Chase

by MGstars

Summary

Regina is married to Leopold, and decides to run away. Robin is a very skilled hunter, and Leopold hires him to kill her. What happens when the heartless assassin discovers the goodness of the woman he has to kill, and falls in his own trap? Set during the first years of her marriage, when Regina is learning magic, before she turns dark. Warnings in the A/N.

Notes

Hello everyone. In the light of the recent events hitting the OQ writers community, I've decided, for personal reasons, to also start posting my work here.

For those who haven't already read this story on fanfiction.net, here's some enlightnings :

This story comes from a prompt on twitter : In which young Regina escapes from the palace and the King hires Robin to find her and kill her.

So logically, especially for those who know me, this story won't really be made of rainbows and unicorns. It's going to be hard, it's going to be tough, it's going to talk about sore subjects, and I'm going to go through it no matter what. Read the A/N each time, there will be warnings regularly depending on the content of the chapters.

Also, this story is about Dark Robin. So there is going to be some aspects of him we of course never saw on the show.

As for this prologue... Well, we start with a Warning about mentions of abuse. Remember,
Regina is married to Leopold, and we're hearing her thoughts about the situation.

Please, do not hesitate to share your thoughts with me.
She closes her eyes, but a tear slips free.

She can't bear any more of this. She can't keep pretending. All the lies, the false smiles, the suppressed anger... It's too much, and it's killing her.

She turns her head to the side, but winces and looks up to the ceiling again. It smells like him. His smell is impregnated in the pillow, even though he left her bed a good half hour ago.

Her husband. King Leopold. A man respected by his people, adored by his daughter, and hated by his wife.

Regina gets up. She needs to scrub her skin, to rid herself of his scent, his sloppy kisses, rough hands and most of all, his seed. God, she can't stand the thought of getting pregnant with his child. It's not that she doesn't want to have a child, but she refuses to be bound to that man more than she already is by their wedding vows.

Walking towards the large tub in a corner of her bedroom, she grabs the bucket meant to pour water into it, and heads to the water supplier in the adjacent room. She won't ask for servants to help. She needs some time to herself, not to be watched over as she removes her clothes and slips into the warm water. She wants some privacy, and forget for a second that she is the Queen of a kingdom she loathes, the stepmother of a daughter who ruined her life, the wife of a man who only remembers her when his needs have to be satisfied. She needs to forget that she's nothing more but a pretty tool others can enjoy, to her greatest despair.

Sinking into water, she exhales softly. This is better. It's not nearly enough to have her feeling free, but it helps a little. Her head is falling to the side, and she looks over the large window, out there, to the immensity of the world. A world she cannot reach.

If only she could leave.

If only she could be free.

And as she stares ahead, unable to look away, unable to rid herself of this thought, a new resolution settles in her mind.

It's dangerous, it's impossible, it could have her killed or thrown into a dungeon, but if she can make it, it could be worthy. If she succeeds, she could finally have that freedom she has always craved for.

When she steps out of the bath almost an hour later, she's determined.

She's going to escape this castle. Soon.

She's going to escape at the first opportunity, and she will disappear, away from this life she hasn't chosen, away from this prison, this shame, this torture.

When the chance is here, within her reach, she will take it, use it, and no one is going to stop her this time.

She's resolute.

She's going to leave this place, and free herself from this unwanted marriage, this surrogate of a
Robin Locksley has never been fond of human touch.

Abandoned by his parents during his young years as a teenager, he learned quickly that life doesn't give you gifts, and that if you want something, you have to take it yourself.

So after a few months trying to steal food and being beaten every other day by older kids from the streets or merchants who caught him red-handed, he decided to learn. He joined a group of mercenaries, and they taught him how to defend himself. He learned how to fight, how to use a bow, a sword, a knife, and how to transform any single object within reach into a murder weapon.

After almost a decade by their side, he became the most fearless and effective soldier of the horde. But again, he's more of a loner, and life in a group can be rewarding but also suffocating. So he bid his goodbye to his friends, and left for a new life, a solitary one, made of travels and contracts. In less than two years, he came to be known as the most effective killer of the Enchanted Forest.

When you hire him, you can be certain that the contract will be fulfilled. When you hire him to kill someone, you can be sure that he's going to bring you the target's body, most of the time still warm. No one truly knows who he is, what he looks like, what his real name is, beside the ones who paid for his skills, and none of them is bold enough to take the risk of reveling his name and face to anyone. All they know, is that to call for his services, a raven has to be sent north, in direction of the border of the kingdom, where the night ends and the sun rises. A description only the birds can understand, and that no human can find. An assurance for his safety. The answer usually comes within a couple of days, with the same raven, offering a meeting, this time in person. That's when things get settled.

Robin doesn't take any pleasure in this, he's not murdering people to answer some primal needs, at least none that he was born to. But it is the only life he knows, the only thing he's good at, and it earns him good money.

And if his new client really is who he pretends to be, then this meeting could be his most rewarding job.

He enters the room quietly, keeps his cloak on, and waits. The door he's facing soon opens, a man enters, and then closes.

"Are you alone?" Robin asks.

"As planned." The man confirms.

"Who is the target?"

The man steps forward, coming into the light, and Robin suppresses a gasp.

This is true. This man really is who he said he was. This is going to be interesting…

"My wife." He says, holding a painting out to Robin.

He takes it, looks at it, and for a second his heart stops. She is the most beautiful creature he's ever seen. Long, lightly curled dark hair, thin features, beautiful brown eyes holding too much fierce for a girl that young. Too young to be married to a man this old…
But he shakes the thought away. She is a mission, and nothing more. However, he can't help but ask, to tingle the other man perhaps, and take some pleasure in this.

"You mean the Queen?"

Robin hears the man stiffen, his whole body tensing, suddenly on his guard.

"Yes."

"May I know why?"

"You're asking too many questions,"

"I need information to do my job properly." Robin answers in a perfectly steady and neutral voice.

The King seems to hesitate, but after a handful of seconds, relents "She's betrayed me. I can't trust her anymore, and I don't want her to be a threat to me or my daughter."

"Where can I find her?"

"That's the tricky part. She escaped the castle while I was traveling through the Kingdom. I sent people after her, but no one managed to find her until now. I don't know where she is."

Robin winces, but it's just an act. Secretly, he's satisfied. A hunt is so much more rewarding than an arrow fired through a window….

"That changes the terms of the contract. It's more expensive."

"Money won't be a problem. Do what you have to do, take all the time you need, weeks, months if you want, and then bring me her dead body. How you do it is nothing of my concern."

"Very well."

"Be careful though. She has magic."

"That won't be an issue. You will receive messages to keep you aware of my progress, and give you the location to retrieve the body."

Robin turns his back on him, almost makes it to the exit, but something makes him stop, look back at the other man. He shouldn't. He usually doesn't. But right now, something is pushing him to ask "What's her name?"

The King's eyes open wide, a puzzled and suspicious look directed at him "I beg your pardon?"

"What's her name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"I have my reasons."

The King lets out a breath, and then reveals "Regina. Her name is, Regina."
Chapter 1

She made it!

She escaped!

She's been on the run for weeks, knows her husband has sent troops after her, but so far she has managed to avoid them. She almost got caught several times though, not counting when she stole some bread from a merchant in a village and the man nearly saw her. Life out there is dangerous, she can see the looks of men roaming over her, can feel her stomach twist with hunger, is well aware that the thin cloak and dress she took from a servant so she has the aspect of a nobody won't keep her warm enough to survive the whole winter, especially if she can't find a place to stay and settle in a permanent way—something that can be difficult when the King is looking for you hastily. She hasn't eaten a full meal since she left, drank the last drop of water from her gourd this morning, hasn't met any river or well in days. During the night, she finds herself unable to close her eyes more than a couple of hours, startles at every noise, every breeze, shivers from the coldness of the forest.

Regina knows this isn't life, this isn't as comfortable as what she lived as Queen, not nearly close, but no matter how difficult this is, at least she doesn't have to stand Snow White's endless and annoying talks and Leopold's dirty touch. She hates this helpless feeling, the fact that all the lessons her mother forced her to take never taught her how to hunt, how to use the forest's resources, how to do things by herself. Being raised as a princess teaches you nothing about what real life is made of. Being Queen is even worse. Servants were always breathing down her neck, almost to the point of holding her fork and putting food into her mouth. Thankfully, with Daniel, during the small time they've had together, she got a bit acquainted with the forest, but not that much. Not enough. She wouldn't go back to Leopold's castle, not for anything, but she wishes she had more time to learn how to handle doing things by herself, how to be alone. Now, she has to learn the hard way. But at least, she has a goal. She knows exactly where she's going. The hardest part is to reach it.

But that's what helps her going. Despite her hunger, her thirst, the tiredness growing in her, despite her sometimes wobbly state and dizzy head, she doesn't give up. Her determination to flee from this kingdom gives her the strength to overcome the loneliness and fear, her hope to finally have the life she has always wanted allows her to keep going for hours even when she can feel the stirring screams of her body begging her for some rest.

Iron will, they say…

She could use her magic, the little she knows, but she has a gut feeling that magic isn't a common ability among the people, and it would send her straight to a pyre. Also, her former teacher, the imp with a green sparkling skin, the great sorcerer named Rumpelstiltskin, could use it to find her. Not that she has doubts about his ability to track her. She's even wondering why he hasn't come to her yet. She figures he can't be happy to have lost his student. Although she feels like she annoyed him more than she pleased him.

Whatever!

What is done, is done, and she won't go back, ever.

So every day, Regina walks through the forest in direction of the next town, whatever that town is.
Every day, she walks from the moment she wakes up until the night has fallen and she can't see anymore. She only stops on her path to get some food, some water, to bathe sometimes.

With her current situation, and because she knows her husband's gold can be traced and lead his men to her -the main reason why she left without taking one cent, other than the fact that she loathes everything that could remind her of that disgusting man, she has no other choice but to feed from what she finds in the forest, and thefts. So logically, she hasn't eaten much since she escaped.

And maybe that's about to change…

Looking up, she notices something familiar, a specific tree she could recognize among a thousand.

An apple tree.

And the fruits seem to be asking for her to eat them.

Smiling, she walks closer, speeding up even, the fruity scent of the wood surrounding her, and she sighs in contentment.

Grabbing the closest fruit from her, she wipes its surface a little, making sure it isn't rotten, but the aspect is perfect.

She doesn't even think before biting eagerly in it, closing her eyes at the soothing feeling of sugar and juice invading her mouth, taking her time with each bite, knowing that chewing will help her feel fuller than she actually is.

And then it hits her.

An apple tree, in the middle of a forest mostly made of pinecones.

So she looks around, realizes that she's actually at the edge of a meadow, of a place drown under sun rays, and her smile grows wider as she takes a few steps forward, letting the warmth caress her face, thaw her cold body, bringing her some energy as she exhales softly.

She remembers reading about this place. It's the first stop she planned to make on her way to her destination. The only apple tree in the wildness of the Enchanted Forest. A tree so unique it's given magical property by the villagers, and is used to make wishes, although no one until now has ever seen any granted.

She turns around, and sits against the trunk. She finishes her apple, gets up to take another one, and another, and when she feels like her stomach is full, she allows herself a moment to rest. Here, in this place, she feels safe. Thinking of the apple tree where she was always secretly meeting Daniel in her old house, she relaxes, and closes her eyes.

xxx

Robin throws his bag on the floor, sits on a log.

Nine days.

He's been looking for her for nine days, and he can feel that the search is about to end. Her traces are fresher with each passing day, even though he can tell she's walking long distances everyday, barely stops to rest, almost never takes a break.

He wipes his forehead, licks his lips, the salty taste of his sweat lingering on his tongue.
Reaching for his back pocket, he unfolds a paper he regularly looks at. A picture. A drawing. A drawing of her.

The painting of her face he made with the memory of the portrait the King showed him. It isn't as accurate as what he remembers, he hasn't managed to capture the sparkle in her eyes, but he for sure has reproduced the beauty of her face.

Drawing isn't something he was taught, it is a gift he always had without really working on it. For years, he ignored it, never paid attention, spent so much time with his companions that there wasn't much room left for personal moments. But loneliness has rendered him a bit nostalgic, and whenever he has time, he scratches the face of someone he met, someone he remembers, one of his old friends, a child, an old beggar, a merchant.

A target…

Truth be told, he never drew the face of his victims before, but this time, he ignores why, he can't get this one out of his mind. Since the moment he discovered what she looked like, since the very second he laid eyes on her picture, something altered in him. He doesn't know what it is. He doesn't know what it means. All he knows, is that she's haunting his dreams.

But it is a mistake.

Whatever is changing in him, he is the most famous hunter in all the land, the most fearful killer, with a reputation that spread through all the kingdoms. He can't look away from his mission.

So he creases the paper, and throws it over his shoulder.

No emotion.

No second thought.

No doubts.

No hesitation.

Only a job that has to be done.

xxx

It's been days since Regina crossed a village, and she's been surrounded by the forest since.

Loneliness begins to weight on her, the fact that she walks through places without being able to create connections, barely exchanging a few words from time to time, trying her hardest to be invisible, hiding her face under her hood so no one sees her, no one notices her. It weighs on her, but she doesn't have a choice. She has to become one face among the others, someone no one really pays attention to, and until now she's succeeding.

But last time, as she managed to get some water from a well to fill her gourd, without many problems for once, she got to exchange a few words with a group of women. It was nothing much, just greetings and thanks, a small gesture of the hand, but if it warmed her heart, it also made Regina realize that she was missing the companionship of someone far more than she thought she was.

Also, the hunger is getting at her again… After she left the meadow, she took some apples with her to last a few days, until she could find more food, could reach another stop, move a little further on the road. Unfortunately, she finished the last fruit three days ago, and even if she managed to find
water at the village, she wasn't that lucky with food. It's hard, it's painful, it makes her weak and dizzy, but as always, she fights it with everything she has.

Regina sighs, shakes her head, continues her long walk in the forest, so focused on where she puts her feet that it takes her a moment to notice that the sun is low in the sky, darkness beginning to surround her, and she pauses, looks around, tries to find a good place to stop for the night. Not that she will sleep much, she's still not used to the forest life, and jumps at every sound. But she usually manages to get some rest, to gather enough strength to keep going the next day, feeding her resolution with the remnant of memories of the life she escaped and never wants to go back to.

At first, she wanted to forget. She wanted to forget everything they did to her, what they took from her. For Snow, her chance at happiness. For Leopold, her innocence, her freedom. But now, struggling to survive, alone in the big wide world, she refuses to forget. She refuses to forget, because if she does, if she doesn't remember why she left in the first place, she will never find the strength to keep going. And considering how long the path is going to be, how many ordeals she will have to face, better have something to fuel her motivation.

Spotting a soft spot at the bottom of a large tree, she unwraps her cloak, spreads it on the ground, and lies down, a hand over her rumbling stomach, curling up in a ball.

The night will be long. Despite her exhaustion, sleep won't pull her under before hours, but Regina breathes in relief. The ground might be hard, uncomfortable, the situation complicated, the dangers numerous and surrounding her (she ignores how she managed to avoid them until now, but she's grateful), but she won't go back to that crystal palace secretly made of spines, falsely reassuring from outside, but carrying in its core her worst nightmares. She won't, and she's ready to do whatever is necessary to stay as far away from that living hell as possible.

Robin releases the bush he's hiding behind, steps back. This is perfect! He found her days ago, as she was retrieving water in a small village miles away from where they now are, and he's been following her in secrecy ever since, waiting patiently for the right moment. Waiting to make contact.

It didn't take him long to find her, she is a royal lost in a forest and he is a well acquainted hunter after all. During the time he spent tracking, and then observing her, Robin took a decision. A dangerous one. Seeing her there, all alone, so small, so fragile, so young –so beautiful-, he couldn't bring himself to simply fire an arrow and end her.

No.

Because from afar, with her long wavy hair as dark as coal, her thin features and determined brown eyes, the apparent fierce hiding a fragile young woman underneath, he needs to know more. He needs to know more about the reason why the King has paid for her execution.

Robin usually doesn't question his clients' motivation, usually doesn't care about anything else but the money he receives for doing his job. But with her, with this Regina, who seems to be ignoring everything about real life, and yet managed to survive on her own several weeks, there's something different.

Maybe it's her evident beauty –he would be a fool if he didn't acknowledge this fact. Maybe it's because seeing her struggling in an unknown world amuses him. Maybe it's because she doesn't appear to be a threat to anyone, if so looks more like a potential victim. Maybe it's something else, a primal need to play a game he sometimes feels, one that was triggered by his long years as a mercenary.
Maybe he just enjoys the hunt too much. Or his soul is so dark he can't help but have some fun with his targets.

Whatever the reason, he decided that she won't be just one of those people he kills ruthlessly without any consideration. No. With her, he wants to make things last. He wants to have some fun first. There is nothing better than earning someone's trust, and then crushing it.

So he turns around, and gets everything ready.

He lights up a fire, sprawls a thick blanket on the floor, and then removes the food from his satchel. It's meat, something that fills your belly and is easy to cook when you have nothing but your knife and a fire. The smell will for sure reach her... And that's exactly what he wants. He has a gut feeling that she won't show up while he's awake, that she might try to sneak and steal from him, and it's exactly what he expects. He wants her to see him, to notice all the food, the water, the fire, the several blankets. Everything she lacks right now. Everything she needs.

For the next half hour, he eats in silence, trying to refrain a smirk because he knows she's there, he knows she's seen him, is watching him, waiting for him to fall asleep. But he wants to take his time, so he makes his dinner last, and then slowly cleans up the place, before lying down on his blanket, rolling up a shirt so he can use it as a pillow, the bag containing all his stuff within his reach, the food and water placed on top of it, of course. It may bring animals close, but unlike Regina most of them will be deterred by the fire, and it's not as if he is planning to sleep anyway.

So he closes his eyes, and waits.

xxx

Regina holds her breath, pushes the leaves away again, stares at him, focusing on his closed eyes, his slow breathing, his stillness.

She's watched that man eat, and she prayed all along that the way her stomach was twisting with hunger and loudly rumbling couldn't be heard from where he was sitting. When she saw him fall asleep, Regina sighed in relief.

She doesn't like to steal, she doesn't want to, she's not overly thrilled with the idea of taking from others, but she has no choice now. If she wants to survive, this is the only option. She already did it a few times actually.

Carefully, attempting to avoid making any noise, Regina sidesteps the bush and tree she's hiding behind, moves closer to the man, heading towards his bag. It's close to him, so she doesn't have a lot of room, has to really pay attention so he won't hear anything.

With delicacy, she undoes the nod tying up everything together, catches the package as one side falls open, preventing its content from crumbling on the ground. She only realizes she's not breathing when the need for air becomes urgent, and she inhales as quietly as she can, glances at the man with anxiety, relieved to see him still sound asleep.

Regina looks inside the bag, spots what she supposes is what's left of his meal, her hand spontaneously moving forward, closing her fingers over it and-

"What are you doing?"

Regina jumps back, heart racing, eyes wide with fear, trying to run away but fingers have closed over her wrist, holding her tight. She meets the man's blue eyes, his suspicious gaze, scowling mouth.
"I…" she begins, at a loss for words "I just-

"You were trying to steal from me!" he accuses, pulling at her wrist, almost making her fall when he moves from his lying position on the ground to his knees and faces her fully as she's still crouching in front of him.

"No!" Regina attempts "No, I wasn't! I-

"Really? I catch you red-handed and you're gonna pretend you weren't robbing me?"

Regina looks down, defeated. She's screwed, she thinks. There is no way out of this situation, and maybe this man will be indulgent if she just admits the truth.

"I was." Glancing up, she adds "Trying to rob you. I only wanted to take a bit of food, I haven't eaten in a while. I'm sorry, please let me go! I swear I'll leave you alone!"

Robin looks at her, internally smirking.

This is perfect! She's scared to death, desperate, and now the act can begin. He keeps his voice neutral. "I should take you to the sheriff."

The panic invading Regina's eyes is a true delight, and she reacts exactly the way he was expecting.

"No! No, please! I- I-" she stutters "I won't do it again! I swear!" She's still trying to escape his grip, but he holds her firmly.

"How can I be sure?"

"I give you my word!!"

"Your word means nothing to me. You're a thief." He spits.

"I just wanted something to eat. I didn't mean to do you any harm." And then "Please! Don't take me to the sheriff!"

"Give me one good reason not to."

"I-" She hesitates, but in her demeanor, Robin knows exactly where this is going. He knows this desperate state, the fearful eyes, trembling body, the terror that make people so fragile you can control and lead them where you want without them realizing. "I… Maybe I can do something for you?"

Robin internally smiles. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Wash your stuff, or-"

"Giving the state you're in," Robin points, glancing at her dress, ripped and covered with mud, "I'm not really sure that you know what 'wash' means."

Regina gives a sheepish look to her aspect, has to admit that he isn't wrong, she does look like a mess.

"Well…" She thinks, but she can't come up with one single thing to offer. She has nothing, no money, no jewelry, no food. So maybe he can figure out what he needs better than she will. "Tell me what you want. Maybe there's something I can do to make it up to you."
"You don't want to make it up to me, you just don't want me to turn you in." Robin states flatly.

Regina shakily exhales, a bit calmer now that they are talking, but still frightened by the thought of the sheriff's cell, of her husband showing up while she's stuck behind bars and powerless to escape. "Yes, but… I regret it, I swear!" She assures with all the sincerity she possesses, and she means it.

"It's not good enough. First thing tomorrow, I'll turn you in."

Regina's eyes grow wider with the panic invading her. She becomes agitated, tries to free herself from his grip, pulling on her hand, fighting him, but Robin is too strong, controls her in one swift movement, making her lose her balance by pulling her forward, and she startles, stumbles, and falls, landing in his arms that wrap around her waist instinctively.

For a second, they just stare at each other, take their time to understand what just happened and how they ended up pressed against each other.

Regina is the first one to react.

She's the first one to react, and she uses that time to do the only thing that comes to her mind. She crashes her knees between his thighs with all the strength she possesses, and it has the effect she wanted.

He releases her, and Regina falls on her back, startled and a bit stunned, but she recovers quickly, glances at the man whose hands are clutching onto where she's hit him, and she hastily moves to her knees, then her feet, beginning to run away before he can get a hold on her again.

She runs blindly ahead, ignoring her ragged breath, tired body, hammering heartbeat. She runs until she finds her cloak, gathers it in less than a couple of seconds, and resumes her escape.

It's only when she collapses against a tree, drained, that she finally stops. Letting the exhaustion win, she leans against the trunk, fear more than present in her mind, her hands trembling.

She needs to calm down.

She needs to calm down, and think.

Looking around, evening her breathing at the same time, she understands that she's out of the man's reach, and that he didn't follow her. So, supposedly, she's safe. For now, at least. Because who knows what other danger could be waiting for her at a corner?

xxx

Robin winces.

Not only did she actually hurt him, but his plan didn't really go as he wanted. He must have pushed too much, scared her more than he had planned, and she didn't give him time to explain that he actually wanted to help her -sort of-. He was too quick to react, too good in his act.

Damn!

At least, he knows it's only a matter of hours after the sun has risen, before he finds her again. But earning her trust might reveal more difficult than he thought. Although, considering where she seems to be heading, how he knows life is out there for a woman with little knowledge of the world and such an incredible beauty, he has no doubt that she's going to need his help soon.
Really soon.

Chapter End Notes

What did you think?

In the next chapter, Regina meets an old 'friend', and finds herself in a tricky situation, but an unexpected help shows up.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A slight warning, there's some violence in this chapter. I don't think it's unbearable violence, but I prefer to warn you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Regina approaches the village carefully. She hasn't talked to anyone in days, hasn't stopped walking and crossing places without looking back, not since she escaped from that mysterious man she tried to steal from. She still shivers at the thought of it, of the fact that he would've had no hesitation to throw her in jail, unaware of the devastating consequences it'd have for her.

She, of course, didn't sleep much that night, and with the sun rising, she didn't hesitate once in getting up and leaving immediately, walking her way into the forest, away from Leopold's castle, away from this man, from this kingdom, and her old life.

The more distance there was between them, the better.

She wanders around the village, the hood of her cloak ready to be pulled up and hide her face if she were to cross path with her husband's men, or any kind of soldiers, for that matters. Better not tempt fate…

Regina enters the market, stays hidden behind clients, looks for a fallen fruit, a piece of bread, anything. But today, in this place, the ground is quite clean, and it means that if she wants to eat something she has to steal. Again! Something she still loathes to do, something she's still having trouble succeeding at — she didn't get caught since that man, but she had to give up more than once.

She could use her magic. She wasn't exactly mastering everything when she left, but just a quick and easy spell could work and help. Except that she doesn't want to be burned on a pyre for witchcraft.

Also, to be quite honest, she can feel the tiredness of her body and mind, the weakness seizing her a little bit more everyday since the last time she ate, three days ago. Even if she wanted to, she doesn't have enough energy to fuel her powers. That's why she has to succeed in finding food this time! If she wants to continue, if she doesn't want to become one of those ghosts sitting by the side of the road and begging for charity, she has to figure something out, or all of this will have been for nothing. Her journey has just begun, her goal is still far, her salvation out of reach for now. But no matter how hard the path is, the reward will be worth it.

Spending some time among the villagers, she begins to understand their rules, how things work. She saw kindness, but also cruelty. Most of the time, she stays away, keeps her distance, but sometimes, she mingles with a crowd, exchanges a few words with an old woman or a young boy.

But not today.

Today, she's alone, and she just spotted a large display near a corner in the street. She can try to sneak there and steal something without being seen.

She walks closer, looks interested by the different loaves of bread, and then turns her back on the
shop, heading in the other direction. Once away from sight, she changes the angle, heads for the edge of the display, carefully hiding behind people. When she's in front of the freshly baked bread, Regina glances up, notices the owner is busy with a client on the other side, and looks around. No one is watching or paying attention to her. Her hand slowly lifts, wrapping around a piece small enough to be hidden by her clothes, removes it from the shelf, and walks away quickly.

xxx

Robin observes her leave the market at a fast but slow enough pace that she won't be suspected of theft.

He's been following her since she disappeared from his small camp. He hasn't made a move yet, there was no need, she didn't encounter any situation dangerous enough that it would require his intervention.

She's good, he thinks. She's a quick learner, knows how to make herself invisible to people, hides her beauty behind a poor appearance, and she seems to have somehow adjusted to the life in the streets faster than he thought she would.

Well, not completely, she still needs a real bath and he knows she mostly doesn't have something to eat or drink. But for someone who lived among royalty all her life, it isn't that bad. A lot of people would've already been thrown into a cell or executed, or would've died starving or beaten up.

But not her.

As he sees her disappear in an alley, Robin can't help but feeling admiring. He doesn't know how long she will keep this up, but she's more resourceful than he thought.

xxx

Regina crosses an empty alley, and stops once halfway there, looks behind and sighs in relief. Removing the bread from underneath her cloak, she takes it with both hands, and bites eagerly in it. She can't suppress the moan of pleasure the feeling of food in her mouth is providing. She takes another bite, and one more, filling her empty stomach and already sensing her strength coming back. This is no real meal, but it's filling her belly, and that's the only thing she cares about.

She doesn't finish the loaf, knows it's all she might have for a while, so she shoves it into her small satchel, wipes the corner of her lips with the back of her hand.

"My my, so this is what happened to my favorite student!"

Regina jumps, swirls around and immediately takes a step back, staring defiantly at the slim figure in front of her.

"What are you doing here, Rumple? How did you find me?"

The sorcerer lifts a finger, sneering through his gritted teeth.

"I know everything, dearie, you should know that."

"What do you want?"

He looks at her up and down "Well, certainly not your appearance. Where did you get these rags? They're not fitting a Queen."
"I'm not Queen anymore!" She argues, crossing her arms over her chest.

"You will forever be the Queen, dearie, no matter what you wear. As long as you're married to-"

"I never wanted to marry him!" Regina bites.

"But you did. And now you're bonded to him by your vows. Nothing can break that."

"I'll find a way!"

"Oh, I'm sure you will! As for whether or not he'll let you do it, don't be so sure."

Regina straightens her spine, tilts her chin up and narrows her eyes "What do you know?"

"More than you do, that's for sure."

"Don't play your games with me, Rumple! I know you, I can tell you're hiding something."

The imp shrugs in an innocent way, one that is definitely not suiting him. "Perhaps."

"Tell me!"

"In exchange of what?"

"What?" Regina frowns, confused.

Rumpelstiltskin rolls his eyes in annoyance. "I thought you said you knew me, dear. Let's make a deal!"

"I want no deal with you!" She exclaims fiercely.

"Then you won't have any information from me."

"I'll manage without it."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Rumple takes a step forward.

"Then I guess you won't need my help to deal with these men." He says in a neutral voice, looking behind Regina.

The young woman turns around, scrutinizing the alley, but she doesn't see anyone, they're alone.

"What m-?" When she looks over to where the imp was, she faces nothing but an empty spot.

Suddenly, a strange feeling invades Regina, uneasiness washing over her, and she feels her guts tense before she actually hears the voice.

"Hey!"

She freezes, body rigid, breath short and eyes closed, praying that this is only her imagination, she didn't hear anything.

"Hey, you! The lady there!"
She glances behind her, counts four men standing on the other side of the alley, their attention clearly on her, but there's something weird about them, a strange feeling seizing her as she watches them.

"Yes, I'm talking to you! Come here!" The man talking gestures for her to join them, and when she doesn't, he encourages. "Don't be scared! I just have something to tell you."

Regina turns on her heels so she's facing them, getting a better look at them, but instead of going their way she takes a step back, and they notice.

"Girl…" An other man calls. "We only want to talk."

They start coming closer, and Regina finds herself paralyzed with fear (she just noticed that this road is a dead end, so there's no way out. How could she have been so stupid?), but she manages to find enough sense to keep her emotions locked inside, her voice perfectly steady when she says, "I'm listening."

Maybe it will work. Maybe she doesn't have to be afraid…

A devilish smile appears on the men's lips, and a small voice murmurs inside her head that she was right to be scared. Because they are moving towards her with a look that she definitely doesn't like.

"Oh, but she talks! What's your name, sweetheart?"

"I am certainly not your sweetheart."

The man plays apologetic, a hand on his chest. "I'm sorry, miss. But you must be called something? Why don't you tell us how to call you?"

"Why do you care?" She snaps, realizing that playing nice won't lead her anywhere.

"And she bites!" He laughs, throwing his head back. "This is gonna be interesting!"

Regina steps back, holding her breath, fear seizing her, trying to find an escape but she can't see clearly anymore. The only thing facing her are the faces of these four men, and a very, very complicated situation she has no idea how to extricate herself from.

"What do you want?" She questions, hoping to be wrong.

"Well," one of the men replies, "fill our pockets, of course!"

Regina gives him a bewildered look. "What?"

"We saw you hurry up to leave the market. You must have something to hide."

Regina takes another step back, instinctively closing her hand over her satchel. She doesn't have much, but there's no way she's giving it to someone else. The little she took when she ran away means too much for her.

"I don't!"

"Really?" One of the men gets slowly closer, smirking. "Why don't you let me be the judge of that?"

Before she can answer, Regina feels a hand closing around her wrist, suddenly yanking her to the side, shaking her balance and she falls into the man's arms with a shriek, her breath cut short. She's so shocked that she doesn't even realize he's already blocked her arms with his own, rendering her almost powerless, at their mercy if she can't find a way to get herself out of there.
"What are you doing!" She screams, trying to free herself from the men's grip, kicking her feet forward, but they're fast to jump back and avoid her.

"Guess what?" One of the men approaches, his face only inches from hers, his dark teeth on full display when he gives her a mad smile. "We take what we want!"

Regina's eyes open wide, her instinct coming back at her, and she gathers all her strength to escape.

"Let me go!" she yells, becoming agitated and by doing so, she doesn't even realize she crushes her foot on the man's, making him scream in pain and surprise, immediately releasing her.

It takes a second for Regina to realize what happened, but when she does, she starts running, putting as much distance between herself and them as she can, but-

"Not so fast!"

She's caught by a large and firm hand closing over her arm, pulling her back to the men, two of them holding her this time, so firmly that she can barely move now.

One of them takes a step forward, a hand lifting to trace the outline of her face.

"That's a beautiful face you have here, sweetheart. How is it that such a cute lady travels alone in this kingdom?"

"Not your business!" she bites, shaking her head to break contact with his rough and dirty fingers.

"Well, I don't really need to know your story to take your money from you." He laughs wickedly, his friends joining him. "But you should know that these lands aren't safe for beautiful girls like you. We aren't in Leopold's kingdom. Here, people just take what they want." He's almost in her face when he says "And right now, what I want, is what you have hidden in your satchel!"

He steps back, surprising her when he rips her bag from her sharply, and Regina looks at him with bewilderment, with fear, anguish filling her, especially when she hears him scream in victory "Let's see what we have in here!" because her entire world is gathered in this bag.

It's a nightmare, all over again. The little she has is taken from her again. Since she lost Daniel, her life has been miserable, and she thought that by escaping it would improve, but she was wrong. Things will never get better. She will never be free. She will never be happy...

"Give it back! Please!" She begs as she watches him plunge his hand inside, pulling out a small paper, a picture. The portrait of her father.

"Useless." The man mutters, throwing it over his shoulder, one of his friends crushing it without consideration.

"No!" Regina screams.

They ignore her, throwing away her small gourd, then marveling about the comb her father offered her for her twelfth birthday. It's made of steel, embossed with colorful jewelry. One of her most cherished treasures, but one of the men just took it and declare that they will make a good money out of it.

Regina becomes agitated, but their grip tightens on her wrists, preventing her from escaping. They shake her a bit to have her to calm down.
"What else's in here?" the man holding her purse questions. "Oh, that's interesting!" He pulls out the half-eaten bread, gives her an amused glance. "So you're a thief too, are you?"

Before Regina has time to answer, he has bitten eagerly in it, turning his attention back to the bag, chewing slowly and spitting bread as he speaks. "I felt something else. Oh!"

His face lights up when he discovers the last object Regina possesses, her most cherished treasure. Daniel's ring.

It's worth nothing, but the man doesn't seem to realize it.

"What is this?"

"It's mine!" she yells, fighting her assailants, moving in their arms so much they almost lose their balance.

"It's mine, now." the man corrects. "I've never seen a ring like this. It must-"

He's cut off by Regina's body colliding with his when she rushes forward, managing to free herself from the others without her really realizing, falling with the man and landing hard on the ground.

For a second, she's shaken, but she recovers quickly, grabs the ring he stills holds, and crawls away from him, attempting to get up but there's a hand closing over her leg, sharp nails ripping and digging into her skin, making her scream in pain, and when she looks up, three men are surrounding her, grabbing her by the shoulders and forcing her up, holding her firmly.

"I want to see her!" He orders.

Hands are grabbing Regina, pushing her up to her feet, and when she looks up she's facing the leader.

"Bitch!"

She receives a slap as the words are pronounced, so hard she feels the taste of blood invade in her mouth, drops dripping from where her lower lip is now cut.

"I'm gonna make a good money out of that thing!"

He closes his hand over her fist, the one hiding Daniel's ring, and he forces her to open it, but Regina holds on, despite his nails scratching her knuckles and the evidence difference of strength between them.

But he is stronger than she is, and all her willpower doesn't allow her to resist the punch she receives in the stomach, making her bend in half and release the ring with a piercing scream.

She looks up with determination, despite her short breath and sore body, attempts to move her hand forward. "Give it back!"

But all she receives is another blow in the face.

"You thought you could beat a real man? You are of no size against.""

His sentence is stopped suddenly, and Regina attempts to breath in, looks up to see what is happening, but her vision is blurred. However, she can hear someone answer, "A real man doesn't rob and beat an innocent lady."
The voice is strong and familiar, so she focuses, finally managed to open her’s when Regina recognizes him.

"She's no lady!" her assailant replies. "She's a nobody, and if I want to take what she has, I will!" he spits, despite his flat position on the ground where who she now knows to be the mysterious man she escaped from in the woods threw him.

"You won't do such thing."

"You're gonna stop me?" Her attacker bites, smirking, glancing at his friends, those who aren't holding her moving towards the man in a threatening way.

"If I have to."

Her –surprisingly- savior is calm, standing straight in front of his opponent, merely glancing at the two others. When one of them jumps on him, he moves to the side, avoiding him without making any effort, before stating, "You shouldn't have done that."

Before Regina's attacker turns around, Robin grabs his shoulder, pulling him backwards forcefully, startling him, making his stomach collide with his knee as he forces the man to bend forward, earning a Ooof and a groan when he sends him away with no delicacy. Only then, he focuses on the next attackers, who are walking towards him.

Robin punches one in the face, instantly breaking his nose, grabs the other by the throat, lifting him up, squeezing, watching as fear is filling his eyes, the way he attempts to plead him to stop, how is breath is cut short and his attempt to breath vain, but Robin doesn't care.

Among all the horrible things he's done, never, in his whole life, has he ever taken pleasure in beating up someone like these men just did. Not that the anger at seeing the woman down will make him spare her when the time to fulfill his mission comes, but Robin cannot let them hurt anyone else. He knows these lands, he knows the vermin who lives here, the bastards like these men who reveal in inspiring fear, but he also knows the good people constantly robbed and attacked for a money they mostly don't have. It might seems a bit odd considering where he comes from and what he does for a living, along with the fact that he will for sure use this event to his advantage -he knew that Regina meeting thieves or being attacked was bound to happen in this land, but because he's a ruthless and professional assassin, doesn't mean he can't respect someone. So that bug is going to learn his lesson, and if it helps in convincing Regina that he is of good faith, all the better.

"Pl… Please," the man begs, and Robin lifts an eyebrow.

"She begged you to let her be, and you didn't. Explain me why I should spare your worthless life?"

The man's orbs are rolling up, oxygen leaving his brain and lungs, and Robin knows that if he doesn't release the pressure soon, death will be quick to follow.

But, glancing at the young woman still prisoner of a last man, he notices the fear in her eyes, the incredulity of what he's doing. And he can't scare her. If he wants her to trust him, he can't cross the line. Her line.

So he drops the body, that crumbles on the ground, slightly moving, proof of him still being alive. Then, he turns towards the only guy left, the one holding Regina.

"I suggest that you leave her alone, or I might take care of you as I have with your friends."

It takes less than a second for the coward to release the young woman, making her fall on the floor as
he takes to his heels and runs.

"You defend this bitch?" Robin hears, turning to see the first man he punched, the one who appeared to be the leader, slowly getting up.

"Keep insulting her and I'm gonna make you regret your words!" Robin threatens, walking to his opponent, barely noticing the others trying to stumble away. He doesn't hesitate for one second before pushing at the bastard with his foot, projecting him on his back, before pressing his heel to his hand, earning a loud groan in reward. Robin presses harder, the groan turning into a scream, a myriad of insults flowing from the man's throat, so he keeps up the pressure, increasing it until he feels bones shatter under his boot, until the words stop, until insults turn into pleadings. Robin gives one last push before pulling back, threatening, "If I ever see you disrespect a woman again, be sure I won't be this merciful."

He waits until the idiot has gotten up with difficulties, holding his hand against his chest, throwing him a murdering glance, but he has the good sense of running away instead of provoking him again.

And then, Robin heads for where Regina is, still half lying on the ground, still trembling, raising terrorized eyes at him.

"Milady," He says softly, holding his hand for her.

Regina shakes her head, recovering slowly "I had the situation under control," she snaps, with less eagerness than she planned to, her voice trembling, but in the meantime she's seen this man almost kill another one. Even though she doesn't mean one word and it clearly is a lie, she stays on her guard, doesn't want to let him think she's trusting him. She has no idea of why he's helped her, what he's doing here.

"A simple thank you would suffice." Robin chuckles slightly, crouching in front of her, his gaze turning into a concern frown at the sight of blood and bruises on her face, the way she holds her ribs and winces with every movement. "Are you okay?"

Regina nods, still a bit shaken despite the strong mask she's trying to put on, her sore body forcing her to grit her teeth to keep the pain hidden. She pushes herself into a sitting position, trying to get up on her own but his hand finds hers, one of his arms winding around hers, steadying her as her legs are still wobbly and she stumbles a little, the pain blurring her vision for a moment.

"I'm sorry if you disapprove my treatment for those men, Milady, but it was the only way to get rid of them. Life around here isn't safe for a lonely woman. Especially in places like this one."

"Did you follow me?" Regina asks, pulling away when she feels steady enough, smoothing her dress, wiping her face and wincing as pain spreads again from her injuries.

"I have to admit that I did." Robin confesses, bending down to grab her stuff, glancing at them as he retrieves each object. "I had a feeling that you might need my help at some point, that something like this could happen. You've entered a far more dangerous kingdom than the one where we first met. Here, the only rule applying is the one of the strongest. The people isn't protected by the King, they're left to themselves. Bandits are the real rulers." He holds her satchel for her, and drops in her hand the ring and comb, before smoothing the creased paper of the picture the best he can and giving it back. "I believe that this is yours."

Regina looks up, studying the man, his blue eyes, obvious dimples that she didn't notice the first time they met, now on full display. He does seem sincere, and she has to admit that he indeed saved her from a very complicated situation, one that she knows deep down she wouldn't have been able to get
out from by herself. So she relents, swallows down her pride, her defiance, closes her hands over her treasures, and nods.

"Thank you."

Robin tilts his head in acknowledgement. She's getting there. Now it shouldn't take him much effort to convince her. She's already on the right path.

"Milady," he takes a careful step forward, not wanting to scare her. "I don't know why you're traveling alone, but if you wish, maybe I can accompany you on your journey? We could keep each other company, and I could protect you."

Regina looks at him with a puzzled look. That's quite a change since the first time they met.

"Last time we saw each other, you wanted to turn me in."

Robin chuckles, shrugs. "It was another day." In front of Regina's dubious look, he adds with as much seriousness as he can find. "I wouldn't have."

"And I'm supposed to believe you?"

"You don't really have a choice." He recognizes. "But," Robin uses his ultimate card, the one that can turn the balance in his favor or make him lose his bet, forcing him to go back to the original plan, the quick execution. "I didn't have to help you today. People usually don't risk their own lives by stepping in the middle of a situation like the one you were in. Do you think I would've done it just to hand you to the Sheriff?"

"Why did you then?"

"It was the right thing to do." He tries, hoping that it's enough. The woman lifts an eyebrow, but she seems to believe him.

Regina is tempted to accept, this man could've harmed her several times since they've been talking, could've left her to her fate, but he didn't. And yet, people always have second thoughts, they are always expecting something in return, and what this man wants, she cannot decipher.

"Don't you have your own journey to follow?"

Robin shrugs "I have no specific place to go. I live a nomad life."

"What do you expect in return?" She asks boldly, suspicious.

"What do I expect?"

"Yes. If I accept your offer, what do you want from me in exchange?"

Robin smiles inwardly. This is it. Just a few more efforts. Just a few more lies…

"Your name."

Regina opens her eyes wide. "What?"

"Your name." Robin repeats. "Tell me your name."

"Only my name?"
"Yes. I mean," he concedes, "if we could have some talks from time to time, learn to know each other, keep each other company, I wouldn't complain. I've been traveling alone for so long, having someone to talk to is something I'm longing for. But" Robin adds, sensing that he needs to voice it, for her. "I will never ask from you something you're unwilling to give. Be certain, Milady, that if you accept my offer, I plan to be respectful to you. You have my word. But in order to travel together, knowing your name could reveal to be quite useful, don't you think?"

Regina hesitates. He seems honest, and that's the trick. She's been on the run for several weeks, yes, but meeting someone ready to help, seems too good to be true. This man may have helped her today, but her instinct gives her mixed signals about him. She wants to give him a chance, just like he's giving her one –he caught her stealing from him after all, and there's a voice screaming in her head to follow him. But another voice is warning her. Danger is everywhere, the King is looking for her, and solitude is her only chance to go through her plan. And quite frankly, she knows nothing about this man.

Just like he knows nothing about you, a tiny voice whispers in her ear.

Regina knows that if she answers, she signs the deal. But, if she doesn't, she also takes the risk for an event like today to happen again. She takes the risk to end up dead on the pavement, to fail in her quest. And she has to admit, she misses the company. Maybe this can be a good exchange of deals.

"Regina." She says softly.

Robin smiles, bowing his head a little.

"Well, Regina, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Robin."

Chapter End Notes

Coming next: Regina and Robin begin their journey together. Robin slowly tries to earn Regina's trust, but will she let him?

Reviews are always appreciated ;-}
"Stay still."

Robin slowly and carefully approaches the cloth to her face, pressing it against her left cheek, where a scratch and a bruise appeared an hour ago.

After Regina accepted Robin's offer to travel together, they left the village to put some distance between themselves and civilization, so Regina could take a break. Despite her brave face, she was still shaken by the attack, and Robin thought she'd relax more easily in a less crowded place. Something she approved immediately.

She flinches when the fabric comes in contact with her skin, so Robin pulls back, hand hanging midair.

"I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?"

"No," Regina breathes. "I mean… It's a bit sensitive." She admits.

"We should clean your wounds, I'm sure you don't want to get an infection."

"No, of course not."

Robin looks at her, her apparent calm, probably stunned state. She appears to have been more upset by the attack than she's willing to admit. So he lets go, hands her the cloth, giving her a small smile he hopes to be reassuring.

"Maybe you'd prefer to do it yourself?"

The question makes her snap out of her dazed state, has her looking up directly at him. "What?"

"Clean your wounds. Would you prefer to do it instead of me?"

"Oh…” She pauses for a second. "Do you mind?"

Robin chuckles. "Not at all. If it makes you more comfortable," He hands her the wet cloth. "Meanwhile, I can start setting the camp for tonight."

Regina applies the fabric against her cheek, hissing as the cold comes in contact with the bruised skin, questioning him at the same time. "Are we staying here?"

Robin puts as much compassion in his voice as he can muster. "Yes, I figured after today's event, you'd prefer to rest until tomorrow, instead of starting a long walk of several hours until sundown."
The softness of her gaze shows the gratitude she feels when she answers. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

xxx

She startles.

Her eyes open wide, and Regina rises on her elbow, wincing at the brightness suddenly hitting her eyes, her hand covering them for a second.

"Good morning."

She frowns, takes a moment, and then remembers. When she opens her eyes, she faces the kind smile of Robin, bent over his bag, pulling two metallic cups out.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

Regina shivers, shakes her head, glances down and grabs the blanket that fell from her shoulders, wrapping it around herself as she slowly and sleepily sits up.

"Ts'fine," she mutters, clearing her throat after hearing how raspy it sounds. "What time is it?"

Robin pours some fresh water in the cup, hands it to her. "Some time around 7. I wanted to get everything ready before you woke up, but one of the glasses fell when I opened my bag, I'm sorry."

"That's ok," she dismisses. "You didn't have to give yourself so much trouble not to wake me up."

"After seeing how you collapsed yesterday after supper, I figured you needed the rest." Ducking his head to the side, he questions. "You haven't slept a lot the past days?"

Regina brings the cup to her lips, takes a sip. "Not really."

"I'm glad you managed to rest. Now, if you want to use the stream I showed you yesterday, a bit further down this road," Robin offers, pointing towards a path in the forest behind her, "you can enjoy a bath while I finish getting breakfast ready? What do you think?"

Regina glances over her shoulder, rubs her still sleepy eyes, and finds herself eager to get rid of the remnant of sleep and this foggy state.

"Alright." She forces herself up on her feet. "But like I said, don't give yourself too much trouble. Don't change your habits because of me."

Robin smiles. "I'm glad to change them, Regina. I've been a loner for too long, let me enjoy the company."

She smiles weakly. "Well, in this case." She bows her head forward slightly. "I'll see you in a bit, Robin."

He watches her leave with an inward smirk. She has taken the bait, is on the right path to trusting him. She's on her guard, something that can be considered normal when you think that she accepted his help only yesterday. But Robin has the gut feeling that if he continues what he does, if he keeps smiling and playing nice without doing too much, she'll be at his mercy sooner rather than later. All he needs is to be able to break through her defense, to find the flaw, and destroy her from the inside. If he's lucky, she will beg him to end her life.

If he's good, she will end it herself.
Regina enters the river with a content sigh.

It's been a while since she had the opportunity to take a real, refreshing bath, to clean her skin from the dirt and sweat, without glancing over her shoulder every other second in fear of someone attacking her.

This man, this Robin, is strange, mysterious, intriguing. He is for sure hiding things, she's not naïve enough to believe he's helping her out of true goodness, but she carries her own demons, so she's not really in position to judge.

Closing her eyes, she sighs with contentment, her head falling back to wet her hair, her hands coming to wipe her face, closing her eyes as she savors the fresh and soothing feeling of water sliding over her skin.

For a moment, she enjoys the first moment of peace she's had in weeks, since she escaped. She takes her time, washes herself slowly, not knowing when she'll have time to take another lingering bath, because even though she's not alone now, they have agreed to travel through the kingdom in direction of the border, and it's a several weeks walking trip. Meaning they won't spend their days playing in the river, or dancing around a fire. They will walk, and walk, and walk, until their feet burn if it comes to that, but they will reach their goal, and Regina will be safe, free from her old life forever.

"Thank you."

Regina takes the bowl, blowing on the hot liquid to make it cool a little, then grabbing the spoon Robin hands her.

"I thought we could stop to buy you some clean clothes on our travel," Robin suggests kindly. "I figure you want to remove this dress, to change into something more comfortable."

Regina looks down, winces when she notices the rips and dirt covering her outfit, the awful state it's in. Same goes for her boots, she realizes, and when she sheepishly looks up, she discerns the smirk on Robin's face. Still, she shrugs nonchalantly, unwilling to make him think that she's using him for his money.

"That's fine, I've known worse." She lies.

"Oh, I'm sure you have." Robin replies with a knowing smile. "But I still think you need more proper clothing if we have to walk our way through this kingdom and the next ones."He ducks his head to the side, using his most convincing smile. "I promise you I don't mind, if that's what bothering you. I didn't offer you to travel together to let you suffer and struggle in improper garments."

"But I don't have the money to pay for them."

"I have enough money for the two of us, don't worry! I'm offering, and if you say no again I won't have any other choice but to insist." He says kindly.

Regina can't help but smile a little, touched despite her defiance, this man is definitely a strange one. However, she relents, "Alright! But don't make it a habit." she adds. "I know you don't mind, but I don't need much. All I have to do is hold on until I reach my destination."
Robin nods. He doesn't know where she's planning to go, beside the little she told him: North. That's the only thing she was willing to reveal, and that's how he knows she isn't trusting him – reasonably so, he'd be surprised if she already was.

So, what he's planned to do, is to keep going on with her, to earn her entire trust until she reveals where exactly she wants to go, and when he knows, when he's figured the exact trajectory they're taking, he'll give a rendezvous point to the King along the road a bit further, so her husband can retrieve her body. Only then, when Regina will face the man and realize she's been betrayed, Robin will take her life. He will do so in front of that King so eager to get rid of his wife, so the old man can understand the extent of what he asked.

Robin doesn't care about people's reasons to pay for his abilities, but from time to time, he likes to give them a lesson. To show them what they paid for, what they asked for. What they are responsible of.

Because ruthlessly killing is something, but making a point is even better.

xxx

"Why are you traveling alone?"

Robin looks over at Regina as she's asking the question, keeps his walk at a good pace while he replies. "The answer would surprise you."

"How so?" she questions with a furrow of her brow.

Robin smirks, winks at her. "Like I told you already, I'm a loner. It means I appreciate to be able to do whatever I want, the way I want, without anyone to tell me what to do."

Regina's confusion grows wider. "Why did you offer me to come with you, then? Especially that we are heading towards a destination I chose, one that you don't even know."

Robin shrugs, glances at her from time to time, while still paying attention to where he's putting his feet, avoiding a large root. "Because when you've been an outsider for years, when you've traveled as far and long as I have, eventually, you end up facing a wall. You find yourself wondering where to go next, what to see, and if maybe, your life shouldn't be different. You discover that you do miss the company you've avoided for so long. And when you happen to fall upon someone in need of help on her own journey, you realize that helping her is actually something that you really want to do, that you just found a new sense of purpose."

Regina blushes, seems a little surprised, tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "That's a good reason, I guess. And I'm thankful for your help, you know that."

"I do," Robin agrees.

"Is there any chance that someday, you tell me where you've been? I'd like to hear stories of places from everywhere, places where I will never have the chance to travel, to discover. If that's okay for you, of course."

He gives her a soft smile. "Why not? It could be nice to talk about it."

"I'm looking forward to it." She concludes with a duck of her head, her gaze following his hand when he shows something ahead of them.

"We'll be exiting the forest in a few minutes. The village I told you about the other day, where we
can buy you some clothing, is only a little bit further on the road."

"Do you know the place?"

"Not very well, but I walked there a few times during my travels. I know they have comfortable and solid outfits made for long journeys, and the owner has the amazing ability to find the exact clothes you need with a single look."

Regina follows him in silence during the rest of the road. She ignores why, but there's something about this man, something she can't quite put a name on. She's still conflicted about whether she should trust him or not, keeps telling herself it's too soon, he's a stranger after all, and he indeed almost choke a man to death. But he also did it to protect her.

_Her._

Someone unimportant, someone now of little value.

Not a Queen.

Not a princess.

A nobody, a person worthless to be saved or chosen. Someone who was even trying to steal from him when they first met.

Yet, he stepped in and rescued her without flinching, and she can't help but wonder why. She's not certain she believes that his sudden "need for human company" is the only reason he offered her to go with him, but she can't come up with any other explanation. She doesn't know him enough for that. And to be honest, she feels safer since she's been with him. Not utterly comfortable, but safer. At least, she can sleep several hours in a row even if it's not always a full night, eat and drink enough, relax a bit.

She doesn't know what the future is made of, she ignores if they will go far together or if they will part ways before they reach her destination, but for now she's willing to give him a chance. It doesn't mean she's ready to tell him everything about her life, to confess who she is, why she's here, where she wants to go, she's not stupid enough to open herself up to a stranger. But a companionship is a good compromise for now.

Regina enters the village and looks around, careful, on her guards, glancing to her left and noticing young children playing by a well, smiles at the sight.

_Children…_

That's not something for her, not with the mess her life has become. It's not that she doesn't want any; on the contrary, she thinks that a child is exactly what she needs. But considering who her husband is, and that she's bound to him forever because he will never free her from her vows, she just has to accept the fact that she will never be allowed to become a mother.

"There!"

She startles, feels Robin's hand on her back as he leads her towards a small cabin, a shop barely the size of a closet. The woman selling the furniture is old but her smile is reaching her ears, and she smells kindness and wisdom despite her poor appearance.

"Hello!"
"Hello!" Regina replies softly, mirroring the woman's smile, hers a bit shyer.

"What can I do for you two?"

Robin takes a step forward, tilting his head towards Regina. "My companion needs a new outfit, and solid shoes. We're traveling by foot; she could use something of better quality than what she has."

The old woman steps closer, adjusting small and dirty glasses on the tip of her nose, wincing and removing them, spitting on the glass and wiping them with her sleeve, before putting them on again.

"Ah, better!" She says, and Regina suppresses a disgusted look. She's not living in a palace anymore, she should be used to this by now. "Let me take a look!"

She walks closer, examining Regina's outfit, grabbing the bottom of her dress and noticing the rips lacerating the fabric.

"I see," she states knowingly. "You haven't taken care of these, have you, young lady?"

Regina shrugs sheepishly. "Not really. I tried to be careful, but they kept getting stuck in roots and spines."

"Because this is no proper clothing to go play in the forest. And look at these boots!" She exclaims. "What have you done with them?"

"Walk?" Regina tries, not sure if this was rhetorical.

"Well, you sure have! Come here!" She calls, releasing the young woman's clothes and turning her back on her, heading towards the back of her shop. "I have exactly what you need."

Regina shyly looks at Robin, who smirks in return, before tilting his chin in direction of the old woman, making Regina understand that he will wait for her here.

She comes back a few minutes later, wearing a tight grey pair of pants in thick cotton, knee-high leather boots, and a smooth long-sleeved white top. It falls over her shoulders, baring the skin of her neck and showing a nice cleavage, is also tightened by a corset at the waist. A bit too uncomfortable for her, considering how well it shows her forms, but Regina has to admit, it's absolutely beautiful, and she barely recognizes herself in the mirror.

Exactly what she needs.

She looks up to find the most stunned look she's ever seen on Robin's face –or any man to be honest, and especially not her husband. His eyes are wide and his mouth a little agape, completely mesmerized.

Regina blushes, rakes a hand through her long hair, brings them to her shoulder, shrugs uncomfortably.

"I know someone who likes what he sees!"

They're both startled, Robin and Regina, when the old woman's voice breaks the silence, making them clear their throat in embarrassment.

"I told you she was good." Robin says, but the faltering in his voice betrays the emotions he's trying to hide.

Damn, if she was beautiful before, now she truly is stunning.
In every way.

Regina nods, refraining herself from squirming under his gaze, instead focuses her attention on the old woman, grateful. "She is. Thank you…"

"Grace," the woman finishes for her. "I'm Grace."

"And I'm Regina." She answers back. "You really have a gift. These clothes are beautiful, and perfectly fitting."

"I mostly have experience, my dear. Oh! Before I forget!"

She disappears to the back of her shop, comes back with her arms full of a large and thick folded piece of fabric.

"You're gonna need something to keep you warm. This cloak will not let you down during the cold winter that is coming. Trust me, you're gonna bless me when you feel the warmth it provides."

Regina glances at Robin, then at the woman, embarrassed. "I don't know. It must be expensi-"

"We'll take everything! Add a pair of pants and a shirt so the lady can change if she needs to," Robin cuts her off, hand already in his satchel. "How much?"

"That's a man talking!" Grace exclaims, nodding her approval. "20, please!"

Regina's head snaps up to Robin, eyes wide, but before she can talk he shakes his head and hands over the money.

"Thank you for your kindness and expertise, Grace."

"And thank you for remembering my shop, Robin. Have a safe trip, you two!"

And before she realizes, Robin has dragged Regina out of the small shop.

"Robin, this was too much!" She argues. "You can't-"

"I can." He replies simply, wrapping the thick cloak around her shoulders. "I told you not to worry about the money. You needed this, and this shop is the best I've seen in this part of the kingdom."

"But I-"

"Should stop arguing with me! I can assure you, you won't win, Regina. And this has already been paid for." He reminds. "All you have to do is say thank you."

Regina stays stunned in front of him, still a bit surprised despite the knowledge that he was indeed going to buy her some clothes. But she relents, knows she won't win this fight, and Robin's right, she does own him thanks.

So she smiles, ducks her head to the side, and says honestly "Thank you, Robin."

His own smile widens, and he throws the bag holding her stuffs over his shoulder, tilting his head towards the forest.

"Come on, Regina! We have a long road ahead of us."
Coming next: Suddenly overwhelmed by her past, Regina has to face a concerned Robin. Will she reveal her secrets to him?
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

A little warning : There are mentions of unwanted sex. It's only a few sentences, but I prefer to warn you first ;-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Robin's been watching her sleep.

Regina had completely collapsed the first night, as exhaustion enveloped her. However, ever since then, she's been alert in her sleep, awaking quickly with the smallest of sounds. Yet, even though they've only been traveling together a few days, she's let go sometimes.

They still have awkward moments, and Regina hasn't opened up yet, she's fiercely hiding her secrets and real identity. But, some nights, after they've had a particularly long and exhausting day, she cannot resist the strong pull of sleep, the need for real rest. Though it rarely lasts more than an hour or two before she's back to pretending to sleep, it allows Robin some time to drop his guard.

Tonight is one of those nights.

It's been maybe thirty minutes, but Regina has let go, yield to tiredness and fatigue.

When he's certain that she won't wake up, Robin gets up slowly, moves away from their small camp, all the while watching her, just in case.

His raven has been turning around above their heads for a few hours now, he really needs to retrieve and answer his message.

Once away from the camp, Robin whistles, holds up his arm, and the bird joins him, long and sharp claws closing over his wrist. Robin takes the message wrapped around his paw, opens it, and rolls his eyes.

Impatient old man…

"How is it going? Did you find her yet?"

Robin grabs a small paper from his pocket, and uses some of the coal he took from the fire before sneaking out to scramble his answer quickly, and lets the bird fly away barely a minute later, after giving him a reward for his mission.

Robin knows the message will be properly copied and sent to the King with the man's own raven, so no need to put too much effort in his handwriting.

"Not yet, I'm almost there. Soon."

When he comes back to the camp, he's startled by a loud sigh, almost a painful one, close to a weep.

Turning his head towards his companion, he sees her roll to her side, and curl into a ball, hugging herself. Her blanket has slipped from her shoulders, and she clearly shivers, so Robin comes closer,
pulled by an invisible force.

_Why do you care if she's freezing to death?_ He wonders, but Robin finds himself unable to answer the question. Or maybe he doesn't want to accept the answer…

He crouches in front of Regina, his hand reaching for the blanket, and pulls it over her, holding back his hand when it threatens to brush her hair away from her face. With her new clothes and regular baths, correct meals everyday and the apparent safety she seems to feel now, allowing her features to relax from time to time, she's even more beautiful than before. Truly stunning.

But again, just a mission.

A name on a list of people to get rid of.

Nothing more.

Robin is about to get up and turn around when he notices _them_.

Traces, on her face.

The traces of tears.

No!

Actual tears, _real_ tears, falling down her cheeks.

Despite her deep sleep state, there are _tears_ rolling down her cheeks, and she lets out a small sniffle. That's when Robin realizes that the weeping he heard earlier was actually her crying in her sleep.

Why?

What kind of dream could possibly make her cry?

"Please…"

Robin's eyes snap up, and he pulls back, ready to see her open her eyes and ask him to back off.

"No- not t'night…"

He listens, quiet, curious. The more he hears, the more he wants to discover. Questions start to raise in Robin's mind as he tries to find the meaning behind her words, to understand what it is that she's dreaming of.

He's no expert, but it seems to him that this isn't a random dream. This isn't a simple nightmare, although she doesn't appear to be agitated.

Considering the little he knows of her, the fact that her husband had planned to kill her and that she ran away from him, and how she is clearly asking someone to leave her alone, he wonders if there's a connection with his being here. And, if this is somehow related to her presence here, in a forest, miles away from her castle?

What is it that forced her to leave? Why did her husband decide to kill her? Is it related to her magic? Is she a powerful witch? Is she a victim? Did she choose her marriage or was it forced upon her? Was she abused? Was she maybe beaten?

She seems so fragile, so powerless, right here, asleep but crying. How such a beautiful creature could
deserve to die?

Easy there!

Robin shakes his head, opens his eyes wide, gets up and steps back, suddenly feeling dizzy.

*What is happening to me?*

When has he ever questioned anyone's reasons when they've given him a job?

Looking down at Regina, who keeps whispering words he forces himself not to hear, Robin hardens his face, his heart, whatever is making him feel this way.

A job!

She is nothing, but a job!

And if he doesn't want to lose himself in the process, if he doesn't want to make a mistake, he should be careful, and end the game soon.

Or she might be *his* end.

xxx

Regina wakes up with a feeling of self-loathing and disgust plaguing her.

This isn't the first time she dreams about those nights, about what she endured for years, but it's the first time that she feels so shaken. Not that she's ever felt good afterward. But today, shame, anger and bitterness are overwhelming her, lingering in her mind. There's no way she can stay like this much longer. She sits up quickly, lets the blanket slip from her body, glancing around and noticing Robin still sound asleep. The man is always the first one up, so it must be really early in the day, despite the fact that the sun is already up.

Regina gets up, grabs the ointment they bought for her so she could really wash herself and not just plunge into water and scrub her skin with her bare hands. There's a stream near to where they chose to establish their camp, barely a five-minute walk, but it seems to last forever.

As soon as she reaches it, she doesn't waste one second. Regina enters the water with a content sigh, despite the coldness seizing her body like spines. Today, it doesn't bother her, on the contrary, it helps her feel something else, helps her rid herself of the memory of *his* touch. But the shame and disgust are still here and, as strong as she is, despite of her strong will, at some point, after several long minutes of ineffective slow and deep breaths, Regina finally gives in, and bursts into tears.

She is so, *so* relieved to have fled this life. She is so relieved that she doesn't have to put up with this disgusting man anymore. With each step she takes towards her final destination, it feels like she's leaving behind something of them, of her old life, her hell.

But it doesn't stop the dreams…

It doesn't erase the memory of Daniel's dead body. It doesn't erase the smell of Leopold's sweat, the sound of his quick and erratic breath, the feeling of his rough fingers closed over her hips as he emptied himself in her.

So she scrubs her skin from head to toe, even though she hasn't been touched in weeks. She scrubs
her skin with all her strength, until she feels sore. At least she doesn't feel him anymore.

Looking up to the sky, sniffling one last time and wiping her cheeks with the back of her hand, Regina closes her eyes, and enjoys the silent and peaceful moment. In the calm surrounding her, now that she's taking a break, she begins to feel it. Relief washes over her, erasing the dreams, erasing the disgusting feeling. It lifts a weight from her shoulders, slowly, her mind drifting towards-

"Regina?"

She jumps, the moment effectively broken. Despite her efforts, it didn't last long enough to find her relaxed. Regina sighs, glances up, searching through the forest for Robin's face, whose voice she recognized, but he isn't there. He must be calling her from the camp, his voice seemed distant.

Regina walks to the shore, wraps herself in her towel, answering loudly enough for him to hear.

"I'm at the river. I'm coming back."

Quickly dressing up, she inhales fully one more time, then exhales, ridding herself off the remnants of the night.

When she meets Robin for breakfast a few minutes later, she's wearing a face bare of any trace of tears.

xxx

"Careful!"

Robin stretches his hand forward, grabs Regina's arm when he sees her trip over a large root. She catches herself before falling in his arms, and faces him, a bit breathless.

"Thank you."

"Are you alright?" Robin questions. "You seem a bit off since this morning."

Regina furrows her brow, then shakes her head. She can't let him see her. It's too soon, she barely knows him. And she's not willing to go back to this morning's state of mind.

"I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" He insists. "You don't seem fine. If you need to talk-"

"I don't. Just mind your own business." She snaps, a little too hard for her liking, he was only being kind, but despite everything, her dream has left her in a foul mood, and she really doesn't feel like talking, especially about that. Even less to a man she met barely two weeks ago and has been traveling with for only a week.

Robin isn't deterred by her reaction, though slightly taken off guard, but she can hear the surprise in his voice when he replies. "Okay. I'm here if you change your mind."

They resume their walk in silence, for a little while.

However, with each passing step, Regina can't help but feel uncomfortable regarding to how she just talked to Robin, when he was only trying to be friendly. She was unfair, she realizes. He's never been anything else but kind to her since they started traveling together, and they might barely know each other, there might still be awkward moments, but she has to admit that for total strangers, they manage to get along. And if they're going to travel together for the next weeks or months, better
avoid more strange moments.

So she clears her throat.

"Robin?"

He hums, not slowing down, but she knows he's listening.

"I- I'm sorry for the way I snapped at you."

"That's fine." He bites. "I overstepped."

Regina opens her eyes wide, baffled. "You didn't!" She argues. "I was-"

"You don't owe me any explanations." Robin cuts her. *Play hard to get*, he thinks. *Let her come to you…*

"Robin, wait!" She puts a hand on his shoulder to stop him, waits until he looks at her. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize, Regina."

"I do."

"I understand." He insists. "You had a rough night, you didn't feel well. I should have understood it wasn't my place to-"

"Wait, what?"

*There we go…*

Robin stops, waits for her to voice what she just realized. He really has to play this nice.

"I had a *rough* night?" She questions, bewildered.

Robin smooths his face into an uncomfortable one, scratches the back of his head.

"Well, yes. That's what I guessed. You were a bit agitated last night."

"Oh…"

Regina looks down, her hand leaving his shoulder, her brow knitted in confusion, and Robin knows he has to reveal it *now*.

"Regina," she looks up at him again "you talk in your sleep."

She steps back, mouth wide. It takes her a moment to finally utter some words. "What did I say?"

Robin shrugs, acts sheepish and sympathetic.

"Nonsense, mostly. But I think that you were pleading someone. You were pleading someone to stop… I don't know what. But you sure weren't comfortable with what was happening."

There are tears brimming in her eyes, so Regina moves away, turns her back on him. She can't let him see her.

"Regina?"
She turns her head slightly to acknowledge his soft call of her name, but doesn't look at him.

Robin takes one step towards her, knows she won't allow him more.

"I don't know if it was a memory or a simple nightmare. I would bet on the first one, judging by your reaction. But it is not my place to question your past. I just wanted to let you know that I'm here if you need someone to listen."

She nods, stays silent, eyes screwed shut, trying to calm herself down.

"I'm going to keep walking, give you some time alone. I won't be far, just follow the trail."

xxx

It's been a good fifteen minutes since he left her, and Regina realizes that she already misses the company. His. Not that they have long and animated talks, but his presence, Robin's, helps soothing her loneliness a little.

Or let's be honest. A lot.

And she was unfair to him. He only wanted to show her that he cared, and she pushed him away thoughtlessly.

At the same time, she's definitely not ready to open up, not about that, this part of her life, her past. Leopold and Snow White are nothing but a far, far away memory, one that she doesn't want to forget, but that she refuses to linger on too much, unwilling to give them more consideration than she thinks they deserve.

But Robin… Robin has been nothing but kind to her. And he deserves more. More than the little consideration she gave him.

So Regina speeds up, catches up with him, slows down when she begins to catch a glimpse of his silhouette ahead of her. She evens her breathing out, but walks fast enough that she's almost by his side barely a couple of minutes later.

"Are you feeling better?"

She's surprised when he speaks, wasn't expecting for him to talk before she does, but she somehow feels relieved, especially with his calm tone, although she can't help but ask, "It depends. Are you still mad at me?"

"I never was mad at you, Regina. You were the one in a foul mood."

She ducks her head to the side, shrugs. He's right, she can't deny it.

"True. And I'm sorry." She apologizes again. "I'm feeling better. You were right, I needed a moment to put my thoughts in order."

"My offer still stands. If you want to keep whatever is bothering you to yourself, you have every right to and I respect your choice. But if you feel the need to voice it out, I'm here." He brings a hand to her elbow, supporting her as she spans a large root. He takes her hands in his, halting her walk and turning her towards him. "Do not think that because we don't know each other much, I don't care about you."
Regina eyes him softly, a bit stunned, but satisfied. This feeling invading her right now, Robin's words, the insurance of his support, is soothing her troubled mind more than she thought anything would.

"Thank you." She breathes in the space between them. "I'm not ready to talk about it, but I know you're here, and I appreciate the offer." She turns towards the path they're following, pulls on his hand a little to invite him to walk by her side.

Not once, during the several hours until they rest at the foot of a giant tree, does she release his hand. And he doesn't either.

xxx

"Can I try?"

Robin gazes up, halts his movements.

"Alright. Come here."

He moves to the side, lets Regina take place next to him, her hands hovering above the wood, waiting for instructions.

"Take this small branch between your palms." She tries clumsily, unsure, so Robin covers her hands with his, and adjusts her position. "Like this, exactly," she glances at him sheepishly, biting her lower lip. "Put the edge against that smooth and flat piece of wood. Now, rub your palms together to make it roll, as fast as you can." Watching her, he nods. "Perfect. Keep doing that. The goal is to create a spark, and when you have it, we'll add some twigs to help the fire start."

Regina focuses on what she's doing, nodding to acknowledge Robin's words but staying silent. She follows his indications, brow knitted in concentration.

After a minute, she sighs. "It's not working."

Robin chuckles, which has her looking up and sending him a glare.

"It takes time, Regina." He says calmly. "Time, and patience. Also, a bit of training. No one ever succeeded in creating fire at the first attempt. That's not as easy as it seems to be."

"Alright. Show me again, I want to learn."

Her determination has him laughing softly. Robin moves closer to her, retrieves the wood from her hands, and begins his explanations. He details every gesture, every step, until a small smoke begins to grow at the base of the branch, and Regina's eyes open wide, shining.

"Next time, you're doing it." He declares. Regina nods, excited, leans back.

"We might not eat very soon then." She replies, amused, laughing shyly, helping him in preparing supper.

"That's not a problem as far as I'm concerned. It's important that you start learning all of this. I didn't realize until now that I was doing everything and never thought of teaching you, I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Robin. I didn't ask either."

She gets up in order to take a hold on one of their bags currently out of her reach, hands it to him.
"Here, the food for tonight."

"Do you want to cook it yourself?"

Regina arches an eyebrow, but her eyes brighten, the corner of her mouth tipping up.

"Of course!" she replies with interest, excited as a kid would be at the prospect of being given some responsibilities.

Robin observes her dutifully peeling potatoes before plunging them inside the now boiling water. He watches carefully her furrowed brow, the way she focuses all of her attention on the meat in her hands, putting as much care as possible in her work.

When she hands him a steaming bowl of chicken, potatoes and zucchini, all he can see is the kind and proud smile she grants him with.

xxx

Regina plunges her hand in her satchel, and pulls out her comb. She leans back against a rock, brings the mass of her long hair over her shoulder, and begins to brush it slowly. She works the nodes carefully, unwilling to damage her hair more than it is now that she sleeps on a floor made out of leaves and dust, and now that she doesn't apply anything to protect it on a daily basis.

She patiently unties every knot, carding her fingers through the curls, stretches her legs a little in the process, sighing. Resting at the end of a long walking day helps a lot. Taking care of herself, even a little, feels nice.

Robin is checking the surroundings of the camp before they call the day a night, makes sure, like he does every night, that there is no wild animal watching them, that they can sleep peacefully. And Regina, as always, uses that small time to herself, to let her mind wander to places she cannot allow herself to think of when she's with him.

Like her father, for example.

Regina exhales softly, smiling warmly when she retrieves the creased portrait of her father in her bag, and stares at it, thoughtful. She tried to smooth the paper the best she could, but there wasn't much she could do, and his face stays strained where the paper was damaged.

Her finger traces the outline of his face, the back of her forefinger brushes Henry's cheek. She imagines him standing in front of her, this soft and tender smile she loves so much staring at her in a fatherly way. She remembers the warmth of his palm cupping her chin, the touch of his lips pressing a kiss to her forehead, the kindness of his voice whispering reassuring words to her ear.

"I miss you, daddy." Regina sighs. "I'm sorry I ran away and left you behind, but I promise you that it won't be for nothing. I'm going to build myself a good life. A life where I'm happy, where I can choose my destiny. A life where I won't spend my days praying for it to end. I love you, daddy. Wherever I'll be, I will always love you."

From his spot behind a tree, Robin has listened to the whole monologue. He has seen the broken look on Regina's face, heard the strangled sobs bubbling in her throat, noticed the tears brimming in her eyes that she fought so hard to keep inside.

He's just seen the woman behind the mask, and he has to admit it, it has nothing to do with the portrait of the dangerous sorceress the King made of her.
Chapter End Notes

Coming next: Robin encounters old friends that might endanger his plan, while Regina's past come back to the surface once more, forcing her to make a choice between opening up or shutting down.

Review anyone?
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

//\ READ THIS PLEASE!!! There's been a problem with this story, I skipped the previous chapter and posted this one instead. So I just put everything back in place. This chapter is the 5th one (in order when you count the prologue), and the rightful 4th chapter has been edited, so you can know read it just before this one.

I apologize for the mistake, transferring my stories from ff.net to here isn't always easy. I hope you'll forgive me and will keep enjoying this story ;-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A week has passed.

Against all odds, Regina has relaxed more than Robin thought she would.

She's succeeded in creating fire five days ago, after almost a good hour trying, her hands ripped by the woods, but her determination intact. She had failed the days before, was forced to stop because of a cramp in her arm, but with time, patience, and her incredible stubbornness, she had been finally rewarded with a success, looking up at him with the satisfied smile of an accomplished work.

Since, she's insisted to be the one to light up fire every night, something she accomplished successfully and faster with every new attempt. This victory might be nothing, but Robin learned to read between the lines, and the sparkle he saw that day in Regina's eyes, wasn't there before.

So Robin knows his trap is slowly closing.

And that she doesn't see it coming.

*Perfect!*

He watches her wander around in the market, peaking over customers' shoulders to take a look at the merchandises.

Bread.

Fruits.

Vegetables.

Meat.

Poor-quality jewelry.

From afar, he can see her wide opened eyes, how mesmerized and impressed she is by what she sees and discovers. Her face is brighter than it was when they began traveling together, despite the tired features caused by the long distances they walk every day, not counting the fact that his pace is faster than hers.
But at least she can get some real rest, whenever she's not having nightmares. It didn't happen much often, only one more time, but he has trouble forgetting about it, her desperate features, barely audible begs. Not that this is any of his concern, but still. It's intriguing, he can't deny it.

Since they spend the majority of their time in the forest, they don't have many opportunities to stop in large markets and take their time to wander around. Up until now, and besides a few sales in small shops by the side of the road, they mostly fed from Robin's hunting preys and what they found in the forest. Of course, he spends some money for her –clothes, food- but the reward for her head is so important everything will be more than paid for very soon.

From what he can see, today is the first time Regina faces and can enjoy such a large market, and she appears to like it very much. She stays quiet and discreet, peaking over people's shoulders, apologizing when she bumps into someone, trying to look everywhere at the same time.

It is quite amusing, really, to see her here. Fitting in, yet at the same time out of place, perfectly playing the role of the peasant, but the amazement and curiosity in her eyes and smile give her away. She is radiant, and Robin has to admit, it makes her look ever more beautiful.

"Robin?"

The voice takes him by surprise, has him turning around quickly, forgetting about Regina and the gourds he was filling with water.

"Guy?" Robin asks incredulously. "Guy de Gisborne?"

The other man smiles widely, opens his arms, stepping forward to hug him.

"Locksley! I wasn't expecting to see you ever again!"

"Neither was I!" Robin exclaims when he pulls back. "What are you doing here? Where are the men?"

So pleased to have found one of his former friends, Robin completely puts Regina aside, deep in memories, grateful for the unexpected meeting.

"That's a long story, but to make it short, they're not here. William and I quit. We left the group."


"A few weeks ago. We were tired of following orders. After so many years, we wanted to see something else, to live our own life."

Robin ducks his head, laughs heartily. "I can only understand. So where is William?"

He looks around, searching in the crowd, not seeing his old friend until…

Damn…

The moment he sees him, he also sees her.

Regina is shyly talking to –or apparently, trying to politely avoid- a man, one that he recognizes immediately as… his former companion, William de Widenal. If she finds them together, the chances for her to learn about his past will increase exponentially, and his whole plan will fall apart. Not that his former friends, or anyone, know who he became. But learning where he comes from, all the murders he committed, might not lead her to entrust him.
So now, he needs to find a way to escape this situation without blowing off his cover.

Something that seems impossible.

But maybe…

Robin knowingly glances at Guy, tilts his chin towards their common friend.

"I wouldn't want to disturb him while he's obviously interested in a woman, but why don't you tell him to let this poor creature be, and that you found a bigger fish? I bet he's not expecting to see me."

"Oh, he for sure isn't!" Guy confirms. "None of us could have been. We thought you left the Enchanted Forest a while ago."

"I did… for a while." Nodding towards the man still discussing with Regina. "Go fetch him! Tell him to leave that girl alone. I don't have much time to spend here, I have to leave really soon."

"Alright, give me a minute."

Hidden from her sight, Robin observes Guy approaching William, politely bowing his head in front of Regina before forcing his friend away, despite his protest at abandoning his prey. Not that Robin can blame them. Regina's beauty immediately jumps at anyone who dares pay attention to her for more than a couple of seconds. Even less than that, actually.

With her new clothes, the way she can take care of herself at least a little with regular baths, she revealed her incredible features to whoever is inclined to look.

Robin has to admit, when she adopts a particular position, when her eyes begin to shine even so slightly, when the softness of her gaze is washing over a couple of birds building a nest, his heart misses a beat, and he has to force himself to look away, to breathe in deeply and remember his mission.

So while he offered her to wander a little on her own and enjoy the market, initially planning to give himself some alone time to think through the next part of his plan, he is going to enjoy reconnecting with his former friends.

He gave Regina a rendezvous point right outside town in about an hour, which should give him enough time to share a drink with Guy and William.

"Oh. My. God. Guy wasn't kidding me!"

Robin is shaken off his thoughts by a large hand clasping his shoulder, the roughness of William's voice sounding like a memory to his ears. Instinctively, he returns the hug, content to find his old buddies back. He might have decided to live his own life, but these two guys stay his best friends, and he's just realizing how much he missed them.

"Will!" Robin exclaims, grabbing his shoulders and looking him up and down. "You look well. How have you two been? It's been so long."

"You tell me! You're the one who's been on his own for years. We have a lot of catch up to do. Guy told me you didn't have much time. Enough for a drink?" Lifting an eyebrow. "I'm buying."

"Then I'm in!" Robin accepts. "I have to leave in less than an hour, but that's better than nothing."

"Come on!" Guy says, waving towards the pub a little further. "Let's not waste any time."
Regina breathes out, relieved.

Luckily, a man fetched the guy that had definitely seen her as a beautiful price to put in his bed. Not that he was aggressive or anything, but he was insistent, made her feel uncomfortable. A feeling she hasn't known since she started traveling with Robin weeks ago. With him, on the contrary, she feels safe. She is safe. More than she's been in years, even locked up in the golden castle that was her daily prison.

With him, with Robin, she can finally relax, breathe. It didn't happen in one day, and she's still hiding so much from him, but just the fact that he's respectful of her boundaries, not pushing her limits, means more than she can express.

Also, he's been giving her space. Noticing her need for private time, for independency, in front of her interest in taking initiatives, he offered her, today, to be the one buying everything they need. To deal with it by herself, without him negotiating prices and handling a grumpy seller.

And she appreciates the gesture.

"Can I have six potatoes, four tomatoes, a zucchini and eight good carrots, please?" Regina requests kindly, brushing away her shyness and anxiety, plastering a soft smile on her lips.

She faces the surprise of the merchant, who can't be used to seeing someone ask for so much food at the same time, but the man quickly shrugs, focuses on his job, gathering her order.

"Sure, ma'am."

When she was observing people, not just today but since she ran away, Regina's been hit by the poverty surrounding her. Raised in wealth, married to a King, she, besides Daniel, has never seen it for herself while stuck behind walls. Now, it is evidence revealed to her, an annoying truth rulers have made their duty to hide or ignore.

So when she plunges her hand in her satchel, grabbing the money she knows the man will ask for, she feels uncomfortable. She's stopped trying to figure out where Robin's apparent unlimited amount of money comes from, but she has come to understand that he is wealthier than most.

"Got a bag to put that in?"

Regina snaps out of her thoughts, smiles and lifts her satchel so it's at eye-level, before she begins to fill it with her purchases.

"Yes."

"10 for the batch. Need somethin' else?"

Regina judges that the price is a good one, so she doesn't argue, hands over the money while shoving the food in her satchel at the same time. They should be able to make this last for several meals, if she's correct.

"No thanks, I'm good. Have a good day, sir." She greets.

"'day." The man mutters, already focused on another customer, moving away.

Regina closes her bag over the vegetables and the bread. She did a pretty good job for a beginner,
she hopes Robin will agree. Looking up at the sky, she notices that the sun is slowly starting to head down, telling her that noon has passed. She makes her way outside the village, heading for the spot where Robin must be waiting for her.

She walks happily, glancing around, smiling at the sight of birds flying around her. And there he is! She spots Robin standing just where he told her he'd be, his back on her, hood up, but she can't blame him, winter is here, and it's a cold one.

"Robin!" She calls, quickly joining him. "I'm sorry I'm late, I didn't see the-

The man turns around, but the person Regina faces, isn't Robin at all. She gasps, takes a step back, glaring at the figure smirking.

"My, that's quite a change since our last meeting."

The sneering voice slaps her immediately, sending her back to her past, this place of her life she's trying to escape from so hard, and Regina is seized with panic, her breath stuck in her throat.

"I didn't think you'd have made it out of that situation alive, but well… I guess the stranger helped. His name must be Robin, I suppose?"

Regina anchors her feet to the ground, standing straight, chin up, eyes throwing daggers at him, unwilling to show him how shaken she feels. "What are you doing here, Rumple?

"I'm taking news from my favorite student, of course! It's been a while since our last lesson together."

"And I don't miss any of them!" Regina spits, glancing around to make sure no one sees them. "I was certain you were rather content of being rid of me. After all, I was a… good-for-nothing. That's what you called me once, wasn't it?" She reminds, remembering a particular lesson where she had been powerless to execute the spell properly the first fifteen times.

"You always needed a little push." Rumple muses, shrugging and giggling, the sound irritating Regina to the highest level. "But I know your potential. If you come back with me-

"I won't!" Regina replies immediately, stepping back briskly. "Forget about me, Rumple. I'm done with this. I'm done with that life." She says, waving towards him. "I'm free now. I won't go back."

"You are so sure about this." Rumple snickers. "Just like you put so much hope into your new friend. You think that he is going to save you?" Regina's eyes open wide. "But dearie, tell me… Where is he then? Are you certain that he's going to come back?"

Regina moves towards Rumpelstiltskin, ready to jump at his throat but he just vanishes in the air before reappearing behind her, forcing her to turn around.

"What have you done to him?"

Rumple speaks in an innocent voice. "Me? Nothing. I'm just wondering what you are going to do, if he decide to never come back, and you end up here alone." When Regina suddenly freezes, the wizard smiles, discovering perfectly shining white teeth with a devilish smirk. "That's what I
thought." Taking a step back, Rumple never breaks eye-contact with her. "My offer still stands, Regina. Come back with me, and I will give you the power to get what you really want."

Regina stays frozen on spot, barely moving, barely breathing, eyes scrutinizing the forest in desperate search for him. She hasn't even noticed that the imp has disappeared.

Right now, she needs his presence. She needs to forget about the darkness her former mentor is trying to tempt her with. She needs to be reassured about the possibilities he expressed, that Robin being late might be the consequence of him abandoning her or being in danger and unable to come back.

"Where are you?" She murmurs, suddenly dreadful and anxious. "Where are you, Robin?"

The lump in her throat grows with every one of Rumpelstiltskin's words, with every doubt he tried to plant in her mind. She fights it, she fights him, but that bastard is effective, knows how to push her limits, how to lead her where he wants.

She begins to feel sweat pearl at the corner of her forehead.

Her hands start to tremble.

She hyperventilates.

Regina closes her eyes, focuses, calms down. She forgets about her the Dark One, her old life, thinks about everything she's accomplished since. Everything she did alone. By herself. With no help whatsoever.

She is capable of handling this, even if Robin doesn't come back. She is strong enough, she knows that. No one would have bet she could have survived this long, and yet here she is. She shouldn't worry. And Robin will arrive anyway, why is she hurting herself by believing a word that stupid imp is spitting?

But then, why isn't he here yet? Rumple is right; they should have met a while ago.

Maybe he got delayed. Maybe he had something important to do? How could she know, she ignores almost everything about him? He did agree to reveal some of his life to her, but she hasn't dared ask for now.

"Regina?"

She jumps, hand covering her chest over her racing heart, swirling around and meeting two blue eyes looking at her, apologetic.

"I'm sorry, I didn't pay attention to the time, and when I realized I was late I ran here as fast as I could."

She stares at Robin, relieved and angry, still not totally free from Rumpelstiltskin's sway. She wants to jump in his arms, and slap him at the same time. So she forces herself not to do any of them. Instead, she stays still, silent, fighting her inner feelings, coming back to herself, without realizing the concern filling Robin's face when he receives no response from her.

"Regina? Are you alright?"

His hand close over her arm, a simple touch that shakes her out of her thoughts, makes her come back to him. "Yes. Yes, I am." She quickly glances around to make sure her former teacher is gone,
before looking up at Robin. "Where were you?"

"I stopped by the tavern, and I got a bit distracted."

Regina nods shakily, ignores the possible ways he could have been distracted by, and the smell of alcohol in his breath. Instead, she tilts her chin towards the forest behind them. "I have everything we need. We can go."

xxx

Robin walks silently by her side, thoughtful, caught between the happy reunion with his friends and Regina's behavior since he joined her an hour ago.

On one hand, he's still full of the enthusiasm from having seen his former companions.

They told him that during one of their travels, as Guy and William were on a reconnaissance mission, they came to meet with a family, one of good fortune who happened to, without knowing who they really were, host them for a few days. In the house, there was someone to whom Guy developed a crush on. A young lady named Marian Fitzwalter, the only child of the house's master. Beautiful, with delicate features, good manners and an incredible smile. When they had to leave their lands, Guy realized he was unable to pull her out of his mind. He was bewitched by her. After discussing it with William, his closest companion left now that Robin was gone, the only one who witnessed him fall for the lady, the two decided that he had to do everything in his power to woo her properly and win her heart. That this life of endless walks and fights was over for them.

So they left.

They left with the firm intention to find Lady Marian, and succeed in making her Lady de Gisborne.

They're still on their way to her, Guy revealed, she lives somewhere in King Leopold's kingdom it seems—what a coincidence!

Before parting ways, Robin wished his friends good fortune, good luck, and promised that as soon as he was done with his current job—he only revealed that he was on a mission he could say nothing about—he would try to find them so he could assist his friend's wedding.

As for Regina… he noticed her anxiety immediately, her concerned face, the way she was standing in the middle of the forest, frozen on spot. He doesn't know what happened to her, she refused to give him an explanation and he didn't push. But right now, in her demeanor, he can see how tense she still is, how she tries to relax and calm down, and he can't take it anymore.

He has to know what she has in mind. He has to reassure her, see her smile again, and help her feel better. He needs to. He's almost there, close to send a message to the King and ask him to join them to retrieve her body; he can't blow up everything now. Regina has to believe that he will never betray her. She has to put her trust in him.

"Regina?" He calls softly, brushing his fingers over her arm to catch her attention, insisting when she only hums in answer. "Regina, please. Stop for a second."

She hesitates, inhales, and stops, exhaling while she turns to face him, raising clouded eyes to look at him.

"What is it?" Robin asks gently. "I know you usually don't want to talk about what's bothering you, and you know I respect that. But Regina, whatever happened earlier completely upset you. I can't let you stay in that state of mind." He smiles down at her, and sees her progressively give in, the corner
of her lips tipping up slightly. "Tell me." He breathes. "Is it me? Is it because I was late?"

She's still silent, her smile fading a little, her brow furrowing.

And then, she looks down, sighs, and when she looks up the usual sparkle in her dark orbs is back.

"No… I mean… yes. And no." In front of Robin's confused expression, she clarifies. "It wasn't you. Just... the fact that you were late only added to the pile, that's all."

Robin doesn't think, closes his hands over hers softly, brushing his thumbs over the back of her fingers, shivering at the touch. Her skin is so soft…

"What can I do to help then?"

She's had so many moments like this, that Robin feels he's offering his help for the hundredth time, but he realizes that he doesn't mind. Especially when she scrunches her nose this way, sighing again, relaxing a little more, before throwing him a sheepish look.

"Just promise me that if… when," she corrects. "you'll decide to part ways, you will tell me about it first, that you won't disappear without a goodbye."

"I told you, Regina. I'm staying with you, and I won't let you down. What can I do to make you believe me?"

Regina shakes her head. "Nothing." She replies resolutely, with more confidence in her voice than he thought there would be. "I don't know what's wrong with me, I'm sorry. I trust you, Robin. I know it wasn't made on purpose. Forgive me, it's me. I'm just…"

Hiding his inner satisfaction, forgetting about the achievement of his plan, Robin lifts a hand to cup her chin, his chest suddenly shaken by a strong, intense beat of his heart, breath stuck in his throat. He has to fight the feeling to be able to speak.

"It's okay." He brushes his thumb over her cheek. "Tell me, Regina. Unload."

Again, this hesitation. A cloud covering her eyes, before she recovers and lets out a long, exhausted breath.

"I met someone, today."

Robin immediately thinks of William, clenches in jaw in anticipation. What could the man have told her to put her in this state?

"Someone I know. Someone from my past."

Robin listens, silent, on his guard, at the same time eager to learn more. This is the first time that she mentions her past, and he finds himself more than intrigued by it.

"He wanted me to go back home."

"Go back? You left your home?" He questions genuinely, the conversation piquing his curiosity.

"I did."

"Why?"

"Because I wasn't happy there."
She shrugs, and Robin nods. "That's a good reason, I suppose." Focusing on the real subject of this conversation and not his curiosity to discover more about the reason she ran away, he questions. "What did you say?"

"No, of course. I don't want to go back there; it's not my home, more like a prison. But before he left, he told me I would never make it without him, that my only chance was to follow him. He said that you were going to leave at some point, and that alone, I would never make it to my goal. And he's wrong! I know he's wrong! I survived for a while before meeting you, I can handle myself. But traveling with you has made things easier, I feel less lonely, safer." She admits. "But when I realized you were late, I thought... I was afraid that..."

"That I abandoned you." Robin finishes for her. In front of her nod, he continues. "I'm in this with you, Regina. I'm sorry I scared you, but I never thought of leaving you behind."

"I know that now. I'm sorry I even thought of the possibility."

Robin acts on an impulse.

He spontaneously closes the space between them, cups the back of her head and hugs her close, rubbing her back.

He doesn't realize right away that his breath is held, his heart hammering fast in his chest, pounding in his ears. He stays like this for a moment, too caught up in the overwhelming sensations building up inside him to know how long it lasts. Enveloped in the feeling of her arms around his waist, and by the sweet scent of her skin, the softness of her skin.

He would have never thought that he could be this shaken at seeing her so lost and troubled.

He's surprised when she pulls back, head lowered shamefully, forehead twisted in confusion, relaxing into a relieved expression, her face lightening up the second she meets his eyes.

That's when he sees it.

That's when she does it.

For the first time, Regina smiles.

Not that she's ever smiled in front of him before, but it's the first time that her smile is so bright, genuine, an elusive but satisfying smile hitting him square in the chest.

Completely taking his breath away.

xxx

"We shall be careful, there's a raccoon in the area. Vicious creatures, those animals! I caught it red-handed trying to steal my clothes when I was getting out of the water."

Regina jumps, drops the ring she was holding, immediately bending to grab it, blowing on it to remove the dust.

"I'm sorry." Robin apologizes when he sits next to her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Regina smiles, shakes her head. "No, don't worry. I was just pulled into memories; I didn't hear you coming back." She tilts her head to the side. "You said a raccoon stole your clothes?"

"Well, he obviously didn't, since I'm fully clothed." Robin opens his arms to prove his statement.
"But he almost did. I managed to scare him off just in time. Those animals have a tendency to steal; we should close our bags tightly and sleep close to them."

"Duly noted!" Regina chuckles, unconsciously playing with her ring, bringing Robin's interest on it.

"May I?" He requests, his hand held, palm up.

Regina doesn't even hesitate, deposits her most precious treasure in Robin's hand. It's not as if he won't return it to her after all. She observes him turn the object in front of him, examining it to the light of the fire, focused.

"I've never seen such ring before. Pardon me, but this doesn't appear to be gold."

"Because it isn't. Just like it isn't supposed to be a ring."

Robin's eyebrow lift in question. "Would I be pushing if I ask for more information? I have to admit, your answer piques my curiosity."

She laughs softly, retrieves Daniel's ring, staring at it as she speaks.

"It was a gift from someone very dear to me, someone who didn't have much, yet gave me more than most people around me."

Watching her, listening to her, Robin notices immediately the cloud covering her eyes, the sadness filling her voice, the frown and blinks made to keep the tears at bay. She did mention a past she didn't want to go to. Maybe he'll get more information about it now.

"He wanted to offer me a ring, but he couldn't afford one. So, he retrieved one of the loops on his satchel, one that miraculously perfectly fitted my finger, and gave it to me. It was the most beautiful gift I ever received. It is worth no money, but to my eyes, it's my most valuable treasure."

Regina falls silent after that, staring at her finger, at the ring in front of her eyes, deep in thoughts.

Daniel's been dead for years now, his body is safely kept and preserved in her crypt at the castle, but the wound of his loss is still fresh, hurts just as much as it did in the beginning. She still hasn't found a way to bring him back, might never find one now that she's given up on learning magic, but at least she can try to overcome his death by living her own life instead of being miserable.

From his spot next to her, Robin peers at her face, her expression, the sadness, but also the amazement, he can read in it. Her story is more complicated than she lets believe, that much is obvious. She has kept a lot of details from him. But this is enough! No matter how eager he is to discover more, this little game he's playing has to stop. Regina is a strange, fascinating, incredibly beautiful woman who makes him question his motivation way too much. But she is doomed to die. He has reached his goal. It took him a month, but he's there. He trapped her. So tomorrow, he will send a message to the King, asking him to meet with him to retrieve her body.

And that will be the end of the Queen Regina, and of his problems.

xxx

The weather is getting worse.

Slipping out of the icy water, frozen, Regina shivers violently, quickly wraps herself in her towel and moves under the cover of the trees, in a sheltered place.
She didn't stay in the river for more than five or ten minutes maybe, but the weather has completely changed during that time, loud clouds covering the sky and darkening the beginning of the day.

If they keep dropping like this, snow will come before they even reach December, and she and Robin may even have to decide to stop somewhere safe until the bad days are over. They already had to, last week, when the rain was so thick that neither Robin nor she could even see where they were going. They found shelter in a small barn next to a cottage, where they stayed hidden throughout the night until it stopped raining. They thanked their lucky stars that the owner didn't think to check for intruders.

Regina breathes out, head down, quickly putting on her clothes, wiping her hair the best she can then tying it into a long braid.

Her mind drifts towards her ultimate goal, thinking of all of the distance she still has to walk to reach her destination. Two more kingdoms to cross. Probably the whole winter spent outside, at the mercy of the nature. She should have thought it through when she escaped. The opportunity was there, and she was drowning into despair and self-loathing, but she should have realized that taking off to the wind right before one of the coldest winters begins wasn't the smartest idea.

She exhales through her nose.

At least, she's free now, and it gave her the opportunity to meet Robin. He probably saved her, and he helps her so much, every day, she thinks she is really lucky to travel by his side.

Her thoughts are interrupted by the crack of a branch above her head. Regina wraps her cloak around her tightly, hugging herself, bracing herself to face the elements.

When she rises and emerges from her small shelter, Regina is hit by a strong wave of wind, cold, freezing even, freezing even, slapping her right in the face, knocking her breath out.

She stumbles back, catches herself on the closest trunk but knocks her head in the process. She instinctively brings a hand to the wound, massages the area slowly, bends her head forward and closes her eyes, waiting for the pain to pass. Enveloped by another blast of wind, she shivers, violently this time, fighting a sudden faintness while she begins to walk in direction of the small camp where Robin is waiting for her. As the wind subsides, the malaise increases. She can feel her fast heartbeat pounding in her ears, anxiety coming back, washing over her, but she fights it. She's close to the camp, she will be safe soon.

_Crack._

Regina hears the sound of a branch breaking, but by the time she turns around and lifts her eyes to the sky, she receives a massive blow to the ribs, her breath knocked out of her lungs, an intensive pain spreading through her whole chest as a fallen branch projects her against a tree, and she hit her head hard in the process.

She falls on the floor, dizzy, holding her head, her ribs, mind foggy, vision blurred, breath erratic, body trembling. There's a warm liquid against her hand, a metallic smell reaching her.

She fights to come back to herself, but the more she tries, the more she finds herself drifting towards numbness, the fog surrounding her thicker with each passing second. Regina attempts to inhale fully, but she's stopped immediately when she feels her bones break in her rib cage. The pain becomes overwhelming, her head begins to spin. She feels dizzy, _dizzier_, and weaker each passing second, and before she realizes, her eyelids slowly close.
The last thing Regina is aware of before losing consciousness is the storm surrounding her, shredding the forest apart.

And then everything turns dark.

Chapter End Notes

Coming next : After an unexpected event changes the course of his plan, Robin has to decide which path he wants to follow...
Chapter 6

Alright, now I'm all caught up with where I stopped with this story on ff.net. No more switching or skipping chapters, I promise!
I asked one of my beta's opinion and she doesn't think this chapter needs a warning, but I'd rather be careful so warning for mention of violence and murder.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Damn!"

Robin is caught off guard by the strong and icy wind unexpectedly rising and almost making him lost his balance. He lifts a hand to protect his face against the blast, leans against a tree and kneels down to its root, to find a camp half ravaged when he opens his eyes.

The wind has decreased a little, but Robin recognized the premises of a storm, he knows this is just the beginning. He needs to find shelter.

Robin begins to gather their things, quickly secures them in the bags, making sure it's safely locked in and he didn't lose anything important.

Then, he looks up and begins to search for Regina's silhouette through the forest. She left a while ago, should be heading back, especially with the growing storm and quickly dropping temperatures. Hidden in the cavity of a large rocky mountain, he waits for a moment, heart beating faster with every passing minute. He can't lose his target when he's so close to fulfilling his contract.

"Regina?" he calls when the wind decreases.

He lends an ear, attentive, eyes scrutinizing the forest, searching through the flying and falling leaves and dust. It doesn't take him long to realize that Regina isn't here and nowhere close. Using the sudden lull in the storm, he walks out of his stash and towards the stream where he knows Regina went.

"Regina, do you hear me? We have to find a shelter."

No answer again.

Maybe she's found refuge somewhere, Robin tries to guess. So he doesn't stop, he hasn't reached the river yet anyway.

He doesn't see it immediately. At first, he thinks of a fallen trunk in the middle of the road. Until he gets closer and recognizes the form on the ground.

The anxiety that invades him makes Robin speed up unconsciously. He fights the storm and the attack of the forest when the wind rises again, protects his face with his arms held up as a shield, drops his bags on the floor before kneeling down next to her.

"Oh my God!" he lets out spontaneously, his voice broken with concern. "Regina!"
Unaware of his frantic heartbeats, he brings a hand to cover the back of her head, the other removing her hair from her face the best he can with the wind assaulting them at every second.

She's unconscious.

What the hell happened here? This isn't his doing. Was she attacked? Did she hurt herself?

Why is she lying down, cataleptic, in the middle of a storm?

A warmth against his palm has him look at his hand to find fresh blood slipping from what appears to be a head injury.

"What the-"

Robin stares at his hand, covered with blood, then at Regina's inert body. She's hurt, but he can see her chest rise regularly, that means she's still alive.

But she needs help.

She's completely vulnerable, at his mercy.

He should get rid of her now.

This is the perfect opportunity to finish things once and for all. This effect she has on him, this smile she so easily puts on his face with a simple glance, the fluttering in his chest everytime he catches sight of her, the way she takes his breath away with a simple touch of his arm, all of these things he cannot explain, make her too dangerous.

Maybe it's sorcery, the King did warn him that she was a powerful witch, even if Robin never faced this side of her. Something is happening, that's a certainty. But whatever this is, he has to make it stop. He has to end this, even if it doesn't follow his initial plan. He should have done it days—hell, even weeks!—ago. Why was he stupid enough to wait? There are so many ways to get rid of someone.

Poison her brew.

Slice her throat during the night.

Stab her when she's least expecting it.

That's exactly what he's going to do now.

He wanted to send a message to the King tonight asking for a meeting in two days so he could kill her in front of him, but bringing the man her cold body will do. So he's going to execute his contract, right now, get the money, and go back to leaving his life.

But Robin stays frozen on spot, unable to move.

He thought it would be easy, that an arrow or a knife would fix this problem when the time comes.

It is not easy.

His hand is at his belt, hovering above his dagger, but he cannot find the strength to close his fingers over the shaft.

His brain is assaulted by contradictory feelings.
Abandoning Regina here to die in the middle of this storm, crushed by falling trees or bleed out to death, only to retrieve her body later to hand it to the King, that or slicing her throat right now, represents a way to honor his contract. He'll get the money in the end, so there's that.

But what if he cannot find it in himself to let her die here, or worse, to just end her life himself? What if his mind is contradicting his heart, begging him to spare her life, for a reason he can't understand?

What if he's making a big mistake, not by letting her live, but by letting her die? What if he's been wrong from the beginning?

Will he be able to look himself in the mirror if he crosses the line? Will he be able to keep doing this job?

Is he still able to?

"Sir?"

Robin stares at Regina's unconscious and pale face, deeply lost in thoughts, torn about the choice to make, so he doesn't hear the stranger walk to him, doesn't notice his presence until he feels a hand on his shoulder. He swirls around immediately, fingers closing over the unexpected guest's wrist, his other fist lifting above his head threateningly, stopping himself instantly when his mind catches up with his reflexes.

"Hey! Easy there!"

A brown-haired man exclaims, stepping back and holding his arms up next to his head in defense. He slowly, carefully, lowers the ax he's holding to the ground, bringing his arm up immediately to protect himself from the wind and dust flying around them, one of his feet stepping back to anchor him to the ground. Robin's arm lowers without him realizing.

"I only wanted to check out what happened. Do you need help?"

Robin is at a loss for words.

Nothing makes sense anymore.

Why is he even here, struggling to decide whether or not he should kill a woman he's been hired to kill and whose life means nothing to him? Why did he decide to change his method this time? Why didn't he kill Regina the second he caught sight of her in the forest, weeks ago?

"Sir, do you hear me?" the man asks.

It snaps Robin out of his daze state. Looking down at Regina, his fingers brushing her forehead, he sighs.

His decision is made. At least for now. He needs more time to think this through, and time isn't something he has right now.

"My friend is injured. She needs a healer."

"Do you know what happened?"

Robin shakes his head. "No. I was... I wasn't... She left our camp to get ready and... I don't know."
He sighs again, hating himself for his confused and hesitating voice, a strange sound to his own hear, a foreign one.
"Alright. I live close from here, we can find shelter there, the healer doesn't live far. Do you feel up to carrying her?"

Hand still brushing her cheek, shivering at the coldness and pallor of her skin, Robin's yes is mixed with the bubbling anxiety growing in his throat.

The two men work together to carefully put the brunette in Robin's arms, covering her with her coat. While he's tucking her head comfortably against his shoulder, Robin hears a whimper, hopefully glances at her face to see her eyelids flutter, fighting to stay open.

"Regina?" He calls, his voice frantic, forgetting for a moment about the storm around him, the strong wind threatening to make him fall, the quickly dropping temperatures.

"Regina, do you hear me?"

The other man turns to get closer, looks at the young woman who's struggling to open her eyes.

Robin sighs in relief when his name pops out of Regina's lips in a whisper. She can't say more, her eyes are still close, and she seems to be drifting towards unconsciousness again, but the brief exchange has given Robin the resolution he needed.

"Hold on, Regina! You're going to be okay." He whispers when her eyelids close again, her head falling back against his shoulder.

To hell with doubts.

Right now, all he wants, is to see the black orbs of this woman stare at him defiantly, and her wonderful smile twitch her lips up again.

"We need to go!"

The voice of the stranger brings Robin back to reality, to the dangerous situation they're stuck in, and he nods, follows the man quickly, their pace as fast as possible despite the natural forces they're putting up with.

For a small while, they make their way through the forest, fighting the strong and icy wind, avoiding the growing fresh fallen snow as it starts to fall and isn't yet sticking to the ground, but rendering it slippery and dangerous. Their faces are burrowed in their hoods, and they take support on trees from time to time when the effort becomes unbearable. Robin glances at Regina every now and then, to her pale features, still closes eyes, her pink lips slightly turning blue.

It's only after a time that seems to last forever that Robin notices a wooden cabin, further on the road, with smoke exiting the chimney.

"We're almost there." The man screams to cover the whistle of the wind.

The door opens quickly the second they face it, a woman standing in the entrance, moving to the side to let them enter.

"I was looking through the window when I saw you arrive." She explains. "Hurry up! Come inside!"

Robin follows the man in the house, lets the woman close the door behind them, but he's still too stunned to speak or react other than mechanically. He hears their voices, but cannot make out their words. His arms are protectively closed over Regina's body, his chin on top of her forehead as he
attempted to protect her from the stormy weather.

It takes him a moment to come back to his spirit. Not that he's never faced a storm before, but the one happening in his head right now is flipping everything upside down. He still can't understand what's happening to him, what's pushing him to help this woman whom he's only known for a month. Why is he finding himself unable to do his job, for the first time in years? He's killed women before, has always fulfilled his contracts. What's different now?

The tactic he's been using with Regina, pretending to befriend her before stabbing her in the back, he's never used it with a woman in the past. So what makes her different? Why did his heart start beating faster the moment he saw her lying on the ground, and hasn't stopped? Why are his guts twisting with anxiety and fear from the second he realized she was unconscious and worse, bleeding? Why is he having trouble breathing? Why can't he lessen the grip he has on her, and feels like keeping her secured in his arms is the best -only- way to protect her?

"Sir?"

His mind is still foggy, his breath still short, his vision blurred. Someone is squeezing his shoulder, there are voices in the background, but it seems to be so far away...

"Sir, are you okay?"

Robin finally snaps out of his dazed state. He blinks repeatedly, stares absentmindedly at the woman and man worryingly looking at him.

"I'm sorry, what?"

"You can lie her down here." she says softly, waving towards the fire and a pile of covers on the ground.

"We have to get her warmed up, and you too. You're frozen."

It's only after his mind processes the woman's words that Robin realizes he's, indeed, trembling from head to toe, his fingers numb, face wet from the snow.

"It's not the most comfortable place, but at least it's the warmest of the house." The woman keeps talking, unaware of his train of thoughts and unbothered by his lack of reply, but that's fine for him. "I'll take a look at her while my husband will get out to fetch the healer."

Robin nods wordlessly, carefully lays Regina on the covers, lets her head rests on the small pillow the woman hands him. He struggles not to brush a wild strand of hair away from her face, finds himself unable to look away. Someone urges him to turn though, and the man hands him a thick blanket, tilts his chin towards his shoulders. That's when Robin realizes that he's still wearing his half damped cloak.

"Thank you." Robin mutters. He removes his cloak, that the man retrieves immediately, hanging it above the door with several other cloaks, and wraps the cover over his shoulders. The warmth spreading in his body, soothing his aching muscles, has him exhale softly and relax slightly.

"Come here, sit down." The man invites him. "Let me get you some water."

Robin shakes his head. "I'm fine. I want to stay by her side."

"You're in shock. And my wife will check on your friend in a minute. You need to rest, there's nothing more you can do to help her right now." The man states, statement to which Robin doesn't
answer, just stares down at the glass of water.

In old times, he would have punched this man for daring speak to him like that. But now isn't old times, and he has changed, much more than he expected, so he listens, takes place on a seat and watches the blonde woman tuck Regina under thick blankets.

"My name is Michael." the brown-haired man introduces himself, drawing his attention again. He waves a hand towards the woman who smiles kindly in return, before she focuses her attention back on Regina. "Eleanor is my wife. And you are?"

Robin sips a gulp shakily, gaze fixed upon the person he probably just saved the life of, the woman he called his friend while he was -still is- supposed to kill her. Against all odds.

"Robin. She's Regina."

"Nice to meet you, Robin. This place isn't a big one, but it will keep you safe from the storm. Our healer doesn't live very far, I'm going to go get her in a moment."

"Alright. Thank you."

"Daddy! Hug now?"

The high-pitched and unexpected shriek startles everyone and breaks the tense and awkward atmosphere. Robin's attention is drawn towards the origin of the call, where a blonde-haired little girl and a boy with dark hair and brown eyes, not older than 3, are standing. The girl is pouting, arms crossed over her chest, while the boy glances between him and Regina in curiosity.

Michael looks at the children and his face immediately lights up. He crouched and opens his arms wide.

"Of course, my darlings. Come here!"

In less than three seconds, he's holding them close to his chest.

"You listened to your mommy and I and you waited quietly. That's very good!"

"Daddy, why here now?" The boy questions.

Surely, Michael must be working during the day to provide for his family, Robin thinks. His situation with Regina, or the storm, must have interrupted his plans.

Michael lifts his son from the ground, settles him on his lap and explains softly.

"I met some people on the road and they needed help. These are our guests. Robin," he waves towards Regina. "And Regina. They're going to stay with us for a little bit, alright." Not waiting for the children's approval, he meets Robin's gaze, introduces them. "Robin, I present you my almost three-year-old twins. Hansel and Gretel."

xxx

"Alright, I have to go, Hansel. I'll be back in a bit."

Michael brushes his son's forehead tenderly, shushes his protest with a firm voice and a kiss to his cheek before putting him on the ground. Gretel is watching her mother change the cloths covering Regina's head with eyes shining with interest.
Eleanor turns towards her husband. "I managed to stop the bleeding to her head, but she's still cold and unconscious. Don't waste any more time, she needs her help."

Robin's head snap up from Regina's form to meet the blonde woman's eyes.

"Her?" he questions.

"Yes. The healer."

Robin lifts an eyebrow. "Your healer is a woman?"

"Indeed." Eleanor nods. "Her father held that position until he passed, last year. He taught her everything he knew. She's the best around here."

"Really?" Robin can't help but ask. He's not defensive, after all during his travels he witnessed so many different things and situations he's one of the few who's aware that a woman can be worthy of man if trained properly. "I thought women weren't allowed to be healers around here."

"Usually, they don't. But everyone in the area knows her, we grew up in the same village, and we trust her. She's helped her father cure many of us from different diseases. She will help your friend."

"That's all I'm asking for." Robin replies pensively, getting up and crouching by Regina's side, a hand covering her forehead. He winces at the coldness hitting his palm.

He doesn't notice Michael coming closer to him, only hears his voice when he asks. "Do you want to come with me, Robin?"

The offer surprises him, has Robin look up at Michael with a furrowed brow. "I'd rather stay by her side." He shrugs, his attention back on Regina already. "I want to be here if she wakes up again."

There's a silence following his answer, one to which Robin barely pays attention to. He's heard the couple whisper a few times already in the short time they've spent here -because really, it hasn't been more than fifteen minutes maybe, mostly time for Michael to recover from the cold outside. But he has noticed Michael's defiant glances to him, figures the man can't feel reassured at the idea of leaving his wife and kids with a stranger.

"Go! We'll be fine. And you'll be back very soon."

Eleanor's hushed reply to her husband confirms his theory, their defiance about him, but what can he do about it? He is a heavily armed stranger accompanying an injured and unconscious young woman, many people would ask questions. So Robin waits, silent, still, except for his thumb rubbing the back of Regina's hand.

"I won't be long." Michael speaks behind him. "Your friend will be fine. Our healer is the best."

Knowing that the healer lives less than a mile from where they are and that she'll be here soon doesn't appease Robin's fear. His shoulders are still tensed, his face strained with concern, his jaw clenched. He hasn't moved from his spot on the ground next to Regina, hasn't released her hand, and stares at her helplessly, as if the power of his gaze could wake her up from her slumber. At least, that's how he must look like from outside.

But inside, it's a whole different matter. He's still pondering whether or not he made the right call, and if he'll have to pay the consequences for his actions sooner or later, because, for the first time in
forever, he crossed a dangerous line. One he's not certain he'll come back from even if he eventually
decides to finally turn her in to her husband. But then he remembers his name slipping from her lips,
the desperation of his heart when it sank in his chest at the sight of her, unconscious and bleeding,
the fear that seized him then, and that hasn't left him yet. He remembers her elusive smile and the
way he thinks of it all the time. The images of her stubbornly learning how to build a fire and then
proudly grinning at him, striking him straight in his chest and, for a second or two, forbidding him to
breathe. How did it come to this? It was the first lesson he learned, the first thing he was taught.

Never get personally involved in a case.

He remembers…

"She's beautiful, isn't she, Robin?"

The teenager jumps and looks at his mentor, Marcus, whose sneering voice just spat the words in his
ear while he was watching a young girl being poorly treated in the middle of their camp.

She's a nobody, a slave to them, someone they bought from a merchant during one of their journeys
months ago, along with a bunch of other girls, so they would do all the tasks that are considered too
low for men to do.

Robin came to speak with this girl one night, as he exited his tent to relieve his bladder. She's a small
thing, a brunette barely his age, and he'd seen her crying in a corner. Kara, was her name. He
learned it after he'd asked her that day, when he sat by her side and, after assuring her he meant her
no harm, they started to get to know each other. It had been secret encounters between them, she
wasn't allowed to speak to the men of the camp and it wasn't permitted to befriend the slaves. But
Robin was in need of a friend, and she seemed nice, as desperate as he was, with her golden eyes
confusingly staring back at him through her tears.

And as their friendship grew, his mentor's suspicions did too, something Robin was about to learn
that day.

"Do you think she likes you, Robin?"

The young man shrugs, ignoring the answer, at the same time unwilling to reveal too much about
his forbidden friendship with Kara.

"Don't be so shy, Robin." Marcus says calmly, patting his shoulder, smirking. "Do you really think
I'm not aware of your little nightly excursions?"

Robin's head snaps to the side, to meet his mentor's shining eyes. He swallows heavily, stuck in a
corner. He knows that if he lies, the man will see it immediately, and will punish him for it.

"I didn't mean any harm!" He assures with a fearful voice. "I just wanted to be nice to her."

"Nice?" Marcus laughs. "Why would you want to be nice?" In front of his silence, he tilts his chin
forward, towards the girl busy cooking lunch. "Ulrich!" A tall man with a large forehead and a scar
across his right cheek gets up, waiting for orders. "Search the girl!"

Robin's confusion grows as he watches Ulrich grab Kara's arm bluntly, dragging her away from the
cauldron under her, sudden and frightened cries drawing the attention of a large part of the camp,
people watching them curiously.

"Watch and learn, Robin." Marcus whispers when he walks past him, rooting himself in front of
Kara, firmly held by Ulrich. Her golden eyes are staring at him in fear, her posture the one of
someone who's been diminished her whole life. What is there to learn from this?

"Go ahead."

At his leader's order, Ulrich begins to search the girl's dress, ripping from her the few things she possesses, a small handkerchief, a handcrafted comb that she must have made herself, throwing everything on the ground. Marcus crouches, examines every item, humming sometimes, mostly frowning.

"Are you sure she doesn't carry anything else on her?" He asks when he looks up.

Their devilish smirks are enough indication to what's going to happen, and Robin watches in horror as Kara fights them with the small and unfitting strength she possesses, unable to stop them from ripping her rags apart, leaving her half naked in the middle of the camp, until Marcus' victorious voice puts an end to the situation.

Robin has watched the scene in shock. He's never witnessed so much cruelty before, and seeing Kara's teary eyes as she desperately attempts to hide her chest and legs from view hits something in him, shaking his resolve to become a part of the mercenary group. He takes a step forward, intending to stop this charade, knowing very well he will probably receive a slap for his nerve, but he cannot stand this anymore.

Marcus turns towards him before Robin has a chance to speak. And he's holding an object he recognizes too well. The first dagger that was offered to him after he joined the camp.

It freezes him on the spot.

Marcus holds the knife in front of him for everyone to see, but his words, Robin knows, are only meant for him.

"We have a thief among us. A slave who's robbed one of us and has probably planned to use this knife to force her way out of this camp. She used Robin's good heart and plotted to stab him in the back." Turning towards the crowd, this time, Marcus addresses them directly. "Tell me, my men: How do we deal with treason?"

The answer is loud and common. "Death."

"Who should perform this sentence?"

Robin knows the answer before it resonates in his ears. His name is spoken so loudly he almost startles, and before he can realize his feet are leading him towards Marcus, who hands the blade to him. But Robin doesn't take it right away. For a moment, he stares at Kara, at the lace around her leg that was holding the dagger hidden, and as the truth hits him, his heartbreak becomes apparent through his eyes brimming with unshed tears. How did he miss this? How could he let this happen?

The pain is excruciating, the anger overcoming his 'good heart', and as she tries to explain her actions to him, babbling that she never planned to hurt him, only wanted to escape, Robin's hand closes over the handle, and with one swift movement, without hesitation, he slices the girl's throat. And watches her body crumble on the ground, unaware of the cheerful and satisfied screams of his pack.

She was his first kill.

He didn't love her, he didn't even know what love meant by then, but Kara was the first woman he felt attracted to, she was the first one he called his friend, and she used him thoughtlessly.
Consequently, she paid the price for her actions.

Robin's hand hovers over his belt, over the dagger he never got rid of, wondering if Regina deserves a similar fate. She surely hasn't betrayed him yet, at least not that he's aware of, and she might never do so.

Except Marcus was right. He shouldn't have let his emotions get in the way of his mission. Now, he's in an impossible situation because of it. But Regina hasn't done anything wrong. Regina hasn't turned against him. If so, she's been nice to him, apologized for each wrong step or bad mood, granted him with smiles, and was happy to learn from him. She enjoys his presence. He knows she does. She isn't playing him. He knows how to read people's faces, and Regina's expressions have always been genuine. A bit defiant at first, something he can't really blame her for. But when defiance turned into trust, when she voiced her trust, he knew she meant every word.

So, despite Marcus' rule, he will let Regina live and recover. He will allow her a few more days to be alive. He will allow himself to receive her wonderful smile for a bit longer, to let it thaw and warm his heart.

But she cannot smile at him while she's unconscious, and her face is pale, her usual pink lips have turned blue, her shining eyes are desperately closed. And it breaks his heart in thousands of pieces.

"Come on, Regina." He breathes. "The healer is almost here. So, stay with me, okay? I told you I wouldn't leave you, so I forbid you to give up on me, do you understand?"

It's only as the words spontaneously leave his lips, that Robin understands how much he means each of them, how true they are. There is no act now, no lies, no twisting the truth to accommodate his version. He wants her to wake up. He doesn't want her to die. As painful and odd as it is, as illogical and incomprehensible, this is his new reality. He came to care enough for his target that he cannot fulfill his contract, for the first time in his life. How did he end up committing such a huge mistake? How did he break the first rule he ever learned, the one that controlled his life up until now?

"Robin?"

Eleanor's voice is soft, but it startles him, has him shaking his head to come back to his senses, turning to meet the woman's eyes. She's handing him a satchel, Regina's satchel, he recognizes, and a large bag, the one they use to put their things in.

"I believe that this is yours?"

"Yes." He swallows, grabs the satchel, lets Eleanor drop the bag next to him. "Thank you."

"You may want to keep an eye on those. Hansel has a tendency to ransack everything he finds. I wouldn't want him to steal something from you."

Robin smiles, notices the boy a little in the back, eyeing him sheepishly, his sister braver and more curious next to him, and attempts a small smile. These people have done nothing wrong, and they're trying to help. He has no reason to be mean to them.

"Thanks for the warning. I'll be careful."

Eleanor politely smiles and nods, straightens her spine and begins to turn away from him, when Robin, pushed by a sudden force, gets up, calls her name.

"Yes?" She says when she faces him again.
"I know I haven't been very... open, or responsive to what you're doing but... I want you to know that I appreciate this." He waves his hand in front of him, slightly glances at Regina. "Letting us stay here, calling the healer, making arrangements to make us comfortable, even though you don't have much space and we are total strangers to you. I might not be very good at showing it, but I'm grateful."

"Don't worry, Robin. I understand." She smiles kindly. "You're worried about your friend, your mind is elsewhere, that's normal. But thank you for telling me."

While the woman goes back to her children, turning away from him, she can't see the sparkle of realization that lit up in Robin's eyes at her words. His mind is elsewhere, indeed. He's not in his normal state of mind. Eleanor is right. He isn't himself right now.

Maybe what he thinks are these new feelings he's developed for Regina, what he imagines to be a pang of his heart, in reality are just him having been bewitched by her. She must have enchanted him, that would explain his current emotions. Without realizing, Eleanor just gave him the answer. Regina has probably used her powers on him, that's why he never saw past her sweet face and smile. But here's the thing! He knows a little bit about magic, and he knows that for a spell to work long term, it has to be kept on. And, while Regina recovers, she won't have the strength to use her magic so her spell will fade, letting him get back to his spirit.

So, this is only a setback, and he won't make the same mistake twice. The minute he finds himself alone with her again, once this situation is over and they're away from this place, he will finish the job. No one will ever know he hesitated. No one will ever know he almost failed. It won't happen. He won't let this witch turn his whole world upside down. Her kindness, her sweet smile, her soft touch, it was all fake. She's playing him just as he's playing her. But she won't win. He won't let her. Kara was the first woman to betray him. And she will stay the only one.

_Knock knock..._

Robin's attention is on the door. He watches Eleanor open it to reveal Michael and a young blonde woman with blue eyes who holds a large satchel and doesn't immediately pay attention to him.

"Hi, Ellie." She greets Eleanor with a warm hug, the woman helping her get rid of her coat and bag.

"Hey! Thank you for coming."

"Of course. Michael explained the situation, you were right to call me."

The woman, the healer, then notices Regina, asleep and covered with blankets. She's still unconscious, and the woman briefly crouches next to her, the tip of her fingers brushing the hair away from her forehead.

"Is this her?"

"Yes." Robin finally speaks, catching everyone's attention and reminding his presence. He still stands where he was when he spoke to Eleanor. "She got injured during the storm. I wasn't there when it happened, she was already out for the count when I found her."

The healer's eyebrows shoot up in surprise, a mask of concern replacing the surprise quickly.

"When was that?"

"Maybe an hour, an hour and a half ago?"
"And she hasn't regained consciousness since?"

"Briefly. She only said my name once, but nothing more."

"Alright. What's her name?"

"Regina."

"And you are?"

"Robin."

She holds her hand out. "It's nice to meet you, Robin. I'm this village's healer. My name is Amelia."

Chapter End Notes

Coming next : Amelia works on healing Regina while Robin is still struggling to decide which path he wants to follow...

For those who think Amelia seems familiar to them, well... I'd say trust your gut!

Thank you for leaving feedbacks on your way out :-)

They asked him to leave the room a good two hours ago. Since, Michael has been keeping his children busy, while all Robin has done was staring out the window, contemplating the storm tearing the forest apart, thoughtful, fighting the anxiety twisting his stomach every time his mind drifts towards the scene happening in the other room.

He has no clue about Regina's state and the cares Amelia and Eleanor are providing for her, and the ignorance is killing him. Robin knows they're doing their best to help her, he's a good judge of character and these two women seem honest.

Which brings him back to the tantrum he's been struggling with for a couple of hours now.

Has Regina bewitched him?

The possibility hasn't left his mind, but the more he thinks about it, the more contradictions he finds.

When would she have casted the initial spell? Why burdening herself with his companionship if she indeed is so powerful? Most of all, why not using her powers against the men who attacked her months ago, or simply, to provide supplies for herself instead of resorting to thefts?

Remembering the last month, Robin cannot find any logical explanation. Since they started their common journey, the large majority of their time was spent together, and whenever they parted ways, it was never for very long, and rarely planned. Regina would have never found time to maintain such spell.

His gut has never failed him after Kara's death, and Regina's behavior never alarmed him. On the contrary, Robin has always felt that she was nothing but honest. Plus, she doesn't seem to have seen through his game, and her attitude hasn't changed, so why would she use him now? What purpose could she have in magically stealing his heart, when he willingly offered his help since the beginning? Also, although he tries his best to ignore it, a tiny voice in his head reminds him that, if he's correct, there's no existing spell to make someone fall in love against his will. But can he say that what he feels for her is love? He's never been in love before, would he be able to recognize it in the first place?

So, he wonders… has she been using her powers on him at all? Or isn't he trying to find an excuse for his failure instead? Whatever the answer to this question is, he still has to do his job and fulfill his contract, doesn't he? Or is it time for him to quit and live a honest life?
Robin sighs, shakes his head.

A *honest life*? What does that even mean? Besides killing, he's good at nothing, what would he do for a living? And why would he change his lifestyle and his code? For whom? Regina? *This is the dumbest idea*, Robin thinks as he closes his eyes. Let's supposed he doesn't kill her. Let's supposed they reach her destination without encountering any more ordeal. She will most likely walk away without looking back. *Worse*, if she ever were to learn his real identity and the reason why he's been travelling with her...

Damn, why is this thought hurting so much? Why is his chest squeezing at the idea that she could turn away from him and never forgive him for this? It's almost as painful as watching her lying unconscious, with no certainty that she'll ever wake up.

He's never felt this way before, so... worried? No, worry, he knew. Every time his friends were in battle and one was injured, he was worried for them. No, it's not that. It's stronger. *Deeper*. It takes him to the guts and has bile rising in his throat. It blurs his vision and makes his hands tremble. It forbids him to breathe and makes his head dizzy.

It's called *fear*.

Because Robin is scared. He's scared for her life. As much as he loved his brothers in arms, they all knew what their lives were made of. They all knew death could take them at any moment. Losing brothers in battles was a common event. But Regina... Regina doesn't have to die. She *shouldn't* die.

So yes, Robin admits it. He's *scared* for her. Of *losing her*, to be exact. And *that* is something he never experienced with anyone else.

Deep down, Robin knows why he feels this way, but he's not ready to accept it yet. Right now, what he wants, is being rid of his doubts, of this spell if there is one. But only time will answer that. And if Regina never wakes up, at least he'll be free.

Right?

XXX

A knock on the door pulls Robin from his thoughts, interrupts the game Michael and the twins were playing at. They all turn around to face Eleanor pop her head inside the room. Her eyes land on her children first, her affectionate smile growing at the sight, before she looks up, finally locking eyes with him. She nods once, slowly, and the words exiting her lips sound like the best news he's ever heard.

"She's awake."

Her "*she's asking for you*" is lost somewhere between the moment Robin crosses the bedroom and stops in front of her. She opens the door wider to let him step inside the main room, and Robin fights to hide his sudden dizziness, the lump in his throat, the squeeze of his guts.

And there she is.

"Hey."

Regina's voice is the weaker he's ever heard her, increases the weight on his chest instantly, the fear too.

"Hello, Milady." He walks to her, a hand linking with the one she holds out for him, the other
covering her forehead. She still looks pale as dead, but she's awake. She attempts a small smile, one that he returns immediately. "How do you feel?"

She takes a moment, swallows hard, fighting the dryness of her mouth, gladly accepts the glass of water Amelia hands her. After a few gulps, she leans back on the pillows with an exhale.

"I've been better." She mutters. "I feel tired. And weak." She whispers, forcing herself to open her eyes, wincing when she attempts to sit up, but Robin brings a hand to her shoulder, forces her to lie down.

"You need to rest." He replies softly, brushing her forehead. "We're taking care of you. Amelia here," he tilts his chin towards the woman. "is going to get you back in shape in the blink of an eye."

"You give me more credit than I deserve, Robin." Amelia answers, her breathless and exhausted voice hitting him immediately. When he looks at her more carefully, he notices signs of tiredness that weren't there before, a bit of sweat pearling on her forehead when she says. "It's a long and winding road to recovery."

"Are you alright?" Robin asks with concern.

He's no doctor, but he didn't think treating a patient could be so exhausting.

"I am."

Well, if she says so.

"You're going to help her, right?" he questions, so overwhelmed with relief he can't even scold himself for the treacherous hope piercing in his voice.

"Of course." She assures with a smile. Glancing down at Regina, who watched the exchange in silence, she explains. "But it's going to take some time. She has a few broken ribs and she knocked her head pretty hard. I'm afraid your trip will be interrupted for several days."

Robin exchanges a glance with Regina. Her exhausted features are enough to convince him that a break is more than required. At least, he's sure that if spell there is, she won't have the strength to keep it up for a while, long enough to give him time to come back to his sense and be rid of the foolish butterflies in his belly.

"That's not a problem." He assures. "Her recovery is more important."

Regina's hand closes over his, sending shivers running up his arm and halting his heart for a second. But in the silence, Gretel's voice coming from behind him (Michael and his children have apparently joined them) brings Robin down to Earth, reminding him of where they are. A family's home.

He frowns, his mouth twitching. "Is there a tavern nearby where we could stay for several days?"

Amelia shakes her head. "There's one three miles from here. But Regina isn't ready to travel even a short distance."

Robin winces. As kind as these people are, he can't really invite himself and Regina in their small house for so long. That's too much to ask. But before he can utter a word, a hand closes over his shoulder.

"You can stay here as long as you need."
Robin gets up to face Michael. "We have bothered you for too long already. You are a kind man, Michael, but you have two young children who need space, and if we both stay here-

"We're not really giving you a choice, Robin." Eleanor cuts him off kindly, exchanging a nod with her husband. "Your friend needs rest, and I'm sure that you do too. So, at least until she's fully recovered, you two are staying here."

He's speechless. He's face goodness before, but what these people are offering is... too much. More than many would be ready to provide. They're stranger who are imposing themselves in their home, they should be wanting them away as soon as possible. That's what he expected after the wary looks he witnessed earlier. Yet, he can read in their eyes that there's not an ounce of regret or hesitation. They've made the decision easily knowing how complicated it'd be for their family.

"Robin?"

Regina's weak voice catches his attention, pulling him out of his thoughts. He crouches in front of the brunette.

"I know what you must be thinking, and I don't want to bother them either, but I really do not feel up to traveling or even getting up yet."

"Give her at least a few days." Amelia adds. "In a week, she should be stronger."

Robin cranes his neck to look at the healer. "Should?"

"I can't tell for sure how much time she's going to need exactly."

Robin sighs, gaze falling over Regina again.

"Alright." Turning towards Michael, then Eleanor, he nods. "Thank you for your offer, we're more than grateful for your kindness and hospitality. Of course, I'll give you a compensation for the trouble we cause you."

"There's no need."

"I insist." He states while getting up. "We are unexpected guests imposing on you, I can supply for our needs." Turning to Amelia, he adds. "Just like I'll pay for the cares you provide for Regina."

xxx

"I'm sorry, Robin."

He looks away from the children playing next to their parents to meet Regina's eyes. "For what?"

She tilts her chin towards her own body, curled up under blankets. "For this. It changes our plans."

Shaking his head, he spontaneously squeezes her arm. "That's not your fault. You didn't plan to-" he stops, frowning. "To what, actually? What happened out there?"

"I'm not sure." Regina shrugs. "I was hurrying to come back to our camp when the storm began, and then…" she looks ahead, furrowing her brow, searching through her memories. "Something hit me." Her hand moves to her ribs, then the back of her head, where she was injured. "I remember pain… and then… I fell and… it turned dark. I- I must have passed out."

"That last part is correct. You were unconscious when I found you."
Regina smiles weakly. "I was lucky that you did."

"I took cover when the storm began," Robin explains. "But when I didn't see you come back, I started worrying. I traced you back to the river where I found you. Michael," He glances at the man discussing with his wife across the room. "arrived around this moment and guided me here."

"They look like kind people." She declares while following Robin's gaze.

"They are."

But as soon as you're back on your feet, we're getting out of here, Robin says to himself. Michael and Eleanor are indeed nice, but Robin can't wait to deal with his main problem: The woman in front of him. As long as they're here, he's powerless, can't do anything against her. And he needs to put an end to this tricky situation sooner rather than later...

Whatever that end will be.

xxx

"Hi!"

Regina smiles at the toddler shyly approaching them. Robin turns around to face Gretel, holding what's probably supposed to be a doll close to her chest.

"Hello!" She replies as cheerfully as her tiredness allows her.

"You pretty." The little girl compliments, looking straight at Regina. A slight blush taints the brunette's pale cheeks, and she chuckles slightly.

"Thank you, Gretel. But you're much more pretty than I am." She replies, the corner of her mouth tipping up at the child's toothy giggle.

"Why you sick?" She asks.

Eleanor intervenes then, calling her daughter from her spot in the kitchen, barely three feet behind. "Gretel! Don't borrow our guests, darling. Regina needs to rest."

"Don't worry, Eleanor. She's not bothering us." Turning towards the child, Regina smiles. "I had a little accident. But I'm going to be better really soon." She adds in front of the child's sudden frown, unwilling to worry her.

"Melia make you better?"

"Yes, Gretel. She did."

"The storm is apparently definitely over, so she should be able to come back tonight as planned." Michael informs while looking through the window. He turns to his wife. "I'm going to check the barn."

Regina looks pointedly at Robin, arching an eyebrow. He understands immediately, gets up and offers. "Let me help you! After everything you're doing for us, that's the least I can do."

"Gladly. Follow me, Robin."

While the men exit the house, Regina lies back down, sighing deeply, something that doesn't escape Eleanor's attention.
"Are you alright?"

Regina gives her a small smile, winks at Gretel who hasn't left her side.

"Yes. But my head hurts like hell, every move and breath trigger the pain in my chest, and I'm still exhausted."

"You should get some more sleep." Eleanor suggests. "Amelia said that you need rest, and I'm not judging but you've spent a long time awake discussing with Robin."

"He was worried." Regina states simply.

Because he was, clearly. She didn't think he would care so much, to be honest, never imagined to find him so concerned over her. It warms her heart, however she can't help but think that there's something else going on in his mind, something she hasn't been able to put her finger on yet.

"You're lucky to have him." Eleanor replies. "He surely takes a great care of you."

"Yes." Regina breathes. "He saved my life."

The blonde woman nods. "By bringing you here."

"No. I mean when we decide to travel together."

Eleanor leans on her elbows, staring at Regina with curiosity. "Really? How so?"

Regina smiles pensively. "I was attacked," Eleanor's eyes widen, her hand absentmindedly waving through her son's dark locks while he's busy playing with handcrafted wooden figures. "By bandits who wanted to rob me. He got rid of them and offered to travel with me." Her face turns sheepish on the next words. "Even if I had tried to steal from him when we first met."

"You what?" Eleanor bursts out, startling her children.

"Yeah." Regina laughs softly. "I'm not really proud of myself. I was starving, hadn't eaten anything in days, and he set camp not far from where I was. The smell... I just- I couldn't help myself."

"You two share quite a story."

"We do." The brunette agrees, settling comfortably in her makeshift bed. "I don't know where I'd be without him."

Eleanor walks closer, crouching and handing her a cup.

"Drink this. It's medication to ease the pain. Amelia gave me some in case you'd feel sore."

Regina gratefully brings it to her lips. "Thank you."

Eleanor rises and grabs her daughter's hand, leading Gretel to the table where her brother is still calmly playing.

"I suggest you get some sleep now. The twins are going to take a nap, so it'll be quiet."

Regina smiles tiredly, finishes her drink and sets the glass aside. Eleanor's right. She definitely needs to rest.

xxx
It's been four days, and Regina's state is improving. Amelia keeps coming twice a day, spending a good hour with her and Eleanor, each time appearing particularly tired when Robin joins them. But she keeps assuring that she's fine, and everything is working just well. So Robin doesn't ask questions.

Despite his preference to stay with Regina, his need, or whatever it is that keeps dragging him towards her, he spends the day helping Michael in his job. The woodsman is a man of few words, hard to decipher, but that's perfectly fine for Robin. During the time spent with him, he realized how hard Michael works, facing difficulties without stepping back, doing as much as he can to provide enough money for his family. It must not be enough every week, Robin thinks, remembering the small amount a merchant gave him for his wood. But from what Robin observed, he's doing more than what many men are physically capable of.

"I think we're good for today." Michael states, glancing around them and wiping his sweating forehead with his sleeve. "Help me charge this in my cart?"

"Sure. Are we going to the village?" Robin questions.

Michael shakes his head. "No. I only go every other day. Today we're going back home directly."

"Very well."

They walk through the forest in silence, taking turns in dragging the cart, and Robin uses this free time to think about the last days, about his body's and mind's responses to Regina. And the conclusions aren't reassuring him.

He knows for certain that, by spending her days with him, Eleanor or the twins, she had no way to cast any spell. Nevertheless, the weight on his chest hasn't lessened. The squeeze of his heart is still here, butterflies invading his belly whenever he catches sight of her. Her smile still makes him shudder, her eyes hypnotize him, his skin flaring with a simple touch. How is that possible if she's not enchanting him magically?

Deep down, Robin knows the reason why. He's well aware that if there is no spell, then it can only mean one thing. But it can't be. No! He wouldn't have fallen into this trap so easily, would he? Or maybe he did. How can he be sure? Is there a way to put an end to this? Well... there is a way, but now it isn't as simple as it could have been.

Damn!

He messed up, big time! He failed his job, and most of all he failed himself and his beliefs. How could he have been so stupid? He put himself in a huge mess he has no idea how to extricate himself from.

You know how, a tiny voice whispers in his ear.

But it's immediately countered by another one. That's not the answer.

Slice her throat.

Open yourself up to her.

Deliver her warm cadaver to her husband and you'll be done.
Allow yourself to love her and you'll be free.

Kill her.

Let her in.

Fulfill your contract!

Follow your heart!

Robin fists his hands and shuts his eyes tight, cursing under his breath and catching Michael's attention, who turns towards him.

"Are you alright, Robin?"

But Robin doesn't hear him.

Choke her in her sleep!

Give yourself to her.

Kill!

Love!

A sharp pain spreads in his foot, and Robin opens his eyes to face the ground, adrenaline coursing through his veins, hands flat on the ground, breath short. The voices are gone, his mind finally empty and quiet, and when he looks up he finds Michael staring at him in concern.

"Are you hurt?"

Collecting himself, Robin blinks several times, glancing around him before slowly getting up, Michael's hand coming to support him.

"Hey there! Be careful."

But Robin is still getting a grip on himself, confused, so he questions. "What happened?"

"You tripped over a root." The brow-haired man replies. "Robin! What's going on? You don't seem to be yourself."

Breathless, confused, overwhelmed, Robin stares at him for long seconds, gradually coming around, the fight between good and evil in him shattering his will into pieces. He wipes his face with his hand, letting out a long sigh and looking down.

"Nothing, I'm fine." He mutters.

That's no answer, but his inner conflict isn't a reason to open his heart to a pure stranger… even if said stranger has been hosting him for the past days and just saw him in a state no one ever witnessed before.

"That's the biggest shit you've said since I met you." Michael crosses his arms over his chest. "Again: what's going on?"

Glancing up and meeting Michael's determines eyes, Robin relents. He's facing a dead end, and his host has more experience about normal life than he does. Maybe he could get some advice. After all,
nothing forces him to be specific about his problem.

"Have you…" he starts. "Have you ever faced two different paths, unable to decide which one to go on?"

The other man lifts an eyebrow. "Depends. Where do those paths lead?"

"Well…" How can he explain this? "One is made of what you're familiar with, it's safe and without any surprise. The other is… unknown. It's a slippery path you've avoided for years, with an uncertain future. But although the choice seems to be an easy one, you realize that."

"You don't want the easiness anymore." Michael concludes for him.

Robin looks up and nods slowly.

"Yeah."

Michael leans back against a tree. "I can only speak for myself, and I don't know what your options are exactly. But I honestly believe that change usually turns out to be a good thing, and that behind uncertainty often lies happiness." Robin's confusion must be obvious, because he clarifies. "When I was a teenager, I was supposed to marry a young girl from my village, Ana Maria. Our union had been decided by our parents when we were children and was supposed to happen after her 16th birthday, which was perfectly fine with me. She was a close friend and we liked each other. I wasn't in love with her, but I cared for her and it was a deal I grew up with. Until one day, a year before the fateful deadline, a new family arrived in our village. A beautiful creature with blond hair and blue eyes, with a skin as shinny and soft as silk, and the most incredible smile."

"Eleanor." Robin guesses.

Michael tilts his head forward. "Yes. I knew immediately that she had stolen my heart with a single look and that I had taken hers. Yet, for weeks, months, I fought my feelings. I was engaged to my childhood's friend, something Eleanor was well aware of and respected, and so I decided to keep my promise. This wedding would assure me a good status in my village, while this passion devouring my insides was forbidden and could lead both of us to our doom."

"But it destroyed me. Little by little, despite my efforts, my love for Eleanor grew stronger, dissolving my resolve to marry Ana Maria. Until one fateful night. We met in secret, at the border of our village, and when our lips connected for the very first time, I knew my old life was over. After leaving notes to our respective families and to Ana Maria, we secretly fled together in the darkness of the night, with nothing more than my little savings and a bag of clothes. When I think back of the life I left behind me that night, and seeing the one I have now, my children's grins and my wife's beautiful face every day, I can assure you, Robin, that it was worth it. And if that's your question, no, I have no regrets."

Robin listened silently, attentively. He's no romantic man, but Michael's story touched it. After spending a few days witnessing his happy family life, he has no doubt about Michael's sincerity and love for his wife and kids.

So, Robin wonders: Can he dare hope to find such life? And more importantly, would he be content with it?

xxx

"Who that?"
Regina turns to Hansel, and her eyes open wide at the sight of what he's holding: her father's small portrait. It was tucked in an inside pocket of her bag, how did the boy-

One look at said bag gives Regina the answer she was looking for. Eleanor must have followed her gaze, because she exclaims with force. "Hansel! What did you do?" Abandoning her son's socks that she was repairing, she moved briskly towards Hansel and Regina, crouching in front of her son. "Ransacking people's stuff is forbidden! Your father and I have told you that many times!"

The little boy looks down sheepishly, twisting his lips in an adorable pout, but is mother is not impressed.

"There's something you should say to Regina, don't you think Hansel?"

He looks up at his mother, then shyly looks at Regina, who's waiting in silence, not wanting to intrude. "Sorry, Regina."

The brunette brushes the boy's cheek tenderly, smiling softly. "Apologies accepted, Hansel."

"I'm sorry, Regina." Eleanor takes the picture from her son and hands it to her. "I warned Robin when you arrived but I forgot to tell you too."

Regina shakes her head. "That's fine, Ellie. He won't do it again, right Hansel?"

Understanding that he's out of the dog house, Hansel grins and shakes his head proudly. Regina holds the image in front of the boy so he can see better, while Eleanor sits back at the table. "This is my father. His name is Henry."

The boy's mouth opens in awe, nose scrunching adorably when he lets out a small giggle and leans against her shoulder, cuddling close.

"Picture broken." Hansel says, pointing at the creased lines distorting the image.

"Yes, it's been damaged by very mean people."

Eleanor looks up from repairing her son's socks. "The ones who attacked you?"

Regina gives her a nod. "Yes. They didn't show much care for the picture of an old man."

"Where is your father?"

"I don't know." Regina replies honestly. "My life was... complicated. He was the only one who supported me in my decisions, even when he sometimes didn't completely agree."

"You were close to him." Eleanor states quietly.

Regina gives her a teary smile. "I was. I loved him more than anything, and I think he was the only one who loved me that much."

"Maybe you'll see him again one day."

"I'd love nothing more. But that's very unlikely. He stayed there," the brunette says vaguely. "While I'm heading in the opposite direction with no intention to come back."

"Well..." Eleanor walks closer and takes the picture from Regina's, observing it quickly. "He looks like a kind man."
"He is." Regina confirms.

"Surely he must know that you're doing what you think is best for you. I don't know your story, but if he really is the father you depict, then I have no doubt that he understands why his child is gone and won't come back. Trust a mother on that." She adds with a wink.

"Thank you, Ell-"

"Mommy! Mommy!"

Gretel storms inside the house, excitingly running to her mother with a paper in hand held so tight it's partially creased, startling everyone and cutting Regina off.

"Gretel!" Eleanor scolds, a hand over her racing heart. "How many times did I tell you not to run inside screaming like you just did?"

It stops the little girl right in her tracks, has her looking down, arms falling by her side. "Sorry, mommy." She says shyly.

Eleanor drops the picture on the table and crouches in front of her daughter, tilting her chin up with her finger. "That's good, sweetheart. Now, what has you so excited that you scared your brother, Regina and I to death?"

The tenderness of her mother's smile has Gretel grinning back at her, proudly showing her what's in her hand.

"Robin make me!"

"He what?" Eleanor questions, taking the sheet of paper from her daughter to get a better look at it and understand such enthusiasm.

Regina gets up slowly, taking support on the wall before walking the few steps separating her from the woman. She peaks over Eleanor's shoulder and gasps when she discovers the girl's sketch. What surprises her even more, is the quality of the drawing. The lines are delicately traced, the details incredibly well done. It's excellent, could be mistaken for the real child had it not been made with a pencil but with painting.

"Gretel!" Hansel exclaims happily, pointing at the drawing, recognizing his sister.

"Wow..." Eleanor breathes out. "That's art." She looks up at Regina, but the brunette is silent, staring at the sketch in astonishment. "You didn't know?" She asks quietly, slowly bringing Regina back from her thoughts.

"No." She breathes. "He never told me he was so gifted in drawing... Or that he even drew to begin with." She finally looks up from the paper, waving her hand through Hansel's ebony locks absentmindedly, the little boy snuggled against her legs. "I never imagined him as someone who makes portraits to be honest."

"And I didn't really plan for you to find out." A strong voice comes from behind, everyone's attention on the man standing in the entrance. Robin's face is unreadable when he steps inside the house and strolls his way towards them, stopping next to Regina. "How do you feel?"

He hasn't seen her since he left with Michael this morning, and when they came back she was asleep. Her condition is improving, but she still needs lots of rest, which forbids them to leave yet. Also, Amelia insisted that Regina isn't completely healed and needs more time, so here they are, a good
week after Regina's accident, still sleeping on the ground of a small house with strangers who are becoming friends, despite Robin's best efforts.

But is he really trying to keep some distance with them anymore?

He was careful at first, made sure not to get attached, not to find the children adorable, to tell himself Eleanor and Michael were just people he didn't give a damn about, that Regina was only his target and he would execute her the second they're out of here.

But after his talk with Michael a few days ago, noticing his growing need to be near Regina along with the evidence that there was no spell enchanting him, Robin progressively changed his mind. It changed him. She's not enchanting him. She can't. Not when he witnesses the tiredness of her eyes and smile on her face when she welcomes him back from his day working in the forest. That's certain now. No magic is involved in his feelings for her, although Robin is not sure of how he feels about this.

What he's certain of though, is that he can't suppress the smile that grows when Gretel comes peak over his shoulder, and asks him curiously what he's doing, or when Hansel shyly asks him to play hide and seek. Nor when Eleanor arranges their makeshift beds to make sure they are comfortable enough. The time spent with Michael isn't filled with long silences anymore, just like he cannot stay passive during animated and cheerful meals. So, when he realized that Eleanor and Michael were rationing themselves so he and Regina would have enough to eat, the decision to start hunting after helping Michael in his job had been easy.

He's changing, and it scares him. But Robin has to admit... it feels nice. Being appreciated and considered as a friend, is something that he enjoys. So yeah, maybe Michael's right. Maybe he wants a new life. The question is... Will Regina want that life with him?

"I'm fine. But I didn't know you were an artist."

Robin blinks.

What? An artist? His gaze lands on the portrait in her hand. Right!

"I'm not." He shrugs nonchalantly. "It's just a habit I took when I began traveling alone."

"That's an excellent job." Regina comments, tracing the line of Gretel's portrait. "It looks real."

Robin awkwardly stands next to her, silent. His attention has just been caught by something resting on the table, something he's only seen twice. The picture of an old man he discovered is Regina's father. The paper is damaged and creased, but she kept it. This man obviously means a lot to her...

It's Regina's voice that brings him back to the current conversation. "I'm honest, Robin. You have a real gift, many people would be jealous."

"I second Regina." Eleanor adds. "Has anyone taught you?"

Robin shakes his head. "Not really, no. One day I was given a pen, and it just came naturally. I know I'm not too bad, I never thought it was good."

"It's more than just good." Regina hands him the drawing. "It's beautiful."

Robin takes it, glances at Gretel staring at him with shining eyes, and can't help but admit that yeah, it is resembling. The hopeful eyes of the blonde child are fixed upon the sheet of paper, and has Robin smiling and crouching in front of her.
"Do you want to keep it, Gretel?"

The toddler nods eagerly, grinning.

Robin chuckles, and hands her the drawing. Why keep it for himself when it so clearly makes the little girl so happy?

"It's yours then. I'm giving it to you."

Gretel's mouth opens wide in excitement, and she carefully takes it, stars shining in her eyes.

"What are you supposed to say, Gretel?"

The girl looks up at her mother, then back at Robin.

"Thank you."

Robin cups her cheek, thumb brushing the girl's temple, and lets this warm feeling of contentment and satisfaction take possession of him.

"You're very welcome."

xxx

"Where did you go next?" Michael questions, wrapping an arm around his wife's shoulders, Eleanor leaning against his chest.

"Arendelle."

Regina watches Robin with eyes full of interest. "I've read about this land. Winters there can be extremely difficult."

"They are." Robin confirms. "But summers are sunny and hot. Although trading can be stopped during some snowstorms, people there live perfectly normal lives."

"Is it true that the Queen there possesses the power to wield the ice?" Regina asks. This wasn't written in any book, but rumors travel far, and she's heard about it a few years ago. She couldn't help but be fascinated by the possibility of a land where magic is accepted by all.

Robin nods. "Yes."

"A witch?" Michael chokes on his beverage. "They let a witch took over the throne?"

Robin shakes his head, crosses his fingers on the table. "No. She's the rightful Queen by blood. Her magic scared people at first, and even now some are reluctant to see her on the throne. But in the end, she won her subjects' hearts. You can trust me when I tell you that she's fair and kind. I've seen different kind of magics, I met witches and sorcerers, but this Queen is deeply good. She uses her powers to help her people, not to harm them. The natural consequence is that they respect and love her. She's a better ruler than most Kings I've seen. She doesn't mind mixing with the crowd, she doesn't care about titles. Yes, she has her privileges, but she also makes sure that no one in her land is starving or bullied. I don't think many rulers can pretend the same thing."

"Most of them don't even care if you want my opinion." Michael mutters.

There's a silence following the conversation, and Robin can't help but notice the way Regina looks down at her cup of tea, fingers fidgeting, brow furrowed. Definitely thoughtful. This must remind her
of her old life, the one she's hiding from them. If only he knew her version of the story, if he could understand what led Kind Leopold to ask for the head of such a wonderful woman -Damn, he called her wonderful again, luckily, he didn't say it out loud.

"Well..." Eleanor speaks in her usual king and sweet voice, interrupting his thoughts. "Such a land must be an amazing place to live."

Robin can only agree. During his travels, despite the way he was raised as an unwanted child and then a mercenary, Robin's vision of the world changed. His naturally open mind allowed him to see the good where it was, and not where people told him it was supposed to be.

He witnessed a beggar share a fruit with a starving kid. He helped villagers put a dog out of a well. He gritted his teeth in front of a King dressed with the finest clothes and carrying jewels made of gold and diamonds, ordering his soldiers to turn houses barely big enough to host a whole family upside down, in search of anything of value, to destroy everything, to take away the small amount of food they had to pay their due.

So Robin knows.

Robin knows that sometimes, a title doesn't make someone a good person. A title doesn't justify every action.

And, looking at the woman next to him while she brings her cup of tea to her lips and sips slowly, reality suddenly strikes him.

For the first time in years, Robin realizes what he did. What he does. What his job implies. He never understood before. He never grasped the consequences of his actions, what it means and what he leaves behind.

Shattered families.
Orphan children.
Widows and widowers.
Mourning parents.

He tramples upon people's rights. He disrespects their lives. He doesn't question the motivations of those who pay for his abilities, but never up until now did he catch on the fact that his targets may be the victims and might not deserve their fate. That the ones who can afford his services might be the real culprits.

The situation is still unclear, tricky and complicated, but as he observes her smile gently to their host, he realizes that Regina is one of them. She's a victim. And whatever reason her husband might have to want her dead, it is not his place to execute someone who might be an innocent.

xxx

His steps are quiet. He learned how to be silent and invisible, that's an ability he mastered quickly when he joined the mercenary's. She shouldn't hear him coming.

He looks up to the dark sky, spots the moon between trees' leaves and branches. A crescent moon so bright it lights up the forest. The screech of an owl resonates in the silent night, covering the ruffle of leaves as a slight breeze passes, disturbing the quietness of the forest.
Almost there, he tells himself. Almost done. Almost free. In a few minutes, his mission will be fulfilled.

He spotted her a bit further, her figure curled up on the ground at the base of a tree. He observes her, her stillness, chest regularly moving up and down with every slow breath she takes. Her sleep is never really deep, but for once, she seems to have succumbed to her exhaustion.

He walks closer, making sure not to wake her up, and kneels next to her, hand over his dagger, fingers closing over the hilt.

She’s beautiful. Even more than that. If he's being honest, she's the most attractive and gorgeous woman he's ever seen in every kingdom. Her hair, her lips, her skin, her body, her eyes... Her eyes. Brown orbs he almost lost himself into while he was spying her over the last days. But a contract is a contract, and as splendid as she might be, she has to die.

"Who are you?"

Shit!

She moves on her elbows, sleep covering her eyes, so she blinks repeatedly, forehead wrinkling in confusion, but mostly, in fear.

"What do you want?"

He releases his dagger into its sheath without drawing her attention.

Kill her now, a voice murmurs in his head. Now, before it's too late.

"I- I just... I want-"

You, a voice screams in his head.

Their gaze lock and suddenly nothing else exists. She sits up, not breaking eye-contact, staring into his blue eyes, into his soul, invading his mind, his body, his heart. Her hand tenderly cups his cheek, and the simple touch has goosebumps flaring everywhere on his skin, stomach fluttering, head dizzy. He's hypnotized by her eyes, the sparkle dancing in them that forbids him to look away. He leans in her palm, and his hand settles at her hip, a light touch, anchoring him to her.

"Trust me." She murmurs between them.

Robin’s will is gone, and he totally abandons himself to her, to this bubble of comfort, of tenderness, of a feeling he never quite fully experienced before, or at least never allowed himself to feel. No more contracts. No more killing. Only safety. Only...

Their lip touch, and his whole world disappear into a gulf of wind, and when Robin opens his eyes, it's plain day, sunrays hitting him square in the face. He squints against the light, searching for the person pulling on his hand, facing Regina's radiant face, her bright smile only meant for him. There's a small cabin a bit further, where she seems to be dragging him.

"Come on! Lunch's ready."

That's when he notices it. The large, round curve of her stomach, her hand protectively wrapped around it. Glancing back at her face, he understands. She’s glowing, resplendent with happiness, with the promise of a new life to come.
Too stunned and confused to react, Robin obediently follows, unaware of the small smile tugging at his lips, of the wellness that has taken possession of his whole self, the calmness and joy that has settled upon him.

"I cooked your favorite meal."

The door opens wide, and Robin's laugh dies down, stomach twisting in pain, bile rising in his throat.

"You belong to me!"

The blade digs deep into Regina's stomach, the King removing it before stabbing her again, spitting words of hate as he stares at her face contorted in pain, her scream sending shivers through Robin's body, as if his heart had just been split in two. He watches, powerless, as she falls on the floor in a loud thud, blood flowing heavily from her curve of her belly, her gaze fixed upon him.

"Save me, Robin." Is the last thing he hears before life abandons her, the sparkling of her eyes turning into a dull grey.

In front of him, King Leopold is smirking smugly, victorious, holding the bloodied blade. Robin can't move, he can't breathe, he can't think, the pain tearing his inside worse than anything he ever experienced. His chest is about to explode, heart stumping fast and strong in his ribcage, pounding in his head, in his ears, overwhelming, excruciating...

"She's mine."

"Robin, wake up!"

A gulf of air enters his lung, breath and life returning to him, and suddenly Robin sits up, coughing, sweating, panicked, a hand over his chest to ease his burning throat.

"Hey, you're alright. It's okay, Robin. You're okay."

This voice...

It takes all of his strength, but Robin opens his eyes, facing Regina's reassuring and kind smile. Her hand is rubbing his back in circles, her other palm is on his forehead, his cheek, wincing at the burning skin, the coolness of her touch soothing Robin's body and soul.

"You just had a nightmare." She tells him, always with this soft voice, this calmness that slowly becomes contagious, easing his anxiety, helping him come back to his own self.

A nightmare, he repeats. Only a nightmare.

But as contagious as her calmness might be, her dead body is still dancing in front of his eyes, and this dream has awoken his own struggle, brought back the dilemma he's been fighting with to the foreground, knocking the last bit of air he has left out of his lungs. As soothing as her touch might be, he needs to put some distance between them if he wants to recover completely.

"I need some air." He manages, and Regina nods, pulls away to give him enough space to get up and exit the room.

The fresh air of the night makes him shiver, but Robin sighs contently, closing his eyes and taking a moment to center himself.
What was that?

That wasn't a simple nightmare. He remembers how he felt, his state of mind, in every scene.

He was the heartless assassin about to murder his victim in his sleep.

He was the happy lover of a beautiful woman about to give birth to their child.

He was the man who witnessed his love and unborn baby being murdered by a fool.

Again, what was this? A dream? A premonition? His own twisted mind playing with him? A secret desire?

But as Robin tries to understand, only one thing comes back to him repeatedly, not giving him a moment rest. Pain. The agonizing pain of losing a lover and a child. King Leopold's mad laugh. And above all this, Regina's pleading voice.

Save me, Robin.

Save me.

And then, her elusive smile staring right back at him, hitting him square in the heart and taking his breath away. The same one that's been on his mind since the first time she granted him with such gift.

Croak. Croak.

Robin looks up at the familiar sound, shoulders sagging. His forearm lifts to let the raven land, and he affectionately brushes the bird's feathering, before retrieving the message attached to its leg.

Robin's heart fills with anger.

Where's her dead body? You should have brought it to me weeks ago!

What did I pay you for?

He creases the paper, is about to throw it on the ground, but thinks twice, remembers where he is, that someone could find this note in the morning, and then everything would be over.

Because now, Robin has chosen his path.

No matter what it takes, no matter the risks, he's putting an end to his contract with the King. His assassin's life is over. He's not sure if Regina shares his feeling, but even if she doesn't, saving her life is the only thing that matters now.

Chapter End Notes

Coming next: While Robin slowly accepts his decision and Regina's state improves, they also have to ready themselves to leave.

Feedbacks are always appreciated.
Chapitre 8

Chapter Notes

A/N : Aaaaaand... There it is! Apparently you were impatiently waiting an update, it's now real!

Thank you everyone for all your support and your kind words! I'm still amazed to see that you love my work so much! *blushing*

One of you made a suggestion for this chapter, and I thought it was an excellent idea so I added a scene you might find interesting ;-)

As always, this chapter isn't betaread, all mistakes are mine and I apologize for all of them.

Val, be careful, this time keep your promise or my revenge will be terrible XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm going to catch you!"

The sound of laughter erupts from the forest, children’s happy screams and men's roars mixing with nature's noises, the wind flying through branches, birds' songs, rabbits running off.

Regina and Eleanor are comfortably seated under the porch, wrapped up in blankets, smiling widely as they watch Robin and Michael chase Hansel and Gretel in the small area in front of their house.

Robin playing with children isn't a sight she ever expected to witness, but Regina must admit that it's a nice one. He’s relaxed a lot over the last days. She ignores what happened to make him pull a 180, but since whatever dream he made two days ago, he's been... happier? Certainly less withdrawn than she remembers him.

"The kids love him." Eleanor comments, chuckling when Hansel yelps loudly as Robin catches him.

"He's good with them." Regina replies thoughtfully.
"He is. However, if Hansel and Gretel are easy children, I hadn’t imagined Robin like the paternal type."

"Me neither. He’s different."

“What do you mean?”

Regina shakes her head. “I don’t know. But something happened a few days ago. I have no idea if it’s related to this sudden change in his behavior…”

Regina’s always been a light sleeper, and nights in the middle of the forest didn’t help. But if she slowly got acquainted with the sounds surrounding her in Michael’s home, the one currently reaching her ears and waking her up is a foreign one, louder than the constant reassuring crackling of the fire. It looks like pants, soft groans that have her frowning, cracking an eye open in an attempt to decipher where it comes from.

What is this?

She rubs her eyes, settling on her back and taking time to accommodate to the relative darkness of the room. The fire is still burning, but the flames are small and dying, barely giving her enough light to see her surroundings.

Here’s this sound again…

Regina carefully raises on her elbows, frowning and looking around her.

Could it be a mouse trying to get out of the- Oh!

Her eyes land on the form not far from her, rolling over in his bed, frowning in his sleep, panting. Robin’s sleep is definitely not quiet. He’s agitated…

Regina pushes the covers and crawls over to him, sitting by his side, a hand hovering above his
shoulder, unsure about the way to react. Seeing his face contorted in pain, the desperate sounds escaping his lips, Robin’s definitely having a nightmare. A hard one, if she trusts the look on his face, one that she never saw before. It’s the first time she sees him like this, the first time he appears so vulnerable to her. That’s a strange feeling, witnessing him being in such state while he’s oblivious, as if she were intrusive, out of place, as if she shouldn’t see him like this.

But she is. And Robin’s in distress, even if it’s just a dream. Regina knows too well the power of nightmares, how upset they can make you, how real they can feel.

So she applies her cold hand to his burning and sweaty forehead, shushing softly in his ear, thumb brushing his temple, soothing.

“Robin, wake up.” She says, slowly at first, but as expected he stays deaf to her call.

So Regina goes on, keeps calling his name, keeps brushing his head, her voice still kind but firmer, touch still soft but more insistent. She doesn’t stop, not even when he makes a guttural sound that seizes her like spines.

“Robin, wake up!”

His eyes pop open suddenly and Robin sits up abruptly, coughing, clearly panicked, his hand covering his chest while he breathes soundly, eyes closed again, probably to center himself and recover. Regina stays by his side, her hand finding his forehead again while the other one rubs his back in circles, trying to appease him.

God, she’s never seen him so... lost? Confused? In distress? But right now is not the time to ask him what happened. He needs comfort and that, she can do.

"Hey, you're alright. It's okay, Robin. You're okay." She murmurs, keeping her gaze on him, alert for any sign of weakness, not knowing what else she can do.

When he opens his eyes again, she makes sure that her smile is the first thing that he sees, so he knows that he’s okay, no one will hurt him, his nightmare is over.

"You just had a bad dream." She explains, reading in his eyes his acknowledgment of her words. However, she can tell he’s far from placid, fear -since when does Robin know fear?- dancing in his
blue orbs, his breath still short and erratic.

"I need some air." He lets out in a raspy voice, and Regina nods, pulls away to give him enough space to get up and watches him exit the room with a furrowed brow and a heavy heart, pained to see him in such state.

"I can't tell how much time he spent outside." Regina reveals once her tale is over. "When he came back, I tried to know what was wrong, but he assured me that he was fine and apologized for waking me up. His eyes though..." She looks at him, trying to catch a glimpse of his face while he's oblivious and busy playing with the kids. "They were clouded with something that I still can't identify. He wasn't fine, that much was clear. But he also wasn't ready to talk, and I can relate to that."

"Maybe he will be," Eleanor replies. "Later. Give him some time. You two are close, he will open up to you."

"I hope so. I was worried about him, Ellie. That night, he scared me. He was completely shaken." She sighs, leans against the wall.

"Robin is a secretive person, Regina." Eleanor reasons. "But he also cares for you a lot. I'm sure that if you ask him, tell him how you felt, maybe once you two are alone," she suggests with a soft smile. "he will probably answer. If you keep your thoughts to yourself, it won't do anyone any good."

“You’re probably right.” Regina wraps her arms around herself.

"Anyway, you're leaving tomorrow, and you have a long road ahead of you. I suppose that if there's more about him to discover, you'll find out soon enough. Asking a question is the surest way to get answers." She assures as she gets up. "Here's Amelia."

Following Eleanor's gaze and leaving behind her thoughts about Robin, Regina spots the young healer coming their way, smiling widely when the toddlers abandon Robin and their father to run to her with shouts of her name. Regina lets out a relieved sigh. After one more week of treatments, she finally feels up to travel, something Amelia has confirmed the previous day. Out of safety though, and to bid her and Robin goodbye, she insisted on a last visit, to definitely clear her patient from any residual injury.

"What are you feeding them, Ellie? These two are so big!" Amelia declares when she joins them, carrying a twin in each arm.
Hansel and Gretel grin widely as they are put on the ground, their mother affectionately smiling at them.

"Blame Robin for the last days." She quips. "His hunting skills clearly improved the quality of our meals."

Robin steps forward, smugly leaning against the house's wall. "That's the least I could do, Eleanor. With two more people to feed, it was only fair that I give you a hand. And I may have brought the meat, but it's your cooking skills that allowed us to have delicious meals."

Eleanor suppresses a blush, instead shakes her head and chuckles. "Enough flattery. Watch my kids and husband while we are going inside, will you."

“Yes, ma’am.” Robin answered with amusement as Eleanor motions for Regina and Amelia to follow her inside the house.

Before turning around, Regina exchanges a look with Robin, his gaze locking with hers for a second, his smirk sending shivers down her spine.

Well... he may have changed, but she sure as hell won't complain about this more than charming new side of him.

xxx

“Take place, please.” Amelia asks kindly.

Regina is used to this now, to this daily ritual that has saved her life. A bleeding inside her head, Amelia had said. A bleeding that took several days for Amelia to finally be done with and stop completely. That was what plunged Regina in coma and would have killed her had the blonde woman not used her abilities to heal her.

Magic.
Amelia's secret, the explanation to her amazing healing skills, lies in magical powers she inherited from her father. He taught her since she was little how to control and use them for good, to save lives.

Regina wasn't surprised when she learned about this. She felt it. Even as she was unconscious, she could sense the fuel of magic spread through her and slowly awake her from her coma. So when Amelia and Eleanor asked her to keep the woman’s magic a secret, Regina easily accepted. Not only does she owe them her life, but she understands too well the risk to be discovered practicing magic. However, despite the solid friendship and trust that built between the three women, Regina never shared her own secret, not feeling ready to admit that if she learned magic too, it was from the vilest creature.

She feels the soft yet soothing pull of Amelia's magic invade her, wrap around her scalp, a pleasing tingling spreading inside her as she lets out a deep sigh, relaxing in what's been her makeshift bed for the last weeks while Amelia mends what's left of her injuries, removing any trace of pain and fatigue Regina might still feel. Thanks to these sessions, her constant headache is gone, exhaustion disappears, and the fog surrounding her vanishes to let place to her real self.

“You're good. The bleeding has completely stopped and the damages are healed, I didn’t have much to do this time.”

Regina opens her eyes to face her friends' smiles and lets out a relieved sigh. “Does that mean you clear me for traveling?” She gets up slowly, using Eleanore’s hand for support.

Amelia gives her a firm nod. “I do. But tomorrow, as planned. I'd prefer for you to rest until the last of my magic does its job before you’re off to the wind.”


"Mommy, more time!" Hansel pleads Eleanor, clutching to Regina's side, who strokes his head kindly, suppressing a laugh at the toddler's yawn.

"You'll see us tomorrow." Regina tells him, pressing a kiss to his head. "But you need your rest, little one."

"Promise tomorrow?" He asks with hopeful yet sleepy eyes.
"I promise, Hansel. Now, go with your mother."

The boy looks at Robin, who winks reassuringly, before outstretching his arms towards his mother in defeat. Eleanor scoops him and follows her husband, who's carrying a half asleep Gretel in his arms.

"They took a liking in you." Amelia comments once they're alone. "Goodbyes won't be easy."

Robin looks down at the table. He got attached to the twins too, more than he would admit. He'll definitely miss their inquisitive minds and matching toothy grins. Never before did he spend so much time with children so young, and if it was slightly exhausting and, let's say it, noisy, it also brought animation and cheerfulness to their everyday life.

"They are adorable." Regina replies, capturing Robin's attention. "All of them. Leaving this place will break my heart."

She looks up at Robin, whose blue eyes are clouded with something she can't quite decipher. After seeing him interact with Michael, Eleanor and their children over the last days, Regina is almost certain that he shares her feeling.

"Our routine will certainly be quieter and calmer." He replies with a smirk when he senses her gaze on him, then admits. "But lonelier."

"We'll have each other." Regina tells him, tilting her head and shooting him a soft smile, one of those that only she can do and that halts the beating of his heart every time.

"We will." He confirms with a nod, before turning towards Amelia. If Regina keeps staring at him with those eyes and smile, he won't be able to hide his inner turmoil very long. "What will you do?"

Amelia frowns. "What do you mean?"

"Do you have any other patients? I figure rarely need your help for so long."

"Oh!" The young healer chuckles softly. "It depends, sometimes it happens. There's no one else who
needs me for now, but people come to me quite regularly. We live in the forest, and many villagers have difficult jobs." She reminds. "They come to me for back pain, injuries, a fall, sometimes a broken bone. Some of them needed my help this week." She reveals. "I also have to prepare the potions I use to treat them. Which makes me think!" Amelia gets up and heads for the door, searching in her satchel before pulling out several vials carefully wrapped in cloths. "I brought these for you." She explains, putting them on the table. "They are potions to ease pain, to clean an open wound, in case of fever... That should help you during your travel."

Robin moves closer, grabbing a vial and making it turn between his fingers, noticing a small handwritten text on the white cloth.

"Instructions." Amelia explains. "It tells you what the potion can be used for, and how to take it."

"Thank you. This will probably be of a great help."

"I figured."

Regina gathers all the vials in a bag that she carefully puts inside her own, before sitting back at the table.

"Thank you, Amelia. You did so much for us, I don't know if we'll ever be able to pay you back."

"Reach your destination safe and sound." Amelia says, patting Regina's arm. "So all my work won't have been for nothing."

xxx

"I'm really going to miss you, guys." Regina pulls back just enough to look the twins in the eyes. "Be good to your mommy and daddy, alright?"

Hansel and Gretel nod in concert, clutching to her neck again, making it just harder to leave. But when Robin steps in front of her after saying goodbye to Michael and Eleanor, Regina knows it's time to go. She reluctantly extricates herself from the toddlers' embrace and rises to face the whole family. Damn, the first days without them are going to be difficult.
"This is for you."

She watches Robin hand Michael and Eleanor a sheet of paper, their eyes widening and smiles growing as they take it.

"It's nothing big, just a little souvenir." Robin explains with a shrug. "That way you'll always remember us."

"That's beautiful, Robin." Eleanor breathes out, crouching to show it to Hansel and Gretel, who are clutching at her dress to try to get a glimpse of what she's holding.

"You definitely have a gift, my friend." Michael tells him, shaking Robin's hand once more.

Regina finally catches sight of Robin's offer, and she gasps in awe when she discovers the portrait of the family, drawn so faithfully it looks almost real. Love and happiness radiate from their sketched faces, and everyone's main trait have been depicted perfectly. Eleanor's kindness, Michael's reserve, Gretel's endless energy and Hansel's shyness. Michael's right. Robin has an incredible gift. One that, if she trusts the smiles on the family's faces, brings happiness to the ones he shares it with.

"Alright, we should go." Robin declares, throwing his bags over his shoulder. Despite his apparent confidence, Regina can see the way he swallows heavily, the slight trace of sadness flashing in his blue eyes. He can't fully hide his heavy heart and sadness at leaving.

"Again," he says, "Thank you for everything you've done for us. We will never be able to thank you enough."

"You're welcome, Robin. Travel safely."

"Send our gratitude to Amelia." Regina adds.

And with a last wave of their hand, after a few steps backward, Regina and Robin spin on their heels to walk into the forest, and away from this family that has stolen their hearts.
"It was really nice, you know?"

Robin glances at her before looking down to avoid a root in the middle of the trail.

"What was?"

"Your gift to them." Regina explains. "I'm sure this is a souvenir they will treasure for many years."

"It's just a sketch." Robin shakes his head. "It will probably finish in a drawer somewhere, and in a few weeks or months, they'll have forgotten about it."

"I disagree. I spoke with Eleanor about Gretel's portrait. They have nothing but their memories to remember old times. With this sketching, you gave them something tangible. In a few years, they'll show their children how they looked like when they were little, how happy they were. Souvenirs matter more than most people think."

Robin falls silent at her words. All of his souvenirs are anchored deep down in his mind.

His parents' abandoning him.

Being recruited by the pack, raised and trained to kill.

Leaving them behind for a lonely life made of contracts and murders.

He would gladly erase many of those memories. Yet, maybe Regina's right. The gratefulness and amazement in their eyes were genuine. It wasn't played. They loved his gift. And this family's life, no matter how precarious, is one of the happiest he's seen over the years.

"I guess we'll never know. But I hope you're right."
"I had forgotten how exhausting walking a whole day was." Regina exhales while removing one boot and massaging her calf, letting out a relieved sigh.

Robin chuckles, focused on cooking the couple of rabbits he killed earlier. "You'll get used to it again. Plus, you may be healed, but Amelia said that residual tiredness could follow you for a few days."

"True."

The pressure of her thumbs against her sore skin is both a blessing and a torture, but most of all it relieves the pain, so for a moment, Regina continues in silence, letting Robin deal with their dinner.

It's strange, yet somehow familiar, to find themselves in this situation again. However, this time, her partner is not as withdrawn as he used to be. He talks more, and more easily. He seems more relaxed too. Maybe Eleanor's right. Maybe she should just broach the topic and see what comes from the conversation. And if he refuses to open up, she won't push.

"Can I ask you something?"

Robin looks up at her with a smile. "Of course."

Regina swallows down and sit up to face him. You’re a big girl, and he’s your friend. So just tell him. Everything will be fine.

"The other day, when you’ve had a nightmare... You told me you were alright, but that wasn’t true, was it?"

Robin averts her gaze then, but stops stirring their broth.

"Indeed."

Regina tries to connect with his eyes again, but he stubbornly stares down.
“Look, I don’t want to make you uncomfortable.” He looks up at that, confused. “It’s just that... I had never seen you like this before. I know we’ve only known each other for a few weeks, but still. I was worried for you that night.”

“I know.” Robin murmurs.

“Why didn’t you say anything then?”

Robin’s voice is clearer and steadier on the next sentences. “Because I wasn’t ready, just like you weren’t ready to open up to me in the beginning of our trip. We all have our past, Regina, and that night mine caught up with me. I had just woken up, I was confused, still stuck between dream and reality. I’m sorry if I scared you, but I am not lying when I tell you that everything is fine now. I’m alright.” he assures with a large and reassuring smile, the flames of the fire reflecting in his blue eyes.

Regina tilts her head and smirks. " I believe you. Even though you're... different."

Robin’s confusion is obvious when he asks, as he resumes stirring the broth. "Different how?"

"I'm not entirely sure quite yet." Regina replies mischievously. "But I’ve noticed that you smile more, you’re more open. I couldn’t help but wonder if it was related to this dream, or if maybe something else happened while we were with Eleanor and Michael?"

Robin suddenly finds a lot of interest in their almost completely roasted dinner, trying to shut down the victorious voice in his head screaming at him to be honest and open his heart to her.

Except he's not ready yet. Changing his whole life is one thing, revealing feelings that took him weeks to admit, is another.

"Not really." He sighs. This is no proper answer. And if he wants to change, he has to give her more. So, he sits down, finally daring to meet her brown eyes that haven't left him since her first statement. "I mean... They were really nice people."

"They were." Regina agrees.
"And the kids... I've never been around kids much." Robin reveals with a shrug. "I guess it must have triggered something in me. Who knew kids had such power?"

Regina's smile widens at that, eyes sparkling. "Who knew a lonely traveler had a soft spot for children?" She replies with amusement. "I didn’t see that one coming."

Robin could feel offended, but he's not. Not anymore. On the contrary, he finds himself laughing softly, admitting in all honesty. "Me neither. But I got attached to them."

"Well," Regina says, grabbing her part of the dinner and blowing on it to make it cool. "I like this new you. I don't mean I disliked the other you," she adds briskly, joining Robin in a small chuckle. "But maybe that I prefer this one a little bit better."

Chapter End Notes

Coming next: Rumple pays Regina another visit. And as winter forces our two travelers to take cover, they find themselves into a proximity that might have unforeseen consequences.
Any review?
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

A/N : A new chapter for you tonight! Took me a while to edit this one, life is beyond crazy and doesn't give me a minute's rest, but I did it! Hope you'll enjoy this chapter.

Thank you everyone for your wonderful reviews! And don't worry, I won't take 9 months to update ;-) 

As always, all the mistakes are mine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Days have passed, and Robin and Regina fell into a comfortable routine. They wake up at dawn, nibble something depending on what's in their bags –bread, a fruit, sometimes even what's left of the broth they had for dinner, and after Regina's bathed herself when there's a river nearby, they start walking. Up north. Always north. They usually wait until one of them is hungry before making a stop for lunch, if possible in a clearing, to catch the rare rays of sun winter still offers. And then they walk again.

Sometimes, they cross a village, allow themselves a break and stop in a tavern for a pint of ale and a full meal. Less often, they rent rooms and spend the night in the relative comfort of a bed and four walls. More than once, they have to suffer some misplaced remarks sent Regina's way, but Robin usually shuts them with one look. But if he doesn't approve those behaviors, he can't entirely blame the men. Regina stays a beautiful woman in a wild and savage environment, made of lonely travelers and uneducated people. She surely catches attention every time she removes her hood.

However, she adjusted quite well to her life, found back her footing quickly after they left Michael and Eleanor. She ignores the men who do a double-take when she walks past them, and almost drinks her ale without making a face. She no longer shivers when facing a spider the size of her hand, or what she's learned to recognize as venomous snakes. She lights a fire in no time, cooks vegetables as well as meat without burning them.

She's happy, that much is obvious. She misses the woodcutters, she's still secretive about her past –something Robin can't complain about, considering his own background- but her behavior towards him has changed, just like he's changed. They talk more. About their plans, about Hansel, Gretel, their parents and Amelia. They even exchanged their opinion about different subjects –travels, royalism, some Kings' reign- more than once. It comes naturally now, and Robin enjoys those exchanges very much. She's extremely educated, quick-witted with a strong knowledge about the world, even if most of what she's learned comes from books and not real life. So, for the sole purpose to–hopefully- make her smile, tonight, he decided to make a gesture, to offer her something that's been on his mind since they left their friends.

Dinner is almost ready, he can just tell to the delicious smell reaching him as he returns to their small camp after washing in a stream.

Regina greets him with a large smile that she only shows since their time with the woodcutter's
family. A smile that lights up her face, and makes her eyes shine a million stars. The more he watches her, the more Robin feels himself fall for her. He doesn't fight his feelings anymore, instead welcomes them with open arms despite the risk of rejection. All he wants now, is Regina's well-being. Whether it is with him or not, doesn't matter.

"Are you hungry?"

"I wasn't until I smelled this. What did you cook?"

Regina blushes as she fills his bowl with a large spoon of meat and vegetables. "I just used what we had. Carrots, potatoes, onion and pumpkin, with the turkey you killed yesterday."

Robin sits next to her and grabs his bowl, humming the sweet scent reaching his nose. He sighs contently as warmth spreads from the wooden plate to his icy fingers.

"That intense, huh?"

He blinks his eyes open. "What?"

Regina blows on her own dish, tilting her chin in his direction and smirking. "You look frozen."

"It's getting colder every day." he points out.

Regina agrees, taking a full spoon of her stew and bringing it to her lips. "Be careful though." She makes a face as she stirs and blows on her stew. "The food is really hot."

Robin puts down his bowl and opens his bag while talking to Regina. This is the perfect moment.

"While it cools down, I'd like to take this opportunity to give you something." He takes the gift out of his bag, inhales deeply, and hands it to her, a touch of apprehension pulling his stomach out.

He stays silent, dreading her reaction. Will she love it, or be offended? Will it harden their friendship, or will she find his gesture intrusive, and everything will be ruined? It's a gamble, but Regina is worth taking all the risks.

She curiously takes and unrolls the paper, a ghost of a smile on her parted lips, eyes shining with curiosity. When she discovers the present, her face brightens. She bites her lip in a way that makes his heart melt, but the feeling is nothing compared to the one her large, genuine and grateful grin sends in his core. His whole body is numb, unresponsive, only filled with his incommensurable love for her and the need to press his lips to hers.

But he can't. Not now. Not when he ignores if she shares his affection, not when there's a risk, even minimal, to scare her off and ruin everything they have. Instead, he stares at her radiant face, secretly attempts to control the fluttering of his heart and dizziness of his mind.

"Robin... " she murmurs, amazed, her gaze alternating between him and her father's drawing. "This is... wow!" She shakes her head, her eyes fixed on the portrait, reflecting a disbelief tinged with wonder. "Amazing. I have never received a more beautiful and touching gift."

Robin blinks. "Really?"

"Yes." She replies with another bite of her lower lip, nodding.

"I was afraid you'd be mad." He admits. "I've used the little memories I have from the portrait you have of him, but I didn't know if you'd appreciate because... you never talk about him. I feared that I
"Robin," Regina comes take a seat next to him. "I barely mentioned my father to you, yet you realized how important he is to me. It shows how much you've paid attention to me. His portrait is in such a bad state I'm not even sure how you've managed to catch so many details about him. *This,* She shows him the drawing he made, with a grin that he for sure won't forget anytime soon. "is perfect." Her hand covers his when she finishes. "Thank you, Robin."

When she leans forward, Robin freezes, hypnotized by her eyes, her smile, their closeness. His heart is racing, pounding against his ribcage, his guts twisting, his hands sweating. Never before did he ever feel overwhelmed and unable to move, a slave of his own emotions, his own needs. The kiss she presses on his cheek triggers a shudder so strong Robin has to control himself not to let it show. It spreads inside his whole body, heart, mind, soul, blurring his vision, raising goosebumps on his skin and stirring up his desire. He inhales deeply and gives her his most charming -and normal- smile.

He might be fighting a burning desire, but Regina's bright smile during the rest of the evening is worth any unsatisfied passion.

xxx

Damn! Why can't she fall asleep? Why can't her mind give her a break and let her sleep?

Regina rolls on her back, sighs deeply, and looks at the sky, or more precisely what she can see from the starry sky through the foliage of the surrounding trees. Sleep eludes her more and more often lately, or is filled with dreams she cannot explain. Dreams with him have replaced the ones with Leopold now. Is her mind playing her? Is she making something up now that he's changed so much? They are closer, that much is clear. They really get along. But does that mean that they could be more? Could there be something going on that they aren't even aware of? Or is she mixing everything up?

Glancing in direction of Robin, Regina can't suppress a small smile at his peaceful face, and closes her eyes when her chest and belly fill with a delicious warmth. Yeah, something is definitely going on. On her side at least. His gift tonight was the sweetest gesture he ever had towards her. What did she do to deserve such a wonderful friend?

"Thinking of another way to betray your husband, dearie?"

Regina jumps, wide-eyed and awestruck. In front of her, the glittering figure of her former mentor is standing, his insufferable grin and snake-shaped eyes directed straight at her.

"Rumple. How?"

His giggle makes her cringe, but most of all, dread that Robin could hear it and wake up, facing the mess of her past and walking away from her.

"You know how." he gloats.

And indeed, she does... Damn magic... Regina purses her lips, scowling. "Why are you here?"

"To try to knock some sense into your pretty head and convince you to come back."

"You tried already, and I've made my choice."

"An unreasonable one."
"Says you!" Regina bites, glaring at the imp and getting up quickly, wrapping her cloak over her shoulders and walking a safe distance to make sure Robin won't hear any of this exchange. "My life isn't in that castle, it never was. Leaving is the best decision I have ever made. For the first time in years, I can say that I am truly happy. So do not expect me to go back, because I won't!"

Rumpelstiltskin looks down and giggles, staring back at her with clear amusement.

"Come on, Regina! Do you really think it will work?"

Regina frowns. What does that mean?

"What are you talking about?"

"This." He tilts his chin in direction of the small camp they just left. "You and Mr. Blue-Eyes there. What will your husband think when he'll find you with him?"

"Nothing is going on with Robin. And even if there was, Leopold has probably forgotten about my existence now. He never cared about me."

"So you think. He's still looking for you, Regina." He reveals, stalking towards her, his words sending a shiver of dread running down Regina's spine. "He still wants you back."

She takes a step back, frowning and doubtful, fighting her fear, the memory of her husband's face the last time she saw him. When she decided to run away sooner than planned. The events are still fresh in her mind, reminding her of the reason why she left. Rumple is only playing with her. There is no way Leopold would want her after what happened.

"I don't believe you." she counteracts with all her bravery. "He never wanted me."

"But you are still breaking marital rules."

"I haven't done anything!"

"Not yet." Rumple smirks.

"That is none of your business!"

"But I care about you, my dear." Regina snorts and takes another step back when Rumple walks closer, stopping an inch from her face. "I wouldn't want you to lose another lover. Because that would be painful, wouldn't it?"

When Regina takes a breath, filling her lungs with the oxygen she was starting to lack, the Dark One is long gone. Her mind catches up with her body, and that's when she realizes that she's freezing, trembling from head to toe, her bare feet numb against the icy ground. She shakes her head, hurries in direction of Robin, and lets out a relieved sigh when she catches sight of him.

He's still peacefully sleeping. Thankfully, he didn't hear any of this. But as Regina lays back down on her couch, she cannot look away from him. Because in the middle of Rumpelstiltskin's speech, between the memories of her husband and the likely false revelation that he would be looking for her -even if that was the truth, she's out of his reach now, one revelation imposes over the others: Could Robin be her second chance at love?

xxx

Robin looks up to the sky, listens to the forest's silence, the lack of birds' songs and crickets' sounds.
As if Nature herself was shutting down, getting ready for what Robin senses. He's been through this before, traveled through this land several times. He climbs down the rock, turning his back on the landscape, the vast forest stretched to the horizon, where it meets the whiteness of the sky.

"We have to move quickly and find a warm place to stay."

Regina frowns, but she grabs her bag and follows him. He seems preoccupied since this morning. They've crossed the borders of a new land, mysterious and little known to most people. Maybe he knows something about this place that she doesn't?

"Is there a problem?"

"A snow storm is coming."

Her brow shoots up, but she stays focused on her steps. That explains the wetter and colder weather. "How bad is it?"

"Really bad." Robin glances at her, allowing Regina to read the genuine concern in his eyes. "This place experiences very violent snowstorms that can last several days. The temperature collapses so quickly that anyone who does not take shelter finds himself trapped, and dies, buried under a good layer of snow."

Regina suppresses a grimace, trying to keep up with Robin's fast pace. This storm is definitely worrying him, and now she understands why. There's nothing around them to protect them, only trees for as far as her eyes can see. "Reassuring... How far is the next village?"

"Too far. At least a day walking, and the snow will start falling soon. If we spend the night outside..."

When he leaves his sentence unfinished, Regina shivers and instinctively tugs her cloak tighter over her shoulders. "What are we going to do then?"

"After realizing how deadly the storms were, cabins were built throughout the forest, so anyone stuck by the snow could find shelter." Robin explains, eyes still scanning the woodland ahead of him. "If I'm correct, there's one in this direction."

xxx

It begins like any regular snow fall. Regina looks up to face the snowflakes falling from the sky. They land in her hair, on her face, and for a moment she forgets Robin's warning. She smiles and chuckles at the coldness that tingles her skin, reminding her of older and happy periods of her life. But soon rises the wind, strong and brutal, turning the flakes into a weapon, a burning touch, needles digging into her skin, forcing Regina to pull up her hood and protect her face with her hand as she struggles to keep her eyes open.

She feels Robin's firm grip on her hand. Shaking herself from the numbness that has started to seize her, Regina follow suits, almost runs, adrenaline coursing through her veins, breath short, the icy atmosphere burning her throat, triggering a cough fit. Robin's hold tightens each time, his eyes meeting hers and making sure that she's alright, something that she confirms with a firm nod.

Soon, they are forced to slow down, because the ground is covered with a thick layer of snow, slippery and threatening to envelop them. Their feet sink to their knees, rendering their progress more difficult.

Regina is cold. She follows Robin mechanically, but she's dizzy, tired, breathless. She needs a break.
They've been almost running for who knows how long, and moving one foot in front of the other has become a struggle. Her sore body is now numb and ice-cold. She's barely aware of what's happening around her. All she knows is that she keeps walking, again, doesn't stop despite her exhaustion. She relies on his firm hand around hers to guide her through the fog that has fallen over the forest, and focuses on fighting the blizzard's deadly kiss.

Suddenly, she's lifted in the air, once, twice, three times. Regina shakes her head, tries to understand what's going on, but when she opens her eyes the snow is gone. The pressure on her hand has also disappeared, but she feels something else, as if another part of her is slowly awakening.

"Stay with me, Regina!"

Robin keeps rubbing her cheeks, waking her up from the numb state she had fallen into, until her eyes light up again, until she comes back to him. He rids her off her bag, throws her cloak on the floor, and rummages through their things until he finds and unfolds a blanket. He wraps it around Regina before adding another one, tilting her chin up to make her look at him. "Give me a minute."

Her small nod is enough of an answer. She needs some time to recover and he has to warm this place up quickly. He leaves Regina standing in the middle of the cabin, and hurries towards the fireplace, buckling down to light up a fire. His hands are shaking, his fingers numb, impeding him from getting a good grip on the wood he drops several times. It takes some time, more than usual, and Robin's frustration grows. Until it works. When the fire lits, Robin sits back on his heels, blowing out a relieved breath, and gives himself a minute of rest.

That was close. They fought the storm for more than an hour. Many people don't survive this long. Regina might have not made it had she been alone. He remembers the exact moment he felt her falter, when the cold began to take her. She was slower, her grip on his hand lessened, and most of all, she became unresponsive to his calls. And how many times he called her name! All along, he never stopped talking to her, encouraging, telling her to hold on, they were almost there, the cabin was just a bit further, just a few more steps, please! The fear of losing her slammed him back in the face with force again, giving him the necessary strength to keep going, to fight his paralyzed and exhausted muscles when he lifted her up the stairs leading to the cabin, and save them both. And he did. *He did...* Robin realizes. They're safe now.

Something falls on his back, startling him and making him look up. Regina is standing behind him, gaze still clouded, but she seems to have partially come back to herself, at least enough to drop a blanket on his shoulders. Robin takes her hand gently, not breaking eye-contact, guiding her until she sits down next to him. He adjusts the blanket around his body, shivering as warmth chases coldness away, then naturally wraps his arm around Regina's shoulder, and helps her rest against him. She willingly does, sighing contently when her head finds the crook of his neck, and as if it was the next logical move, Robin's lips close over her forehead.

xxx

"Hello, there."

Regina blinks several times before opening her eyes, confused and nauseous. She waits until her eyesight clears before she recognizes Robin's smiling face. She opens her mouth to answer, but her throat tingles, triggering a violent cough that she tries to control while attempting to sit down.

"Here, drink some water."

Robin helps her hold the gourd and stay straight, and Regina sips slowly until the dryness of her throat disappears.
"Thank you." She murmurs when she lowers the bottle.

She takes a moment to become aware of her surroundings, and notices that some things have changed since she fell asleep: the fire at the back of the room has warmed up the small cabin and has become their only source of light as night has fallen, her cloak and Robin's are hung next to it, their boots on the ground. Their bags are partially opened, blankets, food and cauldron are out and stored against the wall, just next to a makeshift bed identical to the one she's on. "What's all this?" she asks, even if she guessed the answer.

Robin puts his gourd aside and sits in front of her. "While you were sleeping, I organized the space a little to make it comfortable."

"How long was I asleep?"

"An hour or two. You were exhausted after our race." Robin explains. "You needed to rest."

Regina lifts a challenging eyebrow. She definitely feels better than she did when they found this place, and Robin's care is warming her heart. "Didn't you?"

"I'm more used to deal with this kind of situation than you are, Regina." He smirks at her before nodding in her direction. "How do you feel?"

Regina assesses her own situation at his question. Robin took off her wet shirt and shoes, leaving her barefoot, in a tank top and pants, wrapped in their thick blankets. His initiative could have bothered her, but it is not. She is aware that his only goal was to help her without any ulterior motives. He's her friend, she trusts him and… she likes him… she likes him a lot. Maybe it's Rumple's words that haven't left her mind, maybe it's a simple acknowledgment of what was already there, she doesn't know. But her heart is swelling with this enjoyable warmth she won't complain about, especially not when the fire makes the blue of his eyes shine in a completely different way, hypnotizing her.

"Regina?"

Pulled out from her reverie, Regina startles, fighting her inner trouble when she replies nonchalantly. "I'm alright. Definitely better than earlier."

"Told you that these cabins have saved many lives."

A rumbling breaks the sound of the crackling fire. Regina brings a hand to her stomach, sheepishly looks at Robin. "Seems that I'm hungry too."

"Reasonably so." Robin states as he stands up and heads towards their bags. "We've used up a lot of our energy today, and it's getting late."

Regina gets up and walks to the only window, keeping a blanket wrapped around her shoulders while watching the thick blizzard that has covered the land. She can't even see a few feet in front of her, but she can definitely tell that snow is still falling heavily, and trees are bending in the wind. If the weather doesn't change, they won't get out of here anytime soon.

"Good thing we bought lots of food supplies at our last stop." she says while turning to face Robin, walking the few steps separating them. "If we stay stuck here for days, at least we won't starve."

She swallows heavily to hide her trouble. It's only now that she realizes that he has taken off his thick shirt. Now squatting by the fire and preparing dinner, he stayed in a simple sleeveless shirt. That's the first time she's seen him so... undressed. Winter weather never allowed them to remove a single layer of clothing before.
His shoulders are square, she'd already noticed that. Square, brawny shoulders. And his arms... Damn. She had never seen his arms before. Strong biceps that move with each movement, drawing the lines of his muscles... Even Daniel didn't have such arms... This is a work of art. This man is a work of art.

Regina's gaze is drowned to him, his strong arms, muscled chest, perfect stubble, adorable dimples, the piercing blue of his eyes hitting her in her soul, turning her whole self upside down when he looks at her.

"... I had a feeling something like this might happen."

What?

Regina blinks out of her reverie.

"I'm sorry, what?"

Robin frowns at her, half amused, half worried.

"I was telling you that I knew we were going to cross this land at the worse possible time. That's why I've been storing so much food."

Regina lets out the breath she was holding. "Oh! Okay."

She crouches in front of him, wonderfully ignoring his interrogative look as she grabs a knife and starts peeling a potato.

"Regina, are you alright?"

"Hmm?" She looks up at him and that was definitely a mistake... Her throat squeezes the second she meets his eyes, heartbeat accelerating, and breath short. She manages a small and quick. "Yeah, I'm fine." That clearly doesn't convince him, if his raised eyebrow is any indication.

"Are you sure?"

Regina breathes in slowly, centering herself. She's a grownup; she can handle a handsome man! Half-naked handsome man, her brain whispers to her, but she shushes it. She uses her most charming smile and leans her head to the side.

"Robin, your concern is touching, but really, I'm alright."

"It's not the first time you're not listening to me. And usually, when that happens, it's because you have something on your mind."

Like feeling these strong biceps under the tip of my fingers...

Regina clamps her mouth shut before the words escape her lips. "I'm just a bit off, that's all. Probably still exhausted by all the emotions we've had today. But I can assure you," she manages to reply instead, using her most convincing tone. "everything is okay."

xxx

Regina smiles as she takes the paper sheet from his hand, taking a closer look, biting her lower lip as every line is revealed to her eyes.

"Wow..." she says, leaning her head back against the wall. "I never met those people, yet your
drawing is so detailed that I'm sure I could recognize them if I walked by them."

Robin chuckles. Regina's genuine interest and admiration of his sketches is purely adorable. If he had known, he'd have revealed this to her sooner. Meeting her gaze, Robin swallows hard. From where he's sitting next to her, her light shirt gives him a good view of her… chest. More accurately, the beginning of her breasts. Something she doesn't seem to be aware of. Robin hides his trouble, focuses on her dark eyes, the refined lines of her face, flushed cheeks, pink lips, so attractive in the shadows of the night, gradually revealed by the light of the flames.

_Not helping!_ She's even more beautiful from this angle. How is that even possible?

"Can I see this one?"

Robin's breath hitches when Regina bends towards the pile of drawings, her shoulder brushing his chest, scent reaching his nose, her hair tickling his chin.

Damn, controlling himself is getting more difficult with their growing closeness and physical proximity. If they have to spend several days in here he's not sure he's-

"Wait, is this-?"

Regina's question draws Robin's attention to what has caught her eyes, and he curses under his breath when he recognizes it. How could he be so stupid?

"Robin?"

Regina looks at him with puzzled eyes and an arched eyebrow. In her hand is the sketch Robin had made of her from the portrait the king had shown him. He had thrown one away, yes, but obsessed with her face that never left his mind, he had redrawn it a few days later. And _kept_ it! Newbie mistake! Fortunately, he did not represent any of her royal outfits, only her face, but if she came to realize where this image comes from… No, that can't happen! Not now. Not when everything is so perfect between them. He needs to calm his tense nerves and act normal, and everything will be fine.

"Yeah..." He scratches the back of his head with embarrassment. "I- I didn't really plan for you to see this."

"I didn't really expect to find a drawing of myself." She admits with a shrug, her face unreadable, making Robin shiver.

Regina internally frowns. The drawing is beautiful, as precisely done as any other of Robin's works. But there's something… something that she can't put her finger on. But what she's sure of, is that the knowledge that Robin made a sketch of her, even if it doesn't mean anything, means _everything._

It touches her deeply, that same wonderful warmth spreading in her chest again, cheeks flushing against her will, and Regina inhales, bites her lower lip.

"Why didn't you?" She hears Robin ask, his oh so charming smile and adorable dimples staring at her, heat rising in her lower abdomen. The only time she had felt the same way was during moments she'd spent with Daniel, a long time ago.

Regina's fingers itch to touch him, to run over his skin, discover his stubble, every relief of his face... but she shakes herself out of her reverie.

"I don't know." She sheepishly replies, looking down and losing the battle against a shy smile.
Robin nudges her shoulder, leaning forward and closer to her. "My drawings represent people and situations that are important to me, and that I find beautiful."

Regina's eyes widen, breath stuck in her throat at his words. What?

"Does that mean…" she moves to face him, her face only inches from his. And as Robin nods and words abandon her, all Regina can feel, is the soft pressure of his lips against hers, and her entire self being engulfed into his embrace.

Chapter End Notes

Coming next: While Leopold is furious at not knowing about Regina and Robin's whereabouts, the unexpected arrival of two strangers might change the situation, and perhaps turn the balance in his favour.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I promised an update before the end of the year, so here I am keeping my word. WIRM should be updated soon, holidays got in the way of the last part of betareading.

Before you discover this chapter, a little information so you won't be confused: This chapter starts a little after the end of chapter 7, when Robin decided to put an end to his contract.

It took me a lot of editing before being satisfied, and I believe I finally found the correct version. Hopefully you'll enjoy it. Don't forget to review on your way out ;-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Contract cancelled."

Leopold paces in his bedroom, staring at the piece of paper that arrived by raven a couple of hours ago. He can't believe it. How dare he? How. Dare. He? Who is that man to dismiss his demand while so close to be fulfilling his contract?

"Go to hell, hunter!" Leopold screams with rage, throwing the paper in the fire of his chimney. "You'll pay for your audacity! I will send every man in the kingdom after you, and you won't have a minute rest. As for my dear wife," He looks ahead of him, through the window, to the immensity of the forest stretching to the horizon. "I'll find another way to have her head served on a plate."

"So much violence..." A voice comes from behind him, startling him.

Leopold turns to face the creature that has had the annoying tendency to show up without a warning over the last months. Rumpelstiltskin. The Dark One... He appeared for the first time not long after he hired the assassin, and has paid him regular visits since. His agenda isn't clear, but at least in his presence, Leopold can speak without hiding behind pretenses and appearances. He can have outbursts of anger, list the many ideas of torture that go through his head at his wife's thought, and let his frustration overwhelm him in front of the shameless attitude of this so-called killer who refuses to honor his deal.

"They deserve it!" he spits. "They've betrayed me, both of them. And this man's nerve... Cancelling the contract without further explanation. He's insulting me. Me! The King!" he thunders, banging his fist on the table. "I'm King of this realm, this is insubordination! The sentence for such action is death!"

The creature giggles and jumps from the desk he was sitting on, one arm folded against his chest, the other lifted, forefinger held up.

"Indeed. But what would people think if they learned the real reason why you know this man?" he points. "He's a hunter, an assassin known through the Enchanted Forest. While you are a respected King, whose wife suddenly disappeared without any explanation, leaving you and your daughter heartbroken." he giggles. "Surely, you couldn't have any reason to know such a... reprehensible individual."
The imp's words quiet down the King. He's right, Leopold realizes. He should think this through more carefully, and find a way to find this assassin, wherever he is, and make him pay. Just like his wife. He should let this go though. She left months ago, nothing indicates that she will come back, but he can't take any chances. And truth be told, he can't suppress the intense need to see her dead. She fooled him, and no one fools a King. She deserves to pay for what she did.

And the more he thinks about it, the more he wonders... Could Regina be the reason why the assassin turned his back on him? Could she have... enchanted him somehow? He ignores how much power she possesses, but she's a witch, and she did manage to escape his castle while locked up, so maybe...

Well, if they are found together, all the better. And if she indeed started a relationship with him, whether by using magic or not, he will use this to his advantage, will accuse her of treason and witchcraft, and will sentence her to death without having to worry about what his court will think. He will simply be applying the law. For now, they still believe his men are truly looking for her, while in reality Anton is simply on a wild goose chase to give the change while the hunter was supposed to fulfill his mission. The most important thing is that no one has to find out the real reason why his wife is gone, and why she will be burned on a pyre.

But now that he knows for certain that the hunter's mission has failed, he can change his plan. He can play the concerned King who's yearning for his wife's return, and add the hunter in the equation. Wherever Regina is hiding, if he sends the entire kingdom after her, he will find her. And this time, he will make sure that whoever accepts the mission, has no way around their decision.

"Mmm..." The King looks up at the Dark One, who's watching him with madness and eyes shining with curiosity. "Just gotten an idea, did you?" the creature giggles.

"I did." Leopold replies with confidence. "The only thing I need is an opportunity."

xxx

"I need a costume for my wedding." Guy brags, walking his head high in the middle of the crowd.

"Your lady seems refined." William sneers, glancing at the large market around them. "I'm not certain that you'll find what you're looking for in this place."

"Her father gave me the address of a seller further on this road." Guy explains, his hand vaguely pointing ahead of them. "He said he sells good-"

"Bloody hell!"

Guy stops in his tracks and follows William's gaze, his friend staring at a portrait on a tree, dumbfounded. It takes Guy a moment, but soon, he recognizes her.

The Queen?

"Don't tell me I tried to pick up a Queen?"

Guy steps closer to the portrait. Yes, it's definitely the woman William was talking to on the day they met Robin. He was so thrilled to have found his old friend that he barely paid attention to her, but her beauty had caught his eye immediately, even if she was trying to hide it.

"5 000 reward for anyone who finds her?"

His eyes fall to the bottom of the portrait. According to this, the Queen has been missing for months.
Despite how long it's been since she disappeared, the royal family carries the hope that she can still be found, and that someone might know something about what happened to her.

Guy frowns, remembering their encounter with her. She was on her own when they saw her, and clearly uncomfortable, as if she was afraid. Of what, he doesn't know. But maybe this is the opportunity to find out.

"What do you think?" Guy is dragged from his thoughts by his friend, William looking at him with a smirk. "One last adventure before you settle down? You could definitely use this money for your marital life, and I personally wouldn't complain about having a little nest egg to spare."

Guy glances between his friend and the portrait, hesitant. He promised Marian and her father to stay around until the wedding, to get to know each other better and vow her properly. This isn't a decision he can make on his own.

"Let's go back to Marian." he declares. "I need to discuss this with her and my future father-in-law. I have his blessing to marry her, I don't want to screw everything up by flying off to the wind and let them think I'm a coward."

xxx

"How long would this trip last?"

Marian's father, Robert Fitzwater, is standing straight, arms crossed over his chest, next to his daughter and in front of William de Widenal and Guy de Gisborne. He has silently listened to the two men's suggestion to find the King's wife and bring her back to him safe, only nodded from time to time.

Guy looks at William. "I can't say for sure. With good horses, we could reach the village where we met her in a few days. But if she's not there anymore... We can track her, but it's been weeks since we crossed path with her, and snow has covered half the land. My guess would be a month, possibly more."

Robert turns towards his daughter, who's been silent during the whole discussion. "What do you think, Marian?"

The young woman smiles at her fiancé, Guy returning her smile. "I trust him to come back to me. This mission is a great matter for the King, he and the Princess must be devastated. If Guy can help, it will only make me prouder to marry him once he comes back."

The man gets up from his seat to kneel in front of the woman, taking her hands and bringing them to his lips.

"Your words make me the happiest of men, Milady. I promise you, I won't disappoint you."

xxx

"Father?"

The voice is shy, unsure. Leopold turns away from the window to face his daughter. Snow White is waiting for him before entering the room. He gives her permission with a simple nod of his head. The young teenager walks to him carefully, an air of sadness covering her face. Something that hasn't left her since that damn witch escaped.

"What is it, Snow?" He questions, crouching in front of his daughter. He has the feeling that the
answer won't please him, but no one besides Anton knows the truth behind what happened with Regina, so he has to control himself and not let anything show.

"I had a dream about Regina."

Leopold clenches his jaw. His daughter isn't aware of her step mother's betrayal and the strong anger and resentment –or should he say hate? - he feels towards her, and he intends to keep things that way.

"It's been months, Father. I'm worried about her."

His large hand cups his daughter's cheek. "I know. But you must have faith, my beautiful Snow. I promise you, if she's out there somewhere, then I'll bring her back."

Except that the witch will be dead before you get to see her...

"I miss her." Snow White admits, looking down.

"I know you do, Snow. You have such a good heart, I know how much you got attached to her."

Knock Knock ...

"Your Highness?"

"Come in." Leopold answers, looking over his shoulder to discover Anton, the captain of his guards who tentatively peaks his head in the room.

"I apologize for the disturbance, Your Highness, but two men are requesting a hearing. They pretend to have news about the Queen."

Leopold gets up and swirls around to face him immediately.

Finally!

"Regina?"

Damn, Snow...

"Do they know where Regina is?" the girl questions, taking several steps towards the man.

The guard awkwardly stands in the entrance. "I don't know, You Highness. They want to speak to the King only."

Snow White looks at her father with a hopeful and stubborn face. In his luck, he had the misfortune that she heard this. Now she won't let this go.

"Escort them to the throne room. I'll be right here."

"Very well, Your Highness."

As soon as the door is closed, Snow White's face brightens. "It's a sign! I knew it! There's a reason why I dreamt about her!" she exclaims happily. "Regina is alive! She's alive, Father!" She takes his hands. "You have to find her!"

"And I will, Snow!" he assures, biting the inside of his cheek to hide his real feelings. "I will."
"Gentlemen, I've been told you may hold information about the Queen's whereabouts."

Guy and William bow respectfully. "We do, Your Majesty."

"I'm all ears."

The King listens to their tale with curious and attentive ears, suppressing a victorious smile. This is good... Exactly what he needed. If what these men say is true, even if Regina has left the village where they met her, their abilities will allow them to track and find her. Also, they pretend to be excellent fighters, something that might reveal very useful, especially if —or when— they encounter a certain skilled assassin. And if said assassin stands in their way and they have to get rid of him... well, Leopold certainly won't cry over his death.

"You are the first people who have brought me news about the Queen since she disappeared."

Leopold says once they're done, resuming without waiting for an answer. "As we ignore what happened to her, I'm unsure as to why she seemed 'alone and frightened' when you met her, to quote your own words. I do hope that nothing bad has happened to her, and that no one has hurt her. I may live in this castle but I'm aware that all the lands aren't safe. However, what I do know is that the princess and I are looking forward to her return, and you, gentlemen, have the opportunity to help us on that."

William nods. The King couldn't be more correct. How did the Queen manage to survive in such hostile environment is a mystery to him, so the possibility that she wasn't alone is an idea that crossed his mind. Did she run away? But why would a Queen run away from her life? Was she maybe kidnapped, or forced to leave? But he's interrupted in his thoughts when the King resumes.

"I cannot participate in your entire journey, royal business keeps me here. Nevertheless, I would like to be present when you'll find her. Send me a message by bird when you'll be sure you're on the right track, and I'll join you as soon as possible." He waits for a protest, but there is none. "Will this be an issue for you?"

"Not at all, Your Majesty." Guy confirms with a nod. "We will do as you say." He adds, bowing his head reverently. They could have brought the Queen safely back to the castle, but if those are the King's conditions, they will adjust.

"Good." Leopold gives them a nod. "What do you need for this mission, gentlemen?"

"Horses, Your Majesty. The fastest you can provide us with. And of course, food for the road."

"I suppose you'll need money too."

"Yes, it could be useful indeed." William admits. "We might need to pay for—"

Leopold lifts a hand to silence them. "I don't want to know what you need it for. Is that all?"

The two mercenaries exchange a glance, before Guy replies. "I believe it is, Your Majesty."

Leopold allows himself a small smile. Now, let's get to real business! "Now that everything is settled, I need to have your word."

"Our word, My Lord?" William questions.

"Yes," Leopold nods. "Your word that you will fulfill your mission until the end, no matter what it
William swallows heavily. The King's tone has changed, so has his demeanor. He can't tell exactly what it is, but as he looks at the King now, something bothers him, makes him feel uncomfortable. The man is still calm, but his voice is cold, firm, authoritative, more than it was a minute ago.

"I'm not sure to understand." he says carefully.

The King straightens in his seat. "There is nothing to understand. Are you ready to swear an oath to me?"

William glances at Guy. Are they really doing this? His friend seems sure of himself, but there's something about this King, this conversation... something sounds fake. The man changed when he realized that they were able to help him find the Queen. And not in a good way...

"We are." Guy declares, unaware of his friend's turmoil.

"Sir. De Gisborne and De Widenal," Leopold announces solemnly. "are you ready to do everything in your power to find the Queen of this Kingdom?"

"We are."

"Do you swear to warn me the second you'll find her tracks, so I can be present once you'll find her?"

"We do."

"Do you swear to finish your mission no matter what happens?"

"We do."

"Very well." Leopold smiles wickedly. He got them. "You will be supplied with anything you deem necessary, and the reward will be yours once the Queen will be safely back here." He pauses for a second, makes sure every one of his words are heard and understood. "Know, gentlemen, that if any of you betrays me, I will make sure that you, and your soon-to-be bride, Lady Marian Fitzwalter, will all be arrested, thrown in jail, and sentenced to death for high treason."

xxx

"Your Highness," the captain of the King's guard says carefully. "Are you certain that it will work this time? The previous man you hired to-"

Leopold clucks, cutting him off instantly. "No need to remind me of my mistake, Anton. Don't worry, this time, I made sure they had no choice but to obey me."

The man takes a careful step closer to the King, as he's watching his realm through the large window of the throne room.

"I trust your judgment, Your Highness. But if anyone were to learn the truth about what happened that day-"

Leopold turns around instantly, shutting the guard off. "No one," he says clearly. "will learn the truth. No one, do you hear me?" The guard swallows down, and nods shakily. "You are partly responsible for this, remember? She escaped while she was on your watch! So, if you care about your and your family's lives, you better make sure everything goes according to my plans."
"What the hell happened in there?" William questions once he and his friend have exited the castle.

He's still stunned by the King's last sentence. It was a threat. It *definitely* was a threat. But why? Their only goal was to help, why hang a sword of Damocles over their heads? Why threaten an innocent woman?

"Marian can't know about this." Guy says resolutely, watching ahead of him. "She believes in the King, she claims that he's good and fair. This side of him..." He slows down, gaze lost. "If she was to learn the man he really is... No sane person would do what he just did."

William stops his friend with a hand on his arm, waits until Guy meets his gaze. "Did you realize that he never, not even once, called the Queen his "wife"? As if she simply was a title, and not his supposedly *beloved* wife."

"After the speech he gave us, I'm not certain that he really wants her back. He probably does that for good measure. He didn't carry the concern of someone whose wife has been missing for so long. At least, not after what he said in the end."

William steps back, crosses his arms over his chest, brow burrowed. "Do you think he told us the entire truth?"

"I don't know, my friend." Guy replies sadly. "But wherever the truth lies, our hands are now tied."

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Chapter End Notes

Coming next: As the relationship between Regina and Robin evolves, painful revelations lead to an unexpected apparition.
A/N: The moment you were all waiting for is finally here! Along with revelations you may, or may have not, foreseen. Enjoy your reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Robin of Locksley doesn’t do love.

He does sex, he pays for it or doesn’t say no when a nice woman makes a pass at him. But he doesn’t do love.

Well, that isn’t true anymore.

Robin gently brushes Regina’s hairline, smiles when she sighs contently at his touch, cuddling closer to his chest, even in her sleep. Tonight was unexpected, at every level. Regina’s kiss hadn’t caught him by surprise, but he responded to her immediately. She had taken possession of him in the blink of an eye, and soon he had abandoned himself to her kisses, her caresses, the pressure of her chest against his, unable to resist her.

For the first time in his life, Robin of Locksley didn’t do sex.

He made love.

“I draw people and situations that are important to me, and that I find beautiful.”

“Does that mean…” she moves to face him, her face only inches from his. “Do you…”

*Her words die as her lips cover his own, as if irremediably attracted by them. It’s immediate. Robin feels his chest shake with the force of the feeling washing over him. As if, right here, answering Regina’s kiss, was exactly where he belonged. Never before did he feel that way, with any woman.*
Or anyone.

His lips react instinctively and move eagerly against hers, his hand cupping the back of her head to keep her close. She’s the first one to move. With a boldness he didn’t anticipate, and without breaking the kiss, she straddles his lap, pressing herself closer to him, one hand wrapping around his neck while the other tugs at his shirt. Robin doesn’t stop her. This is so good, so new, his mind has trouble processing it. But he doesn’t want to process it. He wants more. More of this, of her lips against his, or her chest against his own. More of her.

He pulls back, looking at her in the eyes, gaze travelling to her swollen and partly open lips. Her breathing is heavy, her eyes are shining with lust. She wants this, as badly as he does.

No more doubts, no more hesitation.

His hands are actively removing her shirt, and she squirms trying to get rid of it quickly, only to jump on him and kiss him again immediately, her hands working on his shirt now. They’re both bare chested, greedily, Regina’s pelvis grinding against his. She knows what she wants and she tells him quite clearly.

Robin doesn’t need long before he’s hard against her, and she knows, she feels it, because she pulls away just enough to open the buttons of his pant and free him from his clothes. Robin moves on his knees to completely get rid of it, while Regina removes her own. They’re in a hurry, starving to taste each other, to understand what is this feeling that’s pushing them to act as horny teenagers, the reason why they feel so addicted to each other.

The question is pushed away from Robin’s mind when Regina straddles him again, pressing her bare skin to his flesh, the contact both a burn and a soothing feeling that sends jolts of pleasure in his brain and body. When she sits down on his cock, her warmth covering him, Robin’s head falls backward and his lips open in ecstasy.

Damn… I’m not even inside her yet and this already feels like heaven.

Regina is wet, but not slippery, not quite ready to welcome him in the best circumstances. She begins to move on top of him, rubbing her core against his cock, and Robin’s lips close over her neck, tongue drawing circles against her skin. Regina shivers, moans loudly, her fingers closing over his skin. His kisses are more than effective it seems, and she’s ready in a handful of seconds.
But no matter how badly Robin wants her, he also wants to let her take the lead. He doesn't know exactly what she went through with her husband, the last thing he wishes is to scare her.

The wait isn't long. Regina soon lifts herself off of him, and sits down on his cock, this time enveloping him with her warmth, inch by inch, taking possession of him, a long, relieved exhale escaping her lips. Her partly closed eyes open to face his when, for a moment, they stay still, enjoying the feeling, the connection, the physical bond between their joined bodies, the pleasure emanating from it.

Until their need comes back to them stronger. Robin crashes his lips against Regina's, presses her body against his, moving his hips to start a rhythm, one that she follows quickly, greedy as he is. They're making love for the first time, and they're already insatiable, in dire need of more physical contact, more pleasure, more of each other, more kisses, more touch. Robin feels it build in him, as Regina moves up and down on top of him, as he plunges his cock in her every time she slams herself back down on his pelvis. This is so good, and if Robin had believed in heaven it would for sure look like this. His body tenses, muscles stirring, pleasure invading him as he feels his release close. Regina is almost there, he can read it on her face, the contentment written on her feature. Her eyes are closed, her lips swollen and slightly open, her cheeks pink, her breath short. She grips his shoulders, using them as a support while she keeps moving up and down, and her hold tightens, her breathing accelerates, until...

Regina slows down when her walls flutter around him, and Robin doesn't lose a second, speeds up, races towards his own peak, spreading her pleasure it seems, if her face contorted in ecstasy is any indication. He's close, close to the strongest orgasm he ever had. He only needs a minute, or maybe less, maybe just a few seconds, a few...

Robin's head fall over Regina shoulder while he recovers, comes back to his spirit, easing his breathing. Wow! This was just... wow ...

He made love to a woman he was supposed to murder, and reached the point of no return. Even if he wanted to, there is no going back now, not when he tasted what true pleasure is. Can he say happiness yet? They haven't discussed anything, and Regina fell asleep in his arms in a matter of seconds but... yes, Robin can say that he is, for the first time in his life, happy.

Despite the unknown, despite the risks, laying down next to this woman, holding her close to his chest, is the purest feeling of all.

xxx
Warmth.

It’s the first thing that comes to Regina’s mind as she slowly awakes. She’s surrounded by a warmth she’s not used to, something comfortable and soft that envelops her body like a cocoon. Has she ever felt this before?

She tries to stir, moans softly, but finds herself blocked by this warmth surrounding her... Someone, she realizes.

Regina blinks her eyes open, squinting against the brightness of the light, until she remembers the identity of the body lying down next to her. Robin. She turns around to face him and can’t help a smile, a bite of her lower lip, her stomach suddenly queasy. It wasn’t a dream then, it was real. And from the memories that are slowly coming back to her, real and wonderful.

She remembers his gentle kisses, his careful touch, how he let her take the lead, go to her own rhythm, while his desire was more than obvious. She wanted him, she really did, no doubts left, but last night was the first time she had a word to say about sharing her body with someone, and without her ever voicing it, he knew exactly what she needed.

Her hand lifts on its own, the back of her fingers brushing his cheek, his stubble, lingering a little as they get lost at the corner of his jaw.

How was I lucky enough to meet him? She wonders, eyes shining as she stares at his peaceful and sleeping face. Whatever this is, it makes her feel things she’s never known before. Her entire body responded to Robin yesterday, and she didn’t hesitate to give herself to him, entirely and willingly, to trust him in her intimacy, to see her like only her disgusting husband has ever seen her. Except that instead of making her feel sick, Robin made her feel beautiful. In his arms, she was a woman worthy of care and attention, of delicate kisses and tender touches. She felt treasured. He wanted her, not someone else. He wasn’t only interested in satisfy his own desires without caring about hers. Maybe, even if she loathes to admit anything Rumpelstiltskin says may be true, Robin is her second chance at love. Maybe there’s a reason why their paths crossed. Maybe this bliss that took possession of her is more than affection for a friend.

Regina suppresses a little laugh. Who is she kidding? It certainly is more than that.

“Good morning.”
Plunged in her thoughts, Regina didn’t realize the pair of blue orbs now open and staring at her. She startles at the raspy voice, roused from sleep, but smiles when she meets Robin’s affectionate gaze.

“Look who’s finally waking up?” she replies mischievously. Her hand is still against his chin, and she slowly removes it, bringing it back against her chest, blushing from having been caught in her reverie.

Robin silently moves his hand towards hers, closing over her fingers, bringing them to his lips and delicately planting a kiss on the back of her hand. He lets them rest between them, fingers comfortably tangled.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes.” She replies in a murmur, adding with a blush. “That was the best sleep I’ve had in a very long time.”

Robin bites his lower lip, his free hand moving to caress her face before tucking the cover under her chin when she shivers.

“How about you stay comfortable here, and let me cook you breakfast?”

Regina’s breath catches. He cooks her breakfast regularly, but the way he just said it, now, after the night they spent, gives the words an entirely different meaning. Her shining eyes plunge into his. “That sounds lovely.”

Robin grins, his dimples smiling at her, his thumb brushing the back of her hand while his other hand moves to cup the back of her head. “Would I still be a gentleman if I ask permission to give you a good morning kiss?”

Regina nods, feeling giddy and overwhelmed at the physical contact, the prospect of more kisses to come, more moments like this... Can she really allow herself to hope that such wonderful situation would last?

“After last night, you don’t even have to ask anymore.” she replies in a breath, eyes focused on his lips, mouth ready to welcome him when he presses his lips to hers for a soft and wet kiss. Yes, she will definitely let hope win this time.
“I’m afraid we’re stuck here for a little while.” Robin murmurs in Regina’s ear, arms wrapped around her small frame, his chin resting on her shoulder.

Regina smiles, lets her temple fall against his and sighs. She didn’t bother to put on some clothes, only wrapped herself in her blanket, and got up to watch the snow fall heavily through the window. It’s not as if anyone would bump on them. They’re alone in the middle of nowhere, free from any duty or responsibilities. For once, she can enjoy life peacefully, without worrying about her husband’s men possibly finding her. Not that they will find her now. She left months ago, has walked through several realms. Leopold must think she’s dead... Unless Rumple’s right. But he’s wrong. Leopold isn’t after her. Not after what happened last time they saw each other...

She focuses, closes her eyes, hand outstretched in front of her. She’s been training with this spell for two days, she will master it! She succeeded a few times already, but for a reason she ignores, she sometimes fails. So she lets the magic invade her, take possession of her being, and breathe as she finally feels it exit her body. When she opens her eyes, the flower is slowly changing, turns into a-

“What sorcery is this?”

Regina startles and swirls on her feet, facing the person who just caught her practicing magic... Her husband. The King. And judging by the look of disbelief on his face, he’s not really enthusiastic by what he just saw.

“My King,” Regina stammers. “I- I just- It was-”

“Are you a witch?” he yells, stalking in her direction, forcing Regina to take a few steps back. Her heart is hammering in her chest, her mouth dry. His eyes... He’s furious.

“Leopold please, I can exp-”

“Don’t call me by my name!” He thunders into her face. “I told you to show me respect, you traitor!”
The force of the slap sends Regina collide with the table. Her cheek is burning, her ribs are sore from bumping violently with the corner of the table, her breath is stuck in her throat, fear seizing her when she dares look up and face the madness in her husband’s eyes.

“Demon!” His hand raises, ready to crash down on her, so Regina lifts a protective arm, stopping her husband’s blow with a magical shield, which results in increasing his insanity. “You monster! I won’t let you poison my daughter with your sorcery!”

“I’m not- Stop-”

He catches her arm, fingers digging so deep into her skin that Regina can’t suppress a scream of pain as he forces her to lower her arm. “I made the mistake to let you in this castle, but your only goal always was to stab me in the back, wasn’t it? When I think of my sweet girl who took a liking in you. If only she knew what you are.” he spits, Regina turning away to avoid receiving his saliva in her face. “Magic is evil, and so are you.”

His free hand circles her throat, squeezing tight.

“Don’t.” is the only thing Regina manages to say because he blocks the air entering her lungs, slowly suffocating her, and her pleading look only seems to increase his anger.

“I’m going to get rid of you before you make any more damage.” he declares, pressing his whole body to hers, blocking her between him and the table, powerless.

Regina tries to resist, to move, but he’s too strong. Her free arm unsuccessfully tries to push him away, to grab something to defend herself, but all she can do is send all of her items on the ground, the sound deafening, but not making her husband step back. She’s no match to him. He ruined her life, and now he’s going to put an end to it.

But that’s not what she wants.

She wants to live. She wants to escape this castle, and discover what real life is made of. She already decided to leave, she can’t let him end her plans. And as she begins to lack of air, an impulse of survival strikes her. She can do it! She can stop him, free herself from him. She just has to-
The blast of magic hits the King in his stomach and throws him across the room. Regina straightens up, a hand over the burning skin of her neck, taking deep and painful breaths, coughing several times, recovering, but staying on her guards. Her husband gets up, looking at her with madness.

“You evil woman!” he spits, jumping on her in a heartbeat and grabbing her wrist violently when she raises her hand to send another blast of magic. “You are going to pay for this.”

Regina is shaking from head to toe, terrorized, eyes locked into his, when a knock on the door is heard, startling them both.

“Your Majesty? Is everything alright?” When no one replies, the voice insists. “Your Majesty? I’m coming in!”

The door half opens, a man’s head peaking inside, and if for a second Regina thinks that she’s saved, the wicked smirk on the King’s lips makes her understand that she’s not.

“My Lord?” the guard questions when he faces the scene, confused. “What’s going on?”

“Anton!” Leopold calls, sending his wife a victorious smile that the soldier cannot see. “Arrest the Queen!”

“For what, Your Highness?”

“Sorcery. The Queen is a witch, and she just tried to kill me!”

The man’s reaction is instinctive as he pulls out his sword and moves next to the King, edge aimed at Regina’s throat, unaware of the fear and horror written in her eyes when he carefully steps between her and her husband, as Leopold releases her and steps back.

“Come with me, Your Majesty.” He says gently, though on his guard, glancing between the shattered objects on the ground and her. “Let’s not make this any more difficult than it already is.”

Regina is speechless. Arguing is pointless, Anton is Leopold’s most trustful knight. He will never believe her word over his. And with a blade under her throat, she only has little options, especially
that as much as she hates it, she knows that she doesn’t have enough magic left right now, not after what Leopold almost did. The fight with her husband has exhausted her, she needs time to recover... Time she doesn’t have.

Before she realizes, she finds herself pressed against the table, hands tied in her back, while her dear husband explains to the Captain of his guard that no one should know about this, especially that the Queen is a dangerous witch. The soldier knows better than challenging an order, so he simply nods, and obeys.

Regina is thrown into the deepest, darkest dungeon of the castle, one she didn’t know existed and, judging by the state of her cell, no one visited in a very long time.

“I need to think about this.” she hears her husband say. “The Queen’s magic and her attempt of murder on my person must stay a secret, I don’t want people to know I was betrayed by my own wife, and most of all I don’t want to scare my daughter.”

“But her disappearance will raise questions, my Lord.”

Leopold paces and brushes his stubble. “Indeed. Indeed. I can’t be related to this incident. I have to travel to King Georges’ land tomorrow. Out of safety, my daughter will come with me. In the meantime, spread the word that the Queen has asked for some privacy, and is to be disturbed under no circumstances. Make sure her room is cleaned up and there’s no trace of tonight’s events. I need time to think of this. When I’ll come back, we’ll decide on what we’ll do.”

It didn’t take Regina long to make the decision. She needed to recover, so she waited two days after Leopold had left the castle, and in the middle of the night, once she had recovered enough energy to fulfill her plan, she poofed herself out of her prison and into her bedroom, gripped by a feeling of terror at the sight of the place. It had been entirely cleaned, but her memories weren’t, and assaulted her the second she found herself in her bedroom. She quickly gathered her most valuable items, stole a maid’s outfit to replace her refined but now torn apart and very noticeable dress, and flew away while Anton was still sleeping next to her cell, unaware of her jailbreak.

Her husband wanted her dead. He almost killed her with his bare hands. This beloved, respected and kind man... All lies and pretenses. She suffered his bad mood, still remembers his breath full of alcohol as he roughly pressed her on the bed with the sole intention to fulfill his own need, without caring whether she was willing or not. She remembers begging him to stop, to leave her alone, knowing very well that alcohol didn’t do good on him when he was with her, only increased his madness and meanness, only made him be more violent with her, uncaring if he was hurting her or not. Every time, she asked him to come back another night. “Please, my King. Not tonight.” she used to say when he was so drunk he could barely stand. “Tomorrow, when you’ll feel better.”
Every time, he refused.

The slap he gave her that day wasn’t the first one. At the beginning of their marriage, when she dared call him by his name by mistake, he hit her hard, screaming at her to remember that she was addressing the King and had to show respect, and learn her place. If only Mother had known who was really hiding behind the façade of the good man he was in public... But Mother is in another realm, Regina made sure of that when she pushed her through that mirror under the influence of that imp... Rumpelstiltskin...

“Is everything alright?”

The warmth of Robin’s breath tickles her neck, bringing Regina back to reality, to this safe life she built herself, and the wonderful man pressed against her back. A man who deserves more than to be kept in the dark about the risks surrounding her.

It won’t be an easy conversation, but maybe she should start this off right and talk to Robin about where she comes from. Minus one detail...

She sighs, turns in his arms, facing his immediate concern and furrowed brow. His hand tucks a strand of her hair behind her ear, lingering for a delicate brush of her cheek. “What is it?”

“There’s something I should tell you, especially now that we...” she pauses, the corner of her mouth tipping up when she glances between them, “well... share a different kind of relationship.”

Robin smirks, cupping her cheek, smiling when she leans in his palm.

“But I need to, Robin.” She insists. And it’s true, it will be good to finally let this secret out. “If we want this” she motions for the two of them, “to go somewhere, I have to be honest with you. Unless...” she stops again, eyes clouded with sudden doubt when she looks up at him. “You don’t want this to happen again.”

She hates herself for saying the word, for having the thought even. Robin showed much more care
“I think my behavior is enough indication that I want more.” He tells her honestly. As he admits it for good, Robin feels better, lighter. The revelation relieves him of a weight, frees him from his doubts, of the fear of unshared feelings. Looking into Regina’s eyes, now he knows exactly how badly she wants this – *them* - to work.

Regina’s face lights up, her smile growing, eyes sparkling with something new. “It is. I’m sorry, I don’t know why I said that.”

Robin tilts her chin up and smiles. “No need for apologies. We didn’t discuss where we wanted this to go. Your doubts were totally valid.”

“Did you have any?” She questions. “Doubts, I mean.”

He shrugs, looking ahead through the window then back at her. “A little, yes. I was afraid you didn’t feel the same way I felt about you.” Tenderly brushing a strand of hair away from her forehead, he adds warmly. “But not anymore.”

When his eyes find hers, he can’t resist leaning forward, capturing her lips in a sweet and soft kiss, his arm sliding around her waist and tugging her close while she wraps her arms around his neck, deepening the kiss and moaning softly. Their mouths open, tongues finding each other, moving at the same rhythm, together, rediscovering each other once more as if it was the first time again.

Regina falls back on her heels with a content sigh, slowly opens her eyes and stares into Robin’s blue ones.

“We still need to have that talk.” she reminds, nuzzling his nose.

“Right.” Robin takes her hand, leads her to the now unique and larger makeshift bed three feet away, and invites her to sit with him. His hand closes over her arm. “I’m listening.”

“I...” she begins, uncomfortable, frowning, staring at her fidgeting hands, so Robin places his hand above hers, silently reassuring her. She shyly smiles, then resumes. “I’m not really sure if there’s any good way to say this, so I won’t beat around the bush.” She takes a deep breath. “I’m married.”
Robin’s surprise is slightly feigned. He knew this already, but he didn’t expect her to reveal it so... bluntly.

But Regina resumes immediately, her anxiety pointing in her voice. “I didn’t choose this marriage; it was forced upon me. They made sure I wouldn’t have a choice and... it made me miserable.” Her head is down, gaze fixed on her lap. “I wasn’t happy, Robin, I couldn’t keep living this life.”

Robin wants to say something, to comfort her, but he can read in her demeanor how much she needs to confide about this. If he had any doubts about the truth in her tale, they’re all gone as he watches the genuine discomfort and suffering in the way she holds herself, half curled up in front of him.

“My husband... he’s powerful. More powerful and dangerous that you can imagine. I had already planned to escape but... one day, he discovered something and... he lost it. He had been violent before,” Robin clenches his jaw. “but when he put his hands around my throat and squeezed so hard, I thought I was going to die, I just... I couldn’t take it anymore.” She looks up at him with sheepish eyes. “I never thought he would come after me after I escaped but... Do you remember the person from my past I met last month?”

Robin nods. He does. She’d been quite shaken by the unexpected meeting.

“He told me that my husband was searching for me. I ignore if that’s true or if it was a lie destined to make me go back. But my husband... he scares me, Robin.” she whispers with a trembling voice. “He hates me. I don’t know what he will do if he finds me, and if you and I are together then... I think you have a right to know the truth. In case you want to back down.”

Robin closes his eyes slowly. He was right. His gut telling him to spare Regina, that something was wrong, that this King’s behavior was strange... Regina is the victim in this story, and thankfully he had enough sense to cancel the contract and spare her life. The reality of his own past hits him right in the face then, as he suddenly wonders: how many innocent lives did he take? How many culprits did he help get away with murder?

Today, with Regina, he can finally make up for his mistakes, find a bit of redemption. She is his new life, and as long as she’ll have him, he’ll do anything in his power to protect her from her husband.

“I don’t want to back down, Regina.” He declares softly, cupping her chin. “This is unexpected, but it doesn’t change anything. I still want to be with you.”
She smiles at him, this wide and warm smile he loves so much. His hand slides from her chin to cup her cheek and he whispers between them.

“There it is. There’s that elusive but satisfying smile I think about everytime I close my eyes.”

She ducks her head down, hiding the blush that’s creeping on her cheeks, but he tilts it up, bringing her closer and pressing his lips to hers for a warm and soothing kiss.

“And if that person was right and your husband indeed is after you,” he says when he pulls back, making sure that she hears the sincerity in every one of his words. “I’ll protect you. I promise you, Regina. I won’t let anyone harm you anymore.”

xxx

The snow storm forbade them to get back on the road, so Regina and Robin spend several days in the cabin, using this time to enjoy each other fully. They revel in the comfort and intimacy of the small place. It isn’t a palace, but it’s far better than sleeping on muddy ground, curled up to stay warm, shivering with every wind gust, only sleeping from one eye to keep watch on wild animals or strangers.

They use that time to make love countless times, discovering the little things making the other tremble and reach a more powerful orgasm. They watch the snow fall while snuggled against each other and wrapped in blankets. They talk, about what they will do once the storm will be over, about countries Robin visited, places Regina dreams of.

But King Leopold’s shadow hovers over their heads, Robin holding back his own questions out of respect for Regina. Her fear and anxiety at the idea that her husband could be looking for her was genuine, her story wasn’t made up. She told him the truth, even if she kept her husband’s real identity a secret. But does it really matter? Now, he knows why he felt that something was off when he met the man.

However, he didn’t reveal his own secrets. Those few days together are pure bliss, one that he’s never known before, and more than once his conscience told him to be honest. She opened up to him, he should do the same. He should be honest… and risk losing her?

No.
This might not be the best decision, but he’s not ready to have Regina slip between his fingers, not now that he’s the happiest he’s ever been. It may be selfish, but it’s also for her own good. She’ll probably hate him for keeping such secret from her. She would freak out and leave, alone, in a wild land, and Robin can’t let that happen. Especially not now that he knows what other potential dangers she might be exposed to. He has no idea if that man who told that her husband was still after her was right. He hadn’t cancelled the contract by then, so maybe that man spoke of him and the threats are now gone. But he won’t take any chance. There’s no way he’ll let Regina unprotected. He won’t abandon her, even if that means not being completely honest with her.

Nonetheless, despite his best will at sparing her his interrogations, something is on his mind, bugging him, and he has to ask, to understand what started all this. Anyway, if Regina refuses to answer, he won’t push. She already told him far more than what he was willing to reveal about his own story.

He presses a kiss to her temple, brushes her hair away from her forehead, “Can I ask you a question?”

She looks up at him with a smile. “Sure.”

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to but I can’t help wondering... why did your husband try to kill you? Why couldn’t you seek someone’s help?”

Regina shudders. The memory of this scene is still so vivid... She knew her husband never cared for her, but to want to end her life? She never saw this coming.

She feels Robin’s grip on her tighten, and as she looks up, he starts to apologize, tell her he never should have asked and brought back such painful memories. Before she realizes, her fingers are on his lips, shutting him off. Is she ready to do that? Is she ready to reveal her secret to someone?

“It’s Robin, a voice murmurs in her head. He’ll understand. He knows people with magic, he knows it can be good. And he cares about you, the little voice finishes before disappearing.

“I...” she begins, then stops herself. “It’s best if I show you.”

Rumpelstiltskin can clearly track her when she doesn’t use magic, so it won’t change anything. If the imp wants to find her, he will, whatever she does.
She turns her palm up, staring at it under Robin’s confused gaze, closing her eyes and summoning her magic. She hasn’t done it in so long, but unlike what she expected, it comes easily...

Robin startles when the flame appears in the crook of Regina’s hand. It’s true then. The King wasn’t lying about everything.

“He found me practicing magic.” Regina explains, eyes still fixed on the fire. “He thought I wanted to destroy him.”

“Did you?” Robin asks, hating himself for it immediately, especially when he reads the pain in Regina’s eyes and the way she sighs as she closes them.

“No, I didn’t really choose magic, I was desperate and angry, and it sort of just happened. And then, it was all that I had.” She replies sadly, closing her hand and shutting off the flame.

“Is that how you escaped? Thanks to your magic?”

“Yes.” she confirms. “My magic comes at a great cost of energy, but I had managed to gather enough strength to transport myself out of there. My husband would have used my magic to have me condemn to death, so staying there wasn’t an option anymore. But what bothers me most is that... my teacher, he’s a very powerful wizard and... he’s the one I met in the village.” she reveals, fear flickering in her brown orbs. “It wasn’t random, he can track me down.”

Robin straightens up, alert. “How so? What kind of wizard is he? Can he warn your husband?”

Regina senses the sudden anguish in his tone, and she understands him. She asked herself the same thing over and over again.

“I can’t exactly say how. I only know that his powers are limitless. As for my husband.... I guess he could tell him, but why would he? I left months ago, and my husband hasn’t found me yet. My old teacher wants me back, he wants me to keep learning magic, for some unknown reason. But he also knows who my husband is. He’s aware that if he finds me, he’ll kill me.”

Robin is silent, his brain running at full speed. This news changes the game. Now that he has
confirmation that Regina does have magic and isn’t afraid by it, a simple solution emerges. It might not work, but it won’t cost them anything to try. He looks at her with resolute eyes.

“I may know a way to protect you against them. To make sure they can’t find you.”

Regina rises hopeful but doubtful eyes at him. “How?”

“I’m not sure it will work though.” he warns her, but that’s all they have, she’s ready to take her chance just like he is.

“Tell me, Robin!” Regina pleads, placing her hand on his chest. “I want to be free from them, once and for all.”

Robin takes a deep breath. Alright, they’re doing this!

“Make a wish.” he tells her.

Regina frowns at him. “What?”

Robin carefully takes her hands, squeezes softly, looking at her in the eyes and repeating calmly. “Make a wish. If being rid of them is what you want most, then closes your eyes, and make a wish.”

Regina looks at him with perplex eyes, but she does, breathes out, then closes her eyes. Her breathing evens, her muscles relax, and in his mind Robin secretly makes the same wish. Better put all the chances by their side.

It takes a few seconds, but soon, he squeezes Regina’s fingers, urging her to open her eyes and follow his gaze, which is fixed upon...

Regina startles, moves backward, retreating in his arms when she notices the sparkle flying closer and closer to them. It comes from outside, but enters the cabin as if there were no wall, before it grows into a woman, dressed in a very short green and shining dress, her curly blond hair tied in a bun. Her eyes are as blue as the sky on a sunny day, and her smile is illuminating the inside of their cabin.
Regina presses herself in Robin’s arms, who tightens his grip, but also forces her to get up, his eyes not leaving the strange apparition.

“Are you... are you a fairy?” he asks.

The woman’s smile widens, and she places her hands on her hips firmly. “Someone knows his legends. I am.” She bows her head a little. “Tinkerbell, at your service.”

“My name is Robin.” He gives Regina a gentle squeeze. “And this is Regina.”

The brunette is still stunned, so Robin slightly shakes her to pull her out of her daze. She must have never seen a fairy before, he understands it can be quite shocking, although he thought she’d have the knowledge that they exist.

“I’m sorry,” Regina apologizes, shaking her head. “Why are you here?”

“Because you called me of course!”

Regina’s eyes widen. “We called you?”

Tinkerbell nods, and Regina glances at Robin, confused.

“Your idea... was a fairy?”

“Yes.” Robin admits, feeling her relief in the way she relaxes against him and in the soft breath that escapes her lips.

She looks back and forth between him and the fairy for a moment, processing the situation. She knew fairies existed, but Rumpelstiltskin didn’t spend much time teaching her about them.

“What am I supposed to do?” Regina questions, unsure of how this works.
“Tell me what you need.” Tinkerbell says softly. “I don’t have limitless powers, but if I can help, I will. Why don’t we sit down” she gestures towards the floor, inviting them to follow when she sits crossed-legged. “and you tell me what I can do for you?”

Regina turns towards Robin. He cups her chin, thumb brushing it slightly, smiling down at her. “You know what you need more than I do.”

“An escape?”

Her eyes are still set on him when she asks the rhetorical question. Regina needs reassurance and support, someone who understands her, and Robin is willing to do just that. Keeping one arm around Regina’s back as they sit in front of Tinkerbell, he resolutely looks at the fairy, putting Regina’s hopes into words. “Is there a way to hide her from a someone? Well, two people actually: a human and a sorcerer. And make sure they can’t find her?”

“Whose sorcerer are we talking about?” Tinkerbell questions.

This time, it’s Robin’s turn to stare at Regina. Only she can answer that question. And considering the hesitation and shame that cloud her face, he might not like what she’s about to reveal.

“The Dark One.” Regina mutters, head down.

She’s not really proud of herself, of having let this imp get so much power over her. She hates him for manipulating her the way he did, for planting in her mind all of her fears and doubts.

“The Dark One?” Tinkerbell and Robin ask at the same time.

Damn, if he had known that... Robin thinks. This is dangerous indeed. They need a way to hide Regina from the vile creature, and soon. He only heard rumors, but if they happen to be true then... she’s gotten herself in a pretty bad situation.

Ignoring their intervention, Regina continues. “He can find me, wherever I am, and he could also lead my husband to me.”
“Husband? Is he the other person you want to hide from?” Tinkerbell frowns when she looks at the way Regina and Robin are holding each other.

“Yes. My husband tried to kill me.” the brunette explains. “After I ran away, Robin found and helped me. Without him I’d probably be dead by now. However, if Rumpelstiltskin or my husband find me, Robin and I are both dead.”

The fairy ducks her head to the side, crossing her arms over her chest and tapping her chin with one finger. “I understand. It won’t be easy for sure, not many people or magical items can compete with the Dark One’s powers. But there’s one thing… it could work.” She admits, meeting Regina’s hopeful eyes.

“What is it?” The brunette questions, taking a step forward.

“I don’t want to tell you more until I’ve put my hand on it. I’ll need some time, it’s a pretty rare and powerful item, very difficult to obtain. If I’m correct and it can shield you from the Dark One and your husband’s eyes, I’ll do everything in my power to get it.”

“I didn’t dare hope for so much.” Regina tells her gratefully. Thank you.”

Robin glances through the window briefly, but enough to assess the weather. It’s getting better, snow has stopped falling for almost a full day now. If they are careful and lucky, he and Regina should be able to resume their journey tomorrow.

“How much time would you need to retrieve this object?”

“I can’t tell for sure. At least several days. Why?”

“We might be back on the road by then.” Robin explains.

Tinkerbell smiles as she gets up promptly, hands on her hips. “Don’t worry about that! I’ll find you.”
The weather is clear, only a calm wind lingers. The snow has covered the entire land, but is hard enough for them to walk their way through the forest, at least until the next village, that they should be able to reach before the end of the day. Regina takes a deep breath, tugs her coat closer when the cold breeze makes her shiver. Robin’s hand settles on her back, his eyes searching hers.

“Are you ready?”

She smiles reassuringly.

“Yes. But I already miss the warmth of the cabin.”

Robin’s deep chuckle interrupts the quietness of the forest. He wraps an arm around her shoulders, pressing her against him and placing a kiss on top of her head.

“I’ll keep you warm.” he whispers in her ear.

Regina closes her eyes, heat spreading in her lower abdomen, forcing her to exhale as a shiver runs downs her spine. When she opens her eyes, Robin is looking at her with a cocky smile.

“You better.” she mutters with equally amused eyes, hip bumping against him playfully. “Shall we?”

Robin smirks. “I was waiting for you, Milady.”

He throws his bag on his shoulder and starts climbing down the few stairs, Regina following him. “Are you sure that we’ll be able to reach the next village tonight?”

“If we walk at a good pace, yes.”

Her hand slips in his, his fingers closing over hers naturally. “And how long before we reach Sherwood? I heard it’s sunny and warm.”
Robin laughs quietly. “It’s winter, Regina. Every land is freezing at this time of the year, even Sherwood.”

“Hope never hurt anyone.” she sighs.

Robin smirks. “They don’t have snow though.”

Regina beams at him. “Are you serious?”

“No.” he replies, holding back at laugh, then letting it out when Regina playfully hits his arm, bursting out laughing herself.

She told him about her secret destination the day before. After weeks keeping him in the loop, she finally admitted to him what was her goal: Sherwood Forest.

A land of oak trees so tall, no one ever managed to climb to the top. Beautiful landscapes of golden colors three out of the four seasons. A fair King, powerful and kind, not overtaxing his people, and making sure that they live in peace. A strong economy, based on the use of their natural resources, producing poles and laths for building, using underwood for domestic fuel, oak bark in tanning leather. Pastures full of cattle, sheep and deer, living in harmony with humans, who are fiercely protected by their ruler. Robin knows this land, and when Regina told him that she hoped it would meet her expectations, he confirmed that it would.

People out there are kind, helping each other, solidarity runs the land. People have access to education and medical cares. Of course it’s not the same level depending on where they are on the social scale, but the system gives everyone their chance.

Some people could say that according to books’ description, Leopold’s kingdom is the same. That life is as peaceful, the King as fair. But Robin’s been in both lands, he’s seen both reigns. Leopold's kindness, his kingdom's peace, is only a façade. Officially, he fulfils his duty as a King. He establishes alliances, organizes ceremonies, regales the crowd of nobles with endless banquets. But behind appearances, lies a land half abandoned to outlaws. The villages stand up, the little people have about enough to eat on the table in the evening. But diseases are rampant, lack of hygiene and education are found even in the least poor areas, the infant mortality rate is among the highest in the Enchanted Forest. Groups of bandits ransack houses and steal from peasants on every street corner. Of course, the King does not raise taxes, he sends troops to patrol once or twice a month, occasionally helps a villager recover from an unfortunate fire that took his house, or from a herd of
cattle decimated by the disease. But he doesn't solve problems. He hides them behind fine words spoken in public, a few temporary actions that make the villagers believe that everything will be alright, when in fact he's only brainwashing them until they realize the deception... and repeats the process as soon as tensions rise again.

That’s why Robin knows that Regina made the right choice.

If his previsions are correct, they should reach Sherwood Forest in barely two weeks. There, on King Richard’s land, they will finally have the life they always wanted.

Because Sherwood is said to be the place to go for anyone who needs a home.

Chapter End Notes

So, did you see it coming? Did you enjoy this chapter?

Coming next : While Regina and Robin enjoy their new life, Tinkerbell, William and Guy must all make a choice, knowing that it might have devastating consequences.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

A/N : Unless a miracle happens regarding WIRM, this is my last participation to OQUUpdateMonth. I'm not sure how many of you will be interested in this update, but I hope you'll like this chapter at least a little. It might not be what you were waiting for, but it is necessary to the story.

Happy reading :-) 

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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I found it!

Tinkerbell carefully approaches the closed doors, checking her surroundings. She can't believe she's here. Fairies' relics are well hidden, it took her days of searching the books to discover its location. Had she received the approval for her quest, it'd had been easier. But she didn't, and despite the risks of disobeying a direct order, Tinkerbell knows it was the right thing to do. This ring is the only magical item powerful enough to hide Regina from the Dark One and her husband.

Now, she has to pass the test to get it, and pray that Blue never hears about it.

If she succeeds, then Regina and Robin will finally be able to live their life fully. The young woman touched her, really. Her distress, her fear, were genuine. And Robin's protective instinct and care for her were obvious. These two share an incredible bond, it immediately jumped to her eyes. She always gives hundred percent for her protégés, but these two are special. They triggered something deep inside her, a furious desire to succeed, to help them, no matter the risks.

Tinkerbell enters the vault with apprehension, unsure of what to expect. After centuries of information passing through, some may have been lost, forgotten, or distorted. The only thing she knows is that her soul will be tested. Whatever that means.

She climbs down the stairs in the surrounding darkness, barely lit by two torches in front of her. As she approaches them, the light grows, revealing a stone arch and a long tunnel that seems to lead to a large room.

As she progresses through the narrow tunnel, she breathes deeply, calming the beats of her heart and the anxiety knotting her insides. As far back as she can remember, she has never heard of a fairy of her rank who's been given access to an ancient relic. She hopes that she will be worthy of receiving it.

The very moment she walks into the vast stone room, the light grows brighter, igniting the torches that had been extinguished until then, and revealing to her innocent eyes a glass altar within which the sought-after ring rests.

Tinkerbell's eyes are immediately drawn to the relic, whose legend rocked her early years of learning, but a shadow on her right makes her stand up and turn her head in that direction.
In front of her, stands a woman with long black hair falling down her shoulders. Her face is thin and benevolent, her piercing green eyes sparkle in the light of the flames. She wears a long sky-blue dress, fastened at the waist by a cloth belt, simple, without artifice or signs of wealth. She approaches slowly, quietly, as if flying above the ground, and stops in front of Tinkerbell with a sweet smile.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

Her gaze turns towards the altar, and more precisely, the ring that resides there. Tinkerbell follows her gaze, intrigued, not knowing what to say, so she simply replies. "Yes, it is."

"I know what you came for, Green. Or should I say, Tinkerbell?"

The eyes full of curiosity and surprise of the young fairy land on the apparition. "How do you know?"

"Who you are?" The woman asks with a smile. "The object of your quest?"

Dumbfounded, Tinkerbell nods silently.

"I am the guardian of the ring. I know all about those who dare to venture into this place. My name is Lunette."

Tinkerbell opens stunned eyes. How?

"Lunette? The servant of the Lady of the Fountain? The one who gave the ring to Yvain?"

"That one right there."

Tinkerbell remembers the story.

Lunette was the servant of Laudine, a young fairy called the Lady of the Fountain, who lived among humans. The castle where they lived was attacked, and Lunette's life had been saved by a man who helped her hide: Yvain, one of King Arthur's knights. The same one who killed Laudine's husband during the battle. Because he had saved her, Lunette was indebted to him. So when the Lady and her servants wanted to see him dead, Lunette did the same thing for him that he did with her: She helped him hide. Thanks to a ring that allowed him to be invisible, Yvain, who had already fell for Laudine, had seen her first hate him, and then, as Lunette organized encounters between them, showing the Lady who Yvain really was inside, fall in love with him.

What the legend doesn't say though, is how Lunette got the ring.

"How is that possible? The legend says you were just a simple mortal. And that you lived centuries ago."

Lunette laughs softly, puts a wick back behind her ear, and looks at Tinkerbell with sweet eyes.

"Don't blindly trust appearances and legends, Tinkerbell. If I had the Invisibility Ring, it was because I belonged to a family of fairy relic keepers. Since the dawn of time, the same family has watched over and protected the artifacts. One member for a relic. In order to be able to fulfill our mission, we have been granted eternal life. But eternal life and a responsibility to protect mean loneliness. Consequently, we are allowed to spend part of our life in the human world, under the two conditions of always protecting our relic, and never revealing our secret identity."

"But you let Yvain use the ring." She replies.
"Because he was worthy."

Tinkerbell remains silent, assimilating the revelations that have just been made to her, and gradually realizing the path taken by Lunette.

"You're going to test me, aren't you?"

"Shall I need to?"

Tinkerbell frowns. "I thought it was essential."

Again, this light and innocent laughter, and the softness of her blue eyes. "I can see in your heart and soul, Tinkerbell. I don't need to test you. I read you like an open book. I know why and for who you need the ring. I know your motivations. I'm also aware of the risks you're taking by being here. My decision has already been made."

A shiver runs through Tinkerbell. Is that all? It's that simple - or complicated - as that? No justification possible?

The anguish immediately returns, the fear of failing in her quest, of coming back empty-handed to Regina and Robin, of not being able to help them, of leaving them without a solution, at the mercy of the most dangerous creature in the Enchanted Forest. They deserve better than that, better than her, a simple low-level fairy, an incapable...

"I know you'll make good use of it."

When she looks up, Tinkerbell faces the ring of invisibility, resting in the palm of Lunette's hands, her eternal benevolent smile and her bright eyes fixed on her as she hands it over.

Incredulous, the young fairy does not dare to reach out her hand to retrieve it.

"Is this a test?"

"I told you. You've already passed the test, Tinkerbell. Your quest is devoid of any selfishness. You sincerely wish to help these people, without any interest in your favor since you have taken considerable risks by coming here. Go, Tinkerbell. Help them! Give this ring a new reason to protect innocent people."

"Thank you." Tinkerbell breathes, her voice overwhelmed by emotion. "I promise you, I'll take great care of it."

Lunette takes a few steps back, gradually blending into the surrounding darkness as the lights slowly decline.

"I know you will."

xxx

Regina only has little experience with snow. She played in it when she was a little girl, not too long because Mother didn't allow it. She galloped through snow-covered fields with Rocinante and Daniel when she was a teenager. She watched it fall and cover the enchanted forest from her window, all the way up there, enclosed at the top of this castle of misfortune, her freedom then unattainable, when she became Queen.

The snow then seemed sublime to her, a thick, cozy coat, sparkling with the rare rays of winter's sun
and creating landscapes of a thousand wonders.

On the other hand, she had never experienced setting up a camp in an area where the snow had just melted, lighting a fire with branches still wet, lying on a cold and muddy ground that pierced the blankets and grabbed her like needles.

Fortunately, in these moments, she snuggles up against Robin's warm body, sighs with relief when his arms close around her, wrapping her in a cocoon of warmth and safety that she had not felt in years, soothing her doubts, restless dreams, fears, and making the ghosts of her past disappear a little more every day.

His tenderness, his smile, the way he hugs her, kisses her forehead, watches after her, makes sure that she's not too cold, not too tired, not too hungry, fills her with gratefulness and love for this man she was lucky enough to meet. He is her second chance in life, maybe –probably- at love too. An angel from heaven, with eyes so deep and comforting she could lose herself in them and never want to find the exit.

These past days with him have been pure bliss. They share this special bond, something unexplainable that allows them to understand each other with one single look, a simple smile. If Tinkerbell succeeds in keeping her promise, if she gives them a way to escape Rumple, and thereby lessens the risks of Leopold finding them, they could build a good life for themselves, far from her past and her demons.

"I must admit, I have lived many winters in the forest, but this one is particularly difficult."

Regina emerges from her reverie, meets Robin's gaze and nods. "Don't tell me! If I had known what was waiting for us, I would have never left the cabin." she mutters, tugging her coat tighter around her shoulders, and scooting closer from the fireplace.

Robin chuckles and sits next to her, his palm vigorously rubbing her back.

"We left the cabin because we were running out of food." he reminds, teasingly bumping his shoulder into hers. "And because we have to put as much distance between your husband and us as possible."

Regina throws a dark and sharp look his way. "I know! I still hate being cold though."

Robin's chuckle turns into a small laugh when he presses his chin against her cheek, his hand palming her neck as he lays a kiss on her temple.

"We should arrive to the next village soon, Regina. We'll rent a room in a tavern there."

"I can't wait."

xxx

"Bloody hell!"

"Please, tell me that my eyes are betraying me!" William whispers, his eyes still stuck on the couple in front of him.

"I'm afraid not, my friend." Guy replies flatly, although disappointment can be heard in his voice.

"What is he doing with her? Do you think he's keeping her prisoner?"
Guy lifts an eyebrow, eyes still on the two people ahead of him. "She seems more willing than forced if you ask me."

And indeed, when William looks in their direction again, the couple tenderly embraces each other, in the midst of a kiss, the young queen's hand resting in Robin's neck, keeping him close when she withdraws just enough to place her forehead against his. Even without hearing them, there is no doubt in Guy and William's mind that the words exchanged are free of any coercion, hatred or fear whatsoever, but on the contrary filled with deep affection, if not more.

"Well, that changes everything." William sighs.

Guy frowns, his voice cold as he slowly and quietly rises from the bushes, walking away. "No, it doesn't."

William looks at his friend with wide and shocked eyes before getting up and joining him, trying to be as discreet as possible, knowing that Robin could hear them easily. "He's our friend, Guy!"

"And we have a mission to accomplish. Our job is to find the Queen, and warn the King. I will send him a message tonight."

William follows him, but shakes his head.

"So you would condemn our friend without hesitation? You saw them there, just like I did! They are happy, Guy! She is a Queen, she is married, she had everything anyone could want, yet she chose to live in the forest with another man instead, hundreds of miles away from her castle. Don't you think that maybe she chose to leave? That she doesn't want to go back? That the King lied about this whole story? We both agreed that his behavior was suspicious and he didn't seem to care about his wife. Maybe that explains it all!"

"Who's right and who's wrong isn't my preoccupation."

William stops himself from shaking his friend to open his eyes. "Okay, but maybe Robin doesn't know who the Queen really is, and ignores that she's married. We could warn him so-"

"He knows we're coming to send her back to her husband?" Guy cuts him with annoyance. "Great idea Will, really!"

William shakes his head, mind working fast to find a way to change his friend's mind. "If the King sees them together, you know as well as I do that he'll be quick to judge them, and they'll probably be both sentenced to death for treason."

Guy stops, and stares at William right in the eyes. "You're probably right. But in case you don't remember, it's either our lives and Marian's, or theirs." He pauses, letting time for his friend to remember what's at stake. "And as much as I consider Robin a friend, I have a new life now, and I won't let my innocent fiancé pay for his bad judgment."

xxx

It's been more than a week since Tinkerbell's visit. Regina is both anxious and excited. Did the fairy find what she was looking for? Will she come back with a way to protect her from Rumpelstiltskin?

As she follows Robin through the forest, focused to avoid patches of ice and mud, she feels a pinch of nervousness knot her stomach.

A voice in her head murmurs that she hasn't heard of Rumple in weeks now, has escaped Leopold...
for a long time. What are the odds? Yet, she can't quiet down this other voice, the one whispering to her that Rumpel might be correct, that Leopold might still be after her, that she will never be free of that imp she made the mistake to put her trust in in the first place.

However, she wants to settle down. She really does. But although her final destination is within reach, she can't find herself to relax knowing that there are risks that Rumpel might be right. That he, even if he lied about Leopold, can still find her and torment her wherever she is. She can't let that happen. If Tinkerbell can't find a way to-

"Hello!"

Regina jumps, startling Robin whose grip on her hand tightens as she trips over a root. He holds her up, however his gaze quickly moves to the person who just appeared in front of them.

It only takes him a split second to recognize the fairy, and he can't fight a smile. She carries all of their hopes, and his of a better life with Regina. Ridding her off the Dark One's and her husband's grips would relieve them of a weight. If they can't find Regina, she will finally have the life she wanted, free from all the threats and fears.

Well, he hopes so. Robin can't imagine how angry the King must have been when he received the message cancelling the contract. If Regina tries to convince herself that her husband isn't after her anymore, Robin knows he probably still is. The man's messages were getting more and more impatient as time flew by, proof of his determination. They did put a lot of distance between them though, and the land is huge, which sorts of protects them a little from being found. But crossing snow-covered lands by foot does not allow you to go very fast, and good riders who know their position could find them in just a few weeks, days even. That is why Robin tempers his enthusiasm and happiness, and remains focused on the need to keep moving forward. These two weeks spent in the cabin wasted a lot of time. Who knows if the King hasn't already sent men to track them down.

"Tinkerbell!"

Regina's hopeful voice brings Robin back from his thoughts and to reality, a reality in which they might have a way to hide from a powerful creature, and maybe, just maybe, increase their chances to live a good life, free from all the threats.

"Are you bringing good news?"

"I am," The fairy confirms. "I found it." she reveals. "I found what I was looking for. A way to hide you from the Dark One and your husband."

Her revelation is followed by a long silence, during which both women hold each other's gaze intensely, while Regina slowly realizes what these words imply.

Robin's anxiety suddenly vanishes, replaced by a feeling of relief so strong it seizes him to the guts.

"You-" Regina stutters. "You did?"

Tinkerbell's answer is a bright smile and an enthusiastic nod, both warming Regina's heart and leading to her naturally jumping into the blonde woman's arm, triggering a deep laugh as the fairy answers her hug.

When she pulls back, Regina asks. "What is it?"

Tinkerbell unhooks a small bag tied to her fabric belt, and dips her hand inside to take out a ring, made of copper according to its brownish color, adorned with a round, scarlet stone whose glowing...
colors reflect the weak rays of the sun and shines a thousand lights.

"This ring holds a great power." Tinkerbell explains slowly. "Its copper provides shelter from evil spells, and the mercury in its stone is used as protection against disease and evil itself. Turn the stone once to the right." She performs the gesture while explaining it. "And you will be invisible to the eyes of evil. In your case, The Dark One. Turn it once to the left." Tinkerbell turns the stone to the left, and disappears under the couple's incredulous eyes, before reappearing when she puts the stone back in its neutral place. "And you will be invisible to the world."

"The world?" Robin questions, confused.

"Yes." Tinkerbell confirms. "This, is an invisibility ring. It can be used for both purposes. In neutral position, the ring is simply that. A ring. But once its power is activated, it is unlimited. It won't forbid your husband to find you, but if he does and you activate the ring, then you could be standing right in front of him, and he wouldn't be able to see you."

"How long can we keep it?" Robin asks. Such a powerful magical item must be use cautiously, it's strange that they are allowed to keep it without anything in return.

"As long as you need." Tinkerbell assures. "The guardian of the ring gave me permission to let you use it for the time you deem necessary, as long as you respect its power and are worthy of it."

Regina, who's been silent and still during their exchange, finally looks up from the item, to meet the fairy's eyes. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Free yourself from your past." the fairy replies. "Be happy. That's all I am asking for."

She releases the ring to Regina's care, the brunette slipping it on her finger, her other hand hovering above the stone, as if afraid to use it.

Robin nudges her shoulder gently, and nods when she looks up at him. He watches as her trembling fingers finally dare turn the stone to the right, and when she does, she waits, stills, as if seeking a change, but there is none.

"How will I know that it worked?" she questions with apprehension.

"Because the Dark One will not be able to find you. But I am afraid that you will have to trust me, because there is no way for me to prove it to you."

Regina silently nods, and looks down at the ring. So much power in such a small object... yet she does not feel any of the magic that usually came with magical items she trained with. When Rumple taught her, there was always this strange feeling invading her, almost suffocating her sometimes. This time however, she feels lighter, as if a weight had been removed from her shoulders, allowing her to breathe normally for the first time in years. Did it work? Could this simple object be her salvation, free her from Rumple's and Leopold's grip?

She grabs the fairy's hands, squeezes tight, and looks at her straight in the eyes when she says. "Thank you! I will forever be grateful for what you did for me." She sheepishly looks up at Robin. "For us."

Tinkerbell reassures her with a warm smile and a squeeze of her hands. "It's my work, Regina! Making you happy is my reward, I don't need anything else."

Regina pulls back, snuggles in Robin's arms, exchanges a look with him before meeting the fairy's eyes again. "If you do, don't hesitate to ask. After what you just did, that's the least I can do for you."
Tinkerbell nods, then turns back into her fairy size, saying before flying away. "Goodbye, Regina and Robin. Enjoy your happiness."

xxx

"The King is on his way with his men. He should arrive in a few days."

William looks up and stops sharpening his blade. His friend is entitled to fulfill the contract, despite the clear evidence that the Queen and Robin are happy together. Despite how much he'd like to give up and go back to the King empty-handed, he understands his friend's motivation; after all, three lives are at stake, including theirs. Marian is innocent, she doesn't deserve to pay for their poor judgment and the mess they all are in. But Robin is his friend, their friend, and if he doesn't know who the Queen is, does he really deserve to die for it? If their gut feeling was correct and the Queen is a victim, why should they hand her over to her husband?

The more he thinks about it, the more obvious it becomes to William's eyes. He got plenty of time to remember their encounter with the King during their trip tracking the Queen. The madness reflected in his eyes, in his tone, in his behavior. It had nothing to do with the goodness Marian described to them. The man isn't the kind monarch beloved by all, or at least, not anymore. And now, after two weeks of mulling the situation over, it feels wrong to follow his orders. However, remembering his friend's words about the potential consequences, and the King's threat, William knows he doesn't have a choice. No matter how sick it makes him, he and Guy have to complete their mission, or the consequences might be devastating.

"Good." he replies, getting up to face Guy, his face hiding all trace of his doubts and thoughts. His friend is carrying enough guilt and responsibilities, he doesn't want to burden him with his own indecision. "They left a few minutes ago, we should give them a head start or Robin might suspect we're here."

Guy's usual sarcasm and teasing mood has disappeared since they realized that Robin was involved in their mission, so he simply nods. "We already were lucky enough that he didn't yet. We should slow down. It's not snowing here, and we're closer. It's easier to track them now."

William agrees. The first days of their mission revealed to be more complicated than they had anticipated, with tracks that had been covered with snow or washed away by numerous crossings. Not many people would have succeeded in finding them again, several miles later, thanks to a piece of fabric that got caught into a bush next to the ashes left by a fire. And then, they discovered an entire path to follow, that led them to a house occupied by a family with two small children, a boy and a girl. At this point, they had already understood that the Queen wasn't alone, but they didn't know who was with her. Guy and William didn't dwell there, and kept on going straight ahead of them. Until a snow storm stopped them and forced them to find shelter. They had to wait almost a full week before the roads were accessible. They found the cabin in which Robin and the Queen took refuge during the storm, and fresh traces proving that they had left not long ago. From then, it was easy, and in the matter of a few hours, they finally caught sight of them, and realized that their friend was involved in the equation.

He grabs the slice of dry meat Guy hands him, and bites eagerly in it, letting out a deep sigh. This mission was supposed to be a last fun trip with his friend, but now he's lost all interest in it.

"If everything goes well, I should be back to Marian in barely a week or two." Guy declares, looking ahead of him as he eats his own piece of meat, oblivious of his friend's turmoil. He has enough of his own.

Contrary to what he may sound like, the recent turn of event is deeply disturbing him. The life of the
woman he loves is at stake, which leaves him no room for maneuver. But that doesn't mean that it's easy for him to turn against one of his closest friends. A brother even. He and Robin have known each other almost since Guy joined the herd. Robin had been part of the group for about two years already, and Guy was his student and then become his fellow crewman and closest friend. William joined them a few months later. His indiscipline caused him to be knocked down more than once, but he has always stood up, never given up, and has proven his value and loyalty on every battlefield.

But everything changed when Robin left.

He remembers...

"Move move move!"

Robin rushes towards the rock behind which Guy is crouched, and takes shelter from the arrows falling from the sky. This mission is a failure, they should never have tried to take this castle.

"I couldn't get in." Robin declares, out of breath. "They poured a cauldron of burning oil in front of the entrance and set it on fire. There's no way in. We have to retreat."

"Marcus didn't give the order." Guy answers, lowering his head in reaction to the explosion of one of their catapults. "If we leave now, he'll have us killed for desertion."

"This old fool better leave the lead to someone else." Robin mumbles. "He's going to get us all killed."

Guy gives her an amused smile. "You will end up hanged if you keep saying that. If he hears you..."

Robin sighs annoyingly, glances behind him at his brothers in arms falling under the arrows of their opponents.

"This is the third suicide mission in six months. His mind is no longer clear enough and he lets his poor judgment take over. At this rate, the horde will have been exterminated by the end of the year." Robin looks over his friend's shoulder and frowns. "Where the hell is William?"

The two men turn around, watching over the rock sheltering them, looking for any trace of their friend, scanning the scene with their eyes. William has a reckless temper, often puts himself in dangerous situations, and this time isn't exception. Guy tries to find him, but the area is half covered with dead corpses, smoke, fire, making it more difficult to see clearly. Robin has drawn his bow next to him and notches an arrow, aiming at soldiers on top of a tower, focusing for a moment before releasing, his arrow crashing against a shield.

"Shit!" Robin swears, notching another arrow immediately.

Robin never misses, Guy knows that better than anyone. But the circumstances today are far from being the best, and their opponents are hiding behind a castle's walls, barely reachable, while most of them are out in the open, vulnerable and easy targets. All their training is useless here. They are excellent in body-fighting, sword fighting and archery... in an open space. A clearing, a forest even. But not against an enemy locked behind walls. Robin's right. Marcus is losing his mind, but what can they say? He's their leader, and the group will not survive without someone to guide them.

"There!"

Guy follows Robin's gaze to the right wall of the castle, one no one is paying attention to, as the battle happens on the front. Using the cacophony of the battle to his advantage, William is discreetly climbing the wall with a rope he managed, no one knows how, to attach to the top of the ramparts.
"What the hell is he doing?" Guy questions.

"Trying to save our ass." Robin replies, not leaving his friend from sight. "You know him, he loves challenges."

"He's gonna get himself killed." Guy mutters.

Suddenly, their friend disappears into the wall of the castle, and that's when the two realize that William didn't aim the top of the wall, but a broken window.

Robin is already discreetly heading towards where William is, turning around to look at Guy. "Come on! Let's help him!"

Guy's eyes roll to the back of his head, but he relents, lets out a deep sigh. But the arrow that lands a few inches from him reminds him of the urgent reality, and if William's idea works, it could save them all. So he rushes after Robin, who's already halfway to the window. But before he can get there, the soldiers realize the intrusion, and half of them abandon their position to fight the intruders. Guy draws his bow then, and takes aim at the soldiers who are no longer hiding behind the ramparts, taking them down one after the other, giving time to Robin to safely enter the tour.

When the horde realizes that two of their own are inside the tower, the battle takes a new turn. The men are invigorated, putting all their energy back into the battle, using the soldiers' surprise and mistakes to take them down with their arrows, allowing a few of them to follow William and Robin and enter the place.

The drawbridge is down in less than 30 minutes, and when he enters the tower's enclosure with his brothers in arms, Guy knows that the battle is won.

Later, after they've thrown all the castle's inhabitants to the donjons or killed them, they set up for a feast in the main room. The atmosphere is cheerful, boasting of this long-awaited victory, and the 3 friends congratulate each other for their role in taking the castle.

That is, until Marcus enters the room, and asks for silence. He walks until the end of the table, so he faces all of his men. Guy, Robin and William are just next to him, and looking at him expectantly.

Marcus takes a moment, stares at them in the eyes, until his lips form a small smile, one that grows when he holds out a sword above his head. People hold their breaths, until Marcus presents the sword. Guy is close enough to see it. A sharp forged steel blade. The guard of a gilded steel, sublimely decorated with a wolf's head at the ends, and in the center, slightly embedded on the blade, a knight on his horse, holding a spear. A handle also in gilded steel, with decorations forming a braid finishing on the knob in a specific shape with a cross in the center. Pure wonder. But Guy doesn't understand what this means.

"This, my brothers," Marcus claims loud and strong, "is Arondight. Lancelot's sword!"

A few murmurs run through the room, but they quickly die off when Marcus resumes.

"Thanks to this victory, this legendary relic is now ours!"

Only silence meets him then. Most of them have little knowledge of the world outside the horde, they barely know how to read. They never heard of Lancelot. But Guy did. Guy and Robin both did. So Guy totally understands his friend when he stands up, faces Marcus, and asks coldly. "Is this what so many of us died for? The sword of a dead man who betrayed his own King? Was this your goal since the beginning?"
Marcus' smile fades, but his eyes throw daggers at Robin when he turns towards him.

"It was. Do you know how much is this worth?"

Robin chuckles. "Oh, a lot of money I bet. But I'm fairly certain that your intention isn't to sell it for its gold and share it with us, but mostly to keep it to yourself."

Marcus frowns, and Guy recognizes the face he does when someone saw behind his mask. Robin is right. Marcus was ready to sacrifice them for a sword.

"Why would you care?" Marcus replies. "There is enough gold in this place for all of you. I am your commander, I decide on the missions, and this one has revealed to be quite rewarding."

"And almost killed us all!" Robin thunders, moving closer from Marcus. "Just like the previous missions you set. Is this your goal too? To see us fall?"

Guy's breath hitches. Robin may be right, but Marcus stays their leaders, and if he keeps up with his insubordination, he will see the blade run right through him.

"Beware of your words, Robin. You are throwing severe accusations, and if you go on there will be consequences. We won this fight, so there is no matter to discuss."

Marcus turns away from him, staring at the rest of the group with a smile, but Robin isn't done.

"William is the reason we won." All eyes are on him, and William looks at his friend with bewildered eyes. "He found the church's window. He got me in. Thank to him, we were able to let everyone in. But if he hadn't, if it had only been up to you..." Robin shakes his head slowly, taking a step back. "We know where we all would be."

"The result is what matters most, Robin." Marcus says, facing him again. "You get the money for your accomplishments. Don't expect congratulations too. You were only doing your job."

"It was your job to keep us safe!" Robin bites. "And you failed miserably."

"But you're here, aren't you?" Marcus spits, his tone low and threatening, making Guy shiver.

Robin is lucky to be one of Marcus' favorite soldiers, Guy thinks as he watches the scene with twisted gut. Anyone else would already be bleeding to death on the ground.

"I am. But I'm not willing to see my brothers die so you can fulfill your silly wishes. You've changed, Marcus. Once, you cared about your men's lives. I am not certain that this is still true though, which makes me question my place here."

"What does this mean? Are you trying to take my position?"

Robin stares at his mentor with hard eyes, his body straight, unreadable. Has he been planning this all along? Guy wonders. Robin's been questioning Marcus' orders more and more often lately, went to battle with less eagerness than he used to. Has his friend been keeping things from him?

"I am not." Robin replies, much to everyone's relief. The battle exhausted them, they were not ready to see their leader and their best fighter confront each other. "However, I don't believe I belong to the horde anymore."

Shocked murmurs run through the group, but Guy barely hears them. He stares at his friend with wide eyes, mirroring William's, not believing what he just heard. Did he just-
Marcus' stupor is hard to miss for anyone who knows him personally, but he can't show weakness in front of his men, so he straightens up, tilts his chin up in a challenging way.

"Do you realize what you're saying?"

Robin's answer is calm, but firm, not calling for an argument. "I do."

"If this is your decision, then so be it. But do not dare come back. You won't be welcome anymore."

Robin's reply startles them as a thunder in the middle of a quiet night, because none of them thought it would ever happen.

"Very well. I'll leave in the morning."

That day was the end of an era, of a time of celebration and fighting. But despite the brutality of the announcement, William and Guy understood Robin's decision, even though they refused his offer to follow him. Their friendship would continue beyond the horde, and their meeting in this village last month was proof of that.

But if Marian's life involves sacrificing Robin's... Well, so be it. Their friendship may have remained intact, but their paths are different now, and Guy will do anything to preserve his happiness and this woman who made him discover love for the very first time.

Even if it means betraying his oldest friend.

xxx

Sat upon a tree leave, Tinkerbell quietly watches humans be, live their lives. She loves to fly around and just be a quiet observer. Humans are... fascinating! It's almost sunset, and the villagers are storing everything inside, bringing the beasts into the pens, and increasing the fire in the chimneys. She enjoys watching them, what their lives look like, and learn more about those people she's supposed to help.

She thinks about Regina. She may have taken huge risks for her, but it was worth it. Her happiness, her relief, were the best reward she could hope for. Blue was wrong. It was the right thing to do.

She enters the fairies' sanctuary, a wonderful place made of colorful flowers, looking around carefully. She got carried away with her researches to help Regina and Robin, and completely forgot what time it was. Hopefully she'll be able to join her room before-

Suddenly, a green flower opens, revealing... Blue, the Fairy above the Fairies apparently in a horrible mood. Not that Tinkerbell often sees her smile...

"Good evening, Green." Blue greets her coldly.

So much for going unnoticed...

"Hey, Blue." Tinkerbell replies cheerfully. Maybe a little cheerfulness can lighten up the mood. "You look amazing. Did you do something to-

"You're late. You have already broken every rule in the book. Curfew, dust discipline, you 'got big' for no reason."

"Listen, I have news..." Tinkerbell interrupts her, full of energy. "amazing news. I was helping someone!" She declares proudly. "And I found exactly what will solve her problems: The Invisibility
“Ring.”

Blue’s face turns red. Maybe she shouldn’t have said that so bluntly...

“Not a chance.”

“But it’s the only way to help her.” Tinkerbell insists. "She's desperate, and-"

“The ring is one of our most precious relics. You aren’t qualified to take it for your missions, and even less give it to a human and risk losing it.” Blue firmly replies. "Find another way."

“There is no other way!” Tinkerbell insists. She knows that. She made her researches, read all the books to make sure there wasn’t another option, one that wouldn’t put her in a bad position. But really, there's not.

"Then I'm sorry, but there's nothing you can do for this woman." Blue concludes coldly. "Fly away from her, Green."

Tinkerbell tilts her chin up, brows raised. "My name isn't Green. It's Tinkerbell. And I can't believe you want me to ignore someone who needs help. It's not very fairylike."

Blue's eyebrows raise. "I will be the judge of what is fairylike."

"But I-"

"No discussion." she cuts her. "Until further notice, you are to remain here, and continue your training under my direct supervision. Understood?"

Tinkerbell knows that there is nothing more to say. If she wants to help Regina, then she will have to do it on her own, even if it means hiding it from Blue.

"Yes, Blue."

Three days, and nothing. Maybe Blue indeed never heard of what she's done, and she's out of the dog house.

"You disobeyed a direct order."

Or maybe not...

Tinkerbell turns around, facing Blue, who's flying in front of her, furious.

"I know." She replies. "But I did it to help someone, to prove you that I was a good fairy."

"You could've proven that by being a good fairy and respect the rules."

"I was following my instincts." Tinkerbell argues.

"Which are so far from being correct." Blue says, shaking her head.

"But the guardian of the ring released it to my care. She gave me her permission. That must mean something!" the blonde fairy insists.

"It could've..." Blue replies. "If you hadn't broken yet another rule." She sighs. "This can't be forgiven."
Tinkerbell flies closer. "Wait! Wait! Wait! Everyone deserves a second chance. We always tell people that."

"But Tinkerbell, *this* was your second chance."

Struggling to keep the panic inside, despite the tears gathering in her eyes, she begs. She never thought it would come to this. "Please? I promise, I'm so sorry."

But Blue doesn't hear any of it. "You betrayed my trust."

"I can regain it."

"You can't. For one simple, tragic, reason. I no longer believe in you."

Tinkerbell understands it then. She *feels* it. As she looks behind her, her wings disappear, and before she realizes, she's falling, growing, gaze fixed upon Blue, who heartbrokenly avoids to look at her. When Tinkerbell lands on the ground and looks up again, the Blue Fairy is gone, and she's alone in the middle of the now desert village.

Alone.

And human.

Chapter End Notes

Coming next : While Regina and Robin's relationship has never been stronger, the King has never been closer to finding them.

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