**S3E12**

Summary: The townspeople of Storybrooke find themselves back in the Enchanted Forest. Emma tries to juggle her son, her relationship, and Neal's reappearance in her life.

– one year ago –

– The Enchanted Forest –

In the middle of a dense forest sat an old, rundown castle. Parts of the castle had been destroyed by fallen trees and violent storms and clearly no one cared enough to repair the damage. A single tower with a single window remained standing and overlooked the lush vegetation. The tower’s room was filled with old and mismatched furniture – a canopy bed with a chest at its foot, a wooden dresser with a tarnished mirror, and a chaise within arm’s reach of a bookshelf. On the chaise reclined a young, blond haired woman wearing a flowing white dress that looked like it was made of feathers. She stared blankly out the window at the surrounding landscape as she languidly turned the pages of the old book in her hands. The crinkling of the turning pages seemed to keep time.

There was a knock on the door, and the perpetrator gently pushed it wide. The door’s annoying creaking synced up with the turning of the pages, creating a small symphony of noises. An old and frail woman stood in the doorway one it cleared. Her clothes appeared to be as worn and ragged as she was, unlike the elegant tray in her hands. The tray held a teapot accompanied by two teacups and some pastries. The fine china looked like it should be in hidden away in a dragon’s lair instead of gracing such a place with its presence.

“Would you like some tea, dear?” the white-haired woman crooned in a thick Irish accent.

“Perhaps in a little bit. Thank you,” the younger woman responded listlessly in a Russian accent. The elder woman moved to place the tray on the ancient chest. Suddenly, lightning struck, and thunder clapped. Dark purple storm clouds rolled across the horizon in all directions. The wind howled through the room, and the young woman rose from her chair, not noticing the book fall from her hands and drop onto the floor with a <i>*thunk*</i>. As she stood at the window, her dress billowed around her, and she looked like a bird about to take flight.

“Bridget, tell my father they’ve returned,” she commanded, fear and anger tingeing her voice. The old woman nodded and hurriedly hobbled out the room while the other tried to gauge the distance to the storm. She gripped the window’s ledge, cracking the ancient stone beneath her hands.

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Snow White opened her eyes and found herself standing in an unfamiliar clearing. A gentle breeze gave her a chill, and she realized she was wearing a baggy white dress and a robe. It was the clothes she was wearing right before the curse swept everyone away to a far-off land. She continued looking around in an attempt to put a place to her surroundings but came up short. She had no idea where they were. Fortunately, she noted, most of the Storybrooke folk had arrived in the same clearing. Grumpy and Jiminy Cricket were working together dispatching small groups to find the everyone else. She turned to her other side and came face to face with her husband, David/Charming. He wore bloody and torn clothes, which forced a memory to the forefront of her mind that she tried to ignore.

“Where are we?” she asked him.

“Beats me,” he shrugged.

“We’re by my hometown,” Neal said calmly. Surprised, they both looked at him. Neither of them had noticed his approach. He still wore the clothes he had in Storybrooke and seemed unfazed by the sudden transition between realms, not to mention the loss of his father, his son, his… whatever Emma was to him. “That tree in the middle of the clearing–,” he pointed, “–was where I fell down a portal into the Land Without Magic. I guess it seems only fitting to come back where this all started.”

“So there’s a town nearby?” Charming confirmed.

“More of a village than a town, but yeah. Just a short hike that way.” Neal pointed in another direction.

“Then we can send a group over to collect supplies and horses,” Snow said.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll go with you,” Neal offered. Charming nodded, both thanking him and accepting his help. The pair worked together to determine what was needed and who should go with them. More townspeople approached the royals, seeking out their leaders like moths to a flame.

“And what of our things? I can’t very well pirate without a ship,” another voice huffed: Captain Hook, still dressed in his gaudy black leather as usual.

“You’re not concerned about your crew?” Snow said bitterly. Some of them had lost things more important than the material.

“A crew can be replaced. A ship like that comes around once in a lifetime,” Hook said proudly. Smee nodded in agreement from behind his captain.

“All our possessions will arrive in due time,” Regina said. She walked towards them stiffly with Belle at her side. It had been so long since anyone saw her dressed as the Evil Queen that they were all taken aback. Her eyes were red, as if she had been crying, but her face was stony. No one dared say anything to upset her. Belle also had puffy eyes, but her face was gentle. She wore a blue dress with a green and flowery cape and hood. While she seemed more vulnerable and easy to comfort, no one spoke to her for a different reason. How does one speak to someone mourning the loss of the Dark One?

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Neal walked alone towards the port town. The sun was setting through the treetops and he quickened his pace – there was still a long way to go before he arrived. As the last rays of light began to fade from the treetops, he heard horse’s hooves approaching from behind. He moved to the side of the road and a wagon passed him and slowed. He cautiously approached the front of the wagon and saw a young blonde-haired woman waiting for him in the driver’s seat. She looked like Emma but seemed younger and radiated an innocent aura that Emma would never have with all the hardships she had faced.

“If you’re on your way to the port, we can travel together,” she said to him in a thick Russian accent. “It’s still a long way to the town and there’s rumor of bandits about.” Neal gave the woman and her transport a cursory glance. She was wearing a feathery white dress and sat tall and proud. Her wagon was old and worn but clearly well taken care of along with the single brown horse.

“How do I know you’re not a bandit?” he asked her.

“How do I know you’re not a bandit?” she parroted with an amused grin. Neal couldn’t help but smile back at her. She motioned to the sword on his hip. “A gesture of goodwill then. Your sword looks quite old. I will enchant it so that it never dulls nor rusts nor breaks as long as it is in your possession.”

“All magic comes with a price. What’s your price?” He frowned. He was unwilling to accept the offer. He didn’t like magic.

“Keep me company on this journey. Or you could walk the woods alone with that sorry excuse for a weapon and risk being attacked by bandits.” She waited for him to respond. He calculated his odds. She was right, of course: the sword was in desperate need of repairs. He was only using it for show. As if reading his mind, she spoke again, “Light fades. There’s no inns between here and the town. And you won’t get there till noon tomorrow if you don’t accept my offer, assuming you can walk all night in your state.”

“In that case, I guess I’ll have to accept.” His acquiesce earned him a joyful smile. He unsheathed the sword and handed it to her. After accepting it from him, she took a small vial out of her sleeve with a glowing red liquid. She allowed a single drop to fall on the blade and it shimmered in the same red color then faded back to normal. She returned the blade to him and he climbed up the wagon next to her after returning the blade to its scabbard. Once he was settled, she clicked her tongue at the horses and snapped the reins and they were off.

After a few moments of silence, she spoke again: “My name is Odile.” He responded with his own name. More awkward silence passed.

“You don’t like magic, do you?” she said.

“I’ve seen what it can do to people,” he responded bitterly, thinking of his father, and even his grandfather.

“Not all magic is bad, you know,” Odile said quietly.

“Oh? So you use light magic?” Neal was intrigued now, but still wary. Even light magic could be dangerous.

“No,” she smiled kindly.

“Then you use dark magic,” he stated as if it was a fact.

“I use both.” The sound of the horse’s hooves punctuated the silence. “But there is a neutral magic.” She eyed him mischieveously and waited for him to ask.

“Like what?” he gave in, curiousity getting the better of him.

“Like the enchantment on your sword, a fire that never extinguishes, a well that never runs dry, or an instant boil kettle. This magic isn’t tied to emotions or intent. It just exists. It’s natural form, like magic beans, are some of the rarest kinds of magic.”

“Magic beans? The ones that allow you to travel between realms?”

“Yes. They don’t exist to create portals. They just are. It’s the user’s emotions and intent that create the portal and determine the location. If they had never been discovered, they would just be beans.”

“I never thought of magic that way…”

“You have a lot to learn.”

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– one year later –

– New York City –

Emma walked down the hallway to her apartment and searched her purse for her keys. Finally finding them, she unlocked the door and the sounds of lasers shooting and ships crashing emanating the TV greeted her. She knew she shouldn't have bought him that new game.

"Henry, did you finish your homework?" she inquired as she shuffled through the mail on the counter.

"It's the weekend, Mom. Just a little break. Please? Plus, I've almost finished this mission." Henry's begging made her smile.

"Fine, but I want proof of at least one finished homework assignment when I come tonight. Give me two, and I'll take you out tomorrow," she acquiesced. Her hands stopped when she saw a plain envelope with only her name written on it.

“Deal,” he agreed. “Oh, yeah, there was a letter for you in the door when I got home.”

“Who’s it from?”

“Dunno, there’s no return address. Left it on the counter with the rest of the mail.” He then groaned in time with the game over noises.

"Thanks, Henry. I see it." She'd recognize that handwriting anywhere: Neal.

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Emma rushed to the restaurant. It was her three-month anniversary date, and she was running late. While Neal’s letter – still unopened and stashed in her purse – had thrown her off kilter, she was running late because the bastard she was tailing noticed her and gave chase. She caught him in the end but was made late in the process. As she approached the doors, she slowed down and caught her breath. She double checked her hair (still hairspray perfect), her dress (red and hot), her makeup (intact) one last time, then walked into the restaurant as if she owned the place.

Her date was sitting at their usual table: a u-shaped booth by the kitchen. He was making small talk with one of the servers – a sweet girl named Hannah, who was trying to put herself through college – and, when he noticed her, gave her a dazzling smile that made her weak in the knees. She could tell he was struggling with the ill-fitted suit. The jacket didn’t fit quite right on his broad shoulders, and the sleeves could barely contain his arms. The man was built for a different time and place: horseback riding and hunting, not being stuck in an office cube all day. As the server was called away to wait upon another table, Emma slid into the vacant seat next to her date.

“Derek.” She smiled warmly at him as she placed the napkin across her lap.

“Miss Swan,” he said politely, taking her hand and laying a kiss across her knuckles. “Thank you, for gracing us with your presence.”

“Certainly. I captured the rogue, so it seems only fair I indulge myself.”

“Does that mean I have your attention all to myself tonight, Princess?”

“Of course,” she allowed herself to chuckle and pecked him on the cheek.

“Then, let’s eat.” They ordered their food, and the dishes came out one by one to their liking.

“So, Henry’s science fair went well?” Derek asked her as they ate.

“Yeah, he was one of the few students who didn’t do a baking soda volcano,” she gushed. “The teachers were impressed with the map of the migration patterns you guys made. Thanks so much for your help. I didn’t know you knew so much about birds.”

“Well I would have been an ornithologist if I could afford it, but I have to pay the bills somehow, so it’s just a hobby. Though swans are my specialty,” he winked at her. Emma rolled her eyes. She knew he was being truthful, but he was also being ridiculously corny.

Finally, dessert came. It was a small chocolate cake with golden flakes and perfectly sized for sharing between two.

“What’s this?” Emma pointed at the flickering candle sticking out of the cake. It was only a little bit out of place in the decadent icing.

“Happy three months. Make a wish,” Derek smiled at her.

“You know, I’m pretty sure only birthdays require candles and wishes,” she teased him, even though one was already forming in her mind.

“Come on, humor me.”

“Alright, alright.” She closed her eyes and blew out the candle. Her wish made her feel a little silly, but it was all she could think of: <i> I wish for true love. </i> When Emma opened her eyes, she looked at Derek. He held out an open ring box to her, with a pearl ring nestled snugly inside.

“Emma Swan, will you marry me?”

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Emma all but sprinted out of the restaurant and walked briskly to the main street. She tried to hail a cab but to no avail. She hurriedly fished around in her purse for her phone, determined to call an Uber, but Neal’s stupid letter kept getting in her way. She heard Derek calling for her and his heavy footfalls as he tried to catch up with her and she grew more frantic.

“Emma, wait, listen,” he huffed as he finally reached her and put a hand on her shoulder. She turned to face him and pushed him away from her.

“Listen to how you think we’re right for each other?” she berated him. “We’ve known each other for <i>three</i> months, Neal, <i>three! </i>”

“Neal?” He looked at her quizzically. Emma paused before realizing her mistake.

“Oh my God, Derek, I’m so sorry-”

“No, no, it’s ok,” he released a small chuckle. “I thought this was going to be about me and how you thought we weren’t right for each other. I’m relieved it’s just about your ex.”

“I mean, it is kinda about how we might not be right for each other,” she stated, still a bit irritated. “Three months is not a lot of time to get to know someone. I haven’t even met your family or anything like that.”

“That’s all true. I just wanted to put it out there that I’m serious, that marriage is definitely on the table for me. We don’t have to get married anytime soon. And if it bothers you that much, we can go meet my family. I was actually thinking of visiting them this weekend or next and you and Henry are welcome to join me.” Derek wrapped shed his suit jacket and placed it on her shoulders, noticing the slight chill in the air.

“I’d like that,” she said with a half-smile as she pulled the jacket tighter around her.

“Good, me, too,” he pecked her on the forehead. “Now, let me take you home. And before you panic, yes I did pay the bill and I left Hannah a nice tip.”

“Thank you,” she smiled warmly at him. “And thank you, for understanding.”

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