"Born of heroism, captured by villainy, only truly yourself." The Evil Queen sets her revenge into motion by capturing Princess Emma, forcing her into the darkness, but what happens when there is more than meets the eye with this daughter of True Love? And what consequences might their actions bring? /SwanQueen/Enchanted Forest/AU/No Curse/Rated M/LSV/Rewritten
Chapter 1

Cold is what she felt; something aching and numbing, starting from the tip of her nose to the ice that was her toes. A brief thought of her fireplace burned into her mind as she opened her eyes, slumber no longer an option in such an uncomfortable state. Darkness was all she could see and she would have assumed it to be nighttime, as she often had found herself awake at such an hour, but the hard pallet in which she lay upon had produced a stirring worry.

Her limbs ached when she moved to discover if she had perhaps fallen onto the floor, but as she had, something beneath her poked her through the thin material of her nightdress. Even as she continued, disregarding the painful reminder that she was no longer in the comfort of her own bed, she found something moving with her, attached to the delicate fabric that covered her pebbling skin. Reaching for it, she plucked the strange source off her, quickly identifying it as burlap.

What is this? She wondered, pulling the coarse material away to sit up, her bum being poked, still, by the hay underneath her. Wherever she was, someone had attempted to make her comfortable, or, at least, their definition of it. But, she knew she must make her leave.

The tightness in her chest was pushed away for later. She needed a clear head if she wanted to get out of here. Perhaps she was only in her own castle, or at least that's what she had hoped. But, as she moved, carefully attempting to navigate her way around the area she could not see, a sinking feeling took its place inside of her.

A memory, something foggy that twisted her stomach, had slowly crept into her mind. The darkness, the cold, frightful feeling, and the soft glow of a flickering flame had her recalling a shadow; something that laughed mockingly, but never spoke.

She could feel her head grow heavier and her throat tighter as she moved, hands before her to discover anything, a wall, an object… An iron bar. Her heart fell into her stomach when fingers slid along an entire row of them; cold, jeering, and daunting. Immediately, her hand snatched back to her being as she swallowed around the lump in her throat. There was a source of light, she saw as she grew enough courage to near those cylindrical bars; it was in the distance, something that brought hope to her as it winked in the darkness and floated like a lightning bug.

"Is anyone there?" Her voice was cracked and weak, and she knew it once her words bounced off the walls and reverberated in her ears. Clearing her throat, she pushed away any bubbling emotions and replaced them with a stronger voice, something that she hoped would frighten, or at least draw out, her captor. "I demand you answer me!"

It was growing, she noticed; the light. Whoever had toted the torch was drawing near and a sense of satisfaction filled her. Despite the butterflies that stormed in her stomach, she straightened out her spine and hardened her features. Even if they couldn't see her, she would rather stand tall and face her enemy with grace; something that her father had taught her.

As the flame grew nearer, she was able to vaguely make out the contents of the cell she was hostage in, and the musty, stone walls that surrounded her. They were cracked, worn and old. Clearly the upkeep of these cells weren't top priority. But, her thoughts of the decaying wooden bucket placed in the corner of her cell vanished when she felt an intense presence. It was here; that flame that captured her interest.

"What do you want of me?" Her voice wavered as she spoke to the figure that was nothing more than a shadow.
It was a woman, she concluded, of the lines and shapes she could make of her face. She had dark hair and dark eyes. Her smile was crimson. "Princess Emma, you are awake at last." The voice was throaty, but there was a certain venom that made her wince.

"Who are you?" Emma demanded, though absent as her interest was taken by something else. It was oddly captivating, the way her eyes twinkled in the dancing flames of the torch, and she found herself getting lost in the shimmer.

Instead of an answer, the mysterious woman said in her husky voice, "your betrothed is certainly a lucky man, or perhaps… unlucky. He will be very disappointed when he learns of your sudden abandonment." The laughter that soon followed echoed off the stone walls, booming like thunder and filling the princess's every sense.

Emma found herself backing away when the woman approached. She could feel her power; her aura. It was enchanting, but it was also daunting. "Abandonment? I didn't abandon anyone," she said, her voice shaking once again. How did this woman know of this information? "You have stolen me. Do you not know who I am? What is it that you desire from me?"

The mysterious woman tilted her head back with a loud guffaw and Emma found herself frozen in her spot, the strong grace that she once had dissolving into something worth far less as every hair on her body stood on end. "Foolish girl. Innocent girl. Not everyone of this realm is kind and truthful. Of course, you would fall behind on such knowledge, being kept in your castle like a prisoner. We all hold a great falsehood."

The shadow of a woman stepped away from the cell and paced as if she were on the prowl, the clicking of each movement reverberating off the stone walls. "Those who are not closest to you will believe you have abandoned them, sweet princess. After all, you are a frightened, spoiled little girl. You wish not to marry, I am sure. No one wishes to marry against their will." She turned back to her, a wicked smirk on those blood red lips. "You ask too many questions. People who irritate me get punished. Perhaps I should have you whipped."

"I-" She wanted to argued, Gods, she could feel the anger on the tip of her tongue, but there was something that seized her, coiling around her like a snake and disallowing her to breathe, especially after the woman's words had registered. "Wh-Whipped?" Just who was she? "I-I will give you anything your heart desires if you release me unharmed. I am worth much."

The woman, though, merely cackled in response, seeming pleased by the weakness the princess had shown her. "I merely jest, sweet princess. Truly, you do not know who I am? Well, I do suppose I could grant you as much." There was a brief pause, as if for some dramatic effect, before she spoke again, her voice a pleased purr. "I am the one your mother calls the Evil Queen." She took a step forward, this time, fingers trailing along the wrought iron bars. Emma was captivated once again, for more reasons than just the lack of distance.

"You? You're her?" As if something drew her near, like a moth to a flame, she was closing the small distance between them, breathing in the scent and the warmth from the woman who stood as her name had stated; like a Queen. She was far taller than Emma had imagined because she towered over the blonde princess, but she didn't mind, for she merely stared at the features that were covered in dancing shadows.

In a flash, Emma felt the Evil Queen's fingers digging into her flesh as she gripped her jaw, forcing the princess to stumble as she was pulled against the iron bars, their faces but a breadth apart. "Did you think me to be a mere tale? Your dear mother… always trying to cast me aside." A dark chuckle sounded, casting hot air against the blonde's pale skin. Their eyes met, obsidian and jade, and she was frozen again. "Why do you think you are here?"
"I am unsure," she answered meekly, her entire body buzzing. She wanted to look away, Gods she was desperate to pull her gaze from the one that swallowed her up, but there was something pulling her in. "B-Because of my mother? Your revenge?"

"You are smarter than you let on, princess." Those slender digits squeezed her jaw, fingers pressing into delicate, ivory skin. "I have watched you, princess, since you were just a wee babe. I know quite a bit about you." The next words out of her mouth sent a chilling shiver down her spine. "And you will soon learn about me."

The revelation had sparked something deep inside her and she shook, a sudden desire to escape as she was held by the grip of the Evil Queen. Her jaw ached from the touch and her heart hammered in her chest. If this woman was as evil as her mother had said, then the blonde was no better off than dead. "N-no…" she whispered, her throat constricting.

"No?" The witch tilted her head, brows furrowing. Those fingers only seemed to grow tighter but Emma made no noise and merely grit her teeth. "Tell me, princess." She jerked Emma closer, slamming the blonde further into the bars as the Queen's own pressed against them. "Do you wish to live? To go back to the safety of your castle?"

Her brain buzzed, wondering if this was going to be her out. But it was too easy. It had to be. She nodded, bidding her words to follow, but the tightness in her throat had only allowed a small squeak to follow in the form of, "y-yes." Her body shuddered slightly the tighter the dark Queen had held her, as if urging more words to follow, like she knew there was more. Emma closed her eyes, relieving her of the burning stare, and sought solace in the darkness that it had provided.

"Yes?" The Evil Queen pressed, her breath warm and moist against Emma's skin.

"What if I wished not to return?" The question fell from her lips before the princess could think to stop it, those fiery emerald orbs opening once again, shimmering with a shred of fear. "What if I were content on being released into the world?"

Those words seemed to have taken the Evil Queen aback, for her lips curled into a tighter, more sinister, smirk. She released the princess, then, roughly pushing her back as she recoiled, allowing the blonde barely enough time to keep herself from hitting the cracked stone floor. "And why, my princess, do you wish not to live in the safety of your castle?" She turned, knowing dark eyes pinned to the young woman. "Does this have to do with what you spoke of last night, to yourself, when you thought no one was watching?"

"I have always dreamt of being free," she answer simply, taking every desire within herself and placing it into that one thought. Again, she stepped forward, drawn, and wrapped her pale, thin fingers around the rough cylinders.

"Freedom, princess? You get no freedom. You will never have freedom, not while you are a chain in the royal link," the brunette hissed, fingers gripping the bars alongside the princess's. "Tell me, child, what you would do without your guards and your castle and the food that fills your belly?"

Bristling, Emma's grip on the bars grew tighter, her knuckles aching under the pressure. The self-proclaimed Queen had spoken as if she were a mere child, condescendingly, as if she knew nothing of the world. "I could certainly take care of myself. I could hunt for my own food and I could find shelter, and perhaps a few acquaintances," she argued, though the hostility slowly trailed off once she realized she did, in fact, sound like a spoiled princess.

"I would bid you good luck on your dreams, child, but they are just that, which merely makes you a foolish girl with bees in her brain. And that is exactly what thieves and rapists will think as they take
you and your things, then leave your body to be eaten by wolves." The Queen sneered, fingers turning white against the iron bars.

Silence reigned over the cells after the remnants of the Evil Queen's words faded away, leaving a ringing in Emma's ears as she mulled over the older woman's words. Her dreams had always been something in her head, for how could she ever make them a reality when her life seemed too important to throw away? Her mother and father expected much from her, as did their kingdom, and not to mention her betrothed.

But there was something here, something that tore her away from her mundane life and that had gotten her tired brain whirling. "You took me away from that," the princess found herself voicing her next thoughts.

"I almost did you a favor, sweet princess. But here is no better than out there. I am not here to protect you nor am I here to heed your deepest desires. I am here to punish your mother; to break you." She pushed away from the bars and eyed the beautiful princess, lips curling once again to show her pearly teeth. "Whatever infatuation you might have grown with the thought of freedom will soon perish, I will be sure of it. For now, I will take my leave."

"W-wait!" Emma's eyes widened when the woman stepped away from the cell. She paused, dark eyes piercing the girl who still held onto the bars with desperation. "You are not letting me out?"

"Now, why would I do such a thing?" The Evil Queen's cold laughter filled the foreboding air, drowning Emma in its dark sea. "You are foolish to think that I will help you. I am no friend of yours nor will I ever be. You must learn that not everyone is here to do your bidding, princess."

"I-I wasn't-" The blood drained from her face. Her mouth tended to be faster than her brain, as it were earlier, but now, it seemed to have blanked. "I-I did not mean-"

"I know well what you meant, child. You called me your savior. I am not that." The Queen drew closer to the cell. Emma wanted to back away, but she felt immobilized as she met the cold, chestnut gaze that pulled her into the darkness. "I am your worst nightmare."

A chill crept up the blonde's spine at the final growl and a warmth seemed to stir in her lower belly against her better judgment, her face growing warm in shame despite the sick feeling in her stomach. She swallowed hard around the lump in her throat, trying her best to keep the welling whimper quelled and the urine in her bladder. "I thoughtso," the Evil Queen growled, pulling away from the iron bars, her laughter chasing her as she sauntered down the dark corridor, damning Emma alone in the darkness once more.
A man clad in silver armor and a white fur cloak burst through heavy wooden doors, a stricken look on his face.

"The princess is missing!"

The woman that sat at the front of the room in an ivory throne stood and rushed forward to meet the man. "Are you sure?" she asked, voice calm despite the air of panic, but her eyes betrayed her.

"Yes, Your Majesty," said the man.

Before he could speak again, a second man joined him, a gold crown encrusted with precious gems upon his head. "The guard posted by her door was found with his neck broken."

The dark-haired woman made a sound of distress before she pushed past the two men and made her way down the long corridor to find the man they spoke of. The body was gone but the door to the princess's bedchambers were thrust open with a few armor-clad men moving around inside. It felt empty despite the guards, and the absence of the blonde-haired girl sent a chilly spike through her heart.

"When was she taken?" The Queen asked, turning to find her husband behind her. She felt arms fold around her as she shook.

"Ser Willem claimed his body to be cold by the time he found him," answered the King, his worried blue eyes on the empty bed that their daughter once filled. "We will find her, Snow; I promise."

A shaky breath fell from Snow's lips as she leaned against her husband, tears still heavily flowing from her dark eyes. "She took her," she whispered, but her words were caught by the blond man.

"Who took her?" He queried, though the answer was drawing to his mind even as he spoke.

"The Evil Queen," she spat spitefully. Pulling from the King, she paced around the large bedchamber once the guards had left.

"How can you be sure?" He stepped forward. "Perhaps she was anxious about the wedding. It will be soon."

"No," she murmured, shaking her head. "No, Emma would not do this."

"She is young, Snow." He sighed softly and drew closer to his wife. "And she is adventurous like you."

"But she would not just leave, James." Her voice had risen in her distress and she paced heatedly, crystalline tears falling down her snow-white skin. "She is the only one that would steal her away."

"Snow-"

But the Queen cut him off, her dark hues twinkling. "I- I have a feeling, James. I can feel her magic here. Please."

He let out a resigned sigh, a hand falling to the back of his neck. "You can feel her magic?"

Snow nodded quietly, her pink lips pressing together. "I know it well from the days we fought for
our lives. It's dark and suffocating and I just sense it in this room. Do you not feel it? The way it fills your lungs and makes the hairs on the back of your neck stand up?"

The King could not deny what the Queen had told him for he felt those very things and the invisible presence that seemed haunting in his daughter's bedchamber. "What do you propose we do? Do you know where she is?"

She seemed to relax at his words though her muscles were still tense. "We find the one who will know where she is."

The blood drained from his face at the Queen's implication. "The Dark One?" Snow nodded, silent. "He will be angry that she is missing."

"It will make him more determined."

King James swallowed thickly, his stomach twisting inside himself at the thought of the man with the crocodile smile. "Then let us call upon him."

Sleep was not something that would come to her in this dank prison cell. It was far too cold, she had discovered, especially during the night and the floor merely stripped the heat from her body. Thus, she sat, or paced, her feet aching against the cold stone, like ice against her bare skin. But that wasn't what had occupied her mind, no. She wanted a way out of here.

Time was naught but an illusion in this infernal entrapment. She once saw a guard approach, clad in black, shining armor as they lit the torch before her cell and then another came with a sad meal of slop and stale bread. Not once during those times had the Evil Queen returned and briefly she wondered if perhaps the wicked woman had forgotten her.

Not if they fed her, she added, pacing once again near the bars that kept her from freedom, but quickly fell away when she heard distant clatter +down the hallway followed by a shrill cry.

"No! Please!"

The princess quietly moved toward the shady part of her cell, disappearing into the shadows as she listened, the air trapped in her lungs. It wasn't long until she heard heavy footfalls approach along with the pleading voice of a girl and a tall, dark figure appeared; a mere shadow himself. "Please, ser, t'was a mistake! Let me go, please!" The girl, struggling in the armor-clad man's grip, pleaded.

Emma watched as the two passed and that was when she saw the young girl who had been tossed like a rag doll into the cell next to her. What little she caught of the girl told her she was nothing more than a peasant. Rags adorned her frail body and her hair looked as if it were made of straw. "Why are you doing this?" She cried, her voice hoarse, weak. "I just wanted food, good ser. Jus' let me go. The Queen needn't know. T'was just a mishap!"

"Oh, 'er Majesty will 'ear of this, personally." The knight growled as he slammed the cell door shut, quickly pulling out a ring of rusted keys to lock it up, eyes cold, emotionless, as they gazed upon the helpless girl. "You 'ave plotted misdeeds against 'er Majesty and that is the greatest crime of all. We cannot 'ave you goin' 'round plantin' seeds in others' 'eads."

"B-But I-I-I didn't do nothin', ser! 'Twasn't me!" The nameless girl was sobbing, her body curled against the cold, iron bars that she gripped tightly.
The man merely laughed at the desperate girl's pleas, the glow of the torchlight glinting off his ebony helm as his head shook. "You think me a fool, girl? They all say that when they face death."

"No, no, no! Please! I have a brother! He needs me. Please!" But the knight had chosen to ignore her words as he sauntered back down the corridor, his sword clanking against his armor with each step. The princess could only watch on in distress, her heart falling as the girl crumbled to the ground, a choked sob falling from her lips as she slowly resigned to the inevitable.

She had been forbidden from the dungeons by her mother. It was something she never dared to explore since her parents had kept it heavily guarded after the first incident. In her mind, she had always imagined most of the prisoners held within would be hard, scarred men with unsavory mannerisms and a reason to be thrown into the musty cells. But seeing this girl had taken those fabricated realities away and hit her with the truth; or perhaps the Evil Queen's truth.

Shuddering at the thought, the blonde maiden slowly made her way to the opposite side of the cell, toward the wrought iron bars that separated the two compartments. She saw the girl, still, curled into herself. Her sobs had weakened into soft moans, but even as Emma had approached, her feet shuffling against the stone, the girl never moved.

"H-Hello?" Emma whispered, eyes darting toward the silhouettes that moved down the corridor before landing on the other girl. "What's your name?"

The small form moved, another dark figure among the shadows, compelled by the blonde's voice. When she lifted her head, Emma could make out the soft features of the girl's thin face and the tears that stained the sharp contour of her cheeks; she had chestnut colored eyes and, for a moment, they reminded her of the Evil Queen, though this pair held a sort of innocence to them.

"Wha's'it to you?" Emma would have thought the girl's voice would be soft, quiet, but instead, it was brash and impatient, holding a certain lilt to it that she was all too familiar with.

"I would like to know the name of my cellmate." The princess remained a distance away from the bars, and ultimately the girl, wary of each movement she made. She was kept here for a reason. "I do pride myself on being good company."

"Good company?" The girl snorted softly. "Does it matter? We're sure to die in these dungeons."

"Even more reason to become acquainted with one another."

She heard the nameless girl release a sigh, the straw beneath her crunching as she shifted once again, this time facing the blonde. "Brynly. That's m'name."

"My name is Emma."

"Emma?" The peasant said the princess's name slowly as if she were tasting it on her tongue and finally moved from her spot on the floor to near the iron bars separating them. "Emma… Are you named after the princess o' the White Kingdom?" she queried, her voice cracked and rough.

Emma's heart skipped a beat. This girl knew of her. Briefly, she wondered if word had been spread about her disappearance. "What do you know of the princess?" She had to know.

Though, the question faltered the poor, young girl, for she merely blinked at the princess, a frown claiming her lips. "I-… Not much. I only heard whispers. She is the daughter o' the Queen's enemies. If we speak ov'em…" She trailed off, her words lost in the darkness.

"Is that what happened? Why you are here?" The blonde leaned forward, the frigidness of the iron
and the peasant girl's confession seeping into her skin and chilling her to the bone. She recalled the brief encounter between the girl and the knight, and the things he had accused her of.

The peasant girl shook her head; the straw that framed her face never moving. "I dare not speak of them while her loyalists are lurkin' 'bout."

"Whose loyalists?"

Brynly's eyes fell away, drifting toward the guards that moved in the distance, the sound of their armor clacking like a distant thunder. "The Queen's, o' course. They be the ones settlin' on will. They be the guards walkin' the streets. They be the shopkeepers and the bakers and the blacksmiths. They be the fortunate."

Emma met her gaze once again and she shuddered at the intensity within them; the fire that burned and told her that this girl did not admire the Evil Queen. "What do you mean by fortunate?"

"Them that have coin to put food in their bellies and a roof over their heads, even it it's naught but straw." Her tone had taken a hint of bitterness to it. "And bend knee to this Evil Queen; who'd easily behead 'em if they eye her wrong."

"Is she truly so evil?" The princess had heard the stories from her parents, but the extent of them had never been as intense, or bloody. She felt a knot in her stomach for what admiration she had felt for this woman and it made her ill. Wonder of her fate still lay open and dangerous.

"How do you not know?" Brynly rose to her knees, the aggressive and defensive side of her from earlier shining through once again. The fire within those dark orbs continued to burn and her lips twisted into a nasty scowl. "You not seen the streets of the villages? The people weepin' for food and shelter, their babes naught but bones. Or the guards she commands, beatin' 'em when they want just a bite o' the stale bread they throw to the hogs? Or them she beheads for speakin' against her, or them that try to leave for better lives, only to get killed by them guards o' hers?" There were fresh tears tracking down her pale cheeks, but she didn't seem to notice their presence. "She don't care for them that live in her lands, only for her petty revenge, and how she can get the White Kingdom once again."

Her words came as a shock to the blonde princess. She knew of the Evil Queen's desire for revenge and what she had put her parents through to get it, but she hadn't thought the woman would be so cruel to the residents that lived underneath her rule. Why would she create this kingdom if she had no desire to rule over it? And why would the Queen want to rule over the White Kingdom if she did not seem to care for the ones living there?

"So, yes, she is truly so evil." The girl spoke in the absence of Emma's words, her thin lips pressed together. "My parents were loyal to her once."

"O-Once?" The princess gained the ability to speak, once again, her voice cracking.

Brynly nodded quietly, dark eyes falling to the hard, cobbled stone. "They made the mistake of cursin' her name when there was a shortage o'food, a few years ago. They was tryin' to feed us; me and my little brother. The cost for stale bread was worth a month's supply o'food." When she looked up to meet Emma's gaze, her eyes were dull and empty. "We were fortunate to've owned a milk cow and a few chickens. It lasted us a chunk o'time and gave us a small profit when we sold to desperate souls, but we ran out fast and had to buy from the failing markets."

The straw-haired girl shook her head, moisture building in her eyes, shimmering in the gentle flicker of the flame. "I was with 'em that day. There was only a few loaves of bread left and they was askin'
a lot for 'em. We had enough, fortunately, but it coulda bought us a whole lot more on a good day. My father said somethin' 'bout how the Queen is throwin' away good food in her castle and my mama agrees, but a guard heard 'em as he was passin' and left me in the streets with a loaf o' bread as he took 'em away." Her voice grew quiet, the sound of her imminent tears thickening her next words. "The last I saw o' 'em was when their heads was rollin' away from their bodies."

"Gods," Emma breathed that singular word as it left her body, unable to comprehend what this girl had gone through. She was fortunate to have been born into royalty.

"And I will suffer the same fate," she added, defeated. "Rory will starve without me there to feed 'im. He is young, yet. They'll tear 'im apart if he don't get to an orphanage first."

The princess swallowed thickly. "Rory… Is that your brother?"

Brynly nodded. "I never got back to 'im. He don't know where I'm at and he's probably scared."

"What-What happened?" Emma's curiosity reigned victorious as she dropped to her knees, relieving the pressure off her aching feet. "What brought you here?"

The peasant girl merely laughed; something cold and humorless that stopped Emma's heart in her chest. "I stole a piece o' meat and got caught. The Shopkeeper seen me and brought a guard to beat me and told lies sayin' I was plottin' to kill the Queen while she slept. Me, as I am, but, o' course, the guard believed him. He's a loyalist, after all."

"Truly?" The princess frowned at the injustice that this girl had suffered. She leaned back slightly, putting the weight off her already sore knees. She touched them briefly and recoiled when she felt a sting, a dark and sticky liquid following her fingers. "Does the Queen not hold trial?" She asked, wiping the blood onto her already soiled nightdress.

Brynly scoffed at the blonde's words, a look of disbelief on her face. "For someone like me? No. She don't wait. She takes 'em straight to the block to chop their heads off." The girl's dark eyes kept on Emma's pale face for a long moment, searching. "Who are you? You speak like one of them lordly folks in the city and you act like you know nothin' of this kingdom."

Emma let her eyes fall away, but only for a moment. Would the girl believe her? "I am Princess Emma. The Queen stole me from my bed during the night."

She hadn't heard the girl laugh as she had in that moment, something humored instead of the cold chuckle she emitted earlier; it bounced off the stone walls, engulfing Emma like a sea. "If you say so, Princess Emma." Her laughter was infused into her words as she spoke, tears bringing themselves to her chestnut eyes. "You as a lady, mayhap, but the princess? The Evil Queen can do many a thing, but not that."

The princess shifted, offended, as if she had believed the girl would accept the fact willingly. "Why would I lie?" She found herself asking, bristling.

"'Cause I said somethin' 'bout the princess earlier," she chirped, eyes followed Emma as the blonde princess stood. "I appreciate the jest, princess. It makes death easier."

Her nose twitched at Brynly's words. "But I am the princess."

"Prove it."

"Prove it?" Emma stood in her spot, at a loss. How could she do such a thing? She hadn't jewels, nor her crown; not even her usual raiment. The nightclothes that she wore was certainly made of money,
but there were no distinguishable features to prove that they belonged to the Princess Emma White. "How?"

The girl chuckled softly and stood, using the iron rods to pull herself up, a smirk gracing her pale, thin lips. "I thought so."

Disgruntled, Emma paced her cell, fed up with her brain and her words and everything that this damned cell had given her. She was cold and exhausted and just wanted to return to her castle, even if she were going to be stuck there until the end of her days. It was certainly better than being trapped in this abyss of incertitude.

She found the pile of hay that made her makeshift bed, the shadows that revealed it danced as she descended into it, an aura of defeat following her.

"Tell me the truth," Brynly said, breaking the momentary silence when Emma had decided against speaking another word. She sunk into herself and looked up to see sparkling orbs fixated on her. "Is your real name Emma?"

The blonde nodded as she attempted to get comfortable, pulling the coarse material of the burlap over her being. It provided little warmth, but it was something. "Well, it certainly was something that my parents had taken to calling me." She watched as Brynly moved about her own cell, pushing the scattered straw with her feet to form a pile close to Emma, then sunk into it with a soft humph.

"I see. So were you named after the princess, then?" Emma only shook her head again and the peasant girl dropped the subject entirely as she spoke again. "Are you sleeping now?"

"Yes." She could feel the exhaustion weigh upon her like a rock.

"It's daylight out, y'know?" Her words, though, held no menace to them. She looked exhausted herself.

"I cannot remember the last time I had slept." Emma turned onto her side, pulling the burlap up to her chin as she curled underneath it.

"You have a blanket," she spoke, her voice echoing slightly off the stone. "I don't see none over here."

She frowned slightly, but opted not to say a word. She was finally warm and there was no way she was going to lose it, however guilt ridden she might feel that her new acquaintance had nothing. "It does not make much of a difference," she finally muttered.

"It's somethin'." Emma could hear as the girl shifted, the straw underneath her rustling slightly. "S'pose I'm used to it."

Emma frowned at her words, but remained silent. Instead, she curled as tightly as she could and closed her eyes, hoping that slumber would find her. To what matter was it, anyways, when she knew little of her fate in these upcoming days?
Chapter 3

When she woke again, she was met with a seeping, cold ache in her joints and what felt like a bruise on her hip. A soft groan left her lips as she rolled onto her back to relieve the pressure, jade eyes opening to the shadowed ceiling. Gods, she was hoping she would wake in her bed and that this was all just a long, lingering dream. But the remnants of what she had actually dreamt still stuck in her mind; a haunt of dark eyes and fire.

The blonde clenched her jaw as she stood, wanting to in that moment transform into a bird and fly far from here. It felt as if it had been months since she had last seen the light of day and her memory of it seemed distant and vague. Jade eyes drifted to soak in her familiar surroundings; wrought iron bars, stone walls, cobbled floor, and a peasant girl whose eyes were on her, all bathed in the gentle flicker of torchlight.

Slowly, she turned to girl, one she had become well-acquainted with the past… How long has it been again? She wondered if days had passed; the only indication of time was the meals she had been served. She hadn't received one in a while.

"Y'know, you never told me how you got here." A sudden voice filled the air; that of the peasant girl's.

Emma turned to face her, finding that Brynly had now stood, slender fingers curled around the bars that separated their cells. "I did tell you," she replied, voice hoarse. It wasn't until then did she realize her head was pounding. "Gods, how long have I been asleep?"

"I ain't sure. I slept some, myself. Woke before you. The torches were out." Brynly leaned forward, her interest in the subject not lingering long as she smirked and spoke again. "Now, what did ya tell me?"

Something in her chest burned. They had discussed this several times over, enough so that she thought Brynly would have given up by now. But, alas, she continued to press, and Emma continued to answer the same. "The Evil Queen has plotted against my mother and father, and it involved taking me, to make them believe I had abandoned them. What she has planned beyond that, she has not yet revealed." She shook her head and frowned.

"You seen her?" The girl's already large eyes grew. "And you ain't dead?"

"Yes," she answered, sudden relief taking her. Perhaps the girl finally did believe she was the princess. Emma moved closer to the bars when Brynly had done something similar, though her body seemed to have gravitated against her will with her growing curiosity. "I am unsure when. It was the first day I had woken up here. Days ago, weeks." Was she doomed to rot in these prison cells for the rest of her days?

"She say anything 'bout killin' you?"

"She is unable to. A powerful wizard cast a spell to protect my parents and I from her harm." She leaned against the iron bars. "But I do not doubt that she has plan of something dark; that is why I must escape this place."

"No one ever escaped before," Brynly whispered, the fingers that gripped the rough iron turned white from the intensity. "She's a witch, know? Magic holds this place better'n them guards do."

Emma shook her head, unwilling to believe that. "There must be a weakness." She furrowed her
brow in thought, thinking back to what her mother had told her about infiltrating the Queen's castle years before she was born and when a thought did approach, she opened her mouth to speak, only to be silenced as a guard's heavy steps approached.

Green eyes rose to meet the rugged, scarred face of a man dressed in fine, leather armor. He held a small, wooden bowl, liquid sloshing over the sides with each step her took onto the equally as small platter that held a few slices of bread. "'ere's your dinner," he said - nay, growled - as he started to force a key into the old rusted lock whilst balancing the tray. When he succeeded in opening the barred door, he nearly dropped the plate at the blonde's feet, forcing more of the liquid to spill, this time onto the cobbled floor.

"Th-thanks," she murmured, gaze moving from her meal to the large man that served it.

When he took a step toward her, she took one back, finding herself pressing into the iron bars behind her. He growled, something deep and primal, as his eyes ate up the girl's small form. She could feel his hot, rancid breath on her skin, forcing her to wrinkle her nose when the smell of it hit her.

"Too bad you're off limits." The blonde could feel a whimper rising in her throat, but she swallowed it down. The man laughed, something that resembled distant thunder, yet filled her senses all the same. "I could show ya what a real man is like. Would ya like that, princess?"

The blonde swallowed thickly, urging her body to move, but it didn't meet her demand. She was immobilized in her spot, staring into this man's dark eyes, knowing he had done something similar in the past. "Real men do not force themselves upon innocent maidens," she managed to say, attempting to keep the waver out of her voice.

The guard threw his head back and hooted, and even though the laughter sent a chill down her spine, she was thankful for the break in eye contact. "I bet even your old prince Charming has defiled a maid or two in 'is time. Ya don't know what makes a real man." His teeth were yellowed and crooked as they peeked out of his atrocious smirk. "Ah, but, alas, 'er Majesty don't want us touchin' ya. You're fortunate, little girl." He trailed a dirty finger along her jaw, leaving a path that burned her skin in its wake. He backed away from the princess and out of her cell, his cold laughter following him as he locked it up, once again.

"Eat. 'Er Majesty don't want ya starvin'." He puckered his lips and kissed the air, disregarding the disgusted look on the princess's face. "An' mayhap I get to 'ave me way wit' ya once she's done, so don't ya worry."

Emma ignored his words and turned away, no longer able to bear looking at him, though his words sent another chill down her spine. Would the Queen allow her guards free reign over her once she succeeded with her plan? The thought was not something she was willing to see to reality and was another reason to escape this foul place.

Once the guard had disappeared down the corridor, did Brynly finally speak, her skin pale and her eyes narrowed. "Don't listen to 'im. We'll get out of here before he can do anything."

The princess's body shook as she finally released the breath she had been holding and looked to the plate of food at her feet. "We need to escape," she murmured softly, slowly descending onto her knees, fingers moving along the cold, wooden bowl that held the same foul fish soup that she had been given every time the meals came. "However we may do so."

"The guard, mayhap? He has an eye for you." Brynly watched her, eyes falling to the food, though they quickly moved when Emma looked up.
"Are you hungry?" She asked, offering the bowl to the peasant girl. "I have plenty to share."

"Nay, I shouldn't." Her eyes fell away, the soft lines on her face frowning with her mouth. "Not while my brother is 'ungry."

Emma sighed softly and stood, slowly moving toward the girl, bowl extended. "If we shall escape, you must keep your energy." She saw a flicker of emotion in Brynly's eye, but the girl still hadn't moved. "I promise that when we escape, I will provide you and your brother with food and riches. My family will be grateful for your help and they mustn't refuse."

The straw-haired girl made a soft noise of disbelief, but she moved anyways, relieving Emma of the bowl. "You'd say anything, would you?"

The blonde, satisfied, shifted back toward the wooden plate that remained and the bread slices that were soggy now from the soup. She hesitated before grabbing a slice, her green eyes moving back toward the girl who was already slurping from the bowl. "No," she murmured in response, eyes back on her bread as she attempted to find a piece that hadn't been soaked in the fishy liquid. "I tell the truth."

"Oh, yes, yes, princess. Of course." The girl pulled the bowl from her lips and offered Emma another one of her smirks, showing of her slightly crooked teeth. "And you will give me land and a title, an' all that? A few servants o' mine own?"

"Now you are mocking me." Emma narrowed her emerald orbs on the girl and took a bite of bread, recoiling when she found her teeth all too easily sinking into it. "I do not appreciate that."

"Of course not, m'lady."

"I do believe the correct term would be 'Your Highness,'" Emma corrected, taking satisfaction in the way Brynly had rolled her eyes.

"Oh, quiet and eat your soggy bread." The girl crinkled her nose before pressing the lip of the bowl to her mouth, slurping up the contents once more.

The blonde grinned and finished off her bread, eyes falling to the second piece remaining. She ought to save it for later. She didn't know how long she would be here without her next meal.

With a sigh, she watched the girl savor the soup, and thought back to their prior conversation. "What did you mean by the guard, earlier?"

"Hm?" Brynly looked up from the bowl, licking her thin lips, which had now gained a soft pink hue. "The guard. Oh, yes. Well, he seems to fancy you." She shrugged slightly, slowly making herself comfortable on the floor, bowl in lap. "If he gets all handsy again, you can grab 'is sword there on 'is belt."

"And do what?"

"You can't wield one, eh?" She laughed at the thought. "Some princess you are."

The blonde's nose twitched. "My mother desired me to be a dainty princess, though that hadn't stopped me from training behind her back." Shifting onto her bottom to relieve her aching knees, and brought her legs up to her chest and shook her head slightly, memories swimming in her brain.

"Dainty, ah, sure." Brynly shifted, an amused twinkle in her lively eyes. Emma couldn't help but to smile in the light change of mood. "Well, the sword won't work. Is there anythin' smaller to stick 'im
"There must be another way," Emma murmured, mostly to herself, as she mulled over what the guard had on him. The thought, itself, was frightening. He was a large man and would surely overpower the small princess. "Attacking him does not appear to be a wise option if we wish to escape alive."

"I was thinking 'bout that." The peasant girl agreed, dipping a finger into the soup and popping it into her mouth.

Emma frowned slightly and leaned back in thought, lost in the dazzling fire that brought her reeling back to her prior dream. The longer that she had stared at the flame, the quicker she came to realize its unusual pattern as it flickered, causing the shadows to dance rapidly upon the cobbled stone. "Do you see that?" she asked quietly, her body twisting to peer into the corridor behind her, but all remained the same, with the distant silhouettes of the guards.

"See what?" Brynly queried, leaning forward, her eyes examining the same stretch of torch lit stone. "I seen nothing."

"It must be my imagination." The blonde turned back, but she couldn't shake the feeling that crept up her spine.

These dungeons can play tricks on the mind." she said, pointing to her head. "Or so I heard. I bet it's the Queen's doing. She wants to drive you as mad as she. Slowly break your mind. Make you wish you was dead."

Emma shuddered and unconsciously picked up the second slice of bread, but it merely fell apart before she could bring it to her lips. "A good reason to escape."

"I agree." Brynly nodded. "I'd like to leave with my body in one piece."

The blonde nodded, unable to keep her jade gaze from the empty corridor. "We need the keys," she stated, her eyes widening at her own words, even as she spoke them. "I am sure those are what we require to escape. The guard had more than one key."

"I bet they unlock more than one door." Brynly's grin only widened, a finger tapping her head. "Smart thinking, princess. If you let 'im get handsy with you, you can grab 'em right from his pocket."

The thought had her skin crawling; she could still feel his the way his finger moved along her jaw.

"This does not please you, eh?"

She shook her head and swallowed thickly, a hand moving to cover the burning trail. "No, but, if it must be done, then I shall do it."

"A true hero, eh, Princess Emma?" Brynly smirked. "This calls for a victory slurp." She held her bowl up as if to toast before taking a long drink from the cold contents.

"How can you stomach that?" Emma's nose crinkled in disgust as she remembered the bitter taste on her tongue and the vomit that had soon followed.

"Oh, sorry, Your Highness. You not accustomed to peasant food?" A playful grin lilted her lips.

"No," she murmured softly, her lip curling up; the foul stench reached her, even from the distance. "I
"More accustomed to the fine cuisine that is prepared for royalty." A husky voice finished the princess's thought and immediately quelled the mirth of the conversation. She could feel her heart stutter when she saw a figure approach, the remnants of purple smoke creating a haunting aura around it. "Unfortunately, I do not find myself generous enough to provide my prisoners such a luxury."

Emma could feel the blood drain from her face as she gazed upon the woman who stole the air from her lungs. She found it hard to breathe as she quickly stood to face the Evil Queen, her wide, emerald orbs meeting burning chestnut.

"Though, it seems that Princess Emma is as benevolent as her parents, sharing her food with the peasants even when she should not be." Those smoldering, dark eyes fell upon Brynly, who had immediately dropped the bowl, allowing the rest of the contents to spill onto the stone floor. Emma could feel as the cool liquid splattered against her bare feet. "But, what else to share, while you conspire to escape my humble castle? Perhaps I need to speak to a particular guard about sorting the prisoners properly."

"I-I-I don't mean no harm, Y-Your Majesty." It was odd seeing Brynly, the once vibrant and sassy peasant girl, being reduced to a terrified and stuttering mess.

"And why should I believe the word of a pathetic, lice-ridden peasant when I was told otherwise?" The Queen moved from Emma's cell to Brynly's, her slender fingers curling around the bars as she stared down the frightened girl. "I was told you conspired against me, and yet I am to believe that you are innocent of such a crime while I hear of your plan to escape, and no doubt murder me while I sleep?"

"I was doing no such thing, Your Majesty." Her eyes were wide and Emma swore they would pop out of her head.

"It is true," Emma spoke in defense of the girl. "We were not conspiring murder. That would make us no better than you."

"Than me?" The Evil Queen's laughter boomed, echoing off the stone walls, filling Emma's senses completely, yet, she much preferred it to the guard's, even as it made her shudder against the iron she found herself pressing against. "Ever like Snow White, child. You think you can redeem yourself by sparing me? Is sparing your conscious worth it as I rip the heart out of your chest and turn it to dust?"

"You cannot harm me!" Emma yelled, courage taking her in that moment. "You think you can work through me to get revenge on my parents, but you cannot. I refuse to do any of your bidding, witch."

The Queen chuckled darkly, moving from the girl's cell to Emma's, eyes meeting the blonde's. She immediately felt her courage run away, tail tucked. "We will see, princess. You have said, yourself, that you desired to escape your castle, and perhaps, your parents, even if you do not seek it consciously." She tilted her head slightly, her crimson lips curling into a cruel smirk, and all Emma saw was red and white; the colors she would no doubt be witnessing by the end of this. "Without your parents, Emma, you are free to do what you wish. You are free to govern your own life."

"At what cost?" Emma found herself asking, dubious.

"At the cost in which it takes, child." The Evil Queen purred, reaching through the bars. "I could give you such freedom."
The blonde recoiled when the brunette Queen touched her cheek, though the latter had tightened her
grip before Emma could move away. "You cannot and you will not. What kindness do you harbor in
that black heart of yours?"

"You would merely have to discover that for yourself, princess." Her eyes never left Emma's and the
blonde wished she could have looked away, but something compelled her to keep contact. "Alas, I
will let these words settle. For now, I shall take my leave." She pulled away, releasing the blonde's
aching jaw, a pleased grin on her face.

"What do you want?" Emma demanded, thirsty for more and desperate to not be left again.

"The answer is simple, princess; I want your parents' heads on a silver platter." She husked, though
the smile that she wore faltered when Emma next spoke.

"Is that all you care about, Regina? What for? What will it grant you? A kingdom that you do not
want?"

Her lip curled in disgust, though there was an underlying emotion in her eye; an uncertainty. "It will
please me to see the White family as they fall from their glory and into the ashes where they belong.
They have done much to me; far more than your precious little mind can bear knowledge of." She
took a step away from the cell in preparation of her leave. "Only as what they built crumbles to the
ground will I truly be at peace."

"You will let our kingdom fall apart? You never had any desire to run it?"

"Of course not, stupid girl." The Evil Queen spat. "What do you care? You do not wish to rule it,
either."

"It is still my home." Emma glared at the Queen, a certain heat burning within her emerald gaze like
liquid fire.

The dark witch only snorted, a smirk claiming her lips once again. "We will see what you think of
that when I am through with you." Her eyes fell to the rusted lock on Emma's cell before she waved
a hand over the piece of iron, a surge of purple magic binding it. "A simple key will not open this
lock, now, girl. Your plan to escape is futile."

"We will find another way," Emma said, her voice firm, as she watched the pleased witch with a
glower. Why did she look as if she enjoyed the defiance of the princess?

"I will not count on that." The Queen looked toward the peasant girl, whose eyes were wide with
fright. "She will be placed elsewhere, I will see to it that Ser Eordic handles this personally." When
Emma stared at her, lost and blank-faced, she merely cackled. "I will be visiting you soon, princess.
Keep an eye out." And, without another word, the woman was gone in a cloud of dark magic.

Emma felt like she could breathe for the first time since the Evil Queen had appeared. She slumped
against the iron bars, light headed, as she thought over their conversation and the final words that had
eradicated their hope of escape. Her chest tightened. Her future was imminent, as was Brynly's, who
had started to become something of a friend in their short time together.

"You really are the princess," Brynly spoke, her voice bewildered, as she moved toward the bars
that separated their cells. "I apologize for everything, Your Highness."

Emma couldn't help but to allow a chuckle, but it soon turned into a sob as tears broke their barrier
and fell down her cheeks. "No, I must apologize. I could not… save us. You."
The young girl frowned slightly and reached through the space between the rods, finding purchase on the blonde's shoulder. Emma sighed, thankful for the small comfort. "It's no worry, Your Highness. I knew I was dyin' as soon as they took me. It's not your fault. You… You gave me all I could ask for; a friend."

"Call me Emma," the blonde said, quietly, turning slightly to consider those sad, shimmering chestnut orbs and found just that in them. "A friend? I enjoy the thought."

Brynly smiled, finally, and pulled her hand away. "It's good to have when you're facin' death. Makes you lighter."

Emma nodded, the girl's smile contagious as she found herself doing the same. "I have never had a true friend. They were always daughters of lords that wanted to please me."

The straw-haired girl snorted and smirked. "That lot is the worst. I was no princess, but I had poor men's daughters talkin' to me 'cause we had our livestock. 'Course, none of 'em wanted anythin' to do with me after we lost 'em."

"The convenience," she said with a soft scoff. "They only want you for what you have. I say we must all meet in the dungeons; perhaps then we will see a person for who they truly are."

Brynly perked at the blonde's words, her head bobbing in agreement. "T'is true. I would feel too lowly speakin' to you."

"But you are not, Brynly. Not to me." Emma frowned slightly, pulling away from the bars as they began to grow an ache in her back. "I may get this from my mother, but I wish we were all equal; at least socially. You should not be looked down upon for having less wealth than I do."

"That's how it be, Emma." Brynly offered her a sad smile. "Thems be the rules set long before our time."

"Some unspoken rule that these noblemen felt the need to follow." Emma muttered quietly. "When I was younger, I never understood why my parents had disallowed me to play with the children in the city."

"'Cause they be poor and dirty and Gods be damned if aprincess plays with 'em." The girl pressed her lips together, causing them to disappear into a line as she did so. "Is that why you wanted to leave?"

"What do you mean?" Emma frowned slightly and shifted, her brows furrowed. She never recalled telling the peasant of her secret desires.

"The Queen. She said somethin' 'bout you wantin' to leave your castle."

"Oh." For some reason, she seemed to have forgotten that Brynly was present for her conversation with the Evil Queen. Whenever that woman was around, it felt as if the two were the only ones on earth and time seemed to stop; and the two had only met twice. "I-In a way, yes. But, what I desired most was not to be known as a princess, but as Emma."

"Then you couldn't get me and my brother food, eh?" Her eyes narrowed slightly, almost accusatory, but a smile remained.

"I will be able to do that for you, Brynly. This-This desire, it's just a dream. I thought about it for years, but I could not do it." She sighed softly and played with a tear in her silken nightclothes. "And, besides, I am betrothed to a powerful man's son. They would find me."
The girl sucked air through her teeth. "Mayhap they will find you here, yeah?"

"Perhaps," she murmured softly. "I never thought of that. The Evil Queen would be the first to blame."

"Who you s'pose to wed?" Brynly pressed, fingers curling around the bars as her curiosity grew.

Emma met her anxious stare with narrowed eyes, scoffing softly. "No one you would have knowledge of."

"Ooh, Your Highness is blushin'." She teased, a smirk on her pale lips.

"I am not." The blonde princess touched her cheek, a scowl on her face.

"How many years you be?" The girl asked, letting the previous subject drop as Emma's hand did. "I be turnin' nineteen soon, I know."

"Truly?" Emma's eyes widened slightly before she stepped closer to the bars. "I will be, as well. Odd, is it not?"

"Tis." She beamed, the smile engulfing her thin, pale face. "Hope we can make it, eh?"

"We will," the princess said, her voice quiet, serious.

A grim look crossed the other girl's features. "We be seeing 'bout that." She stepped away from the bars, her eyes falling to something past the blonde.

When Emma had turned, she saw a tall figure approach; one much larger than the guard before him. She swallowed thickly when he neared, a sense of dread seizing her. His armor appeared bulky, though she could not tell whether that was the man himself or the ebony metal, yet he wore no helm, revealing short, dark hair. When his eye fell on the blonde princess, it was then that she knew what fear truly felt like. The man screamed death. His eyes were dark, hollow, even though they were an icy blue in color. He had deep, jagged scars covering his face, and half his right ear was missing. She shuddered to think what the other man looked like.

His lips were set in a grim line, but they moved when he spoke in a deep, raspy voice, his gaze moving toward Brynly. "Yer coming wit' me."

It was then that Emma knew who this man was; Ser Eordic, as the Evil Queen had mentioned. He must be of high ranking the way she spoke of him. Cold, she felt, at the thought of what he had to do for such acclaim.

"N-no..." Brynly's voice was a whimper as she pressed against the furthest corner of the compartment, cowering slightly as the man neared. With one swift movement, he effortlessly ripped the lock off the cell door with his hand, wrenching it open. Emma swallowed thickly, fearing for her new found friend in that moment. "P-Please..."

"It is in yer best interest that ye don't resist," he growled, the intensity of it felt as if it reverberated off the walls. "Unless ye would like a premature death, girl."

The peasant girl shook her head, tears running like small streams down her cheeks as she sobbed, her body pressed to the corner.

"What are you going to do to her?" Emma asked, moving from her spot as the man entered Brynly's cell. She flinched when his boot landed on the abandoned bowl, shattering it underneath his weight.
"That is none of yer business, princess." He kept his eyes on Brynly as he continued forth. In one fell swoop, the girl was flung over his shoulder like a potato sack. She struggled, though he didn't seem to pay any heed to her attempts. "If ye wish to live longer, girl, ye shouldn't struggle."

"Brynly," Emma said the girl's name, attempting to savor it on her tongue, as she followed Eordic's movements.

She ceased her struggles when she heard her name spoken by the princess, and when the two had passed, their eyes met. Hers were large, frightened, and red from tears. "Emma," she choked on the blonde's name, her arms reaching out as if Emma could save her.

But she couldn't. Emma futilely reached out, just grazing the straw-haired peasant girl's fingers. "We will see each other again," she promised, though she didn't quite know if she could fulfill it.

"I will remember you," Brynly said, defeat in her tone, as Eordic continued down the corridor until they were naught but a silhouette, and as they furthered, they became a memory.
Darkness is what claimed the air when Emma woke, the tickling sensation of a scurrying mouse across her foot had pulled her from another dream of haunting crimson lips. The torch’s flame must have gone out again, she thought, sitting up with no chance of finding slumber again; she could still hear the squeaking of the rodent nearby.

She pulled herself up off the straw bed, the prickly bits sticking to her nightdress and poking her with every movement she made. With a few memorized paces, she found the iron bars and looked out into the darkness. She shuddered and wondered if the Queen would appear again. Though, part of her would be relieved to see the woman. At least she wouldn't be alone. It was cold and damp, and her stomach complained, ready for another meal.

"Hello?" The princess called into the chillingly quiet air. Her fingers grazed over the rusted iron as she gazed down the corridor again, searching for a wayward flame, but it was completely dark, this time.

"Hello." A rumbling voice sounded just before the blonde's face, forcing her to fall away from the bars and tripping over the wooden tray from her last meal. Her head met with the hard stone, leaving stars to dot her vision and made her brain swim on the brink of unconsciousness.

Emma knew immediately who the voice had belonged to; she could feel the dark presence engulf her and it was smothering and powerful. A flame brightened her cell and she squinted against it, now able to make out the shape of the Evil Queen.

"Princess, it does well to see you again." Her words were sardonic and those dark eyes ate her up. "Have you thought over what I had said?" The husky voice inquired, slender fingers curling into the bars. Emma stood, her head buzzing as she attempted to ground herself. The dancing shadows only seemed to pull the world around her.

"What was there to think over?" She paced forward, though kept her distance, a desire to keep any further bruising from her jaw.

"Cooperation, child. Would you willingly submit yourself to me?"

"What?" The blonde could have laughed if she felt she had the energy for it. "Why would I do such a thing?"

"What other choice have you, princess?" She spat the word as if it were a curse. "You will never make it out of here with your head attached to your shoulders. You can either rot down here forever, or join me."

The princess swallowed thickly, but stood straighter, her eyes on fire. "You cannot kill me. My choices may be limited, but that is one thing that cannot happen."

The Queen smirked, her head tilted to the side as if she found amusement in the younger woman's words. "Perhaps you cannot perish by my hand, but I do have plenty of other options. Any one of my knights would be capable of carrying out such a deed."

"You would not let some knight take your revenge away from you." Emma spat, though when the older woman moved, she tensed in her spot.

The Evil Queen waved a hand over the rusted lock and used an invisible force to push the barred
door open, barely giving Emma enough time to miss the whining iron as it slammed against the bars. The witch seemed to pay no mind, for she merely stepped into the cell, forcing the blonde to move further back, slowly resenting herself for speaking at all.

"You are frightened, yet there is valiance in your soul." There was a sparkle of admiration in the dancing light of her eyes, but it was quickly quelled and replaced with an insane anger that could have expelled the urine from her bladder. "Do not be brave with me, girl. It will only get you killed." Emma cried out softly when her arm was squeezed and she was pulled forward, roughly falling into the Evil Queen. "You think your life was hell? You haven't seen hell, yet."

Her head buzzed as the blood fled from it, her heart pounding hard against her chest. "P-Please. I have done you no wrong!" She pleaded, knowing full well that it was futile, her green eyes shimmering in the torchlight. She was daunting; The Evil Queen was, towering over her small, dirty form, and it only shook her body as her future drew near. Emerald eyes slowly moved to meet the chestnut ones before her. Their proximity seemed to steal the air from her lungs.

"I… I'm sorry. For everything that my parents have put you through," she found herself saying, unable to stop the words, and hoping that they would prevent the events that were about to unfold.

"Your apologies will do nothing, princess." The Evil Queen's fingers dug into the young blonde's arm and she could already feel the bruises. "Your fault lies within your life, sweet child. Now you will pay with blood." She hissed, turning away.

"Come," she demanded as if Emma had a choice, jerking the princess with her as she left the filthy cell and brought her down the long, dark corridor that she had only seen from within the confines of her cage. She took this opportunity to look around, searching the cells that were being revealed one by one from the flame that followed them, finding sparse prisoners in each, all begging and hissing at the Evil Queen. Unconsciously, she searched each face hoping to find a friend; Brynly; but she was unable to make out the forms as they passed.

The princess had opted to remain silent as the dark Queen led her up a set of steep, cobbled stairs that hurt her bare feet. She grunted softly, attempting to keep up with the woman dragging her along like a child's doll. Once they reached the top landing, she was out of breath, her fear growing tenfold. She hadn't a clue where the witch was leading her and she didn't want to find out.

Her eyes stung as they passed through a doorway, the harsh light of day illuminated the ebony stone they trod upon. She had to keep herself from shedding tears as she basked in the sun's golden rays. It warmed the stone underneath her feet and seeped into her cold, aching bones.

Emma inhaled deeply, then, as they passed by several open windows, breathing in the fresh scent. Gods, it was better than the bitter, recycled air of the dungeons. She let her eyes open, finally, and looked to the Queen before her, the woman's grip still tight on her arm. It was then that she was able to see the woman in clear daylight and the glory that she held. Her attire was something black and flowing that swished when she walked, and her dark hair was piled atop her head, wild and teased.

"Where are we going?" She gained the confidence to query, flinching slightly when the older woman had stopped to whip around, eyes on the blonde princess. But, Gods, her ears were nearly deaf to the Queen's words when their eyes met and she became mesmerized by the way her once chestnut gaze shone gold in the sunlight.

"You will be washed at once. Your odor is nauseating."

The two soon found themselves before another set of stairs, this time they were smoother and spiraled as they ascended them. Emma was lost in the winding corridors, each filled with large,
stained windows and black stone, decorated with paintings, weapons, and banners. She became enamored by them and hadn't realized when they turned, that she was faced with a metal tub.

The Queen had pushed her into the room where a young, frightened handmaiden waited, the bath already drawn. Steam rose from the water and Emma found herself wanting to sink into it and warm her chilled bones. Everything ached in the cold and dark, timeless dungeon.

"She will take care of your bathing. No doubt you are familiar." The Queen stated, dark eyes falling to the handmaiden before shifting toward the blonde.

"I can bathe myself." Emma finally snapped, arms wrapping around herself as she eyed the poor girl next to her. She appeared no older than the princess herself, if not younger.

The Evil Queen's eyes narrowed before her hand drew hard across the princess's cheek. Emma gasped sharply at the unexpected contact, her head snapping to the side from the force. When her gaze fell back upon the older woman, the Queen's mocha eyes were alight with a raging fire, lip pulled back into a snarl.

"Do not defy me, princess. I am providing you with a warm bath, are you truly going to refuse? I have no quarrel with throwing you back into the dungeons."

Emma could only nod, a soft whimper falling from her lips. After seeing the sunlight once again, the prospect of the dungeons seemed unfathomable. She might as well see what the witch had in store for her before she spoke again.

The brunette turned toward the servant who stood, watching, relief on her face. "Bathe her. When you are finished, bring her to the council room."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The servant bowed her head.

The Queen left the two alone. Emma sighed softly and looked to the young girl before her eyes found interest in the room they were in. It was large, and one might say perhaps too large for a simple washroom, but this was in the castle, and the Evil Queen's at that. The walls were made of ebony stone, as was most of the interior of the castle she had found, smooth and shining when the sunlight touched them.

It was almost comforting, Emma had found herself thinking, if she were not held captive here. She sighed as she allowed the girl to help her out of her tattered nightclothes. At her castle, she had convinced her parents and the handmaidens to let her bathe herself. Independence was always something that she wanted and wherever there might have been freedom, however small, she would take it.

The princess let a soft sigh escape as she slipped into the warm water. Aside from the sharp sting of her cheek and knees, the warmth was relaxing, comforting. She wished she could remain here forever; to forget about the world around her and believe that she was free and not a prisoner of the Evil Queen. But, she knew that she couldn't, and that the Evil Queen waited for her to finish. Her heart sunk as as she thought of what might be in store for her.

Queen Regina sat poised in a throne-like chair at the head of the council room's table, her olive fingers drumming against the chestnut surface, patience ever waning. The room was bathed in natural sunlight from a row of large windows on the northern wall, its rays splashing against the brunette's back, casting her shadow against the wooden slab.

The high ceiling was vaulted and held intricate patterns that were chiseled along the borders,
something that she had once created herself. It was art etched into the walls that often caught her
attention and stole her boredom on days with little activity. The entire castle held its own unique
stories that were worked into the ebony stone; some unimportant detail she felt necessary to have.

The Queen took her eyes off the swirling patterns when she heard the handmaiden and the princess
enter, eclipsing the sunlight as she stood. Emma had now donned something other than the ragged
and soiled nightclothes; some tan tunic and black leather pants that she had manifested. She was
rather charming, Regina briefly thought, now that dirt hadn't covered her face and those blonde locks
spilled down her shoulders like a golden waterfall.

She turned to the handmaiden who stood beside the blonde still. "Leave us, Gilda." When the young
girl had fled, the dark Queen moved toward the princess, fingers gently caressing the discolored
skin on her cheek. "They say the color black is for mourning. I find the color rather soothing." She
smirked. "And blood does not stain it." She withdrew her hand.

"My mother never allowed me to dress in black; she said it reminded her of death; of you." Her pale
face seemed to glow in the warm rays that spilled past the brunette.

"Your mother. She is the daughter of the absence of color." The Queen chuckled softly. "Black and
white, what opposites we are. If only things were as simple as that in life."

"That is what Snow seems to believe," Emma spoke, soft and hesitant. "Or, at least, those are the
stories that she told. You were malevolent, haunting her, murdering and letting your anger take you."

Regina could feel the corners of her mouth tug into a helpless smirk, something stirring within her;
that bubbling fire that she always felt when there was even mention of Snow White. "And she, ever
the benevolent little brat, never once harmed a single hair on anyone's head, I am sure she told you.
Anything to make me look like a monster; to turn her children and her kingdom against me."

The blonde princess shook her head, slowly, her gaze falling to the cool, stone floor. A moment
passed as Regina waited for the girl to speak and, as she was about to give in to her impatience, she
finally did. "You were betrayed by my mother. You had trusted her with a secret that she could not
keep and I am sorry for that." The younger woman lifted her gaze, leaving the Evil Queen to drown
in a sea of green, unable to look away as those words left Snow White's daughter's lips. Was this girl
truly sympathizing or was she merely playing a game?

The Evil Queen lurched forward, detecting the excrement that flowed from the girl's mouth, the
distant memories that darkened her eyes floating away. "I needn't listen to this," she growled.
"Sympathy and lies will not get you far, princess." This time she did not hold herself back as she
caught the princess by the throat, her short nails biting into the delicate, milky skin. "Do you hear
me? It will not work! Do not underestimate me for I have no good side and will not show
you mercy."

She could hear Emma gasp when the young princess attempted to speak, her voice hoarse and
strained. "Then kill me because- because I am not lying." She struggled for another breath and the
Queen briefly thought of releasing her grip when the glossy eyes met her chestnut orbs. "I believe
you have something good i-inside of you, Regina, a-and I want to get to know that part of y-you."
She remained still despite her predicament, and continued to speak, her voice weakening. "I want to
give you happiness."

Regina laughed, something that reverberated off the stone. She squeezed a little harder in spite of
herself before releasing the blonde's throat, pushing her hard and kept her steady gaze on Emma as
she fell onto the hard stone. "Give me happiness? And how do you propose you will do that,
princess?" She glowered down at her. "Your parents' death will make me happy, and I will
be ecstatic if you consummated the deed yourself."

Emma was coughing as she brought fresh air into her lungs, but the fit seemed to have passed quickly when the older woman's words registered and those sparkling emerald eyes widened. "What will their death bring you? You have played a game of cat and mouse for so long, what will your life be worth since you have lived it only to avenge this spilled secret?" Silence was not provided long enough for an answer to be produced when the princess spoke again, this time there was a hesitance in her speech. "Perhaps all you need is another reason to live; a friend."

Regina took this moment to close her eyes. Emma was her parents' daughter; good and kind of heart, and ever the optimist. It made her ill. She shook her head and paced across the room, eyes on the banners that hung torn and ragged from the ceiling. They had once represented the promise of prosperity for this new era, but, like herself, they had fallen apart with time, a shadow of their former selves.

"It is no place of yours to tell me what I do and do not need." She whipped back around, though she was met with an eyeful of something other than those green orbs. "You... Gods, you. Too much like your mother; irritating. At least she never attempted to expose her assets."

Emma's brows had squished together in her momentary confusion before she quickly gathered wit and stood, adjusting her tunic and brushing the imaginary dirt from her pants. "I had not meant to tell you what to do. I was merely... observing."

The Queen broke contact and turned to the grand window, taking in the view of the lush, green forest that surrounded her castle and stretched beyond her eye. "You are much more effort than you are worth," she muttered. "Why would you foolishly befriend an enemy of your family? It could easily get you killed if word reached the ear of the wrong person." She scoffed. "And, do not forget, you are my prisoner. Befriending me will not spare you of your fate, child."

"And what fate have I?" Regina heard the younger woman's voice behind her, strong and sure. "Why did you remove me from the dungeons?"

"You certainly are letting your courage take the lead, girl." The Evil Queen strode forward, a pace away from the golden-haired maiden, finding herself fingering one of the soft locks. "Tell me, have you ever wielded a sword? Killed a man?" She dropped her hand to run down the princess's bicep, finding her answer as she felt the muscles ripple. "Have you ever watched a man die?"

"I have had some training in swordplay," she answered, though her voice grew hesitant as she spoke, emerald eyes darkening. "I watched the old priest succumb to illness."

"An old priest's illness is not what I had meant." The Queen's laughter only grew; something cold and humorless. "Perhaps we can see where your swordplay skills lead you, child. I can only hope that you will not disappoint for your purpose in my grasp will be moot."

"What is it that you mean? What does my swordplay skill have to do with anything?" There was a distant horror etched on her face and the brunette could only smirk.

"Oh, many things, princess, so let us hope that you can wield a real sword." She released the curl wrapped around her slender digit and stepped back, dark eyes absorbing the blonde princess. "We have yet to bloody you and perhaps I will start with something... simple. I have many disloyal men held prisoner that needs taken to the block. Perhaps you will do the honors when the time is right." She smoothed her hands down the folds of her cloak, those penetrating chestnut orbs never leaving the younger woman's soft features, now more prominent when she contemplated those words. "How does that make you feel? Could you take another life?"
Emma's emerald orbs darkened and her mouth sunk into a frown. "I-I am unsure. If the accusation is just, then perhaps I could deal punishment." Her eyes followed the brunette woman's olive hands as she continued to finger the rich fabric.

"Unsure, princess?" Regina's hands fell away as she took another step toward the younger woman, her form looming over the White princess. "Well, I certainly do hope you will be sure when the time comes because if you are not, well... things will be unnecessarily gruesome." A smile crossed her features, but it was far from friendly. "Once you have taken one life, the next will be easier and from then on, it will be like swatting flies."

When she pulled away from the princess's space, she could see the younger woman sag in her spot. Another wolfish smirk claimed her lips, flashing pearl against plum. She gestured toward the chestnut table that remained momentarily abandoned behind them before taking her spot at the front of the table and leaned against the chair, eyes landing on the spot to her right. "Sit," she growled the demand, watching as the princess meekly slunk over to the open space and slipped in, her back as stiff as a rod. She certainly was royalty.

The Evil Queen leaned toward the blonde whose eyes ate up the intricate carvings on the wood before her. "I am curious, princess, about what you had mentioned in the dungeons. You desire to be free, to leave and adventure, why?" Though, she felt as if she already knew the answer. Long ago, her own defiance had gotten the better of her, some desire to break free and make her own choices, but it had ultimately failed when Snow White had come along.

Silence was followed as it took the blonde girl a moment to answer. She seemed to hesitate, her lips parting as if she were going to say something, only to press together once again. Regina watched, curious, until she finally did speak, though her words were quiet, as if she were afraid to speak them. "My... I am unable to choose anything for myself. Everything in my life is predetermined; like I never had a choice in the matter; as if my life weren't my own." Her gaze met with Regina's for a moment, a brief anger flashing within those soft, green irises. "Before I was even born, I was promised to a man."

The Queen inclined her head, humming softly. "What I do not understand is why you have been betrothed to a man that is not of your choosing when your dear mother will bluster about True Love until the end times." Her upper lip curled into a sneer at the thought, memories of her own flooding over her like a tidal wave of love, loss, and pain. "Of course, it will allow you to rule over the Kingdom and grant you more power than you will ever know. Unfortunately, the Queen does not get much say, or at least from my experiences. Half-witted men who merely think with the worms between their legs." She snorted and pushed the dark clouds from her brain. "If I had not taken the throne for myself and demanded allegiance, they would have expected me to take another husband, though, that was no matter since your mother was the heir of the throne. Women are weak, they say, but I proved them wrong when they defied me and snapped their necks like twigs."

Emma started to lose her posture as she leaned against the table, those vibrant green orbs sparkling as she ate up what the Queen had dished out to her. Regina could not help the smile that tugged at her lips like an insatiable wind.

"As much as I had fought against it, I was out of luck." Emma spoke, her voice cool and full of a certain venom she never heard from Snow White. "It was a truce, my mother had said. They want me to marry Baelfire, a boy that I had not seen for more than a handful of minutes, because of a deal made with Rumpelstiltskin."

"Truces and power are the dominant underlies of an arranged marriage. My own mother wanted me to be Queen and your grandmother had just passed. The King was searching for a wife, thus my
mother had taken initiative and offered me to him like a goat." Chestnut eyes grew slightly when she
realized what she had said and quickly wired her jaw shut. The girl was her prisoner, not a common
friend. She saw it, though; the potential. There was a soft lilt on the princess's lips and that attentive
look in her eye, as if she clung on to each word.

But then it was gone when a certain spark entered her eyes, one that the Evil Queen knew all too
well. Her speech dropped to naught but a mere whisper under her breath. "Sometimes it feels as if I
was no more than a pawn to them than a daughter."

"You are a pawn, my sweet princess, as am I. We are all pawns to the greater forces, bending knee
and will to these dark things. To the Dark One. I have crossed this man and he is not to be dealt with
lightly." But she smirked, regardless. "Queen Snow is a pawn, King James is a pawn, Baelfire is a
pawn. I wonder what they did to warrant such a price and why they accepted these terms when it
meant burdening you heavily."

"Protection is all they said. They never did explain; Gods, they never had the audacity when it
affected me the most." The princess shook her head slightly, honey curls bouncing with each
movement. "He is in love with me," she said quietly. "A woman that he has never truly known, yet
he claims that he loves me." She laughed, and it was cold. "But I don't love him." The maiden
sighed, eyes falling on the older woman's face.

The Queen quirked a brow, head tilting to one side. "How are you so certain that he is in love with
you? Of course, I do not doubt this. You are young and fair, and men are easily swayed by this."

She could see the blood rise to Emma's face; a soft, pink gale that spread up her neck and bloomed
over her pale features. "He had confessed to me during our last meeting. He is a fool."

Regina felt laughter bubble in her throat from the comment and allowed it to slip through dark lips,
her body leaning back against the chair as it creaked underneath her shaking body. She quite liked
the young princess's attitude. Perhaps she would keep the girl under her wing when all was said and
done. "You have potential, child, if you serve me. I can take you away from this life in which you do
not want."

"I have potential?" The princess seemed to quirk in her spot. The words, even though coming from
the dark and feared Queen, had intrigued her.

"I see a great potential in you, yes. What I will provide to you is not what you desire most. Freedom
is not abundant, but you will not be forced into marriage nor will you need to worry about your
duties as a princess. Let it be known that your options are quite limited. You may serve me, or you
may wither in the dungeons, for alternate choices are unavailable." The Queen watched her through
dark eyes as the girl had contemplated her words. When she remained quiet, the brunette spoke
again, her voice a sure rumble. "If you choose to serve me, you will taste blood, and I hope you will
hunger for it. How does that sound?"

"What if I… What if I kill someone and live my life with nightmares haunting me? What will you do
with me, then?" Her response was immediate after the latest question, as if no more thought went
into the options provided, and it was then that the Queen knew the answer.

Her lips stretched into a wicked smile and she leaned back once again, fingers drumming on the
wooden table. "Either way, I will be successful in my endeavors. I am here to break your mind,
princess, not be your friend. This," she growled, gesturing between the two, "this is nothing. You
have no other choices here. You are not free here."

Though, for a reason unknown to the Queen, the princess seemed to nod at her words, even smiling
when a curve took to her lips and the lines on her face. She shifted to the edge of her seat and pressed against the table, green eyes determined as she spoke. "Very well. And it's Emma, not princess," she stated, those mesmerizing emerald orbs meeting with the Queen's own. "You are breaking me free from that life, if what you say is true. That title will be nothing."

Regina quirked a brow and chuckled once again at this newfound confidence that the blonde had held. "You are a princess until you are not, princess," she sneered at the young woman's smile and stood, turning her attention elsewhere. "Great rewards will come to you if you prove yourself to me. Of course, that road is long ahead of us. What say you of this? Are you true in your word?"

"I..." There was a slight pause in her speech before she stood, tall, sure, and proud. "I say that it is better than the imprisoning life as princess. Honestly, I would say anything is better than that. These villagers, these... peasants, they think we are blessed, that we are lucky. But, truly, if they knew how powerless you truly are, then they would understand."

"Of course," murmured the Queen as she joined the younger woman in standing, her back popping slightly as she stretched. "That is why I take control. Being powerless is nothing I ever want to be again."

Emma's head bobbed slightly as thin, pale fingers slid through her blonde locks. "I have always wondered why I admired you when mother told me stories. It is this; this control and this power you have over your own life and the initiative you took to get it. That is what I admired most. I wanted that for myself."

A warmth surged through the Queen's chest and spread throughout her being. It pleased her to see that the princess, Snow White's daughter, had admired her of all people. That smirk on her face only grew, touching her eyes with malicious ease. "Well, I certainly do hope I can live up to your expectations, princess." Those words were said with a sardonic purr; something that resonated within her being.

"You have, already. Your grace and elegance have easily surpassed my imagination." There was a sparkle in those drawing green orbs and the Queen knew it would only lead to trouble.

But, she hummed, regardless, and let her words pour like silk from her mouth. "Come, you will join me in the courtyard to show your skill. This is the start of a new era for you, princess, where your title will soon end and a new one will be provided. And, perhaps, much more will be obtained."
"Are you sure this is where we are supposed to be?" Snow White stood in the middle of a clearing where trees stretched out from all sides, endless in her sight. The sounds of the forest filled her senses and, as much as she had grown used to and loved the serenity it held, she was displeased to find they were, in fact, alone.

“Yes. This is usually where he likes to meet." A masculine voice rumbled beside her and she looked to the source, frowning.

Impatience was already setting in as she paced the clearing, searching behind trees and over the rough surface of a boulder, fingers moving along the rocky face dappled by honey rays. "Gods only knows what Emma is suffering while we wait. She could be dead for all we know." There was a desperation in her voice that had the King moving toward her, arms wrapping around her frame.

"Emma is a strong girl, Snow. She will be alright."

"Not with her…" The good Queen pulled from his grip and smoothed her hands down her leather riding pants. Where was he? "That woman will stop at nothing to destroy our happiness; to destroy us. Even if that means taking the life of our daughter."

"She cannot do that, Snow." Her husband reassured with a squeeze to her shoulder, but she moved away once again, fretfully checking the perimeter.

"Are you sure that he agreed to meet us here?"

"Yes, Snow." Charming sighed softly and joined his wife as he looked behind him into the distance, but found nothing in return. A soft whinny gathered his attention and he turned to see one of the white stallions pawing restlessly at the ground, as if he were impatient himself.

The White Queen joined him by the horses, fallen leaves crunching beneath her weight and a hand moving to scratch the muzzle of the stallion with a drawn sigh. "And he knows where Regina is hiding?"

"I trust that he would. I have no doubt he was the one to help her charm her lands."

"I cannot take credit for such a deed. The Evil Queen hides herself from even I these days." King James tensed in his spot when he heard the familiar, chilling voice of the Dark One and turned to see the imp perched on a boulder, his eerie golden eyes glowing in the sunlight. He swiftly jumped from the rock and landed with a soft thud on the fallen brown leaves.

"Then you do not know where she has taken to?" Snow cast an accusatory glare at the imp, something bubbling in the heaviness of her chest.

"I never said that, dearie." A giggle fell from his lips. The two kept their distance. "I can tell you of where she resides and help you along the way. You will be unable to pass the magical ward she uses to keep her land safe."

Relief slowly filtered through Snow's being, knowing they had chosen well to turn to Rumpelstiltskin for aid. Over the past nineteen years, she hadn't had to worry about Regina, not after the latest incident involving magic and an entirely different pact with the imp. She could not have cared less where the Evil Queen had tucked tail to, that was, until Emma had gone missing.
With Rumpel's help, though, the two could easily locate and penetrate Regina's castle and save the princess from whatever horrors she intended to wreak. But when she heard her husband speak, asking the simple, yet dreaded, question, her heart stopped in her chest.

"What is your price?"

They had already sacrificed much the last time they had made an infamous deal with the Dark One…

"Ah, of course! Who could forget?" Another giddy giggle left his lips. "You needn't worry about first-borns nor second-borns, nor losing something prized to you. I already have your daughter." The look he gave sent a shiver down Snow White's spine; it was something both delighted and mocking. "No, no. I ask of one simple thing from you."

"And what is that?" King James asked. His wife stood by his side, face pale, drained of all blood.

"To let me deal with the Evil Queen." A chilling grin curved his crocodile features. "After all, she has taken something that belongs to me."

"Emma does not belong to you," Snow found herself arguing, the blood inside her veins boiling with an anger she hadn't felt in a long time.

"Oh, dearie, that is where you are mistaken." The Dark One didn't move from his spot as those golden eyes watched them, casting a queasy feeling in the Queen's stomach. "You signed her life away to me when you bought the protection spell against the Evil Queen. She is mine and I will do whatever it takes to get her back."

Before the royal duo could utter an argument, the imp was gone in a cloud of crimson, leaving those eerie words to fill the air with a sense of foreboding.

Emma found herself in a large, dirt-covered courtyard. The grass was sparse; though what little there was had splatters of crimson, and fresh by the looks of it. She shuddered at the thought as she followed in step behind the Evil Queen. Taking her attention from the blood-stained grass, she let her emerald gaze wonder over the rest of the yard; it was small in comparison to the castle and empty – despite the amount of guards she had passed on her way here – except for a few wooden practice dummies.

The witch stopped before a small rack of weapons, a smirk curling onto her full plum lips. Emma felt an unpleasant tingle force its way down her spine. There was a certain unnerver when around her; like the air was too thick to breathe. Yet, she felt drawn to her, like some intangible force was keeping her eyes from moving.

"Choose your weapon. Though, I do implore you to be mindful." The Queen spoke, luring the blonde princess toward her, gesturing to the rack behind her that held swords and battle axes. "These are real men's weapons, not the wooden sticks you used in your play-fight."

"Please, I have used a sword before." Emma felt herself bristle at the words, her cheeks heating slightly as she pushed forward, picking a sword from the rack. It looked as if it had seen many a battle, yet still sharp for plenty more. The hilt was black-stained wood and almost too wide in her hand, but she held it with confidence, despite the weight.

The smirk kept on the Evil Queen's face and it almost appeared impressed, though whatever it may have been that she saw was quickly disappeared. "Tell me, princess, how many boys have you bested?"
Emma's nose twitched slightly as the older woman ran a finger along the blade, unafraid of the sharp edge. "A fair share," she responded, keeping the waver from entering her voice. "When my mother's back was turned."

A dark chuckle bubbled from Regina's lips forcing the hairs on the back of the princess's neck to stand on end. "I see."

"What of yourself?" The blonde asked before her brain could stop the inquiry, though as soon as it had left her lips, she resigned to her imminent fate. Instead of the physical contact she had prepared herself for, she was met with yet another chuckle, this time far lighter and humored.

"I do not dabble with swords. I prefer less... hands-on methods." She slowly walked toward the rack of weapons and drew a longsword, testing it in her hand. "But do not misunderstand, I am able to defend with steel if need be."

Emma swallowed around the lump in her throat as she watched the Queen handle the piece of steel as if it were a mere toy. The blood suddenly drained from her face. "Will you be my opponent today?" she inquired, attempting to quell the sudden dread that rose within her.

"Do you think me foolish?" She hissed, pointing the sword at the young woman's face. "Why should I trust you with a sword near me?"

"Because I have done nothing wrong to you?" Emma answered despite the sword in her face. Her knuckles turned white as they tightened their grip on the hilt. "Next I know, you will be demanding freedom over victory."

The blonde huffed softly and pushed aside the Queen's sword with two fingers, knowing very well she could not harm her. "Who said that I wanted freedom, Your Majesty?"

Her lips twitched when the blade had been pushed aside and for a moment Emma lost confidence in her assumption until Regina slammed the sword into the hard soil with a growl. "Do not be cocky, child. I will have your head as a decoration soon enough. She eyed the piece of steel in the princess's hand. "Why would you wish to stay?"

Emma smirked softly, knowing she had broken some barrier. Taking a step forward, her voice dropped to a whisper, "because I want to taste the darkness." Words she knew the Queen would appreciate and, perhaps, in some way, they weren't a lie. The thought was surely tantalizing. It was not the freedom she had dreamt of, but it was certainly better than marrying Baelfire. "I want to be free from a life I never chose," she murmured, and suddenly, a heaviness dropped upon her being.

She could hear the older woman's breath hitch when she drew closer, though if it were for her words or their proximity, she was unsure, but her lips parted slightly before her gravelly voice sounded. "We shall see how well you enjoy being under my liege, princess."

Letting the weight from her lift for the time being, she allowed a smile on her lips before taking a step back, her arm aching with the sword still gripped tight. "If I am not to duel you, Your Majesty, then who will be my partner?"

"Of course, princess. You are quite eager. Do not disappoint." Her chestnut eyes gleamed in the morning light a golden hue. She turned and quickly left the courtyard in search of her opponent, returning moments later with a tight grin and a man clad in dark, leather armor. He was smaller than most other guards Emma had seen and estimated him to be around her age.

"This is Ser Kevan," the Queen said, urging the young man toward the princess. "He was newly
appointed a moon ago. A worthy opponent, I do believe, princess. Easy for you if you had bested many. Let us see who will be victorious."

The Queen moved away from the two, leaving Kevan to pull the blade from the earth, a grim look on his face.

She swallowed hard and nodded, her brain buzzing. She could do this. The man was plucky, but Emma was guilty of not having much experience with actual steel. It shouldn't be much different than the thin iron, right? But when she lifted the sword, she found difficulty in doing so, and immediately felt herself lose hope.

Kevan was first to make a move, swinging his blade skillfully at the princess's side, but she quickly dodged. Adrenaline filled her being and kicked her into survival mode, driving her to swing her own sword at him clumsily, the weight of it throwing her off balance. The knight let out a rumble of laughter before lunging at her once again, succeeding in slicing through the leather that bound her left thigh.

Emma stumbled, crying out in pain as her leg burned. She had to quickly push the distraction aside as Kevan came at her again, the sharp steel a bolt of light as it came toward her, but she was able to dodge before it nicked her side. She tried for him again but he parried the attack, the sound of steel on steel echoing in the empty yard.

"You are pitiful, girl. Yield." He snarled as the two clunk swords again, dancing around the packed dirt while the Queen watched on with only a smirk.

"Never!" She shouted, loud enough for Regina to hear, countering his next attack that knocked him off balance. Taking the opportunity, she drew her blade across his arm, smirking in satisfaction when the cloth tore and revealed a red scar.

"You are foolish," he hissed, wrenching Emma's sword from her hand with his own, forcing a pained gasp from the blonde as she dropped it. He laughed again and took advantage, knocking the princess to the ground with a foot. "Yield."

When Emma looked up, she was met by the point of his blade and when she attempted to move from her spot, she was stopped by the knight's booted foot against her chest. Stars danced behind her eyes as her head met with the earth. She could hear the Queen's voice like a distant wind.

"That's enough. She has learned her lesson. You may go."

Kevan seemed displeased by this matter, but obeyed, and stepped away, tossing the sword onto the ground. Several heartbeats later, his footsteps faded away and the Queen spoke again.

"Get up."

With a soft groan, the blonde stood, though her leg protested the thought. She could feel the warmth of her blood as it flowed from the wound.

"You speak words well, princess, but you do not live up to them." The Evil Queen looked upon the princess, disappointment behind those dark eyes. Emma felt the need to look away, shamefaced. "How is your leg?"

"Hurts," she muttered, eyes meeting those before her once again. "I will live."

The older woman snorted softly. "You disappoint me, girl. You must train if you are to become a knight of mine. I will not be disgraced by your inability to wield a sword properly."
"I can wield a sword properly!" Emma protested, shifting to pick up her abandoned sword, only to be met with a sharp pain in her thigh. She hissed and let the piece of steel be, and it wasn't until then that the Queen's words had registered.

"You are pathetic," she muttered.

"Did you say I am to become a knight?" Her words were breathless, the prospect frightening and wrong, yet thrilling nonetheless.

"Mayhap, if I see you are worthy enough. For now, you will practice with the dummies for now before I see fit to let you train with a knight." Regina stood upright, her eyes narrowed slightly, searching Emma's face. "For the rest of the eve I want for you to do so. As I said, you will be serving as the headsman."

"I understand." She dipped her head, a sigh falling from her lips. "But I fear, as my incapability of today's duel had shown, that I do not have enough strength."

"The blade is sharp," she responded, voice drawing Emma in like a moth. "You must be swift and sure. Apply all your strength and the problem will be nigh."

"As you say." The blonde bent, now, to collect her sword once again. "Shall I begin my practice?"

"You shall." The witch smirked. "I will return after sun high to check on your progress."

Emma nodded and watched as the witch made her leave before finding her way over to one of the beat-up practice dummies. She could do this; she attempted to encourage herself. Her arm was stiff and tired, but she lunged at the dummy as if he were Kevan, and exacted her revenge.

By the time the Evil Queen had joined her again, Emma was drenched with sweat and exhausted, but she kept at it, determined. If she were to be a knight as the sorceress had said, she needed to build her strength. It was at this point that she cursed her mother for never letting her daughter train with more than a stick.

"Good, good," Regina purred behind her. She could feel her heart swell with pride and she pushed harder, her blade coming down on a particularly weak piece of wood, chipping it away to the ground. "Excellent. I suggest you cease before you tire yourself, princess, and destroy it."

Emma let out a relieved sigh and let the sword fall onto the grass. She turned toward the Queen and felt herself smile at the dark locks framing her face. "How did I do?"

"Are you seeking appraisal, girl?" Regina quirked a brow and clucked her tongue.

"No, no. Of course not." The blonde felt shame rise within her once again and dipped her head. The dark Queen snorted softly. "You must be famished."

At the mention of her hunger, she felt a pang in her empty stomach, demanding to be filled. She swallowed, her mouth watering slightly, but she didn't answer.

"I will see to it that Gilda will bathe you and bring you to the dining hall to join me for a meal." Regina stepped forward and Emma felt her cold fingers under her chin. Her gaze was soon met with the Queen's. "Do you understand?"

"Bathe and eat, yes." The blonde suppressed the urge to nod her head and was met with a slow-forming smile; something salacious and gripping.
"Good. Follow me." Emma had once the witch withdrew and made her way across the hard-packed earth, relieved for the cover from the beating sun. It hadn't taken long before she was before the familiar door she had seen earlier that day and the frightened handmaiden who waited. "I have fresh raiment laid out for you. Gilda, bring her to the dining room when she is finished."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The young girl nodded and gently let the princess into the washroom as the older woman drew away.

After her bath, Emma quickly dressed in the scarlet gown that was provided to her. The material was soft, yet it hugged her curves, but it was far more pleasant to wear than most corset-bound gowns she had to previously squeeze into.

Gilda led her down the twisting corridors and down a set of spiraled, ebony stairs to a room that held a long, dark wood table that could have easily seated a dozen guests. But, today, it only held the Evil Queen who sat, perched, at the far end of the table, waiting for the princess's arrival.

The handmaiden left her at the door and the blonde took initiative to travel toward the Queen. She searched the table for food but only saw a basket of bread loaves and two silver bowls filled with red apples. Her stomach complained, regardless, as she finally found her spot by the witch and waited for a command.

"Sit." The older woman gestured to the seat at the left of her and Emma quickly took it, dipping her head. "Did your bath go well?"

"I-" Emma blinked slightly, taken aback by the question, but she nodded. "Yes."

"Good," she purred and quieted as a few servants approached them with silver platters. Moments later, the smell of cooked meats and potatoes filled Emma's senses, her mouth watering in anticipation to taste the delicious food. But she waited, not yet risking her hand if she were to start the feast.

"You may eat, princess," the Queen said, already cutting into a thick piece of meat.

Permission granted, Emma didn't hesitate to dig in, forgetting her dignity in her hunger.

"You need to keep your strength up if you are to train." Regina continued the conversation, taking a slower approach to her meal.

"H-how long will I train?" She asked, her fork pausing before it reached her mouth.

"Every day, of course," Regina answered, her lips wrapping around her own fork with the red piece of meat. Emma could not help but to watch, mesmerized, as the woman seemed to savor the flavor. A soft sigh fell from the princess's lips and she quickly covered it by a potato piece, heat crawling up her neck. "As soon as the sun rises, I expect to see you in the yard and you will stay put until the sun sets."

"Wh-what?!" Emma dropped her fork in disbelief. How would she survive such a thing? "Will I receive time to rest?"

The Queen hummed, anger flaring momentarily in her eyes, but her voice remained calm. "If I see fit to allow it. You will break your fast before you begin and by sun high, you will receive another meal to recover your strength. Once the sun sets, you are free to rest and feast as you please, as are my other knights."

"Will I return to the dungeons for slumber?" she questioned, slowly chewing on her meat. Gods, it
was delicious after countless days of the cold soup and stale bread. She could already feel her energy returning.

"If I were to knight you, girl, you would have no reason to sleep in the dungeons. And, seeing as to how you are training currently, I can no longer call you a simple prisoner." She paused for a moment and stabbed a piece of her meat. "Knights and the ones in training tend to sleep in the barracks, of course, I cannot have you doing so with the other men. They will defile you, no doubt. My men are savages." She laughed and quirked a brow, taking a moment to chew the meat she had cut.

"That would be… unpleasant," she muttered at the thought of the guard who had touched her, shuddering when she felt his fingers against her jaw.

"Indeed, it would be. I can tell you that it is not enjoyable when a man forces himself upon you." The cold humor in her eyes had faded to a distant memory and Emma frowned, wondering what the dark Queen had meant.

But the look was quickly replaced by a stale anger as she asked, "What concern have you with the dungeons?"

Emma thought of Brynly, but merely shook her head. "No true concern, Your Majesty. I did not know where I would slumber."

"Of course," she said, dipping her head slightly, eyes falling to the bloodied cut of meat. "I have chambers readied for you. After we finish our meal, I will show you to them."

The princess nodded, relieved she didn't have to sleep on the cold, hard ground and the straw that pricked her skin. "Thank you."

Chestnut eyes sparkled. "Gratitude to your captor? How endearing."

"You are no longer my captor, as I recall." Emma murmured absently, finding it hard as she tried to finish the rest of her boiled sprouts. "You are providing me with an opportunity for greatness."

"Greatness? Is this what you call it?" The Queen's amusement returned. She grabbed her chalice filled with red wine and finished it with a swallow. "Well, you certainly are lucky to be given such an opportunity. I do not provide this option to many, much less, the prisoners in my cells."

It was the princess's turn to snort. "Prisoner. I had not stolen a thing from you nor have I spoken ill of your name. You stole me from my bed."

"I have, yes," she said, slipping her meat-laden fork into her mouth again. Her jaw worked as she contemplated her words before speaking, "Yet you seem calm as you speak with me as if I am no more than a common friend."

"What am I expected to do, Your Majesty?" Emma quirked a brow. "You have shown much interest in me and my freedom is limited to the confines of these castle walls."

"And, yet, you do not mind." It wasn't a question, Emma noticed, as Regina observed her curiously.

Her skin was hot underneath the intense stare and she found herself hiding in her meal once again as the air grew quiet. The silence had grown and, before Emma knew it, her food was gone and her stomach painfully stuffed. When she looked up, the Queen had finished her own meal, and was washing the rest of it down with more wine.

"What am I to do for the rest of the day?" She asked, stretching her already aching arm. The days to
come were ones she wasn't looking forward to. Her muscles were sore and stiffening and no doubt would be worse on the morrow.

"I would like for you to train for a few more hours and then you can rest." The sorceress stood and gestured for Emma to do the same.

"Train?" Emma's heart sank, but she stood upright and determined. The sooner she pushed through the rest of the day, the sooner she could sleep, and hopefully in a real bed.

"Yes, princess." The Queen seemed irritated with her query and led her from the room. They traveled back up the stairs once again and down the long, sunlit corridor until they happened upon a large, wooden double-door. "These will be your chambers."

Emma looked at her, hesitant, before she moved forward to push the doors open. She let a gasp escape her as she found herself in a large, well-lit room. She hadn't expected anything extravagant, but she guessed the Queen wasn't one for simple things. The room held a large, canopied bed in the middle, drenched in the rich, yellow sunlight. On the opposite side was a bureau that matched the dark, wooden frame.

Before one of the large windows was a deep, chestnut desk held an unlit lantern and a stack of yellowed stationary, equipped with an inkwell, a raven quill, and a stick of wax and the seal stamp. A brief thought of writing her parents came to mind, but it was quickly quenched when she realized she couldn't send it out without the Queen's knowledge. And, deep within her gut, she didn't want to.

Her eyes fell away from the desk and to the bookshelves on the walls next to it, littered with several tattered tomes. A brief flutter of excitement bubbled within her. She quite enjoyed reading; it was the only thing to truly pass the time at her castle. Perhaps, if she wasn't too exhausted by the end of the night, she would read one.

"And there is a washroom attached so you do not have to travel far." The Queen had joined her, stealing the blonde's attention to a small, wooden door beside the bureau.

Emma's lips twitched in amusement. "Does this mean you trust me to bathe myself?"

"No," she growled in response, the fire back in her dark eyes.

"Then why give me these chambers? Are you going to..." She trailed off, a smirk drawing to her lips. "Join me?"

The Evil Queen's brows rose in surprise, her lips parted in shock as if she couldn't believe what the princess had said. Then the annoyed scowl resumed and her brows furrowed into an angry pinch. "I will send you to the dungeons, girl."

Emma's eyes widened at the sudden hostility, emitting a soft squeak from the young princess. "No, thank you, please. I apologize for the- I was merely jesting."

The Queen's nose twitched. "Jesting," she grunted the word. "My chambers are not far from your own and I will have guards placed outside your door, so do not think you can sneak out during the night."

"Of course," she murmured. "Am I to train in my gown?"

Regina's patience seemed to be waning for she took a step away, her nostrils flaring slightly as those dark eyes stared her down. Then the blonde blinked when she saw those eyes move over her thin frame, forcing a shiver to climb down her spine. Suddenly, she couldn't tell if the Queen was angry
or… No, that's foolish to think, she thought to herself, wanting to laugh at the impending thoughts. Surely the witch was not like that.

"Your bureau is filled with the proper clothing. You are free to wear what you wish." The Queen's voice was throatier, but she remained stoic. "I will take my leave for now and relieve you of your training when I see fit."

"Yes, Your Majesty," she mumbled absently, watching as the royal woman left her to her own device. Without hesitance, she changed her clothing and made her way back to the courtyard and into the hot sun. She was glad she had chosen something lighter to practice in. And, thankfully, the yard was empty again. She briefly wondered if the Queen had purposefully told her knights to train elsewhere.

Emma wandered over to the rack of weapons and examined them; most were rusty, old, and worn. They were certainly not useful in battle, but seemed suitable for beating wooden dummies. She turned and picked up the sword that lay abandoned on the ground and made her way toward her wooden opponent.

Though, she couldn't help but to be distracted as her blade came down on the poor, battered thing, thinking back to the Evil Queen. The witch was full of mysteries, that was for sure, and guarded herself well – or at least, attempted to. The princess recounted the few moments she weakened and spoke of things in her past, though not in detail. She wondered if their relationship would strengthen in the future or if they would remain as they were; a Queen and her Knight.

The blonde could have snorted at her thoughts. Why would she want to befriend the very woman who had wrought pain and grief on her family? Yet, she couldn't help but to yearn for more answers. She wanted to know what made Regina tick and what made her decide to break.

There was more than meets the eye with that woman, the princess knew for sure, and that's what birthed her curiosity. What happened when her mother broke her promise to keep Regina's secret to herself to warrant such hatred? And what had happened while she was married to King Leopold?

Emma stopped, her sword dropping to her side when she grew pale from thought. Had the king done unspeakable things to her behind closed doors? But the thought was silly, she concluded, for her grandfather – as her mother spoke of him – was a kind and gentle man, full of love and compassion.

The princess brought her sword up again and set a hard strike on the makeshift wooden dummy's head, leaving behind a large indent. She thought back to her new bedchambers and felt the older woman's hot gaze on her again. She thought anger had set her off during that moment, but was there more to it? The way she looked at her reminded Emma of the guard in her cell. She had called her fair, as well, though that was earlier.

She could not deny that she found Regina to be beautiful, herself. When she first saw the woman, she was surprised and captivated, but she knew beauty when she saw it. Emma knew she was swayed towards women more than the young lords and princess, though she could never say such a thing to her parents. They were kind and loving, and perhaps they wouldn't mind, but they would urge her to marry Baelfire, either way.

The mention of the man drew her back to her parents and Rumpelstiltskin. Would they be searching for her by now? Would they suspect that the Evil Queen had a hand in this? If the alliance made them desperate enough, she was sure they would be, for she would be too precious to be let go. She wondered if they could penetrate the dark sorceress's castle.

Her bones felt jarred as she stabbed the wooden dummy and ached her arm up to her elbow. She
didn't know if she wished to return to her castle. Of course, life here would not be pleasant, and the start of her stay was spent in the dungeons, but she felt strangely... welcome. She was given a chance at the life she wished. Sure, this was not the adventure that she had expected, but it was certainly turning out to be something.

She couldn't find it in herself to resent the Evil Queen. The woman was showing her what life would have been like on her own, with added protection. With a soft snort at where her thoughts were veering, Emma hit the dummy again, chipping away more wood.

Why was she thanking this Queen who had taken so much from her family?

"But what have they taken from her?" She wondered aloud, sweat dancing down her cheeks.

"I wouldn't keep speaking to myself if I were you, princess, or people might think you mad."

The voice sounded from behind her and, instead of chills, she found a strange warmth caress her cheeks. "I have a busy mind and it tends to leak."

"So, I see." The dark Queen's husky laughter filled the thick air. "You may rest for today."

"Oh?" Emma hadn't taken notice of the time, but when she looked to the sky, she saw it painted red as the sun slowly sunk into the earth. Her exhaustion met her now that her mind hadn't been distracted. With a sudden weariness, she placed her sword back onto the rack and sighed, her elbow and wrist throbbing, and the cut on her thigh burning. "Thank you."

"Are you hungry?" The woman asked, leading the princess back into the castle.

"No," she answered surely, her stomach aching now from the earlier meal. "Thank you."

Regina snorted softly. "I suspect you would like to bathe and rest for the night?"

Emma nodded quietly, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. "That sounds delightful. I hadn't much sleep the past few nights."

"I imagine not." The witch turned toward the stairs and ascended them, Emma following behind. It was then that she noticed the Queen had abandoned her cloak, leaving her with a full view of her thick rear bound tight in black leather. She swallowed slightly and shamefully took her eyes away. "I will let you to it, princess. You worked hard today."

"Thank you," she whispered, stopping before the door to her bedchambers.

"I expect you before sunrise in the dining hall to break our fast."

"Before sunrise, yes." Emma nodded, slight excitement tingling her nerves as she thought of another day of training.

"You are to prepare for the execution." Regina continued, a brow quirking. She noticed the small smile forming on Emma's lips.

That smile soon disappeared, though, at the mention. She had forgotten about the execution. Swallowing thickly, she nodded, a weight falling upon her shoulders. She would have to take someone's life and there was a possibility it might be tomorrow.

"Okay."

"Rest. You will need it." The Queen back away.
"Sweet dreams, Your Grace." Emma noticed the way Regina had faltered at those words and the softening of those hard, chestnut eyes. She didn't say anything, though, as she continued down the corridor, soon disappearing behind a pair of dark, iron doors.

Emma turned into her own chambers, her exhausted mind suddenly alert as she thought of what tomorrow might bring. Any hope of sleep was soon extinguished as she lay in bed, eyes open and mind whirling. What was she going to do?
"You have been doing an exceptional job; for a princess." The Evil Queen's husky voice took
Emma's attention away from her fried eggs; the very ones she had been pushing around her plate for
the past twenty minutes. When she looked away from the mess she had made of them, her breath
was taken by sunlight that surrounded the brunette in a golden aura, making her appear ethereal.

Her fork was abandoned next to her eggs. "Thank you," she murmured softly and averted her gaze
when the Queen's own turned her way. The last time she had been caught staring - which was
yesterday morning during breakfast - the older woman had quirked a brow and asked if she had
something on her face. She couldn't answer and the quirk of the brunette's lips only had her face
turning red.

As it did, now, when she noticed that same smile on the Queen's crimson lips after the chalice had
parted from them. Nothing had been said on the matter, instead, she spoke of the morning's
proceedings. "Are you prepared for the execution?"

"Yes." That was a lie. She had been given several days to prepare; or moreover, train. Exhausted
was an understatement for what she had felt. Every muscle in her body ached, but she could feel the
improvement; she could feel herself growing stronger.

"I can only hope so, princess. We are to head to the courtyard soon." She purred softly.

Emma could feel herself shrink when the Queen had spoken. Soon. She would have to take
someone's life. How could she ever do such a thing? What little she had eaten was threatening to
come up and the scent of what was left did not help.

The sorceress noticed this. "You look pale. You do not like the thought, do you?"

"Of course not," she managed to say, turning away from her plate.

"I will offer you a piece of advice; clear your mind, do not think of it, let yourself grow numb. Think
of them as nothing more than an animal." Her words only seemed to grow the queasiness in her
stomach. Think of them as an animal? Is this what the Evil Queen had done? Think of people as no
more than a mere animal to slaughter?

The princess didn't get the chance to ask, nor had she planned to for fear her head would be rolling in
the dirt, as they stood from the dining table and left to the courtyard; where her life would no doubt
be changed.

"You 'ave stolen from the Queen's carriage, a crime punishable by death." A deep voice rumbled.

Emma's attention was brought to a stringy young man with a mop of dirty brown hair as a bulky
guard pushed him toward herself and the Evil Queen. He was the first prisoner of three, and telling
by how young and desperate this boy was, it was only foretelling what she would have to face.

Her eyes went momentarily to the Queen to catch her reaction but her face was made of stone.

"Please, m'lady!"

"Your Grace," said the same bald man, knocking the young man to his knees with the flat of his
blade.
"Please, Your Grace, I dinnit mean no harm! My mother—she's ill. Please, Your Grace… she will die…"

The Evil Queen seemed deaf to his pleas as she summoned the guard to bring him to the chopping block. She stood at the side of him, receiving a great sword from her knight. The blonde swallowed thickly as the light reflected off the sharp piece of steel. This was, by far, the most tame of executions in which the dark witch had spoken of, but it still held a heavy message for the witnesses.

"Watch, princess, and learn. You are to take my place next."

The young man continued to plea, but the Queen silenced him as she brought the heavy sword down upon his neck; cutting clean his head from his shoulders. Blood sprayed the grass a terrible red and a warmth splattered her face, and, for a moment, that's all Emma could think about. She felt bile rise in her throat, and when the Queen turned to look at her, she was met with small droplets of crimson against olive.

She swallowed her impending fear—and illness—and pointed at the older woman's face. "You have blood on your face, Your Majesty."

Seeming pleased, the sorceress guffawed, head thrown back in a mighty roar of laughter. When the bout finished, she turned to hand the bloodied sword off to the knight who had given it to her and faced the princess once again, a smile on her lips and a mad look in her eye. "Indeed? Tell me, girl, do you think you can handle it?"

"I…" The princess began to nod, her fingers digging into the palms of her hands. The Queen made it look so easy, but she knew it was far from that, and the look of impending insanity in her eye told her just that. But, she hid her bubbling emotion behind a mask, and answered. "Yes."

"Keep in mind, dear princess, to be sure of your swing."

The Queen gestured for the next prisoner and Emma waited, eyes on the blood left behind from the man before.

"Emma?" She heard a familiar voice call, bringing her attention to a dirty, young girl guided by a tall man.

"Brynly?" Emma's eyes lit up at the sight of her lost friend. The girl was still alive. At the sound of her name, that lively girl broke free from the guard's grasp and ran toward her, soon flinging her arms around the blonde princess. Despite the sour smell of the girl, Emma returned the embrace, her heart rapidly beating against her chest.

"I thought you was dead," Brynly said, pulling from the blonde. "I saw you passin' by with the Queen and I thought for sure she was gon' take your head off."

"She cannot harm me," she repeated, eyes falling to the Queen who stood with a dark smile on her face. Suddenly, the joy in seeing her friend faded as the realization dawned on her. The smile she wore wilted into a frown.

"What— What is wrong?" The girl asked, swallowing. "I take it you dinnit find an escape. S'okay… I've accepted my fate."

"If you are through with your reunion, princess, we have an execution to forward." The Evil Queen's voice broke into their conversation and the bald guard came upon them, taking Brynly away from the blonde with a soft growl. Tears came to the peasant girl's face as she was forced onto the bloody stone to her knees, body convulsing.
"I…” Emma's eyes found the brunette, her chest tightening. "I cannot…”

"You cannot? The witch growled, her dark eyes on fire. "Here, I thought you had potential, but you are just as weak as your mother."

"I am not weak." The princess defended herself, her heart thundering in her ears. "I am just not heartless like you."

"Heartless? Is this what you think I am?" She laughed coldly. "The only fault that I have is keeping the godforsaken organ." The Queen's lip curled. "If you do not do it, I will, and trust me, you do not want me to take this into my hands."

Emma hesitated, her gaze falling to the girl who still knelt by the block. Her lungs turned to stone and she found it hard to breathe, let alone think, in that moment.

"You- you dun 'ave t'do it, Emma… please…” Brynly caught her gaze, soon realizing what was going on between the two, and it left the blonde princess helpless.

"Tell me, what will you do?" The husky voice of the Evil Queen sounded beside her. "Will you let your weakness win or your desire for freedom?"

"What is this freedom worth?" She queried, the hot sun beating down on her pale skin. "She is innocent of these crimes you accuse her of."

"No one is innocent, girl." Regina growled. "If you truly wish to follow the path that I have opened for you, emotions are things that you must grow numb to. Friend or foe; it is meaningless."

Emma knew that she was not going to win this argument and save the girl that she had befriended in the dungeons. She had agreed to the Queen's terms and had prepared herself for this moment. The question was, though, would she be able to do it if it were someone other than Brynly?

"Emma?" Her name on the Queen's tongue sounded strange and made her heart flutter inside her chest. "I am growing impatient. This girl is dead whether by your hand or mine. Decide." The last word was a growl and Emma knew Regina's patience was waning.

The blonde tried to turn her emotions off, bidding the fear and the heaviness away as she moved from the Queen's side to approach Brynly without another word. Each step she took was heavier than the last. She saw the witch slowly smirk as she passed her and couldn't help the chill that ran up her spine.

"Do it quick, Emma," Brynly sobbed, her dark eyes looking up at the blonde. "I understand. You've no choice."

Emma swallowed thickly and kept her face cold as the tall guard handed her the great sword. She took it confidently despite the weight and unbalance it provided. It was far larger than the blade she had trained with, but she held it steadily, her knuckles turning white against the ebony hilt. There were red gems encrusting the top of the hilt. Fitting, she thought, as they matched the blood that stained the blade.

"Tell my brother I love 'im."

Her heart squeezed in her chest at the words and, for a moment, she looked desperately to the Queen in hopes she could back out of this, but she was lost when Regina merely stared at her, expectant.

"You will be free," she said, pressing her lips together, and prepared the sword. Brynly let out
another sob as she closed her eyes and bowed her head.

"Go ahead, princess." The Queen urged.

When Emma lifted the sword, she heard the villagers rumble with anxious chatter, knowing well enough that she would be as hated as the Evil Queen if she were to do this. She looked to them for a moment, delaying her swing, and found them parting as a party of familiar white horses trotted between the sea.

Her emerald eyes fell to the Evil Queen as she cursed, hovering near the princess.

"There she is!" She heard a feminine voice call from the group and her eyes honed in on the source, finding a familiar pale face and long dark locks.

"Mother?" The word tumbled from her lips in recognition, the sword that she held clattering to the ground. Regina moved in front of the princess as if she were protecting her, a ball of flames bursting forth from her hand.

"Get away from her, witch!" Emma's attention was brought to her father as he spoke beside her mother. Her heart fluttered inside her chest.

"How did you get past the border?" The Evil Queen hissed, not moving an inch from her spot. "It was an unbreakable magical barrier. There is no possible-"

"We had a little help." Snow spoke and the two parted from one another as their horses moved aside. A darker horse trotted between the pure white ones with a small form on its back. Emma didn't recognize the man but she could feel the hostility rise off the Queen beside her.

"Your magical barrier is not as strong as you think it is, dearie. Remember, I am the one who taught you these things."

"Rumpelstiltskin, I should have figured they would resort to you." The dark sorceress hissed, earning an eerie smile from the man that she spoke to. "What price did they pay this time? Have they promised you Emma's first born?"

A high-pitched laughter filled the courtyard, sending a shiver down Emma's spine. She heard of the man and his antics, but she never had the opportunity to meet him; only his son. Suddenly she was glad that she hadn't for the very presence of the man made her feel exposed and the darkness that he emitted drowned her.

Rumpelstiltskin dismounted his horse and moved toward them, the King and Queen followed suit until the three were standing before the two; the Evil Queen's guards standing tense with their swords pointed in warning. The Dark One merely giggled as he approached, his skin sparkling peculiarly in the sun making him appear inhuman.

"You seem to have something of mine," he simply said, yellow eyes falling to the blonde who stood behind the Evil Queen.

"She is not your property, imp." Regina hissed, taking a step forward, the flame in her hand only seemed to glow brighter.

"And she is not yours, Regina." His smirk stretched wide and Emma shuddered. "Now, if you are through playing with her, I am sure her parents would love to have her back in the safety of their castle."
"I bid you good luck trying to do so." The dark Queen moved forward, her voice a low growl. "Because it will be over my dead body that you will take her back."

"That can be arranged."

"Regina, please," Snow spoke, stepping beside Rumple as the man merely looked between the blonde and the brunette with amusement sparkling in those eerie golden eyes. "Violence is not necessary. If you hand over Emma, we will leave you be."

Regina's laughter filled the air, but it was short-lived as she shook her head in disbelief. "To pay the price of your pact to Rumple?"

"That is none of your business, Regina." The Queen stepped forward, her eyes hard. "Come, Emma, let us return to the castle. We cannot hold your wedding off for much longer."

The princess's eyes fell to her mother; her legs felt like gelatin. The wedding. The thought left a bitter taste in her mouth. Her hope had grown when Regina had offered her freedom from her life as princess and now that her mother stood before her, expectant, it was slowly diminishing.

Emma knew that she needed to follow her mother; to go back home and fulfill her duty. Yet, she remained, eyes on the dark Queen that still stood before her. She felt as if she had a duty here to fulfill, even if she did not know quite what it was.

"Emma? We must leave."

"Do you not see, Snow?" The Evil Queen's voice answered instead. "She does not wish to return; to be married off."

"She is my daughter, Regina. You have attempted to corrupt her and plant seeds in her brain."

"I have planted nothing in her brain. She has done so, herself."

"Come, Emma. We must prepare. There is much to do." But the good Queen stepped forward despite the warning growl from the witch and offered a hand to her daughter, though the gentle smile on her face slowly faded. "Why is there blood on your clothes?"

Emma sucked in a breath, her eyes momentarily falling to Brynly who now stood next to the third prisoner, guarded closely by a stocky knight.

"That is because she was witnessing an execution, Snow." A pleased look crossed the Evil Queen's features. "And I have yet to taint her heart for it was her duty to complete the second before you so kindly interrupted."

Fire flared in Snow White's dark eyes. "I am sure you forced her hand to do your bidding, witch." Her attention fell to the princess who stood silent before returning. "My patience is through with you, Regina. I have given you many chances and I cannot risk any more."

The light Queen turned to the sorceress then to the Dark One who stood with a giddy smile on his face. "Rumple?"

"I will take care of her; do not worry." Rumpelstiltskin's words drew Emma's attention toward the imp, yet even as his words sounded threatening, there was a knowing look in his eye.

The blonde found her gaze meeting Regina's chestnut one and, for a moment, she thought she saw a hint of fear in them. She felt her blood run cold when Rumple's words caught up with her and what
they meant for the dark Queen that she had grown to admire.

Yet, why should she care if he ended the Evil Queen? She was just that; evil and full of contempt. But she couldn't find it within herself to hate the woman that had fascinated her for so long, and she couldn't leave her to whatever fate the imp had planned.

"No." The single word came from the very woman on her mind and she heard the desperation in it.

"I am the one that built you up, Regina, and I can take you back down." The Dark One moved toward the woman who tensed in her spot and snapped his fingers. As soon as he had, the Evil Queen let out a gasp and lifted her hand to reveal a cuff, and she hissed, charging for the imp who merely smirked.

"Take this off!"

"Mother, this is not us!" Emma's voice finally came as the blonde princess stepped toward her mother, but the Queen immediately grabbed her arm and tugged her closer, away from the Evil Queen. "He will kill her."

Snow looked at her daughter as if she were mad. "I have given her many chances to redeem herself and she passed up each one." The woman with the snow-white skin looked to the dark Queen, her brows furrowing.

"But you would let this happen?" She saw Rumple roughly take the bound Queen by the arm; the guards that had once stood to defend her were now on the ground with their necks broken. Emma swallowed thickly.

"Yes," the good Queen simply answered and Emma stared at her in disbelief. "Emma, my sweet daughter, I have made the mistake of letting her free long ago when we planned to execute her before your birth. I could not do it then; something in me would not allow it. But I cannot bring it within myself to let her go now and continue this reign of terror."

"Where is that part of you now, Mother?" Emma's attention was given to the imp and the witch and the crowd of villagers behind them, watching in both horror and delight at the sight of their malevolent Queen being captured. "The mercy that you have given her long ago?"

"That mercy for this woman is gone, Emma." Snow muttered coldly. "You should have no compassion for her. She took you and has done Gods knows what to you."

"I cannot deny what she has done, but she has not harmed me."

Queen Snow ignored her daughter's words and turned her attention to Rumpelstiltskin who had been talking with her husband, King James. The latter man turned, his blue eyes piercing his wife and daughter. "He says he would like to deal his punishment to the Evil Queen before her people. It is his price for his aid."

"Have you not shamed her enough?" Emma asked unconsciously, eyes falling to the dark Queen whose eyes smoldered with hatred as she looked at each accusing person. "What is he going to do to her?"

"Shush, Emma." Queen Snow pulled her closer as the King joined them, all three pairs of eyes on Rumple whose hand soon disappeared inside Regina's chest. Emma lurched when the Evil Queen let out a strained grunt and doubled over when the imp's hand left her, a black heart interlaced with red glowing in his palm.
"Behold, your Queen's heart." Rumple held the beating organ out for the villagers earning murmurs and gasps. "Her one weakness as you will see." He smirked, his pointed fingers curling around the heart until he squeezed it. Regina stiffened in her spot, but remained quiet, though when Emma looked into her eyes, she saw the guarded pain. It only intensified the more the imp squeezed that precious organ, an anger inside Emma stirring.

"Stop!" She yelled, unable to take the torture playing out before her. She didn't care if they thought Regina deserved this, but perhaps that was her mother's mercy that was fueling her to plead to Rumple, or something else, burrowed deep inside.

"Emma."

"He's hurting her, Mother. Can you not see?" She was flabbergasted that her mother, the Queen of benevolence and mercy, would allow this to happen.

The imp's grip faltered and the witch straightened out, her breath labored. Sudden relief flowed through the princess.

"She deserves this after all that she has put us through. She has hurt us." The good Queen grabbed her shoulder gently. "She murdered your grandfather, Emma, and countless others."

Rumple's grip tightened on Regina's heart once again, taking the Evil Queen aback as she cried out, doubling over with the invisible pain in her chest. Emma attempted to fight her mother's grasp and when she broke through, her father was the one to tug her back. The Dark One's grip never faltered, instead, he played with the organ as if it were a toy, forcing the once mighty sorceress to her knees.

Something inside Emma flared to life like a warm fire; her finger tips burned with unbidden energy. "Stop! You're going to kill her!" She cried out and forced herself from her parents' grip, her hands lifting before her, ready to tackle the man if need be. She felt detached to herself as she watched a powerful, white light flow from her fingers, instead, and hit the Dark One, forcing him to fly off the ground and land among the crowd, dropping the Evil Queen's heart into the dirt.

When she looked up, her eyes met the chestnut hues of Regina's and the shock that widened them. She didn't look back at her parents, instead, she made haste to the witch's fallen heart before the imp could take it. Then her feet were guiding her back toward the witch to remove the magical cuffs from her wrists. Seconds later, they clattered to the hard, packed earth and as soon as they had, the Evil Queen took her heart from Emma's hand to thrust back into her chest.

It took her a moment to recover to the familiarity of the organ before she growled, "It seems as if your daughter has chosen a side."

"No!" Queen Snow's voice was the last thing Emma heard before the world went dark.

After a heartbeat, the blonde princess opened her eyes to find herself in an unfamiliar room, but the ebony stone and delicate structure told her that she was inside the Evil Queen's castle.

"Wh-what happened?" Emma's head felt as if it were among the clouds.

"You never told me you had the ability to wield magic." Regina's accusing voice had the blonde's fingers curling into her palms.

"I-I..." She hid her hands in her arms as she crossed them, any confidence in herself suddenly gone. "I had no knowledge of it beforehand."

The Evil Queen laughed coldly, those dark eyes falling to the blonde's covered hands. "You must be
“Why would I have the need to?” Emma pressed her lips together, eyes steadily meeting the brunette’s. “I would have used it on you.”

The Queen’s lips twitched before she broke contact and turned to pace toward a large set of windows. “Then you have never had any indication before today that you harbored magical powers?”

The princess quickly shook her head, arms dropping to her sides, before she realized the witch couldn’t see her. “No. Never. I was just…” She swallowed, thinking back to the moment that the buzzing power of magic flowed through her being, making the tips of her fingers warm and her body burst with an energy that she had never felt before, and then to what had caused it. “I was angry that my parents would allow this to happen and… I could not take seeing you in pain like that; being tortured by that imp. No one deserves it.”

“They believe I do.” Regina’s back was facing Emma, but she could hear the thickness in her words. “You do realize, by saving me, you have upset your mother.”

“Upset is an understatement,” she murmured softly. “After what she had witnessed today, I am quite sure she would want nothing more from me.”

The Evil Queen snorted and turned, a wicked smile on her face. “I doubt that. She needs you to pay the price of the pact she made with that dreadful imp. And I am quite sure she has dug herself a deeper hole when she used him to break into my land.”

“Gods, what will you do? Will they break into the castle, next?” she asked, shifting in her spot.

“These castle walls are impenetrable,” the brunette growled.

“What of Rumpelstiltskin?” Emma moved toward the windows where the Queen stood still and peered out into the vast sea of green.

“We needn’t worry about that man. For now.” The older woman looked to the princess, dark eyes smoldering. “He lost this battle, but he will no doubt return for the prize.”

“Prize?” Emma frowned. “Your heart?”

“No,” she murmured, eyes falling back to the window. “You.”

An unpleasant tremor moved down her spine; a heaviness settling in the pit of her stomach. “How could I ever believe that I would be able to escape this?” She leaned against the cold stone wall, her brain swimming. “I should have returned.”

There was a deep growl next to her, “no! Foolish girl. You mustn’t resign to a fate that is forced upon you by others. You must escape it while you can.”

“And how might you propose I do that, Your Majesty?” Emma’s nostrils flared. “You keep me here and disallow me freedom. And, even if I do obtain freedom completely, I will be hunted by the Dark One and no doubt my parents to be locked away in some castle to bear children for that sniveling boy.”

“I offer you more freedom than you have as princess, girl.” The Evil Queen stepped toward the blonde, pinning her against the wall as Emma shrunk against it. “And protection. But, if you are going to be ungrateful, I will gladly turn you over and perhaps keep my heart where it belongs.”
The blonde princess quieted, eyes falling away from the glaring chestnut hues, and sighed.

Regina took her silence as an answer and smirked. "Tell me, princess, why did you save me?"

Emma frowned, taken aback by the question. Honestly, she did not quite know why she had, herself. "I-I told you."

"Because you did not like seeing me in pain?" The sorceress snorted. "Did you intend to stop Rumple or to free me?"

"I…" She swallowed, gaze unable to meet the Queen's. "Perhaps both. I wanted to stop him and I wanted to free you. I wanted… I did not want to return and be married off. I wanted… I wanted to continue training here and strengthen myself."

Her words earned a smile from Regina; something small, yet genuine. "How endearing," she murmured softly before turning away. "We can commence as planned and you can continue your training. Although," she continued, her dark eyes on Emma once again, forcing the latter's heart to flutter, "I wish to discuss your magic."

"My magic?" Emma pursed her lips, the words foreign on her tongue. "What of it?"

"Do you feel it?" The Queen pressed, olive fingers moving along the ivory skin of the princess's cheek. "Do you feel as if you could use it again on will?"

The blonde shook her head. She hadn't felt the odd energy since the incident and, aside from the slight nausea, she felt the same as before.

"We can work on that," she continued, a smirk blooming on her features. "You have the potential; a very strong magic is dormant within you. I can feel it." Her palm flattened against Emma's darkening cheek. "If I can draw the source to your power out, you will master it in no time."

"What if I do not want to use magic?"

"You already have it, Emma, and it will grow and become uncontrollable if you let it build within yourself. That outburst in which you had earlier was derived from raw emotion, and if you were to feel like that again, there is no telling what will happen; to you, or to someone else." The Queen's hand fell from her cheek and balled at her side. "If you can control it, Emma, the options are limitless."

Emma allowed Regina's words to soak in and thought. Magic was something foreign to her. Both the King and Queen never allowed her near sorcerers and spoke ill of them when mentioned. It was powerful and dangerous and the thought of having it as a part of her terrified the princess more.

"And you will help me?"

"Yes," she answered with a nod of her head. "Of course, we will work on this later. For now, I want you to continue as we have planned."

"Will you teach me dark magic?" The question was hesitant and suddenly she feared the answer – or the wrath.

But the Evil Queen wore an amused grin on her lips. "I will teach you how to control it, child, but what you do with it is of our own volition. If you wish not to use it, then so be it."

"But if I am to be under your liege, Your Majesty, I would only use it for evil."
"Evil," she murmured softly and let her gaze break once again, falling to the endless world outside, remaining silent. Emma watched her for a moment, entranced by the emotion welling in her eyes, yet her face remained as stone.

"Regina?" The princess's voice was soft, but the single word brought those mesmerizing dark eyes to hers. "You are only as evil as you make yourself out to be."

"There is no going back on what I had done, princess, if that is what you are implying." Her features hardened. "And no matter how much I am to redeem myself, they will always look at me as the Evil Queen. No amount of benevolence will change that."

"I saw your heart; there is something left in there; some good. You may never know."

"I do know." The brunette hissed and stepped away from the window. "Should you not be training, girl?"

"I…" Emma inhaled deeply before nodding and pacing toward the large set of doors. "I do not know where I am."

"Must I hold your hand?" The Queen's eyes felt like daggers. "You are in my bedchambers; your own are only down the hall."

"O-oh…" Emma paused by the door and took a heartbeat to look around the large room before her. The Queen's personal space. Why had she brought the princess here? "It… is lovely."

"Go."

Emma quickly nodded, the roar from the Queen shaking her to her core, and headed out to the courtyard.
"No!" Snow White's cry emanated throughout the courtyard in a despairing roar; something that shook those that surrounded her to the very core. All that was left of her daughter's presence was the violet cloud of magic that quickly dissipated with her hopes. What had Emma done?

Immediately, she turned to Rumpelstiltskin who was now brushing the dirt off his pants, those reptile eyes glowing with a burning anger. "Where did she go?" Demanded the light Queen, marching over to the smaller man. She could feel the presence of her husband following.

"No doubt she fled into the safety of her castle," replied the Dark One, his voice eerily calm. "She is near and safe for now. Though, if you wish for your daughter to maintain her purity, I suggest we act promptly."

An icy hand gripped her, sending an unpleasant chill down her spine. "Her purity? What would the Evil Queen do to her?"

"Look before you, Queen Snow. The Evil Queen was mere seconds away from forcing the princess to behead that girl." When Snow turned, she noticed the prisoners who were once guarded by the knights had long fled, though one remained; a girl no older than the princess herself with straw-like hair and dark almond eyes. "She has much up her sleeve."

"What are we standing here for?" The King's voice rumbled from beside his wife whose eyes never left the peasant girl. "Why are we not storming her castle?"

"Her castle is protected by a very powerful spell; some ward that I cannot merely take down within the span of one day. I need time." Rumpel strode forward, past the dead knights, and looked upon the ebony stone of the Evil Queen's abode. When the King had followed him, Snow turned to speak with the girl.

"Why have you not fled with the others?" She asked, quiet, as if someone were listening.

"You are the Queen; the true Queen. I am pleased to be in your presence, Your Majesty." Awe struck those chestnut irises and her thin, pale lips stretched into a smile. "She wasn't lyin'." "Who was not lying?"

The peasant girl's smile had only grown, her bony hands coming together. "The princess. We was in the dungeons together, Your Majesty."

"You were?" So Emma was first held as a prisoner. What made the Evil Queen change her mind? "What did she say?"

"She told me she was princess but I didn't believe her 'til the Evil Queen came and talked 'bout some things. We was plannin' on escapin' the cells, usin' a guard's key, but she sealed Princess Emma's cell and had a guard come take me." A frown claimed her petite features. "I seen the Evil Queen take her the next day and never seen her 'til today. She was bein' forced to do the witch's biddin'."

A tightness fell upon Snow's chest. "Do you know how long she had spent with the Evil Queen?"

"'Bout a couple'a days, I think. Them knights said our… executions were delayed 'cause somethin' was goin' on." She shrugged slightly and looked to the sky and the swaths of clouds that painted it. "I don't know what she done to the princess. I hope she ain't hurtin' her."
"We are doing everything in our will to return her safely back to our kingdom." Snow looked to the daunting castle once again; she could feel a power, something menacing, suffocate her and knew their attempts need be fast. "Do you know what she might be planning to do to Emma?"

The girl's almond eyes narrowed slightly as she looked to the hard-packed dirt. "The witch was talkin' 'bout givin' the princess freedom, I think." She looked up, a haunted look in her eye. "She wants you dead and your kingdom to fall to pieces. A-and… I don't really remember much after that. She sealed the princess in her cell so she couldn't escape and left."

The Queen shook her head, a frown claiming her scarlet lips. "She will no doubt plant seeds in Emma's mind. Freedom? What freedom will my daughter have here? She is too smart to take anything that witch offers." Though, for a moment, doubt briefly washed over her when she thought of the scene not long ago and how Emma had saved the Evil Queen from Rumpel's hand. Why would she do such a thing?

Mercy, she hoped. It would start all over with her daughter, but Emma would soon find out that mercy does not work on the Evil Queen; she was evil, and once so she will always be. There was no good left in her heart; not after all that she had done.

"What is your name?" Asked the White Queen, her dark eyes upon the girl once again.

"Brynly, Your Majesty."

"I am grateful for your help, Brynly. How can I award you?"

"Oh, I needn't nothin', Your Majesty. Freedom will do well. I need to find my brother." There was a darkness that clouded her features. "I hope he is doin' well. He ain't had nothin' to eat and without me there to protect him…"

A frown creased the Queen's face. "I will see to it that both of you are well taken care of. Talk to one of my knights and we will locate him." Brynly's face brightened at the prospect as tears slipped down the sharp contours of her face.

"Oh, thank you, Your Majesty. Thank you, thank you!" Chuckling, the benevolent Queen showed the young girl to a nearby knight, dressed in silver armor.

It was not long until her husband had joined her by the horses, the Dark One approaching behind him. "Rumpel said he will return to his castle and get to work on finding a spell that will counteract the ward."

"What shall we do in the meantime?" The Queen pressed, fingers curling into the palms of her hands. She could not be idle while they wait for Rumpel; not while Emma was in there with the Evil Queen.

"I suggest we prepare for war. The Evil Queen will not surrender willingly, not while she knows we will stop at nothing for our daughter's safe return." She could feel herself shake at the prospect of war, but swallowed away the impending fear and nodded, letting the flames of hope grow within her. "If she had charmed Emma somehow to do her bidding, there is no telling what might happen. Our daughter is strong and she can… She can wield magic. It is powerful and Rumpel tells me it is unstable. It is only a matter of time before Regina takes advantage and forces her dark ways upon her. And with that…" He shook his head, trailing off, but Snow knew the end of that sentence and it certainly was not something she wanted to hear.

"It is pertinent that we act quickly," suggested the Dark One from his spot. "I will notify you when I
am ready." He turned as he prepared to find his dark horse, but paused and turned toward them, his voice echoing throughout the emptying courtyard. "Return to your castle and prepare. War is upon us and the Evil Queen has the most dangerous weapon of all."

"Ser Eordic is one of my best knights. He has a great history of victories. Let us see if you can best the best." The Evil Queen spoke as she took to the sidelines, her dark gaze staring intensely at the two. The Black Knight she had introduced pulled a sword from its sheath and stood, ready for the fight.

Emma swallowed thickly as she looked upon the giant of a man; one that she had seen carry Brynly away moons ago. His face was scarred and twisted into a permanent scowl. The fear that she felt upon first encountering the man rekindled, squeezing her stomach tight and forcing the hairs on the back of her neck to stand on end.

She tested the sword in her hand, now used to the weight and grip after months of training. Though she didn't have the strength that Eordic held, she was far smaller and lither which would give her the advantage of easy movement against his large form.

The blonde had always wanted to push herself, push her limits until she broke them, and that is what brought her here, facing death in the form of a mountainous man.

When she gazed to Regina, she saw the expectant look in her eyes and the pride buried beneath it, and that had fueled her to take a step toward the man clad in all black, already moving like a shadow across the hard-packed dirt.

"You may begin the duel."

The Black Knight did not hesitate and made his strike, the silver blade like lightning as it moved toward the blonde, but Emma saw his lunge and tucked away from his hit, landing behind the man. She took the opportunity and made a strike to his leg, unsure of where the blade had landed, but it made contact when she heard the mighty knight roar.

He staggered slightly as he moved, whirling around as the sword swung with him in another attempt to strike. Emma quickly blocked the attack, sending a painful tremor up her arm. She ignored the discomfort and continued to counter each strike his sword made; the sound of steel on steel resounding through the courtyard.

Then she saw the opportunity; his arm was knocked away momentarily and his chest was unguarded. Instead of plunging her blade forward, she used a foot to knock him back as hard as she could, which had made the large knight stumble, one knee hitting the ground to keep from falling. He grunted heavily. The only evidence of his wounds was the blood that stained the dirt.

"Will it be to the death?" Regina's voice sounded from a distance and Emma paled; there was no way she would be able to take this man down.

The knight merely spat and removed his helmet, tossing it aside with another grunt. She could see the sweat glistening like dew on his brow. "Yer quick, girl, but yer small." He danced back and forth, fingers gripping the hilt of his sword hard. He lunged, then, pushing the princess before she could strike again, knocking her off balance as he slashed at the air, aiming for the arm that held her sword.

She was quick enough to evade the attack, her body rolling just as the blade whizzed past her ear. She quickly picked herself up before the knight would take advantage of her position and shouted, "I may be small, but I am not weighed down!" Once again, she lunged at the Black Knight, avoiding
his next move and slicing the back of his thigh with one quick movement.

The man cursed when the blade kissed his skin and fell, caught off balance, to his knees. "Yer eagerness will get ye nowhere, girl!" he spat and slowly stood, moving to face the blonde. "Ye've no protection." He offered a couple of swipes toward the princess that he knew wouldn't hit, going from one direction to the other. He feigned his next move, aiming high when he went low, the edge of his blade catching her leather clad thigh; always her weakest point.

The princess cried out in pain when she felt the steel dig into her delicate flesh and staggered heavily when she dodged his neck attack. "Fuck," she swore under her breath, eyes like jade fire on the knight who smirked. "At least I have skill," she spat, her blade flashing as she aimed at his fingers, meeting them against the hilt that he held tight.

He shouted something incomprehensible as Emma watched in morbid curiosity, even as two of his fingers disconnected from his hand, falling to the ground along with his blade. His bleeding hand was held close as dark eyes stayed on the blonde. "Ye stupid cunt! I'll 'ave yer 'ead!" He reached for his blade with his good hand; Emma lifted her own and pressed it to his throat, freezing the man in his spot. She hesitated to thrust it forward, to end it right then, but found her relief when the Queen took a step forward, her words coming in a cold laughter.

"That is enough, Ser Eordic. Get your wounds dressed. I will see to it later that your limbs are reattached." Her chestnut hues were glued to the man as he picked his helm off the ground and left, limping. Soon, the Queen turned a sadistic grin on the blonde. "I must say, I am impressed. Not many have bested him. Fewer so to live to tell the tale." She bent to the bloody patch where the knight had dropped his sword and waved a hand over the amputated fingers, making them disappear in a haze of purple magic.

"Thank you," she said softly, bowing slightly with heated cheeks at the high esteem from the Evil Queen; someone she had worked so hard to impress these past months.

The brunette turned toward the princess. "How badly are you wounded?"

"I have had worse," she answered, attempting to ignore the searing pain in her thigh, but as soon as she moved, she nearly lost her balance as blood flowed heavily from the wound.

The Queen only watched, lips set in a thin line. "Being proud only gets you killed… Ser Emma." She smirked and slowly glided closer to the young woman, eyeing the steady stream of sticky crimson liquid. "I cannot have you dying now, can I?" She merely shook her head and hovered her hand over the deep cut on her thigh.

Emma could feel a white hot heat take over her senses before her leg tingled as the skin slowly mended. "Thank you," she murmured. Then, it suddenly hit her, after the strange sensation had faded and the Queen had straightened out. "Did-Did you refer to me as Ser Emma?"

Regina merely nodded, a smirk on her lips. "You have proven yourself, Emma. Your training has built you up to this point and what may come beyond it." She strode forward, that smirk disappearing and being replaced by something more genuine. "Per my established rule, if you are able to defeat the current Black Knight in duel, you are to take his title for yourself."

"But I did not best him, Your Majesty." Emma felt a frown grow on her face. "You ended the duel."

"You stripped him of his dignity and humiliated him as you pointed that sword at his throat. I believe that is called besting him." The witch purred before turning away.
"I…" Blood warmed her face. "What will happen, then?"

"You will need bathed and dressed in new attire. I will make the announcement of your new title on the morrow and with it, I will tell you of your new duties." She gestured for the blonde to follow as she crossed the courtyard, entering the large, windy castle. "Life will become different and our time will be spent with each other more often."

"More often that we already do?" Emma kept beside her, heart fluttering in her chest at the thought. "What will we be, uh, doing?"

"You will soon learn, ser." She smirked, something that wrinkled her face with knowing.

"Will I- Will I be part of another execution, my queen?" The blonde paused for a moment, her mind reeling back to the day the raid party had saved her from taking the peasant girl's life. She briefly wondered where Brynly made off to and entertained the thought that she was back with her brother.

"You will be attending many future executions," she answered, not stopping when Emma had, which caused the latter to quicken her step.

"Will I have to-

"No." The Queen easily answered before ascending the winding stairs. Emma felt relief at the thought as she kept behind her, nodding even though the woman could not see. "I tend to take these matters into my own hands. You will be facing more than pleading peasants in your new position."

"What do you mean?" The blonde shuddered at the thought of what her new duties would entail.

"There will be many battles for you to attend, dear ser." Emma was met with a wicked smirk when the brunette witch had paused. "And anyone that might be out of line, otherwise. As I had said, we will be discussing your duties when the sun rises."

Swallowing, she nodded once again, the blood draining from her face and leaving her with a queasy feeling in her stomach. The inevitability of taking someone's life loomed over her like a dark shadow. She knew no rest would be in supply for the nights to come. "Of course, Your Majesty," she replied, dipping her head.

Regina's lips twitched before she gestured toward the wooden door they stood before. "I will leave you to your bath. I have left you a gift. Wear it and join me in the dining hall when Gilda collects you for supper."

Queen Regina had taken to her own bathing chambers and climbed into the readily awaiting steam of her bath; the warmth of the water seeping into her weary bones. The day, for once, she did not have planned. She decided to leave it open; leave it all to the fate of the princess when she fought her duel with Eordic.

It was something, after months of working up her strength and besting many of her lower knights, that she thought the blonde would be ready for. The thought had occurred to her when Emma had grown weary of the ease of the younger knights - the ones less trained, the ones more trained - and demanded something that would push every limit.

The brunette had expected Emma to lose, perhaps gracefully, and yield for the first time; Gods knows the girl never gave up which was why she won most fights. Though, she had her weakness - her left leg; she always left it unguarded. Regina could not recall how many times she had healed the young woman's flesh, that was, when the knight-in-training had allowed her to, not being too proud.
But, tonight, Emma - that little girl - had completed the impossible; or what she deigned to be so. Eordic was a powerhouse of a man and all that went up against him had left, licking their wounds.

All except for Emma.

And now she was to replace the man that had stood by her side for years.

Regina had to admit that she was skeptical. She feared the girl would be weak, even if she denied it. Emma was small, still, and clumsy on her feet with a sword too large. But she was also determined and held a sort of confidence that she found admirable.

Shaking the thoughts from her mind, the brunette stood from her bath and donned another elegant gown, soon taking to her vanity to tend to her hair and face. It was when the sun sunk into the earth that she found herself in the dining hall before the long dark wooden table filled with various platters of food. Her closest knights and the royal court were seated waiting for the Queen as they talked among themselves. She took her seat at the head of the table, but moved none as she waited for the final guest to take the empty seat next to her own.

When she entered in the scarlet gown, flowing and demure, yet tight and spicy, the queen's breath was lost. She offered a tight-lipped smile at the young blonde, the guard at the door leading her to the empty spot next to the brunette. "I see that you have found the gift."

Emma sat with a stiff poise and looked to the brunette queen with tired eyes. "It is very beautiful. Thank you, Your Majesty."

"You are most welcome," she purred with a smirk before nodding to the awaiting guests, granting them permission to feast. Regina looked to her already full plate as she spoke again. "I must ask you, and you must be honest, how did you feel during your duel?" She cut into her piece of meat and lifted the fork to her mouth. "I noticed you hesitated when you had the sword pointed at his throat."

"It was…" Emma's whisper was lost as she let the words trail away, green eyes falling to her plate. "I mean…" She began once again and Regina noticed the crinkle in her brow. "When I held the sword to his neck I - I could not find it within myself to complete the task and… I felt relief when you ended the duel and that… It scared me, in a way." When she looked up, the brunette saw the reflection of her fear in those sparkling, jade eyes.

Regina nodded slightly, knowing well what she saw earlier that day; the blonde's hesitation; her weakness. Perhaps her fright was the Evil Queen's rage. "Tell me, why were you scared?" She set her fork down and folded her hands on top of the table.

"I did not wish to fail you." Emma's words were quiet and the Queen had to strain to hear them. She saw the girl wince slightly at her own words and once they registered, she knew why. "You said I had potential," she continued much to her surprise. "I was scared that you would think I was worthless and a - a waste of time." As her words progressed, the more Regina had to strain to hear them, but her irritation did not come, only curiosity. "I hoped you would see me differently."

Regina was quiet for a moment as she attempted to process what the princess was telling her, leaving her momentarily dazed at the fact that this girl was worried what she thought.

"May I be excused?" Emma broke the silence and rose from her seat.

Something inside the Queen seemed to snap into place, and for the first time, she frowned. "No, you may not be excused. I am not through with talking to you." She gave her a hard stare, the emotion she had disappeared. She was not letting her go this easily. "Why do you wish to please your captor?"
Why do you wish for me to see you differently? What is the gratification?"

She saw the frown creasing Emma's thin lips. "B-because…" The word was quick and the brunette saw her tense slightly. "I want to please you, for whatever crazy reasoning I have. You may not be the first one that has encouraged me to do great things, but you are the only one that allowed me a certain freedom over it; some sort of gratification; a chance to move up in the world and not just be a Queen when my parents pass and I am married off. And you see me differently than that of a princess because that is all I am to everyone else." Everything fell from the girl's lips and Regina could barely keep up, but she held onto each word. "And I believe you deserve something good and that good is me; is my status and my strength and what you are building me up to be."

Regina expected to meet those soft green eyes but, instead, they were replaced with hard jade orbs, alight with emotion. "I do not wish to be just the princess or some stupid cunt that does not know her elbow from her asshole. I want to be me; Emma, the girl who won over the Evil Queen." Her face was dark with blood and the room was quiet with listening ears.

The Queen grew silent, herself, and did she stay silent for a good long while. Her eyes were wide, flicking from the blonde to the guests and back again until she stood. "What are you staring at? Eat." Suddenly the crow seemed disinterested and did as they were told, mild chatter arising among them. But she did not linger long enough to care as she took her leave, winding up with a blank eye staring at her reflection and her rump in her vanity chair as she mulled over her raging thoughts.

At first, she grew angry at Emma's words, and angrier still how she ended them until she realized what the girl had meant, and found her eyes brimming with unwelcome tears. How did this young woman bring out these emotions in her; these feelings she never wanted to have?

"Gods, this is ridiculous, Regina! Do not let this girl get to you. She means nothing." She muttered to herself and stared at her reflection, anger burning within her again.

"But what other company have you?" His azure skin wrinkled as he smiled. "People might think you mad if you continue to speak to yourself."

"Oh, they already believe that I am mad."

Snorting softly, she pushed herself way from the broken mirror to stand and crossed her chambers to order the handmaiden away for a drink. Regina turned to the window, quickly finding solace in the darkness that touched the forest. She was darkness; meant to cover the world where light was absent. And Emma was the light that she had yet to engulf; yet that little flickering flame seemed to burn her in the process.

Regina cast those thoughts aside and drew herself to the large, canopied bed. She sunk into the feather bed and wondered what she was doing; sulking like a lovelorn girl. A voice stirred her from her position and she stood, swiftly moving toward the door with the grace of a queen. It was her handmaiden, back with a tankard of hot honey milk.

"Good, she needed the aid. Sleep would not come easily."

She quickly thanked the girl, her heart somehow soft in the moment, and took to the halls with her
beverage. She had swallowed the emotion she bid not to come. They were pointless and useless. Though, the very thought of them veered to the princess and her need to find the girl. She sipped her milk as she went, setting off down the dark, winding halls of her castle, and headed toward the dining hall only to falter when she heard voices around the corner.

"Ye’re a goner little princess. Queen wants ye dead either way. So maybe I’ll have my fun wit’ ye before I get it done an’ over wit’. She won’t mind, I’m sure."

Not stopping, she pressed forward to find a familiar crimson gown and the dark armor of a knight. "What is going on here?" she asked, voice sharp and demanding.

When she took a moment to gather the scene, she saw Emma backed into a corner, blade inches from her neck and dress hiked up to her thigh, but the blade was pulled away once the man had heard his Queen's voice and the skirt of her dress covered those milky legs. The princess took advantage of this and pushed the man away from her, forcing him to stumble slightly as he turned toward Regina.

"N-Nothing, Yer Grace!" Eordic quickly answered, his knife clattering to the ground as he bowed. The princess remained silent. "This foolish princess thought she could beat me here and no so I was simply showing her otherwise."

One look at the blonde told the Queen otherwise. She growled and glided down the hallway and toward the two, her empty tankard getting thrust into the knight's hands. "You are on kitchen duty, Eordic. And if I see the princess hurt, your fingers will not be the only thing you will lose." Her eyes darted to his pelvic region before she snapped her fiery gaze back on his. "Do you understand?"

When the knight nodded, she gave him a jerk of her head and he was off. She watched him disappear before she bent to grab his dagger from the ground, handing it hilt first to the blonde. Emma quietly took it, though awkwardly held the weapon at her side. "He will learn. I would have him beheaded, but volunteers for my army come few and far between." She sighed and lifted a hand to the long hallway ahead of them. "Walk with me. We must speak."

"Of course," murmured the blonde, her form still rigid as her knuckles turned white against the hilt of the dagger.

Regina dipped her head slightly before turning back the way she had come. She was silent for a long moment, contemplating how to start what she was about to offer the girl, their footfalls the only sound occupying the thinning air. "You are young and foolish," she started, a bite to her voice. "Your mother was the same."

When she looked to the younger woman beside her, she was met with a frown, but continued with a shake of her head. "Today, you have proven yourself. Today, you have shown me that you are neither of your parents' daughter. There was something about the way you fought today that I found most… impressive, shall I say." She kept her eyes on the stonework ahead of them. "I cannot forgive you for you have done me no wrong. It is… Queen Snow that has wronged me. And that is why I want you to be my knight. And, of course, not just any knight." She finally looked at her, smirking. "I want you to be my Black Knight. The position is of high ranking. I know we have discussed this earlier, alas…" She paused her movements and stood before the blonde, lips pressing together momentarily. "Would you accept this honor? It would mean forsaking all that you know outside these castle walls."

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The blonde' jade eyes widened and the Queen swore she saw a certain light in them; her lips twitching slightly as if to keep a smile hidden. Emma had nearly collided with the brunette in her stupor, but was able to keep from doing so as her brain finally caught up with her, voice a steady answer. "I would be honored."
Regina could not help the pleased grin that split her face. "Good. We must forge a sword and armor for you."

"Perhaps light armor?" Emma queried, leaning forward slightly.

The brunette queen nodded. "Certainly."

It took her a moment to gather their proximity when the blonde had stepped forward once again, but when she felt the young woman's warm breath on her cheek, her heart seemed to have sped. Pressing her lips together, she swallowed and took a step back. "Tell me, what did you mean when you spoke of winning over the Evil Queen? I trust that you will not plot to overthrow me?"

Her eyes fell upon the girl's soft features and the darkness that tinted her cheeks. Something bubbled within the Queen. "No. That is not my intention, Your Majesty. I just…" She trailed off, her face only growing darker, a thought left unsaid behind those beautiful eyes. "Because I wanted to win over your trust."

"To win over my trust?" She quirked a brow, suspicious, but said nothing more. "Get me Queen Snow's head on a pike and I would bend knee to you." She smirked and turned to continue down the hall. You must be exhausted. When was the last time you slept?"

There was a soft noise of discomfort from beside her at the comment, but the princess must have decided against voicing her thoughts for she answered the question instead. "Slept good? Not in months. But I had been training for the past couple days in preparation." She answered, her voice steady and strong.

Nodding, the Queen filtered off to a room and stood aside, gesturing. "Then you should rest. You deserve as much for what you have accomplished today. Tomorrow will be a new dawn." She entered further into the room, though, as the blonde had followed, a weary look in her eye.

"Thank you," she said quickly, a warm smile on her face. Regina had to blink twice to make sure she hadn't seen it incorrectly.

"For what?" She queried, brow crinkled.

"For- For trusting me," she continued and tucked a golden lock behind her ear. "I know it was hard considering who I was. You - You could have left me to die, but you did not, and you opened up a future for me that I would have never known."

Regina dipped her head, a smile finding its way onto her face. "I learn, though, more every day how unlike you are compared to…" She chuckled softly and took a few steps closer to the blonde, an olive finger gliding along her jaw, earning a sharp inhalation from air when Emma had shuddered underneath the touch. "Your beauty is far greater than that of Snow's, who many had argued was the fairest of them all."

When those emerald orbs locked onto hers, she felt herself grow breathless, a brief thought fluttering about her mind. "Thank you," Emma said softly, a coy smile appearing. "But I believe - I know you are far more beautiful than myself. I am nothing compared to you."

The brunette laughed and withdrew her hand, letting it fall to her side. "Flattery in the name of the Evil Queen?" She merely shook her head, that upturn of her lips remaining, and took a step back. "The compliment was meant for yourself. Do not try to please me so much. It shows." The Queen gave her a polite nod, taking another step toward the door, knowing the hazard of skimming the waves that churned in her mind. "I am sure you would like to rest, Emma."
"I would have called it honesty but I do suppose flattery will work." But her words quieted quickly after she realized what the Queen had said. "I suppose I would like to rest, yes." She looked as if someone had stolen her favorite toy. "Now, do I sleep nude or in a different set of clothes since I seem to have used them all?"

Regina quirked a brow, knowing very well the upcoming knight should know, but merely gestured toward the armoire, anyway. "However you prefer. I generally tend to have fresh garments sent up for you. Unless you feel inclined to wear nothing at all, of course, then what point have we?" There was a light twitch on her lips and a darkness in her eyes before she stepped away, her last words echoing as she slipped into the hallway. "I will see you when you wake."

"I shall see you when I wake, Your Majesty. Have sweet dreams." She heard the princess's voice follow her; filling her senses as if reverberated off the stone walls, and, for a reason, she wanted to see her face again.

The burning thoughts from earlier rampaged her, making her blood flow as she turned back around and stepped through that large, chestnut door, her words - her excuse - flowing from her lips. "I have heard you speak of me as the Evil-" She paused for a single moment when she found the red gown on the floor and why it was. She swallowed and continued, voice hoarse. "-Queen. I do have a name. It's Regina."

"I-I know." Emma's startled voice sounded as her head shot up from its position on the bed before she quickly slipped from it to pick up her dress, lifting it to hide her nude form. "I-I-It's a beautiful name."

Regina could feel laughter bubble within her as she watched the flustered princess, her own moment of shock gone. "Why are you shy? I am sure plenty have seen you nude. You were a princess, after all. Do not hide yourself. I know of your parts." Dark eyes devoured the form before her as if it were a piece of meat.

"I-I do not know…" The blonde's face was florid as she spoke, but as she had, she slowly let her arms drop, the dress falling to her side in a pool of red. "I feel different with you."

A single brow quirked at the princess's last words and she grinned, something hungry and sardonic. "Tell me, is this truly why you wish to leave your kingdom and flee your betrothed?" She glided forward, the smirk never leaving her lips. "Do you prefer to lay with women?" Her hands clenched at the folds of her dress as dark, chestnut hues- almost obsidian now - took in what was Emma, something within her stirring to life.

The young woman shifted underneath the Queen's hungry gaze, her head doing a slight nod motion; as if no thought were put into it. "I-I did not want to leave for just that but…" she trailed off, fingers curling against her palms.

Regina could not help the smirk that only grew, along with her inclining excitement, fueling her to draw a hand to the blonde's porcelain cheek once again, digits gliding down the smooth skin; warm and soft underneath her touch. "Enchanting. Your Queen Mother would be pleased." She heard a snort from the princess and laughed, hooking a finger under the young woman's chin to life her gaze. "Your mind is aflutter. Are you ashamed?"

"I… yes," she whispered, her eyes trying to break contact, but Regina disallowed her. The Queen purred softly at the confession, though a frown claimed her lips when an arm moved to shield the exposed flesh of her chest. "It… It is not something that I am very proud of. My mother had this image for me; or perhaps she did long ago before I was sentenced to pay for the price they had bartered for this… protection. No one else knows, aside from you, and I just- I am not sure how to
feel; how you feel."

Regina's hand dripped and she tilted her head, eyes narrowing slightly. "I see," she murmured and stepped back, eyes never leaving her sweet face. "Now you do not have to worry about my judging you. You are here and you are free to take as many women as you wish, as do the rest of my knights." She chuckled. "Why do you worry of my opinion?"

The blonde's gaze broke again as her eyes fell to the ground. "I do not want as many women as I wish because I only want one." She said softly before turning slightly, her body tense as if she prepared to run again, but she went to the bed instead and perched on the edge. "And I... I worry about your opinion because it is important. To me."

This amused the Queen, forcing laughter to fall from her lips. She followed the young woman and stood before her, her interest only growing. "Because I am Queen or because you are infatuated with me?" She tilted her head slightly. "I am not blind, child. I have seen the way you look at me."

"I am not a child, otherwise you would have never consider me as your Black Knight." She spoke up and slowly rose from the bed. "You spoke my interest, Regina. So, I am. I am infatuated with you. But do not worry, I will not let that get in the way of my service to you. It has not thus far." Those words were bitter and the look on her face matched.

Regina took a step forward, allowing little space between them. Her lips curled into a grin as her blood raced through her veins. "Perhaps you may not be a child, but you are far younger than I am, if you find that believable." The Queen let her fingers glide up the young woman's arm; it rippled underneath her touch and she could feel the muscle that the princess had built over her time at the castle. "Perhaps you could expand your services to me, Emma. We can see where this infatuation will lead you once you acquire what you desire."

She heard the blonde groan softly and knew that she had won the princess's interest over. A smirk crossed her features again as those dark emerald eyes landed on her face. "What do these new services entail?" She asked softly, her hands moving to pull the brunette flush against her.

A breathless sigh escaped from between the older woman's crimson lips and she found herself enjoying the new confidence her newest knight had gained. "It is your interpretation that will decide." Her fingers pressed into the taut skin on the blonde's shoulders. "What will you do, my knight?" she queried, her permission given as she pressed roughly against her, still smirking.

Something slow and seductive curved Emma's lips, easily reaching those dark orbs; some whole new side to this girl that had Regina's body buzzing with an electricity that would not cease. She watched as the blonde reached behind the brunette, fingers fumbling with something. "I will give you myself completely, my queen." She purred and leaned up, their breaths mingling.

The brunette's lips had burned until the blonde had quenched the fire, releasing her of the curiosity that long plagued her mind. Emma's lips were soft and tentative and felt perfect as they moved against her own. She allowed herself to be lost in the sweet sensation, her fingers sliding into soft, honey curls. She curled her fingers into the locks and took advantage to tilt Emma's head, tongue thrusting between thin lips when they parted. The corners of her mouth quirked when she pulled away for a moment, breathless.

"Let me," she murmured, finally realizing where Emma's hands were and stepped back, arms waving over herself. Her clothing was gone in an instant, leaving her in nothing more than what she had been born in and a grin that widened her face. She could feel the blonde's heated eyes on her.

"I never realized how small you are..." Emma murmured unconsciously. The muscles in her
stomach twitched when the blonde had grazed her nails over the soft skin of her abdomen.

"Pardon me?" Regina could only blink before the younger woman seemed to have snapped out of her daze and offered a sheepish smile, her cheeks blooming with heat.

"You tower over me in your traditional attire and you carry this aura of power about you. It's a change of pace to see you this way, vulnerable…" she trailed off before stepping forward, her warm skin pressing against the Queen's. "You are beautiful," she whispered breathlessly.

"I suppose you could say that, but my breasts do not define my beauty." Regina hummed, her eyes closing as she enjoyed the warmth against her; something that had been absent in her life for a long while.

"I am talking about all of you," Emma whispered softly, as if she were afraid to break the intimacy between the two.

The brunette let a breathless chuckle escape. "Of course," she purred and pressed her body tighter against the ivory flesh, an impatient desperation welling inside her, setting her blood on fire. Her hands found their way to the young woman's supple rear and squeezed, lips not hesitating to connect with the rosy set before her. She felt as Emma had returned it and found herself lost again until they parted, the latter husking out, "Let me take you to bed."

A growl rose in the Queen's throat at those words, her lips parted and her breath heavy. "Then bed me, my knight," she whispered, nails raking up the blonde's rear. She could feel the blonde shudder against her. "Impress me." She gripped Emma's petite waist hard and moved forward to kiss her lightly, fingers digging into the pale flesh.

The younger woman started to move back, forwarding her promise, and Regina followed until they hit the bed, their lips still connected. She gasped softly when she fell against the feathery surface, but the joy soon left when Emma followed suit and moved on top of her, lips carelessly trailing along her neck. For a moment she couldn't breathe, but then her brain snapped to reality and she took action.

The Queen let out a soft growl before she rolled the two of them over, landing on top of the younger woman with a wicked smirk at the doe eyes she was greeted by. "No," she hissed, connecting their lips together once again, her hips grinding down against the thigh she straddled. She could hear the delicate moan that left her new lover's lips and it sent a heady desire straight to her lower belly.

A hand moved between their bodies to dip between milky thighs and what she found had her nearly shuddering as Emma had beneath her. "You are quite excited, aren't you?" she purred, exploring the southern lips as if she had discovered the most sacred treasure of all.

"F-for you," whimpered the blonde, those green hues growing darker as they stared upon the woman above her. The brunette hummed softly, her own excitement building as she felt the blonde's hands exploring her aching skin. Each movement was like electricity in her veins; spiking up her spine and straight to her brain, intoxicating her.

The words, once they registered, pleased her knowing that she had caused this girl's excitement. She knew that many admired her beauty, though most never dared to speak a word of it. Sometimes they took their actions and, within the throes of panic and rage, she broke their necks.

A plea brought her back as she probed those soft folds with gentle fingers, the ache building between her thighs like a burning fire. She attempted to take the edge off by grinding a little harder against the princess's leg, though the way she had felt the younger woman grow slicker by the action had her moaning as more blood rushed to the tender area.
"Regina..." Emma's voice came in the form of a helpless cry. The brunette silenced her with another kiss which only grew deeper when she felt a hand slide along the swell of her chest and tweak the erect peak.

She mewled softly before falling away from those sweet lips, pressing her own against the delicate canvas before her, painting it red with what remained of her lip balm. A finger no sooner entered the young woman, plunging deep inside the tight warmth.

She could hear the blonde's breath become ragged as she started to thrust that very digit and she couldn't help but to match her breath with each one. Regina smirked softly, trailing her lips upwards and over the swell of Emma's breast, teeth nipping at the tender flesh until she took a rosy bud between them.

"You taste sweet," she husked against pale skin.

"I am flattered that you approve," Emma murmured and when the brunette looked up, she was met with those dazzling emerald orbs that seemed to beg for her attention.

She smirked and pressed another kiss to her chest before guiding them back upwards, over the column of her throat and the underside of her chin until their lips met once again. She thrust her tongue between the sweet, parted lips, those olive digits slipping from within her to tease the swollen bundle of nerves above.

This had earned a sharp cry from the blonde, her hips bucking to meet the fingers. "O-Oh, please," she moaned into the air as pale fingers dug into the brunette's arms, earning a sharp hiss from the older woman.

The sorceress purred as she felt the younger woman's rising desperation. She continued to kiss her, lips fervent as they matched the thrusts of her fingers when she entered the blonde knight once again, her thumb taking over their previous attention to her clitoris. It hadn't taken long from that moment until she felt Emma tighten and pulse around her, a sharp cry emanating from below her.

Regina smirked, pulling away to watch the blonde's release play on her face. Her fingers still worked, helping her ride the blissful high until the young knight had fallen against the bed once again, shuddering. She pulled from her and brought those very digits to her mouth, smirking as she watched the blonde, tongue lapping up the juices.

She moaned, "delicious," and brought a hand up to brush the mussed golden locks from her flushed face.

"Fuck." The blonde whispered, eyes never leaving Regina's face.

The Queen sat back on her knees as she moved to straddle the blonde's hips once again, a smirk claiming her features as she allowed her fingers to slip from between her lips. "Fuck? Well, I certainly did just that to you." She chuckled though, a smile gracing her messy, pink and red lips.

"No, no. I mean, well, yes, but..." The blonde's florid face only seemed to grow darker as she stumbled over her words. A hand, soft and clammy, reached for the brunette's cheek, her thumb grazing over the warm surface. Regina wanted to pull away, but she found herself nuzzling the hand instead, silently grateful for such sweet contact. "I-It... That was amazing, Regina."

"You are quite drunk off your orgasm, my knight." A soft laughter left her lips as she touched the blonde's hand. "I am afraid to ask if you have ever lain with another."

"I believe I am, to be quite honest." Suddenly, her entire face seemed to turn almost purple at the
question and she tried to hide behind her honey colored locks. "I… might have made another girl… uh…" Her mouth twitched slightly into a mortified smile. "But that was my first time."

The Queen laughed and moved away to lay next to the blonde, a smirk on her lips. "You are quite… precious," she mewled, a finger tracing the contour of her own breast, lower lip disappearing into her mouth. "You need to do the same for me, Emma."

"I had intended to. I never- I never expected for you to…" She gestured toward herself, face glistening with sweat as those emerald orbs, now lighter, stayed on the woman spread out before her.

"I find it arousing to watch a woman find her release," she hummed softly, fingers deftly moving across the soft, pale expanse of skin before her. "And, Gods, you are expressive when you climax."

"Expressive, hm? Does this mean this was not just something for tonight?" Emma asked, shifting onto her knees as she gazed down at the brunette.

"Prove your worth and it just not might be," she purred, dark eyes watching the younger woman. Emma swung a leg over the brunette's body and straddled her as she slowly lowered her body onto the Queen's. But Regina quickly seized when she felt the weight upon her and glared at the blonde, growling with the intensity of a thousand storms, "No!"

"Wh-what?" The former princess blinked when she had found herself thrown onto her back, those wide green orbs transfixed on the brunette. "How am I…"

The sorceress let her heart beat once again as she looked upon her new lover before taking her prior position straddling her thigh. "There are many ways to fuck, my knight."

"But, why-"

"Hush!" She silenced the princess with her lips, kissing her roughly. The younger woman moaned in surprise and son found purchase on the Evil Queen's body; her hands following the map of her soft skin. Slowly, Regina started to rock against her, humming softly as it curbed the sharp edges of her arousal, though she ached for something more.

The princess was not nearing the center of her excitement, instead, a hand had found her breast as pale, slender digits caressed the sensitive flesh. Her breath hitched as it shot another does of heat to the already roaring fire burning in her belly and her desperation grew into the kiss. Then she pulled away, growing frustrated, and painfully so.

"Let me straddle your face if you are not going to use your hands." She finally hissed, eyes like obsidian as they stared upon the younger woman.

"Wh- I'm sorry…" The blonde had fidgeted slightly in her spot before pulling her hands away completely. Regina immediately missed the sensation, but she took to shifting her body forward, and hovered above the young woman's expectant face. She kept most of her weight against the headboard and watched as Emma had tentatively started to shift, her arms wrapping around her thighs.

Regina could have wept when she felt the long-awaited contact against her core and carefully ground against the source that pleasured her. "Gods," she muttered under her breath when a soft tongue danced along her tender folds, tasting and exploring. The length she had gone without this contact was far too long; her own hand never pleased her this well.

"Excited, are we?" She heard a rumble beneath her and it tickled, but she remained from tittering.
"Excited is an understatement," she mewled.

Her breath hitched when she felt that delicate little muscle trod over her clit and immediately yearned for more of the sweet contact. It was silently granted when Emma had teased it again, her lips encircling around the little bud. Regina couldn't help the instinctual moan that fell from her lips; her body shuddering above the delight that it had received. She gripped the carved oak hard enough to hurt, but she didn't mind, her hips rocking carefully against the blonde's sweet little mouth anyway.

"More, I need more." It was more of a command than a plead and Emma willingly obliged, one of her arms uncurling from around her thigh to squeeze between them. Regina fell back slightly, shifting her position as she held herself up, hands on either side of Emma's petite frame. She watched as slender digits probed her entrance, testing, teasing. She let out another moan.

"Fuck me!" She cried out, hips sliding forward. Emma complied and easily slid a digit inside her. Regina's hips bucked and another moan fell from her lips. She was a generous lover, but she was greedy, as well. She never resigned to begging, only demanding. But, Gods, she needed more. She could already feel her climax; her body was tensing, prepared, but she needed-

"More!" She demanded once again of her lover and felt as she was stretched, a companion joining the first. She could feel the pressure building within her; something sharp and sweet and uncomfortable. The brunette shifted again, leaning against the headboard knowing that she would need the support. A guttural moan left her when that sharp and sweet intensified and washed over her entire being, creating a divine light behind her eyelids and an electricity in her body that shuddered like an earthquake.

She was tender by the time she released the headboard; though when she opened her eyes, she had noticed that it had split in two. Breathing heavily, she collapsed beside the blonde to catch her breath, though there were wide eyes on her and she couldn't help but to notice with a sharp, "What?"

"You shattered the mirror," she replied and when Regina had looked to see what she meant, she saw the shattered remains of the floor-length mirror that once stood beside the armoire. Blood suddenly rushed to her already flushed face.

"I will fix it," she murmured before leaning up, hand waving over the mess on the floor. It soon repaired itself, leaving her to fall against the bed. Then her chestnut gaze fell to the younger woman, a smirk on her lips. "No longer a child, but a woman, and a knight, of the Queen."

"I find that title to be absolutely suitable," said the blonde beside her, a sheepish grin playing on her lips.

There was a pause before she spoke again. "You must tell no one of what had transpired; not even those who reside within these castle walls. They can never know. Do you understand?"

Emma's brow crinkled and the brief thought of "precious" crossed Regina's mind again, but she dispelled the thought with an internal scowl. "Why would I share this precious gem with another?"

"Of course," Emma murmured, turning her cheek into the soft touch. "I do have a question, if you do not mind my asking."

"It depends on what it just might be."

"Was your..." A certain hesitance gripped the blonde and those sweet eyes fell away to the wrist
next to her face. "Was your last Black Knight subjected to these duties?"

Her hand fell away, tracing along the contour of the younger woman's face. "What duties might you be inquiring about?"

"About- Did he ever-…" She could hear her swallow audibly as heat crept up her neck. "You two..?"

Laughter fell from Regina's lips like a silken waterfall, reverberating throughout the room. "Did we have sex with one another? No, I can say that we have not, though the man certainly did try, or moreover, plead." She grinned, olive finger moving over those pink lips. "I was never interested. Gods, I hadn't been interested in a long while. But, you… Something stirred inside me when I saw you. I tend not to mingle with the ones that work under my liege, but you fascinated me and I simply could not help myself. I knew I would lose control…” Her hand dropped and so did her smile.

Emma frowned slightly. "What is wrong, Regina?" She asked softly, head tilting as she gently cupped her cheek.

"My business is naught but my own." The brunette turned away from the hand. "Do not become too familiar with me. I am still the queen and you are nothing more than my Black Knight. This is merely a duty; nothing more than meaningless sex." She brought her gaze to meet Emma's dark and cold, expelling those pestilent thoughts bubbling like boiling lava.

"I apologize, Your Majesty," she murmured, the frown deepening as her eyes fell away from the older woman's.

The Queen gave a curt nod before climbing off the bed, eyes searching the floor for her clothes only to remember she had used magic to remove them. "I am sure that you are exhausted. Rest. I will be in my chambers if you need me." She turned toward the bed, eyes falling on the still frowning Emma.

Regina kept her eyes on the former princess for a moment, as if she had expected her to answer, but instead, she curled underneath the furs. When she hadn't said a word, the brunette magicked a fresh pair of sleeping garments on and turned toward her once again, her mouth sagging into a frown.

"Do not let my words destroy you, Emma. You should know that nothing more than what had just transpired could happen between the two of us." Even as she spoke those words, she felt a piece of herself wither. "What did you expect to become of this?"

"Nothing, Your Majesty." Though her words were bitter and Regina instantly detected the lie. But, she simply nodded and turned away, ignoring the small voice in her head that said to turn back; that perhaps something good could come of this. But she let the logical side of her brain speak, telling that good never made an appearance in her life and that every time she had let herself fall, let herself lose control, she was only torn and destroyed in the process.

"Then I shall see you in the morning." And before the blonde could utter a word, Regina swiftly moved out of her chambers and headed toward her own with a heavier step.
"You are doing very well."

"I have not accomplished anything." Emma stood in the middle of the training yard, the Queen standing beside her as she stared down the wooden dummy placed before them.

"If you are going to keep your attitude as such, perhaps I will not waste my valuable time on you," Regina replied crossly. "So long as you are concentrated on complaining about not making any progress, your mind is not concentrated on what we are supposed to be doing. So concentrate."

The blonde flinched at the ferocity in the Evil Queen's tone and quickly nodded, eyes falling to the very woman. She felt her face grow warm when she met the dark gaze in return and quickly let her attention be guided back to the wooden dummy, response lost on her tongue.

"Now, remember what I had told you?" Regina spoke in the blonde's silence and Emma nodded, reciting the earlier lessons.

"To take what I had felt at the time and concentrate on that very emotion?"

"Correct," she hummed, leaving the training sorceress to flush in delight. "Magic is generally rooted to raw emotion, and sometimes, like what had occurred with you, it will come out when it is at its strongest. For now, though, we will try to coax it out with a smaller fraction of emotion. What did you feel when it happened?"

"It was powerful," Emma murmured softly, linking herself back to that day several moons ago. "It was… I can only describe it as the feeling of a climax, only more intense."

There was a smirk on the queen's face and the blonde found herself overcome by an unpleasant tingle. "I do suppose you are not wrong. Only when it is so raw it feels so good. You will only get a sample of that flavor using practical magic, but worry not, you will experience it again."

Emma's breath was sucked out of her lungs at the statement and, if not for the twinkle in the older woman's fiery eyes, she would have passed it off as just part of the magic lesson. "Will I?"

"Only if you wish to utilize your magic again." The twinkle was gone, but her smirk remained. "Now, you did not answer my question correctly. I meant what emotion did you feel?"

"O-Oh!" Heat crept up her neck and she ducked her head, fingers curling into the palms of her hands. "I-I suppose I felt… anger. Toward the imp. Toward my parents. They were… they were hurting you and I…" She shook her head.

"Anger," she echoed, her voice taking on a darker tone. Emma caught the brief approval that seemed to flit through her eyes and she wondered what the enchantress was thinking. "That is an emotion best used for magic, I believe, especially for more... powerful spells. Of course, for now, I want you to think back to that time and let yourself feel that anger; let it take over you."

"Then what do I do?" Emma inquired hesitantly and brought her hands closer to her sides.

"Then you will see where that will take you, Emma," she said, eyes falling to her hands before lifting to meet the blonde's widening gaze. "And direct it to the wooden dummy. Think of fire, perhaps. Something to form the magic."
The blonde flexed her fingers and nodded, inhaling sharply, allowing herself to fall back on the anger that dwelt deep within her. But she felt nothing, even as she willed whatever magic that was harbored within her to show itself.

"Breathe." Regina coaxed beside her and it wasn't until then that she had realized she had been holding her breath. She released it and immediately felt light headed, her heart pumping furiously in her chest. "You look as if your head is about to explode. Do not think, Emma. Feel."

"But-"

"Do not argue with me," she warned. "Feel it. Let it flow through you; your heart, your veins, your being. Do not hold back." Emma nodded slightly, brows furrowing. "Now, take a breath and try again."

The knight closed her eyes and inhaled once again, holding the air in her lungs until they burned, and cleared her mind. Once she achieved a blank slate, she filled it, trying to collect the memories that brought her blood to a boil.

She could feel it consuming her, brewing like a wicked storm, and sudden terror filled her of how easily this emotion came to her. But that terror was soon surpassed as she let herself escape beyond the binds of reality, an overwhelming sensation flowing through her veins; both intense and powerful, and in that moment, she never wanted it to end. She let her thoughts, her worries, drift from her mind and concentrated on what had taken her.

When she opened her eyes, she no longer saw the training dummy that once stood before her, instead, the earth where it had been was burning with a slow flame, sending thick billows of smoke into the air.

Swallowing thickly, she turned to the queen who merely looked at her, blinking. "I-I didn't mean…"

"We still have work," Regina murmured softly, those dark eyes shining with… fear? "I can see your magic is very pure. It's nothing that I have ever seen before."

"I-I apologize…" Her voice trembled when she spoke, those emerald orbs unable to leave the waning fire.

"Do not apologize, Emma. You did excellently." The queen looked pleased as she turned to the flame as well, though she flicked her wrist and within moments, it was gone, revealing the patch of scorched earth left behind. "Had I known the extent of your powers… Well, I would have suggested something far less… dangerous."

"What should I do now?" The younger woman asked, brow furrowed.

"Are you feeling alright?" Regina tilted her head and stepped forward. "You look pale."

"My head feels dizzy," she answered, resisting the urge to draw closer to the enchanting woman who clucked her tongue at the statement.

"Mayhap we should leave our lesson for another day. I know how much it takes out of you when your first use." Emma dipped her head, remaining quiet as she continued to speak. "Perhaps now would be an excellent time to tour the castle."

"Again?" Emma furrowed her brow. She had been taken on a tour of the winding castle corridors long ago, but then as she attempted to map out the area of this royal abode, it was vague. Everything
"Indeed, but it would do good to refresh your memory, yes?" When the knight nodded, the queen wrinkled her nose and gestured toward the entrance off the courtyard. "In your position as the Black Knight, you will have new duties to attend to, and that means you must know the layout of the castle as well as I do. I will not always be there to hold your hand. I have my own duties to attend to."

"Of course," Emma agreed seriously and followed her queen as she made her way inside. "I have become well-acquainted of the path between our bedchambers, so I do suppose we can remove that from the list." She had to regain her footing when she nearly walked into the Queen whose sudden cease in step had faltered her. Chestnut hues shone with a menacing light, something that had her frozen in her spot and offering a wavering sheepish smile. "I-I apologize. That was out of line."

"That certainly was, ser. Have you already forgotten what I had told you after our first night together?" Emma shook her head. "Then I trust you will keep your mouth sealed or else I will see to it that you will be punished."

An unexpected shiver quaked down her spine at the prospect. What sort of punishment would the Evil Queen deal upon her? She didn't want to soon find out.

With a pleased smirk, the older woman turned to pace back down the corridor, her dark locks swishing with each movement. Emma was captivated as she followed behind; Gods, she loved it when the Queen wore raiment that clung to her body and gifted her with every curve. Licking her lips, she peeled her eyes away and made note of their location as the brunette spoke of their direction.

"I shall take you to the armory. It will be an important place to become acquainted with for you will meet with the blacksmith to discuss weaponry and armor for our troops; especially if the fates turn to war." Her voice was a husky rumble as if reverberated off the walls and followed them down the stretch of stone. "And, of course, I do suppose we must get a weapon forged for you, yes? And, of course, armor. Those leather rags will do little for you and the rusted armor you had been training in is not fit for the highest ranking knight."

"It is an uncomfortable piece," Emma murmured unconsciously, making sure to note the turns that they had made and the stairs they descended, but she knew she would have to walk this path several times over to remember it. It was not long until they stopped before a hallway where two guards were posted, shadows against the walls. Their armor clattered when they turned to confront the two, only to be waved away by the Queen. She heard them follow close behind, a chill creeping up her spine.

They filtered into a large area filled with more knights, though they did not wear any armor, instead; they donned black leather. She wouldn't mind slipping into something similar. The color black was something she had become acquainted with, as well as purple and red; the colors of the Evil Queen.

"My smith will measure you." Her attention was stolen when a rumbling voice spoke and she turned to find the Queen exchanging words with a large, gruff-looking man. His hair was silver as was the beard that he wore.

"Will you stay?" she asked, turning back to the older woman.

Regina quirked a brow, though nodded slightly. "If you feel so inclined." A smirk lingered on her lips as she paced toward the blonde knight who remained in her spot. "What sort of armor were you looking for?"

"Something that won't weigh me down. I rely on my speed and agility." She said with a firm nod,
though her eyes grew when the hard man drew near her, something held in his hand. "Need I remind
you of how I bested your last Black Knight?"

The Queen smirked and nodded. "Yes, of course. How could I forget?" She turned to run her fingers
along a few pieces that were on display, glinting in the soft fire. "You had mentioned light armor.
We can have something leather with light pieces of metal protecting the most vital parts. That should
suit your needs. And if you are quick, being struck is not an option."

"And if I am, your name will be on my dying breath." She stated simply before her attention was
drawn to the smith who had started to measure her, saying quick words indicating that she should
hold out her arms. Though, soon enough, she realized where his intended position to measure was.
"Of course, if it is worth getting my breasts fondled."

"Many men have died throughout history, yelling for their causes only to die for them as well. Of
course, most did not have breasts to be fondled. Boris is merely doing his job." Something dark and
seductive claimed her features and Emma could feel a warmth find its way where the smith was
nearing.

"And what cause would you die for, my Queen?" Emma asked facetiously, knowing very well the
Queen would never risk her life for anything but her own. "Gods, must you be so-" She was cut off
by a squawk, nearly losing balance when Boris had forced her legs apart to measure them.

"We must make sure the armor will fit correctly, ser." She hummed softly, pacing around the two
before she paused in front of the blonde, her eyes darkening. "Who says that I would ever die, my
knight?" There was a look in her eye that told Emma she was serious and it only sent a chill
throughout her body. If not for the scene in the courtyard days back, she would have believed it, but
the Evil Queen had a weakness as all others did. She was human, after all, even if many consider her
to be a monster.

"Forgive me for asking, Your Majesty," she said, regardless of her thoughts, and watched as the man
finally stepped away.

"We must need a proper sword forged for you, as well." Regina spoke and eyed Boris as if to gain
some sort of confirmation; or to demand.

"A sword? That sounds…” A smile took place of her words. She would get a sword. Something that
she could never have dreamt of having in her life as a princess.

The Queen grinned widely, too proud, as she ever was. "Indeed. I was thinking something similar to
the others, but of course, with your own personal touch. Perhaps a swan knob on the hilt?"

Emma drifted away from the smith and the Queen to look over the display of pieces herself, eyes on
the various weapons that were hung neatly on their respective racks. She reached out to feel a
particular sword that had caught her attention and found it to be cold to the touch. "But aren't I
different from everyone else? I am the Black Knight, after all." If she were to have a sword forged
for her, she would rather it be something special; something no one else would ever dream of
obtaining.

A pleased look crossed over the brunette's features. "What were you thinking, my knight?"

It hadn't taken Emma long to respond; this was something that she had thought long and hard about
in the past. "Black. With a white swan. Not silver, but black." A swan was what she had always
dreamt to be ever since she was a little girl and watched them from her window as they floated on the
pond water below. They were free to enjoy life and they could fly to wherever their hearts desired.
She had always wanted to be one, to fly, to be free... She was surprised the Queen had remembered when she told her of it.

"Black, hm?" The Queen's husky voice slowly brought her back to reality and the blonde nodded, cheeks red when she realized her demand, though the older woman did not seem to mind. "That will take some serious steel. I will talk with Boris and make sure he can gain the supplies." She turned and exchanged a few words with the blacksmith as Emma watched the two, a slow smirk crossing over her features and a flutter in her heart.

"He should be able to forge it."

"Truly?" Her entire being seemed to light upon the confirmation and she smiled, moving toward her queen once again.

Regina dipped her head and chuckled softly. "Yes. You are my Black Knight, after all. You will be as dark as the shadows."

"Perfect. They will never see me coming." She let her eyes fall away from an intricately designed blade of silver and turned to gaze upon the beauty before her. "What else shall we do today?"

"Training," she said, gesturing for the blonde to follow as she departed from the area, taking to the dank corridors once again. "Touring. I must show you where you need to be during the day."

"Yes, I wouldn't mind finding my way to your bedchambers without feeling like a complete idiot." She said with a chuckle and a mischievous grin as she follow the older woman.

"Oh, and to what makes you believe that I will show you the way to my chambers?" she queried, a playful smile on her lips.

"Considering one of my duties includes..." She lowered her voice, eyes taking to the walls as if they held listening ears. "...pleasuring you."

"Certainly, ser, how could I forget?" There was a dark look in her eyes as she continued forth. "Unfortunately, they are far from most other important areas. I do not like a busy hallway."

"How large is the castle?" The blonde quirked a brow.

"You will be doing quite a bit of walking. Complain not, Emma." Regina hummed and turned down another hallway that led to a courtyard where men in armor fought with swords. "Here is where you will train."

"Why should I not complain?" She turned to her, disregarding the announcement.

"Because you will have your rewards." The words that fell from her tongue were dripping with sex and she shuddered.

Emma lost her breath and her logic at the response; something that she had not been expecting. A warm feeling washed over her once again, polling into the center of her being. Swallowing, she turned her attention to the men who fought. Their armor was heavy, she noted, and their movement was slow. They would not fair well if it came to war. "That is a shame..."

"What is a shame?" She heard the question come from beside her.

"They are slow. We will lost at this pace, Re-... My Queen. Your captain, there, he is not training them properly. Their moves are too careless."
"Yes, but the rest of the knights in these kingdoms are slow, weighed down by their armor." She said, looking toward the blonde. "What do you suggest, then, if you are not pleased?"

"I suggest to train them in agility. Instead of weighing them down with heavy armor, give them something light. Make sure they can see everything instead of having them hesitate when they go to make a strike." It was something so simple, Emma thought, for this is what she had trained with herself. If one's opponent was slow and weighed down, one would easily surpass them with speed and sureness.

The Queen grinned before walking across the courtyard, eyeing the men in combat as she did. "Then perhaps I shall set you on that. It is your place as the Black Knight, after all. You give me counsel in these matters."

"Truly?" Emma followed behind the brunette, surprised, as her eyes fell to a knight who had dropped to the ground, his helm landing beside her feet. "I wouldn't want your men to lose, My Queen. This will give them a certain advantage over those other knights. If it is in my duty, of course."

"Of course not. We haven't had a war that called for many of my men. I tend to think they have been lazing." She tsked and entered through another door on the far side of the courtyard. "Through here will be the knights' quarters; dining and barracks."

"And do I eat with them from now on?" She had been curious; she was going to be considered a knight from now on. Gods, time felt as if it had flown by, as if she had woken inside a dream in those dungeons. "Or will I be dining with you?"

"You will dine with me. Members on my council generally do." She paused for a moment, grinning. "Of course, I could always arrange for a private sup every now and again, as we had before." The Queen proceeded. "This is where you will take new recruits if you happen upon them."

Emma frowned at the thought of having to eat with the council after growing used to private suppers with the Queen, or ones just to herself. "I would love to sup with you alone," she whispered before looking around the space. There were several large, empty tables with benches and baskets of apples and stale bread.

"I would be most honored, my Black Knight." When Emma's eyes fell on the Queen, she was smiling; something genuine. "Come, I will show you the execution yard. Well, how to get there, at least." She smirked before taking off down the corridors again.

Emma nodded and followed her with a large grin. "I must ask, is this your second favorite place in the castle?" she queried and immediately wanted to swallow her question. What on earth had compelled her to ask such a thing?

Regina quirked a brow and looked at her once they entered the small courtyard. "Well, perhaps it may be. Red looks lovely against the grass." She smirked. "Though, it depends on what you believe is my favorite place."

"Your bedchambers. With me in them." A boldness took over her; some confidence that buzzed within her being, especially when the queen's smirk had grown.

"Well, perhaps that is my favorite place. I quite enjoy your company within it, though I have always admired the view of the forest from my window."

Emma could feel the heat creep up her neck and she took a chance to move closer to the powerful
sorceress, feeling drunk off her approval as she grabbed her hand. "I enjoy your company wherever we are."

Regina's brows rose slightly as she shifted, a stiff grin on her face and a tenseness in her muscles. "Is that so? Even here, where blood stains the earth?"

"W-Well… Your presence is comforting." Emma nodded slightly, blood welling to the surface of her cheeks.

"I must say, that is a first." She murmured before turning, taking advantage of their linked hands to tug the blonde along. "You are strange, Emma, and unique. I like that."

Surprise, as well as pride, grabbed her at the Queen's statement. Perhaps their time together had warmed the older woman's seemingly chilled heart. "Thank you. I am pleased to see that there is someone that sees me differently from everyone else."

Regina pulled her hand from the blonde's grasp. "If you were like everyone else, you would have killed me by now."

Emma felt her smile sag into a frown, deepening the lines on her face. "Not everyone wants to kill you, Regina."

"And how do you know that?" She frowned slightly, moving back into the castle, hiding her face as she faced forward.

"Your knights do not seem to be trying to kill you." The blonde stated matter-of-factly.

"Because I pay them well. And I could easily snap their necks if they tries." She turned to look at Emma, a darkness clouding her eyes.

"King George? I have seen you meet with him and he has aligned with you on more than one occasion." Emma offered and tilted her head as she moved closer, desperate to take away whatever was haunting the brunette.

"He only wants one thing that I am willing to give." Regina's brow quirked. "I am sure the ones outside of my castle want me dead, one way or another. They only take my alliance because our interests align for a single moment. No one is truly a friend."

"How about the guests at breakfast? They called you by name and spoke friendly of you." She said softly, offering her a reassuring smile only to have it disappear at her next words.

"Of course, but they would not hesitate to stab one another in the back if given the right opportunity. I should know. I have done it more times than I can count." The Evil Queen pressed her lips together in a grim line and stepped away from the blonde's advance to continue with their walk.

"Me, then." She stated and quickly moved after the brunette, her hand gently slipping into the Queen's. "I would much rather see you on your stomach asleep than a knife between your shoulder blades."

Regina's nose crinkled at her words and Emma saw the reluctant smile on those perfect, full lips. "Why do you admire me so?"

"You make me push my limits and it's refreshing. I would not be where I am without your help."

The blonde bit her lip hard as she gently squeezed the brunette's hand, as if using it for some ground to tie her floating head onto. "And you give me these butterflies whenever you are around me."
The sorceress tilted her head, those piercing dark orbs penetrating green pools. "I see. I suppose it is refreshing to have someone pushing your limits, testing your nerves, something to keep you on your toes." She smiled slightly.

Emma stepped before the Queen and hesitantly lifted a hand to cup an olive cheek; warm underneath her touch. "I can only hope that I make you happy, or, feel something, anything."

"Well, you do make me smile, I found. That is certainly a start." She grinned softly, but turned from Emma's hand, the upturn of her lips quickly falling into a frown. "Shall we continue?"

Emma, herself, frowned and let her hand fall to her side. Why was she letting her confidence get the better of her? She could not force the Evil Queen to love her, let alone feel anything for her. "Lead the way, My Queen."

"Next will be the throne room," she explained, twisting down a few corridors before they turned into a grand room with banners strung from the ceiling on either side of a large, deep red carpet that led up to her throne; something black and regal with intricate carvings. "This is where we will be at the end of each week."

Emma followed silently and ate up the room. Recognition hit her briefly as she remembered this dark and enchanting room. It was something she had found herself getting lost in. "For what exactly, my Queen?"

"To govern. To speak with the common people when they come to me for their problems. I still have a kingdom to handle." Regina simply answered and started to talk toward the throne. "Your place, as Black Knight, is next to me."

"Will I be standing?" Emma asked softly, walking beside her, eyes locking onto the glorious throne. It was haunting and mysterious, but in its own way, breathtaking.

"During our sessions, yes. There are no other chairs." The sorceress trailed her fingers along the metal arm of the throne. "The throne, itself, is quite uncomfortable after perching for hours."

"I can do that," she mumbled absently, moving to stand beside the throne. "Why do you not make it more comfortable, my Queen, so you are able to relax?"

The Queen merely shrugged. "Any chair will become uncomfortable after a while. It is no matter." She turned to her with an absent smile. "I believe that is the end of our tour."

"What shall we do now?" She queried, tilting her head slightly. Excitement bubbled within her at the prospect of what would happen.

"How about you train with some of the newer members of the guard?"

She swallowed slightly, deflating. "Will you be there?"

"Yes. I must observe your first day of duty, after all." The Queen purred softly, a twinkle in her dark gaze as Emma nodded. "Are you prepared to leave? Your armor will not be ready, yet, but I am sure we can find something temporary."

"I will train in what I am wearing. I would rather do so than the rusted armor," she said, turning toward the entrance. "Please, lead the way, my Queen."

"If you are sure." Regina dipped her head before she led the blonde knight back out of the throne room and through the twisting corridors.
Emma followed and smiled, her heart warming at the simple statement. "And if I get hurt… you are there for me, yes?"

"Of course. I cannot have you losing too much blood, or any limbs, for that matter." She chuckled softly and turned out into the courtyard.

The knight found herself drowning in the sweet melody, her own body trembling as she laughed, herself, following after her. She quieted, though, as they passed a pair of men who stopped to whisper among one another. No doubt they had caught wind of her victory over Ser Eordic.

Her jade gaze fell away from the men as she pushed forward, finding the Queen who paused before a rack of weapons, gesturing to a few pieces on display. "I am sure any of these fine men will be willing to practice with you." Her dark gaze glared at a certain man and he nodded quickly, scrambling for his sword.

Emma swallowed thickly as she watched the man trip over himself to grab the weapon. "Pathetic." The word dribbled from her mouth as she marched to grab a sword for herself, but she had to stop herself and remember that he was new, someone that probably hadn't touched a sword before now. The Evil Queen always tended to pick boys off the streets and, often, Emma had noticed them to be impoverished and orphaned. She had to grin inwardly, knowing the brunette queen had a soft heart deep down.

The queen chuckled and, for a moment, the blonde knight wondered why until she realized the singular word was said aloud. Shaking her head slightly, the blonde moved away as Regina stood back, her steady gaze never leaving the younger woman.

Emma swung the sword, appeased with its mobility, as she took place before the boy who stared at her. "Show me what you got," she grumbled, readying herself for the attack she knew was coming. The knight- a young man, not yet blooded - clumsily surged toward the blonde, nervous from the Queen's stare, but wanting to please her all the same; she could see the eager look in his eye.

She was able to easily deflect the blow and cut at his arm, scratching the surface. "Steady yourself. Do not think this is a race to win. If you just start swinging aimlessly at your opponent, you will only get yourself killed. What is your name?"

"I-I'm sorry, Ser E-Emma. It's Edward." He stuttered, wincing slightly as blood trickled down his arm. He swung the sword at the blonde's arm and stumbled slightly.

Emma raised her sword and easily rebounded the attack, but made no move to swing. It was too easy. She had gone up against men twice his size and three times as skilled. She remembered being him, though, eager to please and too confident. "Steady, Edward. Do not try to impress anyone but yourself."

Quickly, he nodded, his jaw setting with determination as he wielded the sword and gave a sturdier strike at her other arm. Emma stepped out of the way and swung at the knight this time. Though, the man lifted his sword to block and found that he was successful. He grinned, got a little cocky, and swung once again at Emma.

The blonde chuckled at his block and dropped to her knees to avoid the next strike, shifting to swing a leg to knock him down. Edward fell onto his back, his word falling from his grasp, and grunted, looking up at her with widened eyes.

The Queen walked forward and offered him a scowl. "You embarrass yourself, Edward. Practice against a dummy and make use of yourself before I shove you in the kitchens."
"Your Majesty," Emma stated firmly, walking over to the young knight and offering him a hand. "He is young and new, and wanting to impress you. Do not place too much pressure on him or he will continue to fall." She offered the brunette a wary grin, hoping she wouldn't have a new asshole torn for her.

Regina's upper lip twitched into a snarl. "Of course. You do counsel me in such matters." She smirked and eyed the knight, dipping her head. "You did well, ser, but there is work needed. Starting soon, Ser Emma will continue to train you and show each of you a new technique; something that will help us win future battles." She turned to the blonde. "Of course, if you are prepared to do so. Certainly not today, though, for we have a busy schedule, and tomorrow will be similar."

Edward bowed before marching off proudly as Emma stepped closer to the brunette. "I am honestly surprised I did not lose my head. He will learn and I feel he will do wonderful things to aid your army."

"As I am sure that you will, as well, my Black Knight." She purred and gazed around the yard for a moment. "So far, I hold no regrets for giving you such a position. Do not disappoint."

"I promise," she said as she fought every fiber in her body not to lean up and kiss the brunette. "Do you have anything to do today, my Queen?"

"A queen always has an agenda. I do have a counsel meeting, yet that is not for a while. For now, I suppose, I am to watch your progress." Regina paced closer to the knight. "You will join me later, of course. You must sit on the council as it is your duty. I will announce your new position, then, and officiate it."

Emma nodded, her breath hitching when the Queen had neared her. "Very well."

"What to do in the meantime is up to you, my knight." The brunette watched her with those brown eyes, shining in the sun's rays. Gods, she could drown in them. She certainly did shiver when she found herself exposed by those golden pools.

"I-I should stay and practice… but if I am going to be standing around for the rest of the day, I should take it easy, yes?"

The Queen dipped her head, though the grin on her lips gave her away. She was pleased. "Of course. Though, our counsel is held at a table." She chuckled. "I would not force you to stand. In the meantime…" Those dark eyes never released Emma from their piercing stare and, instead, seemed to become obsidian in color. "I would like for you to join me in my quarters."

The demand already had her body responding and, despite the nip in the air, her body grew warm. "Very well, Your Majesty," she breathed her words.

"Wash up. I will be waiting." And, with those husky words, the queen disappeared in her magic.

Emma felt the static that clung to the air and let her queen's essence consume her senses; something both sweet and enticing. It made her feel even warmer and, slowly, she wondered how she was going to continue this physical relationship with the brunette.
Chapter 9

The knight basked in the soft noises that fell from the queen's lips as she slowly found ground once again, her body landing next to the blonde's. The younger of the two breathed, allowing air back into her lungs, and watched Regina's flushed face as the woman made herself comfortable among the furs that they bathed in.

A warmth spread its way from her chest and throughout her entire being. Despite the brunette's utter control, she enjoyed every moment of it, especially when the queen cried out, as if the earth was moving with her.

"Perhaps we could enjoy a small snack before the counsel meeting. I am feeling a bit peckish." The royal woman's husky voice drew Emma away from her post-bliss state of mind and she nodded absently.

"That sounds delightful," she answered and immediately felt the hunger gnawing at her at the mention. She hadn't eaten yet today, she soon realized, having had a busy agenda from the start. With a soft sigh, she leaned back onto the pillows, thankful for the rest, and let her hair frame her face like a golden halo.

When Emma's emerald gaze fell to her queen, she saw the amused smile that took place on her sweet lips, and couldn't help the muscles that tugged at the corners of her own. "I was thinking bread and cheese would be suitable, for supper will be approaching soon. What would you like?"

"That sounds delightful," Emma murmured absently, earning a soft chuckle from the brunette. Why was she always so much lighter afterwards, as if the conflict of the world had gone and she was just Regina.

"You have already said that, my knight," she replied softly before waving a hand and, within moments, a platter of breads and cheeses appeared before them. The blonde caught her dark gaze soon after, her cheeks buzzing with heat when the brunette spoke. "You look…" She tilted her head slightly. "Happy."

"I am," she whispered and slowly shifted to lean against the headboard. "And not just post-coital bliss happy. I mean- Everything that you have done for me, it's… I know it may sound strange, but, I'm… I'm thankful for it, I truly am. You never had to give me this opportunity."

Emma could see the older woman's lips twitch, but she quickly hid it behind a small piece of cheese as she nibbled on it, though she could hear the weightlessness of her tone. "It was never my intention to make you happy. Though, I do suppose, I quite like the outcome of our current endeavors."

The blonde frowned slightly and plucked the cheese from the queen's fingers, earning a soft growl from the brunette, shooting her a look, one that of the Evil Queen that she truly was. "Of course, it was merely a ploy to get revenge on my parents; letting me fall into the darkness." She smirked slowly, head tilting ever so slightly, something deep within her stirring at the improbably thought. "Or does it go deeper?"

"And to what concern is it of yours if my intentions go further than what you see on the surface? I would hardly share them with you; one who could so easily leave my castle at any point she wishes." She snatched her cheese back and huffed, holding it a bit closer to her being as if afraid that it would be taken again. "Would I be sharing cheese and bread with you in my bed if there was something deeper?"
Emma frowned slightly, the sudden hostility something that she hadn't been expecting, but then what else from the Evil Queen? "I don't know, Your Majesty, you tell me, would you? You have said so, yourself, that you would not hesitate to turn on someone within a heartbeat. You certainly have a f--- up way of showing your emotions if you are trying to tell me otherwise." Shaking her head slightly, she looked to the platter of food before reaching out to grab a chunk of bread, sighing as she nibbled it even though her stomach churned. What were the queen's true intentions, anyway? "And perhaps you would share this information with me because you trust me enough to make me your Black Knight. And, even if given the freedom to leave, I would not, as I have not, because I am far too bound to you to leave now."

"I don't know how to show... emotions well. Anger is the only thing that I know, and that is where my title was born." She shifted slightly and nibbled on some more cheese to ebb her frown. "What have you honestly expected of me, Emma? Did you think that you could break me?" Regina looked toward her, eyes cold. "You can speak words, dear, but how can I trust a single one of them? I have had enemies that befriended my only to stab me in the back, and how can I know that you are no different? I am your parents' enemy, after all, and look how our relationship had started."

"Perhaps you can trust those words flying from my mouth because I am laying here with you in your bed and not out plotting of ways to betray you."

"You could still plot while you are fucking me, my knight."

"Gods, why must you be so paranoid all of the time? Not everyone in this world is plotting against you, Regina, despite what you may think, despite what might have happened in the past." Emma could feel something welling within her; a burning fire that roared the more she spoke, the angrier she got. "Why would I fall into bed with you if I wanted to kill you? Why would I let you take something that I considered sacred to just kill you? Because I didn't. I... You gave me something; a chance. A chance to have a life different than that I was born into." The blonde could only feel herself growing hotter as a wetness tracked down her red cheeks. "Do you not realize that I don't care about you being an enemy of my parents? Do you not realize that your title holds no meaning to me when you are just Regina? Do you not realize that I have fallen in love with you?"

The queen's face paled when the blonde made her confession and it was then that she knew what she had let slip; and she suddenly wanted to disappear. "You what?" she asked, her tone deadly and quiet, as her head snapped toward Emma, those dark eyes angry, yet lost.

"I... I..." Emma stuttered before suddenly standing off the bed, cradling her head in her hands as she paced, wondering how she could have let herself ruin things. She needed air. She needed to breathe. She needed to run. "Nothing. Nothing... I better go and- and sit in my bedchambers...?" She offered weakly, finding a new inability to breathe fresh air into her lungs.

"You are not going anywhere." Regina picked herself up from the bed and headed toward the blonde knight, her upper lip slightly curled. "I heard what you said. How can you love someone like me?"

"Someone like you? Pray, tell, what does that mean? There is nothing wrong with you, Regina. You are- You're a human being. Of course, I am not blind to what you have done, but... There's something about you. I-I... I love you because you do not care what everyone else thinks. You govern your own life and I admire that, and that's all I have ever wanted for myself..."

She inhaled deeply, her feeling as if it were among the clouds. "What we have done, and what we have been doing... This." She gestured toward the bed and to the brunette's nude form. "We have shared much and... I believe we were meant to save one another. We certainly work well together..."
despite- despite who we are."

Speechlessness was an understatement for how Regina had remained. She stood there, still in her stupor, and stared at the blonde, blank-faced. Finally, she regained her sense and shook her head, voice soft and cracked, as if the conversation had worn her. "I have done things that you couldn't even comprehend, Emma. You saw it for yourself. I feed on the pain and misery of others. I kill for my own enjoyment." She brought her gaze to meet Emma's, dark eyes shimmering, and the blonde knew her words were a desperate attempt to turn her away. "And yet…"

"And yet?" She repeated the brunette's words, stepping closer, her entire body trembling. "I do not care, Regina. I can admit that at first, you scared me. You still have your moments of doing so, of course, but now I just want to see that smile I bring to your face - the one that crinkles your eyes; that smile you try so hard to mask." Emma smiled, herself, hoping to bring something similar to the queen's face, but the older woman remained stoic. "I want to see you… you love me like I love you."

The sorceress lowered her gaze, face darkening. "I am unsure if I believe you," she finally said, quietly, somberly. "And me? Love you?" Then she laughed, something cold and humorless, and Emma's heart sank inside her chest. Would she ever make progress? "I cannot love anyone. I-… It never ends well."

Emma frowned. "I don't believe you," she said softly, offering the brunette a small smile in hopes that it would soften the blow that was sure to come.

"What is there not to believe? Is it not obvious?" She snarled, snapping a cold glare at the blonde knight, though it slowly melted. "I can give you nothing that you need and you… Perhaps you do deserve a happiness despite your mother, in spite of your mother. But not with me."

Emma could feel herself tense, prepared for a slap, for anything, but it never came. So, when the queen merely remained in her spot, she took a step forward, her heart pounding inside her chest. "I think you can love me. If you allow yourself to."

Immediately, Regina's gaze intensified and her lips pressed together into an angry line. "I advise you not to counsel me in matters you know nothing about."

"I know nothing of love?" She could feel that useless organ in her chest crumble as she stepped away, her head pounding.

"You are young and foolish and love has never graced you." Regina rumbled, an unstable look digging into her features. "You are merely infatuated with the thought of me, of what I provide. It is not love. Just leave. Train."

"Very well, Your Majesty. I will see you when I am summoned to counsel." She stated, tone frosty, and marched toward the door, some switch inside of her turning.

The queen pressed her lips together, but spoke of no protest, as she watched Emma walk away from her. She dipped her head. "That will be for the best. I will make sure to send a summons when the time has come. You may spend your time freely, for now."

"Oh, I will," she stated as she exited the room, allowing the large door to slam behind her as she quickly paced down the corridor, tears slipping along the contour of her cheeks. Optimism was something she had inherited from her parents and soon, she found it to be a burden. How could she ever think that the Evil Queen could love her as she did? As the brunette had said, the only emotion she knew was anger, and anger was nothing for love.
Shaking those thoughts from her mind, she found herself in the courtyard once again, somewhere she could release her inner demons onto the poor wooden dummies. Yet, as she approached the center of the field, she was met by a young knight, his ocean eyes lit with an excitement, and sought her out. She met distraction in the young man, the dull blade of a training sword glinting in the light as he unsheathed it, matching her own, and she lost herself in the adrenaline.

An hour had passed when someone had taken her attention from her current practice.

"I will not attend," she told the summoner as she parried a strike that came her way from the same young knight. "I am currently busy. If you could inform Her Majesty, that would be splendid." She growled out as she knocked the man down.

"But, Ser Emma…" The summoner croaked as Emma grunted and stabbed the ground with her sword, catching the fear that sparkled in her eye.

"Fine. Lead the way," she muttered and followed the girl through the winding corridors. She didn't want an innocent take the wrath for her own doing. At least, that was what she told herself, green eyes sharp on the path ahead.

"Here we are, ser." The girl bowed her head. "I shall leave you to it. I must fetch fresh water for the council."

Emma nodded to the girl as she headed away and swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat somewhere between the courtyard and now. As she neared the doors, she was greeted by the knight standing guard, though, before she could even reach for the handle, she recognized his throaty voice.

"Ser Emma."

"What do you want, Eordic? My time is precious and I do not have enough to waste on the likes of you." She could feel the hairs on the back of her neck stand on end when those icy blue eyes landed on her.

"Ye will never be the queen's true Black Knight. Y'may have beaten me, but she will never trust a White. Y'er merely her plaything. When she tires of ye, she'll jus' throw ye away." His words could only be described as a growl as those piercing eyes narrowed on her.

"Jealousy does not suit you." She eradicated any negative emotion in that moment for fear he would feast on it. "Now, excuse me. I must-" She was cut off by laughter as Eordic's hand blocked her way.

"Yer attending the council? And do what? Look precious? Ye know nothin' 'bout controlling an army. That seat in there is mine."

Before the blonde could find time to reply, the doors broke open and the queen stood there, a displeased look on her face. "It seems as if every time that I turn a corner, you are harassing Ser Emma, Eordic." The brunette's eyes narrowed on the man. Her fingers flexed. "I thought that I had bid you to the kitchens, but is seems that you have your own agenda."

"That is my seat in there, Yer Majesty. I have proven my worth to ye time an' time again. I will not let some little princess take my place after one lucky fight. I will not stand for it." There was a set determination in his rough features that had an unpleasant shiver course down the blonde's spine.

"I see. Well, perhaps…" The Evil Queen strode forward toward the man who had stood tall, a defiant look in his eye. "You two should settle this once and for all; to the death."
Eordic smirked and turned to the queen. "I would love to put this measly princess where she belongs; six feet under." He growled, dipping his head as Emma's eyes shot toward the brunette. *To the death?* Gods, Eordic was right when he said she had gotten lucky, because that man was a mountain and too strong, even for her acclaimed fighting techniques.

But, she didn't let her fear get the better of her, and, instead, embraced death as she spoke. "If that is your wish, my queen."

"Where and when?" The man asked.

The queen didn't smirk, nor did she smile, as she merely watched the two of them with a stone expression. "The council can wait. The Black Knight is a known member and this duel is for the position. Whoever reigns victorious will keep the title." She turned back into the room and informed the rest of the members that they would be surveying the duel instead.

Regina met the two in the corridor once again and gestured. "We shall go to the courtyard. I would rather not have blood staining my castle floor. The stench can be unbearable."

"Of course, my queen." Eordic bowed before marching off, leaving Emma to pale slightly.

"An unfair battle?" She breathed out, her eyes narrowing on the brunette. The man was clad in his armor and, yet, she stood in only her tunic and pants. Any extra piece of armor had been used when the newest batch of recruits had come in, even the rusted suit that she had used before. "Very well," she muttered, slowly resigning to whatever fate that would bestow her, and turned to follow the other knight.

When Emma had arrived to the courtyard, she saw the members of the council and several knights had gathered, anxious eyes on the two who would compete for the title. Quickly taking the sword offered to her by a meek knight, she felt her stomach fly into her chest and slowly approached the middle of the courtyard where Eordic stood, his icy eyes on the blonde and a twisted smirk on his lips.

"It seems as if a second duel is needed to bestow the title of the Black Knight on one of these two brave knights. Ser Emma, Ser Eordic, ready your swords." The queen's voice pulled her attention away from the giant's menacing stare and she found relief for only a moment until she realized they were starting, and how naked she felt. Regina shifted slightly, eyeing them from her place on a makeshift throne. "The victor will be determined when one no longer lives."

"Prepare to die, princess." Eordic shouted at the blonde who lifted her sword and cocked a brow. Slowly her eyes moved to the queen and part of her sunk, wondering if the brunette had taken their earlier conversation into mind and decided to rid of her once and for all. She had no protection. Nothing to even remotely shield herself from this man who would no doubt stop at nothing to win and she didn't know if she could last the duration of it.

She could see Regina's fingers dig into the arms of her throne as she leaned forward, a smirk appearing on her face and a flame in her eyes. She cast those brown orbs to lay upon Emma and flicked her wrist, and suddenly the blonde felt weight added to her being. "We might as well have a fair fight," she purred. "Now, begin!"

Emma looked down at herself, amazed to see the black armor she had asked for that morning on her slender physique. She barely had enough time to mouth a quick "thank you" to the queen before readying herself for the man's attack which came almost instantaneously. The harsh swing was something Emma nearly missed but she had easily ducked out of the way for. These missed blows kept happening, a game of duck and miss, until she suddenly felt a heavy blow of a fist colliding with
her jaw, causing her to stumble back.

The blonde found herself dazed and searching out the brunette's face; something that remained stoic, though those brown eyes sparkled with something that fueled Emma. She stood upright, her eyes melting into an acidic pool as they landed on the other knight. "Oh, you made a terrible move, pig," she snarled before lunging at him, blocking one of his slashes before kicking him with as much force as she could, though it only stunted him for a moment. She lunged at him again, making no mistake to stand still, and aimed her sword to take advantage of the exposed part of his thigh, slashing at it with ease. Crimson stained her blade; something barely visible that glinted in the sun, leaving her satisfied.

"You've already tried your petty games of hunting me in the hallway; trying to kill me with your play knife. She chose my side and sent you to the kitchens where you belong. She doesn't care about you." She seethed and avoided another one of his blows with a smirk, finding confidence in her agility once again. "So why don't you just die with some dignity?"

A brash laughter filled the air, roaring like thunder. "Doesn't care about me? She just uses you, stupid princess! All she desires is her revenge on your pathetic parents. She sees you as nothing more than a useless pawn so she could get it." He yelled at the blonde, making her falter just enough for him to strike, cutting deep into her arm and forcing her to drop the sword. Pain blinded her for a moment before her adrenaline kicked in.

Emerald hues moved to gaze at the queen for a moment, hoping for some indication that he might have been lying but found none, and those eyes darkened with anger as they locked onto the knight. "Go to hell," she growled and went to collect her sword, only to be knocked back when the man pushed her with a foot.

She lay on the ground, winded, and stared at the man as he loomed over her like death's shadow. Suddenly, she saw her life flash before her eyes as she froze. "Now you lay down and die with some dignity, princess."

Yet, something in those words just burned inside the blonde and she refused to let herself succumb to this man. As he approached, she took advantage of her position and brought her booted leg hard up between his own. His eyes glazed over in pain as he fell to his knees. Emma didn't hesitate and reached to the sheath strapped to her leg to pull the dirk that she had taken from him and screamed with the wrath of a thousand gods as she plunged it up underneath his chin with all her might.

Within the blink of an eye, it was over, and the man fell when she pulled the dagger out, blood coating her hand in the warm, sticky liquid. She felt nothing as she watched his lifeless form thud against the dirt covered ground and slowly stood, herself, eyes falling to the Evil Queen who watched silently as red stained the grass.

Regina stood when all had registered, eyes dark and on the blonde; the victor. "Our Black Knight has proven her worth," she said, stepping down from her throne to glide elegantly toward the two. Her eyes fell to Eordic for a moment before letting her gaze meet the new Black Knight. The crowd, stunned by the former knight's death, broke into applause. "Congratulations."

Emma could only glare at the crowd, some sick feeling rising within her, and let the bloodied dirk slip from her fingers. "You are all sick. Cheering for me because I killed a man? Gods. Is this what your life is?" She turned to the queen, her features hard. "I will be in my chambers if you need me. I must clean up." She exhaled before starting to head away, holding her arm, muttering something under her breath.

The queen watched her with a smirk. "I have need of you now, Ser Emma. We have yet to attend
council. I must officiate your title." She didn't move. "And if you have something to say, I am right here."

"I have nothing to say to you," she stated clearly, stopping in her tracks. She watched as the council moved back into the castle and waited for the knights to depart, as well. "My queen?"

Regina stood for a moment longer as the courtyard emptied, save for a select few that would take the body, and kept her dark eyes on the blonde. "He would have continued to hunt you, Emma; armed or not. If I hadn't intervened yesterday when he had you pinned against the wall, there was no doubt he would have opened your throat." She looked to Eordic's body and sighed. "I had promised you long ago that you would have to taste blood while under my wing. I know you could have died and perhaps you would have." Her eyes fell to the wound on Emma's arm; something deep that didn't stop the red river from flowing. "My favor lies with you; it always had."

Emma turned to her, a frown claiming her lips. Could she truly believe what the queen was telling her? "Did what he say was true?" she asked softly, her legs quivering under her weight. "Am I nothing more than a pawn? I mean- I understand when you had first captured me, of course, your intentions were clear. But, what of now and what I have accomplished? Or is it merely part of it?"

"I have not spoken with him since our last meeting in the corridors and he has not witnessed our relationship." She closed her eyes briefly before opening them, letting them fall to the blonde. "Pawns are for the Dark One."

Emma stumbled toward the brunette, a hand reaching out to grab her arm to prevent falling before she whispered, something within her compelling her to speak. "Prove it…"

The queen frowned, lost at her request as she helped steady the blonde, an arm hooking under her armpit. "How am I to prove such a thing? You ask much of me that I am unable to provide."

The blonde swallowed, her tongue jetting out to wet her lips for a brief moment. "Kiss me with the risk of someone seeing us."

"Kiss you?" Regina's brows furrowed as if the request were inane. "And where might you suggest? I do not see the point of this."

"Well, on my lips, of course." Her small attempt at humor had plundered, leaving her to sigh and regain balance on her own. "The point is to let me know that you are true on your word; that I am not being used and that everything that has happened between us is legitimate. You know what, just… forget I have ever asked. I apologize, Your Majesty."

She was met with a soft growl and before she knew it, she was being pulled toward the queen as their lips connected in something soft and sweet that brought stars to her eyes.

Though, those stars could have been caused by the sudden pain that had been inflicted upon her being as fire shot through her arm. But, she couldn't seem to find the will to care, not willing to let that moment fleet as she returned to the kiss, her hands moving to cup the brunette's cheeks gently as she melted into her.

The queen purred softly and Emma let it resonate within her being as the older woman pressed closer to her. When she pulled away, she sighed softly, her lips quirked. "You are quite warm."

"You are, as well." Emma whispered stupidly before reaching up to touch her cheek.

"You are fevered, Emma." The brunette murmured, dark eyelids fluttering.
Something bloomed within the blonde, starting from her heart and spreading throughout her with a warmth that tingled her from head to toe. "I believe you have it within yourself to love me," she said softly, head tilting.

Regina turned from her hand, a sudden frown demolishing the sweet smile that had once softened her features. "You don't want me to love you." A defeated sigh fell from those smeared crimson lips as she stepped away from their close proximity. "I am sure that you are in pain… Let me heal you."

But Emma felt the sudden desire to run, to hide, knowing she had only dug herself deeper into this endless pit. She stepped away as result, feeling herself burn differently as something simmered within her. "Please, do not touch me," she whispered before turning away, prepared to head off. "I don't want your help."

"Emma. Your wound is grave. We have no healers that could tend your wound. I have told you before, being too proud will only get you killed." The brunette closed the distance between them, the lines in her face growing more prominent.

The blonde knight decided against arguing and turned to her, expelling the emotion from her face. "Heal it and be quick. Please."

The brunette's mouth sagged slightly, as if she were about to frown, but she pressed her lips together instead as she moved a hand over the bloodied wound, fingers twitching slightly. "Why are you angry with me for saying the truth?"

"Because you can love me, you just choose not to." She responded harshly before sighing, realizing the emotion that bubbled had spilled out and let her voice drop an octave. "I have seen it, Regina. I'm seeing it now," she said, gesturing toward that very hand that still hovered over her arm.

Regina finally did frown, something deep and thoughtful as she looked to the now-mended flesh, her fingers lightly touching the rugged scar that it left behind. "It's… not something that comes easily to me."

"Trust me, I have found that out." Her eyes moved to the olive fingers that were soft and gentle as they moved along her skin like butterfly kisses. "But not allowing yourself to feel, to love, isn't a good thing. Closing up and ignoring it won't make it go away. It's… It's okay to let yourself be free, Regina."

"There is no such thing as freedom in this world. It is merely an illusion. I have never been free. I have been…" She looked up, finally, her whiskey hues wide and lost, but the moment was brief and the emotion was replaced by something fiercer. Her body went rigid as she straightened out and the relief that Emma had felt soon turned because the moment was lost; that vulnerability was gone, the progress she was making vanishing in the blink of an eye. "I advise you clean up before you join the council."

"Of course, Your Majesty," she agreed, not lingering on the prior topic. This was the queen's way of shoving her emotions aside, once again, not allowing herself to feel as Emma had desperately wanted her to. Why did she yearn so for the Evil Queen's love? Why did she allow herself to fall so freely, so easily? It only left her burned.

Gods, she wanted to argue, as she walked away from the queen and to her washroom to clean up. She could see it; the way Regina did care for her. Even if it weren't love, it was something, and it was that something that Emma felt the need to have confirmed just to know that it was real; to know that she wasn't alone. But the Evil Queen was too proud of herself; a slave to her anger, feeling as if she didn't deserve any emotion but.
It scared her, though, if Regina truly did feel the same because what would she do? Their union would only be a bastardization of all things good and evil; it would destroy the black and white world and create the grey that combined them. But was Emma truly *good* any longer now that her innocence had been taken and crushed underneath the boot of the Evil Queen? Was darkness in her heart now that she had killed Eordic?

She felt numb when she thought of what she had done, like it was no different than swatting a fly and watching it drop; and that is what truly terrified her. Is this what Regina felt? Nothing? She shuddered at the thought despite the warmth of the water that seeped into her.

A part of her, something small and barbaric, felt thrilled by the thought; the thought of being *dark* and spilling blood, and standing by the Evil Queen as she thirst for more of the scarlet liquid. Was this what she had truly wanted, though, or was the queen somehow breaking into her mind? *Breaking* her mind?

She didn't want to even contemplate the thought for it only shot dread throughout her entire being.

With a heavy sigh, she pulled herself out of the tub and dressed in her usual attire before making her way back down to the council room. She was surprised she had found it on her own, though it would be hard not to for the large doors were kept open with the chattering members inside. Her eyes immediately honed in on the elegance that was Queen Regina, sitting poised in her tall chair at the front of the table.

She drowned in the very thought of her.

The voices that had once filled the room had died away once she stepped foot into it, her footfalls faltering when all eyes fell on her. Regina stood, a white smile gracing her crimson lips as she gestured to the spot at her right side.

"Welcome, Emma. Come, we shall begin." Emma offered a small nod as she entered further into the room, her skin feeling as if it were on fire as the council members watched her make her way over to the queen.

"We shall begin our meeting with Emma's initiation. Emma of House White, please step forward." The blonde swallowed when the sorceress had moved toward the northern windows where the floor had elevated with a single step. "You have proven your worth, today, something that many have not been able to succeed. We had never thought the day Eordic would be defeated would come, much less from a *princess*, but, alas, we were taken. But she is no longer a princess, now, is she?" The blonde could feel the blood as it rose to her cheeks, tingling them pleasantly.

"No, no. She is a knight, and the highest of the rank. My Black Knight, Emma, by accepting this title, you are forsaking your title and your allegiance to the White Kingdom and swearing your life and services to me until the day you die, and this day forward, even though we have taken to it already, you will be known as Ser Emma White. Do you accept these terms?"

The blonde pressed her lips together, letting those words soak into her buzzing head. Gods, was she truly allowing this to happen? Was she going to become bound to the queen tighter than she already had been? Something swirled inside her, some tingling warmth, because the prospect of spending the rest of her life here, freer now than she had been was titillating. But, there was one problem she would not overlook, and voiced as such in a monotonous tone, claiming to have her head on straight and her emotions under control even though she beamed on the inside.

"I have one *small* conflict with your terms, Your Majesty, if I may?"
The queen's eyes narrowed slightly but she nodded. "And what might that be?" Her tone was clipped, yet dubious.

"Instead of being, eh… Ser White, I would prefer to be referred to as Ser Swan. If I am forsaking my household title, then should I not forsake the name?" There was a slow smirk curling onto Regina's features. "This is a new era in my life, after all. And it will keep me anonymous if word gets out."

"Of course, Ser Swan. I do quite like the way you think. I knew I made no mistake of allowing you this position. Does this mean you accept?"

"Yes. I accept your terms, Your Majesty."

"Perfect," she purred before her husky voice boomed throughout the council room. "Then from this day forward you shall be known as Ser Emma Swan, the new Black Knight of the Evil Queen."
Golden eyes, shining in the darkness, woke Emma from her slumber; haunting her like a cruel plague and drenching her in sweat. She was met with darkness, something cold and harboring, as if something were held within the unknown, lurking, watching. A shiver shot down her spine as she moved; the floor beneath her hard and cold.

Those eyes; they were a memory; something she vaguely recalled witnessing as she was walking in the courtyard. She remembered feeling something consuming, filling the air with malevolent power, and it was not like the Evil Queen's; this was something that had been suffocating and left her drowning as panic seized her.

Her hands were bound, she soon found, as she attempted to pick herself up off the floor only to be met with resistance from the iron that bit into her delicate wrists. Magic was the first thing that came to mind; something the Queen had urged her to use, over and over, and that she had refused. She was helpless in her position. Whoever had taken her had the advantage of surprise. Briefly, did she wonder if her parents had succeeded in breaking into the castle and her heart sunk at the thought of what might have befallen Regina.

But, as she moved and urged that magic to power through, she found that she could not access it. Naturally, she thought of her lessons and how they had not yet been completed. She knew little, still, of how to work her magic.

Gods, why did she suddenly have a penchant for getting kidnapped? The Evil Queen surely wouldn't do such a thing; not after what their relationship had evolved into. And her parents, after thinking for another moment, would not lock her up, either. Unless, of course, they feared the magic that she could wield.

"Hello?" She called out, expecting her voice to reverberate off the walls, but it sounded as if she were in a small, enclosed space. Cursing under her breath, she attempted to stand and explore the area, but as soon as she took more than two steps, she was urged back by the rattle of chains.

Whoever this was definitely did not want her to escape. She yelled into the thickening air, suddenly too heavy to breathe, and hoped for a reply.

But nobody came.

Emma stumbled back when she realized she was trapped. Of course, she thought bitterly to herself. She was cuffed and chained up, and it was dark and cold, but the air was thick and suffocating. Her breath shortened as she allowed herself to sink to the ground, wondering if she would ever see the light of day again.

As the seeds of turmoil started to plant themselves in her mind, she was blinded by a sudden onslaught of sunlight and squinted against the intrusion. She could see a silhouette eclipsing it and attempted to discern the form, but her answer was granted when a voice spoke, chilling and eerily pitched.

"Princess Emma, it does well to see you in one piece. Your dear parents were only weighing me down with notions of war. Pity that they underestimate my power and pity that they will never see you again."
"Where is she?" The Evil Queen's voice boomed throughout the courtyard. Several knights stood in a row before her, each with sweat on their brow and a distant fear of death in their eyes. She looked upon their faces, each one only fueling the fire already burning within her.

A meek knight, some shrimp of a man, was pushed forward, stumbling in the dirt. "I- I ain't seen her, Your Majesty," he choked out when glowing hazel eyes stopped on him.

As Regina strode forward, he quaked in his spot, but kept his ground, only to find relief when the Queen stood before the knight who had pushed him forward. "Ser Kadence, do you have knowledge of where Ser Emma might be?"

Kadence only shook his head, his piercing blue eyes clouding over when his leader had bared her pearly teeth. "I 'ave not seen 'er, either, Your Majesty. Last time I saw's the Black Knight was in the 'yard trainin'."

Her presence was smothering him, she could tell with the way he held his breath. When she stepped back, eyes traveling down the row of her knights, she saw one step out of the line.

"I saw her leavin' through the gate," he said, voice wavering as the man next to him elbowed his ribs.

"Ser Rorick," she muttered, moving toward the man. He was young and stocky and the knight next to him was the opposite; thin and greying, and knowing when to force someone else's head on the block. "Did you speak with her?"

"Yeah," he answered, fingers curling into his palms. "She ain't said where she was goin'. Mayhap you gave 'er too much freedom an' she left back to 'er castle to plot against ya." The words, though hesitant at first, spilled from his mouth with venom.

Regina knew the knights did not take a liking to Emma's newest position. Some did congratulate her, but then there were the ones that threw passive aggressive comments her way and always bit their tongues when the Queen was around. She had heard a few and the blonde had handled them fairly, but she worried for the day these men might turn against her.

But the words from Rorick's mouth sent her blood boiling because Emma would do no such thing; she would not leave without speaking to her first. "She would not!" The anger spilled forth and with a flick of her wrist and a crack of bones, the knight was on the ground, life no longer in his body.

She turned her glare on the men surrounding her, all shifting anxiously in their spots as if they were the next to go. "If anyone else would like to spew lies, you will soon join your dear friend in the underworld." Regina moved away from the body and paced along the line of men and the few women that stand among them. When no mouth had opened, she smirked and spoke again. "I suggest you return to your posts if you have no information that will aid me in my endeavors."

With her permission, the knights had fled from the courtyard to return to their duties while a few had remained behind to train. She saw herself out and traveled down the long corridors, having searched them ten times over for the missing Black Knight. Would she truly leave the castle now that she had gained the Queen's trust or, at least, what little she had given her?

Another emotion welled inside of her, though this one was stiff and heavy as it laid on her chest with the weight of a thousand stones. She should have never allowed herself to become attached to this girl; she knew nothing good would come of it. But she had burrowed herself deep within honey hair and jade eyes, and drowned in what the girl had provided.

And it had only infuriated her the more she let those pestilient emotions tide over her fires. Did Emma
use her against all words she had spoken? Of course. Everyone in her life had stepped on her for their own benefit, leaving her in the dirt as they always had with scars that cut deep.

People. She could do without people and she very well had until she manifested the idea of stealing the princess and let her take over the damn castle and, ultimately, her life. *Why would she leave?*

Perhaps she was lying; perhaps she was even working with Rumpelstiltskin just to eliminate the Evil Queen from the earth. That had to be it, she blossomed with the thought as she rampaged through the bedchambers provided to the Black Knight, tearing through books and furs and clothes and papers; desperate for anything that might aid her.

She happened upon a piece of parchment, folded away in one of the desk drawers, and thought she found her answer. Perhaps it was an unsent letter to her parents telling of her successes in the Queen's castle. Wrath had already taken her before she unfolded the yellowed paper, eyes on the familiar penmanship of the blonde and read through the scrawlings.

*Why do I love her?*

Nothing more was written aside from that one question over and over again, and it took the Queen's breath away. Slowly, she doubted herself and that voice that told her the former princess had used her as everyone else had. Her fingers slowly curled into themselves, wrinkling the paper in hand before she balled it up and tossed it at the wall, pushing that doubt away.

She must have planted this to mess with the Queen's mind, to trick her, to throw her off track. But she would find her. The Evil Queen would breathe her last breath if it meant finding that blonde and destroying everything she had to live for.

Emma could feel herself shake and it wasn't from the draft that entered the room she was confined to. The man drew forward, allowing more light to spill forth and reveal his inhuman features; that skin sparkling like gold in the rays. "What did you do to my parents?" Were the first words out of her mouth, wide green eyes lifting to meet his crocodile smile.

"Oh, nothing, dearie. Worry not about them. They still believe they are to follow me to the Evil Queen's castle and take you back. Shh!" A giddy giggle filled the air forming goose pimples on the blonde's skin and stuttering her heart. "They are fools to think I will give you to them. They are weak and they have nothing I hold interest in."

"Give me to them?" His wording made her blood run cold.

"Yes, yes, dearie. Do you not know? You belong to me. When they signed that contract, they signed over your life. Marrying my son was a mere ploy, stupid girl." He smirked, something that stretched too wide for his face. "You must be thanking me, child, for your days with the Evil Queen are through."

The thoughts of Regina stiffened her body. "What did you do to her?"

Shrill laughter filled the air. "You sound far too concerned for your captor," he said, moving closer to the blonde who struggled to stand. "Do not tell me that you have bonded." Emma's lips twitched but she stayed silent and the imp took this as an answer, his grin only widening as he clapped his hands together. "Oh, delightful! I knew I saw something that day you stopped me to save her. Perhaps she will be too desperate to let you go. My plan sets into motion."

"Wh-what do you mean?" Emma wanted to take a step forward, but was frozen in her spot by the man's piercing stare.
"What I mean is that you will bring dear ol' Regina to me. I am, of course, her first suspect; the only one able to break into her castle." He purred and watched her, amusement twitching his lips. "And perhaps I can let you watch as I crush her putrid heart."

"Over my cold, dead body, imp." She found the ability to move and jerked forward, only to be stunted by the chains that pulled her back. A gleeful laughter filled the air once again, buzzing her brain.

The Dark One tsked and strode forward, one of his pointed fingers trailing along her dirty jaw. "And why do you care so much for this Evil Queen that had taken you from your castle? You should want to kill her for what she has done."

"I know what she's done," Emma muttered, trying to turn away from the hand. It burned her flesh.

"What has she done to you?" Asked the imp, taking a step back to regard her, his expression stone as he hooked a thumb under his chin.

"She showed me that I can control my own life," answered the former princess. "Unlike everyone else who merely wants to control it."

But that had only earned another bout of that chilling laughter. "Has she? It seems to me that she had captured you and forced you to do what she wished. What choice in the matter have you?" Emma grew quiet as she thought and when she came up with her response, she was cut short by Rumpel. "None, that is your answer. So, I ask again, what has she done to you?"

"I don't understand what you are asking." Emma responded, pressing against the cool wall behind her, eyes searching for any contents in the room, but it was completely empty. "She has not harmed me."

"No, no. She cannot, remember?" Rumpel cocked his head to the side. "You have changed; I can sense it. You have tasted the darkness, haven't you?"

She could feel her muscles tense when the question was asked of her, but she stayed silent, jade eyes watching as the man paced forward, stopping a mere breadth from her.

"You have!" He snickered, something both pleased and giddy. "But how far have you sunk into the Evil Queen?" Emma looked away, briefly thinking of the times she shared with Regina in bed, how far she had submerged herself in those chestnut orbs and tasted her sweet fruit. As if he had read her mind, he giggled again, and gleefully spoke. "You have fallen into bed with her, haven't you?"

"Why would I do such a thing?" The blonde failed to meet his gaze and realized her mistake when she had. She quickly shot jade fire at him, glaring.

"You are impure," he spat, but his tone quickly changed as he stepped away. "No matter. A man has not taken you. Baelfire will be the one to do so. I had promised him." Those golden eyes reflected back on her. "Make no mention of this."

She shuddered in her spot and nodded, unable to produce a verbal response.

"Good, good." He flashed that all-too-wide grin at her once again. "I shall leave you to your dark, dark dungeon for now. I have a sense Regina is looking for me."

The way he had said the Queen's name only sent another sharp spike down her spine, a sense of unease washing over her before she shot forward once again, this time breaking that chain that bound her to the wall and willed the power within her to release her from her bonds. But it did not come;
that wonderful sensation she felt in her desperation, instead, it had only produced a shrill laughter that
echoed and filled her head.

"You cannot use your magic on me, dearie. Those cuffs prevent you from doing so." The imp
moved forward and Emma shied away, bumping into the wall. "Do try not to break my things. I
simply do not appreciate it."

His presence overwhelmed her as he continued to near, but only stopped when he snapped a finger
and she was bound tighter, the chains wrapping around her body like a snake. Her breath became
short as she attempted to move against the constraints, her eyes wide on the man who cackled once
again. He sure did like to laugh.

"Now, do promise that you will not escape." There was a twinkle in his eye before he turned toward
the door.

Then he was gone and Emma would have been able to breathe if not for the chains. Her eyes kept on
the door, even as it was consumed by darkness, hoping, waiting, to see the Evil Queen return and
prevail. But there was a pit in her stomach telling her that that would not happen; not with what had
transpired moons ago. Rumpel had taken her heart then and he promised to do so now, this time to
end the deed.

She shuddered as she pictured Regina, helpless and in pain, as he squeezed her heart - something so
dark, yet so strikingly beautiful. And, for a reason, she could feel it beating in her hand and the
warmth that it held.

Her attention was grabbed when there was a nudge against the wooden barricade and she braced
herself to be met with Rumpel's domineering presence, but when the door opened and revealed a
taller figure, she relaxed.

"Emma?" The voice queried. It was masculine.

When the figure stepped away from the light and entered the room, she could make out the features
of Rumpelstiltskin's son; Baelfire. The boy was a mere puppy compared to his father, but Emma still
tensed in her spot. He was a nice man, she had to admit, but she didn't quite know what he was
capable of, either. Then again, he did claim that he loved her and, perhaps, she could take that to her
advantage.

"Hello," she said quietly, looking up at his frowning features.

"What has my father done to you? You simply cannot be comfortable." He squat down before her
and tugged at the chains around the blonde's petite frame.

Emma shook her head. "Do you have a key?" Though she didn't know if there would be one since
Rumpel had bound them magically. But when Baelfire had looked to the source of those links did he
nod.

"I should have one," he answered before standing. "I will be back."

"W-wait!" But he was gone and her hope diminished. He would not be so foolish, would he?

When she saw the light become obscured by his form did she find her answer. He quickly stepped
toward her, holding a rusted skeleton key, before going for the lock. Soon enough, the binds that
bruised her were loosened and fell to the cobblestone with a clatter.

"There you are," he said, smiling. "I am glad to see you again, Emma. It has been long and I was
worried the Evil Queen might have done unspeakable things to you.”

Emma wasn't so concerned with that, though, and desperately spoke, her wrists aching as the iron cut into them. "Do you have anything to remove these cuffs?"

"What?" Blinking, he looked behind the blonde as she leaned forward, but shook his head as he returned to his position. "I-I better not. I believe father keeps the keys on him, anyway."

She kept her disappointment hidden and decided the chains were enough. Forcing a smile on her lips, she looked up at the man. "Tell me, Baelfire, what have you been up to?"

"Me? Well, I was preparing for the wedding with your parents and my father… That was before you disappeared, I suppose." He rambled, getting lost in his chatter. "All my time has been devoted to locating and rescuing you; well, aiding my father in doing so. But now that you have returned, we can wed."

"Of course we can," she muttered, though attempted to add forced delight to her voice. "When will the wedding occur?"

Surprise seemed to take him, but he smiled regardless and chirped on about the plans. "As soon as possible, of course. The kingdom awaits the wedding of Princess Emma. Our union is the most anticipated among the people."

"Is it, truly?" She had no doubt it would be. Emma was the only heir to the White throne, after all, and her marriage would be something to celebrate. Not by her, she thought bitterly.

The future she had created for herself with Queen Regina and her knighthood seemed to slowly fade into one of wedding bells and imprisonment. She did not want to sacrifice that freedom Regina had given her and that left her all the more determined to escape.

She could hear Baelfire respond, but she absently listened, attempting to dig through her mind for some sort of out. If Regina did not make it, what would she do? She would have to convince Baelfire to help her; to help destroy the Dark One, if need be. The man would no doubt chase after her even if she sought freedom. At this point, she didn't care of the casualties that would be necessary to gain her freedom.

The Evil Queen's darkness seemed to have already tainted her heart and, for some reason, she didn't seem to mind. She was born of light, but she was falling into the darkness. Her only desire, though, was to let her light shine on Regina, even if it were just a little, and let her have a taste of what benevolence could bring her.

But would any of this happen if the two would perish under the Dark One's hand as if they were only pawns to be thrown away when no use came of them? She shuddered to think what the world would come to if such a thing were to happen and so she thought of the one thing that might help.

"I need… I need some information from you." She interrupted what Baelfire had been chattering about and grabbed his attention.

"Yes, of course. What is it?" The man readily agreed, a smile gracing his soft features.

"Your father… He has this dagger…” Emma's teeth dug into her lip. She had heard of Rumpelstiltskin's dagger from Regina moons ago. It was the only weapon that could kill the man. Unfortunately, he was the only one that knew where it was. She only hoped Baelfire knew of its location, as well.
"Rumpel!" The Evil Queen used her magic to push open the front doors to the Dark One's castle, casting an echo as the wood collided with stone. "Where is she?"

"Where is who, Regina? I have absolutely no idea who you are speaking of." Rumpelstiltskin's sardonic words sounded as he appeared in the entryway where the Queen halted, her smoldering chestnut eyes boring holes into him.

"You know very well who I speak of, imp." She hissed and strode forward, each step only increasing her adrenaline. He looked as if he knew something; yet that man always did. "Tell me where she is."

"Have you already lost your little toy?" The imp of a man merely tittered as he moved into his castle, dusting off an artifact that he had on display. "Pity. You should take better care of your things."

"You know where she is, Rumpel." Her voice was like gravel when she spoke, low and angry; the predominant emotion she had been feeling since she woke up to find her Black Knight gone. "You were conspiring with her and Snow."

"And why do you believe so?" He asked and moved to the next object; some strange, curved sword. This time, he took it from its display and tested it in his hand before pointing it at the Evil Queen, but she merely quirked a brow. "Perhaps she is tired of you controlling her."

"You believe I am controlling her? What about you, imp?" She scoffed and pushed the blade away, growing tired already of his antics. "You bid her to gain my trust so she could turn me over to you. Is that it? So you could kill me or have her do so?"

He laughed and replaced the sword into its case. "You are quite paranoid, aren't you? Believing everyone in the world is out to harm you." He turned to her. "Or use you."

Regina looked away, finding interest in a golden vase as her fingers glided over the smooth surface. "People only want one thing, Rumpel." She curled her lip and turned a glare on him. "You use people as pawns for your stupid little games, all for your own benefit. And, for what? You have your son back."

"I do, yes, but I have gained a penchant for making deals with people. They are desperate, after all, and who will they turn to?" Grinning widely, Rumpel stepped away from her again, moving toward a case display of items, inspecting each as if something were to have gone missing. "You came to me, remember that, Regina."

The brunette scoffed softly and knocked the golden vase onto the floor, letting it shatter into a million pieces. "Oops," she purred and stepped around the mess. "Perhaps I did, but you did not hesitate to take advantage of me."

He giggled again and magicked the vase back into shape. "Poor, poor little Regina, crying into the night, but no one coming to save her." Regina gasped when the imp seemed to appear before her, his golden eyes piercing into her own as he touched her cheek. She stiffened in her spot, face crinkling from the cold fingers.

"Do not touch me, imp." Another cold, cruel laughter bubbled from him.

"What will this sad girl do now that her toy is gone?" He smirked and let that hand fall from her face and down her body, that curve on his lips growing as she remained rigid. "I know you defiled her. At it again, are we, Regina?"

"Go away," she demanded and allowed herself to breathe when he pulled away. "Just leave me
alone, imp."

"Oh, but I cannot do that, Regina. You see, the Charmings, there, they signed a contract giving you to me." The words had her freezing, the blood in her face draining. "Do not like the sound of that, do you, Your Majesty?"

"You can do whatever you wish, but you will never break me."

"Oh, I do doubt that very much." He hummed softly and touched an oaken chest that pressed against the wall. "Perhaps I will have my fun with you for all that you have put me through. Far too much work for what it is worth."

Eyes fell to that very chest; a feeling stirring up within her as she thought of what lie within. She attempted to keep her cool and straighten out, but she knew the fear would be visible in her eyes; she never could mask it well.

"I would like to see you try," she growled.

"That will be sooner than you know, my dear Regina."

Rumpel parted from the room and she couldn't help but to follow, for what, she did not know. All that she had fought against was slowly slipping through her fingers and she could feel her grip on reality slowly fall away. She could not endure that again.

"You have her, don't you? In there?" Her eyes landed on a door; something tall and dark. It was cracked open.

"Do you think me foolish?" The man shook his head and pushed the door open, revealing a room full of more prized artifacts. "Your hopes of finding Emma are nigh; on your own, at least." He entered the room and Regina stood in the doorway, brows furrowing.

"And you will help me find her?" She cautiously asked.

"Oh, no, no." His back faced her as he dug into a small, studded box placed on a wooden table. "You will be joining her."

And, before the Evil Queen could register the threat and run, the Dark One turned back around and blew at a pile of dust in his hand; then the world grew black.

He recoiled at the question, brows furrowing as he paced backward with a shake of his head, muttering something. "And why would I tell you such a thing?"

She felt herself fall apart. "I-I need-"

"You needn't such a thing. You will be under his protection, as well as mine." Baelfire's step faltered as he turned his dark gaze on her. "You are not planning on escaping, are you?"

"I- No, no. Of course not. Why would I do such a thing?" A wide and frightened smile took place on her lips. Under his protection? And what protection would that be while she is trapped down here? The Dark One would no doubt kill the Evil Queen and her parents wouldn't harm her. Would they even come for her?

"Good." He seemed to believe her. "Do not worry. My father will not keep you here long. Soon enough you will be dressed in white as the kingdom cheers for you." A frown claimed his lips when
he saw Emma's smile waver. "Perhaps I can convince him to move you to new quarters; something more comfortable."

"I would be more comfortable if I could get these cuffs removed," she grunted. "They hurt."

"I would help you if I could, princess." Baelfire moved closer, that frown only sinking deeper. "Trust me, I do not wish to see you like this."

"Bae! Get out of here. I told you not to speak with the princess." A voice drew the blonde's attention to the door when a shadow blocked the light.

"Of course, father," he muttered and quickly stood to leave, turning around momentarily as he shouted quickly behind him. "I will speak with you later, princess."

"The boy would do anything for you, Emma. You are lucky to have someone so attentive to your needs." He did not move from the entrance, instead, he turned once again, an eerie tone to his voice as he next spoke. "I have a gift for you, princess."

Her heart stuttered in her chest. What would he have for her? Possibilities raked her mind as he disappeared, only to return moments later; his silhouette gaining mass. For a moment, she thought it might have been a gown, for the material of something swished against him with each movement, but the further he entered the room and the light that filled it, she could make out the form of another body.

Emma's breath was stolen as she gazed upon the unconscious face of the Evil Queen. "What did you do to her?" she demanded and lurched in her spot when the imp dropped the brunette onto the floor. She could see a cut on her cheek; glistening crimson in the golden rays.

"She came to me in search of you. " Emma spat, gaining her courage and her anger, as the man's pointed fingers trailed along the Evil Queen exposed chest, stopping just above her cleavage. The blonde shuddered for Regina.

"In search of you, of course. Must I repeat myself to everyone?" His hand plunged inside the brunette's chest cavity and Emma could hear as Regina regained her consciousness in a sharp gasp. The Dark One only laughed as he pulled the beating organ from her chest; black and red. "Isn't that right, Regina?"

But the Evil Queen was attempting to recover herself after the loss of her heart. "You bastard!"

"I have been called worse names in my day." He stood with the heart in his hand and paced over to the princess, whose eyes kept on the pulsing mass. "Tell me, sweet princess, what shall we do to our queen first? Her betrayal is splendid when it aligns our very interests into this singular moment, casting her mercy into our hands, allowing us to decide her fate as they want it."

Emma's eyes fell to piercing obsidian orbs of the Queen, who had managed to pull herself up, and saw the intensity in her gaze; and the fear that haunted them like a distant storm. She was one to dish
out the pain and the misery, but never left room on her plate when it was turned on her.

"I am not taking part in this," she growled coldly, jade orbs moving back on the imp who stood with a mere smile on his face, as if he had expected that very answer.

"Oh, and why would that be after all that she had done to you? To your parents? Because you think she cares for you? She would gladly let you perish if her own life were on the line." He cackled and she could see those sharp fingernails digging into the fleshy heart.

A soft whimper sounded from across the small room and the blonde couldn't help but to stand in her spot once again, prepared to tackle the man if need be. Though, any plan thereafter was a blank slate. She would still be cuffed, as well as the older woman, and Rumpel would no doubt kill them both.

"I care for her!" Emma roared, nails biting into her flesh. "That is more than anyone else can say. Someone has to."

She is worth no more than the dirt on your shoe, princess. You must understand her crimes and how she is only pulling you down to her level. And where she is… You do not want to be there, you do not want to sink that low." She could feel the weight of the chains, once again, as they coiled around her.

"I am not the princess," Emma muttered and the imp chuckled.

"What seeds has she been planting in your brain? Of course you are still the princess; you are the daughter of the King and Queen, are you not? Your status will always remain for the rest of your life." The Dark One shook his head and turned an eye on the Evil Queen who spat bitterly at him. "My, my you certainly have been busy, haven't you? Taking the princess's innocence and claiming to remove her true title? It will take much to reverse, but worry not, the population of your kingdom will rejoice once you are gone."

"I would like to see you try, imp." Her words only pressed his fingers into her heart and Emma was the one to scream, pleading for him to stop like she had before.

"You are weak," he snarled and only continued until she saw that heart start to misshapen; the cry it had forced from the Queen shaking Emma's own body to the very core. Gods, she thought he was going to kill her; turn that heart into the dust he claimed it would be, but all of sudden he loosened his grip and Emma could breathe again.

Regina was shaking, her face pale and her brow lined with sweat, but she remained silent, letting those fiery orbs speak for her.

"Leave her alone," Emma's voice was hoarse and her wrists throbbed as she attempted to break free from them. "You wanted me. Now you have me. Let her go."

But her plea was only met with that eerie laughter; something that always chilled the blood in her veins, but this time, it made the crimson boil, impinging fire underneath her skin. "Oh, dearie, you simply do not understand. When your dear, sweet parents asked for my assistance, it warranted a price and that price is the Evil Queen's life. She belongs to me and I will stop at nothing until she perishes under my hand." His words were like a knife scoring along the tender flesh of her heart. "And it will not be for a long while until that happens. This woman thought she could break free from me; that she needn't me any longer. She had put me through too much and has failed me more times than I can count."

"You got your son back, imp." Regina's venomous voice spat, though when Emma turned to her,
expecting wrath to turn her face red, the olive skin was devoid of any blood at all. It made her feel sick seeing the once powerful Queen in such a position; facing death as it stared her in the face. But there was a fire still in her eye; some hope she was grasping onto.

"Without the help you were supposed to provide. You left that contract unpaid for; you let the curse fall apart."

"You took things from me, imp. You forced payment." She muttered bitterly. "As you had be-

But the Dark One had none of it for he squeezed her heart once again and the brunette silenced, grunting as she attempted to maintain her composure, as if this simple pain was nothing she hadn't felt before. There was a dullness in her eye; the pain that she attempted to mask, but the stone shattered when the imp's grip on that pulsing organ only grew.

And, as if it were just some sick game, he loosened his grip on the heart before he could break it. The release of death would not be given to the Evil Queen whose face was now pressed to the cobbled floor.

"I will break you again," he stated in a deep growl with an intensity that seemed to quake the building. "I will make you beg for death."

"I will never beg." Regina hoarsely snapped. "Do what you wish to me, just leave her out of it. Let her return to her parents."

Emma's heart sunk at the Queen's words, but she knew her best bet was to return to the White Kingdom; to the safety of her castle. She could warn her parents of Rumpelstiltskin's betrayal. Though she could not find it within her will to leave Regina to her fate.

"And why would I do such a thing? You both belong to me. To me!" His voice roared and that heart in his hand was not spared.

Regina, unprepared for the pain, screamed out and fell once again, hands balling to her chest as if the pressure would save her. Emma felt her head buzz as blood rushed to it, burning and powerful, and she felt something stir within her; that power that consumed her entire being. It was hot and it was intense and she could feel it surge throughout her, looking for an exit.

The world was growing white and the last thing she saw was the Dark One's face and the horror that came to it before darkness claimed her.

"Emma! Emma! Please, wake up. Do not die on me…"

She heard a voice, like a distant ocean in her ears, something that pulled her from the darkness. When she moved, she felt like a wet noodle, numb and exhausted. Opening her eyes, she saw nothing and for a moment, she panicked that she had grown blind, but then they adjusted after she blinked several times to see a distressed face across from her.

Regina.

Gods, her voice was a dream itself as it called to her again.

"Get up, Emma. He's unconscious. We need to escape before he wakes."

Emma tried to move but found that she couldn't. "I-I can't move!"
"Try." Regina was already standing, her face still pale and stained with drying perspiration. She stumbled over to the princess and fell to her knees before her. "You have broken your binds. Come on…"

The blonde did try with all the might left in her body and pulled herself up, staggering slightly in her spot. "Where's your heart?" She asked, searching the room for that glowing organ. She saw it, fallen next to the imp's hand.

"If you get these cuffs off me, we can lock him up." The Evil Queen followed her as the blonde neared the Dark One, slowly, eyes on the man as he twitched.

"Sounds too easy," she muttered, jumping forward to grab the throbbing mass before stepping back, only to stumble when the imp's slender fingers curled around her ankle. She could feel Regina's heart pulsing in her hand, beating in time with her own.

"Let her go." Hissed the Evil Queen as she lurched forward, her foot coming down hard upon the man's wrist, a sickening crunch following the impact. But Emma did not linger long as she scrambled away from the loosened grip, Rumpel roaring behind her.

"You cannot escape me!" He cackled and stood within seconds, those golden eyes shining on them with a fire that could have burned if it were tangible.

"You have to take us back to the castle, Emma!" The Queen's voice was urgent beside her.

"Wh- I-I can't do that. I-I-I don't know how!" The blonde ran with the brunette as they fled the room and traced the halls with their feet.

"Yes you can! You have it within you, Emma. Just think; imagine the castle; picture the warmth of bed; the familiarity of it. Please." Emma would have argued if the Queen were not cuffed and unable to utilize her own magic.

Thus, she tried to, letting the image of the Queen's bedchambers into her mind; the ebony stone and the sun's rays that warmed them underneath her feet; the canopied bed and the furs that she swam in with that very woman; the fire that crackled and the vanity she found Regina sitting at, nude, as she combed the soft locks that spilled down her back like a chocolate waterfall.

She willed the power that resided within her to bubble to the surface, but a voice stopped her as well as the cloud of scarlet magic that appeared before them, and she could feel her desperation rise.

"Where do you think you are going? There is no escape." Emma could feel herself wilt as she stared death in the face; this man that would no doubt kill her now that she had angered him. "It is futile."

"No…” Regina breathed the singular word from beside her and something stirred within her once again. She had to do this; for her. She took everything within herself; that desperation, that fear, that anger and let loose and before she could blink an eye, white had surrounded the two women faced with the Dark One, who shouted after them, something harsh and resounding as it echoed in her ears, even as she found herself in the Evil Queen's bedchambers.

Darkness is what she saw until she opened her eyes to find herself surrounded by a familiar scene. She let herself breathe in the sweet scent that filled the air and relaxed, bringing her occupied hand up to gaze at the pulsing heart that was still held within it, and was mesmerized. She was holding Regina's heart. It felt soft and warm, and it beat in time with her own pulse.

"That certainly was close. I cannot believe that I did it," she said, voice shaking as the words left her mouth, and turned to the Evil Queen, only when she had, she was met with an empty space.
"Regina?" Panic welled within her as she whipped around in search of the woman, only to find that she was alone in the large bedchambers.

Her heart hammered.

"Regina!"
Night had fallen, leaving the remnants of the stained red sky to fade away as the last fragment of the sun had sunk into the darkening earth. The wind howled on this night, sweeping through the courtyard and pushing up dust, something both haunting and beautiful. The Black Knight stood in the middle of the quiet clearing, alone, gazing at the faded stars as they winked at her from above.

They looked as if they were laughing, mocking, as they danced against the black backdrop. A weariness was set in her bones and a heaviness in her heart. Green eyes fell away to an ebony blade, one whose hilt she gripped tight in the leather of her gloves, the encrusted emerald eyes on the white swan knob glinting in the moonlight. She stared into them, for a moment, entranced, hoping that, perhaps, she would find an answer.

Complete darkness consumed her as she closed her eyes for not but a brief moment, filling her entire being with its energy.

"Ser Swan," a voice sounded, deep and rumbling, as the source approached, boots crunching against gravel.

"What you bring to me better be good tidings, Kevan." Jade fire burning within her eyes as they landed on the man and his mop of dark hair. His face paled. "What did you find?"

"Ser Uriel discovered books in the library that might lead to the Dark One's location." His brown eyes sparkled.

"Lead the way," she growled and followed as the young knight brought her to the castle's library.

Emma was met with winding staircases and tall, stacked shelves filled with books, surrounding her like a tornado. She had been acquainted with this room a few days after she had started her training, for the queen had taken notice to her interest in the few tomes that lined the shelves in her bedchambers. Though, this room was far too large to search for anything on her own, thus she had turned to the more well-read knights as she turned to the castle for anything else that might aid her.

A tall, bald man with dark skin approached her, clad in his usual ebony armor. He toted a stack of books.

"What did you find, Uriel?" Inquired the Black Knight and was immediately granted the stack as he spoke.

"This is all I could find on the Dark One, ser." The man dipped his head, though when he had straightened out, something burned in his hazel eyes. "Might I ask why you are trying to locate this imp?"

The blonde turned her gaze away from the man and sought out a red velvet sofa, though refrained from moving. "The queen asked me."

"Doesn't Her Majesty know of his location?"

"Why must you question me? She has asked that I research the Dark One." Her face grew hot with impatience and the knight seemed to notice for he merely dipped his head and backed away.

"Is there anything else I can assist you with?" When the blonde shook her head, Uriel moved away, taking Kevan with him.
Emma was alone in the quiet library as she moved toward the sofa to read through the yellow, aged pages of the tomes. Would any of this truly help? That, she did not know. But she was certainly desperate enough to try as she flipped through the books, one by one, skimming, searching, for anything that would leave indication of his location.

But as the time had passed and her back had grown sore from hunching over the books, she knew that she was only wasting precious time. A day had nearly passed since she returned to the castle and within that day, the Gods would only know what Rumpelstiltskin was bestowing upon the Evil Queen.

They had an advantage, though, or at least Emma would like to think. She still held onto Regina's heart, kept secure in a black metal box around her neck. Strange, perhaps even careless, it may seem, but she didn't trust leaving it alone, not while Rumpel was no doubt on the prowl. That's why she wanted to make the first move; she didn't want to give him the chance.

Tossing the books onto the sofa beside her, Emma stood, taking those thoughts to heart. There had to be a more productive way of locating Rumpel and where he kept the Evil Queen. Magic was the only thing she could think of, something that had brought her back here. But when she had tried to think back on her surroundings, of anything that might have brought an inkling to where she had been, it was only a blur, some distant, foggy memory clouded by red magic and the whisper of Regina's despairing voice.

A chill worked its way down her spine as she relived that one moment.

She had turned to the knights, first, in hopes they would have knowledge of Rumpelstiltskin's abode; that perhaps they had traveled with the queen before, but when each had shaken their heads, she was at a loss. The blonde knight didn't even know if that's where she was taken to in the first place. Would the imp be so heedless?

No.

Everything that man did was carefully calculated, as if he had long planned for events. It chilled her the way that imp moved and spoke and thought, as if he already knew of any circumstance before they happened. Briefly, she wondered if he would have known of the Evil Queen's plans to kidnap the princess, but only shook the thought away like a pesky insect, finding disbelief in it.

Emma found herself in the queen's bedchambers once again. Why, she did not know, she felt the need to sink into the familiarity of it, to remember the woman that was gone as if it would help locate her. There must be some way, she thought, pacing, eyes falling to every surface that she passed. Things that she had rummaged through, papers and books and small items strewn in a storm of her urgency.

"Where is she?"

The Black Knight very nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard a man's voice speak and turned to find the source, only she couldn't. "Who's there?" She demanded, unsheathing her sword and preparing to strike if need be.

"Turn around." It came again; that mysterious, disembodied voice. It sounded as if it were directly behind her, where she had first been facing, yet it also seemed as if it came from across the room, as well. "Not there, you idiot. The mirror." It spoke again, sounding with a chilling echo.

She slowly turned to the mirror as if something were to pop out at any given moment and pointed her sword at what she expected to be her own reflection but, instead, she was met with a man's face.
surrounded in an ethereal blue glow.

"What the fuck!" Her ebony blade clattered to the ground as she attempted to make sense of what she was seeing. In her time here, she certainly hadn't witnessed such a thing. "What are you?"

But the man rolled his eyes, or at least she thought it was a man. Maybe it was a ghost? Or some magical spell. "I am the Evil Queen's magic mirror."

"What the hell did she make you out of?" But the reflection, or ghost, or whatever the hell it was only looked at her, impatient.

"Nothing. I was once a man, but-"

"Whoa… What the hell did she do to you?" Emma, after having collected her sword once again, moved toward the large mirror hung on the wall and pressed her fingers against the cool surface. The image of the man's head remained, garnering only irritation in his eyes.

"I asked you a simple question and you have yet to answer it."

The blonde merely snorted and retracted her hand, eyes narrowing on the mirror. "And why should I answer to the likes of you?"

"Because I have seen you pacing and coming through here like a tornado. The Evil Queen would not allow such a thing." His voice seemed to fill her head and when she turned, she saw his image on the vanity's mirror, as well.

"You've been spying on me?"

"Spying, seeing, are they truly any different? I know who you are and what you and the queen have done." There was a smirk on his face. Emma blanched. "Where is she?"

Color soon returned to her face as her blood pumped once again and she turned, step heavy. "Rumpelstiltskin has her."

A gasp filled the air. "And by have her you mean…?"

"He has taken her." The blonde turned her jade eyes on him. "If you have been seeing what has been happening, then you should know."

"The last I spoke to the queen, she said she was going to confront the Dark One of your betrayal."

"My betrayal?" Emma could have laughed. "He took me. Somehow he broke through and…" She shook her head, reflecting back on those golden eyes that pierced her very soul. Then, as if a light had turned on, she quickly found her footing toward the mirror and looked upon the man inside. "You must know where Rumpel's castle is located. Tell me this."

The magic mirror looked bewildered. "I am merely a mirror, ser. I know of no location."

"You have to know… Can't you- Can't you see through other mirrors or something? Can't you find her?" The blonde drew her attention to the wall behind the mirror as she lifted it, but the man's voice stopped her.

"Trust me, I have tried. I pride myself in keeping contact with the Evil Queen. But I simply cannot reach her." His eyes shifted. "I am able to see through other mirrors, yes, but they will not provide me with a location."
Emma's heart thundered in her ears, feeling as if it were pounding against the one that lay over it. "What of landmarks? Anything that might be able to tell of its location?"

He shook his head, or what Emma had assumed was the gesture. "I am sorry, but it is impossible."

An impending growl rose in the blonde knight's throat. "You are of no help." And, before she knew it, her fist was colliding with the man's face, shattering the mirror and leaving it to bleed broken glass as it showered onto the floor. Shaking her hand and flicking the remnants off her gloves, she turned away, ignoring the face that appeared in the vanity's mirror.

"You must find her." The magic mirror's words stopped her in her tracks. "There is no telling what he might do."

"Then perhaps you should find a way to help me." Emma hissed, finding something stirring in her gut as she moved toward the vanity. "You know, instead of pissing away our time."

"And what are you doing to find our queen?"

The reflection shattered once again underneath her black fist. She took to the corridors, instead, fueled by his words. She needed to do something. The last resort she had within these castle walls were speaking with the knights, once again, and confessing the queen's absence. But if they hadn't been able to help her find route to the Dark One's abode, then what aid would they give her now?

"You cannot ignore me, Emma."

It reverberated, this time, and she almost swore she was hearing that voice inside her head. But when she turned, she was met with another mirror; no, Gods, there was an entire wall of them and his reflection followed her in each one.

"Perhaps the queen was correct in her assumption."

She passed that mirror, fingers curling into her palms.

"You merely wanted to overthrow her."

Her eyes kept to the stone ahead.

"To take over her castle."

Booted feet moved faster.

"No one can ever trust a White."

There was a certain venom in his voice as if he were reflecting the Evil Queen herself. This time the blonde stopped, heated emerald orbs on the mirror before her. "You know nothing."

"I know nothing? Her Majesty speaks every one of her plans to me. I help her, unlike you, who paces these halls as if she were a lost little girl." Laughter filled the hallways, coming from each of those mirrors and it was overwhelming; she felt as if she were drowning in it.

"I implore you, tell me where she is, where I can find her. Or who can help me."

But that cold, cruel laughter only filled the air. "You killed the only one that could help you."

Her lip twitched. His games were tiring. That feeling that welled within her only grew and, within seconds, every single mirror shattered, raining shards of glass in the dark corridor. If he couldn't help
her, no one could. She would just have to do this on her own, whatever it may take.

"It's a pity, Regina, that no one cares." A soft blip of a giggle fell from golden lips. "Not even the one who claims to love you."

The Evil Queen's eyes shot like molten lava on the imp who seemed to dance before her as he paced in that small, small room she had woken in; the same one they had escaped from; the one Emma no longer inhabited. Part of her felt relief that the blonde knight was able to flee, but there was a heaviness, some burning sensation in her heart, knowing that she was left behind.

But she did not let that falter her, no, she wouldn't allow it. She had to remain strong, sure. Keep herself from breaking as the Dark One had wanted her to. The only relief she had was that Rumpel didn't have access to her heart. She could feel it, though, as Emma touched it; soft and gentle, like a caress. It was safe. For now.

She was at their mercy. Gods, she hated losing control.

"Nothing to say?" Another giggle. "You are used to it, aren't you? Being left behind; being used. Thinking someone cares, someone finally hears that cry in the night, but they don't. They only laugh at your misery."

It was Regina's turn to laugh this time, something deep and roaring, resonating within her dark soul. She wouldn't let him get to her, not with words. "I have learned that people are selfish; they only take interest in themselves."

"Oh, you don't truly believe that, do you?" He smirked and moved toward her in a flash, the air that followed him cold and jeering as it caressed her face. "Daniel cared for you."

She stiffened, her absent heart speeding its beat, but she left her features to remain as stone. "Do not bring him into this."

"Still sore, are we?" The sinister curve of his lips never faltered, but only grew, widening his face. "No mind. Our words have been spent of that boy. Now, the girl, on the other hand."

"What of her?" She spat, those leaden, chestnut orbs spitting fire on the Dark One. "She means nothing to me."

"Are you quite sure of that?" He bent, face mere inches from her own, his rancid breath hot against her skin.

She could feel herself grow weak as the blood in her face fled, but she matched his gaze, her lips pulled back into a tight snarl. "She means nothing to me."

But he laughed as if he believed otherwise. "Shame that she has gone. I would have enjoyed torturing her in front of you. But, alas, that must wait for another time. I must cash in my promise first, dearie."

The brunette's nose twitched slightly, any color in her face now gone at his promise, and when he forced her to stand, she tried everything to pull away. "You will not! I will kill you, imp. I promise you that."

"Mighty words coming from a woman who is at my mercy." He pushed her hard against against the cold stone, taking the air from her lungs along with it. She could feel her legs give way, but she was not granted the comfort of the floor as he pressed his body against her own, pinning her against the
That stolen breath was quickened, her body growing too hot, too tense. "Do with me what you will. Flesh is flesh and it will heal."

"But your mind is weak, scarred." The imp purred and trailed a pointed finger along her temple. She shuddered. "And it will break."

"You cannot break me." Something welled within her chest, a fire that roared and crackled, despite the tightness that weighed her down. "You try, imp. You can try."

"You keep saying that," he muttered, a smirk claiming his lips as he pulled away, allowing the Evil Queen to breathe once again. But it hadn't lasted long as she felt her feet part from the floor, his dark magic suffocating her. She only remained still, though, learning that it had been best in these situations. "But I can see the fear in your eyes; that fear that I might just take everything that you had built and tear it down."

A strained laughter fell from her lips. It hurt her aching lungs, but she didn't care. The pain was something that fueled her. "I fear nothing. I have nothing. And it is nothing that you will take."

"You are lying and you know it even as you speak." There was a sparkle in his eye. "Perhaps I will let you live long enough to watch your infamous Black Knight fall by my hand."

Her upper lip pulled back and she growled, "please, do. It will please me endlessly. But, you will be sore of luck for she will not come here. She will return to the protection of her parents."

But her words didn't seem to affect him for he merely continued to smile. "She will come, and when she does, well… Those pretty green eyes of hers will no longer sparkle."

Regina felt her arms separate from behind her back and for a moment, she thought she was free, until she felt the cuffs bite further into her wrists as her entire weight relied on them. The pressure was soon taken away when another set of binds coiled around her ankles and she was lowered to the ground.

When she moved, she heard the clatter of chains, and knew it was inevitable. Her dark gaze fell upon the Dark One who circled her, a hand under his chin as if he were observing, contemplating, and it only sent chills down her spine.

"But you do not care, do you, that she will die?" He stood before her once again, that creepy smile stretching wide across his crocodile features. "How can you when you are nothing but a monster?"

"That certainly is rich coming from you." She only smiled when his hand drew across her cheek, the sting of her flesh only seeming to ignite her fires. "What you subject others to is far worse than what I have done."

"You can tell yourself that, dear Regina, but we all know you will seek any excuse to justify your actions." His fingers felt like ice as they moved along the stinging contour of her cheek. "You have used Snow White as just that for far too long."

Relief flooded her when he withdrew his hand, but that moment of peace hadn't lasted long when his feet moved, positioning him behind her. She twisted to look at him, the chains rattling with each movement, but she couldn't keep her gaze long. "But you merely added fodder to the canon, imp, by showing me the ways of dark magic."

"You let your anger control you. Throughout your life, that is all you felt. For your mother, for
Snow, for me." He tsked and within moments, she felt something shift inside the room. She was granted the answer only a second later when the sound of a whip snapped in the suddenly too-thick air. "Poor, little Regina, so very angry at the world for letting her down."

The brunette queen tensed slightly when she felt something trail along her back. "Snow White is the one that-

"You tell yourself that, dearie, but you know that is not true." He cackled softly and when Regina looked to the imp behind her for that brief moment, she saw the opposing black leather draw forward. Pain tensed her body, something dull, for the fabric of her gown softened the blow, but she could feel it tear. "She may have had a hand, but you and I both know it stretches far beyond that."

"You don't know what you are talking about, imp. You do not know me."

"Oh, but that is where you are wrong, Regina." The Dark One's words were a whisper in her ear, filling her head and resonating throughout her body with an uneasy gelidity. "I have known you since before you were even born."

"You lie!" She hissed, though there was a small doubt in her, because there were still mysteries about that imp that she didn't know. It made her shudder and that whip made her lurch as it was brought down upon her again, a grunt falling from her lips. "You are hell-bent on ruining my attire, aren't you?"

"Well, you certainly do wear too many dark colors." A giddy giggle filled the air. "What happened to that young Regina who wore her pastels?"

"She is dead."

"She certainly is. What a shame. This realm would have benefited from having her." The brunette felt his fingers move along the torn fabric on her back and suddenly she was tugged backward as he sank his fingers into the newly formed slits, ripping at them and tearing her gown further. The split of the fabric only filled her lungs with cement as a cool draft hit her exposed skin.

"This world was never meant to have her." The Evil Queen growled, those dark eyes concentrating hard on the wall before her as if it would help her escape. But, whatever intangible hope that she had willed never came and she was face with that odious little imp, his eyes like golden death. "My whole existence is flawed."

"All of our existences are flawed, Regina. No one is meant to be perfect, not even Snow White," he chirped, using the leather to trail along her paling complexion. "She signed her daughter away to keep safe from you, yet, look where the tides of fate had churned us."

"Fate, if there ever was such a thing." Regina merely spat and turned her gaze away from him, her body shuddering when he bared his yellowed teeth and let that strip trail further down.

"Oh, dearie, there is. The world has a mysterious way of turning things out, but the future is inevitable, no matter how one might attempt to change the outcome." His eyes fell momentarily to her cleavage before he stepped away with a light hop and circled her. "Trust me, I should know."

"Then you are telling me that I was fated to be this… to be this monster?" Part of her didn't seem to mind, for life seemed easier when she could take control; take what she wanted. But then there was another part - something angry and penetrating - because of what she had to go through to get here.

"Of course. You were needed as you are now." The imp paused before her, lips curling into an offensive smile.
A snort left her lips. "So you could do this? That I was fated to be used and abused and…" A part of her crumbled, her eyes filling with tears that she would not bid. "What do you want of me? Is it because I am of no use to you now? So you think you can throw me away? Is death my fate, by your hand?"

"Your worth ran out long ago, Regina." His booted feet moved swiftly once again as he stepped behind her. She twisted to follow him, the muscles in her back aching as his gilded eyes feasted upon the unmarred flesh. "Death is fated to you, an early demise. I have merely assumed the task." And, with his final word, that leather, something so harmless on its own, fell upon her back.

Scarlet was the color that spilled from her veins, escaping the broken bonds of her skin and leaving a warm, tickling trail down the olive surface. Her flesh felt as if it were on fire, but she only grit her teeth, not giving him the satisfaction of her pain. But that whip kept cracking, breaking the weakness of her skin, releasing more of that sweet, metallic liquid, and along with it, she felt salty regret slip down her cheeks and knew she wouldn't last long. But Gods be damned if she wouldn't hold on to the breaking pieces of her already shattered mind.

Emma looked to the sky, those stars that seemed to guide her now hidden behind swaths of dark clouds, seeming to cry for her as cold rain splattered against her ebony armor. She closed her eyes and allowed it to beat down on her skin, revitalizing her tired brain. The sun would rise soon and time was waning; she could feel it, something deep in her bones, screaming.

The village square she stood in was empty save for a few beggars. She had traveled far, outside of the Evil Queen's territory, hoping, praying that she would find her way to Regina. But as time passed, she felt herself slowly lose that hope, but there was a determination inside her like a white light, pressing her to keep going, even though her aching limbs had protested.

The metal box around her neck felt heavy as it still hung, swinging with every step. But the beating that resonated within it kept her going because as long as she heard it, felt it, she knew there was hope; that Regina was still alive.

Sighing softly, she dug into the small coin pouch attached to her hip and tossed a couple gold pieces into the beggars' dishes. Hunger gnawed at her belly, but she would only rest and eat when she had completed her task. As she was about to step toward a set of cobbled stairs, she heard a voice stop her, one that of the nearest beggar.

"You look troubled."

When she turned, she was met by the long, thin face of a man, wrinkled and greyed with age. "I can handle myself," she said and looked to the stairs, anticipation fueling her to move, but she was drawn back by the man's cracked voice.

"You are seeking something that you cannot find."

Her brows furrowed, gripped by his words, and turned a slow eye on him. He was well-spoken for a common peasant; a beggar. "Who are you?" she asked, but he merely chuckled, something wheezing and short, his crooked, rotting teeth being revealed.

"I am no one of importance, but perhaps I can aid you in your endeavors."

Emma remained still, skeptical, her green eyes on the man as he coughed into his hand. She frowned. "And how can you aid me when you know nothing of my… troubles."

"People pass us by, they underestimate us. We see and we hear and we know." He shifted, his bony
limbs popping with each movement. "Tell me what you seek, my child."

The blonde shook her head, though, denying his offer. Everything about him seemed wrong, chilling. "I do not need your help." And, with her words, she turned and ascended those stairs, but his voice only seemed to follow her.

"Time is running short, my child."

"And what do you know of time except that you are wasting mine?"

He cackled, though it was more of a strained cough, the smile on his cracked lips growing. "Impatient girl. You must see the world before you rush by it. Perhaps your answers are where you least expect them, where you might walk right on by, like the villagers do to the beggars."

A strange curiosity welled within her, forcing her feet forward as she brought herself back to the man who gazed upon her with a sparkle in his blue eyes. "Fine, I will bite, but I will not continue chewing the fat for long."

"First you must tell me what it is that you seek."

Nose twitching, she let her jade eyes fall to the cobbled alleyway. "I am searching for Rumpelstiltskin's castle."

"A girl seeks danger, I see, I see." He nodded, that gleam in his eye brightening. "I cannot help you locate his castle."

"What?" The Black Knight was about to draw her sword and stick that man in the neck with the pointy end, but he only smiled back on her, coughing and laughing.

"But I know of one who can." He licked his lips. "Impatient girl."

A growl rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down. This was her only lead, thus far, she had to take it. "Who?"

"A woman with brown hair and blue eyes, a true belle of the dark. She takes to the town a few villages north. How many, you ask?" He smirked. "I would say three. Once you reach the fourth, search for her. She will wear yellow."

"And how do you know she has knowledge of the Dark One's location?" Asked the blonde knight whose stomach soon knotted; some bubble of hope turning the butterflies into a raging storm.

"You can only trust me, my child, for my word is the only you have. I bid you good luck."

Emma's green orbs kept on the man for a long moment, but decided against wasting any further time for she turned and ascended those stairs. But there was something that she didn't ask and faced toward the alley only to find the spot in which he had inhabited empty.

It left her uneasy as she turned away, making her way back toward the borrowed horse she had brought with. Who was that man, and how did he know of her circumstance? But, she didn't let that thought linger for she mounted the black, armored mare and rode off, counting each village as she passed through.

When she had reached the fourth stone and dirt covered village, the sun had risen high in the sky, casting its warm rays upon her. The storm clouds from last night still swirled in the sky as swaths of grey, threatening to gather and form another shower. She loved the smell of a storm and the way the
earthy scent clung to the air after the rain had long gone.

What was left of the greenery was vibrant in the otherwise dreary surroundings. She took a moment, as she dismounted her mare and tied her to a post, to soak in the aftermath. Mud squished underneath her heavy, black boots as she entered the village, buzzing with people as they went about their daily lives.

Immediately, her eyes searched for a woman of the beggar man's descriptions, but there was no one that had matched. She didn't even know when this mysterious brown haired, blue eyed belle would come to town, if she even did, and what her connection to the Dark One might have been.

The sun seemed to swallow her as it appeared from behind a dark cloud, telling her of the time that was passing, of the time that she was wasting. The Evil Queen's heart still beat, thrumming in that black box over her own. She closed her eyes for a moment and let the organ pump with hers, feeling it reverberate throughout her entire being. She could imagine herself in bed with the very woman it belonged to, their hearts beating together more naturally, as their skin pressed against one another and their souls bonded.

"Your flowers are quite beautiful this morning." A woman's voice, lilted with an enchanting accent, sounded above the rest. "I will take two dozen."

"Thank you, ma'am. 'Preciate your business."

Emma turned to see the exchange between a young boy and a chestnut-haired woman in a yellow dress. He gave her a bouquet of colorful roses and she placed them into a shallow, woven basket.

"Thank you, sir," she chirped before turning away to pace around the circle of small stands.

The Black Knight moved toward the light haired boy whose eyes looked upon her, wide. "Are you a knight?"

She offered the boy a gentle smile, reaching for her coin purse. "I am, yes."

"Wow," he gasped. "I never seen a girl knight before."

"Where I come from it is not uncommon." Emma dipped her head as she spoke gently, fishing out a few gold pieces. "Who was that woman that you spoke with?"

His hazel eyes fell to the brunette woman who remained within the square, standing before a vendor that held different wares, looking as if they were from foreign lands. "Oh, her? Name's Belle. She's my friend."

"Is she?" The blonde nodded slowly, jingling those coins in her hand. "Do you know where she comes from?"

The boy shook his head, frowning. "No. I ain't never asked her, but she comes to town every morning to buy flowers. Nothin' else. Just flowers. But she looks."

Her eyes searched out the woman again, Belle, but she was no where to be seen. A frown immediately claimed her lips before she turned back to the boy. "Thank you for your help."

"'Course, ma'am."

She extended her hand to the boy and dropped the coins in his hand. "I will take a red rose."
"Oh, it don't cost this much, ma'am."

"For your help," she repeated and received the rose he had given her. "Do you know which direction she comes from?"

"The north, ma'am. Is she in trouble?"

"No, no. I must ask her a question. Thank you." With a dip of her head, she was off, pushing between people as they swarmed around her, buzzing from stand to stand. Her eyes searched every alley, every street, hoping to see that yellow dress, but her luck was short.

"Dammit," she muttered and found her mare, then proceeded north.

Of course, why wouldn't the Dark One be north? Opposite the Evil Queen and away from her parents' kingdom. How far north was he, she wondered, as she took to the dirt path that broke through the forest, eyes searching through the green and the brown for yellow.

Her heart skipped when she saw her and that basket of flowers, traveling on the side of the road. She hadn't gotten far. Of course not, she was on foot, after all. She gently dug her heel into the horse's flank, urging her forward, and rode up beside the brunette.

"Belle?"

Soft, blue eyes met her gaze and she couldn't find menace in them. How did she know of the Dark One's location? "Wh-who are you?" she asked, stopping, a wary gleam flitting through those sapphire hues.

"I am searching for Rumpelstiltskin," she answered, instead, removing herself from the horse with a hard thud. "I have heard you had knowledge of his location."

"Why are you searching for him?" Her brows furrowed as a frown creased her face. "You- You don't want to make any deals with him. That is a terrible idea."

"I am not looking for a deal. I am not stupid." She spat and the woman flinched. Fingers curling into the rein that she held, she shook her head. "Do you know of his location or not?"

"I…" She seemed to hesitate, those friendly eyes darkening. "What business have you with him?"

"What business is it of yours?" The blonde could feel her patience waning, as it had been throughout this journey.

"How do you know who I am?" Belle countered, her tone sharp.

"A… A man told me of a woman matching your description knew of the Dark One's location." It had sounded strange, of course, even as she thought about it. But that beggar seemed to have a certain knowledge of things that shook her and as she had slowly doubted him, she realized he had mentioned the woman's name in his words, even if it weren't directly. "Are you something to him?"

The woman seemed to hesitate once again, her free hand wringing into her yellow gown. "I was the price of a deal he made with my father. That much is common knowledge."

Emma snorted unconsciously; that imp and his prices. She was a price. "Yet he lets you roam free?"

The brunette's pink lips pressed together as she swallowed and nodded, eyes darting to the horse and down the road. "Our relationship had… changed."
"Changed?" A brow quirked.

"I help keep his castle," she quickly spit out, but Emma could immediately detect the lie, or at least, the cover.

"You love him." That seemed to have surprised the brunette, for her cheeks filled with blood and those eyes kept to the dirt. "You won't tell me his location because you love him. You know that I do not want to make a deal."

"Many people want his head for what he has done." Her words were quiet. "Of course, they cannot succeed."

"Then what do you have to be afraid of? I cannot harm him." That much was true. She didn't have his dagger.

Belle met her gaze, finally, frowning. "Why do you want to go to him, then?"

"He has taken something from me and I would like it back." This woman needn't know that that something was the Evil Queen; she might already know the Dark One has her.

"What is it that he has taken?"

"That is none of your concern. Will you help me retrieve it, or not?"

The brunette quickly shook her head. "I will not step between Rumpel and his items. But I will show you the way to his castle."

A slow smirk spread across pale, pink lips, the pieces of an idea slowly forming. "Perfect. Would you like a ride?" She gestured toward the black mare. "I promise not to kidnap you."

Laughter filled the air before Belle had smiled and dipped her head. "I appreciate it. The distance is long."

Within minutes, the two were mounted and rode down the dirt path at a steady pace. "So you have fallen in love with your captor. How did that come to be? He is the Dark One, after all."

The question seemed to have stunted the brunette who tensed before the blonde knight. "I am unsure," she said quietly and silence took them, letting the gentle clops of the horse's hooves to fill the air.

"You are unsure? What drew you to him?"

"I-I… I don't know, exactly. He… He was kind and gentle, when he let his guard down, as the nights passed. He merely ignored me, for a while, and told me when I had done things wrong. He never harmed me, though, and it was then that I knew there was some compassion in this man."

Emma could hear the smile in her voice as she spoke. "Slowly, I saw that he cared for me. I think he was afraid to, though. To love and to care. He is human, deep down in there, but it's a weakness, he says. I have tried to stop him from harming others but…"

"He's the Dark One," Emma finished her sentence, a bitterness clinging to her words. Human? She had seen what that man was capable of and what he would do to get his way. Regina was right when she said people were merely pawns to him. He only moved them across the board when he saw fit and removed the pieces that were no longer useful. Her mind went to Regina and she felt the need to hurry their journey along.
"I know. Whatever that might be controlling him is dark and consuming. I have tried… but he doesn't want to change; he won't." A sigh fell from her lips.

"Some people cannot be changed," murmured Emma, thinking to the Evil Queen whose thirst for blood never seemed to be satiated. She wondered if Regina would be the same and found no doubt. "How far is it?"

"At the end of the road there is a hidden path on the left. We will take that until we meet two large oaks. You will see nothing, but if we pass between them, his castle will appear. Well… He has it charmed so one cannot find it easily." Emma nodded slowly as she narrowed her eyes on the long stretch of road ahead, mentally writing the directions into her brain. She bid the mare to move faster and soon the trees were naught but a blur of brown and green as they passed, the cool wind whipping her cheeks red.

Light rain had started to fall by the time they had made it to the end of the road and she turned left into the stretch of forest, the path nothing but trampled earth. Emma could feel her stomach burn as the butterflies that had inhabited it raged, fluttering in preparation for what was to come. She had no idea what she would be faced with; she didn't even know if Rumpel was keeping Regina within the castle walls. And what if he wasn't? What if he appeared and she wasn't there and he captured her again?

She would doom them both. There was no way, through her utter exhaustion, that she could break free again. It had drained her the first time and she was surprised her adrenaline kicked in as long as it had to drag her weary body along. It was the fuel to find Regina that kept her going, she knew. Though, part of her wondered if she truly wanted the queen back or the freedom that she provided.

But then she thought and found that she had desired more than just freedom; she wanted the woman's sweet warmth, and those spicy lips, and to feel olive skin against her own. She closed her eyes briefly to seek out an image of the Evil Queen - no, Regina - and smiled to herself, enamored by the raw beauty she held.

"We're here." Emma was torn from the image of the queen and her haunting, chestnut eyes when Belle's voice spoke.

Emma looked up to be met by the twin oaks and the expanse of trees that lay behind. She urged the mare forward and as they passed between them, she could feel that same dark and filling magic consume her, clinging like static to her skin. It felt as if she were hallucinating when she saw the forest turn into a large castle and the dirt beneath the horse's hooves transformed to stone.

"Your horse will be safe by the door," said the brunette as they made their way up the long, stone path. It felt like ages until they reached the large iron and oak door that stood three times as tall as her.

"Is he compensating for something?" She muttered and dismounted the horse after Belle had, following the brunette up to the door.

"What?"

"Oh, nothing." Emma chirped and stepped through the large doors once they had been opened. Dread immediately filled her like a poison and she found herself shuddering, eyes on the displays that surrounded them. "Do you know where he is?"

"He might be out," Belle answered as she took a few of those roses from her basket and placed them into a vase on the middle of a long, wooden table. "He has been busy lately. I saw him in passing
this morning before I left. A door closed as I was exiting the hallway. Another…” She shook her head and offered a weak smile before moving to a golden vase to put a few more roses in.

Emma felt for the red one she had attached to her belt to make sure it was still there.

The brunette turned to her. "What is in that box around your neck? I had seen it earlier, but I did not wish to pry."

"You should have listened to your instinct," Emma muttered, fingers moving to the box that lay warm against her. It still beat.

"Of course. What is it that you are looking for?" She asked, instead, and Emma followed as she pressed forward, placing roses in each vase they passed.

"What did you mean by 'another'?" The blonde deflected her question with another, eyes falling to items held in a glass cabinet.

"Oh, um…” Belle shook her head quickly and deposited the now empty basket onto the floor. "Sometimes he takes people to punish them for misdeeds, or answers. I-I never ask."

"I see," Emma muttered. "Where does he take them?"

"I never know." She shrugged slightly. "Not since the first time I had helped a man escape. He never kept them in the same room."

"Do you know which room he went into this morning?" Emma pried, exploring the area for any corridor that might lead her to Regina; that was, if she was held here.

But she didn't get an immediate response, instead, Belle watched her with those piercing blue eyes. "Why must you ask?"

The blonde turned to her. "No mind. I am merely curious." She saw a splash of sunlight and decided to move through the door despite the brunette's pleads of her not to.

"Where are you going?"

"I am searching. If he is not here, then I will find him, or what I am looking for." Emma was blinded by the sunlight as it filled the room in its bright rays. There was something familiar about it. She continued forward, hearing distant voices in her head and the sight of crimson. Was this where she had escaped to?

"He keeps his prizes elsewhere," Belle continued to speak as she chased after the blonde, worried, as if she would get punished for Emma's wandering; or maybe it was concern for the knight's own punishment.

"Is this where you saw him this morning?" Emma stopped and felt as the brunette bumped into her.

"Yes," she said, confusion taking to her tone. "Why does it matter?"

"I'm sorry, Belle, but I have to do this." When the blonde knight turned, she saw the stricken features on Belle's features and before she could run, Emma pulled her against the ebony metal.

"Wh-what are you doing?" Her voice had grown in pitch as she struggled against the grip, but Emma was far too strong.

"You know what it feels like to be in love." The blonde dragged her along despite the fight she gave
to get free. "It makes you desperate when it is threatened. Stop moving. I don't want to hurt you."

"Wh- A-are you in love with the Dark One?"

Emma could have laughed and she did, something roaring that filled the corridor. "Gods no. You can keep that imp for yourself." She approached the first door and kicked it open, but it was empty of people and filled with furniture.

"Did he take your love?" Her voice trembled when she spoke and Emma kicked in the next door only to be met with more nothing.

The blonde knight did not answer her question as she proceeded down the hallway, kicking in each door that she had passed only to be met with bitter disappointment and a stone in her belly. "Are there more corridors similar to this one?"

"Upstairs, yes," she responded, voice cracking. "Are you searching for someone?"

"Will you stop fighting me?" Emma grunted and continued to drag the brunette along as she located the stairs at the end of the corridor and ascended them. She was met by a similar hallway bathed in the glow of the afternoon sun.

"What are you going to do to me?"

But the Black Knight didn't answer her as she proceeded down the hallway, her eyes falling to one door in particular. Something in her told that was the one. Eyes honed in on the that one door, her body moved against her will, something drawing her to it. Her lungs burned as she neared, staring at the dark wood for a long moment.

"Who are you looking for? You don't have to do this…" The brunette spoke again, her tone raising a couple of octaves and she jerked in the blonde's arms again, but Emma only held onto her tighter.

"Stop," she demanded, her voice strained.

Those eyes never parted from their stare.

Swallowing, she pulled herself from her trance and used all her might to kick hard at the wood, but unlike the others, she was met with a certain resistance. That was surely promising. She tried for it again, and again, and again, her black boot beating on that poor wood, chipping it away, until she felt it give way and slam against the wall as it flew open, pieces of the door clattering to the ground.

The room was dark, or initially had been until the light had illuminated it, revealing the contents. It was empty, just like it had been before, except for a single form in the middle, hands above their head and their back covered in crimson.

Her heart skipped a beat as she moved quickly into the room, shoving Belle aside and demanding her to stay put as she turned to face the prisoner. Familiar chestnut hues lifted to meet her, sparkling with hope, but fading to something darker.

"Gods, Regina…" Emma breathed and reached to touch the brunette's cheek, but she moved away, spitting her words like venom.

"Don't touch me."

"Please, Regina. I-it's me. It's Emma. I-I'm here…" She circled her, looking for a way to free her from those chains that bound her, but her eyes fell to the deep lacerations on her back. "Oh, Gods,
"what did he do to you?" She felt anger boil inside her and quickly moved to stand before the queen once again, moisture welling in her eyes. "I-I'll get you out."

"You're not real..." Regina muttered. "Y-You can't be. She wouldn't come for me..."

Emma felt a stone weigh on her chest. "Yes she would, Regina, because she loves you."

Swallowing, she bent to pull her dirk from its sheath and stood on her toes to fiddle with those damned cuffs. "She loves you," she said again, those once unbidden tears slipping down her cheeks. "And you came for her. Now it's her turn to save you."

"Why?"

"Because she loves you." Emma pulled away, successful in breaking the first cuff and moved to the second one, not missing the mistrust in those dark eyes.

"He was wrong." Regina's voice held more volume to it. "But then he was right..."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" She grunted softly and broke the second cuff, and when she had, the queen stumbled and nearly fell, but Emma caught her before she could.

"He said you would come," she whispered. "Why did you come? He'll only kill you, Emma. Why?"

She looked up, a frown claiming her lips. "You are foolish for coming here, into his home, where he is strongest. I made the same mistake and look where that had landed me."

"I couldn't leave you here, Regina. Not with him. Look what he's done to you." Emma trembled slightly as she gazed upon the broken skin, fresh tears drawing to her eyes.

"He can break my flesh, but he can't break me. I wouldn't let him." The Evil Queen shook her head, a fire growing within those chestnut pools. "I... I couldn't let him."

"Do you know where he is now?" Emma asked, moving to work at the chains connected to her ankles.

Regina didn't answer right away as she shifted, allowing her more room, and looked to the woman in the corner of the room. "He was searching for something. A magical item in his little collection, no doubt."

The blonde shuddered to think what it might have been and didn't want to soon find out as she broke the chains that bound her queen. She quickly destroyed the first rusted chain and moved to the second. "Would you be able to walk?"

The brunette nodded, rubbing at her sore wrists. "How did you find me?"

"Yes, how did you find us?" The light had disappeared behind a figure in the doorway.

"I have my ways," Emma hissed at the imp who merely cackled and stepped into the room, tossing an object onto the floor. She couldn't make it out in the shadows, but she knew it was something dangerous the way it seemed to glow against the shadowed stone. "I have her." She made haste to grab Belle who still stood in her spot, though her eyes had widened and her face had paled.

"Let her go," demanded the Dark One, but Emma shook her head.

"And why would I do that?"

"Because your queen is still at my mercy."
Emma scoffed and drew the dirk up to Belle's throat. "Touch one more hair on her head and your lover's throat will be opened."

His eerie eyes sparkled, but he remained still, smirking. "You couldn't do such a thing."

"Watch me," Emma spat her words and pressed the blade against the brunette's delicate skin. She could hear Belle whimper, but she remained tense, holding her breath.

"Rumpel, please."

That smirk faded from Rumpel's face as a seriousness turned it to stone and he drew forward. "Let her go. This has nothing to do with her."

"Let us go and I will spare her." The blonde watched him closely. She could feel that same numbness take over; that one that had consumed her the day she took Eordic's life.

There was a moment of silence as his eyes fell to the blade and darkened. "You win this round, princess. But you will see me again. I promise you that. Now give her to me." He roared his last words, some distant insanity in his eye and Emma complied, pushing the blue eyed brunette forward before rushing over to the Evil Queen who seemed to have broken free from her last bond.

"Can you use magic to get us out of here?" Emma urgently whispered. She didn't trust lingering for long. Rumpel could turn on them in the last second.

Regina didn't answer her question, though, and instead, she found herself claimed by purple magic. Her head buzzed as she was pulled into the darkness and when she opened her eyes, she found herself in the queen's bedchambers. When she turned, she saw the brunette beside her and felt relief release the grip on her lungs.

She could finally breathe.

"What the hell happened in here?" Regina paced toward the shattered glass that still littered the ground and Emma offered a sheepish smile as she started to peel her armor away, finding it too heavy on her weary being.

"I spoke with your magic mirror and he, let's say, irritated me." Emma bit her lip and watched as the sorceress merely shook her head and put the mirrors back together. Moments later, she had her back turned to one as she examined the lacerations on her back with a bitterness on her face.

"Flesh can be healed," she said to herself and moved a hand along her back, mending the broken flesh into long, welted scars.

"Why does that happen?" Emma queried as she approached the queen, pale digits slowly moving along the uneven surface, immediately wanting her lips to replace her fingertips, but she refrained from doing so.

"It merely quickens the healing process, this spell that I use."

"Is that what happened to your lip?"

Regina turned to her, forcing her hand away as her eyes fell to the metal box that she now held in her hand, keeping the question in the air.

The blonde quickly took notice and pulled a chain from around her neck, taking the key attached to it to open the box. Inside was Regina's heart, still beating, still black, but she saw the soft glow of the
red and smiled. "I am sure you would like this back where it belongs."

"Please," murmured the Queen.

Swallowing, she removed the pulsing organ from the box and gently pushed it back into Regina's chest. She heard the older woman gasp as her body lurched forward, and took a moment to regain the familiarity of the heart inside her. Tears welled in those dark eyes, but she blinked them away, and dipped her head.

"Thank you for keeping it safe."

"Of course," Emma muttered, setting the box back on the vanity. "I didn't want to let it out of my sight. I..." She shook her head and met the softening gaze of the Evil Queen and found herself enamored, drowning in the only sea she would die happily in. Slowly, she found herself gravitating closer to the brunette and before she could gain logic in her brain, her arms were wrapping around Regina's slender frame.

The older woman gasped softly at this contact and tensed in her spot, arms remaining at her side and when Emma was about to pull away, knowing she had overstepped some boundary, she felt arms coiling around her and a cheek press to her shoulder. The blonde smiled and breathed, her nose nuzzling into the brunette's warm neck. She smelled of dirt and sweat, but she didn't mind. She was warm and safe, and she was glad the events of these past days were over.

She felt Regina tremble and only squeezed her tighter until she pulled away, and wiped away the tear that had managed to escape. "You look exhausted."

"Gods, I am." Emma bit back an impending yawn and quickly turned to the armor she dropped onto the floor. "I'm, uh, sorry 'bout that." She bent to pick it up, but the queen's hand stopped her.

"You may leave it for now."

The blonde's face bloomed with heat when she saw crimson petals and the stem they were attached to. She plucked the rose from the waistband of her armor and stood upright, catching the brunette's tired gaze. "I have something for you," she said, extending the rose out for the queen to take and she did, the corners of her mouth twitching.

"A rose?" She murmured, lifting it to her nose and inhaled the sweet, floral aroma. "It's beautiful."

"It reminded me of your lips." Emma watched her with an absent smile. She hadn't known what compelled her to buy the rose, but she was glad that she had. "Soft and sweet and red."

A husky chuckle fell from the queen's lips as she paced toward her bed, summoning a small, glass vase with her magic and placed that single rose inside. Emma followed her, eyes on the torn fabric of her once rich and beautiful violet gown. Blood had stained it now and it churned her stomach, knowing what Rumpel had done to her. Gods, she wanted to kill that imp and it would be her only goal in life, even if she would have to draw her last breath to complete it.

"You should rest, Emma." Regina drew her away from those infuriating thoughts and brought warmth to her; some peace that washed throughout her being and let her breathe. "You deserve it. I will allow you a few days off from your duty."

"Truly?" The blonde felt her heart flutter when the brunette turned and dipped her head. "Thank you, Your Majesty. Gods, I think we both need it. Are you- Are you alright?"

The sorceress nodded and moved past her, step faltering. "I... Yes. I fall only to rise again. Hold no
The blonde dipped her head, though a frown found its way onto her lips. "Of course, my queen."

She nodded once again and turned back onto the path she already had drawn out, speaking as she took a step away. "I will be in the washroom if you have need of me."

"Uh, Regina?" Emma followed her, electricity seeming to buzz between them as she drew near. She could feel her head swim as she stepped forward; though that might have just been the exhaustion taking its toll.

"Yes, Emma?" She faced her, lips parted.

The younger woman could have melted when she heard her name roll like silk off Regina's tongue, but refrained from slipping away. "Do you mind if I kiss you?"

The Evil Queen blinked, her brows raising. "I suppose I find no harm in that."

"Good," murmured the blonde and she leaned forward to do just that. She felt revitalized by the contact and let the buzz that it had provided lift her high into the clouds. Gods, her lips were just like a rose's petals, soft and sweet; and they moved against her own as if they belonged.

She was able to float gracefully back down when they broke away, the older woman's lips parted as her dark eyes ate the knight up. "Your lips are beautiful," whispered the queen as she stepped away, a soft curve on her lips. "Rest, my knight. Tomorrow is a new day. Perhaps it will bring us great things."

Heat crept up her neck and bloomed on her features, an excitement coursing down her spine and lifting the hairs on her body. "Have sweet dreams, my queen."

When Regina had dipped her head, she departed and left the blonde knight to filter off to her own bedchambers, far too exhausted to bathe, herself. Tomorrow was a new day, she thought as she collapsed into the welcoming furs, and who knew what it would bring. Hopefully the Dark One wouldn't make an appearance so soon. They threatened him, she could tell, both Regina and herself. They were nothing to be dealt with lightly, not with her unrestrained magic.

She didn't want to think about him or what the future might bring. Tomorrow was all that she wanted; something peaceful and perhaps even boring. But, she knew, that even if tomorrow brought nothing more than just that, time would still pass, and a storm was brewing, ready to tear through their lives once more.
Chapter 12

Emma lay in the soft familiarity of the feather bed and furs; somewhere she had spent enough nights to nearly consider it her own in the past months since her induction as the Black Knight. It was something unspoken between the two as they shared the bed, their bodies mingling in the night and sometimes the early light of day. She wondered briefly if the queen would mind her moving her items into the bedchambers as she watched the very woman walk toward her, naked as the day she was born.

A masterpiece, she was. Emma could sink into the depths of olive-toned flesh and deep, chestnut hues. Her heart burned within her chest, set on fire by the woman it belonged to, and she knew that she could never find solace in another bed.

"You look thoughtful, my knight." The sweet, husky voice rumbled beside her, sending a shiver down her spine and a stolen beat from her heart.

The blonde smiled, something soft and easy, as she looked upon the face that reflected back on her. "I suppose I am," she murmured softly, watching as Regina crawled onto the bed, looking like a predator stalking her prey.

A sense of peace bloomed throughout her being from the presence that her queen had provided and, briefly, she wondered what it would be like if everyone knew how such a woman, as evil as they see her, could make her feel this way.

"What is on your mind, Emma?" She asked, her voice soft as slender digits moved along the blonde's exposed side.

"You," Emma answered honestly, heat blooming like a pink gale on her cheeks.

"Is it because you desire to fuck me?" The brunette purred, those fingers sliding down her knight's hip and forward to caress her lower belly.

But Emma shook her head, goose pimples covering her pale skin and a pleasant heat settling between her thighs. "Well, I certainly do desire that, but… I think of you and the way you make me feel."

"I see," she murmured before urging Emma onto her back and soon the weight of her covered the blonde. Emma watched her through deep, jade eyes, knowing the queen never lingered on the subject of love.

She felt lips press against the column of her throat and nearly lost all logic in her brain at the sweet sensation. A soft gasp parted from her as she allowed her hands to explore the gentle curves of the older woman, though she couldn't help the question that always burned in her mind every time they made love.

"Why am I always on the bottom?" She let the query slip, brows furrowing. Those lips pulled away from her as chestnut orbs met her own, darkening slightly.

"What?"

"You always push me off every time I attempt otherwise." Emma pressed and suddenly the weight was gone as Regina fell beside her, peculiarly quiet. "Regina?"
"Why does it matter?" The brunette hissed, but her eyes never met Emma's. Something within the blonde sunk as she moved closer to the Evil Queen who seemed so very small now, as if she wished she could shrivel up and disappear. She reached for her, but Regina moved toward the edge of the bed and sat up.

"Because it does, Regina. There must be a reason." Her voice was quiet as she followed her, taking the space next to her, eyes falling to the rough welts on her back. "Did... Did something happen? With Rumpel?" She remained silent, eyes fixated on the black paint on her short nails. "Please... Don't close on me. Let yourself go, for even just a moment."

Prying always got her a kick in the ass, but she decided to chance it this time. What was the worst that could happen? She would be sent back to her bedchambers, alone, frustrated. But, instead of the lash she expected to receive, she was only met with more silence and that worried her, gripping her organs tight and squeezing them.

"Regina?" Emma murmured softly, a gentle hand touching the olive skin on her shoulder. There, she felt the older woman tense, but a sigh followed and she stood, pacing toward the window.

The window was good. She always sought out the forest when something bothered her. Slowly, cautiously, Emma followed her, but kept her distance as she gazed upon the silhouette of her lover, standing, small, still. Where was the mighty Evil Queen whose power was so daunting that it had others cowering in fear before her feet? Someone so strong and sure and elegant?

It frightened her, this silent queen, who still hadn't spoken as she merely stared into the green expanse.

Like thunder, distant and quiet, but rumbling, she heard the silence break as Regina spoke, her words barely caught by the knight who stood like stone, waiting. "Control."

"Control?" The blonde's brow furrowed at the single word, her chest slowly caving in on itself.

Dark eyes flashed up at Emma, burning with an intensity that had her shuddering, but the emotion quickly melted away into a distant memory. "Yes, control. It may be something small - menial - to you, but to me... It's everything." She released the breath she had been holding, lips disappearing into a thin line.

Emma remained quiet, as if she had expected the Queen to further elaborate, but the woman merely stared at her, nostrils flaring with each drawn breath as if something lived within her lungs, urging to escape. "Why? Is it because of Rumpel?"

But Regina shook her head, dark curls bouncing with each movement, and turned back toward the window. "Why does it matter? No one cares. They only see me as driven by the anger that encapsulates me."

"I care, Regina." Her voice was soft as she drew forward, keeping a few paces between them. "And I want to know. You are... You're intriguing; like some story that I want to read, that I want to become well-acquainted with and I want to know everything about you. What drove you. What still drives you. And..." She allowed a sigh to slip past her lips, a soft wisp of warm air. "I want to know why having control is something that you desire."

"It is something that I have." She hissed, her chest expanding with hot air before she released it into the night.

Jade eyes fell to the welts on her back and drew a pale hand to the warm surface. She could feel the
muscles underneath tense up, but she kept her position and allowed slender digits to trace along the other faded scars that spoke of the past. "I know it is, Regina, but… Let yourself be vulnerable for just a moment. Expose yourself to me. Explain to me why."

A scoff fell from the regal woman's lips. She never relaxed, instead, her muscles rippled when she shifted and dug her fingers into the rugged stone of the sill. "You should know what it feels like to be helpless; to have absolutely no control over your life because everything is already planned for you before you even had the ability to speak proper words."

Muscles that Emma didn't even know she had tenses seemed to loosen when Regina's husky voice spoke and she nodded despite the queen being unable to see her. "That was the very thing I wished to escape."

"And so did I when I was your age; younger than you, even." The brunette shook her head and stepped closer to the window, letting the blonde's hand fall into the emptiness left behind. "My mother was the first to show me how cruel this world could be, sending me off to be married to your grandfather. I never had a choice in the matter; not with her power and her magic and the threatening way she held herself."

Her voice had grown thicker and Emma could feel the want to pull the older woman into her being. "She controlled you when you were younger?"

"Yes," she answered simply. "Much like your parents, she had already paved my future. She called me Regina knowing it was a name fit for a queen." Bitterness left her in a spat. "But I only left her control to be suffered underneath the King's, and when I broke from him, I was at the mercy of Rumpelstiltskin."

"What did the King do to you? I know some of what your mother and the Dark One had done, but not my grandfather." Emma could feel her heart hammer inside her chest. "Mother said you killed him to gain control of the kingdom."

"Perhaps," answered the Queen, chestnut hues staring into the distant picture that always seemed to bring her comfort, yet left a bitterness in her blackened heart. "But throughout my marriage to Leopold, I felt as if I were isolated. He spent his time with Snow, his eyes glowing when he saw his precious daughter." She looked small, yet her presence was consuming, as she stood there before the grand windows, her body a haunting silhouette.

Jade eyes regarded the woman as thin, pink lips frowned. "If you were left alone, wouldn't that have made you happy?"

Her cold, cold laughter filled the bedchambers. "I would have been quite fine if he hadn't made his nightly visits to my bedchambers, always muttering something about needing an heir, something to make our marriage more legitimate." The brunette shook her head, tone growing huskier. "My mother encouraged it, of course, after I had called upon her, sore and tired and… Gods, I was weak for allowing that to happen… Allowing her to take over every aspect of my life, my body, and using him against me."

"It wasn't anything that you could prevent, Regina:"

"Oh, exactly what Cora had attempted to reassure me, but I felt I could." She shook her head again, as if she could shake the memories from her mind and turned, eyes darkening with that look that always terrified Emma; something that looked as if she were teetering on the edge of insanity.

The blonde felt as if she couldn't breathe. The once proud Queen was breaking at the seams, but she
didn't let her emotions get to her, the former princess could see the battle on her face; but her eyes shimmered, betraying her. "I-I am not saying this to sound cruel. You were."

"Performing my 'wifely duties,' yes, I know the tale. My only comfort from such a thing was the King's liquored and sour breath as he shouted his dead wife's name in my ear. At least he wasn't thinking about me, hm?" She scoffed softly and it looked as if someone had lit a fire within the brunette queen the way her eyes seemed to glow in the rising sun.

"Snow told me that he was such a kind man…"

"Oh, he certainly was a kind and fair man; that much he showed his daughter and his kingdom, I cannot deny that. But when he got drunk, he was the opposite, and perhaps it was the only way for him to do what he did, and perhaps he hadn't meant to hurt me intentionally… He only wanted that heir my mother had whispered into his ear, after all. But I made sure that it never happened."

"Gods, Regina…" Emma's voice was barely a whisper, perhaps a gasp or a breath of air, but she heard the words resonate within her, tugging at her already burdened heart. "I could not imagine…"

"No, of course not. You were fortunate to have not experience such a thing, as was your mother. I am… I'm glad you were spared." She swallowed, a tight smile appearing on her lips before sagging into a frown, creasing the prominent lines in her face. "That, and- and this… this worthlessness that I felt; this weakness… That is what drove me to the balcony that night."

"Balcony?" She stepped forward and the queen's dark eyes followed her. "What- What happened there?"

"Another hand that took the strings attached to me; someone else who wanted to control my destiny, my future, my life…" Regina scowled in the images that were brought before her. "Some little green bitch tried telling me that I had a True Love waiting out there for me and showed me a path to whatever my destiny had in store. Another thing, another person, that I did not want. I was tired of having things forced upon me and turned away." A bitter laughter fell from her lips, abrupt, but deafening, sending a chill up the blonde's spine.

"Why did she come to you, though?" Emma could still hear her laughter resonating in her mind. "What happened on that balcony?"

The Evil Queen only stared at her for a long moment, eyes burning, yet freezing her. "What does it matter? I am where I am today, my knight. None of this was what you had asked." Sighing softly, she turned away once again and Emma saw her body shudder.

"Gods, I have so many more questions…" Emma could feel them bubble within her like an overflowing pot. "But you did answer my initial one and…" And, like that, those burning questions were washed away by a tide that left her feeling heavy. "You were- You were taken advantage of and abused and- You said you wanted control, but I do not understand…"

Regina finally stepped away from her sacred escape and collapsed onto the bed as if a weight had been added onto her. "You simply cannot understand, princess, the world is not black and white."

"I can understand," Emma said, following her as she fell onto the feather bed, eyes never leaving the queen whose aura shifted back into an electric power. "You wanted to get away from Leopold and Rumpel."

"It is not just-… Those men are not the only ones. A girl, showing enough desperation for anything, also has a certain vulnerability that others like to prey upon, and freedom was mine through magic,
by whatever means I had to come by, and whomever would help." Her fingers curled into her bare thighs. "I just wanted to be in control of my life and now that I have it… I do not want to lose it."

"But you can still be in control, Regina. I would never harm you nor force you to do anything. I…" She let her gaze break for a moment as she gathered her courage, and when she had, she looked intently into those softening brown orbs. "I-I could not fathom ever doing such a thing to you."

"What is it that you imply?" Her tone was sharp.

"Could you lend your trust to me? Allow me to… to do what you fear the most."

"And how is it that you believe I fear that the most?" She asked, her defense rising with her voice. "Or that I fear it at all?"

Emma felt like shrinking into herself, but she kept from doing so as she straightened out and never let her eyes break contact with Regina's own. "Well, perhaps I had misspoken." She calmly mended, fingers curling into her lap before they transferred to the olive thigh beside her own. "We can take it slow, Regina. Let yourself lose control, for once. You have so many times before as we made love."

"I still had control, even as I lost my sense, Emma."

The blonde frowned slightly, flattening her palm on the warm skin, feeling the goose pebbles that formed. "You cannot always live within this bubble, my queen. The limits of your comfort must be stretched, if not broken, and I want to be the one to do so. It seems as if no one else has tried… Or you will not allow them to."

"Why are you so fucking adamant?" Regina parted from the bed, her voice raising into a thunderous roar, reverberating off the smooth, ebony stone. Gods, she had angered the Evil Queen. She knew her limits and she had crossed them, so she shrunk into herself, backing down as she spoke, soft, quiet.

"I want to help you."

"Help me? I do not need your help."

"Even as you claim to be in control of your life, you aren't because you are allowing that fear and that voice inside your head to take it over." A snort of disbelief fell from the Queen's lips. "What voice? You make no sense, girl."

Something bubbled inside the blonde and she let it release into a soft growl. "That voice that is telling you that you're worthless and weak for allowing yourself to have been taken advantage of. The way you spoke of it, I can tell that it bothers you. But you are not, Regina, because you were thrown into a situation that you could not get out of, something that you were helpless to escape." She could hear the Evil Queen mutter something unintelligible, her chestnut gaze darkening with a burning fire. Emma knew this was not something she wanted to hear, but she felt she could see something the Queen did not. "But you did it, anyways, and look where you are today. You have allowed yourself to be controlled for far too long; you have taken it out on countless people, abusing magic in lieu of your pain and anger, and using this revenge against my mother, for what? Because you want control?"

For some reason, the brunette had grown quiet, letting her smoldering gaze falter.

"Let me tell you something, Regina. That fear and that revenge, that is what's controlling you. Is this what you really want? Was this all that you ever wanted; was to be known as the Evil Queen, to be
hated and infamous for unspeakable acts?" She pressed, regardless what the outcome might be. Her own fear of the Evil Queen had been swallowed down, but she could still feel the lump it left in her throat.

"It is better to be feared than to be controlled by others; that way they know not to cross me or else I will snap their necks." She was back, that Evil Queen, spitting her words out as if they were something rotten. "Maybe she's just what they want me to be."

Emma, though, could only scoff, regarding her with a quirked brow, incredulous. "I implore you, what control do you hold over your life?"

"I hold more control than you know, Emma." She stood, once again, forcing Emma's hand away, and looked down at the knight.

"What will you do once your revenge has been exacted? What purpose would your life have, then, since you have spent so long chasing after Snow White?" She didn't expect an answer and it came to no surprise when the sorceress spat a demand.

"I want you to leave."

"Leave? Where to?" Brows furrowing, her emerald gaze lifted to meet Regina's and she saw the dullness left behind, and it shook her.

"I want you to leave my bedchambers. I am not saying you have to return to your own, but you cannot stay here."

Emma did not argue and bowed her head before she stood and turned toward the door, but before she filtered off into the hallway, she spoke, quiet. "Please think of what I said. Think of an answer to my questions and if you cannot come up with one, then you know I am correct."

Before the brunette could reply, she slipped into the hallway and made her way back toward her own bedchambers; some place foreign to be after spending so much time in the queen's own. She sunk into the cool feather bed and allowed her conversation with Regina to catch up to her.

Her heart broke inside her chest for what the queen had gone through, and yes, at one point she could not blame her for the path that she took, but it was also inexcusable. She never had to travel the lengths that she did just to get revenge on her mother; something that never happened.

Until now, that was, so many years later. But, even then, revenge was still not taken. Snow would still hunt the queen down for her daughter's return, and would no doubt cross any lengths that it required. The thought left her feeling uneasy, because the good queen had already resorted to Rumpelstiltskin and promised him Regina; her life.

It was only a matter of time before one or the other to make their appearance; her mother and the war that she was no doubt starting to storm the city, or Rumple and his powerful magic to break down the impenetrable bonds that kept the castle; something they had quickly built after their return. His anger would only grow tenfold for his failure to keep them and it only made her shudder as she thought of what was to come.

The Black Knight stood and located fresh garments to don. She looked for her sword, the need for training on her brain, before she realized her latest excursion with the Queen had left it in her chambers. Not risking upsetting the brunette any further, she decided to head to the courtyard, anyways, deciding one of the worn blades would be suitable enough.

War was approaching from two sides, no doubt, and they needed to prepare for the death that it
would bring.

One knight, clad in tight black leather, stood with dark eyes honed in on his opponent who mirrored his stance, gloved fingers curled around the hilt of a worn sword. Without any verbal indication, they moved, dancing across the packed earth, pushing up dust with each movement. The first man moved, his arm like lightning as the blade flashed in his hand, aiming toward his foe.

But the second man dodged easily, countering the strike with a clink of metal on metal, falling back heavily on his right foot. With a forced yell, the first knight dove forward, a shadow in the daylight, forcing his blade forward, tearing into the black material that bound his opponent's left thigh.

"Protect your left side, Corey." The Black Knight's voice boomed from her position across the courtyard as the second man fell onto his knee. The blonde knight scoffed and shook her head, knowing very well that was her weakness once. "You must remember that if you are to become a valuable member of the queen's army. I want you to work on that, do you understand? Your weaknesses must become your strengths."

"Yes, ser, I understand very well." He stood with a grunt, his brows pinching together as he regained his footing.

"Take yourself to the infirmary and heal up." When the man nodded and stalked off across the courtyard, Emma turned toward the first night and dipped her head. "A job well done, Edward. You may feast now and rest. I will see you on the morrow for more training."

"Of course, Ser Swan. I will see you then." With a smile on his round, youthful features, he dipped his head and departed, soon disappearing through the door that led to the barracks.

Emma watched him for a moment and breathed, letting the butterflies in her stomach wilt for the time being. The young knights were improving and taking well to the new armor she had Boris forge for them. Their movements were far swifter than they had initially been and the young knights seemed to smile at this new improvement, glad for victory and praise instead of defeat and rebuke.

This new era in the Evil Queen's reign would be prosperous, she hoped, at least for the army. Now, if Regina would hear her counsel in other matters such as the impoverished and the production of livestock and crops, the dark kingdom would flourish. She had collected knowledge of those times her mother forced her to sit in during counsel meetings and learned her of what was important when ruling a kingdom.

Emma knew a thing or two and definitely knew well enough that the queen cared very little of the prosperity of her kingdom. Of course, she was able to wield magic, she could manifest anything her heart desired, why would she have need of wealth?

"Our knights have shown great improvement, Ser Emma. A job well done on your part." A deep voice brought Emma from her thoughts. Turning, she stored them for later, and was met by Uriel, the captain of the queen's army. "It will take us far, but not far enough, I am afraid."

The blonde frowned slightly as she looked upon the dark, towering man. "How do you mean?"

"Walk with me," he rumbled, gesturing toward the open space before them and she nodded, standing beside him as they walked side by side. Her eyes went to the training knights, both young and old, dueling one another, coated with blood, sweat, and dirt. "Our troops are large, I cannot deny that." Uriel started, his eyes falling to the training men and women, his voice steady.

"They are, and I feel it is expanding more each day." Emma could feel her heart swell. "They are
taking nicely to the new battle techniques, as well."

"Indeed they are," he agreed, a slight grin cracking his stone visage. "But I am afraid that when war will be waged upon us, we will be defeated. Our last battle had taken many from us. The villages, though generous with the amount of willing bodies, had not provided enough."

"We are short of men, you are saying?" She would have disagreed, especially since they had their new advantage, but with the thought of impending war coming from both her parents and Rumpelstiltskin, she was slowly losing confidence in even herself. She had already been easily captured by the Dark One, and so had Regina, what if such a thing would happen again and they were not prepared?

"Yes. Many lives were lost and there will be many more to spend if we wish to succeed. The majority of our army are new, young men. Though virile, they are still training."

"But we are trying all that we can, Uriel. Even if we were to recruit new members, they would still need trained." And, as if a stone had dropped upon her, she felt the weight of what it was really like to control such a large segment of the kingdom. Warfare was never something her mother wanted her to learn; it was her father that had brought her to the courtyard and trained her.

"Training will need to be doubled; our knights will need to work hard, day and night, to reach a suitable level." He stopped and faced her, his hazel eyes penetrating her.

But Emma could feel herself start to frown. "They are training arduously as it is. We do not want them to be worn by the time the war horns sound."

"Ser Emma, I mean no disrespect, but if you speak as urgently as you had about impending attacks from the White Kingdom... We have already wasted enough time as it is." The lines in Uriel's face deepened, the corners of his mouth sinking, and turned to face the blonde. "It is crucial that we find men to add to our numbers."

The Black Knight could feel herself sink, suddenly too small for her grand title, and nodded, green eyes falling for a moment before they landed on a pair of young men who were chattering with one another, sweat on their brow and exhaustion in their eyes. "Of course. I will send a few parties out to the villages for recruits. Perhaps I will join them, myself, and check the perimeter."

"Of course, Ser Emma. I will gather the few that had ended their training for the day." With a dip of his head, he was off, entering the cool shade against the castle wall where a few men were sharing a tankard of mead as they watched and laughed at the new knights' training.

The blonde sighed, herself, and stepped away into the castle, thankful to be free from the sun that her armor only seemed to soak up. It wasn't long until she was mounted on a black stallion with a party of knights moving alongside her as they traveled across the lush fields that stretched between the city of Stonefell and the first village. She had already set off a few knights to scour the stone settlement and gave direction to the next group.

"Ser Kevan, Ser Edward, you will depart and take Morrowstead. Search nearby farms, as well. Many farmhands are strong, capable men. And, as I have said, if you are met with resistance, offer the thought of food and shelter." Emma nodded for the two to take their leave and continued forward, eyes falling to a flock of birds as they flew overhead, squawking in alert when she and the knights had passed.

It was remarkable how large the Queen's kingdom was. Regina had, once, informed her of the three main villages and the small settlements beyond the great stone city that was nestled in the lands.
below her castle. She had been given a map fabricated from magic and an ambivalent trust from the
dark sorceress to fall away from those safe castle walls.

The path was straightforward, as was the one she currently traveled on alone, dust following behind
as the stallion traced it like a shadow. The final village of Dawnwood was closest to the border and,
as the Black Knight drew near, something in her gut told her she should have kept at least one knight
with her.

But she pressed forward onto the dirt path that drew her to the center of the small village where the
inhabitants buzzed about, working, yelling, and the children chased one another. Though, the steady
pulse of Dawnwood seemed to stop when she entered, all eyes falling to the dark knight who sat
upon her grand horse, dressed in black and face obscured by a heavy metal helm.

They seemed to cower in her presence, slinking away as she dismounted and landed with a thump
beside her stallion. Most were women, she noted, ones with young by their sides or babes at their
breasts, and the ones that weren’t were old and grey. Regina had told her to proposition anyone she
saw fit; someone she could train. Though, Uriel’s words seemed to haunt her; there weren’t many left
in the villages after the last battle, and as she was looking around, now, she saw that to be true.


"Thief! Thief! Guard!" An old man’s voice spoke and when the blonde had turned, she found the
withered and grey man with a stale loaf of bread in hand, shaking it at two turned backs as they fled.
"They took it all!" He cried.

Emma found her feet taking her in the direction of the fleeing duo and found them backed up against
a wood-built shack as the village’s guard stood before them, sword drawn. She saw a rough spun bag
fall to the ground, a few apples rolling onto the dirt.

"Finally got ya. You thought you could run forever, scum? Steal the work them peoples bring to sell
to worthy ones?" She saw the silver of a blade as it pressed against the chest of a long-haired brunet
man. His face was worn and rugged and overgrown with hair.

"Leave him alone!" A woman’s voice sounded and she surged forward, pushing the dark dressed
guard back, but the man only hissed and drew the back of his gloved hand across her cheek.

"Think you can just sneak into our village and steal our things, cunt? And you have the gall
to push me?" He snorted and forced her to stand, blade pressing to her neck instead. "Mayhap I will
just kill you now. Fuck the Queen’s request to bring you vermin down. She’ll just kill ya anyway."

The one dressed from head to toe in black armor drew forward, her step heavy and with each one
only clinked her armor together. "Ser Willem, step away from her before you find my boot up
your ass."

Willem seemed to freeze in his spot when he heard Emma’s voice and turned to face her, though his
eyes sparkled with a fire that only had him surging forward on her. "Oh, take a gander. It’s the Evil
Queen’s pet. And what are you going to do, princess? The Queen will be thanking me for ridding
her of these intruders."

Emma merely snorted and stepped closer, fingers curling around the hilt of her blade, but she kept it
within its sheath. "Not when we are in dire need of new recruits, Willem. And I am quite sure she
would not appreciate you going against her direct orders. Thieves are to be taken to the dungeons
and she is to be informed. It is not in your place to deal punishment."
He stared at her for an intense moment, dark eyes smoldering before he dipped his head and sheathed his sword. "I am not doing this for you, princess. Eordic would have let me chopped their little hands off." An eerie smirk curled onto his thin lips. "And he would have joined me in taking this ugly cunt."

"Get out of here before I do tell the Queen of your misconduct. You are already treading on thin ice with her." The growl that left her lips reverberated within the helm and he nodded, moving back to his post. She let her gaze fall upon the two thieves whose eyes watched her, wary, as they remained still like stone in their spots. "You two, who are you?"

"Why do you care?" The woman snapped, her ash blonde hair tangled and dirty. "You are sentencing us to death. Isn't that how it works?"

Emma would have chuckled if she wasn't attempting to maintain her composure and stepped closer to them. "Generally, yes. But, for you, I do have a special offer." She could see the interest stirring in the thief's eyes. "Though, you must first tell me your names."

"Hansel, my name's Hansel." The man spoke and pushed a hand through his greasy hair. "And this is my sister, Gretel. We happened upon the village a moon ago and been living in the forest since."

"Shush. She needn't know that."

"I do, in fact. Willem had called you intruders. You are not originally from the Queen's lands, are you?"

"You mean the Evil Queen?" Gretel spat her words. "No. But where else to go? We were hoping to find something good, but all our lives had been was scrounging and running because of her."

"You were plotting to kill her?" The Black Knight's fingers curled into her gloved palms, but the man shook his head.

"Like we could do that. No. We just wanted some food." Hansel's eyes went to the spilled apples still in the dirt.

"What did she do to you?"

"What did you have to offer us?" Gretel snapped impatiently and Emma hummed, liking her attitude. She would no doubt make a good knight and perhaps grow to overlook others in the future.

"I want to offer you each a position in the Queen's army," she answered coolly, shifting her weight. "We offer both food and shelter, as well as armor and weapons, and training, of course."

"Really?" The man stepped forward, looking as if he were already sold on the idea and grinned. "Food? No more shitting in the forest?"

"And why would we do such a thing?" His sister shot him a glare. "So she can merely use us again? Sacrifice us like she had meant to when we were children?"

Emma's brows rose. "Sacrifice you? No, no. We are not throwing you into the pits of Hades, if that is what you believe."

"But we are to join some army to fight and die for what? The consequences of the Evil Queen's actions? No, thank you, I believe we are better off-"
"Stealing food and running? Never having a place to settle? Perhaps to die one night when someone wants their revenge and cuts your throats while you sleep?" The blonde shook her head and took a step back. "Then, please, do feel free to continue your lifestyle. I am merely offering you a way out."

"We don't need your help."

"But, Gretel…" Hansel turned to his sister, eyes keeping on the dark knight for a moment before falling to her. "I-I'm tired of living like this. Every night… We don't know whether we're going to get eaten by a wolf or killed by some bandits."

"But she killed our father, Hansel."

"Maybe she did and I cannot forget such a thing, but look what is being offered to us. We have been caught today and if she hadn't stopped that guard… He would have killed us." The dark-haired boy shook his head and remained silent for a moment, his brows furrowing. Then he stepped forward, toward Emma, and looked down at her. "I will join you."

"You gluttonous pig," Gretel muttered before joining her brother's side. "Wherever he goes, I go. I will not let this fool die without me. This better not be a trick."

"A trick?" The Black Knight's smirk was hidden behind her dark helm. "No. I doubt the Queen holds interest in finding two children from so very long ago. Come. We shall return to the castle. The sun is setting."

"What's your name?" Gretel asked as they made their way back to the horse, Emma mounting it as the two followed beside the great black stallion.

"Emma," she answered and took the path out of the village.

"Emma?" The woman queried and looked upon her for a moment. "As in the princess?"

"As in the Black Knight." The blonde hissed and kept her eyes on the rugged path before her.

"But you were her, weren't you? I heard the Evil Queen kidnapped you. Very common knowledge nowadays. Many are searching for you." Gretel looked up at her, brows furrowed. "I do not understand, though, why you would join her."

"Who is searching for me?" She had no doubt, though, even as the months had passed. Even if her parents had not directed them to, people would attempt to find her for the handsome reward.

"Quite a few people have passed by, so very close to the border of the Evil Queen's lands, but never quite passing through. They never help us any, so we don't help them." She chuckled to herself, but it quickly quieted. "Except for one who offered us rewards."

"Who?" Apprehension filled her and she sat, rigid, upon the horse.

"He did not tell us his name, but he wore a cloak. It was rich and brown. He was very nice, which is very quite unfortunate, because the Evil Queen will no doubt burn him to a crisp."

"He had sweets on him, too." Hansel added in. "From a foreign land. They were delicious."

"When did you see this man? Where did he go?" Was this man from her parents' kingdom or was it someone that Rumpelstiltskin sent out? Or perhaps it could have been one of the many greedy bandits, though would they be willing to give something away?
"He went south," answered the woman whose breath was lost as she attempted to keep up with the trotting horse. "It was only this morning that he had passed through. He took a path along the forest, wanting to sneak up unnoticed."

"Shit," Emma cursed under her breath and looked to the stretch of land to the treeline ahead. The sun was preparing to sink into that very forest. If he had passed through only that morning, he could very well be close to the castle by now. "Get on the horse," she demanded.

The siblings did as told and she broke off into a black blur across the expanse of green, trailing southward into the trees. Birds flew overhead as they thundered through the forest, her eyes on every shadow they passed and everything that seemed to move. She came up empty, but there was still time, still more trees until they reached the castle, even as the sun slowly disappeared into the earth, leaving the forest dark and haunting.

"There!" Shouted Hansel, pointing toward a dark figure ahead, walking at a steady pace, though now frozen in its spot when the voice sounded.

"Halt!"

Emma jumped off the horse and moved toward the cloaked man who now turned, dark eyes eating up the shadow that appeared before him. "You! Who are you, trespassing in the Queen's lands?" His face was shadowed by the cloak, but when he spoke, she immediately recognized his voice.

"I am here to retrieve the princess and return her to where she belongs."

"She does not belong with you." The Black Knight hissed and stood mere inches before him. "And who are you to tell me where she belongs, minion. You are only following the Evil Queen's order." When he tilted his head up, his hood fell back and his once puppy-like features were hardened. "I could easily cut you down, knight. You are nothing."

Oh how she did not miss his face; Baelfire. She didn't speak his name, though, as she gathered what he had said to her. He didn't know who she was. The swan emblem on her armor was only recognizable by the other knights. "Please, do. I will not allow you to enter that castle." She laughed. "I would only be doing you a favor by turning you away now. The Queen will kill you."

"I would like to see her try." Baelfire hissed and swept his cloak aside to pull out a sword; something sharp and shining in the moonlight, and expensively crafted. She could see the colored gems on the hilt.

"Are you sure that you want to do this, boy? I will show you no mercy." Emma's fingers curled around the smooth hilt of her sword before drawing the ebony blade out. It appeared almost invisible in the night. "Turn back now."

"Never. No one dares walk away from my father without being punished." His fingers grew white as they clung to the dark wood. "I will not back away so easily."

"Trying to do daddy's bidding, are we? For what?" She widened her stance and kept her eyes on him, face growing hot underneath the metal that encased it. "He only wants the princess as his possession. You were merely a ploy to get her."

"You lie!" He swung the blade toward her but she easily deflected it and disarmed him in one fell movement.

"Gods, what were you trying to do? You are weak." She laughed and watched as he scrambled to
find his sword. "I thought the son of the Dark One would have greater skill than this."

"I know what I am doing. I have something up my sleeve, something that will take care of the Evil Queen." He smirked and threw his sword at her before turning and running through the forest. Emma could only stare in disbelief at the man before realizing the castle was not far and footed after him.

"Where do you think you are running to?" She yelled, though it only reverberated throughout her helm and made her head pound.

But he didn't answer and only cackled. The edge of the forest was nearing and she could see the gentle glow that spilled from the castle's windows. She pressed herself to run faster, her lungs burning and her heart racing. A shadow passed her, she could feel the presence of it, and before she could turn to see who or what it was, Baelfire fell to the ground.

"I will not allow you to enter that castle," she hissed, eyes falling to Gretel who moved away from the two. She nodded her head in gratitude and stood before the Dark One's son as he stood, muscles tense as he prepared to run again.

"I will not allow you to stop me."

"You threw your sword away, idiot. What do you expect to do, now?"

He drew a dirk from within his cloak and pointed it at her. "Whatever it may take. The Evil Queen must pay and the princess must return. There is a wedding to be had, do you not understand?"

"Oh, I understand very well. But, unfortunately, I cannot allow that to happen. You see, the princess is quite content where she is." When Emma stepped forward, she felt a sting on her left arm and saw crimson staining the silver blade in Baelfire's hand. She could have laughed at the small weapon he held against her and drove her own blade forward, disappearing into his abdomen.

For a brief moment, she felt ill, her supper threatening to come up; why hadn't he dodged? But, then coldness seemed to grip her, something that numbed everything, as she twisted that blade and pulled it out with a sickening squelch. Mighty words for a man who crumpled to the ground far too easily, holding the bleeding hole in his stomach.

His glassy eyes fell upon her. "Wh-Who are you?" he asked and it took a moment for reality to set in before the Black Knight fell to a knee and faced the man, though her helm remained.

"Where is the Dark One's dagger?"

"Wh-Why would I tell y-you such a thing?" His face had grown pale as the blood left it and spilled onto the forest floor.

"Because I will not allow any more harm befall the Queen." Her jade eyes burned. "He will only continue to hunt and to torture and use."

"You want to kill him." Baelfire stated, his voice quiet.

"You know as well as I his power is far too great. He abuses it; he takes advantage of people." But the man shook his head and swallowed, lips parting to aid his shortening breath. "I know you do not like his magic; that is why you left. If you help me locate his dagger, we can rid this world of him."

"He is my father."
"He is a monster. You believe the Evil Queen is worse than him?" She shook her head. "Evil cannot describe that man."

"I-I don't know. I-I don't know where it is." Baelfire groaned softly and let his hand fall away from the wound.

"You don't know?" Emma furrowed her brows.

"Who are you?" He attempted to sit up, his face wrinkling intensely with pain. "I-I want to see the face of the one who has defeated me."

"I will reveal myself once you tell me where his dagger is located." Her fingers twitched before she took his arm to steady him.

"I-I..." His dulling eyes gazed up at her. "He mentioned a box buried in the forest. Around his castle. I do not know the exact location. Just- He is no longer the man I knew. A-Are you going to kill him?"

Emma could feel something squeeze at her organs, but she nodded, letting the emotion subside. It was a start. At least she knew of a general location. Perhaps Regina would be able to help locate it. With a sigh, she decided to fulfill her end of the bargain, and reached for her helm to pull it off. The cool night's breeze caressed her warmed skin and she closed her eyes for but a moment before opening them to stare upon the slack-jaw of Baelfire.

His mouth moved in silent words as if he willed his voice to work, those shimmering brown eyes filled with disbelief as he gazed upon the familiar face.

"I am in love with the Queen and I will do anything to protect her, even if it means destroying the Dark One." Her voice was quiet and emotionless as she watched the light in his chestnut hues fade.

Emma stood and knew she had given Rumpelstiltskin another reason to hate her. "We must bury him. He will only attract wolves." She turned to the siblings who stood behind with the stallion. They nodded, quiet, and moved forward to help her.

The world outside was dark by the time she had settled Hansel and Gretel into the barracks. She would train them tomorrow, or at least have another experience knight do so. She stood, now, before the Queen's bedchambers, pale knuckles rapping against the door. Her armor was long gone and instead was replaced by leather riding pants and a rough spun tunic.

"Ser Swan, what brings you to my door?" Regina's face appeared from behind the oaken door, her usual dark paint gone and as the blonde stepped forward she could see the light wrinkles that were hidden underneath it.

"I have information to bring you, my Queen." She dropped her hand and waited as the older woman pulled the oaken door back, revealing the dark, silken robes that hung loosely on her thin frame. The blonde entered when Regina fell away from the door and moved toward the windows, casting her gaze to the dark, moonlit forest.

"And what is it?" The brunette rumbled impatiently after Emma slowly approached her, keeping her distance.

"I sent out recruiting parties to the villages and collected men for your army." Her jade orbs fell to the waterfall of dark hair that spilled down Regina's back. "I traveled to Dawnwood, myself, and caught word of a trespasser."
"Ser Willem mentioned thieves in Dawnwood and Ser Selmy reported the same in Arrowhead. Did you apprehend them?" She didn't move as she let her words drift into the night.

"I did, yes. Ser Willem failed to mention he intended to kill them within the village." Emma moved forward. "They have agreed to join your army."

"Have they?" The brunette hummed softly. "I do suppose we are in short supply of men and they must be hungry if they thieve."

"They were not the trespasser in which I spoke of. There was a cloaked man searching for me."

She turned, finally, her chestnut hues alight, but her face remained still, soft. "And where is this cloaked man?"

"I found and killed him." Regina's lips twitched slightly, something pleased, and she dipped her head, dark curls following.

"Is there anything else?" She asked, fingers linking together.

"It was Baelfire."

"Rumpelstiltskin's son?" Emma could see that familiar emotion in her eye and found herself gravitating closer.

"He was determined to get to the castle."

She could hear as the queen swallowed, her once full lips disappearing into a thin line. "What did he want?"

The blonde pressed her lips together and touched the Queen's hands with a slender digit. "He wanted to take revenge for escaping his father and... Gods, I don't know what he planned on doing to you, but it was nothing good." The brunette was quiet as those dark orbs penetrated Emma's faltering gaze, expectant. "He- He told me where the Dark One's dagger is located."

Regina's pink lips parted as a breath escaped her. "Where is it?" Olive fingers curled around Emma's pale ones.

"He did not know of an exact location, but he said it was buried in the Dark One's forest. We can- We can end this nightmare from him, my queen. We can kill him and let it all be over."

The Evil Queen's features twisted and darkened with a sinister delight. She was here, that woman that could chill anyone's blood, but it only raced Emma's through her veins and warmed her body. "Then we must plan, my dear, sweet knight. The era of Rumpelstiltskin is over."
Hooves pounded against the dirt path underneath them, kicking up dust and covering the large, black carriage that trailed behind, creaking as its wheels worked to pull it along. The ride was not sturdy, for every bump caused the carriage to rock, but it was certainly smoother than taking a horse and less disorienting than magicking to the location.

The Black Knight, seated in that very carriage, kept her jade eyes fixated on the moving world outside through the door's window, watching as they journeyed closer to the forthcoming era.

"Have you ever dreamt of the forest, my knight?"

The question spoken from the tongue of a familiar face drew Emma's attention away from the passing forest. "Pardon?" Her brows sunk as she landed herself back into reality, eyes falling to the Queen who sat across from her with hands placed neatly on her lap.

"While you were locked away in your castle. You have told me that you were disallowed from leaving the boundaries of it." She tilted her head and Emma thought her neck would snap from the weight of her hair piled atop it.

Emma garnered her attention to the expanse of green and the village in the distance as they broke out of the forest. It was odd that they hadn't passed through the city, but then again, the Evil Queen never quite liked visiting the settlements under her liege. "I used to sit by my window as a girl and look out into the forest. I remember catching the scent on the horses; the earth, the pine, the fresh air…"

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, letting the world slip away into darkness and memories, and smiled now that she had been able to visit the forest herself. The scents of it was always something she enjoyed; it smelled of freedom, of adventure, of some life that she only dreamt that she could have.

"I used to dream what it would be like. Snow used to tell me tales of her adventures, though she attempted to make them sound terrible, but I knew… They always intrigued me." That smile on her pale, pink lips widened, stretching her face and when she opened her eyes, she saw the smile in the Queen's eyes, though her face remained quiet of emotion. "Have you? I've always noticed that you tend to seek the window when things trouble you."

Regina's scarlet lips pressed together, her eyes - golden in the sun - shimmered slightly as she dipped her head. "I look upon it and wish I could fly above the treetops, away from everything. Be careless." She shook her head. "But, such is life, my knight. We simply cannot escape our duties. They are sewn into us and keep us grounded."

"I know. Unfortunate that we weren't born swans." She offered a wavering smile and looked to the village of Dawnwood as they had passed through. The people kept their distance from the carriage
that they recognized as the Queen's and a few of their mouths had opened, but Emma couldn't make out their singular words as they mingled, though the tone rang hatred in the air.

After they passed from the village, Regina spoke, her voice spiteful. "And, here I am, hated for breathing."

"Have you ever truly listened to your people?" Emma nearly wanted to shove those words back into her mouth, but she held to her estranged confidence. "And their needs?"

"I have people who take care of that for me. What need have I?"

"It is your duty as Queen, Regina," she said, brow furrowing slightly. "From what I have seen, the people are poor and starving for lack of work and food. And now that most of the able-bodied men and women have been enlisted in your army, things are taking a sharp turn into the dirt. Is this truly what you want, Regina, for your kingdom to perish because of, what?"

"They do not care for me, so why should I care for them?" She hissed, fingers digging into the fabric of her cloak.

"They hate you because you give them nothing. You are their ruler, Regina. And… smite me where I stand for telling you this, but you must give your attention to them, or at least your advisers who control those aspects of the kingdom. If it turns prosperous, your people will be contented and less likely to kill you." She felt a tightness in her chest as her gloved fingers curled into themselves in an attempt to keep her cool.

The Evil Queen merely stared at her, shocked, if anything, that she had been reprimanded by someone lower than her, but then there was that little smirk playing gently on her lips as if she enjoyed the sudden outburst. She dipped her head slightly. "Very well, Ser Swan. I advise you to remember this and bring it up at our next meeting. Perhaps we can wring it out of those vermin what they have been doing with the funds that I provide."

Satisfied, the blonde knight nodded slightly and attempted to keep the growing smirk from her face. Slowly, she felt as if she were making progress with the Queen, and something inside of her bloomed at the very thought. Unfortunately, she hadn't gotten an answer from the last morning's intense conversation, but she didn't mind, for now. The world around them was slowly churning and there was more pressing matters that needed tending.

"Do you think the Dark One knows about his son?" The knight queried, thinking of those very matters, and frowned.

"I have no doubt. That imp has a mysterious way of knowing things."

Emma swallowed thickly. "Will he come for me if he finds out I am the one who had killed him?"

"I will not allow that to happen." The Queen's eyes flashed with an emotion that took Emma's heart and squeezed it with a cold hand.

What does she fear?

"He had done it before…" She could feel herself shake at the thought of being in that dark and impending room with shadows that loomed over her like death. That fear was squashed by a hand on her knee and when she gazed up, she found Regina's eyes staring back at her, filling her with hope that, perhaps, she would have protection from the Dark One. "No spell will keep him out. He can break anything."
"If we must go into hiding, my knight, then we shall." There was a slow doubt filtering into Emma's system because she could see the incertitude in her queen's eyes. The Dark One was too powerful, were the unspoken words, and even if it were to take years, he would still find them.

"Only if we travel to a different realm, my Queen. It would certainly grant us time, freedom. I had heard that is what happened with his son."

The Queen shook her head slowly, eyes falling to her black painted nails. "Acquiring such an item to jump realms is difficult. I know of only two that have the ability, or moreover, access. And one wants our heads while the other is, well… He did not remain in these parts long."

Emma pressed her hands into her lap and sought out the forest that engulfed them once again. "Why must the consequences of our actions be so harsh. Wherever we may turn, we fall upon a wall. I wish—"

"Wishing is for children, Emma. No one will grant you a single thing. That is why we must take it for ourselves, make it happen ourselves—"

"But I wish everyone would leave us alone. What must we do?"

"Kill them?" Answered the Queen as if it were just that simple, but the blonde crinkled her nose.

"Something that does not resort to violence or death. Something that…" The younger woman released a breath, her jaw clenching. "An escape."

"Working your mind on the thought of traveling to a different realm, are we?" Regina clucked her tongue and smirked, as if the very thought were inane. "I implore you to tell me where we will acquire a magical bean or a magical hat just to do such a thing? And what do you think will happen when we reach this unknown destination?"

"We can make our mark; create a life for ourselves. Be—"

"And what makes you think that I want to go with you and make some… life?" Hissed the Queen, freezing Emma in her spot. "Leave everything that I know? Everything that I have created for myself?"

Her breath grew heavy, but she attempted to make them shallow and breathed through her stomach, swallowing away the tightness she had left. "But you will be relieved of your title; no one will know you as the Evil Queen."

But Regina scoffed. "And so the tides can wash over me again? To start from nothing? How many people will use us then?"

"No one," Emma answered quietly. "Do you fear not having a purpose if you leave, Regina? Your revenge will be taken if we leave. There would be no chance of my parents ever finding us. You will win." The prospect of this seemed to perk the Queen slightly, but her eyes still remained ablaze. "But that title, is that all you truly desire? Still, my Queen, you have yet to answer."

Her nostrils flared slightly and Emma expected smoke to puff out, but Regina seemed to collapse into herself, lowering the guard she placed, and sought the forest through the little window where golden rays shone. She was quiet, allowing nature to take over and the beating of the horses' hooves as they continued on their path to the Dark One's forest.

"You do not have to answer me. I will not force you to. I-I… I only want to know what your deepest desire is. What do you hold in that scarlet pocket of your heart?" She let hope glimmer within her
when Regina seemed to sag slightly, losing her stiff composure and turn chestnut hues on her, soft, vulnerable.

"I just want to be Regina." Her voice was quiet, as if she didn't want the blonde to hear, but Emma smiled. "I have always been Cora's daughter, or King Leopold's wife, or the Evil Queen, but I have never been Regina."

"You are Regina to me and that is who I want to know." The Black Knight reached forward and took the hand still planted in the Queen's lap, feeling the warmth and the bones and saw Regina's scarlet lips twitch, breaking into a small, small smile. Butterflies filled Emma's stomach when she saw it and murmured softly. "And if we leave, whether to another realm or far away in this one, that is who you can be and that is who you will be."

The brunette queen released a sigh and drew her hand away from Emma's, casting her gaze back out to the shadows that moved in the forest. "If we could ever be fortunate enough, my knight."

"I promise you, Regina, that when all of this is over, we will run away. We will run from it all." Her emerald hues met with chestnut ones and the moment they shared was intense because she would try everything in her power to make that happen, to make her queen happy; something that she deserved after the hoops that she had dove through.

"Words are just that, Emma, and many have promised me things and none of them have shown their worth." She smiled, regardless, as if she had appreciated the words. The blonde decided against arguing, knowing the Queen would only cut her down, and dipped her head.

"Will the magical powder work in finding the Dark One's dagger?" The Black Knight asked, eyes falling to a pouch that Regina had tied to her waist. It was something that the Evil Queen had produced in aid of the search. The Dark One's forest was large and the possibility of locating the box before Rumpelstiltskin had found them was slim.

"There is a possibility it may not," answered the Queen whose fingers found the little leather pouch, making sure it was still there. "The powder is generally used to locate any magical item and the Dark One tends to collect many."

"I have seen part of his collection. What need has he of them?" The blonde was brought back to the hall filled with strange items, most of which were vases or weapons.

"He collects them to make deals with those unfortunate souls who desire them."

"I suppose I should have expected as much." She shuddered to think of those innocent people, those naïve people, who wanted something the Dark One had. Briefly she wondered if he had even stolen these items from people just to make a deal with them. The imp was unjust and monstrous and it only gave reason to remove him from this realm. "But what if it does not work?"

"Then we will have to dig." Regina drew her eyes to the blonde. "I have not used this magic in a long time and there is a chance the boy had lied."

The path the magical powder had left as Regina had scattered the dust from her palm was purple and reminded her of the Queen's magic. It led straight to the Dark One's castle as expected, though a second path diverted further into the forest, leading them deep into the dense trees. The Black Knight followed her Queen, toting a shovel, as they traced the fading magic trail to an area not unlike any other. It ended between two large oak trees, reminding Emma of the entrance to the Dark One's territory and made her wonder if this was where the border had ended.
Though, the thought did not remain long as she took to work, digging into the hard soil as Regina took watch. The forest was quiet save for the dwellers who moved and ran when they caught sight of the two. When the hole was as deep as Emma's thigh, she rested against dirt that surrounded her, and looked up to the Queen with sweat on her brow.

"I hope he buried it here," she muttered, stabbing the soft earth with her shovel.

"You are strong, my knight," purred Regina whose smile shone above her as she paced back toward the hole, her cloak swishing behind her. "This location seems promising. The imp no doubt wanted a landmark."

"I hope you're right." Emma huffed and wiped the perspiration from her forehead.

"Now, I suggest that you hurry. We don't know who might be lurking about."

The blonde felt herself melt against the dirt before she nodded and resigned to pulling the shovel out of the earth and continue with her digging. The magic that had led them to this point had disappeared now and part of her slowly doubted she was even in the correct place for the gape in the earth only seemed to grow without turning up a single item.

The Queen only watched, or paced, as she kept her eyes to the forest. Couldn't she use magic to aid her? Emma's thoughts were bitter as she continued to dig until the metal of her shovel hit something within the turned soil. "Don't be a rock…" she whispered to herself as she bent in her confined hole and used her gloved fingers to uncover a small wooden box. "I found something!" She almost cried and showed the Queen.

"This looks about the size." Regina took the box and brushed off the remaining dirt, her dark eyes eating up the wood held in her hand. The curl on her lips grew and it made Emma shudder. "Yes, good, good. Fill in the hole before we leave."

"What?" The younger woman could have wept with what was demanded of her, but she merely shook her head and pulled herself out of the wound she dug into the earth. It was up to her shoulder by the time she had found that cursed box and the sun, once high in the sky, was slowly sinking, streaking red in the sky.

"Fine, I will help you. I do not trust lingering." The Queen used her boot to kick dirt back into the hole and the blonde used her shovel, going as quickly as she could. Remaining in this forest as the shadows started to take over only set her on edge. It felt dark and overwhelming, and she wondered how many bodies were buried out here.

A snap of a twig brought Emma's attention up from her work, forcing her stomach to flip inside her as emerald orbs searched the area. She didn't dare call out, instead, she alerted her Queen who still kicked dirt into the hole, though her head was snapped up. "You heard that, yes?"

"Yes. We must hurry," she said, eyes slightly wide as she increased her movements, though as Emma was going back to work, she felt a foreign presence consume her and didn't dare turn around.

"I think it's time that we go…" Emma whispered, nearing the older woman. Without another word, the two abandoned their post and broke into a sprint, Emma dropping her shovel as she retraced her steps back to the carriage. The sound followed them, thundering though the trees, snapping twigs and rustling leaves; and the blonde could feel her heart in her throat as she carried herself as quickly as she could, not even daring to breathe in that moment, or dare look back.

It wasn't until she saw the dip of earth where they had been shoveling did she notice that they had
only looped the forest. "Fuck!" She screeched, nearly tripping over a mound of dirt and stopped, allowing her aching lungs a rest, bringing oxygen into them. The world seemed to close in around her.

"No, no, no…" Regina was beside her, cloak lost and box still held tightly in her hand.

"Do you think he's playing tricks on us?" Emma wheezed, eyes moving behind them to find nothing but the trees they had run through. It was then that she had noticed a buck in the distance and made eye contact with it, but it had shot off before she could squeeze out her laughter.

"What is so amusing?" She was shot a glare from the Evil Queen, but the knight could only shake her head.

"I think a buck was chasing us. I must apologize, I thought it was something else."

"You made me run because of an animal?" If the older woman hadn't been short of breath, her voice would have been far more threatening. Emma shrunk away from her and kicked the pile of dirt she had nearly tripped over.

"Look, we still need to get the hell out of here." She started off toward the direction they had come, hoping the carriage would be awaiting them. "I just… don't very much like it here. It feels consuming."

"I knew I should have marked where we were going." The Queen muttered as she followed behind her. "We must push until we come into view of Rumpel's castle. From there, we can find our way back."

And thus they had, walking into the thick of the forest until it started to thin. Emma had, at one point, found Regina's cloak thrown several lengths away from their path and collected the soiled garment. It amused her to think of the Queen shucking that very thing in her desperation to escape, but she frowned at the same thought, knowing the brunette did not want to be captured by Rumpel again. He would break her, no doubt, as he had promised.

Shuddering, she followed behind Regina, holding on tightly to the royal purple material, and caught sight of the large castle ahead, casting a shadow over them. As she was about to surge forward, knowing where the carriage was, she felt a hand tug at her, forcing her against the rough bark of a tree.

"What the-"

"Rumpel," hissed Regina, pulling the knight closer behind the tree in which they hid. It took the blonde a moment to gather her brain before she saw the figure of the Dark One moving about the forest as if he were stalking prey.

"Fuck," Emma growled underneath her breath and kept her gaze on the imp who didn't seem to notice their presence. There was a generous distance between them, at least, and they took that into consideration as their steps became lighter, their eyes never leaving the distant form. Though, the further they went, the closer that figure seemed to follow, and she seized.

"He's getting closer."

Regina's dark eyes went to Rumpel and the sparkle of his skin as he drew near. "Give it a moment and then we run."

"What about magic?" Emma asked, slowly moving toward the next tree, her gloved fingers digging
But the brunette shook her head. "He will sense it." After a moment, she took the blonde's hand and muttered, "run," before their feet pounded against the forest floor once again. This time, they had made the straightforward path to the dirt road and didn't stop until they reached the carriage parked far down it.

Emma took the chance to breathe once they climbed into the luxurious coach, dirt and sweat covering her. The knights in charge of the horses put them into motion and emerald eyes fell to her Queen whose lips were parted to accommodate the air she brought into her lungs.

"That was far too close," Emma breathed, peeling the gloves off her hands. "You still have the box?"

The Queen nodded and brought the wooden box onto her lap. Her fingers were red from holding onto it so tightly. "I see that you have acquired my cloak."

"Well, you did just throw it." Emma gathered the bunched fabric and offered it to the older woman, but she shook her head, a smirk on her lips.

"You may hold onto it for now." She laughed when the blonde brought the cloak close to her and squeezed. "Shall we open the box?"

"It better be his dagger or else I will resurrect Baelfire and kill him again," she muttered, eyes falling to the wood as Regina observed the container, her brows scrunching.

"There is no lock," she said and attempted to pry it open with her fingers, but the lid wouldn't budge. "Of course, he must have sealed it with magic. He is not stupid."

"Can you open it?" Of course, why wouldn't the solution to their problems be just out of reach? She watched as Regina moved her fingers over the smooth, brown wood and touched it with the palm of her hand, an irritated grunt falling from her lips. "What is it?"

"I cannot open it," she growled and nearly threw the container on the seat next to her. "It is bound with a powerful spell that cannot be broken with practical magic. I should have figured this would not have been simple."

"Does that mean we can't open it at all?" Emma's eyes fell to the offending box and glared at it as if that would frighten the inanimate thing into opening.

"I may have a spell, but I cannot access it until we return." The brunette sagged against her seat and released a heavy breath, her eyes closing. "At least we have it in our grasp."

"One step closer than we were yesterday," Emma agreed, eyes never leaving the Queen whose eyes remained shut. She smiled inwardly and reached forward, finding dirt attached to the brunette's cheek, and wiped it away, though she was stopped by a hand on her wrist, gripping it tight.

"What are you doing?" Those animated orbs snapped open.

"Uh, you- you had some dirt…" She couldn't move her hand from the Queen's grasp.

"I wouldn't speak." Snorted Regina and released Emma, allowing the blonde to swipe the dirt away. She wrinkled her nose, Regina did, but made no effort to move from the touch, even as she let her fingers linger on the olive skin.

"We both need to bathe," she whispered and pulled her hand away. "And figure out how the hell to
"We have it, for now. No doubt he will notice that it is missing, much like his son." Regina's face lost its color as she spoke, but she remained stoic. "Thus we must act quickly."

"Everything seems to be moving quickly these days." Emma traced the intricate pattern of Regina's cloak as she let her gaze move to the world outside and the lavender clouds that hung low in the darkening sky.

"We can settle tonight and rest. We will need our energy for the days to come." The Queen's words brought her breath to a halt.

Reality was making its way to her brain. Everything up to this point had been words and plans and threats, and now that they had the Dark One's dagger, everything would be set into motion and they would have to defeat that very man. It would change the world, whether they would succeed or not, because blood would be shed and lives would be lost, and she hoped that it wouldn't be theirs.

"Why must you look at me like that?" A husky voice inquired, bringing emerald orbs away from the taught, olive flesh displayed before her. The Queen was spread across her feather bed as Emma slowly crawled onto the foot of it, smirking softly.

"Like what?" She asked innocently, falling back onto her knees as the brunette sat up to greet her, scarlet lips parting.

"As if I were some priceless piece of art, or a cheap piece of meat."

The Black Knight chuckled softly, letting the hot air fall against the older woman's flushed cheek. "Because you are worth taking in. Every inch of you is a work of art; like some masterpiece that should be displayed before the world." She moved forward and pressed her lips against the Queen's, cupping her neck. "Though, I would have to blind the population."

Regina's laughter rumbled against her lips as they met again and she leaned away. "I see, well... I am certainly not a masterpiece. My body is scarred and art is pristine-"

"But the best works of art are flawed, my Queen," whispered the blonde as she cupped the nape of her lover's neck and kissed her again, this time it lasted, something hungry and powerful that touched the tips of her toes with an electricity that only fueled her.

Regina sighed against her lips, an absent smile curving her perfect mouth. "I doubt that."

"Oh, but they are." Emma mewled as their lips met again and she gently nibbled the scar on her lip. "I find them intriguing. Your body is like a story, telling of the past and the pain, and the strength it has gained from it. And that beautiful mind that has suffered the most." Her thin lips pressed against Regina's temple.

"You always find flattering words to tell me, don't you?" Asked the Queen, though she didn't seem to mind as her head lulled back, enjoying the soft kisses her neck received when Emma trailed her way down the perfumed tawny skin. Her slender digits pressed into delicate ivory flesh when teeth grazed over a particular spot, eliciting a soft gasp. "Though, I must admit, I quite like them coming from you."

"Oh, do you?" The blonde pulled away and gazed into her Queen's beautiful obsidian eyes.

She nodded, eyes falling to the emerald pair that stared into her own before curling her fingers into
that silken honey hair and pulling the source forward, locking their lips together. Emma could feel a
rumble in her throat when the Queen deepened the passion, her sweet tongue invading her mouth.
The blonde pressed herself closer to the older woman when she felt thin fingers scratch along her
spine, setting the blood in her veins on fire.

The Black Knight sensed the Evil Queen's body move against her own, growing more desperate as
their kiss lasted until they pulled away, her soft, crimson lips parting and curling into a smirk that shot
a certain heat straight to her lower belly.

"Mmm, but I do prefer when other words fall from those sweet lips of yours." Her voice was rough
and husky, a hand falling from the blonde's arm to land on her rear, giving it a soft squeeze.

"And what might those be?" Asked the former princess, biting her lower lip when she felt the hand
come down upon her ass with a sharp slap. Her flesh stung, but it only brought heat to her core.

There was a certain way that she smiled and the way it crinkled the corners of her eyes that had
Emma's heart fluttering, tugging at the muscles in her face. "Well," she mewled, fingers untangling
from golden locks as they fell and trailed down the blonde's side, forcing an unwelcome giggle from
the younger woman. "Whenever I touch you here," she continued, those fingers drawing down
Emma's thighs and slipping between them to cup her most sacred part, "you always seem to utter the
most beautiful of songs."

She swallowed thickly and kept her grip tight on the brunette's arms, unable to keep a clear mind as
those fingers seemed to work and only heighten the ache that continued to grow. A hum grew as she
allowed this, her knees falling apart leaving her to sink against the bed and slowly become towered
by the Queen whose dark eyes kept on her own.

"Gods," Regina murmured and claimed her knight's lips once again in something rough and fervent
as a single digit slipped into the warmth of the blonde. She felt weak with the sorceress on her and in
her and lost her sense for a moment, letting herself fall into the roaring tides that was Regina, as she
took over and pushed her onto the bed; the absolute aphrodisiac.

The covers were cool against her back, but she didn't mind, for it quickly warmed underneath her
heated skin. The Queen never seemed to hesitate when she took her and this time was no different as
her nimble fingers explored, teasing the delicate folds nestled between the blonde knight's legs.
Regina chuckled, something throaty and alluring as her lips broke from Emma's and trailed
downward, passing by her throat with a nip and over her collarbone with another.

Her back arched in anticipation as she watched, her own pale digits combing and curling into the
raven locks that tickled her arms. Red stained her skin, trailing after the older woman's lips as they
made their way down and over the swell of her breast, and inhaled sharply when she felt those warm
lips close around her erect nipple.

"Gods, 'gina…" The sensation left her with a high when those fingers found her throbbing nerve
bundle and worked at it in rough movements. The brunette's tongue left a cold trail across her breast
as it tasted and moved to the other, this time her teeth sank into the delicate tissue earning a soft cry
from the blonde. The pain was only temporary for the result fled to her center and caused the very
flesh to tingle as it was stretched by the Queen's penetrating fingers, a warm energy filling her and
blurring her vision.

Regina merely made a noise crossed between a moan and a chuckle as her knight's hands started to
explore her soft curves. "Gina, hm?" She purred against the flush peak of the blonde's breast and
pressed soft kisses around the bruising teeth marks.
"I-I apologize…" Her face burned and her head buzzed, but she made out the melodic laughter of her queen as it tickled her skin.

"No mind, my knight." The brunette laved her tongue over the hard peak of her breast before covering it with her mouth once again, the pace of her fingers increasing, matching each rock of her hips.

But, Gods, she could barely register the words as they came to her ears. Her brain swam in ecstasy and she could already feel the pressure building in her loins, some scattered question being moaned into the air. "Are you- Wha- Why does it-"

"Magic," purred the Queen whose dark eyes cast upon her with a twinkle and a smirk chased it on her full lips. It wasn't the word, but the voice and the tone, and the burning of the wood, that pushed Emma over the edge and exploded her vision with white stars as everything spun around her. She felt her jaw grow slack and a vibration in her throat, but her ears were deaf to the sounds the dark sorceress reveled in, though it left them ringing when she touched ground once again, pulsing, aching.

"Good girl." She made out Regina's throaty voice and immediately felt empty when the Queen withdrew her hand to shift positions, using her palms to frame the younger woman's face as she swallowed her words with a kiss.

The Black Knight was not about to complain, though, as she returned the heated kiss and ground her hips into the older woman's when she straddled her. She moaned softly when she felt the warm stickiness of her lover's fruit against her own and supported this new position, her arms wrapping around the witch.

"I want you to touch me," demanded Regina whose eyes seemed to penetrate her very being. Gods, she could barely concentrate as her Queen ground against her, soft mewls falling from those messy scarlet lips.

"Of course, Your Majesty." Emma nibbled on the older woman's lower lip and kissed her again, knowing full well what she was about to do would quickly be reversed. She shifted their bodies until she fell upon the Queen, straddling her soft hips with a murmur and gazed down at the widened chestnut orbs. Quickly, she kissed her again to silence the protest and touched her cheek.

"What are you doing?" She hissed and turned her head before the blonde could quiet her again. Regina's nostrils flared and she could feel the way her heart pounded against her chest.

"Let me do this, Regina," she whispered and pressed her lips to the corner of her Queen's mouth. "I need no help!" She could feel the palms of the older woman's hands against her shoulders as she pushed Emma away and the blonde allowed it to happen, though she didn't fall off her and merely sat on her knees between the brunette's own.

"Please," she pleaded, a gentle hand touching Regina's bent knee. "Let me do something different. E-Even if I do not cover you."

Emma could feel the brunette's gaze burn into her and slowly, her arousal was dissipating, and perhaps it was a good thing. The Queen would no doubt throw her out. But, instead of the backlash she had expected, Regina spoke, her words naught but a sigh. "Let us not do this tonight, Emma."

"Then I shall return to my bedchambers." The blonde dipped her head but was quickly stopped by a hand. The Queen was sitting up, traces of her lust still visible within those chestnut hues.
"We can still fuck, my knight, but I-"

"I know it scares you, Regina, to let yourself give in, but..." Emma's hand squeezed the sorceress's tawny knee, her deep emerald eyes never breaking contact with the woman's before her. The brunette remained sitting up for the moment, her chestnut hues contemplative, the light wrinkles in her face deepening. "We do not have to," Emma whispered, finding the intensity burning in those mesmerizing eyes and touched her cheek, smiling when her features seemed to soften.

"The moment I demand you to stop, you will." Her hand hovered over the knight's before she collected it and pulled it away.

The blonde nodded as the fluttering wings tickled her insides and moved forward to kiss her queen again, allowing the warmth to spread throughout her body, curling her toes and fingers. Slowly, Regina allowed herself to fall back onto the bed when their lips broke apart and Emma started to create a path down the smooth map of olive skin.

The brunette's breath hitched underneath the soft contact and released the bubbling sigh from her lips as she arched. Emma could feel the way she lay rigid, though, and frowned into her skin, searching for a remedy while she slowly lowered her body down the older woman's, lips tasting and cherishing each inch they passed over. The Queen's heart thundered underneath her, she could feel the rhythmic pound, and for a moment she could feel that very organ pumping in her hand.

"How are you feeling?" Emma rumbled just above the brunette's breast as she broke away to fall into those dark eyes that stared upon her, mixed with clashing emotions.

Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but a mere sigh fell from her lips instead, something light and airy, yet heavy and burdened. "I want to push you away, but I-..." Dark locks bounced slightly when she shook her head, scarlet lips parted. "I-I do not think we should continue this-"

"How if I put myself onto the bed?" Emma suggested, dark, emerald eyes honing in on the soft features of her queen. The older woman nodded slowly, her lower lip being pulled into her mouth by ivory teeth.

She felt as if some progress were made, even if the conflict had stuttered her mouth as it closed around the dark peak of her queen's breast and gently suckled, eliciting a sweet melody from the one below her. It was a change of pace feeling her lover's body beneath her, shifting, tensing, squirming. The blonde decided to release her queen of the weight as she shifted further, lips trailing across the dip of her belly and over her scarred hips.

"Gods," was a word spoken as another sigh and she soon felt fingers curl into her hair.

"Are you alright?" Emma lifted her gaze, her stomach now pressed against the bed.

"Yes," murmured the Queen. "Continue."

She bit back her laughter at the demand and dipped her head between those taut olive thighs to admire the treasure held between them. This was the first time she had been able to see the entirety of her Queen from this position and she was not disappointed. Jade eyes fell to the face of the very woman as gentle fingers probed at the flush, swollen flesh. Her hips moved forward greedily, already, as her head fell against the pillows, her expression shifting from its intense state to mirror her pleasure, relaxed, as it had always been.

The knight pressed soft kisses to the insides of her Queen's thighs, earning soft gasps and only hoping that they were not reflecting the brunette's earlier fears. She could feel her tense when pink
"Stop teasing," the Queen's roar filled the air, though stressed when that very pink muscle trailed across the sensitive bundle of nerves. Emma could feel the older woman shift and that voice sounded above her head, this time, even as she complied to the demand, wiggling her tongue between the sweet lips. "Do not let it get to your head, this trust I give you."

The Black Knight could feel the corners of her mouth lift, but she denied a response and milked the sweet music from Regina's mouth. She could feel it reverberate and knew that the Queen still loomed, supporting herself with a hand. They grew lighter and louder, those moans that fell from the dark witch's lips, and it only seemed to press Emma to complete her task, pale, slender digits sinking into the warmth of her ruler.

She could feel her muscles ache in this peculiar position and looked to the Queen's scrunched face before pulling away completely. Those dark eyes snapped open when the source of her pleasure was taken away and those messy scarlet lips parted in protest as she watched the blonde knight grab her ankles when she sunk onto the hard, stone floor. A soft squeal filled the air when Regina was pulled to the edge of her feather bed, but any words that were meant to be spoken were replaced by hums as the blonde retained her previous position.

Emma could feel the weight of a leg as it draped over her shoulder and she only used it as ground, wrapping her free arm around the thigh as her other worked, pumping digits into the Queen and only earning an earful of Regina's special medley. Her scalp was growing sore as those fingers kept tugging at it, but it fueled her own desire, billowing the fire throughout her entire being.

"More, Emma!" Demanded the older woman whose voice's pitch was heightened with desperation. The blonde returned her mouth to Regina's sacred flesh and quickly found her swollen clit, and the way the brunette's hips seemed to press and move quicker against her told a story of impending release. The younger woman stretched her already tightening warmth and rapidly flicked her tongue over the button that always seemed to tip her lover over the edge.

And this time was no different as the Evil Queen's cry boomed like a crack of thunder throughout the bedchambers, her leg pinning Emma against the wooden frame and bruising her ribs, but she soldiered through the pain and helped Regina through her shattering climax.

When the grip had loosened and allowed the knight to pull away, she saw Regina sink into the feathers, her chest rising and falling with heavy breaths. Emma could feel a stinging warmth rise within her as she pulled herself off the cold stone, knees aching, and clambered next to her Queen whose skin was slick with perspiration.

"How was that?" The blonde's face burned from the question when the witch's eyes fell to her, now more chestnut than obsidian, but she could see the panther that was hungry for more.

"Are you seeking approval?" Asked the brunette whose smile stretched across her face and crinkled her eyes. Butterflies filled her abdomen.

"Approval? I already have that," she purred and slowly inched closer to the royal woman until their skin touched. "No, I am curious if you felt any discomfort being-"

"After you had changed positions, no. It was… intense." The Queen turned, half her body pressing onto Emma as she allowed her lips to trail along ivory skin. "But I let myself slip away."

"Doesn't it feel good to lose control?" The path Regina had created along her skin was lit on fire and
she could feel it gather and move along her veins to rekindle the flame already burning in her belly.

"Sometimes," she answered instead of protesting the very thought of control, her words tickling Emma's skin. "Now, close your eyes, my knight, for our evening will be long."

She closed her eyes as the Queen took over and thought briefly of what she had said, knowing very well she would still push the boundaries between them until they broke. She was granted this small vulnerability tonight, but it was not what she had desired; she wanted more. Time would be the only friend to aid her in these upcoming endeavors with the Evil Queen.

"What language is this?" Emma held a worn tome in her hand, flipping through the pages of unfamiliar script. There were pictures, but they did not grant her enough to follow along if she didn't know what they were prompting her to create.

"It's Elvish, my knight." Responded the Queen across from her. A table separated the two, filled with books and peculiar jars of various magical ingredients, most of which looked absolutely revolting. "Most spell books are written in Elvish. Something that you must learn if you wish to further your skills." The book placed before her was sifted through before being tossed onto the floor with a growl. When the palms of Regina's hands slammed against the wooden table top, the knight jumped, eyes widening.

"I assume that book was of no use?" She handed over the one she still held, knowing it was futile for her to search when the words were foreign. Instead, she was guided to a standing chest whose doors were open, revealing several stacked drawers that glowed red and seemed to pulse, as if they were a thousand hearts beating at once. She shuddered, having no doubt that is what truly lay within the confines before her.

"Why don't you make use of yourself and search for more ingredients? I might have a few potions tucked away." Regina's attention fell to the tome and flipped through the pages as her knight obliged, moving away from the unsettling bureau to pull open the drawers of a desk, finding more small bottles and vials, each labeled by the Queen's hand.

"Are you sure that you can't use a shovel and break it open?" Emma rummaged through the drawers for a brief moment and found a strange blue liquid. Its label was torn off. When she turned with it, she saw the sorceress glaring at the offending wooden box. It seemed to pulse with magic.

"It would break the shovel. Protection spells are powerful." She growled and forced open another book. "None of these spells are strong enough to open something from the Dark One."

"What about this?" Emma lifted the vial of liquid but the Queen took it from her grasp with a snarl as if she were faced with a deadly poison.

"It is not anything that will aid us, my knight." Her finger curled around the thin glass. "I need his book. I had it, once, but I cannot remember where I had stored it."

But Emma's interest was not in the book, but the royal blue liquid held close still. "What does that do?"

Penetrating eyes sliced into her as they shot up, narrowing. "Have I not asked you to search?"

The blonde seemed to take a moment to think, smirking inwardly before murmured. "Not as I recall. You merely stated that you needed his book, but you do not remember where it is located."

Snorting, the brunette brought the vial back to its compartment and folded the chest's doors when
Emma's attention was caught by it once again. "Do not be bravewith me, ser."

"Where do you suggest I search?" Emma's eyes followed her as Regina paced the small room stocked full of items used for potion making and spell books to aid. She had briefly visited it with the Queen before they left for the Dark One's castle to fabricate the magical dust that led to the very box they were trying to open. She tended to remember an impatient Queen, then, as well, nostrils flaring and eyes dark and wild as they searched frantically.

"Search every cavity in this room, for a start, hm?" Her tone was clipped as she pulled open the drawers of a heavy, oaken desk. "And if we do not find it, then we must look elsewhere."

And, thus, the search began for that particular book, only one that Emma could assume once belonged to the Dark One, or perhaps it was created by him. She had no time to ask the Queen, even when they found the thick tome hidden away on a dusty shelf in the den. It was something that Regina had held great confidence in and the blonde had held her breath as she searched through it, hoping the time spent was not wasted.

It had only seemed to take the Queen minutes to locate the correct page and another spell that, when the knight had gazed upon the pages, could not understand. There were images, though, as she went by those, she recognized several of the ingredients as ones that Regina had in her little jars.

Though, the sorceress cursed as she read through the Elvish words and slammed her hand upon the table once again. "I am completely out of herbs!"

"Why didn't you acquire any more?" Emma looked to the pictures and saw a flowered stalk, recognizing it as something she had passed in the forest.

"I have been busy, my knight. Question me not." Hissing, she paced heatedly across the stone, collecting strange-shaped glass containers; some were round with long spouts and others were shaped as cones. "Could you gather them for me?"

"Where will I find them?" The blonde watched as the Queen set up those containers in an elaborate placement and began to put away the ingredients left on the table.

"The forest," she answered and looked up from her work, lips formed in a scowl. "I created a garden years ago, well, perhaps not a garden. But I made sure I know where they grow." Regina moved from her spot and collected a wooden crate and filled them with unmarked jars. "If you cannot remember the images in the spell book," she said, pushing the tome toward the blonde after setting the crate next to it, "then pick whatever you can and place them into these jars. There are only three particular ingredients that I need and they generally grow together. Pick plenty."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Emerald orbs honed in on the images and she mentally retained them before picking the crate up, nodding.

The Black Knight found herself faced with flowers and thistles and brambles and bushes, plucking anything that she had come across and placing them in the jars. Half of which she didn't know were truly herbs, but she didn't want to risk passing up something that might be pertinent. She had already located the first two required components and kept the image of the third in her brain.

It was a flower, she remembered, even though Regina mentioned an herb. It was red like blood, deep and vibrant, and she would have thought it easy to find among the green and brown of the forest. She said it was the most important ingredient, as if the flower had held magic itself.

Perhaps that was why it was hidden, she thought, moving swiftly through the trees, eyes on the forest
floor. It was there, something red, peeking from behind a thick of leaves and she dropped to her knees to uncover the soft, pointed petals of scarlet. Withdrawing her dirk, she carefully cut the stem and placed it into the jar and looked for more, but it remained solitary and she needn't waste any more time.

When she stood and turned, she was met with a shadow approaching her. The plate of his helm was lifted and showed his pressing features. "Ser Emma! I have urgent news. The Queen sent me."

"What is it?" Her heart leapt in her throat and wondered if Regina had been taken by Rumpel.

But he spoke and calmed her fears, though the words only stiffened her tense muscles. "We are under attack. They have already destroyed Dawnwood and are moving toward Arrowhead. We have men out from the city, but not many. We need you to lead a party north."

The clinking of glass brought logic to her brain when she realized she had dropped the crate. She swallowed and dipped her head. "Bring these ingredients to the Queen."

The young man nodded and gathered the fallen jars. "You may take my horse back to the castle. I can walk from here."

"Thank you, Ser Edward." She didn't hesitate to find the chocolate stallion and mounted him, urging the poor horse to race as fast as he could toward the castle.

The wind whipped her face and stung her cheeks as they rode northbound with the speed of the Gods to meet the offending party. The blonde knight's heart felt as if it would explode the way it pounded against her chest, but the pain was surpassed by adrenaline because they were going into battle.

War.

The word passed through her mind when she gazed upon the familiar silver armor and white horses of her parents' kingdom as they blended with the dark horses and black armor of her Queen's kingdom. Blood stained the grass and she could already smell the death in the air as they drew near.

There weren't as many White knights as she had expected and wondered if they had been a scouting party that took advantage of the unprotected border and village. If that were true, that only meant this was a mere taste of what they would be inspiring.

"For the Queen!" Emma's voice pulled forth from her body and sounded as a deafening roar above the fighting and dying, her sword being drawn and held up as she charged her party forward, rumblings of similar words echoing behind her.

These were men she once knew, ones that she had grown up around and who had protected her as she slept peacefully in her castle at night. She found difficulty in keeping her ebony blade forward as the stallion's hooves pounded underneath her toward the nearing battle. But that life was something that she had left behind to create one here, within the Evil Queen's kingdom. She had forsaken their protection when she accepted the dark witch’s own.

Light reflected off a silver blade as it came toward her, but she was quick enough to dodge and slash at the knight's arm and watched as he fell to the ground. She didn't bother lingering on him and rode her horse into the thick of the battle, slashing at whomever came near to her until her sword slid through the belly of an unfortunate man.

This had thrown her off her own horse, having forgotten to even release her own sword as the spooked white horse raced off. She fell hard to the ground with her opponent and wrenched her
blade free, eyes falling to the man whose last breaths were drawn in that moment. Swallowing away the heaviness that clung to her chest, she picked herself up just in time to be kicked back onto the blood-stained earth.

"Is the Evil Queen so desperate she's enlisting little girls?" The man's laughter boomed and he pointed his sword at her. "It don't matter, does it? She won't last for long."

"You will not succeed. We outnumber you." The Black Knight hissed and kicked his knee as hard as she could. He cursed and stumbled, and she took advantage to stand.

"Not when the rest reach us." The knight clad in silver and white did not hesitate to strike and she easily dodged him, taking the techniques she had learned and taught and applied them, her blood pumping and fueling her to fight for her life.

This wasn't training.

She reminded herself as much when he kept lunging at her and she kept dancing around him, avoiding each movement with precision and saw the sweat as it beaded and fell down his face. Their swords clashed; ebony against silver and kept this duel until the sun started to descend and a voice shouted among the fighting men.

"Retreat! Retreat!" When Emma turned, she caught sight of a bloodied man in dented silver armor as he hopped onto one of the snowy steeds and raced north. Soon, those who remained had followed him and she looked to man she had been fighting, his eyes burning and his face flush.

"You grow lucky, girl. We will meet again and I will tear you apart." With one last spat, he mounted up and followed the retreating members of his party.

Emma stood, her ears ringing now that silence reigned over the trampled earth. Bodies littered the land around them, both of horses and men, dying or dead. Most of them were her men; ones clad in dark armor. Edward had said they were outnumbered before her group reached them and dominated the tired White knights.

Her blood still moved even though the battle was over, adrenaline fueling her from both the fight and the victory. "A job well done, men," she told the ones who were left, standing and mounting horses, prepared to return. "Return. Rest. We will fight again soon. We must prepare."

She found Captain Uriel by a large steed. He greeted her with a smile. "We reign victorious, though we have lost many."

"And we are already low on numbers." Emma could feel an icy hand grip her. How large would the White party be? And would her parents be the ones who led it?

"We will fight and we will fight fiercely. Defeat means nothing to us." Uriel's voice was strong and sure and she only hoped she could wear his confidence. She had to; for them; for Regina.

She dipped her head. "Are we allowing the new recruits to fight?"

"They won't have a choice if the castle is stormed. Slap a sword into their hands and some armor on their bodies." The dark man mounted his horse and held the reins tight. "I will arrange training, though I trust they know how to swing a weapon."

The Black Knight swallowed and scratched the black horse behind the ear, her green orbs searching the area for an available steed. "Have you caught wind of when they will attack?"
The captain shook his head. "Not before the sun rises. It will take at least a day for the scouts to return to the main party. Though, we must be prepared, regardless. Sleep will not come easy to these men."

"What shall we do with the bodies?"

"Leave them, for now." Uriel turned his horse and started southbound. "Our knights need their energy."

When Emma muttered an agreement, he was off, following behind the ones that had already left. A rock weighing heavily on her chest, she took an abandoned white mare and rode her back to the castle. It wasn't long until she found Regina, exhaustion settling in her bones as she pushed through the door to the royal bedchambers.

"What happened?" Demanded the Queen whose eyes immediately honed in on the dirt and sweat on the blonde knight's face. "When Edward came to me asking for you because we were under attack, I-"

Emma furrowed her brows and made her way over to Regina whose voice had suddenly grown thick. Her eyes looked as if tears had dwelt within them but when the brunette blinked, they were gone. "My parents have made their move. We were attacked by a cocky group of scouters, but they retreated in the end, outnumbered by the time we arrived." She touched the Queen's warm cheek with her knuckles. "We have lost many men."

"When are they attacking?" The question fell from Regina's lips like spilt water.

"Two days, perhaps even three. The remaining knights are resting and the recruits will be trained in basics." She shook her head, slowly losing the strength that she had felt just earlier and allowed herself to crumble. "I am afraid we will be defeated."

"The castle is protected-"

"But they will die. Our men will die, Regina. And I cannot send them out there alone. I…" She felt the seams of her sanity rip apart.

"You cannot go out there, Emma. You will die." There was a certain desperation in her voice that terrified Emma.

"I must join them. It is my duty; it is the duty that you have given me. Who will I be if I turn tail now?" The knight looked upon her Queen. "And- And perhaps… Perhaps my parents are leading them. If I can talk to them… It will end this war."

"And what if Rumpelstiltskin is with them? He had promised to join them when war broke and I am without doubt that he is giddily rubbing his grimy little hands together in angst." She bit and moved away from the Black Knight, guiding her feet toward her vanity. When she reached it, she collected the Dark One's wooden box and turned to Emma.

"But if we have his dagger-"

"That is it, my knight, if we had his dagger." The lid of the box opened, revealing a stale piece of parchment. Emma's eyes honed in on the yellowed note in disbelief.

"Was that all there was within the box?"

"A stupid little riddle, yes." She plucked the paper out and handed it to the blonde. "His little
incompetent twit of a son did not know a thing of the dagger's location. He lied to you."

Emma pinched her brow and unfolded the paper to gaze upon the neat scrawl. "Where the sky was stained with blood, and the air reeked of death, where cowardice ran its course, and left the weak man dead," she read and the lines in her face only creased deeper in confusion. "What the hell does this mean?"

"I don't know!" Regina threw the box onto the floor, causing the wood to splinter and shatter at their feet. "I thought perhaps it could lead to the location of his dagger, but it makes absolutely no sense." She paced the rough stone floor and snarled. "Even if we knew of its location, we would have no time to retrieve it."

"There must be a way. There must be logic to this." Emma turned the parchment in her hand, over and over again, hoping that perhaps there was a hidden answer somewhere, but only found where the paper had been torn at each end. Of course, if the Dark One knew the answer to this riddle, why would he put it on the paper? Yet, why would he tear it? Scoffing, she folded it back up and held tightly onto it. "Is there a spell, perhaps?"

"A spell? For what exactly?" Regina's gaze snapped to her, lip curling back to show her teeth. "To enchant the paper into talking? No."

"N-No, I mean…" Shaking her head, she stepped around the broken box and neared her Queen. "Perhaps it could direct a path or…"

"A path. You are desperate, aren't you?" But she could only laugh humorlessly. "I suppose we both are. Our lives are hanging on a thread and that thread is held by the Dark One."

"Is there anyone we could ask?" She stepped forward to close the distance between them but the Queen merely moved away, shaking her head, her words grainy.

"Our time together will end and the Dark One will prevail."
Chapter 14

Gold clung to the air, yellowing the earth as the sun's rays cast upon the surface - trodden from years of training. When the Black Knight stepped into the courtyard, she was met with the sounds of resolute men as they trained for what was to be brought upon them.

"Ah, Ser Swan, there you are." The captain approached her and dipped his head. "I have informed everyone of what is to be expected in the days to come."

"And I see that they have taken to their tasks. Excellent." Emma walked with him as Uriel passed through the courtyard. "How do they feel?"

"Anxious… Terrified," he answered, stopping momentarily to instruct one of the new recruits as the boy stumbled in the dirt. With one last word of encouragement to the novice knight, he turned toward the blonde knight and continued. "But they are brave. Many of these men do not have homes to return to, thus they are fueled to fight."

Her brows furrowed. "And what do you imply?"

The tall man stopped and faced the young blonde whose eyes steadily met his. "We are short of knights and we have lost more than we had to spare. There will only be more men, fresh and well-rested men, that will attack. They are tired, Ser Swan." His dark eyes grew distant.

"You mean to say that we will lose?"

"It will take a miracle to overcome the Whites." Uriel dipped his head and let his gaze fall to the men whose lives dwindled on the thread of war. A shadow loomed over her being, seeming to pull her into the dirt, because she was hanging on by something similar - only it was held by the Dark One. The Fates were cruel. "Half our army is inexperienced—"

"But we must have faith," Emma muttered, despite the mocking voice in the back of her mind. "In ourselves, because if we keep thinking, believing, that we will be defeated… That energy will consume us and turn our fears into reality. You told me just earlier that defeat meant nothing."

"It does not. Not to these men." He cast he gaze upon the training knights, but his lips never cracked a smile. "I have seen them battle; the ones that have served the Queen for years. They prevail because they are strong, but they are now gone."

"And those that remain shall pass on their strength and knowledge to these young men. Uriel, you may not have been captain for long, but you have experienced the pressure of war and what it brings. You have survived it. What has changed that makes you think this way?" The way he looked at her sent ice through her veins.

"Because I know of your troubles with Rumpelstiltskin and we are all powerless against him." Uriel growled and paced away from the courtyard to stand along the castle wall, surveying the ones he seemed to lose confidence in.

"And how might you think we are receiving trouble from the imp?"

He laughed, shaking the blonde to the very core. "I am not stupid nor am I blind. We all know that he wanted you back in his possession. And what he had done to the Queen is no secret. I had not meant to eavesdrop, but as I was passing Her Majesty's bedchamber, I happened upon your conversation and the inevitable words that meant he would come and he would kill and without the
Queen, we are nothing more than a bunch of men with pointy sticks."

"He will not win, despite what the Queen may have said." Emma found herself drawn back to the conversation with Regina and her chilling words. The very idea was not something that she was willing to see to light, not after what the two of them had been through. Regina deserved more than some dark and tortured demise.

"You do not understand his power-"

"I know very well what he is capable of, Uriel. I have seen it and I have experienced it and I will not allow that to happen again." She brought air into her burning lungs and stepped away from the shadows, a new energy bringing itself into her weary bones. "We must act. Dawnwood has been destroyed and I have no doubt they will tear through the other villages. We must evacuate them."

"What time have we to do such a thing?"

"What are we defending if not them?" Emma demanded. "The Queen, the castle, yes. But what point is there if there is no kingdom to rule?"

"Of course, ser," he murmured, dipping his head. "Who should I send out?"

"Are you giving up your duty so easily?" Scoffed the Black Knight and heightened her volume to draw the training men to a halt. Soon, they gathered around the two, anxiety in their eyes but stone on their face. Before she could speak, Uriel did, his voice roaring above the growing chatter.

"Those of you who must work on their training shall stay behind with Ser Swan. The others will follow me to evacuate the villages." He looked to Emma and she knew by the spark in his eye that his momentary uncertainty was gone. Good. They needn't any doubt now that war had greeted them like an old enemy. She chose wisely in electing him captain. "We have no time to waste. I will explain further instruction on the way."

It wasn't long before the courtyard was cleared of men save for the handful of new recruits whose eyes were on Emma, waiting for instruction.

Moonlight had splashed over the courtyard when the blonde knight had seen fit to relieve the poor souls of their training. A rock sunk within her as she gazed upon their weary faces while they passed into the barracks, knowing very well they would no doubt perish in the upcoming events. They were weak, still, even if they showed great promise in the day's training. They had little experience in true combat - yet, so did she and she had prevailed.

She still could not rid herself of that nagging in her gut telling her otherwise.

Perhaps she should have traveled back into the White kingdom and turned herself in, or explained of her situation, anything to desecrate the chances of spending more lives in vain. These men were going to die because of her. They were risking their life for what? The princess's defiance?

Guilt matched each step she took toward her bedchamber, weighing her down and holding her brain hostage. Finding them and ending this war was top priority, but would she find them on the battlefield or would her time be wasted traveling to the White Kingdom?

The concern fled her mind when she heard a crash down the corridor. Her eyes immediately honed in on the large double doors that led to the Queen's bedchamber and didn't hesitate to let her feet carry her toward them. Wood slammed against stone as she pushed those doors open to see Regina perched in one of the open windows and when jade eyes moved, she noticed the mirrors to be broken.
“What happened, my queen?” Cautiously, she moved forward and saw the older woman's frame shake, though when her words reached the Queen's ears, she saw her muscles tense. "Are you all right?"

Regina kept her gaze cast to the forest below, her black-painted nails digging into the ebony stone. "Let me alone."

"Regina…” Emma could feel the Evil Queen's powerful aura fill her as she closed their proximity. "What happened in here?"

"Did I not give you an order?" Her head snapped toward the blonde and she could feel herself stumble from the ferocity in which it brought, as if the Queen's magic had faltered her.

But the younger woman quickly steadied herself when she saw the glisten of crystalline liquid on olive skin, her lips sinking along with her heart. "Speak to me, Regina."

"You have become far too informal, Ser Swan." Regina stood, though not on the floor. Her booted feet balanced on the sill of the window as those fingers continued to dig into stone. The elegant charcoal cloak that she wore swayed in the gentle breeze.

"Your Majesty," Emma spoke, her voice strained, watching as the Queen seemed to wager her life on that edge and the forest that stretched below. "Do not escape us when we need you most."

"Let me fly, Emma." Her voice was thick as she turned to face her self-promised end, as if she deserved nothing more than to be a splatter on the ground. Briefly, Emma imagined the wings of that cloak fluttering in the wind as it spiraled toward the ground, not quite enough to catch flight.

"I want to fly away, too, my queen,” she whispered, becoming aware of each movement her Queen had made; from the way she brushed a curly tress from her face to the hesitant shuffle of her boots. She saw her bloodied, broken form in her mind's eyes - so small and fragile, as she appeared now, standing there as if she were only an inch tall. "But we cannot. There is much left in this world to discover, and we have barely just skimmed the surface."

Regina shook her head, her beautiful features twisting into contempt. "I am not meant to last long in this world."

"And what plants those seeds in your brain, my queen?" Air escaped her lungs when the brunette teetered, her body shuddering.

"Rumpel,” she answered. "His knowledge of the world is far from human. The fates had planned for me an early expiration and he wants to aid it along. But I will not allow him the satisfaction." A laughter chilled Emma's bones, dark and self-loathing. "Evil has no other ending."

"Yes, it does, Regina." Perspiration grew in the palms of her hands. She couldn't lose her, not to something so asinine as fate. "Do not lose yourself to this insanity-"

"If I do not end my life here and now, he will only come and… I cannot bear that. Not any longer. Not again." Her voice broke on the last word.

"I will not allow him to take you, Regina. I will try everything in my power." Emma took a step forward, but the Queen must have sensed her movement for her head turned, those chestnut hues shimmering, yet they were solid - cold and angry. "You deserve more than this." It took everything to keep her wavering voice from breaking when their eyes met. "Don't let yourself believe otherwise. You are worth something."
"Do not try to save me, princess." She spat her words, though the toxicity was absent from her features. There was a hint of doubt that softened her lips and it allowed hope to flutter within the blonde's chest. "I don't want to be saved."

"But why do your eyes betray you?" She saw it, harbored deep within those devastating hues. Did she truly believe that this was her only option? "Why do you allow your fears to control you? Your fear of him. It is not worth ending your life over, my queen."

"I control me!" The brunette queen roared as fresh tears brimmed in her hurt eyes. Her chest expanded as she took a deep breath - burdened and trembling, like her body, her soul. She spoke again before Emma could, her voice growing quiet and bitter. "And this is what I desire most."

And, as if it were without a second thought, she allowed her reddening fingers to release their grip.

Emma saw her falling, slowly, as if the world had slowed its rotation for just that fateful moment. But the knight seemed to be faster than time as she surged forward, pulling the Queen by her arm, denying the demise she thought she deserved.

"No!" Regina wailed when she was pulled away from her escape, falling against the blonde savior. Despite her shuddering form, she struggled, screaming, "I demand as your queen to release me!"

"I cannot allow you to throw your life away, Regina." Though, Emma did not heed her request and, instead, pressed her nose into the crook of the brunette's neck, inhaling the sweet and intoxicating fragrance. She could not imagine a world without the dark tresses that tickled her skin. "I thought you were stronger than this, my queen, that you would not let yourself be so easily defeated."

"What other choice have I?" Her voice was strained as she pulled herself away from the blonde, a smoldering hatred in her dark eyes. "We will only perish under the Dark One's hand if we do not find our expiration with the Whites first."

"They will not harm us - my parents. I won't allow-"

"Rumpel will take me and he will not grant me the mercy of death. And the same will happen for you, Emma, because we have infuriated him beyond any comprehensibility. And do you honestly believe that we can conquer all through, what? Song and dance and hope? I am not your mother."

"We can try, Regina, and that is certainly better than- than fucking throwing ourselves out of a castle window!" Her vision blurred when those words spilled from her mouth, something pressing onto her chest and crushing her heart. Was this what the Queen had felt so many years ago, this powerlessness over her own life? She could feel it welling; a defiance that rang throughout her entire being, unwilling to let herself succumb to something so simple. Or was it far more complex?

"Our only chance in defeating that man is his dagger and we have no such thing." Bitter laughter fell from scarlet lips. "He will only cut us down and anyone who may cross along his path, including your parents. Luck was on our side when we escaped him; or perhaps it was a part of his little game. He enjoys the control he has over people."

Emma shook her head and paced the chambers, something gripping her lungs and shortening her breath. "There must be a way."

"There is no other way," Regina growled, freezing the blonde in her spot. "You do not understand, do you, Emma? We are dead walking. Just walk away and leave me to my demise."

"Give me time. Please..." Emma could feel her nails bite into her skin as her desperation welled. "Perhaps I can locate information about this riddle - a location, anything."
The brunette queen snorted, but she stepped away from the window and made her way toward the canopied bed, fingers gliding along the rich materiel. "And how do you intend to seek this information?"

"I will find a way." The blonde followed her, though broke away toward the door, her step faltering when she turned back. "Do you promise to remain safe until I return?" Regina scoffed softly and turned her gaze to the singular rose that still sat atop its stand. "Regina?"

"Yes. I am curious as to how you will locate some solution to our problem. I do suppose you are Snow White's daughter, after all." She muttered bitingly and plucked the scarlet flower from its vase, bringing it to her nose. "Do you promise to return alive?"

"I will try my very best to." Emma dipped her head, something fluttering about her insides. When the Queen had mirrored her movements, the blonde departed and let her weary soul take her on the next adventure.

Jovial chatter filled the air, only dipping into the pools that Emma's brain was already swimming in. She shifted in her spot and set an empty tankard of mead onto the rough, wooden table, eyes searching the small area; some tavern placed in a village far outside the Evil Queen's kingdom, filled with drunken men and scantily dressed bar wenches looking to please them for gold.

It was a place that she had passed on her way to nowhere, searching for an answer and asking anyone that looked like they might know something. She was sober, then, or at least her head didn't buzz. No one had an answer to the crumbled piece of parchment that she had clung tightly onto, despairing, in hopes of saving themselves from the Dark One's wrath.

People were worthless, she had found, when it came to cryptic words.

The Black Knight called for a refill, even though she knew that she needn't it. It only made her stomach churn when she thought of her fruitless endeavors and the way she had failed her Queen. These people, laughing and singing in their intoxication… They didn't know what hell would be wrought upon the southern kingdom. Perhaps Regina was right for want to fly with death's wings.

"No," she growled to herself, eyes on the piss-colored liquid that was poured into her tankard. Negative thoughts had no place in her mind. She was the Black Knight. The Queen had given her such a title for a reason. She couldn't let herself back down so easily.

"Aye, you gon' drink dat?" A man asked, taking to the bench seat across from her. Jade lifted to meet with hazel. His greasy brown hair was pulled back, though that did little to hide the lack of hygiene; his smile flashed yellowed and broken teeth.

He looked as if he had already had a few too many drinks in him, but she pushed the tankard toward the man, anyhow, knowing that she needn't the hindrance.

"Help yourself," she muttered and let her gloved hands lay flat against the table, covering the crumpled piece of torn parchment. Emma stared at him, urging him to leave, but he merely pressed his lips to the roughly shaped piece of iron and swallowed its contents.

He laughed and let the bottom of the tankard hit the table. His fingers were adorned with jeweled rings. "Somethin' catch your fancy?"

Emma wrinkled her nose, immediately letting her gaze fall away from his dark leather jacket. "I am not paying for your drinks."
"I ain't askin' you to, sweetheart." He winked and raised a hand for another refill. "In fact, I might just pay your tab."

"I am not asking you to, *sweetheart.*" The blonde knight stood with the riddle, knowing she needed to get back on the road to nowhere and hope it led her somewhere.

"It don't mean you have to go." His eyes followed each movement, pausing momentarily on her breasts before landing to her hand. "What have you there?"

She gripped the paper tighter. "Certainly nothing that you can help me with."

"Oh, my heart aches of your distrust." The man jumped from his seat and rounded the table, but Emma was able to draw her dirk out, showing him the pristine blade. He raised his hands but he seemed unfazed otherwise. "You would have stabbed me already if you truly wanted to kill me, milady."

Lip twitching back into a snarl, Emma let her hand fall and sheathed the small blade. Her lungs burned to keep from inhaling his stench - something he attempted futilely to cover up with spiced musk. "One wrong move and the blade goes in your eye."

*Fine, sweetheart.* His hands went into the air as he took a step back. "Just don't get too happy with your stick."

Nose wrinkling in distaste, she asked, "You implied that you could help?"

"Well, I don't know what you're searching for," he hummed, those bloodshot hazel orbs falling to the paper that ascended into his hand. Greedily, he opened the folded piece and read through the scrawled words, his brows furrowing.

"I want an answer as to where this riddle might lead." The Black Knight leaned against an old wood post. "I am searching for an item."

"Treasure? I'm good wit' treasure." He chuckled and grabbed the tankard that had laid abandoned on the table, taking a swig as soon as it found its way into his hands. "I ain't got nothin' for you, sweetheart. Bloody skies? Death? Cowardice?" Snorting, he finished off the liquid and looked for a refill.

"I knew a drunkard would be of no help." She snatched the paper from his hand and placed it in a pouch attached to her hip. "There *must* be a place that is described as this."

"Gimme some rum, a woman, and a good place to lay 'er down, then come back to me. Or come wit' me." He winked and stumbled closer, but she pushed him away as she passed him, eyes on the exit. "You know, I just *might* know of a location."

Those words seized her, but she didn't give the satisfaction of turning back. "And, what might that be? Some rat-infested hole with a rotting bed?"

"Oh, my heart aches of you-"

Emma turned and in one swift movement, she had the man pinned against that rotting wooden post, forearm pressed against his chest. "I *dare* you to finish your words and waste my time."

The man merely laughed, his hot, rancid breath hitting her skin. Mead threatened to escape her stomach. "There were these wars long ago between man and ogre. They say that so much blood had been spilt that it fled to the sky and you could smell the death in the air."
"And how do you know this information?"

"The Ogre Wars is common knowledge to men like me. You know, everyone." He licked his lips. "Now, if you could kindly release me, I would muchly appreciate it."

*The Ogre Wars.* She remembered vaguely of seeing that title in the Evil Queen's library. It was long ago, centuries… The Dark One was known as Rumpelstiltskin for many, many years and she had no doubt that he had borne witness to the height of the war. Was he a part of it?

Shaking the thought from her mind, she released the foul man and stepped away. "Do you know where these wars were held?"

"If you do me a little… favor, I've no quarrel tellin' you." The way his eyes moved over her body forced an unpleasant tingle down her spine. "Oh, don't you look so shy. I like a feisty woman."

"I needn't your help any further. I can manage on my own." Emma shoved him aside just as the door to the tavern was thrust open. It felt as if she were overwhelmed by static darkness when the breeze caressed her, setting her skin on fire. It hadn't taken her long to recognize the source as he came through the entrance with his crocodile smile and those peculiar, chromatic eyes.

She felt frozen as she stared into them.

"Emma, Emma, Emma… I knew I would find you here." The Dark One *tsked*, clearing a path toward her. The patrons of the tavern stared in awe and fright, except for the man Emma had pushed away. Now he stood before Rumpel, hissing at him.

"You have to go through *me* first!"

"Go, you drunken fool!" Emma drew forward to push the dark haired man away, but Rumpel merely flicked his wrist before she could, and swept him into the bar, landing among the gathered crowd with an audible crunch. She watched his body crumple to the ground as the people fled with panicked shouts once they realized he was dead, but her attention did not linger long as the imp stepped forward, giggling.

"You have acquired quite the band, haven't you, princess?"

It felt as if a vise had been put onto her, disallowing her to move, even as he approached, mere inches from her face. "How did you know where I was?" Her tongue seemed to speak on its own accord, pulling forth more of that horrendous laughter.

His eyes burned her. "I heard word of your travels, princess."

"I am *not* the princess!" She hissed, her muscles working from their unholy trance. "Not any longer and my parents will know such a thing when I confide to them."

But he giggled once again as if the very thought were inane. "You will never gain the chance, dearie, for you are mine and your mercy is at my hands."

"They will never allow you to do such a thing." Her tone was dangerously low, but he was unfazed, staring at her with those reptilic eyes, and smirked, allowing his sharp teeth to show.

"Of course, they will never know. You see, they still believe I am on their side. I *am* traveling with them, after all." Rumpel tilted his head to the side. "I 'found' the counter spell to break through the Evil Queen's castle walls."
"People are nothing to you, are they? You are only using them to get what you want." She shuddered. Were her parents so gullible as to believe it would take the Dark One’s sweat to "locate" a spell to counteract Regina’s protection?

"Using? No. They will merely be distracted by the battle, destroying what the Queen had built, as I find you and take you away." Frivolity splashed over his features as he clasped his hands together. "They will believe that our dear Regina had taken you away once they reach the castle and find it empty. And why would they suspect a thing while I am still by their side?"

"That is using them, imp." Furrowing her brow, she stepped forward, growling, when his words had registered. "What enchantment will you befoul them with to accomplish such a thing?"

"Oh, nothing that will harm them, dear, sweet princess." The Dark One paced around the blonde who stood, feeling as if she were exposed underneath his gaze. "But, why should you care? You want to escape them, after all, to toss them aside and join forces with their enemy." Something deep and roaring brought forth from his being, filling the room and her head. "You have grown dark, dark, dark little princess. You have fallen into the Evil Queen’s territory, now. What hand of light will reach for you?"

"Darkness is what I wear, but I am still good." Emma felt it burn within her chest, tightening it. "I do not need help." She sounded like the Evil Queen, she realized, pushing away the very idea of aid, of goodness.

"You will tell yourself that, some lie to keep your brainnaive to your true self, to that darkness that has started to form in your heart." Rumpel took a step toward her, his sharp nails pressing into the middle of her chest, but not entering her. "I know what you did, Emma."

"I killed a man, yes, but I had no other choice." The Dark One giggled once again and withdrew his hand, allowing the knight to breathe.

"You lie, oh, how you lie." The way he tilted his head appeared inhuman and she shuddered, wanting to pull away and escape. "You and the Evil Queen trespassed onto my land."

Stone filled her lungs when he spoke those words. "We did not."

"You believe you are sly, don’t you?" He merely smirked, allowing those cracked lips to widen his abrasive features. "You cannot lie to me, princess. I know you were searching for my dagger, but you did not find it, did you?" She remained silent, pressing her lips together. "Even in silence, answers are provided."

"Your lands are far too large to locate some dagger," she finally said, turning away from his penetrating stare.

"Oh, but princess, you knew exactly where to look." Rumpel stepped toward her, but kept a distance between them, his fingers slipping underneath the rough materiel of his cloak. "You stole the information from him; my son; Baelfire." His tone grew deeper, sinister, and reverberated within the small tavern.

Emma could feel the blood as it fled from her face and pumped through her rapidly beating heart. "I-"

"I told him not to cross into the Evil Queen's territory, but that boy never quite listened to me." The Dark One’s lips curled into a sneer, but it hadn’t lasted long as the muscles in his face seemed to droop, a frown soon replacing any menace. "You have a new debt to pay, girl, and I will have

""
my fun with you."

"No…” She breathed, knowing very well what that had entailed; she had seen the result on Regina that night and shuddered to think what else he would do in his rage. The blonde stepped back and wished that she had brought her sword along, but soon realized, after starting to reach for the dirk tucked into her boot, that it would be useless against him.

"I knew what he had planned when I found the squid ink missing." He shook his head and, slowly, withdrew something from within his cloak. It was a dagger, Emma recognized, watching as the torch flames shone upon the blade. It was both black and silver, carved with intricate design and Rumpelstiltskin's name.

"You had it all along," she muttered, eyes honing in on the sharp edges. It held a sort of obstructive beauty, but it was also sinister; she could feel the darkness radiating off it, overpowering.

"Of course, dearie. I would not be so ignorant as to leave it where just anyone could pick it up." A pitched giggle left his lips as his fingers curled around the hilt. "When Bae had not returned, I knew there was something amiss and planted that box for you to find."

The knight's eyes never left the dagger. "You knew that Baelfire would tell of the dagger's location, leading us onto your territory."

"Who do you think led you to my castle in the first place? A filthy beggar? Think again. I knew that you would hold Belle hostage, I know everything." He smirked and pointed the blade at her, as if daring her to take it from him. "And I knew when your parents planned to attack, even after they long gave up on me."

"You are only playing games with us…” Emma felt as if something had coiled around her. She was only a pawn as Regina had claimed everyone was to the Dark One, and it made her stomach churn, knowing that there was no escape. He enjoyed toying with peoples' lives. "You intently let us escape, didn't you? To, what, let your son hunt us down?"

"He was desperate to have you, princess. He loved you." He scoffed and moved, letting his feet trail around the blonde knight once again. "What I did not predict was his death."

"Are you here to kill me?" She asked, watching him carefully, but his wavy brown locks bounced as he shook his head.

"Oh, it will not be that simple, princess." There was an insanity that sparkled in his eye when he next spoke. "It will be years before I let you succumb to the release of death. Far too easy of an escape for what you have done; both of you. Oh! It will be fun!" He crooned in delight.

She could feel her heart hammer in her chest, setting fire to her stomach as he continued, describing what he had planned, as if it all were an elaborate thought. He wanted Regina to suffer before her knight and spared no detail of the things he would do to her. That fire within her spread, transcending her into what felt like another realm, and she could feel the white power bloom with it, wringing forth from her finger tips.

But the magic that left her was deflected off the Dark One with that twisted laughter.

"You cannot harm me!" He spoke in the midst of it and she could still hear his laughter even though it had faded. "You can try as you might, dearie, but your fate is in my hands. It brought us to this very, very moment."

"Because you know all, is that it?" Emma hissed, pushing away the cowardice that threatened her
being and stepped forward for Regina. "Predict this, imp." Her fist was thrown in tangible evidence of that growing power and cracked against Rumpel's jaw.

His stance grew unsteady from the impact and she took advantage, tackling him to the ground as she reached for the dagger that he had long teased her with. Regardless of the pain and her bruising knuckles, she kept her fists on him, hitting wherever they could land.

"I will not allow you to hurt her again!" She screamed, but he only cackled, and it boiled the scarlet life within her veins as it rushed to her head. "Take me, kill me, torture me! She has had her share of the world."

"Then your parents are indebted to me because she is their payment for you." Stars dotted her vision when she was knocked away from him and onto her back. He loomed over her blurred sight, cackling with that blade in hand. "Perhaps I should kill them, as well? Though what they have to offer is quite beneficial to this world. Unlike your Evil Queen."

"She has much to offer, something that you simply cannot see!" She kicked him back and stood, bringing forth her hands once again, this time they burned, as if they were alight.

"Your act is futile, princess. I can feel no pain." His golden eyes pierced her before she was thrown off him once again and he stood, sticky, black liquid spilling from the cuts on his face. "You cannot escape the inevitable. Regina is destined to perish soon and I will see to it that fate is fulfilled."

The imp would be flayed where he stood if the former princess had the ability, but fire only shot forth from her hands, never once hitting the Dark One as he danced about the room. "Why aren't you fighting back? I see where Baelfire inherited his cowardice."

Those words stopped him dead in his tracks and the next ball of fire knocked him onto the worn table, splitting it in two. Hesitancy did not exist in that moment as she dove forward, reaching for the dagger, but he flipped with her, pinning her to the ground.

"I am not a coward!"

His breath was hot and sour against her face, but her scrunched nose did not remain for long as she attempted to overpower him. "You only play games with people because you hold this power that you believe makes you invincible against them." Laughter bubbled from her lips as she managed to succeed and reached for the dagger once again, but their bodies continued to roll, raining tankards and unfinished drink upon them.

"I am invulnerable. No one can harm me! And most certainly not a princess like you!" Pain shot up her spine when she landed on a wayward utensil, but she felt something in her hand through the midst of it, and ignored the pain for a heavy dose of adrenaline shot through her.

"I am more than a princess, imp, do not underestimate me." Emma growled and slammed him against the stone floor, raising that very object she had obtained, right above his heart. His eyes flashed in recognition and as the blade came down, her vision was filled with crimson magic.

She fell forward when the blade hit stone, jarring her bones, and muttered a curse. Anger would have taken her, but relief did, instead, because they finally had a one-up on the imp. Everything ached as she picked herself up, gazing around the empty, upturned tavern, and breathed, slipping through the exit.

Emma found her in the parlor, draped elegantly on a royal purple couch lined with velvet, eating an apple the color of blood. She had adhered to her plea, the blonde sighed to herself as she entered,
perching on an oaken chair, her cheeks red from the wind. As fast as the poor steed could carry her, she rode back to the castle, keeping her hand on the dagger.

Chestnut eyes rose to greet her as Regina remained in her position, pulling the piece of fruit away. "Have you cracked the riddle?" she queried sardonically, her features stone.

When the blonde shook her head, she saw the color flee her Queen's face, but she spoke, instead. "I found Rumpel. Or, rather, he found me."

"You are still alive, I see. What happened?" She sat, now, hands on her lap as Emma told her of her brief encounter with the Dark One. She ended the small tale by pulling out the dagger and handed it to Regina. "A job well done," she hummed, a quirk appearing on her lips.

"Do you think it might be a decoy?" The younger woman's eyes fell upon olive fingers that slid along the flat of the blade, tracing the pattern. "He left without it."

"You were trying to kill him, Emma." Regina didn't let her gaze fall from the dagger as if it had entranced her. "We can use this to control him."

Emma leaned forward, vaguely recalling such information during her time with the books. "Can we summon him?"

"I do not see how we could not." The smirk that had started to appear suddenly spread in full bloom across her scarlet lips. "Though, I do not want him to have the advantage of being within the confines of the castle."

"What shall we do?" She could feel her stomach knot.

"We shall wait. You said that he is joining your parents, correct?" When Emma had nodded, she continued. "We must prepare. Simply killing him is far too easy. He doesn't deserve it, not after what he has done."

"Are you saying that we are to capture him?"

"In so many words, yes, my knight." Purred the Queen as she stood, dagger held tightly in her hand. Emma's eyes followed her, or the dagger, rather. It seemed to pull her in. She wanted to taste what it brought. "How will we go about doing so?"

"Once, there was a cell procured for him, similar to the cuffs that disallow the use of magic. During a time before you were born, he bid me to cast a curse, ripping everyone from this realm. He was taken, locked away…" She shook her head, as if bidding the memories away. "But I refused after I had found what he had truly meant the curse for; to locate his son in the land without magic. It was a ploy, telling me that I could find my happy ending within it… Another game."

"How did he escape the cell if he could not use magic?" The knight followed her queen, pacing toward the balcony off the parlor, overlooking a lush garden filled with scarlet and white flowers and statues of varying degrees. Her eyes honed in on one that of a horse.

"That I do not know. He must have been working a plan of escape while we were away. I recall returning after he had expected the curse to have been cast, but he was not there. I searched, but he did not appear until after you were born. That was when your parents approached him for a protection spell." Regina turned toward the blonde. "We must procure something more… secure. We do not wish for him to escape and open our throats while we sleep, do we?"
"Of course not, my queen." Emma released the air held captive in her lungs and nodded, eyes falling to the hilt offered to her. "Wha-"

"I do not trust myself with the dagger," she answered before her knight could even ask. Hesitantly, the younger woman wrapped her fingers around the ebony hilt, but the Queen held on. "Keep this safe."

"I will." Then, it was released and Emma held the blade in her grasp once again. It felt heavy, burdened, yet peculiarly lightweight. "Why give it to me?"

"I want to kill him and I fear that desire will overshadow our true plan." Her jaw set as she watched the dagger fall to Emma's side. "As much as the power of the Dark One is enticing, I want to make him hurt."

"He cannot feel pain," Emma found the words tumbling from her mouth.

"No, but I am quite sure the dagger will do plenty." Something sinister crossed over her dark features and she turned, eyes on the large apple tree that stood tall in the middle of the garden. "We will meet him on the battlefield. Remember, if you fall into peril, use the dagger to stop him."

"Wh-what do I do?" She could feel the weight of that very weapon pull at her arm.

"Hold it up and speak to it, whatever command you want him to follow." She chuckled softly and curled her fingers around the smooth iron of the balcony's fence. "He has no other choice but to obey. The one and only weakness of the Dark One."

"Certainly a horrible weakness," Emma murmured and gripped the dagger tight until her fingers ached. "To be controlled like that."

"Indeed, my knight." The Evil Queen stretched before she turned toward her knight and smirked. "We should have plenty of time to devise an adequate plan. Would you like an ap-"

"We are under attack!" A panicked voice sounded from the parlor's entryway. One of the young recruits.

The Black Knight turned to see his stricken features, her heart beating rapidly against her chest, and sought out her queen whose eyes darkened. "They weren't supposed to attack until tomorrow…"

"Rumpel has pushed his pawns forward, it is now our move." Regina rumbled before pushing past the blonde toward the young man. "Prepare to hold the castle, we are relying on your station if they make it past the boundaries."

"Of course, Your Majesty." With a dip of his head, he left, leaving Emma to approach her Queen, who spoke next to her with a cool tone.

"Maintain the dagger. Whatever you do, do not let it fall into the imp's hand."

And, with those words, darkness surrounded her shuddering form and the hand that gripped the Dark One's dagger, pulling her toward the inevitable.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Warning: Major Character Death

They appeared before the field of fighting men where black and white clashed. Dark clouds hung above, covering the sun and casting a melancholy tone. It was a perfect drear for this vain battle.

The added weight to her being told Emma that the Queen had dressed them for battle. Her eyes immediately honed in on the brunette beside her, curiosity taking her as she thought of the woman's own preparation, and was not disappointed in what she found.

The Evil Queen was clad, shoulders to toes, in black plate armor. Her raven hair was pulled back, but still spilled into the heavy metal that encased her being and the blonde shuddered, her blood racing southward. There was something both dangerous and arousing about that brunette woman as she stood there, the lines in her face hard as she lifted a double-sided axe, topped with a spear point, and smirked, as if she were showing off a mere plaything.

A very barbaric part of her could not wait to see the ebony blades sink into delicate flesh.

"Shall we, my knight?" The question came as a primal growl and when those exploring eyes lifted, she saw the beast in the Queen's eyes, waiting to be unleashed.

It was in no place of hers to hinder its escape, thus she dipped her head and the two started, Emma drawing her sword for the first unlucky victim.

She saw a man break from the rest, surging toward the two women when he caught sight of their forms, and yelled something incoherent in allegiance to Queen Snow White, wielding his silver blade. Before Emma could cut him down, she saw the Evil Queen, moving like a shadow as she swept across the dull green plain and buried her axe in his neck.

It looked seamless the way she had completed the act, as if it were no different than swatting a fly. As the blonde approached, Regina was wrenching her blade free from its temporary hold, and his body fell, gushing crimson from the gape.

"Impressive," purred the blonde knight and a scarlet smirk was flashed her way, though the moment did not linger as they were pushed into the thick of the battle.

It was deafening, the way voices shouted in both pain and allegiance, and the horses' hooves pounded against the ground around her or screaming as they were struck, and the sound of steel-on-steel, reverberating thunder throughout the open field. The air was thick, heavy with the stench of blood and death, and the distant moisture of a storm and its earthy scent. It felt surreal, as if she had stepped into an image from a war book, each movement numb as her brain settled into fight mode, swinging that ebony blade.

She made sure to keep close to the Queen - it was her duty, after all, as the Black Knight to protect the royal woman. Though, as her jade eyes fell momentarily to the brunette, she knew Regina could take care of herself. It amazed her - the way her blades swung without missing a beat, slicing into the
exposed flesh of knights that had approached, staining their pristine armor with red death.

She had to shake her gaze away from the glorious dark sorceress as she was thrust into the midst of men and horse. Like a shadow, her blade moved as she did, whipping silver-clad knights as they approached her, their cries and shouts filling her head. Her blade slashed across a silver plate, knocking a man off his horse as he passed, falling hard onto the dirt.

As she rushed forward to finish him off, her Queen was a step ahead, the silver end of her blade stained red as it opened his throat. Green eyes fell to his convulsing form as she passed him and she expected to feel ill as she had before, but an emptiness settled her brain numb. It scared her, this feeling, this coldness.

"For Princess Emma!" Shouted a poor sap dressed in his signature silver plate armor, his matching sword flashing like lightning toward the blonde. It roared like thunder when she parried and aimed for his neck - some place that seemed the most effective. He stood for a moment, stunned, until his sword dropped with him.

His words shook her, even as she continued to cut her way through the men who struck at whatever they could, at the darkness. These men were fighting and dying because of her. Something flashed within the sky and when she looked up, she saw the veins of lightning dancing along the dark storm clouds. Were the Gods angry that lives were being spent for nothing?

Gods, she prayed to them that perhaps she would feel guilt, feel anything at all. It never came, even as a crack of thunder did, reaching within her flesh and rattling her bones. Rain fell heavily, as if the skies were crying, cleansing the earth of death.

It drummed against her skin, seeping its warmth into her, trying to thaw her frozen heart. What if she truly were turning dark? She had killed so many in vain… She was allowing this to happen…

Her eyes fell to dark armor as one of her men fought with an opposing member, struggling, she noticed as she approached. It was a younger knight and she soon found his face familiar. "Ser Edward, watch out!" She shouted when a killing blow was made from the White knight, but she was faster, a shadowy blur as she cut him down.

"Thank you." She could barely hear his voice, but she touched his shoulder, a half smile on her lips.

"You are doing-" Though, her words were cut short when she heard the familiar whir of arrows overhead, and they soon rained down upon them, one forcing its way into the young knight's skull.

Horror could only take her for a moment until she gained enough wit to keep moving, avoiding the opposing arrows that punched into the muddy earth around her. There were too many bodies that lay still on the ground, both of light and dark. She shuddered and searched for her Queen, finding the woman with blood on her face as she sliced her axe across a white steed's throat, forcing it to stumble and crush the riding knight underneath its weight. Slowly, the armor-clad brunette approached the helpless man and-

"I knew we would meet again!" A voice stole Emma's attention from the Queen and guided it toward a tall man clad in silver and white. His face drew a familiar image within her mind, though he looked tired and bloodied, as if he had fought his way just to duel the Black Knight.

"Hell-bent on fighting me?" She asked, preparing her sword as the two circled each other. The blonde knight could feel her Queen's presence as she kept upcoming opponents from harming her.

"I have yet to cut you down, girl." His teeth were straight, but yellowed, as he flashed her a hostile
"Our battle was nothing, then, when we fought unfairly."

"And what is it now?" Emma cooed, fingers tightening around her hilt as they continued to move, though never struck. "I can see you are worn."

"Oh, but for you, girl, I am far from done." A gruff laughter boomed, but it was lost in the din.

Exhaling, she prepared herself, every muscle in her body tensing. Something fluttered her insides, but she pushed it away as she drove herself forward and made her strike, though he easily deflected it, sending her reeling. She would not allow this man to defeat her, even as his face grew more familiar - he had helped train her in the early years of her swordplay. His name was something she never knew, but he had come into the good Queen's service in the early years of Regina's reign.

He didn't recognize her now, not with the darkness that clung to her and the youth that had slowly slipped from her features. The man was kind when he knew she was the princess and that man was far from the one she saw before her; some bitter hatred filled his eyes, now, as he swung at her, aiming to kill.

She faltered, for a moment, letting her past life consume her and fell to the ground. Pain radiated from her shoulder where his blade had struck, but it meant little when she realized that her own sword was no longer in hand. Through the blur in her vision and the boots and hooves shaking the earth under her, she searched for the ebony blade.

"Not so fast, little girl," hissed the White knight, kicking the swan-knob hilt before her fingers could graze it. She took advantage of his momentary distraction and pulled herself up from the ground, spitting at him.

"You cannot so easily defeat me!" She kept her eyes on the black sword and made a run for it dodging his greedy blade as it licked the air.

"I am not playing games, child."

Emma reached for her designated sword and she felt the cool hilt of it, but pain exploded within her as his boot met with her jaw. She stumbled, seeing stars, but didn't fall, and quickly steadied herself, gripping the mighty weapon tight when she finally collected it. The mud made it slip in her grasp, but she fought against it and stood to face him, only to be met with his blade.

It touched underneath her chin, threatening the delicate flesh before it, and she froze.

"Emma!" Regina's voice sounded, almost desperate, as she appeared out of thin air.

"Emma?" The White knight's voice was soft, questioning, as his dark eyes narrowed in contemplation on the blonde. But his thoughts were not settled by the time the Evil Queen had found him, thrusting the point of her axe through the back of his skull.

Emma allowed air into her lungs as she watched him succumb as his companions had.

"Why were you standing there?" Asked the Queen, her voice harsh and demanding, as she helped steady the blonde knight. "He could have killed you."

"It was a predicament, my queen. One wrong move and I would be tasting steel." The blonde wiped the moisture from her brow, though it was only replaced by more as the rain continued to fall heavily from the dark clouds above.

"Watch yourself," she growled in response and was off, once again, using her anger to slice through
the next unfortunate soul's flesh.

Emma followed, not stopping for small duels, as she slashed and cut at the sore eyes of the battlefield. It was then, as she pushed her way through the din and the heat and the death, that she found familiar black tresses and pale skin.

She sat atop a horse, Snow White, her brow pinched as she held onto a bow even though she was behind the battle. Though, her white mare was trotting, as if they were just approaching. Prince Charming, as they had taken to calling her father, rode beside her, wearing something that could not constitute as proper armor, though he wielded a long, silver blade.

They wore crowns - golden and encrusted with jewels - something that would glow in the sunlight if it would have shone.

There was a third form, Emma noticed as she broke away from her final fight, mounted on a dark stallion too large for him. Rumpelstiltskin. His tawny skin didn't shimmer.

The Black Knight turned, searching for her Queen, and found her tearing into another man, spilling more crimson onto the earth. "My queen," she spoke, nearing Regina as her latest victim fell, lifeless. Her eyes were dark and wild, some insane smile twisted onto her dark painted lips. A chill crept up her spine. "They are here."

Those chestnut eyes had lightened when they fell upon the blonde, though the lines in her face quickly deepened when they fell to the approaching trio. Dipping her head, she silently moved to greet them, her words a growl. "How charming that you have decided to joined us."

Emma stepped in beside her, head lowered.

"Regina. Where is she?" Snow spoke first, her voice strangely calm despite the Evil Queen's grotesque appearance. Though, by now, most of the blood had washed from her features in the light drizzle.

"Who?" Her lips were formed into a pleased crescent. "Oh, you are speaking of the princess. I am afraid that she is no longer with us."

Through her lashes, she could see the stillness that took her mother, distrust shining in her dark eyes.

"What did you do to her?" Chilling was the only way to describe her voice, suddenly thick and verging on desperate.

Regina only chuckled darkly.

"Bring her to us, witch!" The king spoke, demanding. "We will not hesitate to turn you over to the Dark One."

"Oh, I am quite afraid that he has already tried that." The dark Queen sounded bored. "Your daughter is right where she belongs."

"She belongs with us!" The good Queen cried, dismounting from the white mare, and stalked forward.

"I believe the imp thinks otherwise." Regina purred, remaining in her spot even as her enemy's husband joined his wife's side.

"You will be thinking otherwise."
"Is that a threat, Snow?" The olive-skinned brunette only seemed pleased, as if she were enjoying it, though Emma could see the way her fingers turned white against the hilt of her axe.

"Where is she?" Demanded Snow, her face growing red.

"I suggest that you open your eyes. Blind, as you always were."

Emma took this as prompt to reveal herself, but something kept her from doing so - some hold on her stomach, squeezing it and burning her insides. Would her parents hate her for what she had become? But, then, what care should she have? They only sold her off to Rumpelstiltskin, after all. It angered her that her parents, the ones that were supposed to be good, would do such a thing.

They deserved her for who she was - who she had become.

They didn't recognize her, but neither did her former trainer.

She lifted her head, green eyes piercing her mother.

"-is she?"

"I am right here," she answered, perhaps a little too harshly. She saw her mother flinch; the rain had washed most of the blood and dirt from her face, but not the darkening bruise on her throbbing jaw. Perhaps it was the anger in her eyes.

"Emma?" Snow was tentative as she stepped forward, not hiding the shock that took her features. "Wha- Why are you wearing that?"

"Because I am fighting, Snow." Venom clung to her name.

"What has she done to you?" Tears brimmed in her eyes, leaving her unconcerned, now, as if the Evil Queen were to blame.

"There is no concern of that, Snow. I will avenge your daughter." Emma hadn't noticed him approach, but there he stood, that little smirk on his face ever-growing.

"You will not touch her!" The blonde's hand immediately went for his dagger, but wherever she had searched on her person, she found that it was not there. "Fuck," she muttered. Had it fallen out?

Panic seized her until she saw the Evil Queen move, widening her stance as she reached for something strapped to her thigh. With a sinking feeling, she realized that it was the Dark One's dagger. Had she not trusted Emma even though she had given her the weapon initially?

"Regina?" She winced after realizing how thick the betrayal had layered her voice.

"Oh, dearie, a very poor choice you have made." Rumpel chuckled, drawing Emma's attention away from her Queen and to the golden eyes that shone. Through the corner of her eye, she could see Regina lift the weapon to her lips, but before she could speak, her body was lifted into the air.

The dagger fell with a dull thud onto the muddy earth just below her form.

"Oh! Am I going to have my fun with you!"

Emma's eyes immediately lifted to Regina, looking as if she were a statue, though she could see the way her features pinched in fear. She had to stop him. Despite the evil witch's actions, she couldn't let her fall into his darkness again.
She surged forward, throwing her hands out to knock him away, to distract his magic, but Regina's voice froze her, strangled.

"The… dagger…"

The blonde scattered to pick up the abandoned weapon and as soon as Rumpel had figured what she was doing, Regina's body dropped to the ground. Her eyes lifted as she picked the dagger up, but the brunette was already on her feet.

"Oomph!" Air was knocked from her lungs as the Dark One's booted foot met with her abdomen, forcing her onto her back and knocking her head against the ground. She stared up at him, momentarily dazed, and was greeted by his menacing eyes.

This was it, was all she could think. They would lose, as it had always seemed to be, carved in stone by Rumpelstiltskin's promise.

"Get away from her, you imp!" Regina's voice roared from across the field, tearing her from her despairing thoughts and the Dark One's immobilizing gaze, releasing the blonde who remained stone still in the mud. She saw the gleam of her axe when a fireball formed in her hand, but Rumpelstiltskin was quicker, throwing his hand up with a surge of invisible magic.

Her heart felt as if it had stopped when the Evil Queen's feet parted from the ground and her body soared, flailing and failing to find safe ground.

"Regina!" She screamed when the older woman landed on top of a knight clad in silver armor. Her heart thundered in her ears when logic had returned, forcing her up from her position, the dagger she had taken from the wretched man held tight.

"Don't move, imp," Emma growled toward the silver and black blade, eyes burning on the man's name etched into the metal. There was a fire in his eyes when her own landed upon Rumpelstiltskin - frozen in his spot, bound by the dagger to obey.

She could hear Snow shout behind her as she moved toward Regina, advising her to step away from the Evil Queen, but her ears only fell deaf as her knees met with the soft earth beside the dark witch. It wasn't until then that she had noticed something protruding from between her breasts, glistening crimson in the sun's mocking rays. Only now did the clouds part.

How ironic.

There was a haunting look in her wide and glazed eyes as she stared at the swaths of swirling, dark clouds, though Emma knew she wasn't seeing them, she was seeing something entirely different; death. Blood crept from the corner of her mouth, greeting the blonde with its glimmer. Why did red look so beautiful against her skin?

"Oh, Gods, Regina…" The Black Knight forgot to even breathe, her vision blurring as her brain kicked into gear, hands hovering around the sword that had impaled the woman. "D-do not move, un-understand? I-I… E-everything will be fine." Her reassurance was weak.

There certainly had to be a way to save her, but Gods, in that moment, she couldn't draw her magic forward - the only aid she could conjure. It never came easily to her unless anger was involved and she didn't feel anger, only something that condemned her, darkening any hope. But perhaps that was enough. She had escaped with desperation before…

"E-E-Em-ma…" She felt the dark Queen's hand on her arm, squeezing it as she struggled for air and convulsed, forcing more of that horrid scarlet liquid to escape. Gazing into her eyes only sent that
blade into her own chest, piercing and smothering her. She could see the fright in them of what await her beyond this life.

"Re-gina..." Emma urged that little burning spot of white magic within her to surface, to explode and take over, to save her Queen as it had before. Her blood moved within her veins, racing, pumping, and she could the heat of magic with it, welling, but she didn't know what to do with it.

A small, wheezing sound let the energy fade and brought her attention to the large, brown eyes, grounding her. "I… I…" It was taking her energy, those words that she tried to sound and Emma could feel it as her body only shuddered below her, each breath becoming harsh and erratic. It felt as if the world - the battle, the fighting, the shouting - had disappeared, leaving just those two in that moment. Cold gripped her, as if she were the one losing blood.

"Do not speak, Regina. Conserve your energy," she whispered, urged, touching her cheek, wiping the crimson away. It only smeared, spreading more of the sticky substance across her face. Her lips still moved - Regina's - opening and closing as if she were attempting to speak, but only soft whimpers fell.

"Help me!" Emma turned to her parents who merely stood behind, urging her only to step away, as if the Evil Queen could be dangerous at this point. But, instead, her attention was drawn back to the brunette, her husky voice sounding.

"E-Emma, I l-lo-lo-"

Her body shook again, though these convulsions were stronger, ending her words before she could finish them. Another whimper sounded and Emma felt a dark cloud roll over her as Regina gripped her arm, desperately attempting to keep a hand on consciousness, but she could see it fading in her eyes. Her trembling form had become limp and the blonde would have been relieved her suffering had ended until she noticed the stillness that took her Queen.

"My Queen?" Emma shifted, no longer stone, and touched her face as if it would awaken the woman who had succumbed to her final slumber. "No… No, n- Regina?" She could feel her throat tighten when she had realized the once proud and feared Queen no longer breathed, even as the liquid that once gave her life still poured forth from the armor that should have protected her. It churned her stomach, that bitter, metallic scent.

Her skin was warm, she could feel it underneath her finger tips as she wiped the sticky scarlet from her face.

*Don't worry, my queen, I will put your blood back in and you will breathe once again.*

But she knew there was no way. Death was finite and it had taken her Queen into its icy grip, ripping her from the realm that she had grown hope in. She felt betrayed.

The blonde's head buzzed, resonating screams, and something seemed to cling to her heart, gripping it tight, and made it hurt, *ache*. It felt wrong. It felt as if she were the one meant to die.

She could see herself in the sill of the Queen's window, standing there, staring down at the top of the forest. She could feel the wind underneath of her, carrying her off into the next life, somewhere where anger and sorrow and pain didn't exist. A place where she would be greeted by a crimson smile that crinkled chestnut eyes.

But she could feel something tug at her, whispering words in her ear. Her time here was not through. She wasn't meant to die. Not yet.
Fire burst forth from that organ in her chest, and made her stand, stalking toward the three who remained behind, her emerald eyes seeming to glow almost white. It was Rumpel who she saw in her vision and the very sight only made the blood within her veins race, her head pounding, and her heart scream.

"You," she growled, her knuckles turning white against the hilt of his dagger. "You killed her."

But it was Snow White's voice that spoke. "You are now free, Emma. She's gone and can no longer harm us. The world will be a better place."

Emma's head snapped toward her mother whose face was framed by raven curls, the pit in her stomach expanding. "She was my freedom. The true threat is Rumpel."

"She only planted ideas into your head. That is what she does - did." Snow stepped forward but Emma threw a hand up and her body parted from the ground, falling onto the blood-stained grass. 

_Magic_. Something that had failed her while her Queen was dying.

Emerald shot back to the imp who merely smirked in his spot, laughing as he always had. "An eye for an eye, princess."

"I will give you an eye to pick, you little imp fuck." The dagger's blade was pointed at him as she neared, slowly, as if she were stalking, but he was helpless; he couldn't run._Good_. How many people had he made feel this way? "I should torture you as you did Regina. I should take your control away from you. How would you like it, then, _Rumpel_? To be on the other end of the stick?"

"That won't bring your precious Queen back." His topaz eyes followed the dagger and there was a darkness that eclipsed them, as if he feared the very thought of what Emma might do.

"But you will certainly know what it feels like." Through the midst of her anger, she could feel the weight of her love's death on her chest, pulling her into the murky depths that awaited. She maintained her pinched lips and steady threat. "What she felt. But, perhaps I shouldn't even give you the satisfaction. You are _nothing_. You fear death, don't you?"

Emma pressed the sharp tip of the blade directly over his heart, but he remained unfazed, bored, as if he knew the former princess would not risk such a thing. "I have felt weakness, princess, and the loss of control; the loss of everything. I come from humble beginnings and I know what nothing feels like."

"And you have used that to justify what you do to people? Your own failures?" She spat and pressed a little harder, but his eerie little smirk only grew. "I will change that. I will take you away from this world. You no longer deserve to be here."

"And you believe that you do, princess?" The Dark One giggled, eyes moving behind the blonde where Snow and Charming had approached. "Your parents do not know of what you have done."

"Perhaps I made a mistake, but _he_ wanted you dead."

He shook his head, disbelieving. "No, no… He merely detested my magic, never did he wish for my demise. And you _killed_ him. For what? He wouldn't harm you."

Emma could feel the presence of her parents. "Leave me alone with him. He doesn't _deserve_ to live." Her heart pounded in thought of Regina and everything ached inside of her, as if she were dying, losing the will to tread on.
"You do not want to do this, Emma. It will darken your heart. Do not fall into the same depths in which the Evil Queen had. Hatred fueled her then. You are good."

"Good means nothing. Evil means nothing." Emma felt the tears that had once built in her eyes break from their barriers, trailing down her hot cheeks. "There is more to it than just black and white. My heart is already dark."

"No it is not, Emma." Snow's voice was quiet, cautious. "You are light. You are good." She kept repeating the word as if it meant something, but it only gripped her tight, angering her further. "Please, Emma, mercy exists within our veins."

"Where was mercy when Regina was dying?" She felt so very heavy when she said her name and turned to them, glaring. "Mercy did not exist for her, you said so yourself months ago. Why should I show it for this imp when he has done far worse?"

"There is no going back, my daughter. You will only fall like she had and let it consume you. You do not want that."

"Have you ever thought that maybe you were her problem?" Her fingers ached. "That you are mine?"

Hurt flashed in her dark eyes, but she spoke again, reaching out. "Have mercy, Emma, it will change the world."

She felt a hand on her shoulder and screamed, "fuck mercy," her pain and her anger taking over her small form, thrusting that blade forward into the imp's chest. Right through the heart like her Queen.

Her eyes never left those of Rumpelstiltskin's as she watched him die, fearing the reaper that would take him, yet there was something else, some small emotion of relief, as if he found solace in the darkness that it brought.

But the physical sight of it did not last long as she dropped to the hard earth, the dagger falling out of her hand and into the remains of the Dark One's attire. Disbelief filled her as she sought out the dagger through the mix of robes and leather, and found it, stuck between the fabric, clean of blood.

Her parents' voices rose above her, underwater, horror fueling them.

"What did you do?"

It was a horror itself before her eyes as Rumpelstiltskin's name seemed to dissolve from the dagger and four letters replaced them, burning into the intricate design of the blade.

Everything hurt, suddenly, as fire seemed to erupt from her heart, its flames licking their way through her veins, spreading from head to toe. A pressure worked its way through her being and, for a moment, she thought she was dying the way it seemed to beg every bone in her body to shatter. Her lungs felt as if they were pierced by small needles, releasing air before it even had a chance to escape naturally, and it burned. Her head grew light, as if it had ascended into the clouds.

Complete darkness drank her in for what felt like a brief moment, relieving her of the unbearable torture. It wasn't until she heard those urgent voices again, surfacing her, did she realize that she had fallen. A dark vignette clouded her vision as she attempted to readjust, the sun burning bright into her corneas. A dull ache crept in her joints, but she stood, regardless, everything in the world seeming to shift.

A new power surged through her; she could feel it tingling her skin and dancing alongside her blood.
It felt dark and consuming like Rumpelstiltskin's magic, but it felt as if it were her own; light and airy and powerful. She could rule the entire realm with this new energy, rushing through her like gold, or so she'd like to imagine. She consumed him. She was him.

Reality settled when she heard voices, not so urgent now that she had stood.

Emma whipped around, facing the two whose faces were drained of blood and forced herself between them, eyes on the Evil Queen whose body remained still.

No longer, she promised herself. You will walk with me once again even if it takes a thousand years to find a cure.

She knelt next to her and, as carefully as she could, lifted the older woman's body off the scarlet-stained sword. The deathly stench of blood filled her senses and twisted her stomach, but she continued, ignoring the man who had been crushed underneath the Queen's body.

"Leave her!" Roared Snow, whose stupor had been shaken, and made a path toward the two, but as she neared with the King, the Black Knight had stood with her Queen draped in her arms.

"Emma, we can return to the castle. We needn't waste any more lives here." King James spoke, his soft blue eyes meeting his daughter's burning gaze. Her fingers dug into the cool metal of Regina's armor. Did they still care for her, the new monster that she was?

"You needn't have wasted any lives at all, father. I never needed your help. I did not need rescuing." The next breath that she had drawn was full and trembling, and before another word of protest could be uttered, she let a cloud of white magic engulf her.
Chapter 16

Emma relaxed when she found herself surrounded by the familiar objects of Regina's bedchamber. It was safe - for now. At least she was alone in the moment she needed silence the most. But her thoughts sliced through the stillness and buzzed within her head like a thousand wings.

The first question; *how did she get here?*

It felt as if it had taken nothing to utilize magic, like it were no simpler than breathing, or blinking. She thought of the royal bedchambers and, before she had blinked, she appeared inside the vision.

Was this the power of the Dark One? The ease of it?

The questions lingered as her gaze fell to the empty, canopied bed.

Emma carefully placed her Queen's body onto the sleek sheets and looked upon her peaceful features - something she hadn't seen on the brunette since they had met. It was oddly captivating how serene she appeared, as if content with the afterlife. Blood still stained her skin, appearing almost obsidian as it dried, molting from her.

Quickly, she waved a hand over Regina's body, removing the armor that she once wore and replaced it with one of her royal gowns - something dark and the color of blood. It looked as if she were merely resting, though the deep and red hole in her chest broke the immersion.

Suddenly the crimson looked less pleasing, forcing Emma from her spot to seek out a wash basin. Her Queen didn't deserve to pass into the other world soiled. As she sunk onto her knees, wet cloth gently wiping away the congealing blood, she thought of Regina's smile.

She yearned to see it instead of this stone carved in familiar features.

Regina had said the fates meant for her an early demise.

*Fate.*

Was Emma fated to fall in love with what was evil only to lose it to the stillness of death?

Had they meant for her to consume the Dark One's powers, damned by darkness to live forever?

She stood and looked at her rose-tinted reflection in the murky waters of the basin.

Relief had taken her when she realized she had not sprouted the scale-like skin Rumpelstiltskin had, though her face was palid, as if her skin hadn't seen the sun in months. Perhaps it was the situation and her ultimate loss. Her jaw was no longer discolored.

If she truly had acquired the Dark One's powers, then there was nothing that could stop her. She closed her eyes and let the powerful darkness pump within her veins; she felt entirely made of it, as if there was nothing more that had created her physical form than magic.

Knowledge seemed to come to her, swarming her brain, of the past and of everything written and spoken, and the spells that Regina had long attempted to teach her. It was the knowledge of the others - the prior Dark Ones. She could feel them, resonating, within her, living in her mind, her body. They were only watching, quiet, but their presence was overwhelming.

Did she truly *consume* Rumpelstiltskin?
He was the hatred in her, scalding the blood in her veins. But she fed on it, letting it fuel her and open her eyes. It was hot and angry and bitter, and it was blood and bone and flesh, taking her wholly.

In spite of him, she had to save Regina.

There must be information in the vast library that was her brain. The Dark One was a powerful being and she was now it, the very incarnation of darkness. Surely necromancy would be like batting an eyelash, though it was frowned upon in most of the magical community.

May the Gods strike her where she stood for contemplation of such evil. She could not let her go - not with this unforgiving end.

Thus, she paced, wracking her heavy brain, and it only seemed as if it were based on the blink of an eye that she had found a solution. Words fluttered inside her head before she could think them.

*Her heart.*

Split in two, she could resurrect the Queen. Though, would this truly work? Regina's heart remained inside her chest, or would it have turned to dust like she had seen when the witch crushed an unfortunate sap's heart?

Her hand was inside her own chest, pulling out the organ that was harbored inside before she could deduce a clear thought. It felt like a tug, though she imagined that it would hurt, and when she saw the pulsing organ in her hand, she stared. It was predominately red with a few spots of black, the opposite of Regina's heart, yet it held a sort of golden white glow around it.

It was like a voice inside her head, or something whispering into her ear, telling her what to do. It made her shudder, this intruder inside her mind, taking her hand and guiding her. She found herself gripping the pulsing organ into both hands, moving on their own accord.

Swallowing, she closed her eyes, pressing her fingers against the soft flesh. Would this kill her if she failed to execute this correctly? But the Dark One could not die unless it was by the dagger. What would happen, then? Though, the answer she could not care for because if she were to dissolve into the earth as Rumpel had, she would not mind.

Emma inhaled deeply and started with the plan that seemed to formulate in her mind as if it were swordplay. She started to pull her heart in opposite directions, the offensive tear of flesh filling her head as she continued, biting the inside of her cheek as a dull pain started to form in the absence of that very organ. It only intensified, that pain and that sound, feeling as if a blade were scoring along her heart, but she pressed forward until one last *snap* had sounded and her hands fell away with each half of the pulsing muscle.

She stared at the two halves in disbelief, feeling as they beat in time with one another.

She drew in a ragged breath as her eyes fell upon the Evil Queen - nay, Regina - and stepped forward, shoving one half of her heart back where it belonged. She could feel the lack of the other half and it left her feeling strangely empty. A piece of her was missing, after all, though the largest part was laying in front of her, pale and growing chill.

"Do not fail me," she whispered to herself, placing the heart over her Queen's chest and before her doubt could move the hand, she shoved the half-heart into her lover's body.

Emma tipped forward and almost fell onto the bed when, after the heart had entered the brunette's body, her hand fell against the rich satin of the duvet. She was gone; Regina. Panic immediately
seized her when she had noticed the absence and pushed away from the bed. Immediately, she searched the vicinity and slipped into the hallway, turning up empty corridors and rooms, aside from the few guards posted along the dark stone walls.

Her blood raced as she entered the Evil Queen's bedchambers once again, mind numb.

What had she done?

Her brain, once fogged with loss and pain, had cleared, bringing logic back into it.

Was this plan made from malcontent; some way the Dark One had opposed the very bastardization of what she had done? Did her magic decimate the Evil Queen completely, sacrificing half her heart in the process?

"Gods, what have I done?" She paced because where would she be if not completely departed from this realm? Her feet guided her back toward the canopied bed and the blood that had soaked into the delicate fabric, her pale fingers moving over the scarlet stain. There had to be a way to locate her…

Before Emma could think of another plan of action, the heavy, wooden doors were thrust open, slamming hard against stone. Emerald fell to the empty doorway before a figure appeared, clad in black leather from her boots to the corset that bound her middle. She held something in her hand.

"What did you do?" A husky voice bellowed as the source approached.

*The Evil Queen.* Though, there was something different about her that Emma couldn't quite grasp, and it wasn't the sudden wardrobe change. "I-I-I could not let you die."

"*What did you do?*" Regina's growl reverberated off the ebony stone, rattling the mirrors.

Emma didn't have to move as the Dark Queen glided toward her. The aura that poured from her had shifted into something that the blonde felt within herself - both of darkness and of light. She could feel her heart beat, but it remained steady, and when she gazed upon Regina, she knew she was gazing at a piece of herself; her other half.

Before she could answer, though, a dagger was thrust before her and for a moment, she felt something grip her, wondering if the Queen would kill her, but the blade paused before her sight and that was when she saw it; Regina's name etched onto the surface. Quickly, she shifted to locate the one that had once belonged to Rumpelstiltskin and found it attached to her side. Her own name glared at her.

The air was stolen from her lungs as her brows knitted. "I-I… I split my heart and gave you the second half."

"Why do I have the Dark One's dagger?" She demanded, knuckles turning white against the ebony hilt. "*What did you do to Rumpelstiltskin?*

Emma swallowed and slowly lifted her own dagger toward the Queen, her hand trembling. "I killed him after what he had done to you. I… I know what we had discussed, but after-… He can no longer harm you, nor I, Regina. We are free of him."

"But we are bound to these daggers." Regina bitterly spat and looked to the weapon. "*How can this be possible? How can there be two of us?*

"I-I am unsure… All I did was give you my heart. Half of it, rather, and then you… disappeared."
"I can feel you…" She murmured softly, letting the dagger clatter to the ground. "This is only a dream. This must be a dream…"

"Where did you go?"

Dark eyes lifted to meet green, sparkling almost gold in the light that shone through the large windows. "I was outside a… a vault, of sorts. I could feel the darkness and thought Rumpel had taken me until I saw the dagger. Then I could feel you; sense you inside of me and let myself find you by this…"

"Connection," Emma finished her thought and before she knew it, she was pressing a pale hand against the Queen's chest, above the beating heart that lie within, steady with her own. "You are healed."

Regina's brow furrowed and she could feel her tense, as if she wanted to pull away, but she remained still. "Healed?"

"The wound… That hole that killed you." She let her slender digits trail along flesh no longer broken, watching as the olive skin pebbled underneath her touch.

"Why did you revive me?" Her voice was breathless, yet held a certain clip, something almost accusatory.

The blonde knight let her hand fall, as well as her gaze. "You are…" She released a breath and turned away, toward the window that Regina usually sought for an answer. Everything was peaceful in the forest below, as if what horrors had been brought to this kingdom were insignificant in the vast stretch of trees. It only set her on edge and twisted her stomach, the green sea below, swaying in the warm breeze.

"I am…?" She could feel the Queen's presence absorb her and the sickness that stirred within her faded.

Swallowing, Emma turned to meet her smoldering gaze, forcing her heart into her throat. "I told my parents you were my freedom." When she looked into those chestnut eyes, she noticed flecks of gold, as well, shimmering in the gilded rays. It was mesmerizing.

Though, her brow crinkled and those eyes darkened. "Am I?" She asked, quiet, as if she didn't quite trust those words.

"Perhaps," she whispered before the word could perish.

"Perhaps?"

"I saw the world… grow dark when…” Emma felt laughter bubble within her, bitterly leaving her lips. "Did I damn us both?"

"You made a sacrifice when you killed the Dark One and became the legend itself." The Queen's fingers twitched by her side, disappointment creasing her features. "But we are not damned."

"But we are bound by the dagger - daggers." She lifted the blade with her name and gazed upon the steel surface before offering it to the brunette whose eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I want you to carry it."

"Why entrust me with your dagger when I could not return the favor with Rumpel's?" She never moved.
"You had better judgment," Emma muttered. "If I had the blade, initially, I would have killed him."

"You only killed him because he-…" Regina swallowed. "Darkness never clouded your heart, Emma."

"You have my heart within you now, my queen. There is darkness, even if it is very little." She urged the dagger forward, further, waiting for the Queen to make her move, but she never did, only stared. "I trust you with my life, Regina. I would give it over to you as many times as it would take. Reason with me."

"I simply cannot understand why." Her voice was distressed, but she took the weapon finally, holding it tightly, securely.

"What can you not understand?"

"Why you would do anything for me." Her head shook and she could see those dark eyes brim with moisture, but she turned away as quickly, inhaling deeply. "Or have even the slightest desire to. I am nothing but the shadow that covers you, yet, when you are released from it, you only wish to have it return."

"I have grown accustomed to the shade." Emma stepped toward her and felt the tightness in her chest that Regina's emotions brought. "And the warmth it brings."

"Shadows are cold and unforgiving-"

"But they are also inviting; solace from the sun." Emma brushed her fingers against the older woman's as she took place beside her. "And when your storm clouds rolled through, covering me, I allowed myself to get saturated. And… You know why I did what I did, Regina."

The dark witch breathed, letting silence take over for the moment before her rumbling voice spoke, the thunder of Emma's favorite storm. "I can feel it; you. Inside of me, beating, thriving… The emotion that you always attempted to keep at bay." A sigh fell from her lips when she turned, fingers curling tightly into the hilt that it held. "It's bittersweet and it aches, and it seems to tide over everything…"

"It hurts to love you," she whispered, wanting to touch her queen, but refraining from even letting her breath escape. "But I love the pain." She could hear the brunette's breath hitch. "Why not let yourself fall?"

"Because love only scorches you." Her voice wavered. "And I have enough burns."

"I heard you…" Emma reached out, but didn't quite make contact with the olive cheek, though she could still feel the warmth that radiated from her Queen. "Your last words; they were a confession."

She stiffened, her plum-colored lips parting. "No I did not." Though Emma could see the lie on her face, in her eyes.

"You were dying and you were afraid. You were leaving this realm." Regina's breath quickened and she could hear the heart within her chest pound. "And you never had a chance to express what you-"

"You only flatter yourself, Emma." Her lip curled back as she stepped away and looked as if she could allow air back into her lungs, that little sparkle of emotion in her eye dissipating.

"Death brings truth, my queen. You love me."
"I do *not*! *I cannot*! And, within the blink of an eye, she was gone.

Regina was blinded by the rays that peeked through grey clouds as they slowly broke apart. The cool breeze caressed her skin as she paced the stone courtyard before her castle, eyes on the city in the distance. Thick, billowing smoke rose above Stonefell and, when she squinted her eyes against the smog and sunlight, she saw orange as it licked up the stone structures.

*Marvelous,* the city was on fire.

Had it been evacuated?

Well, certainly not a sane, living being would be inhabiting it *now.*

Snorting, she turned away just as a loud rumble struck the air from the distant city. Her eyes caught the remnants of the old cathedral crumbling into itself. Of course, the Gods had always abandoned them; *her.* Darkness clung tighter onto her now, not that she had ever believed in the Gods before.

She walked and let her mind flutter, forgetting the prospect of the *Gods.*

Rumpelstiltskin was dead - the terror that had plagued her life since birth - and for once, she felt *free.*

Laughter fell from her lips, making her appear mad if anyone were watching. But what mind have she? She was free of him, his darkness, his games. She was even free from her fate, now that she was born again into the darkness.

Her heart fluttered inside her chest - no, Emma's heart.

Everything crashed down upon her in that moment, tearing down her walls and letting her spill out of them.

She felt different - she felt *lighter;* as if something had changed inside of her. She could feel Emma, what she felt, that emotion… It took away the darkness, that anger and that hatred, the only things that she had ever known for so very long and… she felt something that she hadn't experienced since a girl, and it terrified her to no end.

It was the light that Emma held - what she had inherited - shining over the dark reaches of her soul, allowing warmth to spread forth from their shared heart, flowering serenity.

But she quickly shook it away as the feeling made her grow ill.

*No.*

She could not allow herself to fall into those carmine depths. It only suffocated her - the very thought of letting herself go. What was said in desperation was not always meant to see the light.

The sound of hooves trampling through mud brought her attention to a small collection of horses as they neared the castle. Ebony-armored men sat atop them and she knew that the war was over. The numbers were frightening, but what use have she of an army now that she was the Dark One?

Coolly, she faced them as they approached, shifting back into her aura of royalty.

At the head of the party she saw Captain Uriel, grim lines on his dark complexion.

"Your Majesty," he greeted in a husky voice, dismounting a black stallion. "The Whites have withdrawn."
"Did you speak with the King or Queen?" A familiar feminine voice queried, coming up from behind the Evil Queen.

Regina felt the hairs on the nape of her neck raise, sending a shiver down her spine, fluttering her heart.

"No. But their men fled the battle quickly after the retreat horns sounded." He turned to face the Black Knight as she stood beside their Queen, clad in charcoal leather.

"How much damage has been dealt?" Jade eyes fell to the dark clouds of smoke still hovering above the city. "They reached the city."

"Yes. There was wind of their attack during your encounter with Snow White." Uriel spoke grimly. "The sentries posted saw them exiting from the forest. I sent men to deal with them, but…" He shook his head.

"Is this all that remains?" Regina queried and let her eyes roam over the weary faces. They paused on two who rode together; a man and a woman. They looked oddly familiar.

"Aye. I had to send for the recruits. There were only a handful left to defend the castle." He shifted uncomfortably under her gaze until Emma freed him of it.

"What of the dwellers in the city?"

"I saw no living soul as we passed through. Most of the city is destroyed… or on fire." The captain scratched behind the ebony steed's ear. "I cannot say for the other villages. The battle was moving toward Arrowhead."

"The kingdom is destroyed," said a voice from the crowd. "What are we to do now?"

The Queen's gaze swept over the small crowd of horse and man. Her kingdom; another thing taken away from her; all on Snow White's head. Coldness gripped her, numbing her mind. "Leave. Enjoy your lives. You are free from my service."

"My queen-" Emma sounded uncertain as she called her name, but it was the captain who spoke.

"We have nowhere to go, Your Majesty. This is our home." Desperation grew in his tone. "And we are here to serve and protect you."

The brunette flashed golden fire upon him, her lips twisting into a baleful scowl. "I do not need you any longer. Certainly you have desires outside of bending knee to me. No one wants the Evil Queen."

"Regina, they have no place to go." The Black Knight spoke beside her and she could feel the presence of that frustrating blonde as she neared, her warmth too hot to bear. "Can we not allow them to remain in the barracks? We can never be too cautious when it comes to enemies."

She forced herself away from the daughter of light and growled. "If it pleases you, Your Highness."

"Rest," demanded the blonde, turning toward what was left of their pitiful army. "I will further speak with the Queen of your future. Leave us for now." Regina did not miss the waver in her voice.

They rode off shortly after, heeding her request as Uriel mounted his horse again, heading toward the stables. Emma remained behind, turning to the Queen whose eyes only followed until their gazes met and she was entranced by her vibrant forest eyes.
Her hair looked paler in the sun, almost as if it were grey instead of spun gold.

"What?" hissed Regina.

Emma didn't flinch. "Had I upset you?"

"Upset me?" The brunette scoffed and paced, feeling the need to avoid any visual contact of the former princess. "No, you have not. Though, if you continue to pester…"

Her voice was silken as it reached her ears, making her heart stutter. "What I said earlier about you—You loving me. I—" She shook her head, losing whatever small drip of confidence she had suckled. "You left your dagger."

Regina's eyes fell to the flash of steel as Emma produced the weapon from its sheath. It looked foreign—seeing her name etched on the very blade she had known as Rumpelstiltskin's. An intangible forced pulled her to it, but she sought out the dagger attached to her own being—Emma's. "I have no room on my person to carry it. Why not hold onto it, yourself?"

Surprise clung to the younger woman's features. "Are you sure, my queen?"

The brunette nodded carefully and watched as Emma replaced the weapon. "The risk of being controlled is significantly less if we held onto each other's dagger. If one might take it, they will be unable to control the original wielder and we could very easily sweep through them before they inflict damage."

"I—… I suppose I had not thought of that," Emma said, her eyes falling to the swaths of dark clouds. "We will be—"

"Indelible," Regina finished, a smirk crossing over her features. "Two Dark Ones joining forces…"

"It can be dangerous." The blonde knight's boots moved along the cobbled stone of the front court and the Queen could not help but to follow. "What shall we do?"

"I imagine we shall start anew. No one will be able to control us. Not any longer."

"No, I…" She touched the mossy edge of a fountain that no longer produced water. It was as tall as the two women combined and made of marble, but one could no longer decipher its true integrity for it was laden with green and brown filth. Most of the yard looked unkempt.

The Evil Queen lost desire of beauty in possession long ago.

Shaking those thoughts that had chased away her attention, she found why when silence still clung to the air—aside from the distant grumble of falling stone and the fire that devoured it. "You…?"

"I was thinking of the men and women under your liege. What will become of them?" Those eyes matched the moss as they fell upon her, though the shining irises held a certain beauty that gripped her.

_The only beauty that I have desired._

"They will settle elsewhere. Perhaps your mother will take them in." She spat the word and turned. _How could this be Snow White's daughter?_

"And the ones sworn to your service?"
"Because she cares too much."

"What use have I of their service? I have you - my Black Knight. We are invincible."

"They have given you much. We must repay them for their services." The sound of the leather alerted her movements. Her steady gaze met the Queen's. "And no other will accept them, knowing they were once a part of your army."

"We certainly cannot have a band of men follow us. That will draw attention." Little thought went to the fate of her men. Everything else was crumbling down around her and perhaps it was for the better. This was a new era of her life; an era that will last eternity. "We leave them the castle."

"The-... The castle?" Emma's gaze was scrutinizing.

"I grow weary of it and the kingdom has gone to soot." Her lips curved upward when she saw the sparkle of interest in her forbidden lover's eyes. "If you will join me, we shall explore the world; the realms. Our options are limitless and there is no one that can stop us."

Their first journey landed them in Rumpelstiltskin's castle a few sunrises later. The energy of the dead man left behind lifted the hairs on Emma's body with unease and the silence was less than comforting. Its ceilings were high and vaulted, and the russet table in the hall stretched long and empty.

She saw a single red rose in the middle.

"He has his playthings stored in the next room," Regina rumbled beside her and she unconsciously followed, thinking of the chestnut-haired woman in the yellow dress.

"I remember seeing them briefly," she murmured and found herself in another large room, though it was filled with displays of varying items. Weapons, vases, boxes, and some things she could not decipher, but they were no doubt all magical artifacts. "What are we to do here?"

"Take what interests us. These items are ours, now," answered the Dark Queen as she glided across the smooth, marbled floors.

"Amazing," she murmured, a small, petulant part of her blooming with excitement.

"Amazing? I suppose so. These items will certainly come in handy." Regina weaved between the displays, eyes shining. "Whether we deal to others or keep them for ourselves."

"Do you know what powers they hold?" Emma found herself standing before a singular arrow perched on a hold. The point itself was light pink and fashioned into a point from two rounded ends. The wood was light, birch, and the tail held short red and white feathers. She could not resist the urge to reach out and touch it.

"Do not touch that!" Regina's voice shook her and she quickly pulled her hand away.

"I was not going to!" Eyes wide, she carefully stepped around the offending arrow and looked to her Queen.

The older woman looked at her, eyes narrowing and lips pursing. "I saw that look in your eye, do not lie to me. Resist the urge to touch things without consulting with me beforehand. These items are dangerous."
Emma nodded, keeping her hands close as she observed the arrow more closely, wondering how such a thing could be constituted as dangerous. "What does it do?"

"They call that Cupid's Arrow. One prick sends you madly in love with whomever first crosses your sight." Her husky voice followed her as she neared the weapon.

"It would have no effect on me." Emma purred, eyes never leaving her brunette queen and her dark features. "You are the only one here, after all."

Regina's eyes shot up to meet her gaze, intensely devouring her. "It is a dangerous weapon." She glossed over the implication, or she merely chose not to accept it. "Men who have used this to gain the love of their romantic interests have had their subject catch sight of another. And, if that happened, death would claim them both."

"Death?"

"Cupid, they say, is benevolent when it comes to love. I believe it is merely a power that alludes to something special, but ultimately leaves you burned and broken." Her eyes glazed over before she completely broke her gaze, leaving Emma's heart to sink into her stomach. Quickly, the blonde searched for a distraction as the Queen continued to speak. "And as much is proven when the object of affection is taken with another. The wielder of the arrow and the receiver are said to die of sorrow, for they would never find a love like the one they yearn. I believe the arrow is a mere trick, letting you believe you could force love."

The Evil Queen laughed and Emma let it fill her completely. Though, there was something about her statement that felt as if it desecrated the joy that once leapt inside her heart. Was she trying to force Regina to love her?

"What point is there to love?" The brunette whispered to herself.

Emma decided to let her eyes guide her toward a large chest and let her fingers move along the rough and splintered exterior, letting the subject shift. "Are we to live here?"

"Gods, no." Regina roared with laughter, letting the solemn mood that had taken her dissipate. "I say we burn it to the ground."

"Truly?" Inside the chest she found several garments, all of varying degrees. Some were torn and ragged while others spoke of royal pasts. Were they enchanted? Or were they the clothes of Rumpel's former victims? "A shame, but this place must be haunted with as many people he had killed."

"The lands are tainted," agreed the brunette witch as she approached, a sleek black box in hand, though her eyes were on the contents of the chest. "He always did like his souvenirs."

Emma slammed the chest shut and faced the older woman. "What have you found?"

The smile on her features grew when she opened the metal lid, revealing a pile of sparkling, opaque beans. "Magic beans," she said, plucking one out to hand to her knight. Emma observed it in her hand, flipping the little bean on her palm. It looked small and simple. "We can travel to any realm we wish."

"How did--I thought these were difficult to acquire?" She replaced the bean and Regina closed the lid, sealing the small chest tight.

"There are giants that grow them. One of them must have owed him a favor. Or he decided to steal a
few for himself." The brunette dropped the box into a velvet bag, too small to hold the item in its entirety. "It is enchanted, do not look so struck."

"That will certainly be useful in our travels," she murmured and let her gaze drift away, finding the room empty. "Did-

"Yes, I took everything." A pleased grin crossed the Queen's features. "We do not want thieves to come upon these items, do we?"

When Emma shook her head, Regina parted ways and filtered into the corridor. The knight followed her into another area filled with magical artifacts and it hadn't taken long to clean the room of them with a few more stern words from the Dark Queen when she touched a few interesting objects.

She was stunted by another box, though, this one small and wooden, carved with intricate design, its corners covered by iron. Inside was a strange lavender powder.

"What is-"

"Do not inhale that!" Regina was quick to shut the lid and tossed the little box into the enchanted bag. "It is a sleeping powder that will render you unconscious. I do not wish to carry you back to the castle."

"O-kay." Emma paced the empty room. "Why did he need it when our magic allows us to do so ourselves?"

"For show," she muttered. "He quite adored his theatrics. It was something he utilized when I came in search of you."

"How powerful is it?"

"It can keep you unconscious fo-"

"Rumpel? What's happened in here?"

The Evil Queen's chestnut gaze froze on the doorway when the voice had spoken.

Emma immediately recognized the source as Belle, the beast's beauty. She was harmless, though Regina looked as if she were going in for the kill the way she stalked out of the room. The blonde knight quickly followed to prevent another death and found the blue-eyed brunette in the empty display room.

Belle gasped when she saw the two. "What are you doing here?"

"We were waiting to have tea with you, pet." Regina moved gracefully across the room to meet the brunette woman who remained frozen in her spot, ice-blue eyes filled with terror. She could feel the power that once clung to her putrid lover.

"Where is Rumpel?"

"He is old news, dear. Worry not, you will not have to linger in this world without your captor long." Her dark-painted lips twitched, stretching into a sinister smile.

"Regina!" The blonde stepped forward, standing between the two women. "She has done no wrong."

"But she is his pet." Her eyes were lit with an internal fire. "Was."
"W-was?" Belle's voice shook and Emma could feel the fear that came off her. It made her shudder when she found some deep, dark part of her fed off this distress.

"He is dead," said the Dark Queen simply, grinning.

"Dead?" Blood drained from Belle's face. "He cannot be dead…"

"But you feel it, don't you?" As if pleased by her sudden distraught, Regina purred, letting that baleful curl on her lips grow and touch her eyes. "You did have your chance to remove the wretched curse, to diminish it from this world. I had told you how to go about doing so."

"Regina…"

"But you let is pass, like a plague, and your life is in the unforgiving hands of darkness." The Evil Queen pushed past the blonde knight to reach the woman who stood in her yellow dress, a statue in her spot.

Emma, through the will of her mother's goodness, shielded the helpless woman and stared down her Queen, fear no longer shaking her. "Do not do this, Regina. What need have we to spill innocent blood?"

"You are one to speak, Emma, slayer of the Dark One." Her features hardened and a distant, dark monster reflected in her chestnut eyes.

But the knight stood her ground and growled, "He was not innocent and you know that very well. Is this what you will do with the gift of life?"

"For the first time I am free. I will not have you telling me who I am; what I can do." The brunette stepped toward her. The power in the room shifted.

"I am not telling you what to do, my queen…" She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling the hot breath of her lover on her cheek, tingling her skin. "You have been called evil most of your life, where is Regina?"

"Why should Regina spare this woman? The one who consorted with the Dark One?" Regina asked haughtily, though the blonde knew her words were striking something within her.

"My queen, she is harmless. Rumpel is gone." Emma attempted her rationalization one last time and finally saw the resignation in Regina's eyes.

"Leave before I find your heart in my hand, turned to dust." From behind the Black Knight, Regina's eyes fell to the frightened brunette, still aghast.

"I-I cannot just leave." Her voice shook and Emma felt the need to turn around and slap her across the face. She had given her a fair out, but she was only going to throw it away. Regina's benevolence was not offered twice. "I have nowhere to go…"

"What of your kingdom? Your father?" Regina's eyes narrowed.

"Rumpel forbade me to speak with him…" Belle shrunk into herself. "And he killed any men who attempted to rescue me."

"Now you are free of such confinement. Whether you loved the beast, or not." The brunette Queen strode toward the younger woman now that Emma had stepped aside, though she remained tense, waiting for one wrong movement. "And you are young, yet. A fine Queen you will make."
"I-I cannot-"

Within the blink of an eye, the blue-eyed woman was consumed by violet magic. Emma stared at the empty space where she had once stood before the blooming anger within her burst forth.

"What did you do with her?"

Regina turned to her, calm, and smirked. "I sent her back to her kingdom. Worry not, dear knight. She is safe." The word was spoken bitterly before she departed from the room, leaving Emma alone.

Slowly, she allowed herself to relax and believe, for just that moment, that Regina was telling the truth and that she hadn't sent Belle over a cliff to hungry sharks. As she followed her Queen in search of loot, she thought about her resignation.

She was allowed this one small victory, but she felt that future endeavors might not bring her such fruit.

They stood before a man who wore a crown of jewels and velvet atop his wisp of white hair. His face was wizened and pale with age; though they intensified when the women appeared before him, his foggy eyes widening. It pleased Regina to see him in his old age.

"You; what are you doing here?" His tone did not hide the venom that resided within those words.

"King George, how pleasant it is to see you again." A smirk curled upon the Evil Queen's features as she approached him, everything static in her movement. Guards hid along the walls. She could hear them shift.

Admirably, he stood his ground, his withered form stiffening to meet her gaze.

"Are you truly so insolent as to attack? Maleficent stands behind us still."

"Are you quite sure about that? She used you," she said, her smoldering eyes devouring him alive as she laughed. She could almost feel the way his blood pumped through his veins; his heart racing. It tasted delicious - the fear that suddenly radiated off him. "She used you to exact her revenge on me."

His pallid features only grew paler as he blubbered his next thought, sounding angry. It made her warm sensing his weakness. "Thus her favor lies with us."

But Regina cackled and touched his quivering chest, feeling the heart pound underneath it. He stiffened. "I have a special place inside my heart for traitors like you."

The Evil Queen had turned to King George - the kingdom closest to her own - when Maleficent had sent threat of an attack. She wanted revenge for the curse and her little pet. But, at the last moment, right before they were headed into battle, George had revealed that he was working with Maleficent - the dragon had offered him better goods, protection, he said. She had lost many men, too many to confidently attack the traitor. But, now, there was nothing stopping her.

"Wait, Regina!" Emma finally spoke, stepping forward, curling the brunette's fingers against the rich fabric of his garment. "We should- We should make a better name for the Dark One."

"The Dark One?" asked the King, his eyes narrowing. "Where is Rumpelstiltskin?"

"You called upon him, did you not?" Regina's gaze shot back to him. That little organ inside his chest pumped faster. "That is why we are here."
"Are you working for him?"

His words forced laughter from her once again. "Work for him? I would rather die." She shook her head. "Have you not heard? Rumpelstiltskin is dead. I am the new Dark One."

Disbelief filled his light gaze and he stepped away, but Regina seized him with a magical vise. "You lie!"

"Emma?" She looked to the Black Knight standing steps behind her and nodded toward the dagger attached to her thigh. The blonde hesitated for a moment before pulling the weapon free and stepped forward, showing the old man the blade.

"Impossible! He cannot- He would not-" He flustered, his arms pinned to his sides. True fear flashed in his eyes, quivering his form.

"What did you desire from the Dark One?" Regina smirked. "Protection against the Evil Queen for fear she will tear you down?"

He spat, "no! I am... I am ill. The Dark One's powers could cure me." The dark circles and sunken features alluded to more than just his incline in years.

"They could, yes," she said slowly, calculating what she could do with his plea.

"Please. The heir to the throne is a slimy louse. My nephew. He will only sink the kingdom."

"Well, these things do tend to come with a price." The Dark Queen released him from her magic, knowing she had him still in her clutches. He was desperate.

"I will accept your terms, whatever they may be. Time is valuable to a man like me."

Something sinister curled onto her features. "Anything?"

He nodded and spoke, "anything."

"Words borne from a desperate man can be quite dangerous." But she fabricated a contract from thin air and offered him a quill. "But desperate men often find themselves kissing boots they never once desired to bow down to."

"I am desperate - I understand that." George plucked the quill from her grip and hovered over the long piece of parchment, shaking, hesitating. "I must be if I am taking offers from you."

"But what other Dark One have you, dear?" Emma remained quiet in her spot as the tip of the pen touched the contract. Regina's breath hitched, as if that very point touched her skin. "Too terrified to lose your pact with Maleficent if you begged her?"

"She would not help, either way. It is not of her benefit." He coughed and covered his mouth. She could feel her patience waning.

"Will you sign? Or will you not? I have no time to waste with an old man."

He stood silent for a moment as if in contemplation, but Regina knew there was no serious thought. Desperate men. She could laugh at them as she watched the old one before her sign the contract, binding him to her. As soon as the parchment disappeared, color returned to his face and the sickly complexion faded.

"Rejoice, for the King is healed." The sorceress mocked. "Where is this sweet nephew of yours?"
Curiosity froze him, icy eyes landing on the daunting form dressed in black. "Your price is the boy?"

She smirked, eyes falling to the large bay window behind the old King and to the setting sun that lay behind it. "No, no. I do not want anything that carries your blood within his veins."

"Are you sure? It would do well to rid the realm of the boy." His voice was gruff and cold. Clearly he did not care much for his own kin.

"I merely wish to meet this boy who will inherit the throne." She tilted her head and watched as he shrank away from the penetrating glare. "How many years is he?"

"Fourteen," he answered, throwing his visible fear out the window and straightening, acting as the King that he was. "Philip!" He called and soon a boy with a shock of dirty blond hair shuffled through the doorway. His features were soft and rounded, but Regina knew that when he grew older he would no doubt be handsome and rugged - unlike the man that stood before her, at her mercy.

"Yes, uncle?" His voice cracked as he spoke.

"This is Queen Regina, of…" His brows knitted together as he turned toward the Evil Queen. "What did you take to calling your kingdom again?"

"It is the Kingdom With No Name." Pearl was shown between plum lips. "Though many have taken to calling it the Forbidden Kingdom."

"The Evil Queen," the boy named Philip gasped, his hazel eyes landing on the woman who stood taller than him. Though they soon fell to the blonde who still remained poised next to her Queen, silent. The way his young, dark eyes ate her up made the brunette step closer to the other woman, a growl bubbling in her throat. "Am I to marry her daughter?" His features showed no quarrel.

Instead of letting her impending growl resound, she laughed and shook her head. Emma looked to her, confusion on her darling features. "No. She is not my daughter."

"Am I to marry… you?" Philip turned to the King and whined petulantly. "But, uncle, she is old. She has nothing to offer and certainly cannot bare heirs. Men of all kingdoms will not approach her, I heard. They have no desire for anything she holds. It is worthless. I do not want her."

Before George could reprimand his words, Regina had the boy pinned against the wall with the ease of magic, hissing. "I dare you to speak those words again, boy."

She advanced on him, but was stopped by a hand. By her touch alone, she knew it was Emma, and allowed herself to stop from moving; though her lips pulled back into a snarl. "I will not allow him to slander my name before me."

"He is only recounting what he hears." As if in spite, her body betrayed her, relaxing as she met those soft, green pools. "Have mercy, my queen."

"Mercy? You did not show mercy to the imp." Her brow furrowed when she felt a nudge in her heart - that goodness, that light, that Emma carried with her. No. What place does goodness have inside of her? Darkness was the only thing there when the world gave up on her, why should she forsake it now?

Rumpelstiltskin did as he pleased while he was the Dark One, why couldn't she? Because that little blonde princess told her to?

She moved toward George, now, who had called for his guards. They surrounded her, but she easily
killed them with a flick of her wrist and stepped into his frightened atmosphere, thrusting a hand inside his chest. She gripped his heart tightly - that organ that pumped so furiously now - and ripped it from him, leaving the old man to gasp as if he were a fish removed from water.

"Regina!" Emma tried to ground her, to pull her up, but she let the darkness talk to her, seduce her into its murky sea.

"Do you wish to know of my price?" she asked, eyes on the paling man as he stood, slowly regaining himself.

"What do you want of me?" His eyes never left that scarlet piece of him.

"I want your kingdom to **crumble.**" Her fingers curled tightly around the pulsing organ, earning a groan of pain from the white-haired man, but it only rang as music through her ears. "And I want you to perish with it."
"Maleficent."

The gentle glow of morning light cut through the shadows to cover that very woman - that witch - who gazed upon the intruder with sinister delight.

"Always with the theatrics, Regina," purred Maleficent, stepping forward in greeting. "Please do refrain from breaking my doors, I had them recently replaced."

Regina allowed a smirk onto her face, her fingers flexing at her sides. She had been waiting so long for this moment, to tear down the dragon that steadily declined her integrity. "You will not need them for very long, I am afraid."

"And I trust that you know I will defend myself if need be if you feel inclined to attack." Maleficent tensed, sensing the hostility. "Whether we are friends, or not."

"Friends? We were never friends."

"I would have liked to consider myself as such after our bond so many years ago."

The sound that emanated from the Dark Queen was primal, stemming from the slow-burning fire within her belly. "Friends do not attack one another, leaving their defenses weak."

Maleficent's brow pinched, her body growing rigid. "You left me no choice."

"No choice? I threatened your pet, nothing more." She recalled the small pony that the blonde witch had cherished and the desperation in her features when Regina had threatened its life. When she had come to her, demanding the Dark Curse, Maleficent had the audacity to suggest she merely needed a beastly companion to keep her attention. No doubt it was her fear talking of what would become of her if the curse would have succeeded. "It died anyways, dear. I would have gifted you a favor and spared the imminent pain."

Maleficent's lips pulled into an unattractive scowl as she paced the nondescript burgundy rug lain in the main hall, her green eyes burning. Regina had to take her in twice when she thought they glowed. "What business have you here?"

Straight to the point. Good. She was tiring of petty conversation. Regina straightened, her fingers digging into her charcoal cloak as her lips curled into a crimson smirk. "Certainly not to have tea and catch up like old lovers."

As she neared her former mentor, she could hear the air in her lungs escape and that sweet, pulsing organ in her chest pump furiously. A pleasant chill worked its way down her spine and pooled in the center of her excitement. Gods, it was intoxicating to watch as they fell. "You were the one that had killed him." Her words were breathless, a simple statement rather than a question, as most others had tended to ask.

She could feel the corners of her mouth dig into her cheeks as that smirk grew, secure as she had always been while she towered over the mice. "Has word left mouth quite so soon? I did try to decimate those who knew of my existence, but alas, one or two might have escaped to spread rumors."

Regina did not miss the glowing hue that Maleficent's emerald gaze took, illuminating the otherwise
dimly lit hall. Wisps of thin, grey smoke created a soft haze around the shape-shifter's being as she exhaled - a way to threaten, no doubt, but it had only elicited a soft snort from the Dark Queen. "I should have known. There was no method to the slaughter, as if one had been thinking with hate instead of logic - very you."

Husky laughter filled the hall. "You are frightened."

There was a look of defiance in the dragon's eyes, but her words spoke differently. "I am sorry, Regina, for wronging you. I should not have." A shudder tore through Maleficent's hunched being. Regina could sense the fear, though it only came in small waves, as if it were only a feather tickling her skin. "We can- We can work together. I have many more years left in me, and you have plenty to spare."

Regina shook her head, a rumble of laughter rising in her throat. Around her reptile eyes, ebony scales started to appear like a rash, taking over the pale skin. "Are you truly resorting to pleading? How so very unlike you." The blonde witch slowly took another step backward. "You cannot run from me. I will be wherever you go."

"I do not wish to harm you, my friend." Maleficent's form tensed as she spoke, attempting to keep her voice neutral, though Regina detected the strain, the treble.

"Harm me? You cannot harm me. And, here, I thought you were much wiser. Pity."

With her ever-blooming satisfaction, Regina raised a hand, letting the magic within her surge through her bloodstream and touch her fingertips, the warmth of it white hot as it shot forth to touch the woman shrouded in magic.

"Transforming will not help you!" Regina called over the roar that tore through the too-small space as the form of a dragon filled it. Something long and black swept toward her, knocking her onto the carpeted stone as Maleficent elegantly surged forward, flames as hot as a thousand burning suns flowing from her grand maw.

"Coward!" the brunette shouted over the crackling fire as both marble and stone melted, leaving a hole for the dragon to escape. "Certainly less work for I to do."

Regina chased the tail of her former mentor as Maleficent fled to the crisp morning air and through the blazing infernal that soon became her castle. The dragon crouched, muscles tensing underneath ebony scales, and launched herself into the sky, wings pushing wind underneath them. The Dark Queen braced herself as the gust pushed her backward and thrust her magic forward, ceasing Maleficent's escape.

"You thought you could run. How darling." A roar from that mighty dragon followed her words and stressed her magic as she twisted in the air, a black blur. "Do not use that tone with me," she purred after the distressed screech had ebbed.

"Could you not be so difficult?" Regina breathed, growing weary of concentrating her magic on the shifting dragon and lowered her to the ground as a protesting snarl had answered. "You are quite rude," she muttered. Those luminescent eyes narrowed, harboring enmity, as if they dared her to continue. Well, she certainly was not one to be antagonized without show, thus she said, "I have a new spell up my sleeve that I have been aching to utilize."

Smoke filled the chilled air, warming her, but also speaking of the dragon's growing fright, desperation.
Regina let the violet magic flow from her, but it felt carmine, like needles that didn't quite penetrate, as if she were holding the blunt end, forcing the point on her victim. It took a moment for the dragon to react - for those sharp ends to meet her thick skin- but when it had, an agonized roar ripped through the otherwise peaceful field. Emerald disappeared, pinched behind two ebony lids as the large maw opened to reveal sharp, yellowed teeth and breath that smelled of rotten flesh.

The brunette witch was lost inside her power, letting it tide over her like a sea and pull her underneath its churning waves. Maleficent's large form convulsed underneath this new magic, feeling the wrath that was thrust upon her from the caster, eating away her strength.

For a singular moment, Regina relieved her of this torture, her own breath heavy as she watched the dragon, limp as she rested upon the crushed grass, her chest heaving, billowing thick clouds of smoke.

"You should have known crossing me would only end in death, my dear friend."

Without a second thought, she gripped Maleficent once again in her binding magic, piercing her with a thousand needles, injecting acid into her veins. The dragon's howled screeches seemed to caress Regina's ears - the fear, the desperation, the pain - they only stoked the coals burning within her, surging a foreign power that she welcomed with open arms.

It was titillating, watching as this powerful creature was reduced to a quivering, whimpering mess, at her mercy. This power was something that carried her far, raising her high above the ground to look upon those less worthy - those ants that only scurried at her feet.

Red and black and that incandescent green was all she saw, lifting her higher, taking her away from what little humanity she had. Evil - darkness - could not only exist within the heart, it had to take over the soul, as well, the brain.

Her game was kept, releasing the dragon of her magic for only a breath before bringing hell upon her again. Oh, if only she could hear her speak, hear her beg for death. She laughed until she felt something stir within the atmosphere, shifting as another being had joined them. The presence was drawing, grounding, but she did not want to let go of her heights.

"Regina," Emma pleaded from beside her, an edge to her voice. Had she seen the monster lurking within her again?

Regina's dark gaze snapped toward the intruder, relieving the dragon once again, too weak to fly as she pawed the ground, convulsing, letting obsidian blood stain the grass.

"You are better than to... to torture."

There was a look of distress in Emma's soft green eyes, as if she were desperate for the pain to stop as much as Maleficent, but Regina did not let those emotions penetrate her. Instead, she let anger blister through her mind, screaming, she must pay.

"I realize that she has betrayed you, Regina, but that does not mean you must kill her."

"Yes it does!"

It was hot again, the feeling that washed over her, that took her hand and invaded her mind. Without her control, her magic had flared once again, expelling from her like excrement, and the dragon screeched in agony, falling back toward the earth. She tried to run, Regina absentely noticed, though the thought was a memory as she let the world fade.
Emma’s voice called her name, but it sounded underwater, drowned out by Maleficent’s misery. It pierced her brain, the Black Knight’s voice, as if she had been whispering in her ear. Words that she had heard before.

*We need to make a better name... You will regret this... There is no gratification...*

And as soon as they were spoken, they became a memory as she forced them away, forced away any hindrance. Instead, she swayed, as if she were inebriated off the power and her former mentor’s impending demise. Vaguely she heard laughter - something that sounded on the brink of insanity.

Yet, before she could determine that it had been coming from herself, she saw the world fly around her in a green and blue blur. She fell to the ground, the air knocked from her lungs. Above her was a grand fir, its needles on fire.

There was no pain even though the impact would have broken a mortal’s bones. Irritation took her once she realized Maleficent was across the field, now, a lump of ebony scale and Emma stood a few yards away, anger on her delicate features.

"Do not give me that look, Emma," she spat and stood, approaching the two once again, a new fury generating within her.

As she neared, she saw Maleficent shuddering as she breathed, drawn groans rumbling within her tremendous body as she polluted the morning with her fire’s vapors. As she lifted her off the ground, growing numb to the compassion that Emma wanted her to feel, she heard a vicious hiss leave the dragon.

"Am I to be threatened by that?" she asked and pulled her lip back into a snarl, fingers curling into a fist as she intended her magic to squeeze the shape-shifter, willing her bones to break.

As soon as she had, she heard Emma beside her, boots stalking through the grass. "Do not attempt to stop me. I do not appreciate being halted." She heard another plea, distant, a memory, and didn’t know whether it was within her head or spoken, but she passed it off, watching the dragon’s body as it started to morph, becoming crushed within the magical vise.

*Join me. Let the darkness sway you, swallow you whole. It is beautiful and ecstatic, like bathing in the warmth of blood, making love in it."

"I cannot harm her for she has done me no wrong," Emma answered her thoughts, stepping closer to her, knowing she could not harm, though there was the prospect of the dagger.

The words only brought forth her irritation. What good was a second Dark One if she would not join her within the absolute darkness? Yet, as she protested the thought of what Emma brought, she could feel it within her, that resistance to what she was doing, and growled, throwing the dragon against the castle and breaking its immediate structure.

As the grand form fell, it shifted back into its small, fragile counterpart, dropping unconscious against the charred earth.

"Weak," Regina muttered and looked to her vulnerable form, wickedness tugging at her lips.

"Regina!" Emma warned again. "She was once your friend, have you no compassion for this woman? In your memories, she told you she meant you no harm. Why not show her the same mercy?"

"Mercy!" Regina laughed and stalked toward Maleficent, driving a hand into her chest, gripping the
pulsing organ inside. Maleficent was brought back to consciousness, gasping in pain, fingers curling into her palms. There was a dullness in her eyes as she looked upon the Dark Queen, pleading, desperate, but the brunette merely smirked, squeezing the weakly pumping organ.

She could never tire of the music this elicited.

"You do not always have to be evil, Regina." Emma's voice was in her ear and she felt as the blonde touched her, an onslaught of emotion filling her, raw and powerful - panic, fear, desperation, love - and the shock of it forced the heart from her hand as she experienced them, lifting them from Emma.

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

"I did nothing… I…" Emma was halted by confusion before she quickly ducked to take the heart, movements too swift for the Dark Queen to gather from her stupor. She was frozen when their eyes met. "Friends may have their arguments, their fights…"

"And what do you know of friendship?" she growled. They were one and the same, left without a companion in this world - aside from each other, now.

"I know that you should not waste it. Maleficent could be useful in the future." Emma implored, her lips sinking into a frown as she kept Maleficent's heart in her grip.

Regina growled, eyes on the red mass before she knocked it from the blonde's grip, startling Emma as it fell to the ground beside Maleficent.

"What-"

"Why must you insist on emotion as if it were the only salvation in this world? Force me to feel it?"

"Because you have half of my heart."

"It is merely a burden." Regina bit, but the venom was absent. She had grown exhausted of this fight.

"It is not a burden, my queen, it is a strength. Imagine what you could accomplish." Emma touched her elbow, but Regina quickly pulled away, hissing, as if it had stung her. "If you opened yourself to new horizons."

"New horizons." She echoed, the burning emotion in her stomach slowly ebbed, leaving her light headed, drained, as if her energy had been used in the adrenaline of Maleficent's pain. She closed her eyes, letting the world swim around her.

"What is there to gain from killing her? Empty vengeance? Leave her to suffer. Many of her bones are broken and she is in great pain." Regina's eyes opened when those words left Emma's lips, taken aback by this sudden change in belief and stared at the blonde. Emma's lips were pressed together.

"Death is far too finite."

"It certainly is." Pleased, she kicked the heart away from Maleficent, letting it soar into the burning rubble. The dragon winced in reaction, but donned a look of relief, knowing it was over.

Regina smirked when she saw the shift in expression and bent to Maleficent's level, purring, "this is far from over, friend."

Maleficent met her glare, and through her bloodied and bruised face, she smiled, a wheezing laughter filling the smoky air. "I will see you at the wedding."
Emma watched as blood painted the rough, cobbled stone and felt the warmth of it splatter against her pale face. The victim gurgled her dying words as she succumbed to the ebony blade's fatal edge, her throat opened deep from its touch. She was the last of the living in the city of stone and as soon as she fell, dead, everything was quiet.

She breathed deeply and looked to the twinkling stars that shone above her, wondering how she came to be in such a position. The darkness had crept into her veins and Regina had invaded her mind, but she willingly lost herself to the chaos. The woman at her feet was not an innocent; she was a petty thief, stealing away the goods of God-fearing men. Though, the ones before her were not, ridiculing her deluded justification.

After their encounter with King George months ago, they had taken to answering most calls for the Dark One. It was Regina who had dealt with them and most ended in bloodshed; as it had with the King and his nephew. Emma searched for the Queen as she thought back to the memory.

The raven-haired Dark One had forced the old King to send his nephew to war with the dragon before she stole away with his heart. He was her puppet and, as time drew on, his kingdom fell apart. The King regained his illness and lost hope, and as he deteriorated, he called for Regina again, begging her to set him free, for death. But she left him alone with his heart on the floor and he died, bitter in his bed, cursing her name.

When she returned, Emma saw the dust on her clothing, but did not confront her.

The blonde Dark One attempted to make good of her title - and guide her Queen along the way. She put an end to all deals and broke any contracts that had remained, freeing the doomed souls attached to them. Regina had disagreed and rampaged, tearing through innocents and avenging those who had wronged her. But soon she realized that there were too many and the blood on her hands was not satisfying her thirst.

Until tonight when they both fell, seduced by the hunger that gnawed at them from the inside. There was something grotesquely satisfying about spilling blood and Emma would have pegged it on the darkness that consumed her if she had not felt this energy, this cold numbness, before the dark powers had ever taken her.

The city in which she stood was once the Evil Queen's very own, now ravaged by a band of vagabond thieves and murderers looking for treasure among the rubble. Despite having built a castle on a cliff that overlooked the sea, Regina still felt something in their shared heart for these lands, for the abandoned kingdom. She wanted it clean, untouched, aside from the debris that cluttered the once great settlement.

That, and one of the thieves had taken something from them - albeit small and senseless, but Regina did not tolerate petty thievery.

"Did you find it, my queen?" Emma located the very woman standing before two men whose necks were broken. She saw the glisten of blood on their clothes and knew the Queen had her fun with them.

"Yes," she answered, though there was nothing in her hand. "They insisted they did not steal it from my carriage. Filthy vagrants."

"You would think they would know better than to cross you." The blonde stepped around the corpses and walked among the rubble, eyes on the city she had visited very few times in her days at the Evil Queen's old castle. Something heavy burdened her heart. She would have enjoyed bringing
Regina's kingdom to great prosperity. And she wouldn't have minded visiting the city in search of odd trinkets.

She had, only the prior month, found a necklace adorned with rubies. The piece was large and would have covered her breast-bone if she wore such jewelry, but she had gifted it to her Queen, who wore it often. Red always looked so very beautiful against her skin.

"Emma."

"Yes?" The blonde turned toward the leather-clad Queen who followed behind her, but Regina's brow merely scrunched.

"I said nothing." Her husky voice answered.

"Oh?" Emma shook her head. "I must be imagining things."

"Perhaps rest would be a suitable thing for you." Regina chuckled softly as they crossed the field, enjoying the cool night's breeze. "We have been pillaging for far too long."

"Perhaps," she murmured. Pillaging, the Queen called it. Emma could not disagree. Bodies and destruction was left in their path. The blonde wanted to deny having enjoyed the fear she felt upon encountering those who stared upon them as if they were Gods - or demons. It was impossible to deny the monster that lived within her, especially with Regina by her side.

She tried to keep her head above the surface, but she could feel it tug her under, pulling at her ankle and urging her deeper-

"Emma." The voice came again, calling her name, sounding as if it were underwater.

The blonde knight paused and the Queen noticed. "What is it?"

"Did you hear that?"

"I heard nothing."

"Emma." As it came again, she heard a feminine lilt.

"I heard it again." Quickly, she whipped around, but all that was behind her was the fallen city.

Regina only watched, a slight look of concern on her beautiful features. "Have you finally gone mad?"

"Emma."

"Gods… I must have. It- It sounds like my mother." But how could that be while they stood in this forbidden kingdom?

"Snow White?" The Queen's lip curled as if she had tasted something bitter. "Is she calling you through-"

"I-I believe so. You cannot hear her?" Emma shuddered when she heard her mother's voice invade her mind once again. Regina shook her head.

"When the Dark One's name has been called, it was predominately for Rumpelstiltskin." The brunette shifted in the green brush, eyes narrowed. It had taken them a while to realize the voices in their heads was meant as a plea from desperate souls seeking the devil's hand. "Will you answer?"
"Should I?" she answered quietly, hesitantly. Her gaze lifted to meet Regina's and she could feel herself falling.

The brunette pressed her lips together. "I only sense that bad will come of this."

Emma closed her eyes briefly. Her words were chilling. She could sense something deep within her, something wrong, but her name continued to echo. "Perhaps I should settle thoughts with Snow. She is persistent."

Regina looked displeased, but dipped her head, regardless. "I do not like the idea of you crossing into her territory alone," she grumbled. "I shall join you."

"Of course," Emma whispered, extending a hand. When Regina took it, the two left the open field and found themselves standing before a familiar burning hearth. They were in her parents' bedchambers. She remembered it well from her childhood - playing in front of the fire while her mother warned her to mind herself, reading worn tomes of past adventures, her mother singing her to sleep as she held her in her arms.

The blonde shuddered and forced the memories away. She needed to remember the bitter resentment she felt, being forbidden from entering the city without guard, being forbidden from ever entering the world that lay beyond these binding castle walls.

"Emma?" The voice sounded solid, now, rather than a distant memory in her head. Emma turned to be faced with her mother's haggard face; those once beautiful features were deepened and darkened with weariness. Something moved along the walls - guards, Emma had noticed, a shock of silver. They left through the door.

"I heard you call for me."

The dominating presence of the Evil Queen soon turned Snow's already pallid face several shades lighter when she pulled her gaze from Emma. "What did you do, Emma?" Her words were breathless, horrified, and it chilled her bones. She was seeing a ghost.

Uneasily, Emma stepped forward and watched as her mother tensed. For once, she could not blame Snow for being nervous. Anger drove one to unfathomable lengths. "I-I could not…" Her throat tightened as she brought herself back to that day - something still so very vivid in her mind, and the emotions that still clung to her, aching. It flared within her like a storm, but the hand on her shoulder - the one that belonged to the dark and royal woman - dulled it to a soft thrum. Her heart beat rapidly against her chest.

"She was dead," Snow muttered in absence of a proper answer. "I-I saw you die." Her eyes fell upon the dark Queen who loomed, still, over the blonde knight.

"And I am sure that you rejo-"

The blonde pressed her heel into Regina's toes, silencing her immediately before Snow could utter a word. Emma left the growl in her ear as she stepped forward, strangely calm. "She did perish, yes. I-…"

"What you have done, Emma - it is unethical. It…" Snow visibly shuddered, spooked by the very idea of what her daughter had done. "You should have left her dead."

"For your benefit?"

"For yours, Emma." Her tone was soft, like a mother soothing her angry child. "The Evil Queen is
not who you should follow." The good Queen's eyes fell to the towering brunette only to let her gaze fall away, disgusted, and moved to pace the room. Emma felt herself draw forward, following, unconscious of her actions as the color red painted her vision.

The familiarity of the light stone and bright colors seemed to smother her. She had grown far too accustomed to the color black. "Yet, I should follow you? Trapped within these walls?" Emotion choked her. "You suppressed me with your protection, afraid that every shadow you saw in the night was here to slit my throat. You never allowed me to step foot outside these gates without guards to follow. I-I…"

A warmth was brought forth from that half-organ inside her chest when the Dark Queen's proximity overwhelmed her and bade her to breathe once again. "I was isolated. By you."

"But your isolation will be far greater with her." The raven curls that framed her face bounced delicately against her pale skin when she turned an accusing glare on Regina. She had noticed the way the Dark Queen moved closer to her daughter and, suddenly, the anger and the hurt were gone from her features. Snow smiled, stunning Emma into silence. "I thought that the darkness had already taken you - the evil, the hatred. The way you disappeared with Regina's body… I was helpless to think of what had happened.

"And then I caught wind of a vengeful Dark One, leaving a trail of bodies behind - a shadow, a woman.

"I am relieved that is was not you." Her pale fingers clasped together - the red painted on her nails contrasted like blood against snow.

"Not me?" Emma's eyes lifted from her mother's fingers to the scarlet lips and then her relieved brown gaze.

"Regina," she said simply, and spoke as if the very woman was not there. "She must be forcing your hand to do her bidding. The dagger-…" Emma could feel the heat radiating off Regina when she stepped away from her, allowing her charcoal cloak to swish with the movement. Snow's eyes had been fixated on the older woman, as if she had been waiting for something, and found the answer. "She has your dagger."

Emma's eyes immediately fell to the thigh that Regina had strapped her dagger to and lost her words, unable to protest the accusation. It wasn't her anger that the blonde feared, but what came instead.

"The villages - empty of life and burning - and the carnage, and… I know it well. I know it from the early days of her reign. It is the Evil Queen, who she was, what she used to be." Emma's attention was not on her mother's stricken features but on the small tug of plum-colored lips that worked a chill down her spine. Snow followed her daughter's gaze and stepped forward. "Why? Was this your revenge? Did you force my daughter to resurrect you?"

The smirk that grew on Regina's face was lethal, and pleased. "Pray, tell how I would do such a thing. Reach through the veil of death? Force your daughter's heart in two and place the second half within me?" She laughed, something dark and husky. "It had taken me, as well, when I awoke to find myself no longer… dead and she told me that she had used her very own heart."

Snow White's brows pinched, but the ferocity never left her eyes. "You must have bewitched her as you died, desperate to live."

"Bewitch me?" Emma asserted herself into the impending argument, hissing. "She did no such thing, mother. She never forced my hand. What I have done was of my own volition."
"That is impossible, Emma. Why… Why would you allow yourself to fall into such a forbidden place?" Liquid clouded her dark eyes, her lips parting to allow the air back into her lungs. She was wary, watching the ash-haired blonde, and reached out, hand hovering over her daughter's heart. "I can still feel the light within you, Emma. You have not quite grasped the darkness, have you? There is something pulling you back, holding you… There is hope for you yet. We can-" Her voice cracked and grew thick with desperation. "We can find a cure to remove the curse from you."

The blonde recoiled at her words and stepped back, bumping into the Evil Queen who stood behind. She could feel the heat rolling off her in waves - the wrath that she could never mask. "A-A cure?"

"Yes," she said, smiling. Light always had to shine over the darkness. "True Love, Emma, is the most powerful magic of all. It can break any curse." Her presence burned her as she neared, like the flames that licked up stone. "We can find you the perfect suitor, sweetheart. There are willing men from all across the realm requesting your hand now that the pact with Rumpel has fallen to the ashes."

It was only considered True Love if her mother were the one to choose who she loved. A natural aversion to this control flared within her and she hissed under her breath. "My heart already belongs to another, Snow. I will not throw myself at the first man that wants to make me his Queen."

Hurt flashed in her eyes before she remedied the situation, as if she had found the cure to all, and spoke surely, that light smile still pulling on her lips. "Love will come. You will have your choice of these men when they come and present themselves before you."

Standing as close as she had to Regina, she could feel the woman grow rigid, and when she gazed into those sharp chestnut eyes, she shuddered. The Dark Queen's lip pulled back into a snarl as she hissed before Emma could respond to her mother's plea. "You have already locked her away for all her life, and yet you still want to control who she loves, even if she had told you that her heart belongs to another? Because, what, Snow? They are not of your choosing?"

The air was still - quiet and impending. Part of her wished Regina would remove the smug grin from her features, but the larger piece had become too invested in Snow's response, wondering if she caught the implication. "What are you doing for my daughter? You are only hindering her, attempting to strip her of her benevolence. You should have given up."

"I want this, Snow," Emma finally managed to say, but her words went unheard as Regina's voice drowned hers out.

"Forcing your daughter into situations will only push her away. Honestly, have you ever once believed that she had any desire to marry that boy?" Barking was something that Emma associated with laughter, but Regina purred, as if a feline had existed within her, and turned her mocking laughter into liquid.

"And what will you provide her, Regina? Nothing." Emma had never seen her mother's anger - it was something that never came easily to her. She saw it now in her reddened features, though it was a gentle sway of tree leaves compared to Regina's storm. "She deserves better than to hide under your dark wing."

"Yet I am to have my hand forced if I were to remain here." The blonde found her voice. Snow never once considered that it was Regina - The Evil Queen - that she loved, of all people. She only wanted Emma to marry off to wealth.

Her words finally caught Snow's attention, though, and she looked to her, frowning. "You can find your True Love, Emma, I will give you that. It was wrong of me to force you into relations with the
Dark One's son."

Emma thought she would feel weightless hearing her mother's apology, but it only set fire to her. "I have already found it," she muttered darkly.

The world grew still in that moment as the rock finally struck Snow White who gazed at her daughter pensively, never once daring to look at the Dark Queen who remained behind like a shadow. "And who might that be?" Her question was more of a demand, but she could see the staunch curiosity dominating her round features.

"Who might you think?" Emma queried, keeping her gaze steady with Snow's whose face started to pale, draining what little blood was left within it. "You have been looking at her the entire time."

"You have-..." It was then that their eye contact broke and her gaze fell upon the Evil Queen who remained with her smirk, as if every needle in Snow White's heart was pleasing her endlessly. "That is... That is impossible."

It came as no surprise to her that the Good Queen would deny her daughter's love for the enemy, though she could not help but to ponder, "why?"

"She must have charmed you, Emma." Something had to have broken within her mother the way she grew frantic, fluttering about the room pale as a ghost, muttering half to herself. "She forced you to love her because nobody else would. Please, Emma, stay here. We will help you."

Just as Emma had started to counter her mother's words, the windows shattered, raining glass upon them as thick, snakelike vines slithered through the openings and coiled around Snow, lifting her into the air. She struggled, kicking her feet until another vine wrapped around her legs, pinning them together and Regina's voice roared.

"What care have you when your daughter is no more than a mere pawn to you?" Her olive fingers curled into her palms, black nails biting into her skin. Emma dove forward to stop her, shouting incoherently. "Before she was even born you sold her off to him. You had no idea of his intentions, but I saw them, and they were not pleasant." She raged, as she had before, breathing deeply and snarling like a chained animal. "And, yet, how fair is it to your daughter while you carry another child within you? I can feel it - the energy of that putrid thing. A boy. Your suitable heir."

The words that fell from Regina's lips left the blonde's ears ringing, leaving her heart to thunder within them.

Everything else within that moment didn't seem to matter. It felt as if a knife had been plunged into her, ripping through her organs and tearing out her heart. "Is this true?" she asked, nearly wincing when she heard the weakness - the betrayal - in her voice. When her mother allowed silence to answer for her, Emma scoffed and paced, letting the energies consume her.

She knew there was something different radiating from her mother, leaving her thoughts to the natural repellent between good and evil, but as she allowed her mind to concentrate, she felt the energy. It was a new life - not light - and it grew, strong, thrumming. It matched her, how she felt - powerful, pure. It was her, but it was a boy, and that only boiled the simmering pot.

Finally, her mother spoke soft and apologetic, "we were going to tell you-"

"You were replacing me?"

"No, of course not!" Snow pleaded, those dark eyes glistening. "You will still be the rightful heir, Emma. You are the eldest, you are capable and strong."
"But I do not want your throne." Emma spat. She could feel blood rise to her face, burning it.

"That is the Evil Queen speaking through you, Emma. She is nothing good for you." As if she had suddenly realized she were trapped, Snow struggled against her unconventional binds, tears staining her cheeks. "Do not let her get to you. Do not let her control you."

The heavy oaken doors were thrust open in that moment, revealing King James as he burst through, blue eyes frantic. "Snow!" He called to his wife. "The guards informed me that Emma was here. I came as fast as I could."

His features paled once he realized the predicament and withdrew his sword as if the measly weapon would falter the Evil Queen, but Snow met his gaze and he sheathed it.

Snow spoke, "We can help you, Emma. We love you. I love you."

Emma's eyes were kept on her mother as she stole the air from her lungs with those words. Why did they suddenly feel so heavy on her being? As if a tide had washed down upon her? She had heard those words before, but after a while, she had grown numb to them, as if they held very little meaning.

Snow must have seen the softening of her features and encouraged her. "We will try everything within our power to make up for our mistakes. You can be as free as you wish. I know that you can take care of yourself. Sweetheart, please."

The blonde felt a tug at her heart. Her mother was goodness, light, something that cast over and banished the shadows and the darkness. She was born into this. Regina's words rang through her mind, "Born of heroism, captured by villainy, only truly yourself. How admirable to follow your own path through it all." She was never obligated to remain a hero, nor was she doomed to be a villain.

And she wanted neither, though she was swayed by both sides - light and dark. With her mother, she could enjoy the love of those under her liege and the bond of a sibling much like her, born of True Love. With Regina, she could not have that, yet she would bask in the love of the Evil Queen, herself, if she ever gave herself over.

The thought outweighed all else.

Even as she unconsciously drifted toward her mother, she wanted to let her down, comfort her of the loss of her daughter because she was born into someone - something - else entirely. But as she neared, the vines that bound the good Queen withered away and she dropped to the ground.

Immediately, her eyes honed in on the source she was most concerned for - Regina. Had she sensed betrayal in her movement? But as she looked upon the vexed woman, she saw stains of black upon her perfect features and her father behind her, binding her wrists tight.

"Let me go!" It sounded as if a demon had possessed the woman the way she had screamed from deep within her. That particular vein in her forehead throbbed lividly as she struggled, kicking strongly, but futilely as a group of silver-clad guards filtered into the room.

"What have you done to her?" Emma demanded, sensing the distress that welled within the Evil Queen. She could feel it within herself, seizing her heart and filling her lungs with stone. It burned.

She felt a hand on her shoulder and her mother's voice whispering in her ear. "Everything will be fine, Emma. We will get your heart back." The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Were they going to kill her?
Suddenly, she couldn't breathe, as if the whole world had collapsed on her. And then it was fight-mode because she could not lose her again, thus she struggled as the guards attempted to keep a steady grip on Regina as her parents did the same for her.

"Let me go!" Emma repeated her Queen's words, feeling the tightness that clung to her. She did not want to resort to magic, but if she had to…

"You will not take her away from me!" Regina's despairing cry shook the room. Emma could see the glisten of moisture in her eyes as she continued to struggle against the guards, successfully knocking one down only to be seized by another, silver talons pressed into her delicate neck. "You will not do it to me again, Snow White!"

Snow remained rigid and, for a minute, her grip loosened as if the words had meant something and Emma broke free, rushing toward the helpless witch.

"Get your hands off her," she growled to the man who held onto Regina's throat and, before she could control herself, every one of the four knights' necks had been broken. As their bodies hit the ground, she helped Regina to her feet and magicked the binds away.

"You love her?" Snow's voice sounded, bringing Emma's attention back to her mother. She was visibly shaken, now, hearing those words that the blonde had desperately wanted to hear from the Dark Queen herself.

Regina remained silent, breathing heavily as her fingers twitched against Emma's.

Snow White remained aghast, finding her answer in the silence, and sought her husband who shook, eyes blazing.

Emma let the color white steal them away before her father gained enough wit to hinder them.

"Squid ink," Emma murmured quietly, as if she were observing, or realizing, what it was that she washed from Regina's skin. The girl was always learning and it pleased her when the blonde smiled with knowledge.

The brunette nodded, humming softly as she donned fresh attire. She could not believe that Prince Charming had the audacity to use squid ink on her. It made her feel weak, even as she became free of the binding effects. Her magic was still subdued, some small thrum within her veins. It would return full force, though until then, she would rather stand on the terrace, overlooking the sea.

Regina knew that it hadn't been a well idea to enter the White's castle as they had. That had given those optimistic twits an advantage. Her fingers curled white around the smooth iron as she looked to the dark waves in the distance, inhaling the sweet brine that the wind carried her way. The sun was rising on the surface, turning the water into blood.

Every thought left her, allowing serenity in its place. Perhaps she should have thought about erecting a castle that overlooked the sea long ago. The forest is what had dominated this realm, though, and she felt as if she had no other choice. Besides, the forest in which her kingdom was built had brought her peace throughout the years. Flying above the green sea was a fantasy she long had.

But here, there seemed to be something lighter, as if the water soothed her aching soul. Salt was bitter in wounds, but she didn't mind the pain, not when it was so beautiful. And, here, she could join the sea. Swim within its depths. Let it carry her away.

And it was secluded, far away from where any foot had traveled. They had no trouble with
wanderers and she enjoyed the quiet. It was the perfect place to spend eternity; a safe place.

"My Queen?" Emma's soft and melodic voice joined the sea's gentle song.

"Yes?" Regina purred, never letting her gaze break from the horizon, even as her heart fluttered.

"What you said to my mother…" She was tentative as she spoke, joining the Dark Queen as her fingers gripped the iron alongside her own.

The smile that had started to lilt the brunette's lips slowly faded, letting memories slip into her mind of the earlier events. Only a few hours had passed since, but she had hoped word wouldn't be brought up quite so soon. She let herself sag, knowing Emma would never forfeit her persistence.

She drew her gaze away to look to the soft, pale features of her knight. Was she her knight any longer? They were essentially equals in power, now. "Words that I knew she would stutter at."

The brunette returned to the dark waves once again as they lapped along the rocky shore. It quickly lapsed into silence as Emma let those words sink into her and immediately, Regina knew she was hesitating again. She was persistent, but she was also cautious.

She let her mind return to a similar conversation. It was just before their excursion with the thieves over what had been stolen. Regina had been prepared to present her with a gift - something for the blonde's passed birthday that had been swallowed by chaos between Rumpelstiltskin and the Whites. It was her mistake to lead it off with an apology and other words that had Emma questioning her as she always had.

Then, she danced around the true subject of love, speaking more of friendship and caring, like her mother. She left the conversation prematurely, allowing herself too cool, and searched for the gift. That was when she found it missing and, thus, led them to where they were.

Regina closed her eyes for a moment and let the gentle churning of the waves and the gulls overhead to fill her senses. Without the gush of the conversation beforehand, perhaps Emma would not seek too closely into the gift. It was only right, after all, for all the blonde had done for her.

"Emma?" She broke the silence and dug within her bust to retrieve what she had planned to gift. The blonde's brilliant green gaze landed on her, glowing in the dawn. "I found this and thought you would like it. I do suppose you deserve something nice after… everything."

From her fingers hung a chain with a small pendant. It was a smoothly forged swan swimming on a backdrop of onyx. It was simple - certainly something the Queen was not. But, Emma was - when it came to appearance. She didn't like jewels, she had told Regina, even though she found them beautiful she would never wear them.

Regina's favorite gem was emerald.

It was breathtaking in her eyes, growing moisture, shining.

Perhaps she was biased, even if she enjoyed the color red.

"A swan," whispered the Black Knight as she carefully took the delicate chain from her, looking to the pendant in her palm.

"That is why I thought you would enjoy it. It reminded me of you." A small smile stretched her lips into a curve. "And, you did gift me a necklace as well, after all."
"You do quite like your jewels." Emma muttered, a dazzling smile on her thin, pink lips as she slipped the necklace on. The pendant lay over her heart.

Helplessly, the corners of Regina’s mouth lifted, bringing that smile to her eyes. She was sweet in her joy, and the softness that took her, melting her features.

"I wish you would not lie to yourself."

Suddenly the smile faded. Her fingers ached as she let them curl around the iron again. "And what is it that you are implying?"

She hesitated again and Regina knew what the subject would broach on. Emma’s features had hardened slightly. "The concept that you are in love with me and you will not allow yourself to say those words." Her jaw set as she now fully faced the Evil Queen who stood beside her, rigid. "You are still letting your fears overwhelm you. You are free of your fate and of Rumpel, but you are not releasing that monster that lurks in the dark channels of your mind, telling you that you cannot. What are you afraid of? That monster, or yourself?"

"I am afraid of nothing," she hissed, seeking her escape and wanting to dive forth, to escape reality. Being pinned, scrutinized, is what she hated most. What was she afraid of, indeed!

Something in the back of her mind whispered, though, like a passing breeze, speaking what she refused to think.

_I am afraid of losing you too._

"You are lying again, Regina. Are you afraid to love me? To allow yourself to grow weak? To lose yourself?" Emma's voice snapped her back, banishing the small voice and setting her on fire. "Or are you afraid of those words and what they might bring?"

There was a pain in her chest, pouring forth from that half-heart and spreading throughout her like venom. No. She could not let herself succumb to something so idiotic. She was afraid of nothing, not even what that breezy voice had thought for her.

Rage built within her a thousand stones, ascending her above the clouds, far beyond this realm. What she was deserved none of those soft emotions, those feelings. And what Emma deserved was better than what she had become and what she had long lived as. She was nothingness, worthless, when it all boiled down.

No one could love a cold, lifeless monster. No one could love the hate that she was, or the pain, or the evil. From bone to flesh she was the enemy. Of the people. Of the Whites. Of herself.

How could Emma be the one to push through the wall of doubt she built around herself?

"I can feel it… That you care for me. I… I see it."

She was broken from those dangerous thoughts and grew anger toward the blonde who stirred the old stew pot. Before she could gather sensible wit, she let the wrong emotion take her and closed magic around Emma's throat, lifting her above the railing. The vision of her was blurred, even as Emma remained still.

"I do not need you telling me how I feel."

"I-I was not trying to, Regina." Emma's words were strained. There was dull panic in her eyes. "I only wish for you to be honest with me."
"Honesty means nothing." Regina could feel herself tremble and clenched her fingers, closing off the blonde's airway further. The shade of her face slowly deepened as she battled for air.

"It means the world…" The blonde kicked in the air as if she were swimming in the water below. "You deserve happiness…" Her green eyes disappeared as her face grew purple, her voice a struggled breath. "Is that what you believe? That you do not?"

"Happiness does not exist for me. My ending was never meant to be happy, you have seen so for yourself. I would have died bitter and lonely." She spat the last word. Isolation was the world she had grown to know, and it only brought hatred.

"But you were not lonely, my queen. I was there… with you… for you…"

It felt as if the icy tides of the sea washed over her being, tugging her heart southward and bringing her under. Emma fell onto the railing, grasping onto it as she regained herself and stood upright onto the terrace.

"And you were loved, even as you drew your last breath."

Regina shook, something that rocked her entire being and she knew why once the cool, briny wind whipped against her cheeks. The tears she had long bid to stay away finally fell, leaving a heaviness behind her eyes, pounding, burdened. This was the tide that pulled her completely under, drowning her wholly and filling her lungs. She found it difficult to breathe through it all and looked to the sea for aid, but she was left with the mess she had made.

But then there was something there, within that frantically beating heart that relentlessly pumped within her chest, bringing her life. It was warm and it was powerful and it was releasing, flowing through her like warmed honey. Like toxins, her anger and her hatred were pulled away, drifting into the carmine sea as it passed, stowing away. And in their stead came something else, something that she had felt within her since the day she woke with Emma's heart inside her chest.

It was something that she wanted to push away.

It was something that she never believed in.

It was something that she could never have.

Yet it was there, strong, powerful, thrumming in her veins.

And she despised it.

She wanted it to scald her, eat her like acid from the inside, but it was soothing, freeing.

It was wrong.

Why did something so pure, so full of light and good, love her?

"How could you love someone like me? Something?" she asked, out of breath, yet she could hear the thickness on her tongue.

"Do you wish for me to be honest?"

Regina looked back to the sea. "I did not ask the question as a mindless thought."

Emma dipped her head, cheeks pink. Her ash blonde hair was still pulled back into a tight bun on her head. "I am unsure," she said, her voice quiet, but far closer than it had been. Regina tensed when
she felt the blonde's arms around her waist and the warmth of her body as it covered her backside.

"Unsure?" she asked, her voice breaking, betraying her.

"I…" The younger woman pressed her cheek to Regina's shoulder and looked to the restless waters before them. "You are not a something, you are a someone, and you are a someone that-…

"You upturned my world and drove me from my roots. You… You believed in me when others- When they would not." Regina could feel the way she inhaled deeply, expanding her chest before releasing it into the crisp, morning air. "My parents, my kingdom, they loved me, they cared, but they never drove me to strive for my best and you did, even if unintentionally.

"And, of course, your beauty was captivating - alarming, even. At first it was what I sought, until you gave me that smile - the one that brightened your face and touched your eyes during those small moments you let your guard down, a sliver of vulnerability.

"It let me know that there was a human there. A beautiful human that no one else wanted to see, no one wanted to reach for." Regina trembled again, but bade the emotion away, nearly breaking when she felt lips press to her bared shoulder.

"You let your emotions drive you, even if they are the wrong ones, but that takes a certain compassion that-…" She stopped abruptly, as if what she were about to say would only end poorly, and started on a different plane of thought, cheek pressing to her arm.

"I did not love you at first, I will admit that. In fact, you disgusted me. But I also admired you - I always have, ever since I was a girl, hearing your tales through my mother. I felt that there was always more to your story than the carnage you wrought to bring her down." She felt Emma's muscles tense into a smile, pulling her cheeks upward. "Slowly, as time drew forward, you saw something within me and shared some of that story…

"I cannot say how I fell in love with you, but I knew that I was submerged when I realized it, and I never wanted to pull myself out of your sea. It is warm and beautiful, even if it hurts."

Regina could feel her heart pounding once again in her chest - those words only seemed to fuel that pestilent organ. She allowed herself to pull away from the cerulean waves, no longer reddened by the rising sun, and looked into her own sea of green, drowning instantly. A light smile was offered before it disappeared, attaching to the tender spots of her necks.

She purred, tilting her head slightly, letting her head float above the clouds as the blood traveled southward. Soft, tentative touches were something she had to grow used to, but as Emma's lips drew along the olive column, she believed it would be an easy transition.

It felt as if she were savoring her - the taste of her skin, the sweet perfume, the warmth. Her kisses were kind and forgiving, and something that, outside of bed, she had slowly yearned for.

"It is fine if you do not love me in return. I can… I am strong and I will endure." Emma's breath tickled her skin. "You deserve someone that cares for you, that will be there for you - to stand by your side, for once, who refuses to back away, slink into the shadows when times are rough. And that will be me - I will always be here for you. We are bound eternally, after all."

Emma sighed softly, but it was not burdened, it was content. Her lips continued to move, trailing along the brunette's nape and over her shoulders, bared mostly without her cloak. She felt the blonde's hands shift, falling to gently touch her hips, fingers digging into them as if to ground her. She was floating.
"It is fine if you do not love me in return," repeated Emma, or did those words leave her lips a second time?

They were a whisper, reaching Regina from the heights in which her head resided. They were bittersweet, but they held no anger, no resentment. It hurt her heart - no, their heart.

She closed her eyes and let the blonde's lips drift, caressing her skin and pebbling it. Her heart thrummed pleasantly and from that organ she could feel it again - what Emma had felt for her. Why couldn't she let herself think the word? To bring it to a pure light, without bitterly spitting it like a curse?

It stung her, as it had before, long ago with Daniel.

When she was a girl.

Careless and free - well, perhaps not. Her mother loomed over her, shadowing her, but she felt freer then than she had felt for the duration of her life thereafter. It was when the future was open, bright and promising. Anything could have happened, and the worst did. And it tore her life apart, taking away the options she once had and forcing her onto a different path - one that was shrouded by the dark, daunting forest and hazardous to lone wanderers.

It hurt how unfair the world was - as if it had given up on her. And she believed that it had as time passed, taking away everything - joy, hope, that word that made her flinch. She cried in the night, for anyone that might have been out there, watching, listening… And, unfortunately, there had been.

_Rumpelstiltskin._

The man that drove her into certain madness, using her and her anger for himself, for his benefit.

She could feel it flare within her, taking away the sweetness that let her wounded heart tender.

She thought back again, to her youth and to the boy, and to the horses and the forest and the fields and the sweetness and the hope and the joy that they brought.

But it was something short, something that never lasted. She had forgotten the taste of it.

Until Emma.

She was the one that brought the flavor back into her life because Emma was there, shoving her heart into Regina's chest, saving her in far too many ways than she was comfortable with and secured her to some delusion.

Gods, it was easier to ignore it when Emma's heart did not exist within her.

When it did not pull those forgotten memories forward, drawing that word, that emotion, flowing through her like nectar.

She could feel the pulsing organ. It was there, tight and forever, and it ached, burning deep within her chest like a roaring fire almost too painful to bear, but it was also liquid and caressing and healing.

It was weakness.

_Love_ was weakness.

Those words had been uttered into her ear since birth and she had taken them as her own mantra,
failing to see that love was also strength.

It pulled her through, even though she never truly believed in it. She was alive because of it. It was always something tugging in her mind, taunting, mocking, but now it was there, welcoming, smiling.

It was eternal, transcending realms, transcending death.

And they were immortal, she and Emma, and though that did little to sate the vexation, it was futile to fight the inevitable.

Her problem was letting go - of memories, of grudges, of herself.

Regina opened her eyes, letting the sea of thoughts become tangible through the cerulean waves that stretched beyond her vision. She felt as if that were her mind splayed before her, vast and chaotic.

She needed to let it go.

She needed to let go.

She could hear Emma's words in her mind from a conversation long past, fluttering like a dragonfly's wings.

*Let yourself lose control for once, Regina.*

"Emma?"

Her cheek was pressed against her shoulder again, as if she were afraid to move, afraid of the rebuke. But she did, now, when her name was called.

"Yes, my queen?"

The brunette felt her heart pound once again, flowing adrenaline through her. She furrowed her brow slightly and turned to stare at the beauty that held her, meeting those perfect jade eyes that shone when they lifted to meet her gaze. Something tugged at her lips, aching the muscles, and touched her eyes with ease. This had earned a darling smile in return, though it wavered until it broke into something far larger, far brighter.

It lit her entire world on fire.

She was lost, for a moment, until confusion touched those beautiful eyes and she nearly laughed.

Something lifted from her, making her feel like a bird, light and free, letting her soar among the clouds as she spoke those words, spilling before they crashed to the ground.

"I love you."
"True Love transcends realms, even death. Like a curse, I broke her free. We were meant to be."

"The memories I have of that castle are tainted. I wish to rid myself of them and to replace them with what makes me smile instead of frown."

These were words that brought Emma to where she stood, watching the sun descend into the earth, the sky unchanging from its thick white covers. Snow fell gently from above in thick flakes that stuck to her hair and blanketed the ground at her feet.

She had said those first words to Snow White when she had revealed her betrothal to Regina. Years had passed since the Dark Queen's confession, enough so that her brother had passed his tenth birthday.

Snow was displeased that she was marrying their natural enemy, convinced, still, that Regina had deluded her with a love curse.

Emma would not have felt inclined to visit her mother at all if not for Regina's malevolent and all-too-pleased desire to make the Good Queen's heart stop. A very deep and sick part of the blonde wanted to see this through, still sore of their latest encounter.

Unfortunately, in the end, Snow White had been far too enraptured with her daughter's revelation of finding love, happiness. She wanted the ceremony to be hosted in the White Kingdom, in the garden where Emma had once dreamed any wedding of hers would be held.

When Emma had approached Regina before falling into her mother's clutches, the brunette had surprised her, much to her discontent, by saying the second thought. Her next words, when Emma had wanted to protest, cemented the unpleasant wedding in the White Kingdom.

"Besides, we will live many more years and, once everyone had passed and forgotten, we can marry once again in a place more desirable."

It was bittersweet to be reunited with what she had once desired to escape.

But the tension disappeared when she saw Regina and melted away into the snow.

She was wearing black as if she were attending a funeral instead of a wedding, but she was breathless, nonetheless, with her pure smile and crinkled eyes. Regina looked severely out of place, as if she were plucked from that very funeral and thrown into the ivory flowers and silken ribbons. The dress that flowed from her reminded Emma of a wedding gown washed in charcoal and blood; its train sliding elegantly behind like a shadow, gracing the fresh tracks and smoothing them over. She wore ebony gloves pulled up to her elbows and a bouquet of blood red roses in hand.

Chatter began to stir among the crowd that surveyed - lords and ladies and friends of the good King and Queen.

They had been confused, surely, watching as what they thought was the only bride standing by the altar, dressed in armor instead of the wedding gown Snow White had passed onto her. They had little knowledge of what had befallen their princess in the past years since she had been taken and now that they saw her rise in the flesh, standing next to the only terror their kingdom had known - the one that had taken her - they were dismayed.
She could not help but to look upon their faces twisted unpleasantly in scowls of confusion. Displeasure crossed over her own features, passing over familiar faces of her childhood and falling to one too far, alone beside snow-dusted shrubbery. Maleficent.

She saw her and the knowing sparkle in her eye. Confusion met her with their parting words years ago - something that seemed as if it had only existed within the blink of an eye. She predicted this. Though, many could, if they had seen the Evil Queen and her Black Knight interact.

Pulling her gaze away, she found another from her past, standing next to a young man a head taller. There was a smile on her face that revealed crooked teeth. She did not recognize the smooth, sandy hair until she saw the dark, almond-shaped eyes. Brynly. The name floated in her mind like a memory.

Emma hadn't known of her fate since she was sentenced to death by the blonde's hand. Had she fled to the White Kingdom when given the opportunity? She looked far different than how Emma had remembered her - thin, frail, hair a mess and face dirty. She had a glow in her eye, now, and color to her full cheeks.

"Emma," a familiar voice whispered her name and her attention was taken from dark curls and pale features when her eyes had wandered. Regina's smile was all she could see, now, fluttering her heart.

Clearing her mind, she let the words be spoken by the old priest as they stood, facing each other, hand in hand. She knew that she had been destined to marry beneath this arch, in this garden, in this kingdom. From her birth, it was written, planned. She never had any choice in the matter.

This was where her life truly started, in this moment, as they shared their first kiss in this new union.

And then she found herself swaying with her new wife as the sweet melodies of passionate notes floated from strings and ivories, filling the air as if to fuel their graceful movements.

There were others surrounding them, chattering, observing, dancing but encircling, leaving them space. Emma felt as if they weren't there, losing herself inside chestnut eyes and a crimson smile that could stop her heart.

Regina. She was her wife; her queen in more sense than she had been.

Beautiful was the word that graced her mind, but it could not quite describe the mesmerizing woman before her, laughing as they stumbled over their feet. There were no words that would bring justice to the adoring way the corners of her eyes crinkled, or the crease of her skin as the muscles stretched it when she smiled.

Regina's fingers dug into the small of her back as Emma stumbled over the older woman's feet again. This reminded her of the day on the beach, the salty breeze caressing them, as they practiced barefoot in the sand. Emma had never paid much attention when her mother insisted she learned to dance. It was to impress any possible suitors, she had said, and the princess had a natural aversion to this, preferring to gain knowledge of her own dance - swordplay.

"You are improving," Regina whispered.

"Are you sure?" Emma shivered when she felt the Dark Queen's lips brush the shell of her ear.

"We have not fallen."
"I would not count that as a victory just yet."

Regina laughed as she pulled from her, twirling the two around the open circle, far too fast for Emma to keep up, but somehow she had managed, head growing dizzy as the sea of faces spun. "We were dancing on sand. There was bound to be a few missteps."

"I feel like everyone is staring," she muttered when the room stopped spinning, leaving her eyes on the pale features of Snow White who smiled, holding onto James. Neal - Emma's younger brother - stood before them, disinterested, but forced to watch. She knew the feeling all too well.

"They are," Regina answered, her lips stretching into a grin.

"It must be this gown. I knew I should not have given in to my mother." What she had slipped into was a satin dress the color of blood. It clung to the corset that squeezed her lungs and forced her heart into her throat, yet flowed from the waist, swishing about her feet with each gentle twirl that Regina led them into.

"I had my part, as well, my love," she purred, a gentle sparkle of amusement in her dark eyes. "You rarely wear gowns. It certainly is refreshing seeing your face painted and your hair styled."

Emma's lips twitched in an impending smile, but she kept it at bay, attempting to force a look of vexation on her face. "You had not changed."

"No, I had not, but they do not expect me to." Regina smirked and lifted the hand that cupped Emma's nape to touch her cheek, her thumb moving over the sharp contour of her cheek. "Smile, Emma. You will not have to wear the gown for long."

The Dark Queen's eyes had grown a shade darker and the smile sultry. A gust of warmth breezed southward, warming her cheeks. A smile appeared.

"Do not tempt me to abandon our appearance and take you upstairs." Her skin pebbled when those nimble fingers moved, cupping her neck as the hand on her back shifted downward.

"Will you ravish me?" she asked - nay, growled.

Another shudder worked its way down the blonde's spine as they resumed their dance. "You have read my mind."

"Oh, I know." Regina's chuckle serenaded her ears.

"How long do you think we should keep our appearance?"

"Eager, are we?" Emma nodded. "We have eternity, my love. Have patience."

Emma's patience was rewarded after the guests had given their congratulations and parted. Brynly had approached her, hurt, but her joy far outweighed it. She was relieved to see that Emma had survived in one piece and recounted what had happened after the execution. Snow White had offered her a place within her kingdom and paid her handsomely for her companionship with the former princess. She and her brother had their own home within the city and plenty of food to fill their bellies, and Brynly had even been approached by a few lords that had taken interest in her.

"I cannot believe you 'ave fallen in love wit' the Evil Queen. I never thought her t'have the compassion to love another, but I seen it in her eyes when she looked at you. I wanna be angry, but I'm happy that y'found joy, that y'found light in the darkness."
Those were her parting words, as well as an invitation to visit, before she left with her brother, jesting that she had a line of suitors waiting for her.

Emma smiled as she thought of her old friend and opened the doors to her old bedchambers. She paused in the threshold, frozen as she walked into the past. Her parents hadn’t touched the room since she was taken by the Evil Queen, even so many years later. The same ornate green rug, the same mahogany furniture, and the same canopied bed dressed in light satin. Even the candles looked untouched as if they had waited to be burned upon her return.

"Emma?" Regina pulled her from her memories and wrapped her arms around the younger woman's waist. "Are you well?"

"Hm? Yes, yes, of course. I-…" She shook her head and wrapped an arm around the brunette's, closing her eyes to enjoy the warmth. "It feels as if nothing has changed."

"But they have, my love. You are no longer chained to this castle. You are free." The Dark Queen pulled away from the small embrace and tugged at her hand as she slipped into the room. "And we are married."

"We are, we are…" Emma felt her cheeks tingle as blood filled them. "I never thought to step foot into this cell again. Not after-… It feels strange to be here."

"It certainly does," she agreed, pausing before the bed. Her dark gaze was turned to her, intense, as a frown claimed her lips. There was a distant memory in her eye. "This used to be where I stayed."

The blonde's brows pinched at the confession and suddenly saw the room in an entirely different light. Pain and loneliness filled her, weighing her down. She could hear the voices of the past and it stung. "Where he-"

The lines in Regina's face creased harshly and Emma immediately regretted her words. She pulled her close, allowing the woman that towered over her to be small for just that moment.

"I do not care for those memories. I hadn't thought of them. I think of you, sitting here, gazing outside, longing, lonely. We were much the same in these castle walls." Regina mumbled against her neck, her soft lips moving along the pale flesh.

"As you had said before, we can create new memories, happier memories." Emma's head tilted, allowing her queen to paint her skin, a soft purr rumbling in her throat.

The brunette pulled from her, stroking her cheek, fingers digging into her arm. "I do not trust being here with them."

Those words sent a dagger into her belly. "Snow is wiser than to cross us. We left our daggers home. They cannot harm us."

"But they can incapacitate us like they had before." Emma could feel her wife grow tense.

"Gina," whispered the blonde, pressing a gentle kiss to her jaw. She felt her relax only slightly, but as she continued to trail across the fragrant olive skin, Regina turned into liquid. "I doubt we will be sleeping very much. And they dare not kill you, now, knowing what I would do to them."

"And what would you do to them?" Regina queried softly, absentlly. Her breath had shortened when Emma’s lips found the tender pulse of her neck.

"You know what I would do."
They kissed, then, letting their true night begin - a long night - and let the worries slip away.

"The Evil Queen is dead?"

Emma inwardly chastised herself for allowing Regina to force her before Snow White once again, and outwardly cursed at her mother's lack of compassion. The information that she brought her mother would never have ended well in conversation, that much she gained wit of months ago, as she thought of the conversation that brought her here.

*Regina had been in bed, lazing in her satin nightdress, flipping through a tome filled with information on warfare. Emma found her this way, slipping into their bedchambers with a leather pouch. She had been searching for herbs in the nearest village shoppe, something to soothe her wife's ail.*

*The brunette never complained of physical illness, nor mental. In fact, it was something she merely passed off for magical tension since they had kept to their castle shortly before the wedding in preparation, letting the mysterious shadow of the Dark One disappear.*

"How are you faring today, my queen?" she had asked, joining the older woman. "I brought you medicinal leaves to make tea."

"I am doing well, my love. You needn't worry." Regina had offered her a smile, something absent, keeping her eyes on the small print.

Emma had only frowned and dared to pluck the book from her wife's hands, tossing it aside. Regina didn't growl at her as she usually would, instead, she had kept her eyes on her fingers as if the tattered yellowed pages still existed between them. "You are not doing well. You are my life and I cannot exist knowing that you are… that there might be something wrong."

*The Dark Queen had only remained quiet, eyes far away, searching her brain for an escape no doubt. Emma had argued with her before she left when Regina had refused to answer her. Irritation had settled in quickly. She had been fretting over the brunette for far too long.*

Ever since their wedding night, Regina had been out of sorts, looking distant, worried, confused.

*It had terrified Emma, wondering if the older woman had second thoughts about tying herself to the former princess, as if she had regretted accepting her devotion. After all, it had taken Emma those ten years to obtain the simple, yet so very hard, answer of yes.*

*She had proposed to Regina after the Dark Queen said those three words on the terrace, far too anxious, excited about the breakthrough. But it was also too much for the queen and she had rejected it before disappearing to take her emotion out on innocent souls.*

*She had attempted several times thereafter, perhaps every other year, but the final was when they were on the beach and the sun was sinking into the horizon. Emma hadn't expected her to accept, knowing it might very well be centuries before she would, but then Regina had finally said yes, and the world around her sunk, leaving her on a pillar to stand above it all.*

*Though as something inside of her queen had changed, Emma had found herself slowly sinking back to the earth, falling below the surface.*

*And seeing her, laying there, a look of guilt on her features, hadn't helped, even if her wife had reassured her countless times that she did not regret marrying her.*
"Regina?" she had whispered, urging the answer that still had not come.

And, as time had passed - it could have been days that she sat there watching the brunette hesitate - Regina finally did speak, her words quiet, soft, "I know what is making me feel out of sorts."

Out of sorts. That had been how she had described herself, as if she were not ill physically, but mentally.

"And what is it, my queen?" she had pondered, a little flutter raising a storm within her stomach.

Regina had not answered, instead, she had taken her hand and placed it on the smooth lavender silk of her nightdress.

"No, Snow, she is not dead," Emma answered her mother's delighted question. "Far, far from it, fortunately." She shouldn't have told Snow that she had brought grand news. Of course the Good Queen would jump to conclusions, vainly hoping for the prospect of her enemy's death.

"Oh," muttered Queen Snow, slowly deflating, her smile fading. "What news do you bring us, then, my daughter?" James stood next to her, rigid, observing. Neal had been playing in the courtyard with a wooden sword.

Emma closed her eyes for a moment, allowing the tension to build and remembered what she felt when Regina had taken her hand.

There, underneat her palm, had been a new energy - something concentrated, pure. It had reminded her of the power that radiated from her mother when she was carrying Neal, though this was far less potent, smaller, if she could describe it, but it had pulled her forward regardless. And that had been her answer because when she had looked into her wife's wary gaze for confirmation, she had received it.

"Regina is expecting," Emma said quietly, hands linking behind her back. Regina was not with her, even though she could have used the support, but the Dark Knight had insisted she stay home in case her parents took offensive action.

The blonde had braced herself, thought herself prepared, but Snow's outraged cry shook her still, rattling her bones.

"I knew she was no good for you!" she cried, her face red. "She would only break your heart, Emma. Why would you allow yourself into this mess?"

Emma could feel the blood underneath her skin growing hot as her heart pumped fury throughout her being. "The child is mine, Snow."

"That is impossible."

"No it is not! Magic and True Love is powerful, you of all people should know that is true." Her breath had shortened as she attempted to keep herself from ripping the woman's heart out of her chest to turn to dust. Her father could sense her anger and touched his wife's elbow, though the displeasure in his crystal gaze was sure.

"How can you be certain that she hadn't lain with a man when your back was turned? Or that she is lying to you?"

"I have no reason not to believe her. I trust her inherently."
Emma had been guilty of having these thoughts, herself, but she had known of Regina's past and what she had done in hatred of her mother.

"Thus, she had been prompted to ask, "I thought that you had destroyed your-"

"I-I did," Regina had stumbled over her words, her face pallid, drained in vain fear. "I thought that I would never conceive. I had taken that option away from myself in spite of Cora."

"How are you certain that you are-"

"I am entirely certain, my knight. I cannot explain how it feels, how it happened. After our wedding night, I felt… strange, as if that piece of me had been restored and it felt… heavy.

"As time drew forward, I realized there was something inside me, growing, powerful. At first I thought it was unreleased energy and… you know how well that day had gone." Emma had smirked, mentally recalling the images twisted in satin. "But it never subsided and I thought perhaps it was magic, but… I can feel that it is not. It is… different. Like a light placed inside of me, radiating, warm."

That smirk that had formed on her face soon softened, turning into a smile, small and hesitant. "How long have you known this? You said-"

"Almost as soon as it had happened, my love."

"Why did you not confide in me?" Regina had immediately frowned, turning her gaze away and sinking the blonde's heart.

"I was… afraid to," she had said, becoming caught on the word. "I thought for certain that you would abandon me, hate me, believing I had lain with a man."

Emma had known better. There had been a connection to that little light within her wife and she let fingers caress the thin material of Regina's nightdress as she had leaned up to chastely kiss her, reassuring.

"Perhaps True Love is the most powerful magic of all if it can heal you and create a child with our magic. It did bring you back to life, why could it not bring another form of life?"

"Your trust means nothing to her," Snow spat.

How could her mother, the incarnation of good, find hate in a child?

Because she did not believe it was conceived with purity.

Emma's heart pounded, thundering in her ears.

"Even if she loves you, Emma, sometimes that does not mean enough," Prince Charming finally spoke, calm, but there was an edge to his voice as if that cool would break.

"We are connected, mother, by our hearts, and she will keep nothing from me. Why must you doubt Regina's love? Her integrity?" Emma remained still as a statue, eyes sharp on the Good Queen before her throne.

"Because she has lived in darkness for far too long," she answered simply, as if there was no need of further explanation.

Though Emma was quick to counter, arguing, "And I am the light that guided her out of it."
"And you are the light that she will use to pretend she has a grasp on humanity. You had not seen her, Emma, before you were born. What she had done. What she continues to do-"

"I have my part in this chaos, as well. I have blood on my hands."

"Your mother is speaking truth, Emma. She is forcing you to dirty your hands and we will never blame this on you. We have seen powerful sorcery, we have seen it control people, what it is capable of. You are good," James pleaded, desperate to keep his grasp on his daughter.

"Good!" Emma spat the word as if it were a curse. "I wish you would not use goodness as a sanctity, a justification, for everything that I do, that I am. I fell in love with the darkness and I let it touch me, I let it seep into my heart, but I am more than just evil or good. I wish you would see that."

"You are our daughter, whether you are good, or not." Snow's voice had dropped an octave as she grounded herself once again, knowing that she was slowly losing her daughter. She moved carefully and spoke quietly as if she were soothing a spooked animal. "But that spawn growing within her will only turn bad. It will reign terror and leave this realm in the rubble."

Her fingers ached as they bit into the palms of her hands, drawing crimson to the surface. "It is also my child."

The dark-haired woman shook her head, refusing to believe those very words. "No, no… Impossible. You are merely defending her, for what?"

"She is my wife," Emma argued and looked to her father. He was generally diplomatic when it came to arguments between his wife and daughter, and he would draw toward the blonde's side, but his jaw was set grimly, angry. "I thought you were happy that I had found love, regardless who it was."

"I am, Emma, but she is harming you. This… It has gone too far. You cannot allow her to have this child. She will only pass on the anger that is inside of her and use it for destruction." Snow's voice was pleading and thick. "She was never meant to be a mother, not with her temper, not with what she is."

It felt as if her chest had caved in on itself. She would never win - not when it came to her parents. Snow had been happy that her former enemy had found the happiness that she had cost her so very long ago, and even more so that her own daughter had found True Love. One wrong move, though, sent the tower clattering into a pile of stone.

Senseless, it seemed, to care of petty things when Emma will live past her parents' lifetime and even her own brother's. Would she remember them, this conversation, when centuries have passed?

"She has always wanted to be a mother and I give my full conviction that she will be," Emma said quietly. "And I am very much the same thing that she is."

"We cannot be associated with what she brings to this world," James said, taking his wife's side, raking in the stones.

"Then if you cannot accept me, or my family, I have no business being here." The blonde watched the passing expressions on her parents' faces, but they remained still, silent. "And I shall take my leave and never return."

"We are your family, Emma." Snow stepped toward her, distressed, but Emma took one back and shook her head. They had already severed the ties.

"No, you are not. You have never treated me like family, only like an animal to be locked away."
Emma could hear her voice waver as she took the last wire and detached herself from it. "Regina, I chose her and she accepted me. She is my family, now, along with the child that we have created." A shudder tore throughout her being, convulsing up her spine and rising within her throat, but she swallowed it down.

"Emma…" Snow started to speak, but the blonde stopped her, jaw setting somberly.

"I must say goodbye to this chapter of my life because I have allowed it to wound me for far too long. I am sorry that you cannot see past your thick borders of black and white, but this is who I am, and who I am is not who you want me to be." She breathed and held the air in her lungs, letting it burn.

They said nothing.

"Goodbye," she said, formally bowing before allowing her magic to take her away to the next chapter of her life.

Regina felt something suddenly burden her heart as she overlooked the sea. It was intense and crippling, forcing her fingers around the rough iron that kept her from tumbling over the cliff's edge. She never should have sent Emma to the White Kingdom alone, but the blonde had insisted, attempting to keep her and their child safe.

The Dark Queen growled softly and touched her swollen belly. She could very well protect herself, but her weakness lie within those big green eyes, always forcing her to do their bidding.

"Emma," she whispered when she felt the comforting warmth of the Dark Knight as she joined her. When she turned, she saw her face and the tears that stained her cheeks, and immediately grew angry. "Their opinion means nothing, my love."

"I know," Emma murmured. "I feel sick for desiring their approval."

"You are not sick, my love. We all wish for peace at some point, even if it will never be granted." Regina touched her cheek and kissed the frown until it disappeared, curving into something soft, sweet, that unburdened her love's features.

"How did Snow react?" That piece of information was the only thing that she had wanted an image of. To see as Snow White's world crashed down around her upon learning that Emma had crossed the ultimate line with the Evil Queen, that she had chosen her instead of what she had been born into.

Emma had recounted her conversation and her mother's reaction, and the blood boiled within her veins again, shuddering her form.

"She implied that you must kill our child?" She felt Emma's hand cup her abdomen protectively. Within, she felt the little light squirm, nudging, as if provoked by these words.

"And I implied that she must fuck off." Regina found the corners of her lips twitch upward into her cheeks.

*Good,* she hummed in thought and Emma's light laughter chimed.

"Will they come for us?" she asked, feeling the blade of her own personal razor score along her insides. What worry had she if they did? They were invulnerable with a hand on their daggers, but her worry lie with the fragility of their unborn child.
"We are secluded, safe. They will be dead once we surface again," Emma reassured, fingers moving along the thin fabric of her nightgown, tracing the swell. She shuddered and closed her eyes, leaning forward to bury her nose in sandy locks.

"Snow White's demise - my happy ending. Never did I imagine I would receive it while I still breathed."

Emma snorted at her wife's words. Regina allowed herself to be crushed in her warm embrace as lipsghosted along the sensitive skin of her neck. "That is your happy ending?"

Regina released the air from her lungs. "No, not truly. I always thought I would be satisfied if death took her, but…" Olive fingers curled into the pale locks of Emma's hair, tugging and combing. "You had given me the realization that it would only satisfy me for a single moment and leave me empty for a lifetime. I suppose I had known this long ago, which was why I never did quite take that extra step and resorted to antagonizing your mother, instead.

"And that was when I had started to ponder what I truly wanted, what would diminish this loneliness, this emptiness inside of me. I have tried and failed, over and over. Nothing ever did satisfy me. I suppose deep down I wanted love. Someone to love me, someone to love." Regina cast her gaze to the churning waves as she stood beside her wife, arm slipping around her waist. "But I was told I would never get a happy ending, that I did not deserve one, and I eventually believed it for myself as the years passed and the isolation grew."

Emma was quiet for a long moment, allowing the brunette to lean against her, breathing calmly, relaxing, lulling Regina into a gentle serenity. Her voice was soft, like a lullaby, as she spoke, "But you did find your happy ending."

"Yes. Yes, I did."

One of Emma's hands had lifted, pressing against the bared flesh of her chest. From where it had been placed a fire had started, brimming on the edges of her blackened heart. Her breath was stolen into the flames as the blonde's second hand moved along her hips and curled into the olive fingers that rested where their light flourished.

Softly, she spoke, careful but sure, "We all deserve a happy ending when it boils down. It is the journey that dissuades us if it is too long, too difficult, too painful. But, in the end, True Love will be there to take our hands and guide us toward the light, toward eternity."

Regina felt her heart flutter. True Love; that had always been something that she never believed in, that it would never grace her. But there it was, holding her hand, gently kissing her, loving. She allowed it to swarm within her, bringing the peace that she had always longed for; silence from the screaming hatred and anger.

Closing her eyes, she allowed the rest of Emma's words to fill her, letting the world slip away.

"And you, my queen, you are my forever, and this child that you carry is our happy ending. And I will do everything in my power to protect it.”