Thread Softly

by Whistle Silver

Summary

As far as they all knew, Emma and Henry were content, with no memory of Storybrooke. However, when events beyond her control force Regina to seek them out, she realises not all is as it seems. Swan Queen all the way, folks.
Chapter 1

Well, here we go with a little foray into the world of Swan Queen. Let's see what comes of this endeavor! The story takes place after Pan's Curse is cast and basically disregards canon from thereon. If you're particular about canon adherence, this might be upsetting. Hope you enjoy it. Updates won't be regular, apologies! Enjoy, and hope you're spending this time of year with good food, good company and restful nights!

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Thread Softly

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*My gift to you is good memories... a good life for you and Henry. You'll have always been together...*

The bed is wide and soft.

*When you cross the town line, you'll have the life you always wanted...*

She is solid and warm.

*My gift to you is good memories...*

Dim light catches expressive eyes.

*You'll have always been together...*

An excited child launches himself onto the bed.

*You will have the past you always wanted...*

She curls in bed with her son and his mother on Christmas morning, and nothing could be better.

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The world churned in constant flux, cloud and mist rolling in and changing the view without pause. One moment the horizon manifested itself as a bold line of wet lead against the washed out sky. The next, it vanished entirely, sea and sky indistinguishable but where dark smudges of ragged hills suggested land. Where fitful cloud thinned and sunlight could hit the water, it favoured the far coast, a bright silver line shining beneath imposing cliffs.

The wind brought moisture with it, not determined enough to be called rain but still enough to soak and rob warmth. It chilled a woman with solemn eyes, causing her to curl into the warmth of her cloak. She adjusted a thick scarf to cover her stinging nose as the boat bearing her finally crunched onto a stony beach. She turned to pay the ferryman, trying to ignore his wary movements. The boy with him, pimpled and gangling, gawked openly at her, fumbling in his anxious state.

Once, such displays of fear and deference would have thrilled her, potent reminders of her own power and position. But years passed in a distant land had changed her, in many ways, and she now found their behaviour vaguely discomfiting.

Once landed, she stepped over the side of the boat and onto the beach. The island had no pier or jetty...
so she carefully picked her way over round stones.

"She has her own boat, for the journey back," the youth offered as he loaded bales of hide and antler onto the boat.

His older companion grunted. "Failing that, we return after a moon’s turn. Watch for us from the first hour after dawn."

She nodded her understanding and expressed her thanks, lifting her pack and watching them launch into the hissing surf. They dipped their sturdy oars and the speed with which they receded was surprising. Soon, they were a distant speck and she forced herself to ignore her trepidation.

She adjusted her bag and made her way up to the shore proper, spying a path through withered grass. The wind, never absent in this part of the world, grew more insistent then, whipping her short hair around her face. Onwards, her boots sinking into the mossy ground as she followed the trail.

She took stock of her surroundings. To her left, ragged cliffs loomed, sheltering a copse of willow, ash and alder. The trees were bare and grey in the early winter, long stripped of leaves and berries. To the right, rush filled fields clung to the flat ground between jagged outcroppings of stone. They were populated by a flock of sodden sheep, trudging enthusiastically over the windswept island.

The trail turned to the left now, running along the lee side of the cliff. Creaking in the wind, the pale branches of trees rubbed against one another, the hollow strikes like bones knocking together. They clung to shelter, all half twisted by the weather, desperate for refuge from the incessant wind. The path became lighter, naked chalk underfoot even as trees closed in overhead. She heard the sound of running water, so different from the moaning crash of the surf, and noticed a little stream had appeared beside the path. It sang alongside her as it tumbled over stones and she found herself following its course into a small glade.

There was a small grassy field, with raised beds and fenced gardens lining the perimeter. Opposite her, where the hill banked steeply up, she could make out another chalk path. In the centre of the clearing sat a little stone house with a sagging thatch roof. It was built from lumps of local stone and was desperately in need of a fresh coat of whitewash. An old barrel served as chimney, blue smoke curling elegantly from it. The gardens closest, particularly those beds that sported mostly flowers, were decorated with flotsam and jetsam artfully arranged.

She paused, wondering how best to approach when the door opened and a figure emerged into the morning light. It was another woman, dressed in woolen trousers and a tunic lined with rabbit fur. She was taller than her guest, sure and strong in appearance, older as well. Her boots were well mended and her grey hair neatly trimmed. Her gaze was cautious, but not unkind.

"Well met," she called, shielding her eyes from the low sun. "Who goes there? Friend or foe?"

"Not a foe," the visitor answered, "someone seeking your help. Though I doubt that will earn me a place in the ranks of your friends," she added, with wry humour. Two enormous dogs exited the cottage, faces placid but their size gave the newcomer pause for a moment.

The woman barked a laugh. "They say a friend in need is a friend, indeed. Who are you?"

She drew a breath. "My name is Regina Mills." There were titles, honours and styles she could claim, but they meant little in that place. The other woman regarded her with curious eyes.

"I am Liath." She opened her door and motioned for Regina to enter the little cottage. "Come, eat. If you have travelled here, you've had a long journey."
And so, Regina entered the home of a hermit, months after embarking on her quest, an emotion distressingly similar to hope rising in her breast.

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Emma Swan tousled her son Henry's hair as he bounded over to her, schoolbag slung over one shoulder.

"Hey, ma," he chirped.

"Hey, kid," she replied, grinning at him. "So lemme get this right. No soccer?"

"No!"

"No drama club?"

Nope!

She scratched the back of her neck. "No literary society?"

"Ma!" he laughed, "no! Nothing this evening. Pizza and root beer."

She nodded seriously, but she never could comport herself too sternly around her son for long. She smiled fondly and they began trooping down the street. Henry provided a running commentary of the previous week as Emma listened intently. Her son had taken a while to settle in, to make friends, but he'd blossomed during the last two months.

As a result, she'd seen less of him. It smarted, an ache of longing and loneliness reverberating in his absence that had often robbed her of breath. But what young person didn't need some time away from his mother, to figure out how to actually be around other people? He was sorely in need of that and she'd never begrudge his occasional absence.

They spoke of inconsequential things, primarily their pizza order, as they strode home. They had a weekend of movies planned and both were looking forward to quiet time together. There was a chilly rain falling around them, washing colour from the wet streets of New York, and neither desired to linger. They strode up the stairs to their apartment, skipping and jostling each other giddily. They paused to hold the door for a woman lugging a box, offering her a cheerful greeting, before retreating into their home and into pyjamas.

Curled on the couch, pizza and root beer to hand, they embarked on an ambitious extended edition *Lord of the The Rings* marathon. Henry tucked his head beneath Emma's chin when he had eaten his fill, the pair cuddling together.

The movie progressed, familiar and spectacular. Emma held her son loosely, letting him seek comfort and distance as he needed. He was on the cusp, on the very edge, between being a little boy and a young man. Her heart clenched at the thought.

"Mom really loved this part," he said quietly, during Arwen's flight from the Nazgul.

Sorrow engulfed her briefly and she clasped him more tightly to her side.

"She did," she agreed. Henry was quiet then, nothing else to say that hadn't already been said a hundred times. She kissed the crown of his head and closed her eyes, recalling a shining gaze and dark hair.
Liath was a courteous host, treating her guest with the utmost respect, as though she still reigned as queen. However, despite her humble settings, she apologised for neither the simple food she offered nor the rough stools beneath them. Regina found it oddly refreshing and suspected that the other woman would have treated the ferryman's apprentice with the same quiet civility.

They ate in silence before Liath rose, pouring them each a mug of spiced, mulled mead. It steamed faintly and Regina drank it gratefully, warmed and soothed by the rich taste.

"I heard of a Regina, once," Liath began. "A queen to the south. She vanished, along with her whole realm, decades ago." Her eyes were steady when they met hers, curious and expectant.

Regina nodded. "That was me. I cast a curse that brought us all to the land without magic."

Recognition crossed Liath's face and Regina continued. "The curse was broken some time ago but I was forced to undo it."

"Bringing you all back here."

Regina felt a grimace cross her face. "Not all of us. My son was born there. The curse never touched him, though he lived in the world it created." She swallowed thickly. "He's still there, with his mother."

"Was she of that world, as well?" Liath asked, sipping her mead.

"No. She was born here, but raised there. She's Snow White's daughter, the saviour." She sighed. "Destined to break the curse, and escape it, she stayed with our son. Undoing the curse broke the bonds between the worlds. The portals and paths are all closed."

Liath nodded then, understanding on her face. "Well, that explains why you came to me."

Regina nodded, feeling the weight of two months on the road heavy on her shoulders. The stranger before her was little more than a rumor; a whisper told in half forgotten legends. A person with unique abilities, able to travel along paths others could not.

"Do you wish to return to them?" she asked, with sympathy. "You must miss them terribly."

Regina shook her head, though she agreed. "I'd give anything to see Henry again. But I can't go there, I need them to come here. Emma needs to be here. Her mother is pregnant and the child is being threatened. We believe that her light magic is the only thing that stands a chance of saving it."

Liath nodded at that, eyes solemn in the dim mingled fire and day light inside her cottage. "The saviour?"

Regina nodded. "For better or for worse, she is. The product of true love."

Liath snorted with amused disdain, which actually made Regina feel quite a bit better. "That is more challenging, though I have visited that realm before."

Regina sighed. "They won't remember, either. The life they had ceased to exist when the curse was undone. I crafted memories for them, of a life together. They have no recollection of me, the curse or anything else." She felt her lip quirk into a smile. "I'm hoping I can jog their memory."

Liath's eyebrows lifted and she dropped a hand to the neck of the dog beside her. She was quiet for a
long moment, staring into the fire. "Why should I help you?"

Regina considered the question, and not for the first time. She had run through rewards, threats and every form of persuasion she'd possessed on the journey there. She took in the lean face across from her, mouth pressed into a thin line.

"No one else can," she said, an edge of desperation to her voice.

"There will be a price to pay," Liath said, softly and sadly.

Regina laughed bitterly at that. "Oh, there always is."

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So, it begins. Drop me a line a let me know what you think!
Chapter 2

So, I noticed a whole load of mistakes in the first chapter. How mortifying. I've fixed them a bit, but any advice is always welcome. The story continues... Enormous thanks to everyone who left reviews and who is following this little tale. Hope you enjoy it!

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Regina slept poorly in the little cottage, curled on a pile of blankets close to the fire. Perhaps it had been the wind howling outside or the unfamiliar calls of nocturnal birds, but she woke groggy and poorly rested. She was alone in the small cottage and wandered outside to tend to her morning ablutions.

When she returned Liath was strolling down the path behind the cottage, a brace of grouse in her hand and a mild expression on her face.

"Restocking the larder begins," she proclaimed, hanging the birds over a hook beside the door. "Can you hunt?"

Regina shook her head and Liath shrugged. "Well, I don't have enough time to teach you but I'll fill the larder and show you how to use the fish traps. There's flour and oats, too. You won't starve."

Regina blinked, frowning at the other woman and following her into the cottage. "You sound as though you're leaving me here." She didn't sense malice from her host, but she was wary by nature and being on the island left her feeling off kilter. The other woman busied herself at the small pot beside the fire, stirring the oats bubbling within.

"That's part of the price," she replied, spooning out two generous bowls of porridge. "This place exists on the edge. Edge of the world, edge of another time, all sorts of edges. It's somewhere that the boundaries between worlds get soft enough to slip through, if you know how."

Regina sat, watching her intently. During her research, whispers of a hermit with strange and poorly understood powers had emerged several times. As every other possible solution to their dilemma was discussed and discounted she'd been left with no other option. Leaving on an errand with so little information had made her incredibly nervous but she'd sworn a promise and, for reasons she didn't entirely understand, it seemed rather important to try and keep it.

"Because it isn't exactly… tied firmly to the world, it lets me find paths you wouldn't elsewhere." Liath frowned, and suddenly looked much older than Regina remembered her appearing the day before. "But if a place isn't exactly anywhere, it's hard for it to be anywhen. If we leave together, we will find the Land without Magic, no bother at all. We could bring your family back here, too, though it would be a slightly harder voyage. The problem lies in the next step onwards."

Regina laid her empty bowl down. "Returning to Misthaven."

"A week or a month could pass for us and a century for them." Liath paused to stroke the head of the hound closest to her. "Sometimes it slips the other way, but not often."

"What does that have to do with me staying here?" Regina asked.

"By having you here, there'll be less chance to slip. You were there, you came here in an ordinary manner. As long as you stay here, there's a link between these two places."
Regina sighed. "Have you been in the Land without Magic before?"

Liath nodded. "I saw them building beautiful temples to the stars. I saw them lay great bands of steel over the land to cross it. I watched them build many cities and I drove motorcars down paved roads. I don't stay there for too long, it isn't my favourite place to visit, but it will be good to return. I haven't been in a while."

This gave Regina pause for a long moment. She'd assumed she'd be going too, to help persuade Henry and Emma to return. She hadn't exactly finalised how she was going to accomplish this but she was resourceful. A potion to restore memory was a possibility, though tricky to formulate.

"So I stay here," she sighed.

"That's part of the price," Liath said, softly. "It will not be easy. This island isn't fond of being anywhere. We aren't graced with a huge amount of time. And... this place is on the edge. It tends to find the edges in you, too."

Regina swallowed then, nerves prickling against her skin. "Edges?"

Liath nodded. "You won't have easy nights here."

Regina steeled herself, every inch the former queen. "I am more than capable of surviving a few difficult nights." It would be worth it, she knew, to have Henry back. "Part of the price, you said?"

The hermit shrugged. "I don't know what the balance will be. We might not until this quest is over."

Regina was quiet for a long moment. "It doesn't matter what the price is," she said, softly. "I have nothing to lose."

There was sympathy, and pity, in Liath's knowing eyes as she nodded. "We begin preparations, then."

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Henry pelted down the field, a mighty frown on his face as he threw himself into the chase. Emma cheered from the sideline, her frantic clapping muffled by her bulky gloves. Her breath curled around her face as she cheered her son.

Sadly, the boy on the opposing team was taller and faster, evading Henry easily. In fairness to her son, he took his defeat with a good-natured sigh and jogged back to his position.

Emma knew very little about soccer. The offside rule unsettled her in ways she couldn't articulate but she supported Henry nonetheless. She was happy to sip a large, hot coffee and shout at appropriate moments.

"Oh!" a mother close by scowled, "that team is way bigger than ours!"

Emma shrugged. "And faster." She spied her boy again, watching him bounce on his toes. "But not necessarily better."

Henry once again received possession of the ball, stopping it and taking a look around. He feinted a kick to the left, sending several opposition players away, before chipping it to the right, a lanky team mate sprinting up the pitch towards the goal. The lad was within scoring distance when four defenders converged on his position. He tapped it backwards, to Henry, who quickly sent it to another teammate, beyond the knot of defenders, who wasted no time in sinking it into the back of
the net.

Emma leapt up, cheering and screaming as the boys on the pitch did, delighted by their small victory. She abandoned her coffee, her applause still muffled by thick gloves. Henry was on the receiving end of hugs and fist bumps on the pitch and waved up at her. Grinning like a loon, she turned to the side, her joy needing an outlet. Her heart calling out to another, to find eyes that would mirror her own delight without the need for cumbersome language.

The bleacher was empty, though, as her logical mind knew it would always be. Her mouth dried and her heart lurched in her chest. She took a breath to steady herself, looking back to the pitch. Her ears rang, as she found herself catapulted into the present with abrupt violence.

She should have known better than to go looking for her. She wasn't ever going to be there again. Emma bit her lip and clapped again, doing her best to hide her dampened enthusiasm. Her joy was desiccated by the steadying breaths she pulled through her nose, her lips tight against the sorrow rising up her throat. The hot wind of grief burning through her and scalding her voice.

Still, for her son's sake, she clapped her hands together above her head and kept her sadness crammed down, somewhere in secrecy within the confines of her rib cage.

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Warm firelight flickered against the whitewashed walls, augmented by beeswax candles. The scent was very pleasant, a wonderful contrast to the tallow and oil burned in other homesteads in this land. Still, the light was dim and Regina had to squint to see her work.

Liath sat carding wool on the floor beside her, humming to herself quietly. The dogs were heaped together, snoring in the corner. The wind had settled somewhat, though it was never entirely absent. Night had fallen once more, the stars hidden by racing banks of cloud.

Regina spun the spindle whorl carefully, feeding wool onto it, watching it tighten into a string. She'd never been particularly talented at spinning, certainly never to the standards her mother had demanded, but Liath seemed content to let her continue.

"It's a soothing enough pastime," the other woman mused, not pausing in her work. "Though I'm not a great knitter. The folk ashore value my yarn, though. They say it keeps the water off."

Regina lifted an eyebrow. "Enchanted?"

Liath snorted. "No! Greasy, as I'm sure you've noticed. You'd be hard pressed to enchant anything here. The island resists most magic."

She had, in fact, become aware of this. She shrugged, continuing to spin. Her lack of magic left her more vulnerable than she was willing to admit and she had no desire to visit the subject with the stranger before her.

Liath was quiet for a moment, before her curiosity overcame her. "You're a powerful witch. There are many ways to travel between worlds, yet you came to me. Why?"

She sighed. "As I said, when the curse was undone, the usual portals were rendered unusable. Doors and hats and beans..." she trailed off, sighing. "I tried them all and they all failed. There is a ship that might be able to make the voyage, but she vanished with her cowardly captain months ago."

She twirled the whorl in her hand, watching the round stone bob and twirl. "The connection between the realms was lost. There is a last resort but the price..." she paused, her heart thudding in her chest
at the thought of Snow's proposed solution. "I would rather not, if we have another option."

Liath nodded at that, still pulling away at the wool in her hands. "Well, that will suit the way I travel."

Regina's curiosity was piqued, but she remained silent. The length of yarn she was producing was lengthening, to her satisfaction. It was still quite uneven and slightly ragged, though. "It's softer than I'd expect," she said, quietly.

"The sheep are half wild," Liath said, glancing up. "It'd amaze you, the wool you can get from them, though." She held up an arm and Regina felt her sleeve, eyebrow raising before she nodded in agreement.

She eyed Regina's spindle and raised an eyebrow. "No offence, but I thought you'd be better at this."

Regina glared huffily, fumbling for a moment. Her yarn was quite uneven and she almost snapped the thread. "I never got the hang of it. Not even spinning with a wheel." Given her mother and former teacher, it was somewhat ironic.

"If you want," her host said, "you can use the balls of wool here to knit, or crochet, as you please. It might be an idea for the evenings ahead."

The notion gave Regina pause and distracted her from her mild annoyance at having her skills be questioned. "You'll be gone for a while?"

Liath shrugged. "Weeks, anyway. There is the task of finding the world, then of persuading Emma and Henry to follow me. It will be easier if they come willingly." She lifted slate coloured eyes. "Bringing them against their will might harm them. It is not unheard of for people to fall between worlds and never be found again."

"Do not harm them," Regina said, firmly. "Under no circumstance, save to protect them from a worse injury."

The grey head bobbed. "I won't harm your family, Regina. But this is not a safe way to cross realms. Not everyone makes the journey." It was said in such a matter of fact manner, in such steady tones, that it was almost easy to forget that Liath was referring to the possible death of her son.

"If you think they won't make it," she said, swallowing against the worry rising, "then don't bring them. Do not take them if you think they'll get hurt."

Liath frowned, pausing in her carding. "I thought this was the only way? The price demanded by your other plan…"

Regina stopped spinning, clenching the whorl and distaff. "Is terrible, don't doubt it, but nothing is worth losing Henry."

Liath was quiet for a long moment before she resumed her activity. It was a while before Regina was able to still her shaking hands to continue.

"At the end," her host said, "all we can ever do is weigh one horrible option against another. You wouldn't be here if you hadn't."

The chalk spindle whorl was warm in her hand, the thread lengthening. She didn't reply, knowing there was nothing she could say to dispute the statement and having no desire to affirm it.
Emma was half asleep, reading the news headlines on her phone, when a yell broke through the silence of the apartment. It hadn't been particularly loud or violent, as these things went, but it shook her enormously. She scrambled out of bed and towards Henry’s room, barging in with a racing heart.

Her son was laid on his side, clutching a pillow against himself. Her heart broke a bit; he'd only recently eschewed his teddy bears, dismissed them as refuse from his childish years. He appeared sweaty, eyes rolling beneath closed lids as he dreamed.

Emma laid a hand between his shoulder blades, letting the weight still him for a moment. He smacked his mouth, rising from the nightmare briefly.

"Mom?" he whispered, eyes barely flicking open.

"Ma," Emma sighed. "Go back to sleep, Henry."

"Will you get mom to stop by?" he asked, fighting sleep. She bit her lip hard enough to draw blood, the metallic taste bringing her into a panicky wakefulness. Emma raised her hand to the back of his head, running her fingers through his messy hair. He was in need of a haircut, she noticed, finding another snare for herself in the memory of Regina scolding him about his untidy locks.

"Go to sleep, buddy," she said, softly, affectionately twisting the strands of hair around her fingers. "It's OK."

He sighed, relaxing back into a quiet slumber. Emma sighed, watching him sleep for a minute longer before she stood and exited into the hall, turning away from her bedroom. She had no desire to crawl into her cold bed and listen to the apartment creak around her. So she sat on the couch, curled under a blanket and switched on the TV.

It was Henry's first nightmare in two weeks which was, she supposed, progress. He also hadn't seemed overly distressed, which was also positive. She sighed, feeling completely ill equipped for dealing with Henry's grief. She tipped her heavy head against the back of the sofa and felt a momentary flash of anger at Regina, which was swiftly followed by a wave of guilt.

It's not like she had any damn choice she thought, bitterly.

She squeezed her eyes shut, willing her mind away from the subject, glumly watching the flickering screen in front of her. She drifted asleep in front of an old episode of Friends, curled into an uncomfortable ball on the couch.

### Regina

Regina stood outside the cottage, Liath and the dogs beside her. The tall woman was clad in a tunic decorated with slivers of flint and jet, lined with fur. She held a walking stick but bore no weapons and carried only a small pack. They'd spent the previous two days preparing the cottage and Regina for Liath's absence. She'd received a crash course in fishing, tending the gardens and minding the dogs.

"Well, time to go," Liath said, quietly. "The dogs will keep you sound, but be kind to them. It will help."

Regina, who'd grown very fond of the two great beasts, did not think this would be difficult. Bran, the larger of the pair, butted his head against her belly and panted casually. His brother was pacing in a tight circle, clearly eager for something to happen.
"Leave the sheep, unless one is injured. They're hoary brutes and well fit to survive the next while. If the ferryman comes, tell him I'll pay him a visit when I have wares to trade again."

She paused, regarding Regina solemnly. "Now. Tell me, Emma Swan and Henry. Any last advice?"

"Don't lie to them," she said, cursing the pain she could hear in her own voice. "Emma is excellent at detecting dishonesty and she's very slow to trust. Henry isn't, but he holds betrayal as closely as I do."

Liath nodded. "And they have no memory of any of this? Of magic or this world or you?"

Regina shook her head. "No. Emma will not have given him up when he was born and all Henry will remember is a life with her."

Liath nodded. "Well, I'll get them here and then you can figure out how to restore their past."

"You won't harm them, will you?" she asked, steel in her voice. Liath scoffed.

"You just mind yourself, Regina Mills. Here," she said, lifting a bundle from the windowsill. She opened the rough wrap to reveal half a dozen black feathers. "I'll take three with me, leaving three for you. If you have a message, stand on the shore and in the first light of dawn, whisper it. The bird will do the rest. But be prudent."

The other woman regarded her with steady eyes, colourless in the dim morning light. "Take care. It will not be easy, being here. If I return to find you gone, well, it wouldn't be the first time."

Regina shook her head. "I will be here, waiting for Henry and Emma."

"I hope so. Farewell for now."

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So here we go. Getting the story going. Thoughts, comments and all the rest very welcome. Leave a review! Wishing you a happy 2019.
Chapter 3

Thanks again for all the favs, follows and reviews! Hope you're enjoying this story. Things may become clearer in this chapter, though they also get a bit darker. Let me know what you think!

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In the days following Liath's departure, the wind moaned a continuous refrain. The stone cottage was buffeted by unceasing gusts, the little window panes rattling in their frames. It growled across the island, ever present and rising in deafening crescendo at unpredictable intervals. The noise was unlike anything Regina had ever encountered, a menacing presence snarling in the background, unnerving her as it blew.

The sea was high, great banks of foaming water repeatedly flung against the stony shore with thunderous booms. Few birds or seals braved the conditions, life hunkered down for the moment. Though heavy clouds spat rain with no discernible pattern, it didn't feel like a storm. It felt as though the land was alive, the island an unhappy animal desiring to scratch at a flea just beyond its reach.

Regina found it incredibly discomfiting. As predicted, she hadn't been sleeping well. The wind truly found its voice at night, drowning out all other sound and often startling her awake with particularly vicious gusts. Her dreams had been muddled, too, short and difficult to recall in the morning.

In an effort to keep herself occupied, Regina had taken up Liath's suggestion of knitting after three days of increasing boredom. She had helped herself to the better quality balls of yarn and a fine pair of wooden knitting needles. Liath had in her possession a book of patterns and she'd decided to begin with a pair of socks, mostly because her feet were cold a lot of the time.

The wool was greasy and didn't have the most pleasant aroma, but she knew it was quite waterproof. She was slightly concerned that her boots, though well made, would not survive forever when faced with sharp shards of flint littering the island. It was as though the beast had teeth, she mused.

Bran lifted his head to her, his watery eyes calm. He was the less excitable of the pair, his brother Sceolta restive and easily bored. Bran crossed to her, lying at her feet in front of the hearth. She ran a gentle toe down his broad back, not pausing in her knitting.

She sighed. Liath had been gone for days now, more than a week, and Regina was beginning to feel the effects of isolation. She'd never been the most sociable of people, but she found herself restless, unable to settle and relax into the quiet rhythms of life in the cottage. She had little enough to do, in reality. Preparing her food and minding the dogs didn't take up much time. She walked the island as much as she could, in the hours before dusk when the wind sometimes allowed a grudging reprieve. Even when she'd been essentially imprisoned in Leopold's castle, there had been people there to speak to. She shook her head, deciding to reflect on her journey to this place, rather than reminisce about that period of her life.

After being catapulted back to the Enchanted Forest, and regaining Misthaven Castle from her sister, she'd locked herself away in her rooms, occasionally visiting her mother's vault to collect materials and spell books. Snow had officially rescinded her banishment and she existed as a strange sort of advisor to the crown. None of them really trusted her much, but she'd made herself useful. Her experience ruling, both as queen and mayor, had been helpful in trying to restore the kingdom to some semblance of order.

Setting her knitting aside, she swung the copper kettle over the fire, standing to fix herself some
nettle tea. She had been *tolerated* at court, architect of both the curse and its destruction. As insufferably idealistic as the White Queen and her friends were, they were also pragmatic enough to not look a gift horse in the mouth, not when a powerful witch was threatening them. Snow was also clearly trying to mend things between them, to atone for all the hurts she'd inflicted upon Regina. She still wasn't entirely how she felt about this, but had been too wearied from grief to offer more than a token protest.

She tipped some dried leaves into a little ceramic pot, waiting for the kettle to boil and retrieving the honey. Sceolta wagged his great tail, treating her to a panting grin. The hounds had boundless energy, but when properly exercised were more than happy to loll around the floor.

"If they could see me now," she mused, earning a more enthusiastic bout of wagging. She'd left Misthaven Castle in a handsome carriage with a retinue of knights. Belle had accompanied her for several weeks, surprising Regina by being quite the pleasant travelling companion. As time had passed and their trail grew more nebulous, they'd agreed that Belle should return to conduct further research. Regina had saddled one of the horses and exchanged her gown for riding gear. She'd taken a few knights with her, dispatching the rest with Belle to protect her from any residual ogres or bandits.

As the weeks passed, she sent more of the knights home as their presence became a hindrance. She found herself further from Misthaven, or her own home, than she'd ever been, far beyond their borders. The people were wary of her wealth and status, and terrified of her magic. They were a cautious folk, civil but not welcoming. It was as though the desolation of the land and the effort needed to survive there had left them hardened. Grim and unfriendly, they were nevertheless honourable after their own manner and eventually a blind crone had whispered to her of a hermit on a island.

Shedding the last of her jewels, wrapping her sable cloak around her, she'd headed to the far north with a pair of knights, using little magic and enjoying cool hospitality in ramshackle inns and barns. Eventually, she'd been pointed to a path leading to the coast, too narrow for the horses, and she'd headed alone. Three days later and she'd caught her first glimpse of the island, a solid outcropping of stone against the roiling grey sea. The path led to a fishing village and she'd secured passage off shore.

Her tea steamed in the mug, warming her nose and fingers. She returned to her chair, gazing into the fire. Sods of turf glowed in the grate, emitting a soft light and plentiful warmth. She wondered, fleetingly, what her mother would have had to say about this. Living like a peasant, tramping to the edge of the known world on a fool's errand.

She would have hated the idea, of course. Cora Mills had violently opposed the notion that her daughter might have behaved as anything less than a queen. The memory of her mother left her uneasy and her mind wandered to Henry. Her throat and heart ached at the thought of him. He'd have been utterly thrilled with all this, a grand adventure to save his aunt or uncle *from* his aunt.

She lifted her knitting again, suddenly aware of just how *far* she was from anything. From other people, from Misthaven, from her son. The wind found its voice again, shaking the door in its jamb. Loneliness crept into her, her heart aching with want for Henry. She willed her shaking hands to steady and continued with her task.

She'd finish this pair for herself, she decided, desperately needing something to occupy her mind. The next pair would be for Henry.

SQSQSQSQ
Emma was flicking through her mail, Henry trailing behind her, when they encountered a woman fumbling with the door to the stairwell. Emma recognised her as a new inhabitant of the building who'd appeared several weeks previous. Smiling, Emma held it open, earning a grateful grin.

"Thanks," she said, juggling the muddy gear in her hands. "I'm losing that particular battle today, I think."

Henry smiled widely. "Doors can be tricky things!" He gawked at the items she was carrying and she noted his interest, chatting as they ascended the stairs.

"I'm just back from a three day hike."

"Oh, cool!" he exclaimed. "Isn't that such a neat vacation idea, ma?"

Emma lifted an eyebrow, familiar with the wheedling tone in Henry's voice. He'd been contemplating a holiday for a while now and none of his suggestions involved sitting on a hot beach, disappointingly for her.

"Trudging around the wilderness, sleeping rough? Ain't exactly my idea of a relaxing vacation, kid."

"Nor mine," the woman snorted. "I'm a guide."

Henry gasped at that. "You go exploring for your job!?"

She snorted. "No, I keep corporate groups and stag parties alive in national parks. But it does pay the bills."

They all exited the stairs on the same floor, strolling down the corridor. "Well, pleased to meet you," Emma said. "We're in 402 if you need anything."

"Thank you," she replied, warmly. "I'm at the end of the hall, right in the corner. Same to you."

Emma let Henry into their apartment and set about making dinner, thoughts of their new neighbour vanishing in the familiar comforting hum of domestic life.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Regina found herself walking down a long, dark corridor. Candles flickered in iron sconces, barely lighting the way. Though darker than they had ever been in reality, she recognised her rooms in Leopold's castle. She could hear a storm hurling itself against the stone castle walls and shuddered with cold. She was wearing a thin, diaphanous gown and her hair was loose around her shoulders. She crossed her arms, feeling exposed in the echoing hall as she approached a familiar door.

She entered slowly, cautiously. A small, dark haired figure sat before her vanity, back turned to her. She was wearing a gown that had been a particular favourite of Snow's and a hairbrush was sitting beside her. At one stage, it had been a nightly occurrence, the child still treating her as a new mother. Anguish gripped her, tightening her throat. Snow called to her, her voice lilting. Regina found herself unable to stop from moving, lifting the hairbrush and gently combing Snow's long hair. The child was humming to herself and Regina felt something akin to longing in her chest. To be so young and innocent, she mused, to be the teenager who could have perhaps forgiven Snow, had malign forces not intervened.

"Why are you so sad?" Snow asked, her voice startling Regina somewhat.
"I'm not, dear," she said, "merely tired." She dropped her gaze to the floor, movements slowing until she came to a stop. Snow's hair truly was beautiful, as glossy as a raven's feather and softer than down.

Snow was quiet for a long moment and Regina bit her lip. "I suppose I am sad. I lost the person I love the most."

Old memories, violent and spiteful and so terribly familiar, reared in her chest. Except now, rather than Daniel's lifeless eyes, she saw her son's. Full of mischief and curiosity and affection. She watched them fall from hers as he loaded himself into Emma's car, leaving her forever. The anger though, the desire to wound and lash out was the same though, as familiar as a well worn glove. She clenched her fist around the brush, bringing it away from Snow's hair with a shaking hand. The child turned around to her, though the face that lifted itself had changed. She saw herself, young and guileless and unscarred.

"Love, true love, is the most powerful magic of all. It creates happiness," the child said, with shining eyes.

Regina drew in a breath and the desire to hurt and lash out intensified tenfold, her heart screaming in her chest.

"No," she snapped. "It creates pain."

The child gazed at her, trusting and sure as Regina's hand trembled with the desire to tear her heart out.

SQSQSQSQ

Waking soaked with sweat, Regina launched herself out of bed, stumbling and falling to the ground. The dogs whined, but she paid them no heed. She scrambled to pull her boots and tunic on, choking and gasping for air. The walls of the cottage were closing in around her, stifling and suffocating.

Her eyes were burning and her chest tight as she sucked in desperate breaths. Staggering to the door, she collapsed out onto the path and fled, blindly running down the path to the beach. The moon was waxing full but rapidly scudding clouds hid its face more than they revealed it. She came to a stop on a sandy patch of ground, falling to her knees, heart hammering in her chest.

The wind whipped her hair around her, icy tendrils finding seams and gaps in clothing. It roared past her ears, competing with the sound of blood pounding within. Cold sprays of water were borne from whitecaps on it, soaking her face. The salt of the sea couldn't compete with that of her tears, scalding as they fell.

The moon slid behind a cloud once more and the shore was left in tumultuous darkness. Regina squeezed her eyes shut and raised her hand to her chest, preparing to rip her heart from within. To her horror, she was unable to do so and she cried out to the night. Her screams were swallowed in the wind on the edge of the world, no star or moon to light her way and no one to witness her anguish.

SQSQSQSQ

Emma woke late one Sunday, with the suspicion she'd been dreaming. She padded into the kitchen, kissing the crown of Henry's head as he shoveled cereal into his mouth. He was reading at the table, one of the many young adult fantasy series he favoured. Emma set the coffee pot to brew and decided to check the mail. She'd meant to do it on her way in from work on Friday, but had
completely forgotten. She pulled on a hoodie and her slippers, keys jingling as she jogged down to the foyer. As she was opening her mail box, the new neighbour entered, carrying a newspaper.

"Oh, good morning!" Emma chirped. "Wow, you might be the last person in New York to actually buy a physical copy of the news!"

She shrugged. "Hate doing the crossword online."

Emma grinned as they made their way upstairs. She studied the other woman curiously. She was at least ten if not twenty years her senior and spoke with an accent, though Emma couldn't place it.

"I'm Emma Swan, by the way," she said, impulsively.

"Liath Doran," she replied. "Pleased to meet you. You're friendlier than most New Yorkers. A pleasant surprise."

Emma shrugged. "I'm not from around here. Neither are you, right?"

Liath chuckled. "You're entirely correct."

They entered their hall and the rich aroma of coffee drifted out to greet them. Emma groaned and Liath raised an eyebrow. "Don't judge me, that coffee is amazing." She blinked. "Actually, you want to come in for one?"

Liath seemed surprised but nodded. "I'd be delighted to."

They entered the apartment, Emma calling out to Henry. He seemed delighted to see the woman again and Emma smiled at the sight. They'd had a lot of friends and neighbours in the past and that sense of community was something she'd found herself missing recently. Emma fixed them a mug each and Henry peppered Liath with questions regarding her job, which he found completely fascinating.

Liath accepted the coffee with a grateful nod. "Thank you. It smells even better close up."

Emma shrugged. "Got the beans from a nice place a few blocks over."

Henry bounced up to the table, his atlas in tow. "Here, I can show you the national park we went to when I was eight!" He flicked through the book, grinning the whole time. Liath seemed to bear it with good grace, smiling at the boy.

"It was my mom's birthday," he said, searching for the place. "Ma and me brought cupcakes to surprise her, but someone squashed them."

"Ma and I," she corrected idly, mussing Henry's hair playfully. Liath had a small confused frown on her face and Emma nudged her son. "You want to show Liath your favourite picture?"

Henry nodded enthusiastically, hopping down from the counter and running to his room. He returned with the framed photo he kept beside his bed, a sad expression crossing his face.

"This is us," he told Liath. "Me, ma and mom. My mom died last year," he said in the matter of fact way that children do and it sent a spear of pain lancing through Emma's chest. "We really miss her."

Liath lifted sad grey eyes, sympathy and shock within. "I'm so sorry."

Emma nodded, gazing at the photograph, taking in the scene. Regina was sandwiched between them both, her face shining with happiness. Emma had taken the selfie, her other arm wrapped around her
Regina's waist. God, she could almost feel the warmth and solidity of the other woman in her arms, even now.

Henry started regaling them with tales of the trip, Liath listening attentively while Emma drifted in and out of the conversation, lost remembering the other woman.

"We have other pictures of her, if you wanna see," Henry offered, sorrow in his piping voice. Liath graciously accepted and they soon found themselves sitting before a photo album, Henry happy to guide his new neighbour through their past. Emma, heart brittle and tender, had to leave them when they came to the wedding photos, wandering in to clean the dishes.

A while later, Liath entered the kitchen, washing her mug.

"I'm sorry for your loss," she said kindly. "What was her name?"

"Regina," Emma said, still savouring the sound of it, even as it stung.

"You were with her for a long time."

"My whole adult life," Emma sighed, leaning against the counter. "There was a car crash last year… We came here to get some space. There were so many reminders at home, you know?"

Liath shook her head, frowning. She bore an odd expression, one of surprise and Emma wondered if she was shocked to hear she'd been married to a woman. People generally weren't, she was pretty obviously out, but you never knew.

"It's horrible. I lost my brother, when we were much younger," she sighed. "Losing someone so close, it's a wound that never fully heals." She gazed out the window, searching within old memories. She gathered herself and nodded. "You loved her."

Emma nodded solemnly. "With all my heart."

Liath appeared much older then, frail and time worn. Her gaze was unfocused, distant and troubled. She seemed to reach some conclusion, nodding to herself.

"Thank you for the coffee, Emma, and the company. I'll see you during the week."

SQSQSQSQ

A figure stood on the roof of a New York City apartment block, indistinct in the dim morning light, a feather in her hand. Slowly, as the first hints of sunrise lent purple hues to the horizon, she raised the feather to her lips.

SQSQSQSQ

Yikes, I actually feel bad for doing this to these poor characters. Stay tuned for the next installment, things will make sense eventually. Thoughts, reviews and feedback all greatly welcomed. Also, if you fancy reading some Hermione/Fleur tales, check out some of my other stories. Forgive the shameless plug!
Chapter 4

Another installment. This one has some pretty dark moments in it, with mentions of non-consensual sex and thoughts of self harm. Proceed with caution if these are sensitive subjects for you!

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Regina woke reluctantly, exhaustion dragging her limbs as Bran huffed dolefully at her, nudging her fully awake with a cold nose. She blinked sleep from her eyes, bleary and vaguely nauseous. She'd woken several times during the night, visited by the sharp nails and cruel magic of her mother and suffocating weight of Leopold. Sceolta was less subtle than his brother, whining loudly from beside the door. She sighed and resisted the urge to roll over and burrow back into the warmth of the blankets. She'd neglected to build the fire properly the evening before and the house was cold as a result.

"You'd probably eat me after two missed meals, you brutes."

Bran seemed affronted, cocking his head sadly, but Sceolta eyed her with embarrassment, as though the thought had crossed his mind. Scowling at him, she slid out of bed and went about feeding them and relighting the fire. She realised she'd been slightly remiss with cleaning out the hearth and had to make two trips to the ash pile. Before long, a small flame burned behind the grate, kindling snapping as the fire caught.

She'd have quite a wait until the turf was hot enough to boil water for breakfast so she lifted her knitting. She'd completed Henry's socks the evening before and was contemplating a scarf. Regina glanced at the two pairs laid out side by side and wondered if a pair for Liath would contribute towards a thank you. She doubted the other woman wanted much in the way of gold, but she'd doubtless need a decent pair of socks.

The repetitive click of the needles filled the room and she allowed herself some distraction. It was easier, she mused, to feel less isolated when occupied. Easier as well to not dwell on all the things she was trying to ignore. She could almost forget how far she was from everything and the uncertainty of her mission. The numbness in her breast, the hole in her heavy heart, seemed more tolerable and so she bent to her task, concentrating as best she could.

SQSQSQ

Emma was flicking through articles from a news website based in Idaho, part of her most recent freelance job. A private investigator sent bits and pieces her way every now and again, most of which involved online research. She wasn't particularly suited to it, she'd have been a much better cop, but the idea of going out on the beat terrified her.

Not because she was particularly worried about being shot, but rather that such an event would leave Henry without either of his mothers. It was something she'd never forgive herself for, nor would Regina. Despite the fact that neither of them had believed in any sort of afterlife, Emma was completely confident her wife would find a way to track her down and kill her all over again should she do something so stupid.

A smile quirked her mouth at the reminder of Regina's fiery temper. It had to be seen to be believed and while she had never been happy to be on the receiving end, she'd quite enjoyed watching her wife eviscerate her enemies. Some of her opponents in the Mayoral election had dubbed her the Evil Queen, a prime example of good old-fashioned political misogyny rearing its ugly head. She'd had
the temerity to be young, female, direct, intelligent and unflinching. She hadn't acted with what was deemed due deference and they'd tried to pillory her. She'd been well fit to deal with their attacks, though, and easily won her seat.

It still brought a surge of pride bubbling through Emma's chest, though closely chased by sorrow. She'd expected grieving to get easier, everyone had said it would, but that hadn't been her reality yet. It wasn't only her son waking with nightmares, truth be told. She sighed and shoved back from her desk. There wasn't much urgency with this and she was feeling antsy.

Henry was at school and due to head straight to drama afterwards. She had hours before he'd return home. She changed into her running gear and grabbed her phone and ear buds. She fiddled with the fancy running watch Regina had bought her their last, final Christmas in an effort to encourage some cardio. She'd joked about wanting to fight the bear claws and hot chocolate in front of Henry, but a couple of days later, curled in their bed she'd been a touch more serious.

"I worry about you. We don't know anything about your family's medical history." Regina had been curled against her, their legs tangled together. Bare skin warm against her, the familiar intimacy had soothed Emma enormously. She knew that touch so well, felt the pull whenever they were close.

"I'm healthy as a horse," she'd replied, stroking Regina's silky hair.

"You are now, dearest, and we have to keep it that way for a very long time." Regina had leaned up on Emma's chest, eyes glinting in the low light. "We have to see our grandchildren, after all."

A huge smile broke out on her face and her heart filled with warmth. She knew she'd never stop being surprised by the fact that Regina wanted to be with her, wanted her by her side, loved her so much. She never wanted to stop being surprised by it, either.

She reached for her, tugging her into a gentle kiss.

"Great grandchildren at least, sweetheart. I was a teenager when he was born."

Regina had snorted against her lips then, inelegant but laughing joyfully. She sank against Emma, boneless with contentment as they kissed.

Emma congratulated herself on finding the right thing to say and had downloaded a Couch to 5K app the next day.

She slowed to a stop at the steps to her apartment building, panting with exertion. She stopped her run, noting she'd logged seven K, a bit further than she'd intended. She'd lost herself in memory, again. She heaved a hollow sigh and trudged up the stairs. The apartment was quiet without Henry and felt chillier than it actually was against her sweaty skin.

The hairs on her arm rose, her skin burning in the cold. The ghost of a gentle touch, of skin that seemed to match with hers on a molecular level, breathed over her. Jesus, she hadn't known that flesh and bone could remember so well. Regina had become such a part of her that her body still hadn't caught up with the fact that she was never coming back.

Sighing, she stepped into the shower, near scalding water sluicing over her head as she forced herself to step into the present and plan Henry's dinner.

SQSQSQSQ

The days passed by on the little island, one blurring into the next. Her nights were filled with the scream of howling wind and dark nightmares. She felt small and uncertain, no more a queen or
mayor than the sparrows in the hedges. She spoke to the dogs sometimes but her voice grew raspy with disuse and lacked much of her former strength. Coldness found her more easily now and she huddled by the fire when she could.

There was only so long she could stay inside before the walls began to close in, however. Before the wind and rain and loneliness had her skin crawling with the need to move and her stomach churned with restlessness. At those times, she borrowed extra clothes from Liath's trunk and set out.

One afternoon weeks after Liath's departure she sat wrapped in her cloak on the shore, watching cormorants bob on the waves. Every so often, one of the sleek birds would dive, or take flight, but the flock seemed content to wait until the wind settled. It wasn't raining, but a mist had rolled in, obscuring the mainland entirely. She'd lost count of how many days like this she'd witnessed and would admit she probably should have been better about marking the passage of time.

Her thoughts wandered to Snow, wondering how the Kingdom was faring in her absence. She doubted Zelena would act before Snow delivered and without her little sister to bother, she was unlikely to attack them prematurely. Regina, working unhappily with the Blue Fairy, had also warded the castle against unwelcome intruders. Between that, Charming's army and the group of vigilantes led by Robin Hood, she hoped her sister would be dissuaded from casual forays.

But does it matter? she wondered. If I succeed, will they even see fit to be grateful to the Evil Queen?

Gratitude aside, her chances of success felt very remote, in that moment. Several days past, she forgot how many, a sleek raven had arrived with a message from Liath. She informed her she'd discovered Henry and Emma, safe and well, and was working out how to return them. It had terrified her, in honesty. Aside from the dangerous nature of the crossing, how could her heart survive Henry not knowing her? It was agony, knowing that the only person alive who loved her had no knowledge of her.

She stood, turning from the beach. Bran sighed but followed, his brother off hunting hares. She strode up the beach, to the eastern side of the island. The southern edge was relatively flat, allowing sheep to graze with relatively little peril, but the rocky beach soon reared up into another set of steep cliffs.

The memories of her son she usually soothed herself with seemed very distant. Nebulous and hazy, too tenuous for her to grasp and enjoy. They almost felt like they'd happened to another person, a stranger. But then, when her nightmares laid bare the horrors of her past, she experienced the same numb disconnection.

And there was no denying she'd been the one to perpetuate those crimes.

She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the ground slope upwards underfoot. By some miracle, the wind was starting to settle, quietening somewhat. She didn't get her hopes up, calm teased her several times a day, but she welcomed any reprieve no matter how brief.

With her memories so ephemeral, her thoughts were by contrast intrusive and sharp. They slid into her consciousness without warning, startling her with the stinging pain they could inflict. As they became more familiar, though, she began to accept them with heavy resignation.

He will not remember and if he does, he'll hate you.

Her path rose, high enough now that ravens were riding currents beside her, great ragged wings spread. They ignored her, utterly disinterested in the human in their midst. Her chest tightened.
Almost like being back in Snow's court.

Her heart sank. It was no less than she deserved. She'd told Robin that having someone to destroy was enough to keep her stumbling forward, but that notion was no more than a childish burst of pantomime to cover the shock of meeting Zelena. The thought of retrieving Henry was the last thing she could hold on to, in honesty, and she found herself regretting not using the sleeping potion once more.

She reached the cliff top, the land beyond the waves still obscured. The ocean was enjoying the brief break from the wind, taking the chance to rest before the next squall. Regina stepped to the edge of the stone ledge, gazing out at the sea stacks and rocks below. She'd been uncomfortable in places like this for many years, ever since marrying Leopold. The height always seemed tempting in ways that she didn't wish to examine too closely.

She wondered if the magic that Liath required for a timely return needed her to be alive. Would her bones be enough? Would her corpse suffice to tie this island to Misthaven in the way they wished? Would it matter if she fell? Who would miss her?

The sea boiled far below her, the booming cacophony filling her senses, not muted by the wind for once. She swallowed thickly. She'd come this far, but for what? To help a group of people that hated her? To retrieve a boy who'd look upon her as a stranger? Worse, he'd view her as a monster if she ever managed to restore his memories. The tentative progress they'd made after Pan would doubtless be undone. After all, who had ever truly loved her when life had become difficult?

Regina sat at the edge of the cliff, her booted feet hanging off the edge as she shifted her gaze to the uncertain horizon. She wasn't entirely sure in which direction she was looking but she supposed it hardly mattered. The grey sky merged into the steel coloured ocean wherever she looked, the rest of the world far away.

Her heart was a heavy stone in her chest and she longing to rip it out, to cast it out into the waves and be done with it. What use had it ever been to her, after all? What had her love ever done but bring hurt and pain?

How could anyone ever love me? Why would they want to try?

She gripped her face in her hands and tried to steady her breathing. It didn't matter, she knew. It didn't matter if they hated her, or were completely apathetic towards her. It didn't matter that she was alone, she'd spent most of her life that way. It didn't matter if Henry had forgotten her, he had a mother.

All that mattered was his safety and happiness. She knew that she should have refused to move him and Emma at all, but she was still selfish enough to crave a glimpse, a last look, at her son. He would have been better off with Emma in the Land without Magic and all magic’s associated nonsense. But the last strand of her heart, the only thread that wasn't dark and cold, burned brightly with an aching desire to see him.

If only to say goodbye.

SQSQSQSQ

Emma had invited Liath over for dinner one evening shortly after their coffee morning. The other woman kept as unusual schedule as she did and was pleasant company. Besides, Henry had been bugging her to make friends.
They were tucking into a bowel of green pesto chicken, accompanied by steaming garlic bread. Henry was quizzing Liath about her travels, the older woman taking it all in stride. Emma took a long pull from her beer listening to the conversation.

"Where's your favourite place?"

Her grey eyes twinkled and she sipped her beer. "Now, that would be telling. I have several favourites, depending on my mood. I like islands though, remote ones."

Henry chewed a piece of chicken thoughtfully. "I don't think I've been to an island before."

"Nuh uh," Emma shook her head. "We took you to Nantucket when you were a toddler." She frowned. "And Aruba!"

Henry rolled his eyes. "Neither of those count, I was too little. Also, for the record, you went on way cooler vacations when I was tiny."

Emma shrugged. "You were way more portable when you were tiny, we could just shove you in a stroller."

Liath chuckled and Henry grinned. "They had one of those baby leashes, too."

Emma eyed him seriously. "Kid, we had several. As soon as you could walk, you decided you needed to explore every nook and cranny every damn place you went. You nearly gave your poor mom a heart attack." She smiled softly. "She was so annoyed when I brought it home, though. 'Emma Swan-Mills! You are not putting my son on a leash like a misbehaving terrier!'"

Henry bounced in his seat, taking over the story. "But it was actually a little backpack, which I loved, and mom eventually gave in."

Emma shook her head. "So I gloated about what a great idea it was for like, a week," she glanced to Henry, who took over with glee.

"Until one day, ma was bragging and the next thing, mom pulled out a muzzle and tossed it at her!" He struck a pose and gave his best imitation of Regina's voice. "'Quiet!'"

Liath burst out laughing. "That is some commitment to the joke!"

Emma nodded, though didn't reveal that Regina had actually said 'quiet, bitch'. The point stood.

They shared their laughter for a few more moments, before it petered out. Liath raised kind eyes to Henry, setting her fork down. "It's good to remember her like this, I think. So often, it feels like you aren't allowed to recall the happier times, that laughing about them is sacrilegious. But it's the very finest way to honour the memory of the ones you love."

Emma held her peace. She wasn't quite as able to speak about Regina as Henry was, but it warmed her heart to see the love shining in his eyes. Hopefully they were moving closer to the day when the wounds he bore would heal.

"I lost my brother," Liath said to Henry. "When we were very young. I missed him fiercely for years, but eventually I was able to tell stories about him."

Henry's bright eyes were inquisitive and he turned to Emma, seeking permission of sorts. She shrugged, gesturing with her fork.
"Will you tell us one?"

Liath leaned back and nodded. "I will. There's a saying back home, whoever will bring a story to you will take two stories from you."

She leaned back in her chair and the three of them swapped stories until it was time for Henry to go to bed, tears and laughter flowing easily, a sorrowful camaraderie growing between them all. By the end of the evening, Henry had managed to finagle a promise of a hike out of the older woman and Emma found herself pouting at the idea of tramping through the woods, swatting mosquitoes. Maybe it would be good for them, though, to get out of the city for a day.

Later in bed, she rolled onto her side and hugged her pillow, falling into the place between dreams where memories ceased to exist in the past and instead created something new. Recollection and imagination brought life to the gentle affection she craved, warmth permeating her for the first time all day. A body she knew better than her own was curled in her arms, breaths slow and relaxed. As she fell asleep, she felt delicate fingers lace with her own, their rings catching the light of the alarm clock.

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Liath regarded the feather in her hand solemnly. It had been three weeks since she'd last spoken to Regina and in theory, there was no pressing need to do so again. Regina was expecting her to appear with Emma and Henry, at some stage. However, given the state of things, she felt a warning was justified. She'd been very surprised when Emma had revealed her memories of her life and the more she learned, the more she realised something had gone wrong with Regina's spell.

She scoffed a bit. Well, what had Madam Mayor expected anyway. Magic like hers was always temperamental, following the heart before the mind. Liath was quite glad she possessed nothing like it.

She raised the second feather to her lips, frowning slightly. She was asking for trouble, leaving herself with a single father, but she did sympathise with the little family. They'd have a hard enough time sorting this mess out without Regina setting Emma on fire. Besides, perhaps it would provide some solace, knowing that Henry knew her.

"Regina. I hope you fare well. If this message reaches you, you've persevered on the island. I commend you for your resilience. I leave with Emma and Henry in two days, though I don't know how that will translate for you. I will keep the journey as short as I can and as safe. I believe they're ready, though."

She sighed. "Something went awry with your spell, and they remember you. They remember a different life, though. Henry remembers a mother who loved him dearly until she lost her life in a car accident. Emma remembers her wife, the woman she reared her son with. They're both mourning you as though dead.

"This might come as a surprise, so I wished to warn you. I also caution you to be gentle with them, Regina. They have lost, as you did. Henry lost his mother and I cannot imagine anything but delight will result from gaining you back, but Emma remembers you as the woman she loved. The one she wished to spend her life with. Please, don't be unkind to her just because you don't share her feelings."

She closed her eyes and blew the feather once. When she opened her eyes, a magnificent Raven sat on the wall beside her, eyeing her with a beady gaze.
"Off now," she said, smartly. "Be on your way."

Glossy wings beat the air, raising dust from the roof. As the raven lifted itself into the dawn, the rising sun rendered it translucent and ghostly, though the sound of its wings lingered on long after it vanished.

SQSQSQSQ

Thoughts? This chapter was quite difficult to write, mainly because I'm a bit impatient to get to the good stuff. Also, the themes were not the nicest. Poor Regina. It struck me that she was shown to be pretty apathetic about surviving on several occasions. Thoughts are welcome as always.
Chapter 5

Hi folks. Here's the next chapter. Hope you enjoy! Drop me a line to let me know what you think about this little tale.

SQSQSQSQ

Wet tarmac hissed under the tyres of Liath's truck as it sped up the highway. The first light of a cloudy autumn had brightened the sky to a flat grey, the day unenthusiastic about beginning. Henry was snoring softly in the back seat, the early start clearly taking its toll.

Liath was driving, quiet behind the wheel. Emma's old Volkswagen was in no fit state for a four hour drive in cold weather and she was more than content as a passenger. She sipped her cooling coffee and rested her forehead against the heel of her hand, elbow propped on the door.

She was grateful for the break, in all honesty. The city was a fantastic place to get lost, to run from memories, but a decade in a small town had left its mark. She missed the easy access to the woods and beach, missed the peace of it all. Of course, peace meant quiet, which meant a chance for her thoughts to wander to Regina.

Regina, for all her airs and graces, had been surprisingly comfortable out doors. She'd been a keen equestrienne, frequently visiting the local stables. Emma briefly wondered how Rocinante was faring without his favourite visitor, though she had no doubt he was in good hands. Her wife had imparted her love of nature to their son and weekend camping trips and nature walks had been a frequent treat. She would have liked Liath, Emma mused, would have found her an interesting companion.

She turned to study Liath's profile, the other woman idly listening to the radio. Her eyes were pale, quite colourless, and her nose looked as though it might have been broken once or twice. Her age was quite difficult to pin down. There had been times when Emma was sure they were contemporaries and others when Liath appeared older by decades. She held herself with restraint, a cautious person. Emma shifted slightly, lifting an eyebrow, suddenly curious about their guide.

"So, how'd you get into the tour guide business?"

She shrugged. "I've always had a talent for finding and following interesting paths. It seemed logical."

"You're far from home," Emma said, a bit too embarrassed to ask where Liath was actually from. Her accent hailed from some corner of the British Isles, she reckoned, though she'd been caught out by sneaky Australians before.

"I am," Liath agreed. "I wanted to see this part of the world. It has its own beauty." A wry smile tugged at her lip. "And even if you get more interesting wilderneses further afield, you meet some fascinating characters in cities like New York."

"No doubt there," Emma agreed. She watched the scenery whiz past, a dim blur of vegetation and road signs emerging from chilly fog. Street lights were still lit in places, islands of hazy light, lending a somewhat otherworldly quality to the journey. It was slightly spooky, which Emma actually quite enjoyed.

"It's like something out of an old thriller, isn't it?"

"One of the charms of New England." Liath clucked her tongue and changed the radio station,
clearly not enjoying the most recent song. Henry yawned in the back, waking himself up. He stretched, blinking slowly. Emma chuckled and handed him a bottle of water.

"Morning, kid."

"Woah..." he gasped. "Where are we?"

"The middle of no where," Emma shrugged.

"Are we almost there?"

"Another couple of hours," Liath said, settling into the seat. "We can stop for a break in a bit."

"It's so foggy," Henry said, twisting in his seat.

"Spooky, huh?" Emma teased. Henry scowled at her, not liking the implication that he might be a bit scared.

"When I was little," Liath said, "we used to love weather like this. We'd pretend that we were trying to find the way to Tír na nÓg."

"Tír na nyo...?"

"Tír na nÓg," Liath repeated, her voice rumbling and smooth at the odd phrase. "A wonderful place, filled with dancing and food, merriment and drink. The place ruled over by the Tuatha Dé Danann, the old gods."

Henry leaned forward, interest lighting his face. "I feel like you've got some stories about that place."

Liath laughed, her voice clear and easy. She kept her eyes on the road, yet far away at the same time, settling in to weave a tale for them.

"The Tuatha came on a day like this, they say. Mist and fog rolled over the land and you couldn't tell the sky from the sea. They wore splendid raiment and announced their arrival on golden trumpets, echoed by thunder and lightning. Tall and dark they were, with dancing eyes and strong backs. When they saw the land, they loved it immediately and vowed to remain. In fey excitement, they burned their beautiful ships and the smoke spread over the land, mingling with the fog.

"The men who'd lived there before them were filled with awe and fear, but they were doughty souls. They faced them in battle and it was only the limitless blood lust of the Morrígu and terror of the Badbh that could best them. They sued for peace and the land prospered. Great treasures were crafted and magnificent shrines to the sun and moon built. The rivers ran with fat fish and the forests burst with lazy deer."

Liath blinked, her eyes bright. Her voice was light, though laced with more sadness than Emma could easily comprehend. She shifted in her seat, the hairs on the back of her neck standing to attention. This conversation seemed ill suited to a car on a dull morning, a tale for fireplaces and dark nights. It roused excitement in her chest, a nervy thrill she'd not encountered for a very long time.

"But no crown rules forever, and they were defeated in their turn. They fought an invading army to a standstill, demanding the war stop before all was destroyed. It was agreed they would split the land in half and during negotiations, the Tuatha asked for the underworld. They knew, you see, that without a sun rising and falling overhead, time would not pass for them. The beauty of their world would remain intact forever, in Tír na nÓg."
"So they passed into their shrines, or rode over the waves on horses made from foam, and vanished from our world. They visit us at times, when the veils are thin. Sometimes, a mortal will find his or her way to that land."

"How?" Henry breathed, entranced.

"Sometimes through one of the old passages. Sometimes they'll meet a rider out a-wandering. You have to be careful about taking apples from strange women where I come from," she said, with a wry chuckle. "I've heard legends of people who visited their world for a day and returned to find a century had passed."

"Woah," he exclaimed.

Liath continued. "Those mortals who follow such strange roads vanish so completely from our world that the only logical explanation is that they have died."

She flicked the indicator, changing lanes as they passed a sign for a rest station. Henry was enraptured and Emma wasn't far behind him.

The car rolled to a stop and Liath stopped the engine. She was quiet for a moment, her eyes damp with emotion, her frame stiff, her native restraint briefly brittle and jerky.

"When my brother left, I was very young. Younger than you are now, Henry. I spent a lot of time trying to find a way to cross to Tír na nÓg."

She released her seat belt and reached for her gloves. Emma leaned forward. "Did you ever find him?" she asked, not noticing how ridiculous the question was until it had escaped her mouth.

Liath though, old and sad, tipped her head to one side. "Oh, now that's another story. Come along, let's get a warm drink."

**SQSQSQSQ**

Regina cradled her head in her hands, pressing her cold fingers against her scalp in an effort to still the tremor working its way up to her elbows. The raven from Liath had dissolved into a cloud of inky feathers, dispersed on a snarling snap of wind. She'd sunk to her knees on the path outside the cottage, a basket of turf fallen forgotten beside her.

Heat on her face, stinging in the wind, alerted her to the fact that she was crying. Tears rolled over her cheeks, her breath coming in short, desperate gasps. They were silent, as she worked past the lump in her throat, overwhelmed by the implications of Liath's message.

*Oh, Henry!*

The death of her own mother, and her father, had devastated her. Though the former had been a monster and she'd murdered the latter, when her heart had returned to saner paths and calmer thoughts, she'd felt torn asunder. She couldn't imagine what it would have been like to lose a *loving* mother, if that had been what it was to lose Cora Mills.

*Loving? Isn't that presumptuous. I wasn't a very loving mother in reality.*

Mourning. Grieving. Her boy, her sweet beloved prince had not deserved to suffer! Better to remember nothing at all than to remember happiness and have it snatched from him. What had she done? Was the darkness surrounding her heart so impenetrable that the spell had felt compelled to wound her son?
She drew in a breath and screamed, the evening twilight closing in around her as she descended into tremulous sobs. She clawed once more at the skin over her chest, seeking the thumping, aching, bursting organ prowling behind the protection of her ribs. She could scarcely imagine what it looked like now; a charred and hardened lump of slag, no doubt. A cinder, ruined and corrupt.

The unfairness ripped at her, filling her eyes with new tears. She'd tried so hard to do the right thing. She'd tried to be selfless; to put Henry and his needs before hers. She'd been utterly willing to let him forget her as long as he possessed happy memories. Clearly, her magic was twisted enough to inflict pain on the one person she never wanted to hurt.

He'd never believe her, though. When she restored his memories, he'd hate her all over again. For the lies, the curse and now having made him suffer his mother's death. It was so unjust, she thought, the bitter tears running over her cheeks leaving a foul taste in her mouth.

How cruel, too, that he might act for a while as though he loved her. As though he'd missed her! It was almost worse than what she'd prepared herself for, for blank eyes and the polite curiosity he'd exhibited around strangers. Worse, because it was a lie and bound to fail.

One last reminder of what I can never have.

The wind tore around her as she wept, regret filling every corner of her being.

SQSQSQSQ

When they resumed their journey Liath entertained them with lighter stories, shortening the road as she put it. Sooner than she'd expected, Emma was standing in a car park tightening her hiking boots. Henry was excitedly moving items between his rucksack and the back of the truck, trying to decide which notebook and pencil set he wanted to bring with him. He was wrapped in a Goretex jacket, bundled into his warmest scarf and sporting a slightly misshapen woolen hat. Mary Margaret had gone through a knitting phase several years prior and as a result, the Swan-Mills family had been gifted with a set of quite unsightly hats.

Regina, being Regina, had managed to have hers blown off her head and into the sea the first time she'd worn it. The disappointed pout on Mary Margaret's face had been a hilarious counterpoint to Regina's barely concealed glee. Emma's had remained at home, hidden in her sock drawer on the off chance her friend would visit New York and inquire after it.

"OK," Liath said, snapping her attention back to the present. She beckoned them over and lifted her phone, revealing a small map. "So this is a reasonably good path. It'll take us about three hours and it isn't overly strenuous. Henry, you think you're up for it?"

Henry nodded happily, his bobble waving around. "Yup!"

Liath nodded solemnly. "So this is a safe trail, though we will deviate slightly from the marked route, but please listen to me. If I ask you to do something, do it."

Emma nodded along with her son, trying to impress upon him the importance of staying safe. She tightened the straps on her backpack and checked her laces. Liath locked the car and tucked the key in her pocket, nodding thoughtfully. She had an old fashioned walking stick with her, a length of pale wood with a fork at the top. It was stout and travel stained, with some decorations carved into it.

Henry's eyes lit up and Liath offered him the stick, which he wielded like a staff. They headed towards the trailhead, passing a few other hikers and a couple with a leashed dog. Signs warned against bikes and fires as they ambled down the path. While a few bare trees shivered in the mist,
naked without leaves, the majority of the wood was composed of pine trees of some description. Emma wasn't an expert at field spotting, but none the less enjoyed the mingled scent of resin and leaf litter.

The path was soft underfoot and they met few other hikers. Liath allowed Henry to lead, the boy filled with a sense of importance as he stomped ahead with the stick. She smiled indulgently and settled into an easy pace. Despite her fears, there were no mosquitoes and while the woods were quiet, they were not silent. Birds called and moisture fell lazily from pointed needles. Life went about its quiet business, unconcerned with the visitors in its midst.

Liath stepped forward with a couple of long strides, eyeing a bush. She tipped her head to one side and turned back to them, grinning.

"How would you like to find a more interesting place to visit?"

Henry turned to her, his eyes wide and intrigued. "Go off the trail?"

Liath nodded. "That's what I'm good at. Finding paths others can't."

Henry turned pleading eyes back to Emma's. "Can we, ma?"

Emma shrugged, something daring and impetuous stirring in her. It reminded her of the feeling in the car, of something thrilling just beyond her grasp. She nodded smartly.

"You'll get us back, though, right?" she asked, because a life spent with Regina Mills had instilled a small smidgen of sense into her.

A strange expression crossed Liath's face, amusement and mischief causing the years to fall away. She ran a hand through her cropped hair, causing it to lift in little damp spikes.

"We won't come back the same way," she said. "But I'll get you home safely, when it's time."

Emma figured they wouldn't need to be back at the car for hours yet and, allowing herself to get swept up in the burgeoning sense of adventure, nodded enthusiastically.

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After another restless night, Regina stood on the shoreline, waiting for the sun to rise. Or rather, waiting for the vague retreat from darkness that signified dawn in this place. A glossy feather was clenched in her trembling hand, almost lost in the low light.

Her nails were short, rough edged and dirty. Her hands were unadorned, no jewels to hide her bony fingers. Calluses had roughened her palms and the edge of her index fingers. The shaft of the feather felt oily, slick and cold in her grasp.

*I should tell them not to come.*

She should, she knew. The desire to see Henry had been selfish and inconsiderate. She'd leapt at the opportunity to bring him and Emma to the Enchanted Forest, despite knowing she'd be pulling them away from their lives. While Emma was believed to be the only one capable of defeating her sister, Regina knew prophecy was a tricky thing. Zelena would have a weakness and she would find it. She didn't need the saviour for that.

Her cheeks flared at the thought of Emma. She couldn't imagine a world in which they were truly friends, let alone *together*. The saviour was far too much like her insipid parents to ever try to really
befriend her. Though the idea of them being married made her want to tear her own eyes out, she could see some sort of logic. If a child had two mothers, surely the simplest explanation was that they were romantically involved. That said, her personal involvement in such a scenario was so absurd, so ridiculous, she found herself shying away from thinking about the notion entirely.

Regina looked at the feather in her hands once more. What was to be gained, realistically, from dragging Henry and Emma here? Whatever part of her that would be soothed by her son would be scalded by his inevitable rejection. Whatever Emma could do, surely someone else could? Ultimately, what harm would Zelena's victory do to her?

Rob Snow of another child. Lead to the murder of an innocent baby to satisfy dark magic. Leave another of Cora Mill's daughters guilty of slaughtering the most vulnerable of people.

She lifted the feather to her lips as the sky began to shrug off the pall of night. Birds called, the wind paused in the chill before morning.

_Tell them to stay. Spare them and spare yourself. Snow will suffer, but she deserves to. Zelena is a lost cause, just as you are._

_You don't deserve to see him, to have even a moment's happiness with him._

_Emma will kill you when she discovers the truth._

The surf beat the shore and the morning sighed into existence around her. She drew in a deep breath and closed her eyes.

"Snow, this is Regina. Emma and Henry are on their way so if you're thinking of doing anything stupid, for goodness sake don't. We'll be there to save your backside as usual. Just… just have faith."

She opened her eyes and found herself on the receiving end of beady eyes. The raven perched on her arm, lighter than she expected. She felt exhausted, hollow and defeated. The aching desire to just give in, to curl into a bed and never emerge was strong enough to make her knees tremble.

With the last of her resolve, the last of her faith in any outcome but disaster, she set the bird to flight, watching it soar over the choppy waves until it passed beyond her sight and into the uncertain ocean spray rising over the distant shore.

SQSQQSQ

The strange thing about the path that Liath had found, Emma mused, was how it revealed itself in glimpses. They'd come to a seemingly impenetrable spot of undergrowth and Liath would tip her head and nudge a bough to reveal the way forward. Glancing behind, the path they'd trodden was clear, obvious after they'd walked it. At least they could always backtrack easily enough, Emma thought.

Henry was thrilled, creeping and bounding in turn. His face was flushed with happiness, his cheeks rosy in the chilly air. The woods were opening up now, the trees farther apart and broader. Moss and lichen wreathed the trunks, hanging from low branches. Pockets of mist still lingered, rising from the mould and coiling between the pines. The birds were quieter now, though not entirely silent. No breath of wind shook droplets of mist from the trees and no sunlight warmed their faces.

"This is an old place," Liath said, with quiet reverence. "It's managed to keep itself hidden and safe, despite being so close to the world."

Henry paused and turned to her, eyes curious. "Can the woods do that?"
Liath shrugged. "Some can, when they're so inclined. This one did." Henry was quiet for a while then, contemplating that. Emma knew he had a huge spot in his heart for all things fantastic and magical. This was the boy, after all, who'd almost cried on his eleventh birthday when his Hogwarts letter hadn't been waiting for him in the mail. She'd worried a little bit, wondering if he hadn't been too old for such things, until Regina had vanished into her study and pulled green ink and heavy card from the desk.

"It isn't any harm to indulge him, Emma," she'd said, as she carefully wrote a note to accompany the tickets to The Wizarding world of Harry Potter they'd bought him. "He knows the difference between imagination and reality."

She produced a candle and her father's signet ring, lighting the former and sadly examining the latter.

"He'll spend enough of his life knowing that magic isn't real, dearest. Let him enjoy being a child while he can."

"Do you think this is the kind of place that leads to Tír na nÓg?" Henry asked, disrupting her memory. Emma shook herself, returning to the present.

Liath was silent for a long moment, though she kept moving forward. "This isn't, no. But I reckon it could bring us to somewhere that would."

The path was now wide enough for them to walk three abreast and Emma glanced at their guide. She seemed to have something on her mind, some thought waiting just behind her eyes.

"When we lost Fintan, I was inconsolable. We all were," she said quietly. "We were a big family, four girls and four boys. I was young then, though not the youngest. My parents had twin toddlers and a bad tempered six year old to mind, as well as a couple of teenagers. I started wandering in the forests, or over the fields. It drove my parents to distraction, but I never came to any harm."

She paused, leaning a hand against the trunk of a half dead tree, face solemn. She regarded Henry with the kind of seriousness rarely directed towards children, and Emma noticed him straighten his back in response. "I didn't believe that he was really lost forever, so I tried to find him."

"How did he die?" Henry asked, eyes heavy with empathy.

"I don't know," Liath said, with a hollow chuckle. "I suppose he did, logically there's no chance he didn't but…"

She lifted her gaze to Emma, ancient and sad then, almost vanishing into the mist. "What's logical and what touches the heart rarely coincide. Part of me still believes he's out there, somewhere," she confessed. Emma felt off balance, lost in the gravity of Liath's grief and her memory flashed back to the conversation in the car.

Henry nodded. "I hope my mom is still somewhere out there. In heaven or Tír na nÓg, you know?"

"Heaven is for the dead, if it exists," Liath said, gently. "I never had much interest in visiting."

"But the living can go to Tír na nÓg," Henry clarified. "If they know the way." Liath nodded, the ghost of a smile on her lips.

Emma had the sense then that several conversations were happening at once, that they were each talking about something slightly different. There wasn't a hint of deception from Liath, though. Clearly, whatever she meant when she said she'd looked for this place had been an important part of
moving through her bereavement. She stepped closer to Henry, trying to articulate the gentle caution she could feel forming in her throat.

"It's OK, ma," he said, reaching for her hand. "I know it's only pretend… I know she's gone but…"

"Believe me, kid," she said, wrapping an arm around her son's shoulders. "If if knew the way, I'd be halfway there, too. It's OK to miss her and wish she was still somewhere we could find her."

Liath nodded, gently taking her walking stick from Henry. He peered up at her, some silent conversation happening that caused Liath's eyes to crinkle fondly.

"Could we try, though?" he asked, quietly. "Maybe just today? Even if it's just pretend?"

"We could try, indeed," Liath said, seriously. "We'll have to move forward though, no turning back."

Emma nodded her permission, though her heart clenched. Liath's grip tightened on the staff and she straightened her back.

"This way, so," she said, softly. "As we walk, tell me about her."

Henry's face creased into a wide smile and Emma responded in kind. They began to speak then, as they strode forward, and it was as though a knot had loosened in her chest, letting love and affection wind freely through her once more.

SQSQSQS

So, off they go to find Regina. Who's going to be more surprised, huh? Let me know if you enjoyed it. Leave a review, hit follow and all the rest.
Chapter 6

Hello! Another chapter for you. Content warnings here for thoughts of self harm, non-consensual sex and physical abuse. I know it's rough, but stick with it. I think it'll be worth it in the end!

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Nightfall brought with it torrential rain, furious sheets of icy water flung against the house by the never ending wind. Regina sat huddled beneath blankets on Liath's bed, trembling with exhaustion and cold. She'd tried to sleep but nightmares had woken her, once more. She wiped her face with shaking hands, before cupping and blowing over her fingers in an effort to warm them.

Bran had half crawled into the bed beside her, somehow fitting his bulky frame alongside her. He was whining softly, head heavy on her lap. Sceolta sat close by as well, his cunning eyes kinder than usual, as though sensing her distress. The fire had burned more or less to ashes, the only light emanating from a stubby candle.

She pressed her eyes closed, flashes of her dreams intruding with horrible clarity, a series of flashbulb moments.

*Hot blood on a stone floor, the dry dust between flag stones stirred to a morbid petrichor. Catching in the back of her throat as her anonymous knight slit another's.*

She thought to reach for her knitting, but knew her hands were too cold and her eyes too tired. The latter itched, painful and blurred from lack of sleep. She felt as if she'd been crying, though she couldn't remember doing so.

*Dark vines tightening around her waist, pulling her off her feet and suspending her midair.*

*A rough hand tightening around her arm and pushing her face down onto an overstuffed mattress.*

*A hand grasping her hair and shaking until it came away with dark strands between grubby fingers.*

Liath's supply of candles was running low and while Regina suspected the other woman wouldn't begrudge her a bit of light, she was reluctant to further impose. She'd need them for Henry, after all. If he came here, he'd need light.

*Her son shoving past her, angry tears on his face. Screaming at her as she lied to him.*

*Lying still in a hospital bed.*

*Lying still in Neverland.*

"No," she groaned, grasping her forehead. "He's alive. He's alive and he's coming here."

Bran moved a paw closer to her, a soft chuff drawing her attention. She wrapped her arms around his broad neck, burying her face into wiry fur. Sceolta whined in return, edging closer to her.

Her heart was pounding in her chest, a shuddering mess. It echoed in her neck and head, flashing red behind her eyes. She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, her breaths shallow.

Could this kill her? She remembered hearing about people who hadn't been able to sleep and eventually descended into madness and death.
Henry's hateful eyes, suddenly resembling his grandmother. "You're just like her! Just like Cora!"

"I never meant to hurt you," she murmured, throat tight.

Though you did.

A glimpse of Emma, then, eyes colder than chips of ice. Her mouth was turned down at the edges, disgust etched into every line. She held a sword in her hand, a heavy blade with an unadorned pommel. The sort of sword that would take a head.

She has every right to take mine. After what I've done to her family…

Leopold's corpse lying in state, bruises on her thighs still tender.

Snow drawing a bow, aiming it at her chest, cropped hair hidden beneath a fur lined hood.

Waiting for execution, the scent of mould surrounding her father in the dungeons beneath Snow's stronghold. Exhaustion and weary relief nipping at her, though hidden by the burning scald of injustice.

"Stop," she groaned, bending her head low over Bran's collar.

Cora grabbing her by a wrist, wrenching her elbow. Crying out in pain at the white hot explosion behind her eyes. Tumbling to the floor, unable to stand. Unable to raise her hand to protect herself from the strike that followed, her lip bursting beneath a jeweled ring.

Regina curled into herself more thoroughly, tears falling from tightly closed eyes. The longing, the desire for someone, anyone, to come and stop it all flooded her. Henry or Emma or Snow's soldiers or the damn ferryman.

Anyone.

But she knew no one was coming. No one ever had, so why begin now? Another gust of wind threatened to fling the door open and Bran gave a startled bark, almost deafening her. Sceolta growled at the shrieking and she forced her eyes open.

She need not have bothered. The candle had burned to nothing, snuffed out by time or by a malicious draught. She blinked, strange patterns playing on her eyelids almost immediately.

Nobody would come.

Her sobs guttered out, as freezing numbness spread throughout her. The notion, the idea of living seemed an affront, a waste. No one would know if she died her, except perhaps Liath. Maybe she should leave the cottage, in that case, to spare her the grisly clean up operation she'd cause.

Bran gave a huff, placing himself across her legs. Sceolta stretched his neck to her, laying his head on hers. Though the smell left much to be desired, a tiny mote of warmth penetrated. She leaned her head over Bran's wide chest, hearing his heart beat.

"Not tonight, then," she whispered hoarsely. "But probably not long."

She closed her eyes again, listening to the regular pulse until exhaustion claimed her.

SQSQSQSQ

Emma trailed her fingers over a low hanging branch, her gloved fingers brushing pine needles
gently. Her face ached slightly from smiling, her heart lighter than it had been for a long time. There was something liberating about just talking about Regina. Remembering her as she'd been. Henry had regaled them with several stories of his own, leaving them laughing as they walked.

"And then we all fell asleep, right on the couch," Henry finished, eyes bright.

"You wouldn't believe the crick I had in my neck the next day," Emma chuckled. "And Regina had drooled on my shirt, too, though she tried to deny it."

"Oh yeah!" Henry piped. "She made us pancakes the next morning to try and distract us!"

Emma closed her eyes briefly, savouring the memory.

*Rumpled pyjamas. Sleep tousled hair. The scent of coffee brewing crowded out by the scent of Regina as they pressed together, dancing to the radio as Henry coloured at the kitchen table. Eyes shining with adoration gazing up at her as Regina raised her chin, the way she did when she emotion overwhelmed her.*

*A chaste kiss, breath mingling in the bright kitchen.*

*Regina drew back a bit, one hand on Emma's clavicle and the other playing with the fingers of her raised hand, tracing fingers and the lines on the palm of her hand with something similar to reverence.*

"She was…" Emma paused, uncertainly. "She was tiny but she had this presence, you know? She was always in charge, no matter where she went. She was so smart, too, but she never lorded it over you. She had this way of explaining things and making you feel like a freaking genius."

Henry grunted in agreement. "She was better at math than my teacher." He hopped over a root, watching his feet.

"She worked as a tutor, you know," Emma supplied, watching Henry blink with surprise. "Yeah, when you were really little. She tutored high school students who needed some extra help." She shrugged. "I think if she hadn't been elected mayor, that's where she would have ended up."

"That's so weird," Henry said, grimacing. "I don't think I would have wanted her to teach me in high school."

Emma shrugged. "Yeah, seeing your class mates drool over your mother…"

"Ma!" Henry squeaked in outrage. Emma laughed at his indignation and draped an arm around his shoulders.

"Well, I know you won't see it because she was your mom and you already thought she was the prettiest woman on earth-"

"You're pretty, too."

"Appreciated. Your cheque is in the mail, buddy." Liath snorted at their antics and Emma continued. "But seriously, Regina was probably the most beautiful person I'd ever seen in real life. When she smiled…"

Liath nodded as Emma trailed off, choked with emotion and graciously took her turn to speak. "Fintan was blonde. His hair was so pale, it was almost white. He was pale and freckled and he could wiggle his ears. He wasn't handsome, but I think he would have grown into himself."
"How old was he, when he left?" Henry asked.

"Sixteen," Liath sighed. "But of course I thought that was terribly grown up. He was only a boy himself, but I saw him as an adult."

They were quiet for a while, walking through the woods in companionable silence. Emma felt lighter, somehow. Sorrow still tugged at her thoughts, but memories of Regina, of the happiness they'd shared, kept her buoyant.

They stepped into a clearing, several birds taking flight as they did. Emma looked to the sky, noticing that the sun had emerged. She craned her head back and took her hat off, closing her eyes as the light warmed her face. Henry and Liath sat on a fallen log and helped themselves to a drink of water and some snacks. Emma joined them, happily accepting a trail bar.

"Where next?" Henry chirped. He pointed to the opposite side of the clearing, eyes bright. "There are two paths."

Indeed there were, Emma noted. Both seemed well lit and wide enough, though one pitched upwards slightly.

"Well," Liath said, her voice soft and thoughtful. "That one brings us up a ridge and circles back to the car park. The other one will bring us somewhere else."

"Where?" Henry asked, curious now.

"The edge of the woods," Liath said, catching Emma's eye. "It leads to a shore."

"Will it take longer to get back to the car?" Emma asked, glancing at her watch.

"Yes."

"OK, but we won't, like, get stuck out in the woods tonight?"

Liath regarded her seriously. "No, not tonight."

Emma shrugged. As far as she was concerned, if they'd made the effort to drive upstate, they might as well get their money's worth, so to speak. "Well, what do you think, Henry?"

He peered down the path, then back to Liath. "Does it lead to Tír na nÓg?"

Liath tipped her head to one side. "Not directly. But you can find all sorts of interesting places, none the less."

They agreed to head down the path, Emma replacing her hat as they stood. She was fit from running and Henry was twelve; they'd survive some more exercise.

The little group made their way to the start of the path and Liath paused, holding up a hand.

"This path can be treacherous. Listen to me, alright? If I tell you to do something, do it. It can be a bit… strange, too, for lack of a better phrase."

The hairs on the back of Emma's neck stood up as she glanced down the path.

"What the hell is down there?"

Liath stared back with steady eyes, brows drawn low.
"Honestly? A good place to slip between worlds."

Emma blinked as Liath strode off. She shared a confused glance with Henry, who shrugged and bounded after her.

For the first time since leaving the apartment, she felt trepidation nipping at her heels. As it did, the memory of Regina in the kitchen flashed through her mind, for some reason, and before she knew it, determined steps bore her down the trail.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Regina stirred a small copper pot over the fire, unenthusiastically. She had no appetite, was too weary to do much other than sip tea, but it was cold. If Liath *did* bring Henry back, at least he'd have something warm in his belly when he arrived. It had been days since the raven had vanished onto the wind and she was beginning to doubt she'd ever see her son again.

The thought sat like ice in her belly and she forced herself to move, to sweep the floor and tidy the table. Her hair felt thick and greasy as she brushed a strand back from her forehead. She doubted she was anything but unpleasantly fragrant, either. Sighing, she headed out to gather water for the big iron cauldron.

The wind brought the din of the waves to her, along with a chill that seemed to blow right through her heart. She visited the little well behind the house, dipping a rough leather bucket into the icy water. The ash trees overhead heaved rhythmically, branches sliding over one as though they were ribs, creating the groaning wind rather than the other way around.

She briefly wondered about walking the island, escaping the confines of the cottage, but the thought slid away before it was fully realised. What would she find, but low sky and damp stone?

She made her way back inside, tipping the bucket into the cauldron and lifting her knitting. She had a small pile of socks sitting on a corner of the scrubbed table, slightly uneven but sturdy enough. The needles clicked, a tinny descant to the boughs outside, and the fire hissed. She was almost finished the eighth sock, the quality of her knitting not discernibly improved, much to her frustration.

Still, she sat in silence, her task relieving her of the burden of thought as she completed the last few rows. Casting off, she tied the last of the stitches and regarded her work critically. They were uneven and slightly lumpy, not beautiful in the least. She was gripped with a sudden urge to fling them into the fire but resisted, biting her lip. Though they were awful, the wool wasn't. Someone would be able to unravel them all and create something better.

Steam was rising from the cauldron and she dipped a cautious finger into the water. It was warm enough to tolerate so she stripped her clothes, shivering in the chilly air. Goose-bumps spread over her arms and shoulders as she sat on a stool beside the fire, dipping a cloth into the water. Liath had a few bars of soap tucked away and she folded one into the wet linen, patiently raising a lather.

Regina scrubbed herself meticulously, her skin reddening as she went. She frowned at the blemishes and imperfections; the scars and freckles and errant hair. Her limbs felt strange to her, bony and weak without the familiar thrum of magic beneath her skin. The cold that lingered in its absence prickled at her, leaving her a stranger in her own body. She glanced down at her breasts and thighs, wondering at how frail she felt under her own gaze.

The only physical strength she'd ever really felt had been in the saddle, her legs strong and fit from hours of practice. Despite her recent journey, the memory of that strength felt distant indeed. She
washed between her legs, musing that feeling of vitality was as remote a memory as that of bleeding. The form beneath her seemed utterly foreign, a small and fragile shadow of the vessel it had been.

Empty and uninhabited, like a abandoned building.

She sighed, standing to dry herself and tipping some of her dirty underwear into the warming water. Wet hair dripped down her back and she gathered it atop her head in a towel. Her pack held a final change of clean and dry clothes, a last reminder of the luxuries of court. She pulled the soft linen around her, tucking the layers into one another. Warm outer layers followed and she let her hair down, brushing it carefully. She shivered as a draught found her, hands unsteady and pulling at knots.

Exhausted by the effort, she crawled into bed, curling into a ball beneath layers of blankets and hide, searching for a speck of warmth as she wrapped her arms around herself. Unfocused eyes stared at the fire as the scent of soap rose from the cauldron. She closed her eyes, turning her attention back to the wind invading through the cracks in the little house.

*It can't be much longer, now.*

The thought entered her mind, though she wasn't precisely sure what she was waiting for, anymore.

**SQSQSQSQ**

The path dipped down steeply for a moment and their conversation was abandoned in favour of concentrating on footing. Emma grasped Henry's hand as Liath strode forward, her pace unwavering. Steady steps seemed to float over stones and roots, never faltering. The sun had retreated and pockets of mist sighed into being between trees, coalescing into elegant streams and rivers.

"Tell me," Liath said, never looking behind her, "what was it like where you lived in Maine?"


"It had a pretty awesome diner," Henry added, thoughtfully. "And the woods were kind of like this."

"Was it on the coast?" she asked. "I hear it's quite beautiful up there."

"It was and is," Emma agreed. "There was one beach we used to go to a lot."

"It was the secret beach. Mom found it once, when she was out riding. It was tiny and you had to walk over, like, a mile to get there."

"It was small," Emma added, "but no one really ever went there." Bittersweet affection settled in her chest. "Regina loved the peace."

"Describe it," Liath urged, softly.

Emma and Henry shared a glance at the curious request. "Ok, so, I guess it was about the length of a football field, and a little wider when the tide was out." The fog was growing slightly thicker, Emma noted, and the path becoming slightly indistinct before them.

Henry nodded. "Yeah. With little cliffs on either side. I loved climbing the rocks but mom wouldn't let me after that time I fell." He peered accusingly at Emma, who'd voiced no objection to the ban and had not advocated for a reversal at their subsequent visits. She stuck her tongue out at him.
"Well, your mother didn't want you spilling any more damn blood. That cut on your shin scarred, kiddo."

Henry grimaced. "Yeah, I guess. It was the barnacles. The rocks were smooth, but they had all these barnacles and limpets on them."

"Sounds like a nice place to explore," Liath remarked, brushing a tree branch aside. A gust of wind ruffled her hair and Emma noticed that there was almost complete silence enveloping them as they made their way through the fog.

"There was always seaweed on it, though, and driftwood," Emma said, her grasp on Henry's hand tightening. "We camped out once or twice. Lit campfires."

He squeezed her hand. "The flames used to be green and blue, remember?"

She chuckled. "I do. Until your mother got wind that you're not meant to burn salty wood…" Liath snorted with amusement. "Remember that time the summer before last? It was really warm and we'd been swimming all day?"

"Henry digging a trench at the tide line, guiding the surf into the moat around an impressive castle. Regina paused to kiss his head, before sitting beside her and laying out on her towel. She stretched in the sun, relaxed among her family on the empty beach."

Henry nodded. "You got sun burned."

Regina's skin glowing from the sun, a counterpoint to her own stinging pink tint. She was wearing a plain bikini top and a pair of Emma's shorts, her hair wavy and sea kissed. Droplets of water ran over her trim arms, invigorated after the swim. Emma lifted a finger, following the course of one as it made its way down the valley between two ribs. Flesh rose with goose pimples, despite the warmth, and she chuckled.

"Henry," Liath asked, her voice low and steady. "Can you see your mom on it?"

"Yeah," he breathed.

"Can you see your mom on it?" she pressed, a strangeness to the question that Emma couldn't place.

"I can," he said. "Helping me find shells for my sandcastle. She helped decorate it."

"I want you both to picture that beach really well," Liath said, still moving through the thickening fog, her voice almost hypnotic. "The way it looks."

Regina sitting in a t-shirt, eyes sleepy after an energetic day outside, watching the sun set with her knees bent.

"The way it smells."
"Nuzzling her neck after Henry had gone to sleep, salt and light sweat and sun cream mingling together."

"The sounds."

_The rumble and hiss of the tide. The cries of sea birds. The snap of the bonfire._

"Come this way." Liath said, firmly, her pace increasing. They darted forward, Emma almost stumbling as the mist closed in. She heard a roaring in her ears and her heartbeat begin to accelerate with alarm.

"Liath!?"

"Trust me," she said, voice terse. "Just keep going for one more moment."

Henry made a sound as though to speak, though it transformed into a gasp as the mist parted, leaving them on a small beach, the wintery sea heaving up the shore. A flock of gulls screamed in affront and Emma felt fear fly up her spine.

"Liath…" she began, her mouth dry with shock. "Where are we?"

Their guide turned, sweat dripping from her brow, chest heaving. Grey eyes almost glowing in the light, she tipped her head to one side.

"Now, Emma, I think you know where this place is."

Frantic eyes darted around, her mind catching up eventually.

"This is… this is impossible," she breathed, glancing frantically around the very familiar beach. The beach which was meant to be hundreds of miles away, not a short walk from a car park! She couldn't deny what was before her eyes, though, and neither could Henry if his quickened breathing was anything to go by. She grasped her son to herself, tucking him behind her.

"What the hell is going on here?" she demanded, adrenaline flooding her system. Liath rubbed her face tiredly.

"We came to a shore, like I said we would."

Emma scowled at the other woman, panic and fear setting in as she took in the surroundings. This was not possible. Was she hallucinating? Drugged? Was Henry?

"Who the hell are you?!" she demanded. "What have you done?"

Liath regarded them evenly. "I am Liath and I'm someone from a family with a talent for finding unusual paths and shortcuts." She stepped forward carefully, hands outstretched. "More to the point, you're from a family with a talent for finding its members, no matter where they may be."

Emma blinked, completely confused at that.

"We could go back," she said, softly. "Never speak of this again, chalk it up to a long day. Or we could put our talents together."

"Together?"

Henry trembled beside her, tugging her hand. She glanced down at him, utterly at a loss. His intelligent eyes, hers in shape and colour but all Regina's in their precocious wisdom, shone up at
her. He swallowed, a solemn frown creasing his brow as he stepped forward, turning bravely to face Liath.

"You can bring us to my mom, can't you?"

Liath nodded, a smile on her lips.

"Who do you think sent me to find you both?"

SQSQSQSQ

Dun dun dun. Poor Regina. When will this gang get their act together, huh? Stay tuned. the next chapter won't take long. As always, reviews and insight welcome.
"Who do you think sent me to find you both?"

Emma blinked dazedly. Keeping a tight grip on Henry's hand, she walked down the shore. The beach was exactly as she remembered, though with slightly more flotsam and jetsom, no doubt due to recent storms. They hadn't bothered visiting during winter time before but the scene was unmistakable. She took in the white capped waves and overcast sky numbly, disbelief robbing her of coherent thought. It was chilly and drizzling, the scent of the sharp ocean around them as real as the pounding of her heart. A pair of seals bobbed in the waves, regarding them with unimpressed eyes.

"Ma," Henry said, awe in his voice, "this is our beach."

"I know," she whispered, swallowing thickly. "But that's not possible."

"It is," Liath corrected, sitting on a piece of driftwood. "But it's not easy." She pulled a protein bar out of her bag and bit into it. Raising an eyebrow, she handed Henry and Emma a Snickers each. "You must have questions, people always do."

"Did my mom really send you?" Henry asked, stepping in front of Liath, his eyes wet with tears.

Liath nodded. "She misses you."

Emma scowled and folded her arms over her chest. "Is that a metaphor? You going to kill us?" Her mind was racing back over conversations they'd had and she was suddenly starting to worry that a lot of what she'd presumed were allegorical journeys had been actual journeys.

The older woman shook her head wryly. "Now that would be a colossal waste of time and effort. I was going to offer to bring you to Regina. She isn't dead, though she did vanish from this world."

Tales of Tír na nÓg sprang to Emma's mind, and Henry was clearly thinking along similar lines. "She vanished so completely the only logical explanation would be that she died," he said, quietly.

"Aye," Liath sighed. "She found me a couple of months ago and asked me to find you both. I did, obviously, and now I offer you a choice. We can go back to New York and I'll leave you both alone. I'll drop you off and head back to my land, and we'll likely never cross paths again. Or, you trust me and we go to Regina."

"Why didn't she come with you, if she's still alive," Emma asked, eyes narrowed and trained on the woman before her.

"Because she's basically acting as an anchor between two worlds right now," Liath sighed. "And because she doesn't quite remember things the way you two do."

"Like amnesia?" Henry said, quietly.

"Something like that," she confirmed. "Though she does remember you, Henry."

The crazy thing was that Emma's lie detector hadn't pinged once. Liath was being truthful, if not entirely honest. She ground her teeth.

"You've known us for weeks and you didn't tell us. You didn't think that was pertinent information?! My wife is out there somewhere and we've been sitting on our asses in Manhattan!"
Liath raised a placating hand. "You would have run a bloody mile, Emma, if I'd told you that straight out."

Henry tilted his head to one side, as though acknowledging the truth in the statement, and Emma huffed. "That wouldn't have been unreasonable."

"No," Liath agreed calmly. "Eminently sensible. Anyway. Do you want to come with me to find her?"

She did. By god, she did. Her heart ached with the desire to see Regina, no matter what route they needed to take. She turned her gaze to Henry and the hope and naked longing on his upturned face almost undid her.

"This is insane," she breathed, stiffly slumping to sit on the wet sand. She frowned, a memory flitting to the fore of her mind. "Your brother."

Liath rolled her shoulders. "What about him?"

"What happened to him?"

Liath sighed. "He went exploring paths he should not have and became lost. He wandered between worlds for decades, without ever finding his way home." She wiped her face tiredly. "I spent years following his trail, but it went cold eventually. I presume he died somewhere."

"How did he get lost?" Henry asked. "Could we get lost?"

Emma started at the notion. Liath regarded them seriously. "Yes, we could. It's very unlikely, though, because your mother is acting as an anchor and because I have had a long time to practice this skill."

"Who are you?" Emma asked, the hairs on the back of her neck standing to attention.

"I'm Liath," she said simply, with some embarrassment. "My surname isn't Doran."

"Do you even have one?" Emma snorted.

She frowned. "I've got some titles, but I don't think they'll mean much to anyone here. Or to anyone who's still alive, really." She stood and shook sand from her trousers. "If it helps, call it magic."

"There's no such thing as magic," Emma said, flatly.

Liath lifted her hands in defeat. "And yet here we are." She paused for a moment, staring out over the sea. "It's time to decide. Either we head back to the car or we go to Regina."

Henry moved close to Emma, crouching beside her, his eyes shining, his phone was grasped in his hand.

"Ma, look," he whispered. He'd opened Google maps and the location cursor was smack bang in the middle of the Maine coast, hundreds of miles from where they'd parked. The sight sent a nervy thrill down Emma's back as she met her son's hopeful, shining eyes.

"If it's real," he said, a tremor in his voice, "mom's waiting for us. We have to go to her, ma. She's all alone."

Thoughts spun through Emma's mind, racing incoherently through her consciousness. She swallowed, her heart cracking at the expression on Henry's face. She clenched her hands, the familiar
warmth of her wedding ring digging into her finger.

"We can't believe this, kid," she said, voice shaking.

"Ma, we can't not," he replied. His eyes were steady and determined, every inch his mother and Emma's heart softened, a tiny thread tugging at hope within her. A part of her which she'd presumed died with Regina roared to life and she grasped his hand. She rose, straightening her back.

Fuck it. This might be crazy but it might be crazy enough to work.

"What do we have to do?" she demanded, fixing Liath with a serious glare.

"Believe that we will find her at the end of that road," the older woman replied, turning to a faint track on the beach. "Think of her, hold your fondest memories of her in your heart and follow me."

Henry tightened his grip and their eyes met. A moment, before a firm nod passed between them and they stepped forward in unison.

SQSQSQSQ

Regina leading her through the door of her small apartment, nimbly stepping out of her heels as they both lugged groceries with them. Teasing glances and gentle touches as they negotiated the small kitchen and the diminishing space between them. Shy glances after dinner and a first kiss that moved from tentative to consuming in a handful of breaths.

Curling on the couch entwined in silence away from the world. An unfamiliar feeling that she would only later realise as that of belonging as Regina stroked her hair.

SQSQSQSQ

The path they followed didn't reveal much of itself, despite the fact that it didn't seem to turn. It emerged reluctantly from the mist, an indistinct trail through damp grass. The wind that had whistled around them on the beach seemed to have settled, for the moment, and they were silent for a while. Emma kept a firm grip on Henry's hand, her heart pounding in her chest.

"Are we going to Tír na nÓg?" Henry asked, interrupting Emma's internal monologue, which cycled between Liath's insanity, her own foolish complicity and startlingly clear memories of Regina.

"No," Liath said. "We're going to the island I live on."

"To Mom." He stated, with certainty. "Did she leave us to go there?"

Liath sighed and shook her head. "No, Henry. But why she left is her tale to tell. You'll have to ask her."

He dropped his head. "I just don't see why she'd leave us. Why she'd pretend to be dead."

"Henry," Emma choked out, "she would never have done that to us."

"And she didn't, actually." Liath turned to glance at them, though she didn't pause. "Don't begin to doubt her now, Henry. She crossed half a world to find me, because she wanted to see you."

They walked in awkward silence for another few moments before their guide spoke again.

"Tell me a story about her, Henry."
Henry was quiet for a while, picking through his memories, or so it seemed. Emma knew he curated them as carefully as his action figures, revisiting them when sorrow or loneliness intruded. She’d been consistently astounded by how coherent his recollection was. Her own was more a blur of emotion and sensation, if she were honest. Many of her fondest thoughts were difficult to articulate, much to her frustration.

"One time, we went up the coast to this farm. I think mom knew the family, or maybe the guys in the stables did? But we went up in spring and the lambs were being born. We were able to see two of them come out. It was really gross."

"Birth is never beautiful," Liath agreed.

"There was blood and mucus everywhere," Henry added, nodding. "And all this water came out."

*The coppery tang of hot blood, the earthy sweetness of liquor, filled her senses. A hand behind her neck and behind her knee as she'd borne down. A sweaty forehead against her temple.*

"But they got right up and walked!" he enthused. "And we got to give some other ones a bottle later. It was really awesome. We saw some baby cows, too."

"Calves, kid," Emma corrected absently. The scent of sea water had receded, the path even less distinct.

*The low, warm scent of liquor in the dark delivery suite. Enormous pressure and then relief. A limp, grey body on her bare chest. The gout of blood, her own, across his head. Her hands trembling as they flattered around him, hesitant to touch and half afraid of the blood. Regina clapping his head with a gentle hand as he drew great heaving breaths into his lungs. Colour spreading as he lay dazed and blinking for a long minute before the midwife guided Regina to cut the cord.*

"It was kind of scary though." He paused, his hand firm in hers. "I think one of the lambs died. He came out after his brother and he didn't move. The farmer came in and took him away real quick."

"Being born is a dangerous business," Liath said. The path was even less distinct and Emma found herself reluctant to look at her feet, not entirely sure what she’d find beneath them.

"Yeah," Henry agreed. "I was scared, so I started crying."

*The infant jerking as the cord was cut, hands flying out in affront. A towel draped over his little back as he howled against her. She could barely see him, due to a combination of his position and the tears in her eyes. Shock that it was a little boy, though she’d known there was about a fifty-fifty chance. But she could see Regina, see the adoration in her eyes and the joy crinkling her face. She was laughing through tears, emotion flowing from her, free and unfettered as she pressed a kiss against the tiny baby's head.*

*Emma's chest cramping and overwhelmed and utterly in love.*

"But mom took me to one side and she hugged me," he said. "And she told me it was OK, that the lamb wasn't scared or hurting, but that sometimes sad things happened. She didn't try to pretend he wasn't dead," he mused.

"Your mom hated the idea of lying to you," Emma said, chuckling sadly. "I thought it was a bit much, telling a six year old about death."

They walked on, the fog almost impenetrable around them. She felt suspended in air, the trail far beneath her feet, the solidity of earth absent. A wind had begun to whistle around them, low pitched
and mournful. Liath cast a vigilant eye into the fog, raising her walking stick. For the briefest of moments, she was clad in mail and grasping a spear. Emma blinked and the vision faded.

"When mom died," Henry said, his voice small and cautious, as though he was telling a secret, "I thought about that lamb a lot. At the funeral especially. I thought about how mom had been so calm and just told me like it was. I wanted to be brave, like her, and grownup."

Emma had known this, everyone who'd seen her son's brittle courage had, but it still hurt to hear.

"I know that's a weird story," he said, embarrassment in his voice. "I dunno why I told it."

"Not weird at all," Liath said, quietly. "What happened after the farm?"

"We went home and after dinner, we watched a movie. I think I fell asleep on top of you guys on the couch."

"You did," Emma recalled, laughing softly. "Up on my chest, actually." The wind picked up and another memory tore her breath away, visceral and immediate.

Henry's first week at home. Regina curled against her side, watching with fascination as the tiny baby fed. His eyes were closed, though his eyelashes fluttered. Emma hadn't known where to look; at the little creature on her breast or the shining, hopeful eyes beside hers. Regina shifted, nuzzling his head, breathing in the scent of new skin and milk.

The late sunset of a summer evening catching on motes of dust in their messy, tiny home. Her heart fit to burst with love, even as it settled in previously unknown tranquility as Regina kissed her lips.

They walked on in silence for a while, each of them lost in thought. The wind quietened, distant and grumbling. Strangely, the temperature seemed to drop without it even as the fog thickened, crowding around them and tugging a cough from her lungs.

The curling mist sapped the warmth from her bones, dampness invading every gap in clothing and coalescing into tiny droplets on the bobble of Henry's woolly hat. Liath strode slightly ahead of them, grim and quiet.

"We're close," she murmured, startling them. They walked for a few more minutes and Emma wondered if there wasn't a change to the ground underfoot. She was growing more certain that she was walking on something vaguely substantial again, perhaps sand. A breath of salty air touched her face and she became aware of the dim boom of surf.

"Do you hear that?" Henry whispered, gripping her arm and pressing close. Emma frowned, catching the tail end of a high pitched whine. It was followed by a single brassy bark, the sound echoing through the stillness, an abrupt intruder in the still air.

"We have company," Liath said, fondly. "Don't fret. The brute is gentle."

All of a sudden, boundaries and form returned to the world. A horizon resolved itself, the sea stretched out all around them, aside from directly ahead, where fields and stone loomed into view. They were walking up a sandy beach, cradled on both sides by walls of jagged rock. The cliffs seemed raw, the stone sharp, as though only recently shattered by some great force of nature. The tiny plants and flowers that came into view as they approached seemed to belie that, however.

Emma blinked, dazedly wondering why there was a pony on the beach and why it was charging towards them. The creature opened its stride and she realised with a start it was a gigantic dog. It flung itself at Liath, rearing up to place its huge paws on the woman's shoulders. She laughed and
tousled his great square head. "Down, you slobbering oaf."

Tongue lolling, he dropped to his haunches, hairy tail sweeping the sand behind him. He was dark, though sporting a lighter band of fur below his neck and rusty highlights to his legs and face. His ears were neat and fell softly against his head. Henry had stepped almost fully behind her, pressing into her back. The kid liked dogs, but monsters like this didn't exactly appear in Central Park too often.

The incongruity of the dog, the absurd size coupled with almost dainty movements, went a long way towards distracting her from the fact that they had, apparently, just walked out of the god damn sea. She sucked in a long breath and, feeling an incredible freak out approaching, decided to focus on the panting hound.

"Henry, Emma, meet Bran. Bran, these are my guests. Try not to frighten them." She patted him fondly, her hand barely spanning the length of his head.

Bran blinked up at his mistress with serious, limpid eyes, intelligence clear in the tilt of his head. It still seemed ridiculous, he honestly looked like he could bite Liath's arm off, but he padded softly over to her and Henry, tail wagging slowly behind him. He pushed his snout into her jacket, easily able to reach her belly without lifting his head. Henry peeked out at him, wary at the creature whose level head brushed his chin.

"Hey boy," Emma said, somewhat lamely. "Aren't you… something." She patted his head awkwardly, and Bran responded by letting his tongue loll out and eyes roll with pleasure. Henry laughed and reached out, cautiously at first but more confidently after a few moments. Bran turned to regard him and gently nudged his cheek with his nose. Henry laughed again and released her arm, enthusiastically rubbing his neck.

"Right, introductions complete, let's get a move on," Liath nodded, striding forwards. "Only another mile to go, folks."

Henry turned back to her, his face startled, the grief that he'd carried all year warring with his natural optimism and cheer. There was something fragile in his gaze, as though he was holding something delicate and brittle.

Hope, she thought to herself. She swallowed, suddenly consumed with uncertainty. What had she been thinking, agreeing to go along with this madness? Despite herself, her feet moved of their own volition, following Liath up a slope to a gap in the cliffs. They hadn't actually done it, had they? They couldn't have. It was impossible; unimaginable.

She knew that Regina was dead. She'd identified her body, after all. She buried her, mourned her, missed her and still couldn't sleep through the night without her. She was still grieving her, though it wasn't as raw as it had been. She still held Henry when he woke with nightmares at least twice a week. He frequently sought her out to cuddle on the couch when something reminded him of his mom, or the loss of her. He was still just about little enough to curl against her, trying to be brave.

Her breath stuttered as she inhaled. She couldn't explain the events of the last two hours, the unfamiliar trails or the insubstantial fog. She couldn't explain how she'd some to the edge of the ocean, or how something she'd assumed was a metaphorical journey had become a very real voyage.

She risked a glance at Henry. He was picking his way along the stony track, a frown of concentration on his face. He was pale and looked nervous. She was fairly confident she appeared the same.
The ground leveled off, fields stretching around them on either side, and Bran loped ahead down a narrow, compact trail in the grass.

Liath cleared her throat. "At the end of this track, we go down into the harbour. That's where my house is. That's where Bran's brother is."

Emma clicked her tongue nervously. "How the hell do you feed two of these monsters?" Henry scurried after Bran, reaching up to hold the wide leather collar slung around his neck.

Liath threw a wry glance over her shoulder and shrugged. "Just wait until puberty hits Henry. No hound can out eat a growing young man."

Emma scowled at that, unenthusiastic about the thought of her baby as a smelly teenager. A brief flash of her wife's grimace flashed through her mind. Regina had been dreading that stage of Henry's life too.

"Regina should be there, as well," Liath murmured. Hearing the name, the thought of her still half present in her minds eye, caused Emma to startle. "I smell smoke, so I imagine she is."

Henry faltered and only his grip on Bran's collar and the steady pace of the hound kept him moving. Liath and Emma both widened their stride to catch up, concern lancing Emma's heart.

"She doesn't remember things the way you two do," she reminded them, quietly. "So you must be gentle."

Henry turned to her, frowning sadly. "You said like amnesia, right?"

Liath nodded. "Something like that. Her memories are not the same as yours. That's the simplest way to explain it."

Emma felt her heart beating in her chest, knocking against her ribs. Her mouth dried and her finger tips tingled. She risked a glance at Liath and the pity in the gaze that met hers almost undid her.

"You said she remembers Henry. What about me?"

Grey eyes were soft and sympathetic, but serious. "You aren't a stranger to her, and we didn't speak about exactly how she knows you, but you must respect her wishes if she doesn't open her arms to you."

A long shared look told Emma more than she needed to know, especially with Henry present. Her wife didn't remember her. She swallowed and nodded. Liath's gaze hardened, all flinty resolve.

"Emma, you must."

Emma nodded stiffly, heart now pounding like a drum. They reached a thorny hedge sheltering a copse of hazel and Bran led them to a path, chalky and incredibly slippery.

"Careful now," their guide warned. "Watch your footing."

They picked their way down in silence, creeping down the steep path, before they emerged into a sheltered, green glade. Emma looked up, blinking at the little cottage in front of them, the gardens dotted under the trees and yet another enormous dog. She reached for Henry again, more to steady herself, and the little group stood in silence for a moment, two of them trying to gather the courage to move forward.
The other dog regarded them with cunning eyes and stood, ambling to the door of the little house and Shouldering it open. He sported more red to his coat than his brother, russet highlights dappling the wiry fur. A muffled voice was heard followed by a weary sigh.

"What's bothering you now? I've already fed you."

Emma's throat seized and tears filled her eyes. She trembled, clutching Henry's shoulder and heard nothing but roaring in her ears.

Regina was dressed in clothes that wouldn't have been out of place in a Ren Faire and her hair was messy, wind ruffled. She wore no make up and her face was tinged with exhaustion but it was her.

Henry let out a choked sob and flung himself across the field. "Mom!" he called, stumbling in his haste. Regina's head darted up, her hand lifting to her chest with shock, then to her mouth. Henry barreled into her, and she dropped to her knees, clutching their son to her heart.

Liath placed a none too gentle hand in the small of her back and with that nudge, Emma ran to them, skidding to her knees in the wet grass beside them. Henry was sobbing, shoulders shaking and gulping through his tears as Regina held him, kissing his forehead and stroking his hair with one hand. The other was wrapped around his shoulders, her knuckles white. She was weeping as well, babbling to him and breathing in the scent of his hair, as she'd done since he was an infant.

Emma's heart cracked. Oh god, it was her. No one held such a ferocious love, such fierce adoration for this boy. Her eyes were screwed shut and tears leaking over her cheeks but Emma had never seen a sight more beautiful. Reminders about boundaries forgotten, she threw her arms around her wife and son and clutched them to her, pressing her face into Regina's hair, inhaling the scent of her as though it was the only air she could breathe. Henry reached out, gripping her jacket and she finally felt her tears fall.

*Finally, she thought, and it was only later that it struck her as strange, I found you.*

End of Part One

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Finally, is right! Took me long enough. So we can finally settle in and get to the actual story now. Stay tuned! Any thoughts or comments very welcome.
Chapter 8

Part 2

Regina found herself bombarded with flashes of sensation, unable to comprehend what was happening in its entirety. The wet grass seeping through the shins of her woolen trousers, the bony points of Henry's knees and elbows as he tucked himself into her, the way he shook against her. One of his hands was curled into the fur of her tunic, chilly fingers brushing the bare skin of her throat. He was bigger than she remembered, but still smelled the same, clean and faintly of his preferred shampoo. His sobs were petering out, and he was mumbling mom over and over, awed delight in his voice.

She was aware as well of Emma, pressed into her side, kneeling up to cradle herself and Henry in frantic, powerful arms. She was weeping as well, her face tucked over the crown of Regina's head, whispering her name interspersed with various exclamations of wonder and disbelief. The thought that she should pull away and toss a scornful admonishment at the other woman half-heartedly crossed her mind but was soon over ridden. She was too exhausted, too raw, too relieved to have Henry in her arms to shun the embrace. She even allowed herself to sag slightly against the other woman, so grateful in that moment for all she'd done for their son.

Emma pressed a kiss to her hair and the tenderness of the gesture was enough to bring fresh tears to her eyes. It had been a long time since anyone aside from Henry had shown her such affection. Perhaps she should have been disgusted, this was Snow White's daughter after all, but Liath's words from her message rang in her mind.

Emma remembers you as the woman she loved. The one she one she wished to spend her life with. Be gentle with them, Regina.

So she would try, at least. She leaned against Emma as she held Henry and let herself be soothed by the familiar scent of her son.

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They soon found themselves sitting on a blanket spread on the grass, Regina sitting with her legs curled underneath her and her hand gripped in both of Henry's. Emma perched cross legged close to them, overwhelmed with incredulity still. They were quiet, Henry hiccoughing occasionally, staring at his mothers with wet eyes.

Liath quietly handed them each a mug of the soup Regina had prepared, before slipping discretely into the cottage. Bran and Scelolan regarded them from a short distance, wiry coats contrasting with the vibrant garden. Tiny lilac flowers dotted the rich green of the field, the grass softened by moss and various plants Emma couldn't name. The sound of running water was soothing, a measure of the glade's peace settling into their little family.

Henry spoke first.

"What happened, mom?" he asked, his face pinched and sad.

Regina's face bore a look of agony, her expressive features twisted for a long moment. "I had to leave you, sweetheart, even though it was the last thing I ever wanted." She swallowed thickly. "I didn't have a choice. I had to keep you safe."
Henry blinked slowly. "Is that why ma stayed with me and not you?"

"I'd never have left you alone in the world, Henry. Your mother was able to stay with you, so she did."

He considered that for a long moment. "Why leave at all, though?"

Regina rubbed her forehead, pausing to collect her thoughts. "A very bad man wanted to hurt us all. Not just us, a lot of other people too. There wasn't another way."

He fiddled with the mug in his hands. "A bad man from home, or from this place?"

Regina smiled wanly at that, clearly pleased at the reminder that she hadn't raised a fool. "From here, more or less." She bit her lip. "This is where I come from, originally. I went to the place you call home before you were born."

Liath emerged from the cottage with a snort. "Technically, not this place, but a place close enough to it. Come along, we need to leave. We can't sleep here tonight."

Emma scowled at that. "Henry's tired. We spent the whole day walking." She was also resentful of the idea of disturbing their reunion. She had so many questions and so much that she wanted to say, though the enormity of actually speaking to Regina was somewhat intimidating.

Liath shrugged at her protest, though worried eyes cut briefly to Regina. "True. But none of you will not find peaceful rest in this place. Come on." Emma looked back at Regina, taking in the shadows beneath her eyes and unhealthy tinge to her skin.

Henry hopped up. "Are we going home?"

Regina sighed. "I'm not entirely sure I can go home." She lifted amber eyes to Emma's briefly before looking back to their son. "Or that I should. There are people here who need help and I have promised to try and assist. Though I understand if you want to go home, sweetheart. There might not be any going back, if you come with me."

Emma almost cried out at the notion of doing anything other than joining her, but tamped down the reaction, cognizant of how fragile Regina appeared to be.

Liath cocked her head to one side. "You could return to the land without magic." She and Regina shared a significant look and something incredibly sad washed over her wife's face, stealing the breath from Emma's lungs. She knew, instinctively, that there would be a steep price to be paid should she do so. She shared a look with Henry, whose eyes shone with determination.

"We stay with mom," he said, fiercely, every inch his mother's son, and pride welled in Emma's chest. "Even if it means we can't go home. Family don't leave each other."

Emma nodded without hesitation. She had questions, enormous questions, and quite a few doubts but they all seemed inconsequential in face of the certainty she felt. Remaining with Regina was the right thing to do.

"We stay together, and if I can help you help those people, all the better."

Regina's eyes were wet with tears that she was clearly struggling to keep in check, and she swallowed thickly. "Thank you both. But our host is right, we need to move."

"Aye," Liath huffed, "we won't be spoiled with a long day at this time of year!" She returned to the cottage, striding purposefully.
A thousand questions raced through Emma's mind, but she found herself nodding, somewhat dazed. She sipped her soup, more for something to do than out of hunger, and was pleasantly surprised by the rich flavour. She smiled stiffly at Henry and motioned for him to try some. Regina spoke, hesitantly. "I know you're both tired, but Liath is right. This place is... It's not easy to sleep here."

Emma frowned, taking in the exhausted slump of Regina's shoulders, as well as the guarded expression in her eyes. She looked thin, worn out in a way Emma had never seen her. She ached to fold her in her arms and prop her up, to cradle her to her chest again. But the woman before her seemed wary, defensive and frightened in a way her wife had rarely been. She knew her well enough to give her space, for now. She bit her lip and stood up, anxious for action nonetheless.

"OK, so tell us where we're going and how we get there," she said folding her arms firmly over her chest, keen to do something useful. A small smile tugged the corner of Regina's lip, one she usually kept for moments when Emma was being a little bit ridiculous, and her heart stuttered in her chest at the familiarity of the gesture.

Liath emerged from the cottage, laden down with bags and a truly impressive amount of miscellaneous stuff. She laid it all on the blanket, handing them each a pack before heading back inside. "We're going to Misthaven, so?"

Regina nodded, turning to Emma and Henry. "We are. Misthaven is a kingdom far to the south of here. I..." she paused, frowning. "That's where the people who need our help are."

"How far away is it?" Henry asked, watching as Liath emerged with an armful of food, dividing it between the bags.

"It took me about two months to get here from there," Regina said.

Henry's eyes popped out of his head. "Woah..."

Liath chuckled. "Getting to this place is always tricky. It isn't easy to find if you aren't very determined. You can't cheat. Luckily, getting away from it is much simpler. We're going to take a shortcut to the very edge of the kingdom, beyond the forest. From there, we'll be taking shanks' mare and have at least a week before I'd expect to meet any of Snow's patrols."

"Snow Patrol? Like the band?"

Regina rolled her eyes and Emma gave herself a mental high five because it was the expression she saved for when Emma made a stupid joke and she didn't want to laugh, despite her amusement. "No, like a group of soldiers patrolling the borders, on the orders of Queen Snow White."

Henry gasped. "Snow White is real?!"

Regina grimaced. "Unfortunately, she is."

"Anyway!" Liath huffed, "if we find them, they should be able to lend us a horse or two."

"Or I might be able to help us along," Regina mused. Liath shook her head.

"Please don't, unless it's life or death. There are certain rules to follow, if I want to be able to return here after we finish our quest." She frowned. "The last time I annoyed this place, it took years to get back. The sheep were not happy."

Emma shook her head, the absurdity of the situation saturating her capacity to maintain her cool. "You do realise this is crazy, right? Like, fairy tales and magic... And now we're on a quest! What
next," she laughed, somewhat hystically, "are you going to give me an enchanted sword?"

Liath peered at her. "Can you use a sword?"

Emma blinked. "Um, no. I cannot."

Liath returned to the cottage, emerging a few moments later with an armful of weapons. Henry's mouth dropped as the woman plopped them on the blanket as well. She handed Emma a stout cudgel, a mean looking length of black, spiky wood.

"There. That'll do you."

Emma stared at the stick incredulously. "Seriously? A club?"

Henry's eyes lit up and he leaned into his mom's side, making a face at Emma and grunting. "You always used to call her a caveman, mom. This proves it."

Regina blinked owlishly and Emma scowled playfully at them both, drawing Henry's attention back to her. "Oh no, you two are not allowed to start ganging up on me already!" She mustered her dignity and sat on Henry's other side, nudging him with her shoulder.

Henry laughed. "So, what can I have?" he asked, eyeing the remaining weapons.

Regina's eyes widened and Liath snorted. "You're getting a pack to carry and that'll be enough. Although, here." She handed him a piece of flint, a firesteel and a small paring knife. "Keep the knife sheathed, it's freshly sharpened."

Emma choked on her own breath and turned to Regina, expecting a furious outburst. Instead her wife looked sad and wistful, and flushed when she noticed Emma's attention. "This world isn't like home," she said, softly, stroking Henry's hair. "He isn't a little boy anymore, either. He's growing up."

A surge of compassion and sorrow lifted Emma's heart and she was struck by a burning curiosity about Regina's life in this strange world. Liath laid a hatchet over Regina's lap and stood, girting herself with a sword and attaching an unstrung bow to the side of her pack.

"Come along now," she said, gruffly but with kindness, "we really must leave."

They all rose, Regina gathering the mugs and heading to rinse them. Liath handed Emma her satchel and turned her around, lifting the blanket from the ground and flicking the water off it. She rolled it up and added it to the top of Emma's pack. Regina emerged, securing a rich woolen cloak around her shoulders. It was lined with black fur that looked exquisitely soft and Emma swallowed against the flash of emotion that leapt though her.

"She's really here with us again."

Liath locked the little cottage and whistled for the dogs, squinting at the horizon. Moving quickly, the little group made their way to a nearby beach, stopping beside a small, overturned boat. The hull was black, leather stretched over a long frame. It was surprisingly sturdy, Emma learned, as they brought it down the shore, but as she looked to the shore, at least five miles distant, she felt her heart begin to race.

"Uh, is this safe?"

Regina frowned, somewhat troubled. "It's a calm day, we should be alright." She glanced at Henry,
her throat working. "We don't have a choice."

They brought the boat to the shore, then packed their gear away. The dogs hopped in, settling into the bottom of the boat, closer to the stern. Liath guided Henry closer to the bow, showing him where to sit and hold on. Emma and Regina she guided to a thwart in the centre of the boat, facing forwards. She paused at the stern, waiting for the tide to meet them before pushing off, shoving them into the waves. Nimbly, she hopped in, dipping the oars and puffing her cheeks out.

Henry turned, spinning on his seat and causing his mothers to lean forward in alarm.

"So mom," he asked, "who's in this Misthaven place?"

Regina bit her lip, stiff and quiet beside Emma. The little boat was surprisingly steady on the water, heaving up and over the waves as Liath pulled at the oars. The wind was worse on the open water, making conversation slightly challenging.

"Snow White is, and her husband. They rule the kingdom, but a witch is threatening to take their unborn child. Your mother and I can stop her."

Emma blinked. "Uh, I am not sure how being the sheriff and mayor of a small town in Maine qualifies…"

Regina's head whipped around, eyes wide and somewhat confused. "Mayor and sheriff?"

Henry nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah! We know you don't remember everything about our world, Liath told us. It's OK, we can fill you in!"

Regina was shaking slightly, trembling in the folds of her cloak. Emma reached over and placed what she hoped would be a soothing hand on Regina's knee, relieved when she wasn't rebuffed. The shaking seemed to settle and Regina nodded at Henry to continue.

Henry, ever the little storyteller, grinned widely. "You became the mayor like, five years ago. Ma was just a deputy sheriff then, but she got elected the year after. Basically, you two ran the whole town. You were always getting everyone out of trouble." He paused, his eyes drifting to the side. "Then you were gone."

"Henry…" she said, leg tensing beneath Emma's hand. "I didn't want to leave you. It broke my heart to have to. But…"

Henry nodded, swiping at his eyes. "It's OK. I believe you."

Emma did, as well. She knew her wife, trusted her implicitly. She would never do anything to hurt their son. Whatever had caused her to leave them must have been compelling, indeed.

"Anyway. So we're going to help your friends," Emma said, "they're in trouble and you and I are going to team up to save the day, as usual." Regina gazed up at her, expression cautious and more closed off than Emma could remember it being for a long time. But there was curiosity in those bright brown eyes, and perhaps a flash of excitement at the challenge. Emma grinned and couldn't help but feel buoyed when Regina smiled back, her eyes crinkling in a way that eased every raw edge in Emma's heart.

"It is so much more complicated than that, Sheriff Swan," she murmured, a wry twist to her mouth.

"Well, Mayor Mills, you always tell me I'm a simple creature. Let's not make it harder than it has to be."
The boat heaved up over choppy waves, the spray catching the last of the daylight like diamonds flung into the air. The sun lit the waves from within, lightening the sapphire to a deep and marvelous emerald. It was setting, lending the most beautiful shades of lavender and pink to the sky. A trio of dolphins had come along side them, leaping into the air, much to the delight of all aboard.

"Woah! Henry, did you see that?!!" Emma roared, laughing merrily. Liath chuckled as well and even the dogs lifted their heads to see what was happening.

"They're a good sign," Liath called, "they're keeping us on track!"

Regina nodded at that, squinting ahead to the mainland. Though they'd been rowing for more than an hour, it seemed no closer. Their guide appeared unconcerned and so she set her unease aside, for the minute. Henry and Emma seemed to be enjoying the journey and despite everything before them, her heart was light. She drank in the image of her son, greedy for every detail she could glean. He was so happy and open, laughing and gazing back at her frequently. He was chatting to Emma but both of them made sure to include her, turning to her often and sharing their joy and smiles without reserve.

Good god, what had happened? What part of her, or them, had conjured memories of such a happy life? She was mystified at what had caused her plan to go so awry. She'd intended for Emma and Henry to remember a life together, just the two of them. Instead, they remembered a world where the three of them were a family and, prior to her leaving them, a happy one at that.

She was painfully aware of the fact that happy families weren't something she was overly familiar with. She was also exhausted from weeks of nightmares on the island, her nights filled with dark thoughts and fractured sleep. She felt herself sag, her eyes fighting to stay open and focused on Henry's face.

"He isn't going to vanish, you know," Emma whispered close to her ear. "We found you. We're not leaving you." She started a bit, unused to having someone in such close proximity who wasn't trying to kill her. She was also most emphatically not used to the saviour staring at her with such gentle fondness and affection, as though she'd hung the moon and stars.

Her eyes were a vibrant shade of green, she noted, more like Henry's than she'd realised. His were a touch more hazel, but the warmth and mischief within were identical. The urge to snap at Emma or shove her away flared briefly, a remnant of old hurts, before she nodded. "I know."

A gull called and Liath puffed for breath. "Everyone hold on. If you feel sick, close your eyes."

Henry turned to ask their guide what she meant when a pale mist spread over the boat. It was tinged by the sunset, almost pink in places, but very dense. Within moments, there was no sign of the island or the mainland at all. Indeed, even the prow of the boat was becoming indistinct. She could feel magic around them, ancient and powerful. Fear lanced through her and she reached for Henry, pulling him to sit on the bottom of the boat between herself and Emma.

She felt her breathing quicken and she reached within herself, trying to summon her own power to the surface.

"Don't! Regina, don't!" Liath called, almost faded into the mist in front of them. "We're almost there."

She began to shiver, terror filling her as the emptiness of the place they were in seeped into her.
She'd tasted this on the island, her dreams had been plagued by it, but never like this. Never so strong. She became aware, suddenly, of how far she was from everything. They had slipped through a gap on the edge of the world and there was no guarantee they'd find their way back in.

"Mom?" Henry whispered, putting a hand on her knee. "Are you OK?"

She shook, trembling as waves of cold fear rolled through her. She felt small and weak, powerless and alone. Her mother's cruel voice, King Leopold's, Rumple's, Pan's all whispered to her, taunting her. Here, she could feel every layer of defence she'd constructed peel back, leaving her raw and exposed to the endless, unyielding emptiness around her.

"Regina!" a voice called, sharply. Hands went around her, pulling her into the warmth of another body. She clung to the shape, desperate for contact and burrowed her face into the savior's chest, pressing into her. Henry was beside her, too, holding her tightly. She reached for him, grasping at his shoulder.

"We have you, we got you, sweetheart you're OK." Emma murmured into her hair, nonsense words calming her down, drowning out the voices and giving her something to cling to. Henry was rubbing her back as well, soothing her as she'd done when he was little.

"We're almost there," Liath panted, strain clear in her voice. "Almost there."

Regina squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face into Emma's jacket, willing the fear abate. Slowly, it ebbed away and she found herself able to breathe once more. She paused for a moment, somewhat perturbed by the unfamiliar sensation of being held, before she withdrew.

Emma looked frantic, eyes wide and worried. "Regina, are you alright? What just happened?"

She blinked, eyes adjusting to the dark mist around them, the light now faded entirely. Liath was breathing heavily as she pulled on the oars and one of the dogs whined.

"I'm fine," she breathed, pulling away from Emma entirely, glancing around for a moment. "I'm not sure what happened, though."

Henry frowned. "Was it a panic attack?"

"No, my little prince, it wasn't." She wondered briefly how he knew about panic attacks, but filed that away for later.

"It was the journey," Liath rasped, "and your magic."

Henry started. "My mom has magic?!"

Regina lifted a hand to her head, massaging her temple idly. She blinked, as the mist faded and a bright moon emerged. Emma and Henry gasped, gazing around them. Liath heaved a sigh of relief and lifted weary arms again. They were on a small lake, surrounded by low hills covered in heather. The moon was full and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. There wasn't a breath of wind, either, and silence reigned aside from the call of a night bird.

Liath put them ashore beside a squat stone building, dropping her head between her legs as soon as they stopped moving.

"We're here. On the edge of the Brown Moors."

Regina sucked in an impressed breath. "As promised. A week as the crow flies to the most northerly
of Misthaven's outposts."

Liath stood on shaky legs and stumbled out of the boat. "Hup boys," she called, and the dogs gamboled out, stretching their legs across the moor. She staggered towards the small building, shoving the door open. Regina handed Henry and Emma their bags and they hurried after their guide.

The little house was bare, but clean. There was a table and a hearth, as well as two raised wooden platforms. One was scarcely wider than a bench and Liath had already collapsed on it, breathing heavily.

"We'll need to rest," she mumbled. "It'll be a day or two before I'm fit to move. Sleep well." With that, she spread her cloak over her chest and turned to face the wall.

Regina sighed. It had been a very impressive display of use magic, but foolish. Their guide being out of commission wasn't ideal, after all. They had more immediate concerns, though, such as warmth and light. She moved to the fireplace, glad to see kindling and turf stacked to one side. "Henry, could I have your fire striker?"

He crouched beside her, handing over the striker and flint. "How does it work, mom?"

"I'll show you." She spent the next few minutes teaching him how to lay and light a fire properly before demonstrating the use of the striker. After a few attempts, a shower of sparks lit the tinder and soon, the beginnings of warm fire were burning in the grate.

Emma approached them with cheese and bread, as well as a skin of water. "It's pretty basic, but we need to eat before we sleep."

Henry nodded, his eyes drooping with tiredness. "Mom, are you really magic?"

Regina shook her head, swallowing her mouthful of sharp sheep's cheese. "I can use magic, yes. I wouldn't say I am magic though. I'm a person like you."

Emma regarded her seriously. "So does that mean that there are magical beings out there?"

Regina nodded. "There are fairies and dragons and all sorts of other people here. In a sense, this is a place where fairy tales are true."

Emma frowned. "Is that how you always kept the house so clean? Magic?"

Regina blinked, startled and supremely annoyed by the question. "Emma Swan," she said, in her most threatening voice, "if I had the power to bend space and the very fabric of being to my will, do you really think I'd use it for something as banal as housekeeping?"

Emma and Henry shared a glance, and she was somewhat perturbed to notice they seemed completely nonplussed by her rage. She'd had entire villages quaking at that tone before.

"Well, come on. You would. You totally would," Emma said. "Except for the things you got me to do, like the freaking gutters." Henry wrinkled his nose.

Regina scowled. "Your world is known as the land without magic, you know."

Henry pouted, somewhat disappointed, and Emma chuckled. "OK, you're getting grouchy. It's time for all of us to get some sleep. Rip van Tour Guide over there isn't the only one who needs some shut eye."
Regina couldn't argue with that, though she sorely wanted to argue about something. This new dynamic between her and Emma was strange to her and she didn't like feeling as though she didn't have the upper hand. She huffed to herself and set about preparing the platform to sleep on. It was clear the three of them had no alternative but to share it and she went about spreading the blankets they had, as well as Emma and Henry's coats and her cloak. At least they'd keep Henry warm between them.

After a brief and slightly mortifying discussion regarding toilet facilities (a spade and a discrete distance) Emma and Henry settled into bed. Regina busied herself with the fire, building it up to last the night. She checked on the dogs, who'd returned from their run and collapsed in front of the hearth, and climbed into bed beside Henry.

"Night mom," he said, eyes already closed. "Love you."

"I love you too, Henry," she said, turning to face him.

"Love you, ma," he yawned.

"Love you too, kid," Emma said, yawning as well. Regina scowled when she followed suit a second later. She closed her eyes, exhaustion sweeping over her, and was asleep in seconds.

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Regina wasn't sure what woke her, perhaps a bird calling, but she found herself opening her eyes, peering around the dimly lit room. The dogs were snoring on the floor, in harmony with their master. Henry was sprawled on his back, taking up far more than his fair share of the cramped platform. Her hand was on his chest, just over his heart, and she took a moment to whisper thanks to whatever force had brought them back together.

She became aware of another sensation, a warmth around her elbow. Emma had reached out to hold her, at some stage. It was a light touch, but felt more intimate than it should have. It was casual and unconscious, speaking of long held love and easy affection. It felt quite pleasant, too, which worried her immensely.

The dying embers, or maybe the moonlight, gleamed off something on Emma's left hand. With a start, Regina realised that she wore a ring. She hadn't noticed earlier, probably because Emma hadn't removed her gloves until they reached the bothy. A feeling of dread, of almost revulsion, at once again being unwillingly married to a member of that family filled her and she sucked in a breath. Her movements must have disturbed Henry because a moment later, he rolled away from her, towards Emma. However, as he turned he grabbed her hand, pulling her to curl into his back. Emma snorted and brought her hands to her chin, nestling into the blankets more securely.

The dread faded then, as she held her son. They weren't all bad, after all, she mused wryly, kissing his hair. She turned her gaze back to Emma, studying her features. She'd aged more than Regina had expected, though that was possibly due to her having lost weight. Her face was leaner and her arms hard with defined muscle, but she appeared content in sleep. She wondered if her maturity was also down to suddenly finding herself a single parent.

Regina frowned, thinking back to the moment she'd changed their memories. Things had been chaotic and she'd been pushed for time. She hadn't been able to set specifics, just poured her heart into wishing for Henry to be happy, for he and Emma to have good memories. She had not, in the slightest, intended to include herself. Why would she, when Emma barely tolerated her and Henry had run from her. She had no illusions about any of it. She shouldn't have been there.
And yet she was. Henry snuggled more deeply into her embrace and Emma's long eyelashes flickered over her cheeks. She closed her eyes with a puzzled sigh, falling into a deep, restful and dreamless sleep.

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Well, about time, huh? Drop me a line and let me know what you think! Thank you to everyone who's commented and left likes and kudos. Enormously appreciated!
Watery morning sunlight shone through the tiny window of the bothy, catching motes of dust and forcing spiders to retreat to cosier hiding places. Regina and Henry were tidying up after breakfast, Emma having gone for a walk. An unhappy groan emanated from Liath's huddled form, drawing polite attention from those present. A tousled head poked up and the older woman heaved herself out of bed. She blinked slowly at the pair before her and staggered out the door, mumbling a greeting.

"Is she OK, mom?"

Regina resisted the urge to chuckle, stroking his messy hair instead. "She'll be fine. The journey here took a lot out of her, but she's a very experienced traveler."

He nodded thoughtfully before looking up at her. "Are *you* OK, mom?"

Her chest tightened, bursting with affection and pride. Her little prince was uncommonly sensitive and considerate for a child. She'd feared that part of him had been irreparably damaged by all that had befallen them but this version of him, at least, appeared largely unscathed.

"I'm all the better for having you here, Henry," she said, honestly. She sat on the bed and he perched beside her, the green highlights in his eyes dancing in the ruddy glow of the turf fire. He drank in the sight of her as she did him, his expression full of wonder. He pressed against her and she wound an arm around his shoulder.

"You've been all alone," he said, sadly. "We missed you so much but at least ma and I had each other." He burrowed more firmly into her side, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"We won't leave you again, mom."

"So is Liath a witch, since she has magic?" he asked, after a long moment. "Are you?"

Regina chuckled. "I don't know about Liath. You'd have to ask her. I suppose I am, though."

"We'll totally have been a Ravenclaw, you know."

She stifled a laugh at that, a surge of fondness easing the exhaustion clinging to her. "Not Slytherin?"

"And what about you?" she asked taking in his face. His features were starting to mature, the first hints of adolescence strengthening his cheeks and jaw, the resemblance to Emma growing more obvious. He frowned unhappily, scowling in a way she knew was all from her.

"Pottermore said Hufflepuff."

"Well," she said, trying to fight at smile at his obvious displeasure, "they're loyal and good friends. I think there's a lot to be said for that."

"Ma got Gryffindor," he groused. Regina rolled her eyes at that. Of course she did.

The door opened and Liath shuffled in, still shattered. She plonked herself on her bench, wiping her hands over her face. Regina gave Henry a smile and disentangled from him gently to make some tea.

"Sweetheart," she said, relishing the contented gleam in his eyes. "Why don't you go and get some fresh air? I'll get Liath settled and follow you out."

He nodded happily, smiling broadly at their guide. He paused for a moment, taking in the tired droop of her shoulders and rushed forward, giving her a brief but tight hug. He whispered a quick thank you and sped out, grabbing his hat as he went.

Liath, for her part, seemed quite pleased by the show of gratitude and sat slightly straighter. Regina handed her a mug of tea and sat back down, regarding the other woman.

"Thank you," Regina said, with every scrap of sincerity she possessed. "Thank you for bringing him to me."

She bowed her head graciously. "It was a pleasure, actually." She took a long sip of tea, fighting to stay awake. "You've got quite a wonderful family," Liath said. "I confess, I didn't expect myself to grow so fond of them."

"They're not my family, though," she said, the warmth gifted to her by Henry fading. "The life they remember isn't real. In all honesty, both of them hated me."

Liath was quiet for a long moment, staring into her tea. "Hatred is a ferocious emotion. It isn't easily hidden. From what you've told me, you certainly had some difficult times with both of them." She took a long sip of tea. "But there isn't magic powerful enough to create love like they have from nothing, Regina."

Flushing with discomfort, Regina stood stiffly. "I'll let you rest. You don't look fit to walk to the lake, never mind Misthaven."

Liath was wise enough to let the conversation end. She thank Regina for the tea and curled back on the bench, snoring softly in moments as Regina flitted about the bothy, heart thudding uncomfortably in her chest.

SQSQSQSQ

Henry and the dogs were playing fetch along the lake shore as Emma leaned back on her elbows. The little house was perched on a high moor, with incredible views all around. Purple heather
carpeted the hills, interspersed with bog cotton and myrtle. The sun was shining from a clear blue sky and birds were tumbling in the air over the lake. It shone, a perfect mirror for the heavens above.

Regina appeared with two cups, her face serious but not stern.

"How's our patient?"

Regina shrugged. "She woke up, went to the bog, had a mug of tea and went back to sleep. We'll wake her and feed her at lunch time."

Emma gladly accepted the tea, sitting up in the patch of grass outside the bothy. "You look much better," she said, regarding this version of the woman she loved carefully. "You slept well?"

Regina nodded. "Even with Henry and his sixteen limbs."

Emma laughed. "I know! My god, and that thing is way smaller than I'm used to." She sipped her tea, glancing at Regina. She had a soft, gentle look on her face and Emma pressed on. "He would always insist on being in the middle when he came into bed with us. Said he was worried he'd fall, that our bed was way higher than his."

Regina blinked slowly. "Our bed?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I mean, how much do you remember?" Regina looked away, fidgeting with her mug and Emma smiled wistfully. Seeing her, alive and well and vibrant and beautiful before her stole her breath. All the little reminders of her habits, her tells and the little clues to her insecurities were on display and she ached sweetly to see them again. She had no desire to be anything other than honest with Regina, especially about something as important as their relationship. She'd learned, over the years, that avoiding a subject they didn't want to discuss inevitably led to disaster.

"OK, well what if I tell you a story, then?" Golden brown eyes, careful and maybe a little bit fearful, regarded her quietly. "Once upon a time, there was a really dumb eighteen year old. She'd bounced around the foster system all her life and had never had a family. Never had a home. She met a guy, thought he was awesome and they fell into something like love. However, he turned out to be a giant asshole and betrayed her. She just about escaped the cops and ended up in Boston."

"While there, she heard this pair of truckers in a diner talking about the most remote places they'd ever been. One of them mentioned that we was going to this little town in Maine that was just about the most out of the way place you could be. This sounded pretty perfect to the eighteen year old idiot, who really didn't want to meet any cops. So she snuck herself onto his truck and stowed away to Storybrooke."

Regina's eyes widened and Emma took a mouthful of tea.

"When she got there, she made friends with a girl called Ruby, who got her a job and a room in her Granny's diner. She spent her time washing plates and floors until one day, the most beautiful girl she'd ever seen walks in the door. Now, she was a couple of years older than the idiot, and had just finished a social studies degree. She was also much smarter, much more poised and much kinder than the idiot."

Emma felt her mouth stretch into a wide grin. "However, for whatever reason, it was love at first sight. The two became inseparable. Our princess, because she could be a little snooty at first, brought out the best in the idiot, who applied to get her GED. The idiot brought out the princess's fun side, and she started enjoying life a lot more."

"Then, the idiot found out she was pregnant. Bummer, huh?"
Regina shook her head, tears welling in her eyes. "No. Because that was Henry, right?"

Emma nodded, grinning widely. She abandoned her fairy tale. "I moved into your apartment with you. I was going to give him up for adoption, you know, give him his best chance. We were both so young and we'd only just found each other." She sighed. "You were there when he was born," at that, Regina's head whipped up and tears rolled down her cheeks. "And I swear to god, the three of us? It just felt so right. The first time you held him, I knew he was ours. That his best chance was with his mothers."

Emma scooted closer to Regina and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, as she sobbed. "You are totally his actual mother, by the way. You did all the un-fun mom stuff, like disciplining and getting him to eat veggies. I was basically another child in the house, ninety percent of the time."

Regina laughed at that, though she was still crying. "You got me to do all the gross stuff, like diapers and unclogging toilets, though. And I was always the one who had to bring him to soccer matches when it was raining, too, for some reason."

"It always rains in Maine." She lifted her head and dried her eyes. She looked up at Emma with such gratitude, such longing, that it almost broke her heart.

"Well, can't have you getting soggy in the rain." She wiped a tear off her face and grinned. "Though you're coping pretty well with roughing it out here. I don't think I've ever seen you without makeup for so long."

Regina blushed at that, the intimacy implied seemed completely foreign to her. Emma loosened her grip a little and was pleasantly surprised when she didn't pull away entirely. "You adopted him when he was six months old, second parent."

"And we married," Regina said, softly, something delicate beneath her features that even Emma couldn't decipher.

"We did. Back in 2013, after the vote. It was a really fun day. Henry had a blast and pretty much the whole town showed up." She chuckled at the memory. "Archie Hopper and Ruby got so drunk they ended up dancing together and falling over a damn table!"

Regina was quiet for a moment and took Emma's left hand, examining her wedding ring intently. "I know this ring… It belonged to my father's mother."

Emma nodded. "Your abuela. I only met her twice, when Henry was a baby, but she was a great lady." She shifted around for a moment, catching Regina's hand in hers. "You don't have yours."

"Wedding band and engagement ring," Emma said, gently. "I didn't have a family heirloom to give you, but I found one you really liked in a vintage store. And the engagement ring…" she trailed off, stifling a laugh. Regina squinted at her.

"What's so funny?"

"OK, see, I was planning on proposing for years, way before it was legal. Wanted to take you away, maybe up to Canada, have a vacation, down on one knee blah blah blah."

Regina arched an eyebrow. "A true romantic."

Emma shrugged. "Romantic enough that you married me… Anyway. I was planning it for years and
had the ring ready to go. But then they started talking about legalising gay marriage in Maine and Question 1 and we both threw ourselves into campaigning, as best we could. The night the result came in, we were in the town hall." She paused, savouring the memory. "And when it came in, you dropped to your knee in front of the whole town and popped the question. You'd been so busy you never got a ring, and I had the damn thing in my dresser so…"

Regina nodded at that, a little less tense beside her.

"I mean," Emma shrugged, "I don't think a fancy rock would actually suit me. I'd snag it in my gun or something."

Regina laughed softly, running her thumb over the plain band. Emma let the conversation pause, enjoying the proximity and warmth. Henry whooped and Sceolta barked, causing them to look up. He waved and they waved back in unison.

"Is he happy?" Regina asked, softly. "Does he have friends? Hobbies?"

Emma nodded. "Well, he wasn't, after you died. I mean, that's what we remember. That you were in a freak car accident one morning and you died." She swallowed thickly, the horrible memory of being in hospital, in the morgue, at the mausoleum… She turned to the woman beside her and drank in the sight of her, warm and breathing and alive. She closed her eyes. "It was too much to stay in Storybrooke, so we went to New York. I don't think it was going to be forever, but we needed space. I found a good counsellor for him and a decent school. These last few months, he's been doing better. Had some sleep overs, joined the school's soccer team. He's good."

Regina was quiet for a long moment, lost in thought and teetering on the brink of being completely overwhelmed. "You did a fantastic job with him, Emma. I'm so sorry…" she swallowed again. "I didn't think you'd remember me. Either of you." She lifted her face to Emma's, misery carved into every line. "I didn't want you to."

Emma raised her hands, cradling the tear streaked face before her. She was so dear to her, so precious! "Sweetheart, there is nothing in the world that could make Henry or me forget you. We love you."

Regina's face crumpled. "You shouldn't though." She closed her eyes, fighting a battle within herself, before she opened resolute eyes. "Emma, I'm not the one who's forgotten everything."

**SQSQS**

Henry raced over the heather with Sceolta, hopping down a narrow track to a little copse of trees close to the lake. His mom suspected they might find something to add to their rations there and had suggested they investigate. She followed at a more sedate pace behind them, the little hatchet clasped in her hand. His moms had spent a long time talking earlier and both had come away looking pretty shaken. His ma had made an excuse about gathering more turf and he'd not pressed her about what they'd spoken about. His mom had been quiet, subdued and appearing slightly lost.

He wasn't stupid. He knew something was up with his moms. They hadn't even kissed each other, that he'd seen, which was not typical behaviour at all. He knew his mom's memory was messed up and that some seriously weird stuff was unfolding but the thing he was honestly having the most trouble with was the idea that his parents weren't together.

Traveling through worlds? Magic? His mothers being targeted by some form of villain? He could buy that. His mom not making ridiculous goopy eyes at his ma? Unthinkable.
He slowed down, waiting for his mom to catch up with him. He watched her approach, marveling at the sight of her. She was wearing a pair of brown suede trousers, similar enough to those she used to wear riding, tucked into a pair of tall boots. She was nestled into a long-sleeved tunic lined with fur, cinched at the waist with a wide belt with a brass buckle. It was a slightly darker shade than her trousers, an earthy brown. He felt slightly out of place in his garish red jacket, but at least he was warm.

Her hair was really curly, messy from the wind, and she wasn't wearing any makeup as far as he could tell. She looked like she did on weekend mornings, or when they'd been on vacation. She didn't look like the mayor at all, just his mom, and his heart ached. She looked tiny, too, skinnier than he remembered. It had never occurred to him that his mom was actually small before any of this. She'd always seemed so strong to him, powerful and capable.

She smiled carefully at him, her eyes crinkling at the edges but tinged with sorrow. She seemed pale and sort of fragile, like she'd been sick for a while. He waited until she caught up, then continued on at a more sedate pace.

"What are we looking for, mom?"

"Honestly, anything," she confessed. "If I have to eat plain porridge again, I'm going to scream."

Henry wrinkled his nose. The porridge had been nice this morning, but he didn't want to have it for dinner, as well. He didn't anticipate a store in their future, however. His mom led them into the little copse, peering around.

"We're in luck," she said, "there are berries."

Henry followed her to a tangle of briers, frowning at the curved thorns.

"Are these safe to eat?"

"They are," she assured him, reaching into the thicket and pulling the ripe fruit off the branches. "Blackberries, see?" She popped one into her mouth and sighed at the taste. She'd always had a soft spot for sweets, though she'd rarely treated herself.

The berries were smaller than those he was used to, and much softer, but his mom seemed keen to gather as many as possible. He reached those he could, careful to not snag his jacket. Sceolta was lying panting beside him, tongue lolling out one side of his mouth.

"So you grew up here?" he asked, curious about his mother's life. "You said you went to uh, our world before I was born."

She nodded, eyes focused on her task. "Not here, exactly. I grew up far to the south of here."

He had a ton of questions and was honestly quite confused about a lot of things. But there was something brittle in his mom's voice, something sad and lonesome, and he couldn't bear to hear it right now. Not when he'd only just gotten her back. He bit his lip and looked around the little glade, frowning at the bare trees. He turned to face her, waggling his eyebrows.

"Watch!" he said, tossing a berry up and catching it in his mouth. His mom chuckled at the sight so he repeated the feat, exaggerating his movements. She even tossed at berry for him, which he snapped from mid air with a grin. Clearly, his ma's lessons had paid off. His mother was laughing at his antics, cheered by his messing around.

"What else can we eat?" he asked, handing her the berries he still had.
She squinted as she looked around, the low wintery sun in her eyes. "Hmm, I think that's blackthorn. There might be some sloes."

They made their way to the bush, tree really, and his mother wound a careful hand between inch long spines, emerging with a dusky berry between her fingers. It was a deep shade of blue, almost navy, and appeared rimed with frost, despite the mildness of the day. He looked up at his mom, who held it out for him to inspect.

"It looks like a blueberry," he said, happily. He glanced at his mom, who had a slightly mischievous expression behind her eyes. He lifted an eyebrow, sensing his mother's playful side emerging. He raised the berry to his mouth, watching her try to fight a smile.

"It's edible but it has a stone, like an olive. Be careful not to swallow it," she warned.

He popped the berry into his mouth and bit down, eyes widening at the astringent taste. It was worse than he'd expected, by a order of magnitude. He spat the half eaten fruit out, feeling as though he'd just eaten a mouthful of sand. He glowered at his mom, who was chuckling and holding out a handful of blackberries. He grabbed a couple, hastily chewing on them to rid his mouth of the tart taste.

"Oh my god," he said, when his mouth had returned to normal function and his mother stopped laughing. "That was a dirty trick, mom! That was... that was like something ma would do!"

"Oh, Henry, I'm sorry," she said, her laughter settling down. "I couldn't resist. My father did the same thing to me when I was little."

Henry pretended to glare at her, though he was so delighted to her his mother laugh that he would have eaten a bucket load of the horrible berries. Her face was relaxed and her cheeks red with mirth. He was so glad that she could forget her troubles, even for a moment. Her eyes shone as she touched his cheek, tipping her head to one side. "They're an acquired taste, huh?"

"Olives are an acquired taste, mom, those are like eating a whole bag of sour candy at once."

He leaned into her hand for a moment, giving her a playful shove with his cheek before he reached up and took it.

"Come on. We'd better stock up and get back to ma and Liath."

Her hand was warm and soft in his, curling around his fingers with such easy familiarity that he felt his heart soar. Battered and bruised, his mom was nonetheless back.
Chapter 10

Emma found herself operating largely on auto pilot, tidying the bothy and stoking the fire. The sun was bright outside and Regina had taken Henry to forage for something to supplement their rations. She sighed and rubbed her forehead, disbelief robbing her of the ability to concentrate.

It didn't make a lick of sense. An evil queen, a curse, lost children… Giving Henry up and having him find her years later. Hurt and mistrust and anger… No love between them. She believed her, what was more. Regina wasn't lying, she believed what she was saying. However, just because she believed it didn't mean it was actually true. She knew her heart and it had been filled with her son and his mother for more than a decade. The feeling of safety and belonging she felt when she looked at them was real.

Liath groaned, waking briefly. Emma sighed and passed her a skin of water. The other woman blinked bleary eyes and thanked her. She accepted some food before passing out again and though Emma burned with questions, she let the other woman rest.

She stepped out into the watery sun, closing her eyes against the breeze. Birds called to one another and fluffy clouds scudded across the pale blue sky. She noticed Bran padding towards them her a limp body dangling from his mouth. Dark eyes soulful, he laid the hare beside her and loped off, presumably to find to his brother and Henry. She lifted the creature, a fine sized specimen, and retrieved a knife from her pack.

She set about skinning and dressing the hare, slow and careful in her movements. It had been a while, and she'd only skinned rabbits, but her deputy David had taught her well. She remembered him fondly for a moment, wondering how he and Mary Margaret were doing. She wasn't great with contacting her old friends, she'd admit. A bolt of sorrow lanced through her. She supposed that was probably because they weren't actually real.

Voices rang across the moor as Regina, Henry and Sceolta returned. Despite the turmoil in her chest, she couldn't help but smile at the sight of Henry and Regina. Their son bounded ahead, wielding a small cloth bundle with pride.

"We found some blackberries! And some sloes, but they're not too nice."

Regina spied the hare Emma had prepared, an eyebrow lifting. "I'm impressed, Emma. The sloes can be cooked into a sauce which complements game quite nicely, Henry. We'll eat well tonight."

"Oh, cool!", he chirped. "Can I go play with the dogs?" Emma didn't miss the way he turned to Regina for permission first, as he'd always done, and Emma felt her heart clench. She nodded and he scamppered away. Regina sighed and turned to her, eyes dark and sad.

"What I told you earlier… It's a lot to take in."

Emma nodded, lifting the hare and skewering it on a few sticks she'd found. "It is." They sat in silence for a few moments, before Emma turned to her again. "I find the fact that we hated each other just… That's the thing I can't get my head around. I'll take all the rest but that? It's just so wrong."

Regina laughed, though there was little humour there. "Imagine how surprised I was to hear you thought us married."

Emma was quiet for a moment, studying the woman in front of her carefully. This wasn't a stranger, though their memories weren't the same, this was her wife. This was the woman she loved and the
woman she’d built a life with. This was the mother of her son.

"You must have been really scared when I got there," she said, softly. "Because you thought you
were going to lose Henry."

Regina didn't deny it, fiddling with the sloes. Emma chuckled. "And I bet I was an asshole."

She snorted at that. "You took a chain saw to my apple tree."

Emma's eyes widened. "Oh fuck me… Really?"

Regina glared at her. "Language!"

"I think hearing that I took a power tool to your most beloved plant warrants it!" Emma shook her
head. "Anyway. I was an asshole. And I know how you get when I'm an asshole so I can only
imagine things escalated quickly."

Regina frowned at her. "You don't know me, Emma," she said, with more sorrow than venom.

"Well, maybe not this exact you. But the essence of you? I know her. And I'd like to get to know this
Regina, too because as stupid and as mushy as it sounds, there isn't ever going to be an Emma Swan
who doesn't want to know Regina Mills." Regina flushed, wrapping her arms around herself
protectively. "And that doesn't mean I expect to pick up our marriage, you know? Like, I don't want
to make you uncomfortable, ever. I promise I won't touch you if it's unwelcome." She scratched her
neck. "I've probably been a bit handsy…"

Regina shook her head. "You haven't made me uncomfortable, but I don't… We're not on the same
page with regard our relationship. I don't feel that way towards you and I know the Emma I
remember didn't feel that way either." She lifted haunted eyes and Emma let the fact that her lie
detector was screaming at her go unremarked. "This spell, these memories went wrong. You weren't
supposed to remember me."

Emma nodded, seeing the distress building in the other woman and decided to let things settle for the
moment. Regina was terrified. "OK. Well, look. We have this quest, right? I have to save my little
sibling, as weird as that whole concept is. Let's focus on that."

Regina nodded, biting her lip. Emma shook her head and sighed. "And there's Henry. Even if you
don't have feelings for me, you're the mother of my son. That makes us family, no matter what else."

Regina hugged herself tighter and Emma ached to hold her, to offer the comfort she obviously
needed. "And family looks after each other, in whatever way they can. That doesn't change."

The woman in front of her ducked her head to hide the emotion welling in her eyes. "When did you
get so…"

She trailed off and Emma grinned. "Your good influence, I guess."

SQSQSQSQ

The decision to tell Henry should have been harder, but in the end it wasn't. She remembered his hurt
at the lying from before, the cold rage in his eyes. No matter what else, she didn't want any more
dishonesty between them. She flicked nervous eyes to Emma, who smiled reassuringly.

"Kid," Emma said as they finished dinner. "We need to talk."
Henry frowned, his quick gaze bouncing between them. "OK?"

Regina threw the scraps from her bowl into the fire, reaching for the others as well. The three of them were huddled around the grate, listening to the wind gather itself into a gale. The windows shuddered and they'd had to block the gap under the door with a blanket.

Regina sat straight backed, as her mother had taught her. Henry gazed up at her, his little face so trusting and sure. She would have traded anything for even another day of this. Another day of enjoying his unfettered love but knew he needed to know, if anything lasting was to be built between them.

"Henry," she began, "I know you think that I don't remember, but it isn't as simple as that. Your mother and I want to tell you the truth, because you need to hear it now." His little brow creased and she sighed, her heart like a stone in her chest.

"You know the story of Snow White and the Evil Queen, correct?"

Henry nodded. "The evil queen poisoned the princess with an apple but true love's kiss broke the spell."

Regina felt herself sigh. "It wasn't quite like that, dear. But yes. The evil queen cursed Snow White and all the inhabitants of her realm. They were taken to a land without magic, where they'd never know their happy endings."

Henry frowned, flicking his eyes to Emma.

"But just as the curse was cast, Snow White put her daughter in a magic wardrobe and she was transported to that land, beyond the curse. She was the saviour. The one person who could break the curse. But she was alone, and she had a hard life." She swallowed, her throat burning. Henry's face was pale and Emma's indecipherable.

"She had a little boy, who she gave up for adoption. Because she loved him very, very much and wanted him to have a good life. And by the machinations of a wicked man, that little baby was adopted by the evil queen."

She closed her eyes, feeling the burning there. "She loved him so much, but she lied to him. He wasn't of the magical kingdom and the curse didn't capture him. So when he started noticing things weren't right, his mother lied to him. She drove him away and he found his birth mother, and brought her to town."

A hand clasped hers and she looked down, vision blurred by tears as she met Henry's gaze. "The saviour broke the curse and saved the town. And things weren't easy. In fact," here she laughed bitterly, "they were horrible. Her son hated her. And after a lot of misadventures, a very evil little weasel tried to cast the curse again. The only way the evil queen could find to protect her son," she paused, fighting tears down, "was to undo the curse altogether. Which would mean he would never remember Storybrooke or his mother or anything else to do with magic."

"I know it sounds crazy, Hen," Emma said, softly, "I still don't know if I believe it, really. I mean, I'm no saviour and your mom is no evil queen."

Regina shook her head, clenching her jaw. "Which just shows how thoroughly you've forgotten everything."

Henry's eyes were bright with tears, but also with thought. He frowned. "But we do remember, mom."
Regina wiped her eyes. "I tried to give you both a gift. A gift of happy memories, a good life. I don't know why you remember me, you weren't meant to. And certainly, you shouldn't have had to suffer the death of your mother, Henry."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Do you think the mom I remember knew this stuff?"

Regina shook her head. "No. Whatever created that version of her placed her in the mundane world." She could sense what he was really asking. "She wasn't keeping secrets, dear."

She ducked her head. "She wasn't real, but I know she feels as real to you as my past does to me. But she isn't and it's dangerous for you two to think she is. I'm not a good person." Her voice cracked but she ploughed on. "I'm selfish and mean and I hurt people." Her voice failed her entirely and she looked away from them, taking a long moment to gather herself.

"I'm not much loved in this world, and many people would be delighted to see me dead. The next little while might be difficult, Henry, but remember that I love you so, so much."

Henry was quiet, a thoughtful frown on his face. "Well, even if you say the mom I remember isn't real, you made her. Or maybe I made her?" he turned to Emma. "Or we all made her."

He reached out and took their hands, one each. The wind had picked up pace outside and he shivered in the draught. Emma scooted closer to him, sheltering him a bit. "Even if you were mean, you're still my mom. I bet I had a lot of happy memories with you." He laughed a little. "Did I grow up in Storybrooke?"

"Yes," Regina replied, disentangling her hand for a moment to spread her cloak over the three of them. Part of her huffed that there wasn't an easy way to avoid involving Emma, but the larger part of her was too tired to fight. Henry didn't hesitate to take her hand again.

"Did we go to the library on Sundays, then the duck pond?"

Regina felt a smile crease her face. "From you were old enough to focus on a book. We went to story time, then later you chose your own books."

He was quiet for a moment. "And did we go to granny's after?"

She chuckled, her heart raw. "We did. But only if you behaved." She watched the vivid orange glow of the turf, gentle flames wavering in the hearth. The ash was piling at the edges of the fireplace, powdery and falling down onto the hearth stones.

"That was my favourite thing to do," he replied, quietly. "The only difference is I remember ma being there. But not every time, some weekends she had to work. So, like, when you gave me happy memories, maybe something knew you had to be there for them to actually be good."

Her throat tightened and she felt tears welling again, for what felt like the hundredth time that day. She clenched her teeth against the wild, desperate anguish she felt. Anguish knowing she didn't deserve any of this; that she didn't really know how to love at all. She knew jealously and possessiveness and how to cling and manipulate. It was all a lie.

She knew, with complete certainty, that when she restored their memories, they'd both hate her again. That all talk of family and love would cease. She'd be cast out, no use after they saved the infant. She swallowed and squeezed her eyes shut. Henry leaned up, wrapping a small arm around her shoulders and pressing against her.
"And you brought us here to help Snow White, right? To save her baby. Why?"

She looked up into his eyes, so trusting and calm, certain of her in a way he hadn't been for such a long time. She bit her lip and he smiled crookedly, Emma's cheeky grin on his face.

"Because you're one of the good guys now?"

She couldn't speak, couldn't find the words to explain that she really wasn't. She might have been helping Snow, but she wasn't good. She was rotten, though and through. Emma tapped Henry's chest fondly, smiling at both of them with such acceptance and love that Regina wanted to fling herself through the door. Didn't they realise? Couldn't Emma, with her damned lie detector, tell the truth of the matter?

"We should sleep," she whispered, not meeting their eyes. The three of them readied themselves for bed, quietly and without fuss. They returned to their positions from the previous night and Henry lay on his side, facing her. "Goodnight mom, love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered hoarsely.

"Goodnight ma," he yawned. "Love you."

"Love you, kid," Emma sighed, kissing the back of his messy head. "Go to sleep."

Regina nodded and he closed his eyes, drifting off more quickly than she expected. His breathing evened out and he relaxed, his limbs loose and heavy. Regina gazed at him, trying once more to exist in the moment, to enjoy being close to him while she still could. It was only a matter of time until the other shoe dropped, after all.

After a while, she sensed she was being watched. Emma's eyes reflected the firelight, sparkling in the flames. A line creased between her eyebrows and her mouth was tight.

"We don't have to go there, Regina," she said, quietly. "You don't owe them a thing. We could ask Liath to take us back to New York and get back to our lives."

Regina shook her head, her voice a rough whisper. "Part of me wants to. This world is dangerous and I have a lot of enemies. In fact the only reason I ever agreed to bringing the two of you back was…"

Emma smiled. "Because it was the right thing to do?"

Regina snorted. "No. But it was less awful than the alternative and I thought it was more or less impossible. I promised Snow I'd try but I don't think I really expected to succeed."

The other woman laughed softly at the admission. "Oh my god… Keep saying things like that and I'll never believe that you're not actually the woman I married."

She frowned, unsure what to make of that. "I don't think blatant manipulation should be lauded."

Emma shrugged. "Diplomacy should. Keeping the peace when the people in charge are stupid should."

She was intrigued, but tired. She stifled a yawn and Emma smiled fondly at her. "OK, time for sleep. But I mean it, Regina. If you want, we end this. You come home with us, where you belong."

She closed her eyes against the wave of longing that rose in her. She clenched her teeth and shook
"No, Emma. That can't happen." She opened her eyes, glaring harshly at the sparkling, dancing eyes across from her. "Now, go to sleep."

Emma quirked an eyebrow, then shut her eyes. But she bore a strange, soft smile that worried Regina enormously. She'd seen it every time she'd tried to assert herself, or more honestly, throw her weight around. She had no clue what it was, but she knew it was probably extremely dangerous.

SQSQSQSQ

Regina was a complex woman. Emma knew this and she didn't think that different memories or magic or crossing worlds would alter that fact. She was someone who felt deeply, strongly and without care for her own heart. She was capable of incredible love and devotion and also spectacular callowness. She had a mean streak that Emma rarely suffered but often heard roared about its intended targets. That said, overall she was a warm, loving and decent person. If she could be a bit black and white when it came to people, that was part of her.

You didn't go through a decade of living together and raising a child without learning a lot about each other and you certainly didn't spend several thousand dollars on couples counseling without learning how to work well together and recognise each others rough edges. The fact that her memories weren't, technically speaking, real seemed of little consequence at present. They were the only memories she had and they felt completely real to her.

Besides, figuring out what was real or not didn't feel like their most pressing issue. Regina had suffered enormously. Dark smudges beneath her eyes and the tension creasing her forehead all attested to the fact. She was thin, almost unhealthily so, lacking the lean muscle that years of horse riding had gifted her. Emma inhaled slowly, sorrow and compassion filling her. She longed to reach out and hold her, to soothe her in her arms and press gentle kisses to her face. But Regina was not in a place where physical contact seemed particularly welcome, unless it came from Henry.

Henry was snoring softly, his head tipped at a funny angle beneath Regina's chin as they pressed together. If she'd been cold or hesitant with him, it would have made it easier to differentiate the woman before her from the one she'd married. As it was, while she could see the strain and wounds of a lifetime of pain, she could also perceive the gentle soul beneath it. The truest essence of the woman she loved.

Her feelings hadn't changed in the slightest, though perhaps they should have. After all, was it really fair to Regina, to have to deal with unwelcome emotion? Emma bit her lip and pondered that for a while. She knew her own feelings wouldn't change, an entire year in New York mourning her wife had left them as strong as ever, but surely as long as she respected Regina's boundaries and didn't force any expectations on her, they'd figure things out.

That said, she wouldn't exactly be averse to maybe reminding Regina of some of the reasons they'd worked so well. She knew Regina possessed both enormous capacity and desire for love. The woman cuddled desperately around their son seemed pretty starved for affection, if she were honest.

She closed her eyes, breathing in the scent of peat smoke and her family and let it lull her to sleep. She loved Regina, and that wasn't about to change anytime soon. She'd find the balance between expressing that and giving Regina space, though it'd be damned difficult.

And, she admitted to herself, if they found that love again, rekindled what they'd shared, she wouldn't be complaining.
Enjoying the ride? Drop me a line, let me know what you think!
Chapter 11

Regina woke slowly, feeling something fiddle with her hair. She blinked sleepily, gazing at Henry. He was rolling a piece of her hair around his finger tip, lost in thought.

"You used to do that all the time when you were little," she said, softly. He'd done it when he was a tiny infant on the bottle, and later when he was a small boy being read bedtime stories. He blinked up at her and smiled broadly.

"You hair is really soft. Way softer than ma's."

"It helps when you brush it every now and again, sweetheart."

He smiled wistfully at that, chuckling. He seemed to drift into a memory for a moment, but didn't reveal what had caught his attention. His face grew more solemn.

"So, if you were the evil queen, and ma's the saviour, who am I?"

She felt a smile stretch her face. "You possess the heart of the truest believer. Emma may have broken the curse, but you were the catalyst that allowed it. Without you, dear, we're nothing more than stories."

He was quiet for a long moment, a small frown on his face. "So Snow White and Prince Charming are really my grandparents?"

"Yes," she said, softly. "We have a lot of history, Snow and I, but we are trying to move past it."

"Ma always told me that families aren't always who you're born to, but what you build. Like, just because you didn't give birth to me doesn't mean you're not my mom. She says it isn't always easy, either, but it's worth it for your family."

She couldn't help the warm feeling that suffused her chest. "Well, she certainly has a point there." She pressed a kiss to his forehead and rose. "Come on, time to get up."

The rustling of the blankets disturbed Emma, who rolled over to face them, yawning hugely. Henry bounded out of the bed, letting the dogs out the door. Emma's sleepy eyes blinked open and the adoration in her gaze was almost enough to steal Regina's breath.

"Mornin' beautiful," she murmured, rolling onto her back and stretching. When she opened her eyes again, and caught a decent view of the ceiling, she frowned and then blushed in rapid succession.

"Um, sorry. Good morning, Regina." She sat up quickly, wiping a hand over her face, embarrassment pink on her cheeks.

Regina nodded stiffly, standing up and busying herself with stoking the fire back to life. A loud yawn from the other bench provided a most welcome distraction and they glanced over to Liath. She stared blearily at them before heaving herself up and out of the cabin, heading for the lake.

"Well," Emma quipped drolly, "at least I'm not the only one who's a disaster in the morning."

Soon, they found themselves around the fire, eating a hearty breakfast of porridge and dried fruit. Liath seemed back to her normal self, grey eyes shining at the idea of continuing their journey. She lifted a charred twig from the fire and sketched little maps on the flag stones as she sipped her tea.
"So, we can either take the western path, which will take a day and a half to reach the tree line. There's another bothy a day from here, but we'd probably have to camp out on the second night." She took another spoonful of porridge. "Or the southern path, which is a bit longer. It'll have us to the edge of the forest by the end of the second day, but there's shelter for both nights."

"I'd be more comfortable with Henry staying under a proper roof for as long as possible," Regina said, earning a nod of agreement from Emma. "It's gotten colder."

Liath nodded. "Aye. The wind's shifted. We may even be unlucky and see snowfall."

Regina grimaced. Snow over the moors would make their journey much slower and more dangerous. "We should leave soon, then."

They all agreed with that and finished their breakfast, cleaning the cabin and leaving fresh kindling for the next set of travelers. Regina was sifting through her bag, trying to lighten her load, when she came across several pairs of woolly socks. She paused, somewhat taken aback. They were uneven, quite amateurish, really. She felt a flush on her cheeks as she realised Liath must have packed them for her. She'd originally intended to give them away as gifts, but was suddenly overcome with something resembling shame. They were completely inadequate and ridiculous, no where near good enough.

"What you got there?" Henry piped, startling her. "Oh! Awesome! Clean socks."

She blinked, sifting through the pairs. He plonked himself on the bench, pulling his boots off. She cast a critical eye on the socks he was wearing, realising that while the ones she was holding looked fairly ropey, they would keep his feet warmer than what he had. He whipped the socks on his feet off and she passed him a pair, a soft smile on her face as she watched him wriggle his toes experimentally.

"Awesome. You don't have any clean underpants, do you?"

She grimaced. "You do not want underwear made from this wool, Henry, I assure you."

"You just gotta turn your boxers inside out," Emma offered. "Makes them last longer."

"Or forego them entirely," Liath piped. Regina frowned at the other women, puffing her cheeks out and vaguely mortified. Henry smiled cheekily and laced his boots back up.

"If you're all quite finished," she said, her tone clipped as she did her best to comport herself with a degree of dignity. "We need to get moving."

SQS

Soon, they were striding out beneath the watery winter sun, a pale blue sky overhead. They followed a rough path, composed in some places of crushed stone and in others of wooden causeways. Henry acquired a stout stick along the way and seemed happy to tramp at the front with Liath.

"Who built the houses? And the paths?" he asked. "We haven't seen anyone." He motioned to the great, sweeping expanses of moor and bog all around them. The forest was just about visible on the horizon, a dark smudge on a distant mountain. Pools of rusty water sat cradled by black peat, the steep banks sheltering delicate ferns and tufts of green grass. Here and there, lines of yellow whin bushes brightened the view, jagged and exploding with colour. It was desolate, but not without beauty.

"Nor do I expect to, for several days," Liath agreed. "These houses have been here for hundreds of
years, though they get new roofs every now and again. Shepherds built them, and the paths. They maintain them, too."

Regina tipped her head. "Whose kingdom is this? Have we crossed Misthaven's borders yet?"

"No," Liath shrugged. "This place is inhabited by sheep and shepherds. The folk here don't owe their allegiance to any lord. I'm sure there's a map somewhere which draws a nominal line through this place, but it doesn't belong to anyone. Places like this never do."

Emma was quiet beside her, mulling over that.

"You told us before that your talent lies in finding paths other people can't."

"Yes. Finding a way between places, finding the edges where things fit together and boundaries are thin," Liath added. "Forgotten places, unclaimed places. Timeless places. They aren't as hard to find as you'd imagine." She swept a hand out over the landscape. "Places like this can see a thousand years pass with little changing."

Regina was quite fascinated. "So your magic comes from the land, then?"

"Something like that," Liath agreed. "And from time. From silence. Our lives burn briefly, like striking tinder. They blaze and then they're gone. Your magic follows emotion, flaring and pulsing with life. Mine comes from the places before and after."

Regina felt a shiver roll down her back. "The void."

Liath nodded solemnly. Emma frowned.

"Is that what you felt on the boat, Regina? The void?"

She gritted her teeth, not wishing to answer. Liath sighed, sparing her a glance. "Yes."

Regina swallowed. "It's dangerous."

"Incredibly," Liath said, sadly. "But many wild things are, and as long as you have the sense to not attempt to tame it, you can see many wonders."

Wonders and horrors, she thought to herself. The memory of days and nights spent feeling the world slip away from her suffused her, her throat clenching. The feeling of utter isolation and loneliness, trapped with the unquiet ghosts of her past.

Henry had yet to really speak with her regarding the revelations of the previous night and it worried her. Frankly, while she'd be delighted for him to ignore her past as the evil queen, she knew the chances of that lay somewhere between slim and none. He was likely mulling the information over in his little mind, waiting before they discussed it.

It was a foregone conclusion, though. He'd hate her. He'd realise, as he had before, that some people were beyond redemption. He'd see nothing but the blackened heart within her. She bit her lip, her chest tight at the thought. She'd known it was coming and as sweet as the last couple of days had been, nothing pleasant ever survived for long in her life.

The warmth of the sun was lost on her, the light breeze reminding her of the nights of echoing wind and unrelenting darkness. Of being alone beyond the edges of any world. Of being small and too weak to survive her mother or any of the men who'd trampled through her aftermath.
She wrapped her arms around herself, cold and tired. Her legs ached from the walk, her feet sore. Her ribs felt sharp under her hands, nested blades poised to slice through her blackened heart. She dropped behind the group, overwhelmed and suddenly completely unwilling to speak to them, to let them witness this moment.

She was receding, shrinking from the world at the memory of those interminable nights. She was simultaneously a buoy unmoored, bobbing in a dark sea waiting to be swept from the shore, and perched on the edge of a precipice. The ground was far from her now, her heart a lonely and desolate fist clenching in the silence. She watched the group in front of her as they strode ahead, thankfully unaware of her distress.

She followed in their wake as they made their way over the rolling moors. The dogs loped forward, startling a flock of sparrows and the little song birds wheeled into the sky, filling the air with indignant chirps. Henry laughed, tipping his head so far back his hat fell off. Emma, without breaking her stride, scooped it up and stuffed it over his ears, smooching his head noisily. Sceolta let out an excited bark, jumping to snap at the fleeing birds and suddenly, Regina felt herself invited into the moment, grounded and a tiny step further from the edge within herself.

They reached the next bothy in good time, blessed with an hour of daylight, as Liath put it. Regina had vanished inside to set the fire and Emma stretched outside, gazing around the little yard. Liath had headed to draw water from the nearby well and Henry was scuttling between the turf pile and his mother.

Emma grabbed an armful of sods of turf, hauling them into the little house. Regina was kneeling before the fire, patiently feeding dry grass into the tiny flames biting at tufts of bog cotton before her. Henry motioned for her to set her burden down in a little inglenook, sitting beside Regina.

"There's a skill to it," Regina said, softly. "that most people don't learn. You can nudge a fire into being without burning the house down."

Henry nodded. "You never let ma light the fire at home. She never did it right."

Emma frowned at her son, the little traitor. "My fires were perfectly good."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Nothing like mom's," he groused, sounding like he was gearing up for a rant. "Henry," Regina sighed, her head bowed. "Those things you remember... They aren't real."

Emma drew a sharp breath, taking in how Regina was hunched over herself and the fire, refusing to look at either of them.

Henry glanced up at Emma, his eyes uncertain but trusting. "OK. You told us that. So what happened? You were my mom, but who was my other mom?"

Regina's head flew up with almost comical speed, her tawny eyes wide. "Your other mom?"

Henry nodded solemnly. "Yeah, like, unless you were a single mom. Which is totally OK!" he said, after a moment. "My best friend Grace has a single dad."

Regina's throat worked for a moment and Emma smiled wistfully at the sight, at how easily their son disarmed the woman before her. "Single mom," she choked out. "I raised you alone, Henry."

He nodded, thoughtfully. "So then ma came to town and broke the curse." He wrinkled his nose.
"Which probably involved a lot of mom kisses."

Emma chuckled at her son. He'd recently become convinced that all adult displays of affection were slightly gross, including those on TV. She suspected it was something to do with the fact that he was on the verge of puberty and finding it all a little too compelling.

Regina, though, seemed completely lost, small and vulnerable as she fiddled with kindling. "Henry, dear, Emma and I were not together in your world. True love's kiss broke the curse but that was Emma's true love for you."

Emma sensed the distress in Regina rising to meet that in Henry and scooted forward, placing a hand on her son's back.

"Kid?"

He took a moment, thoughts flying behind his intelligent eyes, before he lifted a puzzled brow to them.

"But you love each other!"

"Henry," she said, fondly, "I love you and your mom more than anything," and here her heart shuddered, as she turned her gaze to Regina's bowed head. To the frightened woman beside her, trying to put on a brave face because she just didn't know how to explain this without hurting their son.

"But mom doesn't remember."

Emma's eyes welled and she clenched her fist, feeling her wedding ring bite into her hand. She blinked, glancing down at the plain gold band on her finger, turning her hand over and running her thumb over it as she thought.

"OK. Think of it like this," she said, slowly. "You remember when we got married?"

Henry nodded, he'd been there and had brought their rings up.

"You saw us put these rings on each other and promise to love other?" He nodded again. "Well, your mom here," she gestured to Regina, touching her arm gently. "She doesn't remember making that promise so she's not held by it. I do, so I am."

Regina lifted wet, desperate eyes to Emma's, her throat working past some overwhelming emotion.

"But with that," Emma continued, "do you remember the first time your mom and I promised to love you?"

Henry's little brow furrowed as he searched his memories, evidently coming up blank a minute later.

"Yeah, that's because we loved you the moment we saw you, buddy, and you were tiny. Tiny babies don't remember those moments, but that's the way it's meant to be. So that promise to love you? You don't remember it, but we do," she said, with utter confidence. "So we're held to it," she said, lifting her eyes to Regina's. "Even if we weren't beside each other when we made it."

Regina opened and closed her mouth, overcome with feeling for a long moment before she gathered herself.

"We love you, sweetheart, so much."
"But you don't love each other," he said, eyes brimming.

Emma ran a hand through his hair, taking in his heart-broken mien. "Oh, Henry, don't say that, buddy!" She pressed a firm kiss to his forehead. "That is way above your pay grade to worry about right now. You leave this with us, OK? Right now, your mom and I are going to get to know each other."

"And then you'll fall in love?"

"Well," Emma chuckled, "maybe? If I'm lucky."

"It's true love."

"No, buddy," Emma insisted. "If things between your mom and me are going well and we choose to see where it takes us, it'll be because it's right for us, not because of some fairy tale."

She turned to Regina, expecting fury or at least an unimpressed eye roll, and was utterly amazed to see her with a lost, uncertain expression gracing her that was threaded with so much gratitude that it sent a chill down Emma's spine.

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The little house they'd used that night had been graced with two equally sized pallets, so Regina had bunked down with Liath. She'd curled under her cloak, knees pulled to her chest as she gazed at Henry and Emma. The pair were sprawled over the opposite pallet, limbs akimbo as they snored happily away. The dogs lay on the floor between them, Bran's head close to her hand. She ran her fingers through his untidy pelt, threading her fingers through his wiry fur.

Honestly, she was terrified to drift to sleep, to face her dreams again. And who was to say that Emma or Henry wouldn't change their minds tomorrow? What reason would they have to choose to believe in her? She was suddenly gripped with gratitude that the ingredients needed for the potion she thought would restore their memories weren't available so far north.

She was terrified as well of the implications of Henry's memories. He remembered, and clearly craved, a pair of loving parents. Who was she to deny him that, after she'd cost him so much. Yet the thought made her skin crawl; the idea of being trapped again. Of having no say in who she was with or who touched her. Emma, at least, seemed to understand this, for the moment. She wondered how long it would last, though. Heroes rarely lived up to their reputations outside of battles with dragons, after all.

She bit her lip, copper filling her mouth as she gazed at the soft face of her beloved son, relaxed in slumber. Her eyes flicked up, to his other mother.

Her mouth hung open, inelegant as she snored. But she seemed untroubled, content with her lot. She also seemed kinder than the Emma she knew, less likely to jump to conclusions or snap at her. She gazed at her with misplaced affection, fondness where none was deserved. She was still completely enthralled by the memories instilled by the spell, calmer and happier.

And perhaps that was no bad thing. She allowed Regina access to Henry and she treated her kindly. There was no acrimony between them, yet, and Emma seemed keen to continue this. She also appeared completely disinclined to force recommencing a physical relationship, which brought Regina enormous relief. Perhaps they could find something like friendship, she mused, divorced but amicable parents.

The thought was oddly soothing and she drifted to sleep imaging a life where she and Emma shared
Henry without leaving chunks of themselves behind after every encounter.

The second morning after beginning their journey found them stepping under the eaves of the enchanted forest, awe suffusing Emma as she gazed up at the trees towering above them, silent cathedrals moving almost imperceptibly in the wind. Some were so tall that a feeling of vertigo rose in her throat when she looked directly upwards, almost nauseous. Her breath steamed in front of her face, the weather colder again now. They'd left the last bothy a mere hour ago, a warm breakfast in their bellies.

Henry's eyes shone as she looked back at him, wonder on his face. Regina adjusted his coat, smiling gently. "Welcome to the enchanted forest."

Liath strode forward, Bran and Sceolta padding beside her. "Keep close, the paths are harder to follow in here. If you lose me, just stay where you are and I'll come back and get you."

"You hear that, Henry?" Emma called. "Stay in sight!" she stumbled over a root and would have fallen flat on her face if Regina hadn't grabbed her by the back of her jacket. She turned sheepishly, earning a slightly exasperated eye roll.

"Do be careful, Emma," she scolded, but held out a hand to help steady her as she crossed a fallen log. Her face bore a look of consternation but there was fondness mixed there, too. Emma grinned wistfully.

"Thanks," she said, quietly. She paid more attention as they marched on, picking their way along game paths. Occasionally, the dogs would bay and break away for a while, sometimes returning with a hare or pheasant. As the day progressed, the wan sunlight filtering through the trees took on a silvery hue, ethereal and beautiful. Though it was cold, the forest was dry and filled with the call of birds. Though it was the depths of winter and little trace of green could be seen, the scent of rich litter drifted up as their boots disturbed the ground, a promise of life lying dormant, not extinct.

They were quiet, more out of the respect for their spectacular surroundings than any fear or concern. It was in contrast to the moor, where they'd chatted amiably, wandering from one topic to another. Even Regina had indulged them with an anecdote or two about previous adventures.

Emma found herself humming though, a couple of bars of a random pop song she'd heard a few days before leaving. Liath chuckled and whistled along with her after a few moments. They trailed off after a bit, the quiet and secret sounds of the forest creaking around them.

Liath began to sing then, a lilting air in a language Emma didn't understand. She had a fine, clear voice and filled the late morning with a mournful longing. It was a sad song, though beautiful, and when she finished the forest seemed much more quiet, as though listening.

Emma turned to Regina, who wore a thoughtful expression. "That was lovely, Liath."

"Thank you. Who'll take a turn now?"

Emma opened her mouth and closed it again, feeling a blush warm her ears. She was quite surprised when Henry piped up, singing a cheerful song from a movie they'd watched recently. He sang with the abandon of a child, unconcerned whether or not the song was any good, merely enjoying himself as he went. Liath laughed when he finished and sang another song, this one much jauntier than the previous.

"It's always nice to have a song to walk to," Liath said after she finished. "The forest seems to enjoy
Emma peered around with suspicion at that. "Who exactly enchanted the forest?"

Regina started beside her. "No one enchanted the forest, Emma."

Henry pouted. "So it's just a name."

Liath snorted. "My eye, it's just a name. The forest has been here, and quite alive with enchantment, much longer than people have. In fact, I think it was the other way around."

Regina appeared intrigued at the idea. "The forest bestowed magic on people?"

"People, plants, rocks, animals… I think that if anyone lives here long enough, and they're not a complete clod, they'd learn something." She sighed. "But people are very good at closing their hearts and minds."

Emma couldn't argue with that one. She turned to Regina, curiosity blooming. "You said I have magic. Do you think being here will help awaken it?"

Regina frowned at the question. "I hope not. You magic tends to present itself when you're in trouble and I sincerely want to avoid that."

Emma chuckled and slowed to navigate her way over a tangle of roots. She paused, offering a hand to Regina, pleasantly surprised when she took it, grasping her firmly.

"You magic is very powerful, Emma, but unpredictable. It emerged after the curse was broken. Had you grown up here, I imagine you'd have had to be in training from a very young age, to help you master it."

They came to a steep bank and Emma was quite annoyed to see Liath hop down it as agile a deer. She turned back, motioning to Henry. Emma grabbed one of his hands and, securing herself to a root, lowered him to the other woman. She turned to Regina, repeating the trick.

"Can you teach me?" she asked crouching as Regina hopped down. The other women turned, Liath grasping Emma's free arm and Regina lifting her own, clasping Emma's hand when she released the root. They lowered her gently enough, Regina steadying her with a hand to her back.

"You're a dreadful student," she muttered, brushing some debris from Emma's sleeve. "But I'll do what I can."

"Well," she grinned, reaching a hand and removing a small leaf from Regina's hair, "you're a great teacher." They were close enough to feel the heat from each other's bodies, matching the warmth in Emma's eyes. Regina's cheeks flushed and Emma stood back, nodding to the others.

"There were old stories," Liath said, "that I heard in halls long turned to dust, of people who learned the old magic of life. Of the rhythms and cycles it undergoes. They became very powerful and rather than die, they returned to the earth. They added their souls to the world and in time, magic became more human. It recognised people with the potential to channel it and sought them out."

"Halls long turned to dust?" Henry asked, frowning. "How old are you?"

Liath chuckled. "Older than my teeth, but not my bones."

"Actually, we learned in science class that a human skeleton regularly turns itself over completely!"
Liath snorted. "So older than both my teeth and my bones, then." Regina laughed softly, her face thoughtful. "We'll come to a river soon, then find somewhere to cross."

As predicted, after about ten minutes they encountered a shallow river. Crystal clear water gushed over dark stones, the sound cheerful in the glade. A heron regarded them with wary, beady eyes, picking its way through the eddies. They followed the course down stream, conversation pausing for a while. Eventually, they found a crossing, Liath stooping to inspect it.

"A ford. Someone's cleared it and left stepping stones."

Regina frowned, regarding the scene. "Who? Are we getting close to civilisation?"

"Not exactly," Liath replied, "but there is a foresters camp about a day from here. I wager this trail is used by hunters during the season. There's plenty of deer here."

Liath crossed the stones carefully, finding a safe route. She paused at the end and Regina followed her, waiting half way. Emma followed closely behind Henry, her hand on his shoulder until he reached his mother. She stopped, waiting for him to find his way across before starting again. Regina held a hand out to her, her warm brown eyes inscrutable as she helped her across.

Emma raised an inquisitive eyebrow at her as they reached the bank. "Thank you."

Regina scowled a bit. "Knowing you, you'd fall into the river and we'd spend the whole day trying to dry you out."

_Uh huh_, Emma thought to herself, trying to keep a smile off her face.

"Well, thank you, nice to know you care."

Regina blustered a bit and stomped ahead and Emma felt her smile broaden, her heart lightening with something she knew well.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Drop a line, leave a review! I'm half tempted to do a little one shot for tomorrow, given the day that's in it. Thoughts?
Chapter 12

Evening all! Here's another installment. This one was incredibly fun to write and is a bit lighter than what's come before (and is yet to come). Warning for length, as well. This got out of hand.

SQUARE SQUARED

The foresters' hamlet was composed of a large hall (which served as the local inn, tavern, gaol and market) and half a dozen log cabins tucked beneath a jutting bank of stone. There was a sawmill to one side, beside the river. The burn had been narrowed there, to increase the speed with which the water tumbled over the great wheel. It nestled beneath the trees, silvered wood and thatched roofs not at all out of place beside the giant trees. Smoke hung in the air, muffling the protestations of chickens and the chiming anvil song of a forge.

"Now," Liath said, quietly, "so far north, these people were never affected by the curse, so they have no reason to hate you, Regina. That said, they have no love for any king or queen, they'd never deign to be ruled by foreigners. So Emma, I don't think revealing your identity will help us."

Regina frowned. "Should we avoid this place altogether?" she asked, peering from their vantage point. People bustled in the fading afternoon light, going about their quiet business.

Liath shrugged. "We don't have to stop. However, our supplies could do with being replenished and the inn has access to the warm springs behind the town."

Emma and Henry shared a look. "Sold!"

Regina still paused. "Is there a chance of meeting any of Snow's soldiers here?"

Liath shrugged. "Scouts from the White Kingdom do venture this far north on occasion, to trade and such. I don't know if they'll have bothered in the weather. However, if Snow is searching for you and Emma, they might."

That decided it for Regina. While she was not in any way beloved by the soldiers of the White Kingdom, they shared a common purpose. They were duty bound to help her bring Emma to Snow.

"Come on. We won't reveal our identity to anyone other than loyal soldiers."

Liath nodded. "Tell them we're from the west, if they ask, traveling to a funeral. No magic or blades unless it's life or death," she reminded them. "And stick together. No one go anywhere alone."

They descended to the village, Liath striding ahead. She held herself differently, taller and with her shoulders drawn back. Regina was surprised, it was easy to forget the other woman's height, given her dreadful posture. She drew herself up as well, every inch the queen, and swept along.

Several passersby stopped and regarded them carefully, wary of the strangers. Liath just nodded at them and headed for the tavern. A white goat was painted on the door and she shouldered it open. Though sunset was approaching, the place was quite empty. She guided Henry and Emma to a table close to the fire, watching as Liath moved to the bar, pulling out a bundle of animal pelts.

Henry sat goggle eyed at his surroundings, taking it all in. The hall was long, with a great hearth at either end and a long bar on one side. Candles and sconces shone merrily on the tables and walls, but failed to penetrate the gloom above them. Rafters wider than Regina's waist arched into the darkness above them, as solid as the woods outside. Clean straw was scattered on the earthen floor, spread
beneath a dozen or so tables. Most of the them were empty, though there were four children sitting with a young man, deeply absorbed in a lesson. Three older men sat lining the bar and two old crones nestled close to the far fire, knitting and talking quietly.

Liath returned, sitting beside Emma and removing her gloves. "We have a room for the night and access to the baths. I suggest we eat first, though."

Regina nodded absently, not particularly hungry but keen to feed Henry. A portly man arrived over with four flagons, setting them down. Three contained a golden ale and one goats milk, which Henry sipped cautiously.

Emma seemed much more enthusiastic, taking a long draught of the ale. Regina tasted it, pleased by its light flavour. They received plates of grilled meat and mashed vegetables a few minutes later and tucked into the steaming food with gusto. The bartender also dropped over a plate of wings, which Emma and Henry tucked into with relish. Regina didn't have the heart to tell them they were wood pigeon wings, instead nibbling a couple herself.

They were enjoying a desert of spiced, roasted apples when the doors opened and a large group of villagers entered, the last of the daylight gone. A group of men settled behind them, throwing curious looks their way. Regina examined Henry's plate and was pleased to see he'd eaten his entire dinner.

"Time for a bath, I think," she said, smoothing his unruly hair. He nodded, finishing his milk.

"Want company, eh?" a silky voice called from behind them. She felt her back stiffen but didn't turn around. Emma's eyes flashed dangerously and Regina kicked her under the table, warning her with a glare. Emma looked supremely affronted and set her mouth in an unhappy grimace, glaring that the man over her shoulder.

"Oh, come now!" he continued, "we mean no offence! It's not often we get such lovely strangers here!"

Regina turned to the side, eyeing him balefully. He was clean shaven, with a broad jaw and sandy hair. He held himself in the manner of someone who thought himself handsome. "And unwed, no less," he gestured to her finger.

Emma bristled and Regina ground her teeth. "The only company I desire is that of my son's, his mother's and our companion."

He laughed. "My, how exotic! Well, no wonder my charms aren't working, lads."

Regina turned away, scowling to herself. Emma's face was clouded with anger though Liath seemed more amused than anything else, eyeing the scene with a glint in her pale eyes. "Come along."

They stood and she ushered Henry in front of herself. She felt a firm smack on her backside and froze. She felt her spine go completely rigid and she turned to the man, treating him to an incredulous expression. Her mind went blank with consuming, unrelenting rage and she drew in a harsh breath. She was completely still for a second, incredulous at the audacity of the man before dark magic welled in her, urging her to lash out. She bit her lip, desperately trying to keep a reign on her the impulse to summon fire and mete out vengeance. She felt it surging to the fore and she struggled to control her ire, gripping Henry's shoulders tightly.

"Hey!" Emma snapped, shoving her way over. "Apologise now, asshole!"

Liath rolled her eyes and guided Henry back a few steps, gathering their belongings much more casually than Regina thought appropriate. She could feel herself poised to strike, ready to leap into an
attack and sink in the rage pulsing through her chest. The world receded, the bright candles dim as she stared at the man before her. The shadows nestling in the high rafters seemed to spread, congealing down and robbing the world of colour.

"The last man who did that to me lost his hand," Regina bit out, eyes sparkling. The forester quailed under her gaze but, hearing snorts of laughter from his friends, found a reserve of desperate, foolish courage.

"Well worth it, for such delightful sport." He narrowed his eyes at Emma. "I'm sure you know what I mean and," he drawled, leaning forward, "I can give you tips, if you like."

Emma's fist flashed out, quick as a snake, and smashed the smug man in the nose. "I don't need any tips when it comes to my wife, dip shit."

Groaning, he lifted a hand to his bloody nose. "Din jävla..." he growled, swinging for her. His blow caught her on the side of the face, causing her to stagger back and fall onto her backside on the bench. Regina's fury returned and she stepped between them, holding up two hands, mind blank with rage.

"Enough!" boomed a voice. All eyes turned to the door, where one of the largest men Regina had ever seen loomed. He was hairy, clothed in boiled leather and had hands like buckets. He strode forward, villagers scurrying out of his way.

"What is this, Micke?"

"I was being friendly! That slyna attacked me!"

Regina balled her fists. "He slapped me, she punched him."

The big man clicked his tongue. His beady eyes were quite close together and he smelled as though he slept in a sty. He folded massive arms over his chest. "I am Orm," he stated, though he didn't elaborate.

"Travelers are allowed peaceful passage through here, if they don't cause trouble." He frowned, which resembled a carpet being rolled up. "You seem like trouble makers."

Henry shook Liath's hand off his shoulder and darted forward. "That guy slapped my mom's butt!"

Orm considered this, regarding the man known as Micke for a moment. The other man said nothing. Orm turned to Regina, then to Emma. "Why did you punch him? It was her place."

Emma was flushed, ears pink with embarrassment. "I got mad. He was bothering my, uh, friend."

Orm nodded at that, glancing between Emma and Micke. "So, you hit him. He hit you. You two are even." He turned to Regina. "He slapped you. Do you want to slap him back?"

Regina scowled, considering that for a long moment. She drew in a tremulous breath, feeling the anger ebb away. She certainly wanted to slap him, among other things, but she was not going to engage in petty violence in front of her son. She was no longer the person, she tried to remind herself, who would commit murder over such a slight. "Yes, I do, but an apology will suffice."

The man muttered a grudging apology, wiping a cloth under his bloody nose. Regina nodded and Orm sighed, cuffing the other man on the ear without malice, but with enough force to send him pitching onto the bench. "Don't be an animal, just because you're pretty. You do that to one more women, we do her plan and cut your hand off."
He turned to the pair of women. "You, spinkig," he said, pointing at Emma. "Don't be so hot headed. Your woman is no weakling, waiting for rescue. And you," he turned to Regina, "I am sorry. Come to my forge in the morning and we make amends for your honour."

With that, Orm lifted Micke to his feet and brought him to the bar. Regina felt her shoulders sag as the fight drained from her and she helped Emma up, guiding her to their room.

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Half an hour later found them in a quite corner of a steaming cave, lounging in the warm water of the hot spring therein. Liath seemed half asleep, elbows leaned on the cave floor, her cropped hair spiky with the humidity. Henry was a few meters away, splashing with two children his age. A small knot of villagers had glanced at them when they'd entered but aside from advising them where to avoid sharp rocks, they'd been left in peace.

Regina was still fairly furious, truth be told, and was wrecking her vengeance on Emma's scalp. She was perched on a submerged stone lip, scrubbing Emma's hair with bog myrtle scented soap. They hadn't spoken much since the incident in the bar, Regina's annoyance too acute to talk.

"I'm sorry," Emma said, eventually, flinching as Regina encountered a stubborn knot. "I can do this myself, you know," she said, petulantly.

"Oh, so you can act like an adult in one small way, huh? Good to know!" she hissed, dunking Emma into the warm water to rinse the suds. Emma emerged spluttering and pouting, turning to glare at the woman behind her. "Henry!" she called, her voice more shrill than intended. "Wash your hair!"

Henry sloshed over, taking the bar and gleefully soaping his hair. He had a wide grin on his face and kept looking like he wanted to congratulate his blonde mother, though he was smart enough not to.

"Ears?" Regina asked, settling more fully into the water, warding off the chill on her shoulders.

"Fingers and toes as well," he exclaimed, finishing the familiar sequence with a warm expression on his face. Regina melted a little and couldn't help the smile that touched her face. Emma reached out and took the soap from him, scooting to sit behind Regina. She froze, suddenly a bit nervous as their situations reversed. She hadn't thought twice about manhandling Emma, her hands needing something to do in lieu of flinging a fireball. She wasn't entirely sure she wanted her that close but Emma moved carefully, gently. There was something apologetic about her touch and Regina, to her surprise, shifted to allow her easier access.

Henry moved back to the other children, tossing a scrunched up linen wrap around like a ball. Something about seeing him just playing stilled the anger in her, settled the sick feeling of spent adrenaline. He was kind to the other children, friendly and adaptable as they taught him their game and it soothed her enormously. Emma let water run from her cupped hands over Regina's head, the warmth pleasant on her scalp. When her hair was deemed sufficiently wet, Emma began to lather it with the fragrant soap.

"I'm sorry I was a Neanderthal earlier," she said quietly. "Just, you were quiet for so long."

"I was trying to resist the urge to set him on fire," Regina replied, causing Emma to pause in her ministrations for a second. "My magic can be difficult to control when I'm angry."

"Oh," Emma said, massaging her scalp. "I didn't realise. I was thoroughly expecting you to slap that guy and then verbally eviscerate him."

Regina sighed. "Emma, I'm not your wife. You can't forget that. You don't know me."
Emma was quiet at that, gently washing her hair. "That's true. But you and her, you're pretty similar." Idly, maybe without conscious thought, Emma rubbed her temples and the side of her head, moving down to her neck and giving it a firm squeeze. Regina bit off a moan, not wanting to betray how much she was enjoying the action. She'd neglected to include a masseuse in Storybrooke, a gross oversight, and if Emma chose to apologise in the language of neck rubs, far be it from Regina to dissuade her.

"It's the little things, you know," she said, after a moment, "the things you say to Henry. The way you look after us." Thumbs dug into the tense muscle at the nape of her neck. "There are a thousand things you do that make us feel at home with you, despite being in this crazy place, with magic and quests and everything."

Emma trailed off, lifting her hands from Regina's neck and moving to her shoulders. "Rinse."

Regina obliged, slipping off the ledge and into slightly deeper water. She held her breath, eyes closed, and let herself bob for a moment, suspended weightless. The peculiar changes that submersion lent to hearing echoed in her ears for a moment before she surfaced. Her feet didn't quite touch the bottom and she let herself bob for a moment, closing her eyes. Adrift, but warm. In the dark but listening to children's laughter echo off the dripping stone. Alone, but with the feel of Emma's apology still fresh on her skin. She opened her eyes and moved back to Emma, regarding her for a long moment.

Emma's face was twisted with contrition, with the assumption she was in trouble. She looked very much like Henry in that moment, open and unguarded, despite the fact that she was anticipating punishment. But there was no fear on her face, no terror and no hint that she was expecting Regina to hurt her. She didn't look as though she was facing the Evil Queen and the realisation twisted something in Regina's chest. The last of her anger flowed from her, lost to the water and the shadowed depths of the warm cave.

"You're still in the doghouse, dear," she said, settling next to the guilty woman. She perched behind her again, reaching for the comb she'd brought. Gently, with more care than she really intended, she began to brush Emma's hair. "But I doubt it's the first time you've been there." She clucked her tongue. "I suspect your wife always caved in, eventually."

Emma nodded at that, settling more comfortably against her without missing a beat. "She usually needed to be bribed. Chores, chocolate, a date, flowers… that kind of thing."

"Well, I am partial to flowers," she said, softly. "And have no compunctions about accepting bribes."

Laughter shook Emma's shoulders and something tender lanced through Regina, soft and delicate but with an edge of steel. She bit her lip and shook her head, feeling fondness well up for the noble idiot in front of her who looked at her and saw a decent person.

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The next morning found them warm and well rested, waking as Liath gathered their packs. Bran yawned, his long tongue lolling from his jaws. Sceolta kicked his feet into the air, a content expression on his hairy face.

"Good morning," she said, cheerily. "I bartered some coin for these," she said, lifting a pair of woolen tunics. "Your coats are excellent and you should keep wearing them, but we might disguise you somewhat when we approach villages. To keep a low profile. As we grow closer to Misthaven, we are more likely to encounter bandits, I'm afraid."
Henry sat up cross legged, excited by the gift. "Awesome! Thanks, Liath!"

Emma lifted the blue tunic, made of heavy wool with linen lining the cuffs and collar. Delicate embroidery accented it and she touched the patterns gently. It wasn't quite up to her goretx jacket, but it was still a handsome garment. Regina was sitting at the dressing table, fiddling with her dark hair as she fixed it back into a stubby braid.

"Our clothes are clean and dry," Liath sighed, "thank the gods for the warm stones here."

They dressed, well scrubbed and luxuriating in clean clothes, and proceeded to fill their packs. They made their way to the hall again, and were treated to fresh bread, sharp cheese and as many eggs as they could eat. One of the cooks gave them a little bundle of pastries to take for the road, grinning toothlessly at them.

They bid the inn farewell, emerging into the village. It was a bright day, the air crisp and fresh. The bark of a saw sounded from the mill, accompanied by men singing as they worked. The scent of smoke was strong, however, and they followed it to a forge. Orm was leaning against a post, peering into the fire with thoughtful eyes, chewing a scrap of dried meat.

"Well met, visitors. Your sleep was restful?"

Emma nodded, smoothing her tunic. "Very much so."

Orm laughed. "Though your woman should have made you sleep in the stables."

Henry stifled a giggle and Regina nudged him playfully. "We'd only just gotten her clean, Orm. A night in the stables would have undone the good work of your springs."

Orm laughed again, a great joyful boom. "Fine, fine." He sobered for a moment. "Micke is a silly boy. He acts without respect. I've left him to his mother to discipline, as she sees fit." He shifted. "But you are no ordinary wanderers."

Liath shook her head. "We aren't."

He hummed at that, but seemed disinclined to question further. "What do you need? My forge is the best for many leagues."

Regina blinked, uncertain. "Well, I'm not sure. We have no need for your wares. We have no horse in need of shoes, nor weapons to sharpen."

Orm nodded, but regarded Regina solemnly. "It is your honour was besmirched."

She shrugged. "I don't care. My honour has never been worth much." There was, she acknowledged, a time when she would have gladly burned the village down for the slight against her. It seemed ridiculous now, like a small dog yapping behind a fence. Henry made a noise protesting the statement and took her hand, pressing against her side. She leaned against him, her heart still for a long moment, at peace and contented. What did honour matter, when she had such love?

The huge man was quiet for a long moment, before he moved to a dark corner of his workshop. When he returned, he dropped to one knee before Henry, his voice low and sonorous, like stones on the shore rolling together.

"I was never lucky enough to have a mother, let alone two," he said, his giant hand reaching for Henry's with unexpected gentleness. Henry reached out, guileless and innocent. Regina had to
clench her fists to stop from crying out, wondering what gift the huge man was going to bestow upon her son. Hopefully nothing sharp.

He dropped a grey metal object into her son's hand, smiling lopsidedly. "It is a little trinket, boy. Three coils, together. You and your mothers."

Henry gazed down, face bright with wonder. "Thank you!"

"It is a reminder of the all father, for us, but for you it is a reminder that your mother is deserving of honour, and a warrior."

Henry examined the object, frowning. "Which is which?"

Orm laughed and clapped a giant hand on Henry's shoulder, causing him to stagger. "They change. Both and neither, together!"

He stood and bowed, having said his piece. He reached into a pocket of his great apron and threw a piece of leather at Emma. She caught it and secured the amulet around Henry's neck, letting it rest against his green tunic. A moment of silent regard passed before the little group moved on, taking the road south.

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They'd stopped for the evening in a sheltered clearing close to water. The sun was still a couple of hours from setting, but Liath warned they faced seven inhospitable miles before the next decent campsite. Better to take advantage of the little hollow than risk being caught out in the dark.

"So," Liath grinned, stripping the leaves off a branch. "You've never used a sword, but you are a fighter."

Emma frowned at that. "I dunno. I could take down guys bigger than me and I wasn't a bad shot."

Regina and Henry were perched on a nearby log, the former knitting and the latter whittling. "The Emma I knew could actually swing a sword," she said, her voice carefully neutral. "She didn't even cut any of her fingers off."

Emma huffed and folded her arms over her chest. "I'll have you know I'm quite dextrous."

"Ma," Henry said, lifting an eyebrow and resembling his mother enormously. "You are the only person I've ever met who can trip over thin air."

"Manual and pedal dexterity aren't necessarily inextricably linked," she groused. A grunt from Liath alerted her and without thinking, she snatched a pared stick out of the air. She grinned triumphantly, turning back to Regina and Henry.

"Very eloquently put, Sheriff," Regina said, tipping her head to one side, a knowing look on her face.

Emma gave the stick an experimental swing before sighing. "Well, it would be. That's something you said. Other you, I mean."

Regina actually seemed pleased with that. "Well, your vocabulary could bear with being improved."

"You always did say you were a good influence on ma," Henry offered, squinting at the piece of wood he was carefully whittling into, from what Emma could see, a pointier piece of wood.
"Well, let's see if muscle memory is all it's cracked up to be," Liath said. "You don't have your gun in this world, there was little point in bringing it without the means to replace ammunition. But you need to be able to defend yourself."

Emma blinked at the way Liath's eyes cut to Regina and Henry. "Especially if you're going to pick fights with everyone who says something unpleasant to Regina." She'd pared two other branches and lifted one with practiced ease. She gave Emma instructions on the correct way to stand and how to strike.

"The trick is," she said, eyes playful, "to not look at my sword. Look at me, try to anticipate my movements."

She tapped Emma's stick with her own. "And don't let me hit you."

Emma grinned, eyes lighting up at the challenge and drew her stick back, unleashing herself with her usual enthusiasm.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Regina and Henry say side by side, watching Liath wallop Emma repeatedly, sending her to the forest floor. Emma, frustration clearly growing, lashed out, Liath responded by slapping her stick down, stepping on it and bringing her own to Emma's throat.

"Isn't that cheating?" Henry asked, frowning. Regina turned to him and took in his wide, slightly worried eyes.

"It wouldn't be allowed in most forms of fencing, but it's a good move," she replied. Emma was back on her feet, circling their guide. She feinted, flinging her arm out and sword to one side, throwing herself at the taller woman and pantomiming a punch at her head. Liath stepped back nimbly, laughing. "She finally seems to be catching on."

"It isn't like the movies," Henry said, softly. He looked down at the knife in his hand.

Her heart ached and she set her knitting aside, taking his hand in one of her own. "No, Henry, it isn't. This world is unkind to those who can't defend themselves."

He was quiet for a long moment, watching the pair in front of them whoop as they clashed against each other.

"Can you use a sword, mom?"

She sighed, biting the inside of her lip. "No, I can't. I learned to use magic to defend myself."

"Oh," he said, eyes dropping. "But you can't use magic right now? Why didn't you use it on that guy yesterday?"

She lifted his chin, suddenly struck by his sudden melancholy. "I can, sweetheart. If you're in trouble, I can protect you. Liath has asked me not to, for reasons I don't fully understand," she quirked a smile. "Knowing her, she just doesn't want to take the fun out of the journey."

Henry's eyes lit up and he nodded. "It has been fun. I mean, if we just apparated to Snow White, we would have missed out on the hot springs."

They had been a highlight, she conceded. She felt much less tense than she had for months and had slept like a log the night before. She regarded him for a long moment, sorrow welling. "I... back
before you left, things between us were very hard, Henry. I ruined things between us. You asked me
to not use magic and... what Emma said being held to our promises? That's true for a lot of things."

He took that in, nodding. "Well, OK. But if you need to keep yourself safe, mom, you do it." He
scooted closer, laying his head on her shoulder. "Or ma or Liath."

"And you," she whispered, pressing a kiss to his forehead.

"Goes without saying. You were always pretty overprotective. It'd be weird if you weren't still."

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Emma felt like she'd been bundled through a washing machine, but despite that was feeling pretty
incredible. Liath had put her through her paces for a long while and she'd felt reactions snapping into
place, instinct flaring from some unknown part of her.

"You're a natural," Liath chuckled, taking a mouth full of water. "But you need to practice. You, my
friend, are going to have a massive target on your chest."

"The wicked witch?"

Liath snorted. "I suspect that a bit of swordplay won't help there. More Regina's area of expertise,
don't you think? No, you're going to have to play the part of the saviour, the white knight."

Emma cocked an eyebrow. "I thought I was a princess."

Liath threw a scrap of cloth at her. "Go clean up, your highness." She grinned widely. "You can be
some sort of warrior princess."

"Like Xena?" Emma asked, unaccountably excited. Liath rolled her eyes and fetched her bow,
whistling for the dogs.

Pleased with herself, she made her way over to the campfire, watching Henry carefully stack wood
onto the flames. He was getting pretty good at this, she thought proudly. Regina lifted a small birch
bark container of cooled boiled water, raising an unimpressed eyebrow and motioning for Emma to
sit. She relieved her of the rag and dipped it in the water, frowning at Emma's appearance.

"You look like you've been dragged through briars," she huffed, carefully washing Emma's
forehead. It stung somewhat and she supposed she must have earned a few grazes during her lesson.
Her gaze was intent and Emma let her shoulders sag, boneless under the familiar touch. She watched
the woman in front of her as she tended to her grievous wounds, her eyes catching dancing flames
from the fire. Her lips were parted slightly in concentration and Emma longed to press forward and
kiss her.

There were still light bags beneath Regina's eyes, the ghost of some dreadful pain, and it left her
more fragile than Emma could ever recall seeing her. That said, she could see the determination
there, the strength she knew intimately well. She appeared much improved, as though the journey
was strengthening her. Emma wondered if it wasn't all the mountain air.

"Liath said I could be Xena," she said, quirking an eyebrow.

"Did she now?" Regina said, moving to her lip. Emma was pretty sure she could have taken care of
all of this herself but she also knew that when Regina was feeling off kilter, she found solace in
caring for her loved ones. Even if Emma technically was more of a tolerated one, she was enjoying
the attention too much to keep away. "Wouldn't you be the annoying sidekick?"
Henry came to sit beside them, gracelessly flinging himself into the leaf litter.

"Oh hell no!" Emma protested. "I am totally Xena. I'm not some country bumpkin with a stick!"

Both Regina and Henry fixed her with identical looks of amusement that usually preceded her being horribly embarrassed. She pouted, lifting her face.

"Seriously, would Gabrielle have gotten a sweet shiner in a bar fight?"

Henry snorted. "You look like you walked into a lamp post," he offered. "And yes, Gabrielle spent, like, her life getting into fights defending Xena. Besides, if mom was the evil queen, she's the one with a dark past on a quest for redemption."

He looked insufferably smug and Emma was about to retort when Regina touched her injured cheek, earning a pained hiss.

"Oh, that was not nice," she said, drawing back. Regina lifted an eyebrow, as if commanding her to behave, and Emma leaned forward. "Is it broken?"

"I don't think so," she said, gently probing the injury. "Even if it is, I don't think we need to worry, as long as you don't go picking any more fights."

Emma rolled her eyes. "He started it. Anyway," she drew back slightly. "Am I all patched up?"

Regina nodded, a light flush on her cheeks. It was incredibly attractive and reminded Emma of an uncertain young college student who'd smiled shyly at the bum washing plates in Granny's Diner. A surge of affection and love suffused her and she had to close her eyes against the urge to lean forward and wrap Regina in her arms, doghouse or no.

SQSQSQSQ

Well, that was damn long. No apologies! Also, can we take a moment to reflect lovingly on Xena? Leave a review, or kudos!
Welcome back! Be interested to see what you make of this one. Allusions to suicidal ideation, briefly at the start.

SQSQSQSQ

The morning dawned colder than the previous few had and their breath fogged before their faces as they broke camp. Despite that, it was bright and dry, the powdery blue sky interrupted only by the occasional cloud or flock of honking geese. The seven difficult miles had been as challenging as promised, a descent into a rocky valley and ascent beyond, and once under the cover of trees again they paused for a rest. Emma was swinging a stick against Henry as Liath fiddled with her bowstring, performing some sort of maintenance.

"That land back there," Regina began, frowning, "there have been ogres through recently." The valley should have been filled with cattle or sheep, with villagers wandering throughout. Instead, the alpine meadows had been devoid of life, barren and desolate. A few half starved crows had surfed the thin air, lonesome smudges against the clear sky. Their little group had been relatively subdued during their journey as well, exchanging neither stories nor songs. Her son and his other mother had seemed to shrug the pall off with little difficulty when they'd arrived in the forest again, though.

"Aye," she replied, "indeed there have. That valley is the easiest way from east to west for many leagues. As they get pushed from one kingdom, they retreat to another. You understand why I didn't want to camp out there over night?"

Regina nodded, watching Henry and Emma play for a moment. Sceolta was leaping with the pair of combatants, but Bran had placed his heavy head in her lap. She scratched his soft ear idly, earning a wagging tail. The weight of his simple affection was comforting after the eerie journey, calming nerves left peculiarly unsettled.

"We're also coming into bandit country. And there might be bears down here, too." Liath huffed. "You see why I like keeping to the edge of things?"

Regina turned to their guide, considering her for a moment, regarding her thoughtfully for a while. A question she'd been meaning to ask for quite some time came to mind. "How did you survive the island for so many years?"

Liath was quiet for a long time, clearly trying to assemble her thoughts. "I don't know. I found my way there when I was very young. I grew up with it. I suppose."

Regina was quiet then, watching the pair before them again. Emma and Henry had abandoned their jackets to play, the bright green and blue of their tunics flashing through the bare winter trees. Emma ducked violently and her hat fell off, golden hair spilling over her shoulders. She tipped her head back and laughed as Henry pelted her with a handful of leaves. The pale sticks in their hands, almost yellow with young sap, gleamed as they chased each other around the glade. It was a beautiful sight and pressed on a very particular spot in Regina's heart just enough to hurt.

"I thought I had nothing to lose," Liath continued quietly. "But by the time I realised that I did, there was nothing left to go back to."

They considered that for a moment before Liath spoke. Regina couldn't find it in her to lift her gaze from Henry's shining brown hair or his sparkling eyes. He threw himself off a log, striking a pose as
he leapt past Emma. She ducked under his stick but skidded in the leaves, landing in a laughing tangle of tumbling hair and detritus. Henry popped a boot on her chest and she responded by pulling him down beside her, earning a high pitched shriek that recalled a younger, less burdened time. They both turned to her, grinning and waving for a moment with happy eyes before returning to their game. Something exquisitely tender, the stretch of long unused muscle, ached within her chest.

"I'm sorry you suffered, Regina," Liath murmured. "I didn't prepare you well enough, I think." Her voice sounded genuinely remorseful.

"I knew there would be a price. I found... I found places in me I didn't know existed. I mean, looking back, they were always there but..." She swallowed thickly. "Once you consciously discover these places, they're always there. Even if I escaped them this time, now I know the path's there."

Liath nodded sadly. "I understand. We all contain within ourselves precipices." She sighed. "But at least you know, now. You may have knowledge of those edges and even know the paths that lead to them but you are not the same person you were. You're not much different, yet, but it's a start. You can't move a cliff or a path, but a different woman can walk them."

Henry and Emma, clearly having tired of their game, were loping over to them, wide grins on their cheeky faces. Henry was hanging onto Sceolta's collar and Emma was brushing leaves out of her hair, a sheepish expression on her flushed face.

She was gripped, suddenly, with a burst of relief that even if it wasn't real, she had people in her life who knew her as something other than the evil queen or the bitchy mayor. She nudged Bran's head off her lap and stepped towards them, hesitant despite herself as her boots crunched through the dry leaves. Emma stooped and handed her her backpack and Henry fetched her cloak, still swinging his stick like a sword. With a quiet nod, they little group set out again.

SQSQSQSQ

Emma had taken a turn to sing for them, entertaining them with a selection of old rock songs. Henry sang along with those he knew and even Liath joined in now and again, her repertoire amusingly eclectic. The forest had changed, the towering pines giving way to beech and oak. There was more space between the boles now, the undergrowth fairly minimal. More sunlight filtered down, though it wasn't doing much to warm them up. It caught the delicate ferns that called the spreading branches above them home, the light catching green highlights as they went. The deep, almost sweet scent of broad leaf mulch took over from the sharp tang of pine resin, nudged into the air as they strode along. Birds and small, curious animals darted through the complex network above their heads, their little world filled with song and indignant chirps.

Emma trailed off, humming softly as she spared a glance at Regina. She'd been quiet, not contributing much to conversation today, almost brooding. There was a heavy sorrow behind her hooded eyes which Emma longed to alleviate. She contemplated offering her hand, but honestly didn't want to face the sting that would follow if Regina rejected her. She wanted to hear her sing along with them, to see the self conscious blush that always accompanied such efforts.

Though she was loath to admit it, she needed these other memories. She had to understand what had happened to the woman in front of her. She needed to know what had harmed her, if there was any hope of helping her heal. Henry seemed to have abandoned their sing-along as well, moving to Regina's side and chattering happily. A warm smile curved the edge of her beloved's lip and Emma almost found herself heaving a lovesick sigh.

Something shifted, then, from one moment to the next. The dogs stopped, freezing in their tracks. Liath paused, lifting a hand for silence and to halt. The woods were eerie around them, suddenly
entirely silent. No birdsong lightened the air and only the sound of a cold breeze shifting dry leaves disturbed the silence. The light filtering through the trees was undimmed, but a sharp thrill of adrenaline seemed to cast their surroundings in threatening contrast.

Regina grabbed Henry with one hand and looked to their guide, eyes hard and narrow. Liath lifted her pack off and placed it on the ground, stringing her bow and settling her quiver at her hip. She loosened her sword in its sheath and knelt on the ground, listening intently.

Emma's heart pounded against her ribs and she took her cudgel from her belt, watching as Regina did the same with the little firewood hatchet she carried. Henry's eyes were wide and Emma lifted a finger to her lips, nodding slowly and wishing she had her gun to hand. Liath unfastened her cloak and handed it to Emma, motioning for her to take it.

The hounds were silent but morphing into very different creatures from what Emma had seen before. Gone were the lolling, friendly beasts and in their place stood two stiff necked, broad chested hounds with raised hackles and bared teeth. She was suddenly struck by how big and solid they were, the strength they possessed.

Liath handed Emma her pack without looking at her, eyes focused somewhere in the middle distance.

"Bran, to Henry," she said, softly but with unmistakable authority. Never taking his eyes off the horizon, the dog picked his way over. "Regina," Liath said, her voice quiet but firm. "Take them and hide. We're on a hill. There should be water at the bottom. Cross it. If I don't find you in an hour, use your magic to take them to Misthaven."

"What about avoiding magic?!" Regina hissed, gripping Henry tightly. There was a wildness to her eyes that sent a icy bolt of dread curling down Emma's spine.

"Doesn't matter if we're dead. Look after the dogs."

Emma took a step forward, burdened with all of Liath's crap and almost flung it down. "Are you crazy?! What the hell is up there?"

Emma's question was answered by an ear splitting bellow which earned a frightened yell from Henry. Regina clamped a desperate hand over his mouth and turned burning eyes to Liath.

"That's an ogre!" she snapped. "You are not facing that on your own."

"No, I'm not," she agreed, "Sceolta!"

"The dog doesn't count!" Emma cried, dismayed. "Give me your sword!"

"Do not be an idiot, Swan," Regina barked. "You cannot use that! You'll get yourself killed!"

"Right," Liath sighed. "Shut up, both of you. Go and hide. Look after your son and I will hopefully be with you very soon."She flashed a grin. "If not, thank you for the lovely company on this journey."

And with that, she dashed into the woods.

SQSQSQSQ

Regina could feel the rapid rise of Henry's chest and the panic suffusing him. She dropped to her knees and clasped his cheeks.
"Henry, sweetheart, you need to be really brave right now and do exactly as I say. There is something really dangerous over where and we need to hide."

He blinked, tears welling. "But Liath-"

"Is an imbecile for running off to face an ogre with a dog!" she could feel her own pulse racing, throbbing between her eyes. Her magic was stirring, slick and oily with terror. She swallowed and attempted to focus on her son, on his terrified eyes, willing the darkness back. "We need to hide, Henry."

"We can't leave her," he whispered. "We're the heroes."

No, she mused, they were a pair of women who had to look after their twelve year old son. She was the scourge of several realms and a murderous villain. The actual hero of the tale was an amnesiac with impulse control issues and no currently useful skills. Though his eyes were brimming with tears, the urge to take him and flee was overwhelming and right. She couldn't lose him again, not a chance.

Emma dropped to the ground beside them, backpacks slung clumsily over both shoulders, with Liath's cloak around her. Her eyes were wide, clearly out of her depth and for once, thankfully willing to follow Regina's lead. Regina saw her swallow, pulling herself together for Henry's sake and gratitude flared.

"OK, kid, we need to move. If this troll-"

"Ogre."

"Really, Regina?! C'mon!" Emma turned, incredulous eyes to her, tipping her head to one side. "If this guy finds us, it's bad, right?"

"But we can't leave Liath!"

*Can and will* Regina thought, though it was with some remorse. Emma reached out to Henry's shoulder but he shrugged her off, lifting his gloved hands to Regina's cheeks, mirroring her position. "Mom, please! Use your magic!"

The tug, the lure of her power hummed below her skin, smoke captured behind glass and promising an overwhelming conflagration should she release it to the crackling air around her. She squeezed her eyes shut, almost overwhelmed. If her magic was difficult to control when she was angry it was a force of nature when she was afraid. She couldn't deny the fear though. She couldn't lose him. Not when she'd only just gotten him back. She was more than a little tempted to teleport the three of them to Misthaven and leave Liath to her own devices. Tears spilled over her son's cheeks and she swallowed, attempting to choke her heart and most selfish impulses back into her chest.

"Mom, please!"

It broke her heart, because here was her beloved son, whom she could deny nothing, begging her. Gazing at her as though she were a hero. As though she was a decent person who actually did things like follow her friends after ogres. She turned to Emma, expecting scorn at the idea of the evil queen deigning to help, but saw understanding and sorrow there too.

"I know you want to go, Regina," she said, almost causing Regina to fall onto her backside in surprise. "I get it. But Henry, your mom cannot throw herself into danger."

"But Liath might die!" Henry said, growing hysterical. He turned back to her and the memory of the last week, of his absolute trust and faith in her flooded her. He'd been looking at her as though she
was a hero since they'd been reunited and it made it easier to slip from the pull of dark magic.

Regina sat back on her heels and sighed. She pressed a kiss to Henry's forehead and shook her head, turning to Emma.

"If you do anything apart from hide down that slope with our son, I am not only going to kill you, I will **divorce** you."

Before she could think better of it, she ran off in the direction their erstwhile guide had fled.

**SQSQS**

Regina followed the booming cries, heart pounding as she ran through the forest. Her hands were sweating in her gloves, hand cramping around the haft of the axe. She was never more than a hair away from summoning her magic but paused when she caught sight of Scoletta, his distinctive grey haunches a stark contrast to the pale brown leaves. She dropped to her knees beside him, flattening herself to the ground. They were on a lip, facing down into a shallow depression. An ogre was bellowing in the middle, surrounded by a group of men in cloaks. She couldn't see Liath among them and cursed to herself.

"What the hell are you doing here?!" the older woman hissed, dropping from a tree almost silently. Her grey clothes seemed lost in the fitful sunlight, blending in with the half shadows and dappled light.

"Liath!" she snarled. "What the hell?!" Liath grabbed her, pulling her down behind a fallen branch. "Running off alone to face an ogre?!"

"Damn it, Regina, I heard the men fighting! I'm neither stupid nor suicidal! We can argue later but right now I need that brute to look up here so I can get a line to his eye."

"Right," Regina sighed, her voice shaky to her own ears. She heard the cries of the soldiers now, fearful and higher than she expected. An archer was attempting to shoot the brute but his vantage point was terrible and his aim was poor. If they left them, they'd be slaughtered in minutes. "You're a decent shot, aren't you?"

Liath merely scowled and realising that Regina was not going to be dissuaded from helping, shoved her out from cover, following a moment later. "One arrow. If I miss, set the bastard on fire." She whistled at the dog, drawing a stout arrow from the quiver.

Scoletta let out a howl that shook the very roofs of the forest, blood thirsty and terrifying enough to give the ogre pause as he tried to flatten the men around him. They looked up, startled, but quickly got on with dragging a fallen comrade away from the battle field. Regina strode forward, brandishing the axe as though it was a sorceress's sceptre.

"Hey, ugly, pick on someone your own size."

The ogre blinked, regarding her stupidly. She drew her arm back, flinging the axe at him as hard as she could. It spun through the air and he dodged it easily enough. The same wasn't true for the half rotten branch she followed up with, or the rock that followed. The ogre roared, blood dripping down his forehead, stomping forward. The ground shook with his approach, causing Regina to stumble to one knee. Scoletta bound to her side, standing before her and snarling with incredible ferocity.

She couldn't take her eyes off the monster bearing down on her, his skin sickly and stinking of decay. His teeth were broken and blackened, though still very large. He ran for her, quicker than she thought he would be, until an arrow suddenly appeared from his right eye, sunk all the way into the
back of his skull. He roared in agony, groping at his face before another erupted from his left. With a high pitched groan, he fell to his knees and then to the ground, his movements feeble as he breathed his last.

"That was almost too easy," she laughed, her voice slightly hysterical to her own ears as she struggled to get control of her power.

Liath let out a shaky chuckle, wiping her sweaty hair back from her forehead. "You don't get to my age by involving yourself in fights unless you know you'll win."

Her heart was pounding and her hands shaking. A strong arm gripped her elbow and Liath raised her to her feet, a wide grin on her face. She patted her back firmly enough to almost send her back to her shaky knees.

"Nicely done, your majesty. Sceolta, fetch the others. Let's see what we have here."

Emma and Henry ran after the two dogs, skidding through leaf little and over half rotten sticks. Emma had never, ever been so frightened in her life. It had taken roughly fourteen seconds after Regina left for her to start hyperventilating. Henry had been as white a sheet, not understanding what was happening because he was twelve and despite having lost his mother once didn't seem to realise that it could happened again.

It had taken everything to stay with their son, dragging him over to the edge of the bluff and tucking them behind a tree. She didn't bother heading down the slope, her legs too weak to attempt such a feat. Henry had cling to her, trembling for many long minutes until Sceolta had loped into view, wagging his tail and panting happily.

She'd taken that as a signal and they'd chased him through the woods until, until after passing by the corpse of an eighteen foot something they'd come to a stop in front of a group of people including a very pale Regina Mills.

The air left her lungs, her pounding heart and clenching stomach rebelling and translating themselves into a choked cry and a flood of tears. Sobbing, she dumped their gear onto the leafy floor, stumbling to Regina and throwing her arms around her. She felt Henry follow beside her, cheering at his mother. Regina was still in her arms and Emma drew back briefly but only long enough to curl a hand around her neck and press their foreheads together. She drew Regina close to her and though her vision was blurred with tears, met wide brown eyes.

Regina was trembling and Emma couldn't help pressing a desperate kiss to her forehead, before gripping her again. Hesitant, penitent hands touched her waist and Regina sagged against her, Henry squeezing them both.

"Never, ever do that again," she pleaded, "don't you dare leave us again."

Regina's grip shifted, one arm sliding around her more firmly, pulling them closer while the other cradled her head gently as Emma wept into her neck, ghosts and horrible memories flooding back to her. Regina's breath was racing, the scent rising from the warm crook her neck tainted with acrid fear. But she was alive, at least, and Emma clung to her with every ounce of strength she possessed.

Henry stepped away from his moms, blinking at the sight. His ma was sobbing into his mom's arms,
more distraught than he'd ever seen her before, except maybe at mom's funeral. Liath was close by, wiping a tired hand over her face and she waved at him. He rushed over and hugged her tightly, pleased to see her unhurt.

"My mom helped you?"

"Indeed she did." She disentangled from him and stepped to the men close by. Henry blinked at the sight. They looked like high schoolers, but they were holding swords and bows. The boy in front had wavy blonde hair and light blue eyes. He was holding a sword but it was shaking in his grasp. The others also seemed shocked, pale and trembling in the afternoon sun. Liath stepped forward.

"We mean no harm," she said, though she looked more like a warrior than any of those in front of her. "We heard the commotion and thought to help."

"We..." the boy in the lead swallowed thickly. "We tried..."

"Thank you," another gulped. He had dark skin and thick black curly hair spilling around his shoulders. "It was going to kill us."

"You're not wrong," Liath sighed. "What are you boys doing here? Playing bandit?"

"We're not," the lad in front said, his throat bobbing. "We're soldiers. The White Kingdom sent us."

Henry's attention returned to his mothers. His mom had pulled back slightly and had a gentle hand on his ma's cheek. Ma was holding her wrist, trying to reign herself in, tears still streaming down her cheeks.

"Later, Emma," he heard his mom say, firmly but gently. She brushed a strand of hair behind Emma's ear and his ma pressed a kiss to the palm of his mom's hand, something he'd seen her do a hundred times. But there was something unusually fragile in his ma and something amazed and uncertain in his mom at the gesture. He almost felt like it was too private a moment for him to have seen and he shuffled his feet. His mom drew back, a blush on her cheeks and Henry watched her shake her head, eyes hardening as she turned to the strangers.

"Who's in charge?" she asked the boy, drawing herself into what Henry thought of as her Mom the Mayor posture. He blinked at her, realising that this was actually Mom the Queen.

"I am."

She was taken aback, he could tell, but hid it well. "What's your name?"

"Conn is my name," he said, lifting his chin. He had a tiny tuft of hair below his lower lip that Henry thought looked quite dashing, though the fact that his lip was trembling detracted from the effect.

"Conn," she said, not unkindly, "did you say Queen Snow sent you?"

He glanced back at his squad mates, unsure. The other boy nodded. "We took the Queen's shilling six weeks past. We've been scouting north for signs of the Princess Emma."

"And your name?"

"I'm Fiachra."

Liath moved forward, lifting an eyebrow. "You boys are all westerners, aren't you?" she mused. "You're far from home."
"Fiachra!" a worried voice cried, breaking the moment. The boy babbled in a language Henry didn't recognise, causing his mother and Liath to stride forward. His ma was looking shell shocked so he took her hand, guiding her over.

His mom was standing beside a boy lying sprawled on the ground. He had short hair and eyes the same colour as his ma's, skin the shade of chalk. He frowned, wondering what was wrong and what the funny smell was.

"Hen," his ma said, an unsteady hand on his shoulder, preventing him from approaching more closely. "Buddy, no."

He blinked in shock as his mom shoved the crying boy aside, watching as he was caught by Fiachra. She ripped the boy on the ground's shirt open and Henry didn't understand what he was seeing. The boy's chest was black and wet and he was gasping, eyes wide but not seeing any of the people around him. His mother touched the black and when she lifted her hands, they were stained red.

"Fuck," Liath said, her brow knitted. "That's not good."

His mother's face welled with emotion and she directed an enraged snarl at Liath. "Fuck, is right! He's a child and I'm going to do something about this, your rules be damned." Henry started. He didn't think he'd ever heard his mom use the F-word before (his ma was a different kettle of very potty mouthed fish).

"Oh you are getting no arguments here," Liath agreed, smoothing the boy's short hair back from his face. "I'll deal with the consequences later. Be swift, he's dying."

His mother closed her eyes and pressed her hand into the mess of blood and stuff on the boy's chest, heedless of the grossness. He felt slightly queasy at the sight, gripping his ma's hand. His mom straightened her back and sighed and to his utter amazement, purple light poured from beneath her hand, suffusing the boy's chest. The boy grimaced and his eyes rolled back in his head and Liath drew back. His mom grit her teeth and leaned forward, head bowed over the boy as light danced over his form, most concentrated on the mess on his chest.

Her face contracted in a grimace, the vein in the centre of her forehead popping out. The boy groaned, high and fearful and the light grew brighter, purple and lilac and sparking through the clearing.

"Mom," he whispered, suddenly frightened. She looked as though she was in pain, her face drawn. Like she was old and tired. Like the boy was drawing the life out of her. Her hand trembled and he grabbed his ma, shoving her forward.

"Help her!"

"What?!" she yelled, incredulous, opening and closing her mouth.

"You're magic too, dummy!"

"Henry Daniel Mills!" his mom bit out, because despite wielding magic she was still his mom.

"Swan-Mills," he corrected absently, pushing his ma towards the light show. She sank to her knees but didn't hesitate to wrap her arm around his mom's waist or press her hand onto the dying boy's chest. White light joined purple and grew so bright that Henry had to shield his eyes, blinded by the intensity.

SQSQSQSQ
So. That wasn't meant to happen, huh?
Chapter 14

The bed is wide and soft, but they’re curled closely together to one side. Arms and legs brush in the cozy warmth beneath the duvet. A sigh and the woman beside her shifts, worming under sheets to connect bare skin to skin. She is solid and warm, her presence comforting and familiar. She turns herself, facing her partner fully and untangling the sheets from between them. She skims her finger tips over Emma’s shoulder and clavicle, coming to rest in the dip at the base of the throat. She kisses her face gently, reluctant to wake her but needing to. Dim light catches expressive eyes as Emma wakes, full of soft affection and love. A gentle hand curls around her waist and slides up her back as their legs tangle. She takes a moment to enjoy the tickle of hair against her hip and the press of soft breasts against her own. Her neck is gifted with a long, loving kiss and she squeezes her beloved tightly, her body reveling in the moment.

But it has to end and she does so with a wry smile. She pinches Emma’s backside playfully, earning a beleaguered moan as she pulls away, fetching their night clothes. They dress with long practised ease and sink together again. Regina cradles Emma from behind, running her fingers in lazy circles over where, at another time, there had been a belly. They drift in and out of slumber for a while before soft sounds emerge from the hallway. A clumsy knock at the door is greeted by an invitation to enter and Henry flings the door open.

The excited child launches himself onto the bed, landing in a heap with his mothers. He kisses them both enthusiastically and Emma rolls onto her back, cuddling the little boy to her chest between them. He laughs, informing them of the urgent matter of Santa Claus and their immanent journey downstairs. He’s lisping a bit, having lost his first baby teeth a few weeks previous.

“Buddy,” Emma grumbles, “it’s five thirty in the morning.”

“Ma...” he wheedles and Regina smiles to herself, capturing a tiny foot as he tunnels beneath the covers.

"Mama needs a little sleep and mommy wouldn’t object, either," she says, grunting as he turns to burrow into her chest. Emma follows, doing her best monster impersonation and sandwiching their son between them.

“Tell us a story," Emma sighs, already half asleep again. Regina settles back into her pillow, Henry’s head close to hers. He lifts a hand and begins to play with her hair, fascinated by it as always. She curls in bed with her son and his mother on Christmas morning, and nothing could be better.

"Once upon a time..."

SQSQSQQSQ

The first thing Regina became aware of was the intense pounding in her head. The second was the unyielding aroma of unwashed clothes and the third was Emma Swan's arm draped across her torso. Emma was snoring softly and they appeared to be in a small and musty tent, which perhaps explained the smell. She raised a hand to her forehead and blinked, trying to recall what had happened. Alcohol?

No. The events of the morning came back to her. An ogre. A boy not much older than Henry dying in front of her and a huge amount of magic. The oily pull of her darkness completely negated by Emma’s buoyant light. Emma had been completely bared to her, not hesitating to open herself entirely to Regina. There hadn’t been even the slightest hint of her old walls, of her defences or
mistrust. There had been nothing but a battered heart lain completely exposed, aching but soothed by
the contact between them. Regina felt completely exhausted and while much of her was content to
stay where she was, another part of her was intensely disconcerted.

She lifted Emma's arm from across her abdomen and sat up, frowning at the heavy appendage but
careful not to wake her tent mate. Emma was dead to the world, pale and deeply asleep, features
oddly peaceful despite all that had befallen earlier. She suddenly remembered being grabbed by
frantic hands and kisses that were at once far too intrusive while also gladly received. The worry and
naked concern had bowled her away. False memories or no, had anyone actually cared so strongly
about her safety before? The contact had been intense without being stifling and she was self-aware
enough to admit it had felt good to be on the receiving end of such affection.

She traced a thumb over the bruise on Emma's cheek, which had started to turn yellow and looked
utterly hideous. She should have been outraged by the embrace, but found she couldn't muster her
usual ire. She suspected it had something to do with the fact that it had been both desperate and
unthinking, like a child after a nightmare. She'd never had much of a problem with physical contact
when needed, only when it was demanded. Emma Swan had demanded much of her, but never that.
A wave of tender affection washed through her, surprising her.

Though she supposed it shouldn't. She threaded messy blonde hair behind Emma's ear, regarding the
woman in the buttery light seeping through the cheap canvas of the tent. Emma shifted closer to her,
seeking warmth, and Regina was struck by the urge to lie beside her again, to let her own battered
heart be soothed for a while. Her chest ached for a long moment and she had to remind herself that
the love she'd felt during the spell, the adoration and the utter trust, hadn't been for her, but an ideal
version of herself. Someone who didn't actually exist.

In that moment, though, listening to Emma breathe in time with the branches whispering overhead,
she was struck with a longing to be that person. She knew she might as well have wished to be the
man on the moon, but the thought stuck with her. She looked back down at her companion, a small
smile tugging at her lips at the sight of the bruise. It certainly didn't detract from Emma's beauty,
adding an almost roguish air. She sat for a long moment, thoughts fading as she just enjoyed the quiet
reverie, watching the woman beside her.

What a noble idiot.

Emma sighed and fondness welled at the sight. Regina adjusted the blankets around her chin, tucking
her in securely, brushing a hand over her hair once more. It was tangled and in need of a good brush
but soft as it spilled over their shared blankets, a golden contrast to her sable cloak. She sighed and
shuffled out of the tent flap, exhausted. She blinked in the bright light, completely uncertain of how
much time had passed since she'd cast the spell.

The camp was messy, the site poorly chosen. She cast a critical eye around, following voices to a
fire. Henry and the boy soldiers were chatting around a large cooking pit and she sat gracelessly
beside her son, earning a delighted hug and a cup of tea. The other boys looked on with something
akin to awe on their faces.

"Mom!" he said, curled against her, "that was awesome! You saved Oisín!"

"Oisín?" she parroted, still in the process of fully waking up. "That's who was hurt? How is he?"

"He's asleep," one of the boys, the fierce one, said, though he appeared quite timid in that moment.
"He rests easy. He had soup earlier."

She nodded, slightly overwhelmed. There were four young men sitting with Henry and she'd be
surprised if the oldest was a day over seventeen. Why had Snow begun to employ child soldiers? Were times so desperate, to repeat the mistakes of the worst parts of the ogre wars? Were they Lost Boys? More urgently, where was Liath?

"Your companion went hunting with the dogs," one of the lads supplied, clearly having noticed her curious glances.

"How long was I asleep?"

"A few hours, mom," Henry replied. "It'll be sunset soon."

"The plan?" she asked.

The fierce boy, Conn she thought, spoke haltingly. "We have a cart. We'll put Oisín in it. We have horses. Not enough for everyone but we can walk," he said gesturing at his companions. "You and the princess will ride, the prince with you. We'll take you to the Queen."

Another boy, with the curly hair and patient eyes, nudged his comrade. "If you'll allow us to escort you, your majesty," he mumbled awkwardly.

Regina almost corrected him, reminded him that she was a deposed tyrant rather than a reigning monarch but frankly couldn't find it within herself. These boys were as far from courtiers as anyone she'd ever seen and she found herself struck by curiosity about them.

"Where are you all from?"

"West," Conn said. "A knight came to our town and said there was coin and adventure in Queen Snow's army."

Child mercenaries from beyond their borders. Regina sighed. She'd have to have words with Snow when she reached Misthaven. She'd known she was desperate to find Emma but there were limits. She knew that better than most what harm desperation could wreck.

The other boy, Fiachra, she recalled, tipped his head to one side, obviously recognising the displeasure on her face. "Queen Snow's kingdom was ruined for many years. When they all vanished, our families had no one to trade with. It was hard to turn away gold when it came back."

"We have mothers at home who need to eat," Conn said. "Little brothers and sisters, too." He frowned. "Though he said nothing about ogres."

"He didn't half arm or train them, either, this recruiting officer" Liath sighed from the edge of the clearing. She had three geese over her shoulder and the boys sat up straighter, eyes brightening. Regina took in their lean limbs and their hungry stares, wrapping an arm around Henry and resting her cheek against the crown of this head. She was quite certain Emma Swan had fed him on a diet of pizza and macaroni, but at least her son had never gone hungry.

Liath muttered to the pair of boys who hadn't spoken at all in a language Regina didn't recognise and they hopped up after her, eager and chattering. Liath clucked her tongue. "We'll have a feather pillow for the young lad by the time we're done. Check on him, will you?"

Regina nodded tiredly and Henry dragged her to another tent. A teary lad with violently red hair knelt beside the sleeping boy, Oisín. He scrambled to leave, muttering again in that strange tongue. The boy on the bed appeared the youngest so far, a scrawny thing not much bigger than Henry and with a chest like a toast rack.
"How old is he?" she asked Henry, her son staring on with solemn eyes as she placed a hand on their patient's forehead.

"Fifteen," he said, softly. "So weird to think in this world you're out fighting ogres..."

"They shouldn't be," she cut across. "A fifteen year old who truly wanted to be a soldier should be squired to a knight, or apprenticed in a barracks. Never in a place like this."

Henry frowned and Regina looked towards the injured boy. He had very delicate features, almost girlish, and she thought he'd likely grow up to be a very handsome man, if he got the chance. His hair was cropped and his pale skin freckled, some mother's son trying to find money and adventure in the ashes of a world she'd ruined.

"You used magic to save him," Henry whispered, amazement in his voice. "You and ma."

"We did," she acknowledged. "It wasn't easy, he was close to death."

She ran a cloth over the boy's face and checked his pulse. It was strong, as were the breaths he drew into his lungs. She sighed with relief and turned to her own son, sorrow lancing through her at the delight on his face. He seemed excited, completely enchanted by her display of power, standing in complete contrast to how the son she remembered had reacted. He was gazing at her as though she were a hero and she knew he needed to be disabused of that notion without delay.

"Come with me, sweetheart," she said, guiding them out of the tent, the redhead returning to his vigil as they left. They walked to the edge of the camp, finding a spot a few minutes walk away, removed enough that they wouldn't be disturbed though close enough to be summoned by a shout.

"What you saw today," she began, facing him head on, "was very powerful light magic. I am absolutely sure I wouldn't have managed it on my own, nor would your mother."

He cracked a knowing smile at that. "You're a good team."

She couldn't argue with results, so she didn't comment. "But there is bad magic. Incredibly dark and dangerous magic." She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "And I cast the worst of it, sweetheart. Those boys down there, they might not have had to leave home if not for the curse. And many people suffered because of it. Your grandparents, people who your mother counts as friends... Everyone except me suffered."

Henry frowned, thoughts darting behind his intelligent eyes because he could clearly see that she had suffered. She could hide from him no more than she could from his mother. "Did you really cast it because Snow White was prettier than you?"

She snorted. "No. God, no." She sighed, rubbing her forehead, pain building. "I cast it because I was heartbroken and wanted to make the world hurt as much as I did. It was a stupid, childish impulse that most people grow out of. Only I didn't and I also happened to have the power to enact it."

Henry sat silent beside her, contemplative and silent.

"Will you tell me about some of it? Maybe about what happened at home in your version of the world?"

She gazed down at his trusting face, still unable to deny him anything he asked of her, and began to speak.

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Henry's face was thoughtful as he walked away from her, heading to the soldiers. She was shaky after their talk, nervous and unsettle. They'd spoken of their time together in Storybrooke, focusing on the curse and some of what had driven them apart. She'd answered him as honestly as possible, knowing that lies now could lay the plug and feather in fault lines he didn't realise existed. If there was any chance of salvaging their relationship after he regained his memories, she needed to be honest. He appeared somewhat unsettled, his hand on Bran's wide back as he wandered away.

She heaved a sigh and skirted the edge of the camp, following a soft voice singing in low tones. Liath was standing cleaning the ass's hooves, singing to the truculent beast. Regina smiled at the sight, lifting a brush and clucking her tongue at a handsome grey rouncey. She gave him a minute to take his measure of her, approaching carefully. She was pleased to see that he and the chestnut mare beside him, and the little ass, were well cared for.

"Their camp is shite," Liath groused, "they can't hunt, or fight, or track and your son can light a better fire than any of them but..."

"At least they looked after their horses," Regina finished, running the brush over the animal before her.

The older woman inspected the ass's hooves carefully, not finding anything to grouch about. His shoes were well worn but still serviceable, Regina noted. He butted his head against Liath's side and brayed, earning an eye roll.

"These beasts." Liath sent him on his way with a fond pat. She lifted her eyes to Regina, her hands fisted on her hips. "Well, that was a rather spectacular light show, earlier. Well done."

Regina wasn't entirely in the mood and couldn't help the frustrated huff that left her lips. "Can you just berate me now, rather than engage in passive aggressive nonsense, please?"


Regina clenched her jaw and shook her head, hands trembling as she brushed the horse. He sensed her tension and whickered softly, tossing his nose back towards her. Her chest was tight, exhausted and not quite on level ground after her talk with Henry. A long couple of minutes passed in silence, as Regina selected and then discarded thoughts and statements. Frustration built and she stepped back from the horse, wheeling on Liath.

"It... I never realised how real it was for them," she said, cursing the tremor in her voice. "I thought they were deluded. Enchanted and just... just acting out some silly story but..."

Liath folded her arms and nodded. "Their memories are as real as yours, eh?"

Regina nodded, eyes stinging. "That idiot, Emma, she... She really loves her wife."

Liath shrugged her shoulder. "Usually a positive attribute in a spouse."

Regina scoffed. "Not if that person doesn't exist! Not if she never did, to begin with!" She wrapped her own arms around her waist, gripping tightly. "I'm not her."

Liath sighed. "No, you're not. But tell me, is Henry your son?"

Regina recoiled as though struck. "How dare you!" she hissed. Placating hands were raised and Liath stepped forward, her face hard and her voice sharp.
"Oh no. Stop that right now. I mean, the young man here does not have the same memories as the son you raised in Storybrooke. That said, you love him and consider him your own. Correct?"

"Of course I do!" she said, frowning.

"And he clearly worships the ground you walk on. Despite the fact that you two have different memories of one another."

"That is not comparable to the situation with Emma," she bit, unsure where Liath's train of thought was headed.

"Emma loves you," Liath said. "Very much so. And it isn't fair for you to dismiss that as a delusion, no matter the origin."

Regina's breath hitched in her chest and she turned her back on the other woman, feeling tears well. "It isn't fair for her to expect so much from me. I'm not the person she remembers and she can't... It isn't fair. She doesn't even know me!"

Her heart was pounding in her chest and she shook her head. "If she knew me, Liath..."

"She'd be able to make an informed decision for herself," she said, gently. "You don't owe her your love, or any affection or anything else. But you share a son. Your lives are bound no matter what. So you two need to figure out a way of negotiating this quandary."

They were silent for a long moment, Regina's pulse pounding in her ears. She felt small, uncertain and insecure as she stood in the clearing, birdsong an unlikely and jarring accompaniment.

"She feels so much for me," she said, quietly. "I felt it, during the damn spell. It's too much."

"So tell her that," Liath advised, her voice gentling. "Explain that you don't want her in that way and just ask her to leave you be."

Regina's eyes squeezed shut and she felt a tear roll down her cheek. "It's too much but," she drew in a ragged breath, "but then I've always been too much. Too intense or too sad or too angry or... Just too much. But even when she hated me, she never backed down."

"You were never too much for her," Liath said, her voice very kind and dreadfully sad. "Oh, Regina."

"And it's not fair that she has this idea of me in her head. It's not the real me."

Liath barked out a laugh, startling Regina. "Oh, but that's the way of it! We only exist as bloody ideas in other people's heads." She approached, her grey eyes reflecting some of the fitful blue in the cloud sky. "And if you stop being a petulant brat for a second, you'd realise your solution."

Regina bristled at being called a brat and scowled at the other women, the despair in her fizzling at the amusement lighting the lined face. "And that is?"

"To let her get to know the real you, whoever that may be." She smiled and flicked Regina's arm fondly. "You also should try and figure out what you want from her. You need, at a bare minimum, civil coexistence for Henry's sake."

Regina swatted at the other woman, irritated but not angry. She clenched her teeth and nodded, striding away and trying her best to not reflect on what happened when she admitted to actually wanting things. Feeling raw, she headed to the fire to help with dinner.
"You're welcome!" Liath called, obnoxiously cheerfully.

An eloquent finger, raised in a manner that would have seen Henry grounded, spoke for her.

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Emma had never been an elegant sleeper, prone to sprawling, drooling and farting, or so she'd been told. She was reasonably sure she only snored when exhausted or drunk, mainly because Regina had very rarely teased her about it. That said, she'd also been told her presence was the best part about going to bed so she supposed Regina had acclimatized to the mundane biological realities of their intimacy long ago.

She woke slowly to darkness, no wind breezing over her, with her nose buried in Regina's neck. Although she couldn't see her, she'd have known that scent anywhere, even if it were richer than usual, tangier and sharper. She wasn't sure if it was due to their lack of a daily shower or the magic they'd shared. Torn between pressing closer to the familiar shape of her wife and respecting Regina the goddamn sorceress's boundaries, she filled her lungs with the scent. Exerting monumental willpower, she rolled away, wiping a hand over her face.

Part of her wanted to scream because she used magic a few hours ago to knit a young man's chest back together. Regina had guided some part of her to him, drawing on something foreign and bizarre within her. It was still thrumming beneath her skin, like a foot gone to sleep, except spread over her whole body. The strange thing was the feeling of odd familiarity. The sensation was not dissimilar to those moments when she'd remembered, in whatever was the corporeal equivalent of the mind's eye was, how Regina's skin had felt on hers.

Part of her wanted to run. Wanted to flee the whole crazy situation and demand Liath take them all home to New York and be damned with fairy tales and ogres and quests. She was struck by the realisation that her own Regina would have been thoroughly unimpressed with the situation, too. Despite the close proximity of the woman breathing quietly beside her, she was suddenly gripped with a sharp feeling of loneliness, missing her wife more than she had since arriving in this land.

"Christ, I miss you," she whispered to the darkness above her, aching for the woman who'd known her so well. She'd have known what to make of all this craziness. What to do.

"Believe it or not," a sleepy voice rumbled beside her. "I miss you, too."

Emma was still for a moment, her eyes wide. "Regina?" she asked stupidly.

"You were expecting someone else?"

Actually, she was. "Where's Henry?"

"He and Liath are in the tent next to us, so keep your voice down." She sighed, shifting beneath the blankets. "It's the middle of the night."

Emma blinked, more memories of the day before trickling back to her. The panic and the fear and the worry all mixed up together. She didn't quite know where to begin and her brain, being hers, offered a ridiculous starting point.

"You miss me?"

Regina was silent for a long while, her breathing quick and uneven, as though fighting emotion. She shifted under the blankets beside Emma and she could smell the familiar scent of her breath wafting to her and feel the movement of air as Regina spoke, her voice hushed and hesitant.
"It was easier in some ways when you hated me. When you all thought I was irredeemable. It was easy to keep being the villain but now... you and Henry have given me this taste of something different and it's just..."

"Hard?" Emma suggested. "A lot of pressure? Too much like, if you slip up even once you'll lose everything?"

Regina didn't reply to that but her breathing was shaky, uncertain in the pitch black beside her. Suddenly, Emma was back on familiar ground. *This* was a Regina she knew. One who'd struggled with insecurities and possessed a perfectionist streak a mile wide. She'd had to fight hard, against her parents' expectations and the perceived wisdom that taking in a pregnant teenager was a monumental mistake. Against people who'd doubted her ability to be mayor or to complete her studies while parenting a small child.

"Henry and I don't expect you to be anything you aren't, Regina. This whole situation is incredibly fucked up and I'm only really starting to grasp that. I mean, what we did earlier..."

"The magic," Regina sighed. "That was... that was unexpected. I didn't think yours would respond like that."

Emma nodded, shuffling to better face Regina, despite not being able to see her. "You need to teach me about it. If there are fucking ogres rolling around and god knows what else."

A bitter laugh puffed across her nose. "Don't worry. The most dangerous villain in the land is right here beside you."

"I doubt it's so simple," Emma said, her heart pounding in her chest. During the spell, she'd felt Regina's anger, her sorrow and her despair. She'd felt the self-hatred that lurked in her, ugly and heavy at the bottom of her heart. It was one thing to have learned about those darker sides to her partner over the course of a decade, shared in dribs and drabs, over too many drinks or in the dark sanctuary of their bedroom. It was another to have *felt* them.

"I did terrible things, Emma," she said, her voice hollow, "unforgivable things."

"There was only one thing you ever did, Regina, that came close to unforgivable and that was leaving," she confessed, her voice tight as she fought past the lump in her throat. "Anything else we could have worked through. Anything else we can."

"Emma," she breathed, voice choked, "You don't know me! I'm not your perfect wife! I'm a murderer. I murdered Graham. I murdered my own father."

That revelation came like a blow to the solar plexus. A fist to the gut, wrenching and horrible. The memory of Regina's sweet father overwhelmed her and she could not imagine a world where her wife would have harmed a hair on his head. She could not imagine a Regina who would.

"Fuck."

Regina didn't respond, but she began trembling, shaking in the blankets beside her and Emma was suddenly gripped with fear, with the awful urgency from earlier and she rolled towards her wife, lifting the blanket. The loathing in Regina's voice shook her and she was gripped by terror, knowing that Regina's scariest impulses had always ultimately been self directed.

"Regina, I really want to hold you right now and I have not been great at this so, uh, I'm asking for permission."
Regina shook and fractured beside her, reaching out and grabbing onto Emma, tucking herself into her chest and sobbing silently. She felt tiny then, more petite and delicate than Emma could ever remember her being. She clasped her to her heart, running a hand up and down her back and murmuring into her ear. The horrors of earlier in the day were present, never straying too far from her memory, and all she could do was hold on.

She'd found herself in a world of ogres and bandits and children sent to war. She was in a place where violence and conflict seemed second nature and of course it didn't excuse what Regina had done but she longed to understand what had driven her.

"Why, sweetheart?" she asked, curling a hand between them and stroking Regina's cheek, cupping it.

"For vengeance. To be free," she whispered, pressing into her. "Because I just wanted to get away and there wasn't anywhere in this world I could to run to."

Emma brushed tears off Regina's cheek, feeling their counterparts run down her own. "After our Henry, he was the most precious thing to you. You loved him so much."

"That was the price," she croaked, miserable. "The thing I loved most."

Horrible understanding rolled through Emma. "Jesus. That was why Henry had to leave, right? You cast the curse again and you had to give him up?"

Regina nodded against her throat and Emma truly understood then. She'd had the knowledge before now but having lived through the previous day, where impossible things happened under her blood stained hand, it all became terribly real. Suddenly the teasing talk about redeemed villains and Xena seemed much, much more serious.

Regina clung to her, coming apart in a way Emma had very rarely witnessed. She held on for dear life, not trying to calm her or dam the flood of emotion, just murmuring into her ear and cradling her until she drifted into an exhausted slumber.

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It was just too much.

Regina shook, her mind spinning and her throat burning as she wept into Emma Swan's chest. Thoughts and feelings boiled through her, roiling and bubbling in every direction. She couldn't keep herself focused on any on thing for more than a couple of moment. She gripped Emma's t-shirt, pressing her face into the skin of her neck.

Too much.

Much too exposed with the enormous outpouring of power earlier that day. Too great an insight gained into the woman beside her and the feelings she harboured. Didn't she know better, Regina wondered, than to go wielding love like that without a second thought? Didn't she realise how easily her heart could break, when left so unguarded?

Too exhausted.

Too tired from weeks of torment on the island and hard slog across the kingdom. Worn out from hours spent reveling in the warmth of her son's presence rather than risk sleeping and have it all vanish on wakening. Too sore from walking and too stiff from sleeping on the ground or pallets. Eyes grainy even before she'd started weeping.
Too much.

But never enough. Never good enough for her mother and an utter traitor to her father. Never a good
enough mother or friend. Not clever enough to properly outsmart Rumple or save those she loved
from the horrible fates that had awaited them. Too selfish to let Henry go, instead enmeshing him in
this cruel make belief world.

Too much.

Too far from everything. Too far from her life in Storybrooke and her kingdom in Misthaven. Far
beyond friends and kind acquaintances. Too far beyond the Rubicon, traitor to her friends as well.
Alone, her vengeance a success on paper and no where else. Adrift and sinking, buoyancy lost over
many years without her noticing.

Too much to keep going, without an end in sight. Too heavy a burden to shoulder knowing that
she'd never be free. Thoughts snapping to windy cliffs and high balconies.

Too much.

A hand winding into her hair, strong fingers sure against her scalp. A soft breath against her ear,
ragged with reflected emotion. No words said, just warmth and an unwavering presence alongside
her. A hand between her shoulder blades, grounding her to the present moment. Keeping her pressed
against a living heart, connected to the warmth below her.

Too much.

Too much kindness and affection. Enough to shatter her entirely. Enough to open every raw wound
on her soul. Enough to unravel the very fabric of her.

A soft breath against her ear.

"I'm here, Regina," thick with tears.

Enough to unravel her.

A hand on her cheek, too gentle and too sure.

"I'm here."

Enough to promise to help her weave her life anew.

She grasped Emma's hand in her own, threading their fingers together as she calmed, mind blank for
long moments before she drifted to sleep.

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Emma embraced Regina all night, though her bladder demanded she move first the following
morning. Dawn had yet to put in an appearance and the camp was empty and quiet, the dogs
seemingly keeping watch. She had little desire to mope in the cold so she returned to the tent. Regina
was awake when she returned, eyes distant and dreadfully young. Vulnerable in the little tent, nested
in the space Emma had left. She swallowed thickly after a moment, not meeting her eyes.

"When we return to the castle, I'll brew a potion to restore your memories, Henry's too. You need to
know what happened in the real world."

Emma nodded, sitting cross legged beside her. Regina was still curled beneath the blankets, eyes red
rimmed and tired. She was pulling at a thread on her cloak idly, clearly miles away.

"Yesterday... it made everything real in a way it hadn't been until now. I mean, Liath showed us magic but yesterday was fucking crazy."

"Life and death situations usually are, Emma."

Emma reached out her hand, laying it palm up. Regina hesitated for a moment before reaching out, running her thumb over it, staring at the lines on her hand as though they held all the answers to their problems.

Which, for all Emma knew...

"Will I forget her?" she asked, softly.

"Who?" Regina asked.

"You. The woman I married."

Regina lifted tired eyes, dulled in the low light of dawn. "I don't know. Probably? If it's anything like the others, you'll remember your enchanted memories but they'll fade. They become less tangible when exposed to the world." She smiled at Emma with such raw, choking sorrow that she curled her fingers around Regina's. "The mayor you knew, the person I actually am will replace her, eventually. The badness in me has always had a talent for destroying the good."

"Well," Emma said, something protective and brave stirring in her at Regina's doubts, "then we'll deal. Because no matter the world, I know you and I believe in you. Even if those memories fade, and what I'm left with is you, the woman here right now, then I will still be on your side and there for you."

Regina's eyes welled with tears and she moved across the tent, shifting to lay her head in Emma's lap, gripping her hand with desperate strength. Emma lifted her spare hand, stroking Regina's hair and scalp and humming her wife's favourite song, knowing how much the woman fighting tears in her lap needed someone to believe in her.

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Whew. That was long and hard work. Thoughts? Poor lambs! They'll be in Misthaven in two chapters, thus wrapping up the second part of this story. Thanks again for all the comments! All errors my own.
Daybreak found Henry crouched beside Conn, lighting the camp fire as the first fitful rays of sun rose above the horizon. The morning was peaceful, birds chirping in leafless trees and flitting through dry undergrowth. It was cold, the air sharp with frost as weak sunlight wound its way through bare branches, slanting low and stinging sleepy eyes. Bran was panting beside them, muzzle lifted to taste the crisp air but no tension in him. He hadn't left Henry's side since Liath's command and he found the big dog's presence reassuring. His moms were still asleep, their little tent silent, and he was torn between wanting them to rest and wanting to see them with his own eyes. He returned to his task, reluctant to come across as a little kid in front of the soldiers.

Conn was humming to himself as he fiddled with kindling, passing it to Henry as the fire caught. Fiachra was sitting nearby, clumsily sharpening his sword. So far, the soldiers had treated him almost like he was one of them, an odd mix of deference and respect. It was nothing compared to how they acted around Liath, or the hushed awe that entered their voices when they discussed his moms, but it was something.

"You're good at this," Conn said, more relaxed this morning, a confidence to his movements that had been absent the day before.

"Thanks. Mom taught me."

"I'm glad the princess knows how to light a fire," Conn said. "Nobles should not be helpless."

"No offence, Prince Henry," Fiachra said, wryly. Conn flushed and mumbled an apology.

Henry made a face, not sure what to make of being called a prince. "I'm not a noble and mom taught me, not ma."

Conn frowned. "I am not good with your language. I don't understand."

"I have two moms," he said, simply. "Ma is Emma, who's blonde, and mom is Regina."

Conn blinked slowly, confusion knurling his brow. "So your father has two wives?"

Fiachra rolled his eyes and threw a twig at Conn. "Don't be stupid. Did you not see them yesterday? They're lovers."

"Actually, they're married," Henry corrected, placing more wood on the fire. "Things are a little more modern where I come from."

"Hey now," Fiachra chuckled, "such things are not unheard of back home, but not among nobles."

"Which you are," Conn said, smiling smugly, "because you're the son of a princess and a queen as well!"

"Technically Regina was deposed," Liath offered, emerging from nowhere as was her wont. Her cloak was wrapped securely around her, her pale eyes glinting with mischief. "And exiled. She's no longer a queen."

"She is married to the heir to the crown, so she will be queen again," Fiachra said, a gleam in his dark eyes.
"Not in her own right," Conn stated, "as the queen's wife."

"Consort," Liath corrected.

"We'll still have to call her your majesty someday," Fiachra said, rolling the words with aplomb. His accent was much less pronounced than Conn's and he seemed blessed with a playful intelligence that Henry appreciated.

"But she was married to the old king," Conn argued, stubbornly. "So she's the Queen Mother. That means we say your majesty now, doesn't it?"

"If you call Regina Queen Mother she will skin you alive," Liath warned, almost cheerfully. "For now call them Emma and Regina and be done with it."

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Emma sighed, rubbing a hand over her tired face as she tried to rouse some enthusiasm for breakfast. It had been a long night and peaceful sleep hadn't featured. Regina had dozed fitfully on her lap for a couple of hours until sounds of life from the camp had woken her. Puffy eyed, she'd withdrawn from Emma's embrace, cheeks flushed. She'd examined Emma's bruise for a moment without meeting her eyes, fingers trembling and unsure. Saying nary a word, she'd left the little tent and Emma had fought the impulse to chase after her. She was still trying to wrap her head around the things she'd seen and heard and was honestly finding Regina's distress harder to process than the fact that they'd performed a feat of fucking magic.

She had little time to dwell, however, as there was plenty of work to be done. The boys were keen but disorganised, requiring direction. Regina had retreated to the tent with the injured boy, tending to his wounds while Henry ran around with her and Liath, helping as best he could.

They broke camp after they'd all eaten, arranging one of the tents over the little cart the boys had prepared for their injured comrade. He was conscious, but groggy. He'd waved at her when she'd passed by, a chill running down her spine at the memory of the wound that had split his chest. She'd waved back, though, smiling at him as she fought the nausea. He looked much younger than the others, closer in years to Henry than his squad mates. The memory of blood, splintered bone and a slowing heart lanced through her and she turned to her son, helping him pack her saddlebags.

The little band had been given two horses and an ass when setting out, not deemed important enough for a steed each. Emma was seated on the placid mare, young Oisín's sword now hanging on her hip in place of her cudgel. Regina was seated on the restless gelding, Henry perched behind her. They led the little convoy, the experienced horses picking their way through the woods. It was colder today, their breath fogging before them and grass snapping underfoot as they began their march.

Liath was sitting on the cart's box beside the redheaded boy, speaking to him in his native tongue and teaching him how to drive the ass. The other soldiers paced alongside, looking quite pleased with the rudimentary spears the older woman had fashioned from saplings earlier that morning.

"Well you can't bloody use swords," she'd grumbled, "and at least these will keep you further from trouble."

"We have these at home," Conn said, "but Snow White's people have not."

"Well, óglaigh ró-óg, the next time you head off to join an army, bring weapons you can actually use."

The path through the woods was narrow and rutted, the going tedious. In an effort to keep from
jostling their patient, they proceeded slowly, though the boys walking did have to hurry a bit to keep up. Given the redness pinching their ears and noses they seemed gladdened by the pace. Their cloaks were thin and much mended, dull grey from many washes. Though they were quite strong and fit they were small, thin and wiry. Emma was struck again by their youth, by the bravado they employed to cover the uncertainty of being alone in the world. Part of her ached for them, knowing they'd have been eaten alive where she'd grown up.

"Since we used magic yesterday," Emma mused, glancing over at Regina, risking conversation for the first time that day, "can we just take that short cut now?"

Regina pursed her lips. "I don't know. Liath didn't suggest it and I am not confident I'd be able to transport our entire merry band all the way to Misthaven." Dark eyes, closed and wary, flicked to meet hers. Regina swallowed, pausing for a long moment before she spoke again. "Yesterday took a lot out of me," she admitted softly.

Emma nodded at that. She wasn't sure how magic worked yet but she still felt drained, in more than one way. There was no doubt in her mind that yesterday had exacted a heavy toll, emotional as well as physical, on the other woman. She didn't know what to say or do, caught between the urge to wrap Regina in her arms and scream at her for pulling away. She understood, she thought, but the sting of rejection was fierce, enough to have horrible thoughts of running away cross her mind. She bit off a huff, glancing over at the other woman. She seemed completely closed off, reluctant to meet Emma's eyes for more than a moment, perhaps overwhelmed by their time together in the tent. Her own wife had been extremely tactile, communicating with touch as readily as she did with words. This Regina was more restrained, except when it came to Henry. Emma wondered if she knew how little it took to trigger her flight instinct, how much the impulse to flee had frustrated her Regina.

She clenched her jaw. They weren't the same person, she reminded herself. She was starting to realise that she needed to understand the Regina in front of her, not try and shove her into space left vacant in her heart by her Regina. She owed it to her current companion, to the memory of her wife, to truly try and understand and not just use her knowledge of her like a book of video game cheat codes. To stay and negotiate the maelstrom of conflicting emotions emerging, even if the idea was becoming more and more terrifying.

She sighed. Life had never been particularly easy, but this was something else. Watery winter light caught the coppery highlights in Regina's hair, shining where it tumbled over her shoulders and her spine straightened. Never easy, but worth it for the ones she loved. The impulse to run, to flee and protect herself from the pain lurking on the horizon, was present, but negated by the desire to stay with the woman in front of her. She drew in a deep breath, reminding herself that such a feeling had never helped in the past. Regina had never let her down before and she honestly believed she wasn't about to start now.

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The day was uneventful, a slow march south along a road that gradually widened. The soldiers paced beside them with the boundless energy of adolescence. Henry had been more than happy to jog with them, pleased to be treated more like their peer than a child. Regina smiled indulgently as he paced beside Conn, listening to a story about fishing. His tunic was smudged with dirt and his hair tousled by the wind, his cheeks ruddy from the cold. He laughed, his warm eyes shining in the evening sun and she found herself smiling sadly. Her little boy really was growing up, she mused.

Her eyes flicked to Emma. She'd dismounted a couple of hours ago and was walking at the front of the little group, quiet and subdued. Regina's chest clenched at the thought. She knew that her pulling
away earlier had hurt Emma, that the other woman had wanted to talk when she'd woken up. But she'd been too raw to meet her eyes, confident in the knowledge that she'd have gone to pieces with any expression of kindness. She'd felt brittle, a moment away from shattering.

And to be honest, she still wasn't far off that. She felt nerves bubbling up in her throat, choking her as she tried to sort through her feelings. She was exposed, vulnerable in a way she'd never been. How foolish of her, to bare herself so baldly to another. It wasn't fair to inflict herself on Emma, either, to have burdened her with her doubts and worries. Emma had been kind to her, gentle and caring, but only because of her memories of the other version of her. She was utterly certain that an Emma with intact memories wouldn't have been so understanding.

Yet she yearned for precisely that. She yearned for understanding and acceptance. She wanted those fierce embraces and she wanted someone who'd undertake the effort to truly know her. She wanted someone who could actually face the darkness and fire within her and not wither away. She doubted neither Emma's courage nor her resolve, but how could she trust that she'd be considered worthy of either?

It had been a long time since she'd felt this impulse, this desire to reach out to another. A long time since she'd trusted anyone enough to offer her hand.

She tugged the horse to a stop, dismounting smoothly and offering him to one of the lads, a tall young man who didn't speak a word of English. He bowed happily and ran his hands through the horse's mane, delighted at the opportunity. She walked toward Emma, her eyes on the straight back and stiff legs. A small smile bloomed from sympathy coming easily.

"Are you sore?" she asked, when she neared the other woman. Emma jerked, her eyes wide and startled.

"Urgh, yes," she said after a few long moments. "Not used to riding for so long." There was something tentative, hopeful, beneath the fear in her eyes. Was it the certainty that she wasn't good enough? Regina's heart lurched, well used to not being enough and she clenched her jaw, her heart unwilling to indulge Emma's fears in the way it usually did her own.

"It's hard," she said, stepping forward. They walked together, quiet for a long moment. The fitful sunshine clipped through the smooth branches and drooping ferns, catching little beads of light as it descended. They neared each other, falling into step on the forest pathway. Emma was silent, shooting cautious gazes at her through the chilly air.

She didn't know what to say, how to begin the conversation that needed to happen. She didn't know how to speak to the woman beside her, only that she really needed to, to ease the pain she'd caused. She chanced a glance to Emma, only to meet bright eyes brimming with emotion.

She bit her lip and let out a gruff laugh. "I'm sorry I'm so awful at this, Emma."

Emma studied her for a long moment, something delicate in her gaze. "You don't need to apologise." "I do," she said, sighing. "I don't want to hurt you. Or lead you on. Give you false hope."

Emma frowned at her then, raised a hand and curling it around the crook of her elbow. "False hope?"

Regina sighed. "You hated me, for all I'd done. I don't want you to think you'll actually like me when this is over. When you remember."

Emma was quite for a long moment before she squeezed Regain's elbow and released it. "I suspect I
"All of this is so crazy, Regina," she sighed, "but just keep me on track. Let me know what you're feeling and just be real with me. Can you do that?"

Regina squeezed the fingers woven with her own, feeling the warmth despite the gloves they both wore. She'd spent so much of her life hiding her true self that she barely knew what it meant to be real. But something about the way that Emma leaned against her and ran her thumb over the back of her knuckles made her want to try. Made her want to be honest and brave for once in her life.

"I'll try," she said, a quiet promise beneath the frosty trees. She paused, taking a quick glance at Emma and was surprised and delighted to find her looking at her, relief lighting her features. Something gentle, a precious and fragile emotion treated kindly, lit her face and Regina's heart thumped, realising how much she wanted to see that look again.

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Hours later, after they'd set camp and fed themselves, the little Swan-Mills family found themselves indulging in a round of star gazing. They were curled together close to the camp fire, huddled close to each other and enjoying a playful discussion about the stars.

"That one looks like a z," Henry remarked, pointing up at the night sky. Sparks from the fire joined the stars above every now and again, the red embers swirling through the cold night air. Their breath fogged as well, little puffs lifting from their mouths. Things felt a little bit more relaxed between Regina and herself, after their talk, and they'd even edged into a little bit of banter when Henry had wandered over to them. It was perhaps a touch stilted but Emma was still counting any joking as progress.

"That one's a donkey," Emma proclaimed, proudly. "See? There's the legs and the back, even a tail!"

"You are a donkey, Miss Swan," Regina scoffed. "That is the constellation of the divine stallion, Rocinante."

Emma lifted her head, scandalised. "Oh my god, you're calling me an ass." She made an unhappy noise and flopped back down. She squirmed her shoulders back towards Henry, a grin on her face as she winked at him. "Number one, Regina, it's Swan-Mills and number two, you are actually the ass."

"Ma, quit it. If mom says you're an ass, you're an ass."

"Henry Daniel Mills!" Regina scolded, though there was affronted humour in her voice.

"Swan-Mills, too," he corrected, rolling his head onto his mom's shoulder. Emma saw Regina move to adjust her warm cloak, tucking it more securely around Henry's chin. He was such a little troll, she mused fondly. She'd taught him well. "Is that where you got your horse's name from?"

"Yes," she said, her voice soft with the memory. "My father and I used to love taking a walk on winter evenings, just out into the garden. He told me stories and taught me about all the constellations."

The note of yearning in Regina's voice held fragile sorrow, something brittle and wary. Emma rolled towards her, just as Regina lifted her face. The bright firelight danced over the planes of her face, catching her cheeks and full lips. The thought that the woman before her had actually killed the father she spoke of crossed her mind, sending a shudder down her spine. Regina, as observant as ever,
glanced away, her eyes distant and haunted.

Emma sighed and reached over Henry, grasping Regina's hand and running her thumb over her knuckles.

"So, your dad was a complete sweetheart," she said, allowing every ounce of fondness she'd felt for him to fill her voice. "However," she chuckled, pausing as Regina turned her hand over in her own. She traced the lines of her palm with the tip of her thumb, chuckling to herself. "He witnessed a few of my most excruciatingly embarrassing moments."

Henry wiggled with joy, knowing the stories well. He grasped their conjoined hands, idly running his little fingers over their own. Emma risked a glance at Regina and found her eyes glowing, soft and young in a way they hadn't been since finding her again. She took a breath and spoke, the three of them gazing up at the stars and sharing stories.

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Dusk was falling towards the end of the second day after leaving the soldier's camp, the lavender veils of a winter evening folding into the quiet shadows beneath the broad trees. The road was wider now and the going easier. They'd even met other travelers along the road, quiet peasants who moved out of their way.

Henry was running with Bran beside Conn, to whom he'd clearly taken a shine. Regina stifled a yawn, stiff after a full day in the saddle. Emma had abandoned hers hours previous, walking with the ass and giving the mare to Liath.

"Are we making camp soon?" she asked.

"No need," Liath sighed with relief. "There's a village up ahead, with an inn. We're well within Misthaven's borders now."

"And a barracks," Fiachra added, eyes wary. "They sent us on our mission."

"Well," Emma laughed, "you found the missing princess. Surely they'll give you a bag of doubloons or something."

Regina rolled her eyes, though the exasperation she felt had a fond tint to it. "A hot meal might be more desirable, dear."

"Or a bath," Henry sighed. "All I can think of right now is how much the Fellowship of the Ring must have stunk by the end of the trilogy."

She and Emma shared a laugh, their eyes meeting for a long moment, an affectionate smile softening Emma's face. Liath drew her mare to a halt, dismounting stiffly.

"I am getting much too old..." she groused. "Emma, Henry, come here." Regina paused as well, nodding thoughtfully and made to dismount as well. "Oh no, stay," Liath called, making her pause. "In fact, you take Henry."

Liath helped her haul her son up behind her, settling him over a blanket. She gave Emma a leg up, launching her over the saddle. Emma wasn't the most accomplished rider Regina had ever seen but she was quite competent, confident without indulging her customary tendency to show off. She'd been surprised and pleased to hear that riding had been a much loved family activity enjoyed by the three of them, in their false memories.
"Regina," their guide called. "Do you have anything from the Crown? With the queen's seal?"

Regina nodded grimly and reached into a saddle bag. She withdrew a folded square of parchment and held it up. Liath nodded and turned to the soldiers. Regina swallowed nervously, the reality of their situation suddenly beginning to dawn.

"Conn, you're in command of this group but don't do anything unless we tell you to." The boy scowled but Fiachra cleared his throat.

"They won't be happy that we found the princess, will they?"

Regina tightened her grasp on the reins, aware that Henry was stiffening behind her. Emma frowned, glancing around.

"What? I thought they wanted me back."

"It brings honour," Conn explained, "we are not worthy."

Regina felt her spine stiffen and she wheeled the horse around, feeling Henry grasp her waist. Emma followed suit, thought slightly less gracefully.

"You are soldiers of the White Kingdom," she said, injecting power into her words, looking at each of the boys in turn. Liath provided translation for those whose understanding wasn't as good. She sat up straight in the saddle, travel worn and dusty but every inch the queen she'd been.

"You fought ogres and survived in the wilds and you succeeded in your mission," Emma added, her eyes glinting fiercely and Regina's heart stuttered. "You shared your camp and protected us on the road here. There is no one more worthy."

Her voice was firm, very much the sheriff rousing her deputies though as her eyes met Regina's, there was well-concealed pain, the empathy of one who'd often been deemed unworthy.

"Hold your heads high," Regina commanded, "as though you were crossing the bridge to Misthaven Keep itself, in silvered mail. And if any bastard so much as looks at you sideways, I'll set them on fire."

They turned to continue, Conn and the tallest young man leading, their long spears gleaming in the darkening air. Someone had wisely attached a white cloth to one, a makeshift banner gleaming in the gloaming. She and Emma followed, their mounts close enough that their knees brushed, the cart squeaking behind them. Liath was leading the ass, her quiver back at her hip and her sword loose at her side. Henry squeezed her belly and she turned to regard him, entirely too pleased by the wide smile on his face.

The forest gave way to fields, the distant lights of homesteads twinkling into being as stars did overhead. The piping calls of song birds gave way to more plaintive hoots, interspersed with the barking of dogs.

Emma's knee nudged her own and she glanced over at her, the fading light lending her an ethereal appearance, almost otherworldly.

"It goes without saying," she murmured, for her and Henry's ears only, "that if anyone has anything to say to you, I'm going to throw them in jail."

Regina nudged her knee back. "You're not sheriff here. They're allowed to hate me, Emma."
"I'm a princess and the mother of your son," she groused.

"And you're better than I was," she said, firmly. "They're allowed to hate me and even express it, within reason." She snorted inelegantly. "This hasn't been a dictatorship since I left."

Emma scowled but kept her peace. Silence reigned for a long moment, before a soft voice made it's way from the front of the little group. Conn was singing softly, some sort of marching song in the soldiers’ native language. It was rhythmic, naturally, with a rolling cry cresting through it. The other boys sang with him, their voices strong and proud as they neared the little hamlet. Liath was chuckling to herself and Regina resolved to inquire about the song later.

"Óró," he sang, his voice strong and certain. The others took up the refrain, proud and happy as they approached the village.

After a short while, and with darkness fully descended, they reached the small town. A guard lounging outside a little tollbooth sat up, scrambling to draw his sword.

"Halt! Who goes?"

"We are soldiers of Queen Snow's army," Conn said, though Regina thought it sounded a bit rehearsed. "On official crown business. We ask for the commander here."

The sentry glared at them, lifting a lantern to peer at them. "You don't sound like no soldiers I ever heard."

"We bring Princess Emma, as was ordered," he barked, scowling mightily.

The sentry's eyes widened and he took the little group in, his eyes finally settling on Regina. With a terrified squeak, he ran for the barracks.

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Two hours, the majority of a roast piglet, a bath and a flagon of ale later, Emma stood in the centre of her room in the inn, anxiously fiddling with Henry's tunic. He batted her hands away, scowling at her. "Ma! Quit it! You're worse than mom."

She managed to calm herself somewhat, even managing to sit down as the door swung open, Regina entering.

"The men," she said, still unable to resist twisting her lip in humour at the phrase, "are settled. They've brought a healer to check Oisín and the horses are being given a good rub down. The knight who commands the barracks was out hunting today but arrived shortly after we did. He'll meet us in the common room."

"OK," Emma said, nodding. "Cool. So, uh, what now?"

"Now we go and negotiate for the supplies we need to complete the journey."

Emma nodded. "And we're still not using magic, right?"

Regina shook her head. "I spoke to Liath. Not if we can avoid it. Again, unless it's life or death. We could split up-"

"No!" Henry interrupted, jumping to his feet. "No, mom. We stick together." Emma nodded firmly and Regina tilted her head, acquiescing. "We're a family."
Regina nodded softly, reaching out to smooth his hair. "We are, sweetheart," she said, with the same crack in her voice that told Emma she was still doubting how long that would last. "We need to go down. Just be mindful. This far out, a lot of people didn't get taken by the curse, but they all suffered from it. They are not what you'd call my biggest fans."

"SQSQSQSQ"

They made their way down into the common room, where Conn and Fiachra were trying to stand up straight and appear intimidating. Liath was seated beside the fire, the dogs snoozing on the rug before the grate a bigger threat than the lads. She bore an inscrutable expression, wary eyes taking in her surroundings and Emma realised she was nervous, unlike her insouciance in the tavern up north.

Regina guided her to a table and she sat stiffly, the other woman to one side and Henry to her other.

The door opened several moments later and four large men in polished armour entered. Their leader stood opposite her, a tall man with a receding hairline and a red face. He frowned at her, his gaze sliding to Regina and Emma was startled by the flash of hatred that passed his face.

"Your highnesses," he bit, sketching a bow to the table, though he sneered at Regina as he did. "I am Sir John of Broadleigh and I command this garrison. I bid you welcome." Sir John's eyes were set close together in his face and he held himself with the air of born bully. He was a large man who'd clearly had his nose broken several times.

Emma shifted in her seat, clenching her jaw and wondering if she'd be blessed with an opportunity to break his nose again.

"Thank you, Sir John," she said, awkwardly. "You've been very hospitable."

"As is only fitting," he stated.

"Um," she coughed into her fist, casting a desperate glance at Regina, not feeling particularly cut out for this princess business. The other woman lifted a wry eyebrow and gave her a very familiar look, one urging her to get her shit together. She'd often been on the receiving end of it during town hall meetings.

"Right, so we need to get to Misthaven Castle, as quickly as we can."

"I shall summon the royal carriage tomorrow, it should arrive from Highbridge within three days."

Emma didn't think she liked the sound of that and judging by how Regina stiffened beside her, neither did she.

"No, no. That's not necessary. We just need horses."

Sir John scowled. "That is no way for the crown princess to travel."

She felt something in her tighten at the disapproving tone he'd used and while not getting saddle sores sounded great, she was too stubborn a person to back down. "Horses, please, Sir John."

"Your highness," he ground, a muscle in his jaw jumping. Regina's knee bumped against hers and she nudged back, sharing the little victory. "We live to serve. I will assemble my finest knights to accompany you."

"We don't need knights," Emma said, frowning. "Do we?" she asked, turning to Liath.
"Not unless you want to hear a lot of very boring stories about jousting."

"You cannot travel without armed protection!" Sir John shouted, sitting forward. His face was reddening, his eyes narrowing.

"Well, the guys will come with us, then," she said, gesturing to Conn. "They've been doing a great job so far."

"What about Oisín?" Henry asked, frowning.

"He's still no where near strong enough to ride." Regina mused, folding her arms, glancing into the fireplace, staring at the flickering flames. "Perhaps he could stay here to convalesce."

Emma saw the way Sir John's face twisted into a mien of unbridled, dark hatred when Regina spoke and she felt herself leaning forward, encroaching on his space. "Misthaven's the capital, right? There might be doctors or nurses from home, right? He might be better off coming."

Liath cleared her throat. "So, then we need eight horses and a couple of pack mules."

"And another donkey for the cart?" Emma suggested, seeing that she was now really getting under the man before her's skin.

"I simply cannot allow you to travel with... with inexperienced curs as your protectors!"

_Oh man, you have really got that back to front._

Emma shrugged. "We've done well so far."

"You were in the wilderness."

"And you're saying that the main road is dangerous? Isn't it your job to keep it safe?" Emma said, peering at the man. His heated gaze fell to Regina and Emma's jaw clenched, receiving the message loud and clear.

"You can't go without ladies in waiting, neither," one of the other men said. "It's not proper."

"Waiting for what?" Emma asked, blinking. "I've been wiping my own... nose for thirty years. I got this." Correctly sensing that she'd reigned her cruder self in to spare Henry's delicate ears, Regina actually patted her knee. Emma brightened, wondering if maybe she was better at this royalty stuff than she'd first thought.

"Well, to chaperone as well," Sir John said.

"I'm married and have a son, thank you very much. Bit late for that."

The knights straightened at that piece of information, eyes wide. "Well, where's your husband then?"

"Right here," Regina drawled, pausing to throw quite a significant look Emma's way. Emma found herself blinking, her heart thundering in her ears as it sent every drop of blood in her body below her waist. Oh boy, was _that_ blast from the past.

"We do things differently back home," Henry said, to Emma's gratitude as she wasn't sure she'd be able to articulate a sentence right now. "Ma doesn't need a parade to get to Misthaven, just a little help."

"And discretion," Liath said, her voice low and very calm. "We've made our way without incident
because we didn't draw attention to ourselves. Kindly give us what your princess has requested and button your lip."

The man in front was spluttering, clearly struggling and Emma eventually took pity on him. "Our guide is right. Please, consider this an order. If anything happens, it's on my head."

The knights turned to look at each other, flummoxed, before numbing dumbly "Meet us in the stables in the morning, your highness. Begging your leave?"

Emma stood, which also appeared to shock the men, and offered her hand.

"Thank you. I'll tell your superiors that you're running a tight ship here."

Sir John shook her hand as though he thought he'd be executed for touching her, fleeing as quickly as his stout legs would carry him. They paused a moment before Liath threw a cork at Emma's head, smacking her smartly.

"Ow!"

"You enjoyed that far too much," she admonished. She moved to the table, setting a bottle in the centre. She turned her attention to Regina, who was collecting glasses from a sideboard. "And you! You two are well matched, indeed."

Emma could have sworn a delicate flush brightened Regina's cheeks for a moment, but it might have been a trick of the light. She ushered Conn and Fiachra to free seats and the little group sat, Liath pouring a drink.

"Now what?" Henry asked, peering at the bottle with interest.

"Now we acknowledge that we've humiliated a big bully who oversees the law enforcement in this town," Emma sighed, sipping some of the mead. "So we definitely can't leave Oisín." She turned to Conn, who was cradling his drink with glee. "We'll bring him in the cart."

"And we find a veil or a hood for our highly recognisable companion," Liath added, nodding at Regina.

All assembled nodded, though Regina rolled her eyes. "If I must."

"We keep a low profile and hopefully make our way to the castle. It's about three days if we leave early."

They were quiet for a moment, considering the fact that they were on the home straight of their strange little journey. Emma cast her eyes around the table and raised her glass thoughtfully.

"Well, here's to the road, and finding good company to walk it."

The glasses met and a chorus of salutations rang out. The final set of eyes she met, as dark as the smoked mead in the glass she held, reflected the dancing firelight. Roiling and mysterious, affection and fear in equal measure, they held something she trusted implicitly. Though life was becoming increasingly complex, there was nothing in the world that soothed Emma Swan's heart as much as the bright eyes before her.

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Jaysus, that was hard work. I'm really not happy with this chapter but needed to move on! What do
you think? We're almost back to the castle! Almost back to the lunatics from Storybrooke! It'll be mental. Thanks again for all your likes, kudos and comments! This story is being written as I go, so reviews do help to inspire me to keep ticking along... Hint hint.
Chapter 16

So, I did promise this chapter would get them to Misthaven... It grew legs. Seriously long legs. So it needed to be split into two. The second half should be up in a day or two, if you want to wait and read them together. The pacing might work a bit better?

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The scent of hay and horses filled her senses as Regina entered the stables in the gloom before dawn. She hadn't slept well the previous evening, despite a couple of glasses of mead and a comfortable bed. They were well within the kingdom of Misthaven proper and it roused a feeling of sickly dread within her. She'd be surrounded by people who despised her, many of whom wanted her executed in some disgustingly imaginative manner. She wandered to the back of the stable, reaching the grey gelding. She'd learned he was called Dapple, an unassuming name for a proud creature. He seemed pleased to see her, gladly accepting an apple. She took out a brush, working it through his mane idly.

The simple task soothed her racing mind, thoughts drifting away as she smoothed his rough coat. The door creaked open and Bran entered, the big dog panting in the chilly morning air. She smiled at him, pausing to run her hand over his broad head.

"Good boy," she murmured, "you getting ready too?"

He chuffed and took a seat in a vacant stall, tongue lolling out happily. The door creaked again and she was somewhat surprised to see a sleepy Emma entering, two steaming mugs in her hands.

"You know, I was wondering, how come you never got a dog? Or a cat?"

Regina blinked, totally taken aback by the non-sequitur. She regarded Emma somewhat incredulously, an eyebrow lifted.

"Excuse me?"

"You," she said, handing her a mug, "love animals. How come you never got a pet?"

She swallowed thickly, watching steam curl from the mug for a long moment, before she sighed.

"With time frozen, there weren't any animals being born. No new puppies or kittens." She sipped her tea. It was flavoured with a touch of honey and lightened with fresh milk. She sighed in contentment, enjoying the comfort of it. "And I don't have a good track record with animals."

Emma lifted an eyebrow, gesturing to the dog in the straw. Regina shrugged, silence dragging on for a long moment. "I love them, don't get me wrong. But I cut Rocinante's heart out to try and cast my curse. I just..."

Emma's eyes were sad, knowing and wounded on her behalf. "When I was maybe eight, I found a kitten. I begged my foster parents to let me keep him but he ended up going to the pound, anyway. Pretty sure he didn't find a forever home, either."

Regina cut her eyes away, a lump in her throat, bare before Emma once more. "My mother had the valet drown any strays around. We needed mousers, for the stores, but they were forbidden from entering the house. If she caught me or the servants playing with one, she'd drown it herself. Didn't want them to become accustomed to being inside or used to affection."
Emma let out an angry breath, shaking her head. "You know, I really don't like this world. It's cruel and it's violent."

Regina cradled her tea to her chest, surprised at how uncomfortable Emma's anger on her behalf made her. "You're standing beside its cruelest, most violent inhabitant, don't forget."

Emma was quiet for a moment, her eyes fixed on Regina's face, gaze unwavering. She set her mug down and straightened her back. She reached for Regina's mug and placed it beside her own. Movements sure, touch unwavering, she reached out and grabbed Regina's bare hands. Her wedding ring, which Regina really should have asked her to remove by now, glinted in the orange glow generated by the intersection of lantern light and the tentative dawn outside.

"I know there's a lot about you that I don't know, Regina. The more time I spend with you, the more apparent that becomes. You're not the woman I married."

The statement caused Regina's chest to unexpectedly clench and it took a lot of effort not to look away, to cut her eyes away from the surprising hurt. Emma squeezed her fingers, her hands warm and dry and certain.

"But you are not the Evil Queen anymore. You did some truly fucked up things but you have changed. You're you. A mother looking out for her son. Someone trying to help people you've wronged. The kind of person who saves a stranger's life." Her eyes were shining with sincerity, with steadfast intensity and she looked every inch the saviour, then. Standing tall and firm.

"And even though you're different, you're you. And I care for you. So does Henry and those big mutts and Liath and the boys." She lifted a hand and brushed a lock of unruly hair back behind her ear, cupping her face firmly. The tips of her finger brushed her ear lobe and Regina swallowed against the emotion rising in her, choked by it.

"We believe in you. You aren't that person anymore and you need to believe it too, Regina." Her thumb swiped the top of Regina's cheek and she grasped Emma's other hand in both of hers. "You need to believe it because if last night showed me anything, there is a kingdom out there who will absolutely see you as evil, no matter what. There are people who hate you and I know that right now, a big part of you agrees with them. I felt that the other day."

She bowed her head then, unable to meet Emma's eyes or withstand her gaze. She didn't think she'd ever felt more vulnerable in her life and she trembled, the urge to run building in her chest. The urge to snap at Emma, to deny or cast scorn or push her away swelled within her, reaching a crescendo as Emma pulled her hands from her.

"If you keep believing that about yourself, you're going to start acting like it, too." Emma sighed, fingers gentle on Regina's chin, tipping it up to meet her gaze. Green eyes were soft, loving but pained, as though the idea of how Regina felt about herself physically wounded Emma. "Don't do that to yourself, Regina."

"Emma," she gasped, feeling tears scald her eyes. The certainty, the knowledge of who she was and the memories of what she'd done were clamouring through her mind, loud and insistent. Cold, alone and unwanted. A tool for other people's schemes until she'd become the weapon to enact her own. "That's what I am," she said, misery choking her.

She shrugged, hands brushing her shoulders. "You're no one but who you choose to be."

Tears burned still, frustration and anger flaring. "Even if I decide not to be your wife? Or your friend? Or the antihero of this insipid little quest?" she snapped, pulling back and wrapping her arms
around herself, suffocated by self loathing.

A line appeared between Emma's eyebrows and she swallowed, something fragile peering through the mask of the saviour. "The only person you have to be is Henry's mom. Everything else is up to you." she shook her head, stepping back a bit, hurt flaring in green eyes. "I mean, if I lose you, I'll live." Her voice cracking on the final word was almost enough to undo Regina, but Emma did not pause. "I had to fucking do it once already. But don't you dare do that to Henry again."

"I had to leave!" she cried, her voice rough with unwanted emotion. "Jesus, Emma, you weren't meant to remember!" She brushed angry tears from her cheeks. "I tried to give you and Henry a life together without me! Without having to deal with me or magic or the damn curse!"

"And that was the last thing we ever wanted!" Emma shouted, tears rolling over her own cheeks. "Do you not get that? Do you not get that this family includes you?" Emma's voice wobbled at the end of the sentence, upset leaking through. She stepped closer, into Regina's personal space and took one of her elbows, clasping it desperately, her fingers shaking. "That's what matters. And it's hard right now. I can't promise you I'm not going to be pissed off when you bring back my memories but I promise you that Henry and I will still be your family."

Though she was fighting tears and trembling, that certainty was still there. The conviction that their little family was real and true. Her throat tightened and she stepped forward, almost pressing against Emma. She was close enough to kiss her and for a desperate moment, the temptation to do precisely that filled her, to end the conversation if nothing else. Emma didn't allow the chance, though, reaching out and wrapping strong arms around her, cradling her with ferocious care. Her own arms wound around her waist and she leaned against her, burying her face in the crook of Emma's neck.

"Just please try to believe in yourself, Regina," she said, one hand caressing the back of her head, the other resting between her shoulder blades. "Just let go of all the bullshit."

Regina dug her fingers into the saviour's muscular back and clung to her, moving her head to lay it over her heart. It was pounding, fast and strong beneath the soft skin exposed by Emma's tunic. She pressed her cheek to the warmth there, craving the comfort. Despite the turmoil in her heart, pressing against Emma Swan calmed her, healed something within her that had been broken for a very long time.

The aroma of clean straw and horses mixed with the unique tang of Emma Swan's skin, a frantic pulse beneath her ear. Maybe it would be impossible, to see herself as anything but the monster she'd become. She doubted she'd be able to be anything else, when she'd see it reflected from every face in the realm. But standing there, embraced by one of the kindest hearts she'd ever encountered, she felt the desire to be good enough, to be the person Emma Swan knew, fill her chest.

A gentle hand stroked her hair and Emma's heart rate slowed, her body relaxing even as she held on more tightly. She ran her hands up to cradle well defined shoulder blades and buried her face into the patch of warm skin. Her parted lips inadvertently brushed over her breastbone, frustration and anger seeping away and for the first time, she felt a spark of hope that she could be the person her family knew.

Or, at least, become someone like her.

SQSQSQSQ

Progress sped considerably, between the extra ass pulling the cart and something resembling a road. Sir John had glared daggers at them all that morning, and his subordinates had stared at Regina with a frightful mixture of fear and loathing. She was glad to leave them far behind, though she presumed
the'd be sending word ahead to Snow White. The muddy ruts in the road were stiff in the cold of winter, ice creaking beneath the cart wheels. Oisin still needed to travel in his bed of straw and warm blankets but had at least spent most of the day awake, chatting happily to the redheaded driver, Art. Emma was sore by the time they approached another village that evening, keen for a proper bed but after a quick visit, Liath had guided them to a field half a mile distant. She hadn't said much, though she hardly needed to. Instead, she'd arranged them into pairs after the camp was laid, practicing their sword work.

"Faster!" Liath barked, arms folded in front of her. "Move your damn feet."

Emma circled Conn, pared sticks held in front of them. The young man peered up from beneath curly blond hair, his face stern with concentration. She lunged and he sidestepped, slashing at her, but she spun around and batted his stick away, booting him in the backside. He grumbled and she grinned. They were three for three, now. Henry was receiving some pointers from their guide, his little brow furrowed. Neither she nor Regina had been thrilled with the idea of his learning how to use a sword but realised he'd be very unhappy if left out.

Emma held a hand up, panting. "Time to call it an evening?"

"We have three each! We need one more to see who wins!" he protested, almost pouting.

"We can pick this up tomorrow, buddy," she laughed.

He sighed but nodded. They turned to watch the others, Liath moving between them and giving advice. Emma grabbed a skin of water and took a long sip. She was pretty sweaty after the practice and sat on a nearby log, motioning for Conn to follow. She hadn't had much opportunity to talk to the boys, between their travels and varying levels of comfort with English. She handed him the skin and he drank deeply.

"So. You joined Snow White's army to find me, huh?"

He sat and grunted, running a thumb over his little soul patch. "We did. They came to our village a month ago. Gave our mothers' coin. Gave us weapons and armour."

Emma cast a skeptical eye over the leather jerkin he wore. Sir John and his gout ridden knights had worn chain mail and she had no doubt they had full suits like something out of Bedknobs and Broomsticks. He sighed, drawing her attention once more.

"We have coin for two more months. Then, we can go home or stay if they still need us."

Emma nodded. The idea of contracted mercenaries wasn't unknown to her, she mused wryly. "You should go home, after."

Conn frowned. "Why? The village is poor. The land was ruined by ogres. We cannot farm. We cannot hunt."

"Well, can't Snow White help your village?"

He shook his head dismissively. "Not her land. The ogres came from there, mind. We have neither king nor queen. We want none."

Emma felt her brow crease. "But you're suffering."

He turned to her, his bright blue eyes cold and much older than his youthful features would suggest. "Show me he who does not." He shook his head. "Your wife took the people from the land, to the
place where they didn't age or die. They grew fat and happy. Without them, the ogres took the land. We starved and we died."

Emma blinked at that, not imagining that many had such a perspective on the curse. Conn mistook her surprise and ploughed on. "The men in the barracks called her evil. But those men kill my people, if we are in the way. They rape and steal. We are foreign bastards to them, worse than rats. All from that kingdom are vicious. Of course their queen is ruthless." He lifted an eyebrow. "She saved our comrade. She is the mother of our friend. Let them call her what they will. We will take her coin and be her soldiers, if she asks."

He stood and grinned at Emma. "Your mother is the queen. Your wife is another queen. You need to learn to fight stronger foes than the likes of me."

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Henry was perched in the back of the cart, enjoying the opportunity to chat with Oisín. The other lad had been too exhausted to speak much before but was gaining strength day by day. His eyes were bright and animated as he spotted Henry. Art was sitting close to him, stitching pieces of cloth to the white banner they'd hung off Conn's spear.

"Your highness," he said, smiling broadly. "Welcome to you."

Henry rolled his eyes. "Urgh, please no. Just Henry. How are you?"

"Sore," he said, wryly. "Tired." He touched his chest, where a bright red patch of skin lay as a reminder of the wound he'd suffered. "They say your mothers healed me."

Henry nodded, enthusiastically. The boy bit his lip and sighed. "I was never cut out to be a soldier. But when they were going, I wanted to be there. I have no one at home and I speak your language better than any of them, except maybe Fiachra. I thought I might be a poet."

Art glanced up and extended a hand, reaching for another scrap of cloth. "A poet?" Henry asked, frowning.

He smiled and nodded. "I could watch them be heroes and tell their stories."

Henry's eyes brightened and he leaned forward, excitement brimming in his chest. Oisín laughed softly and lifted his hands. "So, how did you come to be here?"

Henry's back straightened and he drew a deep breath, settling into the straw and beginning his tale with his mother's funeral.

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Regina had skirted the edge of the campsite, finding small tasks to occupy herself. She felt restless, unsettled. Part of her had been tempted to join in with the fencing lessons, and perhaps she would have if the only witnesses had been Henry and Emma. Sceolta loped beside her, butting into her side as they went. The big fool was behaving in a more affectionate manner than normal and Regina wondered if he was hungry. She massaged his ear and clicked her tongue at him.

She idly gathered dryish wood, footfalls soft through the leaf litter as she went. The temperature had dropped again and her breath curled before her face, the first hints of frost tightening the edges of the air. Two days and they'd be at the castle. One more night on the road sharing a blazing fire beneath a starry sky. Another day or two spent listening to their little group shorten the journey with songs or stories. The boys had taken Henry under their wing, teaching him their language and guiding him on
Dapple, when Regina needed a break from the saddle. They were boisterous and loud, but never rough or unkind with him. They didn't treat him like a child, either, and she saw how he bloomed under their regard.

She was incredibly proud of him, in those moments, seeing his heart open and generous. He was friendly and at ease. He resembled his other mother, she acknowledged, and it made her heart ache. Torn between grief and gratitude. Half hating Emma for leaving so much of herself in their son and half adoring her for it. Henry was different, brave and more confident. He was the most curious mix of the little boy she recalled before lies had poisoned their bond and a strong young man.

He'd never learned distrust, she realised. Never had a reason to guard his heart. He'd lost so much, his beloved mother, but it had not hardened him. She watched him there, more a prince than he'd ever been under her possessive watch. She returned to the fire pit, gently placing her bundle of sticks down, kneeling in the soft leaves and building the fire. She sat back, staring into the leaping flames, her heart heavy once more. What place did she have? What good had her influence ever exerted over her son?

She sat with her knees together, fists clenched in her lap. Emma had asked her to never leave Henry and she would not. But he would leave her. He would find a castle full of new people and adventures, coupled with his true memories. He would be the one to leave. She'd have to let him, too. Knowing that only disaster had followed her attempts to cling to love.

She watched him help Oisín from the cart, the pair met with cheers as the latter took a few wobbly steps forward. They were crowded by the other boys, and Regina's heart ached at the sight, sorrow and pride warring within her.

Warmth at her right side, as Emma sat beside her, their thighs and shoulders brushing. She didn't dare look at her, still raw from the stables, though she did lean her shoulder into hers, heavy as lead but brittle as the frost riming the edges of leaves. Emma had her hands resting on her own thighs, the firelight gleaming against her ring and catching Regina's eye. For a moment, she wondered what it must have been like, to slide a ring willingly over a delicate finger and swear oaths before their son and friends. To have chosen to spend a life with someone who loved her and actually being able to do so.

Emma turned her hand over, opening it, though not moving it from her own leg. The tattoo on her wrist was visible and Regina found herself stroking her thumb over it before she realised what she was doing. It wasn't particularly well executed, the edges blurring a little, but she found it oddly charming. Her fingers found the heel of Emma's hand, sliding along the edge of her palm as her thumb dipped into the well in its centre. Emma's fingertips curled inwards, gently grazing her. She explored the pads beneath her, roughened with callouses, a contrast to the sinew and bone on the back of her hand.

Henry shouted and they both glanced up, watching him toss his head back and laugh. Conn threw a handful of leaves at him and blushed, his pride clearly bruised. But for that, he still grinned as he reached out and shoved their son. He shoved back, though the older lad barely budged, and he arched an eyebrow. They were slightly too far away to make out his words, but whatever he said had drew gales of laughter. His eyes shone and his face split in a wide, charming smile.

"Oh my god," Emma chuckled, fondness and adoration and pride lacing her voice, "your son, madame mayor. Having the room eating out of the palm of his hand."

She almost turned to Emma, but she couldn't tear her eyes from their son. She laced their fingers together, Emma shifting and tightening the grip. The weight of her head came to rest atop her own, Emma slightly taller than her. She sighed and leaned against her, rearranging their shoulders a bit. In
another life, another time, such affection would have been unimaginable and swiftly punished. And it probably would be, in the near future, if she were honest. But in that moment, with Emma's fingers threaded through her own and her gentle breath riffling her hair, she couldn't refuse herself the comfort of her presence.

It wouldn't be so terrible, she thought, to be loved by Emma Swan. To share a life with her.

She closed her eyes, listening to the bonfire crackle and her son laugh, soothed by gentle warmth. She'd enjoy it, she decided, while it lasted, knowing it wouldn't be for too long.

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Let me know what you think! It was a difficult call to split this chapter, but we would have ended up with an eight thousand word chapter. Hope the pacing doesn't suffer... Comments always welcome!
Emma finished spreading her blankets in the tent, idly wondering if Liath would be successful in obtaining some fresh meat. The temperature had dropped once more but they'd again decided against staying in a nearby hamlet. The little village lay half in ruin, buildings roofless and blackened. Time had nibbled stones from wall tops and left broken shards of glass hanging in window frames, with heaps of rubble vanishing beneath dead briars. The villagers had been hard eyed and mistrustful, not even willing to trade with them. Emma suspected they weren't the original inhabitants, rather squatters, and unwilling to risk attention and eviction.

There was no denying they were passing through a land that had suffered. The roads were rutted and potholed, frozen mud and icy puddles slowing their progress. The unruly fields were tangled with dead grass and tall weeds, fences broken and hedges overgrown. The boys were quiet, too, wary eyes taking in their surroundings with more care than they had before. Their spears were held in white knuckled grips and they spoke less. Even Henry had seemed subdued earlier, spending a good portion of the day in the covered cart with Oisín.

She stood, glancing over at the fire. Regina and Henry were sitting close to it, fiddling with wood. Loathe though she was to admit it, she was utterly rubbish with fires and her input wouldn't help much. She was also cognizant of how fragile Regina appeared and how she seemed in need of the reassurance their son's presence afforded. She glanced around, spotting Liath off to one side, skinning hares. She wandered over, wiping her face tiredly.

"Hi," she said, taking a seat. "Want a hand?"

"Thanks," Liath grunted, passing her a limp body. "The dogs went mad earlier."

"They're fast," Emma remarked, beginning the task of skinning the animal in her hands. "Strong, too."

"They're special," Liath chuckled. "Finest hounds I ever encountered."

"You'll have to tell us how you got them, sometime," Emma mused.

"It's a long story and the telling would definitely require something to wet the whistle."

Liath was dumping entrails into a hole in the ground, along with feet and heads. The contents of the grizzly pit caused Emma to wrinkle her nose but she continued along gamely.

"So, we'll be there tomorrow, huh?"

Liath paused, regarding her for a long moment with shrewd eyes. "By evening, I reckon. You ready?"

Emma sighed, leaning her elbows on her knees. "Honestly? No. I mean, they expect me to be what, some kind of fairy tale princess?"

Liath shrugged a shoulder. "You're not a fairy. But you will need to practice your magic with Regina, once we arrive. And your sword work." Pale eyes darkened and Liath dipped her head. "This not a kind world."

Given what she'd seen, heard and been told, she didn't doubt that statement. Her thoughts passed to Regina, to the uncertainty and doubt she was holding, to the pain visible in her eyes. It wasn't easy,
being the strong one in a relationship. Being the grown up. She was only now beginning to understand how much work Regina had done, stepping up with far more frequency than she had. A pang of guilty sorrow filled her chest, regret drawing a sharp breath. "Any advice?"

The older woman stood, using the edge of her boot to refill the hole over the offal. Her face was thoughtful and somewhat sad as she held her hand out for Emma's hare. "Hold that thought and wait here," she said softly. Emma nodded, staring down at the blood on her hands and allowing her mind to drift a bit. The air was crisp, the call of birds and the rustling of leaves filling her senses as her breath curled around her face. The winter sunlight filtered through bare branches, flitting over her hands, blood and all. A firm pat on her shoulder caused her to look up to find Liath standing behind her.

"Come on, there's a stream over here. We can wash our hands."

They made their way down a slope, finding a small burn. Liath knelt, dipping her hands into the clear water. Emma followed suit, the icy water cold enough to sting her fingers, the shocking cold enough to steal her breath. The water gushed over stones and wrapped itself into intricate swirling patterns as it went, catching the wavering sunlight. It carried the blood from her hands, rusty flakes soon vanishing in the current. So perishing and clear it was almost invisible over delicate silt.

Liath leaned against a tree, watching the water flow. She sighed and lifted her face to the sky, eyes closed. The day was still, so utterly calm that her breath ascended straight up, curling around the bare branches above. Wan sunlight found the planes of her face, highlighting the lines around her eyes and mouth. She looked old, Emma thought, much older than usual and she found herself wondering how many decades or centuries the other woman had seen.

"I asked her, when I set out, the same question. Any advice. And she told me not to lie to you or Henry."

Emma lifted an eyebrow. "You got pretty creative with the truth, but you never pinged my lie detector."

She chuckled. "I suppose if I could advise you, I'd urge you to seek the truth, the real truth. Regina has committed atrocities. You cannot hide from that fact, Emma. But she was a child thrust into horrible situations, betrayed by those she should have been able to trust. And she has changed."

Liath shoved off the tree, tipping her head for Emma to follow as she walked beside the little stream. "I saw her once, you know, back when she was Queen."

Emma blinked, quite taken aback. "What?"

The other woman chuckled. "Technically, I stole from her. She doesn't know I did, though, and she never saw me. It was an unimportant thing, a deed for a few acres that meant nothing to her but everything to a family of farmers. Bureaucracy gone awry, actually, a stupid mistake made by some petty functionary. I found my way into her castle and into her court. I won't lie." She paused, coming to a stop in front of a tangle of briars. "She was unhinged. spiteful and cruel and so very angry."

Emma's heart was thumping behind her breastbone, a sick feeling rising in her throat.

"Honestly," Liath sighed, "as I was leaving a thought entered my mind. I realised she'd be dead soon, and that it would be a mercy for her. I pitied her. I was very surprised to see her walking up the path to my home all those years later."

Emma approached Liath carefully, the brittle leaves beneath her feet snapping in the frost. She
clenched her fists and jaw, frowning at the woman before her, feeling tears build.

"She already told me about being the Evil Queen."

"And there will be more to learn," Liath said, grimly. "She was brutal and capricious. But," she shook her head, "she changed. She is trying to atone for her actions. To step away from being the villain."

Liath led her around the briars, eyes distant. Emma scowled.

"I know we're currently wandering through the Enchanted fucking Forest, but this is reality. Not a story. There aren't heroes and villains. There are just people. Sometimes they do shitty things and sometimes they do amazing things." She bit her lip and shook her head. "And I get it. I need to find the truth of her because if I don't, I'll lose her for sure."

"Possibly literally, if they decide to reinstate her execution order," Liath offered, her face hard. "There are few who believe in her. Many who doubt her. None who know her." She wiped her face with a weary hand. They paused at the edge of the patch of thorns, conscious of the fading light.

"I know her," Emma said, feeling a lump rise in her throat. "Not perfectly, but enough to know that I want to know more. That whatever she's done, we can figure it out. That woman up there," she raised a hand, clenching it over her burning chest, "I might not have married her but I love her. As messy and as hard as it is, I will not give up on her. Whether she wants me as her wife or friend or co-parent..." she sucked in a trembling breath, "I will be there for her."

Liath nodded, her eyes softening. "So that's my advice. Find the truth of her, the horrible as well as the wonderful. And be prepared, because to be known is to be vulnerable. Your love has a pained, battered heart and the wounded animal strikes most viciously when vulnerable."

Emma nodded, and lifted her eyes to the briars, amazed to find a perfect, tiny rosebud perched between the thorns before her. She lifted chilled fingers to it and smiled at Liath, pleased to see a knowing grin stretch her features.

"It won't be easy," she acknowledged, moving to pluck the little flower.

"But perhaps worth it?" Liath offered.

Emma nodded decisively. "Totally."

Liath chuckled. "You know, if you take that path there," she said, pointing, "there's a beautiful view to be had."

Emma nodded, cradling the little flower, glad to speak about something else.

"Maybe have a look later on."

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Regina watched as Henry stirred the pot over the fire as she deftly shredded meat from the hares Liath had handed her. They'd added the last of the vegetables that Sir John had given them, popping everything into the bubbling stew. They'd eat their fill tonight, she thought with satisfaction. Two of the boys, Art and Fiachra, approached, the former's cheeks as red as his hair.

"Tráthnóna maith duit," she said, using one of the three phrases she'd picked up. Fiachra chuckled.
"Almost," he said, shaking his head. "Are you well, your majesty?"

Regina, covered in blood and dressed like a wealthy peasant, crooked an eyebrow. She knew that her hair was messy, curling around her head, and her face was free from makeup. She hadn't appeared less regal in a very long time but she felt a soft kind of satisfaction at the eagerness in the boys' eyes. She wondered if this was what she'd have felt if she'd encouraged Henry to have more friends and involve himself with team sports. He'd been shy and she'd been reluctant to press him, recalling well how much she'd hated unwanted social interaction as a child. Maybe she should have pushed a little, she mused, seeing the ease with which he now spoke to the boys.

"You don't need to address me in that manner, Fiachra," she said as kindly as she could, sitting back on a log. "Ms Mills might be more suitable." She motioned for them to sit with her. The other boy seemed nervous, clasping a roll of fabric to his chest. She tipped her head to one side and smiled at him in what she hoped was a welcoming manner. "Dinner will be ready soon."

"It smells wonderful," Fiachra said, rubbing his hands together eagerly. Twigs snapped at the edge of the clearing as Liath and Emma reappeared, the latter meeting her eyes with a glimmer of excitement. She wandered over to them, riffling Henry's hair and sniffing the pot.

"Art has something he'd like to give you both," Fiachra said. "A gift to thank you for everything you've done for us."

Fiachra elbowed the younger boy gently and he shuffled forward, handing her the bundle of fabric. She thanked him graciously, curiosity gripping her. She'd seen the young man working on the makeshift banner for the last few days, though she'd left him to his own devices and not asked what he was doing. Henry's face was delighted, Emma's intrigued.

It was longer than she'd expected, tapering into an elegant swallow tail. Art was clearly very talented, she noted, as she took in the careful hemming. She unfolded the banner, Emma helping her from the other side and Henry the bottom. Her heart clenched in her chest, tears filling her eyes as she took in the sight. The white fabric was slightly grubby, but only in patches. A golden inescutcheon shone in the centre, holding a beautiful white swan. The creature had its elegant head raised, eyes embroidered with black thread. Arching above the golden shield, a grey crown had been picked out in careful detail. She lifted her gaze, daring to meet Emma and Henry's. Emma appeared as emotional as she felt, tears welling in her expressive green eyes.

"Guys," the other woman croaked, "this is an amazing gift." Fiachra leaned towards Art, who flushed with pleasure at the translation, bobbing his head.

Henry grinned and nudged Regina's side. "We were going to put a mill wheel here, instead of the crown but..."

"But you thought you'd make a bit of a statement," Emma chuckled, wryly. She reached out a hand, grasping Art's firmly, holding his gaze for a long moment. "Thank you, guys."

By this stage, the rest of their motley crew had gathered, huddling around the fire and the stew pot as the last of the daylight faded into the chilly mists of evening. They carefully wrapped the banner and Regina held it in her lap for a long moment, glancing to Emma and Liath. Kind, patient eyes met her own, and she was struck by the notion that the pair shared more similarities than differences. She moved her eyes to the boys around her, the golden firelight catching their bright eyes and eager faces. They were so very young and much too gentle to be soldiers. Oisín was sitting beside Henry, his delicate features glowing in the firelight beside her son's, his intelligent expression and strong nose making him appear as old as the others in that moment. She was struck by a surge of protective fondness and nodded her head firmly.
"The last men who marched under my banner did not meet a happy ending," she swallowed thickly. "In fact they were punished for it."

Conn shrugged. "That was fifteen years before any of us were born, when you were killing folk."
Bran pushed his way forward, laying a heavy head on her lap. She ran her fingers through his tangled pelt, smiling to herself. Emma shuffled, sitting close beside her and nudging her shoulder.

"Besides, that's totally our banner," she said, reaching for Henry. He nodded enthusiastically, grinning at them both.

Regina swallowed, knowing that there were Mills coats of arms, and her own personal seals from when she'd reigned. Knowing that the obsessive lunatics in charge of heraldry would have a fit if they saw the simple banner. Knowing that at one time her colours had been enough to set fear into even the stoutest of hearts. She knew there were Charming coats of arms that both Emma and Henry would be expected to wear, though the thought caused her stomach to convulse with anxious disgust.

"Things have changed," Liath said, quietly, her eyes gentle and understanding. "It won't be a bad thing to have a small reminder of that. Or to have something that belongs to just your family."

She closed her eyes against the tears welling there, unsettled and unwilling to allow herself to be so unguarded in front of so many. Emma's arm looped around her waist and she sagged against her. Henry took her hand, his grip strong and sure.

"We are your men, now," Conn said, softly. "If you are to be queens or Henry king or if you go and live as witches in a cottage, we are your men."

"Thank you, Conn," Emma said, her voice rumbling through her chest. Regina opened her eyes, shame filling her as she took in the sight of all the eyes on her. But there was no scorn or pity. No disgust or judgement. Just a group of people who cared for her family and were willing to stand with them during the times ahead.

"Thank you," she said, pleased to hear a good measure of strength in her voice. "We will hold you to no oaths. If you wish to return home, you may at any time. I can't promise the near future is going to be pleasant. But I do promise you all, you are under our protection. No harm will come to you and you will never be forced to do anything that you don't want to."

Emma nodded, squeezing her waist firmly. "And once we've fixed the problems in Misthaven, we'll go and boot those ogres out of your home."

She should have been angered by the offer, at the notion of helping a distant land for no direct benefit, but in that moment all she could see was a group of young men with hopeful faces staring between herself and Emma. Their son was there, in their midst, the expression on his face indistinguishable from the others and compassion clenched her chest. She straightened, lifting her chin and nodding imperiously her assent with Emma's words, their casual agreement curling into mist before the firelight carrying more weight than any royal decree.

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After a quiet, contemplative dinner, Regina found herself following Emma out of the camp, trailing her confident steps. Frost had found its way onto every exposed surface, adding crystalline embellishments to everything from the stones on the path to the tiniest of pine needles. The grass was stiff underfoot, crunching as they walked together in silence. The moonlight, impossibly bright, caught their breath as it curled from their lips, casting uncanny shadows as they passed.
"Here," Emma said, with poorly restrained glee as they crested a small hill. "Look," she whispered.

Regina couldn't help but smile at the other woman, as excited as a child trying to be quiet on Christmas morning. Her breath caught, though, at the sight. Acre after endless acre of dark forest, silver where frost and moonlight mingled, spread before them. Above them, the sky was powdered with endless stars, scarce only on the eastern horizon where the moon out shone them. They'd ascended a small hill which dropped off into a steep cliff before them, offering uninterrupted views of the forest below.

The vault of the night sky stretched over them, faceted and endlessly enthralling. Recognisable constellations hung there, but interspersed and enriched by a thousand other points of light. Soft, sometimes uncertain, unless caught from the corner of an eye. The cold was deep, freezing the air so that every sound snapped through it with a stark sharpness. Her face stung but her heart was soothed, gazing upwards.

"It feels like it wouldn't take much to just step up there," Emma said, tone uncommonly reverent. "Just wander forever."

The wistfulness of her voice drew her and Regina turned to face her. Her hair was almost white in the moonlight, the green of her eyes faded to pewter, but there was softness there still. She was beautiful, all her rough edges buffed away as she held her gaze, and something in Regina loosened. Embraces shared and gentle touches came to mind, generating a frisson of nervous energy. Her heart sped, her eyes blinking at the sight of Emma against the frosty trees, her expression open and so very loving.

Emma stepped forward sporting a smile Regina couldn't interpret on her lips as she raised her hands to her sable cloak, reaching for the silver broach securing it. With careful, steady movements, she threaded a tiny rose bud through the ring. It was frozen solid, a last holdover from a late bloom. Regina watched her hands, marveling at the certainty with which Emma moved. Her fingers didn't shake and her touch didn't waver. It was as though she'd done this, or something similar, many times before.

She lifted her eyes as Emma withdrew her hands, her attention earning a lopsided smile. An urgency, a morbid curiosity, gripped her as nerves tightened her stomach. Too much.

"Did you often adorn your wife with flowers?" she asked hotly, clenching her hands into fists, feeling something clutch at her throat and chest, settling to scorch her eyes. The unintended note of yearning in her voice made her want to fling herself off the bluff behind them, but the tender amusement on Emma's face gave her pause.

"When she let me," she replied, meeting her heat with cool depths, a long swim after a heat wave. "Only if there was a surplus, only if they matched her outfit." She tipped her head to one side. "Only when she was feeling like the head bitch in charge."

Regina scoffed at that. "Well, at least she had you well trained."

Emma grimaced at that, shaking her head. "Wow… Jesus. Well, I guess she did, your majesty."

Regina almost - almost - stomped her foot. "Would you stop that! How can you be so… so passive! Why don't you fight back?"

Emma shrugged. "Well, I guess because I've had more than a decade to get used to your tantrums. Don't mistake me not taking the bait for a fight with being passive." She sighed, her eyes darkening as she folded restless arms around her own chest. "You lash out like this when you feel threatened.
"So… what fucking gives?"

Regina clenched her teeth, turning away. "Do not presume you know me! The version of me you remember was… she wasn't anything like me, so stop pretending you know the first thing about me!"

Emma was quiet for a moment, and Regina honestly thought she had leave. The grass crunched behind her and she felt the weight of hands on her shoulders. An exasperated breath was drawn, shaking at the end as finger tips pressed into her.

"The woman I remember was smart, kind, warm, funny and full of mischief. She could also, at times, be incredibly defensive and insecure. She was bitchy, snobbish and could be inconsiderate to those who weren't in her circle. She also had a pretty spectacular temper."

Regina snorted inelegantly. "Now we're getting to the truth of the matter," she bit, a grim satisfaction rising.

"What, the unbelievable truth that she was human?" Emma lifted her hands and walked to stand before her. "And that I loved her, flaws and all? That we fought like cats sometimes but cared enough to work through problems? Because, surprise! Welcome to being adults in a relationship."

Regina paused, her heart stuttering when Emma caught her eye. "You sound like Dr Hopper."

"Good. We paid him enough to buy a new damn car…" Emma scowled at the memory. "And, obviously worth it but, y'know. If we were both slightly less stubborn and liked ourselves a bit more, we could totally have gone on vacation twice a year."

Regina laughed at that, ducking her head. Tears welled, from where she couldn't tell. It was all too much; too intense and overwhelming. The ground was distant beneath her and she sucked in a deep breath, feeling as though she was very far away from the world around her.

Emma frowned and stepped forward, gentling her voice. "Our first vacation, Henry was only a toddler. We got cheap flights to Aruba and just lay on the beach. Our son refused to keep his diaper on and just ran around like a little naked whirlwind." Regina ducked her head and bit her lip, hearing Emma pause in her approach. "You were so brown! And so relaxed and beautiful."

She risked flicking her eyes up, her breath fogging between them. "A bit different to today."

Emma grinned at that, eyes dancing. "Well, thankfully Henry is fully potty trained."

Regina's eyes widened at that and she couldn't help the short laugh that escaped her. She inched forward, enjoying the way her boots crinkled through the frozen grass. She gazed out over the forest, noting that the moon sat higher in the sky. The woods slumbered below them, quiet and still, and it was easy to imagine being the only two people in the world. She hugged her arms around her waist, drawing sharp breaths into her lungs. The air was clean, almost cleansing.

How much simpler things would be, if the three of them were the only ones in the world.

"I never brought him on one, you know. With the curse active, I didn't want to leave the town."

Emma nodded. "When we finish this, why don't we?"

Regina found herself unprepared for the onslaught of emotion that whirled through her. The notion of something as ordinary, as banal, as a family vacation weakened her. Almost brought a sob to her throat. The desire lancing through her, the longing for it, gripped her.
Emma grasped her elbows carefully, cradling them from beneath. A gentle, familiar way to connect without trapping. A deep breath would remove them; a step backwards disengage them. She swallowed thickly and raised her eyes to Emma’s, surprised to see worry there. No annoyance or impatience or anger.

"Regina?" she whispered, brow crinkling.

Regina shook her head, not trusting her voice, but unfolded her hands, gripping Emma’s upper arms, grabbing her jacket. Their eyes met, concern gentling in the face of turmoil. "It's OK," she husked. "You're going to be OK."

She shook her head again, though she took a half step closer to the other woman. Without heels, she lacked the advantage of height, though Emma hardly towered over her. She didn't feel OK. She hadn't felt that way for a long time, longer than she could easily quantify. She risked looking at Emma, that same expression of worried care knurling her brow. She felt so off kilter that she couldn't name a single emotion within her, entirely caught up in the process of feeling them. Cradled and safe, though, she realised that perhaps that wasn't a bad thing.

They were quiet for a moment, before Emma blinked slowly. "You're going to be alright, Regina."

"You don't know that," she said, reflexively squeezing her hands. "You can't know that."

Emma sighed. "No, fair enough. But I do know you're resilient and tough. I know you've been through tighter spots and come out on top." She studied her face for a long moment, and Regina could have sworn she looked like she was going to speak, once or twice. Whatever was going on, Emma was clearly searching for a way to comfort her, to console her.

Her gaze dropped to Emma’s mouth, opening and closing and the thought of kissing her flicked through her mind. It wasn't the first time the idea had occurred to her but this was the first time it had been accompanied by something so similar to tenderness. Emma stilled, clearly having noticed the change, and gulped almost comically.

"You are," she whispered again, "strong and amazing and just, you just make everything make sense." Her eyes were dark and she closed them briefly. "And it would be a really bad idea to kiss you now, right?"

Regina blinked at that. While there was enthusiastic support from several parts of her, her heart thumped with fear in her chest. "You want to kiss me?"

Emma sucked in a slow breath. "I really want to kiss you."

Regina squeezed her eyes shut against the flood of longing, aching shame, excitement, anger and almost every other emotion she could name. But chief amongst them, the strongest and fiercest, was want. Was a naked desire to just have and take and try to ease that aching numbness, that hole in her heart. To let herself step into the place in Emma’s heart where a much less flawed version of herself existed.

It would have been perfect. The frosted trees, their breath mingling in the cold air, the silence, the silver moon light… It was the stuff of romance novels.

Of fairy tales.

"Oh, Emma," she breathed, raw and vulnerable with need. "Don't."

And Emma, the beautiful, ridiculous creature that she was, gave her elbows one last squeeze and
dropped her arms, stepping back and smiling at her as though she was the most precious thing in the world. There was love there, and understanding, as well as a wry twist of the lip implying disappointment. They stood apart for a moment, gathering their thoughts, before Emma sighed and bounced on her feet.

"Probably time to get back to Henry. Let's go."

And though she said nothing else, and Regina had no idea of what to say to her, Emma's actions spoke loudly the entire way back. She reached out a hand, clasping around her tentative grip, her wordless presence saying the phrase *I love you* loud and clear.

SQSQSQSQ

The next day, the late afternoon sun was weak enough that it failed to warm her where it touched skin. Pockets of mist hung between broad trees, cold and silent. There were few others on the road, mostly weary traders leaving the markets with empty carts who passed little remarks on them. Regina tightened her grip on Dapple's lead rope and swallowed thickly. They rounded a bend in the road and were greeted by the sight of spires and high walls shrouded in mist some distance away. Henry gasped from atop the horse and Emma let out a low whistle from her position sprawled on the back of the cart. Oisín was riding one of the horses, slightly wobbly but delighted to be strong enough for the saddle.

They moved on in silence, Regina's stomach knotted and tight as the boys moved to take up positions around them. They moved through the thinning forest, cleared within arrow shot of the bridge, their pace slowing with reluctance. No one spoke as they neared the stone bridge and Regina could feel Henry tensing beside her, his breaths shallow and quick.

When they set foot on the great granite bridge, Liath stopped entirely, heaving a great sigh and letting her head roll backwards between her shoulders. They all turned to her in concern but she smiled reassuringly.

"No, no. Just relief. Our journey is over, now." Her face quirked into a tired smile and something like dread leapt through Regina's chest. "Though we'll not part ways just yet. Not for a little while. But the journey is finished," she proclaimed, her voice low and her accent more pronounced. Magic, ancient and strange, flared for a moment before evaporating on the next sigh of wind, the air clear and sharp in its wake.

Regina let out her own sigh of relief as realisation spread through her. Whatever strange rules bound Liath's use of magic were satisfied and she could safely use her own once more. She stared at the castle before her, memories swirling of all the other times she'd approached the place or attempted to flee it. It was a forbidding sight, cold and unwelcoming. She glanced down at her humble clothes, spaying the dirt and grime of her journey. She turned to her companions, as untidy and as happy as she herself.

"Like it or not," Regina said, softly, "we are royalty. We'll approach the castle more appropriately dressed, I think." She glanced around, ensuring there were no spectators before drawing her magic to her, summoning power to her finger tips.

She shot Emma a warning glance and waved her hand, transforming the cart into an elegant carriage. The other woman squawked with surprise while Liath rolled her eyes, motioning to her clothes. Regina waved her hand again and the other woman was suddenly clad in a beautiful grey suit, with tall black riding boots. An embroidered waistcoat shone with opal embellishments, a tribute to her fur and flint. She bowed and hopped up to the box, lifting the reins to the proud horses hitched before them.
Emma and Henry gawked at her, jaws open in identical displays of shock. She guided Henry down from Dapple's back and towards the carriage. She then led the docile creature to the front of the team, waving her hand once more and harnessing him in front of a slightly bemused donkey posing as an elegant draught horse. The young soldiers were staring at them incredulously and she smiled, lifting a hand.

"I asked you to imagine silvered mail before. What about we try for it now?"

Conn barked a laugh and strode forward, nodding enthusiastically. The others followed suit, eyes lighting up. With a wave of her hand, their rough spun clothes became soft linen and protective wool. Their shoddy leather transformed into shining chain mail, singing as it settled around them. They bore thigh length white tabards, cinched with leather belts, the swan and crown proudly displayed on their chests. Their rough stripped saplings became turned ash, with bronze spearheads and leaf shaped swords upon their belts. Dirt and grime vanished, worn boots repaired themselves and half a dozen young men regarded her with awe. She smiled at them, gesturing to their mounts and dipping her head.

"Gentlemen," she said, pitching her voice low and injecting some of her old authority into it. "We would be honoured to be escorted by such a fine band of soldiers."

They took the hint, leaping onto their horses. Art led them, carrying his banner proudly on the end of his spear. Regina watched it for a moment, bobbing in the winter sunset and gratitude filled her heart. She left it exactly as it had been, perfect as it was.

She ushered Henry into the coach, bemused by their open mouths, and settled in as Liath got the team of horses moving. A wave of her hand saw her clad in tight riding trousers and a warm black coat, a silk scarf around her neck. Her hair was bound tightly back and she wore black leather gloves. She blinked, knowing her face would be hidden behind paint and false eyelashes. There was a part of her, a big part, which would have preferred to enter in her stained travel clothes, merely another weary traveler seeking refuge in Misthaven, but she was conscious of Henry and Emma and their standing in court. She would not have them appear as scruffy travelers to indulge her whims.

"Mom," Henry said, his voice cracking slightly. "That was amazing!"

She smiled sadly at his awe. "Parlour tricks, Henry. They'll wear off before dawn. But we do need to make an impression. Remember, you're the grandson and the daughter of the Queen. Speaking of which, I do believe you could both benefit from a change of clothing."

Henry bounced. "Do it, mom! Can I have armour?"

Regina rolled her eyes, adjusting her gloves. "Absolutely not, young man." She waved her hand again and Henry found himself clad in a richly embroidered green doublet, with a warm cloak over his shoulders. He seemed delighted with his new outfit, earning fond glances from both of his mothers, every inch a young prince.

Emma quirked an eyebrow. "I'm not going to pass muster, am I?" she asked drolly, motioning to her stained jeans and tunic. "Just don't shove me in some floofy abomination."

Regina tilted her head. "Would I?"

Emma shook her head and folded her arms. "You will go to extreme lengths to get me into a dress. That's another thing that crosses the multiverse."

There was a slightly flirtatious smile on Emma's face, which she likely thought was subtle. If Henry's
eye roll was anything to go by, however… She briefly considered Emma in a full length gown and found the only appeal of that scenario was the inevitable pout that would follow. Emma's preferred kind of dress, and honestly the kind she herself would prefer on her, was most decidedly not in keeping with the White Court. Emma found herself dressed in an elegant blue jerkin and black trousers, a gilded sword hanging by her side. Her unruly hair was gathered into an attractive half braid, curls still spilling over her shoulders though pulled from her face. She looked quite pleased and smoothed her hands over her chest.

"Well, we're dressed to impress!" she laughed.

Regina smiled fondly at her, though sour nervousness rose in her gut. "You know that the people we're meeting… They're your parents, Emma, but they look no older than you do." She swallowed thickly. "And the court has no great love for me. They tolerate my presence, at best."

Henry hopped over to her side, perching beside her. "So? We have enough love," he said, fingerling the iron necklace he'd been gifted by Orm. "You're my mom."

Emma grinned. "And you're my… well, you're you. And I love you."

Her heart shuddered in her breast and her eyes watered. Henry pressed against her. "I love you, too," he whispered. Emma joined them on the bench, the three of them squashed together.

Overcome, overwhelmed and wanting nothing more than to vanish with the pair in the carriage, she held them to her, breathing in their precious scents and committing to memory the feeling of them in her arms. She pressed a kiss to Henry's temple, then Emma's cheek, surrendering to their warmth and affection, knowing it could well be the last time she did.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Liath flicked the reins, clicking her tongue. The dogs padded along side the carriage, the boys ahead on the horses. The late evening light slanted over Misthaven Castle, low and red. Blood red tinged the low clouds, lavender trailing behind. So far from the trees, no birds sang and no breath of wind moved.

"Óró," Conn sang, his voice ringing out from the head of the column. He was answered by his squad mates and Liath found herself singing along as well, joining in where she could recall the lyrics.

'Sé do bheatha, a bhean ba léanmhar..."

Her mouth quirked into a smile and she straightened her back. Dread, excitement and sorrow flared within her and she tipped her head to the darkening sky, to the emerging stars, realising that for the first time in many years, she had no idea what was going to happen next.

**End of Part Two**

Phew. Well. That was kind of exhausting. In this chapter is the first scene ever written for this story. Kudos to anyone who guesses it! Would dearly love to hear what you think about all this. This is a story in three parts, by the way. The final section will deal with what happens when our heroes reunite with all in Misthaven. Thank you to everyone who's left comments, reviews and kudos! I hope you're all enjoying it. It's a pleasure and a privilege to write for such a lovely group of people!

Can't make any promises about updates. They may be slower than before. Ending a story is always so hard! I love these guys and want to do justice by them, you know?

Anyway! Leave a review, leave kudos or just have a wonderful day. Here's hoping you enjoy
reading this as much as I did writing it!
Chapter 18

Welcome! So we've made it to Misthaven, at last! Non consensual sex is discussed with relation to Regina's first marriage. This is a heavy chapter, folks.

Part Three

The great long hall of Misthaven Keep was sparsely populated, gloomy as evening fell. The candles and sconces were unlit, the corners and heights of the room lost to shadows. They’d dismounted outside, handing the animals to an uncertain valet. Few were present to witness the return of the Evil Queen and Princess Emma. They strode up the floor, Liath and the boys following as Regina led with a confidence Emma suspected she didn't genuinely feel. She was met by a seneschal, who appeared incredibly offended by their unusual retinue.

"Tell me, do I really need a hundred mounted knights to return Her Majesty's daughter?" Regina asked, imperious and haughty. Emma turned to her, taking in the heavy makeup and hair scraped back into an elaborate style. She appeared severe and imposing, a far cry from wind kissed curls and sparkling eyes.

The seneschal fussed for a moment before dispatching a page to find the queen. The little group waited, Emma glancing around nervously as people began to filter into the hall. Some she recognised from Storybrooke while others were strangers. She waved at Michael Tillman and he nodded back, appearing as unsettled as she felt. Regina stared straight ahead beside her, rigid and distant. She seemed miles away, nothing like the woman who'd cradled them so gently only minutes ago. Henry began clutching Emma's hand again, his breathing quick and nervous as he took in the imposing surroundings. Liath appeared serious, arms folded across her chest and sword to hand outside her cloak. The boys stood in their armour, trying to not fidget, hands tight on their spears. Bran sat beside Henry, nudging him reassuringly while Sceolta lingered beside Regina, his head low as he glowered at the crowd with raised hackles.

Murmurs rose from the people around them, whispers as the little group waited for their audience with the queen. People were flitting around, lighting candles and sconces, bringing sickly orange light to dance over stone and half hidden tapestries. She took a step closer to Regina, seeing far too many cold stares directed at the woman.

There was a flurry of activity and Emma's breath caught in her throat as a door burst open, admitting a group of friends she'd last seen helping her pack her car after Regina's funeral. She was transported back to that day, the crushing and hollow devastation of losing the person she loved briefly overriding the joy at being reunited with her friends.

"Emma!" Mary Margaret cried, catching her in a tight embrace, sobbing joyously into her neck. She was hugely pregnant, her bump somewhat in the way. Strong arms wrapped around her from the other side and she heard David's familiar laugh in her ear. The next few moments were blur of hugs and tears, Ruby and Lacey and Granny and even Leroy.

She stepped back, somewhat dazed, watching as her former deputy and hunting buddy cradled Henry to his side fondly. Her son looked somewhat lost and she blinked in what she was sure was a slightly stupid manner.

No. Not quite her friends, or rather, her friends but with memories of another life, not her Storybrooke.
"Snow?" she said, hesitantly, glancing at Mary Margaret. The woman who was supposed to be her mother.

*Holy shit,* she mused. *This is fucking crazy.*

Snow White let out a happy sob, stepping forward and grasping her hands.

"You remember us?"

Emma shook her head, glancing helplessly at Regina, who stood apart from the group, a hand on Sceolta's neck. Their gaze connected, brown eyes warmed and held hers steadfastly, though there was aching sorrow there. She longed to reach out to her and take her hand, to steady herself.

"Not exactly," she said with a wince. She gently disentangled her hands and reached for Henry.

"Uh, I remember you as Mary Margaret."

The group frowned at that, glancing at each other. Emma felt something like panic building in her chest, their welcoming enthusiasm fading somewhat. Her heart sped up, the subtle rejection stinging her with more force than she would have expected.

"Emma?" Ruby, Red, asked. Emma and Henry had gone over their friends' cursed identities on the journey here, but it was slightly hard to square the fact that her favourite drinking partner was a werewolf while faced with the solid reality of her presence. Though she doubted Ruby Lucas would have been caught dead in what the woman in front of her was wearing.

"Uh…" she stammered. She glanced helplessly and Regina stepped forward. Henry reached for her with his spare hand, and Emma felt something hot and dangerous flash through her when she noticed the worry on Snow's face.

"Snow, something went awry with the spell I cast." Regina took Henry's hand, standing beside her son proudly. "They remember living in a cursed Storybrooke, more or less. One without magic."

Mother Superior, who Emma had never particularly liked, scowled. "So you got to keep your son, after all, Regina." She laughed humourlessly. "We should have known better than to trust you to take a truly selfless approach."

"Hey," Emma snapped. "Regina didn't mean for us to remember. She *just* told you the spell went wrong."

Snow frowned, glancing between the three of them. "I don't understand, how you remember a curse that was never cast. But I suppose it doesn't matter. We just need to restore your true memories."

Henry started between them and they both drew closer to him. "I don't want to forget," he said, quietly, lifting teary eyes to meet hers, then Regina's in turn. Her heart twisted, something heavy and sorrowful sitting below her ribs.

Mother Superior flitted forward on tiny wings, causing Emma to do a rapid double take, and shook her head. "Those are false memories, Henry. They're not real."

Henry was resolute, as stubborn as both his mothers combined. "They're real to me! I don't want to forget growing up with my moms."

David and Snow shared a bewildered glance at that. "Moms? I thought Emma was meant to keep Henry, Regina!" Snow spat, glaring at Regina.
"I did keep him," Emma barked, seeing the swiftly concealed flash of hurt cross Regina's face in the face of Snow's anger. "And she was there with me every step of the way. He had two loving mothers growing up." She glared at the assembled crowd. "He has two loving mothers."

"Emma," Snow whispered. "What did she do to you? What kind of spell did she cast on you?"

Mother Superior made a noise of disgust. "Something to bind her and Henry to the Evil Queen's will, no doubt. She's acting as though Regina has a heart, as though they loved her."

Regina appeared furious at the accusation and Emma's eyes widened, lost in the swirl of the other woman's emotion. She was too shocked to say anything for a moment, appalled at the way these people were treating the woman she loved. Henry gripped her hand tightly, clenching his jaw with anger. She saw Regina swallow, tamping down her reaction and clenching her fist, probably trying to control her magic, Emma realised. Trying to contain herself and not lash out and thus prove herself the monster they clearly believed her to be. Something broke free within her, the urge to defend her wife roaring through her.

"She has a heart," Emma snarled. "A huge, true, loving heart. You cannot speak to her, to the mother of my child like that."

"She's not really his mother," Leroy grunted, scowling at Regina. "She stole him from you. She's not fit to raise a toast, never mind a child."

"Oh you take that back you little fucker or I am-"

Regina grabbed her arm urgently, and Emma realised with a start she'd been reaching to draw her sword. They were close, Henry between them and Emma could see violet magic sparking in Regina's brown eyes, struggling to control herself.

"Don't," she hissed, "don't you do something you'll regret when you remember who I really am."

They were close enough that Emma could feel Regina's breath on her face and the urge to press a kiss to those painted lips flared through her briefly. She squeezed her eyes shut and clenched her jaw. Henry touched her arm, just below where Regina's hand was resting.

"Ma," he said, softly. "It's OK. Leroy is a douche."

"A giant douche," Emma bit out, opening her eyes to glare at the man in question. She sighed and warm fingers touched her cheek gently, bringing her back to face Regina.

"Ms Swan," she ordered, "calm yourself."

Emma almost laughed then, the tension draining from her at the familiar annoyance in Regina's voice. She almost turned to kiss the hand on her face but resisted the temptation. They stood back from each other, turning to face Snow White as one.

Snow was clearly taken aback, glancing at David, who frowned mightily. The rest of their friends milled around awkwardly, not quite sure where to look. The petite woman frowned, opening her mouth to speak before being cut off by Regina.

"Snow," Regina bit out, voice impressively level, though with a dangerous undercurrent. "We have had a very, very long journey. Henry and Emma need sleep and some time to take all of this in."

Snow blinked, her face folding sadly. "But surely they need their family right now?"
We do, but that's not you.

The thought popped into her mind, causing her heart to thump fiercely in her chest. She shoved it aside for the minute, glancing at Regina. Her eyes were sparkling with ferocity, and she'd taken a step closer to them, defending her family. Claiming them, courageous and powerful without even realising. Emma stepped forward, lifting a hand to touch her back softly. Regina seemed to draw strength from the gesture, standing straight and lifting a haughty chin.

"We'll retire to my rooms and see you in the morning. If you could be so kind to arrange lodging for our friends, I'd be grateful."

She turned to Liath, who nodded sharply. Emma was surprised to see her shaking with anger. "I'll get the boys settled somewhere safe. Take the dogs." Bran rose, casting a limpid gaze around the room, shaking his heavy head. Scoelita paced around, letting out a low growl and causing several people to step back. Regina nodded her thanks and turned to glare at Snow.

"Do not disturb us tonight, Snow. The hounds don't take well to strangers."

With that, she swept Emma and Henry out of the room, guiding them up long flights of increasingly dimly lit stairs. Cobwebs and dust greeted them as they ascended and Regina scowled at the dark, empty halls. Henry pressed himself against his mother, clinging to her as they made their way up. They didn't meet another soul on the way, Regina's quarters clearly off limits to both casual foot traffic and cleaners.

They reached a closed door at the top of a long flight of stone stairs and Regina lifted her hand, purple light pulsing briefly before the door swung open. The room was dark, and quite cold, but appeared large. Regina clicked her fingers and sconces flared to life. She stalked to the fire place and to Emma's amazement, summoned fire to her fingers. She drew the flames to her palm and flung them into a cold hearth, igniting a stack of wood. Henry looked startled and a bit overwhelmed, though he kept himself close to his mother's side.

Regina pressed a hand to her forehead and took several long breaths, trying to compose herself. Emma crossed the floor in three strides, throwing her arms around her. Henry mimicked her action and they held Regina tightly, neither entirely sure what exactly had just happened. She stiffened for a moment, but allowed herself to be held, wrapping a hand around Henry's shoulder and her waist. They held her until the tension in her began to abate, her face dropping to Emma's shoulder.

"You OK?" Henry whispered.

"I am, sweetheart," she whispered. "Just... the usual." She pulled herself from their grasp and turned, kneeling in front of Henry. "You have to know, I didn't do what the Blue Fairy said. I did not use magic to change your feelings. I honestly didn't mean for either of you to remember me."

"We know," Emma said, softly. "We believe you Regina."

She laughed bitterly at that. "For how long? What happens when you regain your true memories?"

Emma joined her on the floor, staring intently at the woman she still considered the love of her life. "Remembering won't make us stop caring for you. Won't stop us being your family."

Henry nodded in agreement. "Yeah, mom. We even have our own coat of arms, now."

Regina sank to sit on the floor, her trousers smudged with dust. Her head was bowed, defeat stripping her usually impeccable posture. Henry wormed his way into her arms, holding her tightly and she clung to him. "We should eat," she said after a long moment, drawing back and waving a
hand. Three bowls of hot soup and a heap of fresh bread appeared, along with a roast chicken and platters of vegetables. Emma's mouth watered at the sight and she stood, offering her hand to Regina. She led her to the table, releasing her reluctantly before tucking into the spread.

"You telling me," she joked, buttering the warm bread and attempting to lighten the atmosphere, "that you could have just clicked your fingers and summoned a roast chicken dinner out of nowhere?" She bit into the bread, then frowned. "Can I do that?"

Regina smiled weakly, Emma's effort to cheer her working. "I summoned it from the kitchen, Emma. And yes, in fact food might be the best way to actually get you to learn something."

Henry nodded, wisely. "You always bribed her with food before, mom. It usually worked, too."

They ate in relative silence, the blazing fire warming the room around them. Huge windows loomed at the other end of the room and something about them made Emma nervous. She couldn't see anything beyond them but reckoned the whole castle would be able to see in, if they looked. They finished their meal and Regina picked skin and left-over meat from the chicken, bringing it over to a spot near the door for the dogs. Henry stacked their plates neatly and Emma popped a last roast potato into her mouth. Regina returned to stand beside the fireplace, gazing into the flames contemplatively. Henry wandered to her side, hugging her waist gently. They stayed like that for a moment before Emma joined them, tapping Henry on the shoulder. "Bedtime, buddy. Regina, where can we sleep?"

Regina rubbed her forehead wearily. "There's a nursery through that door. There's a small bed there. There's a servant's room down that corridor, too."

Henry paused, eyeing the enormous bed in the room they were in. "Mom, can I sleep with you?" He flushed. "I know I'm way too big, so it's totally cool to say no, but just, can I?" Emma though he still looked fairly rattled and realised he hadn't bunked in with Regina for some time, mainly because she'd been sharing a tent with her.

A small, wistful smile spread over Regina's face, beautiful but awful in its sorrow. "It's fine, Henry. Come on, let's get you ready."

In a relatively brief span of time, Henry was tucked into Regina's bed, eyes drooping the second his head hit the pillow. He assured them both of his love and snuggled into the thick blankets. "Can ma sleep in here, too?" he muttered.

"If she wants," Regina said, quietly. Henry mumbled incoherently at that and rolled onto his side. Regina pressed a kiss to his forehead, before turning to Emma. She motioned to a pair of chairs beside the fire and Emma was more than happy to sit. She waved a hand and purple light shimmered around them, a silencing spell, she explained, to avoid disturbing Henry.

Regina poured them both a glass of wine, staring into the dark liquid in her glass intently. Emma watched her for a long moment, drinking in the sight of her. She looked lost and small, despite her imposing outfit, so unlike herself that Emma ached to hold her. She'd only ever seen Regina like this around her mother, truth be told. She looked like the woman they'd met that first morning, following Sceolta out of Liath's cottage.

Emma glanced around the room, more for something to do than anything else. It was spacious and well appointed, but lacked in personal touches or embellishments.

"No time to redecorate yet, huh?" she asked, nervous in the silence and unsure how to approach what had happened in the hall.
Regina blinked. "This place is how I left it thirty odd years ago."

Emma shook her head. "It feels entirely unlike you."

She was quiet for a while and Emma felt her heart twist. "How long were you here?"

Regina sighed. "Almost ten years, in total."

"Were these your rooms?" Regina nodded, eyes wary. "Fit for a king, huh," Emma joked awkwardly.

Regina's voice was flat and low, distant and emotionless. "The king kept separate quarters. If he wished for me, I was sent for."

Emma's heart thumped in her chest and she felt incredibly stupid. They were quiet for a long moment, watching the wood pop in the fireplace. They sipped their wine, neither speaking for some time.

"It's horrible," Emma said, "that they made you marry him. You didn't love him and he was old enough to be your father."

"Older than my father, actually," Regina said, softly. "It was awful," she said, in a quiet, lost voice at odds with the queen before her.

Emma bit her lip, wondering how much more to say. Her eyes flicked to Regina, who was lost in contemplation of the flames, fire dancing in her russet eyes, mirroring the flames dancing in her wine. Recalling Liath's words about finding the truth, she swallowed thickly, dread rising in her.

"You mentioned a nursery."

Regina rubbed her forehead wearily, closing her eyes. "It is a queen's duty to provide the kingdom with heirs. Leopold had one child. He wished for a more secure legacy."

Emma set her glass down, leaning forward silently, hands clasped to prevent their shaking.

"I became pregnant once," Regina said, voice closed and distant. "I miscarried before the third month ended. The king did not cease attempting to sire a child on me, but he was old, past his prime. I came to hate him viciously and the idea of bearing his offspring. Later, in desperation I drank a potion which left me barren, so at least I wouldn't have to worry about bringing a baby into my life." She shook her head. "I was so terrified of my mother laying claim to a child."

Emma couldn't entirely suppress a shudder at the revelation. Intellectually, she'd known that Regina hadn't married her grandfather willingly but hearing the woman she loved speak about being raped was horrifying. Something about the flat, toneless way she spoke of it all scared her too and she wanted nothing more than to reach out to Regina.

"That's really fucked up," she managed. She was on the cusp of overwhelming anger and sorrow and needed to draw back from it, to control her rage.

Regina nodded. "I know that, now." She sipped her wine. "I murdered him."

"Good," Emma said, without hesitation, meaning it with every bone in her body.

"He was your grandfather," Regina pointed out, firmly, meeting her eyes with more courage than Emma thought possible for one person to possess.
"He raped a teenager," she said, shaking her head. Regina flinched at the word and turned back to the fireplace, her hands shaking minutely, her eyes distant and haunted. Emma took a long sip of wine, letting the subject drop, for the moment.

Regina seemed to come back to herself, squeezing her eyes shut briefly. They sat in silence for long moments, a thousand thoughts tumbling through Emma's disordered mind.

"Did... you and your wife," Regina asked, haltingly, "did you discuss having more children?"

Shocked at the direction the conversation had moved, Emma met Regina's eyes. They were wet with anguish and longing, something fragile in them. Sadness gripped Emma more tightly than it had in a long time, squeezing her heart and lungs in her chest. Crushing her guts and robbing her voice for a painful moment. Tears welled in her eyes and she nodded, meeting eyes she knew so well. She wondered if it was right to share this, appropriate to tell a woman who'd just revealed that she was unable to have children. She was aware, increasingly, that the memories she had were some strange reflection of hopes and deeply concealed desires. Whose, she was unsure, but she couldn't refuse the woman before her.

"We'd actually gotten in touch with a place, a fertility clinic. Just about to start trying." She swiped tears from her cheeks. "She, you... You're an awesome mom. We talked about adoption and fostering, too."

Regina's eyes drifted shut, weary and suddenly old beyond her years. "When I was young, before I left my father's estate, I dreamt of having my own home and family. I wanted a sunny house with stables, a man who loved me and lots of children. To be free from my mother." She opened her eyes, dulled and distant. "You can see how well that worked out."

The anguish that rose in Emma's throat threatened to burst forth in a sob and she wiped her mouth with a trembling hand.

"Don't pity me, Emma," she said, softly. "It's good that didn't happen. I mean, look at the things I did. Look at the monster I became. It's good there weren't more innocents involved," she glanced away, retreating into herself once more. "It was bad enough what I did to Henry... The lies and bringing him into this mess."

"You are not a monster," Emma said, firmly despite the lump in her throat.

Regina shook her head in disagreement. "The worst of it is, I can't regret a moment of it. Everything I did led me to Henry and I cannot regret the time I had with him."

Emma watched her for a long moment, realising that part of Regina believed that time was coming to a close. She rose from her seat to crouch before her.

"Never do," she said, fiercely. "Do not regret a thing you did that brought you into his life, because that is the one thing I know he needs, more than anything, is his mom." Regina frowned, a pained expression crossing her face. "No. I mean this. If I'd been alone on the delivery ward, if you hadn't been beside me, I would never have been able to keep him. I wanted him to have his best chance and that was not a single teenage mother."

She knelt, her thighs burning, and lifted Regina's hand, desperate to impart her sincerity. A memory came to her, clear and as bright as the day it had happened. She pressed Regina's hand between both of hers and the other woman lifted her spare hand, softly tracing the outline of Emma's white knuckles, running over her wedding ring.
"I needed stitches after he was born and the damn epidural was wearing off, so I couldn't hold him. You were with me, and I had this moment where I just felt like a total failure, because I was going to spend the golden hour huffing laughing gas and getting sewed back together." She drew a breath, Regina's delicate fingers like butterflies over the back of her hand.

"He'd just gotten his vitamin K and he was screaming and I asked you to just hold him, do skin to skin." She chuckled at that. "I was pretty loopy at that stage and you were exhausted, but you did. You stripped down in that delivery room and just popped him right here," she said, nodding at the spot over Regina's heart.

"We hadn't talked about keeping him," Emma said, quietly. "I'd thought about it, had begun to want it, but I couldn't have asked that of you. But then the second he heard your heart beat, he was quiet. He knew his mom." She inhaled a shaky breath. "And that was that. You and me, a couple of goddamn kids ourselves, were parents. The Swan-Mills family came into being."

Regina's eyes were closed, tears rolling over her cheeks and Emma fell silent, waiting for her to respond. When they opened, there was such raw vulnerability there that Emma knelt up, urgent and desperate to undo the cruel words Leroy had thrown without a thought.

"And you just knew what to do. You soothed him when he was teething and you looked after him when he was sick. He called you mama first," she chuckled at that memory, remembering the delight on Regina's face. "And we were both there when he walked for the first time. You stood him up and he took his first steps to me. You were there when he broke his collar bone during practice and when he was feeling sad or grumpy."

Regina ducked her head, eyes downcast. "Those memories aren't real."

"Well," Emma mused, "aren't they? Because I wasn't there. I mean, everyone down there was saying my memories are false, right? I gave him up? But all those things still happened. So you did that stuff. You raised him. I remember that. The only difference is I remember being there to see it and in reality I wasn't."

The woman before her stiffened, her expression frozen with something like wonder. Emma smiled, though it felt a bit wobbly.

"That's real, Regina. The truth is simple. You are Henry's mom and he loves you more than anything. Me totally included," she grinned at that, and Regina blushed slightly. "So whatever those assholes have to say, remember that."

She dropped her head, shaking it slightly.

"Anyway. I've talked enough crap tonight. Maybe we should get some sleep."

Regina disentangled their hands and reached out, sliding one behind the nape of Emma's neck. Her touch was gentle, incredibly so, and Emma felt herself pressing back into it. Regina leaned forward and tugged her until their foreheads met, breath mingling. Emma inhaled deeply, her heart calming and settling with the familiar scent of her wife's breath. Her nose nudged Regina's, a reminder of playful and intimate times.

"Thank you," she said, softly, her words puffing over Emma's lips. "You don't know what it means to hear you say that. I think… I think if I'd known you before, when I was younger, I wouldn't have become what I did."

Emma smoothed her hands over Regina's knees, not breaking their contact. "I love you, Regina. And
so does Henry. Trust us, sweetheart." She cleared her throat. "Just… just trust us to look after you, the way you've looked after us."

Regina squeezed her neck and drew back. "It's good to know that your saviour complex is intact." She stood and pulled Emma up, guiding her to a wardrobe. "We should sleep."

Emma nodded, weary and shaking with emotion. They changed and took turns in the garderobe, Regina moving about the room snuffing out the candles. There was enough light from the embers in the grate to guide them safely to bed, though Regina still reached out to Emma, making it abundantly clear that she was welcome.

"Regina," she asked, softly, "you want to get in the middle?" She knew she was hovering close to a boundary, but she ached to offer what comfort she could. Regina looked so small before her, delicate in her night clothes and without makeup.

Regina gazed at Henry in the bed, her heart aching on her sleeve. "I do," she replied. She lay down, lifting the rich blanket for Emma to follow. They settled on the mattress, close but not touching.

Regina shifted, her eyes catching the last of the fitful firelight as she regarded Emma. She was silent for a long moment before turning away, facing towards Henry and wiggling around a bit.

Emma smiled to herself, feeling her eyelids droop. "Does having your back rubbed help you sleep?"

Regina was silent for a long enough time that Emma wondered if she'd drifted to sleep.

"It used to, when I was a child."

"Want me to?"

"Yes, please," a quiet voice replied and Emma fell asleep running a gentle hand up and down Regina's back, the other woman's breathing evening out long before hers did.

SQSQSQSQ

Regina woke slowly, exhaustion having left her boneless in her old bed. She opened her eyes to curious scrutiny, Henry sitting up against the headboard. He appeared sleepy, hair mussed and eyes heavy. She inhaled deeply, becoming aware that Emma was clinging to her back, an arm around Regina's midriff and her nose behind her ear. Henry had a sad, wistful smile on his face and Regina made to rise.

"No, don't," he whispered. "She hasn't slept properly in so long, mom."

Emma shifted, and Regina found herself cradled by the hollow of Emma's pelvis, not a sliver of space separating them. The front of Emma's thighs curled beneath the backs of hers and her chest to Regina's back. She ran her hand over Emma's, lacing their fingers together without much thought. She honestly didn't think she'd ever been held like this, in all her long years. It was actually incredibly soothing.

Henry was quiet for a long moment. "She never slept when you went away, you know. Even before you… you know, died. If you were out of town, She'd just get more and more tired until you came home." He sighed. "She was really tired this last year."

Regina's heart ached at the thought. Henry shrugged. "I was scared I was going to lose her too. But she's really strong. When she was at her worst, we'd sit and talk about you and just remember things. It kept her together."
He paused, fiddling with his fingers. "It's weird, but talking like that was different to how we ever talked before. It's hard to explain, but it was like I was seeing her as a person, not just my mom. If that makes sense."

Regina nodded, letting Henry speak. He seemed less like a little boy, now, the realisation bringing proud tears to her eyes.

"Because you were looking after her, instead," she said, softly.

Henry nodded at that, eyes losing focus as he considered the statement. "You looked after us both so well, I think we never had to actually do much. Ma and I had to figure everything out."

"Henry," she said, sorrow rising in her chest. "I'm not her."

He shrugged. "You're exactly like I remember, except sadder. I know you're worried I'm going to hate you if I remember, but I don't think you need to. I mean, you told me I thought you weren't my real mom, because I was adopted?"

She nodded, tightening her grip on Emma's hand.

"But that's so dumb. That's the kind of thing a little kid would think. Like, I know that not every mom gives birth to her kids."

Regina sighed. "There was also a lot of well founded resentment about me lying to you. And I did lie."

Henry nodded. "That sucks and you shouldn't have, obviously."

"I'm so sorry for it."

He nodded solemnly. "And I forgive you for it. I wanna go see the guys, is that alright?" he asked, abruptly changing track. He seemed fine, though, his face unclouded and untroubled despite the difficult topic of conversation. The joys of innocence, she supposed, that forgiveness came so easily.

"Of course. But eat something first." She lifted a hand to his face. "I'll come with you to get breakfast."

"Nah, you stay with Ma. Like I said, she needs the rest." He grimaced slightly. "Besides, I do not need to witness morning mom smooches."

Heat suffused her cheeks. "Henry! Emma and I are not going to be smooching."

He raised a dubious eyebrow and gestured to their position. Regina huffed. "This is entirely platonic."

He raised his other eyebrow. "Mom, you can travel to whatever magical land you want and ma will still be totally in love with you. And you've been making really obvious mushy eyes at her." He scrunched his face. "Don't get me wrong, it's great but I'm totally OK with not seeing you guys make out for the nine thousandth time."

Regina's eyes widened, completely mortified. "Henry Daniel Mills!"

"Swan-Mills," he corrected, hopping out of bed. "Who loves his very gay moms."

Her eyes narrowed and he grinned, clearly enjoying her discomfort.
"You…"

He bounded to the door and waved goodbye, slamming the heavy door closed behind him.

"The term you're looking for," Emma said, voice husky with sleep, "is little shit."

"Emma Swan!" she spluttered, indignant with outrage. She turned to face Emma, rearing up on her elbow.

"Swan-Mills, too," she said, resting her head on Regina's forearm. "Go back to sleep, 's early."

Regina could only stare down, gaping like a beached fish and feeling quite perturbed. Emma huffed and tugged her down to rest beside her.

"And just to remind you, this very gay mom loves her family, little shits and Evil Queens and all."

Regina wanted to point out that she wasn't entirely sure she identified as gay, per se, but Emma was already snoring behind her, snuggled into her back. After all the aggravation and the heavy conversations of the night before, she was more than willing to close her eyes and let herself sink into the comfort of a warm bed and a welcome embrace.

She wasn't sure she was gay, she mused as she sank back into sleep, but she was very sure that she loved her little family.

SQSQSQSQ

Welcome to the third bit. Phew, that was a heavy chapter. Thoughts? Next time around, we get to see the gang interacting with Snow and company. Should be fun, huh?
Well, it's St Patrick's Day so have TWO chapters in one day! Time for a pint of Guinness, I reckon.

SQSQSQSQ

Emma wandered down a wide stone staircase, smoothing her hands over a new jerkin as Bran and Sceolta trotted ahead of her. Earlier, Regina had set about magically adjusting some garments for her, while dressed in a simple silvery dressing gown. It had appeared to be quite intense work, copper kissed eyes tight with concentration as she sat cross legged on the bed. Regina had explained that the spell was slightly challenging because she was altering something in reality, not just creating a glamour. Emma had nodded, accepting the trousers and jerkin gratefully when she'd returned from washing. Regina had been sitting on the rumpled bed, bare legs curled under her and hair mussed from sleep, smiling up at her with easy affection. She hadn't been able to resist dropping a lingering kiss to her brow and Regina had brushed her hip gently, something fond and brave in her touch.

The dogs loped ahead, turning towards an open door and Emma turned right, following her nose. She soon found herself in the great kitchen of Misthaven Keep, curiously poking her head around the corner of the doorway, taking in the sights and smells of the busy kitchen. Again, that strange mix of familiar and strange faces moved through clouds of steam rising from bubbling cauldrons and sizzling pans. The aroma of bacon was enough to make her mouth water and her stomach growl.

The kitchen was bustling as people helped themselves to breakfast, hurrying around and largely ignoring her. She thought she spied Henry and Art flitting in and snatching a loaf of bread, but her attention was grabbed by the appearance of David.

He stood somewhat awkwardly in front of her, his handsome face tinged with a blush. "Hey, Emma," he said, with a touch of uncertainty. She felt affection surge through her, reminded of the high schooler who'd helped Mary Margaret babysit Henry, and managed to resist the urge to excoriate him for the evening before. "Did you sleep well?"

She'd been curled around her wife in a comfortable bed, she mused, so she'd enjoyed a blissful night of slumber. She merely smiled and nodded. David grinned nervously, nodding along with her. "Great!" he said, clapping his hands together. "Do you want to have breakfast with Snow and me?"

She paused for a moment, quite dubious and her deputy clearly read it in her face. "Look," he said, "yesterday wasn't great."

"It was a shit show, buddy," she drawled, folding her arms. "Like, I get that we're here in Fairy Tale Land but seriously?"

He blinked, seemingly taken aback by her bluntness. "Uh?"

"Assholes?" David asked, somewhat forlornly. "Like, I get that we're here in Fairy Tale Land but seriously?"

"David," she sighed, shaking her head. In her world, he'd been her friend for a decade. While he was
generally a chilled out guy, they'd had a few arguments here and there and she knew when not to kick this particular puppy. "I would like to have breakfast with you and Mary Margaret, but you cannot treat Regina like that, OK?"

He blinked, appearing uncertain for a moment, before he nodded and turned to the stove, gesturing for Emma to follow. They gathered up several large plates of food, ducking questions and keeping interactions with others brief. She followed David up a flight of stairs, past a pair of guards and into a large bright room. Songbirds were flitting around, which struck Emma as potentially messy.

"Urgh," Mary Margaret groaned from the bed, an arm thrown over her eyes. "Charming, I think my piles have piles and I blame you for this. I would seriously give my kingdom for a tube of Preparation H right now."

David blushed and Emma resisted the urge to break into laughter. "The joys of pregnancy, Mary Margaret," she quipped. The other woman lifted her arm, utterly mortified, and rolled onto her side with the grace of a beached seal, heaving upright with some effort. She blinked, her eyes full, and Emma couldn't help the surge of affection despite her lingering annoyance with the other woman.

"Emma," she breathed, standing up, clearly unsure of what to say. David lifted the tray in his hands, ushering them to a little table. Mary Margaret was enormously pregnant, almost exaggeratedly so, and Emma winced in sympathy as she slowly moved to sit. "I'm so glad you came!" she said, her eyes teary as well. She took her seat carefully, her bump very much in the way and her breathing rapid.

"We come bearing gifts," she said, lightly, placing a plate in front of the other woman. "Eat." They tucked into their food in awkward silence and Emma took the chance to observe the pair discretely. They were as sweet and ridiculous as they'd been in her memories, earnest and guileless. The notion that they were her parents was frankly unbelievable, and slightly overwhelming. She was setting that entire stew of weirdness on a back burner, for the moment, though. True to form, Mary Margaret, Snow, couldn't keep quiet for long.

"What happened yesterday?" she demanded, wounded. "You sided with Regina."

Emma paused, a piece of bacon on her fork, as she eyed the pair. She popped it into her mouth and chewed briefly before swallowing and sighing. "Yeah. And?"

Mary Margaret's eyes widened. "Emma, I don't know what she's told you but-"

"That she's the Evil Queen, responsible for a wide variety of atrocities," she interrupted. "She mentioned it." She sipped her tea and shrugged. "Henry and I remember her differently, though."

"You didn't give him up?" Snow asked, a hand falling to the top of her bump protectively.

"No, Regina and I raised him from the start," she sighed. "With a lot of help from our friends."

Snow blinked, her cunning eyes wary, and she jerked back. "Friends?"

"You guys and Ruby, Kathryn. Lacey and Ashley. Jefferson and Michael." She chewed a piece of sausage thoughtfully. "We had a good network."

Snow and David exchanged a long glance with each other, incredulous. "We were friends?" Mary Margaret asked in a small voice. David grasped her hand and something in Emma softened.

"Yes, of course we were. We all muddled through together." She sighed. "OK, so once upon a time, this eighteen year old bum gets into trouble..."
Regina had taken some time to do her make up manually, sitting in front of her vanity and losing herself to the meticulous process. It had been a slightly overwhelming few days and she was quite grateful for the time alone, truth be told. She painted her eyelids, careful as she went, lost in thought. Birdsong filtered in through the enormous windows and she found herself tensing somewhat, concerned that Snow might have sent spies.

She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep theory, they were all on the same side, for now.

*Until Snow White finds out her daughter thinks she's married to me.*

Regina applied her lipstick with a practiced movement, casting a critical eye, Cora's eye, over the end effect. She glanced over at the dress she'd selected, one of her more imposing pieces, waving a hand and having it materialise around her. The pinch to her waist and ribs was immediate, and she found herself sorely missing the tailoring of designer wear in the land without magic. That said, there was something almost comforting about the stiffness and structure of the dress, the boning firm along her sides. She smoothed her hands over the skirts and clicked her fingers, transporting herself to the library.

The musty air was still, motes of dust wandering through sickly beams of light. It was cold, as well, and Regina wrapped her arms around her waist. She'd spent a lot of time in the place, as a young and lost queen, trying to find a distraction from her life. She reached out and touched one of the tall book selves, the solid wood comfortingly familiar beneath her hand.

"Good morning," a lilting voice called. Regina turned, blinking at the figure of Belle, seated at her desk.

"To you as well," she replied, softly, unwilling to disturb the peace or send dust whirling about her. She regarded Belle for a few moments, watching as the young woman considered her, intelligent eyes gleaming in the low light. Eventually, she stood from the desk.

"You found them, then," she stated, approaching her. "How?"

Regina sighed. "I found the hermit. The stories about her powers weren't exaggerated. She crossed worlds and fetched Henry and Emma," she said, simply.

Belle sucked in a breath. "That's incredible." Regina nodded, not disagreeing in the slightest. During their research, they'd come across whispers of a strange power hidden far to the north but hadn't entertained any real optimism. Regina's solitary quest had been undertaken in desperation, a last ditch effort to avoid casting the curse anew. "But your gift didn't have the intended effect," she asked, softly.

Emotion welled in her chest but here, clad in the raiment of the Evil Queen, it was easier to dampen the response. She inhaled through her nostrils and turned to Belle. "A long story short, rather than go to prison, a pregnant Emma Swan arrived in Storybrooke."

Belle lifted a shrewd eyebrow. "And stayed?"

Regina sighed. "And stayed. She remembers a version of the cursed Storybrooke."

"One where you still became Henry's mother," she mused, her soft eyes kind. "I'm guessing that you two were close."

Regina laughed, though it sounded hollow to her ears. "Married, in fact." She took a moment to
enjoy Belle's eyes widening. "Unbelievable, isn't it?" she asked, mortified to hear her own voice waver with the question. Bella's eyes widened even further, compassion seeping in.

"Not to anyone who ever saw the way you two looked at each other. No more than a certain tale as old as time," she sighed, wryly. Regina opened her mouth to protest, but given her morning, she was willing to concede that the attraction between her and Emma was not as subtle as she'd thought. Belle rubbed her forehead. "Speaking of which, Zelena still has the Dark One's Dagger and Rumple is insane," she reported sadly. She rested her hands on the desk in front of her for a moment, gathering herself, before she lifted her gaze to meet Regina's.

"I didn't doubt you'd get them back," she said, "you're utterly unstoppable when you want something. But I wasn't sure about their memories. I took the liberty of beginning a few potions that might help," she said, through the statement was posed like a question.

Dread bubbled in Regina's throat, the memory of a happy son bounding to his friends and a fond kiss to her forehead flared to the forefront of her mind. Hadn't this been her aim, though? Restoring their true memories? Freeing them from the lie she'd imposed upon them? From her?

Though her heart shuddered in her chest, she nodded.

"Show me what you have."

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Emma sat back, regarding the pair in front of her. A pair of jaws hung open, incredulity on their faces. She'd provided a very abbreviated account of her life in Storybrooke and the journey back. Though she'd deny it, there was a part of her that enjoyed the expressions on their faces, the utter bewilderment.

"Wow." David breathed, blinking. "You and Regina, huh?"

Emma chuckled. "Oh yeah. Me and Regina."

Mary Margaret, or Snow, and Emma found herself surprised by how quickly she was coming to think of the other woman as that, shook her head. "I can't believe she made you marry her."

Emma frowned. "Uh, I was a very willing participant. Besides, we'd been together for almost a decade by the time that happened. And believe me, she was as freaked out as you when she found out about it." She smiled fondly. "I honestly don't think she intended it, Snow."

David shook his head, rubbing his temple. "So, I mean, you're not really married, right? Like, curse married?"

Emma shrugged and held up her left hand. "It's as real to me as anything. And certainly doesn't feel like I'm cursed! But I guess not? I mean, she didn't say the words so technically, no."

Snow and David shared a long look, some form of silent communication passing before they turned back to her with resolute faces.

"As your parents-

"And no."

Emma slammed her hands onto the table, rattling silver wear and startling the pair before her. Anger flared and she chewed the inside of her cheek, forcing herself to calm down. They were skirting the
edge of very dangerous territory here, and it took a huge effort to draw herself back from the lonely, raging child who wanted to lash out at the very mention of parents or family. White light sparked on her finger tips and she took a deep breath, closing her eyes and drawing memories of Henry and Regina to the fore. She wasn't alone, she reminded herself, she hadn't been for a long time.

"You're not my parents," she said, firmly. "You're both younger than me. David, I bought you your first six pack." Before he was twenty one, and everything. Their faces fell and she shook her head. "And I have a lot of unresolved, very negative feelings about the people who brought me into the world and abandoned me," she said, softly. Distress crossed their faces and she swiped a hand across her forehead.

"That said, you are part of the family," she said, softly. "We were friends and you were there for me, Henry and Regina when we needed you. So we just have to figure it out," she said, leaning back in her seat.

"And please, do not be shitty to Regina. She's not had it easy, as well you both know," she said, firmly, leveling her gaze at the pair in front of her.

A valet entered, breaking the awkward tableau, advising them that a war council was about to meet. Emma stood, tipping her head to one side. "Well, better get on with it, huh?"

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Henry was sitting on a bale of hay, waiting for Conn and Fiachra to join him, Art and Oísín. Ronán and Bradán had wandered off to explore the castle grounds, curious about the woodland surrounding the keep. Oísín was helping Art practice his English, asking him to name objects he pointed out.

"Hound."

Henry kicked his feet thoughtfully, enjoying the feeling of sun warming his face. The dogs had found them, too, though he'd wondered if they shouldn't have stuck with his mom. He'd been pretty freaked out yesterday, honestly, and was worried that someone was going to try to hurt his mother. The dogs wouldn't let anyone touch her, he was sure. Not like she needed protection, what with clearly being a fairly powerful witch.

"Apple."

The courtyard was bustling, people coming and going about their business. Smoke rose from a couple of braziers and a young woman chased chickens through the yard. He had recognised some of the adults from Storybrooke, but no one had spoken to him yet, though Granny had waved cheerfully at him.

"Archer."

He noticed a pair of women entering the courtyard and blinked as they approached the little group. One was wearing elaborate armour, her face grim but not unkind. The other was wearing a green dress, a truly impressive head of red curls bouncing around her shoulders and a bright grin lighting her face.

"Ciamar a tha sibh?"

Art and Oísín straightened, appearing slightly shocked.

"Oh, cool!" Henry said, grinning. "You know their language!?"

Henry gripped her hand firmly, shaking it with gusto. "Henry Swan-Mills of, uh, Storybrooke." Merida turned to introduce herself to the others, Conn and Fiachra having arrived, and Henry turned to the other woman. "Hi," he said, taking in her imposing presence. "Nice to meet you."

"The honour is mine, Prince Henry," she said, bowing gracefully. "Hua Mulan."

His eyes widened. "No way! Wow!" He tried to duplicate her bow, though he doubted it was as slick as hers had been. "These are my friends." A quick round of introductions ensued, the boys all slightly star struck by the impressive warrior.

"I hear you were looking for armour," she said, smiling faintly at the group.

"Yeah, mom cast a spell to make us look all cool yesterday but it wore off."

Conn grunted. "But the quarter master sent us away. Said we weren't real soldiers."

"Which is totally untrue," Henry said, folding his arms. "They fought an ogre."

"And lived tae tell?" Merida asked, excitement gleaming in her eyes. "Well, we'll have a word with yon bawbag, won't we hen?" she asked, cheerfully.

"We will have a polite word, your highness," Mulan sighed, looking quite put upon. "You're here on a diplomatic mission, after all."

Merida rolled her eyes and grabbed Mulan's elbow. "Aye, well, then we'd best be quick!"

The little group hurried after the excitable woman and Henry tried to not dwell on the fact that his life now featured characters from movies he'd grown up watching. He frowned and turned to Mulan, peering up at her curiously.

"Is Hercules here, too?"

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Midday found the war council convening, people slowly taking their seats around a large circular table. Regina swept into the room, Belle trailing in her wake, and found a mix of familiar faces and strangers waiting. Emma was loitering near a fireplace as people filed in, eyeing the great table with suspicion. She lifted her face at the sound of Regina's heels, a bright smile lighting her eyes.

Eyes which immediately dropped to her cleavage. Emma's mouth dropped open and she blinked rapidly, her head falling forward. The effect was both amusing and flattering, though mainly the former. She approached her, clicking across the floor, feeling very much the Queen.

"Pleasant morning, dear?" she teased, pausing just shy of Emma's personal space.

"Great," she said, blinking. "Amazing." She raised her eyes and there was heat there, Emma's green eyes dark with desire, but also affection and some exasperation. "You look terrifying, your majesty."

"Thank you," she said, quite pleased that her intended effect had been achieved. She was reminded of a brash young deputy who loved to argue with her and push her boundaries, who she'd quite enjoyed flusterling. Emma quirked an eyebrow and returned her gaze to her face, taking in her elaborate make up and hair style. Regina felt a jolt of nerves run through her, wondering who Emma
saw, and suddenly wishing they were back out in the forest. Out with Henry and the dogs, enjoying each others' company and wandering under broad trees, free from the complexities of their lives.

Emma must have seen something in her expression, because she winked playfully and leaned forward slightly, keeping her voice low. "Your war paint looks amazing, Regina."

Nerves melting away, replaced by some solid and calm emotion she'd rarely felt, she allowed herself a small smile. She lifted her hands to Emma's jerkin, adjusting the collar slightly. "You look very dashing, too, dear. Now, come along."

The expression on Snow White's face was comical, her eyes wide and blinking and mouth open. She resisted the urge to cackle and motioned for Emma to take a chair beside her. Red rolled her eyes and Liath chuckled.

"So," Snow called, gathering her wits. "Firstly, a heartfelt welcome to Emma, my daughter. To Regina and Liath as well, who brought her and Henry back safely." She turned to Liath first, a wobbly smile on her wide face. "Thank you so much for returning them to us." To Regina's surprise, she turned to include her in the sentiment, her shining eyes grateful. She felt herself stiffen, uncomfortable with the gratitude.

"Thank you for inviting me to this meeting," Liath said, graciously. "And for your kind hospitality."

David nodded and quickly updated them on the situation at hand. Zelena hadn't been seen but had the Dark One's Dagger and Rumple under her control. She was after Snow's baby, though the reasons for that were unclear. Despite frequent flying monkey attacks, she hadn't returned to the castle since Regina left and the attacks seemed lazy, half hearted attempts to annoy the populace rather than coordinated assaults.

Emma frowned, turning to her. "OK. So Zelena is your sister?"

"Half sister," Regina nodded, "we shared a mother."

"Who was an incredibly powerful and evil sorceress," Blue said, her voice tight. Regina felt anger flare and clenched her teeth setting her hands on the table. So evil that her daughters had been abandoned by the fairies, wishes falling on deaf ears, she thought, bitterly. Emma obviously sensed her fury and reached out, without hesitation, threading their fingers together. It was slightly awkward, as Regina had chosen to wear several large rings, but Emma's palm was warm against hers, her simple band shining in the torch light.

"You never knew about her?"

Regina drew a breath and shook her head. "I had no idea. Cora kept all mention of her secret. She would never have been permitted to marry a king's son if they'd gotten wind of her."

"And why does she want your baby?" Emma asked Snow, her brow creased with concentration.

"Cora's daughters seem prone to stealing Snow's children," Blue sniped, sneering at their joined hands.

Regina almost withdrew her hand but Emma's grip tightened, her green eyes blazing and jaw clenching. "Listen, you officious moth," Regina snarled, glaring at Blue, who stood from the table, opening her mouth to speak.

"Enough!" barked David. "Settle down, both of you."
Regina opened her mouth to speak but was interrupted by Liath, of all people. "You know, I'm more interested in the answer to the question." All eyes turned to her, Blue glaring at her with narrowed eyes. "Your temperament hasn't improved with age, Gorm." The fairy's mouth dropped and she paled, blinking at the other woman as though stunned.

"You... I didn't recognise you. How are you still alive?"

Liath leaned forward, shrugging. "Oh, I haven't aged as well as you but then, I'm only human. Also, apologies about last time we saw each other."

Blue's face turned an incredible shade of purple and she sat down, spine entirely rigid. Regina lifted an eyebrow, wondering what *that* was all about. Thankfully, Belle had the good sense to intervene.

"It's a valid question. A child of true love has the potential to be incredibly powerful, like Emma."

Emma jolted beside her at the sound of her name, fingers twitching. Regina ran her thumb over Emma's idly, pondering the question.

"She wants to make me suffer," Regina said, contemplatively. "She wants to take away everything I have."

Leroy snorted. "Then she's not going after the right Charming baby."

Emma frowned, quick eyes flashing. "Or the right Swan-Mills, for that matter," she said, swallowing thickly as she met Regina's eyes. Terror laced through her, choking her at the thought of harm befalling Henry.

"Where is he?" she asked Emma, her heart pounding. "He went to find the boys this morning but where is he now?"

"He and the boys are running around the yard, pestering the quarter master," Robin supplied, his eyes crinkling. "Mulan was going to introduce herself to them, suss out what they need."

Regina took a shuddering breath and clenched her jaw. They'd need to keep Henry under guard until this whole mess got sorted out. Emma squeezed her hand and thanked Robin softly.

"Zelena had opportunity to attack you on the road," Red mused. "Did you see a single flying monkey?"

"No."

"It wasn't a secret you were on your way," Snow added. "But our men couldn't find you."

"On a straight road?" Granny asked, incredulous.

Liath shrugged. "We kept to the edge of it," she said, casually. Regina's eyes snapped to her, widening at the implications. Liath winked at her, mirth in her pale eyes. Heart pounding, she quickly reviewed the defences, plans and protections she'd put in place around the castle and its environs. Safe, they'd be safe as long as they didn't cross her wards.

"We need to teach you how to use your magic," she said, turning to Emma. "Zelena is powerful, but so are you."

"And how to use that sword," David said, concern in his voice. Regina didn't voice her disagreement, but she doubted her sister's downfall would be wrought by something as simple as a
lump of metal.

Emma nodded, eyes slightly wide, appearing somewhat nervous. "OK, yeah. Good idea."

"What of the attacks," Robin Hood piped up, arms folded across his chest. "The villages suffer."

Conversation turned to more mundane topics for a while, Regina's attention wandering as she considered the implications of their discussion. Emma and Henry were in danger, threatened by her sister. They needed to stop her, though this would likely be challenging, given her possession of the Dark One and his dagger. Emma was at a distinct disadvantage in her present state, and though the thought of losing the affection of the woman beside her was enough to make her chest clench, she knew she needed to finish those potions as quickly as possible.

SQSQSQSQ

The meeting ended with the decision to hold a feast in Emma and Henry's honour that night, the idea of which made Emma supremely uncomfortable. She was standing close to Regina, who was quizzing a princess from another realm about wells, of all things, while Emma rocked on the balls of her feet. It was highly reminiscent of city hall meetings, though with more high fantasy malarkey. Mother Superior had, at least, not hung around. She'd stormed out of the room as soon as the meeting had ended, still flushed with annoyance.

She frowned. Liath was no where to be seen, either, and she hoped to god her friend wasn't off looking for trouble. That the woman seemed to be some sort of immortal was less surprising than it should have been, all things considered.

Snow and David approached her, the former looking tired and a flash of sympathy filled Emma. Snow looked like she was due to go into labour any day now and she recalled that at that gestation, all she'd wanted to do was have Regina stroke her hair and feed her grilled cheese.

"Hey guys," she said, stepping towards them. "That was... something."

David rolled his eyes. "Tell me about it. Times like these I really want to go back to the animal shelter."

Snow shrugged. "Still not as bad as a room of fourth graders. I'm good here." She had her hands laced over the top of her bump, a wry expression on her face.

"You're ready to explode," Emma laughed, shaking her head. "It's so weird!" She smiled fondly at them, memories of her two friends flitting through her mind. Out of their whole group, Mary Margaret and David had been the youngest, and least mature. They'd often found themselves on the receiving end of panicked texts about minor emergencies, which had always earned an eye roll from Regina.

Snow shrugged. "It's harder this time, than with you. This baby's bigger and I'm like a whale!"

David nodded for a moment, before shaking his head with a worried expression. "You're not, sweetheart," he finished, lamely.

"You sure it isn't twins?" Emma teased, tilting her head. "You're big enough for them."

Snow faltered, blinking owlishly. "Uh, I don't think so... But then, we don't have ready access to ultrasound here."

"Or sanitation," Regina grumbled, approaching the trio. The rest of the room had emptied, the four of
them standing facing each other. Emma glanced between them all, taking in the wary expressions on
Snow and David's faces and the supercilious one gracing Regina's.

*Oh boy.*

David cleared his throat. "Uh, yeah. We've been working on the wells and pipes. Getting there."

"We need to get there quicker, before there's an outbreak of cholera," Regina snapped, frowning.
David opened his mouth to retort and Regina inhaled sharply, which drew Emma's attention back to
her cleavage.

Snow placed a hand on David's arm and sighed tiredly. "Agreed. I for one am not loving the realities
of medieval medical care right now."

Regina's breath hitched and Emma smiled fondly, not doubting there'd be a flash of concern there
that she'd do anything to deny. A sharp slap drew her attention to Snow and she rubbed her shoulder,
spinning around with affront.

"Oh my god, Emma," she scolded. "Have manners!" Emma blinked, realising she'd been caught
ogling Regina, earning a smack. It was pretty hard not to, though. David was frowning at her as
well.

"It's rude to stare," he chided. "Gowns are cut like that here."

Emma opened and closed her mouth, turning to Regina, who was smirking at her, one eyebrow
raised. "Sorry," she muttered, folding her arms in front of her own, much less impressive chest. "I
didn't mean to be a creep."

Regina held her gaze for a moment longer before shaking her head with something like amusement.
Her hands were placed on her hips, shoulders back. "You're like a teenager."

"Let's get down to the practice yard," David suggested. "Some sword drills will sort you right out
and we can find Henry. Meet me there in ten minutes."

He led Snow out of the room, the latter frowning mightily at Emma, as though trying to decide
whether to continue berating her or protect her from Regina's wrath. Emma sighed and turned back
to Regina, a sheepish blush warming her cheeks.

"Seriously, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

Regina rolled her eyes. "You should be apologising for creating a situation where I agree with those
two idiots."

Emma crossed her arms. "Regina. Seriously. I'm sorry."

She sighed and approached Emma, eyes solemn. "I'm not upset. I got used to it a long time ago.
Charming's right, this is the style here and I used it to my advantage for years." She smiled wryly.
"You're not the only person who gets distracted at the sight of some skin."

"You're not a piece of meat," Emma insisted, annoyed with herself, especially given the content of
their conversation the night before. She dropped her face, scowling.

"And you don't look at me like I am one," she said, softly, stepping close and touching Emma's chin
gently, bringing their gazes together. "Emma, you're the only person who looks at me and sees
something other than the Evil Queen or the Mayor." Her russet eyes were shining, sorrow and
affection mingling. They were close enough to share breath, once more, Regina's fingers warm against her chin. Emma couldn't help reaching out, touching her hips, running her fingers over the heavy brocade.

"Even though you don't know me, not really," she whispered, pupils dilating in the warm space between them. Emma ran her hands up, spreading her fingers and wrapping them around Regina's waist, feeling her breathing quicken. "I feel like you do," she confessed, eyes shining, "like you see me. You look at me like..."

"Like?"

"Like the way I've always wanted someone to look at me."

The moment was charged, electric. The scent of magic was dancing in the air and coiling between them. The moment was charged and Emma was aching to kiss the woman in front of her. Aching to hold her and touch her and lose themselves together.

"And I'm scared," she murmured, pressing even closer. "Because I don't want you to ever stop looking at me like that. Because I want to kiss you right now. Because if I asked, you'd do it and I am trying so hard to do the right thing."

"This feels so right," Emma croaked, eyes sliding closed. "We are so good together, Regina, you have no idea."

Regina drew in a shuddering breath and ran her thumb over Emma's lip. "I want to find out," she confessed, and Emma's fingers spasmed. "But not if you don't remember."

Emma ran her hand up, grasping Regina's wrist and pressing a long kiss to the palm of her hand. Her heart was breaking in her chest, understanding that Regina had laid herself completely bare, opened herself and humbled herself entirely. She pressed against her, hugging her tightly and taking in the glorious scent of her skin.

"I love you," she said, firmly, mouth pressed against dark hair. "And I promise-"

"Don't!" Regina hissed, her own arms around Emma. "Don't make promises now. Not until you know."

"I know what I need to," she said, drawing back. "I won't make any promises. But I love you, Regina."

Darkened, copper flecked eyes gazed up at her, cheeks tinged pink despite her makeup and Emma realised, with a start, that she wore the same expression her wife did when she said those same words.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Oh yeah, there's also plot in this bit. Damn, I'd forgotten about that. Let me know what you all think! Thanks again for all the comments and kudos!
Watery light lit the stone walls of the practice yard, dots of quartz sparkling in the slanted afternoon sun. Small plants had colonised the cracks where soft mortar had crumbled, enthusiastic flashes of green breaking the line of imposing granite blocks. The sand beneath Emma's feet was damp, the scent of unwashed bodies and leather hanging in the chilly air. Her breath steamed before her and she rolled her shoulders beneath the training clothes David had found for her. Her deputy was standing before her, clad in a padded doublet and grinning widely. Enough people were watching to make her slightly uncomfortable, leaning on fences and peering at them, enjoying the spectacle. It set her teeth on edge, though she did her best to ignore them.

They'd found Henry without trouble, a loud girl named Merida teaching the boys archery in a butt, and David had suggested sparring in the adjacent yard. A stern woman named Mulan stood close by, a stout staff in one hand and a frown on her face, having offered to referee. An incredibly imposing sword hung from her belt, clearly signifying her tolerance for fools. Emma then regarded her deputy, gut churning with discomfort. He wore a grin, clearly enjoying himself in front of the crowd. She reckoned some exercise would be a good way to burn off some of the stress from the previous couple of days.

There was something unsettling about these versions of David and Mary Margaret, cloying and overbearing. They made her bristle and ignited the desire to avoid them, to run, an impulse she'd thought she had outgrown. Her versions of them had treated her like a cool older sister, not as though she was a misbehaving child they wanted to tuck into bed.

She gripped her sword, facing David with a scowl. It had been difficult to stomach their disbelief and incredulity earlier, if she were honest. They'd clearly been uncomfortable with the idea of her sharing her life with Regina and the disapproval stung. She really didn't see them as her parents, that was too bizarre, but they had been important friends throughout her entire adult life. The way they had acted heavily implied they hadn't known she wasn't straight, though they'd not discussed the subject. It felt like coming out for the ten thousandth time, an obligation to straight society she'd always resented. Their ignorance about her sexuality also hinted that Emma Swan had been a hell of a lot more guarded than she herself was.

They faced each other, saluting quickly and settling into ready stances. She drew in a quick breath and tightened her grip, frowning at her deputy.

Without further warning, he lunged at her. Emma flung her arm up, her blunted sword catching David's as he swung it towards her head. She pushed it to one side, moving forward and mimed stabbing David in the ribs with a dagger in her left hand, repeating a move Liath had taught her. He sighed, his head tipping to one side in consternation.

"Not exactly in keeping with the rules of fencing."

Emma smirked to hide her discomfort and stepped backwards. "I have zero desire to become a fencing champion. I have every desire to keep my family safe."

Those watching nudged each other, wry grins lifting lips. Heads shook, clearly bemused by the blonde princess playing with a sword. Condescending because of course she'd had to resort to dirty tricks to beat Prince Charming. Her chest clenched, eyes tightening into a glare as she faced David, taking in his swagger and confident grin.
He smiled, quirking his mouth up. "I can empathise, Emma." He stood up, leveling his sword and adjusting his stance. "En garde!"

Regina watched as Emma and David flung themselves at one another, practice swords clanging against each other. The sand of the training ring lifted around them, catching the low light as their scuffling tossed it about. Regina watched with interest, glad to see Emma finding opportunities and scoring points against David. She was quick if not technically gifted, using her speed and intelligence to compensate against her father's years of training and brute strength. Her heart gave a harder thump in her chest, lips curving into a smile as she watched Emma roll across the ground and trip her father up. She'd have been disqualified from any fencing tournament but her instincts were sharp.

"You've really improved, dear."

"You asked for us," Fiachra announced, approaching with Conn. They all spent a moment watching Emma fight, enjoying the display. Henry sat with Oisín and Bradán, alternating between cheering his mother on and teasing her. Affection for her son and his mother surged through her and she bit her lip, concentrating on the matter at hand, forcing herself to look away from them. She still felt a bit shaky after her earlier conversation with Emma, raw and somewhat frayed.

Regina inhaled, turning to them with what she hoped was a neutral face, pulling her ragged edges inside. "I did," she said, "follow me, please."

They made their way to a store room, Regina closing the door behind her. She turned to the young men, pride rising at the sight of their steady eyes, catching her unaware. They were dressed in the gear typical of squires of the White Kingdom's knights, warm but unadorned linen and wool. She decided they needed their own tabards or badges featuring the crowned swan, to mark them as being under her patronage.

"Are they treating you well?" she asked, perching on a barrel. She gestured for Conn and Fiachra to sit as well, glad to see them sink onto a bale of straw without a second thought. They treated her no differently now, in the former seat of her power clad in the raiment of a queen, than they had underneath the broad canopies of oak branches. She was glad she'd decided against bringing them to one of the formal meeting halls or official offices, content with their humble surroundings.

"They are, Ms Mills," Conn said, shrugging. "We have a dry loft to sleep in and they give us food. Hua Mulan got us these clothes."

She nodded, making a mental note to ensure proper accommodation was provided for them in the near future. "You succeeded in your task and for that I thank you, as does Queen Snow. You have fulfilled your duty admirable and the question is, do you want to go home?"

Fiachra regarded her quietly, before sharing a look with a disappointed appearing Conn. His dark eyes were thoughtful, his youthful brow creased. "I suppose we should," he said, reluctantly, "we're not all cut out to be soldiers. But we don't want to leave Henry. There's fierce craic here, Ms Mills."

She felt herself soften at the sheepish expressions on their faces. "Well, I'm caught. Part of me wants to send you home to your families, regardless, and another wants to keep you here with Henry."

Conn bit his lip, his little goatee rearing up. "We aren't good enough to guard him. You can see the soldiers out there, they're much bigger and stronger. It would be safer to get them."

Regina shook her head wryly. "Oh, Conn. I'm not looking for bodyguards." She regarded them
solemnly, taking in the slightly morose expressions they wore, so similar to when they'd approached that first town. The expressions of those who didn't expect to be given a chance, or to have much faith placed in them. "You are young. You all have talents to be fostered, but beyond that you seem to genuinely care for my son."

She inhaled sharply, fixing both young men with her stare. "There is a powerful witch tormenting this kingdom. She might target Henry. In fact, she probably will. There's nothing any soldier in this land can do to protect him if she attacks, apart from run and find me or Emma." She felt her brows crease with worry.

"Will she kill us, if we're in her way?" Fiachra asked, his voice steadier than she would have expected.

"Perhaps," she said, softly. "Most likely she'd turn you into a beast."

Conn shrugged. "Henry is our friend," he said, firmly. "Those men out there might think we're dogs, but dogs are loyal. What do you want us to do?"

Regina regarded the young man with a heavy heart, some mother's son doing his best far from home. "I want you to do what you've been doing, Conn. Enjoy spending time with him. Learn with him. If anything strange happens, send the fastest of you to find me or Emma. Do not try and fight Zelena. Do you understand?"

"I do," he said, solemnly.

She smiled at the earnest young men. "You both have the hearts of warriors, but not all of your comrades do. Discuss the situation with them. Whatever else, I expect you to train or attend school while you're here. Conn, if you want to be a soldier, train with the cadets here. If Oisín wants to be a poet, send him to the library so he might learn to read and write."

"And if any of them wish to leave?" Fiachra asked, his brown eyes shining.

"I'll make sure they get home safely," Regina assured.

"We'll talk to the others," Conn said, his voice steady. "But I think we'll all be with Henry. He's our friend. And you and Emma will be our queens," he said, firmly.

Fiachra grinned and Regina ducked her head, smiling at the boys' enthusiasm. "There are many who expect Henry to have a bodyguard, so at least on paper, that will be you. Shall we call you Henry's Guard, then?"

"No," Fiachra said, smiling smugly. "We'll be his hounds."

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Emma stumbled in the ring, a ringing blow from David sending her staggering backwards. He swung his sword in a graceful arc, a cocky smirk on his face.

"Had enough?"

"Oh, only getting warmed up," she growled, righting her stance. She was sweating, her arms and shoulders aching from exertion. Her knuckles stung from where she'd grazed them earlier, blackened blood cracking and flaking off as she tightened her grip. Her chest was heaving, her clothes sticking to her with sweat. She raised her arm, clenching her jaw and her fist, leather creaking beneath her hand.
"Again!" Mulan called, her tone clipped and stern.

Emma let out a shout, surging forward and swinging out, her sword clattering against David's. It stuttered along the edge of his blade, the blow weak. Her strength was waning and David easily spun her aside, sending her to her knees.

She threw out her left hand, a sting biting her wrist as she caught herself on the sand. She managed to keep her sword up, blocking an idle swipe from her opponent. The impact rang down her elbow, earning a wince. David grinned triumphantly and tipped his head to one side. Annoyance flared briefly. He was kicking her ass but did he need to rub it in her face?

"You having a hard time, Emma?" he teased.

"Yeah, look at you," she chuckled darkly, "giving a rookie a smack down."

He lifted an eyebrow, tipping his chin to one side. "What, you think your dear old dad was going to go easy on you?"

It was as though a switch had been flicked. Her stomach dropped in a sickening instant of disbelief, burning at the thought of someone having the gall to claim to be her father. The world around her faded, her pulse clanging in her ears as her throat burned with sick amazement. Exhaustion and stress had stripped her defences, her heart too exposed to centre itself in that moment.

Rage flared through her, impossibly quickly, flashing down her arms and electrifying her fingers. Anger, old and nauseating, coiled through her and she drew her feet under her, crouching and flinging herself at the solid man, throwing her arm out with wild abandon. She roared, wounds that had healed in the safety of her wife and family rent wide open.

How fucking dare you!

His eyes widened, mouth hanging open as he took a step backwards. He blinked, drawing his stance together with sloppy haste, narrowing his profile defensively.

She stood, her pulse thumping in her ears, her jaw aching.

Moving without conscious volition, she found her sword locked with David's, pressing forward against him. His blue eyes flashed with surprise, doubt flickering through them. She pressed her advantage, getting her shoulder under her blade and heaving, both hands clenched around the hilt. White sparks flashed, crackling over her hands and forearms, static raising the fine hairs there as she drew her weapon back, preparing to strike.

"Woah!" Mulan shouted, rushing in from the side with her ornate sword, blue fire flaring where the edges met. She caught Emma's blade and turned it aside with a practiced flick of her wrist. "Enough! Break it up!"

Emma stumbled back, gazing incredulously at the palm of her hand. Light pulsed from within, sparking over her fingers.

"Fuck," she breathed.

"Calm down, ye mad cow," Merida chided, trotting up and grabbing her elbow. "Ye'll cook that daft git alive."

She wrenched her arm free, blinking slowly as she took in her surroundings. Her eyes found Henry's, wide and concerned, and she felt the fight seep out of her. She gazed around the yard,
noticing that the space around her had expanded, that people were no longer leaning on the fences or jeering, that they were gazing at her with fear from further back, pressed into the wall.

As though she were different. The odd one out. The weird new kid.

"Emma," David stammered, uncertain. "Are you OK?"

She took her breath, cutting her eyes to Henry, to the pallor of his cheeks and the shock causing his jaw to hang loose.

She raised her gaze up to David and nodded shortly.

"Fine."

"Why don't you take a break?" Mulan suggested, firmly. "Give the others a chance to use the ring."

She stepped into Emma's direct line of sight, her brow knurled with concern. "We might put Henry and the boys through some practice exercises, your highness."

"Emma," she breathed, her voice tight. "I'm Emma, not anyone's highness."

"Ma," Henry said, quietly, swallowing thickly. "Hey," he said, hopping off the fence and heading towards her. He wrapped his hand around hers, his fingers cool and sure. He turned bright eyes, deep and knowing like his mother, up at her. "You wanna get lunch?"

She drew in a breath, dropping her sword and running her hand through Henry's hair. "Yeah, I might go get some water, kiddo," she patted his shoulder, affection rendered clumsy by her jangling nerves. She swallowed thickly. "You stay here with the guys, get in some practice."

She nodded at Mulan, seeing the stoic woman bow her head minutely. Henry's mouth firmed into a line, identical to Regina's and her heart clenched. "OK, ma," he acquiesced, softly. "See you in a couple of hours? To get ready for the banquet?"

"Yeah," she nodded, focusing on him and attempting to ignore the spectators. "See you soon buddy."

She turned on her heel and strode away, not lifting her gaze to meet any of those around her.

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Henry watched his ma stride away, his heart sinking. Oísín approached him, pale eyes bright with concern. Leroy and several others crowded around David, glaring at Emma as she made her exit.

"Woah," Henry exhaled, shuddering. "My ma really does have magic."

"Powerful magic," Mulan agreed, stepping beside him. "You knew this, though, didn't you?"

"I did," he allowed, "but it's only come out with mom."

Merida shook her riot of curls. "Ach, but she's nae gonnae always have yer ma wi' her. 'Twas always bound tae manifest. Leave her cool off."

"Why with me?" David asked, voice soft as they wandered to the edge of the ring. "What happened?"

Henry frowned at the older man, honestly surprised he could be so clueless. "You're not her dad. You upset her."
David looked as though he'd been slapped, eyes comically wide and blinking "What? Henry!"

He folded his arms. "You're not," he said, softly. "I mean, we don't remember you as that."

David frowned deeply, sorrow in his eyes. "Because of Regina's spell."

Henry tensed, sensing anguish in the man before him and unsure of how to respond.

"She wanted to make sure the only happy ending was hers," Leroy groused. "So of course she'd make sure you didn't remember."

Henry blinked, frowning deeply. "Well, I dunno but you guys seemed pretty happy. Like, we were all happy. Leroy, you were dating Astrid." He stopped, clenching his fists again and glaring at the deputy who claimed to be his grandfather. He remembered his abuelito. He'd been a quiet man with soft eyes and wisps of grey hair around his ears. "You and Mary Margaret were married and you all had jobs you liked."

They had been happy. He knew that to be true with every ounce of his being. They'd all had fun and spent time together laughing and enjoying themselves. He glared at Leroy, a memory trickling through.

*He'd been little, still in grade school, and angry about not being allowed to play a video game. Emma had tried to command him to turn off the console, which had led to a fight and him screaming. He couldn't remember exactly what he'd said, only that it had been bad enough for his mom to subsequently ban screens for a week. Whatever had been said, though, his ma had fled, running out onto the porch and sinking to sit, her shoulders heaving.*

*His mom pursed her lips, turning to him.*

"To your room, now," she said with urgency.

"Mooooom!"

"Don't mom me, Henry Swan-Mills!" she snapped, her voice brittle. She paused, drawing a breath and shaking her head, reaching out with a trembling hand. "Henry, we need to talk later about what you said to your mother but right now, I really need you to go up and go back to reading your book, OK?"

Startled by this, he'd agreed, scurrying up the stairs. Rather than going to his room, though, he'd run to the back guest room, hoping for a glimpse of his ma from the back balcony. He couldn't see her but he could hear his mom.

"Breathe, dearest," she cooed, "big breaths in and out of the bag. He didn't mean it."

Later, his ma had come to tuck him in, her face pale and blotchy. She hadn't said much, just wished him good night and told him she loved him. He reassured her that he felt the same, but her eyes had darted away from his. His mom had come in shortly afterwards, tired and drawn. She'd brushed his hair from his brow and looked at him with teary eyes.

"Is ma OK?"

"She's going to be," she said, confidently. "But you really hurt her feelings, sweetheart. We'll all talk tomorrow."

"What happened?" he asked, his voice cracking. "Why was she on the porch?"
"Sometimes," his mom said, her voice soft and very sad, "things get really overwhelming, even for people as strong as your mother, and they want to run away. She was on the porch because she needed some space."

The thought of either of his mothers leaving had left him nauseous with fear, which his mom clearly recognised. She kissed his forehead and stroked his cheek, her bright eyes shiny and filled with tears.

"She always stays, my little love. She always will. But those feeling have to come out somewhere. We'll all talk about it tomorrow."

And they had. It had been scary and kind of confusing, but they'd all talked and ended the day cuddled on the couch watching old movies and eating popcorn.

He blinked, returning to the present as Mulan patted his shoulder.

"She needs some space right now, your highness."

"Henry," he said, softly. "Just Henry."

SQSQSQSQ

After a quick meeting with Misthaven's head seamstress and a brief visit to the library to check on the progress of her potions, Regina found herself gazing out her window, taking in the pale lavender of evening and the shadows enveloping the forest beneath them. She held the two black feathers Liath had gifted her, in what felt like another life, taking in the slightly ragged edges and the glossy sheen. She closed her eyes and let herself be drawn to the other woman's side, vanishing in a plume of magic.

She found herself on the very top of the castle, nestled between chimney stacks and surrounded by the smell of wood smoke. A little hut sat in the lee of one of the stacks, ramshackle and collapsing. It looked as though it had been there for many years and she briefly wondered who'd built it.

"Who goes?" Liath called, chuckling fondly. Regina turned and walked towards the older woman, approaching very carefully, her heels not quite designed for roof tiles. Liath was sitting on a small balustrade, her legs dangling off the other side and over a long drop. Regina swallowed, pausing quite a bit before she reached the edge.


Liath turned, her pale eyes meeting her own, soft and sad in the evening light. "Oh, I think you should keep those. I know where to find more, after all."

Regina nodded her thanks before glancing around. "What little hideaway did you find?"

Liath shrugged eloquently. "Dunno, but it's quiet and I am a hermit. Was a bit busy below."

Regina hummed, feeling a smile tug her lips up. "I see." They shared the evening air for a moment, watching the sun sink below the horizon and the first stars twinkle into being in the clear sky. She'd missed this, she'd confess. The land without magic didn't have skies like this realm did. The memory of Emma Swan's eyes shining beneath an endless vault of glinting stars filled her mind, warming her chest with emotion.

"Thank you, Liath," she whispered, injecting every ounce of sincerity that she could into her quiet words. "Thank you for bringing my family back to me."
"You're welcome," she said, graciously, "though you've thanked me before."

"Well, thank you for bringing us all here in one piece. Thank you for keeping us safe on the road."

Liath rubbed her chin, gazing out over the forest. "I told you I would."

She'd also said there'd be a cost, Regina mused. She bit her lip and looked down at her hands, twisting her fingers together, keenly aware that there was still a price to pay.

"Oisín is well," she stated, earning Regina's attention. "I'm glad. He's a good boy. Are they going to stay?"

"I've invited them to," she sighed. "Though part of me wants them away from here and safe."

"Safe?" she snorted. "Oisín is an orphan. He was fostered by Fiachra's family, as they are distant cousins. Art's father is a drunkard who can't afford to feed his children. Conn's mother can't keep his little siblings in shoe leather." She shook her head sadly. "They eke out an existence on the edge of the world. Do you think they would have left if there'd been anything worth staying for?" she asked, her pale eyes shining with some inner light. Regina felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise and she swallowed back against rising bile.

"You never know how close you are to the edge," she said, her voice flat, "until you find yourself there. If they wish to stay, let them. Use your coin and your influence to help them better themselves."

"I will," Regina promised, watching the play of smoke across the roof, small blue clouds sliding behind Liath as they hurried from the chimneys. Liath looked very strange then, ancient and fey and not entirely human. The small hairs on her arms rose and her fingertips tingled. "Who are you, really?"

"My name is Liath," she answered, simply. "I'm good at finding paths that others can't."

"You're immortal."

"I am nothing of the sort," she retorted, sounding almost offended.

"You're old, though," Regina said, suddenly feeling as unsettled as she had during her first few encounters with Rumple. Liath sat up, the friendly and feckless affect sliding away from her as she straightened. She stood, tall and proud in the dusk.

"I am," she confirmed. "But I can die," she paused, eyes wandering over Regina's face for a moment, some decision weighing heavily upon her. "I will die. And that day is closer now than it has been for a long time."

Regina frowned, stepping forward. "What?"

"All magic comes at a price," she said, smiling sadly. "And bringing back someone on death's door? Dear bought."

Regina's heart thumped in her chest and she felt a chill sluice down her spine, cloying and perishing. "Explain," she commanded, earning a fond scoff.

"Well, it's complicated," she said, huffing a breath out and folding her arms over her chest. "I'm no one special, just a lucky wanderer. I found the island when I was very young and gained its trust..." she frowned.
"If you go north now, retrace your steps, you will find that place. You'll find my cottage and you'll find my cranky sheep. My little gardens," she said, her voice tight. "But that thing," she lifted her eyes, piercing and un pitying, "that feeling that brought you to the edges of yourself? That almost had you fling yourself from the cliffs? That's gone."

Regina gasped, drawing in a shuddering breath and blinking rapidly. She sank to sit on a stubby chimney stack, shaking at the words.

"That feeling? It comes from being so close to the void. From keeping a portion of it there." Liath carried on, frowning mightily, "that was what allowed me to travel safely and easily between worlds. The paths I found, or trampled, I kept with me and centered on the island. It came to exist outside space and time, a hub for all the paths I'd found."

She turned her face to one side, grief lighting her. "And as its curator, I existed outside of time, granting me a long life. You can do what you want, you know, as long as you keep to the edge of things. As long as you don't get too involved. As long as no one important notices. I was allowed to use that power as long as I didn't interfere too much or draw undue attention."

Regina frowned, the complicated explanation causing her to pause for a moment to digest the information.

"But you did interfere. You brought Emma and Henry to us."

Liath shrugged. "Oh, they were always going to return to you. Don't doubt that. You would have found a way. Any number of people could have done what I did, though maybe in a slightly different manner. But in that moment in the woods, that boy was dying. We changed that."

"I changed that," Regina cried, frustration welling. "Yet you're the one who'll pay for it?"

Liath sighed, old and worn in that moment. She sat beside Regina, regarding her with weary eyes. "You have led a longer life than many, but still much shorter than mine. As long as Oísín lives, the island is just a rock in the ocean."

"And without access to your power there," Regina said, hotly, "you'll die."

"I'll die," she confirmed, quietly. "But likely not for a while. Time will catch up with me, as it does us all. It might be slow or it might be quick. But, sure, that's the way of living. It always has the same ending."

"I'm so sorry," she said, her throat tightening. She genuinely meant it, as well, as the injustice of the situation pierced her chest.

"Don't be," Liath chided, affection in her voice. "I'm glad we did what we did and I'm glad I met you all. Death isn't an evil thing, Regina." She bumped their shoulders together. "Here, promise me you'll wake me for three days before you shove me in the ground, right?"

Regina felt tears building and she swiped at her eyes, shaking her head. "Four."

"And tap a barrel of ale?"

"And a cask of brandy," she said, tears running over her cheeks, despite her best efforts. Liath grimaced.

"Whiskey or gin, brandy gives me a ferocious hangover." She bumped her shoulder against Regina's again before briefly squeezing her shoulder. "Imagine starting to explore the paths beyond life with a
hungover head on ye. Nightmare."

**SQSQSQSQ**

Emma stomped through the kitchen, huffing her way down narrow stairs into the depths of the castle undercroft. She knew she’d be spotted outdoors and really didn’t want to face anyone right now, except perhaps her wife. Her arm was still tingling, though she wasn’t producing light or sparks. Wandering through the bowels of the castle, she found herself pacing down a long corridor, elegant arches to either side forming the foundations of the keep. Though the light was dim, every arch held a group of people, from jewelers to scribes, and the sound of industry and conversation rang through the stifling air.

She caught a whiff of malt and turned, wandering down a long, poorly lit arch cluttered with tables and low benches. At the far end, a trestle table in front of a couple of barrels of beer formed a bar and she marched straight there. The light was dim, candles burning in sconces along the wall providing flickering illumination.

The bartender grinned up at her, a pleasant smile on his ruddy face.

"Beer," Emma grunted.

"Lager, ale or porter?" he asked.

Emma narrowed her eyes, not being entirely sure what he was talking about but figuring she needed to dance to fairy tale beats.

"Ale?" she asked, her voice wavering slightly. He nodded and got about pouring her a pint. She mumbled something about charging it to her parents and wandered into a dark corner, sipping the drink in front of her.

Jesus fucking Christ, what had she stumbled in to?

It had been awful earlier. Anger had just erupted from nowhere. It had been so long since she'd felt like that, such a long reprieve from that sickening rage that she hoped she’d grown out of it. Though a lot of people had assured her that she’d grown since a lost eighteen year old had appeared in Storybrooke, she’d never forgotten what she’d been.

An angry, lost orphan only ever an inch away from lashing out or running away. A child who'd been hurt and didn't care if her actions hurt others. Only now, rather than running or tossing caustic remarks, it appeared she could fling magic. It was close to unbelievable.

However, traveling across realms and knitting chests back together had convinced her of the existence of magic. She also realised that despite being in possession of same, she had little idea how to control it. Was she dangerous? Could that light show have harmed David? Regina had wielded real fire in her hands, after all. Could she hurt people?

She took a long sip of beer and grimaced. It was pretty warm and tasted kind of soapy. She rubbed her forehead wearily and sighed. She found herself wondering what kind of person Emma Swan had been, a lonely child without a reason to grow up. A teenage ex-con who'd never had the support of people who cared for her or had to realise how much damage her anger could inflict. Had she had *any* sort of a life before coming to Storybrooke, she wondered. She sipped her beer again, contemplative.

If it weren't for Regina and Henry, she'd be finding the next damn path back to New York without delay, wicked witch of the west be damned. She would have preferred nothing better than to bring
her wife and son home, to bring them back to Mifflin Street and curl up on the couch with them and forget this whole crazy series of events had ever happened.

But was that her? Even though it had been difficult to adjust, and trust had been slow to come, she'd done her best to be there for the people who cared for her. She'd had no choice but to adapt, for Henry's sake. Regina had been no different and being parents to Henry, in some ways they'd become parents to all their friends. A stable and calm house, fridge always full and shower always hot. Their couch, and afterwards the guest rooms in Mifflin Street, had always been open to those who'd needed sanctuary. They wouldn't have left their friends in difficult circumstances and she knew in her heart of hearts that she wouldn't now.

Emma let her head thump onto the bench in front of her, groaning softly. She wasn't cut out for this. She'd been just about able to manage being the sheriff of a small town. Being saviour to a kingdom and some sort of princess? Way above her pay grade and her natural inclination.

"Cheer up," a familiar voice drawled, "no one's dead yet."

Emma lifted her face as Ruby, or Red, placed two reassuringly large drinking vessels in front of her. She blinked at them, lifting her head and peering within. She was very pleased to find beer inside, as her own was empty.

"Thanks, Rubes," she sighed. She took a long sip, sighing at the malty taste. "A flagon of ale and a sympathetic ear."

Red took a long swig and lifted an expressive eyebrow. "Technically, this is a tankard and the contents a lager."

Emma let her head smack against the table once more. "I am really bad at this."

Ruby snorted, sipping her beer. "Thank Christ someone else is," she sighed deeply. "How you holding up?"

"What? Like apart from finding out my dead wife is alive, I gave our son up for adoption, my friends are my greatly resented parents and I'm a damn fairy tale princess? And I have magic that I need to use to prevent a wicked witch from conquering the land? Just fine."

The taller woman sighed. "Yeah. That all sucks." She blinked. "Apart from finding out your wife was alive, that was good."

Emma took a long pull from her lager, licking the foam from her upper lip. "You said it, Rubes. Uh, Red."

Her friend shrugged. "Rubes is fine, Emma. I know this is tricky to adjust to." She sighed. "What do you remember?"

"That I got knocked up, came to Storybrooke, fell in love with Regina and made a lot of friends. Regina and I raised Henry and then she died in a car crash," she said, having become eerily practiced with the spiel. "Henry and I fled to New York, and were brought back by Liath."

"Jesus," Ruby sighed. "Heavy."

"Yeah," she sighed. "so you're really a werewolf?"

Ruby chuckled grimly and nodded. "Yup. What big teeth I have, and all."
Emma shook her head, laughing softly. She took in her friend, the one she'd gone out with and gotten messy drunk with when she'd needed to blow off steam. The one who'd understood what it was like to not have parents to complain about or go home to. The one who'd been searching for her place in the world much as Emma had been.

"Tell me about the Emma you knew," she asked, her voice cracking. She needed to know. She needed to prepare herself to face the return of her memories. After all, she mused sadly, she'd always been her own worst enemy. The flash of sorrow across Ruby's face told her all she needed to know but she smiled anyway and sipped her beer.

"Well, she showed up in this crappy little tin can, attitude and leather and nothing to lose."

SQSQSQSQ

Urgh. This chapter did not want to come. I rewrote it three times and am still not convinced. Would be interested to hear what people think so drop a comment!
Early evening found Henry posing in front of his mom's vanity, awkwardly adjusting a red cloak around his shoulders. After his ma had left, he'd done some sparring under Mulan's watchful eye. David had stayed close by, quizzing him about what life had been like in Storybrooke. The deputy had been quiet, willing to listen while Henry told him stories about camp outs and school trips, fishing in the summer and building snowmen during the winter. He'd had this sad, soft look on his face that drew Henry's sympathy and tamped down his impulse to sass him for being so dumb earlier. After the session, he'd given Henry some fancy clothes to wear to the banquet and sent him to clean up.

Back in the queen's chambers, he'd lit the fire and the sconces carefully, wanting to ensure the room was warm for his mothers. He'd briefly explored the environs beyond with Bran, finding the nursery and servant's quarters his mom had mentioned.

The nursery was cozy, with a huge fireplace and large windows. There was no indication it had seen a baby in decades, though, lacking any furniture aside from a chest of drawers and a small bed. The servant's room beyond was smaller again, windowless and cramped, containing a bed and a stool. Beyond it, a narrow spiral staircase coiled drunkenly into the kitchens, the steps uneven and slippery. Both rooms were freshly cleaned, no dust or mold marring them. He lit the fire in the nursery and brought his bag in, deciding he quite liked the idea of having his own space again. He really was too big to still be sleeping with his moms, after all.

That said, the room lacked mirrors and he wasn't sure how to fix his cape properly, so he'd entered the queen's chamber as easily as he'd entered his mothers' room in the house on Mifflin Street. He even lit some scented burners, hoping to dispel the musty fug of disuse that permeated the place. Bran trotted over to the rug in front of the fire, rolling contentedly onto his side and letting his tongue loll out.

He was brushing his hair when with a puff of displaced air, purple smoke and a blunt, metallic scent filled the room. He turned, a smile on his lips as his mother appeared, rubbing her eyes carefully. Her shoulders were slightly hunched, drawn in to her chest and he frowned at the sight, not quite sure what had happened.

"Mom!" he called, happy to see her nonetheless. "I lit the fire for you."

"Thank you, sweetheart," she smiled a wobbly smile, gathering him into a tight hug. It went on for slightly longer than he thought thanks for a small chore necessitated, but he didn't complain. She kissed his head and stepped back, smoothing his hair and adjusting his cape with a practiced hand.

"Who gave you these clothes?"

"David did," he replied. "He said I needed to be ready for the banquet." He turned to the mirror, fiddling with his pendant and standing up straight. His mom was fixing her eye makeup, leaning close to the glass and peering intently at her reflection. He'd always been quite fascinated by the process and would often sit and watch his mom get ready. Sometimes, if they weren't in a hurry, she'd do his ma's eyes, too, usually after she whined about not being able to do eyeliner as well as his mom did.

"David did," he replied. "He said I needed to be ready for the banquet." He turned to the mirror, fiddling with his pendant and standing up straight. His mom was fixing her eye makeup, leaning close to the glass and peering intently at her reflection. He'd always been quite fascinated by the process and would often sit and watch his mom get ready. Sometimes, if they weren't in a hurry, she'd do his ma's eyes, too, usually after she whined about not being able to do eyeliner as well as his mom did.

Her hands were trembling a little, though, not as steady as they usually were, and her eyes looked a bit red. He frowned, about to speak when the door opened, his ma entering. She looked tired, still dirty from the practice yard, and somewhat sheepish as she approached his mom. She set down her eye pencil, frowning.
"Emma?"

"Hey," she replied, the corners of her mouth tugging up into an unconvincing smile. "Sorry I'm so, uh," she gestured to herself and shrugged. "I should go clean up."

He watched as his mom walked towards her, reaching out a hesitant hand. "Did something happen?"

His ma drew a breath and dipped her head, lifting her own hand to briefly clench his mom's fingers. "It's OK."

"You don't look OK," his mom said quietly.

"David was an ass," Henry piped, earning two quite reproachful looks. "What? He was. He teased mom about him being her dad."

At that, his mom whipped her face back to his ma, frowning angrily. "What did that idiot say now?"

"Regina," she sighed, "it's fine. He wasn't thinking. And though he was being an ass, Henry, it is not cool to call him that." Her shoulders were slumped a little, her eyes dull.

"I agree," his mom said, glancing at Henry briefly with a conspiratorial wink, "he is an ass."

Henry snorted at that and his ma lifted her mouth in a little smirk. She shuffled a little and his mom tugged her forward, hugging her gently and rubbing her back.

"I smell," his ma protested, though she did wrap her arms around his mom.

"You do," his mom agreed, pulling back, though still holding her hand. With her other hand, she waved and the tingle of magic filled the air. "There's a bath waiting. Go freshen up. We need to attend this ridiculous dinner." His ma nodded, smiling at his mom for a moment before heading into the washroom. She watched her as she went, a gentle but sad expression on her face, lonesome and wistful.

She shook her head and turned back to Henry, an eyebrow raised. "As much as it pains me to say it, you have to bear in mind that David and Snow are your grandparents."

He frowned, shuffling on his feet. "They're the same age as you guys."

"Younger, in fact," she sighed. "Before, though, you had a good relationship with them. You enjoyed spending time with them. Don't be rude to them, sweetheart. If nothing else, they're the king and queen of this kingdom."

Henry lifted a dubious eyebrow. "You always said that monarchies were an outdated waste of money."

She blinked at him, her eyes wide. "I did, did I?"

"Mom, you're an elected official in a democratic country," he said, rolling his eyes.

She shook her head and sat at the vanity. "Well, as someone who's actually been a queen, I have to agree that there's a lot to be said for choosing your leaders."

Satisfied that his mom looked a little less sad, he joined her at the mirror, preening a bit. He sighed happily, running his hand over his cloak.

"So, what are the rules for a royal banquet?" he asked, bouncing on his feet.
"Well, the same as being in a restaurant," she said, meeting his eyes in the reflection. "Say please and thank you to the servers, don't speak with your mouth full and finish what's on your plate." She paused, grimacing. "Unless you find something you really don't want to eat, which could happen."

Henry frowned but decided to avoid asking what could be presented to him. His mom applied her lipstick, her lips darkening to a deep red. It was very different from the mom who'd led Dapple through the woods, but reminded him of his mom before she headed for meetings in the town hall. She turned to him, her eyes still a bit red, and smiled.

"Will I do?"

"You look awesome, mom."

"Well," she said, holding out an elbow, "luckily, I have a handsome prince to escort me to the banquet, tonight."

Giggling, he took her arm and perched beside her, the heavy fabric of her dress not hiding the warmth of her beside him, the reassurance of her solid presence.

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She sent Henry to feed Bran and bring him for a walk before they left, heading for her wardrobe and pulling a couple of gowns out for Emma. As long as she wore flats, she'd get away with some of her less structured dresses. Emma was taller than her, broader about the shoulders, but very slim around the hips and waist. She laid out the trousers and doublet she'd altered earlier, too, not sure what the other woman would want to wear.

Emma emerged from a cloud of fragrant steam wrapped in a large towel, another piled atop her head. "That felt glorious," she sighed. "Thank you so much."

Regina smiled, relieved to see much of the tension Emma had carried into the room earlier seemed to have soaked away in the tub. She gestured to the outfits. "Any preferences?"

Emma frowned, running a hand over the rich velvet of a simple green gown. "Are all of these floor length?"

Regina shrugged, gesturing at herself. "Cocktail dresses haven't made their way here yet."

Emma crooked a smile, turning back to the selection. "I guess I'm expected to wear a dress, right?"

"Yes," Regina said, softly. "But the Emma Swan I knew never put much stock in expectations." She turned back to the wardrobe, emerging with a pair of soft black leather trousers and a red leather coat with impressive slashed tails. She held the coat up to Emma's chest, frowning. She'd need a top beneath, as she didn't quite have the bust for it, but it could work. She looked up at Emma, who was watching her with soft green eyes, warm with affection.

She felt her heart skip at the easy intimacy, her cheeks warming with a blush. "What would you prefer?"

Emma tipped her head to one side. "Skinny jeans, a tank and a glass of wine with you?" She sighed. "But I guess I can't skip out, huh?"

Regina sighed. "You could. But it might spell the end of the truce with Snow." She rubbed her forehead, the events of the day catching up with her. It seemed like a week since she'd woken up. Her heart was heavy after her conversation with Liath, too, and she had very little reserve to play
nice with the White Court. "I confess, I have zero desire to go down there."

Emma turned to the outfits, inspecting them again. "You wanna sit this out? Could you?"

Regina supposed she could, as her presence was usually tolerated at best, but she was reluctant to leave Henry and Emma at the tender mercies of Snow's allies. It wouldn't be the first time she made herself attend a function she didn't want to, after all. And this particular soiree was being held to celebrate her family. Exhaustion and apathy swelled in her chest, stronger than they'd been for many days, causing her to suck in a breath of air. She closed her eyes, recalling the sight of Henry's bright eyes and Emma's crooked smile, attempting to pull herself back into the moment, for the sake of her family.

"I won't," she said. Emma turned to her, a cautious and grateful smile on her lips.

"I'm way out of my depth here, Regina."

"I know," she agreed. "But remember, you have an advantage. You're the saviour, Snow White's long lost daughter. They love you. Even if you don't feel like it, even if you don't believe it, use it. For Henry's sake, if nothing else."

Emma nodded, turning back to the clothes. She ran a hand over the red leather ensemble, nodding distractedly.

"Yours, too," she whispered.

Regina's throat tightened, though she swallowed against the rising emotion. They didn't have much time to get ready and she needed to just have this night be over.

"Which one?"

Emma grinned, gesturing at the red leather, and Regina rolled her eyes fondly. "Alright. Let's get you ready."

They bustled around for a few minutes, Emma dressing as Regina fussed at the vanity. She cast an appraising eye on her, taking in her muscular arms and the confident way she held herself with a good deal of interest. She adjusted her cuffs and Regina frowned, noticing red knuckles.

"What did you do to yourself?" she asked, lifting Emma's hand to inspect it.

Emma frowned, flushing lightly. "Urgh, sparring with David. I tripped a couple of times." Regina ran her thumb over the raw skin, shaking her head. Emma shifted her feet.

"I also used magic," she said, quietly. "I think I almost hurt David," she said, her voice small and somewhat lost. Compassion flooded Regina's chest and she lifted her other hand, cradling Emma's barked knuckles carefully.

"He made you angry and you lashed out," Regina guessed. She'd honestly wondered where this version of Emma had been hiding her temper, having been on the receiving end of it so often. Emma lifted her eyebrows and offered a little shrug, clearly upset.

"Could I have hurt him?"

Regina sighed, tipping her head to meet worried green eyes. "Magic is emotion, Emma. If he made you angry, and you lashed out, then yes. But without malicious intent, I doubt it would have been serious. I don't think getting angry and wanting to smack some sense into that lunk head is anything
other than a natural reaction to being in his presence."

Emma laughed softly, the desired response. "OK. So how do I control it?"

Regina considered that for a minute. "I suppose in the same way you resist throwing a punch when people annoy you, or snapping at someone who irritates you. You understand your reaction, and learn how to respond appropriately." She considered Emma's knuckles for a moment. "And you try to associate your magic with other emotions."

She tugged Emma to the chairs by the fire, pulling her to sit. She held her grazed hand between them, meeting curious green eyes. "I want you to close your eyes, and picture your hand, whole and healthy, and something positive associated with that."

Emma tipped her head to one side. "Something positive?"

Regina nodded. "Think of the best your hands ever were," she instructed, recalling her lessons with Rumple and determinedly shifting them away from themes of power and vengeance. "When you did something good or right."

Emma peered at her from beneath long eyelashes, a faint flush on her high cheekbones. "OK," she said.

"Close your eyes," Regina said, laughing softly. "Hold the picture in your head."

Carefully, delicately, she drew her own magic to herself, holding the image of Emma's fine boned hands in her mind. Something gentle, something she'd felt for very few people, filled her chest and she lifted Emma's hand, keeping the image of slender fingers, sure and strong, in the forefront of her mind.

"Can you feel that?" she asked, watching Emma nod. "You can see what I want to do?"

"I can," she murmured, her voice breathy with disbelief. "Jesus, Regina, I can see what you want to do."

"Follow me," she whispered, her own eyes slipping shut.

Emma shifted beside her, an incredulous laugh running through her. Regina smiled, drawing her power back as Emma poured her own clumsy, enthusiastic, messy magic into the little wounds on her hand. They healed within seconds, the skin whole and complete. Eyes flicked open and Emma's mouth hung, utter delight on her features.

"I did it," she whispered.

"You did," Regina confirmed. "That was all you, none of me. Good work, dear."

"Holy shit!" Emma exclaimed. "That's incredible!"

Regina shrugged minutely. "No, Emma. It's part of you. It took me many, many years to learn that magic isn't a weapon, but the way you allow your soul to sing, or scream, as it may be."

Emma was examining her hand, turning it around and inspecting the smooth skin. It had been such a little thing, Regina mused, much less than bringing a chest back together, but she shared in Emma's delight. She laughed, freely and from the bottom of her lungs. Emma joined her, throwing an arm around her shoulders and pressing a kiss to her forehead.
"You've always made my soul sing, Regina," she said, light and almost jokingly. "No surprise you do it here, too."

Regina twisted her neck to take in her companion, her chest tightening with the sentiment and squeezed their fingers together, her heart lighter than it had been in many, many years.

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"So the herald will call your name and you approach the dais, and your seat, but don't sit until after the Queen does," a valet instructed, frowning. Emma thought she recognised him as a guy who'd worked in a minimart near the cannery, but couldn't be sure. Regina and Ruby had both alluded to the fact that the people currently filling the castle were a mix of Storybrooke residents and those who'd never been taken by the curse. Dignitaries, tradespeople and refugees from beyond the borders were gathering at the castle and trying to renegotiate old roles.

Emma blinked in terror at his formal tone. She'd just spent an hour getting ready, though most of that had been spent practicing magic, and she felt woefully unprepared. She should have felt quite dapper, in all honesty, clad in rich leather, but she hadn't seen any other women in trousers and wondered if she was about to embarrass herself.

"Don't look so panicked, dear," a very welcome voice teased from behind her. "We'll all go in together."

She sighed in relief at that. Regina and Henry were standing with her, looking far more at ease than she herself felt. She took her son's hand and huffed a sigh, wondering what weird Mills' epigenetics were at work. The antechamber they stood in was dim and stuffy, lacking windows but sporting a large fireplace none the less. Wary glances from the people sharing the room were enough to make Emma want to flee, or at least do something to freak the stuffy bastards out. In another life, with a willing accomplice, kissing Regina had often accomplished precisely that.

"Do I look OK?" she asked, nerves jangling a bit. She didn't think she quite fit into the traditional princess mold and was gripped with a flash of insecurity. The incident with David and her subsequent talk with Ruby had left her feeling off kilter, disconcerted and adrift in a very unfamiliar world. The desire to take her family and run flared once more and she had to concentrate on not moving her feet.

Regina lifted an appraising eyebrow and sighed. "Emma, you could wear a sack and no one would dare say a word, but rest assured you look beautiful." She brushed a hand over her shoulder, picking at a non-existent piece of lint. She lifted her hand to adjust Emma's hair, a small frown of concentration wrinkling her forehead as she mumbled about getting two children ready.

Emma smiled at the other woman, heart calming and settling. It was incredible how Regina's presence could make things seem so much simpler and less terrifying. Though she had no idea how to comport herself as Princess Emma, she'd generally been able to put on a good face as Emma Swan-Mills.

She smiled, something within her loosening and relaxing. She reached out a hand for Regina, pleased when she took it without comment or hesitation. She was a bit surprised to note that Regina had shed several of the more obnoxious rings from earlier, settling for smaller bands that made it easier to entwine their fingers.

The herald announced them and Emma straightened her back, entering the banquet hall with confidence, step in step with her family.
Regina sipped her wine slowly, peering around the great hall with wary eyes from the top of the dais. Snow had placed Emma beside herself, at her right hand, with Henry between his mothers, to the obvious consternation of many. Regina had felt a grudging flare of appreciation at being close to her family, though it was slightly awkward. Merida of Dun Broch sat beside her, with several other nobles spread along the table. Merida seemed entirely unconcerned with her past which didn't surprise her too much. Dun Broch was a distant land and she'd enjoyed a cordial trade relationship with King Fergus's father. She learned that Merida had been sent by her parents, seeking allies and strengthening ties.

She glanced over the packed room, her head held high as she took in the tableau. Tables crowded the floor, fresh rushes and straw lying over the flags. Great braziers, candelabras and sconces blazed, lighting the room enough to eat but failing to penetrate the great shadows of the vaulted ceiling twenty feet overhead. Liath and the boys were seated off to one side with some of the Merry Men. Mulan was deep in conversation with them and from some of her gestures, it seemed the topic was sword play. Robin Hood was bouncing Roland on his knee, the little boy listening eagerly, fascinated by the older lads.

Ruby was seated at the far end of the high table, several minor nobles sending uncomfortable looks her way. Aurora was trying her best to be polite but the tall woman seemed supremely uneasy. She noticed Emma shooting her a reassuring smile and how it caused slim shoulders to relax. A surge of affection rose in her chest, at the effortless way Emma put people at their ease.

"Hey mom," Henry asked, tugging her sleeve. "What's this?"

"Oh, that's manticore, sweetheart." She grimaced. "It's an acquired taste."

He scrunched his nose. "Is that one of the things I don't have to eat?"

"Most definitely."

Merida laughed and shook her head. "Aye, tastes like boiled boots, hen."

Henry pushed it to one side of his plate and turned to the princess. "Do you think you could show us that thing you mentioned?"

"Wha' thing?"

"Shooting from a horse," he clarified, his eyes shining. "It sounds amazing."

Merida shrugged, as though the feat of mounted archery was nothing impressive. "Och aye. Nae bother, lad."

"My mom is a great rider," he supplied, smiling up at Regina. She knew she should have ducked her head humbly, that was what etiquette demanded, what proper ladies did, but with Henry grinning up at her she found herself nodding firmly.

"I can ride," she confirmed, "but I can't shoot very well."

Merida shrugged. "I can teach ye."

"My ma is awful on a horse," Henry lamented, sighing. Merida cocked her head to one side, her bright eyes catching Regina's with enormous curiosity.
"Wee Henry said ye're married tae the princess," she said in a rush, a blush on her round cheeks. "Tha's just..." she bit her lip, searching for the words. Regina bit down on the impulse to correct her, recognising something vulnerable in the young woman.

"A while back, me ma and da tried tae marry me off. Had lads shootin' fer me hand," she frowned, clearly not entirely forgiving of the venture. "Fuckin' disaster. I beat every one of the numpties."

Regina shook her head, chuckling. Merida's response evoked much the same that Henry's frequent forays into idealism did. Affection, worry and pride all at once. "In the land without magic, you don't have to marry. You can live your own life."

Merida inhaled slowly. "Aye. So not every princess marries a prince?"

Regina glanced over at Emma, who'd happened to be looking her way. The hall was too noisy for her to have heard their conversation, Regina knew. Her elbow was propped on the back of Henry's seat, her wrist loose and relaxed, her hand close to Regina. A wide smile lit her face and she extended her pinky finger, brushing it off Regina's shoulder fondly, a brief acknowledgement before she turned back to Snow.

"No, Merida," she said, feeling her cheeks heat. "Some find princesses of their own."

SQSQSQSQ

Dinner was drawing to a close, the last course served and eaten. Henry had bounded down to the boys earlier, keen to hear more of Mulan's stories. Emma wiped her mouth carefully, watching David as he descended down to the table with the boys and Liath. She turned to Snow, who looked weary and excused herself, following broad shoulders. She tapped his back, nerves gripping her guts as he turned. His eyes widened and he stopped in his tracks.

"Emma," he said, "hey."

"Hey," she replied, as lame as he was. "So, uh, about earlier."

They drifted to the edge of the floor, finding a spot to talk amidst the hubbub of the hall. He sighed, crossing his arms.

"I didn't mean to, you know, hit a sore spot."

Emma scratched the back of her neck and shrugged. "And I didn't mean to almost roast you with magic."

He nodded, accepting her apology easily. His brow was furrowed, thoughtful and much more mature than the man she'd known. "$I didn't realise you had power like that."

"Me neither," she sighed, feeling her mouth twist wryly. "$I got mad. It came out."

David cringed, the expression at odds with his regal clothes and proud bearing. "$I didn't mean to make you mad. But, they call me Prince Charming, you know? Not Prince Brainy."

Emma actually laughed at that, shaking her head. "$Yeah, well, I'm pretty sure what they'll call me won't be fit for a Disney cartoon."

David's head tipped to one side, sorrow on his face, though from where Emma didn't know. "$I'm one hundred percent sure the David you knew wouldn't have liked people calling his friend Emma names any more than I do."
She shook her head, laughing softly. "No, no he did not." She lifted her face, meeting eyes that now seemed so familiar. She shook her head, completely unsure of what to say or how to negotiate what was roaring through her chest.

"Maybe we can practice tomorrow, again?" he suggested, shrugging a shoulder.

She smiled, shaking her head. "I'd like that, David."

He grinned, flashing a smile that someone without access to modern dentistry during their formative years had no business sporting, and nodded. He bounced on the balls of his feet and they made their way to Henry and the others. It wasn't perfect, by any stretch, but it was at least a start.

**SQSQSQSQ**

Regina watched Emma approach Charming with less apprehension than she would have expected. The other woman clearly needed to apologise for what she'd done, to clear the air, and she was struck again by the notion that *this* Emma was very different from the one she remembered. More patient, kinder and willing to open her heart to people. Perhaps it was the wine, but for the first time the notion filled her with pride, rather than terror. At least in some world, some version of her had been a decent enough person to allow those softer parts of Emma to emerge.

She glanced around the dais and realised with a start that Snow was watching her. The queen beckoned her forward and, chest clenching slightly, Regina moved to Emma's vacant seat. The familiar face was more rounded than before, her eyes puffy and tired. Her enormous belly strained beneath her gown and the queen winced noticeably if she moved suddenly.

"Snow," she greeted, warily.

"Regina," she nodded. "I know I said it before, but thank you for bringing her home. For bringing them both home."

A flash of sorrow lanced through her, followed by the morose thought that she hadn't, not really. That home for them was the land without magic and an apartment in New York, or a house in Storybrooke. She found herself missing that world acutely, then, wishing she was back in the only place where she'd ever felt like she belonged.

"You look tired," she said, not wishing to dwell on such thoughts. "You must be due soon."

Snow sighed, letting the ungracious segue go. "Fraulein Bosheit thinks I'll go before my time. She thinks I'm big for someone with weeks to go."

Regina frowned at that. Her own knowledge of childbirth was limited, having never carried long enough to need to learn about the process. That said, the idea of a big baby in the setting of very rudimentary medical care unsettled her deeply, in the way that the notion of unclean water did.

"She is your midwife?" Regina asked, quietly.

"She was a midwife here, then cursed as a nurse in Storybrooke. She comes highly recommended," Snow answered, lacing her fingers over her bump. She was unusually reticent and Regina wondered if the effort of speaking was making her ration her words.

"We had an interesting conversation with Emma," she said, her voice hard to read.

Regina lifted her chin, schooling her features. "Oh?"
Snow nodded. "She told us about her memories, about the life she knew."

Regina felt her shoulders tensing, not entirely enjoying the topic of conversation. It was too much, held too much potential for conflict and for old wounds to be reopened.

"About the most recent curse I cast, you mean?" she spat, bitterly.

Snow frowned at her, bright eyes shrewd. "She told me that Mary Margaret was a girl you used to baby sit, who subsequently went on to become Henry's sitter. She went away to Boston to college and came back to teach elementary school in Storybrooke. She and David had been together since senior year and got married last summer. David was a deputy and he volunteered at the animal shelter." She lifted an eyebrow. "Doesn't exactly sound like a cursed existence."

Regina bit her lip, unsure of what to say. "Good evidence that something went terribly wrong," she huffed, "if my spell granted you such a happy life."

Snow shrugged. "The way she tells it, we were all friends. You and I weren't bosom buddies, exactly, but she remembers a good life."

She found her gaze drifting to Emma, who had settled with the Hounds and Liath, David with them. They were laughing heartily, rowdy and free. Henry was curled against her and she was immensely edified to catch him glaring at David, protective of his mother.

"That was the intention," Regina said, softly. "A gift of happy memories." She swallowed thickly. "I don't know why they remember us all."

Snow chuckled. "Maybe because it takes more than one person to make a happy life. I mean, Emma had it all. Her child, friends... her spouse."

Regina clenched her teeth, keeping her gaze fixed on Emma, on the way she seemed so at ease with the soldiers and the way dark red leather shifted over her strong shoulders. She bit down on the urge to snap at Snow, to preempt whatever ire she had with her own rage.

"I'm sure you have something to say about that," she ground out, her back rigid.

"Well, I'm kind of disappointed she never told me she likes women, you know?" Snow sighed. "I mean, we were friends! I figured it would have come up in conversation."

If Regina hadn't been in public, her jaw would have dropped with incredulity. Snow, oblivious as usual, continued.

"Like, it was a shock, don't get me wrong. You do not want to wrap your head around the fact that your daughter thinks she's married to your stepmother." Regina winced, reminded once more of their ridiculously complicated family dynamics.

"I'm worried," Snow confessed, "because this Emma... she loves you so much. I don't know what's going to happen when she remembers but..." She blew out a sigh. Snow White had never been the most articulate of people. She cut her bright eyes to Regina's, something lurking unsaid and she
found herself turning away, focusing on Emma and Henry in the crowd once more.

"We have more important things to worry about," she sniffed, dismissively, even as her heart clenched. "Zelena still seeks your child and we are at a disadvantage."

Snow nodded, rubbing her bump. "What do we do?"

Regina had been thinking about this, trying to decide on the best course of action, and she found herself in an uncharacteristically defensive stance. "We sit tight and gather information. We watch her movements and we try to figure out why she wants this baby."

"She can't breach the wards?" Snow asked, her voice laced with worry.

"Not unless someone is stupid enough to invite her in," Regina scoffed, "but no. You're safe here, Snow, and so is your baby."

Snow smiled at her then, wide and guileless, reminiscent of the child she'd known and Regina was torn between wanting to berate her for being so damn trusting and allowing her own concern to rise to the forefront. She nodded curtly, rising to leave with a hasty farewell, unsettled for a reason she couldn't quite put her finger on. Dread filled her, the certainty that things were going to go horribly wrong strong within her breast.

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The fire had burned to embers in the grate, casting soft firelight around the room. Henry had retired to the nursery, taking Bran with him, and Regina found herself sitting at the vanity, removing her makeup. Emma was moving on soft feet behind her, humming quietly. The banquet had been quite awkward, though relatively informal as these things went. The conversations she'd engaged in had left her with a lot to consider and she found herself in a thoughtful mood.

Emma came behind her, placing a soft hand on her shoulder. "Want help with your hair?"

Regina nodded, enjoying the sensation of fingers running through her hair and over her scalp. Emma began carefully deconstructing the severe twist she'd created that morning, her fingers gentle. She hadn't quite been able to bring herself to conjure longer hair, despite knowing it would have made several preferred styles easier. She loved having her hair short, having the freedom to cut it and bob it as she pleased, and wasn't quite ready to concede that just yet.

Emma was combing her hands through her hair gently, scratching her scalp.

"You've got such gorgeous hair," she murmured. "So beautiful."

Regina found herself humming with pleasure and leaned back, tipping her chin up and looking up at Emma. The crown of her head rested against Emma's warm belly, butting gently.

"The same to you, Miss Swan."

"Swan-Mills," she teased, one hand sliding forward to tap her nose. "Good night, Regina."

Regina turned, standing in her simple grey nightdress, scrubbed and tired. "Did you light the fire in the servant's room?"

Emma blinked, clearly taken somewhat aback. "Uh, no?"

Regina rolled her eyes, though there was little scorn and a lot of tenderness in the gesture. "Well, it'll
be far too cold to sleep in there tonight." She turned and headed for her bed. "This room is warmer."

Emma followed, her eyes soft and amused. "OK. I can sleep on that couch."

Regina held out her hand, slightly annoyed by the gentle teasing. She tucked herself beneath the covers, tugging Emma after her. They lay facing each other in the low light, Regina's heart pounding.

"I know, given what I said, that this might be somewhat of a mixed signal."

Emma chuckled and lifted an arm over the duvet, settling it loosely on her side. "Not at all. I get it. We are not going to do anything aside from sleep here."

She grew solemn for a moment, running her thumb over Regina's back. "You don't want to do anything now because you think I'll feel differently when I remember. You don't want me to do anything I'll regret. Basically the same as waiting until someone sobers up, you know?"

"But sharing a bed, holding you, that's not the same as sex."

"There's an intimacy to it, though," Regina breathed, her heart vulnerable and completely open. "It's more intimate than sex, in all the ways that count. Even the way we speak, Emma..."

Emma inhaled, reaching upwards and tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "I get it," she said, softly and something in the gentleness of her tone urged Regina onwards, her chest tight.

"I have not had good experiences when it comes to sex."

Emma nodded, her gaze patient and open, understanding without pitying. "I had some pretty shitty ones, myself." Regina reached up, taking Emma's hand between her own, playing with the elegant fingers and tracing the lines there. "And you know we don't have to, right? That having boundaries about what level of intimacy you're comfortable with is OK?" She reached a free hand up and ran it over the back of her own, ticklish and light. "Being here and enjoying this isn't a prelude or a promise. It's just you and me."

Regina closed her eyes, guilt and relief and desire and fear all swirling through her, alongside a dozen other emotions. She didn't think it was possible to feel like this, as though she was nothing but her naked heart, thundering in the comforting darkness. She wanted to explain, to put her worries and hopes into words, to make sense of it all. She wanted Emma to know her and understand her and what was more, she ached to know the other woman as well. To learn the truth of the depths and heights within her. It was terrifying and exhilarating all at once. Emma kissed her finger tips gently and shifted on the pillow.

"We need to sleep," she yawned. "It's been a long day, babe." She squeezed Regina's hand firmly. "To be continued?"

"To be continued," she replied, yawning as well. Fatigue swept over her and she rested her head on her own pillow, eyes sliding shut in moments.

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What do you guys think? Hope you enjoyed this one!
Chapter 22

Hello all! Apologies for the delay. Real life got busy.

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Regina's eyes flew open, her heart leaping in her chest as she was catapulted into wakefulness. Disorientated, she blinked rapidly, the scent of freshly spilled blood filling her senses. Her mind spun as she attempted to bring her breathing under control, to slow the ragged gasps she was sucking into her lungs. Her mind roiled with the memory of hot blood on stone, the harsh and cloying scent invading her senses completely.

She became aware of the body beneath her, the warmth and solidity under her cheek and limbs. Her hand was already fisted into Emma's soft night shirt, her leg slung over a slightly bent knee. She shifted closer, burying her face into the softness of Emma's throat and closing her eyes, lips resting against a steady pulse. She inhaled deeply, curling onto the other women and gripping her with a flash of desperate possessiveness, struck by the awful fear she'd be taken from her.

Slowly, gently, Emma lifted her hands to her, one winding around the nape of her neck and the other grasping her clenched fist. Emma shifted on the mattress, adjusting the cradle of her hips and the hollow of her shoulder to better receive her. She nuzzled the top of her head, sleepy breath hot against her hair.

Regina swallowed thickly, squeezing her eyes shut as she attempted to force the dream, the memories, from her mind. She inhaled Emma's scent, tangy after a night's slumber. It sat heavily on the back of her palate, drawn in through her mouth as much as it was her nose. It was blunt yet tart, biting her senses pleasantly. It was unlike any perfume or soap she'd ever encountered, strong and completely unapologetic.

It soothed her, though. It held something of Henry, though more mature and lower in pitch than their son. She tensed her leg, tightened her fist and rolled more completely on top of Emma, sliding her other hand under her, curling around her shoulder. Their arms and legs were bare, brushing against one another as she drew in Emma's essence, half convinced she'd suffocate in any other air. That there was a coppery undertone to her scent, not unlike blood, did not dissuade her. She felt tremors wrack her frame and Emma shifted her grip, wrapping fierce arms around her torso.

It wasn't delicate or girlish, the scent that surrounded her. It was metal and rain on hot stones. It was sweat and exertion. It was strength and power coiled beneath pale skin, ferocious affection in the hands that gripped her. It was the woman who loved her. Who'd borne their son. It was the beginning of their world together. Of crossing worlds to find her. It was the scent of life, hard wrought and tenacious.

She willed her breathing to slow, her heart settling as she did. Her lips were parted against Emma's throat and as the terror that had held her eased its awful grip, she felt tears well in her eyes. She blinked, the image of bright red gore and clots rolling over grey flag stones persisting behind her eyelids. A puddle, expanding in a room filled with high-pitched screaming.

The vision faded, her heart slowing and her frantic grip lessening. She drew backwards, freeing Emma from the bruising embrace and sat up clumsily, sprawled on the bed. Eyes picked out by the last of the moonlight regarded her intently as her wife rose smoothly, with certainty. She knelt before her, just far enough to share body heat but not to crowd her. Her mouth was pulled down into an unhappy frown, though her eyes were steady. She didn't say anything, the dimple in her chin
catching Regina's attention for a long moment.

"I had a nightmare," she whispered, after silence extended beyond what she could bear, her heart heavy and sore. Emma nodded, frowning. She eased onto her backside, sitting cross legged.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

Regina did, but all she could recall was blood on stone. "I don't remember much," she allowed, cutting her gaze away.

Emma made a small sound, reaching out a hand, which Regina clasped, noticing that both of their palms were sweaty. Emma swallowed thickly, tension running through her. She was trying not to tug her forward, Regina realised, and the notion filled her with a yearning, primal and pure, to go to her. She leaned forward, wrapping her free arm around Emma's shoulders, bringing their foreheads to touch one another. She shared her breath, the sickly weakness of spent adrenaline leaving her shaking as she exhaled.

What impulse led her to shuffle forward, rising to her knees and straddling Emma's legs, she couldn't tell. She laid her hand on Emma's heart, her fingers hooked over her clavicle and sank against her as strong arms wrapped around her. Their breasts and bellies brushed and she clenched her thighs, the strength in her legs settling her more firmly around Emma. Firm hands wound around her back, one sitting just above the curve of her sacrum while the other cradled her shoulder blade. It felt so natural, so normal, that she let herself sink into the comfort offered by Emma's arms.

Exhaustion creeping up on her, she let her eyes slide shut as she allowed the regular thump of a noble heart to soothe her. How much time passed, she couldn't have said but when next she blinked, the sun was coaxing the leaden sky into faint shades of pink. The dawn was tinted crimson, freshly spilled blood painting the horizon.

"I dreamt about blood," she whispered, feeling numbed and frightened. "So much blood."

Emma shifted and pressed her cheek to her forehead. "I'm here, Regina."

I know.

Shock chased the fear from her, though it melded well with the numbness. Because she did know. She believed her with everything she had. For the first time in her life, she had someone who would stand by her side and not abandon her. She had someone who really had her back and she felt it to be true with every fibre of her being.

She squeezed her eyes shut and felt tears run down her cheeks, undone. The Evil Queen vanquished and fallen to ruination in the arms of the saviour.

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Emma found herself striding through the kitchens as the bakers were drawing fresh loaves from the great ovens, barking at their apprentices. She was wearing the clothes Regina had altered for her, glad for their warmth against the early morning chill in the corridors. She blinked, surprised to see Ruby perched on a remote counter, peeling a hard boiled egg, expressive eyes pensive as she regarded the dawn through a narrow window.

"Hey," she muttered, sliding up beside her. Ruby blinked and gave her a long look up and down, her brow knit. Emma cocked her head to one side, wondering if she needed to be offended by the matter-of-fact perusal or flattered. "What? Do I smell?"
"Yeah," Ruby said, wryly. "Like Regina."

Emma felt a blush creep up her neck, startled that someone would have such keen insight into their intimate behaviour but not embarrassed by the behaviour itself. "Well, yeah. We share a bed, Ruby."

Ruby's dark gaze was all wolf then as she took a careful sip of tea. Her appraisal long and searching, a slow nod clearly all she felt she needed to contribute to the conversation. Emma recalled their talk from the day before, the careful anecdotes and funny stories about the hapless sheriff, and frowned.

"What's worrying you?" Ruby asked, tipping her head to one side, unruly dark hair cascading over her shoulders. There were many things worrying Emma in that moment, chief among them Regina's distress during the night, but she wasn't quite ready to speak about that. Something about Regina's fear and the frantic way she'd held her concerned Emma enormously, igniting a spark of dread in her guts that smouldered beneath her ribs.

"Honestly?" Emma sighed, because her list of worries was long and she figured there was another topic Ruby could actually help her figure out. "Emma Swan."

"Come again?"

Emma frowned, accepting a mug from the wolf. "The Emma you knew. I'm worried about getting her memories back."

Ruby nodded then, sorrow lending distance to her gaze. "Yeah. It ain't fun."

Emma sipped her tea, the warm liquid soothing her. "I mean, you were cursed with awful lives-"

"I wasn't," Ruby interrupted, abrupt but not unkind. "Here, I'm an animal. Here, I live with the fact that I killed the boy I loved and was responsible for my own mother's death, Emma. The wolf," she sighed, clenching her jaw, "it's always just below the surface."

Emma believed her. Could recognise the spark of something ancient and not quite human in her friend that she'd seen in Liath and sometimes in Regina. The hint of something dangerous and barely controlled.

"There, I was a bored brat living with my granny. I had a pretty shitty job and I wanted to leave the small town I lived in but," she laughed then, "so? Welcome to the twenty first century. At least I had my own money. My freedom."

Emma digested that for a moment, frowning. In her memories, Ruby had blamed herself for her mother's death, too. She'd died in a car crash, Emma recalled, on her way to collect Ruby from a pee-wee softball game. She wondered if it had been the same in the Storybrooke that her friend remembered, but couldn't quite bring herself to ask.

"How do you live with two sets of memories, two lives?" Emma asked, softly.

Ruby, Red, turned to her, a sad expression on her face. "I'll answer when I figure it out. You become this new person, you know?" She shrugged. "I think it's easier for us, most of our memories from the curse were pretty repetitive. We lived the same damn day in and out until you arrived, not real lives." She frowned, briefly. "Though, I suppose I got to spend time with Henry," she said, softly. "Regina let him talk to me. He broke the monotony, because he changed all the time."

Emma cracked a smile. "He does that."

Ruby nodded, though she was solemn. "Emma Swan told me a lot of things in confidence, usually
while she was drunk."

"Emma Swan-Mills did that, too," she said, somewhat awkwardly.

Ruby shoved her shoulder in a friendly manner. "Emma, the life you led before Storybrooke was your curse. You were affected by it just like we all were. You were lonely and frankly, you were a shit show."

Emma flinched at that. "Yeah. I can see how that could have happened."

Red shook her head, bending her neck in a positively lupine manner as she did. "You shouldn't have been alone. We should have kept you with us. Snow made me your godmother, to protect you, but she still sent you away." She lifted eyes, glowing with some inner light, fierce and regretful. "I see you now, how you move and the way Regina and Henry's scent lingers on you, the stillness in you. You don't look like you're one freak out away from running anymore. You're stronger than you were. I mean, you were always strong, Emma, but this is different. You are different."

Emma nodded, solemn. "Before, I sometimes wondered, what would have happened if I hadn't made it to Storybrooke. If I hadn't met Regina, or all you guys. If you hadn't persuaded Granny to let me work for her. I was loved and supported," she said, quietly. "By a lot of really great people."

Ruby's eyes blazed and she grabbed Emma's hand, surprising her. "Like you should have been," she said, firmly. "Like you deserved. Like we wanted."

And Emma Swan-Mills got it. She understood, though it had taken her a lot to get there, that she deserved to be loved. That she deserved to be cared for. But clasping Ruby's fingers, the memory of who she'd been, and the ghost of the angry loner she'd been on the cusp of becoming, loomed large and fear skittered through her. She knew, that with utter certainty, that Emma Swan had not understood any of those things.

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Regina scrubbed her face with annoyance, a plain flannel cloth enlisted in her onslaught against the sickly itch she felt beneath her skin. She had sent Emma to the kitchens to collect breakfast, needing some space after her shameful outburst earlier. She rinsed the cloth and began washing her arms, her skin taking on an irritated hue as she went. Fragrant steam rose from the copper bath she was kneeling in as she quickly moved through the motions of washing. She vowed to assemble a shower, when she found a moment. Soaking in a tub was well and good when one had time to spare but she had a lot to accomplish.

That she wanted nothing more than to crawl back into bed was immaterial. She wanted to strip the sheets, curl into clean linen and sleep the day away. She was tired after her fitful rest and had very little desire to engage with the rest of the world. Sorrow was pulling at her heart, too, frustrating her. What right had she to be sad, she demanded of herself, scrubbing her legs now. She had Henry and though it had been completely unexpected, she had Emma. She had people who loved her and though she had few friends, she had a role to play. A function to fulfill and a job to do. She frowned at her legs, scowling at the stubbly hair. Depilation would have to wait. She finished washing herself, stepping out of the tub and grabbing a towel.

She bit back a frustrated grunt as she secured the soft material, lifting another to dry her hair. She was annoyed with herself, at her mood. What kind of person was she that she couldn't even accept the happiness in front of her? She knew it was transient, doomed to pass in the very near future, but she
should have been happy while she had it. How could she still have nightmares when curled in bed against a warm, caring body? How could she feel as though she wanted to run from her world when it held Henry again? She towelled her hair roughly, all but stomping into her dressing area.

She rooted in the back of her wardrobe, searching for some of her older riding garb. She had a job to do this morning and needed to do it quickly. While she was completely capable of riding in more or less any of her outfits, even if she had to do so side saddle in some, she needed to be dressed comfortably to ride with speed. She pulled soft undergarments on, including fine woollen socks. She paused as she balanced on one foot, noticing the shift of muscle beneath the skin of her leg. It was no where near as impressive as Emma's, but clearly their tramping about the forest had done some good. She pulled a pair of black jodhpurs on, shimmying a bit to fit into the tight leather. A woolen jumper, as finely knitted as anything machines in the land without magic had ever managed, followed. She pulled a short, fitted tweed jacket and emerged into her room proper as Henry did, trailed by Bran. "Hey mom," he yawned, easing sleep out of his eye with a knuckle. She glanced at the sky, noting that it was barely dawn.

"You're up early, sweetheart," she said, smiling at the sight of him. The band of frustration squeezing her chest eased somewhat and she made her way to her vanity, lifting a brush to tend to her unruly hair. It was easier to push the sorrow and negativity away when in his presence, though the memory lingered.

"Yeah, I guess I woke up and I wanted to go see the guys."

Pride that her little prince had made friends, and her eagerness for him to go about the very important business of being twelve, warred with the knowledge that they needed to speak about a serious manner before he left. Emma entered the room, balancing a large tray and Regina used the interruption, and the subsequent breakfast, to gather her thoughts. She ran a hand through her drying hair and ate mechanically, heart heavy with the task ahead of her.

Emma nudged her foot with her own, thankfully having removed her boots on arrival, and Regina felt affection surge through her. She met sparkling eyes the colour of leaves in spring and her heart gave a little thump. The question in her gaze was obvious and the fact that Emma was concerned about her was enough to strengthen her resolve. She cleaned her mouth with a napkin and folded it neatly on her plate, straightening.

"Henry, Emma," she began, pleased to find her voice steady despite her jangling nerves. "I need to speak to you both about something."

Henry blinked up at her, flour from a bacon sandwich dusting his cheek, and she lifted her napkin to clean it. He squirmed slightly, clearly deciding himself too old to allow such an action, but letting her finish without voicing the complaint in his bright hazel eyes. The notion that she might never have a chance to do so again crossed her mind and her heart seized.

"The potion to restore your memories is almost ready," she said, seeing the shock lance through him. Emma gasped and she turned slowly to face her. The fist holding her heart squeezed tightly at the sight of flour on Emma's cheek, as well. She lifted the linen again, wiping Emma's face. She made no move to evade her, sorrow and worry darkening her expression.

"Belle began the ground work, but potion making is tricky. The ingredients for such a difficult brew are hard to come by and the recipe requires delicacy."

Mother and son, so similar it was almost more than she could bear, looked at one another.
"When will it be ready?" Henry asked. Bran leaned towards him, settling his heavy head in his lap.

"The day after tomorrow," she answered. Thankfully, Belle was as meticulous and as resourceful as she was intelligent and had left them well ahead of the game. If she'd had to start from scratch, they'd have been facing weeks.

"That's nothing!" Henry exclaimed.

Regina flinched at that and Emma frowned. "It's time to remember, Henry," Regina said, sadly.

Henry frowned mightily at the notion. "I don't think I want to, you know," he huffed. "From talking to David and the others, it sounds like I was on their side against you."

Pride at his perceptive nature warred with resignation that he could very likely be so again. "I did dreadful things, sweetheart. You did what you thought was right."

"And it doesn't matter," Emma said, though her voice was shaking, "because things are different now." Regina reached out and grasped Emma's hand, holding it gently. She'd have missed it, before, but she could hear the fear there, the concern. She didn't blame Emma, not a bit.

"They are," she agreed, running her thumb over the back of Emma's hand. She reached out to Henry, who hopped out of his seat to curl beside her on her own. She pressed a kiss to his hair and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "I love you, Henry, so very much. I have done awful things but I am trying to do better."

"I know, mom," he said, snuggling into her side. "Ma's right. Things are different. We all got to know each other again. We got our family back and if it's a little different, that's OK."

She closed her eyes, nuzzling his head. She turned to Emma, tugging her forward. There wasn't room for her on the seat so she knelt in front of them, running her free hand over their Henry's back soothingly. She couldn't quite meet her gaze and the flash of fear, of the Emma Swan who'd pushed people away and held herself aloof, made Regina drop her hand to cup her cheek.

The eyes that met her were clouded with doubt, a little crease between her brows. This was not the confident woman who'd married some version of her, but the orphan who'd struggled alone for years, never finding a place to belong or people who wanted her. Regina realised, with a flash of understanding, that Emma had as much to lose as she did. As unworthy as Regina considered herself of their love, of the little family they'd built, Emma Swan would likely feel the same. As much as she herself was worrying about losing them, Emma shared identical fears. She clearly didn't doubt her love for Regina and Henry, but some ugly insecurity was making her doubt that she was ever going to be on the receiving end of anything similar.

Throat aching with sympathy and the desire to soothe those doubts, she took a deep breath, meeting Emma's gaze firmly and with every iota of confidence she could summon.

"We are a family," she said, uttering words she'd never thought she'd say. Emma's lower lip quivered and Regina ran her thumb over it. "We are," she stated, firmly. Something in her, a band she hadn't even known was drawn tight, loosened as she traced her thumb over Emma's high cheek. "And things might not be easy, because they never are," she mused, earning a little smile from Emma and the smoothing of her brow. "But we will never stop being a family."

Some shadow passed from behind Emma's eyes and a slow smile spread across her face, the sun rising from a rain cloud. The satisfaction of saying the right thing, of knowing that it needed to be said in the first place, spread through Regina's chest. She was still exhausted but felt slightly less ill-
equipped to deal with the day. Emma lifted her free hand and stroked a loose strand of wavy hair over Regina's ear, as firm and as sure as she'd been since they met on the island.

"Even if it sucks," she said, because Emma Swan was nothing if elegant with her words, Regina mused wryly, "we'll all be there for each other."

"We will," Regina agreed, feeling Henry mumble an agreement. Emma nodded firmly, whatever had been troubling her seemingly dealt with for the minute. Emma leaned forward and wrapped her arms around them both, her face tucked into Regina's hair and placed what felt like a small kiss to the side of her head. She couldn't believe in a happy outcome for her own sake, couldn't let herself hope for anything other than rejection and loneliness, but she would believe in it with her whole heart for theirs.

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Emma led Henry into the training yard, squinting against the watery winter sun. They'd parted ways with Regina not long ago, after their rather intense breakfast. Despite the subject matter, and her ongoing worry about the asshole Regina was going to unleash upon the world, she felt more settled. Regina had always known when to soothe her insecurities and when to command her to wear her big girl pants. It seemed this version of her had figured the finer points of Emma wrangling out as well.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, she mused. Emma Swan might have been a dreadful collection of her worst traits, but time spent with her family that morning had reminded her of the better parts of her. The fact stood that Henry and Regina loved her, the latter in spite of having met her when she had barged into her life and ruined it. She shook her head as she settled her borrowed training armour around her, pride filling her chest.

She'd always known Regina was remarkable, capable of more compassion and empathy than Emma herself. She'd had a huge soft spot for lost and damaged things, for waifs and strays. She'd taken her in, hadn't she?

Emma finished securing her armour, pulling stout gauntlets over her forearms, warmed by the love and security her family had blessed her with. She lifted a blunted sword and headed out into the yard, joining the soldiers there. She saw David and headed to his side, joining him in watching Mulan put several young men through their paces. She tilted her head to one side, pleased to find the anger from yesterday absent and familiar fondness rising at the sight of her friend.

"She's a good teacher, huh?" she commented, after a moment. David smiled at her and nodded, his soft mouth quirking up easily, reminding her of Henry.

"She's not letting either of us spar this morning," he said, amusement cutting through the annoyance in his voice. "Says neither of us are disciplined enough."

Emma shrugged. "Yeah, we're totally not, David."

He laughed at that, nudging her shoulder with his. "Too true."

He turned to watch the lessons and Emma took the opportunity to observe him, taking in his strong profile and jaw line. How hadn't she seen it before? There was more than a passing resemblance between her and David and he'd left his mark on Henry, too. Something lightened at the realisation, even as her stomach dropped. Curiosity filled her then, though somewhat morbid in nature. There was an elephant in the room and she was disinclined to continue ignoring it, wanting to understand the man in front of her the way she'd understood her deputy.
"What happened with me when I was a baby?" she asked, leaning her arms on the fence. David sighed, dropping his head and shaking it.

"Oh sweetheart..." he sighed. "We meant to send Snow through to the land without magic when she was still pregnant with you. That way she'd have you and take care of you, then you'd break the curse."

"Didn't work out that way," Emma said, softly. A pair of men traded blows, moving in slow motion at Mulan's behest, listening to their teacher.

"No..." he whispered, old pain lancing through his voice. Emma wondered, for a moment, what it must have been like to give Henry away, dread filling her at the prospect of remembering it. "She went a bit early. Just as the curse was being cast."

"I went early with Henry too," Emma confided, recalling the ache in her lower back that became crippling pain. Remembering Regina's gentle touch as she laboured though contractions. She'd been so scared and so afraid of her own body, how it had begun to walk a path and dragged her along without bothering to ask permission. Only her girlfriend's gentle hands and low voice had kept her from panicking completely. Who had been there, in reality? Had anyone?

"I never thought you'd have the life you did, Emma. You were meant to be with us, sweetheart." She kept her eyes on the men, one of whom was frowning with concentration as he parried the other's attack. Mulan raised a hand, stopping the sweating soldiers and speaking to them before sending them to the water barrel.

"It's OK, David," she said, surprising herself. There was still a lot to work through, but that would take time and really getting to know each other. As she looked around the training yard, she realised that growing up the heir to a throne wouldn't have been pleasant for her bisexual, rebellious self. "I'm probably not the person you expected to meet. I know that it's weird. I mean, I get it with Henry sometimes. I totally expected him to be like me, a dumb jock." Though she'd never had the chance to indulge her love of athleticism as a youth, what with being bounced from home to home. "But he's so smart, David, and such a little nerd," she chuckled.

They watched as the boy in question stepped forward, Art opposite him. They listened as Mulan taught them the forms and the movements of basic sword play. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, thankfully neither able nor inclined to summon ferocity or meanness. Mulan seemed happy to encourage that, more concerned with showing them how to move their feet than their swords.

"He's great. You know, I got to spend time with him, in the cursed world. You and Snow vanished into a magic portal and Regina..." he softened his voice. "She wasn't really able and we didn't trust her. She was so broken, Emma. She didn't have anything left."

Emma's heart ached at the acknowledgement of Regina's struggle. She couldn't imagine what she would do if left bereft of their son but she suspected crumpling into a ball would have been high up there. It had been hard enough to hold it together after she'd lost her wife, after all. There had been times when the only thing that kept her going was the knowledge that Henry had needed her. Emma shook her head, not willing to remember such horrible times, and exhaled.

"Is the Henry you know now different from the Henry you knew then?"

David considered that for a long moment, his jaw working. "No, I guess." He bit his lip, worrying it between strong teeth. "I mean, he's the same good kid. You raised him well. He seems way less keen on fairy tales, though."
Emma snorted at that. "Thank fuck for that."

David jumped at the expletive, though something like mischief spread over his face. "Oh yeah?"

"Yeah!" she chuckled. "I mean, I'm not a fairy tale princess. You're not some dumb prince."

David frowned then, his mouth tugging down into a grimace. "Technically I am prince and I am pretty dumb, Emma."

Emma shook her head then. "Well you might be a prince but you're not dumb. You're also one of the least entitled men I've ever met, so hearing that you now have an actual title... It's weird."

David had the decency to look abashed. "Yeah. I don't think I'm really cut out to be royalty. I spent most of my life as a shepherd. But only a prince can marry a princess, Emma," he said, his clear blue eyes solemn, "so here we are."

Emma shook her head fondly. "You're talking to the princess who married a queen, right?" He blinked then. "I did it once and I will again, if I'm lucky."

"But the royals-"

"Can go to hell," she stated, firmly. "This whole hereditary monarchy thing is bullshit, too, by the way. No offence."

"None taken," David said, softly. He frowned at her, his mind clearly working a mile a minute. "So you and Regina are still..."

"Still there for each other," she confirmed, something wistful and tender in her chest. "I still love her with all my heart."

David nodded, his face muddled with confusion, but no scorn or rejection. He honestly seemed like he was trying to figure things out and she appreciated the effort. The David she'd known had been a fair man with a firm sense of justice. "I don't get it, you know. How you fell in love with the Evil Queen."

"Well," Emma sighed, "I didn't. I fell in love with Regina Mills, and she helped me raise our son. In your world, she was the only one to raise him. You knew him there. Was he evil? Raised by evil?"

David reared back as though slapped. He blinked once or twice before bringing his gaze to hers. "Oh god," he gasped, softly. "No! He wasn't. Not at all."

Emma nodded, her mouth drawn into a straight line. David blinked again, tears welling in his eyes. "He was so good. So kind and so sure of what was right. We didn't teach him that. It came from within."

Emma shook her head and grasped David's bicep. "No, buddy. It came from his mom." David was very still beneath her hand for a moment and she let him be, his jaw working against new ideas and notions. She took pity on him and chucked his chin. "Dude, don't feel bad. I don't get why you love Snow White."

David straightened up, his eyebrows raised almost to his hairline. "It's so obvious! I love her because she's her."

Emma shrugged, a small smile playing on her lips. "Funny how that works, huh?"
Regina led a handsome chestnut stallion into the yard, striding towards the mounting block, to the amazement of many. He bore a light saddle on his back, of the kind used during steeplechases, the stirrups shortened. The top of her head barely brushed her mount's withers and, judging by the gaping mouths around her, some were doubting her sanity at present. She'd toyed with the idea of taking Dapple, but the sturdy gelding had earned a rest. Besides, she mused as she mounted the restive horse, this boy was built for speed.

"Hup," she clucked, urging him into a trot. Sceolta loped beside her, the hairy beast having been waiting in the straw outside the stables, as though sensing her impending arrival. Hooves clattered on the cobbles and she rose with the bouncing gait. The groom had been wary of letting her out on the horse, whom they'd referred to only as the brown lad, given his somewhat unruly temper. He was young though, too young to remember a lonesome queen who'd ridden bareback more often than not. She'd merely raised an eyebrow and set about saddling him. She'd almost hopped up without the saddle to spite him but managed to reign herself in. This horse was unfamiliar, big and she really didn't have time to spare with theatrics.

She led him towards the bridge, turning just before the portcullis and taking a path underneath the walls. It was fairly empty at this early hour, few people needing to dodge the trotting horse.

As she rode, Regina reached out for her wards, touching them with her mind and strengthening them. She eased points of tension and smoothed cracks. Evidently, there had been a few instances of flying monkey incursions that had gone unnoticed. It irked her that the beasts were still attacking, still occupying the attention of their guards and terrorising the villagers. She poured her power forth, willing against all uninvited guests and all who wished harm upon the castle. She'd spent days, weeks almost, creating them, circling the keep and surrounding grounds as she weaved her spell.

She came to a side gate and exited, making her way into the gardens. She urged the horse to speed up, the path empty ahead of her. Sceolta gave a bark and she leaned forward in her saddle, feeling the familiar thrill that had always accompanied such an endeavour. The wind whipped her hair about her face as she flew through the chilly morning. The pounding of hooves and the jangling of tack accompanied her as she rode. They reached the end of the gardens, turning west. They were beyond the castle walls but still within the grounds, finding a path that ran along the edge of the woods.

She grinned then, seeing the familiar grassy field ahead of her. The land was used to graze livestock during warmer months but lay empty during winter. It was flat and featured a well maintained path at the bottom, a popular place for exercising the horses. She rose in the stirrups, urging the stallion below her into a gallop. He snorted and flung himself onto the path, delight shivering through his strong body. Sceolta barked in excitement, his own stride opening.

Magic poured from her as they sailed across the grass. The scent of earth and frost filled the air as her mount chomped through the turf. Henry's trusting face and shining eyes flitted into her mind and she let the love she felt so easily, so freely, for him rise through her. The air shimmered around her as she drew on the breath in her lungs and the heart pounding in her chest. The memory of Emma's pulse, her mighty heart beating beneath her fingers only hours ago, rose as well, setting her power ablaze.

She sucked in a surprised breath, taken aback. She hadn't expected the surge of emotion within her or how the exhilaration would manifest in shining flashes of light sparkling along the dome of magic protecting their home. She urged her steed faster, leaning further forward, knees almost straight as she bent over his neck. Her hair whipped around her face and the wind pinched her cheeks. Her eyes stung and she squinted against the chilly breeze.

They were nearing the end of the trail and she reigned him in gradually, easing him down from the
flat out sprint he'd indulged in. He snorted and shook his head, not entirely pleased with having to slow down.

"Shh, you silly brute," she murmured, running a hand over his neck. Besides, it wasn't as though they were plodding along. They were still moving at a more than generous pace, Sceolta was panting beside them. They turned, following the path upwards and back to the gardens and walled orchards around the castle. Slowing as they met more people, they eventually made their way back to the bridge, Brown Lad's shoes clattering on the granite.

Regina stilled him, sinking into the saddle and closing her eyes. She held the image of her shields in her mind, placing them between Henry and Emma and the world beyond. Other faces came to mind, then. Liath and the boys. Belle, Granny and Red. Mulan and the soldiers. The visiting royals and stable boys. Robin and his little boy. Snow and David. A shudder went through her as the thought, the realisation, that they were all so very vulnerable crossed her mind. She lifted her chin, eyes still squeezed shut and forced herself to concentrate on the feeling of wind on her face.

*No one who wishes to lay a hand upon these people will pass into this place. I forbid it.*

With that, light pulsed in the sky, drawing gasps from a few guards. Ozone hung in the air, sharp in the cold morning. Brown Lad's ribs heaved under her legs, which ached pleasantly from exertion. Sceolta whined beside her and the note of uncertainty in it drew her attention.

She opened her eyes, gazing over the stone bridge and dread rose in her as a pair of men approached on tired horses, their faces and armour wet with blood.

**SQQSQSQSQ**

We're in the Endgame now, folks, heading to the finale. Buckle up! It gets intense from here on in. Thank you all for your comments! They function as actual writing fuel (hint, hint).
Chapter 23

Apologies for the delay! This one's intense, with mentions of miscarriage, non consensual sex and violence.

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“They came from no where, your majesty,” the wounded soldier muttered, holding a large mug of wine in his shaking hand as he struggled to meet Snow White's gaze. “We were asleep. Third watch.” He took a gulp of the sweet vintage and paused, visibly pulling himself together. “The boys woke us but... we couldn't see anything. We fought them off as best we could, covered the villagers running to the cellar in the inn.”

Regina was leaning over the round table, watching the exhausted man, cold anger gripping her heart. Snow was seated opposite her, pale and fretful. His unsteady voice echoed through the chamber, catching the attention of all assembled. The overcast morning had failed to provide enough light to chase shadows from the edges of the room, where guttering candles made valiant inroads.

“They... they set the roofs on fire,” he continued, his eyes round. “Jasper and I, we got cut off when the Smiths' gable wall collapsed. We... we had to run into the woods. Found some horses in the tanner's yard and got here as quick as we could.”

He placed his drink on the table, rubbing his broad forehead with a filthy hand. He reeked of smoke and bitter sweat, his terror plain to see.

A commotion at the door led her to raise her head, as Emma, David and Mulan piled into the packed war room. Emma's eyes met hers first, wide and worried. She moved to stand beside her, close enough to touch her back in reassurance. David stood with Snow, placing a gentle hand on her shoulder. Liath, Granny, Red, Belle and Robin nodded their greeting to the newcomers.

“They filled the sky, you majesty,” he continued. “They... they came from everywhere.” He stared into his wine, eyes bloodshot and unblinking. The dim daylight cast a waxy pallor over his skin, catching his stubble and the dome of his bald pate. His armour was bloodied and muddied, though clearly well-kept beneath the grime.

“They're demons,” he whispered, before taking another gulp.
“Where was this?” David demanded, his voice tight.

“Four Oak Ford,” Snow answered, touching his hand gently.

“That’s only a three hour ride from here,” Robin added, leaning his hands on the table. “Bloody close.”

“Are the villagers still trapped?” Belle asked.

“I don’t know,” the soldier replied. “I left them,” he confessed, dropping his chin to his chest in shame.

“The boy, Jasper you called him, was hurt,” Regina stated, firmly, recognising both the guilt on his face and its futility. She’d had to heal a series of nasty lacerations that had shredded the young man’s back, much longer and he’d have been in real trouble. “And you needed to raise the alarm. Coming here was the right thing to do.”

David caught her eye, solemnly grateful, and nodded. “It’s never easy, leaving your men, but you did your duty.”

“Is there anything else?” Snow asked, kindly. “Aside from the flying monkeys? Any knights or soldiers?”

“No, your majesty,” he said. “That’s all.”

“Thank you for telling us so promptly, Hector,” she added. “But you should go and rest now.”

Hector rose unsteadily, bowing to the assembled high folk. Regina didn’t recognise him from Storybrooke, meaning he was one who’d either escaped the curse or moved to Misthaven afterwards. She nodded to one of the soldiers guarding the doorway and he led his older comrade out, clapping his back firmly. The group watched him leave, grim and silent. A log popped in the grate and Regina straightened, brushing a strand of hair off her face. She imagined she must have looked, and smelled, appalling after her ride but she had bigger concerns.
“We need to go,” David intoned, drawing their attention. “Gather the troops and go, right now.”

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“Those people need help!” he yelled, distress plain on his face. Regina blinked, somewhat startled by the genuine anguish there. She sometimes forgot that David was, before all else, a peasant. He was more familiar with the damage that could be inflicted to small villages than most. More familiar with how the definition of events of consequence varied depending on your standing in society.

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Regina frowned at the notion, though she saw the wisdom in it. They were all capable fighters and the witch had no personal vendetta against any of them. However, the thought didn't sit well with her, some hollow dread twisting her guts. She wasn't entirely sure how vulnerable Liath was without her connection to the island, though the other woman didn't seem too stressed at the idea of heading to battle. She grit her teeth, trying to set the sentiment aside. Liath was a magic user, powerful and subtle, and more than capable of taking care of herself. Still, the idea of waiting behind wards while others fought rankled her. She wasn't used to sitting by while other people fought on her behalf.

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“If it's me she wants,” Regina mused, “perhaps I should go, too.”

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“No way,” Emma said, firmly, her hand dropping from her back to clasp her shoulder, touch almost rough with worry. “This is a trap, Regina.” Regina swallowed thickly, dropping her chin to her chest, not trusting herself to face the frantic concern in Emma's voice. She recalled a panicked embrace after the ogre and her throat tightened.
“And pardon me for saying it, but you couldn’t defeat her before,” Robin added. “This one’s cunning and she has us at a disadvantage. When the time comes to attack, you’ll doubtless be the one to strike the blow but today is not for that.”

“Today is to rescue those villagers,” Mulan said, stern but not unkind. “We know that Zelena wants both you and Snow’s baby.”

“So it is imperative that none of you lot,” Robin said, motioning to her, Emma, Snow and David, “leave this castle.”

“And that we figure out a way of finding her,” Belle added.

“Are you any further along with that?” David asked, clearly unhappy but willing to take counsel.

“We are,” Regina sighed, rubbing her forehead. “But you aren’t going to like it.”

“What?” He and Snow frowned up at her and she took a step back, pushing her hand through unruly curls. She found herself uncharacteristically self conscious in the moment, very aware of her lack of make up and her un-styled hair. Missing the warmth of Emma’s touch and support immediately. This wasn’t the face of a queen, a voice that sounded suspiciously like her mother’s whispered to her heart.

“I think I can track her using my blood,” Regina said, softly.

Blue gasped, standing from her seat. “Blood magic?!”

“It’s risky,” Belle interjected, clearly not willing to listen to the fairy splutter. “But only because it will open a two way connection.”

“And because of how it’s obtained!” Blue shrieked.

Emma shifted, folding her arms. “It’s Regina’s blood and she’s offering it. I’m presuming it’s not, like, all her blood?”
“Just a few drops,” Belle confirmed.

“If we could nip this bout of histrionics in the bud, Gorm,” Liath barked, her voice stern, “this conversation can wait. We need to leave. Is this counsel over?”

“So we just allow this... this witch to use the darkest of magics in this castle!?” the fairy bit. Grumpy and Doc exchanged worried looks, peering at Regina with suspicion. Several others shifted in their seats and murmurs began to spread. People began talking, shouting really, several different arguments and debates erupting around the table. Regina scowled, shaking her head and folding her arms around her stomach, grasping firmly. She heard Emma’s irritated growls, though they unsettled more than calmed her.

“Enough!” Snow shouted, after a long moment. The queen stood, eyes blazing. “Enough!” she yelled again. The table settled down, quiet falling. “We all need to work together. People need us and we cannot squabble like children right now! Mulan, Robin, Liath. Take a force and go,” Liath, who’d never seen a shortcut she hadn’t taken, tugged Mulan’s elbow and nodded at Robin. They rushed from the room, leaving the others in contrite, brittle silence.

“Now, with regard finding Zelena,” she said, pausing to take a breath as quiet settled. She opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again, blinking. She raised a hand to her forehead, smoothing her fingers over an eyebrow.

“Snow?” David asked, softly, “are you OK?”

Her hand dropped to the top of her bump and she swayed somewhat on her feet before sinking gracelessly back down into her seat. Regina found herself moving without conscious volition, crossing the stone floor to the young woman in several hasty steps.

As white as Snow was normally, she was unhealthily pale, almost grey. Her eyes were puffy and her fingers trembled as she lowered her hand. She blinked, meeting Regina’s gaze and the fear in those eyes startled her. David had knelt beside his wife, taking her hand and she moved to reassure him.

“I’m fine, Charming,” she said, “just a head rush.”

Regina knew Snow White well enough to know when she was lying and dread gnawed at the bottom of her belly. Regina turned to David, unexpected sympathy lancing through her at the worry
on his face.

“Go fetch the midwife and that idiot Whale. Meet us in your rooms.” She turned back to Snow. “I'm going to bring us there, with magic. It won't harm you.”

It was a measure of how frightened her former step-daughter was that she nodded numbly and made no further comment or sound of protest. Before any remarks could be passed, they vanished in a swirl of smoke, Regina's heart pounding behind her ribs.

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Henry blinked, somewhat amazed by the speed at which his mother and David had departed the practice yard that morning after a worried soldier whispered something to them. Fiachra had held him back with a gentle hand to his shoulder, shaking his head.

“Leave them to it, Henry,” he'd advised, “we'll entertain ourselves.”

This had led to them rooting around an empty armory for practice swords and instead coming across a cache of somewhat spoon-shaped wooden bats, not unlike hockey sticks. The curved end was much broader, but the stick itself shorter. For whatever reason, the Hounds had been beside themselves, delighted to find the strange items. A few more minutes of searching revealed a bag of leather balls and Henry was suddenly involved in a game of some description.

Conn grinned at him, measuring sticks against his hip with a critical eye. Eventually, he found one that met his mysterious requirements and he handed it to Henry with a smirk.

“It needs a bronze band over the bás but sure, it'll do ye.”

“I have no idea what we're doing, Conn.”

The young man frowned, pausing to collect his thoughts. “Well, we can show you what to do. It's a game.”

“OK. Like hockey?”
Conn shrugged. “I’ve never heard of that, but sure let me show you how to hold the camán.”

“Hit the ball?” a small voice chirped. Henry turned and saw Robin's son Roland wandering towards them, his dark eyes wide and inquisitive. Henry wasn't entirely keen on the idea of a little kid joining them, slightly concerned that the boys might remember that he was pretty much a little kid compared to them. However, Conn just smiled and dropped to one knee.

“Aye, we hit the ball. You want to play?”

Roland nodded enthusiastically, running towards them. Little John, sweating and panting, chased after him, catching him gently by the back of his tunic.

“Sorry, your highness,” he said, sketching an untidy bow. “Little nipper got away from me.”

“Play ball!” Roland chirped, taking one of the tough leather balls between his hands. Conn laughed at the sight, his face cheerful and open.

“We need to arm the men,” he explained, apologetically. “Busy morning. Hard to keep track of him.”


Henry scowled, folding his arms in what he hoped was a vague approximation of his mom's best scowl. “Really?”

The burly man laughed nervously. “Really! We's just, um, heading for a patrol. Well, not me. Back got thrown out so I'm kitting the men out.” His brow knurled. “Might tricky with the nipper,” he said, nodding towards an oblivious Roland.
The aforementioned nipper was busy squealing with delight after catching a ball, his curly head of hobbit hair bouncing with glee. Conn clapped, laughing at his antics. Henry frowned, taking in the sight of his friend treating the little boy so kindly and gripped his stick firmly. Guilt flared at his earlier desire to exclude Roland from their game and he bit his lip. He turned his attention back to Little John, who was glancing over his shoulder anxiously. Clearly, something was up and while part of him wanted nothing more than to in the thick of adventure, he also realised that there was little chance of that being permitted. Maybe they could make themselves useful in another way, he mused.

“Roland can play with us, Mr John,” he said, standing straight like his mom had taught him and trying to ignore the sting of frustration at being excluded from the soldiers's plans. “We'll keep an eye on him for a bit.”

Little John grinned, relief blooming on his wide features, and quickly handed Henry a fleece lined cloak and a stuffed toy. “Bring him in for dinner!” he called, rambling towards the quarter master. "And make sure he drinks some milk!"

Conn raised an eyebrow, smirking. Henry folded his arms over his chest for a moment, not sure if he’d done something lame or not. Conn laughed, straightening before reaching a hand to Roland.

“Hup young man,” he said, appearing younger than Henry was used to seeing him, “let's go poc a ball or two.”

Roland grinned widely, bouncing in the spot with joy and waved Henry to them.

“C’mon, Henry! Let's go!” he chirped, wiggling with delight.

Henry glanced up at Conn, who just shrugged.

“Back home, there's always wee ones to mind,” he said, wistfully. “It's the sign that times are good, that there's childer younger than you about. You get practice.”

Henry nodded at the idea and grabbed the sack of balls, throwing them over his shoulder and following his friends to a quieter part of the training grounds.

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Regina found herself in Snow's chambers, for the first time in many, many years. She'd brought Snow directly to her bed and was helping her get comfortable, though it was not an easy task.

“Why the hell do you have seventy pillows on the damn bed?” she groused.

Snow sighed, rearranging the numerous pillows. “Because I can't lie flat and I have to sleep on my side.”

Regina blinked at that, somewhat taken aback. She'd never spent much time around pregnant women and she was not entirely sure what was normal. However, she knew Snow White and the fatigued woman shuffling gracelessly around her bed was nowhere near normal for her. Gingerly, she approached, sitting awkwardly on the edge of the mattress.

“What happened just now, Snow?” she asked, feeling a frown tighten her forehead.

Snow sighed. “I felt dizzy. My eyes got a bit funny for a moment. I guess I stood up too quickly.”

Regina spared a moment to look at Snow, really take her in. Her face was rounded, and had been for quite some time, but there were bags under and over her eyes. She looked as though she'd been crying, in all honestly, though Regina hadn't seen any tears. She was pale, as well, far beyond her normal light tone. Her belly was huge, stretched beneath her dress to a ridiculous degree. Regina wasn't entirely sure when Snow was due, but surely she'd passed her ninth month? She was too large not to have.

“It's harder,” the queen confided, in a small voice, “than with Emma.”

Snow rolled a hand over the top of her belly, her eyes flicking to the side, unfocused and far away.

“I'm so big I can't breathe, Regina,” she said, fear trembling her words into a nervous staccato. “And it hurts, all the time. It feels like the baby's going to break me in half.”

Regina's throat clenched, her mind flitting to a tiny girl, terrified on a runaway horse. To a child who'd looked up at her with adoration. To a young woman she'd hunted and tried to destroy. To the person who'd been the focus of her anger, hatred and spite for so many bitter years. That anger felt
far away, in that moment, distant and faded.

“Maybe it's meant to be harder,” Snow continued, quietly, “maybe I'm meant to suffer again.”

Regina’s jaw clenched, a nasty voice within her hissing that Snow did deserve to suffer. That after all the harm she'd done, all the horrors she'd inflicted on her, she needed to. Her eyes burned at the idea that while Snow did deserve to suffer, perhaps she didn't deserve to suffer this. No one deserved this, to be held captive by a body no longer entirely hers. Her gripe was with Snow, not the child she was carrying, after all.

The room was still. No fire was burning in the hearth, no candles lit. The birds that usually accompanied Snow had graced them with privacy, leaving the air still and staid. The scent of lavender hung in the air, and Regina was reminded of the bushels she'd gathered long ago, tied with string to dry in the hayloft of her father’s home and later in her own garage.

“We suffer for this,” Snow continued, drawing her legs beneath her and cradling her belly, squeezing her eyes shut. “I don’t know how women do this.”

Regina felt red hot tears prick at her eyes. Without warning or consent, memories surfaced, stealing her away from the woman before her.

Exhaustion and nausea. Her gorge rising with any strong scent. The king had deigned to leave her alone when she'd missed a bleed and while she was glad for the reprieve, she was suddenly the centre of attention from many others. Only six months married and already with child.

Midwives, accoucheurs, surgeons and physicians had crowded to see her. To confirm her being with child and to ensure it grew. Her body, never her own to begin with, had become part of the endless grind of royal succession.

Bed rest. Certain herbs. Milk and meat three times a day. Pain in her breasts and throat. Shaking hands and uneasiness as her body changed.

A dull pain low in her back. Spots of blood one day, heralding a gout the following.

Agony. Pain lancing through her as she bled, her legs streaked with crimson. Clots pooling in the sheets below her, her body burning as it cramped and bled and as she lost the fragile little thing
Terror, utter terror, had filled her during that night. A sense of impending doom that had left her inconsolable, unable to stay still or prevent hot tears from rolling over her cheeks. Stern faces at the bottom of the bed as she gasped for air and screamed and begged for the pain to go away. No sympathy or attempt to aid her as they examined what had come from within her.

An old midwife, an old witch really, blowing powder in her face, robbing her limbs of their strength and numbing her heart for a minute. Pressure between her legs and the touch of cold metal.

Relief. The pressure eased and her limbs came back to her control. The stern faces vanished but the old woman stayed, washing her and burning the ruined sheets. The feeling of hollow calm when she finally settled, linen wadded between her legs.

“What happened?” she'd asked, the following morning.

“You miscarried, girl,” the old woman had replied.

Tears pricked her eyes then, though she was surprised to find any left in her body. Loss, sorrow, relief and exhaustion warred in her chest, guilt shouldering its way to the forefront. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, of course,” she huffed, lighting a stubby pipe from the edge of the fire. “Nothing you did brought this on. Nothing you could have done would have stopped it. This is part of bearing children. It happens.”

Regina had curled beneath her blankets, squeezing her eyes shut. She hadn't quite believed she was even pregnant, if she were honest. Sobs tore themselves from her throat as she wept into the soft feather pillow, frightened and alone and utterly unprepared when the king visited her three weeks later.

Regina's heart spasmed and, without thought, she ran a hand through Snow's hair, smoothing it back from her brow as she'd done when she was little girl. Her skin was soft, warmer than Regina expected or remembered. She traced the line of a dark eyebrow, suspecting that it would soothe the woman beneath her, it always had, and was rewarded with a tired sigh.
They sat in silence, the large room oppressively cheerful and grotesquely bright. These memories were not ones for the watery light of a winter's afternoon. These memories were not something she ever wished to revisit. These feelings of kinship, the understanding of the helplessness the young woman felt, were not to be aroused by Snow White.

“If anything happens to me or the baby, Regina,” she stated, quiet resolution in her voice, “Emma is my heir. You take care of her and Henry. You help them rule this land.”

Regina's heart, which had longed for the demise of Snow White for so many years, skipped a beat the idea. An awful flash of fear lanced through her, sympathy for the girl before her. The thought of Snow dying in her birthing bed, or of loosing her baby, sickened her in a way none of the other manners she'd imagined her demise did. It was one thing to defeat a foe in battle or by wits, but quite another to wish them death in childbirth. Her throat was tight, her heart racing, uncertainty washing through her, softening the hatred she'd carried for decades.

“I don't know what you did to their memories,” Snow continued, “if you meant to do it or not,” she sighed. “But I don't care, right now. You love them. You're the most powerful person I've ever met. You look after them if I can't.”

Regina felt her jaw drop, the tears that had been scalding her eyes rolling down her cheeks.

“How can you ask that, Snow?” She wanted to scream at her, demand that she fight. To berate her for her weakness and for surrendering to fear. To do something to prove they weren't helpless in this situation.

Snow sighed, rolling her head towards Regina's warmth. “Because while you scare me, Regina, you're not the scariest thing in my life right now. You love Henry. And you look at Emma like you haven't since...” she trailed off and Regina found herself grateful, as she wasn't sure how she'd respond to Daniel's name crossing Snow's lips in her present state.

Snow frowned, screwing her eyes shut. “And if you love my daughter, if she loves you, then I will absolutely have to engage Archie's services but...”

Regina's jaw clenched and she almost drew her hand back but some old, some young, part of her kept it there. Tracing the line of Snow's dark hair and feeling utterly useless.

“We aren't...” she said, her voice tight. “Emma remembers something that wasn't real. We don't...”
“Oh god, Regina.” Snow groaned, throwing her head to her pillow dramatically. “I am too pregnant to argue about this.”

She lifted her head and peered at Regina, hazel eyes and unyielding stare so similar to Henry that it made her pause, swallowing thickly.

“You told me once that love is magic,” she said, her voice low and calm. “And Emma came from magic. From True Love. I don't like the idea of you two together, Regina, but who would I be if I stood in the way of love?”

Regina was astounded, drawing her hands away to fold over her stomach. Utterly taken aback by what the woman before her had said. She shook her head numbly. Snow smiled, her mouth quirking to one side as it often did, and she placed her hand over Regina's knee.

“I mean, I'm not thrilled that you turned my daughter gay but—”

That sentence was thankfully interrupted by the arrival of David, a dumpy woman in an apron and several dwarves. Regina took the chance to withdraw, striding to the edge of the room and vanishing in a plume of crackling smoke, tears drying on her face as she fled.

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Henry sighed, trying to get the hang of balancing the ball on the end of his stick. Conn had showed him how to lift it from the ground and run with it perched on the end of his bat, making it appear utterly effortless. Henry, however, just wasn't getting the hang of it and was beginning to get a touch frustrated. Off to one side, Fiachra was gently tossing a ball to Roland from a comfortable seat on the ground, letting the little lad pelt around him with a tiny stick. He didn't manage to hit the ball very often, but was enjoying himself enormously.

After realising that the courtyards were much too small for the game the Hounds wanted to show Henry, they had made their way to the far end of the great meadow beyond the gardens. At the bottom of the hill, the ground flattened enough to allow them the space they needed. Their chosen spot was close to the path they'd used to exercise Dapple and the other horses, distant enough to be away from constant adult supervision but within the perimeter they'd been warned to respect.

Bran and Sceolta were bounding across the wide, open field, delighted to play fetch. Bradán and
Ronán were scooping the balls up, launching them into the air in front of them before swinging the sticks like baseball bats. The cracks rang out like gunshots, echoing across the chilly grass. The pair seemed to be competing to see who could send the ball furthest, though it was hard to tell who was winning.

Art and Oisín were trying to get shots past Conn, who was snatching them out of the air with amazing speed and elegance. His fierce eyes were narrowed and his hair falling in sweaty curls over his forehead. He seemed more a warrior than, Henry mused, than when he was holding a sword. With a grunt, he caught the ball in his hand before tapping it back to Art. Oisín, at least, seemed almost as bad as he was but was more than willing to keep trying.

Slightly discouraged and not as enthusiastic as his friends, he turned his attention to the castle. As they’d been leaving the courtyard, Liath and Mulan had led a large group of soldiers out of the castle, barely sparing a glance for them. They’d been grim faced and Henry had longed to follow them or to seek his mothers. He was the prince, after all, and the truest believer. Surely he should be front and centre for all these endeavors?

A startled shout drew Henry’s attention back to his friends. Oisín was curled over, clutching his hand, shoulders shaking with pain. Art still had his stick raised, a comically horrified expression on his face that was mirrored on Conn’s. Fiachra scrambled to his feet, the ball he’d been throwing bouncing away from him as he rushed towards the group. Henry approached but couldn't follow the rapid exchange of chatter, only catching a few words.

Oisín lifted his head, scowling mightily at Art and shoving his shoulder, keeping one hand cradled to his chest. Art took it in his stride, apologising with his customary anxious sincerity. Fiachra ruffled his hair fondly, rolling his eyes and Henry relaxed, Clearly whatever had happened, no one was seriously hurt. The dogs had made their way back, too, investigating the commotion.

“Maybe it’s time for food,” Conn chuckled, glancing his way. “We’ve been here for ages.”

Henry was more than happy to agree, trotting forward to help gather their belongings. He wasn’t too keen on the game but supposed he’d give it a go again, providing he could practice a bit. He joined Oisín, who was shaking out his fingers, more cross than injured and complaining about how he didn’t want to jeopardise learning to write. Henry lifted Roland’s little cloak, blinking for a moment before lifting his head.

“Where’s Roland?”

He spun around, eyes darting anxiously around the field. “Guys?” He scanned the spot where
Fiachra had been lounging, seeing nothing, but movement at the edge of the riding path caught his attention. Roland was throwing the ball, chasing after it on surprisingly speedy legs. His heart sped up as the little boy stopped at the edge of the trampled grass, grabbing his ball with a laugh.

“Roland!” he called, starting forward. “Get back here!”

The child giggled, before running in the opposite direction, crossing the path and jumping behind a tussock of long grass, ducking down. Henry hurried forward, breaking into a run. He didn't know where the wards his mother had erected began, but he knew they weren't far. He slipped a bit in the damp grass, and Roland shrieked with glee, running further away.

“Henry!” Fiachra shouted, swearing after him. “Stop!”

Henry frowned, hearing footsteps thumping the ground behind him as Conn and Fiachra bolted to him. He pointed to Roland, feeling panic rise. “We gotta get him!”

“Stay put!” Conn roared. Fiachra's long legs brought him to Henry's side thirty feet from the path, a hand grabbing his shoulder and jerking him to a halt. Conn was a few steps behind, slowing as he watched Roland giggle, pleased with his game.

“You're it!” he called, throwing his ball away, into the undergrowth spilling from beneath the eves of the forest. They all paused then, even Roland, Henry noticing with sinking familiarity the absence of birdsong. A cold breeze slithered through the few evergreen trees, scratching across bare twigs. The shadows beneath the boughs deepened, the grey sunlight seemingly unable to penetrate the gloom.

“Guys,” he whispered, “we gotta get him.”

“Roland,” Conn called, his voice shaking only a little bit, his knuckles white around the stick in his hand. He seemed to be fighting the urge to move forward, wary at giving Roland cause to restart their game of chase. “Come here. Time for dinner.”

The boy blinked, staring at them for a moment before looking back at the forest. He took a step back towards them and the vice squeezing Henry's heart eased somewhat.

“Good lad,” Conn said, stooping to one knee. “Look, I have another sliotar,” he said, pulling a ball from his tunic and offering it.
Roland's eyes lit up and he took a step towards the group. As he did, an inhuman screech sounded and a blurry mass launched itself from the forest. Henry gasped with fear and Roland screamed, falling over his own feet into the grass. Hovering on ragged wings, fangs bared and eyes glowing with malice, a beast hovered in the air. It glared at them with beady eyes, the rage burning there enough to scorch Henry with fear and horror. Roland cried out and the monster spread its wings and raised its talons, snarling at the terrified child.

Heart pounding in his ears and mouth dry, Henry felt as though he was watching the events before him unfold underwater, or from a great distance. The creature beat its wings and drew its hind legs up, tucking into a dive. It stretched out its terrible claws and began its descent towards the helpless child screaming in terror. Henry felt a scream build within his own chest, shrugging out from under Fiachra's hand and running forward as the beast swooped.

A crack beside him and a rush of displaced air as something sped by his side. The monster lurching backwards as though shot, clawing at its throat and tumbling from the sky and onto the ground with a heavy thud. Fiachra grabbing him around the waist and hauling him off his feet even as Bran and Sceolta sprinted forward, heads low and ferocious as they pounced on the fallen creature.

Claws raking across a hairy back and a flash of blood and a pained series of yelps. A furious snarl as Bran, big gentle Bran, closed mighty jaws around a bruised neck and shook his great head. Oisín leaping ahead of them, bounding over the grass and grabbing Roland, dragging him back over the path and to them. Conn with his fierce eyes and the splintered handle of his bat clutched in both hands.

The monster kicking at Bran and dislodging him, scrambling backwards as gore ran over its neck. Fury and hatred in its eyes as it struggled to stand, wings tattered. Bran's muzzle bloody and hackles raised as he stood over the whimpering form of his brother protectively.

An explosion of purple smoke, sparks and fire as his mothers materialised in front of them. His ma clutched a drawn sword, white lightning sparking down her arm as she strode forward. His mom's hands filled with writhing flame as she flung balls at the hissing beast, almost in time with his ma's angry strides.

Another flash of fire and lighting as a heavy blade fell, a strangled shriek echoing across the grass before stillness settled once more, the scent of ozone fading from the air. Fiachra's arms loosened and he sagged against the taller young man, knees likely jelly.

The rest of the world faded as his mom bore down on him, gripping him in a fierce embrace, his ma only a moment behind. He was shaking, his teeth chattering and he buried his face in his mom's soft
riding jacket, squeezing his eyes shut.

Longing, sharp and hot, to go home filled him. The world they'd found, blocked out for the moment by his mothers' desperate arms, suddenly seemed like a terrible place and he would have given anything, in that moment, to leave forever.

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Whew. That was kinda intense, huh? Let me know what you think. Life is busier than usual for me right now so forgive me if the updates don't come as fast as before! By the way, the game the boys are playing is akin to hurling. Great examples can be seen on youtube!

A huge word of thanks to everyone who's left a review, kudos or clicked to follow. It means an incredible amount to know that there are people out there enjoying this story. Those reviews are like fuel! Until next time.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!