**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. A single tower with a single window remained standing and overlooked the lush vegetation. The tower’s room was filled modest furniture – a canopy bed with a chest at its foot, a wooden dresser with a tarnished mirror, and a chaise in front 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. 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 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. “Oh, Rumple, why did you come back?”

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Snow White opened her eyes and found herself 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 – no, 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. “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,” Snow said.

“Yeah, sure, but we might want to stick around here for a bit. Regina said that the rest of our stuff should be coming, too, and some might end up around here,” Neal added.

– 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, her dress, her makeup 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 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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