The Road Not Taken

by amycarey

Summary

Prince Leo, the heir to the White kingdom, has been killed in a border skirmish. The woman to whom he is betrothed, Regina, is pregnant. His younger sister, Emma, agrees to go and find out whether the child is his, and finds a woman trapped in an abusive home with an illegitimate child on the way and ends up proposing marriage. What follows is the pair grappling with Emma's incessant, high-handed desire to save everyone and Regina's lack of freedom and her grief over her lost true love.

Inspired by Daniels Funeral by Pintsizedprinter
Prologue

Big thanks to onceuponawhine for her beta skills and pintsizedprinter for her killer art.

Title taken from Robert Frost's poem, 'The Road Not Taken'.

It is her first long journey on horseback. They are going to have a picnic, her and Leo and Daddy. She squirms as her daddy helps her onto her saddle. Leo grins from his own horse, teeth gleaming white and his golden hair shining in the sunlight. “Looking good, sis,” he says and she beams. Leo’s eighteen, seven years older than her, and he is pretty much the most wonderful person in all the realms.

And then her horse bolts. She’s screaming and her arms grip the horse’s mane and he’s not stopping and she can feel herself slipping, slipping from the saddle.

But there is another horse beside her now and someone grabs her arms and pulls her off her horse and onto their own and she’s clasped to a soft body as the horse slows and she’s pulled back to solid ground.

“Are you all right?” Her rescuer is a girl. She’s beautiful, Emma thinks. Her smile is wide, eyes warm and golden, and Emma smiles back at her, a smile born of equal parts relief and adoration.

“I thought I was going to die,” she says, breathless.

“Oh, honey,” the girl says. “I would never let that happen. Where are your parents?”

She sees her daddy’s horse in the distance, getting closer every second. “There,” she says, pointing.

Her daddy leaps from his horse and sweeps her into a hug, one hand clasped to the back of her head, holding her tight to his. He spins her around until she feels sick and dizzy. “My Emma Bear,” he says and she can feel his hands shaking. Daddy turns to the girl. “You saved her. I can never repay you.”
“It was nothing, really,” the girl says. She’s anxious now, fussing with her riding clothes and attempting a curtsey, and Emma wants to tell her that it’s okay because Daddy doesn't care about ceremony. He cares about people and the girl has just saved Emma’s life so Daddy will forgive her anything.

The next day, Daddy and Mama and Leo pay the girl and her family a visit and they come back and Leo is engaged to her. Emma is furious. “She’s my saviour,” she says, resisting a childish urge to stomp her foot (and she hasn't thrown a tantrum since she was three). “Why does Leo get to marry her?”

“Sweetie,” Ma says, her slim fingers running through Emma’s hair. “Soon she’ll be your sister. Won’t that be wonderful?”

Emma scowls and runs to her room, burying her nose in a book of stories. When she grows up she’s going to be the brave knight rescuing princesses and damsels in distress and no one will be able to stop her.
Part I

The palace is shrouded in black fabric. Emma flattens her own black velvet skirts against her legs, curled up on the window seat of the private parlour, staring absently out the window. It’s an incongruously beautiful day, sun shining, and the sky so blue it hurts her eyes. She doesn’t understand how it can be, not when he’s gone.

“What are we going to do?” Snow asks and she sounds old and weary for the first time Emma can remember, new lines forming around her mouth and eyes. She’s clutching a letter in one hand, the parchment crumpled where her hand grips it too tight.

“What can we do?” David asks, running a hand through thinning hair. “The girl’s pregnant. If it’s his, it won’t be legitimate… If not his, she is ruined.”

The girl her brother was to marry is pregnant. Leo was twenty-five when he had gone to broker peace at a border skirmish and never come home. Emma can’t quite believe that he’s dead. She’s seen the body, attended his funeral, smashed a few plates, pulled out flowers and weeds alike in her garden until her hands were black with dirt... Nothing helps ease the emptiness, the ache in her heart that tells her every day that her brother will never return home.

“Lady Mills must be furious. Can we bestow her daughter with a title? Lands? A husband?” David paces. He is a man of action; Emma takes after him in that respect. Leo was the one with a head for tactics, with their mother’s cunning and resourcefulness. He would have been a strong ruler.

“That’s not what Cora wants,” Snow says. “You know how much she wants that girl to become queen.”

“Impossible now,” David says. Then, “no, don’t cry,” because Snow is sobbing again. He wraps an arm around her and Snow sobs into his doublet, David holding her and rubbing her back. It’s an alarmingly intimate moment and, not for the first time, Emma wishes herself anywhere but here.


“We have to find out if the child is his before we go any further,” David says and Snow nods, dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief.
“I’ll go,” Emma says, her voice dull and wooden to her own ears.

“Darling, no, we can’t ask that of you,” Snow says. “The journey will take a full day.”

“I need to be active,” Emma says and now she can hear the desperation in her own voice. “I need to do something. Besides, you know that I’m good at picking out liars.” She always has been. It’s a gift perhaps, or a curse. She can tell when nobles are just greasing her or when they genuinely find her ideas interesting. She can tell when her parents are trying to shield her from an uncomfortable truth. She can tell when someone has spilled secrets to King George and allow the guards to mete out punishment accordingly.

“Well.” David exchanges a glance with his wife. “We could always send Graham with her.”

“No,” Emma says. “I need to go alone.”

In the end they compromise. Graham will go as far as a neighbouring village and Emma will journey on to the Mills estate by herself. She doesn’t like this – Graham’s fine, a friend even – but she wanted to travel alone. The palace has become claustrophobic. She responds by urging her horse faster, Graham struggling to catch up. It’s cruel really; Graham hates horses, always has, and Emma is usually more sympathetic to his slow pace.

She stops for lunch, sitting on a log, stretching out her legs in her riding leathers and sturdy boots, and pulling bread, cheese and apples from her satchel. The saddlebags on her horse have clothes to change into on arrival at the Mills residence; her mother packed them. She knows there will be dinner, probably a fancy one, because how often does one have the princess staying?

“Gods, princess,” Graham says, swinging off his horse and collapsing on the grass. “Could you go any faster?”

“Do you really want to test me on that one?” Emma asks, throwing an apple from her satchel at him, which he catches. They were friends as children; at one point she thought she could be in love with him, because she had to be interested in someone and Graham was, and still is, the best looking man she knows. But she kissed him on the balcony at her first ball, and realised conclusively that she was just not that interested in men.

“Not really,” he says. “How are you doing?”
“Okay,” she says automatically. “Well, not really. Le—” She stops, voice breaking. She still cannot say his name without wanting to cry and Graham is definitely not someone she is comfortable crying in front of.

She slows in the afternoon, allowing Graham to ride alongside her. They do not talk and she leaves him at the tavern in the late afternoon, sun starting to dip low in the sky. “Are you sure you’ll be all right the rest of the way?” he asks. “I can journey on with you.” He’s eying up the tavern and she follows his line of sight to a very pretty girl in a very revealing blouse so she doubts the sincerity of his final statement.

“It’s not a long ride,” she says. “I’ve done it before.” Admittedly, she was eleven at the time and she was almost thrown from her horse but Graham so doesn’t need to be reminded of that. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

She arrives at the Mills estate in the twilight, sky deepening to purple, and heads directly for the stables. The boy bows, very nearly scraping his head on the floor. “Milady.” She doesn’t like to tell him that it’s the incorrect address so simply smiles. He looks barely fourteen, with round dark cheeks and his mouth is set so tense that his jaw shakes. He calms when he takes hold of her reins, keeping the horse steady.

“It’s not just you, I hope,” she says, removing the saddlebags and slinging them over her shoulder.

“We’re currently short staffed,” he says and then his eyes dart about in a panic. She hands him a gold coin.

“Thank you,” she says, and walks to the house. She is escorted to a grand chamber by a footman, lip curling at the sight of the princess dressing and behaving in such an uncouth way. A bath is prepared and a lady’s maid stands by to attend her. She introduces herself as Marisol when Emma asks but says nothing else. Emma soaks gratefully, muscles sore. She’s never been a natural horsewoman, finding these journeys exhausting even now. The soap she’s been provided with is strongly perfumed but makes her skin feel silky.

Marisol helps her into the gown Snow packed, black silk, sleeker than anything she usually wears, and with too much of her chest on display. She suspects it came from her mother’s wardrobe, which doesn’t seem sensible to her because she’s taller and more generously endowed. It doesn’t seem appropriate but she can’t find a scarf for love or money in her bags so it will have to do. Marisol braids her hair for her, coiling it at the back of her head in an unfamiliar style when she is finished.
“I appreciate your help,” Emma says and Marisol curtsies. She still hasn’t uttered a word since introducing herself, which Emma finds unnerving after her own lady’s maid, Abbie, who doesn’t shut up. Emma wants to ask what has Marisol so scared but suspects it would only make the poor woman more nervous. She finds her way downstairs, where she’s met by the same footman, who seems mollified by her improved appearance and escorts her to the dining room.

The three people in the room stand when she enters and Emma’s back straightens, chin high, nose up, half-smile playing across her lips. “Your highness,” the elder of the two women murmurs, curtsying low, though her eyes do not show any due deference. Emma doesn’t particularly care.

“Lady Mills,” Emma says. “Thank you for your hospitality, especially in such a time.” The etiquette lessons that were forced onto her as a child come into play automatically in times such as these.

Lady Mills speaks as though butter wouldn’t melt in her mouth, but her eyes are hard as flint. “My husband,” she says, gesturing at an older, balding man who seems to fade into the background. Emma knows he’s distantly royal – the sixth son of King Xavier who rules across the sea. “And my daughter, Regina. You have met, I believe.”

Regina curtsies and Emma inclines her head. Regina is dressed in black, the waistline high, and her dark hair pulled back into demure braids. She is older and smaller than Emma remembers – though of course, Emma was only eleven when the girl rescued her from her horse and small for her age then. She has dark circles under her eyes and she’s scowling but she is still the most beautiful woman Emma’s ever seen and she’s momentarily taken back to being that eleven year old, infatuated with her knight in shining armour. “Lady Regina,” she says. “It’s an honour to meet you once again.”

“Likewise,” Regina says, voice flat.

They eat, which is a sombre affair where no one speaks and Emma struggles with the heat and spice of the dishes. She wishes she was at the inn with Graham, a beer in front of her and the noise of the bustle around her stopping her from thinking. When they move into the parlour, Emma asks to speak with Regina alone. “May I ask why?” Lady Mills asks, eyes flashing even as she tries to keep her face neutral.

“I think you know,” Emma says. “My parents informed you in their letter.”

Lady Mills sighs. “Regina, dear, please show our guest to the small sitting room.”
Regina stands and stalks off, not waiting for Emma to follow her.

Emma sits across from her, taking a moment to stare in silence at the woman. She’s older than Emma, just two years younger than Leo was, and sits with all the grace of a queen. “Thank you,” Emma says. “I was never given the chance to say it properly all those years ago.” Her ‘thanks’ had come from her parents in the form of the arrangement of a future marriage between Leo and Regina.

Regina inclines her head. “It was nothing.” Her hands shift and for a moment her loose sleeves fall up her arms. Emma sees dark bruising on her wrists and starts to build a picture of Regina’s life at the Mills estate.

“You saved my life,” she says.

There is a flash of anger in Regina’s limpid brown eyes. “I am sure you could have saved yourself.”

“No, now maybe,” Emma says. “At eleven, I could barely ride.”

Regina simply stares at her. Then she says, “You had a question for me.”

“Yes.” Emma fidgets. “Is the child his?” She prides herself on her ability to speak neutrally when she wants to cry.

Regina looks at her, brown eyes shining with tears. Emma focuses on her lips, the plump lower lip, the scar adorning her upper lip. “Yes,” she says. “This child is Leo’s. I am two months along.” The timing does work. Leo rode off ten weeks ago and told their parents he would stop at the Mills estate on the way to see Regina. The wedding was due to take place the following year, delayed because of the war and Leo’s role in it – but also, Emma suspects, because of Leo’s own ambivalence towards getting married and the responsibility it entailed.

Emma knows that Regina is lying. She’s good at it, but it is still definitely not Leo’s child. Before Emma can say anything further though, there’s a knock at the door and Lady Mills enters. She stands behind her daughter, clasping her shoulders, uncovered by fabric due to the scoop neck of the dress, with thin, pale fingers. Emma can see the tan skin whiten under the press of fingers, a sign that Lady Mills is pressing too hard and Emma’s theories about the bruises gain some credence. Regina’s eyes flicker with fear for a moment.
“How are we getting on?” she asks.

“Fine, Mother,” Regina says. Lying again. This time less successfully.

And Emma knows one thing. She cannot leave Regina Mills here. Not pregnant. Not with this woman. Emma has pretty good instincts and they are telling her that Lady Mills is evil. An incredibly stupid plan formulates and Emma speaks without thinking. “Lady Regina,” she says. “While I can never bring back my brother, it would be my honour to take his place, to marry you and make you my queen and your child the heir to the kingdom.”

Regina’s eyes widen. Lady Mills responds for her. “Yes. She would be delighted.”

Emma smiles, though it is pained. They return to the parlour and Lady Mills spends the entire time burbling about how happy Regina is. Regina looks nothing of the sort and Emma feels sick about it. Though love marriages are accepted between two women or two men in the Enchanted Forest, the arranged marriages of nobles, where the primary purpose is procreation of heirs, are rarely between two people of the same gender. She doesn’t know if Regina is even inclined towards women in any way.

In the evening, she dresses for bed but cannot sleep. She tiptoes down the dark passage in her shift, hoping to find Regina’s room, though what will happen when she gets there, she doesn’t know. As she nears the end of the corridor, she hears Lady Mills speak. “Well, dear, it appears your indiscretion will not be the ruin of you after all.”

“No, Mother,” Regina says, voice dull.

“Princess Emma’s a fool,” she says. “She will be easy to manage. A few kisses, some kind words, and you will be queen. Good night, dear. I am so proud of you.”

Emma backs against the wall, sliding into the shadows, and watches Lady Mills leave. When her footsteps have faded, Emma knocks at Regina’s door. “Come in,” she says. Emma enters. “Princess Emma,” Regina says, her voice cool. “Are you here to claim marital rights already?”

Emma’s face crumples in confusion. “What? No. I just…”
“Because I may be damaged goods but I do still have standards.” She sneers.

“I might be a fool,” Emma says and cherishes Regina’s face blanching, “but I’m not into anything non-consensual.”

“So that’s why you’ve railroaded me into another arranged marriage?” Regina asks.

“I didn’t expect your mother to answer for you,” Emma says, though of course, she knows that she has done something inexpressibly stupid.

“Why not? She did the first time.”

“What?”

“Did your dear brother not tell you? I never consented to our betrothal.” It’s not like any of this should be news to Emma. It’s not like it’s anything against the norm even. Her own parents’ love match led to the breakup of the engagement between David and Princess Abigail. It’s the reason for the hostilities that still periodically take place between King George and their own kingdom. This knowledge doesn’t ease the nausea coiling through Emma’s stomach though.

She stands, staring at Regina, who has adopted a defiant look, lips buttoned together and a vein in her forehead protruding. “The thing is,” Emma says. “I know that your child isn’t my brother’s. If you want to run away with the real father, I will do anything I can to assist you…”

“He is… not in the picture anymore,” Regina says stiffly, one hand clenched by her side and the other reaching up to wrap around the pendant hanging from a silver chain around her neck. Emma doesn’t know what it is; the chain is so long the pendant had disappeared between Regina’s breasts and now it is clasped tight in her hand.

“It’s your decision,” Emma says. “I’m leaving tomorrow. You can ride, right?”

“Of course I can,” she says, bristling.

“I meant, in your condition. I know you can ride spectacularly under ordinary circumstances.”
“Oh,” she says. “Yes. I am still able to ride.”

“Good,” Emma says. “Get some rest, Lady Regina.”

“Very well, your highness.” Regina curtseys, the movement mocking and her tone sarcastic.

Emma rises at dawn after a restless night playing endless scenarios through her head. Lady Mills beams as she farewells them, hugging her daughter who does not respond, body stiff and arms clenched at her sides. The ride to the tavern is slow, Regina stopping to retch twice, and silent. Emma’s tongue is soldered into her mouth. Graham is waiting outside, horse ready, and looking worse for wear after a night of drinking. “Who’s she?” he asks, pointing at Regina, and Emma resists the urge to slap his hand for his rudeness.

“My fiancée,” Emma says, daring him to comment. “Graham, meet Lady Regina Mills.”

He bows automatically. “Princess, can I speak with you? Alone?”

“I’d rather not,” Emma says, though she allows herself to be dragged aside by her elbow. She notes Regina curling her lip at this weakness.

“What are you doing?” he hisses.

“She needed rescuing,” Emma says. “Her mother is abusive. And she’s carrying Leo’s child. This will legitimise it.” The lie trips easily off her tongue.

He shakes his head. “This is fucked up,” he says. “That girl’s not a kitten abandoned by its mother. You can’t just… save people by taking them home with you.”

“I didn’t know what else to do.” So Graham just shrugs and they return to their horses.

The ride is slow because Regina cannot go faster than a trot before she has to throw up and even then they have to take breaks several times. Emma doesn’t mind though; the sun is hot on her back and a few minutes respite under the shade of a tree is always welcome while Regina vomits in the
bushes or goes to the bathroom. Graham offers to ride on ahead but she knows that his first loyalty is to her parents and he will tell them exactly what happened. She wants to tell them herself.

It is late when they arrive back at the castle, the only light marking their way coming from the nearly full moon. They stable the horses, leaving them to one of the stable hands (though Regina does so only reluctantly) and Graham hugs Emma, before leaving, whispering in her ear, “Good luck, Princess.”

“Follow me,” Emma says, grabbing Regina’s bag from her and hoisting it over her shoulder. Her saddlebags will be brought in later and it’s not like she needs anything from them immediately.

On entering the palace, one of the footmen directs her to the library where Snow is waiting up, a book open in her lap though she is not reading it. “Emma,” she says, rushing towards her, dark skirts trailing behind her. “You’re back.” She looks exhausted, eyelids drooping and hands shaking, and Emma wonders if she slept at all the entire time Emma has been absent.

“Of course I am,” Emma says, allowing herself to be enveloped into a fierce hug. Snow must look behind her and see Regina because she pushes Emma away.

“Lady Regina?”

“Your highness,” Regina says, curtseying. Emma takes a proper look at her under the lights. She looks exhausted, the pale blue riding jacket rumpled, and she looks as though she’s struggling to stay upright.

“We’re kind of… engaged?” Emma says, and Snow falls back into a chair. Her face has grown gaunt with grief since Leo’s death and that, combined with the dark circles beneath her eyes, make Emma see her mother as being an old woman for the first time.

“I’m sorry?”

“She’s carrying his child,” Emma says. The lie is coming out easier every time she says it. “If we marry, we can legitimise it.” She sits on the arm of her mother’s chair and leans against her, finding solace in the warmth of her mother’s arm around her shoulders, and whispers, “I couldn’t leave her there.”

“Oh, Emma.” Snow smiles, though her eyes are wet. “Lady Regina, you have accepted?”
“I don’t suppose I have much choice,” Regina says, sullen.

Snow smiles. “There’s always a choice.”

“Not for me,” Regina says. Her shoulders have slumped and she sways on her feet.

Snow notices this. “Emma, you will show Regina to the blue room,” she says. “We will discuss this in the morning.” She murmurs something to a footman, who bows and departs. “Food will be sent up and baths prepared.”

“This way,” Emma says, taking Regina’s bag and leading her out of the library and up the grand staircase. The tower is Emma’s wing, had been Emma and Leo’s until his death, and the blue room is next door to Emma’s chambers with an adjoining door. It has always been intended as rooms for Emma and her future spouse, whether she lives in the castle or not. She opens the door for Regina, letting her enter, before placing the bag on the settee and closing the curtains across the French doors leading onto a balcony. “Is there anything you need?”

“No,” Regina says, looking around at the lavish space.

“I’ll leave you in peace then,” she says. “I’m just next door if you want anything.”

“I won’t,” Regina says, a sneer forming on her perfect lips, and even though Emma knows she deserved it, it still cuts.

Emma bumps into Abbie as she leaves. “See to Lady Regina first, please.”

Abbie grins. “Oh, honey, what mess have you got yourself into now?”

“I’m engaged,” Emma says and Abbie lets out a short laugh. Emma grimaces and shoos her maid in to take care of Regina before she can ask any questions. Then, she returns to her own room and collapses on her bed, staring up at the ceiling.
This is a disaster.

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The wedding has to happen quickly, before Regina is noticeably pregnant, so technically before they’re out of mourning. This makes for a small, hurried ceremony. Emma’s glad of this.

She’s less pleased to see Lady Mills who arrives to ‘help her daughter prepare for the wedding’ in the weeks before the ceremony. She still feels sick when she looks at her, remembering her treatment of Regina and the way she had sneered about Emma. She likes Lord Mills the more she gets to know him, though she senses his weakness and knows he would not have been able to protect his daughter.

She walks with him in the gardens one day, talking about books and horses when he turns to her and says, “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“Taking Regina away from Cora,” he says. “Now she can be free.”

Emma’s not sure what sort of freedom it is when you’re forced into marriage with someone you cannot love, your mother continues to involve herself in your life and you’re going to be scrutinised by the public every step of the rest of your life. She must look doubtful because Regina’s father smiles. “Shall we talk about something else?”

“Thanks,” Emma says fervently. “How are you finding your accommodations?”

She has not had a chance to talk with Regina, beyond pleasantries across the breakfast table. Every time she tries to catch her alone, Lady Mills is there. Finally, on the eve of the wedding, she finds Regina alone at the stables. Emma has decided an evening ride is the way to rid her of the anxiety bubbling inside of her but Regina stroking the nose of her beautiful steed, Rocinante, puts paid to that idea.

“This was all a horrible mistake, wasn’t it?” she says to Regina’s stiff back.
“Probably,” she says, not turning around.

“I wanted to rescue you from her,” Emma says. “Dad says I have a bit of a hero complex. He says that it’s fine in moderation but I need to rein it in sometimes.”

“It was very noble,” Regina says. “Idiotic, but… well-intentioned.” It’s the nicest thing she’s ever said to Emma.

“You can still run,” Emma says. “I’ll help you. My godmother…”

Regina sighs and turns to face her. Emma can see tears tracking down her cheeks. “I’ve already tried,” she admits. “She found me. She always finds me.” It’s such a cruel echo of Snow and David’s refrain and Emma fights the desire to touch her, a hand on her shoulder or an arm around her, because it’s how she best finds comfort, but Regina’s different. She shies away from casual touches. Emma’s watched her flinch when Snow links arms with her or when Emma accidentally brushes against her.

“Should I go?” Emma asks, after a moment of silence.

“Please,” Regina replies. “I need to be alone.” Emma wonders, not for the first time, about the short-staffed stables at the Mills estate.

The wedding goes off without a hitch. Regina is regal and beautiful, despite the ludicrously wide skirts of her dress, and Emma’s stomach swoops at the sight of her. When pronounced married, they share their first kiss, just the press of Regina’s soft lips against her but Emma can’t help bringing her fingers to her mouth, feeling the tickle that Regina’s kiss left.

It’s after the wedding banquet, when she’s returning to her rooms after wishing her parents a good night, that she hears the conversation in Regina’s room. “Seduce the girl.” It’s Lady Mills. “She’ll be putty in your hands, inexperienced little thing like her.”

“Mother,” Regina says. “I’m very tired.”

“Don’t pretend you’re not interested in women,” Lady Mills responds. “I saw the looks you gave that buxom serving girl last year.”
“Leave me in peace,” Regina says, attempting an imperious tone, and then yelps in pain.

Emma knocks and then opens the door. Lady Mills’ hand is clamped around Regina’s wrist. “Your highness,” she says, bowing. Emma’s nostrils flare in spite of herself. “I will leave you two to get better acquainted.” She smirks and removes herself.

“How much did you hear?” Regina asks, hugging her arms around her body. She’s changed into a white nightgown, her hair loose around her shoulders.

“Enough,” Emma says.

“Snoop,” Regina responds but there’s no bite in her words.

“I don’t want, that is… I don’t expect.” Emma stumbles over her words, fidgeting with the train of the cream gown she’s still wearing.

“Mother is tenacious,” Regina says, stalking forward.

“Would it be easier for you if we pretended?” Emma asks. “I can sleep in here so your mother thinks things are going well.”

“I don’t need your help,” she snaps. Emma takes this as a ‘yes’.

“I miss my brother,” she says because Regina’s been forced to give her so much and Emma feels like she should repay her somehow. “I don’t think I can run a country one day.”

Regina’s hand skates her stomach, fingers splaying across the bump, now barely apparent beneath the filmy layers of her nightgown. “I’m scared,” she says. “I never wanted to be a mother.”

Emma shoves open the door joining their rooms, changes into a nightshirt and returns. She feels impossibly small and young, feet bare, hair loose. Regina is curled up at one edge of the bed and Emma gingerly slides into the other side, taking care not to touch her.
Eventually, Regina’s quiet breathing soothes Emma and she falls asleep. She dreams of Regina, more of a nightmare really; the woman in her dream is fire and storm and violent expressions of rage, eyes sparkling purple and hissing like a venomous snake. She wakes, heart pounding, and finds herself nestled into Regina’s back, sweat pooling between her breasts and glistening on her forehead. She slides away from her wife (because Regina is her wife now, as bizarre as the word sounds even in her own head) and rolls back to her side.

“She’ll have checked in on us,” Regina says and Emma starts, not realising she was awake.

“Well, I guess me curled up against you would have been convincing then,” Emma says, attempting to joke, but it falls flat when Regina doesn’t answer. Her spine stiffens though and Emma thinks she hears a sharp intake of breath as though trying to hold in a sob, but perhaps she’s imagining things.

Married life continues on much as it had before marriage except that Emma now apparently has someone to take her mind off her grief and emptiness. Not that Regina wants to be helpful in that sphere. They pretend to be ‘getting to know each other’ in the company of Lady Mills, who remains at the castle to help her daughter through her pregnancy (though Emma suspects it’s just to keep tabs on her), sleeping together most nights, Emma holding on to the edge of the bed to avoid waking up wrapped around Regina. It’s exhausting.

One day, Lady Mills is gone. “She went home,” Regina says. “Papa will follow her in a day or two.” But Emma asks and no one saddled a horse or called a carriage for her. Emma’s fossicking around in a wardrobe, searching for a pair of boots, and she finds a stack of luggage. The large mirror they were given as a wedding gift is also gone. “It smashed,” Regina tells her, all nonchalance.

“I didn’t like it much anyway,” Emma says, throwing on a jacket and heading down to the stables. She doesn’t say anything else. If Regina’s done something terrible, she can’t say she blames her.

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They have been married three months when word is sent from Snow’s best friend and Emma’s godmother, Red, who has been spying in the forests bordering King George’s land. Snow is entertaining foreign dignitaries and cannot leave the castle so it is Emma who gets to meet her Red at the tavern. Though Red is Snow’s best friend, she is also one of the closest friends Emma has. She orders beers, relishes in the anonymity of a hood and peasant attire (though her disguise wouldn’t hold up to anyone really looking). When the information has been relayed – George’s forces move on the Eastern villages, he is looking to ally himself with Malificent, a powerful sorceress who occupies territory in the far north, beyond the desert – she enjoys the opportunity to just chat. Mostly about Regina.
“She’s beautiful, Red,” Emma says. “Even more beautiful than she was seven years ago. The way her eyes catch the light…”

“Careful now,” Red says, grinning, her teeth sharp and gleaming, a smile that reminds Emma that Red is a werewolf. “I’d almost think you loved the girl.” Emma blushes.

Regina is awake when Emma returns home, sitting in their private library in the East Wing. She has a book open in her lap but isn’t reading it, fingers tapping out a rhythm on its pages. “Where have you been?” she demands.

“Did Snow not tell you?” Emma asks, annoyed but also pleased that Regina’s been worrying.

“No,” Regina says. “I haven’t seen her.” This means she hasn’t eaten dinner. She never goes to the dining room unless Emma drags her down. She’s seven months pregnant and she’s lost weight; the white, filmy dress she’s wearing is loose in places it shouldn’t be, though it strains across her stomach. Emma’s worried but doesn’t know how to voice her concerns.

“I was at the Swan and Crown,” she says. “Meeting an informant.”

Regina hisses, taps the fingers of her left hand against the arm of the chair and grits her teeth. “I was…”

“Worried?”

“No,” Regina says just a little too quickly. “Confused. You’re such a puppy normally, trailing along behind me with those big brown eyes.” Her words have no bite in them.

“Aw, you’ve noticed my eyes,” Emma says, sitting down in the adjoining armchair. “I’ll leave a note next time, since apparently I can’t trust my mother to relay messages.”

“Don’t bother,” Regina says, the mask firmly in place but Emma knows. Regina is starting to care, just a little bit, and it makes her heart sing.
“Do you need something to eat?” Emma asks.

“I…” She stops. Emma thinks that will be the end of their conversation but then she begins. “I’m craving spice,” she admits. Emma sees Regina’s face reflected in the glass, forehead furrowed and mouth slack with pain.

“Like the food we had at your parents’ home?” Emma asks.

“Yes,” Regina says. “Our chef was from Papa’s kingdom. I miss the spice and heat. The food served here is so bland.”

“I can ask in the kitchens. Do you want me to go now?”

“No.” Regina closes her eyes and Emma notes the purplish circles blooming ever darker beneath her eyes. “Tomorrow is fine.”

“All right,” Emma says. “If I can’t do anything for you right now…”

“You can’t,” Regina snaps. “Just, go to bed, Emma.”

Emma moves to the door, turning before she disappears through it. “I’m away early with David tomorrow. The coast. I’ll talk to chef before I leave…” And make sure they send up food for you, she thinks but doesn’t add because she suspects Regina would just not eat out of spite. “Will you be okay on your own for the next few days?” Her parents are teaching her how to be queen and so David is making her accompany him to a parlay with the king of the coastal regions.

“I’ll be fine,” Regina says, eyes still closed. “I’m always fine,” she mutters and Emma’s heart breaks because she’s not fine; she’s grieving and trapped and Emma doesn’t know how to fix things.

* 

The trip ends up taking a week. She’s spent the past two days on a boat and smells like fish and salt and she’s silently cursing David and his ‘the journey will take half a day at most’ when she’s spent four of the past seven days on boats, throwing up over the side and lying in her bunk,
spent four of the past seven days on boats, throwing up over the side and lying in her bunk, clutching her stomach and wishing for sleep. She traipses up the stairs to the East Wing, thinking about the bath Snow has promised has been drawn for her. There’s a light shining from Regina’s chambers. Emma peers in and sees her holding a ball of fire in one hand.

She knocks and Regina turns, the flame extinguished.

“I’m back,” Emma says, feigning ignorance of what she’s just seen, though she can hear her breath pounding in her ears.

“You were away?” Regina asks, her tone nonchalant. However, she cannot hide the lie in her eyes and Emma feels warmth at the fact that Regina might have missed her presence.

“I missed you too, baby,” she says, grinning.

“You smell of rotten fish,” Regina says, nose wrinkling. “I think I might be sick.”

Emma rolls her eyes. “Dinner tonight? Just us?”

“If you bathe.”

“As you wish,” Emma says. “Order the meal and I’ll wash up.” Emma basks, letting the water wash away three days of accumulated dirt. Abbie’s put some sort of expensive oil in the bath and it’s making her smell like Regina, which is all too intoxicating. Before her hands can follow a dangerous path, she wraps a towel around herself and exits the bathroom. Regina’s not around so Emma takes the opportunity to pat herself dry and pull on a loose shirt and clean breeches.

There’s a strangled cough from behind her as she is about to pull the shirt over her head. She whirls around, pulling the shirt down, and finds Regina. There’s a flush in her cheeks. “I didn’t realise…” she says.

“It’s fine,” Emma replies, though her nipples have hardened with the sudden chill of bare skin and are visible through the thin cotton of the shirt.
“Dinner will be up shortly,” Regina says. “I will be in the sitting room.” She turns on her heel and strides out of the room.

Emma follows her, pulling a woollen wrap around herself because the fires have only just been lit and the castle is freezing. Regina is seated at the small table, as regal on the simple wooden chair as though it is a throne. She’s the one who looks born to rule, not Emma, her hair lying damp around her shoulders and more comfortable in trousers than in dresses. “Sorry about that,” Emma says.

Regina doesn’t respond. She has a hand resting on her distended stomach. “It has been really active today,” she says.

“Okay,” Emma says, not really sure what to do with that information. It’s the first pregnancy she’s had anything to do with and she feels hopelessly out of her depth. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I am well,” she says. She looks tired. Emma wonders if she’s eaten while she was gone. Emma had asked the kitchen staff to send up regular plates, preferably of heavily spiced foods, and even asked Abbie to ensure Regina ate. She wonders if she even left their wing of the castle. Regina never goes to the stables anymore. She’s too far along to ride safely and visiting the horses seems to only cause her pain. A footman brings in a plate of cold meats, bread and fruits. Emma busies herself making a rough sort of sandwich.

“We met with the sea kingdoms,” Emma says. Prince Eric had been pleasant; she knows her parents had hoped that she would marry him, shore up an alliance between their kingdoms, though she likes to think they would never have forced her. “They’ve agreed to support us with ships in the fight against King George.”

“I would like to see the sea one day,” Regina says.

“When the baby’s born, we’ll take a trip, hire a little house on the shore,” Emma says and for a moment they’re an ordinary married couple. Then, Regina stiffens, as though remembering something. “Are you well?”

“Very,” she says, though her cheeks have paled beneath her olive-toned skin.

“That’s disturbing,” Regina says.

“Sorry,” Emma replies. “ Seriously though, are you okay?”

“Not really.” Regina sighs. “It’s nothing you can help me with though.”

“You could always try me,” Emma says. She wonders if Regina might tell her about the magic. The people of their kingdom distrust magic, unless it comes from the fairies, but Emma’s always been fascinated by it.

“Just leave it alone, princess.”

So she does, turning the conversation to lighter subjects. Regina actually laughs when she mimics David’s attempts at dancing one of the Sea Kingdom’s traditional dances. Apparently you’re never too old to be totally humiliated by your parents.

“What did you do while I was gone?” Emma asks finally because Regina looks more relaxed than she has ever seen her.

“Read a great deal,” Regina says. She’s leaning back in her chair, cheeks flushed pink. She has kicked off her shoes, having complained earlier about her ankles. She flexes her feet, skirts slipping up to mid-calf.

Emboldened by the tone of the conversation, Emma asks, “did you eat?”

Regina rolls her eyes but doesn’t appear angry. “Yes, dear.”

“I’m worried,” Emma says. “You’re too thin.” Regina snorts at this and rubs her abdomen. “I mean it. I’m half worried your collar bone is going to break free from your skin.”

“I ate,” Regina says. “Thank you for speaking to the cook. She’s putting red pepper flakes in everything now.” Emma pulls a face. “It’s better than nothing. Gives it a kick,” Regina says, scrunching her nose and letting her tongue slip out between her lips.
Emma yawns and realises how exhausted she is, body aching and eyes fluttering. “I need sleep,” she says. “This was nice though.” She stands and helps Regina up, arm around her, and watches her walk from the room, a hand on her back and her shoes in her other hand.

*

Regina is eight months pregnant when King George attacks again. Emma spends the day in meeting chambers, discussing battle plans and the royal christening in the same breath with much the same tone of urgency. Snow wants to talk fabrics for christening gowns and names for the child and guest lists and Emma eventually snaps, “You know, I have a wife. She’s the one actually giving birth to the child; she might like some say in this.”

“Regina won’t talk to me,” Snow says.

“What?”

“She only speaks if you’re there.”

“Why?”

“She blames your father and me for the lack of choice in her life,” Snow says. “Rightly so. We thought it was the right thing to do at the time and they seemed to get on. I mean, she’s pregnant and Leo would never…” The last part is left unspoken. Leo would never have taken a girl by force. It’s true because the child isn’t his but Emma wonders how patient Leo would have been with a new bride, mourning the loss of her true love (that’s as much as Emma’s worked out at this stage) and the thought sickens her.

She thinks back to the young woman who rescued her from her runaway horse, whose eyes had sparkled and who had smiled easily and often. She fell in love with her that day and hasn’t stopped falling since.

She sends a maid to ask Regina to dinner because Emma’s to dine with the court and she wants moral support, someone to laugh at the ridiculous lords with and to know Regina’s safe and well. But the invitation is sent back. “She says she is tired,” the maid says. “She was sitting up in bed when I arrived.”
Emma frowns. Regina doesn’t refuse requests, the perfect, obedient wife, even though Emma has never asked for or wanted that. Red sidles in to sit beside her, flagon of mead in her hand and red cloak ever present across her shoulders. “How goes the old married woman? You know, I still haven’t met your wife.”

“Perhaps you would like to meet her now?” Emma suggests, taking a final bite of chicken and pushing her plate aside. Red nods.

So Emma escorts Red back to their quarters. The room is dark, curtains drawn across the windows and no fire or candles lit. Emma knows immediately that something is wrong. She grabs a candle and lights it. By the thin light, she can see the bed is still made. Red turns to check the other rooms and Emma looks in the bathroom, the closets, the balcony... Anywhere she can think of.

“She’s not anywhere else in your wing,” Ruby says. “I get no scent of her for at least fifty yards.” Emma’s hands shake. Something’s wrong. “Is there anywhere she might go to be alone?” Ruby asks.

“The stables,” Emma says and she’s running, cursing the stupid dress she’s wearing, cursing the pins in her hair falling out, cursing Regina and her idiocy. She can see the stables and light emanates from them and for one horrifying moment Emma thinks they’re ablaze. But it’s just bright light shining through. She and Red creep forward. “She’s not alone,” Red murmurs and Emma’s heart plummets.

There is a chink in the walls and Emma looks through. Regina paces back and forward. Two men exit from a stall, one dressed eccentrically in plum velvet and carrying a large top hat and the other a doctor judging by his bag of tools. “I’m sorry,” the doctor says. “The heart wasn’t strong enough.”

Regina falls to her knees and Emma stands. The two men exit the stables and she runs furiously at them but her heeled shoes and expansive skirts slow her down. The eccentric one spins a hat and a portal appears and then they’re gone, the only thing remaining being the faintest tendrils of purple smoke. Instead, she rushes into the stables.

The main area is empty but she can hear sobbing and when she enters the stall, she finds Regina, prostrate across the body of a young man. Her hands glow and she’s attacking him with magic, binding the cuts in the dead flesh, tears falling onto the soiled shirt.

“Regina?” Emma asks and Regina looks up at her and there is such terrifying darkness in her eyes, now almost glowing purple, and her lips curl into a shaking snarl.
“Get out,” she hisses.

“No,” Emma says because this Regina terrifies her and she worries she might do something she can’t take back. “Who is he?”

“Get out!” she roars and now Emma sees fear in her eyes and she realises that Regina’s lost control. The magic pushes Emma back up against the wall, head slaming into the wooden stall. She shakes herself and crawls over.

“Let me help, darling,” she murmurs, reaching out to clasp Regina’s hand. “Let me help you.”

Slowly, the magic coursing from Regina’s hands dims and fades and she huddles against Emma, who wraps an arm around her while she cries, deep, choking sobs into the fabric of Emma’s dress.

“Can you stand?” Emma asks when the crying has ceased. Regina nods but when Emma helps her up she sways and collapses against her. “Red?” Emma asks and Red is there, supporting Regina on one side, holding the bulk of her weight because Emma feels dizzy and lightheaded too.

“Should I call a doctor?”

“No!” Regina says sharply and Emma thinks of the well-dressed doctor.

“I’ll look after her,” Emma says. Red looks across at her doubtfully and she knows Red wants to remind her of all the times Emma failed to look after herself – the broken arm she let get infected because she insisted it was just a scratch, the cold that turned into pneumonia two winters ago because she refused to follow the doctor’s instructions...

Red refrains from commenting though and simply says, “shall I dispose of the body?”

“No!” Regina says. “Funeral.” Her breath is laboured, coming in short spurts as though every step is painful.
“Can you find somewhere safe for him?” Emma asks. “We’ll bury him in the morning if Regina’s well enough.”

“Sure,” Red says. “I’ll stick around until then. I take it we’re not telling Snow.”

“No,” Emma says. “You know her. No secret’s safe.”

Abbie has got a fire blazing in their room and snuck in some soup and cocoa from the kitchens by the time Emma and Red return with Regina. Emma steals a slice of the crusty, white bread by Regina’s soup and Regina doesn’t react so Emma knows she’s still not right.

She helps her change, unlacing her dress and stays, pulling off her stockings and shift. Regina sits on the side of the bed, the energy to remain upright more than she can handle. Emma’s eyes are drawn to her bare, ballooned stomach and she’s unable to stop herself and strokes a hand across the taut skin, feeling the bump of her stretched belly button. The baby kicks, the first time Emma’s felt it, and she smiles. “Hullo, darling,” she croons.

Regina shivers and Emma hastens to help her into a nightgown, the white fabric soft against her skin. Regina rolls over and curls up under the blankets and Emma stands, uncertain for a moment. “Do you wish to be alone?”

“I’m always alone,” Regina says dully and so Emma gets into bed beside her, still in her best dress, and curls up next to her, an arm wrapped around her.

The next morning when Emma wakes, the corset is digging into her side and she is still closely entwined with her wife. There are tear tracks down Regina’s cheeks and Emma softly, tenderly, pushes her hair back from her face. “You awake?” she murmurs and Regina nods.

“Are you ready to talk?” Emma asks.

Regina shakes her head. “But I will,” she whispers. Her voice is hoarse, raspy.

Emma calls for tea and gently washes Regina’s face, wiping away the tears. “Whenever you’re ready.” Abbie brings in tea and toast, before leaving them. She looks curiously over at Regina and Emma is sure there’ll be questions later because Abbie’s hardly the most discreet servant.
Regina’s hands are clasped around a cup of tea, the porcelain shaking. “His name was Daniel,” she says. “He ran the stables at my parent’s estate. We were in love.” She takes a sip of tea. “My mother, she found out. A bit hard to hide from my mother. We planned to run away together. Mother found out about that too. She…” Regina shakes and dissolves into tears again. Tea spills across the sheets.

Emma takes the cup from her and strokes the back of her hand. “I think I get the picture.”

“That man, he said he could help. He said that with a fresh heart Daniel could live again. I trusted him.” She gasps and clutches her stomach.

“You don’t have to say any more,” Emma says. “Just lie here and I’ll look after you.”

“No, you idiot,” Regina hisses. “The baby’s coming.”

It’s too soon. She’s supposed to have another month. Emma rings the bell desperately and when Abbie appears, cries out, “midwife, please!”

Regina’s grasp on her hand tightens; Emma is sure it will bruise. “It’s too soon,” she says. “I can’t do this. He was supposed to be here.”

Emma wipes her forehead with the cool cloth. The pain passes and then seizes up again, Regina’s hand clenching tight around hers. The sheets are wet, and not just with tea now. “What can I do?” she asks.

“Stop asking stupid questions,” Regina says, teeth clenched in a grimace.


It takes ten hours. Ten hideous hours, Regina crying the whole time, and then Emma hears the wail of small lungs. The baby is tiny and wrinkled and red and screaming with all his might and Emma can only stare as the midwife places the cleaned baby boy against Regina’s breast. He quietens immediately.
Regina gazes in wonder at the baby at her breast. Tentatively she reaches out a finger and strokes it along the downy dark hair on his head.

“Congratulations, Mama,” the midwife says. “I’ll leave you two alone.”

Emma sits down beside Regina on the bed. Her heart is beating a rat-tat-tat drum beat and she wants to cry. “He’s so beautiful,” she breathes. “Can I?”

Regina nods and Emma reaches out and strokes the baby’s soft cheek. “Hello, baby boy,” she murmurs. The baby opens his eyes for the first time and seems to look directly at her and Emma falls deeply, irrevocably in love.

* 

When Regina has recovered sufficiently, she and Red steal her and their son (because Emma has started thinking of the baby as theirs) away to a quiet corner of the grounds for a funeral. Regina is clothed in black and holds their child to her breast, quietening his whimpers by stroking his back and cooing.

It is Emma’s garden, fenced with high brick walls covered in creeper plants. A Rowan tree was planted at Emma’s birth and it stands in the centre of the grounds, growing ever stronger. Her parents had hoped that she would tend the garden, cultivating feminine interests, but Emma was never much interested in plants and the place is wild. One of the gardening apprentices checks in on it from time to time, makes sure nothing is dying or choked with weeds, and sometimes Emma used to come and lie on the grass, reading adventure novels and eating food stolen from the kitchens, feeding the scraps to the birds.

Red has found a spot, behind a patch of Lyon flowers, and has dug a grave. The body is shrouded and Regina does not ask to see it. She passes the baby to Emma and his fist immediately latches on to a golden curl, pulling hard enough to hurt and chortling. Regina takes a handful of dirt and throws it atop the body, whispering something that is blown away by the wind.

Emma passes the baby back, sensing Regina’s need for comfort and between her and Red they fill the rest of the grave. Emma’s muscles burn with the exertion and she can feel a blister form on the sensitive skin of her palm. Finally the grave is filled, the fresh dirt sticking out against the colour surrounding it. Regina moves forward and buries the baby apple tree in the fresh dirt. A gift from her father, cut from her apple tree at the Mills estate.
“The Naming ceremony is tomorrow,” Emma says. “You’ll be glad to see your father.”

Regina nods, subdued.

Red spreads a blanket near roses so red they look like blood. “I brought food,” she says. “Every funeral should have a wake.”

So they sit on the picnic blanket, the baby lying on his back, little limbs waving around because he cannot be still for even a moment. Emma teases him with her finger, tickling his stomach and Regina chews at a piece of bread before bringing the baby to her breast and feeding him, his rosebud mouth latching on to her nipple and snuffling, absolutely content.

Emma amuses herself by throwing grapes into the air and trying to catch them in her mouth and Regina rolls her eyes at this. “I apologise for my goddaughter,” Red says. “She has always been an idiot.”

Regina smiles. “Yes.”

“Have you given any thought to godparents?”

“We were going to ask you, actually.”

Red’s eyes widen, irises golden in the sunlight. “I would be honoured.”

Emma grins. “I figure if you can look out for me, any other child will be a breeze.” Red has no children of her own and Emma knows she yearns for them. She’s afraid though, terrified that she will bite any child of hers and turn them into a werewolf, as was done to her.

The next day, the title is made official at the Naming ceremony, as is the baby’s name. Henry Daniel. Snow pulls Emma aside afterwards. “Daniel?”

“Regina chose it,” Emma says, choosing her words carefully.
“It would have been right to have a memorial to your brother.”

“Not for Regina,” Emma says.

Snow looks at curiously but doesn’t argue any further. “Well, Daniel is a lovely name anyway.” Emma looks across at Regina, who is talking with a noble from the sea kingdoms. She is dressed in white, high-waisted to disguise the roundness of her stomach and the fabric floating loose around her. She is smiling, though not with her eyes, which are empty. “You have fallen in love with her, haven’t you?” Snow says.

“I’ve always been in love with her,” Emma says. “But she will never love me.”

Snow sighs. “Go to her. Her arms must be exhausted from holding the child.”

Emma nods and walks over. She bumps Regina’s hip with her own. “Shall I hold him a bit?”

Without speaking, Regina hands him over and together they stand, Henry blowing raspberries and giggling at the attention.

* 

A curious thing happens three months after the Naming Ceremony. Emma’s father, walking on the beach, finds a golden lamp, within which is contained a genie. David sets the genie free and wishes for the genie’s freedom, before offering him the final wish. The genie has the dark skin of the men and women she has met from Agrabah during trade negotiations, with heavily waxed and perfumed hair, and he takes an immediate, noticeable shine to Regina.

Emma, seated with her parents at the banquet in his honour, notices the genie paying his regards to Regina and glowers.

“Darling,” she says, moving over to the pair. “Shall we dance?”

Regina shrugs. She has pulled away from Emma after their momentary closeness following Henry’s birth and Emma doesn’t know what to do to fix it. “Actually, I was planning on dancing with the genie.” There is a certain smugness around his mouth when Regina turns Emma down
and Emma fights the tide of fire and anger rising up in her at the genie.

“Oh, okay,” she says and can’t help stomping off. She dances with Graham, who teases the sullenness out of her, and with a pretty princess from a small kingdom on the other side of the Enchanted Forest, Belle. She’s betrothed to this vain peacock of a man, Gaston. “It’s arranged,” she says.

Emma raises her eyebrows. “Really? I would never have guessed.”

“I just want to say,” Belle says. “It is so wonderful that you and Lady Regina have found love in the wake of your brother’s tragic death.”

“Yes,” Emma says. “It’s wonderful.” She looks around the ballroom. Regina has disappeared, as has the genie. She wants to go and find her so much but she knows she can’t push or pressure. Regina’s only married to her because Emma left her without any choice. Instead, she excuses herself to check on Henry.

He’s sleeping on his back, mouth slightly open and arms up by his head, hands balled into fists. He has kicked his blanket off and she pulls it back over him, stroking his forehead. “Sleep well, darling,” she whispers and sits for a time, watching him, her scarlet skirts billowing around her.

Regina enters after a while, the taffeta of her skirts rustling. “How is he?” she asks.

“Good,” she says as Henry wakes, shoving his tiny fists into his face and letting out a squawk.

“Is it time for a feed, my little prince?” Regina croons. “Give Mama a moment. Unlace me.” The last is directed at Emma, who fiddles with the tiny buttons up the back of Regina’s gown and unlaces her corset. She steps out of them, dressed only in a cotton shift and unlaces her corset. She steps out of them, dressed only in a cotton shift and picks up Henry, settling down on the bed with him and putting him to her breast. Snow had offered to find a wet nurse but Regina had refused. “He’s my child,” she had said. “I am quite capable of feeding him myself.”

“How is the genie?”

“How is the genie?” Regina says. “I believe he means to stay the next fortnight at least.”
Emma does not reply but sits beside her and strokes Henry’s hair.

The genie does stay and he and Regina become close friends. Emma keeps coming across them in private conversation. She wonders if Regina’s hand lingers too long on his arm. She wonders if the genie spends too much time staring at Regina’s lips. She wonders if Regina’s falling in love with him.

She’s heading to practise sparring when she hears Regina’s voice. “My wife does not care about me,” she says. “We do not share a bed. She would not notice if I were gone. She cares only for our child.”

The genie’s voice follows. “I notice you,” he says. “You are the most beautiful woman I have ever beheld.”

Emma runs back to their rooms, cheeks scalding and the prick of tears at her eyes. Henry is in the nursery with his nursemaid. “You can take a break,” she says and the woman smiles and leaves. “Hello, baby boy,” she murmurs. “Do you want a story?”

Henry giggles and claps his hands. At three months old he is beautiful and perfect. She grabs the story book from beside his bed. It’s history really, but written into story. “Once upon a time,” Emma says, sitting on the rug, back against the bed and Henry settled in between her legs, back held up by her stomach. “There was a princess who was very, very ordinary…” She lets the words wash over her as Henry gurgles and pokes at the illustrations.

She feels a presence and looks up. Regina is watching them from the doorway, dressed in a navy, velvet gown that glides across her body and she is all danger and sinuous curves. “Sorry,” Emma says. “Is it time for him to feed?” She can’t help the hurt in her voice, Regina’s words still firm in her mind.

“Not quite yet.” Regina says. “May I join you?” Without waiting for an answer, she perches on the edge of the bed, fabric of her dress folding across her crossed legs.

Emma continues to read, though the animation in her voice has gone. When the story is over, she kisses Henry’s head and passes him silently to Regina before leaving. She needs to hit someone, or something, with a sword.

After another dinner where Regina flirts with the genie and Emma tries not to care, engaging her
father in conversation about the recent victory against King George’s troops at the falls. She retires early, looking in on Henry in Regina’s room (Regina still down in the banquet hall) before crawling into her own bed.

She wakes hours later. It’s dark but she can sense a presence in her room. She turns to her bedside table, grappling for a match and lights a candle. Then, she screams.

The genie is in her room, looming at the end of her bed. There is a viper coiled around his arm. “I am very sorry, princess,” he says and places the snake on her bed.

Emma is paralysed with fear. The snake moves slowly, slinking towards her. She can feel blood pounding in her ears. Her voice is frozen but she gets out a hoarse squawk. “Regina!”

And as the snake is poised to strike, Regina is there. She freezes the snake and it shatters across Emma’s blankets, pieces of green ice already melting away. Then, she is on the genie. “What were you doing?”

Shock is etched into his features. “You said you wished to be free.”

“And you thought killing the princess would give me that?” She’s screaming now. “I am sick to death of people trying to save me.” Ice shivers through Emma’s body because she’s not as bad as the genie, surely she’s not.

“But… I love you,” he says. “And you love me.”

“You fool,” Regina hisses. “I just wanted that wish.”

The genie’s face hardens. “You may not love me, but I cannot live without you. I wish to always look upon your face.” Emma watches Regina, who tenses, eyes wide and frightened. But the swirl of magic surrounds the genie and when it is gone, all that remains is a silver backed mirror, his face trapped inside.

Regina allows herself a moment to smile before flipping the mirror face down on a table and turning to Emma. “Emma, I had no idea…”
“Stay away from me!” Emma shouts. She leaps from the bed, throws riding trousers and a shirt on, pulls a cloak across her shoulders and grabs her dagger and coin purse.

“What are you doing?” Regina asks, her hands twisting and that golden glow back in her eyes that speaks of vulnerability.

“Leaving,” Emma says. “Anywhere is better than being near you.”

It is easy to get out of the castle if you know the way and Emma does. She grabs a sword and straps it to her waist, saddles her horse and rides past the guards. She will not stop until tomorrow, until she is far enough away that no one can find her.
Part II

She didn’t mean to leave for five years.

“Land ahoy,” Hook shouts. He leaps down from the main deck and claps Emma on the back. “So, Swan. You got a family waiting ashore?”

“I hope so,” she says. “Many thanks again for my time with your crew.”

“You saved my life, Swan. It’s the least I could do.”

She had made it to the coastal villages at the outskirts of when her fine garb made her a target for pirates. Dragged on board, she had promised that her family was wealthy, would pay any ransom. She had told their captain that her parents were Lord and Lady Swan, distant relations of her mother who lived by the eastern sea. So the pirates set sail for the east coast where they were attacked by Hook and his crew.

Hook, doing battle with the captain who captured her, was almost undone when Emma swung a killing blow with a cannonball, knocking the pirate out. “You want a ride home, girl?” Hook had asked and Emma had said yes.

So Hook took her aboard. But she had made herself so useful, he kept extending the deadline and, to be honest, Emma found herself enjoying the action. She cut off her pretty, princess hair. She dressed in trousers and leather and carried a sword. She drank cheap ale and pillaged King George’s ships and generally pissed off his naval forces.

But word had reached them of George’s defeat, the signing of a treaty finally promising to peace between the two kingdoms. Though not without casualties. Her father, too old really to ride into battle, had been severely wounded.

So now she is returning home. The prodigal daughter. “Thank you, Hook, for all you have done.” He clapped her on the back again and then they were busy docking and off-loading goods and Emma slipped away before anyone noticed.

Flush with gold, she buys a horse and supplies and rides half the journey, stopping at an inn on the outskirts of her parent’s land, where she orders a bath and dinner. The barmaid eyes her with
liking; with her hair still cropped, she is often mistaken for a boy and she has encouraged this over
the past five years. Men get into less trouble at sea. So she flirts a little, gets a prime cut of meat
and a flagon of the inn’s finest ale.

“How goes it in the kingdom?” she asks.

“The king is unwell,” the girl says, wiping own the tables. “They say his heart wasn’t in it, not
with the lost princess. But we are in peacetime now.”

Emma feels the guilt that has surged through her veins these past five years rise up once again.
Her parents lost one son and now a daughter. “She was married, wasn’t she?”

him, but. Will that be all, sir?”

“Thank you,” Emma says, flipping her a coin. So Henry and Regina are still at the castle. She
would have expected Regina to flee. She had made it pretty clear she was uninterested in
anything, or anyone, the castle had to offer. Perhaps it was because of Henry. Emma has thought
of their little boy every day; she imagines what he must look like now, five years old. She
imagines him with brown hair – Daniel had brown hair, she remembers – and his mother’s
obstinate chin and nose. She missed Regina when she had stopped raging, of course she did, but
leaving Henry had shattered her heart.

She rides the next morning, clean and refreshed after a night on a proper mattress and a bath. At
the gates of the castle, she pauses and hops down from her horse. There are guards at the gates.
“What is your business?” one asks, hand on his sword.

“I have information about the lost princess,” Emma says. She doesn’t want some anonymous
palace guard to be the first to know of her return – besides which she’s not sure if he’d believe
her.

“Pat him down,” the guard says and she suffers the indignity of the guard taking her sword and
dagger. “If you are what you seem, you’ll get these back as you leave.”

She nods and allows herself to be escorted into court. “It will be Lady Regina you see,” the guard
says. “The queen is with her husband.”
Emma nods, holding her shoulders back and feeling her heart beat erratically. “As you wish.”

“Wait here,” the guard says. “I shall fetch her.”

Emma stands, tears pricking her eyes as she looks around the place. Her home. She grew up running around the throne room, frustrating her mother and father who were trying to hold meetings and restorative conversations. She and Leo once played hide and seek during a particularly dull session of court. She notes the banners on the walls are the same, though some are faded.

There is a cough from behind her. She turns and sees a figure in the doorway. Regina. She looks different somehow, half her dark hair coiled on top of her head, the rest falling down her back in a waterfall. Her dress is burgundy velvet, clinging to her body and encrusted with silver and gems. She stalks towards Emma.

“The guards say you have news of the lost princess,” she says and, gods, Emma has missed her husky voice.

“Yes, Regina, I do,” Emma says, and meets her eye.

Her lips twitch, jaw shifting, and her fist clenches. Her eyes scan Emma’s body, noting the tanned skin, the cropped hair, and the broad shoulders that speak to five years of labour. “Five years.”

“I know,” Emma says.

Regina waves her hands, there is a puff of purple smoke and Regina disappears. Of course. Emma takes the opportunity to sneak out the side door, down a passage she and Leo found as a child and into her parents’ chambers.

Snow sits beside David, wiping his forehead with a cool cloth. She whispers in a voice too low to hear. Emma watches them from the door for a brief moment and then coughs. Snow whirls around. “I believe I was clear that we needed privacy!” Then she actually looks at the intruder and her face crumples. “Emma?”

And Emma runs to them, her arms around her mother’s neck, clutching her father’s hand. “Mama, Daddy,” she whispers. “I am so sorry.”
“Oh, my darling girl,” Snow murmurs and her tears soak Emma’s hair. “You found us again.”

Her mother is reluctant to let her leave her sight but Emma promises to come for dinner. “I have to try and speak with Regina,” she says.

“She has changed, turned cold,” Snow says. “She cares for Henry and then she disappears for hours on end. No one knows where.”

Emma nods. “I saw a little of that.”

Emma finds her bedroom unchanged. She finds an old dress of hers and tries to put it on, hoping to make a better impression, but it tears at the shoulders, her body changed too much in her five years as a pirate. She curses and throws it on the floor, barely resisting the urge to stomp on it like a child throwing a tantrum, before pulling on a clean shirt and the same trousers. She’s washing a smudge of dirt from her cheek, when a high voice comes from behind her.

“Who’re you?”

She whips around. A small boy is staring at her with solemn, brown eyes. His mother’s eyes. “Henry?” she asks. Of course he is. He looks much like she had imagined, rumpled brown hair, though his nose is sharper and his skin is pale; Emma had imagined him with his mother’s darker skin.

“Yes,” the boy says. “Mama says I should not talk to strangers.”

“Henry.” Her voice cracks. “I’m Emma, your mother’s wife.”

“Emma?” he says, lines forming in his forehead. “You’re my mother too then.”

She cries then, deep, gulping sobs over the little boy who is the love of her life, the person she will never forgive herself for leaving. “Yes, baby boy. I am.”

“Henry, come here please.” Regina’s voice echoes down the hall.
“Come,” Henry says, taking her hand. “Mama will want to see you.” Emma is not so sure about this but she allows herself to be dragged along to the library nonetheless.

“Henry, there you are…” Regina looks up from a desk. “Oh,” she says, her scarlet lips pursing when she sees Emma. “You.”

“Ma came home,” Henry says.

“So I have been made aware,” Regina says, her voice cold.

“Aren’t you happy?” Henry asks, looking between his two mothers, eyes round and lip jutting out.

“Of course, dear,” Regina says. “I’m just… tired.”

“Henry,” Emma says. “Why don’t you show me your room? When I last saw you, you slept in a cradle at the end of your mother’s bed.”

Henry seems unconvinced by Regina’s assertion of exhaustion, but leads Emma to his room, chattering away all the while.

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Together with Snow, she manages to cobble together an outfit for dinner her first night back. One of her old dresses had an off-the-shoulder neckline, and she’s strapped far too tightly into a corset to give her the slim waist she had five years ago. Abbie, who is now solely Regina’s lady maid, clucks over her shorn hair but manages to get it up into a facsimile of a bun, giving the appearance of length.

Emma looks in the mirror and can’t help but see a wolf in sheep’s clothing. “I look ridiculous,” she mutters.
“You look beautiful,” Snow says. “It’s an old-fashioned cut, but it will do for this evening. We will have new clothes made for you in no time.”

“How’s Daddy?” she asks, the childish name slipping out.

“Healing well now that you are here,” Snow says. She strokes Emma’s shoulder, fingers brushing a thin scar on her left shoulder. “Oh, my darling.”

“Cosmetic,” Emma says. “Barely felt it.” There are other scars that hurt more. She has a large scar on her upper thigh, for example, that nearly killed her. She doesn’t tell Snow about that one though. There are some things her mother does not need to know.

“So,” Emma says. “Why did Regina stay?”

“Where would she go?” Snow asks.

“I don’t know,” Emma says. “Go and be free of me, royalty, this whole mess. Return to live with her father, fall in love with someone.”

“She mourned you,” Snow says. “She has been very unhappy. I worry about the path she is turning down.”

“But she has Henry,” Emma says.

“Yes,” Snow replies. “And he may just be her saviour.”

“Shall we?” Emma asks and takes as deep a breath as the constricting corset allows. She takes Snow’s arm and lets her escort Emma to the banquet hall. It’s a quiet dinner, a few lords and ladies. Red is there and she rushes at Emma, wrapping her arms around her waist and whirling her around.

“You little idiot,” she murmurs. “We thought you were dead.”
“I almost was,” Emma says. “But I’m back now.”

“Have you seen Regina?” Red asks, expression serious.

“Briefly,” Emma says, wincing at the memories of her cold, implacable wife.

“Ah.” Red leaves them, pressing a kiss to Snow’s cheek.

Snow seats herself at the head of the table and Emma takes the seat to her right. The seat to the left is empty. “Regina likes to make an entrance,” Snow murmurs. And sure enough when everyone is seated, waiting for Regina so that the first course can be served, the grand double doors swing open and Regina enters. She has dressed for dinner, the red velvet seeming almost casual in contrast to what she now wears. A stiff collar frames her face, fanned in purple. The embroidered navy fabric is cut low at her chest; she never used to wear anything that exposed her.

She pauses, takes a look around the hall before sweeping into her seat across from Emma. “Good evening, all,” she says, eyes sweeping across the table and judging it beneath her. Her eyes scan Emma and she sneers. Emma imagines she’s judging the outdated cut of her dress, her hair and her weather-beaten complexion.

Over the first courses, Regina ignores Emma, talking in animated terms to the lord sitting next to her. It’s not until dessert that Regina deigns to notice her existence. “That’s a quaint cut to your dress, your highness,” she says, smirking.

“We didn’t have a lot of time for following fashions on the Jolly Roger,” Emma says.

“And do tell us, what was the Jolly Roger?”

“A pirate ship,” Emma says. A couple of lords gasp. “Their captain was part of King George’s navy but turned pirate and fought against the king. We were quite useful in the war. In fact, I believe King David pardoned the crew of the Jolly Roger.” She looks across at Regina whose eyes have narrowed. “Any other comments, my dear wife?” Regina rolls her eyes. “Well,” Emma says, wiping her mouth, “lovely as this has been, it has been a very long five years. I’m going to bed.” She may as well live up to everyone’s terrible expectations of her. She kisses her mother’s cheek. “I’m going to visit David,” she whispers and Snow nods.
She visits her father before retiring to bed. “Hello, Daddy,” she murmurs, kissing his forehead.

“My little Emma bear,” David says, bringing a hand to her face and stroking her cheek. “You’re all grown up.”

“I don’t fit my clothes anymore,” she says. “Too many muscles.” She jokes, showing off her newly muscular biceps. “But my sword fighting’s pretty good now.”

“I’m glad,” he says. He’s tired but the healers say he is out of the woods. They say that Emma’s return gave him the will to live. She’s not sure if she believes that but it’s a nice thought.

“Ma’s planning a ball,” she says. “Celebrating the return of the lost princess.”

“You’ll need a new dress,” he says. Over the course of dinner she has bust out of one of the thin sleeves over her upper arm and the flimsy fabric hangs from the dress. David tugs at the fabric and grins before his hand falls back against the blankets, the slight movement sweeping exhaustion through his body.

“I’ll let you sleep,” Emma says. “I’m sorry, Daddy.”

“I’m sorry too, Emma bear.” His eyes drift shut and she watches him a moment longer before returning to her room. She discards the destroyed dress on the floor, yanks on a soft shirt and crawls under the covers where sleep takes her.

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Emma tugs at the sleeves of her dress. Abbie has fiddled with her hair again, though this time she has simply cut it into a more stylish shape, bringing out the curl. She has threaded scarlet flowers into it and Emma has to actively stop herself from fiddling with them.

She walks towards the staircase leading to the grand hall. Regina is there already, navy velvet curving to her body although her back is entirely bare, and her hair piled high. She looks more beautiful than ever. She raises a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “Not altogether bad, princess,” she says.
Emma’s proud of the dress. It is layers of sheer, cobalt chiffon, the skirts long and flowing, though not full skirted as her dresses from five years ago have been. The bodice is woven with red silk flowers to match those in her hair. She doesn’t feel like an ugly duckling in it; it hides her scars and emphasises the trim line of her waist and hips. “You look beautiful,” she says, eyeing Regina.

Regina doesn’t seem to know what to say to that, neck flushing pink for a brief moment. “Shall we?” Emma holds out her arm and Regina takes it, presenting a united front for the lands. They’ve barely spoken since dinner a week ago, except when in the presence of Henry, but Regina knows as well as anyone the importance of appearances.

The ballroom is beautiful. David is well enough to preside over the ball, though he stays seated and Snow is nearby to ward off people who talk too much or ask difficult questions. So it comes down to Emma to open the dancing. “Must we?” Regina asks; she smiles though it reads as a falsehood.

“Afraid so, love,” Emma says because playing the pirate seems to irritate Regina.

“Do you even remember how?” Regina sneers.

“I could do this in my sleep,” Emma says.

There is some confusion at the beginning of the waltz as they both try to lead. Regina stomps on her foot with spiked heels and when Emma winces, she takes control, leading them around the ballroom, feet light, head held high.

“I believe we must have some conversation,” Emma says after a moment.

“Oh good,” Regina responds. “Do tell, did the pirates follow similar etiquette to that at court?”

“Hook’s ship was run honourably,” Emma says. The feel of Regina’s hand around her waist is intoxicating; she can feel the pads of her fingers against her skin, through the thin layers of fabric. The dress is so delicate, she has been able to forego a corset.

“Honour amongst pirates,” Regina says. “Fascinating.” She purses her lips before remembering that she’s supposed to be pretending to be in love. “So, this Hook…”
“Former military man,” Emma says. “He turned pirate after circumstances he would not divulge to me.”

“And I suppose he is peg legged and has one eye,” Regina says. “That is certainly how Henry has described him to me.” Their son has developed a fascination with piracy, running around the grounds, brandishing a sword. He has taken over a large tree in the main gardens as a pirate ship and he throws leaves and fruit at any passers-by. It is starting to become a hassle for the gardeners.

“No,” Emma says. “He has a hook for a hand, but otherwise is a very handsome man.”

Regina’s jaw clenches. The music slows to a halt and Emma is swept away by a series of lords and peers of the realm for the next dance, to tell the tale of her five missing years over and over again as she dances.

It must be nearly three hours later when she gets a break and spots Regina, pressed against a wall as a nobleman Emma doesn’t recognises encroaches on her personal space. She rushes towards them. “Sorry,” she says. “I need to borrow my beloved wife,” and whisks Regina away.

Regina’s hand clenches her arm and she drags her out of the ballroom, into a disused library. “How dare you?” she hisses.

“What?” Emma asks.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe we needed that gentleman for something? He owns a great deal of land. I want some of it to be used to improve the lot of the peasants.” Her eyes flash. “I do not need saving by you, Princess Emma. I never have.”

“I’m sorry,” Emma says. It is Emma now who has been backed up against a wall, her heart pounding as Regina moves ever closer. Her hot breath graces Emma’s skin and she shivers, mouth slightly open.

“I’m not an object,” Regina says. “I’m not something you have to protect. I can take care of myself.”

“I know,” Emma says. And she does, because Regina has saved her on at least one occasion and Emma can only imagine her powers have grown over the years. But she’s not listening. Instead,
her eyes glow with fire and she leans forward, pressing against Emma, crumpling the beautiful silk flowers, and kisses her.

It is hard and almost violent because Regina forces her way into Emma’s mouth, biting her lip and hand clutching the back of Emma’s neck to pull her closer. Her anger pushes through in the bruising press of her lips and Emma wants to stop but can’t because it’s what she has wanted for so long, since before she even really knew what kissing was, since the moment Regina saved her from the runaway horse. Emma hears whimpering sighs and realises they are coming from her and the throbbing between her thighs intensifies and she scrapes a hand across Regina’s bare back, hard enough to leave marks. Regina moans at this and lets her fingernails sink into Emma’s neck.

Regina’s make up is smeared when they break apart and strands of her hair fly loose from the intricate styling. “See,” she says, breathing heavily. “I can win.” And she sweeps out, leaving Emma, supported by the bookshelf, taking deep gulping breaths and hoping like hell that this is a turning point for them.

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It’s not.

Regina is as glacial as ever come morning. She keeps Henry so busy Emma cannot spend time with him and ignores Emma when she enters the nursery. So Emma goes to her garden. It’s sunny and she enjoys the feeling of the sun beating down on her through her loose shirt. It reminds her of being on the ship and she wants more than anything for some hard labour, something that will make her feel less pointless. Snow and David are walking the grounds and Emma waves them down. “Come to the gardens with me,” she says.

David finishes taking his walk, Snow supporting him, and by the time they have done a loop, a servant has arrived with a picnic hamper and a rug. The garden is tidier than Emma’s ever seen it. “Has someone been working my garden?” Emma asks.

“Regina,” Snow says. “She and Henry spend a great deal of time here.” Emma’s eyes drift to the corner, where the apple tree is growing. It is not yet bearing fruit but the tree grows strong and is well looked after.

Emma grabs a peach from the picnic basket and bites in, juices dribbling down her chin. Snow rolls her eyes at the uncouth display and picks daintily at the grapes. David lies on his back, head resting on Snow’s knees and eyes closed. “I wonder, is it possible to divorce?” Emma asks.
“Not without Henry suffering,” Snow says. “He would not be able to take the throne if you divorced.”

“I just, Regina hates me so much. She has had no choice in any of this. Wouldn’t it be better if we separated and she could make her own choices?”

“Have you actually talked to her about any of this?” Snow asks.

“We don’t really talk,” Emma says.

“You used to, didn’t you?”

“Sometimes,” Emma says. “Rarely about anything that mattered and that was before I ran away for five years.” She plucks blades of grass from beneath her, tearing them into shreds. “And all of this is because I proposed and forced her into a marriage she didn’t want.” She almost talks about Daniel but her parents think that Henry is Leo’s son and she cannot disabuse them of that. “I worry about what she might become if we stay together.”

“Talk to her,” David says, lifting his head from Snow’s lap and rolling his eyes at Emma. She had thought he was asleep. “Idiot child.”

So that night, after Henry has been bathed and put to bed, Emma knocks on Regina’s bedroom door. She is carrying a couple of bottles of wine and glasses and when Regina opens the door she waves them hopefully in her face. “Yes?” Regina asks.

“I think we need to talk,” Emma says. “I also don’t think it should be sober.”

“Being a pirate has changed you,” Regina says but she opens the door fractionally wider and lets Emma in.

Emma pours them each a glass and settles herself in cross legged at one end of Regina’s bed as Regina wraps herself in a dressing gown and braids her hair. She takes the glass, curling her fingers around the bowl of it, before settling down across from her, lying back against the pillows and crossing her legs.
Regina drinks and says, “so you wanted to talk. Talk.”

“I think we need to start communicating to sort this whole mess out,” Emma says. “I don’t really know where to start.”

“Alternate questions?” Regina suggests after a moment of staring at Emma. “I’ll start. Why did you cut off all your hair?”

“Really?” Emma asks. Regina nods. “It was safer to disguise myself as a boy on the Jolly Roger.”

Regina nods. “I mean, it looks ridiculous…”

Now that Emma has been given the opportunity to ask questions, she finds her nerve failing her. “What is your favourite memory of Henry?”

Regina pauses, the fond expression that Emma associates with Henry appearing on her face. “He was just over a year old,” she says. “He was walking and he gurgled and babbled away as he pulled himself around places. I was sitting on the window seat in the nursery, looking over documents your mother had entrusted me with, while Henry played with a puzzle. Then I heard, clear as day, him saying ‘Mama’ and he ran towards me, arms outstretched.” She sighs.

Emma downs her glass. “I wish I hadn’t missed those five years.”

“So does he,” Regina says, finishing her own glass and refilling, passing the bottle to Emma. “Who was this … Hook to you?”

“My captain,” Emma says, drinking. “And that is all. Wait, was that whole thing last night you being jealous?”

Regina sniffs. “I just didn’t like to think your standards had slipped from mooning over me to fucking some disease-ridden pirate.” She over-emphasises the curse and it’s alarming how sensual Emma finds it.

She shifts, downing her second glass. “When did you start learning magic?”
“After we married,” Regina says. She is tight-lipped on the subject. “My teacher taught my mother.”

“Who is he?”

“Not your turn,” Regina says. She finishes a second glass of wine, considering. Emma watches her, in a way that she hopes is surreptitious. Dressed for bed, she is more familiar as the woman Emma left – beautiful still but less terrifying. “Why did it take you five years to return?”

“I wanted to return almost immediately,” Emma says. “I was kidnapped by pirates. Not Hook,” she hastens to add, seeing Regina’s look. “Another crew. They were attacked by the Jolly Roger and I was taken on board, given the opportunity to work for them. They called me Swan. There were few opportunities to return to shore and I found I enjoyed the hard work, the opportunity to be useful in the fight against King George.”

“So why did you return?”

“My father,” Emma says. “And that was two questions. What did you do to your mother?”

Regina swallows. “Do you remember that mirror? The one I said smashed.” Emma nods. “It was a portal. I pushed her into another world.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t want her anywhere near my child.”

Emma nods. She remembers Cora, remembers that supercilious smile that never reached her eyes, the grip on Regina’s arm like claws, the bruises. “Does anyone know?”

“My father,” Regina says. “But he won’t say. He’s glad she’s gone too.” The first bottle is gone. Emma’s head feels fuzzy, her lips numb and head spinning. “My turn.” Regina’s lips curve into a smile. “Have you had any lovers on your travels?”
Emma chokes on her drink, barely stopping red wine from staining the bedspread. “What?”

“You heard me,” Regina says. She looks so proud of herself and Emma, who has had five years around crude, violent pirates, feels like she is the eighteen year old who blushed at the thought of kissing her wife again.

“No,” she says, grateful for the candlelight, which must surely hide the flush rising on her cheeks up to her hairline. “For that you can tell me the truth about the genie.”

Regina drains a glass of wine. How many has that been? “I wanted that wish. I played with his vanity. I thought… I don’t know what I thought.” She sighs. “I suppose I thought the wish could bring back Daniel. I wouldn’t have needed anything else if I had him.”

“I heard you,” Emma says. “Out in the courtyard. That conversation has haunted me.”

“I’m sorry for it,” Regina says. “I never intended for you to…”

“Save it,” Emma says, suddenly not wanting to hear Regina try and placate her, using slippery words and twisted truths. She lies forward on her stomach, head parallel to Regina’s knees, toying with her wine glass.

“Why did you lie about the child?” Regina asks.

“Because I wanted to save you from your mother,” Emma says. “It was bull-headed and stupid and wrong, I know.”

“You’re lying,” Regina says. She’s speaking in that distinct way that Emma suspects indicates she’s drunk. “Or it’s not the whole reason.”

Emma finishes another drink. “It was because I love you,” she mumbles. “I have since I was a little girl.”

“You didn’t know me,” Regina says.
“I knew enough.” She meets Regina’s eyes. “You’re caring and brave and proud and incredibly strong and I’m so sorry for thinking you needed me to fight your battles.”

“But you left me.”

“Your genie tried to kill me,” Emma says. “How was I to know that wasn’t your idea?”

“Because I said it wasn’t!” Regina says. “You say you can tell when someone’s lying. I do not want you dead.”

“Oh honey, you’re so romantic,” Emma says.

Regina snarls and Emma finds herself hauled up, as if by magic (and it is magic, she remembers). She lands, splayed across Regina’s body, and then her mouth is on Emma’s, lips soft and hard alternately. Emma sighs and then Regina’s lips move, kissing her jaw and her neck, sucking and biting at her neck in a way Emma knows will bruise and she should hate it but she doesn’t because the idea of being possessed by Regina is intoxicating.

And then Regina’s hands are slipping up Emma’s thighs and she reaches the bump of the scar and gasps so Emma sits up and pulls off her night shift and lets Regina’s fingers touch the bumpy fleshy, which healed as well as any wound could heal on a dirty pirate ship, which is to say not smoothly. Regina’s almost reverent in her touch and goose bumps form across Emma’s skin. But then she gets that look in her eye again, the dangerous, ‘fuck you’ look that Emma has seen very occasionally and her hands skirt higher until she reaches Emma’s cunt and there she isn’t gentle or tender, but hard, one finger entering Emma, who winces and stiffens at a sharp pain that jerks through her. Regina pauses for a moment. “So, you were telling the truth,” she says, thumb rubbing lazy circles against Emma’s clitoris.

“Why would I lie about that?” Emma hisses, but the pain is dissipating and her body starts to tingle with pleasure. Slowly, and then building up, Regina pumps in and out and Emma lets out a moan, back arching.

A second finger is added and it’s too much. The heat coils in Emma’s belly like a snake and she clenches around the fingers and then she looks into Regina’s eyes and sees … something. She doesn’t quite know what it is but it’s not anger or passion, something rather softer and gentler, and it is that that makes Emma come apart, screaming Regina’s name and shaking.

Regina removes her fingers from Emma, wiping them on her robe, and Emma kisses her, chaste
kisses peppered across her lips and cheeks and jaw. “What do you want me to do?” she whispers.

“I want your mouth,” Regina says and so Emma complies, untying the dress gown and rucking Regina’s nightgown up, pressing kisses against her small, perfect breasts, watching the way the brown nipples stiffen when her mouth touches them. She has had a lot of time to think about the possibility of this moment and she wants to get it right. She kisses down her stomach, tasting salt. She pauses at Regina’s cunt, running a finger tentatively across it, finger coated in moisture, but Regina bucks her hips up. “Get on with it, princess.”

So Emma does what she normally does in situations where she’s out of her depth; she dives right in. She runs her tongue through the folds, pressing a light kiss against her clitoris. Regina groans, deep and melodious. Gaining confidence, she licks and sucks, Regina directing her with a hand in her hair and the movement of her hips.

When Regina comes, her thighs clench around Emma’s head and she clutches Emma’s hand, currently stroking her breast, fingers hard and claw-like. And for a moment, Regina doesn’t look cold or hard or terrifying and Emma falls for her all over again.

She crawls up the bed and curls herself beside Regina. Her shoulder isn’t the most comfortable place for Emma to rest her head but she’s tired and it’s as close as she can get to Regina. It’s when she’s drifting off that she feels the blankets being pulled across both of them.

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Emma wakes to find herself entwined with Regina. Sunlight paints Regina’s olive skin golden and her hair has curled overnight. Emma rolls over, grabbing her shift from the end of the bed and pulling it on, embarrassed suddenly to have Regina see her body.

At this, Regina wakes, eyes half-open and looks at Emma with something akin to horror. “Oh gods,” she murmurs, pulling the bed sheets around herself. Emma notices for the first time the empty bottles and the two wine glasses, Emma’s tipped over at the end of the bed, the red liquid having seeped into the fabric and leaving a stain.

“We were drunk,” Emma says.

“I don’t think it was just that,” Regina replies. “I think that’s been a long time coming.”
“So where does it leave us?”

“I don’t know.” Regina pauses. “I care – cared – about you. You were kind and noble and didn’t treat me like property and I could have loved that with time if I’d been given a choice in the matter.”

“Well,” Emma says. “Maybe we should go our separate ways.”

“Divorce?” Regina raises an eyebrow.

“No,” Emma says. “I mean, not yet. There’s a house my family own half a day’s ride from here. The village is prosperous. Perhaps you and Henry could live there. Or wherever you want; your father’s house, a tent in the forest. You could decide what you want, do what you want, be free.” She swallows. “I wouldn’t visit. You could make a decision there. If you want to stay married, then we can. If you want a divorce, we can do that as well.”

Regina stares at her for a moment. “You would allow that?”

“I don’t see that it’s about me allowing anything,” Emma says slowly. “I’ve taken away your choices so many times. I need to begin to repay that.”

Regina smiles. “You will have Henry on weekends,” she says. “I can’t allow him to be deprived of his grandparents or his other mother again.”

“Are you sure?” Emma’s heart lightens. She won’t lose Henry again.

“Very,” she says. “What do we tell the court?”

“I’ll work something out,” Emma says. “Your father could be unwell. Or it could be recommended that Henry needs a different environment. I don’t know.”

Regina stills. Then she kisses Emma on the lips, soft and chaste and appreciative. “Thank you,” she says.
Emma just nods and leaves the room, leaving behind the debris of the night before.
Epilogue

It has been a year.

Emma has kept busy, learning how to run the country, keeping up her sword fighting skills, caring for her son on weekends, not thinking about Regina. Certainly not thinking about her full, pink lips or her dark sweep of hair or the way her hands twist and move when she talks. Not dreaming about her lips pressed against Emma’s body or those hands searing her skin.

Right now she’s waiting for her son to arrive. David took the carriage to get him because Emma has been true to her word and hasn’t seen Regina, hasn’t tried to contact her. She’s in her garden, plucking weeds. It was one thing Regina asked of her. “Spend time with Henry in the garden,” she’d said. “Don’t let it go to ruin.”

The apple tree – Daniel’s tree – is growing ever taller and, looking more closely, Emma sees that it has sprung its first fruit. They’re too high to reach from the ground but Henry likes to climb trees. She’ll send him up and then they can get Granny to make apple pies. Henry can take one home with him.

“Ma!” Henry yells and Emma turns, her son running towards her, arms flailing and a beaming grin on her face. Her leaps into her arms and knocks her to the ground and she presses kisses all over his face.

“Baby boy,” she murmurs, hugging him tight. “I’ve missed you.”

“I have something for you,” he says, grinning, and hands her an envelope. She moves to fold it into her pocket. “No, you have to read it now.”

Emma recognises the handwriting and tries not to betray her nerves.

Emma,

It has been a long year but I have made my choice.

There was a man, Emma. He had a tattoo and long ago when we were newly married I saw this
man in a tavern and was told that he would be my soul mate. He was a widower, with a baby boy. We spent a great deal of time together and I realised that I didn’t want a soul mate; I didn’t want another choice taken from me through fate or destiny or whatever else. You’re the only person who has ever made me feel like my decisions mean something. So, here it is.

*I choose you. I want you. I need you.*

*Regina*

Henry’s in her lap and touches her cheeks. “Why you sad, Mama?”

Emma smiles through her tears. “They’re happy tears,” she says.

Henry smiles at her and points towards the entrance to the garden. Emma looks up. Regina stands in the entrance and for a moment Emma is stunned into silence. Henry clambers off of her and Emma stands and before she can even think she’s running and Regina walks towards her, smile radiant, and Emma picks her up and whirls her around until they fall in a tangle on a patch of violets, totally crushing them.

“I choose you,” Regina says and it’s better than ‘I love you’. It’s better than everything.

So Emma kisses her.

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