battles had been glorious for the warriors of her army; only when the numbers had been too overwhelming did they lose. "The only reason you continued to hold Hanover was because I didn't think it was worth my time," she explained, standing upright and ignoring the twinge of pain in her right hip. And by the Gods, had George whined and pled and begged for her to take back his sad little chunk of forest.

Scowling, Mary Margaret's hands coiled into tight fists. "We held our own against your army just fine," she spat with defiance and confidence. However, the longer she held her stepmother's amused gaze, the more she wondered if she was missing something.

"You did receive the housewarming basket full of severed heads, did you not?" the former queen lightly inquired, her head tilting ever so slightly in mild interest. Her eyes sparkled with mischievous delight at her stepdaughter's rising discomfort.

"You are a contemptuous, vile woman," the school teacher sputtered, taking a quick step backward. How could anyone find pleasure in such tragedy? Those men had families and farms, and she had killed them because it had suited her mood.

Stopping to stand before her prey, Regina spread her arms wide, and with a boisterous grin, she skillfully taunted, "You wanted this discourse." Her smile dropped, as did her arms, and she continued in a low, quiet tone, "I accepted your pathetic act of contrition, and somehow we ended up here." She paused and cocked an eyebrow. "I'm beginning to sense a pattern," she mused pensively.

Sighing, Mary Margaret looked at the woman who was her stepmother with sad eyes. "Why do we always do this, Regina?" As she studied her sometimes-enemy, fresh-faced and bare of makeup, she was reminded poignantly of the woman who had raised her to adulthood, and it made her nostalgic for better times. In a bare whisper, so soft it was almost lost to the wind, she revealed, "I miss my mother."

Regina's head jerked back in shock, bewilderment filling her at the admission. Cold hatred followed scant seconds later, and her jaw flexed as she grasped Snow's chin in her hand, fingers digging into the impertinent girl's cheeks. "How dare you say that to me?" she hissed, sotto voce. "You were the one who destroyed our family. You took everything from me and sealed your father's fate in the process." With a bitter, muted chuckle, she fixed watery eyes on her stepdaughter's horrified expression. "The irony is if you had just listened to me and been a good daughter, all of this could have been prevented. But oh no, you had to be a self-righteous little bitch, instead." The former queen tightened then released her grip and tenderly caressed the backs of her knuckles over the marks her nails had left in the soft flesh. "Poor Snow," she cooed mockingly. Voice dripping with amused condescension, she jeered, "I don't have to tear your new
family apart. You're doing so well all on your own."

Lower lip trembling as tears slid down her face, Mary Margaret shook her head in denial, attempting to push away the memories dredged up by the cruel words. "I don't know why I keep trying," she lamented. And even still, she wanted the woman she remembered from all those years ago, before it all went terribly wrong, to be her mother, again. Snow had caught brief glimpses of that person with Emma since the bond, and it had made her heart ache.

"Neither do I, Dear," the former queen readily agreed. Carefully, she moved toward the ladder-stairs, avoiding eye contact with Emma, and was grateful when Alma extended her arm to assist with her descent below deck.

The sheriff pursed her lips. Her eyes bounced from one person to another, gauging reactions. Naturally, the Crows Guard remained unaffected, having witnessed similarly tempestuous interactions between the two women the last few months before Snow's banishment. Their steadfast loyalty spoke volumes to her, but the Salters looked at her parents with a new degree of scorn. One son, in particular, looked ready to read her mother the riot act, but a stern glare from Dave quelled the boy's need to squall. Maybe encouraging Mary Margaret to apologize hadn't been the smartest move, but it seemed to clear a lot of air. And if they wanted to have any chance of rescuing Henry, they needed to know who would have their backs.

So, with a disappointed glance at her heartbroken mother, Emma trotted below deck and weaved her way to their cabin. She slipped around a retreating Alma and under Bruce's arm before the tall guard could fully close the door. However, she was quite surprised to see Regina already lying on the bed with her boots off and her eyes closed.

Knowing who it was, the former mayor nestled down on her side of the bed for a much-needed nap. She felt Emma's nervousness and uncertainty nudging her through the bond. So, after a soft sigh, she forced her tired muscles to relax and gruffly said, "If you've come to scold me, may I remind you I showed remarkable restraint." Then, something odd skittered along their connection, and she opened her eyes to look at her grinning companion.

Carefully, Emma peeled off the layers of training armor, a broad smile stretching across her face. She snickered as she shared, "Yeah, you didn't kill her or punt her off the ship. So, I'll take that as a win." Her nerves settled at the amused harrumph, and once she was out of the leathers and in soft sweats, she carefully climbed onto the bunk. She nestled down between Regina and the bulkhead, for once enjoying the cool feeling seeping through the wood against her back. Then, a few minutes later, she heard the soft, even breathing of sleep from her friend. Instinctively, she reached out and laid her hand on top Regina's right biceps and drifted off.

~SQ~

**Warnings:** Graphic sexual violence (second half only, after Regina is escorted to Leopold)

Regina watched her valet through the mirror on her vanity as he carefully brushed her hair for the night. Unable to take the silence any longer, she murmured sadly, "How are you doing Nathan, truly?" Ever since Daniel's death a week prior, they had both been unusually subdued, but her friend was almost frighteningly withdrawn.

Shaking his head faintly, he set down her brush and placed his hands on his young mistress's shoulders. "I'm . . . managing. I miss him, terribly," he replied, voice breaking slightly. His gaze was fixed on the lace edging the neckline of her robe. It would hurt too much to see the compassion in her eyes.
"Oh, Nathan," Regina began softly, covering his hands with her own, "please tell me you're not still going out to the stables to talk to him." Her tone was full of concern and pain, unable to imagine how much more it would hurt to see Daniel's body every day and know he was never coming back to them. She felt her heart clench at the despondent reflection he cast in her mirror.

A tear fell from his lowered lashes, and he admitted, "I can't seem to help myself. I know he's gone, but when I look at him, I can almost pretend that he's asleep and will wake up any moment, as if this was all a horrible nightmare." He took a shuddering breath and said, "At least your mother agreed to cast the preserving spell on him for me."

Face heating with rage, Regina snarled, "She deserves no recognition or gratitude for her actions! She's the reason Daniel is dead, in the first place. I would be in Basile with you both by now if it weren't for the old bitch," she hissed spitefully.

Pursing his lips, Nathan finally caught her eye over the vanity and reminded her, "Be that as it may, without her assistance, he would be lost to me, forever. And if you hadn't insisted I play ignorant to the plan to run away, your Lady mother would have likely killed me, too." Hazel eyes closed briefly as he considered how close to death he'd come. It was only his feigned lack of knowledge and the appearance of his unwavering loyalty to Cora that had spared his life and saved his position in the household. "I am glad that I can at least remain by your side and help you through the coming weeks."

At the reminder of her upcoming wedding, Regina's throat tightened and she bemoaned in distress, "Mother and that little brat ruined everything for us." They were to have run away together, she and Nathan and Daniel, an odd little trio fleeing to a kingdom where they could have hidden away and started a family. She was to have finally been free of her mother to live a life of her own choosing.

Nathan gave her a gentle smile and stroked the backs of his fingers over her cheek, left hand gripping her shoulder tightly for support. "Don't blame the child, Dearest," he chided tenderly, gaze seeking hers out in the looking glass. "She is young and naïve and thinks that all mothers are good and kind and have only the best interests of their children at heart. She does not know the cruelty that parents can do."

Sighing heavily in capitulation, Regina nodded. "You're right, as usual. Still," she sniffed back her tears and continued, "it doesn't change the part Mother played in Daniel's death. I don't know how you can forgive her." Large brown eyes focused on the reflection of her closest friend, and she whispered brokenly, "How can you forgive me? He'd still be alive if it weren't for me."

He met her stare steadily in the mirror. "Daniel loved you just as much as he loved me, and he wouldn't want you blaming yourself." Moving to stand in front of Regina, Nathan cupped her cheeks and reminded her, "Neither do I blame you. I wanted the homestead and family as much as either of you." He tilted his head to the side as he considered something for a moment before asking softly, "Were you having second thoughts?"

Eyes wide in shock, Regina adamantly shook her head, hands coming up to hold his elbows. "No! No, never," she protested earnestly. "I would have been overjoyed to give you children and raise them together. Only, I...," she trailed off, hands falling to her lap and fidgeting.

Sensing the slight hesitation in her tone, he smirked faintly and concluded, "You don't know whether you could have given Daniel what he wanted. You don't have to feel bad that you loved him differently than I did." His expression softened into a fond smile as his thumbs stroked over her cheekbones. "He would have been content with your desire to start a family with us. It was more than we could have ever hoped to have."
Regina loosed a watery chuckle and confessed, "I loved Daniel in my own way, and I love you like a brother. But I really don't like cock." She laughed along with him, then, gazing down at her fingers twisting together. "I want freedom and children and to be with people whom I care about and who return that affection." Glancing up at her friend, she added, "What we had would have been enough. I'd have been happy."

"As would we," Nathan agreed firmly. A sly grin crept across his lips, and he teased, "Though I'm sure you'd have been happier had we found a sweet, young cunny to warm your bed at night." Her giggle and the accompanying glint in her eyes warmed his heart, and he knew he had made the right decision in staying with her. His young mistress's lack of experience and desire for men meant he had a fair bit of coaching to do if she was going to be ready to perform her marital duties. The thought disturbed him and turned his stomach, but their chance for escape had come and gone.

Biting her lower lip, Regina felt heat flood her body at the idea of having a female lover. She swatted at him half-heartedly and retorted "Gods, Nathan, don't tease me with things outside of my grasp. This isn't Edetani," she reminded him, using the phrase he had so often spoken to her over the years. "I doubt the King will permit me to have a concubine in his court."

Irritated at his own carelessness, Nathan recanted, "You never know. Once the first blush of lust over having such a beautiful, new bride has left him, he may be willing to capitulate to your needs." Leaning forward, he placed a lingering kiss on her forehead and murmured against her skin, "Never apologize for who you are or what you want, Regina." Then, he picked up her brush and moved to stand behind her, again, to finish her hair.

"I'll try my best," she said, flashing him a smile via the mirror. They had just sunk back into their familiar, nighttime routine when the door to the bedroom opened suddenly, startling them both as Cora entered. "Mother?" Regina asked in surprise, rising from her vanity. "Is something wrong?"

"No, Darling. Of course, not," she assured her, stepping close. She gave Nathan a curt nod of acknowledgement, impressed with his professionalism in continuing to serve the young woman who had stolen his lover from him. It was partly that determination that had swayed her in his request to have the stable boy's body preserved magically to await return to his family at a more opportune time. The man's practicality and loyalty had earned him some sort of reward, even one so sentimental as that. Wrapping an arm around her daughter's waist, Cora ushered her toward the door, other hand on her near shoulder.

"Where are we going?" the sixteen-year-old girl asked as Cora led her into the corridor. She was already dressed for bed and unconsciously tightened the belt on her dressing gown as they walked across the great room. Noticing they were headed for the guest quarters, she inquired, "Is it Snow? Is she alright?" Although the girl had spoiled things for her, she didn't truly wish her ill.

Cora gave her daughter a patient smile, patting her shoulder softly. "It's nothing like that. The king just wished to see you," she explained sweetly, stopping in front of a door and knocking lightly. Puzzled, Regina shook her head in disbelief. "It couldn't have waited until morning?"

A flash of what could have been sadness flitted across her mother's face before she said gently, "No, my love, it couldn't." There was no time for further explanation as the door opened, King Leopold filling the doorframe, robes loosely closed. "Your Majesty," Cora greeted him with a curtsy, tugging Regina into one alongside her.

"Good evening, Cora," he responded cordially. Then, his eyes slid over to his young fiancé, a strange heat lighting them as he murmured, "Regina."
A calculated smile brought up the corners of the older woman's mouth, and she informed him, "We came to thank you for the incredibly generous bride price." She steadfastly ignored her daughter's furrowed brow and the vague irritation gracing her features.

Nodding graciously, Leopold replied, "Of course. I trust all was in order, as agreed upon," he added meaningfully.

"Oh, yes, everything was as promised. And here is your lovely bride," she said, urging Regina forward two steps toward the king. Smile turning sly, she gestured around the room and added, "I've also taken the liberty of ensuring your privacy, Your Majesty."

The brunette's head snapped around to stare at her mother in shock. "Mother, what are you—?"

Her voice cut off abruptly when Cora placed Regina's hand in Leopold's. "There now," Cora said with finality. She reached up and tenderly stroked her daughter's cheek. "Be a good girl, Darling," she bade her with the same steely tone she reserved especially for warnings of dire punishments ahead should she disobey. Not waiting for a reply from either of them, she turned smartly and disappeared down the corridor.

Eyes wide with astonishment and confusion, Regina could only follow as Leopold drew her into his room and shut the door. She stood where he released her, blinking as she attempted to get her bearings. What could the king possibly want to see her about at this hour of the night? She dearly hoped that the conclusion she was coming to was wrong. But why else would her mother have handed her over and left, especially after ensuring her bride price had been squared away? Her attention was brought back to the man in question when his voice filled the room.

"You're such a lovely, young thing," he commented absently, catching a lock of her long, dark hair and letting it fall through his fingers. "I think I shall be very happy with our arrangement." His fingers grasped the tie on her dressing gown, deftly unfastening it and letting it fall open, pushing it from her shoulders to drop on the ground.

Regina snapped vexed, brown eyes upward, catching the lustful expression on his face, the anticipatory smile curling his mouth. So, she had been right. Her mother was even more of a snake than she'd thought. She started to take a step back, try to leave, when he caught the front of her nightdress in a quick snatch, a knowing look in his eyes. As he unbuttoned her gown and let it join her robes in a pool about her feet, Regina froze, the realization that the man before her was the king hitting her hard. The sudden reminder of the difference in their statuses caused her to shiver, naked under his hungry gaze.

The king circled her slowly, taking in every inch of her body, and she felt outraged tears well in her eyes at the knowledge that she had just been sold to this man. There would be no reprieve, no last few weeks to herself before the wedding. Regina understood, then, that her attempt to escape had not only led to her being trapped within the boundaries of the kingdom, but it had brought her to the king's bed early. She was too numb with anger to resist when Leopold grasped her upper arms and backed her toward the bed, the back of her thighs hitting the mattress as she was forced to sit.

At last, she looked up, coming back to herself slightly at the unexpected drop. She immediately wished she hadn't, for her fiancé had disrobed and was standing before her. His skin was pale, muscles soft and a slight flabbiness around his gut from too many years sitting on a throne. Regina glanced down and felt her dinner rise in her throat; he was partially erect, his large member bobbing slightly in front of her chest. Though she had seen naked men before, the male anatomy had never been appealing to her. As her eyes scanned the aged body on display, she was suddenly sure she wouldn't be able to stand having the king touch her.
He eased down beside her on the mattress, letting his hand trail over her chest, brushing over her breasts as he explored his new gift. "You're even more lovely than your mother," he complimented, gazing at her with undisguised greed. As his eyes roved over her body, he muttered approvingly, "I see she heeded my request, too."

That explained the potion her mother had made her drink the previous day, surprised when she'd woken that morning to find her adult body hair replaced with the peach fuzz of childhood. Working to keep her face impassive, Regina calmly reasoned, "There's no need to rush this. It can wait, can't it—at least until after the wedding?" She bit the inside of her cheek when he cupped a breast and gave it a firm squeeze.

Smiling in a cruel mockery of kindness, he told her softly, "You shouldn't have tried to run. I don't like people taking what's mine." Leopold brushed some hair behind her ear and leaned forward, placing a kiss at the corner of her jaw. "And make no mistake, Regina," he murmured in her ear, "you're mine, now."

Regina balked at the blatant statement of ownership. She understood that he was a king, but it was startling and aggravating to hear him so boldly call her a possession. The derision she'd nurtured for her mother for so long ratcheted up another notch. The cold-hearted bitch has really outdone herself, this time, she mused. Sure that a silencing spell had been erected around the room, she felt her body begin to tense as the inevitability of the night's outcome descended on her.

The king had been leisurely admiring her, content to lightly stroke over her pale skin as he took her in. He would enjoy taking his time getting to know his young bride; however, he was becoming impatient to explore more of his prize. "Lie back," he commanded her quietly.

Hoping to postpone his advances, Regina beseeched, "Please. Don't do this." Feeling his hand pause, she thought perhaps he would be swayed by her plea, and she looked up at his face looming so close to hers.

There was a type of malicious glee in his countenance as his hand pressed against her sternum and pushed her down onto the mattress. Twisting to sit beside her hip, the king ran his palm down her belly, cupping her sex as he leered down at her. Expression turning thoughtful, he absently massaged her as he asked, "You've never lain with a man, have you?"

"No," she rasped, throat suddenly dry as he continued to fondle her. Regina tried unsuccessfully to stifle a shudder of revulsion, using every ounce of her self-control to not jerk away from him. As thick fingers played with her, she had the rather uncomfortable epiphany that as much as she had loved Daniel, she was positive she would have enjoyed being physically intimate with him. She had been willing to try, given her desire for children. Yet, aside from not wanting the king, she realized that a fair portion of her distaste was the simple masculinity of him.

He nodded knowingly. "Good." He stretched out alongside her, his kneading becoming more vigorous as he tipped toward her and kissed her forcefully.

She could feel the papery skin of his stomach against her arm, the warm weight of his penis on her thigh, and her eyes squeezed shut in disgust. Initially, she had thought she could just close her eyes and try to ignore everything, let it happen and be done with it. It was her duty, after all. For the majority of her life, she'd known if she were betrothed to a man, she would have to mount him long enough to get an heir or two. But as Leopold moved over her, pushing her legs apart with his knees to settle between her thighs, Regina decided that she would not meekly submit herself to him, king or no. "Stop," she sharply ordered, telling him, "I don't want this."

Leopold laughed, amused by her defiance. "It doesn't matter what you want, Poppet. I'm your
husband or will be very shortly," he reminded her with a glance down their bodies. "I can do whatever I wish with you, and no one will dare protest." Pressing his hips down onto hers, he slid his cock along her bare folds and advised, "So, I'm going to claim my rights, and you're going to be a dutiful wife and not fight me."

Regina knew, then, that the king was not a kind or good man. He was going to do as he wanted, and she was to be nothing more than his property. The knowledge wakened something in her, and she started pushing at his chest, trying to wriggle out from under him. "No." She slapped hard at him, catching his neck as he jerked backward, leaving a red mark where her hand had connected with his flesh. A faint sense of satisfaction lifted through her at the sight and, with more defiance than before, she protested, "No!"

Rough hands caught her forearms in bruising grips as he kneeled over her. He jerked her arms above her head, pinning them together by her wrists with his left hand. "You really shouldn't have done that," he warned her, still in that quiet, cold voice she was coming to loathe. A pained grunt escaped him as she twisted in his grasp, attempting to break free, kicking at his calves with her heels as best she could. As annoying as her fighting him was, it sent a thrill through the king to encounter such insolence.

Feeling him reach between them, Regina redoubled her efforts. "Let me go, you bastard!" she shouted, attempting to wrench her arms free. The king was a large man in every way, tall, broad, slightly overweight, and very well endowed. She was inexperienced but not naïve, and had planned for six more weeks to prepare herself for the intrusion of penetration. Without being ready for him, she knew it was going to be uncomfortable at best, painful at worst. Eyes lighting on the small bottle of oil, ignored on the bedside table, it dawned on her that that was his intention. What kind of sadist had her parents passed her off to?

"The more you resist, the worse it's going to be," came the cruel taunt. Her efforts to free herself were making her writhe in the most wonderful manner underneath him, and he felt himself grow harder with each movement.

Upper lip curling defiantly, she snarled, "¡Chingate, pendejo!" and spat in his face. It felt good to do something, no matter how insignificant.

Chuckling darkly, Leopold wiped his face with the sheet and jeered, "I'd much rather fuck you." His movements rough, he grasped her left leg behind the knee and pulled her thigh high up his hip. Spitting into his right hand, he stroked over his glans and, positioning himself quickly, forced himself inside her with a single thrust and a moan of pleasure.

A scream bubbled up as a burning sensation flared between her thighs, only to have his right hand clamp down over her mouth, smothering her cries. She bit down hard on his palm, receiving a slap in return that made her ears ring, but he didn't try to quiet her, again. Taking the opportunity, she screamed with all her might, regardless of the fact that no one would hear and come to her rescue. Regina kicked at the king again and again, until she couldn't because he was driving into her too violently, making her movements uncoordinated and agonizing. So, she cried tears of fury and humiliation as her breath came in stuttering pants.

Later that night, Regina lie beneath Leopold as he violated her, again, hurting too much to do more than push feebly at his shoulders and scratch his chest. Drawing in ragged breaths, she had no voice left to make any sounds of protest after the third time he'd taken her. She felt her body being shoved against the mattress with each thrust, felt the way he harshly grasped and tugged at her breasts, the way his sweat covered her body, the cold stickiness on her abdomen and thighs pulling as it dried. She stared fixedly at the ceiling, unable to think of anything but what was
happening to her. Listening to the sound of the king's harsh breath in her ear, Regina let her hatred for him fester and grow, setting it beside the knot she had reserved for her mother.

Emma woke to the sound of quiet whimpering and jerky twitches coming from the woman next to her. Sometime during the night, the former mayor had turned onto her right side and was facing her. It had been a long afternoon of chores for the sheriff and slow laps around the deck for Regina after their earlier nap. Unwilling to watch her friend go through what appeared to be a particularly violent nightmare, she placed her right hand on Regina's shoulder, gripping firmly and giving her a gentle shake. "Regina, wake up."

The former mayor jerked suddenly, sleep leaving her as she came back to the present. Blinking drowsily, she peered through heavy lashes to see the savior's concerned, green eyes staring back at her. "Emma?" she queried softly, voice high. The thick fog that seemed to accompany the memories began to gradually lift. As she came fully back to the present, she quietly apologized, "I'm sorry if I woke you." A quick glance across the cabin assured her that Anne was not in her hammock, most likely out for a bit of fresh air.

Brow furrowing in confusion, the sheriff shook her head and replied in an equally low voice, "It's alright." There was a brief pause, then, she carefully commented, "It seemed like it was a pretty bad nightmare."

"They're not nightmares," came the faint response. Deciding she couldn't keep the charade going any longer, Regina quietly disclosed, "They're memories. The latest are from my marriage to the king."

Unsure if she really wanted to have her suspicions about her friend's past confirmed, Emma's expression turned apprehensive. "You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to, Regina," she protested gently, reaching between them to grasp the former mayor's left hand with her own.

"The dreams, the memories . . . they're so vivid, as if it happened yesterday." Pausing, she closed her eyes briefly as she shuddered. "I'll lose my mind if I don't discuss it," she admitted. Gaze falling to their clasped hands, she tentatively shifted closer, trapping their hands between their chests as she pressed her forehead to Emma's shoulder. Much as she needed to share her past with her companion, Regina knew she wouldn't be able to handle the empathy she'd see in those soulful eyes. As it was, she could feel the anxiety through the bond mixing with her own, making her slightly nauseated.

Taking a deep breath, the former queen tried to find a place to start. "During those first few days after his proposal, I had begun to think he might treat me well." Giving a self-deprecatimg laugh, she scoffed, "I was horribly wrong. We were still six weeks from the wedding, and the king was staying with us at our estate when Mother took me to him." A shudder passed through her frame as the freshly resurfaced memories flashed in her mind. "I had no idea what was happening, at first, didn't realize I'd already been sold."

Wide-eyed, Emma's hand tightened around Regina's as she indignantly exclaimed, "Wait, how could they get away with that?"

"By paying my bride price and consummating our union, he made me his wife and property. According to the law, short of killing me, he could do with me as he pleased. The ceremony at his castle was merely a formality," Regina stated matter-of-factly, her voice cool and dispassionate. Her stare focused on the ribbing of Emma's tank top, recalling too well the feeling of being chattel. Sadly, she murmured, "From the very first time to the last, the king was merciless." Her voice
broke as she whispered, "He cared nothing for my pain."

Emma silently witnessed the turmoil she’d been watching build within her friend since their arrival in this world finally come tumbling out. The words reminded her uncomfortably of late nights in foster homes spent trying to coax frantic children through panic attacks, listening to horror stories of past placements. Not sure what to say, but wanting to offer her support, she let her concern and desire to protect Regina to slip unfettered though the bond.

Grateful for the savior's patient silence and soothing magic easing to her, Regina took a fortifying breath, right hand clenching the pillow beneath her head. "I fought him for months." Fuming, she heatedly charged, "Nothing stopped him—nothing." Furious tears slipped down her face as she briefly raised her eyes up to meet Emma's compassionate gaze, jaw clenching at the unwanted memories. "The thrashings I received at my husband's hands made Mother appear benevolent. And the sex . . .," she laughed hollowly in muted rage, correcting herself, "the rapes were brutal. There was no satiating him until I was either bleeding or unable to walk, occasionally both."

Unsure what comfort the former mayor would allow, Emma took a shaky breath, right hand hesitantly stroking Regina's left biceps. Her gut was twisted up in knots as she realized her friend's trauma went far deeper than she had ever suspected. All the sheriff could think about was how she wanted to protect the woman beside her, needed to make her feel safe and loved. Hiccupping a little at the thought, Emma tenderly brushed a few strands of tear-dampened, dark hair off the former queen's cheek.

Regina's breath hitched slightly when she felt the rush of emotion through the bond, eyes beseeching the sheriff for a forgiveness she couldn't confer upon herself. "The things he wanted, what he did…. Gods, Emma, the things I did." Reflexively, she strengthened her grip on Emma's hand, her chest painfully tight with equal parts loathing and shame. "I had no idea that anyone could crave such revolting acts, let alone take pleasure in them." Her composure finally crumbling under the weight of her memories, she buried her face in the warm skin of her companion's throat, feeling raw and exposed and hating every second of it.

"Shh," Emma interjected, voice full of pain as she scooted as close as possible. "Please, Regina, don't…." Her voice trailed off as she realized she didn't know how to finish that sentence. She just knew that hearing these things made her want to hurt someone. Wrapping her right arm around the normally indomitable woman, the savior held her securely, hand splayed wide over her spine. Anger bubbled hot and uncomfortable in her stomach, making itself known through their connection, no matter how much she tried to contain it.

"Someone has to know what he did—what he was," she growled vehemently into the soft flesh beneath her lips. "My husband was a sadist." Regina's eyes closed in disgust as she recalled, "He'd make me suck his cock after anal sex, then laugh when I'd gag. And every time, I'd have to thank him afterward," she snarled with venom, brown orbs focused on the jump of Emma's pulse in her carotid. "Thank the gods, he stopped short of bestiality." She shuddered as the words left her, hating herself all over again. "I was his whore, not his queen," she hissed, eyes flashing purple as the long somnolent wrath churned within her.

Emma laid in horrified silence, stomach roiling with revulsion as she tried to process everything. So many of Regina's reactions in the last few months had prompted the sheriff to speculate on occasion about the former mayor's past. But what she was hearing was worse than anything she could have imagined. Eventually finding her voice, she croaked, "How long….?"

"Seven years, four months, and seven days," Regina murmured fiercely, desperately attempting to tamp down her emotions and, by extension, her magic before it could overwhelm her. Emma's fury
was only fueling her own as their combined feelings swirled within her. Pressing herself further into her companion's hold, she took several, shuddering breaths, for once not holding back the hot tears that accompanied the memories. There was unconditional safety and, gods help her, love to be found in Emma's arms, seeking her out through their bond.

Feeling Regina's tears soak into the neckline of her tank top, Emma's heart clenched, and she wished she could share some of the pain to make it more bearable for her. Focusing on her need to heal seemed to settle some of the turmoil that had been building within her. Dismayed, the savior quietly asked, "How did . . . how did you endure that?" tightening her supportive embrace. Absently, her right hand began to make soothing circles on her friend's back.

Having achieved moderate success at reining in the tempest she felt brewing inside, Regina angrily swiped at her eyes before answering. "I almost didn't," she confessed, finally glancing up at her companion's earnest gaze, again. "Thankfully, I had Monty, and Anne, and the rest of my Personal Guard." The former mayor paused for a few beats, quietly adding, "I owe them my life and my sanity—several times over."

The sheriff's head jerked back slightly, and she hissed, "They knew?" Her sharp gaze cut over to the empty hammock, a fresh rush of outrage suffusing her body.

Confused by the sudden heat in her friend's voice and the animosity that caused the bond to churn restlessly, Regina searched Emma's face carefully as she responded. "Yes. They were the ones who would ensure I was returned to my chambers, afterward. They'd bathe and heal me as best...." Her words trailed off as she watched the savior scramble out of bed and storm out the door and into the hallway, barreling past Jason, Qingzhao, and Anne. Following swiftly, the former queen had just popped her head through the hatch when she saw the sheriff square up in front of Elmwood.

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The sheriff didn't pause, didn't stop to consider whether confronting the commander of the Crows Guard was a good idea. Regina had just tearfully confessed that she'd been beaten and raped for years, and no one, not even her oh-so-loyal guards, had stopped it. It had been stomach turning enough when she had discovered Regina had been young enough to be the king's granddaughter when they'd married. Emma wasn't an idiot, could connect the dots, but to have confirmation of the type of man the king had been enraged her when she realized how deep the blind acceptance had gone.

Regina stared in horrified certainty as Emma made her way across the deck toward the commander of her guard. From the amount of hate and animosity that was pouring off the savior, she wouldn't be surprised if her friend blasted the large man clear off the ship. The sheriff's magic was jangly and sharp as it tugged on hers uncomfortably, almost demanding the former mayor join the sheriff in her confrontation. Regina pushed down the rising fury, having learned to carefully channel all her emotions regarding her late husband long ago. "Emma!" she shouted in warning, eyes wide when she realized her friend's intent. Anne's guffaw of amusement from behind her only increased her ire. Could no one on this ship behave rationally?

While Emma couldn't go back and kill the royal bastard, she could damn well exact some retribution from the person who professed to have cared for Regina the most. She was ready to separate Elmwood's head from his shoulders, but as she neared the large man, she realized she had no weapon on her. Instead, she drew back her right arm and landed a punch on his very solid jaw before she'd ever come to a complete stop. Pain flared sharp and hot in her wrist and up her arm, and she quickly cradled it to her chest as she sneered at the towering man. "You fucking bastard! How do you live with yourself!?!" she bellowed in rage.
For his part, Elmwood was surprised to see the savior stomping toward him, a positively murderous look in her eyes. He was momentarily distracted when his queen popped her head above deck and yelled after Emma. It was enough of a diversion that he didn't see the fist coming until it was too late to dodge the blow. Staggering back a few steps, he shook his head and glared at the recruit. Anne's rich laughter reached him across the deck, further worsening his mood. Making a quick gesture of negation at the three Salters who were cautiously approaching, he firmly gripped the back of Emma's neck with a large hand and propelled her to the ladder leading below deck.

Not seeing his queen, Monty realized Anne must have ushered her back to the cabin. He snapped at Jason, "Fetch the others," as he passed the young man in the hallway. Opening the door to the queen's cabin, he unceremoniously shoved Emma inside, grunting when she hit the floor with a heavy thud. "It's time we have a discussion," he informed her, his tone low and menacing, jaw flexing as he gritted his teeth.

Regina bent over and slipped her hands under Emma's elbows, steadying her as she climbed to her feet. Shooting her commander a forbidding look, she hissed harshly, "Monty!" Although the anger streaming from her companion had cooled somewhat after her burst of violence, the former queen was finding it increasingly difficult to tamp down the massive influx of rage, especially in light of Emma's entrance to the cabin.

Elmwood flicked a quick glance at his monarch, understanding that he had breached an unspoken boundary, but he would not have a recruit hitting him. It was tantamount to insubordination, and that was utterly unacceptable as far as he was concerned. His gaze fell on the sheriff, eyes narrowed as he took in her unrepentant countenance. "I hope you enjoyed that because it's the only free hit you'll get," he warned her, crossing his arms over his chest as he pulled himself to his full, imposing height.

Holding her right wrist between her breasts, Emma growled, "You deserved it." As the other Crows Guard filed into the small cabin and jostled for space along the walls, she pierced each one with a heated gleam. "You're all bastards," she caustically spat, her disgust at their lack of action running hot through her veins.

"Oh, boy," Bruce muttered from his spot against the door, still groggy from having just fallen asleep. He had a feeling he knew what was coming and settled himself more comfortably against the wood.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Regina felt the inevitableness of the impending discussion settle on her shoulders. Her eyes remained closed in resignation as she sighed out an exasperated, but fond, "Emma."

Gaze evaluating her commander, Alma checked the information Jason had hastily supplied when he'd roused them from their sleep. "So, I hear the rookie took a swing at your mug, Ser." The grunt she received was reply enough, although the bruise forming along his jaw spoke volumes. Realizing the savior had hurt herself in the process, the guard reached for her right hand. "You jammed your wrist," she chided quietly, frowning when Emma jerked her hand out of her grip.

Anne chuckled and smirked at the scowling sheriff. "Forget her wrist. Someone check the recruit for a cock because she's damn well got the biggest balls I've seen in ages." Her estimation of the savior had skyrocketed with that move, foolhardy as it had been. The fact she had caught Elmwood by surprise was impressive in itself. There was no doubt in her mind that Emma would have happily killed them all had she had the skill. It was exactly the reaction she wanted from a candidate for the Queen's Personal Bodyguard, loyalty to the queen at the cost of everything else.

Ignoring her captain's crass remarks, Regina gently caught Emma's arm in her hands and probed
with careful fingertips. Her searching found the tender area, and she let a thin trickle of magic loose to assess the damage, grateful that her companion’s own magic met her halfway and eased the bite to her still sensitive pathways. "You have a hairline fracture and a torn ligament." Eyes flicking up, she asked incredulously, "How hard did you hit him?"

"Not hard enough," Emma snarled, still directing a hateful look at Elmwood. She flinched slightly as Regina manipulated her hand and wrist, concern about her using magic starting to break through the anger.

The former queen deftly healed the bone and tissue, grimacing a little as the energy grated along her nerves. Keeping Emma's hand captive in her own, she quietly admonished, "There was no need for that." As much as she appreciated her friend's desire to seek retribution on her behalf, Regina also knew that it was misdirected and that this needed to be dealt with swiftly before further incidents occurred.

Emma leaned toward Monty and hissed vehemently, "The hell there wasn't." Turning her head, she pinned her friend with a heartbroken expression and rasped, "They knew and did nothing."

Releasing a long exhalation, Regina ran her thumb along the sheriff’s repaired wrist in an unconscious attempt to soothe her. "They couldn't do anything without forfeiting their own lives and possibly the lives of their families, or worse," she attempted to explain. As much as she despised the loss of privacy, the former queen knew it was time for Emma to understand the true history of her homeland.

Diego's eyebrows rose with comprehension as he breathed, "Oh, that's what this is about."

Crossing his arms, he leaned against the bulkhead next to Farmer, casting his lieutenant a wary look.

"Indeed, and our sheriff believes us to be unfit," Monty said, voice low as he glowered at Emma. No one accused him of being incompetent or disloyal when it came to protecting the queen. He had always done everything in his power, short of directly disobeying her commands, to care for his sovereign, and he would not have some wet-behind-the-ears princess tell him how to do his job.

Bringing her attention to Regina, Irene suggested, "Your Highness, perhaps we should fill in the blanks since Hot Head, here, obviously only has snippets of the story."

Bruce snorted and added, "Until then, she's a liability. She can't trust us, otherwise." They could not afford to have member of the Queen's Personal Guard who didn't have confidence in her squad mates. He had no illusions that Anne was only training her to join the general guard. No, his commander and captain had something special in mind for the princess, but she needed to trust them with her life, and more importantly, the queen's life. And for that, she had to be properly informed.

Regina motioned to the chairs, glad when Monty and Anne sat. Moving toward the bed, she pulled Emma with her, smiling to herself when the savior helped her up on the bed. "Very well," she conceded, sitting on the edge of the mattress. Giving her friend a firm look, she patted the spot beside her and ordered, "Sit and listen, don't react."

Gradually easing down beside the former mayor, Emma nodded hesitantly. Her gaze flitted over everyone in the room and was surprised to see only somber faces staring back, all joviality gone. "Okay, I'm listening," she announced, tone subdued.

A heavy silence descended on the cabin for a moment as Regina gathered her thoughts. She gripped her hands together tightly in her lap and took a deep, fortifying breath. "The Enchanted
Forest wasn't as idyllic as your mother and her sycophants would have you believe. There were nefarious elements deeply entrenched when I married the king," she said matter-of-factly. It was as good a place to start as any, especially since Emma had a better idea of the abuses she had suffered.

"Slavers," Diego growled, eyes hard in a way the sheriff had never seen them.

Anne shifted forward in her chair, tapping a finger on the desktop as she added, "The kingdom was rife with human trafficking."

"The most prolific being the sex trades," Regina tacked on to her captain's statement. Swallowing thickly, she continued, "My husband had an affinity for pre-pubescent girls, in particular. His contemporaries perpetuated the market by providing safe houses, routes, and demand." Witnessing the horror on Emma's face reminded her of her own revulsion upon discovering the king's reprehensible enterprises.

Elmwood leaned back, arms crossing as he sneered, "It was quite lucrative for the involved gentry. Several council members had fingers in the pot, as well." He watched the recruit carefully, seeing the moment when the extent of the situation caught up to her.

Regina tilted her head slightly, wondering what was going through her companion's mind. No doubt, they were shattering all the illusions Mary Margaret and her band of do-gooders had built up about the Enchanted Forest. "As you can see, getting rid of the king would not have solved the overall problem."

Brows furrowed in a confusing swirl of emotions, Emma protested, "But you would've been safe. She still didn't understand why no one had done anything sooner. "I mean, kill the king and get the hell out of Dodge, right?"

Irene shook her head and scoffed, "Hardly." Realizing that the sheriff wouldn't grasp the implications of the council's involvement, she clarified, "Her Highness would have been forced to remain as regent until Snow came of age to rule, since she was legally the girl's mother. During that time, she would have been at the mercy of the king's associates or married off to one of the bastards." Brows lowering in remembered frustration, she said, "All of that was only if she wasn't accused of regicide and executed for treason."

"And if a guard had killed the king, they'd have been executed and their family enslaved. Regardless, the trafficking would have continued, even with the cocksucker gone," Bruce remarked casually, as if he were speaking of the weather.

Jason, who had been quietly observing everything from a corner, finally joined the discussion. "Once the king died, Her Highness spent the five years before the curse weeding out everyone involved who we could find." He had taken great satisfaction in accompanying the queen on her infamous purges. Many a trafficker had met their deaths on his sword, each one a stroke of justice for his brother.

"The kingdom was better for her rule." Looking up from the decking, at last, Qingzhao met her monarch's warm gaze. "I know Alexander and I were," she murmured, voice soft and reverent. No amount of service to the queen would ever be enough to repay her for freeing her from the hell in which she had been found.

There was a pregnant pause as Emma took it all in, her expression nearly blank with shock. Wide, green eyes fixed on Regina, she eventually blurted, "So, you're telling me there was a giant pedophile ring among the nobility, and my mother had no clue any of that shit was going on?" It was almost too much to believe, to think that a world full of fairytale characters could be so ugly
and cruel. She had thought growing up in her world had been bad enough, having to do it through
the foster system, but the Enchanted Forest was sounding more like living in Westeros or Mereen.

Regina inclined her head faintly, correcting her assumption, "And men, and women, and household
slaves, but yes, your mother was blissfully oblivious to the kingdom's and my plight, as usual."
Sighing regretfully, she stared down at her hands, forcing them to remain still in her lap and not
fidget. "That was partly my fault. I wanted Snow to have her innocence as long as possible, and in
doing that, I inadvertently enabled her naivete," she admitted with a rueful shake of her head. A
melancholy smile tugged at her lips as her tone turned wistful. "She truly was a sweet girl, Emma.
It seems that in the end, I played my role far too well and sheltered her to the point that she couldn't
see what was right in front of her."

Frowning at the self-recrimination, the sheriff retorted, "It sounds like she was a blind idiot." Then,
she felt the frustration bubble up, again, and demanded, "But how could no one know about any of
this? I mean, I'd think that people would notice when their neighbors went missing." Even as she
said it, though, she remembered the crime dramas she watched and the willful ignorance humanity
displayed at the atrocities that surrounded them every day. She supposed it really wasn't any
different in the Enchanted Forest. It wasn't as if they had the Internet and news shows to keep them
abreast of the goings-on around them.

"Some people knew. The problem was that many of those aware of the issue didn't care or made
money from it," Monty sadly attested. "Those who did care were either potential victims or didn't
have enough power to make any changes and were held hostage by their fear." His gaze settled on
his queen, and he gently concluded, "Fear for one's child is more than enough impetus to accept
the status quo and keep one's head down."

Jason grunted derisively, hands fisted at his sides as he growled, "Those who remained ignorant
were deluding themselves, allowing the king's rhetoric to override their own common sense." It
was a particularly sore spot with him. Had only one member of their village bothered to send a
missive to him while he had been training with the guard, his brother might never have known
what it meant to be a slave and used so cruelly.

Regina shot Sirtis a compassionate smile before moving the conversation forward, again. "There
were a few council members who supported a transition in power after the king's death and
convinced me to remain as queen to help them remove the undesirables." Her words were tinged
with a muted sort of bitterness, having taken on the responsibility begrudgingly but with the firm
understanding of what had been at stake had she not.

Sneering at the statement, Farmer claimed, "The bastards hijacked her escape."

"I agreed to it," the former queen sighed resignedly. It was an old argument she'd had with her
Personal Guard repeatedly. She wasn't surprised that a curse and thirty-four years weren't enough
to cool their rancor.

Alma scowled and reminded Bruce, "Well, if Snow would've let her be, she still could've gotten
away." Naïve or not, she felt the princess should have had the common sense to see what was
happening around her, especially after she became a fugitive.

Leaning back slightly, Emma took a steadying breath, trying to get her equilibrium. It felt like her
world had suddenly been turned on its head. "This is a lot to take in," she muttered, processing all
the information that had been thrown her way. After a moment, she asked, "So all those villages
burned and people massacred were really involved in the trafficking? And Snow and her posse
thought you were evil and just wanted her dead?" Her tone turning incredulous, she stared at the
assembled group and blurted, "Seriously? Did no one stop to ask?"
Anne snorted contemptuously at the idea. "Of course not, the princess perpetuated a vapid lie to cast herself in a favorable light. Her ignorance was fostered and fueled by the king's toadies because keeping her in power kept them comfortable and safe." Snow had been spoiled and self-entitled, and though the queen had curbed that to a certain extent, old habits died hard.

"It was a very stressful time," Qingzhao sighed. The upheaval that had come with branding the princess a traitor had tested even the most seasoned of the Queen's Guard and soldiers.

A rueful chuckle fell from the former queen's lips while she smirked at the youngest member of her Personal Guard. "That's putting it mildly. Midas had started to provide Snow with enough financial support to bolster her armies, and the ensuing battles had devastated a large portion of the Midlands." Angling her body toward Emma, she expounded, "Eventually, she would have made inroads into my kingdom. The remaining traffickers who had hidden themselves among Snow's followers would have been able to get a foothold, again. I couldn't let that happen." A shadow passed over her features as she finished, voice tight, "That's when I cast the curse."

Attempting to add a little levity to the heavy subject matter, Diego shrugged a shoulder and announced, "I'm not going to complain about indoor plumbing."

"Or electricity," Qingzhao piped in with a grin. As far as she was concerned, it was one of the best things about Storybrooke.

Irene nodded sagely, saying, "Microwaves are awesome."

"Birth control," came the quick addition from Alma.

Both Monty and Bruce grunted in agreement, causing Regina to toss her head back and laugh heartily. Between the two of them, she knew they had enough children for a rugby team.

Emma stared at them like they'd lost their minds. She didn't understand how they could be so flippant about the curse since it was apparently a last-ditch effort to stop the spread of human trafficking. "You're all crazy," she muttered.

Chuckling at the sheriff's bewildered countenance, Regina quipped, "I blame Snow." The girl had made everything so much more difficult with her dogged insistence of reclaiming her birthright.

Diego rolled his eyes in exasperation, recalling all the skirmishes and battles the princess had forced over the years. "If she had only left, we could've finished and moved on, but no," he drawled, "she had to fight for her kingdom."

"The problem was, she wasn't fighting for the innocents but the status quo," Anne snapped in irritation. She had argued in favor of capturing and executing the girl, but the queen's motherly sentiments for her stepdaughter had put a halt to that idea.

Realizing that while her mother may have been inexperienced, Emma considered that Snow had had people she would have turned to for advice. They couldn't have all been so clueless, right? She frowned as she wondered if Ruby had had any idea what was happening. "But she had Granny and Ruby on her council—Archie even. Wouldn't one of them have known what was going on?" Her distress over the idea that someone she thought of as a good friend could have turned a blind eye to the level of depravity they were discussing made her stomach twist into knots. Regina's hand grasping hers in reassurance helped settle her tumultuous emotions a bit.

Elmwood sighed heavily and admitted, "For its size, the trafficking ring was surprisingly subtle in its orchestration. If you weren't involved or affected or looked for it, you wouldn't necessarily
know about it." He had known good people who had simply been lucky enough to live in an area that had been mostly unaffected. And it was always easier to believe convenient lies about bandits than hard truths like slavery.

As Emma absorbed this information, something occurred to her, and she queried, "What about the fairies?"

Regina laughed hollowly, saying, "They follow Blue's instructions, and as you know, she's never liked me very much."

"But all those kids…," the sheriff trailed off as the enormity of it all began to sink in, and her eyes filled with tears.

Interlacing their fingers together, the former queen gave the savior a forlorn smile. "Her almost compulsive conservation of fairy dust supports an ideology of trickle-down economics for wishes." The confusion on her companion's face prompted her to explain, "She helps those in power, first, then works her way down the line."

"How's that fair?" the sheriff exploded. Who the hell did that firefly think she was, allowing all those people to suffer because of, what, socioeconomic status?

Monty raised an eyebrow and asked, "Who said any of this was fair? Life isn't fair. Those in power generally tend to help themselves, first," he observed, yet again grateful for a queen who had truly cared for her people and done everything within her ability to help them.

Emma gazed at Regina's hand clasped in hers and absently ran her thumb over the smooth skin. "Sounds about right," she grumped, intimately familiar with not being important enough for anyone to give a damn about her. When the grip on her hand tightened, she glanced up, startled to see brown eyes focused on her with a quiet intensity. Swallowing hard at the amount of compassion in that gaze, she rasped, "I'm surprised you didn't curse everybody sooner."

Feeling Emma's insecurities through the bond, Regina wanted nothing more than to pull her companion into a reassuring hug. Understanding that it wouldn't necessarily be welcome with such a large audience, she simply quirked a grin at the shaky attempt at humor. "I did resist the scorched earth approach for quite a while. There just comes a point where you can't endure anymore." As much as she had despised the idea of casting the Dark Curse, she had known it was the only way to disrupt the political landscape enough to prevent the trafficking from getting a foothold, again. She would much rather have thrown a continent into chaos than permit her people to live through that kind of hell, once more.

"Yeah," the sheriff agreed solemnly. She knew what it felt like to have reached that limit. Finally, she eyed the men and women around the cabin, and with a nod of concession to Elmwood, she said to Regina, "At least you weren't alone."

Regina flashed a melancholy smile, murmuring, "No, I wasn't."

~SQ~

**Warnings:** Insinuation of pedophilia & Coerced sexual situations

*Regina wandered aimlessly through the castle corridors, unable to sleep and not wanting to be alone in her room. It was the first night in her nearly four months of marriage to the king that he hadn't sent for her to demand she fulfill her wifely duties. She knew she should be thankful for the reprieve, but her intuition kept telling her something was wrong, forcing her into pacing the halls...*
in an attempt to shake off her nerves.

Glancing up from her musings, she noticed her husband just around the curve of the corridor, standing hesitantly outside Snow's rooms before finally stepping inside. Worry and curiosity compelled her forward, and she quietly slipped into her stepdaughter's suite, carefully shutting the door behind her. Not seeing the king in the outer sitting room, Regina crept toward the bedroom, peeking around the corner of the doorframe to see Leopold standing beside his daughter's bed.

He leaned forward and picked up a dark curl, letting it slip slowly from his fingers, and Regina felt dread wash through her. In that familiar caress, she saw the same gesture he had used on her that first night and every night thereafter, a subtle signal that he was about to claim his rights. She hesitated, taking a moment to watch Leopold's trembling fingers hover over Snow's mouth, open slightly in sleep. The young queen's eyes widened in alarm as her husband reached down and began stroking himself through his robes.

Clasping her hands over her mouth to prevent her astonished gasp from escaping, the young woman thought furiously, unsure how she was supposed to stop the king. Regina felt torn; as much as she blamed Snow for her part in trapping her in her marriage, she also couldn't imagine letting the girl suffer the way she was. Tears formed when she realized that the only course of action available to her would be to offer herself in the child's stead. It wasn't fair. She had endured the king's touch every night, fighting until she couldn't any more, and now she had to volunteer to be violated further.

Closing her eyes tightly and taking a deep, fortifying breath, Regina plastered a smile on her face and stepped up behind the king, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. He startled and whirled around to face her, clearly staggered by her presence. "Husband," she whispered sweetly, "I was wondering where you had gone to. I missed seeing you this evening," she lied expertly, eyes wide with false innocence.

"You did?" he wondered in astonishment and a hint of suspicion.

"Of course, I did." Regina looked up at the king from under lowered lashes, turning her body just so, ensuring his gaze fell on her cleavage. "Come, Husband, your wife requests your company, tonight," she breathed in his ear, grasping his hand, relieved when he willingly followed her from the room. Her free hand fell to press against her belly, protectively cupping the slight swell. In that moment, she fervently hoped that it was a boy brewing inside her.

Every step closer to the king's chambers made Regina's stomach tighten further, and she couldn't help but wonder if the sheep ever led the way to their own slaughter. Once inside his apartments, her legs lost their steadiness, her steps beginning to falter. Working hard to regain the façade of eager ingénue, she led him over to a chair in the sitting room and gently pushed him into it, hands resting on his shoulders as she sat sideways on his lap.

"I must say, this is a pleasant surprise, indeed," Leopold admitted as his eyes raked over his young wife. "What brought about this sudden change of heart?" he inquired as he bounced her slightly on his knee.

Giving him a coquettish smile, Regina purred, "Shouldn't a wife be accommodating to her husband's needs?"

A gleam of avarice lit his expression as he observed, "Well then, since you're feeling so accommodating, why don't you start by calling me Papa when we're alone like this."

His tone made it clear that it wasn't a request, and Regina acquiesced quickly, "Yes, Papa,"
silently relieved he hadn't asked her to call him Daddy. She would never be able to look her own father in the eye again if he had.

"That's my good girl," he praised her, stroking down the side of her face. He cupped her jaw with one hand, his thumb brushing over her lips, pressing insistently until they parted, allowing the digit to slip inside her mouth. When her tongue pressed against the pad of his thumb, he moaned, "A very good girl, indeed."

Regina was cringing inside as she felt his grip on her jaw tighten, his hand silently urging her off his lap and onto the floor at his feet. She nearly retched as he pressed his thumb further into her mouth, sliding over her teeth. As much as she wanted to bite down, hurt him, make him bleed, maybe even take the finger clean off, she was too scared. The man was the king and held all the power, while she had nothing—no useful magic, no strength—to fend him off; besides, she had just lured him out of Snow's chambers. If she fought him this time, she felt sure he would return to his daughter.

As she watched her husband part his robes and expose himself, Regina steeled herself for what would come next, even as she felt bile rising quickly in her throat. His thumb left her mouth, and she gulped back the bitterness while he shifted his grasp to a heavy pinch at the back of her neck, drawing her forward. She forced back tears even as she gagged at the feel of him in her mouth, her throat. In that moment, listening to his repeated murmurs of, "Sweet, sweet child," she steeled herself to never cry in front of her husband, again. The young queen fully understood that by capitulating to endure this humiliation for the sake of Snow's innocence, she was sentencing herself to a lifetime of endless sacrifice; otherwise, that night, and every night thereafter would have been suffered for naught. There could be no more fighting, no more resistance, not if she was to keep safe the girl she was beginning to consider her daughter in truth.

~SQ~

Emma couldn't sleep. Even as she listened to the soft snores of her bedmate and the creaking of the sailing ship and the splash of the ocean against the hull, she couldn't relax enough to actually fall asleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the haunted expressions of kids in the system, and then, her guilt over not giving back and even putting Henry in the same system crashed with a vengeance into her sleep-deprived brain. She wiped at the threatening tears and flipped onto her left side, facing Regina.

I wish I was strong like you, she thought wistfully. The enormity of what she'd learned earlier that night was enough to keep her awake, her mind refusing to settle. She took a few moments to study the visage before her. The recent stresses they had been through were clearly evident in the way Regina's forehead furrowed slightly in her sleep, the lines of her mouth curving down unhappily. Emma felt the ache in her chest grow as she gazed at the gentle features and wished she could do more to alleviate the former mayor's pain.

Carefully, so as to not wake her friend, the sheriff readjusted the sheet and quilt, bringing it back up to their shoulders. She peered across the room to the hammock and spotted a messy mop of hair. It was impossible to tell if the scout grandmaster was really asleep. So, she simply nestled back down into the comfort of the too-small bed. Her eyes traced the shadows of the cabin, again, and as she counted the number of squares of light the window panes casted on the walls, she felt Regina jerk, then, whimper. It was quickly followed by another muted cry and a sharper lurch.

After hearing about the type of life her friend had tolerated, Emma couldn't bear it. So, as gently as possible, she laid her right hand on Regina's left biceps. It seemed to quell the pitiful sounds, but the twitchy jerking shifted to fighting jolts. The sheriff's efforts earned her an elbow to the gut,
eliciting a low, pained grunt. "You're okay," she whispered in a strained voice as she shifted closer to the restless woman, wanting to soothe the memory away. "You're safe," she promised as she started rubbing her hand up and down her friend's arm. "You're not alone," she added, even as her affection seeped automatically through the bond, second nature after all the times she'd gone to calm Regina.

She continued the mantra for an unknown length of time. However, as Regina seemed to settle into a calmer state of sleep, she leaned forward and placed a tender kiss on her temple. Her eyes fluttered closed as her lips touched warm, soft skin. "I've got you," she whispered, resting her forehead against dark brown locks.

Hours later, Anne woke and found the two women in the same position, heads pressed together and Emma's arm protectively draped over Regina's side. Her eyebrows nearly climbed off her forehead when she witnessed faint wisps of blue magic leaking from the savior and sinking beneath her queen's skin. A slow smile formed on her face as she turned to get ready for the day as quietly as possible, wanting to give the other two women a little more time for their healing sleep.

~SQ~

Emma edged into the galley, nose first, a hopeful, "Bacon?" announcing her presence. Skirting past Qingzhao at the stove, she announced triumphantly, "I smell bacon!" She had been surprised when a very alert and dressed Regina had gently woken her up several minutes earlier and had told her to get up if she expected any breakfast to be left by the time she made it to the galley. Glad her friend seemed to be feeling better, the sheriff had mumbled her assent and taken her time getting ready that morning. From the smell of things, she had just made it in time to be fed.

Rolling her eyes at her companion's antics, Regina shared a long-suffering look with Anne. They had both been amused when the savior had initially pulled the blanket over her head until food had been mentioned. She had finally grown accustomed to Emma's eating schedule and could nearly set her watch by it. It was like living with a Hobbit. The former mayor scooted over a bit to make room as the sheriff plonked down on the bench next to her.

Anne shook her head in wonderment and snarked, "The girl's led by her stomach. I honestly think she's worse than Alex." Her grin grew when the sheriff stuck her tongue out at her while piling food on her plate.

"I can attest to that. Emma easily outdoes Alexander at the dinner table," Regina confirmed with a chuckle. She put two biscuits on the savior's plate and passed her the nearly depleted bowl of scrambled eggs. "Some days, it feels like I'm feeding an army between the two of them."

Too busy stuffing bacon into her mouth to make a verbal riposte, Emma nonchalantly flashed the middle finger of her left hand at her friend while reaching for the home fries with her right. The action earned her a bright laugh from the former queen, so, she smiled cheekily around her food and focused on her plate.

Diego nearly spit his coffee out as he tried to contain his laughter and ended up in a coughing fit from aspirating some of the hot liquid. Monty patted him on the back as he fought back a smile at the sheriff's antics. She was fitting in just fine, it seemed, even if she had more gall than any of them besides Anne. While he thought her attitude with Regina was too relaxed for a member of the Guard, Elmwood reminded himself that in this setting, she was off-duty and merely the queen's friend. It was going to be a difficult line for them all to walk.

At last recovered, Flores shot Emma a mock scowl across the table before announcing to the group at large, "We've reached Hook's supply island. It's a decently sized isle. Bruce and Irene are
escorting the Salters to shore, now, and will return with the first load of fresh water." Several of them had gone out earlier that morning to do a quick reconnaissance of the island and get a feel for its dangers.

"Anything we should be concerned about?" Monty asked, pausing with his fork halfway to his mouth. They needed to keep the surprises to a minimum after the debacle that was their last day in Storybrooke. If anything else happened to their queen, he'd consider having them all flogged after first letting Regina take the lash to his own hide. They had become too complacent since the curse lifted, not having expected any significant threats. Recent events had rattled the Guard's confidence, but he needed them all to be as sharp as possible if they were to keep their sovereign safe as per the vows they had taken at her feet so many decades ago.

Alma cut a quick look at Diego. They had been with Farmer and Smith as the first scouting party at the shoreline, but they had only been able to go a short distance into the jungle during their circuit of the isle. "The island's too large for a full security sweep, and the geography has proven problematic," she reported with a disgruntled sigh, shaking her head. "We found evidence of two camps, one on the beach and the other on the opposite side of the island, a few yards into the trees."

Flores narrowed his eyes as he added, "Hook's been rather vague with the details." He didn't trust the pirate. None of them did; however, he had the best intelligence of the area, something they were sorely lacking.

Elmwood grunted, muttering contemptuously, "That's not surprising."

Agreeing with her commander's sentiment, Chavez continued, "He admitted to the one at the landing site but not to the one almost around the island. He said he doesn't know who else would stop, here. It's too far out of the normal routes of the natives." While all of Captain Jones's information had rung true, Alma couldn't shake the feeling that he had been hiding something.

At the mention of something akin to the Disney adaptation of Neverland, Emma perked up. Hastily swallowing her last bite of bacon, she chimed in curiously, "Natives? Like Tiger Lily?" Her attention was briefly taken by long fingers placing another piece of bacon on her plate, and she shot Regina a grateful smile.

"Don't know anything about that," Diego drawled, smirking at the domestic scene being played out before him.

Silently ghosting forward, Qingzhao leaned over and placed a cup of tea in front of Regina. She returned the nod of acknowledgement before stepping around the table and settling beside Diego. Cradling her own cup of tea in her right hand, she nibbled on her biscuit and listened to the latest update.

Monty switched his line of inquiry and asked, "Have the Salters had any more trouble with the princess?" As far as he was aware, Snow White hadn't gotten in the way or tried to order others around, aside from making that damned chore list. But then again, the chores had been assigned by Signe.

Grinning happily, Diego said, "Nothing of note, or at least, Dave hasn't complained."

Eyebrows hiked nearly to her hairline, Anne puffed out a surprised breath of air. "Huh, the brat's actually doing what she's told." Leaning back over her plate, she muttered disparagingly, "Who knew she had it in her?"
"Apparently, miracles do happen," Regina quipped with a smirk, eyes twinkling in merriment.

Alma playfully bumped shoulders with Emma and jested, "There's hope for you, yet, Greenie."

Emma's lips quirked halfway between a smile and a frown at the jibe. "I'm not sure how I feel about all of this," she groused good-naturedly. If she were honest with herself, she was starting to feel at home with this little group of Crows Guard. It was overwhelming and warming at the same time, and she thought she could easily get used to the familial atmosphere they exuded when relaxed.

Regina leaned slightly into her side and stage-whispered, "It means they like you. Go with it."

Grinning self-deprecatingly, the savior retorted, tone faintly bitter, "Looks like my haphazard nurture came in handy, at last." Ever since they had boarded the ship, her parents hadn't been far from her mind. She supposed she should try to find a way to forgive them for sending her through the wardrobe when the curse was initially cast. After all, she understood giving one's child up so they would have their best chance. But every time she had gotten close to letting it go, one of them would say or do something that reminded her of how hypocritical they could be, and she found herself mad all over, again.

Feeling the frustration bubbling in her companion, Regina laid her hand over Emma's, hoping to calm her a little. She squeezed the hand under hers and told her softly, "You're stronger for it." They had talked off-and-on about the sheriff's past, and while it hadn't been filled with physical abuse, Emma had suffered more than enough neglect over the years. The former mayor subtly shifted closer so that they were touching from the hip down, silently lending her support, relived when she felt the savior's pique melt away.

Emma turned a bright smile on the former mayor before tucking back into her food. In between bites, she joked, "Between all the training and swabbing of decks, I'd better beef up." Rolling her shoulder dramatically, she lamented, "Damn, I don't know what's kicking my ass more, Anne or the ship."

"Definitely Anne, but at least you get naps," Qingzhao pointed out with only a hint of sullenness in her voice. She did notice how the scout grandmaster seemed to preen at being considered the worse of the two options.

Leaning across the table, Diego pointed his fork at the sheriff and asked suspiciously, "You get naps? I don't get naps. Why do you get naps?" He eyed her as if she'd just revealed herself to be a spy amongst their ranks.

Alma snickered and sing-songed, "It's because she's a princess," tapping Emma's leg with hers under the table and getting a twitch of the lips in response.

Emma affected a look of wide-eyed innocence and replied with all seriousness, "The days are really, really long, here."

Twisting to the side to eye Flores critically, Qingzhao countered, "You're too ugly to be a princess."

Diego gave her his best shit-eating grin as he straightened his posture and announced, "I'm quite attractive. All my lovers say so." He punctuated his last statement with a little nod of finality.

Regina snorted into her cup and drawled, "Don't believe everything you hear."

"You wound me." Diego gasped dramatically, clutching his chest with both hands.
Anne grinned impishly as she taunted, "Yeah, that's what the sheep say." When Flores managed nothing more than indignant sputters, the scout raised an eyebrow in challenge.

Finding his voice, at last, Diego huffed, "Jetta's too good for you."

Rolling her eyes at the lackluster comeback, Anne scoffed loudly, "Like I don't know that."

The conversation gradually shifted to the status of their supplies and what they were likely to find on the island. A schedule of who would provide escort duty and when was discussed. Emma was pleased to hear she would be put on the rotation, excited to have been graduated to some light duties alongside her training. When she was chewing her final bite of potatoes, she noticed Regina leaning more heavily against her side. The savior turned her head to find her friend's gaze had lost its focus, brown eyes having gone a bit glassy as the former mayor fell into a fugue state.

Qingzhao saw the sheriff stiffen across from her and looked up to discover her queen had slipped into a trance. Brows furrowed in concern, she asked Anne curiously, "Is this one of those memory episodes you told us about?"

Bristling slightly at the casual tone the guard had adopted, Emma was prepared to lay into her, but when Anne patted her shoulder, the sheriff took a closer look at the young woman. There was an unusual rigidity in her posture and a faint tightness around her eyes. Qingzhao may have sounded nonchalant, but her body language told a very different story. Letting out a slow, defeated breath, Emma quietly acknowledged the question with a worried, "Yeah."

"You're helping, Emma," Monty reassured her from his seat further down the trestle table. Realizing the savior felt as useless as the rest of them in this situation, he decided to point out some of his observations over the last two days. "Just being in your presence seems to make these . . . episodes easier on her. And you may not have realized it, but your magic has been healing her every time you sleep, not just during your regular sessions."

Emma turned startled eyes on Anne, asking, "Is that true?" At the scout grandmaster's fond smirk and brisk nod, the savior felt a weak smile lifting her lips. Shifting to accommodate more of Regina's weight as the former queen relaxed further, Emma murmured miserably, "She hates this."

Elmwood pursed his lips in empathy. It was difficult to see his queen subjected to the whims of some strange magic that couldn't be pinpointed. Their helplessness to stop it rested heavily on them. "We all do," he intoned solemnly.

Irrked by the unfairness of their circumstances, Emma grumbled, "I hate not being able to be there all the time." She caught Anne's raised eyebrow and allowed, "I know I need to train. Regina and I have talked about it, and I signed up for it." A melancholy sigh escaped her as she lightly leaned her head on Regina's shoulder. "I just don't like it when she's hurting," came the quiet admission from the subdued sheriff.

Alma gently grasped Emma's right biceps in a show of solidarity. "That's why we have each other," she reminded their newest recruit, tone soft and full of understanding. Each of the Queen's Personal Guard had witnessed at least some of the tragedy their queen had endured. And on most of those occasions, they had been unable to prevent events from unfolding without risking much more than just themselves. The sheriff's feelings of inadequacy were intimately familiar to them all.

Reaching across the table, Diego covered Emma's right hand with his left and affirmed, "We're a team."

~SQ~
"It's cold. We shouldn't stay out for long," Nathan warned as he dutifully escorted the queen through the castle gardens. Looking over his shoulder, he nodded at Ser Elmwood and Ser McCormac trailing behind them at a respectable distance.

"We'll go in soon," Regina reluctantly agreed, stroking her very pregnant belly over her cloak with her left hand. The little one brewing inside had finally calmed since she had made it outdoors. After being cooped up in the Great Hall for hours, enduring the seemingly endless pomp and circumstance of receiving royal guests from Britannia, she and the baby had needed some time away from the conniving, sniveling nobles, all vying for the young, High King's ear. Smiling as she looked down at her protruding abdomen, she lightly commented, "Our little one likes it outside."

"Yes, well, the wee one is warm inside his mother." Pausing, the valet gave a pointed look to the woman beside him before adding, "Others are less fortunate."

"You still profess the baby will be a boy," the queen remarked with a mixture of hope and fear. "How could you possibly know?" she pondered aloud.

"Ah, you forget, I'm the son of a midwife," Nathan reminded his young mistress. With a mischievous smile, he added, "I've witnessed enough births to turn me off cunts forever." It lifted his spirits, hearing her laugh.

Suddenly, a few yards ahead of them on the footpath, the strolling pair heard a loud, joyous squeal and delighted giggle, and shortly after, a small girl of about two years bundled in furs and fine clothes barreled through a manicured hedge, gleefully streaking down the gravel path toward the strangers she had met that morning. Her delicately braided hair was falling loose in tight ringlets and was littered with leaves. Gloved, little hands and the knees of her skirt were smeared with dry mud. And her eyes lit up when she spotted the pretty queen. "Help!" she cried with laughter. "Hide me from Merlin," she ordered, skittering around the not-mommy-queen and hiding behind her. Seeing the two guards in tow, she held a little pointer finger to her mouth and dramatically instructed them to shush.

"Oh my," Regina gasped with faux surprise. "Whatever shall we do?" she turned to her valet, gazing up at him with mirth-filled eyes. "Should we help a stranger?" she whispered dramatically.

"Nay," Nathan disputed with a hard scowl. "She could be a wanted criminal."

Frowning, the little girl stood at her full height and proclaimed, "I'm not a criminal. I'm a princess!"

"A princess?" the queen questioned with wide eyes, turning to face King Arthur's eldest. "You don't say," she intoned dryly as she plucked leaves and bits of twig from the girl's hair.

A wave of panic rattled the young child. She gazed imploringly up at the pretty queen. "You 'member me, Regina. I'm Arturia," she helpfully explained, holding onto the not-mommy-queen's skirts.

Bending at the knees, Regina scooped the toddler into her arms with a faint grunt, somewhat surprised when little arms and legs wrapped reflexively around her. "That I do," she pledged seriously, settling the girl slightly to the side above her baby bump. "So, tell me of Merlin's crimes against such a fair and lovely princess," she instructed in a quiet whisper. As the little girl whispered the perceived travesties done unto her, her gaze cut to the highly amused valet, who was grinning like an idiot. She deftly tugged the dirtied gloves off the girl and smiled as small hands
buried themselves in the soft fur edging her cloak.

"There you are!" called out an elderly man walking with a knotty and gnarled, wooden staff, stepping onto the footpath at a break in the hedges. He appeared far too old to manage an energetic toddler on his own. "What have I told you about running off?" he questioned in a gruff voice as he tottered toward his young charge.

Arturia laid her head on the not-mommy-queen's shoulder and answered, "Not to." She bit her lower lip. Absently, she played with the brocade fabric of her protector's cloak with her right hand, left slipping underneath to settle on the warm skin of her chest.

Snorting, Merlin stopped before the young queen and her escorts and gave a respectable bow. "Forgive me, Your Royal Highness. She bolted away, and I zigged when I obviously should have zagged," he offered as apology. He reached for the little girl, silently coaxing her to him, but frowned when she turned away, burying her face in the queen's neck.

Regina rubbed her right hand up and down the child's back in a soothing motion. "We don't have to go back, yet," she suggested, taking a step around King Arthur's trusted advisor. She ignored her valet's soft, irritated sigh. "I have yet to visit my tree," she explained, wiping away a small tear on the little girl's cheek. "Would you like to see my tree?" she asked to distract the distressed child, not caring if Nathan was freezing his balls off. If an old man could amble around the garden with a babe, then, he could walk to her apple tree.

"You have a tree?" Arturia questioned, suddenly curious. She'd never met anyone who had a pet tree. "What kind of tree is it?"

"An apple tree," the young queen answered with a bright smile. "My father gave it to me when I was little older than you." As they meandered down the gravel path, she shared the story of her little tree and how it had traveled the Enchanted Forest. However, her attention was focused on the two men behind her.

Merlin fell into step beside the watchful valet and listened to the story with keen interest. His gaze casually glanced about them, taking in the perfect state of the garden in early winter. The flora appeared far too strong and healthy for the harsh winters of a northern kingdom in the Enchanted Forest, but it was early in the season. Perhaps the kingdom had favored a warm summer? "Does the queen frequently visit the garden?" he conversationally questioned the servant.

"Yes," Nathan promptly replied. He cast a contemplative look at the old man, taking in his thick, white hair and bushy beard. His eyes traced over the weathered lines on the other man's face and decided that he exuded a friendly appearance. It remained to be seen if his personality reflected that trait.

"It's a lovely garden," the sorcerer commented, facing forward. "Very colorful for such a drab time of year," he added, taking in the abundance of berries in the bushes.

"It was designed by Queen Eva," the valet supplied, testing the waters. He found, for reasons beyond his understanding, people loved the king's previous wife and sadly, twisted their misguided adoration for her into suspicion for the young queen. Pausing for a moment, he tentatively supplied, "I'm told it's never looked so lush as since Queen Regina's arrival to the castle."

Painstakingly, he'd managed to win over more and more of the staff; however, as they began to interact with their new queen, it was becoming much easier. Since this was the first visit of any from Britannia, he hoped to nudge their favor to Regina, as well.

"Is that so?" Merlin remarked. Although he cocked an eyebrow, he didn't look at the man beside
him, instead keeping his eyes trained on the woman and child in front of them. All the while, he kicked himself for having missed the queen's birth. What, or who, had shrouded her from Fate's Eye? And just when he'd been ready to make his move, Regina's scheming mother had uprooted her and somehow managed to obscure her location until just a few months prior when the witch had disappeared. "The queen didn't change the garden?"

"No, the queen saw no merit in uprooting life for aesthetics. However, she has added to the garden," Nathan explained, knowing full well the old man was fishing, though for what within their current conversation, he hadn't a clue. But what harm could come from talking of plants? He raised his arm as the group rounded a corner, the famed apple tree coming into view.

The adults fell silent amidst the whirlwind of Arturia's exuberant delight. After a time of play between queen and princess, Regina excused herself from the little girl's attentions, feigning exhaustion whilst deftly sacrificing Nathan to take her place. It was quite amusing to watch her valet's defeated posture. She shuffled over to a stone bench under an old oak, and as she sat, she glanced over her shoulder, fondly smiling at her ever-present guards, who took flanking positions at a respectable distance. Today had been a good day, thus far, and she wanted to hold onto it for as long as possible.

Cautiously, Merlin approached the distracted queen, and he frowned when his assessment of the young woman did not go unnoticed by the smaller of the two guards. However, he shelved the observation of McCormac for another time. "Does the cold not bother you, Queen Regina?" he gently prodded, catching suspicion in her gaze.

"It bothers me no more than the heat," the young queen politely retorted. Out of respect for an elder, she casually indicated for the advisor to sit with her, and although she was wary of all strangers, it was nice to have company of which her jealous husband approved. "Does the cold bother you, Master Merlin?" she questioned as the old man settled with an arm's length between them.

"I am without title, Ma'am, and Merlin is quite sufficient," he clarified with a warm smile. "And no, the bite of winter doesn't bother me," he explained. He pawed around within the left sleeve of his robes, pulling out a small, black medallion with a red rune etched into it. "This keeps me warm enough," he supplied with a wink, testing the waters.

"Magic," Regina quietly remarked in a neutral tone. "So, you are a sorcerer in practice, not just in rumor," she added with a hint of disdain. She had hoped the rumors were false, that the old man was normal and didn't wield mystical powers like her mother.

"It's not something I advertise, but I know a trick or two," Merlin responded evenly, hiding his nervousness. He hadn't planned on outing his capabilities, yet, but he needed to know more about this girl's potential. He needed to figure Regina out while he had the opportunity. "True magic users are quite rare," he commented, searching the queen's profile.

"My mother had magic," the young queen offered. Her brow furrowed as she turned to face the elderly sorcerer. She didn't know why she had shared that tidbit, but something inside her wanted to trust him. "She did not use it benignly," she quietly expounded, her gaze cutting over to the young princess chattering with Nathan under the apple tree.

Nodding in agreement, he vaguely gestured toward her. "Have you given any thought of pursuing your own talents?" he asked, tapping his right thumb against his staff. "Your son could have magic, as well," he quickly added, gesturing toward her pregnant belly. When her arms instinctually wrapped around her stomach, he felt a twinge of guilt because magic users weren't typically well received in the realms of men.
A million thoughts zipped through her mind in that split second, and her initial instinct was to deny she had magic. Quickly glancing around, she leaned toward the nosy old sorcerer and hissed, "The king doesn't know." She squeezed her eyes shut, shaking her head. "Please, don't tell him," she pled, praying her husband wouldn't find out.

"That isn't my intention," Merlin promised solemnly. He pursed his lips when his words failed to waylay the queen's fears. "I merely wish to help you on your path," he explained in a soft voice, laying everything out in the open. Of course, he knew the Dark One had already approached his daughter, and he had coaxed her into banishing her mother to Wonderland. "You have great potential, as does your son," he continued, nodding toward the unborn child.

"How do you know it's going to be a boy?" Regina interrupted with narrowed eyes. Naturally, the king's soothsayers and medicine men all proclaimed a prince because such words kept the king happy. Even so, she prayed daily to Razikale that her child would be a boy and therefore never have his father look upon him as Leopold did Snow. She didn't know if she would be able to keep two children safe from the man's perverted appetites.

Sighing, the old sorcerer leveled a sad expression at the woman beside him. "The same way that I know the king got you with child before your state wedding, and you'll give birth to a son, eleven months after his conception," he elucidated quietly. Pausing for effect, he waited a beat before confidently whispering, "Magic is a tool, and its intentions lie with the wielder. What you chose to do or not do with your gift is your choice."

The young queen looked down at the hard earth beneath her feet, curling her arms around her swollen belly. It was a slight relief to know she would carry her child an extra month. At least the commoners wouldn't think she was a wanton for having a baby too soon after the wedding. "I didn't know I had magic," she replied. A part of her regretted discovering her abilities. She couldn't do anything with it, not really, not since that dreadful day.

"Let me show you the ways of nature and of the Old Gods. You may find solace in it," Merlin gently suggested, but inside, he was trembling with hope. If he could get her to agree to meet with him again, then, he was confident everything else would fall into place. She just needed to accept his offer of apprenticeship.

At the mention of the old religion, Regina met the old man's gaze and held it. Followers of the old ways were far and few between, especially in Angevin. Besides, there was something about him that drew her in and insisted she trust him. "Very well," she softly agreed, going with her gut. She swallowed nervously, her eyes darting around for a moment. "I believe I would like that," she amended, and when she saw the utter, open delight in the old man's eyes, she knew she had made the right choice.

~SQ~

Blinking lazily, Regina gradually woke from her latest trance, which was a nice change of pace from the typical mental whiplash that accompanied the memories. Although the process wasn't nearly as jarring as it had been in the beginning, waking up amongst those she trusted certainly helped and, apparently, so did the bond. She felt the firm press of the sheriff's leg and arm against her own and the soft caress of her magic. It was almost enough to lull her back to sleep. Perhaps it was the combination of their tether and Emma's True Love magic that dulled the memories and eased their intensity; however, those were thoughts for another time.

Taking advantage of the moment and allowing her mind to catch up to reality, the former mayor basked in the fond memory of meeting Merlin and King Arthur and his family. Idly, as the noise of the real world increased in volume and clarity, she wondered if her old mentor had ever
encountered any similar phenomena.

With boisterous mirth, Anne laughed as she happily admitted, "I had no idea royalty could curse so colorfully." She remembered the very first time she had heard her sovereign release her fury in a string of crass and scathing cussing. Gods, it had been perfect. "I couldn't move for a solid minute, I was so gob smacked. Thankfully, Rivers got his ass in gear, after that," she finished her anecdote with a hearty chuckle. Her eyes lingered on the disbelieving expression on the newest recruit's face as she snuggled against the queen. She also caught one of her monarch's slow blinks.

"That's saying something coming from you," Diego laughed, letting his head fall back. It wasn't the first time he had said the very same remark, and it wouldn't be the last. He wiped at the corner of his left eye with the back of his right hand as he slouched forward. "I wish I had been there," he sighed, shaking his head. "It gets funnier every time you tell it."

After about the third blink, the former mayor simply let her eyes stay closed and merely listened to her personal guard's camaraderie, knowing exactly with which story McCormac was beguiling the group. It wasn't the most flattering for Emma to hear.

"Oh, Gods, for a while, I thought she had Tourette's," Jason interjected from further down the table as he finished his breakfast. He took a hearty swig of his coffee.

"I beg your pardon," Regina sharply stated, opening her eyes and raising her head to glare at the young guard seated diagonally across the trestle table. She smirked when everyone, except Anne, startled. "I have what?" she demanded, leveling a harsh stare at the young guard.

"Oh, shit," Jason muttered around a bite of biscuit. He chewed slowly as his eyes bounced between McCormac, Chavez, Flores, Swan, and the queen.

Alma chortled with delight, and she happily remarked, "You do have to admit, Ma'am, you have quite the potty mouth." She crossed her arms and leaned forward on the table.

"Would you care to repeat that?" the former mayor challenged, a smirk hinting at the corners of her lips. She lifted her right hand and summoned a barrage of tiny fireballs that flickered tauntingly around her fingertips.

Groaning, Sirtis glared at his friend. "Damnit, Alma," he hissed. He dropped the remaining piece of his second biscuit, ready to bolt out of the galley. "Those things hurt," he pointedly reminded her. At some point over the years, he knew each of them had earned a fireball to the ass.

Emma pursed her lips as she glanced between the snickering Anne, Diego, and Alma and the very distressed Jason. She held Regina's gaze for a beat and smiled. Slowly shaking her head, she quietly admitted, "I don't see it." And she didn't. She couldn't imagine Regina Mills cursing like a sailor. Reaching out, she interlaced her hand with her friend's, not fearing the flaming sparks sputtering around it. "We're on a wooden ship, remember?" she teasingly rebuked. "Fire's bad."

Regina sensed the soft strokes of magic curling around her. It was so peaceful, but it was hardly the time to bask in the sensation. Rolling her eyes at the not-too-subtle throat clearing from the scout grandmaster, she gruffly retorted, "I'm reliving memories, not sun downing." Put at ease by the subsequent chuckles, she looked around the small kitchen and asked, "Where's Monty?"

"He's talking with Bruce and Irene above deck," Anne supplied, draining the last of her coffee. She stood and placed her mug in the wash box. Her gaze swept across the galley. Stepping up behind Jason, she tapped his shoulder, pointed at his plate and, then, the hatch. "We've lazed about enough, come on," she ordered. When everyone started to move, she quickly signaled for the
recruit to stay put before heading to the weather deck.

Noticing the hand gesture, Emma stalled in rising from the bench and slowly sank back down. Her brow furrowed as she stared out the door, asking, "Am I in trouble?" Sure, the Captain of the Guard could be irritable, but she had always found her to be fair. Biting her lower lip, she turned toward the former mayor.

Stroking her thumb across the sheriff's hand, Regina pondered the question. "No, Dear," she finally responded. "Anne's giving you a break," she explained in a soft tone.

"I told them I don't want special treatment," Emma muttered with a slight pout. Her gaze dropped to their interlaced hands. She liked the scout grandmaster, and she liked how she took care of Regina. Squeezing their linked hands, she looked up and smirked. She also liked how Anne believed she could protect the queen, too. That meant a great deal to her.

"They know," Regina softly assured, searching the bright look in her companion's eyes. She felt the warm flow of magic coiling around them. With her own magic flowing easier, once more, the sorceress found herself having to actively draw her energy back from its constant attempts to merge with Emma's.

The sheriff took a deep breath and inhaled the scent of the ocean and Regina. Swallowing thickly, she glanced away briefly, rolling her lips. "They care about you," she clarified, meeting gazes again.

"It's their job, Emma," the former mayor agreed, relishing in the physical and magical contact. She could almost fall asleep, again, and if they were in bed, she probably would have. It was strange feeling such care from someone other than Anne or Merlin. It also caused her chest to tighten in the most wonderful and worrisome ways.

Shaking her head, Emma blinked as she considered how to explain it. "No, they care more than a job, like Secret Service care, like take a bullet care," she offered, nodding toward the main deck.

Regina exhaled softly, releasing a quiet, breathy chuckle. She placed her other hand on top of their linked ones. "We've been together for a long time," she enlightened her friend. She paused and looked away for a moment before adding, "They've helped me through my darkest years."

"Yeah," the sheriff drawled, wishing she knew how to offer real comfort and not just platitudes. After all, the other woman had reassured her without hesitation. "But aren't they just a little too up your ass, though?" she questioned tentatively. She felt comfortable with the Crows Guard, and she understood the overreaction. But what she didn't get was how the ultra-independent Regina Mills was so accepting of it. When her friend laughed, the low, throaty sound made her toes curl and her insides flutter.

"They do seem to be overcompensating a bit, but it'll level out," the former mayor replied with an amused tone. "It already has, some." Lightly, she caressed her fingertips over the back of the blonde's hand.

Cocking an eyebrow, Emma immediately retorted, "Anne's sleeping in the cabin with us." She understood bunking up, but she didn't think this degree of familiarity would fly. In Storybrooke, the only guard who had ever come into the master bedroom had been Monty, and that was because the queen had been abducted.

"Why, Miss Swan, do you have designs on your trainer?" Regina teased, dropping her voice to a lower, huskier register. She flashed a saucy smirk and felt an answering leap in Emma's magic.
Blinking rapidly as that tone made the flutter drop lower, the sheriff quickly sputtered, "No!" She huffed in exasperation before adding, "She's married." Nope, she had learned that lesson a long time ago, and she liked McCormac solely as a friend.

Raising both eyebrows, the former mayor tilted her head and mused, "Is that the only thing stopping you?" Sometimes the savior was too easy. It was no wonder her scout grandmaster enjoyed yanking her chain.

"Stop messing with me, I'm being serious," Emma firmly scolded with a frown. It wasn't the banter, but the timing that frustrated her—that and the way the smoky timbre of Regina's voice sounded far too pleasant that morning. She weakly tried to pull her hand free.

Sighing, Regina held firm to the hand in hers as she relented, "Very well. I'll behave, for now," she added with an impish grin. Growing serious, the former queen explained, "It's not unusual for an attendant to sleep in the royal bedchamber, even at the foot of the bed." She shrugged nonchalantly in conclusion.

"Really?" the sheriff probed further, her face scrunching in distaste. "All the time?" she asked in a whisper. That was just weird.

Nodding, the former mayor hummed. "It was my normal, Emma."

Emma stared down at their hands for a long moment. She worried on her lower lip and in a quiet voice, asked, "Will it be like this from now on?" She didn't know if she could get used to that or if she could learn to share her friend like that. She liked the way things had been in Storybrooke. Why did Greg have to fuck everything up?

Sensing the worry, Regina gently responded, "No. Things will return to normal by time we return home, one way or another." She lifted a hand and gently tapped the underside of the savior's chin, coaxing her to look up. When their eyes met, she smiled, the lines around her eyes crinkling.

"Okay, good," the sheriff replied, her voice rough.

"They're simply worried, Emma," the former mayor offered.

With a quick nod, Emma muttered, "I know the feeling."

Then, feeling the warm embrace of the savior's magic, Regina smiled softly. She squeezed the hand still linked with hers as she reached up with her other, tucking back a stray piece of blonde hair. Her voice was thick as she said, "I'm going to go talk to Monty and Bruce. You can hide out here a little longer if you wish."

"This ship's a sardine can," the sheriff retorted, rolling her eyes and flashing a goofy grin. The mere promise that their current situation wouldn't be their new normal was enough for her. She trusted her friend. "The only possibility of private time is in our cabin or on the head," she grumbled, standing up.

Accepting assistance getting to her feet, the former mayor laughed. "There are some benefits to having a guard outside your door," she quipped with a wink, enjoying the faint blush on pale skin.

~SQ~

"Stop pouting," Regina ordered, following Bruce and Irene along a grassy path through the thick, lush foliage of the supply island at least four days out from Pan's island. With her right arm looped through Elmwood's left and her left hand resting in the crook of his elbow, her gaze traced the
forest of greens and browns dotted with bright, blooming flowers and swooping streaks of colorful birds. The vibrant hues of the world were overlaid with playful, brilliant wisps of magic. She deeply inhaled the sweet air of ocean and flowers as her eyes traced the fluffy clouds in a brilliant blue sky, peeking through the tree canopy, and she heard the soft song of birds in the distance. If Monty hadn't been guiding her, she would have succumbed to the peaceful aura of land and sea, falling prey to the mysterious, meditative bouts several times over.

Nevertheless, after two days of sailing, she had jumped at the chance for a few hours of shore leave, much to her commander's adamant objections and Emma's more cautious ones. However, Anne had supported her case, so she got to stretch her legs whilst under the supervision of five guards. It was a bit overkill, but she took it. And while the six of them took a leisurely stroll to some secret location Irene had found during her early morning recon of the island, the rest of the Jolly Roger's ragtag crew restocked the freshwater barrels and gathered fresh fruit in abundance along the white sand beaches. Naturally, she had taken a small amount of pleasure when Mary Margaret had pouted, realizing she wasn't invited—much like Elmwood was sulking right then.

"I'm not pouting," Monty gruffly countered, dutifully escorting his queen through the subtropical terrain. His keen gaze scanned for potential trouble, but the small, volcanic island was, surprisingly as Hook had described it, a peaceful paradise. The largest animals he had spotted, thus far, had been sea turtles resting on the beach. He looked over his shoulder, taking in the casual gait of the scout grandmaster and the newest recruit in quiet conversation. Pleased, he relaxed into his role as escort, again, taking his cues from McCormac. "I'm vigilant," he clarified.

"That you are, Ser Elmwood," the former queen fondly agreed with an affectionate pat of her left hand.

"The cave is right up here," Irene interrupted, glancing over her shoulder at her sovereign and commander. During their survey of the island, she and Bruce had come across a hidden treasure trove full of trunks and bags of trinkets, and though Captain Jones had been quite accommodating by sharing his knowledge of Neverland, he was rather vague with details regarding this particular island and its past inhabitants. Also, the permanence of one of the campsites they had encountered suggested someone had loitered here for a long time. It irritated her how men thought she was a lumbering idiot just because she was big and strong. She pulled back several long limbs of a fern, revealing a small hill made of boulders and trees. "The entrance is a little tight," she admitted as Farmer, her queen, and Elmwood walked past.

Drawing his sword, Bruce led the way into a narrow passage down between two, large boulders. He crouched as the ceiling of rock lowered, and then, he stepped out into a large, roundish room nestled under rock and forest, stepping aside to allow the others to enter. Exposed tree roots snaked across the ceiling and walls. He continued double-checking the area, appreciative of the small holes above letting in streams of tree-filtered sunlight. Eventually, he sheathed his sword, but his hand remained on the grip.

Smith pulled a compact, electric lantern from her pack, its artificial light casting an unnatural glow. "See? Pirate's treasure," she smiled as she secured the lantern to a sturdy root overhead. Her eyes searched the scattered pieces of dusty and dirty loot. Frowning, she assessed the large chests and looked back at the entrance to see the others slip inside.

"The way in must've been larger at some point," Monty commented, watching as his queen stepped away from him. He observed as she moved through the room, much more fluidly than the day before. Maybe the excursion wasn't such a bad idea, after all, considering his queen's naturally inquisitive predisposition.
Emma's eyes widened as she entered the cave of treasure. "Whoa," she whispered in awe. Pirate booty was in stories and movies, not something found when on a mission to rescue a kid. She pursed her lips as she picked up a gold coin on top an overflowing, dry-rotting broadcloth bag. *Henry would love this*, she thought with a sad smile. Grabbing another coin, she tucked the few gold pieces in her front pocket.

Cocking an eyebrow, Anne scanned the room before retreating into the shadows of the narrow entrance. There was nothing wrong with souvenirs. She had her own collection, much to her wife's dismay.

Scanning the bags of coins and piles of gold and silver trinkets riddled with jewelry and gems, Regina pondered the plunder's origins. She spotted crests and sigils carved in rotting leather and rusting, base metal. Hook had, so far, made no mention of countries or merchants of Neverland, just the offhanded comments of indigenous peoples that avoided all contact with non-natives. She picked up a silver goblet and wiped at the grime to examine the intricate etchings of familiar runes. Her brow furrowed as she remembered the markings from one of Merlin's books. Turning the cup over, she found no mark of a craftsman but felt the tingling presence of ancient magic tickling her senses. That was when a flash of something gold and emitting a faint aura of magic caught her eye.

Passing the silver chalice to Irene who wrapped and stowed it in her pack, she walked over and carefully extracted a heavy, gold statuette of a supine, four-legged, winged dragon that had been buried under a pile of tattered broadcloth. The craftsmanship was extraordinary, even under layers of dirt, and when she turned the figurine over, she found the seal of the House of Pendragon, the ruling family of Britannia. It was obviously made from a superior grade of gold with unusually clear, dark rubies for its eyes.

"How did that get here?" Bruce questioned with a frown. The small space made him hypersensitive. His fingers flexed on the sword's grip as he debated drawing his dagger, instead. His gaze swept the room, again, before refocusing on the narrow entrance. Seeing McCormac slip back outside, his nerves settled, but when the sheriff accidently knocked over a pile of gemstones, he cut a disapproving glare at the recruit.

With a bashful grin, Emma sheepishly hunched her shoulders and quietly apologized, "Sorry." She cast a nervous glance at Regina, relaxing at the warm amusement on her friend's face. Her heart fluttered and she ducked her head, pushing her hair behind her ear.

"Pirates?" Smith answered Farmer facetiously as she accepted the statuette from her queen. Crouching, she quickly rearranged the items in her pack, settling the gold dragon figure on the bottom, and as she repacked the bag, she was silently thankful her sovereign wasn't interested in hoarding mass amounts of treasure.

"It would appear Captain Jones has a treasure trove of secrets," Elmwood remarked darkly. His eyes stayed on the queen as she moved to the far corner of the cave. "Your Highness?" he prompted as she continued to stare at a seemingly empty space. His brow furrowed with concern as she reached out and appeared to caress something that wasn't there. There was a collective gasp when, suddenly, a large, black chest appeared. Stepping forward, he studied his queen's profile for a moment before dropping his eyes to the lacquered metal.

Regina had felt a nagging pull toward the far corner of the cave as she passed Irene the dragon idol, feeling it was important to keep it. Strangely enough, it almost seemed as if each item was leading her to the next: first, the goblet, then the dragon statuette, and finally, a huge chest.

"Invisible loot is really a thing?" the sheriff quipped. Her eyes quickly studied the massive trunk. She shared a perplexed look with Irene who merely shrugged.
"Shush," scolded Anne, who had returned unnoticed, save for Bruce, Monty, and perhaps the queen. She had completed a quick survey and was content that no one had followed them.

Startling, Emma and Irene spun around to face the scout grandmaster. "Gods be damned," the senior guard cursed with a hard scowl. How McCormac moved with such deadly efficiency, she had no idea.

"Jesus," the sheriff muttered as the scout grandmaster flashed a mischievous grin. Hearing Bruce's soft snicker, she glared with narrowed eyes at the back of the man's head.

Anne firmly patted Emma's shoulder, regaining her attention. "Always pay attention," she mouthed. The corners of her eyes crinkled with merriment as she could no longer hold in a deep, breathy chuckle.

Ignoring the playful antics of her guards, Regina carefully studied her newest discovery. The chest had, apparently, been invisible to everyone except her. And even more interestingly, it—like the other two items—had the same runic markings she had so painstakingly learned from Merlin. Absently, she tried to open the lid, but it was locked. She stroked the stylized relief of the metal and felt the caressing tingle of old, latent magic. Pursing her lips, she carefully urged her own magic to unlock it. She smiled upon hearing a soft click. Lifting the lid, she was assaulted with the warm, earthy smell of petrichor.

Monty and Irene quickly flanked their queen, helping to ease the rounded trunk lid open. It was surprisingly light. Bruce turned his head as a quiet gasp escaped their sovereign.

"It can't be," the former mayor whispered in awe, reaching in and ghosting her right hand's fingertips over a bolt of navy blue leather. She spied rolls of other colors, as well. Her magic reacted excitedly, and she couldn't help but smile. "Dragon leather," she explained, looking up at Elmwood. "All of this is ancient, dragon leather," she restated, tugging a smaller, dark red piece out of the chest. She draped it across her front and over her left shoulder, stroking its length. "I've never seen so much of it in one place," she mused, mostly to herself, relishing the supple texture.

Emma stepped forward and reached out to touch the piece draped over Regina. Her eyebrows rose in surprise at the luxurious softness of it. Absently, she petted the section over her friend's shoulder. "It's so soft," she murmured.

"How is it not rotten?" Smith inquired. She skimmed over the useless piles of metal and leather armor scattered throughout the cave, spying ragged edges and cracks. Looking back inside the chest, she bent and fingered a corner of the blue leather. It was forgiving and flexible as if it had just been lubricated. She frowned as she released the hide, standing upright. It was obvious the trunk had been there for a very long time, a lot longer than most of the other trinkets.

"Dragon leather doesn't dry rot. It's part of its magical properties," the former queen answered, holding a portion of the leather to her nose. Her eyes drifted closed as she inhaled, and old memories flooded her mind's eye, remembering the times she'd come across other items made from the mythical and exquisite leather that royals coveted. Merlin's grimoire had been covered in a white leather while Excalibur's leather sheath had been a charcoal color. Her grandfather, King Xavier, had a small dagger with a hilt allegedly made of dragon bone and had boasted a dark green, dragon leather sheath.

Bruce's brow furrowed as he scowled. Looking over his shoulder, he caught his commander's eyes and cocked an eyebrow. He'd killed a dragon or two during his years of youthful idiocy, and no one had told him dragon leather had magical capabilities. In fact, dragon hide was a pain in the ass to cure. Most tanners wouldn't touch the stuff.
Looking between his queen and the trunk, Monty pursed his lips. If the contents were, indeed, the
dragon leather of legend, it would be worth an unimaginable fortune. His gaze moved to the small
passage. There was no way to carry the chest out of the cave. Then, Anne stepping forward caught
his eye, and he observed silently as the scout grandmaster further examined the contents of the
chest.

"Wait, this is high dragon leather," Irene stated, glancing between everyone. "Not the feral beasts
in the mountains, but the old gods," she added, making sure she understood the implications.
Staring at the pile of hides, she pondered, "What killed them?" Because if the written accounts
were true, the old gods were massive beings of supreme magical ability.

Reverently stroking the supple skin, Regina supplied, "These dragons are still alive." She carefully
shrugged the piece off her shoulder and, with Emma's help, refolded it. "My aunt would tell me
stories of the old gods, but essentially, they would exuviate and bestow the enchanted leather as a
gift," she quickly explained.

"Exuviate?" the sheriff questioned, wrinkling her nose slightly. It wasn't too uncommon for Regina
to use a word she wasn't familiar with, but that one was a bit more unusual than most.

Shaking her head in self-chastisement, the former queen quickly explained, "It means to shed one's
skin, to slough."

The sheriff's brow furrowed as she considered what she knew about reptiles. "Like snakes?"

"Giant, winged, talking lizards that fly, breathe fire, and work magic," McCormac explained as she
carefully pawed through the leathers until she found a smallish, plain oak box. She extracted it and
brought it to her queen. Opening it, she revealed a neat collection of different sized polished, black
bone needles and a small set of shears made of the same black bone and with delicate runes etched
into the blades, all safely nestled in a plush bed of black velvet. "You'll need these to work with the
leather," she offered quietly.

Blinking, Emma squeaked, "Talking?" Only cartoon dragons talked. Hell, the ogres that tried to
kill her in the Enchanted Forest didn't even talk, not really. They just grunted and roared and
smashed things. Running her hands through her hair, she blew out a big puff of air. The existence
of strange and magical creatures of myth wasn't throwing her as much as did hearing the scientific-
minded Regina Mills casually talking about gods. Absently, she rubbed the back of her neck and
looked around at the others, catching their curious expressions. Maybe now wasn't a good time to
share she was an atheist.

"Emma?" Regina gently probed, looking at her friend with concern. She reached out and cupped
the sheriff's elbow.

"I'm okay," Emma sighed with a quirky smile, basking in the affectionate touch. "It's a lot to take
in, is all," she admitted.

"You ate chimera, but a talking dragon stumps you?" the scout grandmaster lightly teased, rolling
her eyes. She shrugged when her queen leveled a disapproving glare at her. Closing the small box
and latching it, she returned it to the chest.

"Be that as it may," Monty interrupted, wanting to put off the impending conversation about
religion until they were safely back on the ship. "how shall we transport the leathers, Your
Highness?" He gestured back toward the small entrance. It was too rare to leave on some nameless
island.
"Assist me?" Regina softly requested in a low tone, glancing at her companion. Her hand trailed down the sheriff's arm, and she interlaced their fingers. Feeling the warm, yielding cushion of Emma's magic immediately twine within her own, she basked in the savior's essence for a spare moment, and then, she elegantly rolled her free hand. The trunk lid lowered with a muted click as it relocked. Then, in a swirl of deep purple, it disappeared from the cave. She looked at Elmwood and smiled fondly. "No transport required. It's safely stowed in our cabin," she smugly decreed with an impish smirk.

Beaming, Emma unconsciously squeezed Regina's hand. "How'd that feel?" she asked, knowing that utilizing magic hadn't been comfortable for her since the abduction. She lazily stroked her thumb across the captured hand, noting the tiredness beginning to seep into brown eyes.

"It was fine, Emma," Regina replied, squeezing the hand linked with hers. She scanned the small, natural room, again, but found nothing else of interest.

Anne pursed her lips in faint amusement at the lingering touch, casting a covert side-eyed look to Elmwood. She raised her eyebrow when their eyes met but said nothing. It was all terribly obvious; both women were ridiculously smitten with one another.

Glancing at her watch, the sheriff bit her lower lip and gently suggested, "Let's head back. I'm sure the others are almost done by now." Then, she would tuck the former mayor in the bunk for a nice, afternoon nap, and they could talk about religion and magical leather over a late snack.

Regina didn't really want to go back to the ship, but she knew better than to drag out the excursion any longer. Her energy reserves were waning, and her muscles were tired and tight. So, she nodded and allowed Emma to guide her out of the secret, treasure trove. She naturally matched the slow stride and looped her arm through the savior's. As they walked along the grassy path with Monty and Anne in the lead, she glanced around at the shimmering magic and was entranced by the vibrancy of it. "It's so beautiful," she commented wistfully.

"Yeah," Emma readily agreed, her eyes fixed on the woman beside her.

~SQ~

As the small group moseyed along the grassy path back toward the beach and the dinghy, Emma let her thoughts wander. Her gaze stayed static on the lush grass beneath her feet as she focused on the arm still linked with hers. She concentrated on the comforting warmth radiating from the body leaning against her, and she ruminated on the progression of emotions she had felt toward her now best friend over the last year. However, she was abruptly snapped out of her reverie when the rest of the party came to a sudden halt.

The sheriff frowned as the light chatter between Bruce and Irene tapered off behind them. Glancing over her shoulder, she briefly caught Farmer's eye before scanning the tree line. Her brow furrowed when she spotted nothing out of the ordinary. Then, when Anne nocked an arrow, she felt Regina stiffen right before catching an arrow in midair with her left hand.

Blinking, the sheriff's eyes widened at how close the broadhead had come to impaling her face, just mere inches. She swallowed thickly, sliding her startled gaze to meet Regina's enraged one. As their eyes met for a second, she felt safe amidst the sorceress's flashing anger, but any deeper examination was promptly shelved for another time.

From there, the situation escalated quickly. Anne reflexively launched two arrows into the forest, both hitting their marks. The first one pierced the enemy archer's drawing shoulder, and the second arrow punctured another soldier midthigh. Both elicited a string of colorful curses that echoed
between the trees. She smirked in satisfaction. With another arrow nocked and bow drawn, her sharp gaze swept the forest around them as she sought the last target. Meanwhile, Bruce and Irene drew their respective weapons, pacing forward to shield their queen as Monty drew his sword.

"I thought Diego said they were on the other side of the island?" Elmwood growled as he slowly stepped backward. "Show yourselves!" he bellowed in demand.

"This was a calculated risk," McCormac reminded the commander. No doubt she would catch hell later for encouraging the queen's little walkabout. Her eyes continuously swept the area. She could have sworn there was someone else out there.

Meanwhile, Regina inspected the craftsmanship of the arrow. "I'm not familiar with this style of arrowhead," she distractedly shared, turning the arrow around by the shaft. It was reminiscent of a few Elven illustrations in old tomes she had seen over the years, but the shaft was made from a type of wood she had never encountered.

"Maybe you can science it later," Emma helpfully suggested. Having drawn her short sword, her left hand had shifted to firmly grip the former mayor's right. When their eyes met, she smiled nervously. "We can evac, right?" she asked, hoping they could avoid any further potential hostilities.

Regina pursed her lips, sensing the apprehension bubbling through the bond. She understood the root behind the emotions, but perhaps, it was time to finally test the savior's metal in a small skirmish. "I think we should say hello, first," she answered, holding the arrow out in front of her. "After all, they did take the time to get our attention," she continued in low tone. Ignoring the soft, exasperated hiss of her name, she turned toward the lush foliage and commanded, "Show yourself."

"The Templar Order does not serve you, Maleficar," snarled a clean shaven, young man in shiny, chainmail armor as he stepped out of a cluster of massive ferns with his chin raised, a hard scowl marring his face. "We will rid the world of your kind," he threatened, gripping his still sheathed sword with his right hand and a large shield in his left.

Arching an eyebrow, the former queen turned to face the solitary soldier. Her keen gaze assessed and cataloged the unusual design of his armor and weaponry, sensing magic woven into it. Boldly, she took a step forward. "And who openly defies me?" she questioned, ignoring Emma's vice-like hold still clasping her hand. Half-heartedly, she tried to break free, but the unyielding sheriff held firm. When she saw Anne signal Farmer and Smith into the jungle, Regina allowed herself to relax slightly. It was unlikely there were more soldiers in the vicinity.

"Your perversions defile the glory of the Maker," the Templar snarled, taking a quick step forward. "You are unworthy of life," he gravely swore, glaring at the small, insignificant woman before him. It would be so easy to smite her, and it was so tempting. His lips twisted into an ugly snarl.

"Hey, Buddy, you need to back the hell off," Emma sharply called out, closing the small space between her and Regina. Subtly, she shifted her stance, readying herself to block a swing from his massive sword. "So, why don't you run along and go play with the other LARPers?" she mockingly suggested, never taking her eyes off the weirdo in front of her.

Ignoring the traded barbs, Regina tilted her head in thought. She could tell the soldier was out of his depth and perhaps stalling for some reason, including the possibility that he was simply waiting for reinforcements. "Well, I have no need to kill you," she dismissively retorted. She casually immolated the arrow she'd caught, letting the ashes fall from her hand, before adding a cold, "Yet."
The templar met the mage's detachment with a hateful gleam, silently daring her to act. "I should take your head, Maleficar," he sneered. His bravado dropped a notch, however, when Irene and Bruce strode from the underbrush, dragging the now unconscious, downed soldiers behind them.

"Really," Regina drawled. A slow smile curled the corners of her lips as she looked the lone soldier up and down. "Boastful pride will get you in trouble, young Templar."

Puffing out his chest, the young soldier proudly declared, "I am a vessel of the Maker." He paused as his expression shifted to one of absolute conviction. "I do not fear you," he proclaimed.

"No?" the former mayor inquired with mock puzzlement. She weakly gestured to Farmer and Smith, looming over the man's two unconscious compatriots, sword tips grazing their necks, and in a low tone, said, "You should."

The unimpressed Templar merely cocked an eyebrow. His gaze lazily assessed the ill-equipped group before he rebuked, "We would all gladly die in service."

"Wow," Emma drawled, not quite believing what she was hearing. Over the years, she'd met some people a few enchiladas short of a full Mexican platter, but this degree of nuts took the cake. And after living in Storybrooke, that was saying something! "That's some hardcore cult lingo, right there," she added with a soft whistle, shaking her head.

Naturally, that was the wrong thing to say as the Templar charged forward, shouting, "Blasphemy!" When Monty's sword pricked his gullet, he quickly stepped backward.

"You'll find I'm rather good at that," Regina aggravated the young man further. Squeezing the hand still holding hers, she hoped the sheriff would take the silent hint and keep her amusing observations to herself, at least for the moment. Imperiously, she instructed, "Now, tell me, who do you serve?" However, before the soldier could speak, she cut him off with a sharp retort and a stern look, "And please, skip the proselytizing rhetoric; I heard enough from Tamara and Greg."

"They are weak, but they seek the Maker's forgiveness," the templar explained in a flat tone.

"Forgiveness for what?" Emma blurted. Sure, she got the message to stop the running commentary, but the question was good detective work. And when she felt the soft, lazy stroke of Regina's thumb across her skin, she felt a thousand little prickles skitter around her body as their magic touched.

Of course, the maleficar would debase a beautiful woman with a striking resemblance to Andraste. "The arrogance of man destroyed the Maker's Golden City and released a terrible blight onto the world," the young soldier passionately answered. His gaze remained on the blonde woman, finding her visage calming amongst the savages. "Only when all the peoples of Thedas accept the Chant of Light will the Maker return," he added with certainty and a hint of wonder in his voice. He prayed he would live to see the day. Looking back at the apostate mage, he coldly continued his memorized speech from boyhood, "Until then, we are charged with protecting the world from the corrupting influence of magic and safeguarding mages from the world," he finished, his voice level and emotionless.

"How lovely," the former mayor muttered, rolling her eyes. It was always the same, no matter the world.

"Shit," Anne cursed, returning the nocked arrow to her quiver. "Can we just knock 'em out, tie 'em up, and be on our way?" she questioned in a frustrated tone. These Chantry folks sounded too like the True Love zealots in the Enchanted Forest and, now, Storybrooke.
"You are all condemned to the Void," the templar snarled, gripping his sword with intense fervor, his angry gleam meeting each person's.

"No chance for redemption?" Regina questioned in a mocking tone, not honestly caring. Smiling insincerely, she slowly stepped back from the soldier, tugging Emma with her. "How Protestant of you," she dryly remarked with honest disappointment. It wasn't what she had hoped to learn, but it was something.

Smirking, the sheriff let herself be pulled away from the possible fray. "I don't think he gets it, Regina," she easily remarked, seeing the confusion blossoming into rage within the young man's glare.

A long, tense moment passed and then, another, before the Templar finally relented. Regretfully, he had his orders, and he would not die because of the stupidity of his fellow Templars. So, he jutted out his chin and begrudgingly informed the group, "You may pass, today, but I will not be so lenient the next time we meet."

"You seem rather confused over who is holding whom hostage," the former queen angrily sneered. However, before another insipid comment could leave his mouth, she waved her left hand, dropping the arrogant bastard to the ground, unconscious.

Sheathing his sword, Monty casually probed, "Done already?" Honestly, he had expected the interrogation to last a lot longer.

Regina shrugged, gently nudging Emma into walking. "He didn't know anything of import," she finally shared with a soft sigh. Yet, it did give her some insight into the Chantry and its ranks. As the guards stowed their weapons and fell into formation around her and Emma, she looked over her shoulder at the bodies lying limp on the forest floor. With a mixture of dread and despair, she comprehended the danger these people truly represented, and they had taken her son.

~SQ~

Meanwhile in Storybrooke...

Jim stared silently at the municipal clerk at Town Hall, trying to process the information he'd just been given. Finally, he asked incredulously, "What do you mean we can't get married? We have all the necessary paperwork right here." He lightly shook the Intentions of Marriage form and their driver's licenses at the young woman. They'd even brought Kathryn's divorce papers to make sure they didn't run into any problems.

The clerk shifted behind the counter and said gently, "I understand that, but I'm not sure when the officiant will be available to perform the ceremony." Her blue eyes were wide with sincere distress as she told them, "I'd hate for you to pay the fee and not be able to get the certificate signed and registered before the expiration date."

Pressing her lips in a tight line, Kathryn asked exasperatedly, "Why aren't they available?"

Polly's usually upbeat expression morphed into an apologetic grimace as she responded, "Um, she's out of town, at the moment."

"Who the hell's the officiant?" Jim demanded, wondering who could possibly leave Storybrooke, unless it was the sheriff.

Earnest gaze flicking back and forth between the prospective couple, the clerk hesitantly admitted, "That would be Mayo—, uh, Ms. Mills."
Kathryn held up a hand to stop the young woman from saying anything else. "Wait a minute. Regina is who we need?" she asked, a note of surprise in her tone. Shaking her head in negation, she said, "There are other lawyers in this town who could do it."

"Technically, no," Polly countered with a faint shrug. "Mayor Herman wants all paperwork to be legal with the state, and Ms. Mills is the only lawyer in town who has actually been admitted to the state Bar." Her enthusiasm at disseminating the information didn't seem to wane at all in the face of having to turn away a couple from obtaining a marriage license.

Unable to remain quiet any longer, Jim blurted with growing frustration, "What does that have to do with anything?"

Rubbing the bridge of her nose in aggravation, the former princess explained, "The state only recognizes marriages officiated by clergy, notaries, or judges—of which we have none—and lawyers of the Maine Bar." If it weren't for the fact that she was, again, being thwarted from marrying the man she loved, she would find the entire situation hilarious. "Regina's the only attorney in Storybrooke who didn't get her law degree via curse." Even with having been forced out of the role of mayor, Regina Mills still managed to hold a substantial amount of power in the town. Kathryn had to give the woman her dues; she was shrewd as hell and had stacked the deck as much in her favor as possible.

"Right!" Polly exclaimed happily with an emphatic nod. Gesturing at the papers Jim was holding, she helpfully informed them, "So, you'll just have to play house a little longer." Seeing the dark looks both gave her, she hastily added, "At least, until she's back."

Jim scowled at the perky, young woman and jerked away from the counter, marching out of the Municipal Clerk's office, steps heavy with anger. As his fiancé followed, she could hear him muttering under his breath, "You've got to be shitting me. I think we're still cursed."

~SQ~

END OF PART 16

Chapter End Notes

First Flashback Synopsis: If you didn't read the first half of this flashback, please do so. There are no warnings for that portion and it covers important information regarding Daniel and Nathan and their relationship with Regina. Just stop once Cora takes her out of her room. During the second half of the flashback, Cora delivers Regina to Leopold, who is staying at the Mills's Estate. The king has paid Regina's bride price and takes his privileges early (thus, making her legally his wife) since Regina had tried to escape. (This would have been after Cora had captured her with the vines in 1x18, The Stable Boy.) The only things of import to note are that Cora had put a silencing spell on the room for their privacy (Surprisingly, no nefarious motivations on her part, here. We'll cover this more in later chapters.) and had given Regina a potion the day before, at Leopold's request, that removed her adult body hair. While Regina was originally willing to go along with things (because the Enchanted Forest is truly medieval, and that's the unfortunate reality), she decides to hell with that. She's pissed about being sold and fights back. No major injuries result from her resistance, but it maintains the tone of her ferociousness, especially when backed into a corner.
**Second Flashback Synopsis:** About four months after being handed over to Leopold (two and a half after the actual wedding), Regina catches the king going into Snow's chambers in the middle of the night. She finds him standing off to the side pleasuring himself while the girl is sleeping and decides to play the part of seductress and offer herself to keep him out of his daughter's bed. Our Regina only blames Snow a little bit for being trapped with Leopold; she puts most of the blame on Cora. Regina is starting to see Snow as a daughter and wants to keep her safe and innocent. This is where Regina first realizes that her husband has a twisted desire for young girls. She also knows that if she continues to fight him, he is likely to return to Snow. The other major tidbit here is this is when Leopold has Regina start calling him Papa during their private moments, hence her trouble with the word in previous chapters. We also learn that she is pregnant (14 weeks) with Leopold's child.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

**Author's Note:** We live! The delay in posting was utterly unintentional, but as sometimes happens, life has been . . . interesting. A lot has happened since we last posted. We house-sat for some friends. We bought our own house which included a lot of DIY renovations that are not yet complete, even now. Of course, that also piled on all the joys of packing and moving all our crap and amenities, then Kitty’s mother a few weeks later. And sadly, one of our cats passed away shortly after the move. Frankly, it was quite heartbreaking, but we’re back, now.

Please keep in mind that, as we are still in Neverland, all of the warnings regarding flashbacks remain in effect. Synopses of the flashbacks will be in the chapter endnotes.

**Thank You,** as always, for all the likes, favorites, follows and kudos. Please remember to be polite in your comments and reviews. Also, if you feel the need to leave extensive commentary as to the grammar and mechanics of our story, do us the courtesy of contacting us privately about it; anything else is simply rude. Our emails are in our profiles, and there’s always our Tumblr: ncfn.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**PART 17**

**Neverland, Part 3**

The cabin door slammed open, a highly agitated Emma Swan storming in and whirling around to deliver it a swift kick, shutting it behind her. She stalked across the cabin, muttering incoherently as the scowl on her face deepened. She was so caught up in her own head that she didn't notice when Irene cracked the door open, only to be waved off by Regina.

As soon as the door closed, once more, the former mayor stepped up to her pacing friend and placed a staying hand on her upper arm. "Emma, what's the matter?" she inquired, not having seen the woman so upset since the night she had discovered the truth about the Enchanted Forest.

Emma turned wild eyes on the woman hovering at her elbow, as if seeing her for the first time since entering the room. It took a moment to truly register her presence, and once she did, the sheriff felt heat blooming in her cheeks. Shaking her head roughly, she looked away, too embarrassed to form a reply.

Brows furrowing in concern, Regina moved to stand in front of her companion, the deep mortification flowing through the bond worrying her. When attempts to catch her eye didn't work, she placed two fingers under the dimpled chin and urged her to look up. "Now," she encouraged softly, "tell me what has you so upset."

Unable to refuse the coaxing tone, the savior bit her bottom lip, worrying it for a few moments before finally mumbling, "I started my period." Immediately, her gaze found the floor, again, too
humiliated to make eye contact. She broke away from the light contact and started pacing the length of the small cabin, once more. Running her hands through her hair, she explained in a rush, "I had felt kinda tired today but didn't think anything about it. And when I went to the bathroom just now, I discovered…," she trailed off uncertainly, throwing an anguished look in her friend's direction. "With everything happening, I didn't think about how close I was. I mean, everything was crazy, then we were on a boat, and I just… And now, I don't have anything to deal with this, and my clothes are probably ruined. And—."

Regina quickly cut her ramblings off, gently placing her fingertips over Emma's mouth. "It's okay," she assured her frantic companion. "We'll take care of it, Emma. Just take a deep breath and try to relax." Seeing the sheriff following her instructions and slowing her breathing, the former queen smiled softly, running through the options in her head. Nodding to herself, she said, "You have two choices. I can create some tampons, or I can use magic to move things along more quickly."

The last statement made the savior's head snap up, and she regarded the former mayor carefully. "What do you mean by moving things along?" she asked dubiously. It wasn't that she didn't trust her, she was simply wary of anything meant to affect her body.

"There's a spell I can use that would hasten your menses," the sorceress offered. Off Emma's startled expression, she expounded, "I've utilized it for my guards, before, if you want to ask someone else what it's like. Essentially, the spell forces your uterus to expel its lining very quickly."

Emma's nose crinkled slightly at the idea. Still, the thought of several days of worrying with her period without modern conveniences, even if she did have tampons, was just too much for her to contemplate. "When you say very quickly, just how fast are we talking about, here?" she queried curiously. It wasn't a subject she was overly comfortable discussing, though she noticed Regina seemed to be taking it all in stride.

Smiling as she felt the sheriff's anxiousness start to dissipate, Regina explained succinctly, "It would be over in three to four hours." She fought not to laugh as Emma's mouth dropped open incredulously, knowing it wouldn't be appreciated, at the moment. "I will warn you that the cramping associated with it can be more intense than you may be used to, but most consider it a small trade-off for the convenience."

Several long moments passed while Emma mulled it over before she nodded slowly. "Yeah. Okay," she agreed, nervously raking her hands through her hair, again. "How does it work?"

Regina took one of the savior's hands in her left and made an elegant gesture with her right, using magic to create the items they'd need. Giving Emma's hand a light squeeze, she walked to the bed where a small stack of black towels now rested. She removed an absorbent pad from the top of the pile and placed it in the middle of the mattress, quickly topping it with a plush towel. Turning to her companion, she informed her, "You'll lie down there, and once you're situated, I'll enact the spell. It's that simple."

"Wait a minute," Emma balked, paling slightly. "You mean I have to lay there while I just bleed everywhere?" The idea was somewhat horrifying, and she stared at Regina in disbelief.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor placed her hands on her hips and met the sheriff's stare unblinkingly. "Trust me when I say this is much better to the alternative of attempting to walk around while the spell is in effect." Her gaze assessed the woman standing uncomfortably before her, and she sighed as she tried to think of a way to calm her. "I'll stay with you the entire time, if you like, Emma. And it's really not as much blood and tissue as you think, only two to five tablespoons, at most."
The sheriff blanched further, eyes impossibly wide as she exclaimed, "Jesus fucking Christ, Regina. That's not a very reassuring thought, just so you know." The frown on her face morphed to a look of disgust as she shifted her feet. "Ugh," she moaned, pressing a hand to her belly and glancing down. "You know what? Fine. Anything is better than this." Just thinking of the mess and hassle of cleanup every time she'd need to change out tampons was enough to make her agree. Four days into their excursion, and she missed running water with a fierce passion.

Dipping her head to hide her smirk, Regina pointed to the bed and instructed, "Strip and lie down. You can use the other bath sheet to cover yourself, and there's a smaller towel to place between your thighs, if you wish." She turned her back to the bed, going back to the trunk of dragon leather, removing a bolt of dark blue, along with the box of sewing implements, and setting them on the desk after moving aside the pile of black leather already there. Her smirk grew as she listened to the savior grumble and shuffle about, having to bite her lip when she heard a vehement, "Gross," float across the room. Once everything was silent, she asked over her shoulder, "All settled?"

Emma shifted one last time under the giant towel and replied reluctantly, "Yeah." She knew that she really should be happier about the prospect of getting her period over and done with so quickly, but she was feeling vulnerable and exposed, unsure of what to expect. One glance at her friend's soft smile had her relaxing a little, the compassion in those brown eyes going a long way to steady her nerves. "So, what happens, now?" she questioned quietly.

Regina came to stand beside the bed, eyes crinkling at the corners as she flashed a supportive smile. "Now, I'll need to place my hand on your abdomen to cast the spell. It will only take a moment, but it does require direct contact," the sorceress explained as she perched on the edge of the mattress. Upon receiving a hesitant nod in response, she requested in a gentle tone, "Place your hand directly over your navel for me." Eyeing the small lump under the towel, she snaked her left hand under the material, resting it precisely beneath Emma's hand on her lower abdomen. She concentrated on the spell she needed, feeling her magic flow freely into the sheriff and coil in her belly. It happened almost immediately, and Regina was startled at how effortlessly the spell had transferred. She patted her companion's hand before withdrawing and standing.

"Why is it a spell and not a potion?" the savior asked. While she had been undressing, the thought had crossed her mind, but she had waited until then to voice it. Some of the things the former mayor had done had been accomplished with potions, and she wasn't sure what the criteria were for deciding which would be better for any given situation—a potion or a spell.

Eyebrows raising, Regina looked at Emma and tilted her head, studying her inquisitive expression. It warmed her to see her student taking a more active interest in learning the finer points of magic. Settling into the chair closest to the bed, she said, "Potions are used for most ailments and for curing things, but the reproductive system and the hormones involved require a delicate touch. While a potion would work for inducing sterility, abortion, or even temporarily alleviating impotence, utilizing one for this purpose could be disastrous." A quick glance at furrowed brows caused her to continue. "If not calculated perfectly to your current hormone levels, a potion can cause irreparable damage to the lining of your uterus and cause infertility. It's simply not worth the risk," she advised softly. "This is one time the hands-on approach is best, as it allows the caster to directly assess exactly how much of a nudge your body needs to speed things up without accidentally overcompensating."

Emma laid there silently, staring up at Regina as she absorbed the new information. After a few moments, she responded, "That makes sense, I guess. I mean, not that I'm planning on having any kids, but I'd hate to have the option taken away." She chuckled a little then caught the tightness in her friend's expression and sobered quickly. "What is it?" she questioned gently, wondering at the abrupt change.
Regina shook her head quickly, throat closing and a heaviness settling in her chest. "It's nothing," she denied in a strained voice, refusing to look Emma's way.

Shifting to get up, the sheriff stopped herself at the last second, remembering her current state. Huffing in annoyance, she reached out to the former mayor and tried to get her attention, quietly calling, "Hey, talk to me." Not getting a response, she pled in a low tone, "Regina, don't shut me out."

That brought the sorceress's head up, and she gazed into compassionate, green eyes, eventually extending her own hand to grasp the one being offered. "I... I can't have children," she whispered, voice cracking on the last word. The fingers around hers tightened to nearly bruising, and she squeezed back gratefully. After a moment, she added, "I'm unable to carry to term, another of Leopold's legacies."

Emma began rubbing her thumb over the back of Regina's captive knuckles, not trying to hold back her feelings from the bond. "I'm sorry," she murmured, not sure what else could be said other than expressing her own desire to rip the old bastard's heart out of his chest.

Regina gave her companion a wavering smile and replied, "Thank you." The savior's affection was heavy and comforting and moved unrestrained through their connection. It made her heart light up, and she could feel the magic washing back and forth between them like waves against the shore.

With one last, parting grip to the hand holding hers, she pulled back and focused on the pile of leather on the table. Changing the subject, she said conversationally, "I suppose this is an excellent time to get your opinion on a project I have in mind."

Deciding to let the matter go, the savior capitulated easily. "Alright. Lay it on me," she declared, giving her friend a goofy grin, knowing it got to her every time.

Chuckling indulgently, the former mayor gestured to the trunk in the corner and the implements spread out about her. "I realized you don't have any armor for your position in the Crows Guard," she said with a wry twist of her lips. "And don't tell me you have your training leathers. Those would never protect you in a real fight." Her expression turned bashful as she added, "I'd like to use this leather to rectify that, if you'll allow me."

The sheriff blinked, nonplussed at the realization that not only was Regina planning on making her armor out of enchanted, dragon skin, she was going to do it by hand. "I... I can't even...." There was a pause as Emma's brain finally kicked back into gear, and then, she was bobbing her head enthusiastically as she squeaked, "Hell yeah. That would be awesome."

A beaming grin lit Regina's face, and she indicated the dark blue hide. "I thought this navy and the dove gray would look best on you, but there's probably enough of the plum and buckskin if you'd rather have that," she suggested, lightly running her fingertips over the supple material. It was a dream come true to have the opportunity to work with so much of the exquisite leather. She couldn't wait to get started and only needed the sheriff's approval to begin.

"What about that red?" Emma asked, remembering the way the former mayor had cradled the piece against herself in the cavern. She had a sneaking suspicion that the woman had other plans for that particular bolt, and her hunch was confirmed by the faint blush coloring the sorceress's cheeks.

Nibbling gently on her lower lip, the former queen raised her eyebrows anxiously. "I had been hoping to use that and the black to make something for myself," she admitted sheepishly. One look at the mischievous grin on her companion's face had Regina huffing in mock indignation. "It's not nice to tease your elders."
Scoffing, Emma retorted, "Yeah, all of one year, maybe." Her eyes skimmed over the trim figure bent over the desk. It was impossible to ignore the former mayor's stunning beauty.

"Physically, I'm three years older than you. In terms of actual years lived, I'm twice your age, Dear," Regina pointed out as she spread the navy leather on the desktop and began drafting out pattern pieces with chalk. A smirk formed when the sheriff only rolled her eyes in response.

Emma watched quietly for long minutes, observing the way Regina's brows furrowed faintly in thought and how her face scrunched up when she wasn't happy with something. It was utterly adorable, and the sheriff knew she was in deep and sinking further every day. A heavy puff of air escaped her as she tried to push down her more-than-friendly feelings for the former mayor.

Head coming up at the loud sigh, the former queen focused on her companion and asked, "Is everything alright?" She worried that she had misjudged the amount of magic she'd put into the spell. Had she used too much?

Quickly coming up with an excuse, the savior replied, "I don't think the spell is working. Shouldn't I be feeling something by now?" And it was true that she wasn't even twinging, let alone cramping, like she'd been led to believe would happen.

Regina frowned and stepped over to the bedside, muttering half to herself, "It's been decades since I've performed this spell. Perhaps I didn't use enough magic." Holding out her right hand, she inquired, "May I?" and gestured at the savior's abdomen.

"Sure," the sheriff mumbled uncertainly. While the touches weren't sexual, they were intimate and made Emma squirm slightly. So, when Regina's hand made contact with her lower belly, she flinched the tiniest bit.

Noticing the reaction, Regina squinted in apology. "Sorry if my hand's cold." Again, she let her magic free to curl around Emma's womb and discovered that she had, indeed, not given it enough of a push. Concentrating briefly, she felt the area under her palm warm as their magics met, and she nudged the savior's own magic into helping her out, waiting until she could sense the first, faint contraction before removing her hand. She made sure the towel was still covering her companion's modesty, then moved back to her sewing project. "That should do it. I'm sure you'll be feeling it shortly, now," she quipped lightly, knowing Emma would be cursing her in the next fifteen minutes or so.

A comfortable silence descended, once more, as the sorceress resumed drawing out her plans on the leather. Emma watched as she pulled out a pair of her jeans and a tank top, using them to check proportions over the course of several minutes. Her quiet contemplation of the former mayor was interrupted by a sudden, intense cramp, and she soon found herself curled up on her left side, arms wrapped around her middle. A long, low groan of discomfort left her, and she watched her friend's head snap up from her work.

It took only a moment's indecision before Regina set down the bone shears she had been holding and moved to perch on the edge of the mattress. Tenderly, she brushed a few long, golden strands of hair back from Emma's face, noting the pained look she sported. "I'm sorry it's so uncomfortable," she murmured regretfully. Yes, it was a relatively fast-acting spell and would make the savior's journey more comfortable in the long-run, but at the moment, the former mayor disliked knowing she was indirectly causing Emma pain.

"S'okay," the sheriff grunted, drawing her knees up tighter. After a moment, she tentatively queried, "Did you ever use this spell?" She needed a distraction from what was rapidly turning into
Expression falling instantly into a stoic mask, the sorceress blinked a few times before shaking it off and remembering that she didn't have to close up around Emma, not anymore. "I never had an opportunity to use it for myself in this manner, no," she admitted in a raspy voice. Subtly clearing her throat, she expounded, "I did employ it on a few occasions to hasten along miscarriages, though." Her eyes slid shut as she pushed down the remembered pain, physical and emotional, that still accompanied those losses.

Emma's eyes widened with realization and she cursed, "Shit. Regina, I… I'm sorry," she stumbled through the apology, sending her remorse flooding through the bond.

"It's alright, Emma," Regina quickly reassured the savior to stall any self-recriminations before they could take hold. "I've had an extremely long time to come to terms with my past, including this," she said, continuing to stroke blonde tresses in an attempt to comfort them both. Scowling faintly, the former queen muttered, "It's only because these damned dreams—these memories—have been so unrelenting since we arrived here that I'm having any difficulty. I'll admit that reliving pieces of my life every time I drift off or go to sleep is becoming a bit tiresome." Her face scrunched up in distaste as she recalled her dreams just before waking that morning. Feeling the boundless concern rolling off Emma, she added for her benefit, "That's partly why I'm so pleased about the prospect of making you armor. I'm hoping it will keep my attention and prevent some of these... trances," she finished with a vague wave of her left hand, not buried in soft curls.

Understanding that her friend was handling things the way she preferred, the sheriff didn't push and decided to follow the change in topic, hoping for a distraction of her own. "So, in the cave, you said this leather has magical properties," Emma said leadingly. "What were you talking about?"

Grateful for the minor deflection, Regina sent a short burst of warming magic through her companion's body to help relax her before getting up and moving back over to the desk. Her hands picked up the shears and immediately set to work, again, as she answered the question. "High dragon leather has a naturally high resistance to the vast majority of magic. Depending on the intentions of the dragon who shed it, it can also be imbued with a specific, magical effect."

Although the circumstances were unusual, Emma was immediately drawn into the mini lesson in which her teacher seemed to be engaging her. "Skipping the intentions thing, right now," she started, "what kind of effects do you mean? Is it an enchantment like the gauntlets the Crows Guard have?"

Regina laid out the cut pieces of leather that would eventually become a cuirass on the desktop to check the design. Nodding to herself, she stacked them together and began working on the grey hide for the pants. "The enchantments I put on the gauntlets are different. Rest assured, I'll be adding some of those to this set, as well, but this is different." She took a moment to visually check on the sheriff, making sure she didn't seem to be in too much pain. Seeing only a faint tightness around green eyes, she kept working. "What I'm talking about are properties that are part of the hide itself, not layered on top. For instance, Excalibur's scabbard is wrapped in high dragon leather that releases a concussive shockwave when someone attacks the wearer."

"Wait a minute," the savior blurted in disbelief. "Excalibur, as in King Arthur and the sword in the stone Excalibur?" Everything just sounded so ludicrously epic. "You knew King Arthur?" she asked skeptically.

A fond smile curled the corners of Regina's mouth as she remembered watching the charismatic monarch training with the castle guards during his visits to Angevin. With a chuckle, she affirmed, "Yes, I did. He had to remove the scabbard during training or else have his opponents blasted
across the yard on their first hit. It was endlessly amusing to watch him trounce the King's Guard." Her smile grew wicked as she made the last cut and gathered up the scraps, placing them in a small broadcloth bag and returning them to the trunk.

Bringing their conversation back to the topic at hand, Emma inquired, "How do we find out if there's anything special about this leather?" She shifted slightly and made a face of disgust as she felt a gush of warm stickiness on her thighs. If they made it back to Storybrooke, she didn't think she'd ever utilize this particular magical option, again.

The former mayor set the pile of grey leather on the edge of the desk and settled into the chair nearest the bed. When she threaded a black, bone needle with the thread she'd found in the sewing box, she marveled at the unique texture, strong like sinew but soft as silk. As Regina started on the task of sewing the pieces together, she discovered she had to use a small trickle of magic to get the thread to move through the hide. Distractedly, she commented, "We won't until you're in an actual fight. There's really no easy way to test it." The comically apprehensive look on her companion's face encouraged her to add, "No need to worry, Dear. This is better than heavy plate. Swords and arrows won't even scratch it. And I could always try a few spells on the leftover bits to see if we can figure it out."

Frowning in consternation, the sheriff shook her head as if it would help her process all this information. She took in the way Regina's hands moved with deft surety as she pushed the needle through the leather effortlessly. "Okay. If that's the case, how the hell did you just cut all of that?" she challenged. Raising her eyebrows, she taunted playfully, "Explain that, Miss Smarty-Pants."

Regina fought down her grin at the teasing tone and responded haughtily, "The shears and needle are made of dragon bone, of course." It only took a few moments of expectant silence before she cracked and chuckled quietly, lips twitching in amusement. "It's probably dragon horn, to be more specific." Visage turning pensive, she said, "I don't recall ever hearing any mention of high dragons desecrating their dead to use their bones. And no one else would have the ability to shape the bone like this." She resolved not to mention the apparent required use of her own magic. It would only make the sheriff fuss over her, and while the sewing caused an odd ringing in her body, it wasn't an unpleasant sensation.

"You keep talking about them like they're smart or, I don't know, sentient," Emma huffed with a hint of frustration.

Tilting her head to the side, the former queen wondered why the concept was hard for the other woman to grasp. "That's because they are. High dragons are incredibly intelligent beings." She tried to find an analogy that would help the sheriff understand. At last, she explained, "They're no more akin to the beasts that roam the mountainous regions of the Enchanted Forest than we are to chimpanzees."

Emma considered that for a moment, then, remembered her encounter beneath the Storybrooke Library. "What about that dragon that I killed under the library? Please tell me that wasn't one of those high dragons because it only roared and tried to eat me," she snarked.

The former mayor looked down at the leather in her lap, a remorseful look on her face. "No." It was almost a minute before she found her voice, again, and she fought the desire to squirm under Emma's continued silence. Very softly, she confessed, "That was Maleficent. She used a shapeshifting spell to turn into a dragon. She was as human as you or I."

The savior felt like she'd been doused in ice water as the words registered. After what seemed like ages, she croaked, "Maleficent? A person?" Green eyes filled with tears sought out her friend, the full implications of her actions that day crashing down on her, at last. Her voice warbled as she
beseeched, "Are you telling me I murdered someone?" When no answer was immediately forthcoming, she demanded more forcefully, "Damnit, Regina, did you know I would have to kill her to get that potion?!": She sat up in the bed, clutching the towel to her chest as anger and betrayal churned in her stomach.

A flash of ire sparked in Regina's eyes, and she glared at Emma as the cabin door swung open, Irene and Diego worriedly peering inside. Raising her hand and never looking away from the sheriff, the former queen used her magic to slam the door shut as she commanded, "Not now," ignoring the faint protest through the wood. She narrowed her eyes at the savior and snarled, "I didn't know Rumpelstiltskin had hidden anything inside her until that moment in his shop. You were there when he admitted as much."

"Yeah, but you two were talking in riddles, as usual," Emma sneered petulantly.

Incredulous at her companion's obliviousness, the former mayor jeered acerbically, "You really are blonde, aren't you? What part of 'old friend' could you misinterpret as anything other than a person, Miss Swan?" She had no idea how the woman managed to survive so long on her own if this was the limit of her reasoning skills.

Throwing a hand up in exasperation, the sheriff exclaimed, "I don't know, Regina! For all I knew, dragons were the Enchanted Forest's equivalent of dogs—you know, a sorcerer's best friend." Her brows were tightly drawn together as she said, "It's not like you explained much beyond, 'Find a way to retrieve the potion and get out of there.'" Realization dawned on her, and she accused, "You did know. You knew and sent me down there to do your dirty work. What the fuck, Regina?! In what world is that okay?"

Irices flashing a warning violet, Regina hissed, "In the world where our son lived, Emma!" She placed her hands on her hips and stared down at the savior, scorn lacing every word as she said, "Yes, I knew you'd have to kill her for the potion. Yes, you murdered someone. Join the fucking club," she extolled with a mirthless chuckle, spreading her arms wide. Then, she leaned forward slightly and growled, "We killed her because we thought it would save Henry. And don't you dare tell me you wouldn't kill again to save our son. I know you better than that." She jabbed a finger into the mattress, eyes manic as she declared, "I would give up everything for him."

And just like that, Emma felt all the fight drain out of her because she remembered this woman saying things like our son, and family, and miscarriages. Biting her bottom lip, she dipped her head to break the intense stare being leveled at her and took a deep, fortifying breath. "You're right," she said, bringing her gaze back to Regina's. She watched the former queen suck in a quick breath and relax infinitesimally, so she carried on. "I would do whatever it takes to save Henry and worry about the moral implications after the fact. So, yeah, I get it." She reached out in silent apology to catch one of Regina's hands. "It's just, you know, the idea of outright murder—not something I really prepared myself for," she trailed off uncertainly.

Regina dropped ungracefully back into her chair, the sudden fury gone as quickly as it had come. "You're never prepared for your first kill," she whispered sorrowfully, lost in her own head for a moment. Bringing herself back to the present, the former queen dismissed the argument and took the offered hand. Releasing a heavy sigh, she murmured softly, "I'm just afraid we'll be too late, this time."

"I feel the same way, too, sometimes," the savior acknowledged just as quietly. Her expression turned morose, and she settled back down on her side, unwilling to meet Regina's eyes. A part of her had always been dubious about her actions under the library, but it had been their only hope for saving Henry, at the time. Even nearly a year later, Emma found the situation overwhelming and
firmly shoved her concerns into a mental corner to be unearthed later—much later. At least Regina seemed remorseful of the outcome, as well.

The sorceress flicked her gaze over her companion's face, cataloguing every miniscule twitch of muscle. Interlacing their fingers, she gave a gentle squeeze of the digits held in hers. Knowing she had to be the strong one in this situation, she spoke with firm conviction as she avowed, "We will find Henry and take him home." Then, in an effort to lighten the mood, she quipped, "We'll simply have to confine him to the house until he's forty to ensure he stays out of trouble."

Emma saw the merriment dancing in dark orbs and couldn't help but laugh, in spite of everything. "Somehow, I don't think that will go over very well when he starts dating," she remarked with a snigger. "I mean, it'll be bad enough when he's a teenager, but can you imagine the awkward walks of shame we'd be subjected to once he's in his thirties?"

Regina rolled her eyes and pulled her hand free to lightly smack Emma's arm as she returned to her sewing, fondly muttering, "Ridiculous," under her breath. Focus returning to the leather, she waited for the next inevitable question from the sheriff. If the last four and a half months had taught her anything, Emma was persistent when she had a puzzle to solve. And right then, she knew that the idea of high dragons was titillating the savior's naturally inquisitive mind.

Sure enough, only a few more minutes passed before Emma needed further distraction from her cramps and inquired, "Just how intelligent are your high dragons supposed to be?"

Smirking slightly at knowing her friend so well, the former mayor supplied, "Immensely so. Our history teaches us that they are the creators of our world." Off the skeptical expression directed her way, she expounded, "It's not in the same sense of the Christian god, more along the lines of gently directing the evolution of our species and nudging significant events toward a particular outcome."

Her tone was so nonchalant, Emma could almost believe it. Then, her common sense kicked in and she snorted in derision. "Sure," she scoffed. "So, you've seen one of these high dragons, before?" This was all just too far-fetched for her to lend any credence to the idea. They weren't even talking about people but animals.

"No," came the easy concession. Before the savior could get too excited about a possible loophole, Regina added, "But someone I knew had. He was acquainted with several, though he wouldn't tell me their names." Her smirk grew in the face of Emma's confusion, enjoying the opportunity to tease her friend.

Emma simply stared at the former mayor for several seconds and concluded that she was just going to be in a constant state of cynicism for the rest of this conversation. "Alright," she drawled as she figured out how to phrase her next question. "Do you believe in them?" she queried hesitantly. They were getting into uncertain territory because if there was one thing Emma knew, people got defensive about religion very quickly.

Tilting her head to the side, the former queen carefully considered her response. "I know they are living, sentient beings with many of the abilities ascribed to them. I do not, however, think they are actual gods." She was quiet a moment while she concentrated on a few stitches, mulling over her convictions. At last, she continued, "High dragons are simply more powerful and advanced wielders of magic than we are, thus, they appeared godlike to the early peoples of our world. But there are plenty of non-religious, historical accounts of them to know they exist."

The sheriff thought about that and realized it made perfect sense, especially when she considered that the Enchanted Forest existed in a completely separate world from Earth, and they were on yet another world. It was just the idea of anything being worshipped as a god that was really throwing
her for a loop. Rolling her lips and grimacing as she shifted a little, she probed curiously, "Do people still worship them?"

Regina nodded as she picked up another piece of leather to add to the ones in her lap. "In some places, they are still venerated as gods. That being said, worship has declined greatly over the last few hundred years, and it’s become a matter of small, private acts of devotion," she explicated, glancing up to find her companion watching her intently.

"How?" Emma asked when it was obvious the former mayor wasn’t going to continue. "How do people worship them? Are there churches and prayers involved, or is it more sacrificing a goat kind of thing?" she joked, grinning at the ridiculousness of the idea.

The sorceress worked hard to keep a straight face when she responded flatly, "Both."

Dumbfounded, the savior’s mouth dropped open in shock. "Wait. What?" She tittered nervously, pretty sure that her friend was pulling her leg. But then again, the woman did have a knack for throwing odd truths her way. Clearing her throat, she said, "I could have sworn you just admitted people sacrificed goats."

"They did, though the practice has largely died out since none of the dragons are active on our world, at this time. Cattle, deer, sheep, and elk were quite common, as well." Upon seeing Emma’s shocked expression, Regina ducked her head and bit her lip to stifle the snicker that tried to escape. Finding it too much fun to tease the woman, she added nonchalantly, "However, young girls were by far the most frequent offerings at the temples." She risked a peek at her friend and couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up in response to the flabbergasted look she was receiving.

It took a few tries before Emma could finally squeak, "Please tell me you're joking."

Shaking her head, the former mayor had pity on the sheriff and reassured, "The girls were sent to the temples to become acolytes and, hopefully, priestesses. They weren’t sent there to be eaten by the dragons." Pausing, she conceded with an impish smirk, "Well, not as food, at least, and not until they had reached adulthood. Although," she muttered as an afterthought, "that can be as early as fourteen in the Enchanted Forest." Emma’s sudden coughing fit compelled her to add, "Sex was, and still is, an integral aspect of the religion."

The savior fought a moment to find air, reeling from hearing the oh-so-proper former queen so casually reference oral sex. If nothing else, she was fairly certain that Regina was just trying to get a rise out her. "Just to clarify, here, are we talking about sex with dragons?" she asked suspiciously, part of her not sure she wanted to know the answer to that.

"The dragons would take human form for any temple rituals, Emma," came the dry response. On a bit of a roll, now, Regina laid out some of the basics. "The old religion was polytheistic and centered around a handful of dragons, but the main one was Razikale, the god of mystery. She is considered the cardinal deity and was the patron god of my family, both on my mother's and father's side." Her gaze returned to the leather as she spoke. "Temples were run almost exclusively by women. Priests were exceedingly rare, and the last time one was awarded that position, it was over two millennia ago."

Propping her head on her left hand, elbow digging into the mattress, Emma found herself getting lost in the cadence of Regina's voice, completely forgetting her physical discomfort in the face of what was turning out to be an interesting history lesson. It impressed her how the former mayor could make such information as appealing as a good fiction novel, and she wondered if it was the way that she presented the material or just the woman herself.
The former queen smiled inwardly as she noticed she had her audience's rapt attention. She enjoyed imparting knowledge when her student was so eager to learn more, and it helped her reconnect with a world she hadn't seen in nearly three decades and occasionally missed. "You'll be interested to know that all of the gods were female, though there are male dragons, of course. They aren't indigenous to our world; rather, they act as guardians of sorts." Sorting through the stack of leather on the desk, she picked out an oddly shaped piece and resumed her sewing along with the lesson. "The animals were brought as food offerings, and the girls sent to the temples would be educated in healing, arts, literature, mathematics, and magic. A woman who had earned the title of priestess was considered a formidable sorceress. As a result of the rituals involved, it became a part of her and was woven into her DNA."

That peaked the sheriff's interest, and she perked up considerably. Following the thread Regina had begun, she extrapolated, "So, then, magic is hereditary and passed down from one generation to the next. If that's the case, why don't Mary Margaret or David have any magic?"

"You're unique, Emma," Regina told her with a fond smile. Her lips twisted into a smirk when she added, "Your magic stems from you being conceived during a moment of True Love between your parents. If either of them stem from a priestess line, it's so far removed as to have little effect on you." Chuckling lowly at the way Emma's face contorted in distaste at the mention of her origins, she had mercy on her companion and said, "But it is why I have magic, and my mother, and her mother before her. It runs in the female lines. On the rare occasions it manifests in a male, the magic tends to be volatile and . . . dangerous. Boys born with magic don't usually live terribly long," she informed her regretfully.

Her countenance turning pensive, Emma muttered quietly, "That sucks." She couldn't imagine how awful that would be for a parent to go through. It reminded her a little of the Legend of the Seeker books she had borrowed from Regina. She still needed to finish that series so she could begin the one that the former mayor was currently reading—something about sassy witches, misunderstood demons, and smartass pixies.

Regina hummed in agreement, remembering Merlin telling her he had been one of the more fortunate ones. Thoughts of the old man brought a smile to her face, and she fell silent as she recalled magic lessons that had been fun and lighthearted, a strong juxtaposition to those taught by her other master. He had been the one to help her connect the ancient traditions learned from her aunts to the benevolent form of magic he practiced.

Worried that her friend was slipping into one of her dreaded trances, the savior broke the stillness with a follow-up to an earlier question. "You said that people no longer use the temples like they used to?" she led in, waiting for Regina's attention to return to her. After getting a succinct nod in reply, she queried, "How do they worship, now, the ones who still do?"

There was a long pause before the former queen answered as she deliberated just how delicately to couch her response. "When I mentioned private acts of devotion, earlier, I meant sex. It was said that the energy expended during the old ceremonies was absorbed by the dragons. Needless to say, since it was a pleasurable way to provide an offering to the gods, sex as praise lingered long after the dragons withdrew their presence from our world." After a moment's hesitation, Regina decided to forgo mentioning the temple prostitutes. If the sheriff's expression was anything to go by, she didn't think she could take in much more before overloading. However, she didn't bother to hide her smirk as she muttered, "Gods know I paid enough solitary tribute in my early teens."

Emma's eyebrows practically tried to crawl off her forehead at this new information. When she had begun her line of inquiry, she hadn't expected to get such a mind-bending, or personal, answer. "Um, that seems a bit unusual," the savior said, surprised by the former mayor's easy candor.
"Sex and sexuality are not considered shameful things in the Enchanted Forest, or in most places in our world. It was the True Love zealots who tried to turn such a natural part of life into something to be hidden away," Regina lectured, a hint of sternness in her tone. She had been particularly diligent in trying to keep that upstart religion's bishops out of her kingdom. Softening at her companion's startled reaction to her vehemence, she added gently, "Not quite the answer you were expecting, I'm sure."

The sheriff snorted and replied, "Not really, no." She paused for a minute then probed, "Did you ever worship them? Do you still?" It was only after seeing the decidedly wicked grin on her friend's face that it dawned on Emma just what she was asking, and she wished she could swallow her tongue.

A perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched high, and Regina licked her lips and purred, "Why, Miss Swan, are you asking if I masturbate regularly?"

"What? No! That's not…!" Emma began protesting, eyes wild and cheeks flaming. After a bit of mental flailing, she seemed to collapse in on herself and muttered, "Fuck it all."

The former mayor released a giggle of sheer delight and clapped a hand over her mouth, chestnut irises sparkling with mirth. "I'm sorry," she managed around her laughter. "I do know what you meant, and yes, I did worship them to a certain extent." Demeanor becoming more serious, she informed her, "Most of it came in the form of a reverence for nature, an appreciation of the world around me. It involved planting new trees each year and taking a portion of the harvest's first fruits to the temples to be given out to those who needed it."

Relaxing as her friend let her faux pas go, the savior questioned, "Is that where some of the magic techniques we've been working with come from, the old religion?" Their entire conversation felt like it was loaded with land mines, and as much as Emma wanted to know more, a part of her was worried what would be unearthed with each new query.

A wistful expression crossed Regina's features as good memories rose to the surface. "Merlin was the one who taught me how to channel energy from the earth, how to truly connect with nature in a magical sense. It is where I learned my meditation, centering, and grounding techniques." She absently fiddled with the needle in her hand, overcome with a sudden desire to see her old mentor. "He explained the meaning behind old traditions, and yes, that included the sacraments of self-love," she relayed, a hint of mischief lacing her tone. A faint edge crept into her voice as she concluded, "However, my marriage had done a thorough job of removing any sexual desire I might have had. Even so, I compensated with devotion to my people and offerings of charity."

"That does sound nice," Emma admitted. She had never been a fan of religion, having been drug to many churches over the years, each proclaiming to know the only right way to serve God. It had annoyed her, being forced into a dress and made to sit quietly and patiently while some old, white man droned on and on about a savior who was supposed to make her life better if she just believed hard enough. Now, she was a savior of sorts, herself, and she still didn't know what to make of it most of the time. It felt too overwhelming, a lot like church had felt to her. And that made her think of something else. "Are there expectations? You know, like do the right thing and go to heaven, or sin and go to hell."

Lips pressed in a tight line, the former queen easily negated that idea. "No. There were never really expectations from the dragons. We were left as a people to live our lives as we saw fit." Stopping herself, she cocked her head to the side and amended, "Perhaps the only thing requested of us was to take care of our world, be good stewards to the flora and fauna that coexisted with us. The dragons acted more like guardians or custodians than gods. They didn't police morality, either."
With a wave of her hand, she expounded, "Oh, they accepted worship and prayers, but they truly answered the requests of their followers. That's part of the reason the temple priestesses existed. They used their magic to intercede on behalf of the dragons and provide what assistance they could to the supplicants."

Exhaling slowly, the sheriff blinked a few times before uttering, "Well, that's the first time I've heard of actual, answered prayers." A few seconds later, she quipped, "Looks like Christianity got it wrong. Turns out the dragons were the good guys, all along."

Lips quirking faintly, Regina deadpanned, "Perhaps we should send a letter to the Pope upon our return to Storybrooke. Although, I do see how enormous, pansexual, shapeshifting, alien lizards being worshipped as gods could be a bit disconcerting to the uninitiated."

At that, the sheriff announced, "Okay, we've officially reached Twilight Zone levels of weirdness." Shaking her head, she grumbled, "I'm almost sorry I started this conversation."

Laughing as her friend pulled a face, the sorceress had pity on the other woman and asked something she'd been curious about for a while. "Do you ascribe to any religious beliefs, Emma?" From what she had observed during their time together, she had guessed that the savior did not have any religious inclinations but finally felt it was appropriate to ask since the topic was currently open.

Wrinkling her nose in distaste, Emma adamantly stated, "No. I'm, uh, I'm an atheist." She shrugged her right shoulder and explained, "It's kind of hard to believe in a god when there's so much hate and misery in the world. And just the idea that some omnipotent being is treating us like their own personal chess game pisses me off." There was a new passion in her voice, the intimation of something hard and unyielding under the surface.

Regina flashed her an understanding smile and said slowly, "I think if I didn't have the concrete proof of high dragons to rely upon, I would likely be an atheist, as well." Raising an eyebrow, she gestured at herself and reminded the savior, "I've already explained I don't believe they are gods, per se, so it shouldn't be too surprising. As you've pointed out I'm the, and I quote, 'most sciency realist' you've ever met." Her smile faded, then, as she considered Emma's reasoning. It made frighteningly perfect sense to her. "And you are correct. The worlds are full to brimming with terrible things that no higher power should ever abide."

Brows knit together in consternation, the savior thought about all the awful things she'd seen, how so many of the kids she'd met in her foster homes had horror stories. She thought of the bits and pieces she'd gleaned about the Enchanted Forest and Regina's life there. It only reinforced her stance on the subject of religion and gods. "If there really was a god who cared about us, and all this shit keeps on happening—the wars and poverty and famine—I'd hate to see what an apathetic deity would be like. Uh uh," she negated, "no religion for me, thank you very much."

Regina graced her with a faint smile of commiseration. "Believe me, I understand. I'd hate to think that Razikale was awake during everything that my people and I suffered and did nothing."

Glancing down, she unclenched the fists she had unconsciously made at the thought of being written off by her world's guardian. "However, she is currently in repose, or hibernation, and won't wake for another fifteen hundred years or so. In the meantime, we muddle through the best we know how."

"To hell with gods and religion," the sheriff proclaimed. Looking Regina in the eye, she stated seriously, "I say we make our own fate."

Lips tugging upward as a fierce sort of fondness swept through her, the former queen inclined her
head and concurred, "Indeed."

For the most part, everyone onboard the Jolly Roger left the Dark One to his own devices, and that suited him just fine. His daughter and the savior had commandeered the captain's quarters, which had left him to claim the far less spacious quartermaster's. There was the officers' cabin, a tad larger, but he had left the Charmings and Hook to cohabitate with the double bunk. However, the mixed crew of Crows Guard and Salters had truly surprised him. They worked with an unexpected harmony, knowing what needed to be done and when and how. That was an attitude they desperately needed to survive his father, Peter Pan, though he was sure it would be fruitless.

So, writing most everyone off to die, Gold remained out of sight, only coming out for the occasional group meal in hopes of catching his estranged child or to lap the weather deck during the wee hours of the night. Hidden away in his room, he assessed and experimented with the natural magic of Neverland. It was pure and rich and thick, like nothing he had ever felt before. He was in awe of its clarity. Yet, as they traveled toward the cursed island that his father ruled, he felt the power rising, and that concerned him. If Peter Pan had amassed more magic since their last dealings, he feared for his son and grandson's lives.

The pawnbroker sat in the center of his small bed, staring at the closed door. With his right hand, he reached out and rolled his wrist, calling the invisible threads of magic to him. He felt the subtle tingle as it coiled around him. It was a heady experience, and he sighed with contentment as his eyes drifted closed. As he allowed himself to be dragged into that fleeting meditative state, he pondered whether Regina had sensed the underlying current to this world's magic. He wondered if that was why she primarily kept to herself, tolerating only her guard and Emma for company. However, talented apprentice or not, he doubted her ability to master the raw wildness of Neverland's magic before he could, and after days of tinkering, he was ready to explore the depths of potential titillating his mind's eye.

His body went rigid as his consciousness was abruptly swept into a particularly powerful current of magic, drawing him into a metaphysical space that existed somewhere between the physical realm and an endless void. Then, as his essence traveled a tunnel illuminated by vibrations and thin streaks of magic, he sensed others beyond the channel. He tried to peer through the blurred, murky boundaries that surrounded him, but he was moving too fast. Several times, he attempted to slow or alter his course, and each time, he was yanked along by the mysterious magic of this world.

"I'm no one's play thing," he snarled into the darkness. Then, on his command, he willed himself to stop, but his moment of triumph was short lived because the next thing he knew, he was plummeting down into unknown depths. The small streaks of colorful magic blinked away from his perception. He quickly lost track of his direction and distance, uncertain if he was falling down or up or if it made any difference in a place that was made solely of energy without form. However, just as he spotted a tiny dot of barely visible light, his body abruptly smacked into a cold, hard surface.

Groaning, he rolled onto his side. His left arm stretched out in front of him as he laid on the chilled, grey stone. Swallowing a few times, he blinked slowly, wondering how he had fallen prey to substance in a place of pure thought. As his left hand flexed, his fingertips caressing the smooth texture of the rock, he realized something was very wrong. If he hadn't willed the physical manifestations into being, who had?

It started off soft, at first, the quiet hissing. Gradually, the noise grew louder, and more susurrations joined the emerging chorus. Gold pushed himself upright. His head whipped around,
searching the darkness that surrounded him, but saw nothing. He attempted to call forth a fireball, only for the magic to refuse to materialize. His fear fueled his wrath, and he demanded in a roar, "Show yourself! I'm afraid of no man or beast," he taunted.

Then, the tone of the murmuring shifted from annoyed to amused. The chorus of noise rolled in an almost pleasant ebb and flow of varied volumes. However, a loud, shuddering growl flowed out of the darkness, eclipsing everything else.

The pawnbroker's eyes widened as he stumbled, trying to keep his balance. He frantically searched for the being tormenting him. Before he could futilely make another demand, he heard a low, deep voice snarl, "Lo!" And another shouted, "Vodovahkiin!" Suddenly, there were multiple voices hissing and growling. Then, there was absolute silence.

Gold spun around. His gaze was drawn downward as his small circle of light closed in around him. "Wait!" he pled, looking back into the inky obscurity. He didn't know what laid beyond the light, and a frisson of dread shook him as he was encapsulated in black, a humid breeze rushing around him like the rhythmic breathing of a furnace bellows. "Please," he whispered as he trembled in fear. Even the Dark One could admit that whatever was lurking in the darkness was well beyond him, their power terrifyingly immense as it pressed against him.

A new voice sharply snapped, "Bovul."

Violently, Gold's consciousness snapped back into his body onboard the Jolly Roger. His eyes flew open as he gulped for air. Frantically, he tugged at the lacings of his shirt with trembling fingers, loosening the collar and opening the front. Sweat poured down his face as he flopped onto his right side. Eventually, he rolled onto his back and stared at the planked ceiling. Whatever the hell that had been, he knew it had nothing to do with his father.

~SQ~

"Are you sure about this?" Emma tentatively asked in a quiet voice, following behind her friend as they traversed the ladder-stairs. Her eyes darted around the narrow hatch, making sure the woman in front of her had a solid hold on the handrail. She squinted into the bright sunlight as they walked out onto the main deck.

"I told you," Regina mildly scolded, a little annoyed at repeating herself, again. And as much as she appreciated the tender care from her guards and Emma, she had quickly found it all suffocating in such close quarters. "I feel better," she added in a gentler tone. Turning around to face her apprentice, she flexed her left hand. A fireball sprung into existence with nary an effort. "As long as I don't overdo it, I'm sure I'll be fine," she assured softly with a warm smile. Dispelling the fireball, she closed the distance between them and cupped her friend's right elbow, drawing her attention. "I can only occupy myself with my tailoring project for so long, Emma," she explained, her voice taking on a low, warm quality. A fond smile curled her lips.

The sheriff felt a flutter in her stomach as she met brown eyes. Maybe she was being overprotective, but Anne had administered a drop of that medicine from the brown vial just that morning. Her brow furrowed as she frowned. "Regina," she whispered, not wanting to bring too much attention to them or their conversation. "You're still taking that medicine," she quietly reminded. Sighing, she closed her eyes and hung her head. Her hands went to her hips as she shook her head. She didn't want to overstep, but their fight several months ago over the damned pain pills still bothered her. It troubled her even more, now, and it never felt like the right time to approach Anne.

"Emma," the former mayor soothed. She squeezed the arm still in her grip as she brought her right
hand to Emma's chin. Gently, she urged her friend to look up. "Sweet, Emma," she praised affectionately. "I'm fine. I promise," she swore, stroking her thumb along the sheriff's jaw. "It's just laudanum, and I'm used to its effects." Perhaps she should have discussed the drug sooner, if the blast of uncertainty rolling through the bond was any indication. "Emma, please," she husked, moving both of her hands to rub her worried friend's biceps. She couldn't bear for her to be upset with her, not any longer.

"I…," Emma started but trailed off, losing her train of thought in earnest, chestnut eyes. She blinked a few times before vigorously shaking her head. "I get it. I do," she swore, relaxing her stance and realizing her mistake. Bashfully, she shrugged and admitted, "I just worry." She flashed a goofy smile. And as she observed concern morph into affection, her stomach did that little flutter thing, again. "I know, I know," she interjected, cutting off her friend before she could interject. "We're okay," she promised. It didn't even register with her that they were communicating in half-formed thoughts, each intuitively understanding the other.

"Very well, if you're certain," Regina replied after a moment. She dropped her hands and took a step back. "Are you ready to begin, then?" she prompted, calling forth another fireball, grinning hugely at the feeling of her magic flowing comfortably, once more.

Biting her lower lip, the sheriff nervously glanced around the wooden ship. "I don't know if fire would be the best thing," she stated, rubbing the back of her neck. Maybe ice would be better. She pursed her lips as she pondered if ice bolts were a thing.

"Oi!" Hook shouted from the helm. Glancing around, he saw no one to relieve him, and when the queen didn't douse the fire, he quickly locked the wheel, looping a rope from the wheel house around a few spokes. "No, fireballs!" he demanded, rushing down the stairs to the main deck.

"No?" the former mayor cooly queried, tilting her head to watch the fool scurry toward her. She gazed into the fire hovering over her palm as a devilish smile crossed her lips. Then, she elegantly flipped her hand over, letting the fireball fall to the deck.

"Bloody hell, Woman!" Captain Jones cried. As soon as his boots hit the weather deck, he darted toward a storage locker. Yanking the heavy lid open, he pulled out a large, wooden pail with one end of a rope tied to its handle and tossed it over the side of the ship. The rope rapidly uncoiled as the bucket hit the ocean with a splash. He vigorously heaved on the rope, pulling up the lifesaving water. "You're fucking crazy," he seethed under his breath. Finally, the pail was within reach. He leaned over the side and hooked it. Then, after he pulled the half-full bucket over the gunwale, he stopped dead. There wasn't a fire. He glanced around, still holding the bucket of salt water.

Regina laughed heartily, her head falling back in delight. Merriment danced in her eyes as full, pink lips parted in a gleeful smile. She truly did miss having someone to torment now that she and Emma were such close friends.

For her part, the sheriff was utterly entranced. After days of tears and suffering, to hear such joyous amusement from her friend was a relief, for she worried about her. Emma couldn't stop her own soft chuckle from escaping, unable to look away as mischievous eyes met hers. She couldn't believe how incredibly strong this woman standing beside her truly was. As she took a deep breath, she felt her heart swell with pride and something more.

Watching Hook toss the bucket across the deck and storm back onto the quarterdeck, the former mayor basked in the now-familiar feelings emanating from her apprentice. She looked to the other woman and was struck by the apparent clarity and scope of emotion. In that moment, something shifted deep within her. It was something she hadn't experienced in a very long time, but pleasant as it was, she wasn't ready to contend with it just yet. So, she deflected with a sassy smirk and a wink,
turning away. "I believe we shall work with your shields," she stated, pretending she didn't notice the flushing face under a curtain of blonde hair. She also ignored the responding flutter in her stomach.

"Okay," Emma squeaked. She cleared her throat and forced herself to focus. Her brow furrowed when she pulled the abundant, native magic to her. It felt different, or was it sailing across the ocean that made it different? She wasn't certain, but her confidence settled as the magical bubble shimmered around her.

Tutting, Regina shook her head as she gently reprimanded her student, "Never show your hand, Dear." With a roll of her left wrist, a new fireball sprouted into existence, and with expert precision, it was effortlessly tossed past the savior's shoulder toward the main course.

Reflexively, the sheriff ducked, forgetting about her personal shield, and spun to see the sail catch fire. "What the hell?" she gasped. She looked over her shoulder at her teacher, letting her mouth hang open.

"Fucking hell, Woman!" Hook bellowed, glaring upward as the canvas over his head burned. Fire on ships meant death, even more so in Neverland. "Put it out!" he demanded, his hand tightly gripping and twisting the spoke of the wheel. In a blink of an eye, the flames were gone and the sail restored. His shoulders sagged in relief, but he doubted that would be the last of the queen's magical torment. "Spirits preserve us," he muttered, closing his eyes and scowling at the two women.

Ignoring the pirate, the sorceress linked her hands in front of herself and raised her chin. "What was your mistake?" she questioned her apprentice. She patiently waited, giving the other woman a chance to process. However, an unwanted presence drew her attention. Lowering and turning her head to the left, she spied Rumpelstiltskin loitering on the forward bow, watching them with thinly veiled interest. She had hoped her former teacher would have been otherwise occupied in his cabin, as she didn't care to weather his criticisms. Nor did she need his cutting critiques undermining all Emma's hard work. Because for a novice who hadn't even believed in magic almost a year ago, her companion had made astonishing progress.

"I put my shield up too fast," Emma blurted, looking past her friend to see Gold. She bit her lower lip. "I assumed I would be the target," she added, refocusing on the woman before her.

"Yes," Regina responded with a brisk nod, facing forward. "You've become quite proficient with creating and maintaining a single, significant ward, but often, you'll need to protect multiple targets simultaneously," she explained, conjuring a fireball in each hand. Her eyes never left her apprentice.

"Oh, shit," the sheriff cursed under her breath, not missing Regina's wicked grin. She licked her lips and glanced at the full sails overhead. This was going to be a long lesson, but she shook off any doubts, re-centering herself. Her teacher was raising the bar, and she was ready to meet whatever challenge she set.

From the bow, Gold casually observed the impromptu magic lesson between the two women with keen interest, and he was suitably impressed with both student and teacher. Pride swelled within his dark heart, seeing his daughter as the capable master. Then, his focus shifted to the savior with her wild potential, teeming with the raw power of True Love. Turning away from the women, he gazed out into the seemingly endless expanse of water. Ever since Emma had cast the binding spell, he'd been unable to scry the future, leaving everyone's fate shrouded in darkness.

He scowled as he rested his hand on top the gunwale. Listening to the splash of water, he took a
deep breath, but he couldn't stop himself from looking over his shoulder at his daughter. Again, his focus wandered back to the sheriff. No, things hadn't worked out as he had hoped, but maybe he could still make a few course adjustments.

~SQ~

With everyone occupied, Gold cautiously made his way down the narrow hall, past the officer's cabin, toward the captain's quarters. His curiosity had finally gotten the better of him. He had to know what Regina and Emma had magically transported onboard the day before. What did his daughter find that was so important? What was so valuable it had veered her focus from solely finding her son?

Stopping in front of the cabin door, he waved his hand over the doorknob, and when nothing happened, he frowned and tried, again. And again, the mechanism didn't move. He reached his right hand out, caressing his fingertips over the invisible threads of energy. His brow furrowed as the scope of the spell was revealed to him. It was impressive work. The entire cabin was magically secure, and the only entry-exit point was the cabin door. No one, at least not without serious effort, was going to get inside without the appropriate key.

He scowled at the door and abruptly pivoted on his heel. It wouldn't do to be caught loitering when Regina and Emma were both above deck. Apparently, his daughter had managed to develop another hidden talent outside of his tutelage. He needed to discover who else had mentored her if he wanted to prevent his last premonition from coming to pass.

~SQ~

**Warnings:** None

*Head bent low over the workbench, Regina steadfastly ignored the cramp in her hand as she meticulously completed the rune she was etching into the ring clamped in the engraving block vice. She was only two more runes from completing the project, and she was determined to push through the discomfort and finish. Lifting the delicate stylus, the queen shifted her hand the tiniest bit and let her latent magic flow to her fingers. It coiled down the stylus, along with a thin trickle of her blood, allowing her to engrave the next sigil of the spell. Sweat dripped from her brow to stain the wooden surface upon which she was working.*

*Merlin had been teaching her the fine art of enchanting and had complimented her for her natural proclivity for it. Thus far, she had produced two sets of magic deflecting gauntlets which she had bestowed upon Elmwood and McCormac. They were remedial and would only protect against the weakest of spells, but they were progress. It had helped that her teacher had been supportive and encouraging during the learning process. He had bolstered her confidence with his genuine praise and gentle words.*

*She had surprised him when she had requested the sigils for a concealment spell, but he hadn't balked in giving it to her, not even when she had refused to explain why she wanted it. It had taken a couple of months pouring over the list of runes he had given her before she'd found the right combination to accomplish her goal. Creating a new spell that incorporated the specific exclusions she needed had been an exercise in patience. She had been testing the different variations on small, metal disks, but Regina was sure that the most recent adjustment she had made would do the trick.*

*As she made the last mark to complete the enchantment, she felt the spell activate, an odd sort of chiming resonating through her. Shivering slightly at the sensation, Regina set the stylus on the workbench and unclamped the ring from the vice, quietly admiring it. The runes were already fading into the gold of the band, the emerald stone winking in the bright sunlight streaming in the*
Taking a deep breath, the queen stood and began tidying her craft room turned workshop, hiding away the stylus and small vice in a secret wall compartment Merlin had created for her. It was safer for all parties involved if her husband didn't find out about her latent magical abilities, no matter how miniscule they might be. And it wouldn't do at all for Rumpelstiltskin to discover she had another teacher in the arcane arts. Once she was sure everything had been put back, she gripped the ring tightly in her hand as she left the room, Elmwood and McCormac flanking her as she stepped into the corridor.

As she entered her quarters, Regina stopped in front of her wardrobe and motioned for her handmaidens to attend her. Methodically, they stripped her until she was bare, carefully setting aside the rich clothing as she moved to stand before her full-length mirror. Eyes locked on her reflection, she slipped the ring on her finger, gasping as the magic shimmered through her, the sensation more potent than she'd expected. Her lips gradually curled up into a smile until she was beaming broadly, twisting her body to examine her hip and back in the mirror as she looked over her shoulder.

Glancing down at herself and away from her reflection, she could still see the mark her husband had had etched into her hip after her attempt to run away. She grimaced as she recalled the fateful day she had made it to the border of the kingdom, only to be intercepted by Rumpelstiltskin. Once he had left and she had confirmed that her mother's spell still held strong, even with her banished to another realm, she had begun the trek back to the castle. The queen wasn't sure what had made her keep the book, but after the king's punishment for the near escape, she had gladly called upon the strange little man and begun her apprenticeship.

Regina shook herself from the memory and turned back to the mirror. Stepping closer, she carefully examined her face, pleased to see that the scar on her lip remained. The mark was too much a part of her appearance for it to suddenly disappear. It had been the biggest hurdle in perfecting the concealment spell. Practically giddy with her success, she ran her hand over her hip, disappointed that she could still feel the raised skin of the fine scars there.

"I see the king has found a way to keep his young bride looking pristine," a voice mocked from the door to the balcony. Rumpelstiltskin leaned against the doorframe, arms crossed over his chest, having been observing the queen for the last few minutes. He slowly meandered into the room, head tilting to the side as he noticed her stiffen at his presence.

Raising her chin slightly, Regina straightened her posture and squared her shoulders, refusing to let her nudity bother her. While she had never been ashamed of her body, the king had eradicated any remaining shyness when he had repeatedly taken her with several of his associates as audience. She fixed her teacher with a withering glare, lips pursed as he moved closer, gaze blatantly raking over her body. "Our lesson isn't for another hour," she snapped, refusing to flinch when he came within six inches of her.

He studied his pupil carefully, cataloging every blemish on her skin as he made a leisurely circuit around her. "You've been known to try to avoid our sessions" he muttered, reaching out to place the fingertips of his right hand on her right shoulder blade. Rumpelstiltskin lightly trailed his fingers down her spine, dragging them across her left hip as he circled her. His touch smoothed over her heavily pregnant belly, tracing her stretch marks before grazing up her sternum and the tops of full breasts. Using the back of his knuckles, he continued along the line of her throat, finally brushing over the scar above her lip. There was an odd light in his golden eyes as he retracted his hand, curling it in front of his chest as he observed, "Quite an advanced spell, indeed, to leave the evidence of your motherhood in place but take away your husband's tokens of affection."
Regina narrowed her eyes at the imp’s impertinence. Flashing the political smile she’d perfected, she replied sweetly, "My husband is nothing if not unyielding in having his desires met with meticulous attention to detail." She watched as he ambled to her vanity, idly inspecting each object on its surface as if it might hold a precious secret.

Lifting a perfume bottle to his nose, he inhaled delicately, eyes closing as he took in the earthy scent. "Where ever did he manage to find someone who could fulfill such a specific request, I wonder," the Dark One mused, opening his eyes to pin her with a searching look. He had no idea where the king of Angevin could have procured an artifact containing such sophisticated magic if not from him. Not only did the spell visibly hide all scars inflicted by another, save for one, it even hid them from the sense of touch. He was utterly flummoxed, and it was not a sensation he cared for in the least. Perhaps that old wizard from Britannia had something to do with it.

"I had thought he had brokered a deal with you," she retorted with a faint gesture in his direction. Eyebrows high in confused innocence, the queen explained, "The king has many contacts to which I am not privy. I couldn't begin to tell you where he might have obtained it." Taking secret glee in his scowl, she nodded toward her clothes and said with false politeness, "If you'll excuse me, there seems to be a decided chill in the air."

Rumpelstiltskin bowed solicitously and informed her, "Oh, you needn't bother on my account, Your Highness." His gaze turned lecherous, roaming over her in a way it hadn't before, mouth curling with a salacious smile. "I'm sure I could adjust today's lesson, accordingly," he suggested with a high-pitched giggle.

Regina ignored his comment and turned to her handmaidens, who had been waiting wide-eyed by the bed. They scurried forward when the queen flicked her fingers in their direction, redressing her with haste, motions efficient and practiced after almost two years in her service. Once done, they curtsied at her wave of dismissal, retreating to their small room connected to the queen’s apartments.

Smoothing her palms over her swollen abdomen, she inquired, "So, tell me, Teacher, what is our lesson to cover today?" Thus far, he had taught her precious little other than a few simple potions and how to shrink an inanimate object to a smaller size. It wasn't something she had found to be particularly useful, but she practiced at it, none the less. The theory behind it intrigued her, though, and she had vowed to ask Merlin about it at the next opportunity.

He decided he would unravel the mysteries of the concealment spell’s origins at a later date, after all, it made no difference to him if others would not witness her scars. It was obvious she could still see and feel them, and that was what truly mattered. "I thought, perhaps, a little alchemy would be an excellent next step." Tittering slightly, he added, "After all, your mother picked it up quite easily."

"You want me to spin straw into gold?" Regina asked in surprise, seeking clarification. She had often watched her mother perform that particular feat, though she had never mentioned it to the man standing before her. Ever since their first encounter, she had known that she would need to utilize every bit of cunning she had developed in her grandfather's court if she was to have any chance of surviving her association with the Dark One relatively unscathed.

With a flourish of his wrist, a spinning wheel and a small pile of straw appeared before the hearth. "That is exactly what I want you to do, Your Highness," he confirmed as he strolled over to the fireplace. Indicating the small stool beside the machine, the imp requested, "If you would be so kind...."

The queen strode to the spinning wheel and gracefully lowered herself to the offered seat, having
perfected the maneuver near the end of her first pregnancy. She held out her hand in an imperious gesture, not bothering to stifle her amusement as her teacher stooped to pick up a handful of straw, handing it to her with a scowl. Putting the straw in the dip of her skirts across her lap, she placed the ball of her foot on the treadle, pressing a few times to check the leader for correct tension. Just managing to hide her smirk at the imp's disconcertion over her apparent familiarity with the device, she gestured for him to add more straw to her lap.

Rumpelstiltskin's brows knitted together, but he did as she requested, not really able to fault her considering she was due to birth her second child within the next few weeks, her belly far too cumbersome for her to bend as required to gather more spinning fibers. He watched as she picked up a few pieces of straw and wrapped them with the leader, preparing to begin. Mouth stretching in a haughty grin, he instructed, "Now, basic spinning techniques include spinning from the fold, wherein one...." His voice trailed off into nothing as he observed with wide eyes as she began treading and successfully drafted the straw fibers using an inch worm technique. Reining in his surprise, he cleared his throat and continued, "Remember, magic is emotion. You'll need to draw on something particularly strong to manage something as complicated as alchemy. Just don't be too discouraged if it takes you a while to get the hang of it," he condescended with a light sneer.

While her master had been prattling on, Regina had been carefully pinching, twisting, and drafting the straw in her hands, concentrating on the love she held for her children. As soon as the imp had finished his short diatribe, she held out a length of sparkling, golden thread and asked with affected surprise, "Like this?" The delight she felt upon seeing his face contort in disbelief was all the reward she needed. It may have been her first time attempting the endeavor, but enough hours at her mother's feet had taught her better than the Dark One ever could.

He was livid. His student had to have been working with another teacher behind his back. Even Cora hadn't caught on immediately. There had been several hours of trial and error and seduction—not to mention the threat of death looming over her head—before she'd managed the task. "How did you do that?!" he demanded harshly, spittle flying. His eyes narrowed as he stared her down. "Who taught you to do that?!"

The young queen was taken aback by his sudden fury and momentarily froze as she assessed how much danger he posed her. It took but a few seconds for her to determine that it was simply a case of his ego taking an unexpected blow that had set him in such a snit. Not wanting him to discover her secret lessons with Merlin, she yielded to his demand. "If you must know," she began exasperatedly, "I picked it up from watching Mother."

"Impossible," he scoffed, his rage already beginning to settle somewhat at the mention of his former apprentice. "Alchemy isn't something you just pick up like a mislaid shoe. You have to work at it." He was feeling a bit thrown off balance, though, because everything about her response screamed she was telling the truth. There was no guile hiding behind her dark irises, and the first, ice-cold trickle of dread skated along his spine. His student should not display such advanced talent. She couldn't even light a candle with her magic.

Shrugging slightly, she insouciantly replied, "Be that as it may, it's the truth. I spent many an hour reading while Mother spun gold. I don't think she realized just how closely I was paying attention to her actions," she mused contemplatively. Flashing the Dark One a bright smile, she inquired with feigned enthusiasm, "Is there anything else you wanted to teach me today?"

Rumpelstiltskin glared at her, irritated that his plans to taunt her when she failed, to make the day another part of her slow descent into desperation, had been completely derailed. Logic told him he should be pleased that his pupil had more talent than he'd first thought, that she might prove to be the better student of the two sisters, after all. But he needed to break her down in the process. She
needed to be pliant and hopeless and willing to sacrifice anything—including the thing she loved most—for his curse to be enacted. And here she was, nearly ready to pop out a second brat that would surely claim another place in her all-too-giving heart. Rage gathering momentum, once more, he growled lowly, "Not today," and disappeared, along with the spinning wheel, in a plume of red smoke.

Laughing happily at showing up Rumpelstiltskin to the point of sending him off in a fit of rage, Regina struggled up from her position on the stool. She slowly made her way into the adjoining nursery and took her eleven-month-old son from his nanny just as he began fussing. "Hello there, my little prince," she cooed with a broad smile, bouncing him gently in her arms. As she unfastened the front panel of her bodice and situated him on her breast, she murmured, "I know, I'm a bit late for your feeding, but someone was terribly rude and moved up an appointment without my permission. Don't worry, Fauntkin, Mommy won't let it happen, again."

"Pretty soon, the miting will have to make way for his sibling at the teat," Helga said, folding one of his blankets by the crib. She had never seen a mother dote so fondly on her children as the young queen did. Motherhood agreed with her monarch. The woman had even taken to calling Snow her daughter and treating the girl as if she were her own. It seemed that no matter how unhappy the queen was in her marriage, the love she harbored for her children was boundless.

Regina settled in the rocking chair and glanced up at the forty-something woman. "Oh, Helga, I'm sure Tristan will manage just fine," she advised her. "And even though this new, little one will get the lion's share," the young mother reassured her son, "I will make sure you get some, too." When his tiny brows furrowed with a grunt of concentration, she giggled and rubbed along his arm as she began to hum a quiet tune. Regardless of everything wrong in her life, the warm baby in her arms and the one growing in her belly gave her all the hope she needed to keep going.

~SQ~

Regina's eyes flew open, and her lungs expanded forcefully as she took a deep breath of sea air. She remained still, taking in great lungsful of air as the world reformed around her and the memory faded. An old pain filled her chest as she thought of Tristan, and her hands clasped low on her flat abdomen while her breasts ached with the phantom heaviness of milk. Her eyes slid shut in an attempt to ground herself, to push away the faint echoes from her trance. All her children were lost to her, save for the stepdaughter she could no longer bear to claim. No, she told herself. Henry is not gone. Emma and I will find him and take him home.

Quickly blinking back a tear, she focused her attention back on her guards. Four of the five not sleeping were moving around the rigging with ease, following commands being belted out by Salter's oldest daughter, Signe. She watched with amusement when the twenty-two year-old barked at Jason for not doing something correctly, and the young guard flirted with her in return.

"He's either going to get himself laid or flayed," Alma observed from her perch next to her on the storage locker that was fast becoming her queen's favorite spot when above deck. "That girl is all business when she's in charge and seems like the type to punish people for insubordination."

Regina chuckled wryly and snarked, "Should Jason get on her bad side, he deserves whatever discipline she metes out. If he's lucky, he'll enjoy it," she finished with a smirk. Then, a laugh slipped out when the guard in question was shoved hard in the chest by the feisty sailor and sent into the crow's nest.

Lips quirking up, Chavez quipped, "Foreplay it is, then." A second later, she groaned and grumbled, "It's going to get terribly warm below deck if this keeps up."
The former queen raised an eyebrow, curious about what was happening in the hold. "How do you mean?"

A faint scowl marred Alma's features as she explained, "It's bad enough with Diego and Irene, but if these two decide to hook up, there's going to be a hell of a lot of heat being generated in those hammocks." She didn't begrudge her fellow guards the opportunity to find a little release when they could, but damn if their moans and heavy breathing didn't keep her awake and remind her uncomfortably of her single status.

"Diego and Irene, hmm?" Regina murmured in quiet contemplation. "I suppose that's one way to work through grief. How's Irene holding up? I know she and Aengus had a rather serious relationship." Unless it interfered with their duties, she had always made it a point to stay out of her guards' love lives. Even so, she was worried how much the loss of a partner was affecting someone she trusted and cared for deeply.

Sighing at the reminder, Chavez flipped her right hand back and forth in answer. "Today is better than yesterday. I think she's trying to fuck through the pain, find a way to dull it, somehow." She snorted and concluded, "And you know Flores is always willing to lend a hand, or his cock, to a friend in need."

It was just the right amount of levity, and the sorceress laughed at the accurate assessment. "Truer words were never spoken." Exhaling heavily, Regina slapped her hands down lightly on her thighs and stood, informing her guard, "It's time to get back to work on my project. I've procrastinated long enough, I think." She didn't have to look back to know that Alma had signaled to Bruce and both were following her below deck to her cabin, the ever-dutiful sentinels.

~SQ~

The sky was clear, and the winds were strong as the Jolly Roger raced toward Peter Pan's island. With the course set and the ship's billowing sails at full mast, the crew enjoyed the ride and took the opportunity to further prepare themselves for the trials that lay ahead. The sharp clang of steel meeting steel rang across the weather deck, interrupting the tranquil atmosphere, as father and daughter danced in fun sport.

From her position in the crow's nest, Anne assessed the recruit's progress and was quite pleased. She was, also, moderately impressed with Prince Charming's skills, although she'd never admit it, and for someone who had learned on the fly later in life, she found the shepherd's technique rather apt. She knew his flaws would be easy enough to correct, not that she ever would. However, seeing Emma fight a capable opponent did offer necessary insight, and she made mental notes of tweaks to the sheriff's training.

With a heaving chest, David signaled for a break. He sheathed his sword and moved to the forward, port bow, reaching into a bucket tethered to a small locker for a freshly washed towel. A little out of breath, he wiped the sweat and salt from his flushed face. When his daughter approached, he bent and offered her a cloth, but when she refused, he dropped it back in the bucket. "You've improved," he commented, rubbing the towel across the back of his neck.

"Yeah," Emma agreed with a bright smile. She went to lick her dry lips but managed to stop herself. "Anne's been working my butt off," she shared, sitting on top the storage locker. She glanced up to the crow's nest but couldn't see through the sails. Her lips pursed as she realized just how thirsty she was; however, fresh water was at a premium, and she would need to fetch her assigned tankard from the cabin before she could fill it from a barrel in the galley. All of that sounded like far too much effort at the moment.
"Decided on the short sword, huh?" the former shepherd inquired, studying his daughter's profile.

With a shrug, the sheriff smiled softly as she traced the edge of her sword's hilt. "The arming sword was a little too heavy," she replied. Looking her father in the eye, she added, "I've got to build up some upper body strength before I go swinging that thing around." It was a small jab, but it was also the truth. Still, she was very curious how her father was going to react.

Nodding, David tilted his head and shyly questioned, "Do you like melee training?" He wanted his child to enjoy their time together, not disparage it.

"Eh, it's not too bad," Emma answered honestly. She did enjoy the physicality and essence of the fight. Of course, she didn't like Anne pulling her out of bed at six in the morning or repeatedly tossing her ass on the cold, hard ground, but that was happening less and less. A part of her wondered if she and her father would have done something similar if she had grown up with them in the Enchanted Forest as the princess everyone proclaimed she was. "Monty says I need to have a purpose," she shrugged. She wasn't sure why she shared that tidbit, but she went with it. "So, I just roll with it."

"But you're the sheriff," the former prince stated. His brow furrowed as he considered his daughter's unique situation. "Isn't that purpose enough?" he pondered with honest confusion.

"That's what I told him!" the sheriff laughed, tossing her hands in the air. She smiled brightly at her father before shrugging. "The Crows Guard are very protective of their own," she explained in a serious tone, hoping he would get it, that at least one of her parents would understand the crazy position she had wrangled for herself. "And it's been kind of nice being a part of that," she added in a smoother tone.

David was quiet for a long minute. His gaze wandered away from his daughter, watching the people who, quite frankly, had a better relationship with his child than he did, but eventually, he nodded. He witnessed the utter relief in her eyes, very similar to her mother's but not quite the same, and he sighed. The weight of their wrongs pressed firmly on his shoulders. "We haven't really been there for you," he intoned, unknowingly breaking his daughter's heart, again, with that statement.

"David," Emma whispered, hanging her head. She tightly gripped the sword across her lap.

"No, it's okay," the former shepherd quickly reassured. He wanted to comfort her but restrained himself. He was determined to rebuild the bridge he and his wife had nearly burned. "We did wrong by you . . . and by Regina," he apologized. A small smile ghosted across his lips when she looked up at him with such hope. "I want you to know that we want to make it right," he declared, meeting her scrutiny with honesty.

Only the sounds of the ship passed between them before the sheriff acknowledged his words with a soft, "Alright."

As relief eased the pressure inside his chest, David fought to keep his joy in check. His lips pressed into a thin line, and his eyes sparkled as he resisted hugging his daughter. Swallowing the swelling lump in his throat, his voice was rough as he spoke, "I know it won't happen right away, but we're willing to earn back your trust." He hoped she believed his words. Because if this didn't work, he and Snow didn't know what else to do. If he could slowly win back his daughter, then, maybe they could reach a truce with Regina, as well. And if the interactions he'd observed between the two women were anything to go on, he needed to make every effort to accept the temperamental sorceress into their circle before Emma's feelings forced the issue.
"That means a lot," Emma responded, blinking in surprise.

Smiling, the former shepherd felt comfortable enough to sit beside his child on top the storage locker. His long legs stretched out in front of him, and the pair casually scanned the deck of the ship. Most everyone had decided to get in a few extra winks of shuteye. After a long moment, he turned toward her and asked, "Are you going to practice with your magic, again?" Yesterday had been quite the spectacle. He had been surprised by Regina's nurturing presence and calm instruction. Perhaps his daughter's trust had not been misplaced as he'd first suspected.

The sheriff shook her head and laughed softly. "No, not today," she replied. "I don't think Hook appreciated Regina's fireballs yesterday." Of course, she knew all too well that the former mayor had messed with the pirate on purpose.

"That was funny watching him panic," David agreed, his mirth easily matching his daughter's. He casually leaned against the storage locker and crossed his arms. As a comfortable silence settled between them, his brow furrowed as he silently debated on his next topic. Finally, he asked, "How is Regina?" Despite what the former queen might say, he wasn't a complete idiot. The torture and the magic that had followed had to have hit her hard.

Emma frowned as she probed, "What do you mean?" Then, suddenly, she felt as if their conversation had taken on a whole new agenda, that her mother had somehow put him up to sniffing out information. Thus far, she had done well to keep solo interactions with Mary Margaret to a minimum, which she felt guilty about, but she couldn't yet reconcile how she felt for her mother versus what she was starting to feel for Regina.

Drumming his fingers on top his arms, the former prince bowed his head. He sighed as he was unsure how to express his concern. "She's been reclusive," he stated, looking at his daughter. He noticed the skepticism in searching green eyes, but he held her gaze. And when he was about to expound on his worries, he was interrupted.

"Yeah, she's just tired after everything," the sheriff answered with a shrug. She looked down at the short sword lying across her lap. In that moment, there was the impulse to share, to tell her father how worried she was for Regina, but she pushed it all down. Her heart wasn't ready to trust him quite yet. Sometimes, when she closed her eyes after hearing or seeing her parents, she saw them and the Blue Fairy looming over Regina as she sat tied to a chair in her study. She shoved the memory to the back of her mind.

"Well, if there's anything we can do…," David trailed off, cutting his words off with a sharp nod. He swallowed down the aching lump sitting in his throat. Should he not have brought it up? It was obvious Regina was important to his daughter, and while he wasn't entirely certain how deep Emma's feelings went, he knew his wife wouldn't like it. He was struggling with the concept, himself, but gods help them all if Snow White discovered their child was pining after the Evil Queen.

Tilting her head, Emma regarded her father, and she was truly impressed with him. She wondered if she took after him a little more than her mother. "I'll let you know," she offered with a warm smile. Rolling her eyes, she thought about the latest spat between her friend and her loyal protectors. "But the guards have been up her ass. So, I'm trying to give her some space," she explained, hoping to lighten the mood, again. It also helped that the former mayor had a sewing project to occupy her time, now.

"Okay," the former shepherd accepted. The pair sat in contemplative silence for several minutes until finally, he asked, "Ready to go again?" After all, what else could they do?
Groaning, the sheriff stood and stretched. "Ugh," she grunted in complaint. Then, she sighed and drew her short sword, walking out to the center of the weather deck. "Yeah," she agreed as she adjusted her stance.

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**Warnings:** Infant Death

Regina sat in the plush, wingback chair as close to the hearth as she could get without worry of catching her robes on fire. Tenderly, she cradled the tiny infant to her bare chest, a heavy quilt wrapped around her and overlapped across the child. Turning a watery gaze down at the little girl, she gently stroked her index finger over a pale cheek, beseeching quietly "Please, Little One, keep fighting for Mommy. Just make it through one more day. Alright?"

Again, the queen attempted to get the infant to latch on to her nipple. If she would just eat a little, she'd have a chance at survival, having been born so early at twenty-eight weeks. A few stray tears fell as she listened to her daughter strain for each breath, her own breathing shallow and uneven from the pain of a few cracked ribs. She hadn't expected the lingering morning sickness to hit her while she had been serving her husband's needs and had been unable to get off him fast enough. The subsequent beating had induced an early labor, leaving her to watch her newest child fight for every moment of her precarious life.

A tiny mewl sounded in the still room, causing the nanny tending Tristan to glance up, watching the young mother rock side to side. Helga finished changing the twenty-month-old's diaper and placed the boy back in his crib, glad that he was such a tractable child. Glancing back over at the queen, she frowned sadly as she considered the poor girl's unfortunate struggles with her last two children: a little boy born breech with a prolapsed cord and, now, a girl birthed too early to possibly survive, even with the queen's unnaturally long pregnancies.

Several hours passed in silence, the fire regularly tended by the chambermaid as mother and children slept. An abrupt, keening cry broke the hush, stirring Helga from her doze and startling the toddler to crying wakefulness. The nanny began to bend over the crib to soothe the bawling child when her gaze caught on the sight of Faye standing before the queen's chair, hands cupped over her mouth in dismay. Quickly pushing Pegeen toward the crib, Helga hurried over to her monarch and the distressed chambermaid.

Regina clasped the small bundle tightly to her naked chest, loud sobs shaking her entire body. All her attention was focused on the frighteningly still form in her arms as she murmured in a panic, "No. No, no, no. My baby girl." The young mother's tears splashed down onto blue-tinged lips as she stared at the tiny features that were so delicate and perfect. "Come back to me, Sweetheart. Please, please come back," she sobbed, rocking back and forth.

Helga's face crumpled at seeing the anguish consuming her monarch, and not for the first time, she wondered how someone so young, barely nineteen, could bear such heartache as the queen had. Reaching out for the child, she advised softly, "Here, Your Highness, let me take the babe, now." She was not quite prepared for the violent reaction that erupted from the girl before her.

Clutching her baby closer to herself with one arm, Regina fought off the nanny with her free hand, scratching at the woman in her desperation to cling to the infant. "No! I won't let you take her!" She tried to writhe away from the three pairs of arms rapidly extending toward her in an attempt to prevent her from harming herself in her grief-stricken frenzy. "I can't lose another one. I can't!" she wailed as firm hands finally stilled her struggles.

Gently lifting the dead infant from suddenly lax arms, Helga soothed the distraught queen, "I'll
"Dolores," Regina choked out in a strangled whisper. "Her name is Dolores." The loud shrieking that had been in the background increased in volume and caused the young mother's head to snap up. "Tristan," she rasped brokenly, already reaching for the hysterical toddler Pegeen was bringing to her. Pulling the boy to her chest, she wept when he immediately began suckling at her breast as he sought comfort amid the chaos. Regina pressed soft, repeated kisses into his dark hair as she breathed reassurances through her tears. "I love you so very much, my heart. Don't ever leave Mommy," she pled quietly, rocking the nursing toddler and feeling her heart break all over, again.

~SQ~

"Emma's taking well to her training," Monty quietly commented, coming to stand beside his queen as he watched her come out of yet another trance. He relaxed his posture as he leaned back against the gunwale, his sharp eyes assessing the rapid movements between Emma Swan and Jason Sirtis, who was exceptionally talented with a short sword. Then, cutting a sideways gaze to his liege, he added, "Bruce has been quite impressed, and you know he's impossible to please." He arched an eyebrow when she pursed her lips.

With a soft sigh, Regina nodded and decided to tolerate her commander's company, torn between the need to be alone and appreciating his steady presence after such a particularly wrenching memory. "She seems to be progressing rather quickly," she replied, focusing on the sheriff's quick, reflexive movements, eyes briefly tracing Jason's elegant and fluid countermoves. She always had enjoyed observing the sparring matches between her guards. "Jason's footwork has certainly improved," she commented.

"Properly motivated, I guess," Elmwood remarked, crossing his arms. He looked out beyond the dueling guards. Perhaps he should have a pair of falchions commissioned for the queen. After all, he knew for a fact she hadn't practiced her swordsmanship since casting the Dark Curse.

The former queen's brow furrowed as she turned to look at her commander. Her gaze searched his stoic profile. "How do you mean?" she softly asked after a moment, knowing he wasn't speaking about the older Sirtis brother.

Nodding toward the woman in question, Monty casually remarked, "Emma's taking her new responsibilities to heart." He had high hopes for the sheriff and not just as a guard. Although the woman was a little rough around the edges, he had witnessed the youthful delight her presence brought to his sovereign.

"Well, Emma has continually demonstrated superior muscle memory despite her propensity for clumsiness," Regina easily defended her friend, not that it was necessary. She was proud of the sheriff, and she felt a great sense of personal fulfillment by helping her tap her potential. A soft smile curved her lips as she watched Emma expertly parry an attack.

Tilting his head, Elmwood looked down at his queen, his gaze cutting to the recruit for only a moment. "Is that an effect of your bond?" he questioned with muted curiosity. "You were always a quick study," he reminded, reminiscing on the queen's own melee lessons done in secret before the king's death.

"No, I believe that is intrinsically Emma," the former mayor explained. However, she realized it did beg further consideration. There was so much they didn't know about the binding spell, perhaps there were additional aspects that could prove beneficial. "She shall overcome any detrimental self-perceptions with time," she assured with confidence, trusting in Emma's inner strength.
Monty faced ahead, again, pleased with his sovereign's answer. "Then, she's fully embraced her role," he commented with soft fondness and a bit of relief. He watched the woman beside him out of the corner of his right eye. When she merely hummed in response, he tightly pursed his lips, and after counting to ten, he added, "She's extremely protective and very dedicated to you."

Narrowing her eyes, Regina tilted her head and peered up at her current companion, mildly irritated by his atypical behavior. "You're repeating yourself, Commander," she drawled in a low tone, having a good idea what his angle was. She did not appreciate meddling of any sort.

"Permission to speak freely, Your Highness," Elmwood briskly requested, turning to face his queen. He straightened his posture and lifted his chin. If he was going to suggest it, he would do so as a warrior.

Rolling her eyes at the dramatic shift in stance, the former mayor sighed, her suspicions confirmed. "And if I said no?" she dourly prompted, arching an eyebrow in silent challenge.

"I'd still tell you, and you'd punish me for insubordination later," Monty supplied, flashing a broad grin.

Regina looked forward, smirking. "Cheeky," she muttered with amusement, but after a beat, she gave her commander a quick side nod, signaling her consent.

Sweeping the weather deck, Elmwood quickly assessed those present and in possible earshot before dropping to sit beside the storage locker. "Surely, you've noticed the sheriff's developed feelings for you," he stated carefully, keeping his voice level and subdued.

"Of course. We're friends—family in an odd sort of way," the former mayor tersely retorted. She crossed her arms, refusing to look at the man beside her. Instead, she focused on Anne demonstrating a new move to Emma and smirked when the scout grandmaster smacked the sheriff with the flat of her blade.

Monty ground his teeth as he kept his annoyance in check, knowing his liege was being purposely obtuse. "It's deeper than that, and you know it," he scoffed. He rolled his eyes at the lack of response. Sighing, he leaned toward his queen and softly intoned, "She loves you." Observing the subtle movement of her neck muscles, he patiently waited.

Looking down at her hands, Regina fidgeted with the emerald ring on her right ring finger. She took a deep breath then another before saying, "She shouldn't." Her brow furrowed as she felt the all too familiar conflict battle within her. Finally, she looked at her commander, and with absolute conviction, she gently decreed, "She deserves better." Her eyes held his for a brief moment before she flinched, turning away.

Frowning, Elmwood pithily countered, "Better like Hook?" It was no secret the pirate pined for the savior. It was also known, at least by the Queen's Personal Guard, that their sovereign exclusively favored the fairer sex.

"That pirate's sailing against the wind if he thinks Emma's ever going to succumb to his charms," the former mayor snarled, glaring at the man at the ship's helm. She found his attempts at wooing woefully lacking.

Monty snickered, and after a short snort, he judiciously commented, "Sounds like someone's jealous." He gestured vaguely with his left hand, laying the wrist on top his bent, left knee.

"Of that blaggard?" Regina scoffed, straightening her posture. She glared down at the man beside
her. It frustrated her how he so deftly maneuvered her emotions. "I think not," she insisted, not caring that her voice carried across the deck, ignoring Anne's curious glances.

"See, you do care," Elmwood countered softly. A broad grin stretched across his face as he held his queen's gaze.

Huffing, the former mayor crossed her arms. As her fingertips pressed into her biceps, her lips curled into a hard scowl, knowing the treacherous game her commander was playing; nonetheless, she found it mockingly cruel. "Stop trying to appeal to my possessive tendencies," she rejoined in a quiet voice. After all, she had warned Emma several weeks ago in Manhattan. However, she had never planned on admitting her fledging feelings for the savior to anyone because someone like Emma Swan wasn't meant to be hers, ever. Sighing softly, she slouched as she stared down at the decking.

"Oh, so you want to possess her, then," Monty suggestively teased with muted, yet clear, amusement. Walking the thin line between servant and friend, he believed in his liege's resilient and fiery spirit. His eyes drifted back to the newest recruit, and he believed with all his heart that for reasons beyond Rumpelstiltskin's machinations, a child of True Love was born the moment his queen cast the Dark Curse.

Regina blushed brilliantly as she spluttered, "What? No." She snapped her mouth shut, taking several deep breaths through her nose. Then, closing her eyes, she shook her head. "I'd thank you to stop putting words in my mouth," she growled, laying a glower on the man beside her.

Softening his expression and curbing his mirth, Elmwood held his sovereign's gaze for a long beat. "I've known you a long time, and you deserve to be happy, to find someone to love and who loves you in return," he intoned. It pained him to see her skepticism.

"With my mortal enemy's daughter?" the former mayor grimly responded with a huff, looking away. She scanned the deck and rigging, assessing if anyone had overheard. "You've gone mad," she dismissed, dropping her hands onto her lap. She lazily traced the pad of her left thumb over the nail of her left index finger.

Not so easily dissuaded, Monty rolled his eyes. "The princess drove you crazy by not listening to you. You didn't necessarily hate her," he sensibly reminded, looking across the deck. His gaze was drawn to the quarterdeck, spotting Mary Margaret by the rail, staring proudly at her daughter. "It's somewhat ironic when you think about it," he wistfully remarked.

A dour chuckle cooled the air, for Regina didn't hold a high opinion of fate or destiny. "Nevertheless, it would be unfair to drag Emma into my darkness," she stated. She rolled her neck and let her arms relax, her hands linking across her thighs.

"Didn't she already take that on when she bound you to each other?" Elmwood curiously questioned, turning back to his queen. There was so much he didn't understand about the mysterious spell. His eyes studied her downturned expression, and he frowned.

"A side effect of which she had no earthly idea, I might add," the former mayor quietly countered. She idly turned her emerald ring around her finger, staring blindly at the wood beneath her feet. Her brow furrowed as she remained silent for several long minutes. Then, releasing a soft sigh that was nearly carried off by the breeze, she explained, "A romantic entanglement would only further complicate matters."

His heart broke for his queen. Laying his hand on top the storage locker next to her thigh, he wished to offer some sort of comfort but was unwilling to breach the looming barrier of casual
physical contact in such a public venue. So, he pressed his lips into a hard line and curled his resting hand into a tight fist. His glanced across the ship to the blonde sheriff. "She obviously wants a closer relationship with you," he rejoined. When her eyes met his, he gently suggested, "I should think it would simplify your situation."

"And if things didn't work out? What then?" Regina curiously probed. All of this was new to her because never, in all the years she had known Montague Elmwood, had her commander taken a personal interest in her romantic affairs or lack thereof. Looking up and watching Emma with Jason, she certainly understood the allure of the savior. The woman was beautiful inside and out and caused her heart to ache and body to waken in a manner it hadn't in over four decades.

Monty tilted his head and simply rebuked, "What if they don't now?" He gestured vaguely with his hand on top the locker. "You live together, work together. You share a son. Hell, you even share a bed," he elaborated, ticking off each item by extending a finger.

"You know we're not involved in a sexual relationship," the former mayor interrupted, growing annoyed by his all-too-sensible urging. She crossed her arms and glowered at the man beside her.

Shifting, Elmwood reached up and lightly touched his sovereign's elbow, his fingertips barely resting against her. "Maybe not, but eventually, she'll want physical closeness with someone," he warned. When he witnessed a soft blush creeping across his liege's cheeks, he raised an eyebrow, but when she bit her lower lip, he inquisitively asked, "Has something happened?"

Regina swallowed as her eyes darted about the deck. Clearing her throat, she answered with a rough voice, "I believe Emma occasionally forgets the extent of our bond."

"How so?" Monty asked, dropping his hand back to the storage locker.

Rolling her eyes, the former mayor cursed her luck; however, she was resolved to her fate. "Her role as the control allows her emotions and impressions to push through our connection," she dutifully explained. Her gaze traced the lines of rigging above her head. Sighing, she begrudgingly admitted, "I may have picked up on some of her solitary pursuits, as of late." That, of course, had been a startling revelation. As the length of time Emma spent bathing had increased, the stronger the sensations had become as they rolled through the bond. If not for the growing frequency, she might have shared the discovery. However, at this point, it would only embarrass the sheriff, not that it bothered Regina. Sex was a natural part of life, even though her own experiences had been anything but normal.

Elmwood's eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Oh?" he husked. Opening his mouth, he attempted to ask a follow-up question but found the words wouldn't quite come out. He grunted in frustration at his ineptness, feeling too much like he was talking to his little sister before her wedding night. So, after a huff, he turned away, watching his queen out of the corner of his eye, and asked, "Did you find it pleasant?"

"It might have been," Regina admitted sheepishly. She worried at her lower lip, avidly searching her commander's profile.

Sighing in relief, Monty relaxed his posture, and with every ounce of affection he could muster, he gently rested his hand on top his sovereign's forearm and gazed up at her adoringly. "I know it's not my place to tell you what to do, but it seems to me she's worth the chance," he bravely shared. With all his heart, he believed his queen deserved a happy life, and she sure as hell deserved a partner who would cherish her beyond measure.

The former mayor's stoic exterior melted at the heartfelt statement. She smiled softly with absolute
fondness as she cupped his cheek, dislodging his hand from her arm in the process. The intensity of his faith in her still startled her, but her tired heart treasured it. Dropping her hand onto his broad, muscular shoulder, she promised, "I'll think about it."

~SQ~

Henry stumbled slightly as he stepped out of the dinghy but was caught by the shoulder by Knight-Corporal Eremon. He glanced sideways at the man as he was guided forward firmly but without malice. Even after several days with these people, he still had no clear idea what they needed him for, only that Greg and Tamara had been responsible for his mom having been in the hospital and that they seemed to hate magic even more than he did. As the rest of the men from the two dinghies settled around them on the beach, Henry shifted restlessly.

A rustling in the foliage where the trees met the beach heralded the arrival of another party, and a few Templars placed their hands upon the hilts of their swords. Their grips only tightened in distrust as several adolescent boys stepped through the lush greenery. There were only six boys in the group, ages appearing to range from eight to seventeen, and the soldiers relaxed infinitesimally when it was apparent that none of them were armed.

Knight-Lieutenant Bettonis stepped forward to address the newcomers. He waved vaguely in Henry's direction and stated flatly, "We brought the boy, as requested."

A young man of fifteen moved to the front of the group of boys, his tunic and breeches once rich and vibrant now well-worn and dark green, blending perfectly with the jungle behind him. "I see," he replied cheerfully, flashing a bright smile at Henry. He cut a sharp glance at the oldest member of his group, a gangly almost-man with sunken eyes and a sullen cast to his thin features. Still looking at his compatriot, he added, "It's nice doing business with someone who can follow through," earning a scowl in return. Turning to Henry, his round cheeks bunched up in a broad grin, once more. "Hello, Henry. It's so nice to finally meet you. Welcome to Neverland!" he greeted, arms outstretched as if trying to encompass the entirety of the island.

"I'm sure he'll enjoy himself," Bettonis interjected smartly. Sweat was already running down his back, causing his shirt to stick uncomfortably beneath his armor. The Templar was ready to finish the exchange and be that much closer to getting off this Maker-forsaken world. Inclining his head slightly, he prompted, "Shall we conclude our remaining business?"

Eyes wide as if he'd forgotten the Templars' presence, the young man nodded amiably. "Of course, here's a token of my appreciation." Gesturing at those behind him, two of the younger boys moved forward, carrying a bulky bag between them. They set it down in front of the Knight-Lieutenant and scampered back to the other boys. "You'll find it to be of an exceptional quality," the designated speaker assured him.

Bettonis checked the contents of the bag with a frown. He lifted out a large crystal of blue lyrium, inspecting it in the early morning sunlight. "This isn't what we agreed upon, Pan," he growled lowly, eyes narrowed in suspicion. They had bartered for access to a large vein of the precious mineral, not a mere sack of the stuff.

Squinting in confusion, Henry studied the strange crystal with unmasked curiosity. These people were exchanging him for a bag of rocks? There had to be more to it. Glancing around, he noticed most of the soldiers were eyeing the blue stone oddly. It made him uneasy, and by the way Greg was shifting on his feet, he wasn't too keen on the situation, either. Then, he registered what the Templar had said and focused on the boy who had greeted him. That was Peter Pan? He didn't seem especially unique from what Henry could tell.
Tsking quietly, Pan scolded, "So, impatient. What you have there is but a sample." Producing a rolled, parchment map in his right hand with a flourish, he held it out to the knight towering over him. "This will lead you to what you seek."

Lips pursed in irritation, the Knight-Lieutenant took the proffered map, unrolling it and glancing over the sketch before handing it off to Eremon. "You're not going to escort us?" he asked, eying the young man warily. His instincts were screaming that something was off about the entire transaction, but the Lost Boys were following the letter of their agreement—the location of an enormous lyrium deposit in exchange for a very specific boy.

"Sadly, I have other business to attend to. You see, while you mine your precious stones, Henry, here, is going to save Neverland," Pan proclaimed boldly. He tilted his head in thought, tapping his forefinger against his lips as if contemplating a particularly difficult problem. Finally, he perked up somewhat and offered, "However, if you wish, one of my lads will gladly show you the way to your reward."

After considering the situation for a moment, Bettonis nodded once and gestured for Eremon to pass Henry over. "Very well," he agreed with a hint of reluctance. He knew some of his men felt uncomfortable handing over a child to the care of other children. But the payoff, a vein of lyrium large enough to supply the entire Order for decades to come, was too valuable to worry about the morality of selling off the boy of a maleficar of the worst magnitude.

Pan stepped forward and wrapped an arm around Henry's shoulders, drawing him toward the jungle, all but one of the other boys in tow. "Come, my boy, we have much to discuss," the jovial young man informed his newest charge. As he passed into the tree line, he shot a meaningful look at the oldest boy who had stayed with the Templars.

Henry's continued perplexity had him half stumbling, half trotting alongside Pan as he was led away from the shore. Several moments passed in tense silence until he blurted a stream of questions that had been simmering under the surface during the encounter on the beach. "Who were those soldiers? What do they want with that weird-looking crystal? Why do you need me? Does it have to do with what you said about me saving Neverland? Am I a prisoner here? How do you know my name?"

Laughing boisterously at the boy's outburst, Pan clapped him on the shoulder a couple of times and replied, "Let's start with the easiest of those questions, Henry. You are not a prisoner on this island. You're a very important guest with a very important mission to fulfill." As he led the little group further into the dense jungle, he began the painstaking process of answering as many of Henry's inquiries as possible.

Back on the beach, Tamara looked over her shoulder as Pan disappeared with Henry and the others. Something felt wrong, but she couldn't put her finger on it. Leaning slightly into Greg, she muttered apprehensively, "I don't like this."

Snorting irritably, Greg said, "It's not our problem. Eyes on the mission, Tamara," he reminded her. After all, she had been the one to insist they follow the Chantry's instructions in dealing with Regina. A nugget of bitterness welled up as he thought about how close he had been to his vengeance, only to have it ruined because of her determination to join the Templar Order. He'd had the opportunity to shoot the bitch while they were down in the cavern as the failsafe destroyed that damned town, but Tamara had made him stick to the plan and drag the boy away, instead. This mission had better be worth it.

A heavy sigh left her as she nodded reluctantly. "Eyes on the mission," she reaffirmed, squaring her shoulders and turning in time to hear the remaining Lost Boy introduce himself as Felix.
Bettonis ordered two of the soldiers to remain with the dinghies and the bag of lyrium as he and the others followed the teenager into the jungle, opposite the direction Pan had taken. The group traipsed along for a good forty minutes, their leather armor squeaking in the humidity and chainmail rustling with each step.

As they walked, Eremon fell back to keep pace with Tamara and Greg near the rear of the column of eight soldiers. "Once this is done," he began in a quiet tone, "I think you will find a great deal of training in your future."

Tamara's head snapped around with unconcealed excitement. "You've heard something?" she prompted eagerly.

"The Knight-Lieutenant has sent a missive to the Order informing them that your hard work and diligence are what have gotten us this far. Regardless of how this pans out, he has recommended that you be brought forward as a recruit," the Knight-Corporal told her with a grin. "It is rare to see such dedication and loyalty in one who is not from Thedas. You have impressed many with the completion of your quest."

A bright smile lit up her face, and Tamara hissed gleefully, "Yes!" She glanced at Greg, noting his pinched expression, but before she could question him, their group came to a sudden halt as their guide had them pause so he could relieve himself.

As soon as the boy slipped between the trees, a large group of Lost Boys descended upon them. They dropped from the canopy above them and closed in from all sides, brandishing crude but effective weapons made of wood and stone. The Templars flew into action, using swords and axes and maces to cleave through the attackers.

Tamara drew her gun only to have it smashed out of her hand with a heavy club by a boy who couldn't have been older than twelve. Pulling a dagger from her boot with her left hand, she lashed out at her foe, slashing deep into his abdomen. She watched him fall to the ground as she held her right hand tightly to her chest and frantically scanned the immediate area. "Greg!" she yelled, moving closer to Eremon so they stood back-to-back to fight. Hearing no response, she called again, "Greg!"

"I think I saw him run into the trees," Irminric informed her as he parried a blow from an incoming cudgel.

Growling low in her throat, she snarled, "Fucking coward." As much as she loved the man, she couldn't abide the yellow streak he tried to hide behind bravado and bluster. She stabbed at another boy who had ducked beneath Eremon's sword, catching him in the side and feeling her blade grate along his ribs before he staggered back.

Eremon fumbled at the leather pouch with the map, finally managing to loosen the ties that held it on his belt, and handed it over his shoulder to Tamara. "Take this and make your way back to the boat. Tell the others what happened," he ordered while blocking more strikes from his newest opponent. There seemed to be a never-ending supply of vicious teenagers slipping from the jungle.

"I'm not going to abandon you!" she protested hotly. These men were her brothers in arms, and she would not willingly leave them to such a pitched fight.

Whirling around to face her, the Knight-Corporal shoved the pouch at her, tucking it between her right arm and her chest. "This map is more important than all of us combined. You have to get it back to the Order." Seeing her continue to hesitate, he gave her a slight shove. "Go! That's an order."

"This map is more important than all of us combined. You have to get it back to the Order." Seeing her continue to hesitate, he gave her a slight shove. "Go! That's an order."

His words were cut off in a hideous gurgle as a blade slid around his throat, a Lost Boy...
clinging to his back and peering at her over his shoulder.

Tamara shook her head in disbelief, but as the initial shock of watching her friend die wore off, she turned and fled into the dense foliage. She stumbled over roots and careened into trees in her headlong rush to reach the shore. Tears of anger and grief rolled down her cheeks as she escaped. Though she was completely turned around, Tamara didn't stop running until long after the sounds of pursuit had ceased. Finally, breathless and trembling, she collapsed at the base of a tree, well concealed by several ferns. As the adrenaline left her system, she bowed her head and said a prayer to the Maker for the souls of the Templars she had left behind.

~SQ~

Warnings: Graphic sexual violence

Regina strode slowly across the flagstones as she made her way to the woman lying in the center of the room. She came to a stop beside the supine, naked body, refusing to look at the other woman's face, instead focusing on the honey-colored hair matted with filth. She stood silent and rigid as the prisoner began to beg, bruised arms reaching for her.

"Please, Regina," came the high-pitched entreaty, broken fingernails catching at the hem of the queen's skirt. "Help me. Get me out of here, please."

Laughter erupted around them, and a soft, masculine voice mocked, "Yes, Regina, help her."

The queen clenched her jaw, remaining unmoving when warm hands came to rest on her shoulders and squeezed slightly as the king stepped up close behind her. When her loose gown was pushed from her shoulders to puddle at her feet and leave her bare, she didn't react, even as greedy eyes fell on her body. Those same hands maneuvered her to stand just past the prisoner's head and pushed her to the floor, compelling her to kneel on the stones.

"You're going to help her, aren't you?" Leopold taunted, leaning over to murmur in her ear. At her obedient nod, he straightened and stroked his palms possessively up and down her upper arms and over her shoulders. "You know what to do. Hold her arms good and tight, now." Grasping her chin in his hand, he pulled her head back painfully to make her look up at him. His tone was unyielding as he instructed, "Don't let her go, no matter what. Understand?"

"Yes, Husband," she acknowledged impassively. Deftly, she caught the prisoner's wrists in her hands, ignoring the fact that the skin was broken and raw from having been restrained by ropes. Regina shuffled backward on her knees until the woman's arms were stretched out on the floor, pulled over her head as far as they would go, a small cry escaping the prisoner.

Tears fell from red-rimmed eyes, creating clear tracks through the dirt along the woman's temples. "Why? Why are you doing this?" she beseeched the young queen, eyes wild with fear and pain.

She hung her head in shame and cringed back, attempting to avoid the dark, almond-shaped eyes searching her for answers. "I'm so sorry, Ida," Regina whispered, a sob catching in her throat and swallowed down as she felt the king's slippered foot tap the inside of her thighs. Meekly, she spread her legs further, kneecaps digging into the hard floor. There was the familiar, soft thump of a cushion being placed between her calves. Then, her husband's hands were holding her hips as he knelt and took her from behind.

Regina forced herself to relax as much as possible, letting her body sway along with the king's thrusts. After two and a half years of marriage, she had learned that compliance sometimes meant she could walk to her chambers under her own power when he was done with her. As the first of
the king's inner circle climbed on top of the prisoner, the queen let the mask of apathy she'd perfected slide into place, compelled to watch for fear of retribution. She did not relish the idea of more broken bones, her ribs only recently healed from the last thrashing at her husband's hands.

Ida's struggles and screams began anew with each subsequent attack, and she jerked hard against her captor's unforgiving hold. The queen panicked as she lost purchase on one of the wrists she held, the prisoner's hand flailing out to claw at the man above her. Frantically, Regina snatched the thrashing limb, bringing it back to the floor. She gripped Ida more tightly and leaned forward, shifting her weight onto her arms to pin the woman in place. It was too little, too late, as her husband grabbed a fistful of her hair, pulling hard enough to make her eyes water as he switched to anal penetration as punishment for her lapse. A brief cry of pain left her before she bit fiercely at her bottom lip to stifle any further sounds.

The queen pressed down on her hands as firmly as possible, feeling the delicate bones under her palms grind into the flagstones and break under the added force. And as she watched nobles and council members rape and beat the woman she held to the cold, stone floor, the overriding emotion she experienced was relief. Regina let the guilt wash over her, accepted it, as she considered herself fortunate that the king remained opposed to sharing her in that manner. She'd be bruised and hurting in the morning, but only one man would have defiled her, not the five mauling the milliner's wife.

~SQ~

The sun had finally set for the day, and Emma stood midship at the port gunwale, forearms resting on the rail as she gazed out across the dark waters. The faintest pink tinge still reflected on the surrounding waves, and she glanced up at the stars emerging in the deepening sky as night truly began to fall. Already having freshened up from the day's activities, she was taking advantage of a rare moment alone while providing Regina the privacy for her own sponge bath. She heard the measured steps of the ship's captain approach and remained silent as he joined her in quiet contemplation. After several minutes, the sheriff finally commented, "I never realized how beautiful the ocean was."

"Aye." Hook replied softly, eyes leaving the horizon to fix on Emma longingly. Finding her attention to the scenery unwavering, he added, "The open sea is an alluring mistress." She may have been a princess by birth, but as he had watched her since their journey had begun, the captain had come to realize that her life had been a harsh one. The manner in which she held herself back from others and her wary stance told him much about her history and had him yearning to know more about the elusive savior.

Deciding the pirate seemed to be on good behavior, she asked a question that had been burning in the back of her mind for a while. "How long have you sailed?"

His eyebrows rose in surprise that she hadn't automatically led with him being a pirate. It was where most people chose to focus their attention, after all. "For most of my life. I'd say," he drawled as he tapped the gunwale contemplatively with his fingers, "380 years, give or take a few."

Emma barked out a quick laugh. She had known he'd been around for a while, but the number was still startling to hear. With a brief quirk of her lips, she jokingly complimented, "You look good for your age."

Flashling her a roguish smile, the captain smoothly rejoined, "I'm glad you noticed, Love."

The blatant but tame flirting caused the sheriff to roll her eyes and smirk, having honestly expected something more crass from the man. "Have you been a pirate that whole time?" she queried after a
moment, sobering as she looked back out across the waves.

There was a long pause as the captain considered how to answer that question before he decided to speak a rarely voiced truth. "Nay, I joined the king's navy with my brother, Liam." He swallowed hard as painful memories swam to the surface, and his words were heavy with melancholy as he admitted, "This was his ship, originally."

"What happened?" came the quietly interested response. Maybe there was more to the pirate than all the bluster and swagger with which he cloaked himself.

A heavy scowl marred his face briefly before he darkly uttered, "Neverland."

His tone spoke volumes, something for which Emma had gained a greater appreciation during her time with Regina. The woman was a complex puzzle for which she was just recently acquiring the missing pieces. She figured the infamous Captain Hook would be no less enigmatic if she started picking away at his rough exterior. "Must be a hell of a place," she mused, worriedly pressing her lips into a tight line as she wondered, yet again, how Henry was faring.

Not particularly wanting to make the princess worry more but also instinctively understanding her preference for the truth over platitudes, he elaborated, "Aye. If not for Neal and your boy, I wouldn't step foot on that cursed island." Still, he wouldn't tell her of the horrors of that place unless she asked directly. No need to worry the mother unnecessarily.

Knowing there was nothing she could do to help Henry, at the moment, the sheriff focused on the part of Hook's statement that had been intriguing her for a while. She turned her head slightly, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. "Sounds like Neal means a lot to you." Her natural curiosity was welling up at the prospect at finding out more about the man whom she had once loved. She had yet to sit down with her ex and discuss his past beyond the fact that his father had chosen power over him.

The captain nodded and returned his attention to the night sky, gaze automatically seeking out the guiding stars he had memorized centuries before. "He does, or rather, he did," he murmured into the silence. His eyes closed slowly as he said regretfully, "I want to do right by his mother."

Confused, her brows furrowed, and Emma shifted to face him while still leaning on the gunwale with her right arm. "His mother?" she prompted, needing clarification for the apparent non-sequitur.

"We were involved when Neal was but a lad, still called Bae, then." The words were difficult for him to say, as was anything having to do with his lost love, Milah. It was the one wound that time had not healed for him.

Emma shook her head as if it would help settle the words. "Wait, so the bad blood between you and Gold is Neal's mom?" In a way, it made sense. Don't most epic stories of betrayal and revenge revolve around some sordid, love triangle? she thought to herself before realizing that Regina's didn't, not once all the facts were known. The savior was pulled from the rabbit hole her thoughts were spiraling down when the man beside her spoke, again.

Seeing the contemplative look on the sheriff's face, the pirate told her, "Her name was Milah, and she chose to leave with me, despite what the Crocodile might say." With a flourish and grim smile, he held up his hook. "He cut off my hand for it after he killed her—crushed her heart right before my eyes."

The savior paled a bit, and she wondered how Regina had managed to maintain such a good and
caring heart with the horrible parents she had been dealt. Her mind turned to Gold and the awful things he had said to the former queen shortly after their arrival in this world, and Emma felt righteous anger and indignation spike, her magic skittering restlessly under her skin. "Once a bastard, always a bastard, I guess," she muttered hatefully.

Jones had been staring at his hook and missed the murderous look that had flashed in the sheriff's eyes. Raising his head, he agreed heartily, "Aye. We'd returned for Bae, but by that point, Rumpelstiltskin had lost him and become the Dark One." It had hurt him to see Milah so heartbroken that her son was gone with no chance for a reunion to make things right between them. And then, her future had been cruelly snatched away by her scorned husband, and he had been left with nothing but revenge.

Blinking out of her dark musings, Emma voiced her earlier thought. "Wow, talk about a twisted love triangle." As she forced herself back into the present, her brows knit together in consternation. Realizing the intent behind her original observation had never been answered, she said, "But, that doesn't explain how you know Neal."

"Fate is a fickle thing, Love. I fished Bae out of these very waters of Neverland," he explained with a wry smile. The captain paused in fond remembrance of better times before elucidating, "We had a good year together before secrets came to light. I tried to explain, but the lad wouldn't hear of it. So, he sought out Pan's island, and I never saw him again, until I arrived in your fair town," he finished with a heavy sigh, weighed down by the reminder that he had ultimately failed Milah by alienating her son.

Emma pursed her lips at this revelation, trying to let the new information sink in and form a better picture of the man who was Henry's father. "Did you and Neal get to talk any in Storybrooke?" she queried, interested in whether the two men had interacted at all or if they had studiously avoided one another.

The pirate frowned as he recalled their conversation on the docks. "A little," he confessed. "He was more interested in his own boy. The notion of family has always been important to him." Hook understood it was why the lad had felt so betrayed by his omission of having known Milah. Had he admitted early on to their association and taken the time to explain things, their lives might have played out very differently.

Things finally began clicking into place for Emma. As she rapidly reassessed all of Neal's interactions with Henry and Regina since returning with them from New York, she realized that she was, at last, starting to understand his motivations. "That actually explains a lot," she murmured hesitantly. "Huh." The savior realized her sudden insight meant that she'd need to back off a bit once they got back to Storybrooke—if they got back. Her own family reunion had become bittersweet since her relationship with her parents had progressively soured. Neal's need to connect with what little family he had made perfect sense, now that she allowed herself to think about it.

Having enjoyed the blessed solitude to wash and change, Regina quietly slipped out onto the deck clad in silk pajamas, cotton robe, and soft slippers. As she scanned the deck, she was surprised to see Hook still up and about. The man had started turning the ship over to one of the Salters around sunset so he could retire for the night. She was even more startled to see the pirate leaning on the gunwale next to the sheriff having what appeared to be a pleasant conversation. Something cold twisted in her gut, and letting her curiosity get the better of her, she covertly eased closer.

After several moments of companionable silence, the captain asked, "What about you, Lass? How have you fared with your parents?" He had been privy to several, uncomfortable interactions between the savior and her parents, though she seemed to be getting along fairly well with her
father. If the animosity between the queen and Snow weren't enough, Emma's steady avoidance of her mother had only increased the tension on the ship.

"Ugh, we are so not going there, ever," Emma groused. She hunched her shoulders against the weight of parental expectations that the mere mention of the pair seemed to press upon her.

Hook eyed her briefly before offering, "As you wish. However, I can be a sympathetic ear when the need arises."

Lips quirking up in a faint smile, the sheriff replied quietly, "Thanks."

Realizing he had an opening, the pirate decided to test the waters as to the savior's feelings regarding her ex. Carefully clearing his throat, he queried, "Forgive my curiosity, but do you hope to rekindle your romance with Neal once you find him?"

Regina had been about to return to the cabin and let one of the guards inform Emma that she could come back when she was ready, but Hook's question caught her attention on a startlingly visceral level. Pausing in the shadows of the main mast, she placed her hand against the smooth wood, leaning lightly into it for unconscious support.

A low growl of irritation rose in Emma's throat at the suggestion. She might have been willing to set aside her past with Neal for Henry's, and now Regina's, sake, but she was not nearly ready to forgive and forget. "Nope," she spat out with a hard pop on the end of the word. "I have absolutely no plan to revisit that disaster."

"A child out of wedlock isn't the worst of things," Jones scoffed, slightly dismissive of the thought.

The sheriff straightened and shook her head, crossing her arms over her chest. "You're missing the point. He set me up. I'm not sleeping with him." Her scowl deepened as she muttered fiercely, "Never again."

Giving her a somber nod, Hook asked leadingly, "So, no happy ending for the boy, then?"

Catching a faint flicker of something indefinable in the pirate's blue eyes, Emma found her own gaze narrowing. Hands going to her hips as her indignation grew, she exclaimed incredulously, "Happy ending? What the hell does me hooking back up with Neal have to do with Henry's happy ending?"

"I'm sure the boy would like his parents to be together." While he wasn't above wooing a woman away from another man, he wasn't about to betray Baelfire, again. But if the sheriff really wasn't interested in renewing her old relationship, it would be a different matter, entirely.

Immediately, Emma went on the defensive at the implication she was failing her son and retorted sharply, "Henry's doing just fine with Regina and me. If he wants to build a relationship with Neal, that's fine, but I want no part in it." The savior took a deep breath to push back her ire, and as if just saying her name had conjured the woman, she caught the scent of spices and wood smoke and petrichor that seemed to hover around her friend. It had only grown stronger after several days without fancy soaps and shampoos to cover it, and Emma had found herself breathing deeply whenever she was around Regina, intoxicated by her natural aroma. 
There was a ping of awareness that resonated through the bond, but the former mayor didn't move from her spot by the mast. Initially intrigued by the turn the conversation had taken, she was now concerned about her companion's emotional agitation and decided to remain a quiet and discreet observer unless she was needed.

"Neal may have different ideas," the captain pointed out with raised eyebrows.

Emma snorted and said uncharitably, "Yeah, well, Neal isn't known for his brains." The man had street smarts, she'd give him that, and a type of wary cunning she'd only ever encountered in two other people—Regina and Rumpelstiltskin.

Laughing at the assessment, Hook admitted, "Aye, the lad can be a tad impulsive. He gets that from his mother." Many a time, he had had to redirect Milah from some rash decisions made in the heat of the moment. When the savior smirked and huffed with amusement at the remark, he grinned slyly and hinted, "Then, I suppose that leaves you free for other pursuits."

Not in the least surprised by the ham-handed segue, the sheriff rolled her eyes impatiently. She was the tiniest bit impressed that it had taken him so long to get around to pressing his case, again. "I have enough on my plate, Hook," she demurred politely, feeling generous since he was being polite and not smarmy.

The captain shrugged lightly in acknowledgement of that fact. The princess had a great deal of upheaval happening in her life, but that didn't mean she couldn't take some time out to have a little fun, once in a while. It was obvious she wasn't a chaste, naïve princess who had been locked away from the world. In truth, the prospect of her experience intrigued him more than if she had been an innocent. "Of course, but I'd be happy to oblige you in making the beast with two backs," he told her, leaning his left elbow against the gunwale and smiling casually.

"What?" Emma asked flatly, blinking. She wasn't sure she'd heard the phrase before, but from the increasingly dirty grin the pirate sported, she thought she could puzzle out the meaning.

With a light laugh, Hook muttered to himself, "Perhaps you're more of a princess than I thought." He leaned closer and clarified, "I'm speaking of shaking the sheets."

Mouthing the words slowly, the savior had no trouble figuring out that euphemism. "Wow. Okay, not in this life, not ever." The man's propensity to turn his unwanted overtures into a physical pursuit had been the last straw. Uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken, she took a step back, shuddering faintly.

Hook matched her step with one of his own, moving back into her space. "Come now, Love," he cajoled condescendingly, "I've seen the way you look at me."

"With contempt and loathing?" Regina retorted, striding confidently out of the shadows. The former mayor could not stand idly by while Emma was sending out precursory signals of panicked distress through the bond. And the idea of Hook so much as touching her companion's arm had made her go rigid under a wave of possessiveness she couldn't quite push aside.

Frowning at the interruption, the captain turned to Regina and reminded her insouciantly, "Your invitation has been rescinded, Your Majesty. This is between the savior and I." As he finally took the time to notice her nighttime attire, he tilted his head to the side in appreciation. She looked inviting in the moonlight, the wind blowing her hair around her face to give her a disheveled appearance. His lips curled up in a lascivious smirk when he said, "But I bet you could do with a bit of cock."
Emma's hands fisted at her sides in a flash of sudden anger, wanting to claw out Hook's eyes for the way he was staring at her friend. "Hey, that's way out of line!" she accused, ready to treat the pirate to the same right hook that she had introduced Monty to just the other night.

Regina chuckled ominously and rejoined in a flat tone, "I wouldn't recommend trying." Looking up at him from under lowered lashes, she crooned, "I killed the last man who did."

The captain feigned serious introspection, as if trying to remember something important. Finally, he snapped his fingers, affecting an epiphany. "That's right," he jeered, "the queen prefers tipping the velvet."

A sneer darkened the sorceress's countenance as her eyes flicked over the man from head to toe. "Are you offering, Pirate?" Disdainfully, she taunted, "You're not fit to lick my boots. What makes you think I'd let you anywhere near my cunt?" The smile she bestowed upon him, then, was one of pure contempt.

Hook leveled her with a reproachful grin and shook a finger at the former queen. "You mistake my meaning." Easing closer, he lowered his voice and alleged, "I think you want the princess, here, for yourself."

Inching forward with the slow deliberation of a predator, Regina replied, "And you mistake Emma's kindness for an invitation." She continued to press nearer until she was practically nose-to-nose with Hook. Tone taking on a hard edge, she said, "I distinctly heard her tell you no, yet you continue to pursue her. And while I'm well aware that Emma is perfectly capable of dealing with you on her own, there's something you should be aware of." Her voice was sweet as honey as she murmured, "I will flay you alive and strap you to the prow to serve as figurehead if you so much as lay a finger on her without her express permission."

Several beats passed with the pirate utterly still in light of the threat. He swallowed hard, then, coming back to himself, narrowed his eyes and puffed up with bravado. "No," he countered, "I don't think you will. I imagine your boy wouldn't be too pleased to learn his mother was returning to her evil ways." Swiveling to face Emma, he told her, "Come find me once the witch takes her claws out of you, Love," before turning on his heel and strutting off.

Emma had been incensed throughout the exchange, itching to step in and defend Regina against his crude barbs. "What the hell was that about?" she wondered aloud, incredulous that he could go from sensitive to slimy so quickly. "I mean, that got real nasty pretty fast."

Seething silently, Regina kept staring after the loathsome pirate, even though he'd already disappeared below deck. "Like most men from our world, Hook is under the impression that all women want him and has trouble believing anything contrary to that." She'd endured that attitude long enough in her home world and did not care to experience it, again.

The sheriff scoffed, "Yeah, well, that's not exactly limited to the Enchanted Forest." She shook her head, irritated at the captain's reaction to being rebuffed by two women. "Typical guy to assume a woman's gay if she doesn't want him," she groused.

Regina blinked at the savior, nonplussed at her response. "The beast with two backs goes over your head, but that reference you catch?" The corners of her mouth tugged upward slightly in fond delight.

Sheepishly, Emma shoved her hands in the back pockets of her jeans, muttering, "I saw the miniseries." A light blush rose to her cheeks, and she shrugged dismissively. "Still, what he said wasn't cool."
Head cocked in intrigued scrutiny, Regina softly replied, "He's not wrong, Emma."

"Seriously?" Emma startled, focusing wide eyes on her friend. Nerves flared brightly as she recalled Hook's implication that Regina wanted her for herself. The prospect that the attraction she felt for the former mayor—and endeavored to ignore—could be reciprocated was too overwhelming for the sheriff to contemplate. "You…." She trailed off uncertainly.

The former queen raised an amused eyebrow as she finished, "I'm a lesbian? Yes." Feeling an odd sort of disquiet roll through her companion, she grew apprehensive. She queried hesitantly, "Is that going to be a problem, especially considering our current situation?" The last thing she wanted to do was make Emma uncomfortable, though the sheriff had never seemed to have an issue with anyone's sexuality in the past.

Emma immediately felt guilty upon noticing Regina's worried expression. "No!" she blurted in a high-pitched voice, hands coming up in a conciliatory gesture. Clearing her throat, the savior blushed, embarrassed by her alarmed outburst. More calmly, she restated, "No, it's really not." A fluttering started in her stomach. Her previously-assumed-to-be, straight friend was now very gay, and suddenly, her crush didn't seem so ludicrous as it had mere moments ago.

Bemused by the darkening flush on Emma's cheeks, Regina flashed a relieved smile, replying, "I'm glad." The sheriff's rapidly shifting emotions allowed her brief insights to her companion's thoughts, and she almost laughed when everything clicked into place. Affecting an innocent expression, she redirected the conversation, knowing it would be appreciated by the other woman.

"I had come to get a bit of fresh air and see if you were ready to turn in for the night. It's rather late."

"Uh, yeah," the savior drawled, mentally scrambling to catch up with the shift in topic. "I was just waiting for you to get done with your bath." The thought of Regina taking a sponge bath caused Emma to duck her head, not wanting her friend to see the heat that seemed to have permanently settled in her cheeks.

Regina's impish streak came to the fore, and she husked lowly, "In that case, I suggest we go to bed." She grinned as their bond lit up with a spike of longing, followed by an awkward rush of mortification. Biting her bottom lip to keep from smirking, the sorceress knew she shouldn't tease Emma in such a manner. It was just that the sheriff was so easy to get a rise out of, and it felt good to engage in a little harmless flirting.

Voice not quite a squeak, Emma nodded and acquiesced, "Okay. Sure." Still slightly dazed by this newest bombshell, she meekly followed the former queen across the deck and down the ladder-stairs leading to their cabin. As they settled into the bed and Regina snuggled up against her back, the savior felt very sure she would not be getting any sleep that night, too conscious of the woman beside her.

~SQ~

Tamara had been crouched at the edge of the tree line for a solid two hours watching the beach and listening for any sounds of movement. Both of the men left behind with the boats and lyrium were sprawled out on the sand, red staining the ground beneath them. She had caught the slight rise and fall of the larger man's chest and knew there was at least one other survivor. Finally, the sun was almost set, dusk wrapping the island in an ominous shade of grey, and she staggered for the boats.

Collapsing beside the still breathing Templar, she roughly shook him, letting out a sigh of relief as his brown eyes blinked open. "Thank the Maker. Get up," Tamara whispered harshly. Her gaze continually darted around the open shoreline, worried about another ambush. When the man only
groaned at her, she jostled him again, demanding, "Wake up, Soldier!"

That seemed to do the trick, and the Templar struggled to sit up, hand going to the cut over his left eye. "How many made it back with you?" he asked, gaining his bearings quickly. Already reaching for his missing sword, he scanned the edge of the jungle warily, fists clenching in the sand upon discovering his weapons gone.

"None. I was hoping some of them would have made it back by now," she admitted as she got a better look at the deep gash in his lower, right leg. It went all the way to the bone which appeared to be shattered. Grimacing, she inspected the makeshift tourniquet he had managed before passing out earlier and knew that it had been left too long. He'd lose the bottom half of the leg if he lived. "Do you think you can move, Barbeta? We need to be ready to get out of here when the others get back."

As he watched the small woman lug the bag of lyrium to the nearest dinghy and heave it inside, he shook his head sadly. "No one else is coming, Green. They'd have been here already," the Templar informed her regretfully.

Pausing in her efforts to gather the downed soldier's effects, she whirled on her remaining companion and bit out, "You're wrong. More will show up. I'm sure of it."

Barbeta had painstakingly made his way to the boat in an awkward, dragging crawl through the wet sand. Bracing his hands on the bow of the dinghy, he pushed it a couple of inches into the water with a grunt. "We'll be lucky to get off this island alive. And that's not going to happen unless you help me get this hunk of wood off the beach," he told her pointedly with a quick glimpse over his shoulder.

"Greg's still on the island!" Tamara reminded him even as she leaned against the front of the boat. Her heels dug into the soft ground as she pushed with her back and shoulders.

A snort of disbelief escaped the large man. His gaze settled on her strained expression as he replied tightly, "Too late, he's probably captured or dead by now." Their progress was slow but steady, and soon, the waves were lapping over the Templar's legs, his wound flaring hotly with the stinging scour of salt water. Sweat was rolling down Barbeta's face and back, a combination of exhaustion and agony; however he kept inching further into the tide, determined to get back to their ship and update his commander.

Tamara's eyes welled with tears at the thought of leaving her partner behind. It didn't matter that he had run off during the fight. She still loved him. Wiping hastily at her tears, her voice came out in a wavering whisper as she pled, "We have to save him."

"We have to warn the others," Barbeta refuted sternly as the water reached the middle of his chest. In a moment of frustration, he grabbed her left arm, giving her a hard shake. "That demon child betrayed us, and who knows what else he's planning." Desperation had crept into his tone, and he made a concerted effort to swallow back his rising panic. Releasing her arm, he continued more calmly, "Our duty to the Order comes first, Tamara. Greg knew the risks. We all did."

She took a deep breath and stared into his dark eyes, just as frightened as her own but full of a certainty built upon faith. Nodding briskly, she placed her hand on his shoulder, squeezing it in reassurance. "Yes, of course." Tamara gripped his belt with her left hand and helped him stand on his good leg. A short struggle later, and both of them sat nearly collapsed in the dinghy, panting from the pain of their exertions and injuries. "You're bleeding again, Fede" she murmured with a gesture at her companion's leg.
He shrugged it off and grabbed the oars at his station, putting all of his strength into getting them back to their ship. "It's nothing worth fretting over. Maker willing, we'll live to serve another day." He stared fixedly at her countenance, refusing to spare even the tiniest glance at the island.

Casting one last look back at the beach, she scanned the tree line before facing forward, eyes on the rolling waves. She thought of all the betrayal and loss she had endured in her life, how lost she had been until the Chantry had come along and given her a purpose. Greg had been lost to her when his need for vengeance had nearly cost them their mission, she decided. Her future was with the Order. Tamara met Barbetta's curious stare and replied resolutely, "Yes. Yes, we will."

"You have the makings of a fine Templar, Tamara," Fede complimented her seriously. "Never lose sight of your faith, and the Maker shall reward you." His mouth turned up in a grim smile as he rowed in the dwindling twilight until he heard her announce she could see the sails of their ship.

Meanwhile in Storybrooke...

"Why are we even having a meeting?" Ruby asked, wiping off the countertop in her grandmother's diner. Business had been pretty typical for a Wednesday, and with the big names out of town for the last several days, the gossip mill had started to peter out. However, she had spied Mother Superior talking to the dwarves at lunch today, but the noise of the lunch crowd had kept her from eavesdropping. She tossed the wash cloth in the rinse sink and crossed her arms. Her eyes swept the nearly empty diner, landing on Stephen Doggle, the dentist down the street, drinking his afternoon tea. Looking at her grandmother, she quietly remarked, "Things have reached a new level of boring."

As she counted the money in the till, Widow Lucas quipped, "Then, the meeting tonight will liven up your social life." Pulling out most of the cash, she rolled the money up and tucked it inside her cardigan's right pocket. She'd write a deposit slip for the bank as soon as she made it back to her office in the bed and breakfast. Hearing her granddaughter's overly dramatic groan, she smirked and added, "They're our friends, Ruby. We should spend time with them."

"Archie and Marco are friends. We're family. The dwarves have some weird brotherhood thing going on, but we," the waitress explained, gesturing between herself and her grandmother, "are not friends with them." She turned her back to the open diner and glared at the drink fountain. "You, Marco, and Archie talk and sometimes hang out, do stuff, but nobody wants to hang out with me," she admitted sulkily. Ever since Albert Spencer had rallied half the town against her, people had given her a wide berth.

Eugenia asked, "I thought you and Emma had hit it off?" while she casually straightened the items stowed behind the counter. It had been a long time since her granddaughter had opened up to her. "You enjoyed going out skeet shooting with her," she reminded her. When she didn't hear a reply, she turned to the young woman. "You've been spending a lot of time at the house."

"I like it over there," Ruby shared with a sigh. Her gaze dropped down to the spotless floor. "The Crows Guard are cool." She paused and cut a sideways look to her grandmother before saying, "And Regina's actually nice."

Rolling her eyes, Widow Lucas scoffed. She crossed her arms and pinned her granddaughter with a hard scowl. "You need to watch yourself around that woman, Ruby" she warned. It worried her sometimes, how close her kin had gotten to the Evil Queen.

"Granny, come on," the waitress huffed, tossing her hands up in exasperation. "Emma lives with
"The savior doesn't live there by choice," Eugenia countered, stomping past her granddaughter.

Arms crossing defiantly, Ruby snapped, "Yeah, well, whose fault is that?" She turned to face the woman who raised her. "Emma cast a spell out of desperation because her parents were driving her crazy," she added. Snatching the damp wash cloth from the sink, she wrung it out and draped it over a towel bar. "And what did Regina do? She nudged Emma into a moderate hero, one everyone could get behind."

"What are you talking about?" Widow Lucas asked, casting a cautious glance at Stephen, well-known as one of the town gossips. "The Evil Queen isn't causing trouble because the savior is keeping her in line," she explained. "I'm sure if Cora Mills hadn't been apprehended, mother and daughter would be terrorizing the town."

Scrunching her face, the waitress disbelievingly replied, "Is that what you think?"

"It's what all the good people of Storybrooke think, Ruby," Eugenia immediately responded. Noting her granddaughter's disappointed expression, she sharply probed, "What?"

"Nothing," Ruby quietly rebuked, turning away. She bent over and pulled out a tub, starting to restock the napkin-wrapped silverware.

Sighing, Widow Lucas shook her head and stepped toward her kin, saying more gently, "Tell me what's on your mind."

Glancing at her grandmother, the waitress took a moment and worried at her lower lip. "Do you think the Crows Guard are bad people?" she asked tentatively, halting her movements. As the silence stretched, she idly prepared another bundle.

"Bad? I think their loyalties are misplaced, but bad? No," Eugenia answered. Her brow furrowed as she leaned against the counter. "Get to the point, Girl," she urged, not wanting to have this conversation drag on for too long in the open.

"The Crows Guard have helped a lot of different people. They stopped Spencer from rigging the mayoral election. They even saved him from inhumane imprisonment, which David and the dwarves did, by the way," Ruby elucidated, dropping the silverware bundle in the tub. She faced her grandmother and continued, "They helped out at the nursing home during the snow storm. It turns out some of them were keeping an eye on Nicolas. They're even helping Widow Granger rebuild her greenhouse."

Widow Lucas harrumphed and bitterly countered, "Jetta is married to one of them. Of course, they're going to help."

"You know Granger. How many times have you bitched about her no cash, no service policy?" the waitress argued. Shaking her head, she lowered her voice and added, "Isn't she the one who told you about the wizard who made my red cloak?"

Eugenia looked away. She had traveled for days out of Hanover and into Angevin to reach Helena's hut within the Dark Forest. "Yes, she brokered the deal for it," she admitted, closing her eyes. She'd spun the tale of finding a wizard to protect her granddaughter from the truth.

Ruby quietly interjected with a frown, "I thought you went to a wizard." However, she quickly shook her head and waved her right hand, cutting off anything her grandmother might have said. "It doesn't matter," she sighed, snapping the lid back on the silverware tub. "My point is the Crows
Guard have done good here in Storybrooke. They stepped up and fought off Cora.

Pushing away from the counter and standing up straight, Widow Lucas snipped, "Only after we nearly got ourselves killed." She narrowed her eyes at her kin. "That woman's poisoned you against us," she accused in a soft snarl.

"Will you please stop!" the waitress cried, practically throwing the tub under the counter. "My supposed best friend almost got us killed," she corrected as she stared her grandmother down. "I told you it was a bad idea. I told everyone at that stupid meeting that it was dangerous and we shouldn't do it," she hissed. Slipping past the old woman, she stormed back into the kitchen.

"Hold on, there," Eugenia warned following the irate girl. "Ruby!"

"No," Ruby snapped, whirling around to face the last of her blood kin. "If I wasn't a werewolf, Cora could've killed me with a flick of the wrist. I was covered in bruises, Granny. My clothes were ruined," she explained for the first time. Her frustration bubbled toward the surface as she paced the length of the kitchen. Thankfully, the short order cook was out on a break. "You never asked where I went after," she quietly stated. Squaring off with her grandmother, she lifted her chin as she recounted how she ran to Regina's and found the Crows Guard squaring off with the heartless sorceress. "I bit her and she didn't turn, Granny," she finished, pursing her lips.

Widow Lucas laid a hand on top a stainless-steel worktable and softly admitted, "I thought you went for a run to work off some steam."

"I went to check on Emma and Regina," the waitress admitted. She huffed and shrugged. Walking over to the punch-clock, she pulled her card from its slot. "You know, during all our meetings after that day, nobody once considered how Cora could treat her daughter like that," she quietly muttered before stamping her time card.

With a furrowed brow, Eugenia watched her granddaughter. "She'd figured it out, Ruby. Our cover was blown," she reminded the young woman.

"Sure, the witch figured out I wasn't her kid pretty quick, but you weren't looking her in the eyes. You didn't see the flicker of hope and want," Ruby countered, dropping her card back in the slot. "Emma told me that Cora attacked them afterwards," she explained as she retrieved her coat off the hook by the clock. "She told me some of the stuff she said," she trailed off, slipping on her jacket.

"Cora Mills is crazy," Widow Lucas proclaimed with finality. She pursed her lips and kept her eyes on her leaving grandchild.

Spinning on her heel, the waitress raised her left hand and pointed at the old woman. "No, Cora was heartless, and that was how she treated her own daughter. She nearly killed Regina that night," she sternly corrected her grandmother's assumptions. Roughly, she buttoned her coat and yanked out the gloves stuffed in her left pocket. "What happened in that cemetery should've been a wakeup call," she growled with frustration.

"To what?" Eugenia questioned, her eyes fixed on the young woman.

With her coat and gloves on, Ruby felt herself relax. She was about to head out the door and go to her second job at the Sheriff's Office. "Snow has always professed how good Regina was until the king died," she casually reminded her grandmother. When the old woman nodded, she continued, "So, maybe we should ask ourselves what the hell would have to happen to someone who survived a mother like that to turn her bad?" Then, with her piece said, she whisked herself through the kitchen, out the side door, and into the cool, night air.
Widow Lucas stared at the door long after her granddaughter had departed. Her brow furrowed as she turned and headed back into the diner. The next shift of wait staff wouldn't be in until right before the dinner rush. So, she returned to the till and stashed her wad of bills underneath the tray, and as she pushed the drawer shut, her gaze drifted to the counter where Regina and Emma had sat for lunch one day. She remembered their conversation about Gertrude, King George's wife.

Looking up, she noticed Stephen still sitting in his booth. When their eyes met, she gruffly barked, "I suppose you heard all of that."

The dentist smiled as he slid out of his seat. "Nothing I didn't already know," he admitted, walking up to the cash register. He pulled out his wallet and passed a few bills to the old werewolf. "There's a lot that doesn't make sense over the feud for the Angevin throne," he remarked. Then, without another word, he left the diner.

Eugenia frowned as she deposited the money. A heavy feeling settled in the pit of her stomach, and she shook her head because Stephen was right. Quite a bit of the animosity between Snow White and the Evil Queen didn't make much sense, not with knowing what she currently did.

~SQ~

END OF PART 17
to tune out what is happening, she's beginning to disconnect from her emotions in order to maintain her sanity. Finally, this scene points out that these types of occurrences are becoming commonplace to her and blending into her everyday life.

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