(yeah just like me) she was a victim of the night

by andromeda3116

Summary

Prompted from fyesemmaandhook on tumblr. Emma’s getting married in the morning to someone she’s never met — some prince from some rich, powerful kingdom on the other side of the continent — and so she needs to make tonight last. And the foreign pirate who’d shown up to rob her blind at her engagement ball will help her do just that. Captain Swan; wildly, shamelessly, gleefully AU.

Notes

Prompt: "AU, arranged marriage. Maybe princess Emma need to marry prince Killian for some treaty. Prince Killian is from some kingdom near the sea and in his free time he’s up to no good on his ship. Crack, smut, anything ;)"

Sometimes I just want to write dorky, happy romantic comedy, okay? I apologize for nothing.

See the end of the work for more notes
There was someone in her room.

In most stories, this was the point where she was supposed to scream *Guards! Guards!*, who would then burst in with swords flashing, but Emma was a bit more practical than most princesses, and knew that: A: if the guards could hear her shouting for them, so could the intruder, B: the guards had been nipping at the ceremonial wine all night, and C: frankly, there wasn’t anything they could do to the intruder that Emma couldn’t do at least as well, and probably better.

Her glittery formal dress featured a corset, which she had glared the maid into loosening, and her corset featured a total of four small, concealed knives; but it was the other, larger knife strapped to her thigh that she went for at the moment. It looked wicked, all sharp spikes and curves, which was why she liked it so much — it was intimidating as hell and could probably cut the devil in half.

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It had been a present for her last birthday.

Carefully hiding the knife in her skirts and holding it loosely on the pretense of holding up her dress, she walked casually into the room and froze at the man standing at her bureau. She wasn’t sure what she had expected, but *walking sex in black leather* had not been it; she also wasn’t sure what she’d expected him to do, but look at her and smirk had also not been it.

He certainly looked threatening, but not in any way that her knives would be good for.

“Ah, Princess,” he said cheerfully, leaning against the wall like he hadn’t been rooting through her possessions. “I had assumed you would be at your engagement party. Didn’t it only just begin?”

“I begged out,” she replied, matching his casual tone. “Because, you know, I’m getting married tomorrow and that takes such a toll on a woman.” He raised an eyebrow, looking at her oddly, and she brought her knife up to tap her cheek idly (both eyebrows went up, and he stepped into a subtly defensive stance). “By the way, I don’t keep jewels in my rooms,” she said coolly. “There’s nothing you want in here, so if you would please…” She indicated to the doorway with the knife, but he stepped towards her, eyes raking her body, making no attempt to hide the fact that he was mentally tearing her dress off.

“No, milady, there was nothing that I wanted in here,” he murmured, almost a purr, almost enough to make her launch herself at him and drag him to her bed because he really just shouldn’t be allowed to exist if he wasn’t losing clothing rapidly.

She didn’t let it show. “Who are you?” she snapped, crossing her arms, and he straightened up suddenly.

“Where are my manners?” he declared dramatically, and swept into a (perfect) bow. “Killian Jones, at y’ service, milady.”

“And what do you do for a living, Mister Jones?” she asked innocently. “Make toys for little orphans?”

He grinned brilliantly. “In a manner of speaking,” he replied, just as innocently. “My exploits fill their imaginations and give them ideas about what they want to do with their lives.”

She paused for a moment, taking in the clothes and the stealing and the swashbuckling demeanor. “So you’re a pirate,” she said flatly, and his grin widened as he bowed again.

“Perhaps I didn’t introduce myself properly. It’s Captain Killian Jones, I admit.”
“Tell me you’re just here for the crown jewels, because if your plan is to kidnap me…”

“Please,” he said, rolling his eyes. “If I’d wanted to kidnap you, love, you’d be passed out on my ship by now.”

She thought about that for a second, and shrugged. “Fair enough. It’s a bad night for kidnapping anyway,” she added lightly. “There’s too many guards, and anyone who’s anyone from both kingdoms are here for the wedding. A week ago, maybe.”

“You’ve learned this in your self-defense classes?” he asked, leaning back against the side of her bureau in a way that was both unbearably sexy and which he knew was unbearably sexy — it was calculated seduction and it should not be working.

“Logic and rhetoric,” she countered, but she was lost in thought. She was getting married tomorrow — to a man she had never met, some prince of some rich, powerful kingdom on the other side of the continent. When would she ever have a chance like this again? All her independence was going away tomorrow (and no she wasn’t bitter about that at all nope not a bit).

She should at least have tonight.

“Let me propose a deal,” she said, walking forward and holding the knife up to his throat, the blade of which he stared at warily but didn’t retreat from. “I won’t tell anyone you’ve been here, and you can take your ship and leave peacefully — if you get me out of this place tonight.”

That eyebrow went back up. “Running out on your wedding?” he asked. “No concern for leaving your True Love at the altar?”

Emma smirked; he said “true love” the same way she always did, sarcasm and derision and eye-rolling disbelief. Sure, her parents were the patron saints of True Love, and obviously they really did love each other, but all that meant was that they, well, really loved each other. “I’ve never met the man, I doubt he would be too terribly heartbroken. But no, I’m not running out on it,” she explained softly. “I’ll be back in the morning.”

He met her eyes — oh this just wasn’t fair, he had beautiful blue eyes, he should not be — and stepped casually over the line with a decidedly wicked smirk. “All intact and everything?” he challenged, mocking, and she leaned forward, just a little.

“Yes,” she replied, in his same challenging tone, “at least as far as you’ll ever know.” She stepped back again, but the amusement in his eyes said that he didn’t believe a word of it, which — while frustrating — wasn’t really surprising because she wasn’t sure she believed it either. “Do we have a deal?”

“Do you mean to suggest that the darling princess has been less-than-virtuous in her youth?” he asked cheerfully, barely concealing outright laughter.

Emma glared, and refused to answer. (Because of course the answer was yes, the outer eastern wall of her room was crisscrossed with thick ivy that made it entirely too easy to sneak out of and yes, she had made use of it but it was none of his business.) “Do we have a deal?” she repeated, firmer, and held out her hand to shake. The way his grin widened said that he had read between the lines, and found the story hilarious.

“Well, I would be quite the fool to refuse, now, wouldn’t I?” he replied, taking her hand and kissing the back of it, eyes still locked on hers.

He should not be allowed.
This was a terrible idea.

“Fantastic,” she said brightly, and swept to her wardrobe to pull out casual clothes — as well as a small, leather-wrapped bundle of concealable weapons because she wasn’t an idiot — and disappeared into the powder room to change into them, ignoring the sensation of his eyes following her every move.

Killian blinked and ran a hand over his face after the door snapped shut — and locked — behind her.

That was not what he had expected. In any way.

Maybe the gods were real.

…and hated him.

Okay, Emma. You can do this. Don’t make the Neal mistake again, that was terrible, and yes, he’s pretty but so was Neal and that ended in a near-disaster of epic proportion. You are getting married tomorrow, it would be unspeakably worse.

She tugged on the riding pants and tight-fitting leather bodice anyway.

Because.

Emma pulled her hair up into an uncaring semi-bun as she walked out of the powder room, using the excuse of keeping it in place to conceal her last two knives, a pair of stilettos disguised as hair sticks. She had designed them herself, and anytime she wore them, she got endless compliments about how pretty they were. Anytime she used them, she was dead on target and whatever animal she and her father were hunting was, likewise, dead.

Emma was really proud of them.

“Hair sticks?” Killian sneered disbelievingly. “Honestly?”

“I almost look like a man,” she replied coolly, and he let out a tiny, contradicting laugh that she ignored, “give me my one concession to vanity, all right?”

“As you wish,” he shrugged, in carelessness that may or may not have been feigned, and gestured to the window. “Well, love, if you’re ready, shall we go? I’m simply dying for a tour of your city.”

So.

Captain Killian Jones had never been to her kingdom before. That was interesting.

“Well, you’re in luck, then,” she said brightly, opening the window — it hadn’t been broken or unlocked: he hadn’t come through it; also interesting — and throwing one leg over the sill, “because I’m a rebel and I’ve never been caught. I know where all the really good bars are.”

He glanced out the window, sizing up the ivy winding down the wall, and then at her, pausing for a moment. “Quite a long drop.”
“Are you trying to say you’re afraid of heights?” she asked incredulously, and a little condescendingly. 

He gave her the unamused side-eye, one of her personal favorite glares. “I was going to say that I was impressed, but I’m afraid I’ve suddenly lost the desire to compliment you.”

“Except you just did,” she replied, and didn’t wait for a reply before swinging herself onto the nearest branch. It was a long way down, since her room was on the fourth floor of the castle, and it could be a bit of a harrowing journey in winter, when the ivy was slick with ice and mostly brown. But the alternative was sword-fighting lessons with her father — which, while she enjoyed spending time with her dad, infuriated her because she and swords didn’t really get along — or studying with her mother — which also infuriated her because she knew her mother was just as much a warrior as her father, even if she didn’t really do that kind of thing anymore.

Every now and then, they’d practice archery together, which was fun and challenging, as Emma’s lackluster swordplay was made up for in her archery. But she was best with the weapons that neither of her parents really liked to use, like hunting and throwing knives, so practicing those with them was boring.

And Emma would swallow her hair sticks before she would open an etiquette book without someone glaring at her from close range.

Risking death by attempting to sneak out was a perfectly acceptable alternative, as far as she was concerned.

“How in the bloody hell did you do this?” Killian snapped from several yards above her (and the view was really nice but he’d gloat if he caught her staring so she made a point not to), and she laughed.

“First window escape? I would’ve thought a pirate had done this a million times, you know, escaping irate husbands and such,” she said mockingly, and he glared down at her, but it was weakened by the darkness. “There’s a pretty good string of sturdy vines going all the way down, just follow me.”

He watched her for a moment as though memorizing the way, which turned out to be exactly what he was doing. It seriously dampened her pride when he did begin following her route exactly and making much better time than she ever had. But then, she thought, he was a pirate. He probably climbed ropes and netting and things all the time, so obviously he’d be good at it.

It might have made her feel better if she hadn’t spent the last ten minutes mocking him for being bad at it.

“For your information,” he said sharply, as he caught up to her around the first floor, “I don’t escape irate husbands.”

“You mean you don’t get caught?” she asked, and it was almost a question. He smirked.

“Pirate, sweetheart,” he replied, shrugging, about half of an apology. “I wouldn’t have both my hands if I couldn’t get out of trouble.”

She laughed again, jumping to the ground. “All right,” she started cheerfully, and he looked at her in deep mistrust, so she grinned, “I have got to know: wildest near-miss. You tell me yours, I’ll tell you mine.”

He was watching her in much more amusement than she thought was really warranted. “You’re
very forthright, aren’t you, darling? Most noblewomen I’ve known try to pretend they’re perfectly chaste and pure, except for that one time that results in pregnancy.”

“I said I’m a rebel,” she replied, shrugging. “Look, I have to do that in front of the court constantly, and it gets old, hearing endless tirades about that baby was born a month too early to be that big and how awful of her sneaking out of Lord So-and-So’s room in the middle of the night what a whore.” She sneered and rolled her eyes, muttering darkly, “but no one cares whose rooms the men sneak out of.”

“So, you enjoy being able to, for once, talk about your undoubtedly — ” he cut himself off as they approached the outer wall’s gatehouse. There was a guard, but it was Happy, and all it had taken to get Happy on her side years ago had been a full — and completely honest — explanation of why she needed to get the hell out of the castle sometimes. He’d rarely stopped her, only when he had reason to believe the streets were especially unsafe, on the condition that she be back before dawn; if she wasn’t, he would alert the rest of the guard. Emma figured that was fair.

Happy looked at Killian oddly, and Emma rolled her eyes. “I caught him sneaking around,” she whispered. “I’m being charitable, and not arresting him.”

The dwarf glanced at her in confusion, and then back at Killian, and opened his mouth to say something that he seemed to think was important, but stopped himself abruptly and held up his hands in supplication. “You know, you won’t be able to do this after you’re married. You’ll be in another castle and they won’t let you get away with it.”

“I know,” she replied evenly. “That’s why I’m doing it tonight.”

Happy watched her carefully for a moment, and then conceded with a nod. “All right, but you know the rule.”

“Back by dawn, I haven’t forgotten,” she whispered, smiling, and kissed him on the cheek. “I’ll miss you,” she said, suddenly realizing that she really would. More than once, she’d stopped on her way in and had long (not-always-sober) conversations with him; Happy knew more about her than anyone else in the world, and he always had a kind word or a bit of advice for her — and he always kept her secrets, even from the other dwarves. He was… pretty much her only friend.

“I’ll miss you too, Emma,” he replied, and then glanced back at Killian. “If there’s one single scratch on her when she gets back, sir, you will face the full force of dwarven wrath. It won’t end well for you.”

Killian was grinning like he was having the time of his life. “Of course. She’ll come back in more or less the same condition — I can’t promise sobriety.”

“I get that. I’m a dwarf,” Happy said flatly, by way of explanation.

She waved at Happy as they left the grounds and made for one of the back alleys that would lead around to the market district. “He and I go pretty far back,” she explained.

“I can tell,” Killian said. “And here I was, thinking that you escaped the castle all those times by wit and skill alone.”

“I did,” she countered honestly. “It takes wit and skill to convince a guard to let the crown princess leave in the dead of the night.”

He was quiet for a moment, before nodding thoughtfully. “A fair point. So where to, love?”

She really wanted to get annoyed with his pet names, but couldn’t quite find it in her to. “The
harbor,” she answered quickly. “I want to see your ship.”

“Don’t trust me that it exists?” he countered, and she glared at him for being right. She couldn’t think of a pirate that would actually bring a princess back in “more or less” perfect condition — the opportunity to wring two kingdoms for ransom was just too good to pass up.

“I’ve never seen a real-life pirate ship. It’s a great story to tell my grandchildren,” she said off-hand, and then thought about that sentence in full. “Oh, gods, my purpose in life is about to become ‘childbearing,’” she muttered distastefully. “Are you sure you don’t want to kidnap me?” she asked, and it wasn’t entirely in jest.

“Quite,” he replied with a smirk. “Although I’m sure both of your to-be kingdoms would pay handsome prices for your return, they also feature a powerful standing army and a monstrous navy, respectively. Also, I’ve heard that your godmother is a werewolf. I don’t need gold badly enough to take that risk.”

“Coward,” she muttered dramatically, but he didn’t take the bait.

“I prefer the term ‘in one piece.’”

“So, where’s all your crew?” she asked, looking over his ship in excitement (this was a real-life pirate ship! she’d never been on one before!), and intense inspection; she’d heard that you could learn a lot about a person by the conditions they lived in, and, even though she probably wouldn’t see the man ever again after tonight, she was terribly curious.

“They’re on shore leave,” he said airily, leaning against the railing in that deliberately sexy way (again). “I expect we’d find them in the red light district.”

“Naturally,” she replied absently, much more interested in the ship. If it was true about people’s homes, then Killian Jones was meticulously clean and probably a perfectionist — the only scrap of dirt on the whole thing had come from Emma’s boots. The only reason she didn’t think the ship was just new was that there was a good bit of water damage to the wood, and the sails had been patched up on the edges with surprisingly even stitches.

“I wasn’t aware you were an authority on sailing vessels,” Killian said, apparently apropos of nothing, and she turned back to him, confused. “You’re inspecting my ship like you want to buy it,” he explained, articulating carefully. “Or else join it,” he added in a lower voice, and somehow made it sound dirty.

“Oh, I just…” she started, and then realized that she didn’t really have a good explanation except that she really really always wanted to sail with pirates at least once in her life and it was hard to turn around and make her feet go back toward the dock and the palace and her wedding. “You’re almost scary-clean, you know that?”

“It’s a necessity, as far as I’m concerned,” he said, shrugging and leading the way back onto the dock. “If you don’t keep a ship spotless, you end up with barnacles and rot, and salt begins to corrode all the metal and cannons until they fall apart, and then if you get attacked, you’ll lose because your ship and crew are both falling apart.” She almost laughed at how annoyed he sounded and how long his list of reasons — excuses, she noticed — was.

“I think you can get away with regular ‘clean,’” she replied incredulously, trying to hide her amusement. “I don’t think ‘spotless’ is necessary.”
“I do,” he countered, eyes narrowing.

Emma looked him over carefully, and wondered how she hadn’t noticed before. “Even yourself, huh?” she asked, and he glanced at her quizzically, so she indicated to him. “You’re cleaner than any pirate I’ve ever seen or heard of. They usually smell pretty bad, and I’ve never seen one with all his teeth.”

He gave a little laugh. “You’re right, love, they usually do smell, and ‘pretty bad’ does not do it justice,” he said, utterly disgusted by the thought, like he found it personally offensive. “Which is precisely why I take care not to.” He leaned in a little closer, to confide, “Paying for a woman’s company is something that happens to other people.”

She smirked. “I’m not sure there’s enough gold in the world to make me go to bed with your typical pirate.”

“Ah,” he said airily, with false innocence, “but I’m not your typical pirate, am I?”

She looked at him, and motioned for him to lean in closer. “Listen, this is a big secret, okay?” she whispered, and he raised an eyebrow and tilted his head slightly so he could hear better. “Tomorrow is my wedding day,” she confided; he glared at her, unamused. “I’m no paragon of virtue, but that’s a little far.”

It took him a moment to answer — to come up with a response, she thought. “So, what I hear in that is, were your wedding day not tomorrow, then nothing would be standing in our way.”

“I don’t know,” she lied flatly, “I think your personality is a pretty big wall there.”

He stared at her for a few seconds with a look on his face that said he was really, really trying to hold back a great response, but then his self-control apparently failed him. “Well, there’re always gags,” he said cheerfully, “You know, I’m really not terribly opposed, although you may find yourself regretting it.”

Emma choked on her own saliva and coughed painfully, forced to stop in the street in an attempt to regain control of herself. Killian just stood by with a dark laugh and wicked smirk, watching smugly until she could breathe again.

“Inappropriate,” she wheezed, trying to sound offended and failing badly. “I am a princess, you know.”

“Oh, my apologies, I forgot,” he replied quickly. “The outfit and the conversation and the open laughter at jokes a proper princess would never catch distracted me from the truth.”

“Okay, fine,” she croaked, finally getting it under control. “You win that round.”

He didn’t even attempt to pretend that they weren’t playing a game, that he wasn’t openly trying to see how far he’d have to push her to break through her walls and she wasn’t openly baiting him to see how far he was willing to push.

She hadn’t had this much fun since before they’d told her she was engaged.

Emma looked up and tried to gauge the hour from the moon — it wasn’t far from midnight, and that twisted something inside of her.

Dawn should stay just like this, she thought: hours away.

“All right,” she said abruptly, and he glanced at her again. “Liquor or beer?”
“Look at me, sweetheart,” he replied, giving her a sardonic glance. “Do I look like an ale-drinker?”

She grinned. “I was hoping you’d say that. Follow me.”

“Okay, asking again,” she declared, holding up her empty glass in a vague attempt to make a second vodka appear, “wildest near-miss. Go!”

Killian wasn’t the one who spoke — it was the bartender, taking the glass out of her hand and giving her a mock-admonishing look. “Rosie,” he said, tsing and shaking his head and adding a little too much emphasis on the false name, like maybe he wasn’t entirely joking. “Discussing such things with strangers? How scandalous.”

She glared at him. “August. Less advice, more alcohol,” she snapped, but without much force. “It’s my last night as a free woman, and I’m determined to enjoy it.”

“Hey, I’m not here to judge,” he said evenly, and probably untruthfully. “I’m just the one who makes the vodka happen.”

“A job at which I see you’re excelling,” Killian cut in, sounding more amused than his eyes suggested.

(He lied with his voice better than his face… interesting. Also, he suddenly didn’t like August much, where he’d previously been indifferent to the bartender. Also interesting, but for different reasons.)

But August was used to dealing with belligerent types, and getting him angry had become nearly impossible, so he just smiled and shrugged. “Fair enough,” he said lightly, sauntering back to the bar.

“Rosie?” Killian asked, now looking amused as well as sounding it, and raised an eyebrow. “You frequent this bar, I take it?”

“Yeah… August had to drag me home the first time I got drunk,” she answered, wincing. “Happy made me go back the next morning with a fruit basket to apologize… which was far more eventful than it should have been, because I didn’t remember the way. Only time in my life I’ve been chased by a goat.”

“You’ve had quite the entertaining life, haven’t you, darling?” he mused, snickering, and Emma shrugged.

“Only when I’ve made it entertaining.”

“So, you crave adventure, yes?” he prompted, and paused while August handed Emma her drink but didn’t stay to talk — a fight was breaking out in the corner. “The life you’re forced to live doesn’t appeal to you.”

“Obviously,” she snorted, taking an overlong drink to chase the bitterness back down. “I’m the least royal princess in the world.”

Maybe he didn’t have anything to add to that, or maybe he caught the darkness in her voice and decided to change the subject, because he leaned back in his seat, swirling his drink carelessly. “Have you ever heard of the Vestal Virgins?” he asked suddenly, and she blinked, before
realizing that he was finally answering the ‘wildest near-miss’ question.

“Vaguely,” she replied. “Temple-maids who can’t have sex for… some reason.”

He nodded, gesturing with his glass. “Apparently, the goddess they serve will remove her protection over the city if one of them turns out to be unchaste. It’s punishable by death,” he added helpfully, and Emma raised an eyebrow.

“Huh,” she muttered. “I didn’t know that.”

“Neither did I,” he coughed, and had the decency to look uncomfortable. “And we were caught… red-handed, so to speak. It was considered an act of treason for her and, because I had led her to knowingly commit treason for which the punishment was death, murder for me. Although I suspect that accusation had less to do with the law and more to do with how they hated me.”

She covered her mouth with her hand, eyes wide. “And?”

He paused to take a drink and shrugged. “Well, it wasn’t especially difficult for me to get out of their dungeon, but then I discovered that the sentence for a Vestal No-Longer-Virgin was to be buried underneath the city with a few days food and water, under the assumption that the goddess would… I’m not sure, save her if she was meant to be saved? I believe it was actually intended to placate their conscience.”

“So, you found her — right?” she asked, sharply on the last word, and he gave her that you’re kidding look.

“No, I’m such a monster that I decided I’d let an innocent woman starve to death in a glorified grave,” he replied sardonically. “Yes, I found her and released her. She, quite understandably, wanted nothing to do with me.” He shook his head at her like he was honestly offended that she’d had to ask, and she actually felt a little ashamed. “That was the only time I’ve ever been convicted of murder and sentenced to death for having sex, so I doubt you’ve got anything better.”

“Well, I’ve never been sentenced to death or anything like that,” she said, off-hand. “But I have almost lost my entire inheritance once because of it.”

She said ‘once’ like she’d a long string of partners, of which this was only one. The truth was, she hadn’t had that many — she was twenty, and a princess, and neither of those had left much time for experimentation — but she couldn’t resist a challenge, even one she could never win.

“That doesn’t take much imagination,” he replied dismissively. “I imagine you would be disowned if you were ever caught.”

“Not when I’m the only child,” she countered, and added mentally and when I have parents who actually care about my welfare, but something about him made her keep it in her throat. She almost wished she had a dark and mysterious past that would lend her, well, darkness and mystery, but her life had really been pretty good, all things considered. “Actually, it wasn’t the act that was so bad, it was… it ended in a pregnancy scare.”

Realization dawned over his face. “Well, that is quite the near-miss, isn’t it?” he remarked slowly.

“Yeah…” she breathed. “You can’t get away without telling anyone about that, either. And then I made the mistake of assuming my father would take it better than my mother because — I’m closer to him! He’s always said I could tell him anything,” she added desperately, “so he was the one I confided in, and now Neal… isn’t allowed within thirty miles of our borders and I think my dad has only just decided that I’m forgiven.”
“He would’ve disinherited you if you’d truly been pregnant?”

“Not by choice, but there are… other factors he’d be forced to consider,” she answered honestly, even though she was stretching the truth a bit — her father would have killed anyone who tried to make him disown his only daughter. “My mother was also pretty furious, but that turned out to be more because I had gone to Father rather than her. Apparently, she had a wilder youth than she lets on, because she gave me secrets and tea recipes that I don’t think come standard with the job.”

He snickered at that, and she made a face. “Anyway… I almost messed up the line of succession, brought shame upon the family, proved myself a disgrace, all of that. And I almost had to be a mother at eighteen. Let’s not forget that,” she said in exaggerated fear, trying to make light of the situation that still made her a little sick to her stomach, although not for the ‘right’ reasons.

Killian had an… odd look on his face. Calculating, like he was reading something in the shape of her eyes. “He was the first, wasn’t he?” he asked, taking her off-guard.

Yes. “What makes you think that?”

“The way you say his name,” he said slowly. “And the way you rush away from it and try to dismiss the aftermath while saying nothing of the man involved. You sound defiant,” he added, deliberately casual, and she couldn’t breathe. “As though perhaps you’d do it all over again.
And… I think,” he went on in that same measured voice, eyes piercing to the bone, “that the only reason you’ve had any other is because you think it may make you forget him.”

She couldn’t answer that. He was right, in a way that she had refused to accept — maybe it wasn’t (always) the case anymore, but it had definitely started like that — and that was wrong, all wrong. He was a pirate, one she’d never see again, and it wasn’t fair, it wasn’t right, that the only person to ever look at her and actually see her was someone she’d only ever know for a handful of hours.

This wasn’t part of their game. This was cheating. This was — this wasn’t fair.

They were both silent for a long, drawn-out moment, the air between them tensing slowly and inexorably like a bow being strung, his eyes locked on hers and her unable to move a muscle for fear she’d snap — and then he leaned back in his seat and looked away.

“Or maybe it’s just the alcohol talking,” he said casually, kindly giving her an out. She leaped for it.

“We have been drinking here for a while,” she replied desperately, draining the rest of her drink in one go. She wasn’t handling this with any grace, but she didn’t care. Almost every fiber of her being suddenly wanted to go back to the castle, get away from this man and this conversation and this feeling.

Almost.

(Not even Neal — who had, briefly, made her believe in her parents’ True Love talk — could have seen that far under her skin.)

Killian seemed to realize he’d made a mistake, because he stood abruptly and said, “Then I’ll pay our tab and we can be off,” in a woodenly cheerful voice. She wasn’t entirely sure he’d return.

She wasn’t entirely sure she’d be there if he did.
Killian cursed internally as he leaned against the bar and motioned for one last drink. That look on her face — he shouldn’t have said anything. He thought she’d wanted someone to understand her, and he did, and much too well for his own good, but she didn’t know why and he didn’t want to explain it because he’d buried it even deeper than she’d buried Neal.

He was starting to think that maybe this whole thing was a huge mistake. He’d planned this to the letter, he had everything in place, all he had left to do was pay lip service to what remained of conscience (and satisfy his curiosity) and it would be done… but he hadn’t expected to like her this much. He hadn’t expected to want her this much, to want to ‘kidnap’ her like she hadn’t quite asked, take her with him (keep her with him), get her out of her gilded cage.

Now he didn’t know what the hell to do. She’d gone completely off-book and thrown his very simple plan upside-down because she refused to fit the mold she was supposed to — expected to, because of her station — fill.

She didn’t follow the script at all — no one had ever pulled a knife on him before! It hadn’t even occurred to him that someone ever might. After all, what kind of person — what kind of princess — walked into a room that she knew had only one exit and one window, when she knew there were no guards on the entire floor, and looked an intruder — an obviously dangerous intruder — in the eyes and openly threatened him with a knife? Who did that, except the dangerously arrogant or suicidally reckless?

He thought about that for a moment.

Maybe she was near-suicidally reckless. Maybe she was unhappier about the wedding than she let on, angrier than she let on. Maybe she didn’t care if the unfamiliar pirate kidnapped or killed her tonight, if it might get her out of tomorrow morning and the rest of the life they’d written her into.

Maybe she would come with him, if he asked — had asked. If he had asked, before he’d opened his mouth and spooked her and probably run her off.

He couldn’t stay, but he wasn’t sure he could leave, either. He wasn’t naive enough to call it love, but she was tantalizing and intriguing and if he left now, there would always be that dangling string in his mind, the girl who could have been, if he’d been just a little less pirate.

The rum burned on the way down and he didn’t bother to ask how much he owed before tossing a large amount of gold at August, who raised his eyebrows but didn’t complain.

Killian almost hoped that she had run after he’d left the table, so he wouldn’t be the one to blame.

He did look surprised when she was still sitting there, waiting for him to return, and more surprised when she smiled brightly and stood up like he’d never said anything about Neal at all. “Are you hungry?” she asked, and went on without waiting for him to say anything else. “Because I am, I get ravenous every time I drink vodka.”

“Actually, yes,” he replied, watching her carefully, guarded. “Do you have any specific place in mind?”

“Would I have brought it up if I didn’t?” she challenged, crossing her arms and cocking her hip.

“I’m not sure,” he said lightly, relaxing at the softer atmosphere. “You women are so unpredictable.”

“Ha!” she barked, and motioned for him to follow her out of the bar again, almost making the
mistake of taking his hand to lead him; but no, she refused to go that far. Emma, her vodka, and the last bit of Killian’s drink had decided that — well, so what if he could read her like a book when even her own mother couldn’t? He’d be out of her life tomorrow, and she’d be married, and that would be that.

She could throw it all aside for just this one night, and deal with the fallout later. Anyway, she didn’t think she ever would’ve forgiven herself if she had left things like that, so unsaid and unfinished.

Dawn would come soon enough; best to make tonight last.

Unfortunately, it turned out that they had spent a little longer in August’s bar than she’d thought, and the place she had wanted to eat had already closed up for the night. In theory, that should have been the cue to return home, but it was a cool, clear night and still felt too early to stop.

Her feet almost subconsciously took them toward the seedier parts of the city, and she let them because those were the places that stayed rowdy until the sun came up, and she needed the noise and the light right now. If Killian noticed, he didn’t mention it, but even so, she couldn’t imagine a pirate being bothered.

“Oh, look,” she said eagerly, as your typical pirate was thrown out of the door of the pub a block ahead of them. “A pirate bar! Let’s go!”

When she glanced back at him, he was giving her a look that was half-amusement and half-uncertainty. “Are you really sure about that?” he asked, and maybe it was because she was still in defense mode after the last bar, but she took it as a challenge.

“Absolutely.”

So he shrugged and followed her, but sped up as they closed in on the door so he would be going in first, and made a point of scanning the bar and keeping close by. It made her roll her eyes, but it was still kind of nice.

“Far end of the bar,” he muttered, and she glanced over. “I’ve dealt with that man before, he’s a nasty piece of work.”

“Okay,” she replied, matching his volume, not entirely sure he was telling the truth. “We’ll stay on this side.”

The way he winced made it pretty clear he’d meant her to reply that they would leave, which only made her more determined to stay. The place looked interesting, and loud, and so full of drunken energy that her blood itched with it; after a second, it started to affect him as well, the indistinct fog that had hung over them on the walk here evaporating as he swung back into full “rakish pirate” mode.

He slipped an arm around her waist, quite a bit lower than necessary, so his fingers were resting on her hip. She glanced at it pointedly, and then back at him, but he just smiled innocently.

“Rough types in this bar, love,” he said (she was surprised to be relieved that he was calling her pet names again). “Best you stay close to me.”

Part of her wanted to admonish him, part of her wanted to shove him away because she honestly didn’t need the protection, but most of her liked being this close to him too much to do either. Still, pride was her deadly sin.
“Really? Don’t you know anything about me?” she challenged, unable to contain a little smirk. “Let me make you another deal: if you can accurately guess how many knives I have on my person, right now, I’ll buy all the drinks.”

It didn’t have quite the expected effect on him, although, in retrospect, she should have seen it coming. Instead of interest, or curiosity, or concern, he shot her a wicked grin, the kind that should be outlawed for indecency. “And how exactly am I to confirm that you haven’t lied to me about that number, darling?” he said, voice barely above a whisper, and far, far too close to her ear. And it was subtle, but his fingers at her hip tightened just a little.

Emma had been raised to, in theory, be a Lady. And a Lady did not curse, but then, a Lady also didn’t sneak out of the castle and occasionally into men’s beds; however, the one lesson that had stuck, and this was more out of sheer habit than any real desire, was that a princess never cursed.

“Shit,” she spluttered, and Killian laughed out loud, pulling her to the bar with him and keeping his hand on the small of her back. “That doesn’t count,” she snapped, voice a little too high. “It was too easy.”

“And whose fault is that, love?”

“Yours,” she replied belligerently, refusing to look at him even though he was watching her with apparent, deeply amused fascination.

“I am simply dying to hear your justification for that,” he said, after a moment’s pause.

She was saved before she was forced to come up with a suitably witty reply in the next five seconds (or else lose a third time) by a large, older man crashing into the bar right beside Killian, whose expression suddenly became a little wooden. “Captain!” the man cried cheerfully, in a powerfully thick, rough version of Killian’s accent. “Didn’t think you’d be out tonight, y’should come have a drink with us!”

“Well, you wanted to meet the crew,” he muttered flatly, and turned to the sailor with a forced smile. “Not tonight, mate,” he replied, but Emma cut in.

“No,” she said, and they both looked at her. She glanced to Killian. “Let’s have a drink with them.”

He stared blankly at her for a moment while the sailor blatantly checked her out, grinning widely at what he saw, until the captain glanced coldly back at him to make his eyes immediately lock on a point just above her head. He didn’t say anything. She suspected he didn’t have to.

Finally, he shrugged, as if to say well nobody lives forever anyway. “If you think you can handle it,” he said, and she smirked.

She hadn’t realized that he had actually been holding back.

It was fantastic.

She had initially tried to take it slow, because she did have to be reasonably presentable and preferably not still drunk when she was ‘awoken’ to prepare for her wedding, but when she
thought about it like that, it had made her snatch Killian’s drink and finish it off (at least there hadn’t been much left in it) and challenge him. It had been a really ambiguous challenge, her exact words being “I’m challenging you. To anything. I’m two down, I have to at least get one point.”

Maybe she should have taken the grin he responded with as a warning, but at that point, she honestly didn’t care.

So, the whole crew had started up one hell of a drinking game — something involving a silver coin, a flagon filled with a life-ending combination of an unknown mixture of alcohols, and the shot glasses that were mysteriously beginning to take over the table — and split into three teams: one allied with her, one allied with Killian, and one taking all bets.

And Killian was absolutely ruining the rest of them. Every time the silver coin passed to him, he successfully bounced it into someone’s shot glass — he had been kind enough not to aim for the flagon, although that may have merely been his own trepidation — and Emma’s team was becoming seriously ragged, quickly dropping one by one.

At least, she thought dimly, he never aimed at her; however, some other members of his team were not so nice, and seemed to aim almost exclusively for her. But she had managed to hit the sweet spot of drunkenness when everything suddenly made perfect sense, and her last few turns had finally put Smee entirely out of the running and, temporarily, the world of the living.

“How much longer d’you think you can keep this up, darling?” Killian asked from across the table, grinning arrogantly, and she narrowed her eyes. She wasn’t sure if he was talking about her winning streak or her alcohol consumption, but either the way, the answer was “not very.”

He may not have been aiming for her glasses, but he had been mocking her cheerfully and relentlessly for the past hour, and she was determined to make him drink the horrifying flagon, now that her vengeance against Smee — who was almost singlehandedly responsible for her current state — had been completed. “Long enough,” she replied, and took the coin.

The crew had been several sheets to the wind before they’d even arrived, so it was down to only a few of them at the table, and at this point, it had become a free-for-all, which actually meant that it had become an “everyone turn on the captain and make him pay for being too damn good at this game.” It hadn’t been said. It hadn’t even been implied by glances and nods. It had simply happened — as soon as the teams dissolved, everyone turned on him.

He seemed to find it hilarious.

Until right now.

It was beautiful, how the coin bounced off the table and caught the candlelight as it spun in the air. By the time it hit the concoction in the flagon, she and everyone but Killian had already picked up and started their shots; it would have felt vaguely like cheating if he hadn’t been obliterating all of them up to that point.

He almost succeeded — but the bosun’s glass hit the table barely a second before his, and he stared at it for a moment, before his eyes slowly closed and he cursed violently as about a quarter of the bar cheered.

“You know the rules,” Emma said, gloating shamelessly, and he glared at her without tilting his head up.

“I was winning the entire game,” he snapped, just this side of petulantly, taking the flagon and sweeping the glare around the table. “Enjoy this now,” he growled, but without much force, and,
taking a deep breath, drained the flagon.

She made a mental note to memorize this moment, in every single detail: he set the empty flagon down, coughing violently. Killian Jones was not the sort of man who reacted badly in any way after taking a drink, and she was well aware that she was currently witnessing a once-in-a-lifetime event.

“What the bloody hell was in that?” he choked, and various liquors were supplied by bar patrons — the flagon had been passed around beforehand to get a splash of everyone’s drinks, turning it into a monstrous mixture of various rums, gin, whiskey, a few red wines, several different beers of varying darkness, at least one splash of grog, and one jerk had even added brandy.

(It was actually incredibly impressive that he’d managed to drain it in one go; anyone short of a god of alcohol would have reacted the same way he had, and most much worse. Personally, Emma suspected that she would have thrown up.)

She grinned brightly at him, leaning across the table and, because the bar’s volume had risen significantly following Killian’s defeat, mouthed I win.

But, it occurred to her as she stumbled out of the bar to see the sky lightening in the east, it was a once-in-a-lifetime victory.

“You cut it close this time,” Happy said disapprovingly, arms crossed, and Emma smiled, opening her arms expansively, and very, very drunkenly.

“Back at dawn, just as I promised,” she declared, all drama.

“And in more or less the same condition,” Killian added, in a tone that could only be described as smirkingly, “just as I promised.”

Happy looked between the two of them warily, eyes finally settling on Killian. “If you’re not back here in ten minutes, I’m coming after you. And I’ll have the king with me.”

“Now, you’re just being paranoid,” Emma said as she breezed out of the gatehouse, only slurring a little bit. “I’m getting married in a few hours, you don’t have to worry.”

The moment the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them: at the reminder, her happy drunkenness abruptly crashed into the closest thing to sobriety her body was capable of. Neither of them spoke until they were standing in awkward silence at the wall; Killian was searching her face in a way that she wasn’t sure she liked.

“You don’t have to, you know,” he said quietly, and she gripped the ivy, eyes closed.

“Yes,” she answered in a decent attempt at stoicism, “I do.”

“No, you don’t,” he replied, agitated, and she looked back to him just fast enough to catch a flicker of an unnameable emotion before he schooled it into blankness. “You could do this, you’d make a hell of a pirate — “

” — and I’d be leaving my country without an heir to the throne,” she cut in, and he turned away. “Breaking a contract that would unite two powerful countries against the threat of war — or have you not — do you know what’s — “
“Yes,” he snapped tightly, “I’m aware.”

She didn’t want to look at him. She couldn’t look at him. He’d see too much if she did, and she wasn’t sure — between the alcohol and the close proximity and her own desires — whether or not her resolve would hold; for this one night, she had experienced the life she’d always dreamed of, and she wanted, badly, to make it last.

It wasn’t fair.

…but neither was abandoning her family and country for her own happiness.

“I would,” she whispered, “in any other life.”

He breathed out a tiny, cynical laugh. “No,” he replied, and she finally glanced back up, “you wouldn’t. You’d always be too self-sacrificing for your own good, and never be selfish enough to leave them behind for the high seas. It wouldn’t be you if you could,” His tone was unreadable; maybe mocking, maybe admiring, maybe bitter.

Emma met his eyes — he was right, again, the way he could see straight through her, down to the things she’d never admit to anyone (but especially herself). When she didn’t say anything else, he gave her a tiny, bitter smirk and kissed her hand.

“Until we meet again,” he lied, and left.

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Charming knew she’d been out all night; she could see it on his face. But her father had been seriously reluctant to agree to the arranged marriage in the first place, and had admitted to her while breaking the news that he had put it off for as long as possible — to give her time to put Neal behind her, she learned later.

Her mother wasn’t much more excited about it, but she was a fundamentally practical and generally optimistic person, so she had been emphasizing the fact that everyone said Prince James was unbelievably handsome and a… charming man… and that had been about the extent of positives she’d been able to come up with. Mostly, she’d admitted finally, no one really knew much about him, except that he was kind of distant and sort of cold.

“Well, what does he look like?” she asked her mother, who looked at her and shrugged.

“Didn’t see him,” Snow replied.

“He never showed,” her father added, fussing over the sleeves on her dress out of nervous energy, and gave her a falsely-admonishing smile. “He has that in common with you.”

“I showed up,” she countered, and her mother snorted, but it sounded fake, too. “I did! You saw me.”

“You were at the ball for exactly thirteen minutes, Emma,” her mother said, crossing her arms. “I counted.”

“Well, what does he look like?” she asked her mother, who looked at her and shrugged.

“She has a point,” he conceded. “And it is thirteen minutes longer than this prince was there.”

Snow opened her mouth to reply, but Red poked her head through the door before she could.

“Wow. You look stunning,
“Thanks,” she answered, and then thought about it as her mother nodded and walked through the door almost like she was going to the gallows. “Wait, Red,” she called, and when they both looked back at her, she bit her lip, feeling a little stupid. “You’ve seen him, right? Is he — ” she asked, making a hand motion that she hoped would suffice to say not a troll at least?

“Yeah, I’ve seen him,” Red replied, nodding and laughing a little. “I’m… a little jealous. A lot jealous,” she added, and smiled. “Your children will be gorgeous.” It was meant in kindness, but it twisted Emma’s gut up in knots all the same, and the way her father’s fingers tightened on her arm suggested that it twisted Charming’s gut up in knots, too.

“Was there ever any doubt?” Snow countered, mock-indignant, and, with a final glance back at them, left for the chapel, and she was alone with her father and her fears.

“Okay, Emma,” Charming said, stepping over until he was directly in front of her, looking her in the eyes seriously and taking her by the shoulders. “Do you remember the code?”

She wanted to roll her eyes and smile and hug him and cry, all at the same time. “Yes, Dad, I remember the code,” she replied, smiling fondly at him. He’d made her memorize — and swear to use — the phrase ‘I miss having peaches for breakfast’ in a letter to him if she was in trouble and needed him to come to her aid. He didn’t openly admit it, but his concern was really if this guy turns out to be abusive.

Emma’s father was, quite possibly, the only person less happy about her getting married and going off to a distant country with a man she didn’t know than she was.

“Good. Look at me, Emma,” he went on in that serious, urgent voice, eyes locked on hers. “If you get up there and something about him seems off, or wrong, or he rubs you the wrong way, or anything that makes you think he’s bad news: you turn and you walk out.”

“I can’t just — ” she started, and he shook his head.

“I will deal with the king and smooth over anything I have to, any way I have to, before I will see you stuck in a marriage with someone who might ever hurt you.”

She hugged him tightly around the middle, blinking back tears. “Okay.”

“Promise me,” he told her sharply, and she smiled up at him.

“I promise.”

She took a deep breath, eyes closed, and tried — tried tried tried tried so hard — to forget black hair and wicked smirk and piercing blue eyes, as the doors opened and her father walked with her into the chapel.

But, to her absolute and overwhelming horror, she didn’t have to forget.

He’d only looked at her long enough to see her false smile freeze, before he’d turned back to the altar to hide the wince.

She took his hand with slow, deliberate movements and that same frozen smile, as the minister —
a high-ranking knight with dark skin — glanced between them in confusion for a second before starting the ceremony. His words were white noise.

“Would you care to hear an explanation?” he whispered.

“Not particularly,” she replied, through clenched teeth. He nodded slightly, as much as he could while being discreet.

“It’s a very good one.”

“I don’t care.”

He bit his tongue and suppressed another wince; he’d expected this, but he hadn’t anticipated just how angry she would be. “I didn’t actually lie to you,” he muttered, and her jaw tensed in such a way that said the only reason she didn’t hit him right then was because she was in front of so many people and the stakes were so high for her country… and because then she would be forced to explain herself.

“Right,” she hissed, teeth clenched, if it was possible, harder, “your name just happens to be James-Killian, yeah, I believe that.”

“It is a name I go by very often and quite a lot of people know me by it.”

“You have a really fluid definition of the truth, don’t you?”

He couldn’t suppress the wince this time, because her fingernails were digging painfully into his arm, and deeper with each word he said, and so made the perhaps-belated decision to keep his mouth shut until they were alone. Even if he didn’t think she might throw propriety to the wind and attack him if he didn’t, it was starting to get hard for the minister to focus and keep the confusion hidden on his face.

The rest of the wedding was a surprisingly-short blur, and he didn’t think there was such a thing as a more awkward — or quick — kiss than the one she accepted from him.

She managed a genuine-ish smile when they turned to the clapping crowd, although he didn’t bother to because he could get away without bothering — one of the perks of having an ambiguous and vaguely negative reputation.

“Neither of you are going to explain that to me?” the knight muttered behind them, and he shot him an apologetic smile. He might have stayed to explain, but he was completely sure that if he released Emma’s arm she would disappear into the crowd and he wouldn’t find her again until much later.

“Long story, mate,” he replied.

She knew he was trying to get her alone so he could explain himself, but Emma didn’t want an explanation — especially not if it did turn out to be a good one. If she wasn’t furious with him right now, she’d start taking full, mortified stock of all the things she had told him last night, things that he had no need to know about her and which she had only said because she was never going to see him again.

Gods, she had told him about Neal! And the pregnancy scare! They had discussed their sex lives!

Why the hell would he have done that? Did he want some kind of power to hold over her when
she got back to his country? How much of what he’d said had been true? Had any of it been? Shit, what was the code? Something about peaches, and —

Why hadn’t she turned around and walked out like Dad had told her to? She had objective proof that she was at the altar with a liar and a pirate, both of which added up to the walking definition of “bad news,” the bad news Dad had been so worried about.

“Will you at least listen to me?” Killian — or James, although she privately, and somewhat traitorously, thought his false name suited him much better — hissed, trying to pull her closer to him surreptitiously.

“Oh look at the cake,” she said brightly, woodenly, as they led the procession into the banquet hall for the after-party and wedding feast, although the thought of it made her nauseous.

“We’ll have to discuss it eventually,” he snapped, and she twitched.

“Then we’ll discuss it then,” she replied in a tight voice, cheeks aching from how she’d been forcing them to smile for the better part of the past hour.

He rolled his eyes, and gave up. “Fine,” he said acidically, finally releasing her arm. She couldn’t immediately run out of the room and hide until the horrid embarrassment faded and/or she had enough wine in her bloodstream to both kill her lingering hangover and make the whole thing seem funny, because she had to smile like a puppet and flit around and be sociable and that traitor in her head wondered what jokes Killian would have made with her to make this party less awful.

But Killian was a lie. It didn’t matter if he claimed it wasn’t, it didn’t matter if she’d seen a whole crew of pirates apparently proving that it wasn’t. He was a lie.

He was a lie.

That was it.

Nothing else.

She couldn’t explain exactly why — probably something to do with the mortification that refused to leave her with how often she was expected to be around him — but she was avoiding her parents. And maybe her mother had sent her, or maybe she had picked up on it on her own, but it was Red who caught up to her and — laughing off the scandalous looks people shot them (and making her laugh a little in the process) — pulled Emma onto the dance floor, using the excuse to talk in semi-privacy.

“You okay, sweetie?” she asked seriously.

“Yeah,” Emma replied, too fast. “I’m fine, why?”

“Don’t even try it,” Red said, giving her a slightly patronizing, but mostly concerned, look. “You’re walking around like a doll, not yourself at all. What’s wrong with the prince?”

“Nothing,” she answered in that same too-fast, completely unfooling voice. “He’s fine. You were right, he’s beautiful.”

Your children will be gorgeous.

It struck her like an arrow and she suddenly thought she might die, right there on the dance floor
with her godmother. “If you don’t want to talk about it, that’s all right,” she whispered, “but you look like you need to.”

“Did Mom send you?” she asked desperately, and Red just looked at her.

“No, she didn’t,” she replied, sounding a little offended. “I was watching you the whole ceremony, your parents were busy trying to take stock of the prince and writing up full personality profiles and judgments.” Emma almost smiled, shaking her head. “I don’t think they were impressed.”

“Why not?” she said hollowly, a little desperately. “What’s not to like?”

The song was coming to an end, and anyway Red knew when to stop asking questions, but she did lean forward to say, quietly, in her ear: “The code is ‘I miss having peaches for breakfast,’ and I know your dad said to send it to him, but he’s wrong. You send it to me and I’ll pay him a visit the next full moon, all right?”

She genuinely smiled at that, and as the song finished, gave her godmother a hug. “I don’t think I’ll need to, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

“You’d better,” she replied, hugging her tightly. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

Emma could only put it off for so long, and by dusk, she was standing in the hallway outside her room opposite him, trying to decide if it would be better to have this conversation here — where someone might (would) hear or stumble upon them — or in her room — where the awkwardness might kill her outright.

He was watching her with those piercing eyes, waiting for her to make the first move, and she realized, dimly, that he’d done that all night, wait for her to act and going along with whatever she said. Interesting, that traitor whispered.

She glanced around; there were guards at either end of the hallway, and… well, he’d have to be in her room anyway, for the show of things.

He followed her in, his fingers light on the small of her back, and for a second, she gave into the sensation and acknowledged the way her stomach flipped at his touch. She closed the door behind them and leaned against it.

“All right,” she said finally. “What’s this great explanation?” He opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off suddenly. “Actually, no, start with explaining to me how you weren’t lying to me.”

“Killian Jones is not my birth name,” he answered, like that meant anything, “but I’ve been using it for the better part of ten years and everyone who doesn’t live in a palace or a castle knows me by that one.”

“I live in a castle,” she snapped, “and was apparently engaged to you! I didn’t deserve to know the truth?”

“What would you have told me if you’d known?” he asked in exaggerated curiosity, and she glared. “How much would you have said about yourself?”
She wanted to lie and say she wouldn’t have been much different, but he didn’t give her the chance.

“And don’t even try to tell me you would’ve been honest,” he cut in caustically. “It would be a lie. You’d’ve said nothing.”

“So?” she spluttered, throwing her arms open wide. “Why did you need to know? This is just a — a political contract, it doesn’t — “

“You’d rather be married to a man you know nothing about?” he countered. “You’d rather be standing here wondering if this stranger was going to take what he’s supposedly owed tonight?” He paused, as she looked at him, uncertain, and his expression darkened. “If you believe for one second — ” he started coldly, and she shook her head.

“I don’t,” she said immediately, truthfully, but then the bitterness rose up in her, and with it, the desire to draw blood. “I — no, I don’t think Killian would, but you’re not Killian, are you, you’re Prince James.”

Finally, the tense propriety he’d maintained snapped, furious at her mistrust. “You think I would — I didn’t lie to you, Emma!” he spat, stepping forward in anger and freezing as she stepped back against the door again. “I am not going to hurt you,” he hissed in a low, incredulous voice. He closed his eyes and his jaw clenched as he regained control of himself. “And I didn’t lie. In fact, I was more honest with you last night than I have been today. D’you think I want to be king?”

Emma didn’t answer, shame already creeping up her neck but too proud to admit it.

“I hate it, I’ve hated it since I was old enough to think about it,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “So I started volunteering for any diplomatic mission to anywhere, so long as it got me out of that damn castle. I bought a ship,” he went on, shrugging. “I made up a fake name and I bought a ship and anytime I’d get the chance to leave, I’d take it and pick up a crew and make my own way wherever it was I was going.”

“And became a pirate in your spare time,” she said slowly, stepping forward, and then the venom came back out as that sunk in. “You’re a prince, you don’t need any of it, but you attack people and steal everything they have just for — for the fun of it?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ve never claimed to be a good man — ” he started, and she cut him off with a harsh laugh.

“And that makes it so much better?”

” — and,” he snapped sharply, “I don’t steal from my own people, and when I dissolve a crew I’ve picked up, they split everything between themselves. You’re right, I don’t need it,” he conceded, but without any real concession. “And you’re right,” he added in caustic brightness, “I do it because it’s fun — and you know you’d do the same if you had the chance. You and me, we’re a lot alike.”

She wanted to scream at him that he was wrong, but he wasn’t, and she couldn’t come up with a decent response; so, she redirected the subject. “So, what was the point?” she asked, voice shaking with either anger or hurt, and she didn’t want to examine which. “You hate it, you planned to leave it — you asked me to leave with you! Why did you come back, why did you — ” she tried to stop herself, but couldn’t. “I could’ve stayed, I could’ve been free,” she whispered (hurt). “You hypocrite,” she shouted, hitting him — hard — in the chest several times, trying not to cry. “You hate it as much as I do, but you locked me into it!”
His tenuous control snapped again and he shoved her against the door, grabbing her hands and pinning them to the wall on either side of her head, leaning in disconcertingly close. “I came back for you,” he whispered, in a way that suggested he might be thinking that was a mistake. “If I hadn’t returned, what would’ve happened then?” he hissed coldly. “What would’ve happened when your parents needed to make another alliance? D’you think he would give you any choice?”

In a flash, Emma understood, but the anger in his eyes and still poisoning her blood made her rise to it. “And you have?” she countered, seizing onto the only thing she might be able to refute at all.

“If you would let me!” he snapped, and finally shoved himself away from the wall, startling her. “Yes,” he shouted, “I hate it as much you do, but if I’m to be trapped in it — ” he cut himself off, clearly fighting to control himself again, and more or less succeeding ” — if I’m to be trapped in it, it will be on my terms, or not at all.”

“And what about — ” she started, but he cut in before she could finish her sentence and, in all likelihood, piss him off worse.

“You can be free,” he said, teeth clenched, and then opened his arms expansively. “I’m your husband now,” he explained, in false cheer, “which means I officially have the authority to say I have no authority over you.”

She froze against the wall, unwilling to jump to any conclusion about what he meant. “Something I probably wouldn’t get from another arranged marriage,” she supplied hesitantly, and he gave her an annoyed, incredulous shrug, like why the hell are you so mad at me for this?, a question she was beginning to ask herself, too.

“Yes,” he replied, tension falling from his shoulders and slowly calming down. “You don’t have to come with me,” he explained, and she couldn’t look him in the eyes. “And if you do, you can leave whenever you like, do whatever you like, because — ” he laughed a little ” — I can promise you, sweetheart, I’m not selling my ship.”

I’m not selling my ship, that traitor in her head repeated. You can do whatever you like.

Emma had never been any good at swallowing her pride, but the anger had faded and been replaced with horrid, crushing remorse, and now she had to come up with a way to apologize that hopefully didn’t involve admitting she’d been wrong.

“The reason I liked you is because you were independent and refused be shamed for it,” he said, like he almost regretted it. “I don’t believe such a rare woman should be caged.”

She stared hard at the floor several inches beside his feet; the past tense wasn’t lost on her. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, clutching her elbows, because it was all she could say.

“That’s nice,” he replied coldly, voice barely louder than hers.

Propriety, and the traditions held to political marriages, were a bitch.

He had offered to sleep on the floor, but that would have only made her feel worse, but he refused to let her sleep on the floor, which left them with only two options: either share the bed, or share the floor.

It probably said too much about each of them that they chose the floor.

For the first quarter of the night, anyway, until Emma finally had enough of laying cold stone
when there was a large, comfortable, warm bed right there. “Killian,” she hissed, because he just wasn’t a James to her, and because she knew he had to be awake too. “I think we’re being stupid.”

He didn’t respond for a moment, just long enough to make her think that maybe he was asleep after all, but then he sighed. “I have been more comfortable,” he grumbled, and she couldn’t stop herself from laughing and covering her face even though he wouldn’t have been able to see her even if there wasn’t a bed between them.

“It’s a big bed,” she sighed, standing up and crawling in. When he didn’t follow suit, she shifted to the other side and leaned over, glaring at him in the darkness. “Do you need a hand up?” she asked flatly, guessing that he would be too stubborn to move. She could barely see the glare he gave her as he relented and stood to get into the bed, but knew it was probably a mean one.

Emma curled up on the far edge from him, but still couldn’t sleep in spite of her bone-crushing exhaustion; the guilt was only getting worse as she lay (technically) next to him.

“I really am sorry,” she whispered, half-hoping he had already fallen asleep. “I just… panicked.”

He didn’t reply, but she wasn’t sure it had anything to do with sleep.

She had made the mistake of taking the eastern side of the bed, and when dawn came — brilliant and early — it woke her up and ignited one hell of a headache.

“Oh, gods, am I still hungover?” she muttered into her pillow, and was surprised to hear chuckling behind her; the memory of the previous night crashed over her suddenly, and she winced, face already burning hot. She’d lashed out at him, less out of anger than embarrassment and pent-up frustration with the whole arranged marriage in general, and now that she’d slept on it and calmed down, she could accept that this was — quite literally — the best possible way this situation could have worked out for her.

He’d made it the best possible way the situation could work out for her, and she’d attacked him for it.

“You said you could handle it,” he mumbled, maybe teasing or maybe mocking (depending on whether or not he was still angry), and in a voice low and hoarse enough to make her suppress a shiver.

“You may have noticed,” she replied flatly, “but I have a real problem with admitting defeat.”

“Oh, I’m aware,” he said. “Pride is most definitely your mortal sin.”

She almost denied it indignantly, but then realized that she would be proving his point if she did. “Yeah,” she answered, wincing. “I’ll admit that. What’s yours?” she asked instead, finally turning to look at him and finding, somewhat uncomfortably and somewhat consolingly, that he was watching her carefully. He took a while to respond, long enough for her to become disconcertingly aware that he — admittedly, like most men — slept without a shirt on.

“Wrath,” he admitted finally, and it took her a second to remember why he said it. “Followed closely by pride… and I believe lust and greed are not far behind.” He gave her a half-apologetic smile. “I can’t help it, I’m a man of many vices.”

“You’re in good company, then,” she replied, turning away from him again because she wasn’t sure she could keep up a conversation while he was looking like that and looking at her like that.
She couldn’t really explain why, but it had become a matter of, well, pride to her that she wouldn’t be the one to give in first, that she would at least maintain the show of being unaffected by him. Distantly, she thought that maybe he was aware, and maybe this was a form of punishment for the things she’d said yesterday.

Maybe their game was still going.

“Please, darling,” he said sardonically, and she could almost hear him rolling her eyes. “Compared with me, you’re the very definition of virtue.”

She snorted. “You have a seriously messed-up definition of virtue, then. I get nasty when I’m mad, and jump to conclusions — ” he snickered at that, and she winced ” — and I’m jealous, and lustful, and — “

“Really?” he challenged, cutting her off, and she caught her mistake seconds too late to draw it back in. “Lustful, are you?”

She hadn’t heard or felt him move — damn feather beds muffling everything — and jumped when his fingers ran lightly over her exposed arm, drawing goosebumps and making her tense in an attempt to avoid giving herself entirely away. “That isn’t what I meant,” she said, and was gratified to find that it sounded reasonably believable.

He should not be allowed.

“Sweetheart, you do know,” he whispered, perilously close, “don’t you: you can’t lie to a liar”

Yes, he was definitely taunting her: he knew she was too proud to give in at this point (although she was beginning to care less and less about winning their unstated game), and she had the sneaking suspicion that he’d push her into giving in to him and then walk away without even giving her a taste. Because he was as stubborn as she was about proving points, and wrath could take many forms.

“So you admit you’re a liar,” she replied, and her voice came out rougher than she’d like, fingers tightening in the pillow as his hand trailed up her arm and over her shoulder, and began tracing — with the lightest of touches, dear mother of all things holy, he wasn’t even fair — abstract shapes on the center of her back.

“As are you, my dear,” he countered, and this time she did feel him shift closer, breath hot on the side of her neck. “In fact, you’re lying right now.”

“I am lying in a bed, yes,” she snapped, too fast, too hoarse, trying much too hard. He laughed darkly, and his hand flattened on her back.

“Your heart is simply pounding, love,” he whispered, close enough that his stubble lightly scratched her earlobe. A shiver ran unwillingly down her spine, made worse as his fingers followed it to about halfway down her back; there was no way that winning this game could possibly be worth it.

But just as she was about to cave in and throw herself at him, a heavy knock came at the door, shattering the atmosphere, and he growled, rolling away, onto his back. “Yes?” he snapped irritably; Emma took the chance to collect the scattered pieces of her thoughts and try to decide if she was relieved or furious at the person knocking.

(Roughly equal concentration of both, she concluded. Pride: 1, Emma: 0, Killian: cheating.)

“It’s time to get up,” her father said, voice muffled by the wood, and she groaned into the pillow.
“You’ll miss the tide if you wait much longer.”

Emma jumped out of bed immediately, well aware of what would happen if she didn’t, and ignored the way his eyes followed her as she stubbornly stalked to the wardrobe and began pulling clothes out of it with perhaps too much gusto. “I’m up,” she called. “Be out in a minute.”

“Right,” Charming replied, hesitant and awkward and audibly uncomfortable. “I’ll just — Right.”

She laughed, and then made the near-terminal mistake of glancing back at the bed, where Killian was lounging — like he owned it — with arms open and resting on the headboard, watching her with particularly intense eyes. When she did glance at him, he shot her a devilish smirk and made a point of looking her over in that same mentally-tearing-her-clothes-off way he had when she’d first met him.

With more than a little difficulty, and just a shred of smug satisfaction, she rolled her eyes and walked into the powder room, locking the door behind her.

She didn’t see him when she stepped back into the bedroom, and for a moment, she thought he’d already left, but then she closed the door and he caught her wrist, pulling her back and around and pinning her to the wall like he had last night, arms pinned on either side of her head, but in an entirely different way.

He had been waiting behind the door. What a — what an ass!

His eyes gave him away, and it occurred to her suddenly that maybe she had won, maybe he was through playing — and thank all the gods for that if he was, that traitor in the back of her head whispered.

“What, exactly,” he hissed, thumb pressing into her palm, “do you want from me?”

Even if she’d had a good answer, she didn’t think she could come up with it right now; his hand was slowly crawling up to her own and the only thing she could focus on was the texture of it, callused and cool and strong. All she could do was stare into his eyes and open her mouth ineffectively to talk, and he took a step closer, raising her arms above her head as he did.

Off the top of her head, Emma knew at least three ways to get out of this hold if she desired — he’d left his entire torso exposed, he was more than close enough to headbutt, both of her legs were free to kick — and a tiny part of her wanted to make use of it, just because no one dominated her like this.

The rest of her was distracted by his mouth and his body heat and his hands and his eyes and — he could tell, he could see it, he was searching her face and probably finding what he wanted, but they were still both too damn stubborn to make the first move.

“I’m waiting,” he whispered, barely an inch from her face, and — and screw it, just screw it.

She closed the distance between them and kissed him, hard; his reaction was immediate and overwhelming, releasing her arms, sliding one hand around to the back of her head and the other around her waist, pulling her closer to him, and —

“Emma, really,” her father’s voice came from the other side of the door, accompanied by several sharp knocks. The back of her head hit the wall and Killian groaned into her shoulder.

“Damn that man’s timing,” he snapped, and Emma snickered, almost against her will.
“I think he does it on purpose.”

“I know he does it on purpose,” he muttered. “There’s plenty of time to catch the tide.”

“He thinks if you’re on time, you’re late,” she replied, and slipped away from Killian, determinedly not looking back at him even as she felt his eyes on her. “Dad,” she said, finally opening the door and looking her father in the eye. “It has not even been ten minutes, stop being impatient.”

“Oh,” Charming replied, and she could tell — from his tone and the look on his face and just logic, really — that he had, in fact, been trying to break up anything that might be happening in her room. “You’re… almost ready,” he muttered, redness steadily creeping up his neck, and she couldn’t help but laugh at him.

“What did you think I would look like?” she asked innocently, and he opened and closed his mouth several times before nodding.

“I’ll be, um. In the dining hall. Because breakfast. Is there.”

“That sounds lovely,” she said sweetly, and closed the door, still shaking her head and snickering.

But when she turned around, Killian was leaning against the wall, watching her with an odd expression, halfway between affection and bitterness. “You won’t come, will you?” he asked quietly, and she looked away, because she didn’t know what to say or do. She wanted him, but she really didn’t know him that well and she really didn’t want to leave everything behind for politics and a man she hardly knew but she wasn’t sure they’d be able to just pick up where they’d left off if she stayed and she’d always wonder if —

“Ask me later,” she whispered, and he nodded slowly.

He didn’t ask her later. She suspected he didn’t have to.

When she walked into her room after breakfast, a silver coin, old and worn and still sticky from alcohol, was sitting on the bureau.

*I’m not selling my ship.*

Her dress suddenly felt unbearably stifling.

She turned the coin over and over in her palm, not really seeing where she was going. Dad had been so relieved when she’d told him she would stay, at least for a while longer, until she was good and ready to go in her own time; Mom had watched her in a way that she wasn’t sure she’d liked.

She found herself standing at the main doors, staring at them blankly, and she started violently when someone placed a cloak over her shoulders.

“This used to be mine,” Snow said, smoothing out the wrinkles and coming around to look her in the face. “You’ll need it; winter comes on faster over there than it does here.”

“Mom, I said I’m not going yet,” she replied, laughing a little, and received her mother’s tried-and-true yeah, sure look. “I’m not!”
“Well,” her mother said, shrugging, “it’s chilly out there anyway, and I don’t think you actually
said goodbye. That’s hardly proper.” She led the way through the doors, arm linked with hers. “I
mean, he is technically your husband, and he seems decent. He deserves a goodbye at least, don’t
you think?”

Emma watched her mother carefully. “What do you know that I don’t?”

“How to manipulate Happy into talking,” her mother replied matter-of-factly, and she gasped,
offended and betrayed, but Snow shook her head. “I can’t believe I didn’t think to ask him
anything before now. It seems so obvious.”

“What did he tell you?” she asked slowly, and realized that they were taking a lot of shortcuts
through the city, bringing them to the harbor much faster than Emma would have if she’d been
alone.

“That you went out last night with the prince — a man you thought was a dashing stranger — and
came back as happy — and horribly drunk — as he’d ever seen you,” she answered, smiling both
apologetically and affectionately. “I’m impressed at how well you hid that hangover, by the way. I
think your father and I were the only ones who picked up on it.”

Emma laughed into her mother’s shoulder. “I thought I was gonna die,” she croaked weakly.
“I still have a headache.”

Snow laughed out loud. “You should’ve invited me,” she said petulantly. “I could show you how
it’s done.”

It wasn’t like she hadn’t gotten along with her mother — it was just that she’d never felt like they
had that much in common, and she’d always just been closer to her dad, ever since she could
remember. But right now, she was thinking that her mother understood her much better than she’d
ever given her credit for.

And just like that, they were at the harbor, and Emma pulled her mother’s cloak tighter around her
against the chill of the sea breeze and the sudden goosebumps that had risen at the sight of Killian
standing at the docks, arguing with someone dressed up entirely too fancy for his own good. “I’ll
be right back,” she said, and Snow looked at her.

“No, you won’t,” she replied, voice soft and tender. “I’ll tell them, don’t worry.” She paused for a
moment, taking Emma’s face in both hands, and then kissed her on the forehead. “I love you.”

“I’ll be right back,” she repeated.

“I am not having this discussion,” he was saying in a low voice as she walked up behind him,
feeling awkward as hell. “I don’t give a damn what your law books say.”

“But it isn’t — it isn’t proper, my lord,” the man replied quietly, in a tone that said he’d had this
argument a thousand times before, and lost every time.

Emma was robbed of her chance to take him by surprise when one of Killian’s crew — it turned
out to be Smee, that little bastard — whistled at her. “We was wondering when you’d show up!”
he cried. “Thought for a second we’d be leaving without you.”

Killian turned slowly to see her, but she couldn’t look right at him just yet. The silver coin was
digging into her palm.
I'm not selling my ship.

“You will be,” she replied, and was a little disappointed when his expression didn’t change. “I just have to talk to the captain for a second.”

“Well?” Killian asked, crossing his arms and raising an eyebrow, and Emma glanced to Fancy Pants behind him with a look that said everything she needed to say.

“Right,” the man muttered, turning and stalking off.

She opened her mouth to form the word goodbye, but what came out instead was, “Do you really form a new crew every time you take a trip? I thought they were supposed to be more… I dunno, permanent than that.”

He blinked. “That is what you came here to say,” he replied bluntly, incredulously, staring at her; she suppressed a wince, and when she didn’t say anything else, he shrugged in exasperation. “It’s mostly the same group,” he answered, a bit irritably. “They usually live quite comfortably between journeys and prefer to sail with me. The cut of the treasure is larger than among most other crews.”

“Right,” she said slowly, looking at the ship. “That makes sense.”

You can do whatever you like.

“Is that all?” he asked coolly. “Now we are on the clock, so if you’ve got no further questions…”

She met his eyes, and couldn’t come up with anything else except the rising to desire to distract him, waste his time, make him miss the tide so he’d be forced to stay just a little longer. What had she come here to say? “I… no, that’s all I had to ask.”

“Right,” he said, emotionless, and started to walk away.

Emma tried again to form the word goodbye, but instead: “I’ll come with you,” she called out, and he turned around again, face unreadable. Mentally, she cursed her mother for knowing her too damn well, but she couldn’t take the words back and honestly had no desire whatsoever to do so. “On one condition.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

Without thinking about it, she flicked the silver coin to him, and he — impressively — caught it, eyes flicking down to his hands and then back up to her. She smiled. “We take your ship.”

Killian gave her an almost fiendish grin. “And the scenic route, perhaps?”

“Oh, yeah, absolutely,” she replied matter-of-factly, smirking as she breezed past him, toward his ship. “I mean, what kind of ruler could I be if I’ve never seen how other cities and countries function? And besides,” she whispered, pausing at the gangplank, “I’m still a point behind you.”

“Two points, darling,” he countered, sliding a hand around her waist and guiding her onto the ship. “You never did explain to me how it was my fault that you didn’t think your bet through,” he explained, and then leaned in to whisper, “also, the number was fourteen. I almost didn’t catch the hair sticks.”

“I think you cheat,” she muttered, looking at him suspiciously, and he raised his eyebrows, smirking.
“Pirate,” he explained. “I believe that actually means you’re three points behind me, doesn’t it? You’ve got a lot of catching up to do, love.”

“Oh, believe me,” she replied, crossing her arms and glaring at him. “I will.”

End Notes

1. Why is his real name James? Why, James Hook, of course! That's actually my headcanon for him in general, that "Killian" is a fake name, and he was born James, to better fit with Peter Pan.
2. You know Charming would be the ultimate moment-ruiner. He also totally thinks he's doing her a favor, too.

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