Snow White Mysteries

by MiaStory

Summary

Enchanted forest AU in which Snow White is a brilliant investigator and Lieutenant Nolan the partner she didn't ask for...trying to solve the case of the missing Queen.

Notes

New Story, hope you like it!

See the end of the work for more notes.
The case of the Missing Queen

Snow tiptoes into her bedroom, kicks off her boots and plops in her bed. She is too tired to take her clothes off. Too tired to go under her blanket. She drifts off to sleep in an instant.

Snow stretches and looks at the cuckoo clock hanging on the wall. It's almost noon. She slept through her alarm.

"Oh, no," she groans. She jumps out of her bed and rushes out of her bedroom to see Nova reading a book, on a chair by the window.

"You are up!" Nova smiles.

"I didn't mean to oversleep, why didn't you wake me?" Snow mumbles, reaching for a mug.

"Oh, we tried," Nova shrugs. "Emma kissed you and shook you but you were too exhausted so she let you sleep..."

"Did she get to school alright?"

"Of course," Nova smiles, then she shakes her wand and Snow's cup is filled with coffee.

"Thank you," Snow sighs contentedly, taking a sip of coffee. Nova's magiced coffee is so good you almost can't tell it isn't brewed coffee. "I don't know what I'd do without you..."

"You are very welcome," Nova smiles. "Can I get you anything else? Do you want breakfast?"

Snow shakes her head. "Not hungry," she replies. She walks to the window next to Nova's chair and looks outside. It's raining. More of a drizzle really, watering the snow lilies on the flowerpots on Snow's porch.

Nova is one of the people that has been watching Emma for Snow since day one. Nova and Ruby. Granny Lucas too. She lives with Grumpy just around the corner, which is incredibly convenient.

"How is your case going?" Nova asks.

Snow rolls her eyes. "There is no case..." she sighs. "I solved it last night...Dopey has been getting drunk and tagging the dwarves houses in the middle of the night...surprisingly he is a really mean drunk...the dwarves are furious..."

"Oh no! I'm sure I'll hear all about it when I meet Grumpy for lunch," Nova replies. "I'll pick up Emma from school, don't worry..."

"Oh, I was going to do that," Snow frowns.

"I don't think you can. Your mirror has been ringing all morning. I think Jiminy is looking for you..."

Snow sighs. "Do you mind picking Emma up?" she asks.

"Of course not," Nova smiles."I'd be delighted...is it Ruby's turn to watch her this evening?"

Nova has a full time job as a weather fairy but she is on leave now. She is eight months pregnant. She is not supposed to exert herself and use too much magic now that she is pregnant.
Alright, I better go see what Jiminy needs...

Snow picks up her magic mirror and says "Jiminy!" heading to the back of the house where her home office is located.

The mirror is smoky at first then the cricket appears. "Snow White! Where have you been? We've been trying to reach you for a while..."

"Sorry, I slept in," Snow mumbles suddenly aware of how wild her hair might look. "Do you have a case for me?"

"It's fine, it's just that this is important and we need to talk in person, as soon as possible. I can't tell you over the phone. I'm sending a squad gourd to pick you up."

"A squad gourd! What happened to the squad pumpkins?" Snow glares at him.

"Budget cuts" the cricket shrugs.

"I don't like squad gourds. I can just ride my horse to the station!"

"It's raining!" the cricket replies incredulously. "Besides, I already sent the gourd, it's on its way."

"Oh, alright, see you in a bit..." Snow consents, turning off her mirror.

She rushes back to her bedroom and brushes her hair while looking for something clean to wear.

She really needs to do laundry. She's been meaning to do laundry for a while it's just that she's been so busy and tired. She grabs a white tunic, her pair of favorite brown pants out of the hamper and walks out to Nova.

"Could you take care of this for me real quick?" she asks. "Jiminy is having a gourd pick me up..."

"A new case?" Nova asks shaking her wand. Snow's clothes are immediately clean. Snow inhales deeply. Her tunic smells like lilacs. Nova is really good at magicing laundry. Her magiced laundry smells so good and gets so clean it's almost impossible to tell the clothes haven't been in the washing machine.

"Thank you so much," she says in a hurry and disappears back into her bedroom. She glances at her mirror. Green eyes, red lips, long dark hair almost tamed. She looks tired but presentable nonetheless. Professional enough for a meeting with Jiminy. She pulls on her riding boots and hangs her favorite two daggers on her sword belt.

Snow White is rumored to be the best private investigator in the Enchanted Forest. They say there isn't a missing person she cannot track, a mystery she cannot solve. She lives in the Northern kingdom and whenever the black knight force is stumped with a crime or a mystery they cannot solve, they always ask for her help. Jiminy is the chief of her department and they get along fine because he knows when to back off and let her work. Jiminy Cricket, who can shapeshift from human to cricket form and who rose in the knight force ranks after he singlehandedly brought down the Black fairy after years of working undercover, strictly existing in his cricket form.

"The problem with squad gourds is that no matter how much you magic them you can never get rid off that distinct gourd smell," Snow says the moment she steps into Jiminy's office. "Squad pumpkins are so much better. I know you have budget problems but you really should..." her voice trails off.
Jiminy is in human form today, glasses resting on top of his nose, his tie in place, but he is not alone. There is a knight in light armor sitting across from Jiminy's desk, a case folder in his hands.

Snow pauses to get a better look at the new knight.

"I'm sorry, I thought you were alone. I'll come back," she says preparing to make a hasty exit from Jiminy's office.

"No, no, please stay. We've been waiting for you..." Jiminy replies in a hurry.

"Waiting for me?" Snow frowns looking at the knight. "I don't believe we've met, I'm Snow White..." she offers her hand.

The man stands up. "David Nolan," he replies shaking her hand.

He is taller than her, blond hair, bright blue eyes, clean cut, fresh shaven, broad shoulders, his armor is impeccable, his boots shined to perfection, wearing a sword and several daggers. He is looking so official, not a hair out of place, except for a small scar on his chin.

He is a White knight.

What is he doing here, she wonders. This is the Black knight force. He is out of jurisdiction. Snow's gaze lingers, and all of a sudden she is acutely aware of how worn out her boots are and how she threw her hair in a braid in a hurry.

"What is this about? Do the White knights need our help?" Snow frowns.

"Won't you sit down, Snow White," Jiminy points to the chair across from his desk. "Lieutenant Nolan will be joining our force for this investigation..." he adds.

"Please, call me David," the knight interrupts.

"He will? Why?" Snow crosses her arms on her chest. She is still standing.

"In fact he is going to be running point..." Jiminy continues. "I need you guys to work together..."

"Excuse me?" Snow glares at him. "I thought that I made my self very clear, that if you want to hire me I work alone...No offense, Lieutenant Nolan, I'm sure you are great at whatever investigation you run for the Southern kingdom... But I do not need your help..."

"Be that as it may," Jiminy interrupts, "I am pretty sure you will make an exception just this once, because this is a sensitive investigation that you want to participate in. And the only way I could convince the boss to include you is if you weren't alone... and we all know that no one from this department is willing to work with you...except for maybe Grumpy who is busy in the one eyed strangler case..."

"Cowards," Snow scoffs. "This order is coming straight from Blue? On what grounds? I have done nothing but solved cases for this department, I close cases, that's what I do. And if that's the way you are going to treat me, maybe I do not want to be associated with you and your knight force any more..." She looks ready to storm out.

"Snow White, please, hear me out! We need your help!" Jiminy exclaims.

Snow shakes her head. "You have a very funny way of showing it!"

"Queen Regina is missing!" Lieutenant Nolan says mildly and Snow freezes in her tracks. Her face
"What? What did you just say?" she breathes.

"Regina, the Queen of the Northern kingdom is missing. Official itinerary has her visiting King George in his Summer estates yesterday morning and then she disappeared on her way back..." he explains extending the case folder that was on his hand.

Snow doesn't move. She either doesn't see or chooses to ignore his gesture. She stands perfectly still, trying to process this information. For a second she looks as though she might cry. But she doesn't. She nods, takes a deep breath and sits down on her chair, across from Jiminy's desk.

"I'm in," she says quietly. "Would you be so kind as to give us a minute," she turns to the Lieutenant.

"Of course," he replies, he steps out of Jiminy's office and shuts the door behind him.

"How long has she been gone?"

David can clearly hear them through the stained glass door.

"This morning," Jiminy replies. "Nobody knows yet..."

"How long do you think you can keep this quiet?" Snow frowns.

"She doesn't have any official engagements for this whole week...her council has been notified and they are confident they can run things smoothly without her..."

"A week then?" Snow pauses briefly. "Two weeks?" She shakes her head. She cannot believe this is happening. "I really wish you hadn't blindsided me like this!"

"I didn't mean to. I've been trying to reach you all morning..." Jiminy protests.

"I mean, he is running point. Who is he? How do we even know whether to trust him? This isn't just any missing case, this is my stepmother we are talking about..."

"Not just your stepmother! This is the Queen. And she disappeared while visiting King George so this is a diplomatic nightmare no matter which way you look at it. This is serious. Which is why we need him Snow. He will open door for us. He is the best the Southern kingdom has to offer, or so I'm told... Give him a chance. I have no doubt you can manage him..."

"He is white Knight!" she groans, knowing that Jiminy is probably going to ignore that point as well. "White knights don't break rules, they don't even bend the rules, how am I supposed to work with him..."

"Give him a chance Snow White, we need him..."

"Why! Why do we need him?"

"Exactly because he is a White knight. Regina was last seen in the Southern kingdom. I do not need to remind you that it's outside of our jurisdiction. Technically our department shouldn't be the one handling this at all, but this is out Queen that's missing. If we do a joint investigation, they've agreed to let us handle it as long as he is in charge..."

Snow sighs. This is a nightmare on so many levels. "He looks like a sword fighter, not an investigator..." she is looking really doubtful.
"So, the ladies will be willing to talk to him. That's a good thing..." Jiminy is relieved. He is pretty certain Snow will cooperate.

Snow rolls her eyes. There is a brief pause.

"So, Regina is missing, huh?" Snow sighs. "Why am I not surprised?"

"When was the last time you talked to her?"

"Right after Emma was born," Snow shrugs.

"Are you sure you are up for it? You don't have to..."

"Of course, I'm up for it," she replies.

There is a brief moment of silence.

"Won't you let him back in then..." Jiminy motions to the glass door.

Snow glares at him but she does open the door.

"Alright," Jiminy Cricket tries to sound confident. Like this isn't the hardest most complex case his office was ever asked to handle. "Now that we are all on the same page... there will be no official announcement. You report directly to me or Blue. There is no room for error, the fate of all the kingdoms is resting on this investigation..."

Snow glares at him. "No pressure," she deadpans.

Jiminy shoots her a warning look.

"This is just a missing person's case," she argues. "Do not say the fate of the kingdoms lies in this investigation or something equally dramatic..."

"She is the Queen!" Jiminy protests.

"Queens can be replaced. Nobody is indispensable, the kingdom will go on..." Snow argues.

Lieutenant Nolan looks at Snow White, wondering if she is as certain as she sounds, and whether she is mostly trying to convince herself.

Jiminy nods. "You are right. This is first and foremost a missing person's case. Let's do our best to keep this under wraps as long as we can. Lieutenant Nolan has all the information you need...Keep me posted..."

And just like that without actually saying it, Jiminy dismisses them both from his office.

Snow nods trying to keep a neutral expression, trying not to glare at Lieutenant Nolan who happens to be in charge. They both step out of Jiminy's office, David carefully shutting the door behind him. He points to the corner office. He has only been here for a few hours but due to the sensitive nature of the investigation he was offered a private office. Or rather, they have been offered the corner office, because there are two desks facing each other in a small room. Lieutenant Nolan seems to have already claimed the desk on the left so Snow sits on top of the desk on the right and crosses her arms. Without a word she reaches for the file in Lieutenant Nolan's hand. He hands it to her right away.

"There's not much to go on," he starts, studying her face carefully as she browses quickly through
the information. A missing queen and all they have to go on is two measly pages of nothing.

"The Huntsman called it in?" she asks.

Lieutenant Nolan nods. "He was expecting her to arrive at the last night..."

"Last known location?"

"Crossing of Queen's road and Story Lane," he replies, pointing to the last page in the file she is holding.

"She took the scenic route," Snow mumbles mostly to herself. "That's unusual. I suppose that's where we start. Alright, shall we go?" she asks, jumping off her new desk. "Your squad gourd or mine?"

"We don't do gourds," he replies.

"You have pumpkins?" Snow almost perks up.

"Beans," he replies pulling a small leather pouch from his pocket.

"Beans? Magic beans? " Snow is looking shocked. Because the Black Knight force struggles with budget cuts and can't even afford squad pumpkins let alone magic beans. The White Knight force seems to be doing alright.

"Yes!"

Snow is so fascinated for a brief minute she almost forgets how annoyed she is at him. Almost.

"How do they work?" she asks, looking at the clear bean he has in his hand.

"Here, would you like to try?" he offers.

Snow looks closely noting how the bean shimmers to the light.

"How many of these do you get a month?" she asks.

"Ordinarily between thirty to sixty, but we haves no limit," he replies. "As many as we need..."

"Infinite beans? You are not serious!"

He smirks and doesn't reply he just places the magic bean in her hand.

"I've never used one before..." she mumbles.

"There's nothing to it. You toss it on the ground and you say where you want to go...But it's safer if we go outside...technically you are not supposed to do it indoors unless it's an emergency" he points to the staircase that leads to the front courtyard where all the squad gourds and pumpkins are parked.

They walk hurriedly down the stairs. Once they are outside, in the open space of the courtyard, Snow takes a deep breath. "Crossing of Queen's Road and Story Lane," she says tossing the bean on the ground.

A light flashes and a bright green ring appears on the ground, the size of a small pond making a loud humming noise. Snow is looking at it very carefully. This is both brighter and louder than she
"After you!" he smiles.

Snow isn't scared. If she is, she is definitely not going to show it, not in front of Lieutenant Nolan. She steps inside the green circle, careful not to touch the bright green burning edge. Lieutenant Nolan steps in right after her.

For a while she feels confused like she doesn't know which way is up, which way is down, she is lost in the fog, falling. She reaches around her, trying to grasp something, anything. Her hand finds his arm.

"It's alright," she hears him say.

Snow pulls back her hand trying to force her heart to calm down. It's just a magic bean, she tells herself. They are perfectly safe, it's just a magic bean...

And then the fog clears up. They have arrived.

"Are you okay?" he asks. "First time can be very disorienting..."

"I'm fine," mumbles, not sounding entirely confident.

"You are doing great," he means to say but she walks away. She definitely doesn't care much for his approval.

At the crossing of Queen's road and Storylane, thirty white knights are combing the forest on all four sides.

Snow's eyes open wide. "Who authorized this?" she asks. "I thought we were keeping this under wraps!"

"I did," Lieutenant Nolan is right behind her. "They don't know exactly what they are looking for..."

Snow turns around to face him. She is not looking happy about this at all. "In the future you run everything by me..."

He is not about to commit to anything. "My men are trustworthy" he replies. "They are trained, they are very reliable... How is it going?" he asks the young knight that rushes towards them.

"Nothing to report so far sir. We will proceed in area B-59," he says pulling out a magic mirror that shows a grid map of the enchanted forest. "How are you doing Ma'am?" he asks noticing Snow.

"B-59? " she rolls her eyes. "You don't say..."

"Is there a problem?" David asks.

"Of course there is nothing to report after their highly trained feet stomped on everything..." Snow says shaking her head. "Pull them back!"

"If they said they didn't find anything, that's because there was nothing to find..." he replies firmly.

"Rule number one, Lieutenant. There is always something to find...and I get to look at everything first..."
"You plan on combing the entire forest by yourself?" he asks incredulously.

"Rule number one..." the young knight repeats, his eyes open wide. He knows that rule. He recognizes her. "Excuse me Ma'am, do you happen to be Snow White?"

And when Snow doesn't react he continues. "You...you are amazing, I am a big fan, I studied all your cases in the academy... Would you mind signing my sword..." he says unsheathing his sword and handing it to her.

Snow doesn't reply, she just glares at Lieutenant Nolan.

He takes a deep breath. "You heard the lady," he turns to his knight. "Pull everybody back..."

"Sir?"

"Rule number one," he mumbles following her.

This is going to be a long day.

But in the end even as Snow carefully walks the edges of the carriage road, there isn't much to find.

When no one is watching, Snow whistles and a bluebird perches on her hand.

"Was the Queen here?" she whispers.

The bluebird chirps back at her for a while, then it flies away.

Snow squats to the ground looking closely to the patterns of the dirt on the ground then she walks back to Lieutenant Nolan.

"When was the last time it rained?" she asks.

He pulls out his magic mirror and checks the past weather reports. "Three days ago..."

"This isn't right," she replies looking at the ground. "None of this is right...it's should almost be carriage tracks overlapping, instead there is nothing...as if someone swept it clean..."

"Who has those kind of resources," he frowns.

Snow looks at the thirty knights that are throwing their magic beans on their ground one by one heading back to the white knight force headquarters.

"King George?" he raises his eyebrows.

Snow shrugs.

"Surely he'd be smarter than that. He wouldn't make a Queen disappear right after an official visit to his estate..."

"What if he was pressed for time?" she asks.

"Alright. Shall we question him next?" he asks.

"That's going to be a nightmare," she sighs. "I'm going to have to run it by Jiminy and Blue... and the superiors of their superiors..."

"No, you don't. We can go question him right now..." he offers.
"We can? We can just walk in the castle and question the king?" Snow is looking at him shocked.

"I don't see why not," there is no doubt in his voice.

You'd do that? You'll question the king without getting some kind of approval first?" she looks at him as if she didn't quite hear his previous answer.

Lieutenant Nolan is standing tall, unflinching. "It's what I'm here for, isn't it?" he replies. "Make it possible for you to run this investigation without White Knight force blocking your path?"

Yes, she thinks, but she looks at him surprised. She didn't expect him to admit to that.

"Alright...what time is it?" she asks checking her mirror. "It's dinner time, um... I need to check on someone real quick, it will just be a minute..."

Snow walks away and she looks in her magic mirror. "Call Ruby!" she says. But nothing happens. "Ruby!" she says again, but her mirror stays dark.

Snow turns around. She is looking uneasy now.

"She is not picking up. I have to check on my daughter," she mumbles, "before we question the king...it shouldn't take too long..."

"Here you go," he says handing her two magic beans. "Message me when you are done?"

Snow glares at him. She needs to decide and she needs to decide fast. Can he be trusted? He is a White Knight, from the Southern kingdom, no doubt loyal to his king. Can she trust that he is not going to warn the king? Can he be trusted at all? What if... Her eyes are still on him when she drops the bean to the ground, right at his feet.

The green ring opens up and swallows him whole.

"I want to go home to Emma," Snow tries to hide her mischievous smile.

When the fog clears up he is standing there, right next to Snow's mailbox, overflowing with mail and covered up by vines, his arms crossed.

"If you wanted me to come along all you had to do was ask," he says dryly.

"What? I've never used beans before," she shrugs.

He is not buying it, not even for a minute. "Maybe you should be using squad gourds," he glares at her.

But she is not listening, she's already heading towards her cottage. "Are you coming?" she asks.

He is still shaking his head, even as he follows her.

"You really should check your mail," he mutters under his breath.

Snow's place is a simple cottage with large windows and a rose trellis shading the front porch. It's beautiful in a rustic disheveled sort of way. Her yard needs to be mowed and her flower beds need weeding. She walks inside, and he rushes to follow her.

Her living room has a large fireplace a comfortable oversized couch and pictures of birds hanging on every wall. It would be really cute if it didn't look like a tornado run through it.
"Mom!" a blond girl that can't be older than ten runs and hugs her so fast Snow almost tumbles over.

"Emma," she says, smiling brightly for the first time.

"Are you busy? Do you have a new case?" Emma doesn't really wait for an answer. She just starts talking fast. "I made a picture at school but Grace spilled the glitter and it got on my hair and then Grace laughed and..." Emma's voice trails off as she takes in the Lieutenant.

Lieutenant Nolan isn't really listening to her words. He is just standing there, looking at Snow and her daughter. Sure, he's heard rumors of Snow White being the fairest of them all, everybody has. And he does find her incredibly attractive even when she is glaring at him, but this, this is different somehow. Snow is listening intently to her little girl, smiling back and she looks like she is practically glowing.

"Hi!" the little girl smiles at him brightly.

"Hello," he returns her smile.

"I'm Emma!" she says, "who are you?"

"This is Lieutenant Nolan, he is going to work with me for a while," Snow replies.

"I'm David," he interrupts.

Emma untangles herself form her mother's arms and walks over to him.

"Are you a private detective like Mom?" she wants to know.

"Not quite," he replies. "I am in the knight force..."

"White knight?" she asks looking at the insignia on his armor.

"Exactly," he nods. "That's really good! How did you know?" he looks genuinely impressed.

There is something about this little green eyed wisp of a girl he finds captivating.

"Mom says if I'm going to be in the knight force one day have to observe everything."

"Your Mom is right... Are you going to join the knight force?" he replies smiling, because she looks so serious there for a moment.

"I'm going to be a knight, or a ballerina, or a vet" she shrugs. "Haven't decided yet..."

He nods trying not to laugh.

"What happened? Ruby wasn't picking up her mirror, I got worried..." Snow is fussing, pulling Emma's hair out of her face.

"Auntie Ruby is cooking," Emma shrugs points towards the kitchen. "Maybe she forgot to charge her magic mirror..." There is a vague unidentifiable smell of burned food coming through the door.

"I see," Snow nods. "Do you want to tell me what happened here, sweetheart?" Snow asks pointing at the broomstick sticking out of the couch and the big white sheet attached to it.

"Hansel and Gretel came over," Emma shrugs. "We played pirates and bandits..."
"Nice," Snow laughs. "I better check on Ruby."

She walks into the kitchen to find Ruby staring at some chicken nuggets, poking them with a fork.

"Snow! You are back early. How do you know if the nuggets are done?" she asks.

"When they start smoking it's generally a good indication," Snow offers.

Ruby pulls them out of the oven. "Is everything alright? Are you done for the day?" she asks.

"Not done... You aren't picking up your mirror... I got worried, I came to check on you guys..." Snow explains. "Also, I got a new case by the knight force and a new partner..."

"A new partner?" Ruby frowns. "I thought that you'd made it clear you work alone. What's he like?"

"He is too..." Snow's voice falters.

"Too bossy? Too old? Too incompetent?" Ruby tries to be helpful.

"No...He is too..." Snow looks away. She doesn't know how to finish her sentence. "Well, since everything is under control here, I should get going..."

"You have to go back right now? Snow!" Ruby looks at her friend face carefully. "Snow, what's wrong?"

"Nobody is supposed to know about this," Snow's voice is barely louder than a whisper. "But my stepmother is missing..."

"Your stepmother... the Queen?" Ruby's eyes open wide.

Snow nods.

"How is that not the biggest news of the day?" Ruby blurts out. "All they keep talking about in the news is Ella's triplets...apparently one of them lost a tooth..."

"They are keeping it under wraps... trying to at least." Snow shrugs. "You can't tell anyone..."

"My lips are sealed," Ruby makes it a point to pretend lock her lips and throw away the key.

Snow smiles.

"Are you alright?" Ruby asks quietly.

Snow hesitates. "I will be," she nods decisively.

When the women step out of the kitchen they find Lieutenant Nolan sitting on the couch, Emma standing in front of him, both of them deeply engrossed in a clapping game. Emma is going faster and faster and the Lieutenant is messing up.

"No, you are doing it wrong, you have to do it three times..." Emma corrects him.

He shakes his head. "I'm a little rusty," he replies. "Let's me try this again..."

Emma giggles. "One more time," she agrees magnanimously. "Don't mess up this time..."

"I'll do my best Ma'am," he replies playfully, and Emma giggles again.
"Is that your new partner?" Ruby mouths at Snow, fanning herself, her eyes wide open, a very playful smirk on her face.

Snow avoids her eyes all together.

"Come on Emma, your chicken nuggets are ready," Ruby smiles.

"I'm not that hungry," Emma mumbles.

"Did by any chance Hansel and Gretel bring candies when they came over?" Snow watches her daughter's face carefully.

"Maybe," Emma smirks. "Hansel and Gretel were lost for a while and Mom found them and now their Dad spoils them rotten and they get as much candy as they want," Emma explains to Lieutenant Nolan who turns and gapes at Snow.


"You are not going to ask me to autograph anything, are you?" Snow sighs.

"Oh, how exciting! He is a fan!" Ruby claps her hands.

Snow half glares at Ruby and doesn't reply.

Emma smiles at David. "I have to eat. And you need to practice more, you need to get better..." she says then heads towards the table.

"Absolutely," he laughs.

Ruby coughs loudly.

"Oh, sorry." Snow starts. "Ruby this is Lieutenant Nolan, umm I mean David, David this is Ruby. And we really got to go. I'll probably be home after you are in bed," Snow kisses her daughters forehead. "Please go to bed early and don't give Auntie Ruby a hard time you have school tomorrow..."

Emma looks disappointed. "Do you have to go?"

"I'm sorry baby..." Snow replies in a hurry. And then they are heading out the door.

Once they are outside, Lieutenant Nolan turns to Snow.

"Do you have children Lieutenant?" Snow asks before he gets a chance to say anything.

"I don't. Listen, If you need to stay home..." he offers. "I can question the king on my own...Or if that goes against your rules we can question the king tomorrow..."

Snow shakes her head. "No," she sounds quite firm. "This needs to happen today, while it's still only a missing person case. I want to keep it that way. Time is of the essence..."

"True..." he pulls out a magic bean, "To the castle," he says and then he carefully drops the magic bean on the ground.
The Case of the Missing Queen

Outside of Snow's cottage, Lieutenant Nolan turns to Snow.

"If you need to stay home..." he offers. "I can question the king on my own...Or if that goes against your rules we can question the king tomorrow..."

Snow shakes her head. "No," she sounds quite firm. "This needs to happen today, while it's still only a missing person case. I want to keep it that way. Time is of the essence..."

"True..." he pulls out a magic bean, "To the castle," he says and then he carefully drops the magic bean on the ground.

When Snow White and Lieutenant Nolan materialize in the middle of the courtyard in King George's castle three royal guards surround them, their swords already unsheathed, eyeing both of them suspiciously.

"State your purpose!" they yell while a line of additional guards forms behind them, stringing arrows on their bows.

Snow raises her hands but Lieutenant Nolan acts like he doesn't see them, he is already taking a step forward.

"We are here to see the King," he says firmly.

"Were you invited? Is the King expecting you?" all three guards are glaring at him, their swords a mere inch from his chest.

"He is not..." David replies.

"You know you cannot expect to see the king without a notice. You are going to have to apply for an audience just like everybody else..." the captain of the guard, a strong burly man looks very intimidating.

"No, I really don't. This is an official knight force investigation. Will you let me through or will I have to arrest you first?" Lieutenant Nolan asks, pulling his badge out, his other hand already on the hilt of his sword.

The captain of the guard reads the name on the badge and looks around nervously, signaling his men to stand down. "I don't know Sir..."

But Lieutenant Nolan has already pushed his way through them.

King George is in his study when David and Snow walk in.

He stands up in a hurry. "What is the meaning of this!" he says and then he sees Lieutenant Nolan and freezes. There is no accounting for all the emotions Snow reads in his eyes. Sadness, Snow thinks, sadness, pain and regret.

Snow takes in the whole room. There is a large portrait of king George with his wife behind his desk. His wife who died tragically twenty two years ago. No picture of his son though, Snow notes. His son died about ten years ago. You'd think the king would have a portrait of him too. That's a little unusual.
"What can I do for you my boy?" the King's voice is softer now.

"This is an official investigation Sire, this is investigator White, I am Lieutenant Nolan, and we need to ask you a few questions..."

The king's expression hardens. He sits back down slowly, crossing his arms. He leaves them standing there, he doesn't offer them a seat. "You two are working together?" he mumbles not really expecting a response. "I know who you are. What is this about?"

"Queen Regina is missing..." David starts.

"Is she now...I can't say that I'm surprised..." the king interrupts.

"Really?" Lieutenant Nolan frowns. "Why is that?"

"She tends to ruffle one's feathers," the King replies. "Rub people the wrong way..."

"Was she with you yesterday morning?"

"What if she was?" the king has no intention on making this easy.

"Please answer the question, was she with you yesterday morning in the summer estates?"

"Maybe..."

"What time did she leave?"

"I didn't check!" the King replies defiantly.

"What was your meeting about?"

"Confidential!"

"Did she say anything to upset you? Or did you upset her?" David asks.

"What are you implying my boy?" the king glowers at him.

Snow is watching David surprised. She has seen royals, Kings and Queens cower at George's intimidating gaze, but Lieutenant Nolan just stands there, staring back at him. Welcoming the challenge. Not threatened at all. Snow tries hard not to let the surprise she is feeling show on her face.

"The Queen's itinerary said she planned to be with you all day, yet reports have her leaving the summer estates abruptly, in the morning. What happened? What changed?"

"Are you sure about those reports?" a condescending smirk on the king's face.

"No Sir, that's why I'm asking you. Did you argue with the Queen? Did she say anything to upset you?"

"She didn't say anything new...this was more of a trip down memory lane," the king replies. "She kept bringing up the past, she kept saying she needs to fix things, she needs to make amends, but she wouldn't tell me anything specific. I asked and I asked. Then I gave up. I figured she'd tell me when she was ready..."

"Make amends for what?" Lieutenant Nolan asks.
"I told you, she wasn't specific..." the king is looking away.

"Venture a guess!" David persists.

"People usually want to make amends for the way they treated their family," the king replies, trying to avoid David's' eyes. "If I had to guess I'd say the way she treated her stepdaughter," the King looks at Snow White.

Snow's face is white but she doesn't react. She is just staring back at the king.

"Really?" David doesn't look convinced. "Any particular reason she would come share that with you? If she wanted to make amends with her stepdaughter wouldn't she have gone straight to her stepdaughter?"

"I lost a son...I understand what that is like..."

"Forgive me Sire, but her stepdaughter is very much alive. That's not really the same thing, is it? Is there anything else she wanted to make amends for? Anything that you did together? Some order or some agreement she made with you that she expressed regret over?"

"You are overstepping boy," the king's eyes flash with anger.

"I am a Lieutenant in the White Knight force. Fully authorized to conduct this investigation. I am well within my bounds..."

"Fine, fine, I know who you are but what about you, princess? Why are you here? Do you not see what a huge conflict this is? You can't be investigating this case!"

Snow's face flush. She has an angry retort ready to tumble out of her lips, an answer they will probably all regret, but she doesn't get a chance.

"Snow White is one of the best investigators in all the kingdoms," Lieutenant Nolan sounds angry. "We are very grateful she is willing to be involved in this, this is the Queen missing after all. I do not have to tell you that a missing Queen can cause civil unrest, destabilize the peace of all the kingdoms. Now please, we need to get back to the subject at hand. Have you and the Queen ever done something illegal, something that perhaps she might have come to express regret over?"

Snow maintains a neutral expression. She doesn't let her face how shocked she is, at the forceful way Lieutenant Nolan just vouched for her.

"No!" the king replies. "I think we are done here..."

"Not quite," David replies. "Now. Can anyone confirm the particulars of your conversation with Regina?"

"Of course not. When two sovereigns meet, they do so without witnesses!"

"If they have something to hide," Lieutenant Nolan observes and the king looks like he is ready to throttle him. "Anything else you can remember that might help us with the investigation?"

"No! We talked yesterday morning, then she left. Nothing happened. Now get out!"

"One might think that you didn't want the Queen, your friend, to be found..." David observes looking directly at the King.

"Watch your words boy..."
"Lieutenant Nolan," David interrupts.

"Not for long," the King replies dryly.

David smiles. "Perhaps not. When did you get back from the Summer Estates?"

"Yesterday evening," the King replies. "I was there all day, all my people can confirm that..."

"Right," David replies. It wouldn't be too hard for the king to get his people to vouch for his whereabouts, whether he was there or not. Then again if the King wanted Regina gone, he wouldn't make her disappear himself. He'd have his people do it. The same people who would cover for him without a second thought.

"Anything you want to add, Investigator White?" David turns to Snow.

Snow shakes her head. "Not at the moment," she replies.

"Thank you for your time Sire..." David nods.

The king glares and says nothing as Snow and David exit the room.

Neither of them utter a single word as they are escorted out of the castle. They both understand that even the walls have ears. Anything they say on their way out will be reported to the king in great detail. Snow wishes the guards would stop following her, because she really wants to ask the birds to confirm the information king George just gave them. But it's not possible. The guards follow them so closely, if they were to stop walking, they would bump right into them.

Once at the courtyard David throws a magic bean on the ground and steps inside. Snow rushes to follow him.

When the fog clears up they are in the front steps of the knight force head quarters.

"Well, that was surprising!" Snow says unable to disguise the shock she is feeling.

"That's an understatement," David replies facing her.

"I didn't expect him to lose his temper like that..." she adds.

He doesn't reply.

Snow looks ready to head inside.

"Wait," David hesitates.

Snow takes a deep breath.

"What is it?" she asks, keeping her voice even.

He looks at her. "Let's sit for a minute," he points to a bench on the park across the street under a pine tree.

"Fine," Snow mumbles, following him. "You were very..."

"Very?"

"Bold," she replies. "You handled the king really well..." she sounds surprised.
"Can't let the royals bully you," he shrugs. "That's my number one rule..."

"Right," Snow replies looking at him. "It's not a terrible rule. Can he get you fired?"

"He can try..." he shrugs, "but it will make him look really guilty if he does."

"He was totally lying to you too..."

"I know," he nods.

"Glad we agree," Snow mumbles.

"Yeah," he adds, "he is trying to shift the focus of the investigation on you."

Snow nods. She knew this would happen. Sooner or later. They might as well deal with this now, get it out of the way.

"And?" she raises her eyebrows to face him.

"You know I have to ask you, right?" he asks quietly. "Before we go any further with this?"

Snow nods, swallowing hard. "Go ahead..." She doesn't have much to hide.

"Is there anything you want to say now, off the record?"

"Not really..." Snow shrugs looking away.

"Alright," he pulls out his magic mirror and hits record. "It is seven ' o clock and I'm at the black knight force headquarters with Investigator White, now tell me please, when was the last time you came in contact with Queen Regina?"

Snow shakes her head. It was such a long time ago and yet the questions about that time never seize. Regina is always casting a shadow over her, no matter how far she runs and how much she tries to distance herself from the royal life.

"Ten years ago..." she replies, looking right at him, keeping her voice steady. "Ten years ago I abdicated any claims to the throne and I left Regina and her castle...I walked away and never looked back..."

"You haven't talked to her since?"

"No."

"Did the Queen ever tried to contact you?"

Snow shakes her head. "She hasn't."

"Why did you leave?"

"My stepmother didn't believe that the Kingdom could survive the scandal of me having a baby..." she is looking right at him almost daring him to question her further.

"The scandal being..." his voice is very soft. Very different from when he questioned the king.

He is good, Snow can't help but think, even as he uses his skills against her. He picked a park bench under a tree, a very non threatening location, and he is speaking so softly. Even as she
recognizes this, as nothing more than a smart interrogation technique, it's still working. She still feels like telling him everything.

"That my memories were wiped clean and I had no idea what I'd been up to the past year and a half or who the father of my baby was," she replies, her voice calm. Almost too calm. "I couldn't remember..."

He should be offering a follow up question but he hesitates. He doesn't push.

"I don't think I could have been much of a queen anyway...not really cut out for it..." she offers quietly, even though she really doesn't have to.

He knows all this of course, everybody does. The facts of Snow White's abdication are well known throughout the kingdoms. Besides he did some thorough research on Snow White the moment he took this case. And yet asking those questions when she is sitting next to him, green eyes ablaze, keeping her head held high, right after he met Emma... Knowing all that she's accomplished since she walked away from her throne...

"Alright," he replies, "That should do it..."

"No Lieutenant, your follow up question should be 'if Regina disappears your daughter is the one who stands to gain the most from this...at which point I'll say I don't want my Emma anywhere near the castle or the royal life..."'

David shakes his head still putting his magic mirror away. "No. No follow up questions," he replies.

"If you don't ask the right questions your investigation will not be complete. You need to ask me where I was all day yesterday and if someone can verify that."

"Our investigation," he amends.

"Our investigation," she replies, suddenly aware of how tired she is feeling.

He hesitates. "Why are you looking for her? After everything she put you through, why...?"

Snow shakes her head. That's not the follow up question she expected. Her eyes are still on him, unable to hide her surprise. "It's what I do..." she struggles to find the right words. "It's who I am. I need my mysteries solved, I need the stories to have endings...does that make sense?"

David nods. "It does..." though he is still trying to read her face.

"I've been very busy this last few days. I could give you a list of places I've been but I'm not sure that I have a solid alibi..."

"That won't be necessary," he replies quietly.

"Of course it is necessary!" she snaps, and she doesn't know if she is annoyed at him, or the case, or Regina for disappearing. Or the fact that Regina's disappearance dredges up the past for all to see.

"You are not a suspect, Snow White!" his earnest tone surprises her.

"You can't know that for sure! I should at least be a person of interest..." she frowns.

Why, why is she even doing this? Why is she arguing about this? She doesn't know. She is
surprised at the warmth she reads in his eyes.

"We have to do this right," she replies quite stubbornly.

"Is that a rule?" he smirks. "Tell you what. You make that list of where you were all day yesterday when you get a chance and send it to me..."

Snow nods.

"It's getting late. I think we should call it a day..."

Snow nods.

"Here you go..." he says handing her one more bean. "For getting home..."

"Home," Snow mumbles. She is feeling so exhausted all of a sudden. "Thank you. Goodnight Lieutenant," as she tosses the bean on the ground and she is gone.

Gone before he gets a chance to respond.

"Good night," he replies even though she can no longer hear him.

Lieutenant Nolan heads upstairs to his new office at Black Knight force headquarters. He is about to file a report about the two interviews he conducted today, when the Jiminy Cricket flies to his desk. He is in cricket form as he often is at the end of the day when he is tired.

"Well?" Jiminy asks.

"We just finished interviewing the king," David offers.

"And? How did that go?"

"As well as it could be expected. He wasn't exactly forthcoming with information. We'll verify his answers first thing in the morning... I don't have much more than that," he replies.

"How is it going with Snow White?"

"It's going great," he replies absentmindedly and Jiminy is looking quite surprised.

None of the officers that worked along side Snow White have ever said that, after their first day working together. They said things like "terrible," "horrifying," and "I want off the case."

"Really?" he replies dumbfounded.

David nods. "Of course," he replies.

Once the cricket is gone David turns back to his magic mirror and listen his interview with Snow.

"Ten years ago I abdicated my throne and I left Regina and her castle...I walked away and never looked back..." Snow's voice is soft.

He types "Snow White", "abdication" and hundreds of old news pages pop up with dozens of pictures of Snow White holding her baby, visibly upset, trying to walk away from the cameras.

SNOW WHITE FOUND IN ABANDONED COTTAGE, the dramatic headlines read. Snow White the missing daughter of the late King Leopold and Queen Eva, stepdaughter of Queen Regina has
now been found by Granny Lucas to the great relief of the Kingdom. Queen Regina is thrilled.

IT'S A GIRL! Snow White has been busy during her missing year. She is the proud mother of healthy baby girl..."

A FORGETFUL PRINCESS! Snow White claims she doesn't remember who fathered her child." DID THE PRINCES REALLY FORGET?

KISSING AND NOT TELLING. A royal Scandal.

SNOW WHITE HAD A BABY GIRL. WHO IS EMMA'S FATHER? It appears that Snow White has been very busy during her absence. She is the mother of a new born baby girl. The princess claims she doesn't remember who the father is.

Article after article speculating about Snow's mystery lover, was he a fairy, was he a dwarf, was he human, was he an ogre, or a troll, did he kidnap her and then wipe her memories... Was the child born out of wedlock, what did that mean for the throne, was Snow kidnapped, was there consent, can the future Queen of the Northern kingdom be a mother to a child whose father is unknown...

CAN WE TRUST A PRINCESS WHO FORGETS?

The news were obsessed, half of them offering salacious speculations, the other half horrified for the fate of the kingdoms. There wasn't one ounce of mercy, not one kind word. Nobody believed Snow's story.

He feels his blood boil just by reading the articles. Everyone treated the princess with suspicion, nobody believed that her memory was wiped. He can't imagine what it must have felt like. No wonder she abdicated. No wonder she chose a different life. No wonder she doesn't want Emma anywhere's near the royals.

"I walked away and never looked back..."

David taps his fingers on his desk, going back to his recording of Snow's answers. She's quite adept at hiding it, but he think that she sounds quite sad.

He glances back at the News articles.

SNOW WHITE ABDICATING THE THRONE.

A picture of Snow looking small yet somehow determined, signing the kingdom away while Regina was hovering behind her, watching her.

"My memories were wiped clean and I had no idea what I'd been up to the past year or who the father of the baby was...I don't think I could have been much of a queen anyway...not really cut out for it..."

He pauses the recorder and he looks at her face. Right there, right there, a sense of regret, she looks like she'd cry, but she doesn't. He studies her face closely. Why, the way she walked into the forest this morning and ordered his men off the path... she is wrong. She would have made an excellent queen.

Snow White checks on Emma who is fast asleep, then she steps outside on her porch. It's a beautiful night, the sky is finally clear. Snow breaths in the moist earth form this mornings drizzle.
She raises her hand. A nightingale perches on her finger.

"I am looking for Queen Regina," Snow says softly, rubbing her forefinger on the birds head. "Can you help me out?"

The bird looks at her, chirps a couple of times and flies away.

She steps back inside her house, walks into her bedroom, plops on her bed, kicking off her boots.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall," she says playfully, pulling her magic mirror out of her pocket. "Show me Lieutenant David Nolan, of the Southern kingdom, on the White Knight database."

A picture of David stares back at her along with a brief description of his career. Apparently Lieutenant Nolan is a talented swordsman and decorated officer. He didn't become an investigator until after a serious injury ten years ago. Snow clicks for more information, and then her screen goes red.

"CLASSIFIED," the red letters read. "Please enter authorization code."

"Really?" Snow frowns at her magic mirror screen.
Snow wakes up early the next day, before her cuckoo clock strikes seven, before Emma is even up. She puts her clothes on in a hurry, then she glances at the mirror. She pins her hair up. She is grateful to see Nova walk in through the front door.

"You are up early," Nova smiles.

"New case!" Snow mumbles.

"Oh yeah? Something interesting?" Nova shakes her wand and a cup of fresh steaming coffee materializes in Snow's hand.

"This one is an official knight force investigation. I can't really talk about it," Snow shrugs taking a sip.

"It's alright. Is it true that the Queen is missing?" Nova asks.

Snow's eyebrows shoot up and she almost spits out her coffee. "Where did you hear that?" she tries to sound completely indifferent.

"Rumors were flying yesterday at the market," the fairy shrugs. "They say the Queen's castle is in lockdown...Is it true?"

Snow nods. "It's true, though we are trying to keep it under wraps..."

"Oh, Snow, are you alright?" the fairy walks over to her and places her hand on Snow's shoulder.

Snow shake her head. "Not really," she replies. "I mean, I don't know. No matter how far I run, there is always questions and remarks...it's like she is always there, complicating things, you know? And now she is not..."

Nova nods sympathetically. "You'll find her... If anyone can find her in the entire Enchanted forest, I know it's you..."

Snow looks like she might cry but she sighs instead. "I'll find her," she nods. "I should go..."

"Good luck," Nova calls out after her.

Snow heads to the small stable behind her cottage. She is going to ride her horse to work today. It will help clear her head.

"Hello to you too" she mumbles as her mare neighs softly. "Come on girl, ready to go for a ride?"

David is on his desk glancing out the window when he sees Snow White riding towards the knight force station on her white mare. Her hair is disheveled, her cheeks are red and she is looks like...well, she looks like a run away fairytale princess, that's what she looks like. She looks like a dream. When they gave her the fairest of them all nickname, they weren't exaggerating at all, he thinks. She glances up at his window and he hurriedly looks down at his papers, just in case. She provably can't see him through the thick tinted glass.

A few minutes later she is there, hair now almost in place, cheeks still red.

"Good morning," he half smiles.
She nods then she motions him to follow her as she heads into Jiminy's office. She leans against the wall waiting for Jiminy to look up from his papers.

"The cat is out of the bag, gentlemen," she says as soon as she has his attention. "There are rumors flying about the disappearance of the Queen..."

"I was afraid of that," Jiminy mumbles. "I need to talk to Blue. She needs to decide whether it's time to hold a press conference and make an official statement. If she does, I'm going to need both of you to be present..."

Snow winces. "I don't do press conferences," she is quick to reply.

"You need to be there," Jiminy frowns.

Snow is shaking her head fast.

"No," David argues. "Are we going to be taking questions? I highly doubt it. It's just for show anyway, I'll be there and you can ask Grumpy or somebody else from this department to join me..."

Snow turns to look at him surprised, grateful for the support.

Jiminy glares at both of them. Whenever he tries to partner up anyone with Snow White they always show up the very next day, begging to be reassigned. She is too bossy, she doesn't share information, she has too many rules. And yet here is Lieutenant Nolan, after surviving his first day with her, actually agreeing with her, supporting her? What is she up to? He vows to double check every step Snow takes in the near future, because Lieutenant Nolan might need to be protected. What sort of investigator is he if he doesn't recognize imminent danger?

"Fine, I'll talk to Blue," Jiminy motions both of them to get out.

"Ready to go?" David asks Snow as soon as they are out of Jiminy's office.

Snow nods.

They head downstairs in a hurry. Lieutenant Nolan throws a magic bean on the ground. Once the fog clears up they see a gilded gate next to a lush green hedge. King George's summer estates. They are both surprised to see that the summer estates look closed, the gates are locked. There are no servants around, just an older groundskeeper who doesn't seem to remember much.

"The Queen?" the groundskeeper asks, after it takes him five minutes to find the right key to unlock the front gate to let them in. He motions them to talk louder. "The Queen died years ago, she rests in the royal cemetery..."

He seems to be referring to King George's late wife.

"No, we are talking about Queen Regina!" Lieutenant Nolan tries again. "From the Northern Kingdom!"

"Who? You are going to have to speak up..."

Snow pulls out her magic mirror and shows him a current picture of Regina.

"This Queen!" she says loudly. "Was this Queen here?"

The man squints. " Oh you have on of them modern magic mirrors," the old man mumbles. "Can't
really say I care for such contraptions, myself. They are a terrible nuisance. Besides, I can't really see her without my glasses," he mumbles. "Now where did I leave my glasses?"

"Is there anyone else on the grounds? Someone we can talk to?" Lieutenant Nolan tries again quite loudly.

"No need to shout boy, I can hear you," the man glares at David.

"Well, is there?"

"What was that? you are going to have to speak up..."

If the fate of the kingdoms didn't depend on them finding Queen Regina as soon as possible then this conversation would be almost funny, David thinks.

Snow points to the side door of the estate.

"Thank you so much for your time," she yells loudly at the man and then she heads out of the front gate. David follows her.

"I'll check to see if there are any cameras, you watch him closely. As soon as he is gone we can sneak inside and take a look," Snow whispers. Lieutenant Nolan hesitates.

"This is an official investigation, we can't be sneaking around," he tries to say.

Snow glances at Lieutenant Nolan. He is wearing a black doublet today, leather pants, sword and daggers strapped to his belt, his boots polished, his face perfectly shaved. A perfect White Knight. She is not surprised he is against breaking the rules.

"Suit yourself Lieutenant," she shrugs. "I'll do it, you don't need to get your hands dirty..."

"No," he rushes to reply. "If you are doing this I'm in..."

While David is busy following the groundskeeper Snow extends her finger. A bluebird flies right at her, perching on her hand.

"Has anyone been here the last few days?" Snow asks and she tilts her head listening closely for the birds answer.

"He is gone," David says and Snow looks up at him startled. The bluebird is still on her hand. She looks uneasy. She braces herself for the inevitable comment. She should be used to it by now. Knight force officers usually give her that look that says 'that's why you are an amazing investigator. You get the birds to spy on everyone for you!' As if she is cheating, using her ability to her advantage, when she is solving crimes. Or they actually say something like 'You can't listen to birds, their information is unreliable.'

But Lieutenant Nolan doesn't say either of those things.

"You talk to birds!" he whispers instead, looking quite amazed.

"Everybody talks to birds," Snow replies dismissively, trying to change the subject.

"Yes, everyone talks to birds, when they use them to send messages and notes, but you actually hear them talk back, don't you?"

"Maybe," Snow avoids his eyes.
That's amazing! What did the bird say?

Well, that's a first, Snow thinks. Because knight force officers never give any credence to anything she has heard from birds. In fact she never even offers that information.

She says the king hasn't been here for many days," Snow replies.

"Can you ask the birds to help you locate the Queen?"

And when Snow doesn't answer right away he smiles. "You already did, didn't you?"

Snow nods.

"And? No leads?"

"Nothing yet. Is the groundskeeper busy?" Snow asks.

David nods. "He is trimming a hedge by the water fountain."

"Alright," Snow whispers. "It's a perfect opportunity to sneak in."

"Are you sure that's a good plan?" he asks again. "Breaking and entering into royal property?"

"Do you have any better ideas?" she asks.

He shakes his head.

"You can stay here if you like, you don't have to do anything illegal..."

"No!" she is surprised by his firm reaction. "I'm coming with you!"

Snow rushes back inside, David in tow.

She pulls two small metal bars from her pocket and works fast on the lock of the side door. It's a basic lock. In just three quick moves the door is open and they are inside.

"Impressive," David remarks, "but if we had used a magic bean it would have been impossible to tell we entered at all..."

Snow turns to look at him, eyes wide open in disbelief. "Seriously? Do you use the beans for everything? Do you use the magic beans when you are in your kitchen and don't want to walk to your bedroom?"

He laughs. "Maybe."

Snow shakes her head and then she observes her surroundings. They snuck in through the servant's entry. The room looks dusty and untouched. Nobody has been here for a while. They step further inside. Past the servant's quarters on the main room the chairs are draped with a heavy white cloth, the tables are covered in a thick layer of dust.

"It doesn't look like anyone's been here for months," David runs his finger across a side table, then wipes the dust off his hand. "There is no way that King George and Queen Regina met here..."

"We better get out of here," Snow mumbles.

"Why? What's wrong?"
"This feels like a trap," she whispers turning around.

They are about to sneak out the same way they got in. David hasn't taken more than half a step out the door when Snow yells "Watch out!"

David ducks as a shovel almost smashes his head.

The groundskeeper, shovel in hand swings at him again.

"Thieves!" he yells. "Trespassers! Thieves!"

"Stop it! You stop that right now! This is an official investigation!" Snow tries to say but the old man isn't listening. He doesn't even look at her.

David is about to pull out his badge, but the man isn't wearing his glasses, so what's the point? He is going to pummel them to death before he hears what they have to say.

"Let's just go," Snow pulls Lieutenant Nolan out of the man's reach. Once they are around the corner she yells "Bean!"

David tosses the magic bean on the ground.

"Headquarters!" he says and they are both gone.

Snow and David are leaning against the wall, breathless.

"What was that?" Snow manages. "He can't see, he can't hear but he has no problem attacking full force..."

David shakes his head. "The king knew what he was doing when he let him guard the place!"

"Well," Snow says "I suppose we already knew that the king was lying..."

"We need to question him again," David replies.

"Right..." Snow is looking doubtful. "I don't think he is going to give us a different answer, David!"

"He has to. We have evidence now..."

"Do we have evidence? What are we going to say? Based on the layers of dust on the coffee table on your summer estate, where we trespassed without a warrant, and information we got from red robins, you lied to us?"

"It was a bluebird and yes. We won't phrase it like that, but yes. Based on the evidence, no one has been in the summer estate for months..."

"Yes and then the king is going to say 'what evidence boy? You are overstepping, you keep this up you will be filing for unemployment by the end of the day...-' Snow manages a rather good impersonation of the king's voice.

David half glares at her. "What's your plan then?"

Snow is about to respond when her magic mirror rings.

"Can I see you two in my office?" Jiminy practically shouts at her. "Right now!"
Snow's never heard Jiminy sound this tense before.

The moment Snow and David walk inside Jiminy's office they know this is really serious.

The Blue Fairy is standing there behind Jiminy's desk, her arms crossed, tapping her foot impatiently on the ground. Jiminy is in cricket form. That's never a good sign. Snow knows he has a hard time staying in human form whenever he is angry.

"Do you want to tell me what just happened?" Blue asks.

"Nothing much to report Ma'am. We need to question king George again..." Lieutenant Nolan answers first.

"No!" Blue is now openly glaring at them. "I'm afraid I can't let you do that!"

"Why not?" Snow asks. "The king lied to our face when we interviewed him yesterday...we need to ask him more questions..."

"And if you hadn't done this I'd agree with you wholeheartedly..." Blue turns the screen of the large magic mirror on Jiminy's desk towards them so they can both see.

And there they are, clear as day, sneaking out of king George's estate while the old man attacks them with a shovel. And they look startled and ridiculous and it's the sort of video that the royal news channels will play on a loop from this day forward until the end of time or until they die, whichever takes longer. The sort of footage they will never live down.

David groans. "Where did you get this?" he asks. "There were no secret cameras on the side entry, I checked!"

"A concerned bystander!" Jiminy scoffs.

"I just got a message from King George saying he has instructed his people not to release this footage but if you ever use the tone you used with him again, this will be on the morning news. Along with a lawsuit on our department for illegally trespassing on royal grounds..." Blue explains.

"It was all a trap wasn't it?" Snow says eyes wide open. "That's why he sent us to the summer estates..."

"It appears so. Why were you trespassing anyway?" Jiminy asks blinking his large black eyes. "Do you have any idea how embarrassing this footage is for the department?"

"Never mind that," Blue interrupts. "If you are going to break the rules, you need to not get caught. I can't have my people doing this sort of thing...Now the King has the upper hand!"

"No!" David shakes his head decisively. "You can't go along with what the king says. King George is clearly involved in the disappearance of the Queen. Either way he'll find a way to leak this to the press. So, let him publish the video. I'll take the blame for the trespassing. It is my case, I broke the rules, I'll deal with the consequences. You can take me off the case, suspend me, do whatever you have to do... We are on the right track. Just send someone else to question the king. Now that we have ample evidence that he lied..."

"What?" Snow glares at David. "I'm not letting you take the blame for this!"

Jiminy watches Snow stunned. Snow's partner just offered to take the fall and walk away from the case and she actually looks angry and upset that he is about to leave? What upside down alternate
"We will do no such thing," Blue intervenes. "I want you both on the case. I will handle King George, my way. I appreciate your offer Lieutenant, but I do not need you falling on your sword. Not now, not ever. What I need you to do is find the Queen. You will both remain on the case. And you will be smarter about this. Assume that everyone is out to get you, cover your tracks. Let the king think he won for now. Get me more evidence that he is behind this and I will arrest him myself...Also I will be giving a statement to the press regarding the Queen's disappearance in about thirty minutes. I trust that both of you will be long gone from the building before I do..."

Both Snow and David are looking at Blue surprised. Neither of them expected this.

"What are you waiting for? Go!" Jiminy points to the door.

The moment Lieutenant Nolan steps out of Jiminy's office, Snow turns to look at him.

"Can I speak with you in private for a minute Lieutenant?" her voice is calm. Too calm.

David follows her into their office. She shuts the door behind them.

"What was that?" she hisses at him.

"What?" he asks.

"I'll take the blame for the trespassing, it's my case, I broke the rules..." she says doing a pretty good impression of his voice. "I am not a damsel in distress Lieutenant. I do not need you to take the blame for me, I do not need you to defend me. I am a grown woman responsible for my actions...I do not need a big strong man to come rescue me..."

"What? A damsel in a big strong what? What are you talking about? That's not what I was doing at all..." he sounds so defensive.

"Really?" Snow leans on the wall and crosses her arms. "Do tell. What were you doing?"

David searches his brain for an adequate question. What was he doing? Why did he just do that? It was instinct, he realizes. She might not need to be protected, but his instinct was to jump upfront and protect her anyway. Why, why did he feel the need to save her? His mind wanders to the footage he watched last night, Snow's face when she walked away from the throne. When she was surrounded by reporters, following her every move, asking the same questions over and over. He watched hours of footage last night, all of it the same thing. Reporters stalking Snow White.

"Look, we messed up, alright? We both messed up. But I'm not famous. Nobody cares if I almost got hit in the head with a shovel by a blind groundskeeper. Nobody cares if I get suspended or even if spend a night in jail. But you... your stepmother is the Queen and she is missing. And you have a child. Once the news about the missing Queen hit the media circuit you'll have reporters on your front step, dredging up old stories, asking for a statement. It's not fair that you'll have to deal with that. You don't need that. Your daughter doesn't need that. And you definitely do not need to get blamed for what happened in the summer estates. We don't both need to go down for this..."

Snow's expression softens for a minute.

"But I'm a private investigator," she replies. "My career will not be over just because I bent the rules. In fact a little notoriety might be good for business. My clients hope that I will break the rules to solve their cases. You, on the other hand, are in the knight force. If they don't suspend you right away, they are going to stick you in pumpkin parking enforcement or I don't know, behind a
desk in the basement, filling paperwork for troll toll service permits for the rest of your life. The king already threatened to fire you. If you lose your job what will you do next?"

"I always wanted to try my hand at gardening," he mumbles half jokingly.

"Are you going to grow turnips?" she asks, not at all convinced by his response.

"Maybe," he shrugs, half smiling.

"Like I said. I don't need you to protect me or take the blame for me. Especially since what happened was mainly my fault..." And then she looks at the cuckoo clock on the wall. "The press conference. What time is it? I should check on Emma...I need to warn Ruby!" She looks panicked.

"Let's go," he offers a magic bean quietly and she doesn't argue.

"Can we use the magic bean in here?" she asks. Because out the window she can sees reporters already lining up, waiting for Blue's official statement. She can't walk out of the building now, not without being seen.

"If we are very careful," he replies. He drops the bean on the ground and they both disappear together.

Everything is quite around Snow's cottage. Everything is peaceful. No signs of any reporters yet.

Snow rushes up her porch steps and walks in her living room.

"Mom!" Emma smiles delighted. "David! You are back..."

"I'm hear for just for ten minutes baby, I need to talk to Ruby..."

"Do you have time to play a game? Do you play scrabble?" Emma turns to David.

"I'd love to but I don't know if we have enough time," David is smiling.

"Just a few words!" Emma claps her hands all excited.

"You don't have to..." Snow starts saying, thinking she should rescue the poor man from Emma, but she doesn't bother finish her sentence. Lieutenant Nolan is looking genuinely happy, eager and willing to play with her.

Snow follows that vague smell of burned food into the kitchen.

"Come on," Emma says and before he quite realizes what is going on, she is pulling him by the hand towards the table. She pulls out a magic wand from her back pocket she waves it around and the board game appears on the table, magically handing each of them seven tiles pieces.

"You have magic!" David says his eyes wide open.

"I do. I go to Fairy School," Emma smiles. "Do you want to play regular scrabble or magical scrabble?"

"What's the difference?" David is looking confused.

"Magical scrabble is when you get to include all the magical sounds. Like 'Kapow!' or 'booom!' or 'swoosh!' All those words count..." Emma replies brightly. "Magical scrabble is better..."
"We are definitely playing magical scrabble," he stifles smile.

"Does my Mom like you yet?" Emma asks quietly, rearranging her letters.

He looks up surprised. "It's hard to tell," he shrugs. "Not too much."

"Well, she likes working alone...but don't worry I'll help you out. Will you come to my birthday?" Emma asks while arranging the word 'kablow' on the board.

He watches her bounce on her chair, bubbling up with excitement.

"When is your birthday?"

"Next month!" Emma smiles. She looks so hopeful. How can he possibly say no?

"I'd love to, if it's alright with your Mom," he replies.

"Pinky promise?"

He laughs. "Pinky promise," offering his finger. "How old are you going to be?"

"I'm going to be ten!" she replies and then she adds the word 'poof' on the board.

"That is a great sound," David is biting his lip trying not to laugh.

And then Snow steps out of the kitchen. She hands Emma a plate full of spaghetti with meat sauce, the meat sauce only looking partially charred. Emma waves her wand and the food on her plate no longer looks burned.

"No magic wands at the table," Snow says and Emma reluctantly hands over her her wand.

David is busy adding the word "swish' on the board.

"Is that a magical sound?" Emma frowns.

"Definitely magical," David replies. "It's the sound my sword makes when I...-

"Lieutenant Nolan!" Snow glares at him.

"When I flourish it," he continues undaunted. "What did you think I was going to say?"

"I don't know," Snow replies.

Emma places the word 'splooshy,' to the board.

"Mom!" Emma states quite seriously. "David is my friend. He is coming to my Birthday party. Which means you have to be nice to him, you can't lock him up in the basement like that other partner you thought would mess up your case..."

Snow is doing her best to avoid Lieutenant Nolan's stunned look.

"Oh, okay," she sighs, "would you like some dinner David?"

"No thank you, and did you really lock a partner in the basement?" he asks.

"Allegedly," Snow shrugs. "No charges were filed, just an official complaint..."
Emma is the clear winner of the game. Snow kisses her. "Good job, sweet girl. Now eat your dinner."

"Oh, do I have to?"

"At least three bites. And listen, I just talked to auntie Ruby about this. If anyone shows up at the door, asking questions...you do not open the door. For anyone. You let Auntie Ruby handle it. And depending on how things turn out, we might have to spend a couple of nights at her house...you don't mind, do you?"

"A sleepover with Auntie Ruby? Yay!"

Emma doesn't mind at all.

"Just promise me you will listen to Auntie Ruby, because I'm going to go back to work..."

"I promise..." Emma is looking so excited.

As if on cue Ruby steps out of the kitchen. "Snow, you are still here. Hi David!"

"Hello!"

"How is the partnership going?" Ruby asks a mischievous smile on her face. "You are not going to lock him in the basement like that other guy, are you Snow?"

Snow throws her arms up in the air. "Come on...he was going to blow the whole investigation, I had to do something..."

"Allegedly," David replies dryly and Ruby laughs.

"Let's go," Snow mumbles and heads out the door.

David expects Emma to pout or whine more, but she doesn't. She hugs and kisses her mother and then she walks over and throws her arms around him. "Goodbye David," she says quite seriously.

He looks surprised. He reluctantly places his hand on her back. "Goodbye, Emma."

"Don't worry, now that we are friends she will be nice to you," she whispers then she sits back at the table and places a forkful of spaghetti in her mouth.

The moment they step outside Snow realizes she is still holding on to Emma's magic wand. "Hold on, I can't take this with me, Emma needs that for school tomorrow" she mumbles and she rushes back to the house.

"So your daughter has magic," David says, when Snow gets back.

"Yes, she does," she replies and she braces herself for the inevitable question about Emma's father. How does Emma have magic? Was her father a fairy or a wizard?

"She is so bright," David says instead. "You must be so proud of her..."

Snow's smiles. "She is the light of my life," she replies. "Having said that, you are not obligated to come to her birthday party next month..."

"I don't know, I think pinky promises might be legally binding," he grins, "unless you'd rather I didn't..."
"Oh, it's fine... you are welcome to come..." she shrugs. "Shall we head out?"

But then the beeping on her magic mirror stops her. It's a news notification. Blue is about to make a statement to the press.

Snow and David both watch the magic mirror intently.

Blue is surrounded by so many reporters. She stands still, looking at every single one of them.

"The chief of knight force has a brief statement to make," Grumpy announces. "She will not be taking any questions at this time..."

"As of yesterday morning, Queen Regina of the Northern Kingdom, went missing on her way from a meeting with King George of the Southern kingdom. We are using all our resources to find her and have no doubt that she will soon return to us. If anyone has any information we are setting up a hotline..."

"No, not a hotline," Snow groans as she watches Blue's statement on her magic mirror. "Now we will be flooded with worthless tips..."

David doesn't reply. He is staring at the end of the road. There is a news van approaching, no, two news vans approaching.

"Snow?" he says. "Let's get back to your house. Now! Come on!"

"Oh, no," Snow gasps. "How did they get here so fast?"

They rush into the house and shut the door behind them.

Emma is still eating her spaghetti while Ruby is sitting across from her. It must be Ruby's turn to play magical scrabble.

"Emma, sweetheart, we should probably grab a couple of things, your pajamas and your clothes for tomorrow, your backpack for school, we really should get out of here," Snow hesitates, regret filling her voice.

She can just picture reporters camping in the clearing in front of her house for weeks.

She doesn't want to disrupt Emma's life, she doesn't want her girl questioned by reporters, her every move scrutinized.

"Wait, I might have a solution for this," David interrupts.

"What sort of solution? Don't tell me to make a public statement because I won't!" Snow crosses her arms.

"No, of course not!" he replies. "I know a girl, a fairy to be exact, who is really good at making locations practically invisible."

"Invisible? Like a hidden location spell?"

He nods.

"Oh, those are expansive, I can't possibly afford that!" Snow sighs.

"She won't charge you. Hold on."
He pulls out his magic mirror.

"Hello Tink?" he says quietly. "I need a quick favor...Yes, a quick location spell. As soon as possible. Yes please. I'll send you the coordinance. Thank you!"

He turns to Snow and smiles brightly. "She is on it. This shouldn't take more than a minute..."

Snow's eyes open wide. It can't possibly be that easy. She walks over to the window hesitantly and she is surprised to see the news vans already turning away.

"That's incredible!" she gasps. "How did she do that? I don't know how to thank you!"

"It's nothing," he shrugs. "Tink is the best..."

Back at the Knight force head quarters, once the press conference has concluded and there are no more reporters around, Snow and David are staring in their office, in front of the whiteboard where he has drawn a timeline of known events since Regina's disappearance.

"We are back at square one," he says, because they've been investigating for two days, and they don't have much to show for it.

"Yep," Snow mumbles, tilting her head, looking closer at the whiteboard. "We are back at the beginning."
Snow is tossing and turning in her sleep.

Regina approaches in her shimmering purple gown staring down at her. "There is no place in the royal family for a baby whose origins are unknown," she explains. "Surely you see that, Snow White, you have to let her go. There are so many couples in the world who would love and take care of her as if she was their own. This baby needs a father, we'll give the baby to the fairies, surely they will know what to do..."

"No," Snow cries in her sleep. "This baby is mine..."

"Be reasonable Snow White... How will you run the kingdom? How will you ever get married to a royal if you already have a child? You are a royal, a future queen, you can't just do whatever you want..."

"Then maybe I don't want to be a royal anymore," Snow replies.

"You don't mean that! What would your father say if he was here..."

"Please leave him out of this..."

"You know I'm right...You can't just run away from the kingdom..."

"No!" Snow is screaming in her sleep.

"Mom! Mommy, are you alright?"

"Emma?" Snow opens her eyes her heart is still beating fast. "Emma, baby, what's wrong?"

"You are screaming in your sleep, Mom, are you okay?"

Snow is breathing fast, trying to look calm, she doesn't want to scare Emma. "I'm sorry I woke you up sweetheart, I just had a bad dream... everything is fine baby..." Snow smiles.

"Can I lay down with you?"

"Of course," Snow moves over, making room for her little girl.

Emma climbs on Snow's bed and closes her eyes. She falls asleep right away. Snow's pillow is now covered in blond curls. Snow gets up quietly and lights a candle to drive the bad dreams away. She places it on her nightstand. One more habit she picked up from her year of missing memories. She watches Emma's face in the flickering light of the candle.

"Can you imagine that she wanted me to give you up?" she says softly. "My sweet sweet girl..."

This case is stirring up too many memories.

She watches the candle melt away slowly. She doesn't remember anything about the year she went missing. But she does know one thing. There was a lot of love in that missing year. Enough love that she came back to the castle strong and determined to keep her baby no matter the cost. Strong enough that she gave up her claim to the throne to be with Emma. She looks at the dripping wax and wonders if Emma's father is somewhere out there, lighting candles to keep his nightmares at bay, missing a year of memories as well.
David blows the candles one by one in his apartment. He is having a hard time sleeping tonight. Something about the new case, something about the little blond girl he met two days ago, something about her mother. He looks at his magic mirror. Snow White face is on the glass, from when he questioned her, on their very first day working together.

"I don't think I could have been much of a queen anyway...not really cut out for it..."

She looked so sad when she said that.

He often thinks she is about to cry but then she never does.

He puts the magic mirror down decisively, blows out the last candle. He is going to stop obsessing about his new case and get some rest.

Snow is still asleep when Emma shakes her.

"Mom! Mom! David is here!"

"What? Why?" Snow mumbles trying to sit up. The cuckoo clock says it is half past seven. "What is he doing here so early?" Snow asks not really expecting a response.

Why is he here? Showing up at her house isn't something Lieutenant Nolan would do, is it? Not unless it was some sort of emergency. Snow washes her face in a hurry, throws on a white shirt and a pair of leather pants, pulls on her boots and she walks out of her bedroom.

Nova is already in the living room, using her wand to pour cereal in Emma's bowl.

"Do you like 'Lucky charms' David?" Emma asks.

"Love them," he replies smiling at the little girl. He is about to say something else but he doesn't get to, because Snow White steps out of her bedroom, and her hair is down, soft curls framing her face, she didn't have a chance to pull it back, her cheeks rosy from sleeping, her eyes are still piercing green and he finds that whatever he meant to say couldn't have been that important, because he can't quite remember it.

Nova shakes her wand and a cup of steaming coffee, materializes in Snow's hand.

"Thank you!" she tells Nova, "you are a lifesaver," and then she walks over to him.

"What's up Lieutenant? I thought we were going to the Queen's castle at nine..."

"We need to talk...Remember the hotline Blue set up, so the public could offer any information? My people intercepted an anonymous tip this morning...-" he starts.

"Intercepted, huh?" Snow sips her coffee, not sounding convinced at all. "And it couldn't wait till nine? Please tell me you knocked on my door and didn't just materialize in my living room..."

"Of course I knocked, I would never..." he frowns.

"Relax Lieutenant, I'm just teasing," Snow mumbles taking another sip of coffee.

Did he really have to show up to her house first thing in the morning with his polished boots and his perfect light armor and his blue eyes, she catches herself thinking and dismisses the thought outright. No. No, no, no. She is not going to go there.

"Care for some coffee?" she asks glancing at Nova. Hopefully Nova will magic him a cup too,
because her coffee pot is somewhere in the back of her cupboard, she hasn't used in a very long time.

"No, thank you. Listen this is urgent..."

"What's so urgent about it," she mumbles, trying to stifle a yawn.

Lieutenant Nolan doesn't reply. He just pulls out his magic mirror and shows her an address.

Snow freezes in place. She doesn't say a word, she just nods. She rushes back to her room and hangs her daggers on her belt then she rushes back out. "Emma, sweetie, I have to go, I'll see you later, please behave today..." She walks to her daughter, offers a quick hug and a kiss. Then she takes a step back and then without realizing she is doing it she searches her daughter's face, her eyes wistful.

"Mom? Mom? Why are you looking at me funny?" Emma asks.

"I'm not..." Snow smiles, touching the girl's nose playfully. She turns around and walks over to David. "Lead the way," she says firmly.

As soon as they step out of Snow's cottage, David drops the magic bean to the ground and they are gone.

It takes them a few seconds to arrive on location. It's a small cabin, covered by overgrown ivy in the heart of the Enchanted forest, away from the beaten path. In fact if you didn't know it was here, you'd probably walk right past it. That's how small it is. Wild mint is growing all around the cabin, scenting the air.

"An anonymous tip," Snow says, her eyes focused in the small building. "What did the tip say?" she asks, her voice steady, calm.

David observes her face closely. "Apparently someone called in saying there was a disturbance, possible violence, two women screaming..."

"Really?" Snow rolls her eyes. "A concerned neighbor?" she scoffs, because there is no one around but trees for a mile.

Snow looks at the small house, almost longingly. She walks to the front door. She touches the grain of the wood first, a gentle caress, then she tugs on the knob decisively and opens the door.

She gasps at the strong smell of blood assaulting her senses.

There is a lot of blood inside. It looks like someone managed to spray blood in every available surface of the cabin. Snow looks at the small table, the two chairs, the wood burning stove, the narrow bed in the corner, now marred with blood. She doesn't walk inside right away. She stays at the threshold.

Lieutenant Nolan is watching her, rather than looking at the actual crime scene.

Snow sighs. "Whoever staged this didn't know the first thing about crime scenes," she mumbles because there is no way for blood to splatter this way in an actual attack.

"Right."

"If this is Regina's blood then there is no way she is still alive, no one could lose this much blood
"I doubt that it's even human blood," he replies quietly and when she raises her eyebrows questioningly he shrugs. "I grew up in a farm..."

"So, someone slaughtered what, an animal in here, and sprayed blood on all the walls?" she says looking at the red liquid closely.

"That'd be my best guess too," he replies pointing to the blood pooling under the table. He then pulls out his magic mirror. "This house is registered to...-"

"Mary Margaret Blanchard and James Charming," she interrupts. "Don't bother looking them up, they don't exist. The cabin was purchased with golden coins eleven years ago, by a young couple who gave false identification to the old lady who sold it to them..."

"Blanchard..." he says quietly. "White."

"Yes," she replies. "Blanchard. White. It's my cabin. Don't ask me who Charming is, I have no idea, I can't remember. I was found here, right after I gave birth to Emma with my memories already wiped. I came back looking for answers, but the old lady that sold us the house had died from accidentally ingesting poisoned mushrooms. Hard to believe since she was an expert botanist..." she pauses and looks around. "Someone has gone to great lengths to make me look guilty for Regina's disappearance. Make it look like I'm out for revenge... Make it look like I lured her here and killed her on the very spot where they found me... But you already knew all this, didn't you? You've already been here. The only reason I'm here is because you wanted to see my reaction..."

She doesn't sound angry or even annoyed. She is looking at the blood covering her cabin, feeling like she might throw up. This can't be happening, she thinks. Even if this is a staged crime scene, it makes her look so bad.

"The reason you are here is because I don't appreciate my partner being framed," he replies, his voice firm. "And I want to give you a chance to decide how you want this handled..."

Snow turns to look at him surprised. "How long do we have?" she asks. "Before knight force comes to check on the tip?"

"What tip? he shrugs. "I might have accidentally erased it from the records..."

Snow turns to him, her eyebrows raised. She looks at him from top to bottom, the clean shaven face, the light armor doublet, the sword, no doubt sharpened and polished, the daggers, the spotless boots. Somehow she expected him to be more rigid. More by the book. She didn't see this coming.

"Are you sure about this?" she asks. "If we find evidence of who is trying to frame me, we might need that in the investigation..."

"Yes. We might. But in the mean time what we don't need is reporters coming here, dragging your name through the mud, bringing up your past, questioning your motives or your participation in this investigation. We follow this lead on our own and if anything important turns up, then we call in a tip ourselves..."

Again Snow looks at him surprised. She blinks a couple of times.

"Do you disagree with my approach?" he asks.
She shakes her head. Disagree? No in fact she is feeling really grateful at the moment.

"Let's do this your way," she says quietly. And for the first time since the beginning of the investigation, she doesn't look one hundred percent sure of herself. "I...I'm going to check the perimeter first..." she steps outside in a hurry.

His first urge is to follow her. He doesn't. He walks around examining the room carefully. Such a small room.

There are old scuff marks all around the floor, and scrapes, evidence of a struggle. A couple of marks on the wall too. By the looks of it, a long time ago, probably around the time Mary Margaret Blanchard and James Charming lived here, someone had an intense sword fight in this very room. Someone fought desperately. Whoever he or she was they must have lost, David thinks looking at the spot where he thinks the swordfighter crushed to the floor, his sword leaving a rather large scratch on the floor planks.

He walks over to the bed. There's a carving of small snowflake inside a heart on the bed post. Something a lover might do, for fun...he traces the heart with his finger. All of a sudden he feels like an uninvited intruder in Snow's forgotten past. He shouldn't be here. Not alone anyway.

He steps outside. He finds Snow squatting on the ground.

"Did you find something?" he asks. She seems lost in her thoughts. "Snow?" he tries again.

She shakes her head. "Nothing... There are some cart tracks but they are too old..." she points to the ground. "This is a dead end...Whoever did this came here on foot."

He pulls out a mirror and takes a picture of the faded tracks, just in case.

"Do you want to look inside?" he asks. "Rule number one..."

Snow gets up and walks inside without a word. The house is the same, always the same. The bed, the stove, the table. The floor with the clear signs of struggle.

She's spent countless hours staring at these walls, looking for answers. Why should today be any different? There's still the carving of the small heart on the bedpost, the only clue she left in place. The single red candle on the table. Snow shakes her head.

How do you get used to loss, the kind of loss that gnaws at you, tears you up on the inside...how do you grieve that which you don't remember...

All the walls are bare except for the wall behind the table.

"This wall has been plastered," David observes.

"Yes. I did that, years ago" Snow replies, her voice tired.

"Yes. I did that, years ago" Snow replies, her voice tired.

Why he wants to ask. Why plaster just one wall...what was on that wall? He waits for Snow to search for clues, he waits for her to discover something, anything, but she just glances around, a glazed look in her eyes. She already knows every inch of this space by heart, he realizes. She is done. She already knows there are no more answers here...

"Shall we go?" he asks.

Snow lets out a small breath she'd been holding in. She looks relieved, he is not asking her any
more questions. "Let's go," she replies.

He is ready to throw a bean on the ground and head back to knight force headquarters but Snow whistles. A bluebird perches on her finger.

"Who did this?" she asks very quietly.

The bluebird chirps a couple of times and flies away. And Snow follows it. She is taking a non existent path away from the cabin.

There was blood, there was blood all over the walls and Snow needs to run, Snow needs to hide. There was blood all over the walls and she is walking fast, so fast, not fast enough. Snow needs to run, she needs to scream, Snow needs to punch something.

Where are we going, he wants to ask but he decides against it. If he walked into his old farm and saw blood all over the walls he'd probably be running too.

Snow is walking fast. She's almost forgotten he is there. There is a small fence on the right. She jumps over it and she keeps on going. She practically slides down a small hill and rushes into a pine forest. He has to run to catch up to her. She jumps over a couple of more fences then she crosses a small rickety bridge above a stream. Where is she going?

There is a valley on the left. A small farmhouse on the right and a pig pen. Lieutenant Nolan is now beginning to understand.

Snow climbs up on the pig pen's fence, sits, and places two fingers in her mouth. She whistles loudly.

A man walks over. The moment he sees Snow White sitting there he scratches his head.

"Snow White?" he asks hesitantly.

"Did you lose a bet Jack? Is there a reason why you are using my old cabin to slaughter your pigs?"

"Snow, I swear..."

Snow shakes her head. "Don't bother, your word mean nothing. You might as well come clean... Does Jill know what you've been up to?" she replies.

"You can't tell her, Snow please...I'm sorry, I just..."

"You just what?" she asks.

The man is looking down.

"Did someone pay you to mess up my place? Who hired you? "

"I don't know. They said if I splattered blood all over the walls of the old cottage they wouldn't break my legs, I owed them a bunch of money...I've had a string of bad luck Snow, but you know I have a feeling my luck is going to change..."

Snow shakes her head. "Luck doesn't change, Jack!" she replies. "What did they look like?" she asks.

"They looked like...I don't know, I was really drunk Snow, the whole night is a blur..."
Snow doesn't reply. She just glares at him.

"Snow, I'm telling you the truth..."

"Where? Where were you?" she asks.

"The burping pony..."

"Alright," Snow says jumping down from the fence. She is already walking away.

"Snow I'm sorry, I'll go clean it up, Snow..." the man offers.

Snow turns around and places her hand on her dagger.

"If you step your foot in my home again I will gut you!" she warns.

The man takes a step back. He looks at Lieutenant Nolan standing behind her, somehow expecting him to intervene. He is definitely a knight force officer, isn't he? Is he really going to let Snow White threaten him like that? David just stares back at him.

Snow walks away. Lieutenant Nolan rushes after her.

"My home..." She just slipped and called the cabin her home. She wasn't thinking straight of course, the sight of blood splattered all over the walls clouding her mind.

She didn't mean to overreact like this, not in front of the Lieutenant. She made a mistake. But maybe that's alright. He is already proven way more trustworthy than she anticipated. She should have send Jack back there to clean up his mess. It's only fair. It's just that she could't bear the thought of him back there defiling the old cabin with his filthy hands.

She should be using a bean to get to the burping pony, but she'd rather keep walking, she needs to clear her head.

Lieutenant Nolan is having a hard time following her. He should be asking her to slow down, but he doesn't.

His knee is beginning to hurt now. It's an old injury that he doesn't bother him much. It doesn't even slow him down. But he uses magic beans to travel, he doesn't usually choose to speed walk through the forest. If Snow White doesn't slow down, he is going to start limping, he is going to have to use his cane. Snow is crossing through fields and gardens, jumping fences, walking around barns, she doesn't spare him a glance, she doesn't see him struggling.

He is going to have to pull out his cane. He'd rather not, but he is not going to stop her, not now. Snow seems to know the place well. She makes a sharp turn to the left and he is relieved to see a small tavern with a rickety sign hanging up front. The burping pony. His knee is burning now.

Snow strides inside the tavern.

The moment the barkeep recognizes her, he is already on the defensive. He's dealt with Snow White before.

"I don't know anything. Whatever it is you are asking this time I do not know...go away..."

Snow glowers at him.

David leans heavily on the bar. He pulls out his magic mirror.
"Let's see," he mumbles, "'the burping pony...' there it is. You have a fine establishment here. Unfortunately looks like your licence expired last year, you owe some taxes... Also this counter is disgusting, your employee, is that your nephew? He is way too young to work in a place that serves alcohol... plus I'm counting five code violations, your bathroom is definitely not accessible to people with disabilities... I figure we are going to have to shut you down until you can bring everything up to code. Of course your contractor will need to be licensed and bonded... what do you think Snow? Six months?"

"Give or take," she plays along. "Maybe a year..."

"You brought knight force to my tavern?" the barkeep glares at her. "What do you want?"

"He is my new partner," Snow shrugs. "Answer my questions and I'll leave you alone. The other night, Jack lost a bunch of money. Who was he playing with?"

"You can't be serious Snow White! Jack loses money here every night! How am I supposed to keep track of who he loses his money to?"

"They were from out of town!" Snow replies.

"Fine. Maybe I saw them... I don't know, they were pirates... a guy with an eye patch, a guy with a peg leg and a guy...-"

Snow rolls her eyes. "A guy with a parrot?"

"I'm not lying. No, the third guy had a hook."

This could be something. "A hook?" Snow wants to make sure she heard correctly.

"That's right, a hook," the barkeep replies impatiently.

"Alright," she replies. "But if I find out that you lied to me..."

"I'm not lying..." the man replies eyeing Lieutenant Nolan all nervous.

"We appreciate the help. Here is my magic mirror number if you remember anything else..." David hands him a card.

The man looks at the card with obvious disgust on his face. No doubt he means to throw it away the moment they step out of his tavern. He has no intention on ever contacting them.

Snow is ready to head out. She turns to say something and then she notes the Lieutenant has pulled out what at first glance looked like a dagger and is unfolding it. It's a cane. Lieutenant Nolan is using a cane. She tries not to stare, tries not to look horrified. How did she miss that? She thought that it was just another dagger strapped onto his sword belt. She just trekked through half the enchanted forest assuming he could keep up. This has been such a terrible draining day.

He catches the regret in her eyes. He should have pulled out his cane a lot sooner. If he keeps walking now his knee will most likely buckle. He needs to sit down, now. He picks a corner table.

"I don't know about you, but I could use a drink," he says before she gets a chance to comment. Because he'd rather say that, than admit he can't keep on walking.

Snow hesitates then she sits across from him. This goes against all rules and regulations she can think of, in any knight force, in any of the realms. But there was blood all over the walls and then
she made Lieutenant Nolan run after her through the whole Enchanted Forest, and now she is feeling guilty and awful and breaking all the rules seems like a great idea.

The barkeep stares at them incredulously. First they interrogate him then they stay for drinks? Really? Who does that? What sort of knight force investigators are they? He walks over to them slowly, staring at them.

"Anything I can get you?" he asks his voice dripping with disdain.

"Beer?" David asks looking at Snow.

"Yes. Only because it's way too early for something stronger," she shrugs shaking her head.

He smiles.

"I'm sorry I didn't realize...-" she starts saying and then her voice trails off.

"Just an old injury," he replies. "Now you know why I get unlimited magic beans..."

Snow looks away.

"I think the case is going great," she blurts out.

"Spectacular, really," he deadpans. "Always a great sign when I'm drinking on the job, and it's only day three..."

"Yeah," she laughs.

The barkeep brings them two beer mugs filled to the brim.

Snow takes a sip. "That's truly disgusting," she says putting her glass down. "We should shut him down for a whole year...that ought to teach him not to serve us the cheapest beer in the whole forest..."

"We should..." he replies.

"What are we going to do, David?" Snow mumbles.

"Oh, I don't know, solve the case, get fired, not necessarily in that order..."

She chuckles. "That sounds about right..."

He takes a large swig. "That is truly disgusting..." he agrees putting down his drink. He doesn't drink the rest.

"I appreciate what you did for me today..." a serious look on her face. "Giving me a head's up, letting me deal with this..."

"That was nothing..." he shrugs. "Don't mention it..."

"It means a lot..."

He nods. He wants to ask. He really wants to. He opens his mouth then he changes his mind.

"What is it?" she frowns.

He shakes his head.
She glares at him. "Out with it," she frowns.

"If we are going after pirates, if that's who is trying to frame you, then king George might no longer be our main suspect," he says.

"Right..." Snow watches him carefully. She kind of suspects what he is going to say next.

"It could be more personal. If... if you know where he is..." he hesitates.

"Where who is?" she asks, even though she knows exactly who he is talking about.

"James Charming?"

Snow looks down. Amazing after all these years how the mere mention of his name, that's not even his real name, affects her heart.

Snow raises her eyebrows "Are you the 'ex always did it' sort of investigator?"

"You may be in danger..."

"You think he'd try to hurt me? Try to frame me? Based on what? The neat little heart he carved on the bedpost?"

He hesitates. "How many people know the location of the cabin in the woods?" he asks.

He does have a point. As much publicity as her rescue got at the time, it was after the fact. The location wasn't publicized. The fact that the princess had given birth was so fascinating, everybody wanted a glimpse of her baby. Nobody cared about the exact location of the cabin in the woods.

"A few people," she shrugs. She looks lost in her thoughts. "Well, to answer your question, David, I really don't know who or where he is, I honestly don't have the faintest clue...I've spent years trying to figure that out" she replies. "If I knew...-"

"If you knew?"

"I wouldn't be here..." she replies.

He should drop it, he should drop it right now. But he really wants to know. He needs to know. Does she mean she wouldn't be an investigator? Does she mean she wouldn't be in the Northern Kingdom? Or is she saying she wouldn't be breaking the rules, drinking beer with him in this dirty tavern during work hours? What does she mean?

"Where would you be?" he asks softly.

She doesn't reply. She looks away, towards the direction of the small forgotten cabin in the forest, a sad half smile playing on her lips.

"Ready to go?" he asks.

She nods.

"Are we going after the pirate?"

"The barkeep said the third pirate had a hook. You know what that means..."

"Captain Hook," he nods.
"We are going to the Jolly Roger!"

"In that case," he replies, folding his cane, hanging it back on his swordbelt. "Never show weakness in front of pirates," he says. "My rule."

"Just pirates? Not villains in general?"

"I never liked pirates," he shrugs.

They step outside the tavern then he tosses a bean on the ground. A few minutes later they are boarding the Jolly Roger.

"Well, well, well," a very drunk Hook sits up on his cheap folding camping chair, pulling his feet off the blue cooler, places his rum bottle on the mesh drink holder and smiles at Snow. "What are you doing here pretty? Are you here for the cruise?" he is slurring his words.

There is a large banner hanging on the side of his ship.

Now offering trips to Neverland for spring break, 1/2 price for students

"Spring break?" David frowns. "That was months ago..."

"It's always spring break if you want to party mate," the pirate replies.

"Hook...I have a few questions for you," Snow interrupts.

"I'm doing well, thank you for asking, even though you brought knight force to my ship..." Hook glares at David.

"Captain Hook, this is Lieutenant Nolan my partner. Now, the other night you and your friends asked Jack to do something for you so you wouldn't break his legs..." Snow continues undaunted.

"Jack? Who is Jack? Is that name supposed to mean something to me? I know a lot of Jacks..."

"Jack. Jill's boyfriend. The one who loses his money and his pigs every night at 'the burping pony'"

"Oh, that guy...alright, what about him?"

Now that he is not using his cane, the Lieutenant's knee really hurts. He is losing his patience.

"Alright, here is the thing. You don't have a licence for the tours to Neverland you are offering...-"

"Oh no, I don't have a licence...the horror...will you write me up? Will I have to pay a fine?" Hook feigns being terrified. "Is he always this much fun?" Hook smiles turning to Snow. "Because if he is boring you I'd be happy to show you a good time..."

She rolls her eyes. "Does that line ever work?"

"You'd be surprised," the pirate winks at her.

"And I've gotten several tips that your whole operation is just a front to import dreamshade, from Neverland," David continues undaunted. "Dreamshade being the most popular drug at the moment...You seem to be doing really well. Are those new sails? Here is what I think. I could come back with a warrant and say, forty knights, and we could go through every inch of your ship, gathering evidence, take down your whole operation. We'll disassemble it if we have to. Or you could answer our questions and we can all go home..."
Hook is no longer smiling. "This is a witch hunt...an abuse of power, this is an outrage..."

"Indeed," David opens his magic mirror. "Should I call for a search warrant?" he turns to Snow.

"Absolutely," she plays along.

"Alright, alright," Hook seems willing to cooperate. "The strangest thing happened the other night. Two guys, came with me to the burping pony, disguised as pirates. They wanted to pretend to be part of my crew and play cards with Jack. I don't play with Jack. Playing with Jack is no different than stealing candy from a baby, it's almost bad form... But they paid well, so I made an exception..."

"How noble of you," Lieutenant Nolan replies. "Could you describe them?"

"They were older, dressed up like pirates, one of them was pretending to have a peg leg, trying to say 'Argh', and 'ahoy there matey,' looking ridiculous if you ask me. Very unconvincing. But old Jack was drunk, he didn't know the difference."

"You didn't really answer my question."

"They were in disguises, mate, did you miss that part? I don't know what they looked like..."

"You better give me something..." David is relentless.

"They were older, probably retired knights if you asked me, maybe even retired knight force..."

"Knight force from which kingdom?" David asks.

"If I had to guess I'd say White knights," the pirate shrugs.

"How could you tell?" Snow frowns.

"Oh, you know the type. They were standing around like him, like they own the place" the pirate points at Lieutenant Nolan. "Perfect postures, boots spit shined to perfection. Like they were born uptight..."

Snow stifles a smile, "Alright, that will be all..."

They get off the Jolly Roger. As soon as they are out of earshot Snow turns to David.

"We spent the day chasing our tails," she shrugs. "All this just to point back to King George with no credible evidence whatsoever..."

"Right," he sighs. "I don't know about you but I think I'm done for today...it's way too late to go to the Queen's castle now..."

She nods.

"Ready to go home?" he asks handing her a magic bean.

She is feeling exhausted. "Can we not start at the crack of dawn tomorrow? I mean, unless I'm being framed again..."

"Sure," he smiles.

"Good night, David!" Snow tosses her magic bean to the ground. "I want to go home," she
whispers.

David drops his magic bean next.

He walks in his apartment. He takes off his jacket, he takes off his sword belt. He sits on his couch, rubbing his knee absentmindedly, looking at the pictures he took of Snow's cabin in his magic mirror. His dog, Wilby, wags his tail and places his head on his lap.

"Am I working too much?" he asks, petting the dog. "We'll go for a walk in a minute boy, hold on..." he yawns. He is feeling drowsy. He doesn't mean to but he just drifts off to sleep right on the couch.

He must have been asleep for a while when his magic mirror rings.

"This is Nolan" he mumbles, barely awake.

"Do you want to come get your partner?" A loud voice on the other line. "She is tearing my place apart!"

"What? Who is this?" he mumbles rubbing his face with his hand, trying to wake up.

"This is Paul from the burping pony. Snow White is here, she got drunk and she picked a fight. She's beat two of my regulars and I am going to call knight force, I don't care who she is. I'm going to press charges and call the press..."

"Don't! Don't call anyone, I'll be right there," he cuts the bartender off.

He puts on his sword belt and pulls out his cane. He throws a magic bean on the ground.

As soon as the magic bean fog clears up, David rushes up the two steps into the burping pony.

The situation is a little worse than the barkeep described. Two men dazed and bloody stumble out of the tavern. David steps inside leaning heavily on his cane. Snow has a guy against the wall, he is already bleeding, she looks ready to punch him again and possibly break his nose.

"Hey," he says dropping his cane and rushing towards her. He pulls her back, his voice soft, soothing. "Let's not do that..."

Snow turns to look at him all furious, her fist still raised. For a second it looks like he is getting punched next, but she drops her hand on the last minute.

"It's you!" she says, her voice now soft, filled with wonder. "You...What are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" he counters. "I thought you were done for the night, I thought you were going home..."

"Apparently home is a relative term, David," she replies bitterly pulling out of his grasp. "At least where magic beans are concerned. Why are you here?"

"I got a call from our friend there," he says pointing to the barkeep. "He asked me to come get you..."

"You ratted me out? Oh, I ought to shut you down for a year..." Snow moves threateningly towards him. The man takes a step back looking horrified.

"Come on," the Lieutenant says in a reconciliatory tone. "Let's go outside, you could use some
"fresh air..."

"Fine," Snow straightens her shirt. "I'll have you know I'm not that drunk..."

"I can see that."

"What about my damages?" the barkeep turns to the Lieutenant as he bends over to pick up his cane from the ground.

David looks around at the broken mirror, the glass on the floor, the chairs, the upside down table. "I don't know, it looks better this way," he shrugs. "It's really opened up the space..."

The barkeep looks at him incredulously, but David is rushing after Snow.

Snow has been walking for a while. The night air feels good on her face. Once again he is struggling to keep up with her.

"I was going to go home," she turns around to face him. "I really was. I dropped the bean on the ground, I said I want to go home, but it didn't take me home. It took me to the old cabin instead...I think that magic bean might have been broken..."

He looks at her, eyes wide open.

"...so I thought I ought to clean up the blood off the walls just a little..." Snow continues. "It looked so creepy, there was so much blood, it got on my hands...I...I just couldn't do it...so..."

It was so strange being back there, looking at the walls covered up with blood, I felt like punching someone, so I came back here and picked a fight she means to say, but she doesn't.

He tries hard not to overreact. Not to look horrified at the thought of Snow alone, showing up at the old cabin, looking at all the blood on the walls.

"I am so sorry," he says. "The magic beans can be very temperamental...I should have told you... Sometimes they will take you to locations that you didn't mean to go. They lean on your emotions more than your words. Anyway. It helps if you think of a person rather than the location. Someone to anchor you. You could think of your daughter when you say you want to go home..."

"I could think of Emma," Snow mumbles wistfully. "Who do you think about when you want to go home?" she blurts out without really thinking.

"I think of Wilby," he replies.

She wouldn't be this nosy if she weren't drunk, but she is. "Who is Wilby?"

"My dog."

"Wilby is an excellent name for a dog," Snow slurs.

"Yes, anyway, let me try to make this up for you. I know a girl, a fairy to be exact. She will clean out the old cottage instantly, she will be in and out within minutes, she won't touch anything. It will be like none of this ever happened..."

Snow doesn't protest so he reaches for his magic mirror "Hey Tink? I need a favor, off the record. A friend was pranked. Not, it's not an actual crime scene, it is animal blood. I need you to make it all disappear without disturbing anything...I'll send you a location. That's right. Off the books. Thanks Tink, I owe you one."
"She'll get right on it. It will be spotless within the hour, I promise" he says quietly. "Tink is the best."

"Thank you..." Snow is sort of stumbling. She is looking exhausted.

"Shall we get you home?" he asks quietly.

"Yes please," she mumbles, leaning her head on his shoulder. "Why is the whole world spinning? I don't feel so good."

David places his arm around her waist and he tosses a magic bean on the ground and the next minute they are at Snow's front door.

Snow stumbles into her living room, and crashes on her couch.

"Hi Emma!" she smiles and she closes her eyes.

"Mom!" Emma yells all excited, but her mother is already asleep. "Is my Mom sick?" she asks David.

"No, she is really tired. She worked really hard today. You are not home alone are you?" he asks.

"No, Auntie Ruby burned some cupcakes and now she scrubbing the pan. Auntie Nova will magic it clean tomorrow. I used to clean up after her but I made the stove disappear once and Mom said I shouldn't do that anymore...anyway auntie Ruby thinks I'm in bed..."

"I see," he smiles.

"Do you want to play uno?" she asks excitedly.

"I should be heading home, and you should be in bed for real...don't you have school tomorrow?" he hesitates.

"Just one game of uno? Pretty please?"

He can't just say not to her, not when she is looking at him with those big green eyes.

"One game then you'll go to bed?"

Emma nods, smiling brightly. She knows she's already won.

"Oh, alright," he shrugs.

Emma sits on the rug in front of the fireplace. He struggles to lower himself on the ground.

"What's wrong with your leg?" she asks.

"I got hurt a long time ago," he replies.

"The fairies could fix that," Emma offers.

"They could," he replies.

Emma is using her magic wand to shuffle the cards.
"That's incredible," he smiles.

He is picking up four cards when Emma cries out "Uno!" loudly.

Snow's head jerks up. Her eyes open.

David throws his hands in the air in mock exasperation. "You win!"

"One more game?" Emma begs. "Just one more, pretty please, David?"

"But it's so late!" he protests looking at the cuckoo clock above the fireplace. "Didn't we agree to just one game?"

Snow, no longer sleeping watches her daughter who is pleading and David who is sitting on the floor across from Emma, trying to reason with her.

"Emma, let the Lieutenant go home," Snow says softly.

"Mom! You are awake?" Emma exclaims brightly, dropping the cards on the ground, running to her mother.

David gets ups slowly, and heads towards the door.

"Good night David!" Snow says quietly then she ushers Emma back to bed.
"Can I see you for a minute Snow White?" Jiminy asks her as soon as she steps in the Knight Force Headquarters.

"What is it?" she asks shutting the door behind her.

"How is the investigation going?"

"It's going," she shrugs. "We followed a lead yesterday that didn't amount to much. We are going to the Queen's castle today."

"Is that all?" he asks. "Anything else you want to tell me?"

"Pretty much. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know Snow White, you tell me. Whenever I partner you up with anyone they are in my office within hours filing official complaints, begging me to take off their assignment."

"Did David complain?"

After what she did in the tavern last night Snow wouldn't be too surprised if he did.

"He did not."

"Then what's the problem?"

"What are you planning? Are you framing him for a crime? Are you going to lock him in your basement? What are you up to?"

Snow gets up shaking her head. "I'll let you know what we find in the Queen's castle," she replies walking away. She walks straight up to Lieutenant Nolan's desk.

"You are here early," he smiles.

"Could you do me a favor? Could you go complain to Jiminy about me?"

"What? Why?" David frowns.

"He finds the fact that I haven't killed you yet disconcerting."

"I'll get right on that," he smirks.

"Good."

"Are you ready to go?" he asks.

She nods.

"You aren't going to like what I'm going to say next."

"What is it?"

"I've been warned that it'd be unwise to use a magic bean to enter into the Queen's castle. She might have force fields or all sort of security measures enacted."
"Don't say it!" Snow is already shaking her head.

"I'm sorry..."

"No!"

"We are going to have to take a squad gourd..."

"You are killing me David..."

"I know," he stifles a smile and gets up from his desk.

Snow grabs the squad gourd keys. "Do you mind if I drive?" she asks. Squad gourds are automatic. They don't really need a driver. But driving them is certainly more fun.

"Go ahead," he replies wondering how bad he is going to regret this small concession. Turns out that she is a really good driver. Good enough to race in the Enchanted Forest 500, the famous pumpkin race. Snow is driving faster and faster and he finds that he is not half as terrified as he should be. This is fun. Fun in a 'we might never make it out of this gourd alive' sort of way, but still fun.

It is a very foggy day, as the squad guard speeds through the windy road and rolling hills to enter the more mysterious darker part of the Enchanted Forest, the Queens' route that leads directly to the service entry of the castle.

"Have you been in her castle before?" she asks.

"Once," he replies. "Didn't get to see much."

Snow nods. "Well, it's different," she replies. "Nothing like King George's castle..."

He can see what she means as she drives over the metal bridge, towards the metal gates.

"The Queen is unavailable. The gates are closed to the public," a royal guard informs them at the gate.

David flashes his badge. "This is an official knight force investigation. Open up."

"Then what is she doing here?" the guard glares at Snow White.

"Open up! Now!" Lieutenant Nolan says more forcefully this time.

The royal guard glares at them but he opens the gate slowly.

"Here we go," Snow mumbles mostly to herself.

The Queen's castle is different than any other castle in any of the Enchanted Forest kingdoms. The walls are made of metal and they are reaching up towards the skies like a lopsided overgrown forest. Her castle is considered an architectural marvel. But it feels all wrong to Snow White. Nothing about this castle feels right. Not since the Queen moved in and added her own personal magical touch to the place. This castle reeks of unnatural forces. The Queen's powers have gone unchecked for way too long. Snow parks right on the main entry. She takes a deep breath and she exits the vehicle. They walk inside the castle together. Royal guards and servants all appear to be glaring at them.

Snow looks around at the very familiar dimly lit hallways. Being back here is so strange, like she is
young again, confused, desperate for things her stepmother is either unable or unwilling to give her. None of this matters now, Snow thinks. Regina is missing. Regina needs her help.

David sideglances at Snow. She is holding her head high, she looks so confident, so self assured, as she strides through the Queen's hallways. He hesitates at the large painted portrait of the King, his hand on young Snow's shoulder. Young Snow looks just like Emma, he thinks, except for the dark hair. Young Snow looks so serious. Emma smiles a lot more. Snow walks right past the portrait.

"Regina's quarters are on the left," she explains.

There are several staircases ahead. He is not going to make it that far, not without help. He's about to pull out his cane, when Snow points right.

"Elevator through that door," she offers quietly.

A massive royal guard blocks their path. He crosses his arms.

"This elevator leads straight to the Queen's quarters, do you have a warrant?"

"The Queen is missing," Snow replies, "We don't need a warrant. Don't you want your Queen found?"

"If she knew you were here about to go into her chambers and look through her stuff..." the royal knight practically spits out the words.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Snow steps around him and into the elevator.

David follows her.

The Queen's quarters consist of several meeting rooms, five walk in closets just to store her magnificent gowns, two closets for all her shoes and accessories. Regina's living quarters are dimly lit. A small green fire going in the fireplace. There is a dark canopy bed, filled with throw pillows, a large overstuffed arm chair, a vanity, large unlit candelabras, a beautiful rug. Other than the green fire nothing seems out of place, there is nothing unusual in this room. David squats by the fireplace. This is strange he thinks. He's never seen green fire before.

"Endless fire," Snow explains. "It's a beginner spell really, it will keep you warm forever, it will look nice and it will self regulate, it will keep your room temperature even. It won't produce any heat in the summer. It's a neat little trick. Regina's had this for years, even before I left..."

"It's green!" David says running his fingers through it.

Snow smiles. "Not a fan of endless fire, Lieutenant?"

He shakes his head. "No, I think I like my fires ending."

There is nothing in this room that might give them a clue as to where Regina might be. Nothing suspicious, nothing out of place. Snow walks across the room counting her steps, then she runs her fingers across the walls.

"I've always known there's a secret room here somewhere, but where?" Snow mumbles.

He pulls out his magic mirror. "Here is the blueprint for the Queen's chambers," he says. "I don't know if it will help."

They both study it quietly for a minute.
"That left corner is too close," he observes. "In the blueprint it's further back."

"Let me see," Snow draws closer. "Of course!" There is a large ornate mirror flush to the wall in the corner. "Right there," she points, "What if the secret room is behind the mirror?"

"Wait...-" he tries to say.

But before he gets a chance to finish his words Snow has already grabbed a candlestick off Regina's nightstand and hurled it right at the mirror.

The mirror smashes into hundreds of glass pieces and it falls on the ground.

A dark corridor behind the mirror gapes at them.

"Who needs good luck?" he shrugs.

"You are not superstitious are you?" Snow asks as she lights a candle and approaches the hole in the wall. The space behind the mirror is unnaturally dark, a cold breeze running through it. It is impossible to tell where it might lead. Snow gets ready to step through the broken mirror frame.

And then she hears it, the familiar twang of arrows flying through the air.

"Watch out!" David yells. He grabs Snow White in a hurry and he pulls her down with him to the ground. He doesn't mean to but he ends up laying on top of her. Her body is neatly tucked under him, her lips a mere inch from his neck. Three large arrows fly close to them and lodge into the wall behind them.

Snow is breathing fast. David is about to get up and probably apologize when he hears a strange noise.

"There's more," he cries out and he holds her tighter, his body tensing up. Her hands are clasping at his doublet.

This time the arrows are on fire. They lodge themselves on the curtained wall behind them and now the curtains are ablaze.

David jumps up. He rushes to rip the curtains off the wall. Snow grabs a blanket off Regina's bed and throws it over the flaming curtains now on the ground.

"Water, we need water," Snow yells.

David tosses another blanket over the flames. Snow grabs the pitcher for the wash basin and throws it on the flames. For a while they are both frantically stomping on the burning fabrics and then the flames are all gone. Snow breathes out a sigh of relief. They are both standing above the smoking fabric, panting.

"She has the room rigged to kill the intruders and burn away all evidence," Snow says visibly shaken. "She is not even here, we are trying to save her and she is still trying to make me disappear!"

He gives her a minute to catch her breath. "Are you alright?" he asks.

Snow takes a deep breath. "I'll be fine. Thanks to you. Are you alright?"

"I'm okay," he shrugs. He hesitates. "We should be calling this in, asking for reinforcements..."
He already has an idea of what she will say next.

"We should. In fact why don't you go ahead and do that...I'm just going to take a quick peek..." she says walking towards the newly discovered hallway behind the broken mirror. If they call in for reinforcements they are going to insist on walking into the tunnel first. She can't let them do that. She needs to look at the evidence first. Rule number one...

"You are not going in there alone," he replies. "Hold on, Snow, let me go first..."

"But-," she tries to argue.

"Snow!" he says. "I'm going in first!" his tone indicating that it is useless to argue.

"Fine!" she sighs.

"Come on," he motions as he steps into the dark corridor.

Snow is holding a candlestick following Lieutenant Nolan who is walking into the darkness, his back flush against the wall. He is not taking any chances. There are torches hanging from the walls. Snow lights them up, one by one as they walk by. A circular stairway leading down.

"Watch your step," he says heading down. The air feels colder down here, damper. The stairway leads to a small room that could be an office. There is the faint scent of magic in the air, very much like the smell of burned sugar. Snow steps closer to the large wooden table in the middle. Large yellow paged books pile up on the table and on the shelves on the back. Behind her there are apothecary drawers filled with vials and spell ingredients.

She flips through the pages of the books stacked on top of the table.

"How to get rid of warts," she reads aloud, "How to give your enemies migraines, how to put your enemies in an endless nightmare state, the art of poisoning apples, how to survive the fire room... At first glance, none of the books seem incredibly rare. "She almost killed us to protect what... her secret library?" Snow asks incredulously. "Does that make sense to you?"

David opens a large wicker box on the side of the table and he lets out a cry as he slams the box shut.

"What's wrong?" she rushes to his side.

"Something bit me" he gasps, gripping his arm tightly. He is having a hard time breathing

"What?" she cries out rushing over to him, pulling back his sleeve. "Did you see what bit you?"

He can't talk, his eyes look panicked as he is gasps. Two small diamond spots bleeding on his arm. The unmistakable mark of the Agraban viper bite.

Snow's face blanches. "No, no, no, no no," she says quickly as if she can keep the snake venom from spreading with her words, trying not to let her panic seep in her voice, "Breathe, David, breathe. Please, breathe..."

She rips a strip off her shirt and ties it tight at his elbow to keep the poison from reaching his heart. Then she helps him sit on the desk.

David is clasping his chest gasping for air.

"You are going to be alright, you are going to be alright, stay with me David, breathe," she says
over and over. She turns around and is now frantically going through Regina's apothecary drawers pulling out jars and ingredients, smelling them and tossing them on the ground. One by one the drawers reveal dried liver and bat wings, salted frog tongues and mustard powder from the land without magic, all incredible rare and expensive ingredients, all completely useless at the moment. And then she finds it. There is a small jar filled with green leaves.

"I got it, I got it, I got it," she says fast, her voice coming out highitched. Panicked. She places a few leaves in her mouth, chews them fast. Her hands are trembling when she places the leaves right on his snake bite. She pushes the leaves tight on the wound, wrapping them up with another strip of fabric.

"I'm sorry, this will sting a little. Are you alright? David!" she asks.

When he doesn't respond she holds her breath.

He is shaking now and she is desperately trying to sound calm. She places one hand on his shoulder, the other on his face. "David? David can you hear me?"

He nods a bunch of times, his eyes panicked, focused on her face. This is it, he is going to die here, in Regina's secret basement, as his lungs are desperately screaming for air. He reaches for Snow's hand, trying to stay calm, trying to focus on her face, her eyes, her words, begging him to breathe. He feels like he is deep inside the water, only it's not calm and peaceful, it is dark and terrifying and there is no air no matter how hard he tries to breathe.

"David, please..." she says, covering her mouth. "Try to breathe for me..."

He is going to die, just like this, as Snow looks on terrified, like she is about to cry. He wants to say he is sorry that he can't do what she is asking. He is sorry he can't breathe.

"Breathe for me please, David just breathe..."

And then his lungs contract and he takes a short breath. Then another, then another, he is breathing easier now. Faster.

"It worked!" Snow whispers, feeling so relieved. "Are you feeling better? Breathe David, breathe!" Snow pulls out her magic mirror. "This is Snow White. I am on location at the Queen's castle and I'm going to need a healing fairy immediately," she says, "My partner is hurt!"

David is taking fast shallow breaths.

"I'm alright," he rasps. "Really, I'm fine..."

Snow sits down next to him, breathing fast, clasping her hands together, trying to keep them from trembling. "I'm so sorry," she says over and over, "I am so, so sorry..."

It takes him a minute to realize what she is saying.

"What are you sorry for? You saved me!" he manages.

"You wanted to call for back up, it was my idea to keep going," she replies, her hands still shaking.

"You didn't do anything wrong..."

Snow closes her eyes. "If we ever find Regina and she is still alive I am going to kill her..." she blurts out.
David is too tired to laugh.

"You think I'm kidding, but I'm not..." Snow replies. She picks up her magic mirror again. "I'm going to need thirty knights, and animal control. I need Regina's quarters evacuated, knight force positioned at every entry, no one comes in or out without my saying so...and where is the healing fairy? Why isn't she here yet?" Snow turns off the mirror.

"How did you know how to do that?" he asks.

"Do what?"

"The leaves," he points to his bandaged arm.

"An Agrabahn viper killed my father," she replies. "I did a lot of research on snake bites after that. Silver-root leaves is the only antidote that will counter any snake bite but they need to be applied within seconds..."

He nods. He leans back closing his eyes. He is feeling lightheaded.

The Yellow fairy shows up with a flash of light, holding her medical kit.

"What seems to be the problem?"

"My partner just got bit by a snake. I'm pretty sure it was an Agrabahn viper," Snow explains.

The Yellow fairy looks at David. "Is this your partner?" she turns to Snow.

"Yes!"

"He is still alive," the Yellow fairy replies.

"I used silver-root leaves," Snow replies.

"Really?" the Yellow fairy looks surprised. "And it worked? Silver root leaves work in theory but no one has ever applied them fast enough...that is incredible...you, sir, are a very lucky man..."

The yellow fairy, examines David's arm. She waves her wand and the bite marks disappear. "I am sensing a knee injury as well. Would you like me to take care of it for you?"

He tenses up. "Not today," he replies.

Snow sideglances at him.

"You seem fine," the Yellow fairy continues, "I'll let you go home but I don't want you to be alone for the next twelve hours. Do you have someone that can stay with you?"

Lieutenant Nolan shakes his head. "I live alone," he replies.

"Then I'm afraid I'm going to have to send you to the hospital for observation," the Yellow fairy replies.

David doesn't protest but Snow can tell he is not happy with that prospect.

"You could come home with me," she offers.

"I couldn't possibly..." he is about to say. But Snow White is right there, offering. She really means
it too, she is not just being polite. "Are you sure?" he asks.

"Of course," she replies placing her arm on his shoulder. She turns to the Yellow fairy. "What do me need to watch out for?"

"Any signs of confusion or disorientation. He shouldn't do anything taxing for the rest of the day..."

"Sounds easy enough," Snow nods. "But can he play magical scrabble?"

David smiles, the Yellow Fairy looks confused.

"Magical what?"

"When can I get back to work?" he asks.

"Come see me tomorrow. As long as you don't show any symptoms today, I'll clear you for duty," the Yellow fairy replies.

"Thank you..."

"Let's get you out of here," Snow says as soon as the fairy is gone. "Do you need your cane?"

He unfolds his cane and she helps him stand up.

They walk together slowly. By the time they are out of the elevator the place is swarming with black knight force officers.

"Have you evacuated Regina's quarters yet?" Snow asks.

"We just got here Ma'am!" the knights looks at her incredulously.

Snow nods. "You know what to do," she explains. "Nobody gets past this point without my expressed permission...and send animal control downstairs, there is at least one Agrabahn viper in a wicker box..."

"Sir? " the knight turns to Lieutenant Nolan.

"You heard the lady. You will do exactly what she said. Are we clear?"

"Crystal, sir,"

"Good," he says moving on forward.

Once they are outside Snow turns to look at him. "Do you want to swing by your place to get your stuff?" she asks.

"That'll be great, thanks..."

His apartment is spotless, not a thing out of place. Snow doesn't get a chance to look around much because a dog runs straight to her. He jumps up at her barking, waging his tail, like he is greeting a long lost friend.

David gapes at Wilby stunned. Wilby is really old he doesn't usually react when he meets new people.
"Hi there, sweetheart," Snow says petting him."You sure are friendly, aren't you?"

The dog is now licking Snow, whimpering.

Snow squats down next to him.

"Are you feeling okay, boy?" David looks worried. It's been years since he's acted so excited with anyone.

The dog wags his tail at him then he turns back to Snow, licking her hand, begging for attention.

"He really likes you," he observes. "Do you mind? I can put him in the bedroom, if this is too much..."

"No, this is fine," Snow smiles. "I love dogs..."

The dog is laying down, letting her scratch his belly.

"You are such a good boy, who is a good boy?"

"I won't be too long," he says disappearing into the bedroom. When he comes back out he is wearing a plain shirt and a pair of pants holding a small leather suitcase. Unsurprisingly his casual clothes are just as impeccable as his work clothes. His shirt is perfectly pressed, his shoes are spotless. Maybe he always looks like he stepped out of a magazine of "Enchanted Men Weekly." Maybe he wakes up already shaved, Snow catches herself thinking.

"Alright, let me feed this guy, then we can go..." he points to Wilby who is still gazing adoringly at Snow White.

"Aren't we taking him with us?" Snow asks.

"Are you sure?" he looks surprised. "I mean, this is a lot..."

"It's nothing. I'm sure you are both house trained," Snow smirks.

Once they are in Snow's cottage Emma runs to greet them.

"Did we get a puppy?" she asks all excited.

"A puppy?" Snow laughs. "I'm pretty sure this dog is older than you..."

"He is about fifteen, which makes him really old in dog years" David confirms.

"No sweetheart, this is David' dog. David is going to spend the next few hours with us, he is not feeling too well, we got to keep an eye on him..."

"Are you sick?" Emma can barely contain her excitement. "Can I make you tea? Do you take honey in your tea? Do you want cookies? When I'm sick I want cookies. Can he sleep in my room tonight, Mom please?"

"What he needs is peace and quiet," Snow stresses the words looking at her daughter. "We can be peaceful and quiet, can't we?"

Emma nods. She stays quiet for a whole minute then she climbs on the arm of the chair David is sitting on.
"Do you have a fever? Are you hurt? Can I take your temperature? Can I try a healing spell on you?"

"Emma!" Snow pulls up her daughter and stirs her out of the room. "Come on, help me make sure the bed in the guestroom is made..."

"Don't worry, I will be right back," Emma says quite serious.

David is trying hard not to laugh. Emma is the sweetest little girl he's met in his whole life.

"Unfortunately, Ruby tells me that she burned the lasagna. How is pizza for dinner?" Snow asks once they are back.

"Yay pizza!" Emma exclaims. "We don't like olives, or pineapple. We don't like mushrooms do we David? Mushrooms are icky..."

"We? Are you his official spokesperson now?" Snow replies trying hard not to laugh loudly. "Is pepperoni okay David?"

"Pepperoni is great..."

Snow is still ordering pizza when the doorbell rings.

Emma opens the door.

"What is going on here?" Jiminy cricket flies in the room then in the moment he is turned into his human self standing in the middle of the living room. The sight of the flying cricket turning into a man seems to be too much for Wilby who starts growling.

"Stop it!" David sounds firm and the dog lies next to him grumpily, still eyeing the cricket with suspicion.

"Come on in," Snow shrugs.

"Is everything alright" Jiminy asks. "I just talked to the Yellow fairy,"

"I'm fine, this is just a precaution" David explains. "Snow was kind enough to take me in..."

Jiminy does not look at all convinced "Well?" he asks turning to Snow White.

"Well what?" Snow shrugs. "We found Regina's secret office, we'll probably go though her notes and spell books tomorrow if David is up for it. Her whole wing is a death trap, but I guess that was to be expected..."

The cricket is still glaring at Snow White. "Right. What is really going on?"

"That's all, nothing else." But then Jiminy just stands there watching her, expecting more.

"Do me favor David, blink twice if I've taken you hostage and I'm about to force feed you pizza," Snow deadpans.

"Oh no! Not pizza!" he groans playfully.

"Jiminy, are you joining us for dinner?" Snow asks.

"No, I should go, I just happened to be in the neighborhood. Can I see you outside for a minute
Snow White?" and then he is a cricket again and he flies towards the door.

Wilby growls.

"What are you really up to? How are you not jumping at the chance to take over the investigation now that Lieutenant Nolan is hurt?" Jiminy looks at Snow inquisitively as soon as she shuts the door behind her.

"Regina's secret office is a death trap. I'm not going back down there on my own..." Snow explains.

"Right. So you want a partner? You don't mind being partnered with Lieutenant Nolan? Do you really expect me to believe that?"

"Believe what you like," Snow shrugs.

"Fine!"

"Fine," she replies.

"But I should warn you, Lieutenant Nolan is not only our liaison to the Southern Kingdom, but also a highly decorated officer, and if you try anything..."

Snow rolls her eyes and walks back inside.

"So much for peace and quiet," she says and then she stops. Because David is already asleep on his chair, his hand on Wilby's head and Emma is sitting quietly next to him, holding her book.

"I started to read to him and he fell right asleep," Emma whispers.

Snow takes in the whole picture. Emma in her playclothes and tousled hair reading to David, David looking impeccable asleep on the chair, Wilby old and tired laying on the floor at his feet. They are so mismatched and yet they all look like they belong together. And something cracks inside Snow White. She wants to walk over, take David's pulse, make sure he is alright. Her hands are shaking again.

"Good job sweetheart," she tells Emma instead. She covers him up with an old white quilt, then she walks into her home office. She sits on her desk and stares absentmindedly at her files. David's face flashes in front of her, trying to breathe, clasping at his chest. She shakes her head to shake the image away. "You are going to be alright, you are going to be alright, stay with me David, breathe," her own voice replaying frantically in her mind. "Stay with me, stay with me, breathe..."

There is a soft knock on the door.

"Come in!"

Ruby walks inside. One glance at Snow's face and she knows something is wrong.

"Is everything alright?" she asks softly. "Snow? Are you okay?"

Snow shakes her head. "The Queen's office was booby trapped. He almost died," her voice cracks.

"But he didn't," Ruby replies. "Did you save him?"

Snow nods though she doesn't look too convinced.

"Hey, if you want to lock him in the basement to keep him safe, I won't judge..." Ruby smirks.
Snow laughs. "I'm thinking about it."

It's getting late. Ruby is long gone, Emma has been asleep in her bedroom for a while, Snow is on the couch trying to concentrate on the file in front of her. Surprisingly Wilby is laying next to her, his face in her lap. She is absentmindedly twirling her hair in her finger, her other hand resting on the dog’s back when David stirs.

He looks around the room trying to remember where he is.

"Are you feeling alright?" Snow asks quietly.

He nods, rubbing his eyes. "How long have I been asleep for?"

"A while. Are you hungry? I saved you some pizza..." she points to the table.

"Thank you." He stretches as he gets up, then he grabs a large pepperoni slice.

"It's nothing..." she shrugs. "Just pizza..."

"No, I mean...thank you for letting me come over, I really don't like hospitals..."

"Nobody does," she smiles sympathetically.

"Well, I really can't stand them. I was in a coma for a while, and I lost some time, I really can't stand heart monitors and hospital sounds..." he explains.

"You were in a coma? How much time did you lose?"

"I was in a coma for about three months but I'm missing about five years worth of memories..." he explains.

"I had no idea," she looks surprised.

"How could you?" he shrugs. "My whole file has been redacted. Ironically the new me doesn't have high enough clearance to know what the old me was up to..."

"You are not serious!"

"They said they couldn't tell me what happened, my previous mission was classified. They claimed that my memories would come back in time, but they never did."

"How long ago was it?"

"Ten years ago..."

"Ten years ago," Snow frowns, "and your memories haven't come back yet? David, that sounds a lot more like a memory spell than amnesia..."

He is slow to reply "I wonder about that sometimes..."

"Maybe they really didn't want you to know what your mission was so they wiped your memories. Maybe wiping your memories and redacting your file was easier than admitting the truth," she offers.

"Maybe."
She should really leave it alone, she shouldn't intrude, but his face gasping for air is still haunting her. "Breathe," she thinks. "Please breathe, stay with me, breathe..."

She wants to help him. She knows exactly what it's like to lose part of yourself and your memories.

"Do you ever wake up in the middle of the night and have the feeling that you remember everything, that everything makes sense, but then as you try to figure things out, it all fades away?" her voice is very quiet.

He nods emphatically. "I do!"

"Are you allergic to blue mint tea?" she hesitates.

"How did you know that?" he asks.

"I'm allergic to blue mint tea too... It's a common side effect to memory spell victims..."

He is sitting up on her large chair trying to gather his thoughts. He is looking so lost.

"I went to a support group, It helped...Memory spelled anonymous. Then I had to stop," Snow continues.

"Why?"

"Because people joined the group just to hear me try to remember...The famous princess is in MA. I don't even know if they were Regina's spies or tabloid reporters. I'm pretty sure one woman paid to get memory spelled just so she could join the group and record me... So I had to stop..." she explains.

"That's awful!"

"That was along time ago, right after I abdicated. People wanted to know everything... what did I have for breakfast? What designer dress did I wear? Did I happen to remember who Emma's father was? Now I'm old news. They've moved on to Ella's triplets..."

"I'm not going to argue, Ella's triplets are cute, but people are still interested. You are the most famous investigator in the Enchanted Forest..."

"It's a little different now," she smiles. "Now I get the knights fresh out of the academy gawking at me, wanting me to sign their magic mirror or their fingerprint kit or their books. I suppose that's a lot better..."

He smiles.

This is different, Snow thinks, this is effortless, this feels right. The two of them talking into the night, by the fireplace, over cold slices of pizza. Maybe he is thinking the same thing. Maybe David with his spotless boots and his perfectly pressed shirt and his blue eyes, maybe he is just as alone as she is. Maybe.

She is not alone, of course, she has Emma and Ruby and Nova and Grumpy and Granny. She has so many people, but she still spends her nights alone. Maybe that's why she invited him over, because when he said 'I live alone' she recognized his voice as her own.

"I should head on to bed," Snow smiles. "The guest room is the on to the far right," she points, then she gets up and walks out of the room.
"Good night, Snow," she hears David behind her.

"Goodnight," she whispers when she is alone in her room.

David is the first to wake up in the morning. He is feeling great but it's too early to visit the Yellow fairy at the hospital. He is in the kitchen. He's already located the coffeepot and he's brewing coffee. He should write a thank you note to Snow and Emma then he should head back out, go to his apartment to shower and shave before he sees the healing fairy. He is about to look for a quill and parchment when Emma shows up. She is wearing purple unicorn pajamas and her hair is all tangled.

"You are up!" she smiles all excited. "Do you want to play 'go fish'?"

"I'm looking for a quill and parchment," he explains, "I need to write your mother a note before I head out..."

"Come on," Emma tugs on his hand. "There's parchment in Mom's office..."

Snow's office is quite unorganized. Her desk is covered with case files, there are papers stacked everywhere, pictures pinned on the wall. Maps, dates. He actually has to step over case files to get to her desk. The office is a disaster zone really. It's a wonder she gets any work done.

"There is parchment, right there," Emma points to the desk and David picks up a scroll. He is about to grab a quill and ink when Emma asks.

"Do you want to see Mom's weird mystery wall?"

"Her what?" he asks absentmindedly, dipping the quill in black ink.

"Snow, thank you so much...-"

"Her mystery wall," Emma says pointing to closet that has three padlocks on it.

David frowns.

"If your Mom is keeping this locked she must have a good reason...-" he starts saying but Emma has already pulled out her magic wand. The padlocks snap open one by one and now the closet is wide open.

There are pictures, so many pictures, pinned to the closet wall, pictures of fairies and wizards crossed out, places, dates, maps. There are red strings and yellow strings connecting events with locations. A photograph of Emma as a baby. A photograph of Snow's cabin in the forest. A newspaper clip stating Princess Snow White finally found with baby girl. Who is the baby's father?

And he feels it, just by looking at the wall, all of Snow's hopes and wishes and efforts to connect the dots from her missing year, all her hard work to find Emma's father. All her efforts to place the missing puzzle pieces together.

He is not certain why, but David feels like he can't breathe. He shouldn't be here, he is intruding in Snow's innermost hopes and dreams.

"I was going to go home, I really was. I dropped the bean on the ground, I said I want to go home, but it took me to the old cabin instead...I think your magic bean was broken..."
"Well, to answer your question David, I really don't know who or where he is, I honestly don't have the faintest clue...I've spent years trying to figure that out. If I knew..."

"If you knew?"

"I wouldn't be here..."

"Emma, we really shouldn't be doing this," he says quietly taking a step backwards, and then a pile of photographs catches his eye. There is an envelope full of photographs on the shelf, detailed photographs of Snow's cabin. He shouldn't pick it up but he does, glancing through the pictures. There is a picture of the scuffle marks on the cabin floor. A picture of the carved heart on the bedpost. A picture of the wall behind the table, the one wall Snow plastered over.

The wood is bare in the picture. Someone carved the same word again and again on the wall. Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming. Remember.

Who did this?

David can picture Snow alone in her cottage with her baby in her arms carving her lover's name on the wall over and over, as the memory spell took effect, trying to keep herself from forgetting.

Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming.

"My Mom is looking for my Dad," Emma says softly. She says it matter of factly, but he can read the longing in her eyes. "I think my Dad is lost somewhere," she continues. "Do you think you can help her find him?"

And David looks at Emma's bright green eyes and he is at a complete loss for words.

Snow wakes up, throws on a clean shirt and pants and steps out of her bedroom.

The whole house smells like coffee. She takes a deep breath and pours a cup. Fresh coffee is better than magical coffee that's for sure.

Nova is not here yet. Emma must still be asleep, she thinks stirring sugar in her cup. Snow peeks into her daughter's bedroom but Emma's bed is already empty.

"Emma?" Snow says.

Her office door is open. Emma really shouldn't be in there, Snow thinks as she rushes into the room.

Emma and David are both standing in front of her closet, staring at her research.

"What are you two doing here?" Snow's voice startles both of them. She is standing at the door staring at both of them, eyes wide open in disbelief. Emma and David are both wearing matching guilty expressions. He places the stack of pictures back in the closet in a hurry.

There it is, he thinks. That look in her eyes when he thinks she might cry, but she won't. She is going to look at him instead and the betrayal he will read in her eyes will be enough to stop him on his tracks.

"Snow..." he starts saying but his voice trails off.

She is shaking her head. She doesn't want to hear it. Not now. She might never want to hear anything he has to say ever again.
She is not really seeing him, it's more like she is looking through him, back to the wall full of pictures and longing and research.

She walks to the closet, shuts the doors tight.

"You seem to be in good health. Can I trust you to find your way out of my house Lieutenant?" she asks. Her voice is so cold.

He steps out of her office in a hurry. "Snow!" he tries again but her back is turned now, she is snapping the padlocks back in place, one by one.

"Get out," she says again, her voice quiet and unfeeling.

It takes him a minute to gather his clothes from the guestroom and stuff them in his suitcase. He walks out of her cottage into the cold morning breeze, feeling completely defeated. Wilby trails behind him, whimpering. He doesn't want to go either.
David is on his desk at knight force headquarters, staring at his magic mirror. It's five minutes past nine. Snow should be coming in, any minute. He keeps glancing at the door. He needs to talk to her, he needs to explain...What can he possibly say? What is he going to do? Throw the blame on Emma? What can he say that might make her forgive him, that might make her understand?

He was in the hospital, in a coma for a month, when the story of princess Snow abdicating hit the news. A nurse that was checking his vitals had turned on the large magic mirror hanging on the wall in his room to listen to the breaking news. Princess Snow was abdicating her throne. Snow White had signed the official papers then she'd walked into a room full of reporters, all of them holding their magic mirrors in hand, all of them ready with questions.

"Did the Queen force you to do this?"

"Are you moving away from the kingdom?"

"Who is your baby's father?"

"Please," she'd say quietly. "I have nothing to say. Please, let me go..."

And it was on those very words that David had opened his eyes. "...let me go..."

He'd sat up all confused and said "No!" he didn't want to let her go, he couldn't. In all his confusion, he actually thought Princes Snow White was talking to him. He'd looked around the room waiting to see the woman who was begging him to let her go. He didn't know who he expected to see in the room with him, certainly not the nurse glued to the magic mirror, not the tubes and the machines monitoring his heart and his breathing. He'd gotten up all upset, he'd tried to pull out the cords himself, he needed to find her...He was so insistent they had to sedate him. It was a while later, when the doctors and the healing fairies had walked in the room and explained that he was a knight, part of knight force in an undercover classified mission that things started making some sense. Not a whole lot, mind you, but a little. They told him that his amnesia was temporary but there was no need to worry. His memories should come back, his life would get back to normal. He'd soon remember everything. Except nothing went back to normal. His memories stopped the minute he joined the knight force. After that he remembered nothing. And nobody. Wilby was all he had, Wilby who sat outside the hospital for a month, whimpering, Wilby who laid at the door of his new apartment pouting, waiting for someone to walk in. Wilby who cried and begged for endless walks in the forest, undoubtedly looking for someone even though David didn't know whom. Nobody else.

The healing fairies explained that he'd been stabbed three times. They'd healed all his wounds of course, not a mark left. Except for the knee injury. Maybe because the knee didn't hurt until he was really tired. They'd offered to heal it of course once they realized they'd missed it in their initial assessment, but he'd said no. Because this injury is all he had, the only clue, the only shred of evidence of what happened during his missing years. He figured he'd get it taken care off once his memories got back, but they never did. And now Snow White is suggesting that this might be deliberate. She is saying that maybe his memories were wiped. Maybe the knight force has things to hide, maybe his memories were erased on purpose.

Last night they talked, and as they talked he felt the world become softer, the jagged edges of his life become smoother, the world making more sense just by listening to the sound of her voice. Puzzle pieces falling into place. But now that's all over. He ruined it. She wouldn't even look at
him as he walked out of her house this morning. She let him spend the night in her guestroom and he repaid her kindness by betraying her trust.

And now he has to fix this. He doesn't know how. He just knows he has to.

He walks into the break room and gets another cup of coffee. Grumpy is hanging announcements on the bulletin board.

BUY YOUR TICKETS NOW FOR THE WINTER BALL! The colorful invitation reads.

"Are you coming to the officer's ball Nolan?" Grumpy asks.

"What?" he replies distractedly.

"How about you Snow? Going to the Winter ball?" Grumpy asks.

David turns around fast to look at her, feeling guilty as if he got caught again doing something wrong. He didn't even hear her come in.

Snow shakes her head.

"The ball? Perhaps you haven't noticed that the Queen is missing..." her voice cold, distant.

"And there is an one eyed strangler somewhere loose in the forest. I'm still taking my wife to the knight force ball..." Grumpy shrugs.

And when Snow ignores him he adds "Did someone spit in your coco puffs this morning?"

Snow doesn't bother with a response. She walks straight into Jiminy's office. She shuts the door behind her.

Grumpy turns to look at David, his eyebrows raised, and then a mocking smile appears on his face, as his eyes flash with understanding. "She is mad at you isn't she? Dead man walking!" he announces to no one in particular, then he walks away chuckling to himself.

"You wanted to see me?" Snow asks Jiminy who is browsing through an old case file.

"Yes, have a seat please, Snow White. I wanted to apologize for my skepticism. I misjudged you. I just talked to David and he had nothing but nice things to say about you. I'm sorry for mistrusting you..."

Snow doesn't have anything to add to that. She is looking at the floor feeling lost.

She felt it last night, she felt it the day before, that spark between them, David looking so out of place and at the same time fitting in her living room, in her investigation and in her life.

And now? Now what? When she caught him looking in her research this morning, she felt like she'd ran out of words, like this was all a cruel joke. She found someone that earned her trust just enough that it would crush her when he'd lose it. What was he thinking? What is he getting at? How could he just stand there and look in her heart and her soul and her broken hopes without her permission?

"Snow?" Jiminy asks because she is just sitting there, looking down on the ground, not saying a word.

"Is that all?" Snow asks quietly. What else is there to say? What more can be said? Today is
already lopsided and broken, today is a mess, today is mocking last night's dreams. She dared to think he was someone she could trust. She was wrong.

She might be in there requesting reassignment, David thinks and his breath hitchs.

"Let me go..."

When Snow walks out of Jiminy's office he is quick to walk up to her.

"Snow," he tries to say.

"Lieutenant Nolan," her voice void of any emotion. "Have you been cleared for duty yet?"

"Yes. Listen, Snow, about this morning..." he tries.

She shakes her head. "No. I really don't want to talk about this morning... let's just get to work," she offers and he should be feeling relieved.

Maybe she understands, maybe she doesn't think that he is a spy completely undeserving of her trust. But her voice is so cold, her eyes so distant. She grabs the keys to the squad gourd and heads out of the room.

He takes a deep breath and follows her.

Back in the Queen's secret room, the very room where she saved his life yesterday, Snow just walks straight to the bookshelves and opens the first book she sees. She browses through it, page by page.

He doesn't mean to but he is staring at her.

"Something the matter?" she asks.

"We really should talk," he tries.

"We really shouldn't," she counters.

He needs to stop this, he needs to stop looking at her, stop distracting her. He needs to leave her alone. Maybe if she physically hands him something to do, maybe he will leave her alone. She walks over to where he is standing and she forces a tall stack of books from Regina's shelves in his hands.

"Here you go, let me know if you find anything relevant to the Queen's disappearance."

He places the stack of books on the ground, flips through the pages in a hurry. He doesn't see how a book in the magical properties of glow worms can possibly help their case. He walks around the room slowly, feeling the walls with his hands. Regina didn't go through all the trouble to booby trap a room just to hide her spell books. Why, most of the books in here aren't even rare. One could walk into the public library and borrow them. There must be something more to this room. Another secret passage perhaps. He knocks on the walls, pushing each individual stone, looking for hallow parts.

"Could you keep it down?" Snow asks, not bothering to conceal her annoyance.

"This room is a smokescreen. A facade. There is more to this secret office," he starts saying. "We are going about this the wrong way..."
"We?" she snaps shut the book she is holding. "No, no, no. There is no we. "There is me and then there is you. There is no need for a we, no need to agree on anything, all you and I have to do is survive this investigation, and find the Queen. Then we can write our reports and you and I can go on our own separate merry ways..."

"Of course. What was I thinking? We don't need each other. It's not like we both almost died yesterday..." he really shouldn't be yelling back at her but he does.

"Yesterday was a mistake. I'll be more careful next time. You will be more careful next time. I'll make sure to stay away from snakes..."

"Snow!"

"What? Did you think we were becoming fast friends? Did you want to come over for tea parties?" she is talking so fast.

He takes a step back, feeling like she slapped him.

"What if I did? What's so wrong about that?"

"We both know you got saddled with this investigation. No need to pretend otherwise," Snow glares at him.

"I'm not pretending. I didn't get saddled with anything..."

"Right, you are here on your own free will...Well, I'm not. I work alone. I didn't ask for a partner. I know I'm hard to work with...-"

"But Snow, you are not," he interrupts.

"I'm not, what?" Snow frowns.

"You are not difficult to work with. Nobody forced me to do this, I asked for this case!"

"You what?" "What do you mean you asked! You volunteered? On purpose?" Snow takes a step back. She didn't see this coming.

"Of course. I jumped at the chance to work with you..."

"What? Why?"

"What do you mean why? Isn't it obvious? You are Snow White! You are a brilliant investigator! Of course I wanted to work with you..."

Snow gapes at him. Lieutenant Nolan with his perfectly pressed shirt, his spotless boots and his blue eyes. He actually chose to be here? Well, that's a first. He needs to stop this, he needs to stop saying things like that. How is she going to keep yelling at him if he goes on to say things like that?

"Be that as it may, you had no right...you had no right to go snooping in my office, looking through my research..."

"I know, I know I didn't, and I am so sorry...but in my defense...."

"There is a defense?" she is glaring again.

"Half a defense. Not a very good one..." he offers a half pleading smirk.
"Go on..."

"Your daughter looks at me with those big eyes and she is sweet and I just kind of..." fold, he wants to say but he doesn't. "I kind of went along without thinking..."

"Yes, Lieutenant Nolan. Blame it on the nine year old, that's a real classy move. You could have walked away..."

"I could have..."

"But you didn't..."

"I didn't..."

"Why didn't you?"

"Because..."-

"Because?"

"I didn't because I thought... I thought maybe I could help. You deserve answers. So does Emma...Emma has magic. Have you told her anything about her father? If you tell her the truth, maybe she won't be sneaking around trying to open locked up closets, going through your sensitive case files..."

"So this is my fault!" she look at him incredulously. "Is that what you are saying?"

"No! Of course not. It's a complicated situation. Emma has magic, she is snooping around, if you tell her the truth she might stop..."

"You've known Emma for maybe ten minutes! Do not presume to tell me how to raise my child..."

"That's not what I'm doing at all..., all I'm saying is that Emma has magic and if she is opening secret vaults or closets and sneaking around your investigations she could end up getting seriously hurt..."

"I know," Snow is more quiet now. "I know...but what would I even tell her? Where would I even start?"

"The truth..."

"What truth?"

"What you already know..."

"I don't know anything!" Snow sounds so exasperated.  

"Yes you do! You know a lot!"

"What exactly do you think that I know?"

"You could tell her that once upon a long time ago her parents really loved each other and then someone intervened and took their memories away...you could tell her that you've never stopped looking for her father...you could tell her that as soon as you find him, she will be the first to know..."
"What if I never find him!"

"Of course you will..."

"What if he is a terrible person?"

"How terrible can he be if you loved him?" he argues, then he adds quietly. "If you love him?"

Snow looks away. "How can I say any of that?" she whispers. "I don't know any of that for sure!"

"Of course you do!" he speaks so quietly, because she is finally listening and he is worried he might scare her away. "Snow! You scratched his name on the wall twenty eight times...Mary Margaret Blanchard does not sound like a name of someone who was a kidnapping victim and James Charming is a very unlikely kidnapper alias. When you say you want to go home the beans take you to the old cabin in the woods...you came out of the forest strong, unbending, unwilling to cower to Regina's demands...Yours was a love story, not a mysterious kidnapping, I'm just going to where the evidence leads..."

"Twenty eight times..." she muses. "You got all that from looking at my closet for what, thirty seconds?" There is a tightness in her chest, a tightness she can't explain. "Can I have a magic bean please?"

He should ask what she wants it for, he should hold back, but he doesn't.

"Here is what we are going to do. I will give you a chance. One chance. We'll go back to my house and I'll let you look at my personal case. You can see my progress and I'll give you five minutes to point out something I don't already know, something I've missed. And if you can't, you will go straight to your superiors and request off Regina's case! Today! Right now! Do we have a deal?"

He shouldn't be agreeing to this, this is an impossible thing that she is asking. He doesn't want off Regina's case. He should be bargaining, negotiating, asking for more time. He should be saying no, but then he looks at her and he sees a little glimmer of hope behind all her anger. Maybe this isn't a smart calculated move to get him off Regina's case once and for all. Maybe she doesn't want him to fail, maybe she doesn't want him off the case, maybe she can use a fresh set of eyes to the puzzle that is her backstory. Maybe.

"Deal!" he replies and the certainty in his voice surprises even himself.

Snow hesitantly shakes his hand.

"Let's go then!" Snow drops her bean to the ground. "I want to go home, to Emma," she whispers.

And then the most unusual thing happens. The floor opens underneath their feet and they are falling, falling through the floor.

Snow doesn't scream, she doesn't make a sound. Perhaps she is used to things never working out the way they are supposed to. She holds her breath, clasping his doublet tightly, like a drowning person grasping for a lifejacket in the dark. His hands find their way around her shoulders. And then they land hard, the jolt sending waves of pain to his knee. He bends, letting out a groan. Now she is the one holding him up.

They've landed in total and absolute darkness.

"Are you alright?" she asks. "What just happened?"
"We weren't supposed to use beans in Regina's castle," he replies. "She has magical wards guarding against them..."

"Oh, no! I completely forgot..."

"So did I," he confesses. "Where are we?" he rises slowly. He pulls his magic mirror out of his back pocket. He uses the light from the mirror to look around. Her face is now dimly lit, her eyes big, her hands still clasping his jacket. He can't help but notice how beautiful she is. She looks angry and confused and regretful and scared and...beautiful. That's it, that's the one word he is looking for. She looks breathtakingly beautiful.

She pulls out her mirror too, avoiding his eyes. "I don't know where we are..."

"I think we might have reached Regina's actual secret room," David observes pointing to the spell books piled around them on the dark marble floor.

There is a candelabra right behind them. Snow lights the candles one by one.

"I wouldn't call this a room " she muses because there are no walls, the space seems to stretch infinitely without end in sight, "it's more of a magical storage realm..."

The flickering lights are casting long shadows to the collection of unusual items in the room. A giant mirror, an older wardrobe, a dried up apple tree in a large clay pot. And there, behind the magical mirror the most unexpected item of all.

They both gasp.

"What is this?" Snow whispers. "What is Regina doing?"

Because behind the mirror there is a glass coffin with a body inside it...

A man that couldn't be older than twenty two is laying in the glass coffin, perfectly still, his eyes closed, his hands at his sides. His face is so perfectly preserved he might as well be sleeping.

"Do you think he is in a sleeping curse?" he wonders.

Snow shakes her head. She looks horrified.

"Do you recognize him?"

Snow nods. She pulls out her magic mirror and takes a picture of his face.

"Snow? Who is he?"

"This is Daniel," she replies. "Daniel was Regina's fiance, the one that inexplicably died when her mother forced her to marry my father. And if I'm right," she says looking at Daniel's body laying perfectly still, "this body will not have a heart."

"No heart?"

"I was ten when he died...his body was found in the woods, and he was missing his heart..."

"Do they know who did it?"

"Officially his case remains unsolved, though I have my suspicions..."
David is looking at her, his eyebrows raised.

"Regina's Mother had some pretty dark magic..." Snow mumbles looking through some books that are stacked right next to the glass coffin. "I think we are getting warmer..." she mumbles. "All this books are on different death theories..."

"Death theories?" he turns to look at her eyes wide open. "As in, how can death be reversed, death theories? Are you saying that the Queen preserved his body in order to...-"

He doesn't finish his thought. It is too incredible to even think about.

"Yes, I'm saying that I think Regina is trying to bring her dead fiance back to life..." Snow finishes his thought.

David is looking stunned. "Is that even possible?" he frowns.

"On a theoretical level. No one has ever done it. Not to mention this is highly illegal. If this comes to light...no, when this comes to light, this would be grounds for impeachment!" Snow replies.

David is silent for a minute. "And to think that Jiminy and Blue think that finding Regina will stabilize the kingdoms..."

Snow shakes her head and lets out a sad laugh. "Not anymore."

Snow opens up her magic mirror, she takes several pictures of Daniel's body. Then takes pictures of Regina's books. David opens his magic mirror too.

"This is Lieutenant Nolan, requesting back up, we are underneath the Queens quarters in a secret chamber of sorts...hello? Can you hear me?" He tries again and again. He has no signal. He turns to Snow. "Can't reach them from here, I'm afraid we are on our own."

"I was afraid of that," is all that Snow gets to say before the strangest noise comes from the edge of the endless room, a dark hooded creature hovering towards them, eyes glowing like fire embers.

David springs into action, he unsheathes his sword, waiting. He feels a sharp jolt on his now, he thinks. You can't start hurting now...

Snow reaches for her daggers.

"Any idea what this is?" he asks as he positions himself to attack.

"I think it's a she," Snow replies back. Because the hovering being is now screaming at them and her voice sounds like hundreds of women howling in pain.

"You are back!" the screaming voices of ask. "You are back...Have you brought what I asked for?"

"What did you ask for?" Snow frowns aiming for the creature's heart.

Snow's dagger flies in the air but she misses as the monster dives for David, her long gnarly fingers and dark blood stained nails reaching for him.

"Don't play coy with me young Queen. You know exactly what I want! A pure heart! Oh yes, yes, yes this this will do nicely..." her terrifying voice sounds almost excited.

He slashes her with his sword over and over again but the woman laughs.
"You think mere swords can hurt me boy? Your sword is nothing but a silly toy!"

Tendrils of darkness slither towards him, coiling around him, constricting him. He pushes back as hard as he can but the darkness is winning. And then his knee buckles at the worse possible moment and he is on the ground kneeling, unable to fight the darkness surrounding him. His sword clatters on the floor.

Snow throws her second dagger. The dagger finds the creature's neck. Black blood gushes forth and the head unexpectedly rolls and drops to the ground as if Snow's knife cut her neck through and trough. The darkness surrounding David slackens a bit. Then the monster cackles loudly, startling them both.

The head is laughing from the floor, the darkness is still immobilizing David, pinning his arms to his side, while the long fingers are finding their way to his heart.

"Get away from him!" Snow jumps in front of the monster unarmed.

The headless monster laughs again.

"Or what? I don't understand you, young Queen, my price was a pure heart! You should have brought him here subdued, willing! He is still very much awake, he is fighting back and now you defend him. What are you doing?"

"Your price for what?" Snow yells back.

"My price to bring your old lover back to life of course... But you seem to like your new lover better..."

"I am not Regina, I am Snow White... I brought you no one, I made no bargain with you..."

"Names don't mean much to me," the monster replies. "When you've been alive as long as I have, names are not important. What is important is hunger, thirst. You brought him here and I hunger for a human heart..."

"You hunger for a heart? You have no plan on bringing Regina's lover back, do you?" David asks.

The monster laughs. "The young Queen is desperate. The young Queen isn't asking too many questions. The young Queen is on a journey to get me a pure heart..."

"So you tricked her," Snow asks quietly.

The monster reaches with one of her longest arms, lifts up her head from the ground and places it back on her head, pulling the hood back on. It's a gruesome sight.

"Tricked her...why shouldn't I trick her...her life is full of trickery and deceit...why shouldn't I get my heart when I'm so hungry..." The woman laughs one more time, a thousand voices laughing with her. She darts at Snow except now she has thirty more hands reaching for her, screaming and wailing...

"Go away," Snow bellows decisively, picking up David's sword from the ground. "You are not getting a heart form us and you are not getting one from Regina either..." Snow is now slicing at the monster.

The monsters eyes glow with ire. "You promised," she is crying out now, her voices even more horrifying, "you promised, you promised, you promised!"
With every word she coils around David tighter, he is panting now, gasping for air.

"Let him go, let him go, let go of him," Snow yells, swinging David's sword desperately, hitting the monster again and again to no avail.

The situation is dire, the sword she is brandishing is useless. Human blades do not seem to hurt her, but what about fire?

Snow grabs a candle. She catches a small glimpse of fear in the monster's eyes. Fire it is then, Snow thinks. She drops a candle on Regina's spell books and once they are ablaze she picks one up and pushes it right into the woman's hollow chest.

The woman screams and wails but pulls back, releasing David.

Snow keeps throwing books at her, books set on fire.

The woman falls down on the ground her arms flailing.

David gets up, he lights one more book and tosses it straight on her heart.

She screams one last time and then she is gone, leaving nothing but dark smoke on the ground.

"Are you alright?" Snow turns to David. "Are you hurt?"

He nods. "I'm alright," he manages. "You saved me, again..."

She doesn't reply right away, she just places her hand on his arm.

"Are you sure you are alright?"

"Do you think she is gone for good?" he asks pointing at the dark smoke still lingering on the ground.

"I wouldn't count on it. We need to get out of here as soon as possible... Any ideas how?" she asks.

He pulls out a magic bean. "Do we dare try this again?" he asks.

"Do we have a choice?"

He shakes his head. "Where to?"

"My place," Snow's voice is quiet.

"We are going to Snow White's house, to Emma," he makes sure the destination is clear. The bean falls on the ground and they jump through.

They are relieved to see that this time the bean worked. The bean brought them right to Snow's doorstep. Except it's night time now.

"What is happening?" Snow asks. "How long were we in there for?"

His magic mirror beeps. He has thirty two messages from Jiminy. Snow's magic mirror is beeping too. Then his mirror rings and he is about to answer when he catches her eyes. She is looking at him expectantly. His heart sinks. He'd almost forgotten. She is going to hold him to their agreement. Time to make good on their deal.
He nods.

The moment they open the door, Ruby runs over to them, eyes wide open.

"Are you alright?" she asks. "Where have you been? Emma is already asleep, but your boss keeps calling here asking if you are back, I told him if he wakes up Emma I'm going to go ever there and tell him what's what...- " Ruby's voice trails off noting the odd tension between them.

Snow is barely listening to her words. David looks away.

"Well since you are fine I'm going to go then," Ruby adds raising her eyebrows questioningly. "Glad you are okay...and everything is fine...because everything is okay, right?"

But Snow walks to her office without saying another word.

Snow's heart is pounding. She fists her fingers, she doesn't want him to see her hands trembling. This is big, this is intense, this is excruciating. She's never let anyone near her research before. She feels almost like she is opening a window for a stranger to look into her soul.

Except he no longer feels like a total stranger. Lieutenant Nolan is a bit of a mystery himself, a bit of a contradiction, with his shiny light armors, and doublets and spotless boots, willing to sit on the floor and play uno with her nine year old daughter. Willing to hike miles through the forest because she needs to walk and clear her head. Willing to pull her away from a bar fight, just so that she won't get in trouble.

Lieutenant Nolan, always observing her, assessing her, trying to read her. Lieutenant Nolan with his blue eyes, and the little mark on his chin, the one she feels like tracing with her finger.

She doesn't want him off the case. She realized that when the monster was trying to snuff out his breath and tear out his heart, when she jumped to his defense without a dagger or a knife, just with her sheer force of will, wanting to keep him alive. She doesn't want him to walk away from the case. She doesn't want him out of her life either. But a deal is a deal. And she doesn't know how to back track, she doesn't know how to take things back.

She opens the office door and then she walks to the closet and her hand shakes as she unlocks all three padlocks. She opens the closet door without saying a word. She couldn't talk if she wanted to. She can barely breathe.

He takes a step closer, tilting his head, crossing his arms. This is it, this is where he is going to lose. He is going to have to keep his word and walk away from the case. What can he possibly come up in five minutes that she hasn't already thought of in the past nine years? She set him up for failure and he let her. He doesn't want him off the case. But more that anything he wants to help her, he wants to help Emma, the little blond sweet girl, sleeping on her bed tonight, no doubt wearing her purple unicorn pajamas, completely unaware of all the darkness and the crushed dreams hidden in her past.

Emma deserves this. Emma deserves to know.

Snow standing next to him, tension radiating from her, eyes glazed, looking at the wall she's stared at thousand of times trying to make sense of things, trying to see through vales of smoke and magic, Snow deserves to know.

As tough as she is, as strong, as unyielding, when she is standing next to him, green eyes ablaze, he still feels like pulling her in his arms, still wants to protect her from the world.
He looks at the pictures of Emma's potential fathers, the maps, his fingers trace the red yarns connecting people to places, if the red yarn is connecting people with locations...what is the yellow yarn connecting, he doesn't know...then he pulls out the photographs of the cottage wall, the wall Snow plastered over, the name scratched on the wall. Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming, Charming. He feels a younger broken Snow reaching for him, both asking for his help and pushing him away at the same time.

"Let me go..."

Then he looks at the pictures of Emma's potential fathers, all of them crossed out.

"You are only looking at Fairies and Wizards," he observes. "How come?"

Isn't it obvious? She wants to say. If you can't even see that, you have no business being anywhere near my case, you have no business being an investigator, I don't know what I was thinking letting you anywhere near my case.

"Emma has magic," she offers her voice tired, exhausted. "I have no magic so she must get that from her father..."

"Not necessarily," he argues.

He has her full attention now, her eyebrows raised, her eyes open wide. "What do you mean?"

"Hear me out...two ordinary people that don't have an ounce of magical blood in their veins can produce something as magical and as powerful as true love's kiss, right?"

She nods.

"Now, you take two people that really love each other, that are desperate to stay together, willing to change their names, forsake their past, willing to stay on that small cabin in the middle of nowhere, no neighbors in sight...couldn't all that intense desperate love produce a child with pure magical blood running through her veins?"

Snow doesn't realize it but she is holding her breath.

He points to the wizards and the fairies on the board, the ones she crossed out. "If James Charming was a fairy or a wizard he could have protected both of you from a memory spell, but he didn't. He couldn't. Look at the scuffle marks on the floor. There was a fight, I'm guessing he was using a sword and he lost. A sword. Not magical powers. You saw what happened today. A sword is useless when you are dealing with magic. I think you are looking for a man, just an ordinary man, not a fairy, not a wizard..."

Snow White is speechless. She nods a couple of times trying to find the right words. But there are no right words, there is nothing she can say.

"Snow?" he is looking at her all concerned, placing his hand on her shoulder.

"You can stay on the case," she manages and then she rushes out the door.

He wants to stay, he wants to keep staring at her wall. He pulls out his magic mirror, he snaps a picture of the cabin wall with the name Charming, Charming, Charming scratched all over it, then he rushes after her. His knee is hurting, he limps his way out towards the hallway. He hears a muffled sobbing sound.
He should leave her alone, he should respect her privacy, but he can't stay away, not when she is
crying like her heart is torn in hundreds of pieces. Snow is outside Emma's room, her back against
the wall, her hand over her mouth, stifling her sobs.

"I'm sorry," he mumbles not really sure what to say next. Not sure what he is sorry for.

Snow shakes her head, wipes her eyes in a hurry. "You've got nothing to be sorry for. Nothing.
Thank you for offering to help!" She closes her eyes, trying to prevent more tears and more sobs
from pouring out and then he can't help himself, he pulls her in his arms.

"It's alright," he whispers, "It's all going to be alright."

She should be pushing him away, she should be telling him he has no idea what he is talking about,
nothing is going to be alright. She could be telling him that he cannot fathom what she's been
through, but he is here, he's lost memories too... There is a lot more to him than meets the eye, he's
more than the impeccable knight force investigator. So she holds on tighter and then she pulls
back.

His shirt is all wet with her tears.

"Oh no," she mumbles smiling, "I ruined your perfectly pressed shirt..."

"What?" He smiles back all confused.

And then both their magic mirrors ring at the same time.

Snow picks hers first. She holds it away because Jiminy is frantically yelling in her ear.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN! I'VE BEEN CALLING FOR HOURS! AND WHERE IS
LIEUTENANT NOLAN? SNOW WHITE IF YOU MADE HIM DISAPPEAR...-"

"Tell him I didn't make you disappear," Snow hands the mirror to David.

"I can't talk right now, I'm bound and gagged in Snow's basement," he shrugs, a mischievous smirk
on his lips.

Snow stares at him incredulously and then she bursts out laughing.

"That was incredible unprofessional on your part Lieutenant Nolan," she replies trying her best
stern look, not entirely succeeding.

"THIS ISN'T FUNNY," Jiminy is still yelling on the line.

"You must be rubbing off on me, Investigator White," he replies. "You are a terrible influence..."

"I can see that!" Snow is still chuckling when she takes back her magic mirror.

"I'd love to update you on the case, the moment you stop yelling at me," Snow says firmly and that
seems to work. "We are at my house, could you come over? Yes, I know it's the middle of the
night. I know it's highly irregular. It's an irregular case... We had a very eventful day, if you want
the scoop you'll come over because I am not using any more magic beans today..."

She plops on the couch exhausted. "Are you hungry?" she asks.

"Why, did Ruby burn something good?"
Snow throws her head back and laughs again. "Probably, who knows..."

"I'll make grilled cheese sandwiches," he says decisively, then he walks into the kitchen as if it's the most natural thing in the world. "You don't happen to have any beer, do you?"

"There is red wine in the cupboard, above the fridge" she yells after him."Don't ask me where the wineglasses are, Nova magicked the kitchen clean the other day and now I can't find them either..." Snow takes off her boots, places her feet on the coffee table and leans back, wondering in what state of burned disarray he will find the kitchen in. She is so exhausted.

A few minutes later he walks back out with grilled cheese sandwiches stacked on a plate, two mugs and a wine bottle.

"From the looks of it, Ruby burned meatballs," he says placing everything on the coffee table.

"She tries so hard," Snow stifles a smile, reaching for a sandwich.

David pours wine in two mugs and hands one to her.

"Here is to still being alive after two days in a row in the Queen's castle," he smiles wryly.

Snow clinks her mug to his. "I'll drink to that!"

He sits on the couch next to her.

"This is really good," Snow mumbles taking a large bite of her sandwich, her mouth way too full.

"Why, thank you, it's a secret family recipe," he smirks, taking a sip of his wine. "You will never guess the secret ingredient..."

"Cheese?" she laughs.

"What gave it away?" he frowns.

When Jiminy flies in, he finds them both next to each other on the couch eating and laughing, their feet resting on the coffee table.

He tries not to look too surprised. "Well?" he asks. "Does someone want to tell me what's going on?"

"Well, we fell through Regina's secret room to her other secret room," David says sitting up, trying to look just a little more professional, not entirely succeeding.

"Regina keeps her dead ex-boyfriend in her secret within secret room," Snow adds. "We suspect she's been trying to bring him back to life. And then we got chased by a...- what was that?" she turns to him.

"Half wraith?" he shrugs. "We were chased by a half wraith who confirmed our suspicions..."

"We set our evidence on fire fighting her..." Snow adds.

"Secret room is in some sort of time warp, because we got out it was already late...would you care for a grilled cheese sandwich?" David smiles.

Jiminy gapes at them trying to decide if they've both lost their minds. "Are you serious? Are you making this up?"
And when they both sit there smiling at him he sighs. "Put it all in the report," he replies.

"The Lieutenant will be happy to," Snow snickers.

"Thanks," David elbows Snow laughing. "I'll do it. It's fine."

David is refilling Snow's mug. Snow is still laughing.

"If the Queen has been trying to bring the dead back to life then we are talking about impeachment proceedings!" the cricket glares at them.

"I know," Snow sighs.

Jiminy doesn't know what to think about this turn of events. "I'll update Blue, you both get some rest!" he replies flying away.

And then Emma stumbles in the room all sleepy, wrapped in her blanket.

She smiles. "Mom! You're home!"

"Come here sweetheart. What are you doing up?" Snow asks her, pulling her up on her lap.

"I heard some noises. I think there might be a monster in my room. And Auntie Ruby burned the meatballs. I'm hungry!"

David hands her a grilled cheese sandwich.

"Hi David!" she looks at him almost shyly. "Mom, can I have some milk please?"

Snow motions for Emma to sit on the couch and heads to the kitchen.

"Did you get in big trouble?" Emma whispers to David as soon as Snow is out of earshot.

"Big trouble," he nods. "Did you?"

"A little. She got sad and made me promise never to go in her closet again. I don't like it when she is sad..."

David smiles. "Me either. Are you going to keep your promise?"

Emma nods. "Sorry I got you in trouble David. Are you still coming to my birthday?"

David ruffles Emma's hair. "Of course I am..."

"Can you check on the monster in my room?"

"Sure," he says standing up. He is exhausted and his knee is burning. Funny how he had been solving case after case for ten years, his disability never really getting in the way until now. The case of the missing Queen is more physically demanding than he could have anticipated. Most missing cases don't involve half wraiths or deadly snakes or magical realms. Most missing cases don't involve hunting for monsters under little girl's beds at midnight either.

Emma climbs on the bed and looks at him expectantly. "Under the bed," she points.

David nods and kneels on the ground. He looks around carefully pulling out Emma's missing sock and a forgotten teddy bear.
"Nothing to report Ma'am," he replies playfully. "There is no unusual activity of any sort happening under your bed, no irregular lifeforms...Would you like that in writing?"

Emma offers a sleepy grin, then she closes her eyes. "Thank you David."

You are very welcome, he means to say but Emma is breathing evenly, she seems to be asleep.

David rises up slowly then he pulls out his cane. He turns to step out and he catches Snow's eyes. She is there, a glass of milk in her hand, watching his interaction with Emma, and the tenderness she reads in her eyes makes it harder for him to breathe.
The Case of the Missing Queen

Snow is already in the Knight force office when her magic mirror rings. It's Lieutenant Nolan.

"I'm going to be about an hour late today, I'm sorry...-"

"Is everything alright?"

"Yes, I'm at the hospital and the lines were really long...-"

"You are at the hospital? Are you hurt? Hold on, I'll be right there...-" Snow's heart is beating faster as she closes her magic mirror before he gets a chance to respond.

The Teal fairy walks inside his exam room smiling.

"David, you are back! It is so good to see you again. Ready to take care of your knee? What made you change your mind? It's been what...ten years?" she asks checking is chart, her hand on his shoulder.

"Almost..."

"Did your memories come back?"

"No, no, they didn't. But it's time to move forward... I'm in this really challenging case at the moment, and I...I need to be able to be more active..." he explains.

"Good to hear that you are moving forward...As long as you are ready..." Teal's eyes are sparkling.

"I'm ready!" he nods quickly.

"Alright. Healing an injury like this, can be an emotionally draining experience. You should probably take some time off..."

"I can't take time off, not at the moment..."

"You are not the one looking for the missing Queen are you?" the Teal Fairy smile but when David doesn't respond right away, her eyes open wide. "Oh, I see..."

"I can't really talk about ongoing investigations..." he shrugs.

"Well, you don't have to talk about the case, but still, healing an old injury can be incredibly draining... Do you have someone to talk to?" and when he doesn't reply right away she starts again. "Because if you don't I could clear my schedule..." she is looking almost hopeful.

"I couldn't possibly take any more of your tine...I appreciate you squeezing me in without an appointment. You've already done too much..." he replies carefully.

"It's not trouble at all, I told you to come whenever you were ready..."

"Yes, you did. And I appreciate that. But I have to get back to work. In fact my partner is on her way over...-"

Snow storms into the trauma room breathless, her eyes wide open. "What happened? David? Are you hurt?"
The Teal fairy turns to face her. She is not looking pleased.

"Teal, this is my partner Snow, Snow this is the Teal Fairy..."

"Nice to meet you, but I'm going to have to ask you to step outside, we are not quite done here... I'm not sure what you were told or who let you in here..." the fairy's voice is cold, official.

Snow is barely listening. "Are you sure you are alright? What happened?"

He nods. "I tried to tell you. I'm fine. I'm just finally taking care of my knee... - I should have done this a long time ago..."

Snow looks relieved. "Oh, good. Are you sure you weren't hurt? Alright, I'll be right outside..."

"There is a waiting room around the corner," Teal replies pointedly but Snow has already stepped out.

"David are you ready?" Teal asks.

David nods.

"This is going to sting a little."

Teal places her hands on his knee and he feels the full force of her power burning. He lets out a soft groan.

She looks at him questioningly.

"Keep going," he gasps.

Snow is in the hallway leaning against the wall. What did she do? What was she thinking showing up like that? She thought he was injured and she just ran, she didn't think about this at all. Maybe she should just go back to work. Then again David shouldn't be left alone here. He doesn't like hospitals.

He is not alone, the Teal Fairy looked more than happy to keep him company, a little voice inside her head offers.

Snow shakes her head, pushing that thought far far away.

And then, after a few more minutes pass, the Teal Fairy walks up to her.

"You can go inside now," she says sounding very calm, very professional. Then she hesitates. "Wait, may I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure?" Snow frowns.

"Have you been partners for a long time?"

And when Snow doesn't reply right away Teal adds "you and David."

Snow shakes her head. "No, it's fairly recent," she replies.

Teal looks crestfallen. This is not what she wanted to hear. "Well, keep in mind that he is supposed to take it easy today. I'm not sure he knows how..." She walks away.
Snow walks back inside the room hesitantly. Lieutenant Nolan is putting on his jacket.

"Sorry," she mumbles. "Didn't mean to intrude, I thought you got injured yesterday or..."

He shakes his head in a hurry. "Don't. I really appreciate you coming...besides, if I start bawling you can lend me a hankie..."

Snow looks at him confused.

"Apparently getting emotional after healing an old time injury is a real possibility..." he shrugs.

"Are you sure you are alright?" Snow looks really concerned now.

He smiles "We'll see... Are we going back to Regina's castle?"

She nods. "If you are up for it... I'm parked right up-front..."

She should leave it alone she really should. She has no right. But as they walk together through the hospital hallways, the words kind of spill out of her mouth, before she gets a chance to stop them.

"Why now?"

"What?" David doesn't understand the question.

"Why come to heal your leg now?" Snow asks again, half regretting it already.

"It's time..." he shrugs. "I'd rather not die when the next monster comes after us just because my leg gave out..."

She nods. She really should stay out of this, quit pushing. "What happened? How did it happen?" she points to his knee, now all healed.

"I don't know. It's classified. I had three stab wounds and it was touch and go for a while which is how they didn't notice that my knee was hurt too. They were busy trying to keep me alive. And then I was awake and I remembered nothing. They claimed they couldn't tell me what happened, it was all a classified mission. Teal was a junior healer then. When she noticed that she'd missed my knee injury she was going to just heal it right then and there but I couldn't...I wouldn't let her. I thought it was my only connection to my past..."

He throws a quick glance her way. She nods. She understands. He wants to say I couldn't move on, I couldn't pick up the pieces because I didn't know what pieces were there to pick up. How could I move on with my life if I didn't know who I was leaving behind? If there were people in my past who were hoping I'd go back, hoping I'd remember them? There is a lot more he wants to say out loud but he is not sure he needs to.

"I'm sure you know what that's like..." he adds.

Does she know what it's like? He's lost five years. A whole lot could have happened in five years...When it comes to loosing parts of yourself, how do you even begin to measure which loss matters the most?

"I do...Memories are such slippery fragile things..." she comments quietly avoiding his eyes.

"Like bubbles?" he smiles.

Snow laughs, the sound of her laughter pushing all dark thoughts and nagging questions out of his
They are in the squad gourd now.

"Let's go," Snow smiles.

Inside the Queen's castle, every entrance is now guarded by black knight force. They pick one of Regina's council rooms to conduct their interviews. Snow goes through a list of Regina's staff.

"We should question the Huntsman first," Snow decides. "He is the Queen's head of security."

The moment Huntsman walks into the room where they are conducting their questions, Lieutenant Nolan feels a jolt of pain on his knee. He tries hard not to groan. Snow looks at him all concerned. Lieutenant Nolan is looking at the Huntsman. He has no recollection of ever meeting him but he does look familiar somehow.

"You are back!" the Huntsman says quietly, looking intently at Snow.

"Not exactly," Snow replies. "I'm just here to find the Queen..."

"How old is your daughter now?"

Snow shakes her head. The topic of Emma is off limits. That is not what she is here for. "Tell me what I need to know," she says instead of answering his question.

The Huntsman's gaze lingers at David, then back at Snow. "Are you two working together now?" he asks.

Again, not relevant. "How come you didn't join her on her journey to visit the king?" Snow asks.

The Huntsman looks away.

"Did you have a falling out?" she persists.

The Huntsman is looking at David, as if silently asking for help.

"Well?" Snow asks.

"You could say that..."

"Did you fight?" Snow watches him carefully.

"It wasn't like that," the Huntsman shifts uncomfortably on his chair. "We didn't fight, she just..."

"Look, if you want her found, you will tell me what I need to know," Snow is not at all satisfied with his answers, or rather the lack of answers she is getting.

He doesn't reply.

"Maybe you don't want her found," David observes his reaction.

The Huntsman winces. "I want her safe," he replies. "I have no answers of you. She never confides in me..."

"But you relationship had changed? Recently? Even though there was no fight?" Snow asks again.

The man nods, looking down.
"She wasn't sleeping with you anymore," Snow says bluntly.

David sideglances at her.

The Huntsman's silence might as well be an admission.

"Was there someone else?" she asks.

He looks at her, with dark pained eyes, almost begging her to stop asking. "I don't know," he replies," after a long silence. "She doesn't talk to me..."

Snow nods. "But you are a smart man, you see things, you know a lot more than you are telling me. Was there someone else?"

The man shrugs. "There was always someone else. That never changed...she can't love anyone else but him..."

"Daniel," Snow observes quietly.

The Huntsman looks away. He nods slowly.

"Do you know if Regina was in search of a pure heart?" Snow asks.

The man frowns. "I don't know," he replies.

"Do you know where she hides her secrets? Whether there are secret chambers or crypts or secret realms..."

"I thought you found a secret chamber already. I certainly don't know where anything is...The Queen works alone..."

"Do you think she is still alive?" Snow asks quietly.

The man rubs his chest, right over his heart. He nods. "I think so," he replies, his voice hollow. "If she were dead, I would feel it..."

Snow nods. She turns to David. She is done asking questions.

"Where were you three days ago?" David asks.

"I was here. I'm always here," the Huntsman replies.

"Can anyone verify that?"

"Everyone," the Huntsman shrugs.

And then Snow does something unexpected. She places her hand on his shoulder. "You can leave, you know," she says softly. "You don't have to be here..."

He raises his eyes to meet her gaze. "I...It's been so long, I wouldn't know where to go," he says and his expression is so haunted, David feels sorry for him.

"Alright, we'll let you know if we have any more questions," David motions towards the door.

The Huntsman looks at them slowly. Then he turns around and exits the room.

David looks at Snow, his eyes wide open.
"Her ex lover and head of security?" he whispers. "He certainly knows more than he is letting on..."

Snow nods. "I think it might be a little more complicated than that," she replies.

"How?"

"I'm not sure..." Snow hesitates. "I thinks Regina might have his heart..."

"Do you mean that he is in love with her?" David frowns, not quite grasping what she said.

Snow shakes her head.

"His actual heart?" David gasps.

Snow nods. "Maybe? Do you see how he hesitates, how he seems vacant, like he's lost the will to resist?"

"What would that do to a person? If they were missing their heart?" David frowns

"I think the'd lose their free will," Snow explains. "The Queen would own them..."

David shudders at the thought. The more he learns about Queen Regina, the more he wonders whether she should be found.

And then they are both startled, because the Huntsman walks back in the room. He doesn't say anything right away, he just looks at Snow.

"Can I...may I speak to you in private for a minute, princess?"

David thinks that the Huntsman has this look in his eyes, like he is drowning and Snow might be the only one that can save him.

This is quite startling, having the Huntsman call her princess. No one does that anymore. Snow nods.

"I'll be right outside if you need me," Lieutenant Nolan exits the room.

"What is it?" Snow asks.

"Who is he?" the Huntsman asks, pointing to the door.

"My new partner," Snow frowns.

He doesn't reply he just looks at her face, trying to read her mind. "Is that all?" he says.

Snow glares at him. What exactly is he asking? "Is there something you wanted to add?" she tries to get the conversation back on track.

"Right," he says trying to get back to the subject. "Do you think the Queen is coming back? Do you think you will find her?"

Snow shrugs. "That's my job, I'll certainly do my best..." she replies.

"Snow," the Huntsman starts again, taking a deep breath and Snow watches him closely. He doesn't often call her by name. "If you find my heart..."
"She has your heart?" Snow whispers.

The huntsman nods.

"That's a crime you know. We can file a report and when she is found we can charge her with illegal heart possession. Force her to give your heart back to you...She will get prison time..."

"She is the Queen!" the Huntsman looks confused.

"She is not above the law," Snow explains.

"I just need my heart found, I do not want to press charges..."

"Where would she keep it? Do you know of her secret hiding places?"

The Huntsman shakes his head. "All she has to do is order my heart to forget..." he replies. "Maybe I know all her secret places but she ordered me to forget. She orders me to forget things all the time. I'm surprised she let me remember that she has my heart..."

"We will look for it," Snow promises.

"Thank you."

"Do you want the Queen found?" Snow asks.

The Huntsman touches his chest, looking away, a pained expression in his eyes. "I need her found," he rasps. "I feel like I'm in constant pain..."

Snow looks at him sympathetically. She can't imagine what that is like, missing your own heart.

"Have you tried seeing a healing fairy?" she asks, "or a therapist?"

He shakes his head.

"We'll do our best to find your heart but you really should make an official report..."

The Huntsman walks out of the room in a hurry.

Lieutenant Nolan is standing there, waiting for him.

"It says here that you've been in the Queen's service for the past eleven years, is that true?" he says pointing to the file with the list of the Queen's staff.

The huntsman nods.

"The whole time?"

"The whole time," the man replies.

Did we ever meet before? David wants to ask but he nods instead. He watches the Huntsman walk away. He can't help but think that he looks so familiar.

When the Lieutenant gets back in the room Snow seems lost in thought.

"Everything alright?" he asks.

Snow shakes her head. "It's just as I suspected. She has his heart. She's had it for years. And he
refuses to file a report. Which means he knows a lot more than he is allowed to say but he can't break her confidence even if he wants to..."

"We should have him watched then," David is picking up his mirror.

"I'll put him on bird watch. I promised him we would look for his heart..." Snow adds.

David is looking doubtful. "You know his heart is probably in Regina's secret chamber..."

Snow nods. "We are going to have to get back there eventually..."

"Sure, along with fifty knights carrying torches," he replies "definitely not on our own!"

"Right," Snow mumbles, thinking of how horrified and outraged Regina would be if she knew knight force officers and fairies were rummaging through her stuff in her secret chambers.

"How does that even work? Ripping out a heart?" David's voice pulls her out of her thoughts.

"It's rather simple really," Snow places her hand right on his chest without really thinking. "If I had magic I could just reach in pull out your heart, and you would be mine...you would have to do anything I asked..." Snow says and then their eyes lock. And they are both standing there, his hypothetical heart in her hand. And his real heart leaping inside his chest and he doesn't know if he is imagining things or if her cheeks look flushed too.

Lieutenant Nolan is an adult, a knight, an investigator... a small thing such a heart rip demonstration shouldn't affect him... shouldn't take his breath away, shouldn't send his mind spinning, should it? Except she is right there, green eyes still looking at him, fingers holding his imaginary heart, red lips curving up slightly...

Snow momentarily forgets what it was she was saying. Her heart beats faster. He isn't moving either, he seems entranced, fallen under her spell.

"Um, anyway, like that," she says looking away in a hurry, pulling her hand back..

"And you know this how?" he frowns.

"I saw Regina's mother do that once, when I was a little girl... I didn't quite grasp what she did back then..."

His eyes open wide and he stops to think for a minute.

"Snow..."

"Yes?"

"What is the Queen like?" he asks quietly.

Snow takes a deep breath. "Beautiful, charismatic, intense, a master manipulator, cold and calculating...I don't know..."

"Because she sounds truly evil," he replies.

"I don't know about evil," Snow looks away.

"She stole the Huntsman's heart," he replies dryly. Let alone how he treated you, he wants to add but he doesn't.
"Right," she sighs. "Yeah, you are probably right... let's talk to her handmaidens next..."

The servants do not have much to add.

Rose, Regina's lady in waiting looks terrified.

"I don't know, I don't know," is her answer to all of their questions. It's more like she is terrified of what will happen to her if the Queen comes back and finds out she cooperated with the knight force investigation.

"I really don't know..."

Elisa, Regina's handmaiden is trying hard to be helpful.

"Did you know that Regina was in search of a pure heart?" Snow asks.

"You mean, like a journey of self discovery? Eat pray love, sort of thing?"

"Not exactly..." Snow struggles to explain. "More like she was trying to find someone who had a pure heart..."

"What for?" Elisa asks and then her eyes open wide. "You mean an actual heart? Not a metaphorical heart, like a good person, but an actual physical heart?"

Snow nods.

And then Elisa looks terrified. "What do you think Regina is into?" she frowns. "You of all people should know she is a good person!"

"Is she a good person?" Snow asks quietly.

Elisa eyes open wide. "She has never been anything but fair and kind to me...that's all I know..."

Alina, the Queen's event coordinator is sobbing in her monogrammed handkerchief.

"This can't be happening," she says over and over, incapable of answering the simplest of questions. Every new question brings a fresh outburst of tears.

Rowena, who handles the Queen's press releases is stoic. She looks away, trying to reply to questions with as few words as possible.

"Have you worked for Regina a long time?" David starts.

"Yes," is all she replies.

"How long?"

"Nine..."

"Nine years? Nine months? Nine days?" Snow stares at her incredulously.

"Yes," the woman replies and Snow does her best not to glare.

Agnes, the woman in charge of Regina's wardrobe is pretty defiant. She seemed cooperative at first. Then David moves on with the harder questions.

"Do you know if the Queen was looking for a pure heart?" he asks, rubbing his knee.
"What my Queen is up to is none of your concern," she says over and over haughtily, her pale blue eyes sparkling.

"Don't you want the Queen found?" Lieutenant Nolan, replies incredulously. "Don't you want to help us?"

"Of course I want to help, but those questions are just insulting..."

"Are they?"

And Agnes looks away and doesn't cooperate any more.

Otis, one of the royal guards on duty the day she disappeared seems to be drunk.

"Have you been drinking?" Snow looks at him stunned.

"I took a couple of sips Ma'am, when I found that you wanted to question me. I get very nervous around authority figures..."

"You work for the Queen!" Snow observes.

Otis doesn't respond, he just hick ups.

Olive, Regina's intern who helps her with secretarial tasks tries to be helpful but she doesn't know much. She shows them Regina's appointment book, and all her engagements over the last few months.

"What about the meeting with King George?" David asks. "Had she planned that a while ago, or..."

"That wasn't actually planned ahead, no... Regina asked me to arrange it last week, she said something came up... I was surprised she asked me to handle it, I'm new around here..."

She doesn't know anything about the Queens' secret rooms, has no idea if Regina has been looking for a pure heart.

"If you think of anything," David hands her his card. The girl nods, grateful that this is over.

Snow looks out the window. She feels really tired.

David is going through their notes absentmindedly.

"It's getting late, let's go through Regina's financials tomorrow..."

Snow nods.

Once they are in the squad gourd David turns to Snow.

"Regina was looking for a pure heart, to bring Daniel back to life, right?"

"Right," Snow frowns, driving even faster.

"She has the Huntsman's heart at her disposal, why doesn't she use it?"

Snow pauses, her hands on the steering wheel of the gourd, thinking.

"Maybe his heart isn't pure enough," Snow speculates and then she slows down. "Or maybe, as twisted and problematic their relationship might be, she still can't bring herself to use his heart to
bring Daniel back... maybe she cares for him..."

David doesn't reply. He has a very hard time seeing Regina as anything but a stone cold villain.

"How strong would you say Regina's magical powers are?" he asks.

"I don't know," Snow shrugs. "I haven't spent any time with her in ten years..."

"Could she shapeshift?"

Snow thinks about this for a minute, then she turns the wheel right fast and the squad gourd screeches as it changes directions.

"Let's find out," she replies. "Let's pay the Dark One a visit."

He doesn't argue, but his hand is automatically on his dagger.

"Are you sure about this?" he asks. "Do we have something to trade for information?"

"Nothing comes to mind," Snow replies.

"And yet we are still going," he observes dryly.

"Are you afraid Lieutenant?" she asks.

"Of course," he replies. "I would be foolish not to..."

She sideglances at him. He is the perfect knight. Perfect uniform, excellent fighting stance, good interrogation skills, braver than most. She thinks she has him figured out, she thinks she knows what he'll do next. But then he catches her unaware, when he is earnest, admitting something like that, when he doesn't pretend. And she feels like she is not used to that. She is used to knights posturing, going out of their way to pretend they are better, to pretend they are fearless.

"Well, you dagger is not going to be much of a defense against the Dark One..." she replies.

"Don't I know it," he shrugs. "I'm still using it..."

"That's fair," she replies.

Rumpelstiltskin leaves on a dark mansion outside of the beaten path at the edge of the infinite forest.

Snow lifts up the heavy metal door knocker and raps on the large oak door three times.

David almost pulls her hand back. He doesn't want her talking to the Dark One. He doesn't feel like they have a solid plan. They should have something to offer in exchange...you do not go to Rumpelstiltskin's castle unless you have something you can bargain with. But Snow just knocked on the door without hesitation. Just like she walked into the Queen's secret chambers, just like she stormed into his hospital room. She does that a lot, he realizes. But there is no more time to think about Snow White because the door creaks and opens by itself and they walk inside.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Snow White and..." the Dark One starts talking from the darkest corner in the entry room, making both of them jump. The room is lit by three candles, and now as he walks forward his shadow looks really big, falling on the wall. He is wearing a jacket made of alligator skins, the dark hue matching his skin. He doesn't look entirely human.
"David Nolan," he interrupts.

"Oh, yes, yes of course..." the Dark One's smile is not at all reassuring. "Lieutenant Nolan! So glad to see you took care of that pesky knee injury. Took you long enough. Glad you are moving on. What can I do for you?"

David's hand is instantly on his sword. Snow shoots hims a warning glare. He needs to resist the urge to unsheathe his sword. How does the Dark One know about his knee? Why does he even care?

"We have a few questions," Snow starts.

"And I have a few answers," the Dark One laughs. "Though perhaps not the answers you seek..."

"We are here about Regina," Snow replies. She does not want to get tangled up in one of the Dark One's riddles.

"Oh, yes, yes, Regina the missing Queen," the Dark One makes a face and his voice rises playfully, his fingers dancing. "What about her?"

"I know you were her instructor when it came to using magic and I was wondering, if Regina wanted to, could she shapeshift?"

"If Regina wanted to, could she shapeshift?" the Dark One laughs. "Is the sky blue? Is the grass green? Could Prince James slay a dragon if he had a sword in his hand?" Rumpelstiltskin casts a quick glance at Lieutenant Nolan.

"What is that supposed to mean?" David asks.

"Can you?"

"Can I what?"

"Can you slay a dragon?"

"I don't know, I suppose if I had to...I'm not a dragon slayer..." David replies all confused, shifting his weight to his left leg. He knee keeps hurting. No, not actual pain, more like a ghost pain, a memory of pain, felt long ago.

"No, of course not..." the Dark One replies, a mischievous smile on his face. "Snow dear, have you noticed how king George doesn't have any pictures of his son around the castle? I wonder why that is..."

And then the Dark One twirls his fingers and they are both standing outside his mansion, next to the squad gourd, Rumpelstiltskin's large oak entry door firmly shut in their face.

"What was that?" David asks, running his fingers through his hair.

"That was the Dark One indicating that this interview is over. And yes," Snow replies. "The answer is yes, Regina can shapeshift. And then he implied you can slay dragons and I don't know what else..." she shakes her head, as she gets back into the gourd.

David sits next to her. "What does prince James's picture have to do with anything?"

Snow sighs. "I don't have the faintest clue," she replies as she steps into the squad gourd and then she steps on the gas and drives back to black knight force headquarters.
There is a festive tone inside the knight force headquarters.

Happy is there, hanging evergreen garlands around the office. "Are you as excited for the Winter ball as I am?" he asks them as soon as he sees them walk in.

"No," Snow replies rolling her eyes. "I'm a little preoccupied, trying to track down a missing Queen..."

"You can take a night off," Happy replies merrily, undaunted by her tone. "Aren't I right Nolan? How about you? Do you have a date for the Winter Ball?"

David smiles and follows Snow into their office. She drops her notes on her desk, and pulls out her magic mirror.

"Do you want to..." he offers a half smile. "Snow, would you like to go to the Winter Ball with me?"

Snow is staring at her magic mirror. A quick name search of Prince James turns up no pictures. "I'm not going to any ball," she replies absentmindedly and then she lifts up her eyes to meet his, as soon as she realizes what he just did.

Wait, did he just ask her to the ball? Did he mean it? Did she just turn down an invitation before she even realized what it was? He is going to say as friends isn't he? As colleagues? He is going to add as friends, he is going to, he has to...he is going to say as friends. Even if he doesn't say it, she is pretty certain that's what he means. Of course that's what he means...Except he doesn't. He is looking at her, smiling. She still expects him to back track, take this back somehow, tell her she misunderstood.

"If you change your mind..." he says instead.

And Snow doesn't know what to say next, she doesn't know what to do with his eyes, still blue, his lips still smiling at her, or her traitorous fluttering heart, pounding so hard inside her chest.

She is Snow White. She is Snow White. That means the knights avoid her like the plague, hoping to never be assigned to work with her. When she is not solving cases, she is at home with Emma too exhausted to do much. She doesn't go on dates. She doesn't go to balls. She certainly doesn't go on balls with handsome blue eyed lieutenants that look like they belong in the bachelor edition of Enchanted men weekly. That just doesn't happen.

And it's the end of the day, at the moment she looks like she could use a bath or three naps, her carefully pinned hair is slowly uncoiling, coming apart, she has ink stains on her fingers and one on her shirt. Of course Lieutenant Nolan still manages to look like he did this morning, his shirt void of wrinkles, his boots still spotless, but that really is beside the point. When was the last time someone asked her out, just like that, without any reservation? Without holding back?

Her heart is still beating fast, and this makes no sense, because she is a grown woman, not a teenage princess, thrilled to be getting invited to her first ball. She glances at the cuckoo clock on the wall. It is getting late.

"I really should get home," she blurts out and he nods, stepping out of her way.

"Good night Snow," his voice still soft, hopeful.

"Goodnight," she mumbles as she walks away.
Emma is all excited when Snow arrives home. She is in her unicorn pajamas, sitting on the couch, and Ruby is brushing her hair.

"Hi Mom! Where is David? " Emma asks.

"David? I don't know, probably on his way home," Snow replies taking off her boots.

"Is he not coming over today?"

"What?" Snow frowns. "No, he isn't...he doesn't come over every day, does he? I'm sure he is busy, there were no emergencies today...no reason for him to come over, he doesn't just come over every day..." Snow rambles.

Ruby puts the hairbrush down and raises her eyebrows. Snow looks away. That sounded incredibly defensive, didn't it?

Emma looks disappointed. Then she brightens up. "Mom, my book is boring, won't you come tell me a story," she says tugging on her mother's arm.

"Did you already brush your teeth?"

Snow follows Emma to her bedroom, blows off all the candles in Emma's room except for the one on her nightstand. She climbs on Emma's bed, and leans her back on the head board. "What sort of story would you like?"

"A princess story," Emma replies closing her eyes.

She thinks for a minute. Her eyes fall on the wallpaper above Emma's bed. There is pictures of heroes fighting dragons, princesses sword fighting, dwarves dancing in the forest, fairies sprinkling fairy dust, goblins doing somersaults in large green meadows...

"Have you told her anything about her father?" yesterday's conversation with David echoes in her mind.

"What would I even tell her? Where would I even start?"

"The truth..."

"What truth?"

"What you already know..."

"I don't know anything!"

"Yes you do! You know a lot!"

"What exactly do you think that I know?"

What does she know?

"This princess story is sort of true," Snow starts quietly. "Sort of true, because the princess who lived it lost her memories, and the only things she has to go on are dreams and shadows and clues she left for herself in the dark..."

Emma's eyes open now. She watches her mother's face thoughtfully.
"Close your eyes...think sleepy thoughts..." Snow caresses her daughter's hair. "Once upon a time, there was a princess that could speak to birds and lived in big castle..." Snow's voice is soft as she is grasping for truths and facts, anything she can tell her Emma. "And she met a boy, and she loved him very much..."

"Did she kiss him? Emma looks both intrigued and disgusted.

"She definitely kissed him," Snow stifles her smile. "And then something must have gone very very wrong, because there were people after them that had dark magic and they thought that the only way to be together was to run away together and hide in a cabin deep inside the forest..."

Emma's eyes are open again.

"Close your eyes sweetheart...so they hid in the forest and they thought they could keep each other safe and they thought they'd live happily ever after...the princess got pregnant and she had a baby girl that had magic running through her veins... And then someone found them...took their memories away...took the boy away and in the end the princess was left with her beautiful magical child and no memory of the boy she loved..." Snow is holding back tears.

"She should ask the birds..." Emma yawns. She is sounding sleepy now. "I bet they know who he was..."

"She did...but birds don't remember that far back, they remember a month back, maybe two months, and by the time the royals left the princess alone long enough so she got a chance to talk to the birds they'd already forgotten...You see, when the princess was found in a cabin in the woods with her baby, they carried her off to the castle. Then everybody showed up at the castle to ask her questions, and there were reporters, and knight force investigators and healing fairies and doctors and nurses and royals and councilors...and they were saying terrible things about the boy she loved... She didn't want to find him while they were there watching her every move...she wanted to find him on her own...They wouldn't leave her alone, not even for a minute, they were afraid she might run away again..."

Emma nods.

"How did she find him?"

"She didn't...not yet. The princess grew up to become an investigator... and she is always looking for the boy she loved, her baby's father...and one day maybe she will find him..." Snow can't go on, there are tears streaming down her face. She wipes her eyes in a hurry and looks at her daughter, but Emma is already asleep.

"I'm sorry I lost him, baby girl," she sobs softly. "I'm sorry I forgot..."

When David steps inside his apartment, Wilby welcomes him, wagging his tale, barking at the door.

"Ready for a walk?" he asks surprised, because Wilby is quite old now, he is not usually this excited about heading outside. "Hold on," he reaches for the dog's leash. Ordinarily, after an eventful day like today, he'd need his cane in order to walk Wilby, but not today. Because his knee is healed now, it will never bother him again. David and Wilby walk off the road into the forest. There are so many stars out tonight, and the trees are dancing around him, moved by a northern wind. Wilby runs next to him almost pulling him further into the evergreens.

"Can you slay a dragon?" the Dark One asked, and he no doubt meant something, though David
still doesn't know what. He walks his dog into the night, wondering if he is ready to let go of the five missing years, ready to move on, ready to accept that he will never know what happened, during that time.

Snow is sitting on her bed cross-legged, in a camisole top and pajama bottoms, her magic mirror on her lap. She should be sleeping, but she is doing research instead. She needs to drown herself in her work, she needs to put all thought of her own personal riddle out of her mind. It's not like she can solve it tonight. She'd rather focus on Rumpelstiltskin's riddle instead.

"Show me Prince James, of the Southern Kingdom," she tries again, trying to figure out the meaning of Rumple's mysterious clue. And while the mirror has article after article full of information about the brave prince who died eleven years ago, it is surprisingly short on pictures. There are pictures of him as a child of course, official royal portraits, James sitting next to king George and Queen Helena, blond hair, blue eyes wide open, cute little royal outfit on with red cape, but not any pictures of him as an adult.

"Show me articles about prince James slaying dragons," Snow tries again.

"VICTORY!" the title of the Enchanted Daily reads. "Prince James of the Southern kingdom killed the dragon that has ravaged Midas' territory. King Midas is grateful promising great reward."

Prince James, when asked by our reporter if he was afraid when he encountered the dragon, in a rare show of honesty he said "of course. I would be foolish not to..."

Snow reads that phrase again and again.

"Of course, I'd be foolish not to..."

It's a coincidence, it has to be, she tries to tell herself, even as she knows after years of solving cases that there is no such thing as a coincidence. There is a picture on the next page, a blurry photograph of five men, looking exhausted yet triumphant above the lifeless body of a redscale dragon.

"Enlarge picture please," Snow asks the magic mirror. And there he is, the second man from the left smiling back at her. Snow feels so shocked she gasps audibly.

"What is this?" she whispers, running her finger across prince James' face. "Who are you?"

Ordinarily Snow would light a candle on her nightstand and spend the rest of the night trying to figure this out, browsing through article after article, compiling a list of people she should question. Ordinarily Snow would do everything on her own. But things have changed now, haven't they? Snow has a partner she trusts, this will be a lot easier if they are both looking into it together, she doesn't need to work through the night alone.

"Call Lieutenant Nolan," she asks the magic mirror without really thinking this through.

Of course she should sleep on this, try to understand it better, of course she shouldn't call him this late and tell him what she found. But Snow is missing memories herself, and she know what is like. If someone had a missing clue to her past she'd want to know right away.

"Snow?" the Lieutenant's voice startles her. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything is fine," she replies in a hurry. "Sorry to call you at this late hour...did I wake you?"

"No, I'm still up. What's going on?"
"I might have stumbled on something... I can't really explain over the phone... Do you think you could come over?"

A brief pause. "I'm on my way..."
"Call Lieutenant Nolan," Snow asks the magic mirror without really thinking this through.

Of course she should sleep on this, try to understand it better, of course she shouldn't call him this late and tell him what she found. But Snow is missing memories herself, and she know what is like. If someone had a missing clue to her past she'd want to know right away.

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A brief pause. "I'm on my way..."

David knocks on Snow's door, Wilby wagging his tail excitedly next to him. Snow opens the door, a camisole top and pajama bottoms, green eyes shining brightly. She is looking effortlessly beautiful, and David holds his breath. He has to look away, he finds the way her unruly curls falls on her bare shoulders very distracting.

"What's going on?" he tries to say but he is interrupted by Wilby who whimpers and rushes to her.

Snow looks at hims surprised. She kneels to the ground and she smiles. "Well, hello to you too, boy, did you miss me?"

David watches Wilby who lays on the ground content as Snow rubs his belly. And there is no rational explanation why his dog is so utterly taken with Snow White, but he dismisses that thought because they have more pressing matters at hand.

"Come on," she smiles, "let's see if we can get you a treat..."

David follows Wilby and Snow into the kitchen.

There is a faint burned meatloaf smell so Ruby must have cooked again. Snow places a half charred meatloaf slice on a plate in front of Wilby who devours it enthusiastically.

"What's going on?" David asks.

Snow hesitates. "This has nothing to do with the Queen," she starts.

"What is this about?"

"I'll show you," she says and she walks into her office motioning him to follow her. The room is still in disarray, files upon files of cases on her desk, on the chairs, on top of her filing cabinet, and in most of the floor. Snow picks up a stack of papers and empties a chair for him. By now he is pretty certain whatever she found has to do with James Charming, a clue or a hint of her missing year. He fully expects her to unlock the closet next, the one where she keeps all her research, the information she doesn't want anyone, not even Emma to see. But she doesn't. Instead she sits on top of her desk, next to a stack of files that threaten to topple on the floor and watches him closely.
"How long..." she hesitates. "Your memory gap. What is the last thing you remember? Before you woke up?"

"This is about me?" he frowns. This is completely unexpected.

Snow nods.

"You found something about my missing years?"

"I might have," her voice so soft, it might as well be a whisper. She is worried about him, he realizes, worried about how he will react when she tells him what she found.

"Alright," he nods. "I'm missing about five years. I was recruited by the knight force. I was done with basic training. And that's when my mind gets fuzzy and I wake up in the hospital..." he rubs his knee, even though it doesn't really hurt. It's more like a hint, memory of pain.

"You were recruited?"

He offers a rueful smile. "Look, I came from a sheep farm in the Eastern Valley. Nobody would have looked at me back then and thought I was knight force material... We were always broke... There was a scuffle with a local warlord who demanded more and more money from us... money we couldn't spare. So I stood up to her. I didn't have any training, yet somehow I got them to back off. The local knight force found out. They were impressed or they were really short on manpower, I don't even know... they asked if I was interested in joining. We were about to lose the farm anyway, I thought that a steady wage would help even things out..."

"We?" she asks quietly.

"My mother and I. She passed sometime during the missing years... I have no memory of it."

"I'm so sorry," Snow whispers.

David nods and he looks away. It's been a while since he's thought of that part of his missing years right now, the horror of going back to the farm to find the farmhouse burned to the ground, his mother's shallow grave under the oak tree. The neighbors ignoring him, unwilling to discuss what happened. The old newspapers referring to the event as a tragic accident.

Funny, he thought he'd made peace with all that, he'd made peace with not knowing.

Snow pulls out her magic mirror and points to the picture of the screen.

It's a picture of five men smiling above the slain body of a redscale dragon.

"What exactly am I looking at?" he frowns, so Snow enlarges the picture and there he is, the second man from the left looking at the camera. And he might look tired and have some dragon blood smeared on his face, but the likeness is unmistakable.

"We killed a dragon," he mumbles uncertain of the significance of the event. Then his eyes open wide as he reads the description of the photograph.

From the left, sergeant Thomas, prince James of the Southern kingdom, private Thorn, private Sharp and private Fox.

He looks up, completely stunned, speechless. He glances at the picture again.

"What are you saying...-" he hesitates, looking at this picture of himself.
"I have no idea what I'm saying," she replies quietly. "Only that the Dark One suggested there was a reason that there were no pictures of the prince of the Southern kingdom on record, and suggested that prince James could slay a dragon. He wanted us to find this picture...and look there is more..." she says pointing to the quote form the prince in the article.

Prince James, when asked by our reporter if he was afraid when he encountered the dragon, in a rare show of honesty he said "of course. I would be foolish not to..."

"Alright, so the prince was honest, I'm not sure what that proves," he counters.

"David! Those were your exact words this evening, when I asked you if you were afraid of the Dark One," she points out quietly.

He stands up in a hurry. He'd like to pace around the room, but there are about five stacks of boxes overflowing with case files blocking his path. He sits back down.

"I am not prince James," he frowns.

"Well, no, of course not, David" she replies softly "I didn't think you were, but sometimes royals employ doppelgangers, people that can look and act like them, ready to take their place in case something goes wrong..."

He nods slowly, trying to wrap his mind around this new information. "That makes sense," he says quietly. "Almost."

She nods. "Do you recognize the men that are with you?"

"Yes, most of them. Sergeant Thomas is dead, he got stabbed in an altercation with pirates, Harris and Thorn were given assignments to the ends of the realm, as was I," he replies, "after I woke up..."

Snow nods. "Once the prince died, they had no further use for you," she remarks. "Or...-

"Or?" he looks at her eyes wide open.

She wonders if he is terrified of what she might come up with next.

"Or they brought you in once the prince passed, to finish whatever the prince was supposed to finish and then they announced his death..." she explains, pointing to the great reward that king Midas' offered the Southern kingdom for slaying the dragon.

"Five years is a long time," he replies.

"Official date of the prince's death is...hmm... Hard to tell, maybe more like three and a half years as a prince..." Snow pulls Lieutenant Nolan's records and compares them to the anniversary of the prince's death. "Maybe you were in a coma for a long time...Funny, you woke up exactly a month after I was found...we are lost memory buddies..."

He doesn't reply. He is looking bewildered, staring at the old newspaper article.

"I'm sorry, I should have asked if you even wanted to know, I was wrong to just spring this on you, in the middle of the night," Snow mumbles. "Do you need a moment? Can I get you some tea?"

He looks up surprised. "What? No! Don't apologize, you solved my memory riddle, that is incredible! I mean, don't get me wrong, it's a lot to take in, but still...-"
"You didn't ask me to interfere!" she still looks so apologetic.

"I didn't. But I didn't ask you not to either. I mean, I held onto an injury from my past, because that is all I had to hold on to, if that's not a cry for help, I don't know what is..."

Snow offers a half smile. She still looks so worried.

"Listen, finding out that I impersonated some prince, or killed a dragon...it's alright... These are all things I can live with...compared to the alternatives..."

"The alternatives?"

He takes a deep breath. "My assignment was classified... that is what they call it when they ask you to do things outside the law. Best case scenario going undercover to uncover a dreamshade trader, or spying on someone, worse case..." He takes a deep breath. "My biggest fear is that I'll be assigned a murder case now, and as I solve it I realize that I was the one that committed the murder in the first place...as part of my classified mission..."

Snow places her hand on his arm. "It'd be very hard to picture you as some kind of soulless assassin," she replies.

"This is a lot weirder and a lot better than I anticipated," he shrugs. "I can't possibly thank you enough!"

Snow shrugs. "It's nothing," she mumbles.

"No, it certainly isn't nothing, it is a very big deal!" he replies.

Snow doesn't know what to do with herself. The perfect Lieutenant Nolan is in the disaster zone that is her office, his casual clothes just as perfect as his work clothes, not a hair out of place, except the small scar on his chin, his eyes still blue, and he is looking at her with so much gratitude.

"Well, you are very welcome," she smiles back.

"That's why he called me boy," he blurts out.

"What?" Snow is confused.

"King George, he kept calling me 'my boy' and I thought he was trying to intimidate me, but no..."

Snow's eyes flash in understanding. "You are right! I thought the king looked sad when he first saw you and I couldn't understand why... So what do you think happened? Once you woke up with your memories wiped? They sent you away, at the edge of the realm hoping that eventually people would forget what the prince looked like?"

"It worked, didn't it?" he shrugs. "They erased almost every single picture of the prince too..."

"How long were you there for?"

"Four years. Since they wouldn't tell me what I did previously, and there wasn't much to do at the edge of the realm where I was stationed I asked for permission to look into a couple of cold cases. Turns out I was a good investigator. I solved both cases then they brought me back..."

Snow nods. It makes sense. It would be hard to ignore a good knight force investigator, one that managed to close cold cases and let him stay in the edge of the realm forever.
"Could you... never mind, it's getting late," he hesitates looking at the cuckoo clock on the wall.

"What is it?" she asks, her voice so soft, almost a whisper.

And he doesn't know how much more of this he can take. Snow, Princess Snow White, the most famous investigator in the enchanted forest just casually stumbled on the riddle that was his past and solved it. And now she is looking at him all worried, concerned she might hurt him, her voice so soft, so cautious. And she is beautiful and kind, she is nothing like she was supposed to be, and her eyes are piercing green, making his heart pace faster. He should get out of her office now. Now. He doesn't need to bother her with anymore of his issues, not tonight anyway.

"David?" Snow's hand reaches for his arm.

"Could you help me make a timeline?" he asks apologetically. Because now that he knows who he was for the last five years, now he can look at every single thing he did, not as himself but as the prince. And it would help if he didn't face these actions alone.

"Of course," she replies, getting up. She wipes the whiteboard behind her desk clean and then she pulls out her magic mirror.

For the next two hours they work out a timeline. Everything that prince James did according to the tabloids and newspaper articles ten years before he died. Then they compare it with the time Lieutenant Nolan got recruited. And there is a lot of useless random information on Prince James of the Southern Kingdom. He had several rumored relationships, turned down wedding alliances, went on endless vacations, slayed monsters and beasts that didn't necessarily need slaying, they weren't bothering anyone, he formed a rather predatory alliance with the giants, he killed a dragon and got engaged to Katherine, King Midas' daughter. The beautiful princess of the Western kingdom. A relationship that got interrupted by the prince's untimely death.

"Right there," Snow points out on the timeline. Five months after the giants, three months before the engagement "I think that's when you took over..."

"How can you tell?" he frowns.

"Prince James surprised everyone by spending the day in the orphanage." Snow reads 'Enchanted Men Weekly', out loud. "He played with the children and promised to contribute to the fundraiser. Looks like out prince is growing up. Why he might even want a family of his own soon. Get ready ladies!"

And when David stares at her blankly she adds "Oh come on, don't you see? They used to joke that prince James is allergic to children and then he spends a whole day in the orphanage? That wasn't him, that was you! It seems like the prince went though a drastic personality change," she observes. "He went from being an arrogant and entitled obnoxious brat to a kind and intelligent person!"

He looks at her, wondering if she realizes that she just gave him quite a compliment. She is quite serious too, she means every word.

"And right there," she points at the timeline, "right there it looks like they decided that it was over, it was time to announce that the prince was gone and let you go..."

Three days before the wedding the prince had a hunting accident and died, or so the official statement reads.

"Three days before the wedding," he muses. "That's cutting it a bit close..."
You are lucky they didn't kill you for real, she thinks but she keeps that thought to herself. The official statement reads that there will be a close casket funeral, because of the prince's gruesome injuries. For all he knows that casket was empty. It's all very surreal, but he does shudder when he see the picture of the coffin. And that's it. His timeline of it anyway. Now he knows.

"Still missing about a year and a half," he observes.

"Yeah...once they announced that the prince was dead, no one recorded you every move..."

It is a lot to take in. He stares at the timeline for a while, this whole other life, this person he doesn't recognize. Not at all what he expected.

Snow hands him a cup of tea. He never even heard her step out of the room.

"Thank you, for doing this with me..." he says looking at her.

"Is this enough?" she asks. "I think whatever you do you should continue as normal. Just in case they are keeping tabs on you...But, if you need to know more I would be happy to interview Thorn, Sharp and Fox. I'd make sure they didn't suspect it had anything to do with you..."

"No," David shakes his head. "This is enough..."

"If you change your mind..."

He nods. "Thank you..." he looks so very grateful.

"Don't mention it," she says her hand on his arm. "Besides. You are helping me with my case..."

"Of course..." he says, "Anything you need..." and then he snaps a picture of the time line with his magic mirror and he gets up in a hurry. "I should go..."

Snow glances at the cuckoo clock on the wall.

"It's two 'o clock in the morning," she replies and "Wilby is actually asleep on Emma's bed... and the bed in the guestroom is still made..."

David frowns. "I can't keep doing this to you. I can't keep staying here..."

"Why not? You make a mean grilled cheese sandwiches and you play magical scrabble..." she teases.

And then before she gets to finish her sentence, his arms are wrapped around her. Snow hugs him back.

"Thank you," he whispers and she is pretty certain his cheeks are damp. He disappears into her guestroom and Snow heads to her bedroom.

Alone in the dark, Snow is still awake. She can't stop thinking how a week ago the thought of having a partner made her feel uneasy and angry. And now, after just a few days working with David, the thought of closing this case and going back to working alone makes her heart fill with dread.

She hesitates then she whispers "Eastern valley, properties owned by David Nolan."

One item shows on the screen. It's a small plot of land, nothing more. There used to be a farmhouse and a sheep pen and a barn but then there was a fire. Snow's eyes open wide.
She looks up old news stories, trying to piece things together. There is a story, a small blurb about a fire in the eastern valley, and then there is the obituary of Ruth Nolan. Survived by David Nolan, son. That's all. Snow looks at the black and white picture of the kind woman smiling back at her. Ruth Nolan, David's mother.

Just like David said, this all happened during the end of the five missing years. And David wasn't important like Prince James, there weren't reporters asking about his every move, no detailed descriptions, no intense coverage, no exclusive interviews. Nothing. Just a whisper of grief, a brief mention on the back page.

Well, David is important, Snow thinks. He is strong and kind and smart, he is a good investigator and they had no right to take his past away from him like they did. They had no right. And Snow finds herself increasingly angry with the White knight force and their tales of classified missions, and use of doppelgangers for a spoiled prince. She is angry that the news coverage disappeared the moment they announced James'death. Because David deserved better. He deserves better. He deserves to know what happened next.

Snow closes her mirror and lays back on her bed. She closes her eyes. There are no current taxes owed on David's small lot in the eastern valley, which means he faithfully pays every year, for a small lot that is worth next to nothing, a small piece of dirt he is holding on to. Just like she holds onto Mary Margaret Blanchard's cabin in the middle of the forest. She falls asleep thinking that in some ways the perfect Lieutenant Nolan and herself are very much alike.

David is sitting on his bed, in Snow's guestroom. He rubs his knee a couple of times, even though it doesn't really hurt anymore. It is such a relief to have a general idea of what happened in his missing years. And yet when he thinks about the missing memories, what he feels is this intense soul gnawing loss.

Something happened in the missing years, something life changing and important, something he didn't want to give up when his stint as a prince was over. Or maybe something happened after he was no longer a prince...

Could it be that he misses his fiance? He finds his magic mirror and he says "Show me Catherine, the princess of the Eastern kingdom."

Catherine's face appears on the screen accompanied by her husband Frederick and her two children. He searches her face, trying hard to remember her. Her hair is blond her eyes are blue and however beautiful she is, he feels nothing. He doesn't recognize her.

"My beloved subjects," she addresses the crowds and David cringes. He pauses the video instantly. He cannot imagine ever liking someone who would address the crowds in such a condescending manner.

"Show me articles about Catherine commenting on the death of prince James," he asks.

There is a ten year old interview of Catherine smiling sadly at the camera. "I will forever be grateful to James for saving my Frederick. He was a true hero. James, if you can hear me, wherever you are, I will never forget you," she whispers, her eyes teary, blowing a kiss into the air, her hand on her heart. "You will be missed..."

It's almost as if she knows that the man who was the prince is still alive, out there somewhere, David thinks.

It's not likely that it's Catherine, the one he is missing, but if not Catherine then who?
David closes his eyes. Regardless of the shocking revelations of the night, he still has a case to solve tomorrow. A case he has to solve with Snow White. He lays down on his bed and closes his eyes.

Snow White. And at the thought of his first encounter with Snow, Snow dismissing his knights, Snow saying "Rule number one, Lieutenant. I get to look at everything first," he closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep with a smile.

Snow wakes up unusually early in the morning. She showers and gets dressed in a hurry, her hair still wet. She steps out in the living room to see Lieutenant Nolan already up, drinking a cup of coffee, looking out the window in her living room. Wilby shakes his tail as she enters the room and rushes towards her.

"Good morning," she says careful to keep her voice quiet, petting the dog gently. She really doesn't want Emma to wake up, not this early.

"It's snowing," David says pointing at the snowflakes falling down gently on the ground. The snowbells on her front porch are already covered in a fresh layer of snow.

Snow feels a surge of excitement.

"I love the first snow of the season," she whispers standing next to him by the window.

"Me too," he smiles. The very first day after his knee is healed and he wakes up in Snow's cottage, the world looking new and fresh, covered in snow.

Everything is changing, everything is moving on.

Snow looks towards Emma's bedroom. "School is probably going to be closed today."

"Does Emma like snow days?"

"Loves them. She'll probably be disappointed that I can't stay home and play though," Snow shrugs.

"I should go," he says quietly. "Thank you so much, Snow White, I'll see you at work..." and then he steps quietly out of her front door, Wilby trailing behind him, feet crunching on the fresh snow.

Snow watches them disappear in the magic bean portal and then she leans against the window watching the snow fall gently to the ground. The revelations of last night still weighing heavily in her mind.

Lieutenant Nolan was a prince for a while, visiting orphanages and battling dragons. That is a lot to process. She is not the only former royal working on Regina's case. Snow pushes her thoughts away and looks at her cuckoo clock. Nova should be here any minute. She needs to get ready for work.

Turns out that the Queen's financials are just a complicated as everything else in her life. Snow half suspects that the Queen kept her ledgers barely legible just to mess with her, as if she knew one day Snow would be pouring over them, trying to locate her.

"We are going to have to hire a forensic financial analyst, aren't we?" David asks, frowning over some old receipts.

Snow shrugs. "Probably. And audit Regina's treasurer..."
She stares at the page in front of her.

"Alright," he starts. "At first glance the castle's finances seem to be in order. Every expense accounted for, there are receipts for everything...there is no hidden costs, no secret accounts, she is not funneling any money to any offshore accounts. No mysterious debts..."

Snow is reading the dressmaker invoice. Regina spends enough money on dresses to feed a small country.

"Her gowns are embroidered with precious stones," Snow notes. "If she wanted to make herself disappear and needed money, all she had to do was rip some emeralds off her dress... We need to check her closet. See if any dresses or jewels are missing..."

David nods. "It wouldn't be easy for Regina to fence the jewels herself," he observes. "Would she ask help from one of her servants? A royal guard perhaps?"

"Even if she got someone to sell the jewels for her, it would be hard to find a buyer..." Snow mumbles.

"I know a girl, a fairy to be exact... she can give me a list of people who wouldn't shy away from trading stolen jewels..."

Snow nods. "Call her," she replies.

The Queen's treasurer is coming in to talk to them in a couple of hours and the fairy David wants to talk to is unavailable at the moment.

Snow is still pouring over the Queen's financial records when David interrupts.

"Look, there isn't much more we can do at the moment, you should go to lunch."

"Go to lunch?" Snow frowns.

"Go home, have a snowball fight with Emma then come back when the Queen's treasurer is here..." he suggests.

Snow hesitates. Emma would love nothing more but still.

"Don't worry," he smiles. "I won't find the Queen while you are gone, I promise..."

Two weeks ago if someone she worked with had suggested she took a long lunch while they went over the case without her Snow would have been so suspicious. That goes her very fundamental first rule. She gets to look at everything first. And yet David is different somehow. He is being quite sincere. There is no hidden agenda here.

"Go on. Build a snowman. I'll call you if anything comes up..." he adds handing her two magic beans.

Snow hesitates. She looks at him closely. He is freshly saved, his clothes are impeccable as always, but he looks tired. And there are five boxes and three folders overflowing with Regina's financials on his desk and Snow has this sudden irrational fear that the boxes are going to tumble over and crush him somehow.

She watches him comparing Regina's files of receipts with her expense accounts she can't help but think that she can't leave him here, alone.
"Come with me," she offers quietly. "You've already gone over this twice, you deserve a break too... When was the last time you played in the snow?"

David looks up surprised. "What?"

"When was the last time you had fun in the snow Lieutenant?" Snow is smiling playfully.

"I don't know, it's probably been years..."

"Come with me!"

"I...um...alright," he offers a half smile.

Snow's cottage is covered in fresh snow. The moment they walk in the house a very excited Emma rushes towards them. She is already wearing her snow boots, she is struggling with her gloves.

"Mom! David!"

"Ready to play?" Snow laughs because Emma is practically jumping with excitement. "I have just enough time to build a snowman!"

"Yes! I want to build a snowman and maybe a snow fort and a snow castle..." Emma bubbles up with excitement.

"Give me a minute to find my gloves," Snow rushes to her room. When she comes back she has a long scarf wrapped around her neck, gloves, a knit hat.

"Ready!" she smiles.

"I'll have lunch ready for when you get back," Nova offers.

Turns out Emma is more interested in using her magic wand to create small snowstorms and attack them than she is of actually building a snowman. She is more of a warrior than a builder. While Snow piles up fresh snow to build a snowman Emma throws small snow storms and snowballs at David who answers in kind, bombarding Emma with endless snowballs. And then Hansel and Gretel show up, bundled up in long scarves and gloves, both of them ready for action. They gang up against David who still manages to hold his own for the most part. In the end he calls for a truce. A truce that doesn't last long. There are snow balls and snow angels and it takes both Snow's and David's collective efforts to build a snowman since they are both constantly under attack.

The snowman complete, Snow takes a step back to admire their work.

David places two branches for arms, three acorns for buttons then he takes off his scarf and places it around the snowman's neck.

"He is handsome fellow," he observes.

"He is perfect!" Emma claps her gloved hands. "Take a picture!"

David pulls out his magic mirror while first the children and then Snow and Emma pose next to the snowman.

And then Emma tugs on his hand. "You have to be in the picture too David," she smiles at him.

Snow snaps a picture of David and Emma making faces next to the snowman.
"Alright, kiddo, we have to eat and get back to work..."

"Can I play some more Mom pleaseeeeee!" Emma looks at Snow with large pleading eyes.

"Aren't you really cold?" Snow asks.

"Pretty pleaseeeeee!"

It's so hard to say no to Emma.

"If Nova doesn't mind keeping an eye on you out here in the cold," Snow replies..

Nova doesn't mind, the children go back to their snow games, Snow and David head back to the cottage.

Nova magics hot chocolate and sandwiches.

Snow shivers in front of the fire.

"How can they stay out there so long and not freeze," she muses.

David laughs and takes a bite of his sandwich.

"This is really good, thank you!" he tells Nova who is watching the children through the window.

Nova laughs watching the children play. "Emma and Gretel have Hansel backed into a corner," she observes.

"I know the feeling," David replies, with mock terror and Snow laughs.

Snow walks closer to the window.

Emma waves her wand and a smaller looking snowman shows up. Emma places her scarf on it. Then she twirls her wand around and there is another snowman, next to the smaller snowman.

"It's a snow family," Emma explains to her friends. "It's a snow mom and a snow daughter, and that's the snow dad but he doesn't remember them," she points to the original snowman Snow and David built, standing further away. The one with David"s scarf wrapped around his neck.

Snow covers her mouth. Looks like Emma took her little bedtime story to heart.

"How does he not remember them?" Hansel asks.

"Snow magic," Emma explains with the air if an expert.

"How do we break his spell?" Gretel asks, her eyes wide open.

"A snow tornado!" Emma replies brightly and then she twirls her wand and snowflakes are falling on her estranged snow family. And then Emma, Hansel and Gretel are back throwing snowballs at each other and Emma is laughing loudly.

Snow turns to see David standing next to her. He places his hand on her shoulder and doesn't say a word.

Back at knightforce headquarters Sidney Glass is going over the Queen's financial records with Snow and David.
"Everything is in order, the Queen isn't hiding money in off shore accounts," he replies glaring at them indignant. "If my Queen was to hear such baseless accusations coming out of your mouth..." he is directing his rage mostly at Snow.

"I am asking questions. Not accusing Regina of anything..." Snow fires back.

"My Queen would not engage in illegal activities, you of all people should know that!" Sidney proclaims.

"Your Queen was engaging in plenty of illegal activities, one could argue that some of them constitute impeachable offenses!" Snow replies. "There is no use hiding that from us, we already know..."

Sidney is flustered. "Show me a monarch that didn't have to make tough choices for the good of the kingdom and I'll show you a King or Queen that didn't care enough!" he replies defiantly.

"Enough!" Snow is losing her patience. "The fact that the Queen didn't have any offshore accounts doesn't prove much. All she had to do was grab some jewels from one of her dresses and she would be set for life!"

The treasurer seems to be struggling to come back with a good retort.

"That's it, isn't it?" Lieutenant Nolan intervenes. "She took some jewels and disappeared, that is why you are not too worried about finding her? Because if I were in your place and my Queen was missing, I tell you there wasn't a stone I wouldn't turn or an answer I would hold back. I would want my Queen found!"

Sidney Glass looks stricken. "I want her found," he replies. "I do...but..."

"But what?" Snow asks.

"Some of the jewels..." Sidney Glass looks away.

"Some of the jewels..." Snow tries to convince him to continue his sentence.

"Some of the jewels," he starts again and he looks around to make sure no one is listening "aren't real," he whispers.

"The jewels are fake?" Snow's eyebrows shoot up. She didn't see this coming.

"Not fake!" the man protests too loudly. "Never use this word," he says. "Not fake. Magicked!"

"So they look real but they wouldn't stand a standard test of authenticity. She couldn't even sell them at the pawnstore," David replies.

"She couldn't use the jewels to get away then," Snow says quietly.

Sidney Glass shakes his head. "Can I trust on your discretion?" he asks.

"Wait!" David interrupts. "What about the dressmaker's bills, she paid top prices for dresses with magicked jewels?"

Sidney Glass throws his hands up in the air. Must they notice everything? Must they? Are any of his Queen's secrets safe?

"She asked the dressmaker to inflate the prices? What for?" Snow is trying to sound calm and not
threatening.

"Just in case," Sidney Glass replies.

"Just in case what?"

"Just in case..."

"Yes?" Snow looks at him impatiently.

"If she ever needed emergency cash she could claim a couple of dresses were stolen and..." He is not going to spell it out for them.

"Insurance fraud?" David looks at the treasurer incredulously. "That's what this is about?"

"Please, keep your voice down," Sidney Glass is looking distraught. "When someone like the Queen uses a little white lie to inflate the value of a jewel...who is to say that it is actually fraud..."

"Everyone?" Snow replies. "Did you not just say that the Queen didn't do anything illegal?"

"When a Queen does something untoward, who is to say if it's even illegal..."

Snow rolls her eyes. "I see. When a Queen commits a crime who is to say it's a crime?"

"Exactly!" Sidney Glass smiles brightly. "I'm glad we are seeing eye to eye!"

"We are doing no such thing." Snow shakes her head.

"We are not?" the treasurer looks so disappointed.

Snow sighs. "When a Queen commits a crime, it is still a crime," she replies as if explaining how the world works to a child. "You don't get to redefine words to suit her needs. The Queen is committing crimes left and right!"

"They are not crimes!" he argues passionately. "They are mild indiscretions...

"Minor lapses in judgement?" David asks.

"Yes!" Sidney looks so relieved the Lieutenant agrees with him.

"Little white lies that don't hurt anyone?" David asks again.

"Yes, yes, yes!" Sidney looks so grateful he could cry.

"Criminal offences?" David adds.

"Yes!" Sidney is quick to reply then he shakes his head in horror. "What? No! Of course not!"

"No one is above the law Sidney..." Snow replies quietly.

"My Queen should be," he says a smile playing on is lips.

"No, she shouldn't" Snow sighs.

"Yes, she should! You are just bitter because..."

"Let me stop you right there," David glares at him. "Before you say anything you regret..."
"Yes, yes of course," Sidney sighs.

"Right now, they way things are, it looks like you are going to be charged for fraud..."

Sidney is still looking down, almost resigned to his fate.

"But if you were to help us with this investigation, tell us anything that can be helpful, then perhaps the DA will look at your case favorably," David suggests. "A loyal treasurer, who loved his Queen and went along with all her wishes..."

Sidney smiles for a brief second then he turns to David.

"Are you offering immunity, Lieutenant?"

David doesn't skip a beat.

"Immunity? Why, I'm in no position to do such a thing, not without talking to the DA first, but if you were to tell us everything you know I would put in a good word for you..."

Sidney hesitates.

"You don't deserve to go down for this, you were just following orders, weren't you?" David continues.

"Sidney, if you end up in prison, it will be years before you see the Queen again," Snow offers.

Sidney swallows hard.

"Regina is in danger Sidney, don't you want to help her? Don't you want to save her?"

"I certainly do but..."

"But? Imagine what happens if the Queen finds out that you were the one who helped us save her. Who helped us find her..." David looks quite convincing.

Sidney beams for a minute.

"What if she is lost and alone and scared..." David continues, but Sidney is still smiling.

"You are not too worried about that, are you? Because she is not in danger?" Snow asks quietly. "Regina doesn't want to be found?"

The man looks away. "I already told you everything I know, " he replies quietly.

"What do you know of Regina's secret chamber?" David asks.

Sidney practically jumps. "Her what?"

"The secret chamber where Regina keeps Daniel's body?" Snow adds.

Sidney looks at them horrified.

"Was Regina close to finding a pure heart for Daniel?"

"I'm going to defer the rest of your questions to my attorney," Sidney replies.

"Are you sure you want to do that?" Snow asks quietly.
Sidney crosses his arms on his chest decisively. They aren't going to get another word out of him.

"Positive. Am I free to go?" he asks. "Or are you charging me with a crime?"

"For now," David replies. "If I were you I'd stay in town and put my affairs in order. I'm guessing the DA is going to want to talk to you about overinflating the value of Regina's belongings for insurance purposes..."

Sidney throws a dark glare their way and walks out of the interrogation room in a hurry.

"Are we putting him on bird watch?" David asks.

"You know it!" Snow nods.
"You are not going to like this, but I just got a notice," Lieutenant Nolan says to Snow who is sitting on her desk across from him.

It's the end of the day, they spent most of it reviewing their case, going over all the interviews and Regina's financial's again.

"Oh yeah? What about?" she asks absentmindedly.

"Magic beans," he replies.

"Magic beans? What about them?" she looks at him over Regina's expense reports.

"I am now allowed no more than twenty a month, and I have to keep a detailed log of what I use them for..."

"What? Why?" Snow frowns.

"My knee is healed," he shrugs. "They have no reason to give me unlimited magic beans anymore...Sorry, I know you can't stand squad gourds..."

"David!" Snow replies quickly, shaking her head. "I'm just glad you are okay..."

He doesn't reply right away, distracted by the list of employees at Regina's castle in front of him. "Wait a minute, what's this..." he frowns.

"Did you find something?"

He nods so she walks around her desk to stand next to him.

"Going through the list of people that were on the royal payroll in the castle. Not sure how royal protocol works, but this woman got hired the day of the Queen's disappearance..."

"That's normal. I'm sure she was hired before and that was just her first day at work..."

"But if the castle was on lock down how would she even get to work..."

"True," Snow nods. "It's worth looking into...It's too late to go now... so, Regina's castle first thing in the morning?" Snow asks.

"Yes..."

"Alright. Well, I should probably head home..." Snow gets up grabbing her jacket from the back of her chair.

"Alright..." he looks at her apologetically. Normally that's when he'd hand her a magic bean to get home, but he can't do that anymore.

"Don't worry about it, I'll get a ride from Grumpy," Snow replies reassuringly then she frowns. "Hold on, how are you going to get home everyday without magic beans?"

Because David's apartment is in the Southern kingdom, nowhere near the black knight force head quarters.
"I'm going to have to rent a room at Granny's Bed and breakfast," he replies.

"Oh, that's great... you probably don't know this, but Granny is Ruby's grandmother..."

"Really? It's a small realm..."

"Is she going to let you bring Wilby along? She has a no pet rule..."

David nods. "She said she'll make an exception, if the dog is well behaved..."

"That's good... Twenty beans a month, huh? That's just not enough..."

"It's the absolute minimum one can get," he replies.

"Do you get a sense the white knight force is singling you out?"

He nods. "It makes no sense that they know that my leg is healed already. And they take away the beans not giving me much time to make arrangements to move here, this just isn't proper procedure..."

"That's just wrong," she replies. "King George must be behind this, I'm so sorry David..."

"It will be fine," he replies.

Snow hesitates briefly. She should be offering to help him out, but how?

"Well, I'm going to head out... Goodnight David..." she says then she heads out of the room.

Grumpy is happy to give Snow a ride home.

"Listen Snow White, I need your help," he starts.

"Help with what?" Snow I absentmindedly staring out of the gourd window. The gourd is in automatic mode. When she asked Grumpy if she could drive, Grumpy laughed really hard and didn't even reply. Even if there wasn't fresh snow on the road, he wasn't going to let her drive.

"The ball is tonight," Grumpy hesitates.

"Right..."

"Something came up," Grumpy lowers his voice, even though no one can hear them, "I am supposed to meet someone at the ball tonight. I'm about to get a tip that could crack my case wide open..."

"This is great," Snow smiles.

"Yes, so I need you to come with me..."

"Me?" Snow is no longer smiling. "Why me? I though you were taking your wife..."

"Nova is coming down with the flu. She is not feeling well and I really need this Snow White, I need someone to come with me, to be all dazzling and distracting so no one notices..."

"Someone dazzling?" Snow glowers at him. "You can't be serious, you know I don't go to balls...I haven't been to a formal ball in over ten years!"

"Yes, I know...but it's not like it's a royal ball, it's just the officer's ball... and Snow, I wouldn't ask
if there was any other way... Please..."

"I haven't been at a ball for over ten years," Snow says again shaking her head "I have nothing to wear...and...-

"Well you know, I happen to be married to the most talented fairy who would gladly play the part of your godmother for the night..." Grumpy smiles brightly at her. Clearly he was anticipating this argument.

"I thought you didn't want her doing a whole lot of magic now that she is pregnant..." Snow protests.

"True, but making a ball gown is child's play for a fairy like my Nova..." Grumpy beams at her proudly.

Snow is still shaking her head, but she is no longer protesting. Nova and Grumpy have been helping her with Emma for years, how can she possibly say no to him...but then a gown, and dancing shoes and a ball...she can't go to a ball, she hasn't been to a ball in years. She wishes Lieutenant Nolan didn't have to start rationing the magic beans today of all days. If she hadn't asked for a ride home from Grumpy, this wouldn't be happening.

Snow steps into her house, and she comes face to face with Nova who is bubbling with excitement.

"Grumpy told me you said yes!" she says waving her magical wand excitedly around.

Snow looks at her, eyes wide open. How did she find out so fast?

Because Nova has pins in her mouth and a tape measure around her neck, and there is a beautiful red dress on a dressmaking mannequin in the middle of Snow's living room and a large mirror in place and a stool for Snow to stand on and Emma is already dancing with excitement wearing ribbons in her hair, throwing colorful fabrics around.

"What is this?" Snow utters.

"It doesn't hurt to be prepared!" Nova replies pulling the pins out of her mouth. "Would you like to shower first or can I just magick you ready right now?"

Snow groans. "Real shower first please," she mumbles and disappears inside her bedroom.

When Snow steps out of the shower in her bathrobe, hair still all wet she finds Emma, Ruby and Nova all expecting her.

"Come on Mom! You are taking forever!" Emma complains.

Maybe because I really don't want to go to the ball, Snow thinks but she smiles at her daughter instead.

"Ready!" she states.

Nova twirls her wand and then Snow is in a gorgeous red dress, and high heeled dancing shoes. Snow takes a moment to look at the delicate embroidery of the dress. It looks stunning.

Ruby says "ooh!"

Emma claps her hands. "You look so pretty Mom!"
Snow turns to glance at herself in the mirror.

Nova twirls her wand again and now Snow's hair is up in an elegant bun, a single ruby hanging from her neck.

"I guess I'm ready," Snow mumbles looking at herself in the mirror again. She is not sure she recognizes the beautiful woman looking back at her.

"What are you talking about! I haven't done your make up yet!" Ruby protests.

Snow turns to face her friend who has brought her whole make up kit.

"How long have you been planning this?" Snow asks.

Nova smiles mischievously. "What makes you think we planned it?"

Snow can't answer because Ruby is applying lipstick to her lips and eye shadow and blush and when Snow turns to look at herself she almost gasps. When was the last time she dressed up like this, she can't even remember.

"Alright," Nova replies, clearly pleased with the results. "Grumpy asked that I make you dazzle. I believe I've accomplished my objective!"

"Mom!" Emma says quietly, "you look like a real princess!"

"Thank you sweetheart," Snow replies and she kisses her daughter in the cheek, then she wipes the lipstick off her daughters skin.

Ruby protests that Snow should let her reapply her lipstick, but Snow shakes her head.

"I'm ready to go," she states firmly. "Grumpy better get here before I change my mind..."

As if on cue Grumpy opens the door, dressed in a black jacket, a black cape draped over his shoulders.

"Hey beautiful!" he smiles, his eyes on Nova.

"You look so handsome!" Nova waddles over to her husband and straightens his bow tie. Then she twirls her wand and a single red rose appears on his lapel matching Snow's dress. "You look so cute!" she says squeezing his cheeks and it is so heartwarming and funny to see Grumpy endure her affections stoically, without a single word of protest.

Grumpy kisses her back, then he places his hands on her tummy, then he turns around to look Snow appraisingly.

"Honey, you did an amazing job! Come on Snow White!" he says offering his arm. And the sharp contrast of Snow's red dress next to Grumpy's dark clothes makes them both look striking.

"You guys look so good!" Nova blows a kiss at him.

"You know, you don't look so sick," Snow protests and that's when Nova sneezes three times in a row and wipes her nose on an oversized hankie.

"You were saying?" Grumpy glares at her. "You are not getting out of this Snow White!"

"Fine! Let's do this," Snow sighs.
Grumpy looks at her closely. "No, not like this, you can't look like a lamb going to slaughter!" he protests.

Snow offers a weak smile and flutters her eyelashes. "I will dazzle," she replies quietly. "I promise..."

"Has Snow White graced us with her presence?" Happy asks the moment Grumpy helps her out of their taxi carriage.

Snow wants to roll her eyes, but her objective is tonight is to distract and to dazzle, so she offers a bright smile instead.

Several knight are looking at her. They've never seen her dressed up before. They avoid her in the office daily, but now that she looks stunning, they find it hard to pretend she is not there.

As much as she wishes she was home, going over the details of her case, Snow has to admit that the community center that the knight force is using for their Winter Ball is looking incredible. There are hanging chandeliers, magicked in place, candles burning with endless fire, actual snowflakes suspended midair. Tables filled with all sort of delicious treats, all of them white, sugared scones and white chocolate eclairs, coconut truffles and angel food cake. There is an open bar and a ballroom orchestra is filling the room with the most enchanting music. The dance floor is filled with couples dancing, quite a few of them fairies, who are fly dancing, raising themselves and their partners several inches above ground as they flutter their wings. When Ursula, the famous singing diva retracts her tentacles and steps up to the microphone the room erupts in applause.

Grumpy and Snow are having an animated conversation with several black knights when the doors open and a herald announces the arrival of Blue and Jiminy.

Blue is wearing an incredible dark blue shimmering gown, Jiminy is wearing a tux and she leans on his arm as they descend the steps into the main room together.

And then Snow's heart skips a beat, because right behind them Lieutenant Nolan steps in escorting a beautiful blond woman in a striking green dress with a long slit exposing half her thigh. The woman is petite, her features are pronounced, her hand wrapped around David's arm. Snow guesses that she must be a fairy, not a fairy she's ever met before. David is wearing a dark gray jacket and the two of them look picture perfect together. Snow is trying hard not to stare. The mystery green dressed woman whispers something in his ear and he laughs and turns to give her his bright smile and Snow has to look away in a hurry because it hurts to see him happy like that next to a... next to a beautiful fairy? Next to a beautiful woman? Next to a beautiful what? Next to a beautiful... someone else. Next to someone else.

What did you think he was going to do? Spend the rest of his week pining for you? She asks herself angrily, looking away, trying to get her heart to listen to reason. He asked you to the ball. You said no. You said no casually, like it didn't even matter, like his invitation wasn't real, like it did not merit any consideration. He is representing the white knight force, of course he has to make an appearance, so he asked someone else. Why wouldn't he? And yet her heart is ignoring all her excellent logical arguments, beating fast like a bird trapped in a cage far too small to fit her wings.

Grumpy winks at her and heads over to talk to whoever his mystery contact is, which leaves Snow in the middle of a heated discussion about the benefits of retired knight force members. And then Grumpy gets back right away. Snow wants to glare at him. Was that all? She dressed up and came to the ball for this, some mystery person to pass him a note? Really?

"Well, I don't know about you but I'm having a great time," Grumpy says quietly, indicating that he
just got some great information that will help his case. "Would you like to dance Snow White?"

And when Snow doesn't reply Grumpy starts talking again.

"They are playing Nova's favorite song...we don't have to dance of course..." he looks longingly at the couples fly dancing. If Nova was here she'd be in his arms and they'd be dancing together, ten inches off the ground.

Snow is trying to gather her thoughts and tuck away her beating heart barely listening to Grumpy. Dancing is the last thing on her mind.

"Snow! Would you agree?" Jiminy is actually expecting a response.

Snow looks around. At some point Jiminy must have joined their conversation and now both men are looking at her expectantly, waiting for her opinion.

"I almost always agree with you," Snow replies noncommittally. She's completely lost track of what they were talking about.

"Since when?" Grumpy frowns. "Anyway I think that the officers in knight force could very well work another ten twenty years past the current retirement age..."

"Yes, they could," Snow places her hand on his arm. "I think they could. But their service record should be taken into consideration here. If they have impeccable conduct, they should be asked to stay on, if not they should be urged to retire..."

"Perhaps but..."

"Would you excuse me a minute?" Snow mumbles and then she heads towards the bar and asks for a glass of wine. A woman with blue hair is serving drinks. Snow wonders if she is a mermaid. She leans on the counter and sips her wine, she is not in a great hurry to get back to Grumpy or Jiminy.

Grumpy watches her, a puzzled expression on his face. Snow is certainly not acting like herself tonight.

David is walking over to the bar when the world slows down and comes to a stand still. Because Snow is standing there in a red gown, her hair pinned up, a single ruby hanging from her neck, raising her glass to her lips against the all shimmering white backdrop of the Winter Ball. He glances around surprised at how everyone seems to manage to continue intelligent conversations, drinking and dancing as if Snow is not standing on the bar wearing a red gown, raising a glass to her lips.

It's not like she is not beautiful every day. He is never immune to her beauty. But he still works with her and he still manages to function and breathe and form coherent thoughts just fine around her, even though she is the most beautiful woman in the room. It's just that she is usually dressed in tunics and riding pants and boots, her hair is usually braided in a hurry or falling on her shoulders, sometimes twisted up in a bun with nothing but a quill to hold it on place. It's as if she is usually trying to blend in, trying to look ordinary. As if she is not the princess of the Northern kingdom who abdicated her throne.

But right now Snow is leaning against the bar, talking to the bartender and her hair is up, a couple stray curls falling in her face and there is nothing ordinary about her... she is not blending in. She is standing out. She is so breathtakingly standing out that it almost hurts to look at her.

Snow is lost in her thoughts when she is surprised to hear a familiar voice next to her.
"You came!"

Lieutenant Nolan is standing there, getting two drinks for himself and his date.

"I did," she offers quietly, contemplating whether she should explain that she really didn't mean to come, and if she had, she wouldn't have turned him down, she would have gone with him, and his eyes, his perfect jacket, his pants void of all wrinkles and his boots, always perfectly polished...

Would she have gone with him? She wants to groan in frustration. Did he have to be this good looking tonight? The problem with Lieutenant Nolan is that even though he is dressed for the ball he still looks like he could easily jump into battle and wrestle with a dragon on a moment's notice, or handle a tough interview with the king of the Southern Kingdom or play hide and seek with a nine year old, or solve a murder case, or walk in the kitchen and make grilled cheese sandwiches... And then she is having a hard time rationalizing why she finds that to be a problem.

She smiles back at him, trying to drown her inner voice that is echoing 'Lieutenant Nolan is a problem!' over and over.

"Save a dance for me, would you?" he half smiles.

She nods quickly then he turns away, no doubt to dutifully deliver the drink to his date. The mystery fairy in the green dress.

And Snow finds herself drowning in the soft echo of his voice in her mind, playing over and over "you came...," watching his shoulders as he walks away. She drinks her wine in a hurry and then asks for something stronger.

This must be the most successful officer's ball as of yet. It's been a while since it started, yet everyone is still dancing, the music is going strong with no intention of slowing down. Snow is feeling tired, this is all too much, too much noise, too much joy, too much merriment. She is wondering whether Grumpy will forgive her if she sneaks away and rents a taxi carriage in order to go home now. He is on the side, talking animatedly to Happy and she doesn't want to interrupt him.

And right as Snow has decided that she will in fact go home and bear Grumpy's wrath tomorrow, David walks up to her. Their eyes lock and her breath hitches. He is about to say something but in the end he doesn't say a word, he just takes her hand in his, and tilts his head towards the dance floor, a silent question.

Ordinarily, if anyone else was doing this, Snow would be giving them a piece of her mind, about being presumptuous, about crossing lines. She would be saying something. Anything. She really should say something. Except her heart is beating fast and her mind is out of words and her throat is too dry and she did promise him a dance after all.

Snow is finding that the world comes to a stand still as he pulls her onto the dance floor.

Lieutenant Nolan is a good dancer. Snow already knows that, because she kept stealing glances at him when he danced with the mysterious blond fairy, and when he danced with Blue. He didn't shy away from even the most intricate dances, so Snow is bracing herself, trying to focus on the order of the steps for this particular dance. It's not too complex, it's a rather slow waltz, just an ordinary three step, nothing fancy, she should manage without tripping on her dress or messing up his spotless boots. It has been so long since the last time she danced.

But then something unexpected happens. Maybe he knows that she hasn't danced in years, maybe
he can sense that she is exhausted.

She can't really read his expression when he pulls her in closer, his hand on her waist and then he just folds her in his arms, holding her hand above his heart and that is all. Her fingers on his hand, her face on his shoulder, his hand on her waist and it's like they are barely moving, swaying in the music. There should be more steps than this, there should be at least one turn, there should be some twirling and...there should definitely be more steps than this. But there aren't. And there is something so protective about the way he places his arm around her waist, about the way he wraps his fingers around her hand.

She raises her face to meet his eyes, surprise and relief both written all over her face.

He returns her gaze. He is steady, unflinching, his eyes filled with light, a soft smile playing on his lips.

It can't be that easy, he muses. Meeting the one your heart belongs with, cannot possibly be that simple. He didn't mean to just hold her of course, he meant to dance with her, but when he walked up to her to ask her to dance, she looked so sad, so defeated. All he could think of was he had to protect Snow White, even if the meant from herself or her own dark thoughts. He had to protect her.

Snow leans her head against his shoulder pushing away every thought until there is nothing left but the music. Her senses are flooded with the scent of his cologne or his aftershave or whatever it is perfect Lieutenants wear these days when they go dancing, and she can't help both shiver to his touch and think of wild mint and a roaring fire and a small cabin in the woods, a heart carved on a bedpost. This doesn't feel like a dance at all. It feels more like coming home.

She closes her eyes because inside her chest, her heart is swelling, cracking and shattering into hundreds of pieces.

She misses him. She doesn't know who he is, she doesn't remember him, but once upon a time Mary Margaret Blanchard ran away with James Charming. They ran away from the world and hid inside a small forgotten cabin in the woods. And Snow doesn't understand why, but it is at this exact moment, when she is slow dancing with Lieutenant Nolan, that she realizes that every inch of her skin and her mind and her heart is still broken, still desperate, still missing him. She wants to grieve for all the time they've spent apart, all those years they could have grown older together. Her heart has always been with him, her heart's never stopped missing him, never stopped loving him, not even for a moment. And it doesn't seem fair to think of Charming while Lieutenant Nolan is holding her, but there is nothing she can do about this. No way to hold back.

"What is this!" Grumpy exclaims out loud without thinking, looking at Snow and David slow dancing in the middle of the colorful waltzing crowd.

"What is she playing at!" Jiminy glares at them, crossing his arms. "I thought... I never expected her to take it this far..."

"What are you talking about?" Grumpy turns to Jiminy all confused.

"Snow White, sabotaging Lieutenant Nolan!"

"Does this look like a premeditated sabotage to you?" Grumpy looks at him incredulous.

"Are you suggesting she is sincere?" it's Jiminy's turn to look shocked.

"Why wouldn't she be?" Grumpy shrugs.
"Name one partner that walked away after working with her unscathed!" Jiminy shrugs.

"Not her fault she is sharp and runs circles around them... I survived working with her just fine..." Grumpy replies.

Jiminy looks at Snow and David, eyes wide open in surprise. Maybe this is real, he thinks. Maybe Snow isn't up to something.

David is holding Snow in his arms, his heart expanding, he is barely breathing. This is Snow White, he tries to remind himself. This is Snow White, and she is a brilliant investigator, and very much an independent woman. It's a miracle she even deigned to show up at the ball. This dance means nothing. The way she looks at him, eyes filed with longing, like she is about to cry, means nothing. He is not the one she is in love with.

This is Snow White, he tells himself over and over, she is an independent woman. She already has a life. She doesn't need him, she doesn't need anyone. This is just a dance. Not a life altering meeting of souls, of hearts that have been broken for far too long. Because there is a hunger in her eyes, he can see it. There is a hunger and an undeniable thirst in her eyes, and in her arms and in the way she is breathing faster and in the softness of her fingers, clasping his hand. And oh, how she fits just right in his arms...

The song is over. Lieutenant Nolan forces himself to step back. Snow looks at him. More, she wants to whisper. She wants more. He raises her hand to his lips and offers a small bow.

And then she brushes her thumb against his cheek without thinking. In another time, another life, if things were different, she would be standing in front of him, willing to give this a chance, willing to hand him her heart. She really would.

And then a quiet part of her wonders, if she were to hand him the shattered fragments of her heart right now, would he even know what to do with them?

"I thinks it's time for me to get home," Snow whispers softly and he is still too dazed to think of an appropriate response. Wait...don't leave yet, please wait... he wants to say, but he remains silent. He reaches for her without thinking, and then he abruptly catches himself and stops, offering a sad smile instead.

"Goodnight!" he rasps. He watches her walk towards Grumpy and head out of the ballroom and he wonders if he imagined it or if those where in fact tears glistening in her eyes. He really needs a drink.

He walks over to the bar. He downs the drink he is offered and he notes that the blue haired mermaid bartender is looking at him funny. He doesn't know why. He isn't feeling so well. He needs to splash water on his face, so he walks to the restroom and before he can make it to the sink, the room starts spinning and he collapses on the ground.
The Case of the Missing Queen

Lieutenant Nolan walks over to the bar. He downs his drink and he notes that the blue haired mermaid bartender is looking at him funny. He doesn't know why. He isn't feeling so well. He needs to splash water on his face, so he walks to the restroom and before he can make it to the sink, the room starts spinning and he collapses on the ground.

Snow is walking out of the ballroom with Grumpy when there's a loud scream.

"It's the new guy," somebody says. "The white knight. What's his name?"

Snow turns around and runs, Grumpy right behind her.

David, his name is David, she thinks. Snow runs faster towards the gathered crowd.

"Excuse me, coming through..." she says over and over as she makes her way to the very front. David is laying on the ground, his face pale, his eyes closed.

The green fairy is kneeling next to him. "Nolan! Nolan wake up!" the fairy says over and over and then she raises her hand as if she is going to slap him.

Snow kneels next to them.

"Don't!" she tells the green fairy. She reaches for his hand, taking his pulse, then she watches his chest. He is breathing.

"Who is this guy?" a knight asks.

"It's my partner!" Snow replies. "Did someone call a healing fairy?" Snow looks at the gathered crowd. "Back up please! Give him some air..."

Everybody takes a step backwards. No one here is going to argue with Snow White.

Snow has pulled out her magic mirror. "I need a healing fairy right now, this is an emergency...I need a healing fairy, is Teal is on duty?"

Then she puts her magic mirror down and reaches for his hand. "Come on David!" she says quietly. "Wake up, wake up for me please..."

David stirs just barely, at the sound of her voice.

"Is this a sleeping spell?" Snow mumbles. "This looks like a sleeping spell. Come on, David, wake up for me please!"

He stirs again.

"You are really good at this," the green fairy looks at Snow White. "I'm Tink by the way," she blurts out.

"I'm Snow," she says her eyes never leaving David's face.

"I know who you are," the green fairy replies. "I've heard so much about you..."

Snow casts a quick glance her way. "This is a terrible way to meet," she replies and the green fairy
nods.

"He'll pull through, I know he will," Tink replies, placing her hand on Snow's shoulder.

Then the paramedics are there, along with a healing fairy. They load David up on a gurney and they wheel him away.

He is running in the forest, snowflakes gently falling all around him. And then a soft woman's voice says "I got you!" and he turns around to see Snow in a heavy woolen cloak, smiling brightly. Her tummy is all round and swollen, visibly sticking out of her cape. Snow is pregnant he realizes. Wilby is jumping up at him, licking his gloved hand. David laughs, pulling Snow in his arms.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, because usually when he gets lost in fogs of complicated faded memories, he is there alone.

"I don't remember," she smiles even though her eyes are welling up. "Do you remember?"

"Snow? Why are you crying?" he asks, holding his breath, wanting to wipe her tear away with his thumb, hesitating.

"I'm crying because I forgot..."

"I'll follow them in a taxi carriage if you want to come along," Snow White offers.

Tink shakes her head. "My way is faster. Here, hold my hand!" and before Snow gets a chance to respond, Tink has grabbed her hand and they are at the entry of the hospital, the room is spinning and Snow feels like she's been trampled over by wild unicorns.

"Are you alright?" Tink asks.

Snow nods as she steadies herself. "Your magic is incredibly strong!" she gasps.

"Sometimes," Tink shrugs. "Nolan can't stand it when I magic him away either..."

Snow and Tink both head into the emergency room together.

"He is still unconscious," the Teal fairy looks both Snow and Tink wearily. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"We were at the ball. He passed out. That's all I know..." Tink replies.

"Alright. Would you mind waiting in the visitor's room?" Teal gives both of them a stern look, then she heads back to David's room.

But neither woman moves.

"So you know," Tink blurts out after a moment of silence, "we are not together or anything, we are just friends..."

"It doesn't...I didn't...I wasn't...because..." Snow really has no response for that.

It's none of my business she should have said, but she already strung a bunch of nonsensical words together so there is no point pretending that this doesn't concern her at all.

"Right," Tink replies, not bothering to conceal the teasing twinkle in her eyes.
Snow decides it would be wise to change the subject completely.

"You location spelled my house and cleaned out the cabin in the woods," Snow smiles warmly at the fairy. "Thank you so much..."

Again the fairy shrugs looking around worriedly. It's like she doesn't want anyone to know the incredible range of her magical powers. "David Nolan is a friend," she says "he got me out of a tough scrape a few years ago, so if he asks for a tiny favor...-

"A tiny favor!" Snow looks at her incredulously. "I feel like you saved my life!"

Tink is fiddling with the edge of her sleeve then she looks away. "it was nothing," she shrugs.

"Have you worked for the white knight force for a long time?" Snow asks.

Tink's eyes open wide. "The knight force? Oh, no, no, no, I don't work for the knight force, I work for myself" she replies and Snow doesn't get to ask anymore questions because the Teal Fairy is walking over to them.

"He's awake!" Teal says and both women look so relieved. "It was just a mild sleeping potion, you can see him now. Maybe one at a time, do not overwhelm him!" Teal tries to say but both women have rushed into David's room.

He is looking pale, his eyes closed, leaning back on the hospital pillows.

Snow can't help but think again, how he looks so vulnerable, so alone.

Tink just walks next to him and punches him softly on the shoulder.

He opens his eyes and offers a weary smile.

"You gave me such a fright!" Tink half glares at him. "That's what I get for coming to your fancy party!"

"Sorry," he mumbles then he turns and his eyes rest on Snow's face. "Snow?" he asks quietly, wondering if she is even real or just a figment of his imagination. "Snow, what are you doing here?"

"What are you doing here?" she counters softly. "For a guy who doesn't like hospitals, you sure end up here a lot!"

He lets out a faint laugh. "Teal said it was just a mild sleeping potion..."

"Yes but why...how..." Snow feels both angry and relieved at the same time.

"I don't know. I think there was something in my drink..."

"The mermaid!" Tink exclaims, her eyes flashing angrily. "The woman bartending...I thought there was something fishy about her. Don't worry, Nolan, I'm on it!" she exclaims then she turns around after casting one last glance his way. "You are in good hands. Feel better soon!" and with a soft wave of her hand Tink is gone.

"She sure is intense," Snow muses, because now it's just the two of them.

"Isn't she?" he replies quietly.
"How are you feeling?"

"Like I don't want to attend any more balls for a while..."

Snow laughs. "Are they keeping you overnight?"

"Probably... Teal didn't say..."

"This is a warning shot isn't it?" Snow asks.

David turns to face her. "I think so," he replies.

"Then you can't stay here," Snow says decisively. "Not alone. What if they come to finish the job?"

"They ransacked my apartment too," he mumbles.

"What? When was this?" she asks.

"Two nights ago, when I was at your place figuring out my past..."

"Why didn't you say something!" Snow scolds him. She wants to yell at him but she forces herself not to.

He looks away. "I didn't think it was related, I thought someone tried to rob me... There is so many things going on..."

"No David! Don't even! The whole point of having a partner is that we keep each other safe! But if you don't tell me what's going on I can't protect you. You can't keep me in the dark!"

David looks at her, eyes wide open. It's been a while since someone has stated their intent to protect him so fiercely.

"First they ransack your apartment, then they take away the magic beans, then this!" Snow continues. "You are not safe here and I very much doubt you'd be safe at Granny's! My house is already spell protected. You are coming home with me..."

David opens his mouth to protest. But Snow is wearing a red gown, and two curls have already escaped from her bun and they are framing her face and he was already lightheaded and sleepy from the sleeping spell. He can barely think straight. If there is a good reason to say no, it escapes him at the moment.

"Alright," he consents sitting up slowly. "Thank you!"

"Good," Snow whispers, and she can't account for the intense relief she is feeling. He will be close, she can keep an eye on him, she can keep him safe. "I'll tell Teal we are going."

The Teal fairy is looking very displeased as David signs off to leave against medical advice.

"Come see me in the morning, if you are feeling alright, I'll clear you for duty," she is looking hopeful at David who just nods.

Grumpy is waiting for them at the hospital entry.

"Where to?" he asks once they are all inside the taxi carriage.
"My house," Snow replies.

If Grumpy thinks this is unconventional or a terrible idea, he sure doesn't say it out loud. He casts a questioning glance at Snow.

"Whoever cast this location spell at your house is very good," Grumpy mumbles as Snow steps out of the carriage. "I've been coming to your house for years and yet when I'm here I feel completely lost and confused. Certain I'm in the wrong place!"

"Tink is the best!" Snow smiles. She extends her hand to David helping him up.

"If you need any help with anything Snow..." Grumpy adds.

Snow smiles "I know, have a good night Grumpy!"

Once in her cottage, she kicks off her dancing shoes by the front door, then she ushers David straight into the guest bedroom. Ruby, who was curled up on the couch, playing a game on her magic mirror, because she was babysitting Emma watches with eyes wide opened in astonishment, but she doesn't say anything, she just waves at Snow and goes home for the night.

Snow helps David take off his jacket. He still feels sleepy and disoriented. She asks him if he is hungry or thirsty, she seems very reluctant to leave him alone in the room.

"No need to fuss, I'll be alright," he mumbles.

She gets him a glass of water anyway, but by the time she comes back in the room he is already asleep.

Snow lights a candle on his nightstand then she sits in the living room, alone, in the dark, and she can't account for her hands shaking and the terror she feels in her heart. She closes her eyes, trying hard to keep from crying, but it's too late, she is crying now, crying hard. She thinks of David laying on the ground in the men's restroom, his face so pale. She can't do this. She can't go through this again. People, her people keep getting hurt, they keep disappearing, they slip through her fingers and there is nothing she can do to keep them safe. And she wonders if that's why for years she was so against having a partner, or letting anyone get close. If it wasn't so much that she didn't want someone messing with her investigations. If it was more that she couldn't bear to lose anybody else.

She closes her eyes.

Snow is standing in front of the empty wall in the cabin, baby Emma is crying in her arms. He is already gone, they took him away and she knows it's a matter of time before she forgets all about him. And she can't forget about him, not after everything they've been through together, not when she chose him and he chose her, to have and to hold for all eternity. Not when they brought Emma into the world together. They already took her daggers and her knives and any other weapon they had stashed in the cabin. She has nothing left but a rusty nail. She stands next on the wall and she carves his name over and over again, willing her brain to remember and her heart to hold on, as her memories like bubbles pop, disappearing one by one. There goes their first kiss, there goes the first time he said I love you. She reaches up to write his name, but his name is already gone. All she has is Charming. Charming, she writes. Charming, Charming, Charming Charming Charming. And it more like a chant, a prayer, as her memories dissolve into nothing, and the nickname she gave him is all she has left. The name and her Emma. Charming, Charming, Charming. Charming.

Snow wakes up at the crack of dawn, her whole body sore. She did not mean to fall asleep on the
couch with her red gown on. She stumbles towards her bedroom, with her right hand trying to untangle the mess that was last night's beautiful hairstyle when she runs into Lieutenant Nolan. He is barefoot, only wearing his undershirt and his pants, holding onto his jacket and his boots.

"Did I just wake you? I didn't mean to...-" he starts.

She shakes her head. "I woke up on my own. Never accidentally fall asleep on the couch with your ballgown on," she mumbles. "It's a terrible idea. I know that now..."

He laughs. "Thanks for the tip!"

"Are you heading out?" she smiles.

"Going home to gather my things and my dog...are you sure you don't mind me staying here for a while?"

"It's the only safe place I can think of," she shrugs. "I know we are loud and hyper and you know... a lot to deal with and I wish I could think of a solution that could afford you more peace and privacy... I'm sorry, this is all I got...It's not like Tink can location spell Granny's, it is a bed and breakfast after all, she doesn't want to be off the map..."

"Snow! Don't apologize! This is incredibly generous on your part!" he protests.

Snow smiles. She just managed to uncoil her hair that is now falling on her shoulders, looking wilder than normal. And she has no idea how adorable she looks, all ruffled up in her wrinkled red gown.

"Do you need help getting out of your dress?" he blurts out without really thinking through how badly this can be misinterpreted.

Snow looks incredibly relieved, excited even. "Would you help me? Because Nova magicked it on me and I can't even reach for the zipper on the back," she says turning her back on him, pulling her unruly curls out of his way.

"Zipper?" he frowns. "No, it has small buttons, hold on..."

It takes him a minute to figure it out, then his fingers undo the small buttons one by one, exposing her back, brushing against her bare skin, and Snow feels both like she can finally breathe freely and like holding her breath. She turns around, her heart beating faster, her cheeks mildly flushed.

"Thank you!"

"You are welcome!"

"Wait," Snow frowns. "Are you going back to your apartment alone?"

"I have to get Wilby," he replies. He wonders if she is going to offer to come along, just like that, barefoot with her red gown unbuttoned. And if he is going to be honest he isn't entirely against the idea. He tries not to think of how cute and fierce she looks even in this state.

But Snow says "I bet Grumpy is already up, he lives around the corner, I could get him to come with you..."

"No," he shakes his head in a hurry. "Snow, I'll be fine. Don't worry, I'll gather my stuff, get Wilby, I'll be right back..."
"Oh, alright," Snow consents though she doesn't look at all happy with that idea. "If you run into any trouble call me!" she states firmly.

He nods stifling his smile then he steps out of her house and he is gone.

He makes a quick stop to the hospital.

Teal takes his vitals. "I'm not happy about this at all David," she says as she quickly fills in the form that will allow him to get back to work. "Sleeping potions are serious, we were supposed to monitor you overnight..."

"I know, I know," he shrugs defensively. "My partner was concerned..."

"Right," Teal replies dryly staring at the paper in front of her.

"Teal, I need to ask you something..."

"What is it?" Teal stops what she is doing.

"I used to get unlimited magic beans because of my leg, but as of yesterday I do not. "

She looks at him over her paper waiting.

"Except I never got a chance to tell the knight force I got it taken care of..." he continues.

"How did they know?" she frowns.

"I was hoping you might know how..."

"I never told anyone," she replies. "Other than adding it on your medical file, like I do with all your visits."

David nods. Looks like the White Knight force has access to his medical records and they are watching them very closely.

"Right," he smiles his friendliest of smiles. "I should go..."

Teal is looking worried, as she watches him walk away.

"How was the dance last night?" Nova smiles brightly at Snow.

"It was nice," Snow shrugs.

Nova makes a face and then she moves her wand and a coffee cup appears in Snow's hand. Snow motions to takes a sip and then she looks at Nova incredulously. Her cup is empty, not a drop of coffee inside.

"How was the dance last night?" Nova smiles again at Snow.

"Are you going to withhold coffee from me until I give you information? As if you don't already know..." Snow glares at her.

"I might have heard a couple of things but it's not the same...Grumpy forgets the most important details..."

Snow sighs. "I danced with Lieutenant Nolan. And then he passed out and we rushed to the
hospital. Turns out it was just a mild sleeping potion but still..." she doesn't continue. The events of last night still raw, haunting her.

"Snow, are you alright?" Nova looks so concerned. Snow's cup is full of steaming coffee now.

"I am not the one who got sleeping spelled..." Snow looks away.

"True, but when one catches feelings after one has been on their own for a while... then something like this happens, it's a lot to cope with..."

Snow looks up, her eyes wide open. "Feelings? I'm not...-

"No use denying it" Nova interrupts. "I'm a pregnant fairy. My sense of smell is heightened...I know your pheromone levels have been up all week..."

"My what?" Snow looks partially angered partially horrified. "Stop smelling me..."

"Can't help it," Nova shrugs pointing at her very pronounced belly. "Pregnant!"

Snow sighs. "Well, I suppose now is as good a time as any to tell you that Lieutenant Nolan will be staying with us for a while... and if you smell anything more, I will thank you to keep it to yourself..."

Snow walks out of the living room, trying to keep intact whatever shreds of dignity she has left.

"Don't you want to know if he likes you too?" Nova yells after her.

But Snow doesn't hear her. She has already stepped in the shower, and she is scrubbing her body hard with the strongest scented body wash she owns.

David gathers his clothes, his boots, a few toiletries, his swords, Wilby's leash, Wilby's dog bowl. He looks around the apartment. There isn't much more that he needs here.

He looks at his small leather pouch. He has twelve more beans. He shrugs, and drops a magic bean to the ground.

"Home to Snow and Emma," he mumbles without really thinking.

David pulls his clothes out of his suitcase and hangs them in the closet in Snow's guest room. Wilby has already made himself at home napping on Emma's bed.

Snow is looking out her window when a blue bird stands on the railing of her porch, looking at her expectantly.

"Do you have a message for me?" she asks stepping outside.

The bird nods chirping a couple of times.

Snow listens carefully then her eyes open wide.

"Thank you! she whispers then she places the bird on her best bird feeder. She rushes inside and knocks on David's door.

"What's wrong?" he asks opening the door widely.

"I got a...-" Snow looks at the guest bedroom distracted. How is it that this room already looks
more organized and put together in the last ten minutes since he moved in? How does he do that?

"You got a...?" he looks at her questioningly.

"I got a location," she exclaims. "A bluebird just told me where King George and Regina met in the forest..."

"Let's go," he says reaching for his sword belt and his daggers.

The troll bridge looks the same as always, standing in place, defying gravity while several large rocks are missing, making the very act of crossing it a death defying stunt. It's always cold and foggy in this part of the woods, this isn't new, still David shudders as he looks around. He knows that there must be several trolls guarding the bridge even though he can't see them. Snow's head is raised high, she shows no signs of fear. A well rehearsed act, David thinks.

"Here" Snow points at the forked path that leads to the bridge.

"Right here?" he asks looking at the ground.

Snow nods.

"Alright," he nods heading back to the bridge. "Anything that happened here was in clear view of the bridge. Let's see if we can get ourselves some witnesses..."

He steps onto the bridge and leaves a handful of golden coins on the bridge wall.

"Careful," she whispers.

He nods, his hand already on his sword. Four trolls show up at the same time. They are walking slowly, looking at them menacingly.

"Why, if it isn't the forgetful princess investigator herself," the taller troll nods at Snow White. "I thought you knew royals aren't welcome here..."

"Oh, I know," Snow nods, "but I'm not really a royal anymore. Besides, you let Queen Regina and King George here which surprised me, given how much you hate royals..."

The trolls look to each other.

"Alright, who squealed?" the first troll asks and the rest take a step backwards.

"Nobody squealed, she is messing with your mind," the youngest troll replies.

"It was you, wasn't it Jad!" the first troll glares at the young one.

"It wasn't me!" the troll is looking scared now. "Gand! I swear! It wasn't me!"

"Hey!" Snow yells loudly and they all turn around to face her. "If you start beating each other up, we are going to have to arrest you all..."

"Tell me who squealed and I won't push him off the bridge!" Gand growls at her.

"Really?" she crosses her arms. "You are going to commit murder in front of a White knight?"

"I might push him off the bridge next..." Gand replies, glaring at David, but he is not looking as confident.
Snow rolls her eyes. "Threatening a knight force officer with violence is a crime too! But I'll be willing to overlook it if you tell me what you know..."

"Tell me who squealed!" Gand takes a threatening step towards Snow.

"It wasn't Jad, that's for sure," Snow replies. "And it wasn't those two either," she says pointing to the other two trolls.

Now the three trolls are glowering at Gand, stepping threateningly towards him.

Snow sighs.

"They are going to kill each other before they give us any information..." David mumbles under his breath.

"Hey!" Snow yells again. "Stop this right now and tell me what I want to know..."

"Who squealed?" this time it's Jad asking the question.

"Tell me what I want to know and I'll tell you who squealed!" Snow crosses her arms on her chest.

David sideglances at her unable to decide whether this is a genius move or a reckless one. This could go both ways. It could get them the information they need, or they could both end up at the bottom of the ravine.

"Fine," Gand starts. "The King of the South and the Queen of the North did meet here, though neither of them were dressed up as royals..."

"Really!" Snow looks surprised.

"Yes, she wore just a black dress. Not her usual fancy wear. He wore a simple robe. He came in an unmarked carriage, no royal insignia, no knights accompanying him. Probably stolen licence plates. Just him and his coachman. Older guy, probably retired knight. She showed up in a large cloud of smoke right there," Jad explains pointing to the very spot the bluebird said. She said 'As I told you in the message I sent you I'm ready to make amends, I need to set things right...I need to make my heart pure...'"

"And the King said 'that's ridiculous, it's too late for that, we have come too far,'" Gand takes over.

"Don't you tell me how far we've come!" Jad walks up to him shaking his finger at Gand's face. He is actually taking on some of Regina's mannerisms and he is doing an excellent reenactment of the scene.

"Regina please! Be reasonable! You can't make amends now, they will lock you up..." Gand is looking tall and imposing like king George.

"Don't you tell me to be reasonable George!" Jad tosses his hair back, blinking fast.

"Why? Why do you need to make amends? After all these years, why now?" Gand as George throws his hands up in the air.

"Because my heart needs to be pure!" Jad as Regina pleads. "I can't live like this, night after night, I'm swallowed up by my own darkness! How do you sleep at night?"

"My healing fairy makes this wonderful concoction. All natural, essential oils and herbs. I sleep like a newborn babe. I'll have her send you some if you like..." Gand as George sounds incredibly
"I don't need your sleeping potion..."

"It's not sleeping sleeping potion. It's made with completely natural ingredients! I don't even get side effects in the morning!"

"That's not what I meant and you know it..." Jad as Regina is outraged.

"I was hoping you'd see reason!" Gand George stares at Jad-Regina, eyes filled with scorn.

"I'm being very reasonable..."

"Really!" Gand rolls his eyes. "You don't say... Will you sleep better in a dungeon after they lock you up? Because that's what will happen if you confess! I know I won't!"

"Listen, I'm just going to come clean, I'll talk to Snow, I won't talk about you at all, she has no idea of your involvement..." Jad is talking fast.

"You can't be serious!" Gand as king George glares at her. "You can't separate the two, we acted together..."

Jad is soft spoken now. "I didn't know she was pregnant... if I knew I wouldn't have gone through with it... I would have left them alone...Do you believe me George?"

"Do you even believe yourself?" Gand asks. You said 'I will destroy her happiness if it's the last thing I do'... did you forget that? How can you ever think that you can make amends and come back from something like that?"

"I don't know," Jad almost screams. "I don't know. How did we get here George? I need to talk to her I need to come clean...I'm going to do it and you can't stop me..."

"Oh, no you wont! Not if I can help it!" Gand says reaching for an imaginary dagger, off his belt. He throws it at Jad.

"And then the Queen turned into smoke," Jad twirls, snapping his fingers. "And scene," he says bowing his head.

Snow's face is ashen white. She is out of words.

David glances at her, and when she doesn't respond he takes over. "That was incredible," he says. "You guys are the best witnesses I've ever met in my life!"

"Really?" It's hard to tell but Jad might be blushing.

"Really," David nods. "Have you ever taken acting lessons?"

"I did, a long time ago," Jad replies. "But there just isn't a lot of acting parts for trolls in these woods!" he replies sadly.

"And you!" David turns to Gand. "You were really good too. I could see the King when you were saying his lines..."

Gand scowls but David can tell he is secretly pleased.

"Now just to make sure, you are saying that they said everything just like you did?" David
continues. "You didn't improvise at all?"

"Word for word!" Gand replies. "I don't do improv..."

"The princess didn't like it..." Jad tilts his head towards Snow who still looks shaken.

"The princess loved it," David replies. "She is overwhelmed. Her stepmother is missing and you impersonated her so well!"

Jad turns to Snow. "Forgive me princess, I didn't mean to cause you pain..."

Snow shakes her head quickly. "Not your fault Jad," she replies quietly. "You were incredibly helpful. What did the king do once the Queen disappeared?"

"He pulled out his magic mirror and ordered his people to go after her..." Gand explains.

David nods. "Have they been meeting here often?"

"No, never. Last time they met here, it was about ten years ago..."

"Do you remember what that meeting was about?"

"They kept saying we have to stop them, stop them at all costs..."

"Stop them? Stop whom?"

"They never said..." Gand shrugs.

"Did they say how they were going to stop them?"

"They didn't. Regina said she had a plan, and then they boarded his carriage and they left..."

Snow closes her eyes, trying to picture herself and Emma in the small cabin in the woods. Trying to focus on the smells and the sounds. Wild mint, wood burning in the fireplace. Does she hear the sound of the king's carriage in the distance?

"Anything else you can tell us? Anything at all?" David asks handing them his card.

"Can't think of anything else," Jad replies. He hesitates then he coughs a couple of times. "We are thinking of putting on a small show, nothing fancy, and I was wondering if maybe you'd come...-" he says handing them a small pamphlet 'musical on the troll bridge' the paper reads.

For the first time ever a musical production of "INTO THE WOODS" played by an all troll theater troupe...

"I'd love to," David replies but really it's the princess that the trolls want to invite. They look at her, holding their breaths.

"Of course, I'll be there," Snow forces a smile. "Thank you for your help..."

Snow and David walk back to the squad gourd. And for the first time since they started using squad gourds Snow doesn't pull out the steering wheel and start operating the gourd manually. She sits back instead and lets the automatic gourd take over. "Take us back to the Headquarters," she whispers.

"Are you alright?" David asks.
Snow shakes her head.

"Do you want to talk about it?" his voice is very quiet.

"Did they just say what I think they said?" her voice comes put so small.

He looks so worried. "What do you think they said?" he almost whispers.

"That both Regina and the King were involved in what happened to me," Snow's eyes are welling up.

"Yeah," he mumbles reaching for her hand. "That's exactly what they said..."

Snow has tears streaming down her face. "Then Regina won," she says and she sound so broken.

He's never heard her so defeated before.

"What are you talking about?" he asks squeezing her hand. "What do you mean she won?"

"When I was a little girl, Regina planned to run away with Daniel, the guy we found in the glass coffin. Her mother was the one who wanted her to marry my father. Hard to say no to a king...And I...her mother begged me and I told her the truth. I told her Regina loved Daniel. I'd promised Regina that I'd keep her secret but I didn't...Her mother ripped Daniel's heart out of his chest while she watched..." Snow pauses briefly, closing her eyes, trying to stop crying.

David waits for her to continue.

"So later, I must have fallen in love. And we ran away together. That's why my memories are missing, she got her revenge...she took him away, she must have made him forget too..this was all my fault..."

David fights the strong urge to pull her in his arms. He is searching for the right words, trying to wrap his mind around what she just said, looking for the right argument but he is coming up short.

"Not your fault," he finally replies.

"Of course it was," Snow shrugs.

"How old were you?" he asks quietly. "How old were you when you told Regina's secret?"

"Ten," Snow wipes her eyes on her sleeve.

And then David smiles sadly. He knows exactly what to say next. "Emma," he replies looking at Snow. "Emma is almost ten. Would you hold her accountable for blurring something out if she was excited or scared or just wanted to be helpful? She is almost ten years old. That's what ten year old children do..."

"Emma?" Snow contemplates what he just said.

He nods, grateful that she is listening. "Would you hold Emma accountable if she told a secret?"

Snow shakes her head. "I wouldn't," she replies. "I mean I might talk to her about it, about keeping her promises...but I wouldn't ...I couldn't...- Emma wouldn't know whether she should keep the secret or not... and depending on the secret maybe she shouldn't even keep it. What if someone hurt her and asked her to keep it a secret from me?"
"Exactly," David replies. "A ten year old, wouldn't know..."

Then after a while she adds "Regina didn't win...because I have Emma. She thought she'd make me forget and I'd be all alone. But I'm not. I have Emma..." she says quietly but she still has tears streaming down her face.

"You are not alone," he replies and the warmth she reads in his eyes makes her heart skip a beat.

They've already arrived at the black knight force headquarters when she turns to him eyes wide open. "Not alone!" she repeats. "Not alone. Regina was not alone either! So maybe Regina wanted revenge on me or didn't approve of Charming and she decided to come in and make him go away, my memories of him too. But she didn't do this alone. Why, why was the King of the Southern kingdom involved in me getting memory spelled?"

"Excellent question. Lets ask him!" David replies. He pulls out his small pouch. He still has eleven magic beans left. "Shall we?"

"How? I thought Blue said we couldn't question the king again..."

"Right, officially we can't question him again. But unofficially...who is going to stop us?"

"He said if we talked to him again he'd release that incriminating footage of us breaking and entering the summer estates..."

"But he wont," David replies smiling brightly. "He can't...He was bluffing!"

"Why not?"

"If he made sure all images of prince James are gone, do you really think he wants the video if me getting almost smacked in the face with a shovel while exiting the summer estates?" he asks.

Snow takes a step back.

"If I was the prince for a while, does it even count as breaking and entering?"

Her eyes open wide. "David, this is a very dangerous game you are playing. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"We can call his bluff without showing our hand... He can just think we are reckless, we know he is not going to release that video..."

Snow nods slowly.

"Ready?" he asks dropping the magic beam to the ground.

The smoke clears up in King George' s courtyard.

"It's you again!" one of the royal guards glares at them.

David smiles defiantly. "We need to see the King, now..."

The man glares but he does let them through.

King George is in council, yet he still steps out to talk to them.

" I thought I made things very clear when I talked to Blue..."
"Yes Sir, you did. However, I do have a few more questions ..."

"What was your involvement when Regina took my memories away?" Snow asks quietly.

The king takes a step backwards.

"What?" he asks. "I have no idea what you are talking about..."

"Really?" Snow crosses her arms. "I thought everybody knew that my memories were erased ten years ago. You didn't know?"

The king's eyes dart between Snow and David.

"Get out of my castle!" he whispers. "Both of you. Get out now..."

"This is an official knight force investigation!" David glares back at him but the King doesn't care. "You've just made your last mistake boy!" he says pushing a button on the wall.

Twenty royal guards show up, weapons already drawn.

"You can't do this!" David yells raising up his arms.

"No. You can't do this," he says pointing his finger at the two if them. "Surely you understand princess that no self respecting judge will accept any evidence you present...you can't be investigating a case that is about you. There is so much conflict of interest... So...get out, now!"

The royal guards take a threatening step closer to them, weapons drawn.

David has no interest in backing down. He stands there contemplating options.

"We were on our way out " Snow tugs on David's arm and she pulls him away from the wrathful king and his guards. "Give me a bean," she whispers, "we are not dying today..."

"Alright,"Snowo says once they are back at black knightforce headquarters. "We made a lot of progress today..." She is pacing up and down in their small office, David is sitting on his desk.

"We did."

"What did we learn?"

"Regina got away on her own," David replies. "She was not kidnapped. She is alive...she must be hiding somewhere..."

"Right," Snow nods. "Where would she hide?"

"We haven't found a secret source of income, she doesn't have money stashed somewhere..."

"Right," Snow nods. "She can't get too far..."

"And we have her down for at least three impeachable offenses, not counting the insurance fraud..."

"Three?" Snow raises her eyebrows.

"Trying to bring Daniel back to life, that's one," David is counting his fingers. "Stealing the Huntsman's heart, that's two. Taking your memories away, that's the three..." he concludes.
Snow nods. "Three impeachable offenses...we can for sure, prove two" she sounds uncertain. She is feeling so exhausted.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

She offers a sad smile. "I'm not sure I know what alright feels like!"

"Coffee," he replies "we need coffee. And sandwiches..." he picks up his magic mirror and places an order at the nearby deli. He looks so worried, but he is trying to make light of the situation.

Snow is pouring over Regina's files.

Then she points to a name. "Right there," she says. "You said she got hired in the very day Regina disappeared..."

David's eyebrows shoot up.

"I think you are right..."

Snow nods.

"This is going to be tricky, we are going to draw her out, we need a diversion..." he frowns.

"We are. You are. I think it's time that I go into Jiminy's office and recuse myself..." she replies.

"What? Why?" David looks shocked.

"You know why. It's not just my stepmother that we are after but the whole reason she disappeared is because of me! Now that I know that I can't in good conscience continue in this investigation...It will look like a tainted the investigation, it already looks like I did!"

"You just solve the case!" he argues. "I can't take credit for this!"

She shakes her head. "I didn't. We did. You are the one who pointed out that she got hired on the day of Regina's disappearance...Besides what is the goal here? Who gets credit? Or setting things straight? Because I really need answers David!"

"Snow!" David wants to argue, but can he really argue with her when she looks at him, her green eyes on fire. "Alright," he nods. "We'll do things your way. Either way, chances that we'll succeed are very small, if Regina can turn into a puff of smoke..."

"I know," Snow replies quietly. "Which is why I'm going to ask you for a really big favor..."

"What is it?"

"When you bring her down...can I be there too?"

"Of course!" David replies without even thinking. "Actually," he smiles. "I'll do you one better. I'll agree to you recusing yourself from the case if you remain on the team as a consultant. You can be an essential part of the plan for bringing her down...this way no one can deny you access to the scene..."

Snow's eyes open wide. "You would do that? David that could mess up your case...What exactly do you have in mind?"

"A diversion within a diversion," he smiles.
"If things don't turn out they way they are supposed to, and it comes out that you let me in there, that will reflect really bad on you..."

David shrugs "What's the worst thing that can happen?"
Jiminy tapping his quill on his desk, staring at Snow and David as if they are speaking underwater fire goblin.

"You want to what?" he asks adjusting his glasses on his nose.

"I'm going to need thirty knights and twenty magic beans. We need to go into Regina's secret realm room and bring out as much evidence as we can, including Daniel's glass coffin... you need to have a judge on standby. Once we bring out enough incriminating evidence, he can sign off on a warrant for her arrest..." David explains.

"Yes, Lieutenant Nolan, I heard that part and I'm inclined to approve it. It's the second part that has me baffled..."

"I need to recuse myself," Snow explains patiently. "Please assign Grumpy or someone else on the case so David can go on and arrest Regina..."

"But why? If you recuse yourself now, that will mess up the whole investigation..."

"If I don't recuse myself it will taint the investigation even more..."

Jiminy takes a deep breath. "Explain, please!"

"According to the evidence presented by some very trustworthy trolls the reason Regina fought with George is because she wanted to come clean about what she did to me..."

"What did she do?" Jiminy hesitates to ask.

"Had my memories and my...- " Snow pauses and swallows. "She had Emma's father taken away..." Snow replies quietly.

"Snow!" Jiminy gasps getting up from his chair. "Did you just find that out?"

Snow nods quickly.

"Are you alright?"

She nods again. She braces for his next question, but it never comes. Jiminy turns to David instead.

There is a certain benefit to always having your partner along, Snow thinks, and then she looks at her hands, because she just solved the case and passed it on, she just effectively dissolved this partnership, so now this, whatever this is, it is almost over. Snow doesn't feel like she is ready to let go.

"David, I'll assign Grumpy to work with you, he just got a confession on the one eyed strangler case, he is available to help... Snow I don't know what to say... can you bring Grumpy up to speed?"

Snow nods again.

"How soon before we are ready with the beans and the knights?" David asks.

"How soon were you thinking?"
"Yesterday?" David shrugs.

Jiminy's eyes dart between Snow and David.

"Alright," he says crossing his hands on his chest, leaning back on his chair. "I'm going to need you to walk me through this. What is the plan?"

"Get as many of Regina's hidden artifacts including Daniel's body inside the glass coffin pulled out of her secret room," David explains.

"We need the evidence," Snow adds.

"And we can use this as a diversion to expose the Queen."

Jiminy nods. "Alright, I'm going to need you to be more specific..."

David looks back. "You might want to shut the door for this...

There are thirty black knight force officers split into groups of three holding on their magic beans tightly. They stride into Regina's castle while Regina's people gape at them. This is so unprecedented, Regina's people actually follow them into Regina's quarters. You'd think the knight force officers would be stopping them, asking them to back off, but they don't. They keep going about their business as if they are not completely surrounded. Once in Regina's bedroom, one by one they disappear in the dark corridor that used to be concealed behind Regina's mirror. And then they reappear in the courtyard, withing clouds of magic bean smoke, carrying the most incredible things. A potted apple tree. Stacks and stacks of Regina's books. A trunk full of wooden boxes with red glowing beating hearts inside them. A glass coffin with a young man inside being the most incredible of them all.

Grumpy, David and are sitting together in the small office that Snow and David conducted interviews last time they were in the castle. First they ask to see the Huntsman. Then a couple of the maids. Then David gets a message on his magic mirror.

"Proceed," says Jiminy's text. "We have a warrant."

That's when they ask to see Agnes, the woman in charge of Regina's wardrobe.

She walks in, her cheeks pale, glaring at David and Grumpy.

"What do you want?" her expression is haughty. "I already told you what you needed to know..."

"Did you really?" David asks quietly looking at his notes, his expression not betraying how he feels inside. "Because I think there is a lot you know you are not letting on..."

"I'm just in charge of the Queen's wardrobe, I know nothing!" the woman looks incredulous, tapping her foot on the ground. Then there is a soft knock the door.

"And how long have you worked here?" David asks, ignoring it.

The woman frowns. "Not too long..."

"According to our records you started working here the very day the Queen disappeared..."

"I...that's not accurate..."

"Pardon me Sir," a young knight force officer appears through the door. "I just wanted to verify
"Excuse me," David is looking very apologetic, "The body in the glass coffin?" he asks the officer.

"Yes Sir."

"Yes, we are cremating him immediately, the fire goblins should be on their way..."

The woman stands up, her calm and annoyed facade crumbling.

"No!" she says and her image shivers like water ripples on the lake. "Please don't!"

"Don't? Don't do what?" David frowns.

The woman manages to appear calm once again.

"Am I under arrest?" she asks quietly.

"No of course not..." David frowns. "I would like the exact date you started working here..."

"Am I free to leave then?"

"Yes, but I would urge you to reconsider... we need your help to find the Queen" David starts saying but the woman has already stepped outside and into the adjoining room, where Snow is standing, leaning against the wall.

David and Grumpy step next to the door, listening carefully for what Agnes will say next. He opens his magic mirror and sets a five minute count down.

"Snow!" Agnes looks surprised to see Snow standing there. The she stumbles towards her, "Please, please don't let them burn him..."

"Do I know you?" Snow asks. "You are Agnes aren't you? Why do you care what happens to Daniel?"

"Snow it's me!" Agnes snaps her fingers and she is no longer the woman in charge of Regina's wardrobe, she is now Regina the Queen, her eyes welling up, her eye shadow smudged, tears and mascara dripping on her usually flawless, arrogant face.

And even she knew this would happen, Snow being the one who solved the case after all, she still feels stunned as she stands in front of her stepmother.

David next door signals the three knight force fairies who just stepped in to get closer and get ready. They are holding fairy dust steeped in squid ink, strong enough to stun and incapacitate the Queen for hours.

"Not yet," David whispers. "Hold your position." He looks at his mirror. Four and a half minutes to go. He holds his breath. Snow is about to get some answers.

"Regina?" Snow asks quietly. "Regina, what are you doing here?"

"Snow, please. You can't let them burn Daniel..."

"What were you doing with him?" Snow asks.

Regina is looking on the ground, she doesn't reply.
"Were you trying to bring him back to life?"

"Maybe... You wouldn't understand...You can't let them burn him..."

"Wouldn't I?"

Again Regina doesn't reply.

"You told King George you wanted to come clean about what you did to me..." Snow whispers. "Regina, now is your chance... What did you do?"

"It doesn't matter" Regina replies quietly. "It's too late now...tell me you won't let them burn him..." And there is so much pain in her eyes that Snow nods slightly. She shouldn't be agreeing to this, she should be using Regina's fear as leverage, hold Daniel's cremation over Regina's head, get the answers she so desperately needs. But seeing Regina standing in front of her, begging... Snow is just too kind to do this to her.

"I'll see what I can do..." she whispers and just like that Regina's countenance changes. She stands up straight. She already got what she wanted. She is not begging Snow White anymore.

Regina gets ready to turn herself into smoke and magic away. But there is some kind of resistance in the room, something is blocking her magic.

Because the room Snow is in is sprinkled with Tink's special blend of fairy dust. Tink calculated that it will incapacitate Regina's magic for about five minutes, no more. Strong enough to keep her from magicking away, long enough to get Snow some answers.

"Tell me what you did..." Snow tries again.

David watches his mirror. Four minutes.

"I...I...I did something terrible," Regina starts. "I took your love away, because I was so angry, I wanted to get revenge... I..."

Regina rambles as she tries to fight the power blocking her magic, as she tries to get free. "I didn't think this through..."

"You and George were behind what happened to me ten years ago..." Snow whispers.

Regina says nothing, but her silence might as well be an admission.

"I'm here to hear you out," Snow says and she leans again the wall watching Regina. "Isn't this what you wanted? Isn't this why you went to the king?"

Three minutes. David's magic mirror is counting.

"What do you want to hear?" Regina is trying to stay calm. She is feeling trapped, she is trying to hold back, she wants to lash out.

"The truth," Snow takes a step closer. "You told the king you wanted to make amends..."

"Well, it looks like you are going to be Queen after all, so we are even..."

"We are not even," Snow shakes her head and she speaks so softly, tears streaming down her cheeks. "You took my memories away, you left me with nothing...Tell me...Tell me..."
"What is there to tell?" Regina takes a step backwards.

"Who was he?" Snow asks and her voice cracks.

"Who? Charming?" Regina scoffs.

Snow closes her eyes. It hurts to hear his name in Regina's lips. "Yes!" she whispers.

"You don't know?" Regina looks almost surprised.

"Tell me..."

"He..." Regina hesitates. "Why? Why should I tell you when you clearly already know? Why should I incriminate myself further? I was trying to make my heart pure, I needed a pure heart for...-"

"For Daniel?" Snow asks softly. "You were going to use your own heart to bring him back to life?"

Regina nods, tears streaming down her cheeks. Regina wipes her eyes in a hurry. "My mother spent her whole life with her heart locked up in her vault for safekeeping... I thought I could hide my heart in his chest, couldn't think of a safer place... Why shouldn't I give him my heart, when it was already his? But in order for the spell to work my heart had to be pure. It's over now. I'm sure I'll be impeached, I won't ever bring Daniel back, why should I tell you anything?"

One minute, the magic mirror is still counting down. David needs to give the signal for the fairies to step inside, but Regina has told Snow nothing. And she is so close, so close to cracking, he can feel it. One minute left. There is still time, he thinks, there is still time...

David's been through so many interrogations by now, he knows that there's a moment when the suspect is willing to talk, a fraction in time. And if you miss it, if you interrupt them or if you lock them up too soon that moment may never come again. They will think this through, they will regain their power, they will build their walls back up and its over. They will never confess.

Snow's eyes are streaming with tears. "Regina," she says softly "I am so sorry, I know I hurt you and I...-

Snow stumbles for the right words. She is a little girl again, lost in the big cold castle, eager to gain Regina's love.

Grumpy looks at David. "You have to give the signal" he whispers.

"I know," David nods impatiently and still he raises his hand, asking the fairies to holds back.

He watches at the mirror counts down. Forty seconds. Regina is about to talk, she has to talk, and then Snow will know, and Emma, Emma will get her father back. Emma. He thinks of Emma's sweet beautiful face when she asked for his help. "My Mom is looking for my Dad. Can you help her find him?"

Regina has to talk now. The mirror is counting thirty seconds left.

"I'm sorry too," Regina says quietly. "I can't even tell you how sorry I am..." Regina's magic is slowly adjusting to Tink's fairy dust, Regina's magic is getting stronger.

"Tell me who he was..." Snow pleads.

"He was...-"
A name, David thinks, ask, ask for his name.

"His name Regina! Give me his name..." Snow pleads.

Fifteen seconds. He needs to give the sign. Grumpy stares at David. Now, his eyes seem to say.

"His name," Regina whispers. "His name was Daniel and I'll never get him back!" Regina's voice is a sob, her face is crumpled, but she still raises her hand in defiance, black smoke curling on her fingers.

"Now!" David yells, because his magic mirror has counted down five minutes, he has gone over the agreed time frame, and Regina has clearly overcome Tink's special dust.

The fairies storm into the room silver fairy dust escaping their fingers.

And for a brief second it looks like it's going to work. The world slows down. The cloud of silver fairy dust falls reaching, almost, almost touching Regina. Almost. She looks shocked at Snow, betrayed, but then she lets her body fall backwards and then before she crushes on the ground she is a cloud of smoke and she is gone.

"No!" David yells both stunned and furious, angry, so angry. "No!"

It didn't work. Regina was on the verge of a confession, or maybe she was stalling for time, Regina didn't give up Charming's real name, Regina managed to escape and it's all his fault. How, how did he let this happen? She was ready to confess, she was ready...

He was in charge, he let Regina escape... he let Regina slip through his fingers. And he doesn't know if he is angry at himself because Regina got away, or angry because he miscalculated Regina's intentions or angry because Snow has now knelt on the ground and she is stifling her sobs with her hand.

"What happened?" the fairies want to know.

"No!" David yells again.

"So close!" Grumpy says shaking his head.

And then David needs air, this room is too small, this room is too crowded. Snow is on the ground sobbing silently and he failed her, he failed to get her answers, he failed to capture the Queen and he feels just like when the poison of the Agraban viper was in his veins and he couldn't breathe. Except this time Snow isn't standing in front of him, begging him to breathe. No. This time she is on the ground, she is the one hurt and broken. He failed. He failed on so many levels. He storms out of the room because he is drowning and the walls are closing in and he needs to get some air.

Grumpy kneels in front of Snow and holds her tight.

"A name " Snow sobs, "she wouldn't give me his name..."

"I'm so sorry Snow," Grumpy whispers, patting her back. And Snow buries her face in his shoulder and lets herself weep.

Back at the knight force headquarters Grumpy and David are sitting in Jiminy's office while he paces back and forth.

"I don't understand. Your plan worked perfectly, Regina revealed herself to Snow and asked that
"we do not cremate Daniel's body... how did we not arrest her? Didn't Tink's special dust work?"

"It worked," David replies.

"Then what went wrong? David, I just approved one of the most expensive operations in my career, thirty officers and I don't know how many magic beans. Everything went according to plan. Why is the Queen not in one of our dungeons right this very moment?"

David doesn't reply.

"I need an answer!" Jiminy is getting louder.

"The Queen was about to confess, then we..."

"Arresting the Queen was our number one priority. How did we mess this up?"

The answer is rather simple really. Arresting the Queen was the knight force number one priority...Getting Snow and Emma answers was his.

David shakes his head. "I don't have an answer for you," he replies. "I messed up..."

Grumpy who very well knows that David hesitated for Snow's shake looks like he is about to say something. But then he doesn't. What is there to say? We thought that Snow and Emma deserved the truth? We thought that Snow and Emma's need was greater than getting the job done? David is going to go down for this, it's as simple as that. And it's not fair, it is not right, and there is nothing that Grumpy can say to make this better.

"We made a judgement call," Grumpy offers weakly, not that this will help much.

Jiminy sighs. "I don't know what to say," he says quietly. "I just got notified that the White knight force wants you back immediately, they want a full report on the operation and they are discussing disciplinary action, they claim that your visit to the King was unauthorized. And I wish I could let you go with a report explaining that everything went down according to plan, that none of this was your fault, but after talking to both of you I cannot in good conscience say that... and I don't know what else I can do for you... David, you have to give me something..."

"It's fine," David mumbles. "You don't need to worry about me. I can handle the white knights..."

"Can you? I don't know what to say," Jiminy continues. "We solved a very difficult case and yet we failed to apprehend Regina... what's that quote... the operation was a success but the patient died? I wish I could help... I wish I was saying goodbye under different circumstances..."

David nods a couple if times.

"If there is anything I can do for you...anything I can say..." Jiminy adjust his glasses, lines of worry creasing his face.

David shakes his head. "I'll be fine..."

Jiminy stands up and shakes David's hand. "Good luck!"

"Thank you Sir," David nods then he walks out of the room.

"Do you want to tell me what really happened?" Jiminy asks Grumpy.

"Regina was about to tell Snow who Emma's father was..."
"Did Snow prevent him from arresting Regina?" Jiminy frowns.

"What? No of course not..."

"He held back on his own? Why didn't he tell me that?"

"Would it help with the report?" Grumpy asks.

"No..." Jiminy replies thoughtfully.

"That's why he didn't tell you... What do you think is going to happen to him?" Grumpy asks.

"Nothing good," Jiminy replies. "How is Snow White?"

"Snow is a survivor," Grumpy replies, wishing with his whole heart that he is right.

Jiminy can read the doubt in his eyes. He groans and buries his face in his hands. His head is hurting.

"Would you please shut the door on your way out?" he asks Grumpy.

It's very late and the rain is pouring hard. Snow is leaning against the window, watching the flowers on her front porch try to stand while getting relentlessly drenched, when David shows up outside Snow's cottage. He knocks hesitantly at the door.

Snow's door opens wide.

"Come on in..." she says quietly. "I've been expecting you..."

The room is quiet except for the fireplace and a couple of candles.

"I was worried you were already asleep..." he explains.

"Nah, I couldn't sleep," she shrugs. "What happened?"

"Nothing much," he shrugs. "There is going to be a hearing in a week..."

"They dragged you all the way to white force headquarters just to tell you that?"

He nods.

"They can't be serious!" Snow is looking outraged. "A disciplinary hearing?"

He nods.

"David, I am so sorry..."

"Not your fault," he replies, then he takes a deep breath. "I am the one that should be apologizing. You handed Regina to me on a silver platter and I flinched..."

Snow looks at him shaking her head. That is not at all what happened. I know you blew the arrest in order to get me answers, she thinks but she doesn't say it out loud.

"You didn't flinch," she replies. "You thought she was about to confess... you made a judgement call..."

"And it was the wrong call," he shrugs.
Snow shakes her head. "I don't think that was the wrong call," she whispers.

"You are the only one," he smiles ruefully.

"An arrest with a confession would have been so much better. One could argue away our evidence, they could claim it's circumstantial... even the chest full of hearts. That's quiet incriminating, but she could claim that it belonged to her mother... I talked to the Huntsman this morning, he is still unwilling to press charges..." Snow insists.

David looks away. He is not in the mood to rehash this all with Snow, of all people.

"Would you like a drink?" she offers.

He should get his stuff and head out. Really. There is no longer any reason to impose on Snow White. It is so late.

The sound of thunder rattles Snow's cottage, lightening illuminating her face, green eyes, pale skin, searching his face for answers, looking so worried.

"Sure," he replies.

Snow comes back with two beer bottles and they sit on the couch next to each other.

"Well," she says," clinking her bottle to his, "You called it. You said we'll solve the case and get fired, not necessarily in that order..."

"I did call it," he almost laughs.

Snow sighs placing her feet on the coffee table.

"Are you going to be alright?" he turns to face her.

"I'll be fine," she shrugs. "Cases to solve, mysteries to unravel... How about you?"

"Yeah," he shrugs noncommittally.

"You are not going to the meeting alone, are you? Are they providing you with defense council?"

"They are not," he shrugs.

"You shouldn't be dealing with this alone, David!" she says again.

"I'll be fine..." he replies. "What is the worse thing that could happen?"

"I don't know David, your memories could get displaced again or...I don't know..."

He turns to look at her, moved by her concern. "I know you don't have the best opinion of the white knight force, but they are not like that... worse case scenario they will reassign me to the end of the realm or all together discharge me, I'm not any in any actual danger..."

Snow doesn't look convinced. She would be offering to go with him, if she thought it would help, but she knows it wont. If anything her presence will enrage the king. "I'll come with you," she offers quietly. I won't say anything, I'll just wait outside to make sure you are okay..."

He shakes his head. "You don't need to do that..."
"Promise that you'll call me right after and you tell me that you are okay," she says firmly. "Tell me that your memories are intact and you remember everything that happened this past month..."

"I'll call you," he smiles. And before she gets a chance to argue he places the empty beer bottle on the coffee table. "I should go get my things..."

Don't go, she wants to say. Don't. But there is no rational reason for him to stay here. The case is solved, new officers are assigned to search for the Queen. Nobody is going to try to intimidate him or try to scare him off. Not when the case is solved and he failed. He needs to go home.

He walks to the guestroom, gathers up his belongings, he whistles to Wilby who comes out of Emma's room and then he walks towards the front door. Snow follows him.

"Tell Emma..." he hesitates. Tell Emma I'm so sorry I didn't get her father's name, is what he really means to say, but he doesn't. "Tell Emma goodbye for me," he says quietly. Snow nods.

Thunder echoes again and they both jump, her hand now in his. Their eyes lock just for a second and he is standing right there, close enough for Snow to read all these questions in his eyes, close enough that she could answer by leaning her forehead on his chin, close enough to answer that she could answer with a kiss. It's like they are both magicked in place, neither of them willing to move, neither of them certain of where to go next. He can see that she is breathing faster. Snow, he is about to whisper. She is looking at his lips now, her heart thundering inside her chest, she is going to do it, she is going to kiss him.

"Mommy!" Emma's voice from her bedroom, breaks the spell. She must have been spooked by the thunder. David looks away, a sad smile on his face, Snow looks down. And just like that, Lieutenant Nolan and Wilby step out of Snow's cottage and disappear into the night.

Snow wakes up when Emma shakes her in the morning.

"Where is David? Where did he go?" Emma asks. "I thought he was going to stay with us..."

Snow wraps her arms around her.

"We solved the case," she replies. "It was time for him to go home..."

"But I wanted him to stay," Emma looks about to cry. "Mom, David is my friend, I wanted him to stay longer with us..."

"I know, sweetheart," Snow's voice cracks. "I know..."

David is dressed in his official white knight's uniform, sitting next to Throx, the centaur in charge of his defense, who unexpectedly showed up in his apartment three days ago, willing to represent him for a fraction of what the cost of his rate should be. He his staring at the marble checkerboard floor, the white columns and the vaulted ceiling, trying to stay calm, wondering if this room is designed to make him feel small and insignificant. He talked to Snow last night in the magic mirror, he made a very compelling argument on why she shouldn't come to the hearing. If the knights are angry that we interrogated the king again, you being there isn't going to help much, he'd said. She sounded disappointed. The truth is, that if he gets demoted or has his badge taken away... he really doesn't want Snow, of all people to witness that. He doesn't know why. He is beginning to regret that decision, being in this strange room, with not one friendly face in sight, he feels so alone. Sensing his discomfort, Throx places his massive hand on his shoulder.

"Almost our turn" the centaur states.
David is feeling lightheaded. He plays the scene over and over in his mind. Snow's face drenched in tears, Regina sounding so apologetic, about to give up the answer to Snow's question. "His name Regina, give me his name..." She was about to do it too, he doesn't think she was faking remorse. She was apologetic and sad and about to tell the truth and just like that she changed her mind and disappeared. No matter how many times he's played the scene in his mind, he always makes the same call. The wrong call. You do not interrupt an interrogation when the subject is about to confess. You just don't. Even if it's the Queen, even if the whole kingdom is looking to you for stability and answers.

And then the large dark walnut door of the hearing room opens and in walk Blue, Jiminy and Grumpy. They sit on the very front row, as if it is perfectly normal for the chief of the black knight force to attend disciplinary proceedings for white knights.

"What are they doing here?" David whispers.

"They are here just in case," Throx replies cryptically.

Next case, number 0815, Lieutenant Nolan please approach," the officer's voice sounds cold, official.

David stands up decisively, his hands clenched, his head held high.

The next thirty minutes are a blur, the equivalent of a brutal interrogation.

David gets asked the same questions over and over, reworded just enough to make him trip up, to say something incriminating.

"Would you say you conducted yourself according to the white knight force code?"

"Did anyone promise you anything in return for you failing to apprehend Queen Regina?"

"Did you follow the plan of action according to knight force code 3.121 regarding apprehension of high officials accused of crimes?"

"Would you say you conducted yourself as a knight befitting this realm?"

"What did you receive in return for letting the Queen of the Northern kingdom go?"

"Why did you not follow the plan of action according to knight force 3.121 regarding apprehension of high officials accused of crimes?"

"What were you promised in return for letting the Queen go?"

"Objection," Throx's voice booms again and again, his front hoof clip clopping on the ground. "Asked and answered. Objection!"

The door opens up and king George walks in. All the knight force officers in the room are up on their feet. The king raises his hand, a signal for them to proceed, as if he is not there, as if he didn't mean to interrupt the hearing. As if he is not here to make sure the white knight force chief is acting according to his instructions. He glares at David and David instinctively rubs his knee. The king looks stunned to see Blue and Jiminy in the audience, their presence there a silent protest, but he recovers quickly. He nods towards them, a silent acknowledgment of their presence. He did not see that coming.

Throx puts up a vigorous defense but in the end the truth doesn't necessarily matter. The results
have been predetermined by forces above.

The white knight force chief opens the paper handed to him by the three review officers. "David Nolan, please stand. You are hereby stripped of all rank. Please turn in your badge. If you wish to remain in service you are required to report in Wonderland in two days time where you will be placed on desk duty. This decision is final and cannot be appealed. Next case!"

It's not like he didn't expect it, but it still feels like a slap in the face. David swallows hard. He hands his badge to the officer in front of him, then he turns to shake hands with Throx, who is looking at the chief of the White knight force stunned. This is a travesty of justice, but there is no legal recourse, the decisions here are final. David walks out of the hearing dazed, his hands shaking, his stomach in knots, he doesn't know whether he is angry or sad, he doesn't know...

He feels an arm around his shoulder. A familiar voice says "Let me buy you a drink, brother..."

It's Grumpy.

"What are you doing here?" he asks as Grumpy points to the tavern across the street.

There is a fairy right outside, holding a box full of turtles whose shells have been magiked with colorful pictures on.

"Don't you want to buy a turtle sir?" the fairy asks. She is rather young, blond with bright eyes, can't be but a few years older than Emma. "I painted them myself..."

"I'm here to support you," Grumpy shrugs guiding him away from the fairy, and into the tavern. "I don't quite understand what happened in there..."

"Oh, you know," David replies sitting at the table staring at his hands. "The king had a point to make..."

"The king?" Grumpy asks.

"There might have been a meeting Snow and I forgot to mention in the official report...a meeting where I accused the king of conspiring with the Queen to erase Snow's and Emma's father's memories..."

Grumpy's eyes open wide. "Is that true?"

David nods. "Wouldn't have accused him if it wasn't..."

Grumpy shakes his head. "No wonder he wants you sent to Wonderland..."

"Who is after the Queen now? Who did they assigned to the case?" David asks.

Grumpy looks surprised. "Oh you don't know..."

"Know what?"

"The Queen reached out to the DA through Sidney Glass who is now acting as he official representative. She claims she has gone into voluntary exile, in an undisclosed location, she will not dispute any of the charges..."

"How was that not in the news?"

"They are still hashing out the terms... There should be an official press conference by the end of
the week."

"And they are going to let her do that?"

Grumpy nods. "The royal council is relieved. They want this unpleasant business over with..."

"But she can shapeshift, she could be living under their noses for all they know..."

"They don't care, they just want to avoid the national embarrassment. A Queen going to trial. That's unheard of..."

"Is it? If they continued investigating, if they bothered to connect the dots, then King George could have been charged too. The Northern and the Southern kingdom could put their royals to trial together... share the embarrassment," he replies sipping his beer.

"Yeah..." Grumpy replies.

"What is the Queen getting out of it?"

"She gets to avoid the unpleasantness of the trial plus they promised that Daniel's body will be cryogenically preserved..."

David rolls his eyes. "Is that all? Did they negotiate answers for Snow too, before they let the Queen off the hook?"

Grumpy lowers his voice. "Just between you and me I believe they could if they wanted to...but they don't want to. They don't care. I don't think that they never forgave Snow for the royal scandal!"

"What scandal!" David raises his voice and everyone in the tavern turns to look at him. "What scandal!" he hisses under his breath. "Where exactly is the scandal? When people elope they usually do it to get married... Nothing scandalous about that... And if they didn't elope, if they think it was a kidnapping then it certainly wasn't her fault..."

"If she'd agreed to give Emma up, rather than abdicating back then, they'd probably be more agreeable..." Grumpy shrugs.

David shakes his dead. He shudders at the thought of Emma being alone out there in the world somewhere, being raised by someone other than Snow.

"So in the end, you were the only one willing to stick your neck out to get her answers..." Grumpy says quietly, sideglancing at David. "She was going to come to your hearing too...it's just that she felt that her presence would hurt your chances..."

"How did you end up at my hearing?" David frowns.

"Oh you know... it was the right thing to do..." Grumpy smiles, ordering another round of drinks.

David doesn't look at all convinced. "And Blue and Jiminy?"

Grumpy shrugs, "Snow stormed in Blue's office and said 'if you ever want my help again in any case at all, you will all go to the hearing and stick around long enough to make sure he doesn't get carted away in a unmarked pumpkin..."

"Did she really?" David looks stunned.
"You know Snow, she can be very... -"

"Persuasive?" David is smiling for the first time in days.

"Bossy. I was going to say bossy, but sure, we'll go with persuasive, it sounds better..." Grumpy smiles. "When Snow decides someone is family she will go to the ends of the realm to keep them safe... I personally thought that she was overacting, but after watching the gourd wreck that was your hearing, I am not entirely convinced she was wrong... When we walked in the room the chief of white force looked stunned... He didn't really want us there, he didn't want witnesses..."

David nods.

"Still you should watch your back... Are you going to go to your new assignment?" Grumpy looks concerned.

"In Wonderland?"

"Yes..."

David pauses briefly. "I don't know... if Snow is right and they want to make me disappear, then showing up to my new assignment in Wonderland is a decidedly bad idea isn't it?"

"You are quitting then?"

"I don't know..." David is staring at his drink.

"Well you have to give me something..."

"What do you mean?"

"Brother, once I get home, Snow will torture me for information. Are you alright, are you going to survive this, have you been eating, sleeping, are you looking well... you have to tell me what to say..."

David is smiling again. "Tell her... no, don't tell her anything, I'll call her..."

"Good!" Grumpy is looking like a man who succeeded in his mission.

"There is just one thing I don't get..."

"What?"

"Throx... Who sent Throx to represent me and charge me only a tenth of his actual rate?"

"Oh, that's easy..." Grumpy is smiling brightly now. "Three years ago, when Throx's grandfather died, his sister showed up with a new will, signed the week before, declaring her his sole heiress...while his real will went missing. Throx hired Snow to find the old will and help him prove that will to be a fraud... She must have called in a little favor..."

David nods, smiling.

"Well brother, I got to go, I promised my Nova I'll make it for dinner... Don't want to upset her..."

"When is the baby coming?" David asks.

"Next week, if you believe in due dates...babies seem to have a mind of their own..."
"Well, best of luck to you then," David gets up to clasp his hand. "Thank you so much..."

"Call her..." Grumpy winks at him then he heads out.

When David steps out of the tavern, the a fairy is still there, she has one turtle left, the smallest turtle who has shimmering stars and wings painted on its shell.

"Don't you want to buy a turtle, sir?" she asks. "I painted it myself..."

David looks at the fairy but all he sees is Emma, what Emma might have been like, if Snow had caved into pressure and let her go.

"I thought that painting their shells was really bad for them," David says quietly.

"Not my paint sir, it is magiked on, it doesn't hurt them none..."

"How much do you want for this one?"

The fairy is left blinking, stunned, because David just paid three times the price she asked, then he walked away, holding a very colorful turtle in his hand.
The Case of the Missing Queen

It is a beautiful winter day, the breeze is gently swaying the almond tree that is blooming above the picnic table in Snow's back yard. Ruby is up on a ladder hanging lanterns and twisting purple and pink garlands from the lowest branches. "Happy Birthday Emma," reads the banner she already nailed on the back yard fence.

Grumpy is on his hands and knees, pulling weeds out of Snow's flower beds.

"Honey, you don't have to do this!" Nova exclaims. She is sitting on a chair in the middle of the yard overseeing the preparations. "I can just magic the weeds away..."

"We talked about this Nova!" Grumpy replies tugging on weeds now even harder. "Now that you are pregnant you are not supposed to control the weather, yet somehow Snow's yard is in blooming Spring while the rest of the world is freezing, which has me thinking that this wasn't supposed to happen, so you are not doing anything else magical today..."

"No, no, no," Nova glares at him. "What I'm not supposed to be is pregnant, three days past my due date...yet here we are. So I'm going to use as much magic as I can and maybe this child will get a clue and spring into action..."

And while Grumpy focuses on pulling a really large dandelion that comes up to his chest Nova goes back to her serene happy self.

"Besides, Emma wanted a back yard party, we can't have a back yard party in the middle of a winter snow storm can we? So I had to make arrangements..." Nova smiles sweetly looking at the very spring looking grass in desperate need of mowing, gently swaying in the breeze. "Isn't this better?"

"You prevented a snow storm?" Grumpy looks incredulous as he stands up. "Nova!"

"Please don't yell at me honey, think about the baby!" Nova blinks a couple of times, offering her most innocent of smiles and Grumpy doesn't know whether to growl at her or kiss her. So he does the only thing he can think of, he tugs on the overgrown dandelion one more time.

Nova waves her finger, the dandelion pops right up, roots and all and Grumpy who was pulling on it with all his might loses his balance and stumbles backwards.

"Careful honey!" Nova cringes slightly.

"Nova!" Grumpy cries out all exasperated.

"Sorry?" Nova looks almost apologetic briefly and then she covers her mouth trying to stifle her laughter. "So sorry honey, I had no idea this would happen..."

Ruby folds the ladder mumbling something about wedded bliss not being all that it's cracked up to be and gets away from the back yard and the Grumpy family as fast as her feet will take her.

Granny is in the kitchen, putting the final touches on Emma's birthday cake.

"Won't you blow some more balloons," she tells Ruby, well aware of the fact that when Ruby steps in the kitchen food somehow manages to spontaneously combust.
"Fine," Ruby mumbles walking away.

The door bell rings. Hansel and Gretel are already here.

"Come on in!" Snow smiles at them. We are having the party in the back yard...

"The back yard?" their father asks. "I thought it was snowing..."

"Not in my yard," Snow shrugs.

The doorbell rings again. This time it's Hatter with Grace along with Geppetto and Pinocchio.

"Come on in," Snow ushers everyone on the back.

Emma in a purple flower dress and leggings is doing cartwheels on the lawn. Her friends are taking off their jackets, hats and scarves, looking delighted at the beautiful spring weather and the decorations.

"How is it so warm back here?" the Hatter asks taking off his scarf.

Nova smiles at him. "It's lovely, isn't it?" she asks.

Snow is done pouring pink lemonade in clear plastic cups at the picnic table. She leaning against the tree, watching her daughter play with her friends. Today is a hard day, today marks the anniversary of the day her memories got erased and Emma's father became nothing more than a ghost. She is so grateful her daughter is laughing with her friends completely unaware of the dark clouds troubling her mother's mind.

"Snow?" Ruby asks.

Snow turns to smile at Ruby. Ruby quietly places her arm on Snow's shoulder. "Look at her," she says quietly. "She is so happy... you are doing such a good job..."

Snow gets misty eyed and squeezes her friends hand.

Emma walks over to her mother.

"Where is he?" Emma frowns at Snow.

"I'm sure he is on his way," Snow winks at her.

"But he is late..."

"Maybe your party is too early," Snow laughs.

"That's not how it works Mom..." Emma replies and then she turns to glare at Hansel who took this opportunity to tag her on the shoulder and yell "Emma is it!"

"Hey! Doesn't count!" she yells but then she runs after him, laughing, a ball of energy and hair and ribbons and purple fabric.

Snow is still laughing when David walks into the back yard. "How is it spring time when it was snowing at my place!" is all he gets to say before Emma cries out his name and rushes to hug him.

He is wearing a doublet and his leather pants except he doesn't have his usual swordbelt with his sword and daggers on. His hair looks ruffled, and there is at least a days worth of scruff growing on
his cheeks and Snow wonders if the fact that he quit his of his job has something to do with this new more relaxed appearance. Snow things she may like the ruffled version of him even better than the perfect Lieutenant version. His boots are still spotless though.

"Hello Birthday girl!" he smiles.

"I am mad at you, you know!" Emma pulls back to glare at him.

"Is that so!" he frowns. "What did I do?"

"I thought you were staying with us for weeks, I even put my favorite blanket on your bed and you left!"

"I'm sorry," he replies, booping her nose. "Maybe you can find it in your heart to forgive me..." he is pulling out a very colorful turtle from a brown cardboard box. "Oh, no, the ribbon already came off..."

"You got me a turtle?" Emma practically squeals with excitement. She grabs the turtle with both hands, embracing it tightly. "This is the prettiest turtle I've ever seen in my life! This is the best birthday ever!"

"Am I forgiven yet?" he asks, but Emma is not listening, she is just pulling him along detailing all the great adventures they will embark on together. "We can teach her to do tricks, and we can take her on a picnic and maybe she can guard under my bed for monsters and maybe we can help me dig into the backyard for treasure..."

Granny comes out of the house, with a beautiful frosted cake in her hand, decorated with purple swirls and white flowers, lit candles already on it.

"Happy Birthday to you...!" she sings and they all join her.

The cake is placed on the picnic table next to the colorful eclairs and the dainty cucumber sandwiches and mini corn dogs and the chips. Granny has really outdone herself.

Emma closes her eyes. She opens her eyes looking at David. "I'm not telling you what I wished for," she winks at him then she leans in and blows all of her candles at once.

Everyone claps their hands and then Ruby helps serve the cake and Snow has to make sure that Emma doesn't feed her new turtle any frosting.

"It's not fair," Emma pouts. "It can be Star's birthday too..."

"Is that what we are calling the turtle?" Snow asks.

"I think so" Emma replies. "Is it a boy turtle or a girl turtle?"

David grimaces looking at Snow for help. It didn't occur to him to ask the fairy who sold it to him if the turtle was a boy or a girl.

"I'm sure Nova can figure it out," Snow smiles reassuringly.

"It's a boy turtle," Nova replies sensing the turtle's essence from the spot where she is sitting at. Grumpy tries not to glare at her. Clearly she is using her magic non stop, no matter what he says.

"Star is a good name," Emma replies, so it is official. Star the turtle is offered lettuce and
strawberries, and he doesn't seem shy at all, eventhough he has an audience, he still eats all three strawberries, then he goes onto to explore the back yard.

The party is dying down, the children are gone, Granny already excused herself. When David approaches Snow, Nova discreetly tugs on Grumpy's arm. "Time to go home," she whispers.

"But I was going to help Snow clean up," Grumpy argues.

"I bet David doesn't mind cleaning up," Nova gives him a look and Grumpy finally nods in understanding.

"I can always magic everything clean in the morning," Nova shrugs and Grumpy sighs in quiet resignation. She is a fairy. Asking her to refrain from doing magic is like asking her not to breathe air.

"Are you sure you don't mind the new pet?" David asks Snow, who is tossing the leftover plastic cups and plates from the picnic table in a large trash bag.

"What, Star?" Snow smiles. "I told you, a turtle is fine, it's low maintenance, it's not like you got her a pony..."

David laughs.

"How have you been?" Snow smiles

"I'm good," he replies. "I...I got something for you.."

"You did? It's not my birthday..." She pauses to look at him. She is wearing a white dress, her hair is falling in soft curls on her shoulders, with a few white flowers braided into it and he stands there taking her in. Even though they talked on the magic mirror, he hasn't seen her since the day he failed to arrest Regina, and he doesn't understand how he could have missed her so much. Just being in the same space as her, makes everything different, makes the colors of his life seem more vibrant, makes his heart feel alive. As if he'd been asleep for the past ten years and it took spending time with her to finally wake up.

"It's not a present," he shrugs. "I know a girl, a fairy, to be exact and I asked her to pull some past records..." he says handing her a sealed envelope.

"It's Tink, it's always Tink, isn't it? But you make it sound like you have an army of specialists at your disposal, even though it's always Tink..." Snow smirks.

"Yes, of course it's Tink...But doesn't it sound so much better if it's way more than one person?" he laughs. "Besides, Tink would kill me if I go around telling people all the things she can do..."

"It does sound better," she replies, green eyes sparkling playfully. "Well, your secret is safe with me, David, I won't tell a soul..."

And then he watches her as she tears open the envelope and she scans the first page and her breath hitches, her eyes welling up. "Oh... how..." she rasps. "I expected to have to fight to get this, how..."

"I find that it's better not to ask...When Tink hands me things, I'd rather not know how she obtained them..." he replies quietly, because she is tearing up now, trying to find her voice, before she can speak again.

Because in that envelope he handed her, there is a list of every reported memory spell victim, from
no doubt hacked hospital records and medical databases around the time Snow lost her memory. He just saved her from doing a month's worth of research. And she doesn't know if she is crying because of the content of the envelope or because he did this for her, he made this happen, today of all days.

"So, his name is probably in here," Snow's voice is barely above a whisper. Then she wipes her eyes and looks at him. "Did you already look at them?" she asks, her voice hopeful, because she'd really like his help screening the people on the list.

He shakes his head. "I didn't. Rule number one, right?"

"Rule number one," Snow smiles through her tears because that is one of the things she told him on their very first day working together.

"Rule number one, I get to look at everything first..."

"Thank you..." she whispers, blinking her last tears away.

"You are very welcome," he offers a wistful smile. "So? What's next?"

"I'm thinking of renting an office space in town. Because ever since Tink location spelled my house my clients can't find me, but I don't want to remove the location spell... it's so much safer this way..."

"Is that all? I thought that now that the Queen is gone, the counsel would be begging you to run the kingdom..."

"Oh, they tried... they left a couple of messages...I haven't responded... which is one of the reasons I want my house location spelled. They can't find their way over here..." she shrugs.

David laughs.

Snow hesitates. She folds back the paper, puts it in the envelope decisively then she smiles back at him. "What are you going to do next?"

He shakes his head. "Haven't decided yet..."

She takes a step forward. "I am so sorry things turned out this way," her hand now on his arm.

"The writing was on the wall," he shrugs. "You heard the king..."

Snow rolls her eyes. "If we could convince those trolls to join the witness protection program, we could be building a case against the King... I don't know if you heard, Jiminy offered, they turned him down..."

"Yes," he nods, "But they are trolls. It's not like they are easy to hide..."

"I don't know, their impersonation of the Evil Queen was dead on, perhaps we can hide them in plain sight and they can run the kingdom..." Snow shrugs.

David laughs again.

Snow takes a deep breath. "I've been thinking..." she says and as he gazes at her intently, she wonders if he knows what she might next. Some times they are so in tune with each other. "I've been thinking, I have so many cases, and half the time I have to turn them down, because I can't possibly do all of them on my own, but if I had a partner, I could do so much more... so... maybe..."
you and I...would you like to come work with me?"

He looks taken aback. He did not see this coming. "You are looking to hire me?"

"No, not like an employee...more like a partner," she shrugs, and she looks almost shy, which isn't like her at all. "We could be Nolan and White or White and Nolan, whichever sounds better...we could work together, we make a good team..."

"We do," he agrees and his first instinct is to just say yes, yes, of course he wants to work with her.

Then his eyes fall on that envelope in her hand. If she hadn't just teared up and looked to the list of names he just gave her with so much longing in her eyes...perhaps his response would be different. There is nothing he would love more, than to work with her every day, nothing would make him happier, except she is about to solve her riddle, she is about to figure out who Charming is. He doesn't know that he can work with her everyday, he doesn't know that his heart can take being her partner, while she finds her long lost lover, while she finds the man she has been looking for the past ten years, the man she is still obviously very much in love with. He doesn't know if he can be there while she figures out if she can have her very well deserved happily ever after with him.

David wants more. He wants more that a partnership, and a friendship, he wants more than to trade clues and tips and interrogations techniques with her. He wants to be the one to kiss her goodnight every single night, he wants to be the one to wake up next to her everyday, he wants to be the one loving her. He wants... He stands in front of her, trying to come up with a coherent response to her generous offer, while his heart is nothing but a gaping wound of wants...He wants... He wants this so badly. Which is why he knows what he has to say next.

"If you ever need my help with a case, or help with your list of names, or if you need anything at all, I am there," he starts his voice filled with emotion, "count me in..."

"You are?" her eyes so bright, they could blaze through his strongest concerns with a single glance.

Because when she looks at him like that, she leaves him no room for doubt. This isn't one sided at all. She certainly has feelings for him, but whether it's gratitude for his help or something more he doesn't know... and he can't be here, wanting things, he can't be in her way as she is about to find the one she has been looking for for the past ten years. Emma's father.

"Always," he replies and her heart leaps, because that sounded so much like a promise.

"I almost believe you..." she smiles sadly because she kind of suspects what he is going to say next.

"But I think I am going to take some time off, figure some things out, I'm not ready to get back to work just yet..."

I can't spend every day with you while you fall in love with him all over again. I'm not strong enough. I can't.

She tries to nod in understanding but her disappointment is bleeding through. "If you change your mind..." her offer lingers.

He smiles.

And then she takes a step further. "I've been meaning to thank you," she says quietly.

"For what?" he frowns.
"I'd forgotten what it was like to work with someone I could trust..." she explains.

He looks away. "You found the Queen and I let her slip through my fingers... Nobody would look at this as a successful case..."

"I would," she replies, her voice swelling with emotion. "The case of the missing queen will not be studied in the academy for years to come as a model case, ...but that doesn't mean you made the wrong call...what you did there...for me...I don't think I can ever thank you enough..." and she can't help it, her eyes well up again. Because he risked so much, he pretty much threw his career away to get her answers.

He looks away, then he nods a couple of times. "It's probably my turn to thank you for not locking me up in the basement," he counters and now they are both laughing.

"Oh, I don't know about that," she shrugs playfully. "There is still time..."

"I better watch my step then," he laughs again.

Then he looks thoughtful "I should be the one thanking you, for being this generous and letting me feel like a part of your family..."

"Don't tell anyone that," she lowers her voice. "If Jiminy makes me work with a partner ever again, I want them afraid..."

"I won't..." he grins and then Emma and her turtle run up to them.

"Do you want to play hide and seek?" she asks him. Then she points out to Star already in his shell. "Look! He is already hiding, he is so smart..."

"Emma...I was getting ready to head out..."

"But I want you to stay," Emma replies. "You can bring Wilby too, and we can train Star to do tricks and we can take them for walks in the park..." Emma is speaking so fast.

David ruffles her hair.

Emma looks very somber. "You can't go, David, now that the case is over, you live so far away and I never see you..."

"Emma..." David starts and he doesn't know what else he can possibly say.

Snow wraps her arms around her daughter's shoulders. "We talked about this," she says quietly. "Won't you thank David for coming over and for his present..."

"Thank you David!" Emma smiles even though her eyes look sad and her lip quivers.

"You are very welcome," he says then he smiles at Snow still holding her daughter, he pets Star a couple of times and he says "Goodbye!"

Emma breaks free from her mother's arms and rushes over to hug him.

David holds her tight, looking at Snow for help, because he can't walk away. He doesn't know how.

"Come on sweetheart," Snow's voice is so soft and her hands are so gentle as she tugs Emma away, releasing David from her grip.
"See you around David," he hears Snow's voice and with one last glance he walks outside, to his horse, then he rides away.

"I don't want him to leave," Emma sobs and Snow kneels in front of her and pulls her in her arms. "I don't..."

"Emma," Snow kisses her daughter's tears stained cheeks. "Emma sweety, didn't you just have a wonderful birthday?"

Emma nods through her tears.

"And didn't you get whole bunch of incredible presents, including a turtle?"

Emma nods again.

"Can we be happy for tonight? And maybe tomorrow we can call David and invite him for pizza, or I don't know, magical scrabble, something fun..."

Emma nods again. "I wanted you to make him work more cases with you so I can see him everyday..." she mumbles. "I liked seeing him every day..."

"Me too," Snow surprises herself by admitting this out loud. "I liked it too..."

I tried, she wants to add and she is surprised to feel tears stinging her eyes. She kisses Emma's cheek over and over and then Star bumps into Emma's shoe so Emma lifts him in her arms. Star is shyly getting out of his colorful shell and Emma giggles.

"This is the best birthday present ever..." she says and Snow is so relieved to see Emma happy again.

Snow is sitting in her home office, biting the tip of her quill, looking at the list David gave her last week on Emma's birthday. It took her a while but she tracked down each and every one of the memory spell victims on her list. And it's not looking good. Two of the men died shortly after getting memory spelled, five of them where together on knight force assignments when it happened, a good looking knight decided to duel a wizard in the Eastern kingdom and the Wizard picked a memory spell as his first move. None of them could be Charming. All of them had family and friends who knew exactly how their memories got lost and informed the healing fairies and the doctors. None of them miss a year that would match her memory spell, none of them were found in the woods alone. Perhaps one of them could have given the healing fairies a false story, but as Snow looks at their images in her magic mirror, none of them leap out, none of them look right. Not one of them look like they could be Charming. Perhaps she could ask David to come over and take a look, perhaps there is something that she missed...

Snow thinks of how in the beginning of the case of the missing Queen, she thought that it would be a relief to get back to work on her own, but this doesn't feel right. She constantly looks around, to share a joke or ask a question, get for a second opinion. And David is not there.

Snow needs a break from this, she decides so she walks to the living room to find Emma rolling on the floor next to Star who is munching on lettuce happily.

"Emma, are you alright?" she asks.

"Fine," Emma is too busy to stop what she is doing. "Training Star to roll around..."

Snow stifles a smile. "I don't know that turtles can do that..."
"Star is special," Emma replies undaunted.

"Not sure who is training whom," Snow tells Ruby who is leaning against the wall, her arms crossed, a triumphant smile on her face. "You certainly look happy!" Snow observes.

"I made lasagna and I didn't burn them! I didn't even char them one bit!" she says tugging Snow's arm. "Come see!"

Snow follows her friend into the kitchen.

"Ta-da!" Ruby exclaims.

"Good job!" Snow claps, taking a deep breath. "They smell so good!"

"Speaking of good jobs, when are you asking David Nolan out on a date?"

"Wait, what?" Snow looks confused. "Speaking of what? I fail to see the connection here. What does that have to do with anything?"

"It doesn't," Ruby answers matter of factly. "Now stop evading the question and answer me..."

"I'm not evading the question, I'm just baffled!"

"She said evading the question..." Ruby deadpans, and Snow glares at her.

"Well?" Ruby asks crossing her arms on her chest. "Look, I didn't burn the lasagna which means I'm making progress, now it's your turn..."

"Not burning the lasagna and asking someone out is not nearly same thing!"

"It is, if the theme is progress," Ruby replies. "Try to focus..."

Snow takes a deep breath. "I asked him to work with me, he said he needs a break from work which probably means no..."

"He needs a break from work. That's great. A man that takes time to rest is a wise man. He didn't say he wants a break from you... Now forget work and ask him out on a date..."

"Forget work...I don't know how... Ruby, I don't... I don't even remember how to do that..." Snow shakes her head "besides I don't want to go out with him..."

"You don't? What do you want?"

Snow looks away.

"Well?"

"We make a good team...I want to work with him everyday and...I want..."

What does she want? She wants to jump into magic bean portals with him, she wants to drive squad gourds too fast with him, she wants to interrogate suspects, and pour over financial records, and watch trolls do strange reenactments, and solve strange puzzles, she wants to pull him out of danger, and cup his face, and yell and scream and beg him to stay and breathe... she wants to come home and play games with Emma, and bond over eating cold pizza... she wants to make sure there is beer in the fridge for him... she wants him making coffee every single morning... she wants...
Snow's eyes open wide as she looks at her friend.  
"I want..."

"Yes?"

"I..."

"Snow, what do you want?"

All of it... Snow thinks, I want it all...

"Well?"

"I think I'm in love with him..." Snow's voice sounds so small. "How do I tell him that?"

"Well you certainly don't lead with that..." Ruby smiles, "but maybe you call him and ask him out for coffee?"

Snow nods slowly. "I think you are right!" she exclaims, and she is so surprised at the relief she feels at admitting this out loud. She is in love with him... She is shocked at how happy this small admission makes her.

Snow is downtown looking at the office space she is thinking of renting. She steps outside and thinks of how White Investigations would look painted on the glass window screen. No, not White Investigations, it doesn't sound right. White and Nolan Investigations, she thinks again. She steps inside and looks around. It's big enough for three desks. Why, its big enough for a partition wall and two desks. Big enough for several file cabinets so she is no longer stepping over her files. She wonders what David would think of the space and this time she doesn't push the thought out of her mind, she picks up her mirror and calls him instead.

"Hello? Snow? How are you doing?" David's voice over the magic mirror and Snow finds her heart beating faster.  
"Hi David," she smiles. She loves the sound of his voice, she thinks and then she wants to laugh, because this is so new and fresh and lovely. She needs to say something though, she is the one who called him. "So I'm here looking at this office space...and I'm wondering, how big is too big for an office space?"

And then she realizes she is not really giving him much to go on, no dimensions, this was just a strange thing to ask, but maybe she should skip the small talk and go straight to asking him out. Or maybe it won't matter.

"Well? How big is it? Compared to your office at home?"

"Double the size of my home office, three times the size of the office we shared in the headquarters..."

"That doesn't sound too big...are you planning on actually filling things in cabinets or are you just going to build forts with file boxes like you do at home?"

Snow laughs. "Are you mocking my filing system?"

"There is a system?" he frowns.

Snow shakes her head. "Listen, I was thinking that I'd like to ask you out on a...-" and then she
hears someone a noise behind her. "So sorry David, hold on a second... I'm sorry we are not open yet... who are you?" she says but she can't really see who the person in front of her is, they are surrounded by a strange swirling smoke and then her she gasps and her eyes roll back... "help," she whimpers as she crashes on the floor.

Her magic mirror thumps on the ground next to her.

"Snow? Snow are you there? Snow, what's happening?" David sounds really worried and then someone steps on Snow's magic mirror and her mirror cracks
The Case of the Forgetful Princess

Tink is keeping watch, her fairy wand extended, ready for action as David Nolan runs through the dark musty corridor, steps over the mysterious liquid pooling on the ground and kicks the last door open. There is a woman laying on the ground, her body shivering.

"Snow!" he cries out and kneels next to her. The woman is dressed in rags, blindfolded, her wrists tied together with thick rope. A bowl full of some sort of unidentifiable mush, and a wooden spoon are next to her. She doesn't move, she doesn't react at all. It's too dark to help her, too dark to see what he is doing so he uses the light of his magic mirror to get a closer look at her.

And then his hearts sinks. This can't be Snow White, her hair is so blond it looks almost white.

"Who are you?" he whispers as he removes her blindfold. He pulls out his dagger and he starts working on the ropes binding her hands. The frayed rope resists his dagger. It must be steeped in some kind of magic.

"Silver," the woman rasps, "my name is Silver..."

"Silver? The Silver Fairy?" David looks shocked

A few days earlier...

David is at his apartment manager's office turning in his thirty day notice. He's decided that it's time to move. He's spent too much time in the Southern kingdom, waiting for his memories to come back. He is not sure where he is going to go next, what he does know is that there is nothing holding him here, it is time to move forward.

His magic mirror rings. It's Snow White.

"Hello? Snow? How are you doing?"

"Hi David...So I'm here looking at this office space...and I'm wondering, how big is too big for an office space?"

Snow sounds excited, maybe even nervous. Renting an office must be a big move for her. "Well? How big is it? Compared to your office at home?"

"Double the size of my home office, three times the size of the office we shared in the headquarters..."

"That doesn't sound too big...are you planning on actually filling things in cabinets or are you just going to build forts with file boxes like you do at home?"

Snow laughs. "Are you mocking my filing system?"

It is so good to hear her laugh. He misses seeing her everyday so badly. "There is a system?" he frowns.

Snow hesitates. "Listen, I was thinking that I'd like to take you out on a...-" and then she pauses. "Sorry David, hold on a second...- I'm sorry we are not open yet... Who are you?" he hears her saying to someone and then there is a thump and muffled sounds. "Help," she whimpers.

"Snow? Snow are you there? Snow, what's happening?" David sounds really worried, staring into
his mirror, trying to figure out what he is looking at, because the picture looks blurry for a moment, like tendrils of smoke against the magic mirror glass and then a quick view of the ceiling, the sole of a boot coming right at him, someone stomps on Snow's mirror, and then the screen goes dark.

"SNOW!" David yells as if she can hear him, and everyone in the manager's office turns around to stare at him.

"Call Ruby," he tells his magic mirror, rushing out of the room, accidentally knocking a stack of papers on the ground on his way out. Ruby's mirror rings and rings and rings and he's practically given up when Ruby answers.

"Sorry David," Ruby laughs, "I almost didn't hear you, there is a lot going on here..."

In the background he can hear Hansel yelling "It is time to surrender!" and Emma laughing "you will never catch Star alive..."

"Snow is looking at an office space today," he says breathing faster. "Please tell me you know its exact location..."

"Of course," Ruby smiles, "it's the small office above the bookstore across from Granny's Bed and Breakfast. Why? David what's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he replies. "I'm going to call you as soon as I find out!"

"David!" Ruby sounds really worried but David has already hang up. He pulls out the pouch of magic beans he's saved just in case of an emergency. He tosses one on the ground. "Granny's Bed and Breakfast!"

It's hard to miss the office space Snow was looking at. It is the office above the rather whimsical bookstore across from Granny's. Snow's horse is still tied up upfront. David scales the external staircase, taking the steps two at the time and he bursts into the entry of the office. The door is unlocked, but the space inside is almost completely empty, just a desk against the wall. No sign of Snow or her broken magic mirror.

An older lady walks in after him, leaning heavily on a cane. She is breathless after walking up the stairs.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

"Where is Snow White?"

"You must be David, her partner," the woman smiles offering her hand. "She told me she hoped her partner would join her one of these days. You came early..."

David sucks in a breath, he feels like he's been stabbed in the chest. Snow is still calling him her partner, hoping he'd eventually accept her job offer. "Please," he manages. "Where is Snow? We were talking on the magic mirror just a minutes ago and then the mirror went dark..." he doesn't want to give her anymore details.

The woman doesn't look too worried. "She is probably in the restroom," she points to the small door in the back. "She was just in here... she couldn't have gone far..." The older woman walks slowly and knocks on the door. There is no response so she peaks inside. "I don't understand... she said she'd come talk to me, when she was done...where did she go? There is no other way out..." she says pointing to the small window on the back wall. The only way to get out from there is if
Snow were a fairy.

"Did anyone else come up here?" David frowns. "Did someone follow her?"

"Other than you dear? I didn't see anyone..." the woman replies. "It's been a slow day today, I own the bookstore downstairs... no one's come in for the past two hours."

"Does the camera at the entry work?"

The woman shakes her head. "No, but Snow said it was better this way, people want discretion when they are visiting a private investigator, she'd have the camera removed all together..."

David is thinking fast. He steps outside and looks around.

"Maybe she left..." the woman offers. "You are not thinking that something bad happened, are you dear?"

"Her horse is still here." David points to Snow's mare who is chewing on the flowers of the nearest rosebush.

"What are you doing to my flowers!" the woman starts climbing down the stairs slowly. "No! What are you doing? If Snow rents the office, this can't become a habit!" she says sternly, shaking her cane threateningly towards Snow's horse. "I'll have you know these are award winning roses..."

But David is no longer listening. He is on his magic mirror again. "Tink?" he asks. "I think Snow is in danger. It's almost like she vanished into thin air... Can you help me?" He is breathing fast, doing his best to stay calm.

The woman still shaking her cane at the rose eating horse blinks twice, because a fairy just appeared, out of nowhere, and is now standing next to David. She is in a tight dark green dress, knee high boots, and sunglasses, her blond hair in a tight bun. The older woman is gaping so Tink lowers her sunglasses to stare at her, raising her eyebrows. The woman looks away in a hurry.

"What's going on Nolan?" Tink crosses her arms on her chest.

"I was talking to Snow a few minutes ago and then she cried out for help and her magic mirror went dark. She was right here," he points to the empty office space.

Tink takes off her sunglasses and makes them disappear with a flick if her wrist. She looks at the very peaceful road. A pumpkin rolls into Granny's parking lot across the street. A fruit vendor is slowly crossing the road, his cart overflowing with apples. Tink glances at the camera mounted on the ceiling above the door.

"Doesn't work," David explains.

Tink raises her hand touches the entry door. She shakes her head.

"They magicked their way in and out?" David says looking at her and she nods.

"You were the last person to touch the door and Snow before you, nobody else in the last hour..."

"I need to call this in," David frowns reaching for his magic mirror.

Tink rolls her eyes. "What's the point?" she asks.

"She is a princess, she works cases for them, they need to know!" he replies.
Tink shrugs leaning against the wall. "What do you need me to do?"

"Can you canvass the street, see if anyone saw anything while I deal with the knight force?" he asks.

Tink flicks her wrist, her sunglasses are back in her hand and she puts them on. "Alright," she replies and she heads down the stairs.

While David talks to the black knight force officers, Tink strolls up and down the street, looking for witnesses. Everyone is willing to talk, everyone wants to help, yet no one has actually seen anything. Tink walks up and down the street, an apple in her hand, the fruit vendor insisted she take one, his treat.

Jiminy flies into the room and shape shifts into his human form.

"What's going on David?"

"I was talking to Snow on my magic mirror then her mirror dropped on the ground midsentence...and she cried out for help, someone stomped on her mirror... That's all I know..."

Jiminy frowns. "She called for help?" he asks. "She said nothing else?"

David is shaking his head, glaring at him.

"Something on your mind, David?" Jiminy adjusts his glasses.

"You settled with the Queen, but left way too may lose ends and now someone kidnapped Snow... It's not over!"

Two knight force officers are dusting the door for fingerprints, a third knight goes downstairs to request access to the footage from the security camera that David already knows doesn't work.

Jiminy hesitates. "Possibly," he replies, "but this could be completely unrelated..."

David glowers at him.

"Listen, settling with the Queen was not my ideal ending to this story either... Nobody asked me, that decision was above my pay grade..." Jiminy continues.

David looks away. He has a lot more he wants to say, but he holds his tongue. Taking his frustration out on Jiminy isn't going to help Snow. "I have to go, if you need anything more, call me," then he strides out of the office.

He is untying Snow's horse when Tink materializes right next to him.

"Absolutely no witnesses, all the way up and down the road. It's not busy here this time of day... Granny's security camera caught nothing, it's aimed lower... Where are you going?" she asks.

He doesn't reply.

"Do you need me to come with you?"

And when she doesn't get a response again Tink says "David!" loudly.

David turns to look at her, just now registering that she was actually asking him a question. He seems to be in a daze. "I'll go talk to Ruby and Emma, first" he replies "then I'll head out to the troll
bridge..."

"The troll bridge? You think the king is behind this," she states.

"Who else?" he frowns. "We need to get some leverage, we need to make him talk... What was his involvement to Snow's memories disappearing and what is his involvement now..."

Tink frowns. "You are not in the knight force anymore, he doesn't have to talk to you..."

"He can talk to Jiminy, or Blue... he can talk to the blind witch for all I care, we need to force him to talk to someone..."

Tink is looking rather doubtful. She thinks King George is the sort of man that even if he had crossbows and swords pointed right at his throat, he wouldn't confess anything if he didn't want to. He'd take his secrets to his grave just to spite them all.

"I'll keep asking around to see if I can find anyone that saw something...," Tink nods and then she is gone.

Ruby is waiting for him at the front porch.

"What is going on, David?" she looks so worried. "I've been calling Snow on her magic mirror, and she is not picking up, this isn't like her..."

David swallows hard. "I don't know," he forces out. "We were talking, then she dropped her magic mirror on the ground and cried out for help... I went to the office and she was gone, no sign of her, no fingerprints, no witnesses..."

"Did you call the knight force?"

"I did..."

"Will they let you run the case?"

He looks at Ruby surprised. "No, of course not... I'm not in the knight force anymore..."

"You have to help her!" Ruby is trying to keep her voice down.

"What do you think I'm doing? I'm going to the troll bridge next... I'll let you know if I have anything..."

"What do I tell Emma?" Ruby covers her mouth, trying to stay calm.

"I... Don't say anything yet..."

And then Emma appears from behind the door, her eyes open wide, her chest rising and falling fast, she is holding back sobs. She must have been eavesdropping, because she seems to have heard everything.

She doesn't say a word she just runs to David who leans down and now her arms are wrapped around his neck and she is sobbing.

David pats her on the back. "Emma!" is all he says, because what else could he possibly say? How could he make this better? "I am not going to rest until I find your mother, I promise," he says, caressing her hair and Emma pulls back to look at him.
"Pinky promise?" she asks.
And he doesn't know how this little girl's eyes always pierce straight into his heart, but he offers his hand.

"Pinky promise," he manages, then she wraps her arms around his neck again.

"Please David," she says quietly, "You have to find her..."

"I will," he whispers.

David Nolan rides Snow's mare to the troll bridge in a hurry. He leaves the horse a few feet behind and he steps on the bridge.

"Hello!" he calls out loudly. "I know you are here! Come out! I need your help!"

Slowly, out of the shadows four trolls walk towards him, Gand and Jad among them.

"Where is the princess?" Gand asks.

"That's who I'm here for," David replies. "I'm afraid that Snow has been kidnapped and I need your help..."

"Our help?" Geoff frowns. "How can we possibly help?"

"We haven't heard anything..." Jad adds.

"I know you haven't. But you have information that could really help...I understand that two weeks ago, Jiminy offered you to go into witness protection to testify against the king and you turned him down..."

The trolls are looking away.

"I need you to step up! I need you to do this...Please..."

"We are trolls!" Jad exclaims as if it was possible for David not to have noticed. "How exactly would you hide us?"

"I don't know," David frowns, "that's not my department, but I'm sure there are ways..."

"Because if you are planning to dress us up as dwarves and stick us in the mines, let me tell you, that just won't work...We need to be above ground, we need sunshine...we are artists, you can't just lock us away!" Gand explains.

"You know what they say about trolls..." Jad adds.

David is drawing a blank. He is not well versed in troll literature.

"A troll can't survive in captivity, any more than a carrot can survive in the ocean..." Jad recites mournfully.

David doesn't really care what they say about trolls or carrots. "You can negotiate that, when the times comes...come on..." he pleads. "Snow White is... I have no idea where she is, and I'm certain the king is behind this, but I can't bring him down, not without your testimony..."

And then Jad places his large hand on David's shoulder. "Don't worry, we'll help you find your
princess..."

She is not his, not in any sense if the word, she is not even a princess anymore, but that's not a point worth arguing at the moment.

"Tell the cricket we are willing. Do you need us to come in now or...-

"I'll talk to Jiminy, then I'll get back to you," David replies then he rushes back to his horse and he takes off galloping.

David walks inside Jiminy's office in a hurry.

"Hello, David, won't you sit down...-" Jiminy is looking weary.

"No time," David replies talking fast. Too fast. "I talked to the trolls, they are willing to testify so I think we should go pick them up and use their testimony to pressure the king..."

"Sit down!" Jiminy sounds very firm.

David sits at the edge of the chair. "As I was saying...-

"Let me stop you right there. We offered the trolls witness protection in relation to the Queen's disappearance... that case has been resolved, however unsatisfactory the results might have been...I'm afraid that witness protection is off the table..."

"What? Why?" David is standing now, glaring. "What about Snow White? How will we find her?"

Jiminy stands up as well. "I understand your frustration David, but we have no proof that Snow's disappearance is in any way related to the Queen's..."

"You can't be serious!" David is getting louder.

"Please keep your voice down..."

"You know very well that Snow disappeared because she got too close to the Queen's and the king's conspiracy..."

"I don't know that. You don't know that... there is insufficient evidence..."

"So you think what? This is just a coincidence?"

"Perhaps..."

"Why would someone kidnap Snow then?"

"Because the Queen is gone and she is next in line for the throne?"

"She abdicated!"

"That doesn't change her lineage...Besides...no matter what the trolls heard, it's all hearsay. You can't convict the king of conspiring with the Queen just because of what the trolls heard..."

"I know that. But you can convict the king for attacking Regina...that's not hearsay. They saw that happen!"

"Regina is still alive...Accusing a king of a failed attempt on a disgraced Queen that has the ability
to turn into smoke... that's just not happening, no jury will ever convict the King on the word of two trolls..."

"Four trolls. I know that. I know we can't convict him...but that's alright. We don't need to convict him, we can use this as a pressure point. We tell him what we know and we threaten to charge him until he tells us where he is keeping Snow..."

Jiminy is shaking his head. "I can't authorize four trolls being placed on witness protection, just to pressure the king, David, our department can't even afford that...do you know how much it would cost the department a day to glamour four trolls?"

"I don't care how much it costs! Snow is out there somewhere..." David can't even bring himself to finish his sentence. He has never felt this frustrated in his whole life.

"Yes she is..."

"You just don't want to go against the king!"

"If I though that it would help, I would David, but we both know the king isn't going to budge... If he is behind this and he thinks we are onto him, he will deny everything, then he will bury her even deeper..." Jiminy looks horrified as he realizes what he just said.

David closes his eyes.

"He will hide her even better," Jiminy tries to correct himself.

"Tell me what you are doing to get her back!" David is doing his best to keep his voice down.

"I can't divulge that information, David, you no longer work here..."

"Come on!" David feels like throwing things or breaking things or saying tons of things he will probably regret later. "Please tell me you are doing something..."

Jiminy sighs. "We are doing something..." he replies. "Is it effective? I don't know..."

"I got to go," David says quietly then he exits Jiminy's office.

Tink is sitting on the log of a fallen oak tree. It's rather cold out here, and her lips are turning blue. Her face is leaning on her hand while David is pacing back and forth.

"Okay Tink, you are king George, you want to make Snow disappear, who do you hire?" he pauses briefly to ask her.

"Everybody knows the king uses retired knights to do his dirty work, knights he grew up with and gangs of trolls... For something as serious as kidnapping a princess I'd use trolls... no self respecting knight would ever agree to do that..."

"Yes. Which troll gang would you use?"

"He is the king, he'd probably use the Rod troll's gang..."

"Let's start with the Rod troll," David says decisively.

"The Rod Troll?"

"Yes," David sounds very decisive.
"You and I both know that the Rod troll is like a myth, a legend. He wears a mask, nobody knows his true identity..."

"Forget his true identity," David shrugs. "Who cares who he is? We just need to meet him..."

Tink's eyes open wide.

"Back to the troll bridge then," he breathes in deep and nods offering his hand.

Tink magics them back to the troll bridge in an instant. David stumbles forward, trying not to throw up. Tink's teleportations are brutal.

When David steps on the bridge, all the other trolls are gone. Only Jad is leaning at the ledge looking down the ravine mournfully.

"Jiminy said no, didn't he?" he asks the moment he sees David approaching.

David nods.

"I figured as much," he says. "Did you ever just want to start over, start a whole new life..."

David sighs. He is sort of doing that right now, or at least he thought he was doing it, starting over, turning over a new leaf, away from the white knights. And then Snow offered him a job and he turned it down...

"You were looking forward to witness protection weren't you?" David asks quietly.

"I don't know... If I were somebody else, who would I even be?" Jad asks.

"You'd still be you..." David shrugs. "You'd still be lost in the same way you were lost, before you became somebody else... I'm speaking form personal experience..."

Jad nods. "What can I do for you friend?" he asks and David's eyes open wide. He is very well aware that a troll never calls a mortal man friend. "You didn't come all the way over here to tell me that I'm not going into witness protection, did you?"

David shakes his head. "No, I didn't. I need to ask for a favor, and if you choose to help me...it will put your life in danger..."

"Ask away," Jad replies.

"I need to get in touch with the Rod troll..."

"My life in danger? If I put you in touch with him your life will be forfeit..." Jad replies. "You do not know what you are asking of me..."

"Snow is out there somewhere..." David chokes out. He can barely form the words.

"You are no use to her dead," Jad shrugs.

"Please..."

Jad rakes his fingers through his hair. "I can't arrange a meeting. I have no connections of the sort."

David's shoulders slope. "None of your friends do?"
"Do the White knights seriously not know who the Rod troll is?" Gand looks surprised, David shakes his head.

"They do not even suspect who it is?" Jad whispers.

David stays silent, stifling the urge to say, no I'm here for kicks. I already know who he is, but I enjoy pleading.

"Well," Jad whispers, "that's because he is not a troll..."

"What?" David cannot hide the surprise in his voice. "Who is he?"

"He is the dwarf..."

David looks at Jad incredulously. He finds that very hard to believe.

"He is the dwarf running the 'The Tipsy Faun'..." Jad continues.

"The tavern?" David looks at the troll incredulously. "Are you serious?"

Jad nods a couple of times then he clasps David's hand. "It was nice knowing you... Try not to die..." he shrugs walking away.

"The Tipsy Faun!" Tink looks incredulous.

"That's what Jad said. So I think that we walk into 'the Tipsy Faun,' we grab onto the dwarf and we magic away. Easy!" David tells Tink who is once again sitting on the fallen oak tree, watching him pace up and down. This time she is prepared, though, she is wearing her heavy winter coat, so at least she is not shivering.

"Sure thing," she glares at him. "We grab him and then what?" she asks dryly.

"I force him to tell us where he is keeping Snow White..."

"Force him how exactly?" Tink's voice comes out clipped.

David looks away. Does he really have to say it out loud? "I'll do whatever it takes..." and when Tink doesn't respond right away he asks "What's wrong? Can't we do this?"


"Too dangerous?" he asks.

"Obviously," she replies. "Can we take a minute to acknowledge some facts? This isn't like you at all!"

"Which part?"

"All of it! David, you are calm, methodical. You look for clues, you dig deep... you don't use blunt force, this isn't like you..."

"I can't... I don't... I....-Tink, you were there. Did I miss something?"

Tink shakes her head.

"Was there a clue? A hint of an answer, a witness, anything?"
Tink shakes her head again.

"Can you talk to birds?" he asks again.

Tink frowns. Is he mocking her? "No," she replies hesitantly.

"Then I'm out of options," he rasps leaning against the closest tree. "There is no time to dig deeper, no time to look for clues... they have Snow and I can't bring myself to think of what she may be going through at the moment..."

Tink's eyes open wide. He wasn't mocking her at all, he was quite serious. "Can Snow talk to birds?" she asks quietly.

David nods.

"David? How in love with her are you?"

"What?" he frowns.

"Scale from one to ten? How in love with her are you?" Tink asks.

David doesn't reply.

"Twelve then?"

"Thirteen," he shrugs looking away. "Does it matter?"

"You are about to capture a dwarf and torture him for information, you tell me," she replies. And then she adds. "She is in love with you too, you know..."

David shakes his head. "How do you know?" he asks, even though he meant to tell her that it really didn't matter.

"After the ball, when we were waiting for you to wake up in the emergency room, I happened to casually mention that you and I were just friends, nothing more... I wanted to see her reaction. She blushed and stammered like a middleschooler..."

David pauses briefly. He thinks of waking up to Snow White and Tink in the hospital room. He has a very hard time picturing Snow stammering. "This isn't relevant. You do know that, right?" he asks.

"Oh, it's relevant," Tink replies, "because once Snow rescues herself and finds out what kind of wild and reckless suicidal missions I let you engage in, in order to save her, there is a good chance that she will kill me..."

"Well, if she rescues herself," David shakes his head, trying to regain his composure. "I hope you are right, and I hope she does rescue herself, I really do, because Tink, I have a really bad feeling about this..."

"About kidnapping the dwarf?" Tink frowns.

"No, about Snow missing," David replies impatiently.

"Alright," Tink sighs. "Since, against all odds I am forced to be the voice of reason, before we engage in any reckless investigating we are going to get your dog out of your apartment and anything else you don't want destroyed... because as of right now your residence is forfeit..."
And David stares at her blankly she adds. "Because once the the Rod troll's gang comes after you he is going to go destroy your place, kill your dog, and slaughter your family... you know, the usual sort of retaliation. You don't have any family, so let's keep Wilby and your stuff safe, shall we?"

Tink reaches for his had and they materialize in his living room. Once again he whistles to Wilby, then he grabs Wilby's dog bowl, his leash, he throws a few clothes into a suitcase, his daggers, a spare pair of boots. Last time he did this, he packed his things in a hurry because Snow invited him to stay at her place. Last time he was drowsy and tired but moving in with Snow and Emma felt like moving in with family. Like going home. This time it's different. He dreads seeing Emma again and Ruby, he dreads telling them that he's been looking for Snow all day and he has nothing yet.

Tink flicks her hand and his suitcase disappears, in that magical place in between realms she uses for storage. He takes a deep breath and reaches for Tink's hand. The next minute he is on Snow's porch, leaning against the railing, unable to decide whether he will throw up or not. This is his third Tink teleportation of the day and his head is spinning.

Ruby opens the door hesitantly. She doesn't even ask. She can read the answers written across his face.

"Emma cried herself to sleep," she whispers and his heart pinches. Ruby sees Wilby and doesn't even ask. It's like she already knows. She just takes the leash and the dog bowl from his hand.

"Do you think you can keep Wilby safe for me, for a few days?" he asks.

She nods quickly, she is doing her best not to cry and then she grabs his arm. "You know," she says quietly. "I have a really good sense of smell, I'm part wolf..."

"Can you go into the office and tell me who was there earlier?" he asks.

Ruby nods. "I can't live Emma alone."

"Go with Tink? I'll stay here with Emma."

David walks inside the living room and shuts the door quietly behind him. It's so weird being in here with Snow gone. He stares at the couch where they sat together at the end of the day, drinking and laughing, the office at the end of the hallway where she caught him red handed, looking at her research. He walks around the room, looking at the framed vintage illustration of a robin on the white washed rustic walls, the painting of bluebirds, the framed photo of Snow, Emma, Nova and Grumpy eating ice cream, and the photo of Emma Snow and David playing in the snow, the candles and the three old table clocks on her mantelpiece. Everything in here, is so Snow, it hurts to look at it. Emma's coloring book is on the ground, a picture she drew of her and Star flying up in the sky together is pinned on the wall above the couch. David adds some more wood into the fireplace, then he sits on the couch and runs his fingers through his hair. This is just too much. He wonders where Snow might be at the moment, if she even knows he is looking for her. She must know. She has to know.

How would she know? She asked him to work with her and he turned her down, how would she know? She doesn't know, she is in a dungeon somewhere alone, she doesn't know.

"Mommy?" Emma cries out in her sleep and then she rushes in the living room to see David sitting there. He is looking at her, like a deer caught in the gourd lights, he doesn't know what to say. He doesn't have any answers for her. She doesn't talk right away, she just sits next to him, her head leaning on his shoulder.
"Didn't find her yet?"

"Not yet," he whispers.

Emma's feet are bare, she is shivering so he covers her with the white quilt that was folded on the side of the couch.

"Is that better?" he asks.

Emma nods, and they sit together, neither of them talking for a while.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

Emma shakes her head then she reaches for his hand.

Ruby opens the door and stumbles inside the living room.

"Let's not do that again," she stammers, leaning against the wall. Her skin is pale, she is looking nauseous.

"Are you alright?" David asks.

Ruby shakes her head. "I've never teleported with a fairy before..."

"Well?" he asks, standing up.

"There was a sulfur smell, very faint... it was masking every other smell, that was all I could sense..."

"A sulfur smell?"

"Is that helpful?" Ruby looks so worried.

David nods. "I got to go... Thank you!"

Emma doesn't protest, she just pulls the quilt up higher and all that is visible are her eyes, red from previous crying, nose scrunched up as if she is trying hard not to cry again.

"Bye David," she whispers and David waves, a sad smile on his face as he meets Tink who is waiting for him on Snow's porch.

"A sulfur smell?" he says as they walk away together.

Tink shrugs "I couldn't smell anything..."

"Ruby is a wolf," David explains. "What does that mean? Sulfur could mean that whoever took her was using expired magic beans... Or whoever took her spent their day wrestling with dragons..."

"Or actual sulfur..." Tink replies, then she falls silent.

David frowns, waiting.

"It's a main ingredient..." Tink hesitates.

"A main ingredient for what?" he asks, trying not to sound too impatient, because he knows Tink is withholding information. Then looking at Tink's expression he swallows hard. He knows he is not going to like what she is going to say next.
"Sulfur is a main ingredient for an advanced pain spell," Tink says quietly and David feels the blood drain from his face.

"No!" his voice is nothing more than a whisper. He is shaking his head. "We can't let this happen, we can't let them use a pain spell on her...We got to go now..."

If Tink was going to argue about being cautious or being careful earlier she doesn't do that now. A pain spell changes everything. Strong burly knights trained to withstand torture have died after getting painspelled. It's time to throw caution to the wind.

"Do you want a disguise glamour or a forget me spell?" she asks.

David looks at her, not quite understanding what she is asking. "A forget me spell?"

"Do you want the people of the tavern to be unable to remember and describe what you looked like?"

"Yes!" he says decisively.

Tink twirls her hands. At first glance, neither of them look any different, but as David looks at Tink he finds himself feeling confused. At first he is surprised to note that her hair is dark and long, then he is stunned to see her tight black miniskirt and bright red boots and short pink wig, and the next second she is in a floral dress, with red flowing curls and a small barrette on her hair, then a fur coat and a blond braid, but the transitions are seamless, while a soft hypnotic voice repeats on a loop inside his head "nothing to see here, this is perfectly normal."

If he didn't know there was a spell involved, he would look away, completely unable to describe who he was looking at. He glances at his clothes wondering what he looks like.

"Yes, you look like a punk, cowboy biker, school teaching librarian," she explains. "It will be impossible for people to remember or describe you... Let's go..."

'The tipsy fawn' is a tavern in the middle of nowhere, away from the beaten path. There is nothing remarkable about it, nothing that suggests that it is a cover for one of the most notorious troll gang leaders alive. David stumbles inside, Tink holding him up. It's not hard to pretend to be drunk after one of Tink's teleportations. With his eyes half closed he takes in the room, the middle aged woman taking orders, a clean apron tied around her waist, the customers chatting happily, clinking their glasses, filled with red wine, the delicious smell of lamb, sweet onions and herb roasted potatoes, cooked slowly over the fire, the freshly baked bread. David thinks that there must be a mistake, this cannot possibly be where the rod troll operates his empire of crime and terror.

Then he sees the dwarf sitting on the table at the corner, slowly sipping his wine, his eyes on him and Tink, evaluating if they are posing a threat. A couple of rather large men seem to be standing nearby, one of them wiping tables the other one holding a pitcher full of water, refilling glasses, both of them staring down the newcomers. Of course the Rod Troll has protection, he is not going to be alone.

David blinks looking away. He takes a couple of more drunken steps forward.

"You've had enough to drink," Tink glares at him, "you need to eat something..."

He laughs, motioning the woman taking orders to bring him a drink.

Tink is still glaring at him. David leans over to kiss her on the cheek and she pushes him back. "What do you think you are doing! Sit!" she hisses at him, obviously annoyed at his advances.
The dwarf is watching them closely, a smile playing on his lips. He waves to both the large men to get back to work, he doesn't need their help, in fact he is quite enjoying the view of Tink glaring at David.

Tink is barely touching her dinner, while David drinks a whole carafe of wine and is motioning to the tavern maid to get him some more.

"Don't you think you've drunk enough?" Tink glowers at him.

He laughs at her, refilling his glass.

And then he leans across the table to kiss her. His glass tips over, spilling the contents across the table and all over her white simmering gown, because that is what she is wearing at the moment, a white shimmering gown that compliments her long blond curls.

Wine is drizzling on the ground staining her ankle boots. "What are you doing?" Tink growls at him.

He pins her hand at the table.

"Let me go!" Tink is getting louder.

"Kiss me and I'll let you go!"

"Stop this!" Tink is looking both mortified and disgusted.

"Stop giving me a hard time," he replies.

Tink pulls her hand out of his grasp in a sharp move, standing up, and her chair tips backwards.

Everyone in the tavern is now looking at them. The two burly men look ready to intervene but the dwarf waves them down. Tink looks around the room, her cheeks flushing. She is so embarrassed.

David, completely oblivious to everyone's disgusted stares, steps around the table and grabs her hand again. "Why do you have to be like this?" he asks.

Tink hisses under her breath "I am warning you..."

And then the dwarf intervenes.

"Is everything alright here?"

David has to admit, that even though the dwarf is much shorter, his presence is impressive. He feels a little intimidated as the dwarf takes a step closer to him.

Tink dissolves into tears. "This is so embarrassing," she says quietly. "He is my sister's husband, and ever since he lost his job, he's been acting like this, and I was trying to sober him up, get some food in him and get him to go home, but all he wants to do is drink more and I don't know what to do. If my sister finds out about this, she is going to be heartbroken..."

"It's alright," the dwarf tries to encourage her, but Tink is inconsolable.

"She is not going to be heartbroken, she won't even care..." David spits out and the dwarf looks at him incredulously.

"She wants to have children, but she won't come anywhere's near me... how is that going to get her
children?" David sticks his face in front of the dwarves, slurring his objections.

Tink burst into a fresh round of tears. "When my sister finds out..."

"How is she going to find our?" the dwarf replies patiently. "We are all friends here, we can be discreet..." A quick glance around the room and all the patrons are now enthusiastically focusing on their lamb and their onions and their potatoes, not at all interested in the domestic drama unfolding in front of them.

"How about we get you a taxi coach and send you home?" the dwarf says leading David away. "Don't you think that's a good idea?"

Tink wipes her tears with the back of her hand. "Thank you!" she whispers.

"It's all going to be okay," the dwarf smiles reassuringly and pulls David through a side door. "It's all going to be alright... You are going to sleep this off, and in the morning you are going to buy your wife flowers right after you call your sister in law and apologize... and everything will be fine..."

Once they are out of sight Tink reaches for David's hand then she places her arm on the dwarf, who is still trying to comfort her and just like that, she magic's both of them away.

They end up in the abandoned location spelled barn, one of Tink's hideouts. The dwarf drops to his knees, the teleportation hitting him like a double punch in the stomach, he cannot breathe. "What is this?" he says stunned because Tink no longer looks sad and David straightens up, no longer drunk, not even a little bit tipsy.

"Why, I thought you of all people would know," David replies. "This is a kidnapping..."

"I should have noticed the forget me spell," he glares at them. "Who are you? You know what? I don't care who you are, you are dead," the dwarf states matter of factly, "you are dead..."

And then David's fist connects with his nose, and there is a sickening sound, as the dwarf's nose breaks, and the dwarf falls backwards, still glaring at them, eyes filled with hatred, blood gushing through his nose.

"I can live with that," David shrugs.

The dwarf motions to stand up and undoubtedly launch at David, but Tink snaps her fingers and then he is blindfolded, tied up as he was kneeling to the ground, his nose still bleeding.

"This isn't going to be a fair fight," David explains. "This isn't going to be a fight at all. By the end of this discussion you will tell me everything I want to know. Are we clear?"

The dwarf spits at David's direction, but David barely notices.

He fills a half barrel with water and grabs the dwarf by the collar and drags him next to it. Tink takes a step backwards, feeling uneasy. It's not that she hasn't seen her fair share of violence, or that blood makes her queasy, it's just that watching David, willing to torture a defenseless dwarf, is like watching the moon eclipse the sun in the middle of the day, it isn't right, it's unsettling.

And Tink wants to hold him back, she wants to stop him, she wants to explain that the ends don't necessarily justify the means, but she finds herself frozen there, staring at him. Because Snow is out there somewhere probably getting pain spelled. And Tink doesn't know what to do. She wonders if Snow were here would she stop him? Would she know how far is too far? Would Snow
know how to pull him back form the darkness that he is about to plunge into, without a second thought?

When David dips the dwarf's head into the water Tink snaps her fingers and she is gone.

The Teal fairy is picking up her purse from her locker, ready to head home, her long shift at the hospital over, when Tink materializes next to her causing her to jump.

"Don't do that!" Teal scolds her but Tink doesn't apologize, doesn't even say hello, she gets straight to the point.

"I need a jar of healing potion..." she says matter of factly.

"What? For whom?" Teal sizes her up. "You know that we do not indiscriminately hand out healing potion without examining the patient first, healing potion isn't a heal for all, it won't take care of everything. If it is applied wrong it can cause some serious damage. What sort of injuries are we looking at?"

Tink doesn't reply, she just looks at her, her gaze steady, unflinching.

"This isn't something I can just hand out!" Teal protests again.

"Yes," is all that Tink says.

"Is David alright?" Teal frowns.

Tink remains motionless.

Teal sighs, and pulls out a key to a medicine cabinet. She steps out of the locker room and she comes back with a vial of green liquid. "You didn't get this from me," she states firmly.

"Get what?" Tink replies and she is just gone.

When Tink thinks that it's been long enough, she teleports back to the barn. She is not wrong, the dwarf is wet and whimpering helplessly on the ground, breathing faster. Tink raises her hand to stop David then she steps closer to the dwarf and tips a drop of healing potion into his mouth.

The dwarf is breathing fast, as his broken nose heals, even though it still looks misshapen.

"Thank you," he rasps. Maybe he knows that this isn't part of the plan. This is such a relief, not to feel the throbbing pain in his head and the agony of almost drowning and the his burning lungs. "Stop..." he whispers, "just stop..." He will say anything not to feel pain again.

"You know what we need," Tink replies. "Give us what we asked for or I'm going to let him start over..."


Tink makes a quill and some parchment materialize and waits. The dwarf looking disgusted both with himself and his captors, his voice barely audible as he explains that he had stepped back, planning on retiring from his life of crime, his right hand man now in charge of the day to day operations. He doesn't know if the Rod Troll's gang has Snow White but if they do, there are ten possible locations where Snow could have been taken. Ten secret hideouts.

This isn't good of course, but it's a lot better than what they had three hours ago. If they work in secret, if they do this carefully, they can buy David some time, before the Rod troll gang figures
out what is going on.

"Is that all of them?" Tink asks, staring at the addresses in her hand.

The dwarf nods, "That's all," he rasps.

Tink pulls out a vile of gray looking fairy dust from her pocket and throws it on the dwarf. There is a small cloud of smoke as he shrinks and becomes smaller and smaller, his hands curving inwards, stringy whiskers appearing on his cheeks, his ears elongating and moving higher on his head. It is David's turn to be shocked, as he watches the dwarf turn into a small gray barn mouse. Tink snaps her fingers again and he is now a mouse stuck in a cage.

"I'll turn you back if your information pans out," she explains. The mouse squeaks in protest but neither of them speak mouse, they have no way of knowing what he is saying.

Tink is keeping watch, standing next to a cage that has four trolls turned to barn mice in it, her fairy wand extended, ready for action as David Nolan runs through the dark musty corridor, steps over the mysterious liquid pooling on the ground and kicks the last door open. There is a woman laying on the ground, her body shivering.

"Snow!" he cries out and kneels next to her. The woman is blindfolded, her wrists tied together with thick rope. A bowl full of some sort of unidentifiable mush, and a wooden spoon are next to her. She doesn't move, she doesn't react at all. It's too dark to help her, too dark to see what he is doing so he uses the light of his magic mirror to get a closer look at her.

And then his hearts sinks. This can't be Snow White, because her hair is so blond it looks almost white.

"Who are you?" he whispers as he removes her blindfold. He pulls out his dagger and he starts working on the ropes binding her hands. The frayed rope resists his dagger. It must be steeped in some kind of magic.

"Silver," the woman rasps, "my name is Silver..."

"Silver? The Silver Fairy?" he looks shocked.

The Silver Fairy was the one disappearance that shook the Eastern kingdom. The golden knight force tore up Midas' entire kingdom looking for her to no avail. And now, as he desperately looks for Snow White he found her. He pulls out his magic mirror. He calls for an ambulance first then he and calls Jiminy.

"What can I do for you David?" the cricket asks. "Do you have any news?"

"I found Silver! Please send your people and an ambulance..."

"Silver? You found the Silver fairy? You found the Silver Fairy here, here in the Northern Kingdom?"

"I did. She is in the abandoned mine next to the pixie pond..."

"Hold on!" Jiminy says ordering a couple of knights to go. "They are on their way. The silver Fairy was found in our jurisdiction, how about that! The pixie pond is right next to Rod troll territory, isn't it..."

"Yes!"
"Any luck looking for Snow?"

"No, not yet...How about you?"

The cricket hesitates. "I'm afraid our trail has gone cold..."

David doesn't say anything else, he just puts his mirror down.

"Help is on the way," he tells the fairy who is shivering. He takes off his cape and wraps it around her shoulders.

"You saved me..." the fairy croaks. "Who are you?"

"My name is David, I'm...I'm a private investigator." He hesitates, because he is so used to saying I'm a knight force investigator. "The golden knight force has been looking for you for the longest time..." he continues.

"How long has it been?" she whispers.

"About two years," he says quietly.

Silver's eyes well up with tears. "Thank you," she whispers leaning her head on his shoulders.

"It's going to be alright," he says quietly.

As soon as the healing fairy and the two medics arrive carrying a gurney, David squeezes Silver's hand and walks back outside to Tink.

He doesn't even say anything, she already knows.

"Next location?" Tink asks.

He doesn't bother to reply. So far going through the rod trolls hideouts they found two dwarves, a mermaid, a child and the Silver Fairy. They have also turned a lot of trolls into barn mice, all if them magicked away into Tink's abandoned barn.

David pulls out the list that the dwarf gave Tink. It is a list of ten different locations, places where the gang of the rod trolls hides their prisoners. They are at location number seven right now. He shows the fairy their next destination and she reaches for his hand.

David's magic mirror rings.

"This is Nolan," he replies.

"David. It's Jiminy. I need to talk to you..."

"What's going on?"

"We want to be the first ones to extend you an offer...we want you to come work for us full time. We are prepared to offer you a full time position plus benefits. You've already worked for us, so you know what it's like..." Jiminy is talking fast, trying to convince him.

David frowns. "I'll have to think about it..."

"Of course, of course, take your time..." the cricket sounds very accommodating. "It's just that now, under this unexpected turn of events, with you being being out of work and finding the Silver Fairy
and all, we are certain that you will receive a lot of offers and I want to make it clear, that even though due to budgetary concerns we might be unable to meet their offers, we would be happy to reinstate your rank..."

"Look, all I care about at the moment is finding Snow White. Once she is found, I'll consider it..." David cuts him off.

"Right. Of course. I know, this is terrible timing, but Blue wanted to make sure we made you an offer first..."

"Snow made me an offer first," he replies dryly.

"Ummm, she what?" Jiminy seems confused.

"She offered me a job first," David explains.

"Um, did she? I wasn't aware... of course..." Jiminy stammers.

"I got to go..." David mumbles shaking his head.

Terrible timing is an understatement. Snow White offered him a partnership. They could be "White and Nolan, Investigations" or "Nolan and White" whichever sounded better, she'd laughed. And he'd declined her offer. He told her that he'd be happy to help her locate Emma's father and help her in any case she needed assistance but he thought he'd take a break form investigative work for a while. And he's never regretted anything more in his life. Because if he'd said yes to her offer, they would have been looking at the office spaces together, and she wouldn't have been alone when they attacked her. Snow wouldn't have disappeared.

Jiminy is right. Within hours of him locating the Silver fairy he receives job offers from both the Silver and the Golden knight force. The job offer for the golden knight force actually coming straight from Midas himself who personally calls to thank him. Turns out the Silver fairy is a personal friend of the royal family. And at the early morning hours he gets a message from Robert, a White knight who says the chief is furious the king suggested they let David go. The White knight force would have loved the credit and the good publicity of Silver's rescue.

There are news reporters outside his apartment, waiting for a statement. They are very disappointed, because he doesn't go home. He forges on with Tink, breaking into the remaining troll hideouts. And some time at dawn he sits next to Tink his face in his hands. Since he called Jiminy, he has found one missing child, two tortured dwarves and a goblin and three tree nymphs. Tink has turned ten troll guards and gang members into barn mice, sending all of them to await their fate in cages in her location spelled barn. David's mirror is ringing non stop, the local news channel would like a statement.

His face is on the front page of all morning papers. "Former White knight, now private investigator David Nolan, rescues the Silver Fairy." "Who is David Nolan? One day in the life of the brave Investigator who found Silver" Pages and pages of information about him, without him saying anything at all. So much for laying low, so much for doing this without alerting the Rod troll's gang of who he is.

"What's next?" Tink asks.

"We have one last location," he says pointing to the first address. Because on the first address, they found no one, just an empty storage unit, but David knows that they must have missed something. "I want to try there again, there has to be a secret door or a trapdoor or something..."
"And if the Rod troll's gang didn't take her?" Tink asks.

David doesn't want to think about that option. Because if the trolls didn't take her, then he has to rethink this whole plan while Snow is somewhere hurt and alone and that thought makes him feel unable to breathe.
The Case of the Forgetful Princess

Snow takes a deep breath and welcomes the pain. She screams at least two or three times, she can't help it, as brave as she is trying to be, her body betrays her. She begins shaking just at the anticipation of pain the moment she hears the key in the lock before they enter the room. She doesn't know how they can hurt her so badly without even touching her. She doesn't know if they are dark fairies or evil witches or just mere mortals in possession of some really dark magic.

And then the world explodes, sparks filled with agony, her mind bends and she is there.

In the heart of the forest, she opens the familiar wooden door to the small cabin and she steps inside.

"You are back!" he says rushing to her. "I was so worried!"

"I'm back," she smiles, dropping her bow and her quiver along with the hare she caught for dinner on the kitchen table, walking over to kiss him. "I didn't take too long did I?"

"No..." he replies searching her eyes, "yes... maybe a little."

Snow laughs. "It was less than two hours!"

"Too long then," he half smirks kissing her. "I can't believe I'm sending my pregnant wife out there hunting, while I'm here limping around," he says pointing to his knee that's bandaged.

"Wife?" she gasps. Because after years of speculations and endless gossip about the father of her child, finding out they were actually married is both surprising and extremely comforting. And she doesn't realize it but her eyes are welling up.

"Why are you crying?" he looks so worried. "Are you hurt? Did something happen while you were out?"

Snow shakes her head in a hurry. "You called me your wife," she replies quietly, her hands playing with the collar of his shirt. "Those are happy tears..."

He doesn't doubt her explanation, but he is still looks confused. "My wife? What else am I going to call you? Are you sure nothing is the matter?"

Snow shakes her head. "Nothing else, I promise...how is your knee feeling?"

"Better," he shrugs.

"Are you sure you don't want to call a healing fairy?"

"And let them know our location? I don't want to take that chance..."

"Alright," Snow smiles burying her face in his shoulder.

And then she wakes up alone in the room, her tormentors being currently on a break. She is laying on the cold glass floor, water constantly dripping in the corner of her cell. She is crying and she doesn't know if it's tears of terror or tears of joy.

She is just sitting there, lost in the memory of her dream. And she doesn't question why Charming is wearing David's face, she doesn't wonder why he is using David's voice, or why he looks at her
exactly the same way David does when he is really worried for her. She is too broken, too lost to question these things. She just lays there crying, her tears soaking her blindfold, working against her binds in the dark. But those are magical binds. As soon as she manages to rip apart the ropes around the wrist, the rope reconnects and she tries not to cry. She doesn't give up, she still tries to rip the ropes off her hands. She needs to get back into that dream.

She is constantly blindfolded. She hears their steps at the door, the key turning in the lock and then she starts trembling.

They always ask the same question. "Where is Regina hiding?"

Snow always says "I don't know!"

Part of her is grateful Regina disappeared, because if she knew where she was, there is no way Snow could have kept her secret this long, not through all this pain. The other part wishes she knew where Regina was, then she could tell them and then maybe the pain would stop.

They walk toward her. Snow holds her breath.

"Where is Regina hiding?"

"I don't know..." her voice sounds small, terrified.

And then the pain blinds her, intense excruciating pain over her entire body, like thousands of needles, pricking every inch of her skin, going deeper, piercing muscles and veins and hitting bones. She tenses against her restraints and she screams. She screams one, two, three times then she is there. Always the same memory. Always the same scene with small variations.

She opens the door to their cabin and she steps in.

"You are back!" he says rushing to her. "I was so worried!"

"I'm back," she smiles, dropping her bow and her quiver along with the hare she caught for dinner on the kitchen table, walking over to kiss him. "I didn't take too long did I?"

"No..." he replies searching her eyes, "yes... maybe a little."

Snow laughs. "It was less than two hours!"

"Too long then," he half smirks kissing her. "I can't believe I'm sending my pregnant wife out there hunting, while I'm here limping around," he says pointing to his knee that's bandaged.

And then Snow laughs. "I'm pregnant Charming, I'm not sick, I can still do things...how is your knee feeling?"

"Better," he shrugs.

"Are you sure you don't want to call a healing fairy?"

"And let them know our location? I don't want to take that chance..."

"Alright," Snow smiles burying her face in his chest.

And then they make stew together and they have dinner at their small wooden table and they lay down on the narrow bed in the corner. Snow's belly is so big he barely fits to lay next to her, but when he suggest she would be more comfortable on the bed alone and he should lay on the floor
she shakes her head.

"But I'm going to hurt the baby!" he protests.

"The baby is going to be fine, you are not laying on the floor..." she frowns as she tries to make room for him on the bed.

"Tell your Mother I'm not going anywhere, I just want her to be comfortable!" he says to Snow's belly. "Did you hear her? She says I'm right!"

"She said no such thing!" Snow laughs.

"Your mother clearly can't hear you as well as I can... She does speak to birds after all. Maybe you could chirp a little louder, little bird... Yes, I know that I'm going to fall off the bed in the middle of the night, but what else am I supposed to do? Your Mother won't listen..."

Charming has full conversations with the baby in Snow's belly and she laughs so hard there are tears streaming down her cheeks.

Snow wakes up alone, still blindfolded. She tries frantically to untie her hands. She really needs to get back to that cabin.

She hears their step at the door. The key turns. She is breathing faster now, she is terrified and excited at the same time.

"Where is Regina hiding?" the same cruel cold voice. The same question.

"I don't know!" she chokes out.

She barely recognizes the sound of her own voice, she sounds so alone, so broken.

She screams so loud. They must have changed their pain spell somehow, this one feels is more potent, like her skin is on fire while her bones are being ground into fine dust, she can't breathe.

Snow screams again. "Please!" she begs in between screams.

She opens the door to the cabin.

"You are back!" Charming says rushing to her. "I was so worried..."

And this time Snow doesn't reply, she just buries her face in his chest and she starts sobbing.

"Snow! Snow what's wrong? What's happened?" he asks helping her take off her bow and quiver, placing the hare on the table, pushing the hair back form her face. "Snow!"

"Nothing's happened yet," she rasps in between sobs. "It's what's going to happen..."

"What?" he lifts her up and places her on the table. "I don't understand, Snow, talk to me, please, you are not making any sense... Snow, are you hurt?"

"You are not really here," she whispers. "This is just a memory. My memory. They will walk through the door, after I give birth to Emma, and they will use a memory spell on me, and when they are done, I won't even remember your real name..."

He shakes his head. "I won't let them..." he shakes his head, his hand already on his daggers.
"They have magic Charming, you will fight for us but there is nothing you can do..."

He stands there looking at her, holding both her hands tight. "Then, I will find you...I will always find you..."

She leans her forehead against his shoulder. She doesn't want to contradict him, not when he is so confident, so loving, but she does owe him the truth.

"They'll memory spell you too," she whispers. "They won't let you find me, Charming, it's been ten years..."

"Ten years and I haven't found you yet? Are you sure? Maybe I don't remember much, but maybe I'm still around..."

Snow stays still considering his words. Did he manage to find her even though she didn't realize who he was? Is he around?

"I love you Snow, and love can't just lose..."

Snow wakes up alone in her cell, his presence so strong she can still feel him with her.

"Charming?" she cries out, then she starts working on her binds.

The hours are blending together, so do her dreams. She has no idea how long it has been, whether it's been just a couple of days or a few weeks. Sometimes she calls him James, sometimes she calls him David, most of the time she calls him Charming. He is there, always loving, always looking so worried for her.

"I will find you!" he promises every time she tells him what's going to happen in their future. And even as she knows this is a promise he won't be able to keep she still loves it when he says those words. "I will always find you!"

There are steps on the door. The key turns in the door. Snow swallows hard.

"Please, " she begs, "there is nothing more I can tell you, I don't know where the Queen is!" she says before they even get to ask.

The pain engulfs her and Snow screams.

"You are back!" he says rushing to her. "I was so worried!"

"Let me stay here with you!" she cries out, her knees buckling, dropping on the ground along with her weapons and the hare she caught for dinner. "Can I stay here please?"

He looks at her confused, his knee is injured, he is struggling to kneel in front of her. "What do you mean? Where else would you go?" he asks.

And Snow doesn't bother explaining things this time. She just clings to him tightly.

He pulls her hair out of her face to get a better look at her.

"They are coming, aren't they?" he asks quietly. "They are going to find us?"

Snow doesn't mean to but she nods. "Not today. But yes, they are coming..."

"Can we run?"
Snow stifles a sob. "It's too late Charming, it's already happened. This is a memory, I'm not really here..."

"I'm so sorry Snow," he whispers. "I am so so sorry..."

"This isn't your fault..." she tires to argue.

"It really is..." he replies."If I hadn't gotten injured, we'd be on that ship by now...we would have left...and you would have been safe..."

Snow places her finger on his lip.

"I'm here now," she replies. "I'm here..."

He lifts her up, as if she weighs nothing.

"Put me down," she protests, "your knee is hurt..."

"Just two more steps..." he whispers placing her on the narrow bed in the corner.

"After both our memories are gone I'm going to come back here again and again," she says, pointing her hand at the cabin. "Looking for clues..."

"Did we leave any?" he asks.

"You did," she says running her hand on carved heart on the bedpost. "I won't remember our time together and I'm going to wonder if I was abducted, if I was brought here against my will..."

He looks horrified.

"And then I'm going to see this," she whispers pointing to the carving on the bedpost, the snowflake inside the heart. "And I'm going to know..."

"If I knew you'd ever doubt us, I would have carved hearts and words in every surface of the cabin..." he replies.

Snow leans her head against the crook of his arms. "What would the words say?"

"They'd say I love you Snow White... even if I forget, I'll still love you with every fiber of my being... my heart will never stop looking for you..."

"I'm waking up!" Snow gasps. "I don't want to wake up, I want to stay here with you..."

"I love you!" he replies. "It's alright, it's going to be alright...I will find you, I will always find you..."

"Charming!" Snow screams waking up alone in her cell, her body aching on the cold glass floor. The constant sound of water dripping in the corner of her cell reminds her exactly where she is. He isn't here. He's no longer here. He wasn't able to keep his promises after all. And Snow unable to hold back her sobs, she is crying.

"Please, please find me... keep your promise..."

She shivers alone in the dark, fear mixed with grief and pain. She hears steps approaching at the door. She stops crying instantly. Her whole body trembles.
This time there is no sound of the key turning in the lock. Someone kicks in the door instead.

"I don't know where the Queen is...Please, please don't hurt me...I don't know anything" Snow begs and then she is breathing fast, panicking, trying to brace herself for more pain. She can't do this. She can't, she can't take this anymore.

It's alright, she tries to remind herself. It's going to be alright. It's going to hurt a whole lot and then she is going to see Charming again. She makes her hands into fists, to keep them from trembling, but her body won't listen to her mind, she is still panting.

Except the pain doesn't come this time.

"Snow!" she hears his voice instead.

"Charming?" she asks and it's such a huge relief, hearing his voice while she is awake, she can't help herself she starts crying, soaking the blindfold with her tears, her hands unable to stop trembling. She reaches for him in the dark, she needs to touch him, she needs to know he is real, not another dream, not a figment of her tortured mind.

"Snow it's me," the voice tries to explain and then she feels a pair of hands tugging on her blindfold. "It's just me..."
David rushes to the last door at the end of the corridor. This door is different, it's made of glass. He can see Snow blindfolded and tied up laying on the ground. Her glass cell reminds him of Daniel, laying perfectly still inside his glass coffin. Except Snow White is very much alive.

He kicks in the door.

Snow is shaking, breathing fast, turning her head towards him.

"I don't know where the Queen is... Please, please don't hurt me...I don't know anything" Snow begs as she braces herself for more pain.

"Snow!" he says quietly, kneeling next to her.

"Charming?" she asks and it's such a huge relief, hearing his voice while she is awake, she can't help herself she starts crying, soaking the blindfold with her tears, her hands unable to stop trembling. She reaches for him in the dark, she needs to touch him, she needs to know he is real, not another dream, not a figment of her tortured mind.

"Snow it's me," he tries to explain and then she feels hands tugging off her blindfold. "It's just me..."

She squints her eyes, trying to adjust to the light, she can barely make out his face. "You found me!" she cries out, her hands desperately clinging on his jacket.

"It's alright," he says quietly, "it's going to be alright..."

"I want to stay with you" she sobs. "Can I stay with you, please?"

"Of course you can stay with me," he chokes up, his hands struggling to unbind her ropes and when he fails he lifts her up in his arms instead. "Don't worry, I got you..." he says carrying out of her glass cell. "Tink! A little help here! She is bound with unbreakable rope..."

"Let's get her out of here first," Tink's voice. "This place is giving me the creeps, it reeks of dark magic..."

"What? No! We need to call an ambulance she's not well enough to be magicked away!" he tries to protest but Tink has already grabbed a hold of his hand.

And then the world folds and turns upside down, he holds her tighter, all worried for her, because Tink’s teleportations are more powerful and scarier than magic bean portals, but after enduring so much pain, this feels like child's play. Snow wants to laugh, Snow wants to cry, Snow doesn't know what she wants to do. She closes her eyes and clasps his doublet with her bound hands, worried that any minute she is going to wake up alone in her cell.

"Let me stay with you!" she pleads again.

"Snow!" is all he says, holding her tighter. He doesn't know how to comfort her. It is such a relief to finally find her, its such a horror to find her in such a frantic state.

They arrive in a room she doesn't recognize. It might be a hospital room, it's hard to tell, she is so disoriented.
Charming is here. He is here. He is finally here.

"You found me!" she whispers, leaning her face on his shoulder, breathing him in, tears streaming down her cheeks. How did she not notice it before, how he smells like wild mint, like tall evergreen trees and the small cabin tucked deep inside the forest...

He places her on the bed in the middle of the room so slowly, as if she is a piece of cracked china, he cannot afford to break, then he pulls back to look at her.

"Snow, are you hurt? Did they hurt you?"

She nods.

"I don't see any injuries!" he is searching her arms and legs, trying to stay calm. "Hold on, we'll untie you then we can get a better look..."

Tink concentrates her magic on the ropes around Snow's wrists and ankles and the ropes finally fall off.

Snow sobs as she looks at her hands, now free, then she focuses back on his face and she stops crying. Instead she reaches for him, her right hand cupping his face.

"I'll get Teal," Tink mumbles, sneaking out of the room in a hurry.

Charming. Charming is here.

"How did you find me?" her voice filled with wonder.

"It's what I do," he shrugs, unable to hide the worry from his face. "Where does it hurt, Snow? Where did they hurt you?" Now that he is no longer carrying her he is terrified that he might accidentally touch one of her injuries.

Snow shakes her head. "Everywhere," she whispers. "They used a pain spell..."

David wraps his hand around her fingers as they caress his face.

"Let me stay here with you..." she pleads again.

And he is not sure exactly what she means, but he sits on her bed and wraps his arm protectively around her shoulders and she leans her face against his chest and stays there content, closing her eyes.

"Of course you can stay Snow... It's going to be alright," he whispers over and over, his eyes welling up. "You are going to be alright...I found you... Of course you can stay. You can go wherever you like, you are safe now..."

The Teal fairy walks into her room.

"Snow White!" she exclaims "How are you feeling? Tink tells me you've been through a lot, I'm going to examine you now. David if you can give us a moment..."

He motions to get up.

"No!" Snow cries out desperately grabbing on his hand. "Don't go! Stay, please..."

"It's alright," he whispers, "I'm not going far..."
"You can stay," the Teal fairy amends quickly. "But I'm going to insist that you lay down Snow White, I'm just going to get a closer look at you..."

David stands up slowly, and because Snow is panicking he pushes a chair flush to her bed and sits there, reaching for her hand. "She said they used a pain spell," he explains and Snow can hear so much anger and frustration in his voice. David is looking different. He is not the calm and impeccable knight she met last month. No this David is different, he is on edge, he has dark circles under his eyes, and his hair is disheveled and there is a few days worth of scruff on his cheeks, why there is even mud on his usually spotless boots. But Snow is too exhausted to notice any of those things. The only difference she notices is that her heart recognizes him now.

The Teal fairy nods. "Nothing I can do about that," she replies. "You are right. I sense no external injuries. The pain spell memories will fade in time...there is nothing more I can do for you...unless you'd like a sleeping spell to help you rest..."

Snow shakes her head. "No more spells, please..."

"Of course. We'll keep you here for observation, we'll see how you'll feel tomorrow. I'll be back to check on you in a couple of hours, try to get some rest... if you need anything do not hesitate to ask..." the Teal fairy smiles at them then she exits the room.

Snow nods then she turns to her side to face David. "Emma? How is Emma?"

"Emma is with Ruby. I told them you are safe, I let them know as soon as I found you..." David replies.

"Thanks," she whispers, trying to hold back tears. "I don't think Emma should see me like this... I am not okay... I don't know... -" Snow is tearing up.

"Emma is very brave, she is going to be fine..." David is caressing her hair.

"Did you see her?" she whispers.

"I saw her yesterday..."

"Good," she smiles. "Can you stay?" she whispers. "I know you don't like hospitals..."

"I'm not going anywhere..."

Snow doesn't mean to but she is crying, tears of relief.

"It's alright," he whispers, shifting his body closer to her, his fingers laced with hers.

"I don't want to wake up," she whispers. "Because when I wake up I'm on my own and you are no longer there..."

He doesn't know what she means, he doesn't know if she is even talking to him or if she is confusing him with someone else. She looks so exhausted, she's already called him Charming once. So he says the only thing he can think of.

"Snow, I found you, I will always find you..."

And this must be the right thing to say because Snow smiles through her tears, she whispers, "yes you did..." and then she drifts off to sleep holding his hand tightly.

Snow sleeps for the whole day. Teal and several nurses come in and out of her room to check on
her but she doesn't stir. If David didn't know better he'd think that she is in a sleeping spell and then, almost at midnight she wakes up with a start. She is still in the hospital room, David is still there, half asleep on the chair next to her, his hand still holding her hand.

"You are awake," he whispers, pulling his hand back long enough to stretch his arm. "How are you feeling? Are you in pain? One of the nurses said if you woke up in pain they could give you something..."

Snow shakes her head, trying to piece the broken fragments of her memories together. "Not in pain," she says quietly.

"I should call somebody," he reaches for the bell but Snow shakes her head.

"I'm thirsty" she whispers.

"I could get you some tea..."

Snow shakes her head again. Then she looks at the cup next to him.

He helps her sit up then he holds his cup to her lips.

She takes a couple of sips then she lays back down, she is looking at him with big eyes. This isn't like her, this isn't the tough Snow who walked in the crime scene and made him withdraw his men, the Snow who got drunk and beat up three men in the tavern. She is different now, and he has this intense possessive feeling, it is his job to protect this new fragile Snow until she is back to her tough strong self.

Teal walks in the room. "You are awake," she smiles at them.

"Just now," David replies.

"How are you feeling?"

"The same," Snow shrugs.

"I'll ask them to bring you some food, you are probably not feeling very hungry right now, but do try to eat."

Snow nods.

"Would you like to take a bath?" Teal asks.

Snow looks at her hands, there is sweat and grime all over her skin. It's not like they allowed her to shower in her glass cell.

"Yes please," she whispers.

"Alright, I'll have a nurse assist you..."

"No, I got it," Snow replies quickly.

"You want to do this by yourself?" Teal replies. "Excellent. I'll bring some fresh clothes, ring the bell if you need any help..."

Snow gets up slowly and walks to the adjoining bathroom. She shuts the door behind her. She sits on the edge of the tub and turns on the water. She watches as the water rises. All she needs is to do
is take off her filthy clothes and step into the tub. Her heart is beating faster, the walls are closing in. She sees herself tied up in her cell, then water constantly dripping in the corner. She stifles a scream and she steps out of the bathroom in a hurry.

"What's wrong?" David jumps up from his chair.

"I..." Snow's face is deathly white though she feels rather silly at the moment. "I... the bathroom is too small... I don't think I can do this..." she winces, fully aware of how strange this sounds.

"It's alright, you can try again later..." David says relieved. He thought that maybe someone had materialized in the bathroom, ready to grab her again.

Snow looks at her filthy shirt clinging on her body.

"I can do it, I just need... Would you mind...can you step in the bathroom with me? I just need you in the room with me that's all..."

If he finds the request strange, he certainly doesn't show it. He steps in the bathroom behind her without saying a word. He turns around, sits on the ground his back against the tub and looks away.

"Does this work?" he asks quietly.

"Yes," she whispers. Snow takes off her clothes and lowers herself in the tub.

"Are you alright?" he asks.

"Yes..." she replies. Now that her panic has subsided, being immersed in hot water feels great. She lathers shampoo on her hair, she scrubs her whole body then she lays back and closes her eyes.

"You can turn around now..." she says quietly. The water is full of suds, her body is well concealed underwater.

He turns around hesitantly and leans his arm on the edge of the tub.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Better," she shrugs. "A lot better..."

He can sense she has a lot to say, so he waits.

"How long has it been?" she asks quietly.

"Took us three days to find you, and you slept through today so four days" he replies.

"Three days," Snow's voice is so quiet. "It felt like three weeks... All they wanted was to know the location of the Queen..." and the she shakes her head, tears streaming down her cheeks. She covers her eyes and her body is racked with sobs.

"Snow?" is all he says, because he doesn't know how to make any of this better.

Snow shakes her head, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "I feel...- David, I begged, and I cried and I would have given them anything they wanted, I couldn't hold back..."

"They used a pain spell," he replies, trying hard to remain calm. "Snow, I have never in my life met anyone able to resist a pain spell..."
She looks so fragile, emerged in the tub, so breakable, so different from the tough and resilient Snow he met last month, and he is both heartbroken and furious that he let this happen.

Snow closes her eyes, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I don't know... And to think that the council wants to talk to me about being their Queen... like I'm trustworthy and strong enough... They have no idea how weak I am..."

David is shaking his head.

"No," he whispers. "Whether you were able to resist a painspell has nothing to do with how strong you are... You are still alive... that's all that matters... I knew knights who didn't survive getting painspelled twice... You are incredibly strong, Snow White..."

And David feels physical pain, his heart pricked by a thousand needles, because this is all his fault, he let this happen, and now Snow is questioning herself, wondering whether she is fit to be a queen... This is his fault, he allowed this to happen. "I am so sorry," his voice cracks, "I am so sorry... I don't know how I let any of this happen..."

"What are you talking about? This wasn't your fault, you saved me," Snow is quick to argue.

David looks away.

"David?"

"Yes?" his voice cracks.

Snow is still trying to makes sense of things. "Can you tell me how you found me?"

He groans. "It wasn't easy," he admits. "I made so many mistakes. I was terrified for you and Emma being left alone and I...-" he shakes his head. "When the case is personal...-"

Snow is surprised to see that David is holding back tears.

"David?" she asks her thumb tracing his face. "David what's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong," he replies wiping his eyes on his sleeve in a hurry. "Everything is fine now that you are here, everything is fine..." He just broke every rule on the book to save her. He couldn't bear the thought of anyone hurting her, his feeling for her obvious to everyone else. Yet here she is completely unaware of how much he cares for her.

Snow reaches for his hand. "Talk to me..."

"I can't..." he replies. "Shouldn't... not now..."

Snow doesn't say anything, she just waits for him to sort out his thoughts.

"Please?"

David shakes his head imperceptibly and Snow sits quietly, waiting. He looks at the door in a hurry, as if he is expecting someone to walk in the bathroom and rescue him, but nobody comes.

He can't tell her now, this isn't the time or the place, but his heart is overflowing with words he's been holding back these past weeks. And now, relieved that she is safe, it's like a dam has broken inside him and he can't hold back. Words come tumbling out of his mouth, words he has been mulling over these past three days, a lot more words that he ever meant to say.
"You see, Snow White, when you offered me the job I said no. Not because I didn't want to work with you again, in fact nothing would make me happier, working with you this past month... I've never... I really enjoyed it... but I said no because I have feelings for you...and it's not fair to you, not when you are looking for Emma's father, to even bring this up, it's just not fair at all. I wanted more than just being your partner or even your friend. A whole lot more... " he says pulling his hand back, his eyes focused on a spot above her head, avoiding her eyes. "So I walked away thinking that was the right thing to do...and then they took you..." he closes his eyes. "And I've never felt so afraid for anyone in my life...I can't even describe how terrified I was...and I can't help but think that if I wasn't so selfish...I wouldn't have walked away. I would have stayed with you, taken the job you offered and they wouldn't have taken you away..." his voice trails off and then he looks down. He didn't mean to say even half of what he just said, so he holds his breath, swallowing hard, forcing himself to look her in they eye. He owes her that much. Even if she is about to tell him that he shouldn't have brought any if this up or that she cannot return his feelings. Even if she is about to break his heart.

"They would have taken us both," she whispers squeezing his hand. "David I'm pretty sure they had enough magic to take us both... And I would have died there," she replies tearing up, "and then Emma would be alone... You weren't being selfish... why would you think that?"

And he doesn't know what to do with her hand reaching for him, he doesn't know what to do with her eyes searching his face.

"If you still want me, I'll be happy to work with you," his voice cracks. "I'll keep you safe... What I just said...it doesn't matter...I... forget I said anything... I shouldn't have even brought it up..."

Snow is tearing up. "I don't think I can forget about it," she whispers. "I don't want to forget..."

"What then?" he struggles to come up with a response. "I won't let my feelings get in the way...I can make this work, I'll still help you find him..."

"Do you promise?" she whispers.

"I do!" he nods really fast.

She draws a deep decisive breath. "Listen..."

He stands there frozen, sitting on the bathroom floor afraid of what she might say next, not wanting to hear her let him down easy. He loves her too much and he doesn't need that, neither does she...she shouldn't have to do that, she shouldn't have to explain herself, not now, not after everything she's been through.

"David, I went through every person on the list that you gave me...none of them can possibly be him..." she starts.

"We'll make another list, maybe he got memory spelled but he never reported it, Snow, we'll find him...I'll help you find him..." he blurts out in a hurry.

"Wait... " Snow shakes her head. "Just listen to me..."

"Right, sorry," he mumbles looking down. "Go ahead..."

He sits there acutely aware of the fact that this is the one conversation that might change everything.

"There is one person we know, who lost a lot of memories during that time, even though he was
told it was amnesia, not a memory spell... and we have a timeline of what he did during that time but the timeline is incomplete... I though maybe we should look at him closer next..."

He gapes at Snow, his eyes wide open. She can't possibly mean... can she?

"I know the stories don't line up, but maybe we could look to see if he is the right guy..." Snow continues, tears streaming down her face. "Because when they were torturing me, I kept flashing back to the cabin in the woods... and he was there too. Every time they hurt me I flashed back there and I saw him... and the only reason I survived the pain spells for as long as I did, was because he was there," she whispers then her eyes lock on his. "You were there and I called you Charming and you knee was injured... so either my brain was making stuff up, trying to fill in the blanks, trying to bring me comfort, or maybe it's been you all along... maybe you are the one I've been looking for..."

He stands there perfectly still, stunned, like he doesn't dare believe what he is hearing.

He looks at her, wet hair, green hopeful eyes, red lips, suds covering her shoulders, so beautiful that it hurts.

"You saw me in the cabin with you?" he rasps. "You flashed back?"

Snow nods slowly, her eyes searching his face.

And then the whole world makes sense, everything becomes clear. David feels like he has been underwater for this past ten years and he didn't even know it, suffocating, drowning in the dark and for the first time she's pulled him up and he is drawing his first breath.

"David?" she whispers, because she has a hard time reading his face.

He tries to form coherent thoughts. It is not that easy. "Snow, I don't know how... I don't know if you still..." he closes his eyes. Nothing is coming out right. "I don't know if I'm him, Snow White, but I'm in love with you..." he manages, wondering if his words sound as inadequate as he thinks they do.

She kneels in the tub, running her fingers through his hair, looking at him, eyes fill with wonder.

He moves in closer, his eyes searching her eyes and then their lips meet and he cups her face with his right hand, careful, oh so careful not to hold her too tight, just in case she is still in pain. When she pulls back to look at him he feels like he can't breathe, he already misses her, even though she is naked in the tub, right there, in front of him.

"You are taking it a lot better than I thought, you would" she whispers. "I was worried..."

"Were you?" he rasps. "Why?"

"It's not easy to spring to a guy that he might have a ten year old daughter he doesn't remember, is it?" she smiles even though her eyes still look worried.

"But I love Emma," David's eyes well up. "It's not the same..."

He thinks of Emma introducing herself, he thinks of Emma saying 'Will you come to my birthday?' Emma asking him to check for monsters under her bed. Emma showing him Snow's research for her father. What if she knew all along, what if her heart recognized him?

And David is tearing up now, he can't hold back his tears any longer. At this point, after all these
incredible revelations, his heart is going to break if Emma isn't his daughter.

"If Emma is mine..." he starts and then he doesn't continue. He can't. He is so overwhelmed, there are no words.

Snow is so moved by his reaction. "If you are Emma's father she is going to be so happy..." she adds then she whispers "Would you hand me the towel?"

Snow steps out of the tub wrapped in the towel, tugging on his hand then she throws on a hospital gown. She is looking around the room for her shoes.

"Are we going somewhere?" he asks, all confused.

"Home," she replies. "It's late. Emma will be asleep and I can't wait till tomorrow to figure this out. I need to know... Does Tink know how to run a basic fairy DNA test?"

David's heart is thumping, he can't hear her words or his own thoughts. He is pulling the last magic bean from his pocket. His hands are shaking as he hands it to her. He can't trust his voice right now.

He looks so dazed that Snow hesitates.

"David, if you need more time..." she whispers.

He shakes his head. "It's been ten years, Snow," he replies. "I think I've had plenty of time..."

Jiminy stares at Teal incredulously.

"What do you mean Snow is not here? Did you discharge her?"

"No, of course not... Look, you asked me to notify you as soon as she woke up and I did. But they are both gone..."

"Where would they go? This is an official investigation, I need to talk to her..."

Teal shrugs. "They do that a lot," she replies.

"What do you mean they do that a lot..." Jiminy tries to keep his voice down. This is a hospital after all.

Snow and David step out of the magic bean portal right at Snow's porch then they enter into her cottage quietly.

"Snow!" Ruby gasps, getting up from the couch where she was sleeping, rushing to hug her friend. "Snow how are you?"

When Ruby notes that Snow hair is damp and she is wearing nothing but a flimsy hospital gown and David's jacket on top she pulls Snow into her bedroom and helps her put on pajamas and a soft pair of socks. They are both surprised to hear whimpering and scratching at Snow's bedroom door.

"Who is that?" Snow frowns.

"Must be Wilby," Ruby shrugs.

Snow opens her bedroom door to a Wilby who is crying and jumping at her, wagging his tail.
Snow kneels down to pet the dog and then she catches David's eyes. He is looking stunned.

"Snow! What if the reason he acts like this whenever he sees you is because he remembers you..."

Snow's eyes open wide. "Hello friend," she whispers and she can't help it, her eyes well up. "Do you remember me? I am so sorry I forgot you..."

Then Snow walks right into Emma's bedroom.

"Baby, I'm home," she whispers, caressing Emma's hair, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I was so worried I'd never see you again..."

She watches her daughter sleep then she whispers, "Emma, I have the most wonderful news... I think I found your father..."

David, leans against the door frame holding his breath.

Snow reaches her hand to him and he steps inside the room.

Emma is sleeping soundly. She is wearing her favorite purple pajamas, holding on to her teddy bear tight, her hair all over her pillow. Star the turtle is asleep in his shell under her bed. David has to hold himself back, because he yearns to wake her up and hold her.

Snow watches him closely. It is so good to have David here.

"I want you to know... no matter what the test says," she whispers, "I love you..."

David pulls her in his arms. Because this is so much, this is too much. Snow White loves him. Not only does she love him, but she thinks he might be the father of her child. And it's entirely possible, what, with him missing five years of memories...and he doesn't know what to do with himself while they wait for Tink to show up, he doesn't know what to do with his hands and his arms and his lips and every single part of him that wants to hold Snow, every single part that wants to wake up Emma...

Ruby leads Tink to Emma's bedroom. Snow already explained to her over the magic mirror what they need her to do, because David hasn't been able to string words into cohesive sentences for a while.

"This will work right away" Tink explains. "You'll know in the next minute or so, okay?" she repeats, because she can't even tell if David is listening. "Are you ready?"

Tink stands next to the bed of the sleeping child and sprinkles some fairy dust, then she moves her hands willing Emma's essence to raise and look for her parents.

It is the strangest most fascinating thing to watch a translucent silver thread slowly, almost shyly come out of Emma's heart, then fly around the room. First it reaches for Snow's heart.

"Your father," Tinkerbell whispers, "now look for your father..."

David closes his eyes and swallows hard, he doesn't dare see what happens next. Snow reaches for his hand.

"David look!" she whispers and he can hear her chocking up.

He opens his eyes to see Emma's silver thread resting right on his heart, beating along side his heartbeat.
"Does that mean...-" he asks too scared that he might jump to the wrong conclusion.

"Congratulations Nolan..." Tink winks at him then she exits the room.

David steps forward and drops to his knees in front of Emma's bed, marveling at this beautiful child, his child, his Emma. He doesn't try to hold back, he is crying. His heart is overflowing with so many emotions. In the end he just kisses her forehead a couple of times and Emma smiles in her sleep and changes sides.

"Would you like to wake her up?" Snow whispers placing her hand on his shoulder.

He looks at Snow confused at first, then it occurs to him that this is his child, he could wake her up if he wanted to, he could take her to the park at midnight, or build snowmen until dawn, if there was any snow left that is, he could feed her ice cream for breakfast or let her skip school till the end of the year. He could. Because Emma is his daughter she really is. His daughter. His.

And he decides that his first decision as Emma's father is going to be a rational one. He is going to let his daughter sleep.

He stands up instead and walks out of the girl's bedroom, Snow trailing him.

"Are you alright?" she whispers. She looks so worried.

A couple of hours ago, he was sitting at her bedside, terrified at what the tortured Snow could handle, if she would ever be okay again.

And now, she is the one looking at him with big worried eyes, and it doesn't seem fair or logical, but then again, their life together hasn't been fair or logical either.

"Come on," he says pulling her next to him on the couch, lifting her feet to rest on the coffee table. "I'm supposed to be fussing over you, not the other way around..."

"We can take turns," she smiles.

"Tell me everything," he whispers. "How did you know?"

Snow takes a deep breath. "They would place a pain spell on me," she starts and he winces. "And then I'd see myself walk in the cabin and you were there..."

She describes her dreams one by one, what she asked, what he answered.

"I think we were married...- are married..." she concludes still looking at him with big worried eyes, concerned that this is all too much, that she might still scare him away.

"Of course we are," he says bringing her hand up to his lips. "If I were half as in love with you then as I am now, of course I'd ask you to marry me..."

He hesitates, then he turns to face her. "What would you say if I asked you now?" he whispers threading his fingers to hers. "What would you say if I asked you to marry me?"

Snow blinks a couple of times leaning her head on his shoulder. "I'd say yes," she replies back.

"You would?" part of him feels shocked, the other part feels deliriously happy.

"Won't you ask and find out!" she winks at him.
He laughs. Snow closes her eyes. She feels exhausted and so content. No, not content. Happy. Happier than she's felt in years.

"You look like you need to rest," he whispers pulling her up from the couch.

He leads her into her bedroom and he hesitates at the door. He's never been in her bedroom before. Surprisingly Snow's bedroom is almost organized. He sort of expected walls covered in boxes of case files, or details about cases pinned to the walls, but there is nothing like that. There is an ornate white metal frame bed, in front of a curtained window, a beautiful wedding ring quilt on top of the bed, a red candle on the nightstand.

"Stay with me?" she asks and she looks worried as if it's possible that he could still choose to walk away.

"Snow, I'm not going anywhere..." he replies.

"Promise?" Snow lays on the bed, exhausted, her head sinking in her pillow, closing her eyes.

"I promise!" he replies kicking off his boots and climbing on the bed next to her. But Snow doesn't hear him, she is already asleep.
The Case of the Forgetful Princess

David doesn't sleep much. He lays next to Snow who keeps crying and whimpering in her sleep. "It's alright,' he whispers pulling her closer. "You are home now, you are safe, it's going to be alright."

And at some point towards the morning hours Snow relaxes against the warmth of his body and she falls into a deeper dreamless state. That's when he finally closes his eyes and lets himself drift off to sleep. He wakes up really early and he rushes to Emma's room. Emma is sound asleep. Snow is still sleeping. He is not quite certain what he should be doing on his very first day aware that he is Emma's father and Snow's husband. Part of him wants to be in the room when Snow wakes up, he also wants to be the first to greet Emma in the morning.

David walks into the kitchen, he turns the coffee pot on then he starts mixing pancakes. He is almost cooked them all, just a couple of scoops of batter left when he hears the sound of soft footsteps behind him.

"David!" Emma is at the door.

And even though has been anticipating this very meeting for hours, since Tink made Emma's essence connect right to his heart, he is still caught unaware. He watches this living breathing child, his child, in her unicorn pajamas, tangled hair and his breath catches. She is so beautiful!

"Emma!" is all he manages to say.

"Where is Ruby? She said you found my mom" Emma's glare is quite accusatory, "but I can't see her yet! Where is she?"

"Emma!" he says again then he realizes that she actually asked him a question. "That was just for yesterday, she needed to rest. Your mom is here, she is asleep in her room..." he starts and before he gets a chance to finish Emma darts out of the kitchen and into her mother's bedroom.

David completely forgets about the pancakes and follows her.

"Mommy!" Emma practically screams then she jumps on Snow's bed.

Snow's eyes open wide, terrified for a brief second then she realizes she is at home in her bed and she reaches out to Emma.

Snow is holding Emma. No, this is more than that. His wife is holding his daughter, the daughter she kept against the wishes of a Queen and her council, against the wishes of the whole northern kingdom, the daughter she raised alone, and David leans against the door, the enormity of what he is witnessing threatening to crush him.

"Ruby said I couldn't see you..." Emma is crying now, partially glaring at David as if it's his fault that she wasn't at Snow's bedside right away.

"I'm sorry, I'm afraid that was my idea baby, I was feeling so awful..." Snow says quietly. "But I'm here now and I'm alright, my sweet sweet girl, and I missed you so much..."

Emma is crying.
"It's alright," Snow whispers over and over, caressing her hair, kissing her cheeks and her tears. "I'm back and everything is going to be alright, I promise..."

"Did you catch them?" Emma frowns. "The guys that took you away? Did you catch them?"

Snow hesitates. She doesn't know. She didn't even ask.

"Most of them!" David declares and then Snow notices him standing against the door.

"David!" she whispers, smiling brightly. She looks so happy. "Come on in, don't just stand there..."

David walks in and sits on the edge of the bed.

"Did you tell her yet?" Snow asks.

He shakes his head.

"Go ahead," Snow smiles encouragingly.

Emma is looking back and forth from her mother to David.

And David falters. David, who had no trouble standing up to king George when he was threatening his job, David who stormed into Regina's castle and stood up to her royal guard, that same David hesitates in front of the little ten year old blond girl. His daughter.

"Emma," he starts quietly, "remember the other day when you asked me to help your mom find your father?"

Emma nods swallowing hard.

"Did you find him?" Emma looks both excited and terrified. Like she doesn't want to get her hopes high and have her heart broken.

David nods a couple of times before he can find his voice. "I did..."

"Where is he?" Emma looks around the room as if her long lost father could jump out of Snow's closet or crawl out from under Snow's bed.

And he shrugs, his eyes welling up.

"Where is he?" Emma asks again crossing her arms.

"Emma, it's me..." he says softly.

Emma sizes him up from top to bottom.

"You?" she asks, eyes wide open in shock. "You are my dad?"

"Yes!"

"My real dad?"

David nods a bunch of times because he really can't talk anymore.

"My real dad?" Emma frowns, holding back even as she is stepping towards him.

"Yes!" David manages.
"Why didn't you tell me right away?"

"I didn't know," he says quietly, completely overwhelmed by her question. "My memories are messed up, I couldn't remember..."

"Can I call you dad?" Emma looks hopeful.

David nods gain, wiping his eyes quickly with the back of his hand.

And then Emma takes the final two steps and breaches the gap between them. He opens his arms and she crushes into him, sobbing softly. Emma is crying and David is cradling her head, kissing her forehead.

Snow covers her mouth, tears streaming down her face. She thinks of all those times she walked into Emma and David playing board games and laughing together and how she had the strange thought that they looked like they belonged together.

And then there is a strong smell of smoke and Snow sits up. "Wait, is something burning?"

David's eyes open wide. "I forgot the pancakes" he exclaims.

"You are making pancakes?" Snow sounds all excited.

"Burning them is more like it..." he says rushing to the kitchen, Emma in tow.

But it's only two burned pancakes, the rest of them are fine. Emma climbs on the kitchen counter and watches him cook.

"I can fix the burned ones, if you like, I fix burned food for Auntie Ruby all the time..."

"Alright!" he offers and Emma points her wand at the two blackened pancakes. The two burned pancakes disappear along with the plate.

Emma's face scrunches up as if she is going to cry. She messed up.

"Incredible!" David bops her nose with his finger. "How did you do that? My daughter has magic!"

Emma looks at him surprised.

She didn't think her making the pancakes disappear was something worth celebrating over but David beams at her so she smiles back.

"Here," she says handing him her magic wand. "You try!"

He swings the wand as if flourishing his sword and Emma giggles.

"Dad!" she exclaims playfully. "You are holding it wrong!"

David freezes looking at her. This is the first time Emma called him Dad.

"Why are you sad?" Emma asks shyly. "Did I do something wrong?"

He shakes his head, trying to find the right words to express what he is feeling.

"Emma!" he says quietly. "You didn't do anything wrong...I'm just sorry I got so lost...I'm sorry it took me forever to find you..."
Emma nods a couple of times. "Did you want to be here? The whole time?"

"The whole time," he says wiping his eyes. "The whole entire time... I am so sorry..."

"You burned another pancake!" she says and he laughs.

Emma swings her wand around and new the pancake looks just right. She claps her hands.

"I did it!" she exclaims proudly.

"Yes you did," he laughs. "Does your mom like pancakes? Should we take her some?"

Snow looks very happy when David and Emma bring her a breakfast tray with pancakes and coffee.

"Mm," she takes a sip of coffee. "Just between you and me, non magicked breakfast tastes better..."

Emma climbs next to her mother. "I was so worried about you mom..."

"Funny, I was worried about you," Snow kisses her daughter's cheek.

"When are you going to catch the rest of the bad guys?" Emma asks.

"Good question," Snow smiles. "When are we going to catch the bad guys?"

Just then David magic mirror rings. He silences it.

"Who is it? Did I miss something?" Snow asks taking a large bite of pancakes.

"Nothing much. Jiminy wants to come in to question you. He is unhappy because he went to the hospital to talk to you but you weren't there..."

Snow nods.

And then David thinks of Rod troll, trapped inside the barn in his small cage along with the rest of the guards that were and his eyes open wide. Why, with all the events of the last two days, finding out he is Emma's father he completely forgot about the dwarf and the trolls.

Funny, when he decided he was going to do whatever it takes, even incur the wrath of the troll boss to find Snow White he was a single man. His choices affected himself and nobody else. Now he is married and has a child. And the choices he made two days ago are going to affect his family too.

And he feels crushed by the weight of the decisions he made two days ago. He is weighing his options, not sure he sees a way out.

Snow reaches for Emma, and kisses her on the cheek, then she catches David's eyes.

Something is wrong.

"Emma, sweetheart, won't you go feed Star and Wilby..." Snow smiles, and then the moment Emma is out of the room, she moves closer to David.

"What's wrong?" she asks quietly.

"Tink and I turned a dwarf and some trolls into mice, and I'm hoping that she remembered to feed him," he replies.
Snow tilts her head questioningly.

"It's a long story," he hesitates.

"I like long stories," she replies.

David looks away. He wants to lie, he wants to downplay everything, but this is Snow White, his wife, he's only just found her, getting this second chance with her and he can't mar this new beginning with lies. Besides, he has put her and Emma in incredible danger, she deserves to know.

"Alright," he starts, "I got to the office space just a few minutes after our conversation. There was nothing there, no evidence, no clues, no witnesses. Absolutely nothing. Tink said no one had touched the front door but you and me. Ruby smelled sulfur but I couldn't smell anything. I tried to convince Jiminy that the king was behind your abduction, I wanted him to push the king for answers. He wouldn't do it. I was out of options. I knew the king uses trolls to do his dirty work so I went straight to the Rod troll. We kidnapped him, we forced him to give up the location of his safe houses. That's how we found you..."

Snow is looking stunned. "The Rod troll? You kidnapped the Rod troll? How did you even figure out who he was?"

"I got a tip from our favorite actor... Turns out the Rod troll was actually a dwarf, about to leave the criminal life..."

"Really?"

David shrugs. "One of the reasons nobody suspected him..."

Snow is more reluctant now. "How did you get him to give up the safe houses?" Her eyes are big, worried, she can feel her hands shaking so she sticks them in the pockets of her pajama bottoms.

David doesn't know how to tell his wife who just survived three days of agonizing excruciating pain spells that he beat up the dwarf and then stuck his head in a half barrel full of water until he was too terrified and into too much pain to offer any resistance. He doesn't know how. He wonders if this could be it, if Snow White will walk from him, once she finds out the truth, barely a day after he found her. He wonders how he ever thought that torturing a dwarf was something he could get away with, something she could look past.

Just tell her the truth and deal with the consequences, he tries to convince himself and yet the words don't come out right away. He just found her. He only just found her. How? Could the very act of finding her be the one that might drive her away?

"David?" Snow's eyes are filled with questions, so he looks away. He doesn't want to say the words, he doesn't...he can't lose her...

"What did you do?" she whispers.

"I... I stuck his head in water," he replies, and he feels like he can't even lift his head up to look at her. This is it. This is the moment Snow White will take a closer look at him and walk away.

Snow stands there, the enormity of his confession washing over her.

"You tortured the Rod troll? David, that's like signing your own death warrant..."

"I wasn't married, two days ago, I didn't think I was putting anyone in danger other than myself,"
he replies unable to look at her, his heart begging her to understand, to see things from his point of view. And then he dares lift his eyes to meet hers.

"You were willing to die for me?" she asks and there are tears streaming down her face.

David just looks at her, he doesn't reply.

She reaches for his hand and then she takes a step closer, her hand cupping his face.

"I put us all in incredible danger, and I am so so sorry," David isn't quite doesn't confessing yet.

"David If you hadn't done that I'm pretty sure I'd be dead by now," she whispers. "I don't think I could have survived the pain spells much longer..."

David is shaking his head, he can't really wrap his mind around a world where Snow isn't in it. And then Snow kisses him on the lips, and he wraps his arms around her, his hands trembling, so relieved he could cry.

Snow pulls back to look at him. Then she sits on the bed and tugs on arm so he sits next to her.

"What's the plan?" she asks. "Release the mice? Turn them back to human and then release them?"

"There is no plan," he replies. "There was no time to think things through. I was just doing whatever I had to do to find you. Now that I know how evil they are, I don't want to release them at all. Snow, do you know how many we found locked up in their lairs? We found the Silver Fairy, two dwarves, a child, a goblin and three tree nymphs... I don't want to let them go. I'm going to turn them all in, and I'll tell the knight force what I did, and let the pieces fall where they may..."

"You found the Silver Fairy?" Snow is quite stunned. "That is incredible... But David if you do that, if you come clean, they are going to have arrest you as well..."

"I don't see another way out of this..." he replies.

"I am not losing you again," Snow frowns.

"Well, the obvious solution would be to turn in the Rod troll and then run away together..." he offers a rueful smile "except we already know that doesn't turn out well..."

Snow nods. Ten years ago they were very naive to think they could get away with that, but now... Now they know better. "It doesn't turn out well at all," she agrees, "and then what would Emma do, if we were on the run? This is her home, she loves her school... I couldn't make her give all that up..."

"No, of course not," David replies and he is looking kind of lost.

"The council is already asking me to step up and become a Queen... if they decide to charge you, I can always take back the throne and hand you a royal pardon," Snow muses. "If it ever comes to that..."

"I didn't think you wanted to become Queen..." David frowns.

"If that's what it takes to get you out of trouble, then that's what I'll do," Snow replies decisively. "David. you are not going to get in trouble for rescuing me..."

And it's David's turn to kiss Snow, and this kiss last longer, and his fingers getting tangled in her hair and she is pulling him in closer when Emma comes inside the room.
"What are you guys doing?" she asks. "David, come see, I got Star to play dead..." and then she turns to look at him in a hurry. "I mean Dad," she corrects herself.

"Playing dead?" David smiles. "How did you manage that?"

And Snow is left alone on her bed feeling just bit flustered. Recovery time is over, it is time to get up, she decides. There is a lot going on today. Snow jumps into the shower, then she comes out wrapped in her towel and she picks out a beautiful white dress from the closet. Because no matter what is happening out in the world, no matter what cases are there to be solved and motives and puzzles, today is the first day that Snow knows who Charming is and she intends to celebrate. When she steps into the living room she finds Emma sitting on the floor with David playing go Fish. Emma has dealt Star the turtle into the game, and now Star is actually trying to eat the cards.

David takes her in, the white dress the bare feet, the single flower in her hair and he can't hide the longing in his eyes. He can't lose her again.

"Who is winning?" Snow smiles.

"Not Star," Emma replies mournfully.

"Maybe Star needs a little help," Snow laughs and she sits behind the turtle picking up the turtle's cards. "Do you have a Queen?" she asks David, who smiles playfully.

"I do," voice full of emotion, then he actually checks his cards and hands her the Queen of diamonds.

And then David's magic mirror rings.

"It's Jiminy again," David hesitates.

"Here is an idea, you tell Jiminy who and where all the mice are and let him deal with the situation today. That ought to keep him busy. And tell him we'll both come in tomorrow and give him full statements. Tomorrow. Anything he wants to know..."

He looks at her surprised. "Tomorrow?"

"Yes. Because today is our day," Snow replies, looking at him with bright green eyes and she looks so beautiful, he feels like he can barely breathe.

He steps out on the front porch to talk to Jiminy.

Jiminy must not love Snow's plan because Snow can hear David yelling "What do you mean, that's not possible? If Regina can negotiate going into self imposed exile not spending a single day in prison, surely Snow White can get half a day of peace!"

Snow fans herself with her go fish cards and smiles at Emma. "I really like your father," she mumbles, a dreamy look in her eyes. She opens her magic mirror, and sends a message to Ruby first and then to Tink. She has a couple of ideas for tonight, a few plans she needs to set in motion.

When David gets back in the room, Snow beams at him. "Everything alright?" she asks.

David nods.

"Good," Snow smiles. Today is going to be a good day.

Emma sits David on the couch and shows him the album with her baby pictures, then she makes
him promise he is going to pick her up from school one of these days, then she has all sort of games she wants to play next, when Snow interrupts them.

"I'm going to go around the corner and visit Nova and the new baby, do you guys want to come along?"

Emma runs up ahead, and David and Snow follow her their fingers laced together.

"I haven't seen the new baby yet," Snow says leaning her head against his shoulder. "I was too busy, being kidnapped and all."

David wraps his arm around her shoulders and he marvels at how perfect this all is, how easy, how he fits seamlessly into Snow's and Emma's life.

Nova and Grumpy's house is a blue two story cottage, complete with sunflowers in the front yard and a very friendly black and white cat who lays on the welcome mat expecting them to pet her.

"Nova has magicked the weather around her house, it's always spring in her front yard," Snow explains as they climb the front steps together.

Grumpy opens the door.

"Snow!" he cries out and he pulls her in his arms, trying hard not to show her he is crying. "How are you sister?"

"I am better. We are here to see the baby," Snow smiles.

"Come on in, he is still awake!" Grumpy beams at them.

Nova is sitting in a very pretty nightgown, on her light blue couch rocking a very drowsy baby in bassinet in front of her. The room is dimly lit by candles, and soft music is playing on her gramophone.

"Snow?" Nova smiles, looking so relieved. "How are you?" and then the baby whimpers and Nova turns to him "Look Nate, look, everyone is here to see you..." Nova coos and for a brief second the baby looks like he is about to smile.

"Who is a happy, happy boy," Nova continues.

"He is so beautiful," Snow whispers. "Nate? Is that what you are calling him?"

"Nathaniel Stealthy," Grumpy replies and Snow nods.

"A perfect name," Snow exclaims. Emma is quite disappointed that the baby is not sitting up yet.

"Would you like to hold him?" Nova offers.

Emma sits on the couch and they place the baby in her lap. Emma is thrilled for a minute then she looks overwhelmed. David, comes to her rescue, he picks up the baby, and the baby grabs onto his finger and then closes his eyes. Snow is looking at the peaceful scene. Grumpy kissing Nova's hand, Emma on the couch, David holding baby Nate, their faces lit by the last sun rays, streaming through the back window.

This is what the first days with a new baby are supposed to be like. Just quiet peaceful moments like this. It is not supposed to be missing memories and frantic royals questioning her gain and again, "But tell us who the baby's father is? What do you mean you forgot?"
And even though she said today is going to be a good day, Snow can't help but feel robbed. Regina took this form her, she took everything away from David. Snow can't help herself, her eyes well up. She heads to the kitchen to get a glass of water. David hands the baby back to Nova and walks after her.

"What's wrong?" he whispers. "Snow? Is this too much? Would you rather be home?"

Snow smiles at him, through her tears and leans against him. "I was just thinking, about all the things we missed..."

David nods and squeezes her hand.

"Today is a good day, today is a good day, today is a good day," Snow repeats stubbornly to herself, waiting for the sad thoughts to disperse.

"What's going on?" Grumpy asks when he gets a moment alone with Snow. "Are you guys together now, or what? What's the scoop?"

"He is Emma's father," Snow replies, her eyes welling up.

"No!" Grumpy looks shocked. "Nolan is the Emma's father? What are the odds?"

Snow thinks of David in her pain spelled induced dreams saying "I love you Snow White... even if I forget, I'll still love you with every fiber of my being... my heart will never stop looking for you..." and then a very flustered David yelling back at her in Regina's secret chamber:

"You are not difficult to work with. Nobody forced me to do this, I asked for this case!"

"You what?" "What do you mean you asked! You volunteered? On purpose?"

"Of course. I jumped at the chance to work with you..."

"Not that odd," she replies her eyes welling up. "He found me!"


Snow nods pointing at Emma who is busy telling David a story about how Celia bit little Tim at school the other day.

"Snow, I am so happy for you," Grumpy gives her a bear hug and then he walks across the room and hugs a rather surprised David.

"Welcome home, brother," Grumpy says and David understands and hugs him back.

It's late in the evening when Snow, David and Emma are back home, sitting around the table eating pizza.

"Do I have to go to school tomorrow?" Emma asks.

"Yes," Snow replies. "You missed quite a few days while I was gone..."

"Can I tell my friends that I have a Dad now?" Emma asks.

David is looking so moved, unable to reply.

"Of course," Snow replies for him, squeezing her hand.
Emma beams at him.

"Now come on, my sweet girl, it's time for bed..."

There is a soft knock on the door, and Ruby walks in.

"How is everybody?" she smiles.

David is surprised to see her, but Snow looks like she has been expecting her.

"Alright Emma," Ruby smiles. "Tomorrow is a school day, it's time to get ready for bed..."

Emma is about to protest but then she thinks better of it. She throws her arms around David and says "Good night Dad..."

And David feels his heart swell and grow several sizes.

"Ruby is going to stay with Emma, because I have plans for tonight," Snow whispers on his ear, and David feels his heart beat faster.
The Case of the Forgetful Princess

11 years ago in a small cabin hidden in the depths of the Enchanted Forest...

David adds wood to the fireplace, casting a worried look at Snow still asleep in the bed at the corner. She's been uncharacteristically tired lately and he is starting to get really concerned. They had plans for the day, why its spring time, they were going to ride to the edge of town and maybe if it looked all quiet and unsuspecting and sleepy, maybe they'd go into the tavern and have a drink, maybe they'd get a bite to eat, something that they didn't have to capture themselves and skin, or feather and watch the blood drain. Maybe. But even though it hasn't snowed all winter, last night it snowed and now the forest is a quiet magical place, and he can't wait for Snow to wake up and see it.

But she hasn't stirred yet, so David sits in front of the fire, watching the flames dance, wondering if she is getting tired of the quiet life. Was it a lot of him to expect a princess to enjoy living alone in the forest? Is she sleeping too much because she is depressed, and she doesn't want to admit it?

If she doesn't feel better soon he is going to call a healing fairy, never mind that they both agreed they wouldn't do that, because the fairies will recognize them for sure.

He needs Snow to get better. He needs her to be happy and healthy and whole. He needs...

"I can hear you worrying all the way from over here..." Snow's voice from the corner startles him.

"You are up!" he smiles. He wants to kiss her good morning, but he holds back. If she is unhappy, if she needs space in this tiny cabin, giving her a minute is the least he can do.

She sits up slowly hesitating to place her feet on the floor.

"It's really cold," she mumbles and he places another log into the fire.

"It snowed last night," he offers.

"Really?" Snow stands up wrapping their blanket around her shoulders then she runs to the front door and opens it wide and steps outside. David rushes after her.

Wilby from his cozy spot in front of the fireplace opens his eyes to look at her then he closes them again. He is not going out there.

"You are going to freeze..." David says closing the door behind them looking at her bare feet stepping on the fresh snow all worried.

Snow throws the blanket on the ground and takes a deep breath. "I love snow!" she says her eyes closed, inhaling the brisk morning air briefly. "Listen," she whispers because when they are silent they can hear the sound of the snowflakes falling on the ground. Then she opens her mouth trying to get a snowflake to land on her tongue. After several unsuccessful attempts she laughs and picks up the blanket again wrapping it around her shoulders.

"You are right. I'm freezing," she says, her teeth actually chattering.

He opens the door, and she runs to stand in front of the fireplace.

Snow closes her eyes enjoying the burning hot sensation on her cold skin. "I love snow so much..."
she exhales. David is leaning against the door watching her, eyes creased with worry.

"David," she looks at him from across the room. "I am going to say this again, because I said it last night but you seem determined not to believe me..."

He is looking at her carefully, drinking in her words.

"I love it here, and I love you, I have never been happier... and I regret absolutely nothing..."

David lets out a soft breath. Even so something is still off, and he doesn't know what it is.

"But I think I know what's wrong with me... and it might complicate our plans..." she continues.

"Are you sick?" he is walking towards her. "Because if you are, we should call a healing fairy..."

Snow is shaking her head.

"Snow what is it?"

He is squeezing her hand urgently and she doesn't want to keep him waiting, but she also doesn't want to say this out loud, because once she does everything will change.

"Snow?"

"I think I may be pregnant," she says softly and she has no idea how this admission softens her smile and makes her eyes sparkle.

And David is left stunned, speechless. Of course. It's all obvious now, why she is tired and moody and she doesn't like to smell meat frying in the pan and why she is weary of heights all of a sudden. Everything makes perfect sense. And this is an incredible complication, they are going to have to take risks, and get what the new baby will need without getting recognized in town and they might have to adjust their traveling plans, because they have been planning on boarding a ship and getting to the edge of the realm, even further if they can.

"David?" she asks because he got silent, taking this in, thinking this through. "We can still travel, nothing has to change, I can do this..."

But David places his finger on her lip and then he wraps his arm around her and lifts her up, burying his face in her neck, a bright smile on his lips.

"Are you happy then?" she whispers.

"Am I happy?" he beams at her. He swings her around twice and he ends up tumbling with her in the bed. "I am thrilled..."

And she is laughing while he is kissing her hands, and then he notices that her feet are cold so he tries to help put her socks on her all the while he is rambling "It's going to be a boy right? It's going to be a boy, I can tell... it has to be boy... or maybe a girl, a girl with your eyes, I love girls... I love your eyes...- come on put your socks on, your feet are frozen, you are going to need a warmer coat..." and Snow lays back on the bed laughing so hard her eyes water.

"What? Are you laughing at me?"

"Would I ever laugh at you?" she tries to bite her lips and keep a straight face.

"Right," he gives her a halfhearted glare and all he accomplishes by that is to get her to laugh some
"Come on," she says pulling her pants and her boots on, "I want to go for a walk in the snow..."

"What now? You are going to freeze the baby!" he tries to protest but she laughs at him again.

"Your baby and I are going for a walk, you are welcome to join us, if you like..." then she puts on her clothes and her cape on in hurry.

So he puts his heavy coat on and he hands her her scarf, then he places his arm around her shoulder and they walk together.

"Careful I think you are stepping on ice," he tries to warn.

"It would appear that your father is a bit overprotective..." Snow looks down to her still flat belly, her eyes sparkling mischievously.

"I am not...-"

"And, oh, so bossy...-"

"What? I am not bossy...-"

"And he likes to fuss...-"

"Hey I am just trying to keep you safe, little one," since he is not going to win the argument with Snow he turns his attention to her belly and then he smiles brightly, "It's alright, I think the baby just said she agrees with me..."

"I heard nothing..."

"Chirp louder little bird, your mother can't hear you..."

10 years ago

Snow screams so loud, he practically jumps then he closes his eyes.

"Breathe," he says over and over.

"It hurts," she moans, "David it hurts..."

"I'm calling a healing fairy," he tries for the tenth time.

"No, no, not yet, I can do this, I can do this..." she whispers and then she screams again.

"He is coming!" David cries out. "I can see the head, Snow breathe, breathe and push one more time hard...one more time hard for me please...

And Snow screams so loud his head rattles and his heart trembles, because they were too foolish to decide to do this alone and if something happens to Snow White his world will end and that is all. His world will end. And if something happens to the baby... he can't, he can't think that way... and then Snow screams again and again and the baby slides into his hands and David is staring, at this small perfect beautiful child, all slimy and bloody and helpless squirming in his hands.

And then the baby cries.
Snow is leaning back panting, David's eyes well up as he cuts the cord and wraps the baby in a blanket and places her on Snow's chest.

"It's a girl," he rasps, and now they are both crying, Snow is leaning her forehead on his. "You did it!" he whispers.

"Hi, Emma," Snow smiles through her tears.

"I love you, I love you, I love you so much," he tells her, so moved by the whole experience.

Snow is letting the baby's fingers curl around her forefinger. "She looks just like you," she marvels.

It's been a couple of hours since Emma's birth but it feels like its been so much longer. David has changed the bedding and helped clean Snow up as best he could and he's given the baby a bird bath and Snow's tried to nurse her and that didn't go very well because it seems that Emma is more interested in sleeping than nursing.

Snow is asleep on their bed and he is holding Emma near the fire when she lets out a small cry. Funny how newborns sound so much more like lambs rather than children.

"Your Mama just fell asleep," he whispers. "She is exhausted... Are you hungry? Can we let her sleep just a little bit longer?"

Emma stills at the sound of his voice so he walks back and forth to keep her happy. His knee is hurting today, it must be all tension of the day, but the baby needs to be soothed so he ignores the pain and hobbles along.

"Who is the loveliest girl in the whole Enchanted forest?" he asks. "Who is the most precious girl in all the realms? Emma is... that's right... Emma is..."

And he is not sure, but he thinks the baby might be smiling back at him.

"Is she hungry?" Snow lifts her head up from the bed, still visibly exhausted.

"It's alright, she is happy..."

"I really should try feeding again," she says propping her head up in her arm.

David kisses Emma's forehead, places her right next to Snow and watches her, eyes bright in wonder. His wife. His daughter. His.

Snow groans because the moment her nipple touches Emma's lips Emma's eyes close and she falls asleep again.

"You are supposed to be eating, sweet girl!" Snow tries to argue with the sleeping baby who is entirely undisturbed by her mother's concern.

"Are you hungry?" David asks.

"I'd like a cup of tea," Snow replies, her eyes getting heavy as well.

Wilby runs to the door and starts barking.

"What is it boy?" David asks. "If it's just a squirrel can we just let him be, because Emma is sleeping?"
David puts the kettle to boil. Wilby is growling and barking at the door.

"Hold on," David mumbles. "I'll check who it is, just give me one second..."

Emma lets out a whimper, startled by the barking dog.

David picks up the baby then he is on his way to check the door.

There is a deafening crack. Somebody has kicked their door in. And the first thing that goes through his mind is that the gush of cold wind and the snow coming in through their door can't be good for either Snow or the baby. David rushes to get his sword.

Wilby is barking frantically.

Two men and a troll burst into the room long swords bared. They aren't dressed in any sort of uniform or any identifiable markers. He has no idea who they are though he doesn't for a moment doubt who sent them.

"OUT!" David yells. "Get out!"

"Who are you! Get out! Get out!" he yells swinging his sword at them, "Get out!" The first man slices the air with his sword, David parries, kicking the second man in the knee. That was a terrible idea because now his knee is burning.

Wilby bares his teeth biting one of the men who tries to pull back. Snow sits up, eyes wide open reaching for her dagger. David is retreating, he needs to put Emma down. He hands Emma to Snow who is looking at him with big scared eyes.

David is still fighting with the two men and the troll when a dwarf steps in the cabin, walking straight for the bed where Snow is.

"Snow!" David turns and yells, hoping she can fight back long enough until he can get to her and on that moment he feels a sharp pain on his side.

"Don't hurt him!" Snow screams. Funny, how she is screaming louder now, than she did earlier. He is almost surprised to see the blood spreading on his shirt. He touches the wound trying to control the bleeding, it's quite deep.

Snow aims and throws her dagger and she finds the dwarf in the shoulder. The dwarf gasps glaring at her then Wilby bites him on the shin. The dwarf falls down.

David struggles to remain upright, while the room around him is spinning. He is losing too much blood too fast, but he needs to keep fighting because Snow is here and Emma, and Snow and just gave birth and she is still in pain and if he doesn't defend them who will? He needs to defend his Snow, his Emma. His.

David is leaning against the table, panting. He has to stay up. All he needs to do is kill everybody, that's all. Then he can get Emma and Snow out and as far away as he possibly can. Kill them all. Move Emma and Snow away. He keeps repeating the plan over and over in his head, trying to focus, trying to will his body to keep on fighting. All he needs to do. He is not going down. He is not.

Queen Regina dressed in all black enters the cabin, but David barely notices because one of the men just stabbed him on the shoulder and Snow is screaming again. He wants to reach for her, he wants to see her face, his body crushing on the ground, Snow, his Snow. And as he lays there he
sees Regina stand above him, strange unidentifiable words coming out of her mouth, smoke curling from her fingers.

"What are you doing to him!" Snow screams.

Funny he is supposed to be protecting her, not the other way around, because she just gave birth, to a baby girl... what is the baby's name? He can no longer remember. The smoke clouds around his head, wiping parts of his memory, he tries not to breathe it in, he coughs, he feels his lungs burning, And then everything goes silent inside his mind.

A woman is stumbling towards him in a white gown, she is the most beautiful woman he's ever laid eyes on, and he doesn't know her name, he doesn't remember.

I'm sorry he wants to whisper, he knows he let her down. She kneels next to him, big green worried eyes, tears streaming down her face.

"What did you do?" she sobs looking at the woman in black standing over them.

"Oh, nothing much, just a little forgetting spell. In a few moments you will not remember you knew him, let alone having met him..." the black smoke now reaching the beautiful woman's face, and she is chocking, coughing.

David's hand is reaching out to her, he needs to help her, she seems to be in pain.

"No, never, I will not forget!" the woman in the white dress cries out and she leans in to kiss him. He needs her kiss like a man in the desert needs the last drop of water, but the troll pulls him away roughly, while he is reaching for her.

"Don't forget his dog. Search the room for daggers and weapons, we wouldn't want the princess to hurt herself in her frantic state," Regina orders the men. And then they all leave. Snow is looking around the cabin lost and confused. Where is she? A baby whimpers from the bed in the corner. Snow looks back confused. She crawls back to her bed. She knows the child, this is her child, her baby, her Emma. Where is Emma's father? Snow could have sworn he was here a minute ago. What is happening?

Snow picks up the baby who is now crying loudly and then she looks around the room. She needs to write down what happened, she needs to write it all down, because she can already feel her memories disappearing one by one. Except she doesn't have parchment or quill or ink, she doesn't have a dagger, so she picks up one rusty nail and walks over to the back wall of the cabin. She should write his name down so she doesn't forget. His name. His name is... What is his name?

Charming... Charming... Charming... she carves on the wall again and again, tears streaming down her face, because she already forgot his name, and the color of his eyes, the feel of his hands on her skin and the sound of his voice. The spell is fully taking effect.

Charming...

Emma is crying again. Snow looks at the wall. She wrote the name Charming twenty eight times, her hand is now bleeding. She drops the rusty nail on the ground. She sits back on the bed and bares her breast. Emma is hungry. Emma needs to eat even as Snow's world is ending and her life is crumbling, even as her heart is empty and lost.

And now...

"I have plans for tonight," Snow whispers in David's ear, and pulls out two magic beans from her
"Where did you get those?" he asks.

"Oh, I have my sources," Snow offers a playful smile. "Are you ready?"

"If you are not going to give me any clues about where we are going, I don't see how I can be ready," David frowns.

Snow lifts up his hand and barely rubs her lips against it. It's a tease of a kiss, a promise. "There's your clue," she whispers.


Snow tosses the magic bean on the ground. "Home!" she whispers. The ground opens up and Snow still holding onto David's hand jumps in.

When the fog clears up they are standing right outside of Snow's small cabin in the woods. No. Their small cabin in the woods.

David holds his breath. Not the romantic getaway he would have chosen, but Snow saw him here in her torture induced memories, he knows this place holds an extremely significant place in her heart.

Snow tugs on his arm urging him forward. He looks at the cabin wistfully.

I wish I could remember, he wants to say but he doesn't. In one swift move he lifts up Snow in his arms and carries her through the threshold of the cabin.

"Is this what you had in mind?" he whispers.

Instead of a reply her lips meet his, her arms wrap around his neck. Yes, that is exactly what she had in mind.

He is surprised to see that inside the cabin the candles are already lit, there is a roaring fire in the fireplace, there is fresh bedding on the corner bed and beautiful flower garlands streamed across the ceiling.

He wants to ask how she managed to do all this but he doesn't get to say another word, because Snow's lips are still on his. He places her down and her hands clasp his doublet as she pulls him closer to the bed in the corner.

She undoes the ties of his doublet, then she unbuttons his shirt. She gasps then her fingers trace the scar on his shoulder and the mark on his abdomen. She tilts her head, pointing to the scuffle marks on the wooden floor, a silent question. He nods. Snow brushes her lips against his chest then turns her back on him and pulls her hair out of the way. David unbuttons her dress, his breath catching. He lets her dress slip to the floor. His arms wrap around her and she turns around to face him. Their lips meet again slowly, deliberately, looking at each other, touching and tasting, caressing and loving.

Trying to remember.

He doesn't rush. He searches her eyes, looking for missing memories, looking for the innocent young Charming that thought running away together was possible. His hand slowly stroking her jawline, searching for the beautiful young Mary Margaret Blanchard who thought a cabin in the
woods and their love was enough to keep them safe. His lips are tracing her skin looking for kisses and touches he must have hid there a long time ago, looking for hints of love that managed to stay alive against incredible odds.

The bed is too narrow, and the cabin is too small, their hearts are too full and his hands are too careful. Just two days ago Snow was still missing, tortured in ways he cannot even imagine. He cannot be too cautious. He doesn't want to hurt her.

This feels a lot like the officer's ball. There are so many things he wants to do, but the moment he meet her eyes, those thoughts completely vanish from his mind and all he wants to do is fold her in his arms and hide her there, keep her safe.

David is kissing her finger tips one by one and Snow hides her face in the curve of his neck, breathing him in. Wild mint, and a cabin in the woods, love and missing memories. She lays back on the bed and tugs him on top of her, tracing his back with her fingers, more, she wants more, and then she brushes her lips in the crook of his neck and if he was standing his knees would buckle. He feels like she owns his heart and his body, like he'd be willing to jump in the fire for her or drawn in the ocean for her, all she had to do was ask. And then she takes one of his careful hands and brings it up to her lips.

"I am not going to break, Charming," she whispers. "and I am not in pain... "

David pulls back to look at her, her eyes are glowing, a half playful smile on her parted lips. Her cheeks are flushed, she is beaming with joy.

"I missed you so much, it's been way too long" she rasps, "now stop treating me like I'm made out of glass..."

Their bed is too narrow and the cabin is too small, their hearts are too full and the realm is folding and bending to their will, their hearts fall into rhythm, their bodies remember touches and moans and whispers and pleasure, echoes from their forgotten past, the kind of love neither of them thought they'd ever taste again. This feels right, this feels perfect, this feels both fresh and old, like joy and laughter and wonder all tucked in together with longing and pain. This feels like coming home.

Their bed is too narrow, the cabin is too small and the realm is not big enough to contain how much he loves her, how happy she is to be his once again.

"Can you tell me again," he asks after they've laid side by side there for a while, resting.

"Tell you what?"

He props his head with his hand, his finger playing with her curls. "Tell me what you saw when you flashed back... if you don't mind thinking about it..."

Snow nods, trying to gather her thoughts. "I came in through the door, and you were standing over here and your knee was bandaged... and you were talking to the baby in my belly, acting like she was talking back to you...seemed like you did that a lot... and I was laughing, I was so happy..."

She recalls her flashbacks one by one as they huddle together under the covers. Why, in the light of the melting candles they can almost see Mary Margaret's and Charming's shadows dancing across the walls, running around the cabin, laughing and loving, holding each other in this very spot, promising to love and cherish each other forever.

And if you asked him later what was the most memorable part of their first night back together, he
wouldn't tell you when she whispered his name breathless and panting, or when he trembled in her arms, but this: his favorite part of the night was listening to Snow's voice, catching the shadows of Mary Margaret and Charming loving each other in the candlelight.

"Maybe we should head back to the house" Snow whispers after they've laid quietly for a while, his arms wrapped tightly around her, her head nestled on his chest, his finger tracing lazy circles on her back. She doesn't really mean it though, she doesn't even make the slightest effort to get up.

"Hold on," he mumbles, "There is something I want to do..."

He reaches for his dagger that's on the ground next to his clothes. Then he carves his name on the bedpost next to the snowflake he carved years ago. DAVID NOLAN LOVES SNOW WHITE, he writes, with bold large letters and then he leans towards her, whispering in her ear, "more than life itself..." his fingers tangled in her hair.

There's a sharp intake of breath and Snow turns to meet his lips, pulling him in closer, a sob caught in her throat. "I just love you so much," she rasps breathlessly and he is out of words. And this time their love is more urgent, more demanding, more raw, more desperate, as they struggle to erase years of loneliness and loss, as they heal broken pieces, as they wake up forgotten dreams and bring them back to life. His fingers running through her bare skin, his eyes filled with light, because today feels like the start of a new life, today feels like a chance to make everything right, today they get a new chance, today everything will work out.

It's almost morning when Snow starts getting dressed.

"When did you do all this?" David asks pointing to the candles and the flower garlands on the ceiling. Yesterday, they spent all morning with Emma then they visited the Grumpys. There was no time for her to sneak away and plan any of this.

"Oh, I had some help. I know a girl, a fairy, to be exact..." Snow replies.

David laughs.

"Tink is amazing," Snow adds. "It's like she has all these powers, it's like she just blinks and all these incredible things happen, and she doesn't want anyone to know..."

"Yeah," David replies, reaching for her hand, pulling her back on the bed, leaning his forehead against her cheek. Because right at this moment Snow White is the only incredible woman he wants to think about.

"Are you ready to get back to the real world?" she whispers.

He wants to say no, he wants to stay hidden with her forever, here, try again what they tried once before. Except Emma is at home, she will no doubt wake up soon and burst into her mother's bedroom. Emma. Their Emma. His Emma.

David sits up.

"Ready," he replies. "Let's go home."
The Case of the Forgetful Princess

Snow and David use the magic bean to sneak back into Snow's cottage in the early morning hours. As much as they want to spend time alone, Snow can't handle the thought of Emma waking up in the morning and them not being there, not after everything she's been through.

They sneak into Snow's bedroom and they lay down as quietly as possible. Snow scoots as close as she can to David, her back leaning on his chest. David smiles and wraps his arm around her waist.

"Yes, just like this," Snow mumbles, half asleep. She sighs contentedly and mumbles "Good night Charming." David doesn't reply but he does close his eyes, a smile playing on his lips.

In what feels like mere seconds a tornado of curls and giggles runs to their bed and yells "Good morning Dad! Hi Mommy!"

They both jump, half startled.

"Emma? What time is it?" Snow whispers.

"It's just seven. I'd let you sleep more but I have to go to school and I wanted to see Dad and maybe make breakfast and maybe Dad can walk me to the squash stop..."

Emma is talking so fast.

Snow groans and gets ready to get up.

"No, let me," David says quietly, squeezing her arm.

Snow smiles still half asleep, she can barely believe this is happening.

David follows Emma into the kitchen.

"Can't reach the bowls," she says pointing to the cupboard. "Usually auntie Nova magics them down..."

David reaches two bowls, hands them to Emma who places them at the table. She brings two spoons and a boxes of cereal.

"Fruit loops or Lucky charms?" she asks.

Neither, he wants to say but he points to the Lucky charms.

He doesn't ever start his day eating what feels like mainly large spoonfuls of sugar, but his daughter is making breakfast.

"Hold on," he gets up and turns on the coffee pot. "Alright," he says sitting back down.

Emma brings the milk, she pours it in both bowls, without spilling any of it then she sits across from him taking a large spoonful.

"So, David..." she starts then she scrunches her nose adorably and tries again."I mean Dad... are you going to be here when I come home from school?"

David hesitates. How he wishes he could just answer yes and mean it. But he is not sure he is
coming home today, he is about to go to the black knight force headquarters and confess abducting
a dwarf, torturing him, turning several trolls into mice, locking them up in cages... What are the
chances they are just going to let him walk away after confessing that?

Funny, if he knew three days ago he was Emma's father, he might have not taken so many risks
finding Snow White. Maybe he would have thought he would have to be careful, stay out of trouble
for Emma's shake... No, that's not right. There is no world or alternate realm, in which he sits by
patiently and does things by the book while Snow gets painspelled.

"Actually..." he starts saying and Emma automatically glares at him.

"David!" Emma is sounding very firm. "You have to be here when I get home. If not right away,
maybe later, but you have to be here..."

"I know," he replies.

"Where are you going to go?" Emma crosses her arms on her chest.

"I want to be here, Emma, believe me, there is nowhere else I'd rather be but...-

"No buts!" Emma interrupts. "You can't just be my Dad for one day and then leave..."

David closes his eyes. "I know," he says quietly. "I know... but in order to find your mother I broke
some rules..."

"What sort of rules?" Emma frowns.

"The kind a knight should never break..."

"You mean like the oath the knightforce takes?"

David nods.

"To conduct myself as it befits the knight of this realm..." Emma recites solemnly.

"You know the words of the knight oath? How?" David is smiling.

"I told you I'm going to be a knight or a ballerina one day..." Emma looks so serious.

"Right. Those words. I broke the rules to save your mother...and now I have to tell the truth about
what I did..."

Emma frowns. "You broke the rules for mom?"

David nods.

Emma is looking thoughtful. "And you might get in trouble?"

"I'm afraid so..."

"What sort of trouble?"

David shakes his head. "I don't know yet..."

"I don't want you to get in trouble..." Emma's voice quivers. "It's not fair. You were just trying to
save mom... Other kids get to have their dads everyday even though their dads never try to save
anyone. My Dad saves people all the time and I only get him for one day..."

"No, not just one day," David's voice cracks. "Everyday... until you are old enough and sick of me and ask me to go away... Even if I can't come home tonight I'm still your dad...- nothing can change that. That's how this works..."

"Really?" Emma asks and the earnest tone in her voice pierces through his heart.

David nods and then he steps around the table and squats next to Emma's chair. "Really," his really. "I am sorry, I was gone. I am sorry I forgot. I am never going to forget, ever again..." he kisses Emma's hand and then she wraps her arms around his neck and kisses his cheek.

"Pinkie promise?" she asks.

He offers his hand. "Pinkie promise," he replies, his eyes welling up.

And Emma hides in his arms again and then she wipes his tear away.

"Don't be sad David," she says quietly. "I get it. Heroes have to make sacrifices..."

And he is not even certain that he is a hero, but when he hears Emma's words, his heart swells up threatening never to fit in his chest again.

"I love you Emma," he says quietly. "I loved you when you were a tiny baby, as tiny as Nate, and I love you now..."

And Emma kisses his cheek and then she replies "I love you too..."

On the other side of the kitchen door, Snow is wiping her eyes. She didn't mean to eavesdrop, but she was on her way into the kitchen when she heard them talking and she didn't want to interrupt, so here she is, crying behind a closed door.

She loves David. She loves him so much, and Emma needs him and there is no way she is letting Jiminy, or Blue or any well meaning Black knight official, lock him up for saving her. It's a simple as that. She is going to do whatever it takes to make sure he comes home tonight.

She walks into the kitchen, trying to look calm. Both David and Emma are eating their cereal now.

"You made coffee!" Snow exclaims enthusiastically, because she needs to hug him now, and she can't very well say "I was eavesdropping and you were amazing..."

David smiles back, accepting the quick hug, not questioning her motives at all.

"Emma, you better get dressed," Snow points to the clock.

Emma jumps off her chair, hugs David on her way out.

And David is left smiling, eating his now soggy cereal. He can't remember ever getting this many hugs at breakfast.

"How are you holding up?" Snow asks, placing her hand on his shoulder.

"I should be the one asking you," he frowns.

"Asked you first," she teases, then she points to the pantry door Emma left half open. "I have grown up cereal too," she grins.
"We do?" he asks and Snow notes that he changed the I into we and this is just too much joy, too much happiness, too many tiny delightful changes and she wonders if her heart can take this much love in one day, or if it will maybe explode from being too joyful.

"Yes, we do... David? Move in with us? Permanently?" Snow is looking really hopeful.

David is wearing his brightest smile. "I just gave my thirty day notice a week ago..."

"You did? Where were you going to go?"

"I don't know...away," he replies and the thought of how he felt a few days ago, when he was all alone, when he walked away from Emma's birthday party after he turned down Snow's offer, is all too fresh in his mind. "After I turned your job offer down I felt so...-" he shakes his head. "I felt the need to just go home and change everything..."

"Why did you turn my offer down?" Snow is almost whispering.

David hesitates. "Because when I gave you the list of names of memory spelled victims, you cried," he replies.

Snow feels like crying right now. "I cried because that was the most incredibly thoughtful thing anyone has ever done for me on Emma's birthday... I always find myself so lost on that day. I want to grieve and celebrate all at once...and then you come and do this... No one's ever done something like this for me on Emma's Birthday before..."

David is looking stunned. He assumed she got teary eyed because she was closer to find Charming.

"Anyway, I wasn't going to let you walk away. I was about to ask you to go out with me when I got kidnapped..." Snow winks at him.

"You were?" he sounds so surprised.

Snow nods. "To be entirely truthful, I didn't really want to date, I work too much and at the end of the day I'm too exhausted. I want to spend my evenings with Emma. So what I wanted to do was call you and tell you I'm in love with you, but Ruby said I couldn't possibly lead with that..."

David laughs. "You can lead with that," he argues.

"I can?" she is looking doubtful. Then she takes her hand in his and she says "I'm in love with you..."

David gets off his chair, he walks around the table and kisses her on the lips. "See?" he whispers, running his fingers through her hair. "You can lead with that..."

"Dad!" Emma bursts through the kitchen door. "We got to go, I'm going to miss the school squash..."

"Hold on, I need to put on my shoes..." David rushes out of the kitchen.

Snow moves her cereal around with her spoon and says out loud "I am married to Charming and he is moving in with us..." and even though it's her own voice, and her own life, she still startles to hear the words spoken out loud. She wipes a tear from the corner of her eye and then she gets up and places her bowl in the sink.

No matter what Jiminy or Blue try to charge David with... Snow is going to fight back. She refuses
to lose him now. "Today is going to be a good day," she says out loud, then she walks into her bedroom to get dressed.

When David walks back inside Snow's cottage he finds her already dressed, her usual tunic and leather pants, daggers strapped on her belt, practically ready for battle.

"Hold on," he mumbles, "I'm not quite ready yet..."

David is done showering when Snow leans against the bathroom door frame, watching him shave.

"I plan on telling them the truth, apart of the extent of Tink's involvement," he explains. "Everything but that... We can't really talk about that..."

"I won't mention Tink," Snow nods. "Listen, David, If they decide to charge you, I'll have you bailed out before sundown... I promise..."

David looks at her in the mirror. "You can afford that?" he frowns. "I mean, we haven't discussed finances yet, but, I have some money set aside and...-"

Snow shakes her head. "I got this," she smiles playfully. "You saved me, the least I can do is bail you out...

"You have bail my husband out of trouble money stashed somewhere?" he half teases.

"Of course I do," Snow shrugs.

When David turns around to face her, she's already stepped away.

"She has 'bail my husband out of trouble' money," he mumbles mainly to himself while rinsing his face. "I love Snow White!"

Snow is surprised to find herself increasingly nervous at Jiminy's office. She can't even force herself to sit down, she leaning against the wall instead.

"I don't know where to start," Jiminy frowns. "I am so relieved to find you healthy and well Snow White. But Blue and I spent the day yesterday turning mice into trolls... who all gave us contradicting confessions so you can understand that I need information. And I think I want to talk to you separately," Jiminy adjusts his glasses. "David if you don't mind I'd like to talk to Snow first..."

"No!" Snow replies, crossing her arms. "We are here to tell you what happened. You interview both of us or we lawyer up and you talk to our attorney..."

"Our attorney..." Jiminy muses. "I don't understand, why would you even need an attorney Snow White? You were the victim in all this..."

David turns to look at Snow. Clearly she has 'get my husband an attorney' money stashed somewhere as well.

"Fine," Jiminy replies, crossing his arms against his chest, leaning back on his chair. "Have it your way... What happened?"

"David is Emma's father," Snow blurts out even thought that's not what she meant to say at all. She is surprised to feel her eyes well up. "That's what happened..."

Jiminy gapes at them. He lifts up his magic mirror and calls Blue. "You are going to want to hear
"Did you know? When you came to work with Snow White? Did you plan this?"

David shakes his head. "Regina and King George conspired together ten years ago. They erased both our memories. I had no idea..."

Jiminy looks at David. "Have you confirmed that you are Emma's father with a fairy DNA test?"

"We did," David is surprised at how calm he is feeling. This is the moment if truth, And while he is not proud of what he had to do to save Snow, he isn't ashamed either. He is ready.

"Well, how about that..." Jiminy is actually smiling.

Blue enters Jiminy's office and pulls a chair next to him. "What did I miss?"

"David is Emma's father," Jiminy replies and Blue beams at Snow and David.

"Really?" she is smiling.

Snow nods and she is almost annoyed to find herself ready to burst into tears. This isn't like her. How is she going to fight for David if she can't keep it together?

"And you didn't know?" Blue's voice is so soft.

"No idea," David replies and then he reaches for Snow's hand. And even though Snow planned on standing up for the whole meeting and maybe staring Jiminy down, once David's fingers are wrapped around her hand, her expression softens and she takes the chair next to him.

"Are you alright?" he asks her quietly.

And Snow doesn't dare reply, because the softness in his voice threatens to undo her, any minute now she is going to start sobbing.

David laces his fingers through hers and picks up the story because he senses that Snow can't at the moment.

"I'm sure you know that my past service is classified. Looks like the king George conspired with Regina to take both our memories away..."

"In light of recent developments I can see Regina taking away your memories, but I can't for the life of me fathom why would king Gorge get involved..." Jiminy frowns but Blue nods in understanding.

"Do you know what you were involved in before you and Snow run away together?" Blue asks.

"I don't remember, but Snow did some digging... we think I was asked to impersonate prince James..."

Blue nods.

"You knew about this?" Jiminy looks baffled.

"I suspected," Blue replies. "Didn't you notice the resemblance?"

Jiminy looks at David again. "I do now... What happened?" Jiminy is still looking baffled.
"I think you know," Snow frowns. "Our memories were erased. David was taken away first, then I was at the castle with Emma and then nobody believed me and everyone insisted I give Emma away," she replies, her voice barely audible.

Jiminy shifts uncomfortably at his chair. Snow is so tough, he sometimes forgets all she's been through.

David is looking at her all worried. Snow avoids his eyes because she isn't going to burst into tears, not in Jiminy's office. That is just not happening.

"I was injured. I think they put me under a sleeping spell. I woke up at the hospital the day Snow abdicated," David adds. "I was told that I had amnesia and my past missions were classified and then I was assigned to the edge of the realm..."

"We didn't meet again until you made us work together..." Snow explains.

"How about that..." Jiminy is still looking stunned. "Alright, let's move onto recent events. We know that Snow was looking into renting an office and got abducted. Then what happened?"

"They painspelled me," Snow replies quietly. "They kept asking me for Regina's location..."

"Did you get a good look at them?"

"I was blindfolded. I didn't see anything," as hard as she tries she can't disguise the tremor in her voice. " Didn't recognize their voices either... And then David found me..."

There is a brief pause. "David, maybe you can tell us... start at the beginning. How did you find Snow?"

David hesitates. This is it. The moment of truth. He can't bare to think of spending the night locked up somewhere while Snow heads back home and faces Emma's questions alone. "You were there, at the office above the bookstore. There was no evidence in sight. Except the smell of sulfur. You know what that means..."

Both Jiminy and Blue are looking grave as they nod.

"I assumed the king was behind this, so I figured he'd use the Rod troll's gang for the kidnapping..."

Jiminy frowns.

"That's a reasonable assumption," Blue agrees.

David takes a deep breath. "I got a tip about who the Rod troll was, so I abducted him. I forced him to give up his hiding I visited them one by one. You know the rest, I found the Silver Fairy, two dwarves, a child, a goblin and three tree nymphs. Snow was in the very first hideout we looked but there was a false wall magicked in place. We didn't see it. We searched every single location, and then I thought we should try the first one again, something didn't feel right... I had a feeling we missed something. We walked through a false wall and there she was in a glass room, tied up and blindfolded..."

"How exactly did you force the Rod troll to give up his hiding places?" Jiminy frowns.

"Wait! Don't answer that!" Blue replies. "We don't need to know that..."
"Who turned the troll you found along the way into mice?" Jiminy looks so concerned.

David shakes his head. "Can't tell you that..."

"Look, it was obviously a fairy, if we look at the fairy registry we will find out who has that sort of power, you might as well tell us..."

David shrugs because Tink was a feral fairy for years. She is registered as a benign flower fairy, nothing more.

"No," Blue disagrees. "We don't need to know that either..."

"But Blue..." Jiminy tries to argue.

"No," Blue is still shaking her head, then she turn to Snow White. "Looks looks like the Northern kingdom had done nothing but been suspicious and cruel to you and you've done nothing but give, you've been open and honest, bore it all like a good knight... Snow White it's a pity you never officially joined our ranks... And David... Same goes for you. Looks like the southern kingdom rewarded you with a memory wipe and a demotion after years of service... It's about time somebody cut you both some slack..."

David looks at Snow, eyes filled with hope. This isn't at all how he saw this going. Snow's tearing up. David wraps his arm around her shoulder and she closes her eyes.

"Here is how this is going to go," Blue continues. "This is the official version of the events: Snow White got kidnapped. The department was stumped, and asked undercover agent David Nolan, to assist with Snow White's disappearance. He delivered. Not only did he deliver but he exceeded our expectations by finding the Silver Fairy and solving several additional missing people cases. And that's all. That's the official version of the events..."

"And the unofficial version?" David frowns.

"We still don't know who ordered Snow's kidnapping. Let us work on that. The Rod troll is accusing you of kidnapping, false imprisonment, illegal transformation and all sorts of things. The trolls on the other hand are cooperating, they are willing to go on record accusing their boss of an array of crimes, some of which we had no idea they were committed by their gang. It will take us months to sort this all out, but my guess is that in the end the Rod troll is going to cop a plea... this won't go to trial. And David I really want you to work for us..."

David looks down. "And if I want to work with Snow instead?"

"Then we will wish you the best of luck," Blue smiles, "Under one condition..."

"What sort of condition?" he frowns.

"Snow can you please talk to the council? They call me everyday, wanting to hear form you..."

"Just talk to them?" Snow frowns.

"Well I'm not going to force you to become Queen, that would be ridiculous. But, you could reassure them that they are doing a fine job, and they can continue doing a fine job, until your cousin, Erwan duke of the North becomes of age..."

"Erwan is three years old..." Jiminy replies incredulously.
"The council is doing a fine job," Blue replies again. "I will not argue the pros and cons of the monarchy now with you Jiminy. The kingdom is fine, the council is doing a fine job. I think I am done here... Jiminy please record Snow's testimony, anything she can remember about her ordeal that might help us..." And when Snow casts a worried glance towards David Blue adds, "David you are welcome to stay in the room with her, add anything we might have missed, it' up to Snow really... And David, maybe you can come see me on your way out..."

David turns to Snow, squeezes her hand and asks "Do you need a break?"

And Jiminy who is used to his knights avoiding Snow White at all costs leans back on his chair, watching Snow lean her head on David's shoulder. "I'm fine," she says quietly even though she is looking quite pale.

David shakes his head. "We are going to need ten minutes," he tells Jiminy.

We, Jiminy thinks, unable to hide the surprise from his face. He said we and she didn't stop him, she didn't glare at him for daring to speak for her. The Snow he knows would have never let a knight speak for her, yet here we are. Jiminy steps out of his own office to give them some privacy shaking his head, hint of a smile on his face. "Well, how about that," he muses going to the break room to get some coffee.

Two hours later, once Snow has described everything to Jiminy and he recorded the whole conversation Snow is feeling dazed and exhausted but still incredibly relieved.

David knocks on Blue's door.

"Come in," he can hear Blue's voice.

He motions to Snow to join him then he steps inside Blues office.

"How are you guys holding up?" Blue smiles. She doesn't wait for an answer. She knows the day has been challenging. "David," she starts, "you are the one I meant to talk to. I understand you've done research into your past and discovered that you impersonated James. But I might have stumbled on something you don't know..."

"What is it?"

"Thirty years ago a fairy that was a close friend of mine was called into King George's castle to be a fairy godmother to his son. His newborn son. She explained to the king that this was unorthodox, the baby's heart was already linked, he clearly already had a family that loved him... The king explained that his son was adopted and asked her to be his godmother anyway..."

"Why are you telling me this?" David looks confused. This has been a long day.

"The baby's heart was linked to his parents" the Blue fairy continues, "and his twin brother."

"Twin brother?" David gasps.

"Identical twin..." Blue continues.

David nods.

Snow turns to look at him worry etched on her face. He seems to be handling the shocking news well.
"The fairy's name..." he simply asks.

"Why, I believe you saved her two days ago," Blue pauses. "Her name is Silver... the Silver Fairy..."

"Thank you," he says getting up slowly.

"You need to be very careful when you deal with King George," Blue continues. "He is ruthless... But you also need to know exactly who you are... Sometimes, there are ways to get justice that aren't entirely straightforward... Like Regina for example. She did some terrible things, but she is in exile now, no longer the Queen. This isn't the same as being locked up in prison somewhere but it is something... Am I right in thinking that you two will continue investigating on ways to connect King George in Snow's disappearance?"

Neither Snow nor David reply, but the answer is obvious, written on both their faces.

"If you ever need my help..." Blue smiles. "And if you discover anything, would you keep me in the loop?"

This time Snow nods.

"Excellent," Blue smiles. "Good luck!"

"Are you alright?" Snow asks as they walk away from the knight force headquarters, hand in hand, on their way to hail a taxi coach.

"I thinks so," David replies. "I impersonated my twin brother who was a prince... I had a twin brother... it's hard to wrap my mind around this... Are you alright?"

"I'll be better when I'm home," she mumbles.

"Let's get you home then," he smiles helping her into the carriage.

Inside the carriage Snow is leaning her head on his shoulder. "Is that it then? You are walking away from the knights to work with me?"

"It's either that, or work for the knights and wait until I'm stumped in the case so I can ask you on board," he replies and Snow laughs.

"You'd pretend to be stumped for me?" she smirks.

"Every time," he replies. "Besides, if I'm going to confront the king, I can't be working for the knights, can I?"

"I suppose not," Snow replies quietly, because today has been a trying day, and she is not ready to think about confronting the king again.

The coachman looks confused at what seems to be a dead end, complete with overgrown blackberry bushes and a dilapidated fence. Snow's house is location spelled, but of course he doesn't know that. He thinks that he is lost.

"No, this is great, this is the right spot" Snow argues with him and then they wait until he drives away before they step into Snow's front yard.

"You are back!" Emma exclaims opening the front door wide open and running into David's arms. "You are back..."
"We are back," he smiles and Snow can't help it, her eyes well up again.

She looks up at the sky. It's a cold cloudy evening, why it might even snow again.

"We are back," she whispers, and once they are all safely inside she closes the door behind them.
Snow wakes up startled in the middle of the night. She sits up on the bed, reaching for the glass of water she keeps on her nightstand. Then she freezes. The spot on the bed next to her is empty. David isn't there. Funny, she spent ten years sleeping alone, and now, after sleeping on the same bed with him for two nights, all of a sudden the thought of going back to sleep alone seems unbearable.

She gets up slowly and walks out of her bedroom. She checks on Emma first. Emma is sleeping peacefully, Wilby laying next to her, Star is in his shell under her bed. Then she notes light from under the door in her office. She knocks on the door.

"Come in," she hears David, so she walks inside to see him in front of her whiteboard, frowning at his magic mirror. He's drawn two timelines, one for himself one for prince James and he is comparing them.

"Snow," he says turning to look at her. "What are you doing up? Did I wake you?"

Snow shakes her head. "No, you didn't..." She walks in the room, moves a pile of papers and sits on top of her desk. "What if I turn out to be one of those women that can't sleep alone..." she mumbles and she looks so earnestly distressed about this he has to stifle his smile.

"Are you laughing at me?"

"Who me? I would never," he replies even as the edge of his lips is tugging up.

"You are laughing at me!"

He sits next to her on the desk. "I am just thinking that I will be happy to sleep with you every night for the next hundred years if it turns out that you can't sleep alone..."

"Are you sure?" Snow is still frowning.

"Positive," he grins, taking her hand in his and raising to his lips.

"Just a hundred years?" she teases.

"Maybe a hundred and fifty," he shrugs.

She looks at the events he has jotted down on the whiteboard.

"Would you like some help?" she offers quietly.

"Yes please!" he breathes handing her his magic mirror.

"Let's see," Snow is browsing through the articles about James in David's magic mirror. "Forms alliance with giants... did you get this one?" she asks.

"Is that before or after he killed the chimera and claimed it was self defense?"

"Right after..." Snow shows him the date and David writes it on the board shaking his head.

"From what I can find, I think my brother was sort of a...-"

David nods. "I keep looking for a clue, a hint, an event that can explain things..." he lets his sentence linger. "How did I not know I had a brother?"

"You probably did at some point..." she is speaking softly. "It's in the missing years..."

"Right," he replies, running his fingers through his hair.

"You'll figure this out," she says and her voice is soft, soothing.

They work together for the next hour, and when they are done Snow feels like they have a clear understanding of who Prince James was. It's not looking good. Other than incredible sword fighting skills and an uncanny ability to excuse whatever trouble he caused the prince doesn't seem to have a lot of redeeming qualities.

David looks at the timeline they have and shakes his head. "I don't see it," he says quietly. "The man is a complete stranger..."

"I'm sure being raised by King George was no picnic," Snow replies.

David glances at her, then he leans his head on her shoulder. He is so grateful she is here.

"What was your father like?" Snow asks.

David smiles ruefully. "Sad, and drunk. And even sadder when he was really drunk. He died in a cart accident when I was six..."

Snow reaches for his hand. "And your mother?"

"My mother was a rock," he replies. "Strong, hopeful, realistic. Always smiling. Nothing could get her down... She fought so hard to keep the farm going, to give me a future...she was so proud when the knight force recruited me..."

Snow nods, smiling. They stay quiet for a while looking at the new information on the board.

"Here," she points to the time where they think that Prince James died and David took over his life. "I think we must have met around this time..."

David turns to look at her.

"James Charming," she explains. "Your nickname. We must have met while you impersonated James. Then you walked away from the royal life and we run away together..."

She takes the marker from his hand and draws a third timeline. She marks Emma's birth, Emma's possible conception time and then the period her memories start missing. She is right. The timeline overlaps with the period David impersonated James.

David nods. "You are right..."

"Didn't you say that King Midas called you himself and offered you a job in the golden knight force? Maybe we call him back and ask to talk to his daughter..."

"Catherine?" David is looking doubtful. "What if she didn't know she was engaged to a fraud? I don't want to cause an international incident ten years after the fact..."
"Queen Catherine," Snow corrects him. "King Midas plans on stepping off the throne in three months time, but she has the official title as of the first of the year. Why not? Are you trying to protect king George?"

"No, of course not."

"Then what's the problem?"

David makes a face.

"You thought that getting answers for me was worth risking Regina's investigation... and risking your career... You don't think you are worth the same thing? Its not your fault the King tangled you up in this mess and erased your memories..."

David sighs. "When you put it that way, I suppose you are right..."

"Of course I'm right," Snow smiles brightly. "We can try to get a hold of Catherine tomorrow... and maybe even talk to the Silver Fairy..."

David stays silent then he wraps his arm around her shoulders. He is so grateful he is not facing this alone. "It's hard to see things clearly when it's about me..."

Snow nods. "This may sound silly, but I'm going to say it just in case. No matter who he was," Snow points to the James timeline, "and no matter how many memories you lost... it doesn't for a moment change who you are. You are my hero, in our previous life and the next..."

And David looks surprised and moved all at once. "Snow..." he says quietly and Snow thinks he may be holding back tears when his lips brush against hers.

Her eyes are closed, she is leaning her head on his chest.

"We'll figure this out together..." Snow looks both content and sleepy. And this together sounds so much like a song or a dream David wraps his arms around her to make sure she is really there, she is not a figment of his imagination and then he laughs, because Snow just tried quite unsuccessfully to stifle a very big yawn.

"I can't believe I'm keeping you up this late," he mumbles and then he helps her off the desk and walks with her to her bedroom.

Snow is half asleep, her head is buried in his shoulder, her arm wrapped around his waist.

"We still need to figure out is if we are Nolan and White or White and Nolan..." she mumbles.

"White and Nolan," he replies. "We put the name of the famous investigator first..."

"You just rescued the Silver Fairy and turned the Rod troll into a mouse. Your face was front page news two days ago. You are pretty famous yourself... If I were looking for a Privete Investigator, you are the one I'd be hiring..." Snow replies and then she yawns again.

"White and Nolan," he argues. "Princesses first... it's PI protocol..."

And Snow could argue that there is no such thing as PI protocol but "White and Nolan" is happening and she found Charming and all the broken puzzle pieces of her life are coming together so she mumbles "White and Nolan," in agreement and then she closes her eyes and falls asleep.

David gets up before Emma gets a chance to storm into their bedroom and wake up Snow again.
He also makes french toast before Emma gets a chance to offer him Fruit loops again.

When Snow wakes up Emma is already gone, there is a plate french toast waiting for her at the table.

"You are up," he smiles at her and he leans over to kiss her cheek. And then his magic mirror rings and David stands up. "Sorry," he mumbles.

"Go ahead," she whispers.

"This is David Nolan," he answers.

"Hello, David, this is Catherine, I was notified that you wanted to talk to me..."

"It's very kind of you to call me back, your Majesty..."

"Your Majesty?" he can hear the princess smiling on the other glass. "No need to be so formal..."

David looks at Snow and he mouths at her "she knows!" and then he replies "I don't?"

"No, not at all. What can I do for you David?"

"Well I was looking into my past...and I am missing some memories and I was wondering if you could help me out..."

"Of course. What would you like to know?"

"Anything you can tell me..."

"Alright," he can hear the hesitation in her voice. "David... did they really erase your memory?"

"They did..."

"I am so sorry," Catherine replies. "Alright. Here is what I know..."

David walks into Snow's office in a hurry. He stands in front of his timeline.

"I met you right after you slayed the dragon... the engagement was my fathers idea... because my Frederick was accused of embezzling funds and was in prison. Father thought a chance at love would help me heal and forget... only we were a terrible match... or maybe I was terrible," Catherine laughs. "I was both furious at Frederick for betraying my trust, and at the same time I couldn't accept that he was guilty... I wasn't at all willing to give you a chance. And then you helped me prove him innocent. And at the same time you met somebody, though you wouldn't say who... I wanted to get back together with Frederick, you were in love with someone else... My father was willing to call off our engagement but King George wouldn't hear of it. He was very much unwilling to walk away from our alliance. Your plan was to go forward, expose the king, tell the truth about James' death and walk away... But I thought your plan was too bold. I was afraid that your father would tear you to shreds... So we came up together with the hunting accident... James was laid to rest, right before the wedding. You disappeared, I spent some time mourning then I married Frederick..."

David is very quiet.

"Are you still there?" Catherine sounds worried.

"Still here," David replies.
"All this time I wondered if you were okay, I wondered if you got your girl and if you were happy..." Catherine sounds distressed. "When I heard that you were the one who found Silver, I had my people investigate further. To find out that you were sent to the end of the realm... and that you were in a coma... David, I am so sorry... if I'd known... After what you did for my Frederick... if there is anything I can do for you..."

"Just tell me more, please... when did I tell you who I really was?"

"A month into the engagement. You cleared Frederick's name, and when I suggested we call off our engagement, King George was furious... and that's when you told me..."

"What did I say exactly?"

"That you grew up not knowing you had a twin brother adopted by the king... That the White knight force recruited you to impersonate him... you didn't say more. You didn't really want to talk about it... You hadn't come to terms with it yet..."

David nods. Sounds about right. That much hasn't changed.

"How..." Catherine hesitates. "How did you figure things out? Were you able to remember?"

"Long story," he shrugs. "I worked a case for the Northern kingdom... Had to ask Rumpelstiltskin some questions and he pointed me to the right direction..."

"Yeah, you worked on Regina's case, didn't you..." Catherine nods. "Heard about it. Had no idea it was your case..."

"You said I met someone... Did I say who she was, or how I met her?"

"You didn't. Though I had my suspicions..."

"Did you?"

"Snow White disappeared right after you vanished. So I thought maybe the two of you... Was I right?"

"Yes," David turns to look at Snow.

"Oh, David... I am so sorry... when that whole Snow White debacle happened and the abdication and all the rumors started flying... I thought it couldn't possibly have been you... Are you alright? Were you able to see the child?"

"I am alright. Yes, I... yes."

"Oh, good, that's so good to hear... Well I'm not sure if you are interested, but when my father found out it was you who saved Silver... he really means it. He would love to have you working for the Golden knight force..."

"Thank him again for me, but I am planning on staying in the Northern kingdom now, I am going to work in the private sector..."

"You are?"

"Yes. I'm partnering up with Snow White..."

"Oh," Catherine gasps. "That's wonderful!" she sounds so relieved. "Well if you ever need
anything... you can count on me..."

"I do need one thing..."

"Name it!"

"I understand that Silver is staying in your castle and I need to ask her a few questions..."

"I can arrange that. I mean she's been through a lot, but you saved her..."

"Thank you Catherine."

"You are very welcome David. Anything else I can do?"

"I'll let you know, but nothing comes to mind at the moment..."

"Take care, David."

David places the mirror on Snow's desk and he turns to face her.

"Did you catch all that?"

"Most of it..." Snow looks worried.

David marks the timeline right before the dragon slaying.

"Turns out I didn't talk much about my brother back then," he shrugs. "Never even got to meet him... And you and I met right about here. You were pretty accurate on your guess..."

Snow glances at the timeline that is David's fractured life. Looks a little more broken than her story.

"David..." she starts quietly.

He doesn't reply right away, then he shakes his head. "Did you say something? Sorry, don't mean to be in a foul mood today..."

"Oh, I don't mind... You don't owe me a sunny disposition," she grins.

"Are you sure?"

Snow tugs on his arm "Come on, let's go for a ride..."

"Where are we going?"

"Well, I certainly don't want to rent the office above the bookstore anymore... not after what happened. But Geppetto is renting out the space between his workshop and Jefferson's hat shop. I'd like to go look at it..."

David and Snow tie up the horses in the hitching rail outside the shop. Unsurprisingly Snow likes riding her horse too fast. After riding into town as if they were being chased by flesh eating bats David is feeling a lot better.

The shops in question is small, white white stuccoed, with a green door and a small window. It doesn't have a window display like the adjoining hat shop. Which is perfect because when people visit a private investigator, they really want discretion more than anything.
"I like it," David says taking in the small front door and the window.

Geppetto walks outside to greet them. "Hello!" he smiles at them and then he points to their horses. "There is a small barn on the back, if you are going to ride your horses to work every day..."

"Great!" Snow smiles back.

"It will be nice to be your neighbor," he says unlocking the front door. "If you need to ever bring Emma to work, she can hang out with Pinocchio at my shop... while you chase the bad guys..."

"Thank you Geppetto," Snow smiles stepping into the shop. "What do you think?"

It's a nice cozy space. A little smaller than the office above the bookstore.

"It's not too small, is it?" she asks.

"It's big enough..." David replies.

"If we ever need to bring Emma to work, Ruby can pick her up on her way home from work..." Snow adds.

"Where does Ruby work?"

She teaches self defense classes at the gym," Snow replies. "It's around the corner..."

"I like it, " David glances appraisingly at the space. "I'm in if you are in..."

"Is this it? We are doing this?" Her eyes are glowing, she can hardly contain her excitement.

David grins back. How can he say no to that? "Yes! We are doing this!"

"We'll take it!" Snow smiles at Geppetto who looks very excited.

"Welcome then, Snow White," he replies handing her the key. "I have a desk I built a while ago, I never use it, perhaps you could find a use for it..."

"A desk you made? Yes please!" Snow beams at him, because Geppetto is one of the most talented woodworker in the whole Enchanted forest.

"I might have a table too, won't you come by to look at them," Geppetto looks very pleased by her response.

"I'll be right over," Snow looks really happy.

"Well?" she says leaning her head against David's shoulder.

"White and Nolan, open for business," he replies. "Got crimes to solve and a king to take down..."

Snow grins. "You might want to live that last part out of our mission statement..."

"Too risky? Too bold? Not good for business?"

"Only a little," Snow laughs.

And then David magic mirror rings.

Snow is looking serious all at once. It might be the Silver Fairy. But it turns out it's Tink instead.
"Hey Tink, we just rented a new office, won't you come by!" David invites her and his magic mirror is still in his hand when Tink materializes in the middle of their office.

"Where is my desk going to go?" she grins.

David laughs. "I can't imagine you sitting behind a desk longer then three minutes!"

"Tink," Snow walks over to her, "I never got a chance to thank you..."

Tink looks incredibly uncomfortable. "Don't mention it..." she says looking down.

"You saved me..."

"It was nothing. You are family now. I mean, you two are together now, am I right?" she looks between David and Snow.

David nods, smiling brightly.

"Good," Tink shrugs, "because lovesick Nolan is a sorry sight..."

David shakes his head, but Snow is laughing.

"So, I'm thinking you need wards guarding this place, so people can't just sneak up on you..." Tink is already walking around the room calculating.

"You would do that?" Snow is looking both surprised and incredible grateful.

"Of course, didn't I just say you are family? Got to keep you safe..." Tink frowns. "Now let me see..." she says opening her hands, "this should do it, you are all set..."

"That was it?" Snow's eyes are wide open.

"Yes! That's it. Easy..."

"What level are you?" Snow asks.

Because all the fairies get sorted and registered when they graduate fairy school, level one fairies being the ones that can do simple things, like change a flower color or gather fairy dust, and level ten being very rare, when they have incredible amounts of power.

"Don't know," Tink shrugs. "Never got sorted..."

Snow wants to ask more, but she is sensing that it might be too soon.

"Do you guys want a sign for your front door?" Tink offers.

"We do," David nods. "White and Nolan."

"Come with me, tell me how you want it to look..." Tink mumbles so David and Snow follow her back out of their new office.

"Black letters or something else?"

"Purple sparkly letters..." Snow teases but David doesn't even look vaguely alarmed. "Black letters, please" Snow adds in a hurry because Tink is already moving her wand.

"Alright," Tink waves her wand and a nice, clean 'White and Nolan Investigations' sign appears
right above the door.

"It's perfect," Snow exclaims. David places his arm around her shoulders.

"It is, isn't it?" he muses.

"Officially not a knight anymore, huh?" Tink turns to David.

"Um, no, no, no. I'm already in the middle of one existential crisis, I don't have time to mourn my lost knighthood too," David shakes his head.

"What? Why?" Tink looks worried. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, you know... remember Prince James?"

"I really don't..."

"Yeah, me either. But it just so happens that he was my twin brother," David replies and Tink's eyes open wide. She turns to face him.

"Your what? That is absolutely the wildest thing I've heard all month!" she replies.

"Tell me about it," David shrugs.

Tink shakes her head. "How did you even find out?"

"Ex fiance I also don't remember, who happens to be a Queen..."

Tink's eyes open wide again. "Are you alright? Seems to me like it's drinking time," she suggests.

David shakes his head. "Can't do that... not yet... I have a king to bring down..."

Tink laughs. "I like the way you think... I want to see that. When you are ready to bring the king down I want to help..."

"Tink! Do you want to work with us? Officially?" Snow offers.

"Oh, no, I don't do that, " Tink shakes her head. "Just when you need help, I'm there..." she shrugs, then she waves her hand and she is gone.

"She doesn't do addresses, or official jobs or real anything," David explains.

"I see that," Snow nods her head in understanding. "David, she may be a level ten..." she almost whispers because a level ten fairy is incredibly rare and very sought after.

"I thinks she is above ten if that's possible... and if she catches us saying anything like that she will disappear for good, so this conversation never happened," David explains.

"What conversation?" Snow asks.

"Exactly," David grins. "Let's go look at Geppetto's desks..."

Two hours later David is sitting at his desk, Snow is squatting on top of hers. The file cabinets they ordered will be delivered in the afternoon. Their new office is starting to take shape.

"We need an inspirational quote for above the wall," Snow has a teasing smile on her face.
"Live, love, bring down the king..." David offers. "If you can't join them beat them..."

Snow's eyes widen.

"Too aggressive?" he frowns.

"Just a little..."

"How about Teamwork... we will bring the king down..."

Snow laughs. "There is exile in excellence?"

"Yes!" he nods emphatically.

"I can ask Granny to cross stitch that in a pillow..."

"Bold red letters?"

"Exactly. Speaking of Granny, I'm hungry, do you want to go to lunch?"

David and Snow pick a corner booth at Granny's diner. When Granny spots them she walks from around the counter pulls David into a bonecrushing hug, then she gives him two servings of lasagna, insisting that it's on the house.

"Your people give us free magic, my people give us free lasagna," Snow smiles at David.

Back at the office, Snow is pushing the new file cabinet in place when there is a knock on the door.

David says "Come in."

A woman with shoulder length blond hair, so blond it is almost white, wearing a heavy coat and sunglasses walks in.

"Who put your wards in place?" she says and her voice sounds soft, too soft.

"Why?" Snow asks.

"They are incredibly good I can't even sense their seems," the woman replies. "I was going to materialize inside this room but I couldn't..."

"Silver?" David asks.

The woman turns to look at him.

"It's you," she says quietly. "You saved me..."

"How are you doing?"

"Catherine said you wished to ask me some questions that had nothing to do with my abduction..."

"That's right. Would you like to sit down?"

The Silver Fairy looks at the chair and she sits hesitantly, as if she is afraid that the chair is an illusion, and that she will end up falling on the ground.

"If it was anybody else, I wouldn't have come," Silver states.
"Well, I really appreciate you coming. I wanted to ask you to tell me anything you can remember about the night when king George asked you to become his son's fairy godmother..."

Silver studies David's face carefully.

"It was raining that night. He invited me to the castle. He was so happy. Queen Helena was holding a squirming baby in her arms, a beautiful child. He said he wished me to become his fairy godmother..."

Snow casts a worried glance at David's directions. He is holding his breath.

"I told him I couldn't do that... The child was well loved and belonged to someone else," Silver continues.

David doesn't realize it but his hand is clasping his desk tightly.

"What did you mean by that?" he asks.

"The child was born of true love," Silver replies. "It was bonded to his mother and father. They didn't really want to give him up. And if that wasn't enough he had a twin brother. When you sever true love bonds, things tend to go awry..."

"Did you tell the king all that?"

"I tried but I didn't get a chance to. As soon as I refused to become the child's godmother, he ordered me to leave. He said he would ask the castle fairies instead. I was never invited back to his castle..."

"The castle fairies?"

"A family of fairies that has been bound to the king of the Southern kingdom as long as I can remember..."

"Which family is that?"

"The Teals..."

And David feels like the ground has shifted underneath his feet. He doesn't say anything he just stares at Silver.

"Did you tell the king the baby had a twin brother?" Snow takes over, because it looks like the David has run out of words.

Silver shakes her head. "Tried. He didn't want to hear anything else I had to say he had me escorted away..."

"Is there anything else you can tell us about that night?" Snow hesitates.

Silver is looking at David. "After I left the castle I followed the baby's freshly severed bond to a small farm in the eastern valley, because I had to see the baby's family..."

"What did you see?" David's voice is a whisper.

"I peeked through the window, I didn't go inside... They were devastated," Silver replies quietly. "The woman was yelling and crying, the man looked lost. And then the baby coughed and cried, the baby was sick and they both stopped and picked him up... they took turns rocking him while he
cried until he went back to sleep. I thought that maybe there was hope for them after all, hope for that child...

David is sitting there frozen. Snow is trying to hold back tears but she can't.

"That's all I can tell you..." Silver walks closer to David. "Was I right? There was hope for that child wasn't there? He is going to grow up and feel whole?"

David nods slowly.

"Good to know. If there is anything else you need..." the Silver fairy says softly then she steps out of their office.

"I don't need anything else," David replies even though the fairy has already gone.

"Come with me," he is looking pale and furious and lost all at once as he storms out of their new office.

Snow grabs her jacket and runs after him.

She has so many questions but she stays quiet, watching David saddle his horse with brisk movements. She can't imagine what it would be like if someone like Ruby or Grumpy, someone she knew and trusted had kept such an enormous secret from her. She mounts her horse and keeps up with his pace. Snow loves riding fast, she loves the breathless exertion, the wind on her face, the sound of the horse's hooves on the cobblestone road but today all she can think of is David hurting, David being stunned and lost and confused and betrayed. She yearns to make this better, soften the edges of the world for him, why in the past three weeks they've both been through so much. He saved her, in more ways than one and now it's her turn, but for the first time he is going too fast, and she wonders if she'll be able to keep up.

The hospital where Teal works at is only a twenty minute ride away. David ties his horse in the hitching post and then to Snow's relief he waits for her and ties up her horse as well.

"David Nolan, here to see Teal," he explains to the nurse at the reception. "My knee is burning..."

The nurse shows them to a waiting room and Snow leans cautiously against the wall. David is standing in front of the window, staring outside, tension radiating off him.

The Fairy walks inside the exam room smiling "David how are you? What's wrong with you knee?" she asks.

David turns to look at her she stands perfectly still. "Your knee is fine then?" she asks, her voice barely audible.

"Do you want to tell me what really happened?" he asks, and even though his voice is quiet Teal takes a step back.

"What do you want to know?" she breathes out, clenching her hands.

And David doesn't reply she takes a step forward.

"David?" she asks quietly.

"Start by explaining my memory spell," he glares at her.

"You know!" she whispers. And she looks almost relieved. As if she knew this day was coming.
"When your family has taken a blood oath and you are ordered to keep a secret, if you try to tell the truth, your tongue turns to ice, and your heart beats so fast, as if it's going to explode. Then your mind goes dark and everything stops..." Teal's voice is almost pleading. "I couldn't say anything. I couldn't drop a hint or write a note... I'd die if I tried..."

David is shaking his head. "But you knew exactly what was wrong with me? You knew I was memory spelled?"

Teal nods.

"Could you heal me?"

"Memory spells are irreversible."

"Did you know I was brought to the castle to impersonate my brother?"

Teal looks away and doesn't reply.

"Did you know that when they attacked me and memory spelled me they took me away from my wife and my child?" his voice is quiet but Snow thinks she's never seen him this angry.

And for the first time Teal looks shocked. "I... I didn't," she whispers. "I didn't know anything about a wife and child..."

"Why should I believe anything that comes out of your mouth?" David is getting louder.

Snow is leaning against the wall, crying.

Teal shakes her head, her eyes welling up.

"Did you do it? Were you the one who memory spelled me?"

"No, David, of course not! I became a healer twelve years ago. My family may be bound to king George, but I never worked for him. But the oaths my family took a hundred years ago are still binding. They brought you in here barely alive, bleeding, your memories already wiped. I kept you alive. Could I sense that you were memory spelled? Of course. Could I tell you? No..."

"So you lied to me..."

Teal shakes her head. "I... I didn't heal your leg..."

"Excuse me?"

"Your leg. I didn't heal it..."

"What does that even mean?"

Teal takes a deep breath. "A memory spell as extensive as yours when done right should take away any desire to look at your past, any need to wonder. I didn't heal your leg. A physical injury can counter a memory spell, it can act as an anchor you to your missing past..."

And David is looking at her incredulously. "Should I be thanking you then?"

And Teal looks down and doesn't reply.

"Did I not ask you the right questions? Did I not spend countless hour staring at white walls, doing
memory exercises, did I not go to therapy for months, did I not do enough trying to remember..." his voice cracks. "Tell me Teal, what did I do wrong?"

And when Teal stays silent he continues "because I have a child that I forgot, and she'd like to know where I've been the past ten years, so tell me, Teal, what did I do wrong?"

"I didn't know about a wife and a child... I swear I didn't..."

David is spent and Teal isn't talking anymore.

"I think we are done here," Snow says quietly and Teal is grateful to stumble out of the room.

Snow walks towards David slowly.

He pulls her in his arms almost roughly, as if he is drowning. "I'm sorry," he whispers. "I'm sorry I didn't ask the right questions..."

Snow shakes her head in a hurry, clinging to him tightly. "Not your fault," she whispers. "Not your fault... are you listening to me?"

And David nods, burying his face on the crook of her neck, hot tears burning in his eyes. "She was there from day one, she lied to me and I didn't see it..."

"Not your fault, Charming," Snow whispers.

And they stay there in the exam room holding each other, people passing around them, healing fairies and nurses and doctors, and they are still holding each other tight.

"Come on," Snow whispers, "let's go home..."

Emma is sitting in the living room working on a large colorful picture.

"Dad!" she cries out as he walks in. "Look, we did this in the beginning of the year, but now I know who you are, so wanted to fix it. Will you help me?"

David looks at the picture and he is stunned to see that Emma is working on a family tree.

Snow hesitates. "Maybe we should do this later..." she suggests mildly.

But Emma is standing right there, bright green hopeful eyes. "But I want my class to know I have a dad now!" she replies.

"We can do this now," David nods. "Let's see," he says pointing in the branches where the names of the grandparents should be. "Your grandmother's name was Ruth, your grandpa's name was Robert, and right there on this branch should be your uncle James, who, believe it or not was a prince in the Southern kingdom..."

"Really?" Emma writing fast, her eyes wide open.

"Really..."

Snow takes a step back and smiles.

"Do you have any photos of them?"

"I do," he replies. "I'll have to dig them up for you..."
Emma picks up the picture of the family tree and looks at it.

"Perfect," David smiles, but Snow notes, that he is watching Emma rather than her picture. "How was your day at school?"

"Lila told Pink that she didn't throw a laughing spelled note at Tommy, but then..." Emma sits on the couch and talks nonstop for the next ten minutes and David sits in the couch, leaning back, listening to every word, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"And now it's your turn. How was your day?" Emma is looking at him expectantly.

"It was horrible," he replies leaning back on the couch, "and dark and spooky and totally awful!"

Emma is looking at him with big worried eyes. "Are you okay?" she asks quietly.

David shakes his head.

She wraps her arms around him, kissing him on the cheek. "Is this better?" she asks.

"I think so..."

Emma kisses him five times in a row and she is looking quite serious when she asks. "Are you even better?"

"Even better," he nods sitting up.

Emma is patting him on the back. "Would you like some ice cream?"

"Yes, please!"

"Don't worry Dad," Emma pulls him up from the couch. "I'll help you feel better..."
David is pacing, staring at the whiteboard in Snow's home office. There is plenty of evidence against King George, but is it enough? Enough for whom? The DA or the evening news? Enough for what? What is his goal?

The Silver fairy would probably be willing to testify, so would Queen Catherine. He goes over the details of the case in his mind. Two twin boys, one of them raised by the king in a secretive adoption unsanctioned by the fairies, the other one forced to impersonate his dead brother. David faking his own death, trying to get away. Eloping with princess Snow White. One year later the king catching up with him, his memories erased. Is this enough?

It's enough to ensure that every publication in the Enchanted forest will be discussing his story and nobody else, until he dies or until Ella has another set of triplets, but that's certainly not what he is after...

David stacks some of the file boxes cluttering the floor in Snow's office against the wall and sits on the chair, his eyes never leaving the white board. What is he after?

Emma walks in the room.

"Dad? What are you doing here?" she asks.

"You are up early," he smiles. "Is it time for school?"

"No! It's Saturday," Emma laughs.

"Oh, right," David nods. "I forgot..."

"What are you doing?" she asks again.

"Trying to decide what to do with all the information I have," he shrugs.

"Did you solve a case?"

"You could say that."

"Well, that's easy," Emma smiles. "When you solve a case then you celebrate. That's what mom does..."

"Oh yeah?" David smiles. "And how do you guys celebrate?"

"Ice cream," Emma replies. "Or pie... or cake!"

David laughs. "It's too early" he tries to argue.

"Never too early for cake," Emma replies. "Do you want to go get one?"

And that's how David finds himself shopping for a cake mix with Emma at Sleepy's convenience store, located just a few blocks away from Snow's cottage, rather than dealing with his case.

Snow walks into the kitchen yawning, still in her pajamas. The whole kitchen smells like freshly baked chocolate cake. "What are you guys making? It smells so good!"
Emma is staring at the cake, there is some chocolate frosting smeared on her face. "We definitely need more sprinkles," she decides.

"Is there coffee? Wait, what's going on?" Snow turns to David. "Is it your birthday? Did I forget your birthday? When is your birthday?"

"Dad said he solved his case," Emma declares brightly "so we are celebrating..."

"Oh," Snow is looking at David almost worried, but he is busy pouring sprinkles on the cake.

"Is that enough?" he asks.

"More! We need more" Emma replies.

"That's definitely enough!" Snow interrupts.

"I guess," Emma shrugs, because now the cake is completely covered and you can barely make out the chocolate frosting. And then on they are all sitting around the table eating cake and drinking coffee, while Emma describes a list of her favorite deserts corresponding with her mother's most famous cases. "And then we had ice cream cake when you solved the case with the goblin whose leg was broken and cheesecake when you found the missing treasure..."

"What am I doing here Snow?" he asks, once they are back at her home office, staring at the white board. "Am I asking the DA to charge him? Am I telling the reporters what happened? What am I doing?"

"All of the above!" she offers quietly. "We are going to war!"

"But... you are going to have reporters at your front door, people will be asking asking Emma questions and... nothing will ever be the same if I go public with this information..."

"We tried to deal with this privately and look where it got us," Snow's voice is quiet but decisive. David nods thinking of his memory spell. The ten years he spent away from Snow and Emma.

"The king stole your brother, then five years of your life, then your memories, then ten years of you raising your daughter... We are not holding back. We are going to war! The question is what do you want to so first?"

"I want to confront him, but I have no authority I'm not in the knight force anymore, I can't make demands!" he is sounding so frustrated.

"Oh, I can make that happen," Snow smiles brightly, "are you sure that's what you really want?"

"Positive!" David's voice is firm.

"Okay then, allow me..." Snow opens the window and whistles. The sudden gust of wind makes a stack of papers fly off her desk. A crow flies in through the window. "Hi there," Snow whispers, "you are such a big strong bird. Could you do me a favor? Could you take a message to king George?"

She places the crow on the back of the chair then she deeps her quill in ink and writes in large bold letters: "MEET ME AT THE TROLL BRIDGE TODAY AT 5.00! THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT" She ties the note at the crow's claw.

"I know the king can't understand you, but do me a favor, just in case, don't tell him the note is
from me...let him think it's from the former Queen..."

David is looking at her, eyes open wide. "This will work!"

"Of course it will," she replies, closing the window, now that the bird has flown away.

"You are...-

"Evil?" she frowns.

"No, not evil, never evil, you are a genius though..." he laughs pulling her in his arms.

Snow and Tink are hidden in a cluster of evergreens, close enough to see the troll bridge. They have been here for a couple of hours. They are here just in case things go awry.

"Do you think he'll send his knights to search the place first?" Snow asks.

"I'll make us invisible if he does," Tink shrugs.

"You can do that?" Snow looks at her amazed. "Is there anything you can't do?"

"Fly," Tink shrugs looking away. "Can't fly. Don't worry Snow, I won't let anyone hurt you!"

Snow is looking at her hands. "I...it hasn't been the same... since I got abducted. I feel this constant fear," she confesses. "Like I have to constantly keep myself calm..."

Tink nods, "It will get better," she says quietly. "But it won't go away overnight..."

"I was afraid of that," Snow whispers.

"It took me six years," Tink confesses.

"You were abducted?"

"Imprisoned," Tink shrugs. "But imprisonment in Neverland is sort of like an abduction. They didn't actually lock me up. They clipped my wings and they put special cuffs around my hands to prevent my from doing magic. I tried so hard to access my magic even though the cuffs were blocking it. That's how my power grew. Because I tried and I tried and I failed. I had no idea my power was growing at the time. I just thought it was hopeless. People complain about my teleportations being too brutal but they have no idea what a relief it was to be able to do that... since my wings will never work again..."

"Why?" Snow whispers. "How could they do this to you?"

"I was born in Neverland... never met my mother... never went to fairy school... I was kind of like the lost boys... A feral fairy. And it was all fun and games until I helped some lost boys escape. They remembered their mothers and wanted to go home. I helped them fly away. Peter Pan wouldn't forgive that. So when someone dumped the body of a mermaid in a Neverland cave, Peter Pan accused me of murder and implemented what he called Neverland justice..." Tink explains matter of factly.

"How did you get out of there?" Snow tries not to let the horror show on her face.

"Oh, that's when David comes in the story. He was investigating a different murder and he found a connection with the mermaid... Solved the case. Peter Pan told him that he'd already dealt with the killer, the case was already closed. David hiked through the Neverland jungle to find me. He used
a magic bean to get me out. When he took off my cuffs, I had so much magic bottled up inside of me I burst into flames, I could have killed both of us...So... you can understand why as far as I'm concerned, David Nolan is family. Which is why, I will die before I let any harm come to him or his family," Tink explains.

Snow nods wiping her eyes.

"I'm so glad you found each other," Tink continues. "For years I watched him turn everybody down... like, we'd be out drinking and the most beautiful tree nymphs would practically throw themselves at him and he'd smile and walk away... and I'm not one to pry but I had to ask...'are you seriously not attracted to anyone, ever?' And he said 'can't move on until I'm certain I'm not leaving someone behind...' I thought for sure he'd be alone forever, and then he was assigned the case of the missing Queen. He came alive once he started working with you... he is like a completely different person!"

Snow is about to say something when Tink points to the bridge. Because something is finally happening. An unmarked black carriage arrives. The carriage door opens and King George steps out along with another man who is taller. He is quite handsome, about Snow's age, dark hair, blue eyes and a goatee, dressed like a white knight.

"Who is that?" Tink frowns.

"That's Edward. He is a baron. He is next in line for royal throne of the Northern Kingdom," Snow explains.

Tink is eyeing him suspiciously. "Where has he been hiding all this time?" she whispers.

"Oh, he's been around for a while," Snow shrugs.

David steps forward out of the shadows, the centaur Throx walking next to him, the theater trolls also coming out of the shadow, standing on the bridge, their arms crossed.

"What is this?" the king exclaims.

"We need to talk," David replies.

"I have nothing to say to you!" the king spits out, ready to retreat back to the carriage.

"But I have plenty to say to you, father!" David replies out and the king freezes.

"You are not my son, you are nothing like him, he would be facing me in my castle, like a man, not here in the forest, among whatever freaks you have gathered..."

"I wouldn't know what he was like, since I was never allowed to meet him!" David yells back and Throx shoots him a warning look.

"I know what you did," David starts more quietly this time, "I know you adopted my brother in an illegal adoption, I know you asked me to impersonate him after he died, I know you erased my memories after I escaped, because I refused to spend my whole life pretending to be him..."

"So, you found out. What are you planning to do about it? Is this a shakedown James?" King George's wearing an arrogant smile. "How much is this going to cost me?"

"David. My name is David. I am not a criminal. I have no interest in your money. I am here to let you know that I know everything and I plan to...-"
"We plan to pursue all options available to us, and make sure you are prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law," Throx explains calmly in his best most official lawyer voice.

"That's rich coming from a man who faked his own death three days before his wedding to avoid doing his duty to his kingdom..." King Gorge forces a laugh. "All the theatrics just to threaten to sue me?"

"You abducted and tortured my wife!" David yells and Throx holds him back because it looks like David is going to attack and throttle the king.

"What? When?"

"What do you mean when? Just last week!"

"I did no such thing! Where is this accusation coming from? I would never torture a woman... If someone hurt Snow White it certainly wasn't me... My intentions were always honorable..."

"Why should I believe anything you say?" David cries out. "My entire life is nothing but lies and gaps because of you... I think we are done here... expect to hear my story in the news!"

"Wait!" the baron is soft spoken. "Wait... Forgive me, uncle George, I'm sure you know the crown will not survive such accusations..."

King George turns to the man next to him, stunned, eyes wide open. "What are you saying, my boy?"

"I think you know what I am saying..." Edward replies. "Can I trust you to hold back and not let the story come out until we make arrangements? Until my uncle steps down from the throne?" he turns to David. "Please! For the sake of the kingdom you once served..."

"How long are we talking about?" Centaur Throx asks.

"One week, two at most!" Edward is practically pleading.

King George is bristling. "What?" he cries out. "This is an outrage..."

Edward sends him a warning look that silences him.

Throx looks at David who nods. "We'll give you a week," her replies.

King George is looking furious as he stomps back towards his carriage.

"Thank you!" Edward looks so relieved. "Thank you so much! Expect an official announcement soon," he tells David almost apologetically then he rushes to catch up with his uncle.

"Well, that was certainly unexpected," centaur Throx turns to David.

David is breathing fast. He is completely overwhelmed, he didn't expect this to happen. He didn't expect Edward's support. He is surprised to hear the trolls clapping their hands.

"Excellent timing!" Gand the troll is looking impressed.

"You have great stage presence, have you had any stage training?" Jad agrees.

David doesn't know what to do with a group of star struck trolls that will no doubt ask for his autograph, his or the centaur's, he hasn't figured that part out yet.
He turns around and heads towards Snow and Tink's hiding spot.

"Snow!" he cries out, because it feels like she is the only one that makes sense and he needs her, he needs her now.

Snow is looking quite shaken. She doesn't know why, but this meeting between David, Throx, King George and Edward has left her quite shaken. Her hands are trembling. She should be stepping out of her hiding spot to get to David, but the world has slowed down and her knees are wanting to buckle.

Tink is looking at her quite concerned. "Snow?" she asks. "Snow, what's going on?"

Snow stumbles out of their hiding spot, leans her hand on the closest pine tree and throws up.

"Snow!" David yells and her runs up to her. "Snow, what's wrong?"

The centaur and the trolls follow him and Snow is feeling dizzy, she can't get her body to stop trembling so she sits down on the grass. She figures it is better to do that than pass out in front of everyone.

David kneels next to her, her hands already in his. "Snow? Are you alright?" he whispers.

Snow looks at the concerned centaur and the trolls, there are too many people, too many concerned faces, the trees of the forest are closing in.

"Let's give them some space!" Tink asks and when nobody moves she speaks louder "Now!"

The trolls walks begrudgingly back to their bridge.

"Shall I teleport you home?" Tink tries to be nice to the centaur, who turns a little green at the thought of surviving one more of Tink's teleportations, but to his credit he offers his hand to her bravely.

"I'll be in touch," Throx tells David before he disappears.

"Snow," David murmurs and she doesn't reply, she is shaking, clinging to his doublet, feeling almost as lost as the day he found her in the glass cell, the day she begged him not to let her go.

"I don't know what's wrong with me..." she admits and he doesn't say another word, he just scoops her in his arms and carries her to his horse.

"I'm sorry," she whispers over and over and he shakes his head.

"You have nothing to apologize for..."

"You were incredible and I couldn't... What if I'm like this every time we need to confront someone in the investigation? What if I keep falling apart?"

He shakes his head, holding her closer, as his horse trots through the forest paths. "It's only been one week, Snow, give it some time..." he whispers and it is so comforting being in the woods alone with him. Snow thinks wistfully of their small cabin in the middle of nowhere. Part of her wishes they could pick up Emma and move there, and never look back. Alone. Safe.

Later that day Emma and David are out together, walking Wilby and carrying Star the turtle, since Emma insisted that he wants to be walked too, when Tink shows up in Snow's cottage.
"How are you holding up?" Tink asks Snow and without waiting for a response, she pulls out a small jar filled with dust that was tied on a leather string around her neck, and hands it to her.

"After I got away... I..." Tink hesitates, "let's just say I felt intense anxiety and fear for a long time... and that's when I made this. It's... It helped. It made me feel like no matter what happened, I would never get caught off guard ever again. I'd always have options... I don't think I need this anymore."

Snow looks at the jar full of dust and hangs it around her neck. "What exactly does it do?" she asks quietly.

That night is when the Snow's nightmares begin.

Snow is shivering. She is in the glass room, blindfolded, her hands tied behind her back. She hears their steps at the door, the key turning in the lock and then she starts trembling. "Please," she whispers. "Please don't!"

"Snow?" David wakes up all startled. Snow is trembling and whimpering in her sleep. "Snow, what's wrong?"

"Where is Regina hiding?" and it's the sound of that voice that makes Snow start trembling. She's heard that voice before, she recognizes it, but where? "Please!" she begs again.

"Snow? Snow wake up!" David shakes her. "Snow, this is just a dream!"

"Where is Regina hiding?"

"I don't know," she rasps and she braces herself for the pain.

"Where is Regina hiding?"

"I don't know..."

"Where is Regina hiding?"

"Please..."

"Where is Regina hiding?"

"You have to believe me..."

"Where is Regina hiding?"

And Snow sobs because Charming isn't there, he'd promise he'd find her but he is not there. And then Snow screams.

"Snow! Snow, wake up! Snow!" David is really shaking her now.

When she opens her eyes she is still crying. "Please, please don't hurt me," she whispers and he grabs on to her and holds her as tight as he can.

"It's a nightmare Snow..."

"David?" she looks at him, both surprise and incredible relief mingling in her voice. "You are here... David, let me stay with you please..."

It's very early the next day when King George of the Southern kingdom holds a press conference
and announces that the time has come for him to step down and for his nephew Edward, Baron Grey of the Southern Peninsula, to succeed him, his coronation scheduled for the end of the week.

Snow and David are still in bed when the news notifications ring on their magic mirrors.

Snow grabs her mirror from the nightstand and they lay close together watching the news clip. A very reserved King George appears on their screens.

"My people," he says his voice almost cracking. "This might come as a surprise but I have been feeling this way for a while, and I am assured that this kingdom is ready. I plan on resigning and letting my beloved nephew, Edward, baron of the Southern Peninsula, royal knight and protector of the realm, assume the throne with the crown's blessings and gratitude. This is the position he has trained for his whole life and I am relieved to leave you in his capable hands, while I step back and assume a supportive role. Because I will never stop fighting for you, I will give my dying breath at your service..."

"He sounds like he almost believes what he is saying," Snow scoffs. The news reporters look absolutely stunned and then they are shouting over each other, trying to be heard.

"Why this sudden move?"

"How is the King's health?"

"Why now?"

"What's going on?"

But the king and his council give nothing but vague answers.

"It is the right time... the kingdom has never been stronger... our people are ready..."

"You did this," Snow whispers, laying her head on David's shoulder. "This is all you..."

"It's strategic isn't it? If we pursue this and and go public with our information, and he receives a royal pardon from his nephew?" David frowns.

"No... when once our story comes out, people will figure out what prompted this sudden resignation..." Snow replies. "Edward is going to be a young untested new King, I'm not sure he can handle the public outcry if he forgives the king for such heinous crimes..."

David stays silent for a moment.

"We are not going to let that stop us, right?" Snow asks.

"No," David replies. "Even if he never spends one day in the dungeon where he belongs, the world needs to know what he did..."

Snow lays her head on David's chest. They are both quiet for a while, both of them contemplating the events of this past week when their door bursts open.

"What are you guys doing still in bed!" Emma smiles brightly. "Come on! The sun is out!"

"We are up, we are up," David sits up stretching. "Is it time for school yet?"
"Dad! It's Sunday!" Emma smiles.

"It's Sunday?" he frowns. "Then why aren't we sleeping in?"

"Because sleeping in is boring!" Emma giggles.

"Really!" David asks incredulously. "Says who?"

"Yes! Really! Because I said so..." Emma laughs again.

"Really?"

And then David and Emma are running around the house and Snow has no idea if Emma is chasing David or if David is chasing Emma. All she knows is that her daughter is the happiest girl in the whole Enchanted forest. Her daughter has her father back. So she tucks away last nights' nightmares, she splashes water on her face and smiles stubbornly in the mirror.

"Today is going to be a good day," she says out loud, mostly for herself to hear. "A good day..."
The Case of the Forgetful Princess

The doorbell rings.

"Emma! Can you get the door? It's probably Ruby," Snow asks. She is in her room getting dressed. Ruby is going to watch Emma while David accompanies Snow to the council meeting. Snow can't help herself, she is feeling tense. She looks on the mirror. She is wearing her usual attire, a nice shirt, a pair of pants, her favorite pair of boots. It's just the royal council. Nothing more, nothing less. She doesn't owe them anything. She is not going to dress up for them. She is not.

Snow is wondering whether to tie up her hair or to leave it down.

"Snow," Ruby calls out so Snow casts one last glance at the mirror and then she steps out of the room.

She is surprised to see both Nova and Ruby in her living room smiling at her.

"Nova?" she smiles. "How are you doing? Where is baby Nate?"

"He's with Grumpy. I'm here to help..." Nova replies pulling out her wand.

"Help with what? What's going on?" Snow frowns.

"We are here to help you get ready for the meeting with the council," Nova replies brightly.

"Let me do your make up..." Ruby starts, pushing Snow gently towards a chair, pulling out her make up kit. "Snow, what's going on? I know you and David just got back together but you've got to get some sleep too girl... you've got black circles under your eyes..."

"No, it's not that...," Snow sighs, "I have nightmares..."

Since Sunday when they confronted the king, she's been having the same nightmare every single night. She is tied up and blindfolded and the same voice is asking her over and over "Where is Regina?" right before the pain comes.

"Nightmares about what?" Ruby asks applying concealer under Snow's eyes.

Snow looks around. Emma is busy changing the color of her shirt form red to pink to purple. She just learned how to do that. She is not listening.

"I don't know... ever get the feeling that you are really close to solving a puzzle and then last moment the answer just blows away like thin smoke?"

"Can't say that I have," Ruby frowns. "Then again I don't solve puzzles for a living. "What's the answer are you looking for?"

"The voice..." Snow whispers. "That voice. The man who kidnapped me and locked me away. I recognize his voice from somewhere but from where? Who is he?"

"What does David think?"

"He thinks that the king ordered my abduction, so he is hoping we are on the right path...and he is probably right..."
"But you disagree..."

"I want to feel hopeful, I want to think this is almost over, we already put the king on notice, he is giving up his throne, but I'm just not sure..." Snow sighs, shaking her head.

Ruby nods stepping back to examine the results. Snow is looking better.

The front door opens and David walks in. "The horses are ready," he says and then he stops. "Hello Ruby, hi Nova... where's the baby?"

"The horses?" Ruby frowns."Oh, no, no, no... you can't take the horses, a horse ride will ruin Snow's hair..."

David glances at Snow. Her hair is down, just like she usually wears it. She's never avoided a horse ride for the sake of her hair before.

"I thought you wanted to ride to the castle," he asks.

"I do. Of course I do," Snow tries to sound firm ignoring her friends' disappointed looks. "This is just a meeting with the council, I am not dressing up for them, I owe them nothing!"

"Of course you owe them nothing, that doesn't mean you shouldn't look incredible!" Nova replies. "I mean, look, David is all dressed up!"

David looks down at his doublet and pants. He isn't wearing anything different than what he normally wears.

"He always looks incredible," Snow argues, because of course David's doublet is perfect, as is his shirt and his pants and his boots, not a single spot on them, perfectly polished. "And I am still not dressing up!"

And then Nova waves her wand and Snow is wearing a beautiful off white tunic, fitted at the waist and a pair of tight light colored leather pants and a gorgeous embroidered long coat with a hood. And it doesn't look that different from her usual clothes, but the emerald earrings are certainly bringing out her eyes.

And David is holding his breath.

"Oh, come on! I just told you I am not dressing up!" Snow tries to protest.

"But mom!" Emma cries out. "You look so pretty!"

Snow turns to David for support.

"You don't have to," he tries to sound supportive but his heart is not in it. He clearly likes the new clothes, so maybe the outfit change is not a terrible idea. "But you do look amazing!" he adds.

Snow's expression softens.

"So glad you like it, because I thought that if your shirt was a shade darker than Snow's," Nova replies shaking her wand towards David "then you two would look really good together, let me try this..."

David's shirt changes color. He doesn't protest so Nova goes a step further waving her wand again. And then he is wearing a black overcoat and Snow has to admit he is looking incredible.
"Oh, you two are going to make the best dressed list!" Ruby claps her hands. "Snow! Let me do your hair," she turns to Snow all excited.

"I am still riding my horse to the castle," Snow says through gritted teeth.

"Of course you are," Ruby sighs. "Nova, would you please magic her hair in place so it can survive the horse ride?"

"No problem," Nova shakes her wand and now Snow's hair is in place, soft curls framing her face, half of it pulled back.

"You look like a queen," Ruby whispers.

"I think you are missing the point," Snow sounds quite sad. "Thanks guys... I'll be back tonight, sweet girl" she blows Emma a kiss and she walks out the front door.

"She didn't like it!" Nova sounds disappointed.

"She didn't like it, but when she gets surrounded by reporters on the castle steps, she will be relieved she looks the part...and when tomorrow's tabloids say, 'Snow is elegant', rather than 'here comes a frumpy princess', then she is going to be really grateful..."

"Snow?" David grabs her hand before she mounts her horse.

She shakes her head. "They are probably right..." she breathes and then she looks at him all worried. "Are you sure you are up for this?"

He nods. "Why wouldn't I be?"

Snow looks away. "The council can be so...- It may be easier for me to go deal with them without having to worry about them insulting the man I love..."

"Oh, I won't get insulted," he smirks. "I've always thought I'd make excellent arm candy! I'll even make the best dressed list!"

Snow laughs. "You have no idea how well the council can get under one's skin..."

David is looking serious now. "Look, if you don't want me there, I won't come. But I don't want you facing them alone..."

"I really want you there, I'm just... I know it's going to be awful..." Snow sighs.

"Then I'm in," he kisses her cheek in a hurry. He turns around and mounts his horse. "Race you to the castle?" he gallops away before she gets a chance to respond.

"This isn't going to work, I am not that easily distracted," Snow mumbles but then she is on her horse trying to catch up with him, and the breeze is on her face, and David turns to look at her, a dare in his eyes as he speeds up and she laughs. Maybe she is easily distracted after all.

Outside the Queen's castle, David helps her down from her horse and hands the rains to the stable boy in the courtyard.

"Looks like I won," he brags.

"I passed you twice..." she replies.
"That's not how I remember it," he smirks. "Besides, it's the ending that counts..."

"I wasn't going to gallop over the drawbridge and into the castle courtyard!" she protests. "That's like asking for trouble!"

"Which is why I won!" he laughs and Snow shakes her head, stifling a laugh. "What's my prize?"

"What do you want your prize to be?" she mumbles under her breath.

"I have a couple of ideas..."

She hears the smile in his voice and shoots him a halfhearted warning look. "Careful what you say in here, even the walls have ears..."

"Maybe that makes it more fun," he shrugs.

Snow is looking at him surprised, then she laughs. "Really?" she asks. She is feeling lighthearted and giddy and playful. Nothing like the deep sense of dread she was feeling earlier. "Thanks..." she whispers reaching for his hand and he winks at her.

"Snow White!" a dwarf she hasn't met before bows before her pointing to the hall ahead. "My name is Gloomy, I'm at your service. Who might this be? I need to know how to announce you..."

"That's David Nolan, my husband," Snow smiles brightly, daring the dwarf to challenge her.

"Welcome to the castle, Sir!" Gloomy the dwarf bows again, trying not to look to surprised. "I'm afraid you are not authorized to bear arms into the palace. I'm going to need your sword... Next time you can message ahead, we'll grant you special clearance as long as you pass our background check..."

Snow shakes her head. What are the chances that David with his classified service in the white knight force will pass a Northern kingdom background check?

David hesitates but he does takes off his sword belt and hands an attendant his sword and daggers.

The walk to the council room is quiet, the sound of their boots echoing in the cold hallways dimly lit by torches. The heavy metal door creaks opens into the council room. Three tree nymphs, a troll, a fairy, and two knights are seated at the round council table. The Huntsman is the only knight sitting at the table that David actually recognizes.

"Snow White and...umm David Nolan" the dwarf hesitates before announcing who David actually is.

Snow takes a deep breath. Here we go, she thinks.

Her head is raised high and she is smiling. She is not going to let them get to her. Not this time. Everyone around the round council table rises. There is a single chair that is empty.

"Welcome Snow White, please, join us," the Crimson fairy smiles.

"We are going to need one more chair," Snow smiles sweetly to one of the knights standing guard at the door. "We can probably share this one for now," she states and she motions for David to sit on the chair then she leans on the chair handle crossing her arms to her chest. "So," she asks ignoring everyone's shocked expressions at this blatant breach of protocol. "How is everybody?"
A knight rushes to the round table with an additional seat.

"Much better," Snow smiles sitting on her own now.

The council is breathing easier. Order has been restored. Almost. They remember Snow being uncooperative and defiant, but they don't remember her ever being this confident. This bold.

"Ummm, forgive us, but we are not sure that Mr Nolan is qualified to be here... he doesn't have clearance, he hasn't been vetted...and this is a private meeting" the older knight at the table is looking uncertain.

"Oh, he's been vetted," Snow replies.

"How?"

"I'm sorry Sir Philip, I understand I neglected to formally introduce him. This is David Nolan, my husband..." she explains and everyone in the room gasps. They are looking at David now completely stunned. "And since you were the ones insisting for this meeting to take place, I'm afraid that I will insist that he accompanies me at all times. I know better than to come to this council meeting alone..."

"Are you insinuating that you wouldn't be safe in the castle where you were born and raised your Highness?" Sir Philip isn't pleased.

"Oh, I'm not worried about my physical safety," Snow shrugs. "But my well being has never been the priority of this council... that is the part I am worried about..."

"Your Highness, can't possibly mean that!" the knight looks ready to raise from his seat in protest.

"Of course I do. If you cared for my well being, you wouldn't have asked me to give up my daughter ten years ago..."

Sir Philip stammers, looking at the other members of the council for support.

David reaches for Snow's hand. He knows that's probably the wrong move, maybe even showing weakness, but the thought of a much younger Snow facing this council alone is overwhelming. He has to fight the urge to grab Sir Philip from the collar and slam him against the wall. Remember, he tries to tell himself. You said you wouldn't be insulted. You wouldn't react.

But he is not insulted. Not for himself anyway. He is furious for Snow's and Emma's sake. This is different.

The faces of every single member of the council look frozen. Disbelieving that Snow would even bring this up.

The Crimson fairy frowns. "You've gone and married without out approval... disregarding how this will affect the kingdom..."

"Though a royal consort might be a good idea, we will need an heir for the throne," Sir Philip observes even though he spits out the word 'consort,' like its a dirty word.

Snow bristles. "I abdicated. I owe you nothing!"

"You are not wrong princess..." Sir Philip tries his most accommodating conciliatory tone.

"I am not a princess. Not anymore. Remember?" Snow is not going to back down.
"Of course," the Crimson fairy replies. "But in light of the circumstances, perhaps we can put the past behind us..." the fairy is trying.

"In light if the circumstances?" Snow's voice comes out clipped. "What circumstances would those be?"

The youngest of the tree nymphs present, who must be at least seventy years old speaks up. "The Queen is in exile dear..."

"The former Queen," Snow replies. "You let Regina run rampant. She was trying to bring the dead back to life in this very castle. She had a collection of people's hearts in her secret room. She erased mine and my husband's memories ten years ago. Is that what you are referring to?"

There is a brief pause as the council takes a minute to digest this piece of information. Is Snow saying that David Nolan is the man she ran away with ten years ago? Emma's father? Where has he been hiding this whole entire time?

"Correct," the tree nymph continues undaunted, "and we'd like you to come back..."

Snow is shaking her head. She means to sound strong, but this time her voice quivers. "After everything you put me through, what makes you think that I would ever let my daughter anywhere near the castle or this life?"

Not now, Snow begs her brain, not now, you can't fall apart now, you were doing so well...

"We were wrong, dear, we were wrong. We are so sorry. We could issue a public apology, we could beg you on our knees..."

"Madam Willow," Snow swallows hard. "It's not contrition I am after. I just don't see how I could ever come back..."

"You have to, dear, it's in your blood..."

"I don't think it is," Snow replies, her eyes welling up.

"Tell me, dear. Ten years ago, why did you run?"

"I don't remember," Snow's voice is merely a whisper. David turns to look at her.

And then the huntsman clears his throat. "I believe there was an assassination attempt..." he says quietly.

Every member of the council stands and turns around to look at him in horror.

"A what?"

"An assassination?"

"On Snow's life?"

"On whose order?"

"How were we not notified?"

"How did we not know about this?"
David looks at Snow. Somehow, she doesn't look surprised. Deep inside she kind of suspected. Come to think of it, he kind of knew too. This doesn't feel like new information. It feels like a memory suppressed along with the rest of their fractured timeline. Their forgotten time together.

The Huntsman shakes his head. "Look, my memory isn't clear on this, but now that I have my heart back, I remember things better. Snow ran away because the Queen was actively trying to kill her... I was one of the people she gave that order to..."

"You were ordered to kill the princess?" the Crimson fairy gasps.

"How did you not tell us about this?" Sir Philip looks horrified.

"She ordered my heart to forget," the Huntsman confesses. He is looking both horrified and disgusted with himself.

The members of the council settle down.

"Under the circumstances, Sir Graham," the Crimson fairy uses the Huntsman's real name, "I don't see how you can remain on the council..."

The Huntsman nods, looking down. "You will have my written resignation by sundown," he replies then he stands up. "You will excuse me..."

"You should stay," Snow interrupts and everyone turns around to look at her. "I'm still alive," she adds. "If you managed to disobey a direct order while the former Queen owned your heart... that shows incredible strength of character..."

The Huntsman raises his eyes to meet hers. In all his years, serving the Queen, no one has ever credited him for being particularly noble or strong.

"Your Highness," he stumbles.

"Snow," she corrects him. "I have no interest in being a queen. For the past ten years, Regina has focused all her attention in running her special projects and hiding them from you, and this very council has run this kingdom. And as far as I can tell, everyone has a job, everyone has food on their table, the schools are run efficiently, the knight force is doing well... the kingdom is running smoothly. Why do you need a queen? You are doing so well..."

"This is a kingdom your Highness..." the Crimson fairy protests.

"Maybe it shouldn't be..." Snow shrugs.

"Maybe it shouldn't be," the tree nymph nods.

And for a brief moment Snow feels like she is able to breathe freely. This could work. This should work. She should be able to walk away from this meeting a free woman.

"But you should have a position in the council," Willow adds and Snow's shoulders slope. So close.

"Why?" she asks quietly.

"It's your birthright," Sir Philip offers.

"I'm willing to forego that right," Snow tries again.
"It's what your father would have wanted," the Crimson fairy retorts.

"My father was a great man, but he was wrong about a lot of things," Snow looks away.

"He wasn't wrong about you," the tree nymph smiles.

"No!" Snow stands her ground. "I already have a job and a life. I will not change everything to be a part of your council... you don't actually need me..."

"But princess...-" Sir Philip tries but then a stern look from Snow has him trying to back track. "But Snow White..."

"A ceremonial place in the council," the tree nymph offers. "You only come to the meeting the first day of every month... just once a month. It will legitimize the transition of power..."

"A ceremonial position for the next two years. Then I get to step down..." Snow is still bargaining.

"Ten years," Sir Philip counters.

"Five," Willow the tree nymph is looking pleased. She can sense that Snow is about to give in.

"Five," Snow sighs.

"Alright," the Crimson fairy smiles brightly. "Today is the first of the month... Shall we get to work?"

"It is the first of the month! What a happy coincidence..." Snow muses. "Is there any money in the budget so our knight force can go back to using pumpkins?"

Everyone in the council turns around half glaring at her.

"A ceremonial position, princess," Sir Philip replies, his voice clipped.

"You think you are going to give me power and I won't yield it?" Snow is smiling brightly. "Ceremonial or not, we'll still right a few wrongs..."

David chokes out a laugh.

"Fine," Sir Philip sighs, "let's take a look at the money allocated for the knight force, see if we can do better..."

"The black knight force will throw you a party after this, you do know that right?" David whispers under his breath and Snow smiles back at him.

Four hours later Snow and David are silently rushing out of the castle. Snow just survived her first council meeting. Not only she just survived it. She managed to ensure a large increase in the money that the black knight force will be receiving this year. Jiminy and Blue will be thrilled.

"Well that was...-" David is about to say, but as they turn around a corner and are now facing the courtyard, Snow gasps.

David follows her eyes to see Edward, the successor to King George's throne ascending the steps to the entry hall with four of his knights. Snow's steps have slowed down.

"Snow?" David whispers. "Snow what's wrong?"
"Everything is fine," she smiles but her voice sounds strained. Her heart is beating faster, her palms are sweating. She is not alright.

"Snow?" David tries again, but there is no time to talk, because the Southern Kingdom delegation is here.

Gloomy the dwarf is looking displeased. "It's just a formal introduction, due to the coronation this week. He is early. We were expecting them later today," he mumbles then he turns to Snow. "Let me introduce you, council woman Snow!"

Snow tries to smile back. This is just an introduction. Nothing she hasn't done hundred's of times before, when she was a princess, so why is her heart beating wildly and why does she want to throw up?

"Your royal Highness!" Edward offers a deep bow and then he smiles at her.

Gloomy the dwarf takes over.

"Snow White may I introduce Edward, baron of the Southern Peninsula, future king of the Southern kingdom...-

"Oh, stop it, Edward will do just fine. If the future Queen of the Northern Kingdom goes by her given name, you shouldn't make me sound so pompous..." he laughs. Then he reaches for Snow's hand and brings it up to his lips. "Enchanted," he says gazing straight into her eyes.

Snow winces just slightly.

"And this is David Nolan, Council woman Snow's husband...-" the dwarf continues, feeling that he is ready for this very confusing day to end. He is used to carefully studying and memorizing every royals name and lineage, except Snow is here and she is upsetting royal protocols with all her choices.

Edward is shaking David's hand. "We've met before," then he turns back to Snow all surprised. "Council woman Snow? You will not be the new Queen then?"

"Not hungry for power, no..." Snow replies and she can hear the dwarf gasping. Because it sounded like Snow just went out of the way to insult the future king of the Southern Kingdom. Gloomy needs a drink. He needs council woman Snow to go away before she causes a diplomatic episode.

"A pity... I was hoping we'd work together closely in the future..." Edward's gaze is still on Snow.

Snow is done, she is walking away. She has no interest on exchanging any more formalities with Edward.

Edward seems annoyed. "I see... Where is Regina hiding, anyway?" he asks.

Snow stumbles backwards, her face pale. "Please don't hurt me," is the first sentence that comes out of her mouth and then she leans against the wall. She feels like she is going to throw up.

And that's all she needs to say before David has slammed the future king of the Northern Kingdom against the wall. Then since he us unarmed, he pulls Edward's own dagger and holds it at his side.

"You!" he hisses and he is looking quite murderous.

The knights on Edward's delegation are pulling out their swords pointing them at David.
Aware of the commotion the castle guards are running towards them, unsheathing their swords.

"Another step and he dies," David warns Edward's knights even though he knows he is at a complete disadvantage.

Snow is breathing fast, her hands trembling, the walls are closing in. David is surrounded by Edward's knights, but what Snow sees is David in the cabin, surrounded in a dwarf, a troll and two knights, one of them stabbing him, while she is holding baby Emma in her arms.

She knows this isn't really happening, not now anyway, it's already happened, but it all looks so real.

"No!" she screams, tears streaming down her face.

It's the wrong move of course.

David turns fast to look at her, momentarily distracted and that's when one of Edward's knights knocks him on the head, another one kicking the back of his knee. And before Snow gets a chance to catch her breath Edward's knights have him on his knees, their swords at his throat, waiting for orders.

Snow gasps, her knees buckling. "No!" she breathes, tears streaming down her face.

David is looking furious and defiant, his expression softening only when his eyes meet Snow.

"What are you waiting for? Put him down, this was a completely unprovoked attack!" Edward yells and Snow staggers.

"No!" she wants to scream but her voice won't cooperate. All she can manage is a hoarse whisper.

"Please, please, don't..."

"Please what? Say it again, Snow White, beg me...," Edward's looks drunk with power, certain of his victory "I so enjoy it when you beg... Why the hours I spent listening to you beg were the best of my life ..."

David tries to lunge at him but the knights pull him back.

"Kill him!" Edward orders again.

But Edward's knights hesitate. Edward isn't king yet, they are not used to obeying his every order blindly. Besides he is being so creepy and awful right now.

"Sir, the man is the princess' husband, we could just lock him up... you are not in any danger..." the knight in charge argues.

"Kill him now!" Edward's voice thunders. "Seize her and kill them both..."

"She is a princess!" Edward's knights are stunned at this new order. That can't be right. You cannot murder a princess in her own castle on your first introduction meeting, that just doesn't happen. Doesn't Edward understand how these things work?

The castle's guards are here now, swords drawn and their eyes darting between Snow and Edward, David and Edward's knights. They are completely confused. They don't know what to do next. This is going to be a blood bath.

"Don't...-" Gloomy orders. That's the best he can do under the circumstances. He has no idea what
the right order would be.

Snow needs to act, she needs to act now except her hands are shaking and her heart is beating too fast. She looks at David struggling to fight back as one of the knights twist his arm behind his back, forcing him lower to the ground. Snow places her hand right on her heart and then she remembers. She feels it, Tink's glass jar tied on a leather band around her neck.

"Seize the princess now!" Edward yells again.

Her hands still shaking but she opens the bottle and she throws dark fairy dust at the two of Edward's knights coming right at her. The knights disappear. No, they turn into beetles and now they are scurrying on the ground. She throws dust on knights holding David, next.

"Witch!" Edward tries to yell. "She is a witch! Snow has dark magic..." but then Snow's thrown dark fairy dust right on him and he is reduced to a small creeping centipede crawling on the ground. The rest of his knights are beetles, blinking fast trying to understand what happened.

David is still on his knees, looking stunned. Half a minute ago he was certain he was about to die, but he is alive, and Snow is looking at him, sobbing, looking ready to pass out.

And Gloomy, the dwarf takes a step backwards and sits down, wraps his arms around himself and rocks back and forth. "I need this day to end," he whispers mainly to himself.

"David" Snow stumbles forward.

David is getting up slowly, looking around, disbelieving what just happened.

"David!" a sobbing Snow is in his arms and he holds her tight. She is frantically running her hands up his chest looking for injuries.

"I'm alright," he breathes, "Snow, I'm alright, you saved me..."

But Snow is sobbing too hard to see things clearly.

The castle guards are surrounding them, swords drawn.

"Give us some room, please, and trap that centipede," David orders and everyone rushes to comply, nobody argues with him.

The castle guards are on their knees, chasing centipede Edward and his beetle knights, placing them inside glass mason jars.

"I got him!" one of the guards exclaims.

"I can't," Snow is breathing fast, unable to get out the right words, "I can't... David, he can't get away..."

"He is in a jar," David replies, "he is not going anywhere..."

"Can I..." Snow is trying to catch her breath. "Can I see him..."

"Bring the bug here!" David asks and again nobody questions his authority. A castle guard brings the centipede to Snow and she is looking at him completely disgusted.

"He can't get away..." she whispers.
"We won't let him go, Ma'am, I promise you!" the guard replies.

"Would someone like to explain what is happening here?" the Crimson fairy appears out of nowhere and is looking at the scene stunned. "Who authorized the use of dark magic?"

"I... I did..." Snow tries but her hands are still shaking. She struggles to find the right words. She is not thinking straight.

"We need to call the knight force," David replies. "Please, call Blue..."

"I'd still like to know what is going on first..." the Crimson fairy is glaring at David.

David hesitates. "Edward confessed to a crime, I held him back. He ordered his guards to kill me and the princess..." he replies.

The Crimson fairy doesn't look quite convinced. "Who used dark fairy dust?"

"I did," Snow replies.

"I see," the Crimson fairy is shaking his head. "You just attacked a foreign delegation! I don't know where to go from there! If it were anybody else, Snow White, I would be locking you up both in the dungeon. I'll call Blue... You are to stay right here. I'm afraid neither of you is allowed to leave the castle for the time being..."

Snow is looking lost, David quite defiant, but he doesn't argue with the fairy. He leans against the wall and pulls Snow close to him.

"We got him," he whispers.

Snow doesn't reply. She is staring at the glass jar, both exhaustion and disgust in her face, her hands still trembling.

Blue and Jiminy show up along with several knight force officers.

Once David explains what happened, Blue questions him again and again. She wants to know about David's meeting with the king at the troll bridge, she wants to know exactly what David is accusing the king of.

Then she has the knights move the jars with the bugs into the library, taking special care with the centipede jar. Inside the tranquil quiet space, she turns Edward's guards back to human. The men are dazed, confused, but as she interrogates them one by one they all give the same story.

"What did Edward say when Snow White asked him not to hurt her husband?" Blue asks. Most of them are very confused about what the future king meant. None of them remember exactly what he said but they are close enough.

"Something about the princess begging, and that was the best time of his life," they say and as they try to repeat Edward's exact words they all seem to be ashamed of their future king.

"I'm afraid to think of what he meant by that," one of the knights confesses to Blue. "Does that mean he hurt the princess?"

"Sure sounds like it, doesn't it!" Blue replies.

"David Nolan is right. Edward's words sound very much like a confession to me," Blue concludes, once the last knight has been sent to wait outside of the library. Blue releases Edward's guards after
Jiminy writes down their statements and they sign each individual statement. Then she sends Edward, still in his jar to one of the high security dungeons of the kingdom.

"Are we not going to turn him back?" Jiminy frowns. The thought of someone remaining in insect form against their will really bothers him.

"There is no rush, is there?" Blue frowns. "He painspelled Snow! Besides, we are quite busy at the moment. We need to contact King George. Looks like he is going to need a different successor. Edward will be unavailable on coronation day..."

Blue holds her ground as King George practically screams at her over his magic mirror.

"You cannot arrest a future king, that just doesn't happen. Two days before the coronation! That's unheard of!"

"What's unheard of is the future king of the Southern kingdom abducting and painspelling a princess!" Blue snaps back at him.

"How dare you accuse my nephew...-" he continues.

"Accuse him? Please, feel free to ask the royal guards that were in his delegation what he said in their presence! They were appalled at his blatant confession. He ordered them to kill Snow White..."

"He what?" King George is beginning to sound deflated. "What was the boy thinking?" he asks, without expecting an answer, mainly talking to himself.

"He was thinking that David Nolan was already after you. What better way to get his hands on your throne sooner than to hurt Snow White and let David and the knight force put the blame on you," Blue explains, carefully choosing her words. "He was trying to make you look guilty, your Majesty. I am guessing he already knew of Snow's and David's connection?"

"Well! Yes, yes, he is my heir, of course he knows...he knows everything..."

"He tried to make you look guilty of painspelling Snow White!"

"Well, I would never!" the king sounds outraged. "I told David that. Everything I ever did was in defense of my kingdom. I would never stoop so low as to torture a woman, let alone a princess...-"

"You have always put your kingdom first, haven't you," Blue muses. "Is this why you took David's memories away, because he knew too much? Because it was bad for the kingdom? Or was it because he dared walk away from your big plans?"

The king remains silent.

"Your majesty, you might as well come clean," Blue continues. "You agreed to step down from the throne, because David Nolan finally knows the truth, and he has proof and witnesses and he plans on going public with this information..."

And the King freezes. He doesn't know what to say next, he doesn't know how to spin this. Edward's betrayal shocked him so much, He is breathing fast.

"Did you erase David's memories?" Blue asks again.

"Watch what you are saying to me fairy...- Or you are going to end up...-"
"You can't threaten me, your Majesty. I have the support of the Northern kingdom council along with the black knight force. Did you force David Nolan to impersonate prince James? Is that why you erased his memories?"

"Why... that's just not how things happened..." the king stammers.

"If it isn't how things happened, if you are not guilty, then why did you agree to step down from the throne, when David accused you?"

And instead of replaying, King George stares at his magic mirror for a long time then he throws it against the wall. His mirror shatters. He should have killed that boy. When the Queen discovered Snow and David in the woods and she told him the plan to attack and erase both their memories, he shouldn't have gone along with the plan. He should have insisted that David died instead. A memory spell was too good for him.

Blue turns to Jiminy. "Did you hear all that?" she asks.

"I certainly did," he nods.

"Where are they? Are they still here?" Blue is looking concerned.

"I believe so," Jiminy points towards the hallway where he saw Snow and David last.

"Come with me."

Blue and Jiminy find David and Snow exactly exactly where they were when the Crimson Fairy forbid them from leaving the castle. David is sitting on the floor, his back against the wall and his hand absentmindedly caressing Snow's arm. Snow is sitting in between his legs, her eyes closed, leaning on his chest. And Jiminy marvels at how fragile the usually fearless Snow looks at the moment. And he recognizes the grief in David's face. David thinks he is about to get arrested. He doesn't expect to go home tonight. David Nolan is holding his wife, as if its just the two of them, alone in the room, thinking he is going to soon have to say goodbye.

When they hear Blue and Jiminy approaching David looks pained for a brief second. Then he motions to get up. He seems determined and ready.

Blue squats on the floor instead. Jiminy hesitates but he joins her.

"It's over," Blue starts.

"Snow didn't do anything wrong," David protests. "If someone is going to get charged, it has got to be me..., she was in shock, you can't expect her not to react...-
"

Evidently he has a whole speech prepared.

"You misunderstand me," Blue interrupts smiling. "Nobody is accusing you. Not only are we going to charge Edward with Snow's abduction, but tomorrow first thing I'm going to ask to meet with the Southern kingdom's council and discuss charging the King with fraud, conspiracy to commit fraud, false imprisonment, and illegal use of memory spelling. That is if he hasn't already disappeared..."

David gasps. Snow's tearing up, closing her eyes.

"I had a long talk with King George. And he broke his magic mirror instead of answering my questions. My guess is he is half way to Wonderland by now. We will never see him again..." Blue shrugs. "I wish I could just appear in his castle and arrest him, but the fact that he is the king
affords him certain protections. Can't charge him without consent from his council. Not that outcome you hoped for, but hopefully it's enough to give you a measure peace..."

David shakes his head, he is completely overwhelmed. "This is..." he struggles to find the right words. "You went further than I ever expected you to... Thank you!"

"I've said it before and I'll say it again. Both of you went above and beyond what your kingdoms required of you and you got nothing but grief in return. I am here to set things right... "

David looks at Snow. She is looking exhausted.

"I know you don't work for me anymore but if I may order you one last time, please go home, get some rest, take a few days off..." Blue continues.

"We are free to go?" David asks incredulously.

"Of course," Blue nods. "I will inform the Crimson fairy of my findings..."

David gets up and he offers Snow his hand. They walk out of the castle together, David's arm around Snow's shoulders. She hasn't said a word since Edward got captured in the glass jar. They don't mount their horses right away, instead they keep on walking. They walk in silence, nothing but the sound of the breeze through the trees and the horses' hooves following them interrupting their thoughts.

David is casting worried glances at Snow. Being quiet this long isn't like her.

And after a long time, when they have walked half way home, Snow turns to face him. She has tears streaming down her face.

"I almost lost you today... I panicked and I did everything wrong..." she breathes.

"You didn't," he protests.

"I almost got you killed..."

"Not your fault." he counters. "Besides, you did save me..."

"Tell me we are going to survive this," she whispers. "Tell me we are going to be okay..."

And somehow he answers the one question she isn't asking out loud.

"Snow, either way, I am not going anywhere..."

And this must have struck a nerve, because Snow is crying and her hands are trembling and he is leaning his forehead on her cheek, holding her tighter. And then her lips are on his as she struggles to stop crying.

"I'm sorry I forgot and I got so lost and I wasn't there," he whispers.

"Not your fault," she protests, shaking her head.

"I know... but still... Snow, this time, I am not going anywhere..."

"Promise?" she whispers.

"Marry me?" he smiles.
She looks up, confused. "We are already married."

"I know, but marry me again, anyway," he breathes.

And now Snow is the one holding onto him tight. "Yes!" she smiles through her tears. "Yes...-" and the next thing she says comes out all muffled because his lips are on hers.
"Time for you to go!" Ruby is standing firm by the front door in Snow's cottage, pointing the way out.

"Wait..." David tries to protest.

"Do you have your clothes?" Ruby is relentless. "Your sword? Your boots? Your cape? Your toothbrush? Do you know where Grumpy lives? Then please, go!"

"But..." David tries.

"You can't see her today! I didn't make the rules!" Ruby is quite serious.

"You do realize that I woke up next to her this morning?" he counters. "And we had breakfast together? And we are already married?"

"I didn't think of that. I would have been here sooner. Now, get out!"

"Come on, Nolan, go..." Tink laughs.

David shakes his head, because he thought that at least Tink would be on his side, but there is no such chance. It's really surprising how Tink got roped in to the wedding preparations. He never in a million years thought that'd be something she'd enjoy, but she seems really excited about it. Nova, Ruby and Tink have formed an unofficial wedding committee. They have banned everyone from walking to the back yard while they decorate it and he doesn't really mind, except now they are blocking his access to Snow entirely. He doesn't want to just take off while she is in the shower.

"I'll come with you Dad!" Emma tries but Ruby shakes her head.

"You have to stay here and put your dress on!" Ruby protests.

Emma shrugs shaking her wand. Her dress is instantly on. She takes a deep bow, then she changes back to her old clothes with a flick of her wrist.

Ruby's mouth drops. "How did you do that?"

"I've been practicing with Tink!" Emma smirks.

Tink offers her a high five.

"Fine," David can recognize a losing battle when he sees one. "Give Snow this for me, please!" he says pulling out a small bouquet of snowbells.

"Aw," Nova smiles. "That's so sweet, David, I'll give it to her."

"Now quit being adorable and get out of here," Ruby frowns, so David walks out the door Emma in tow.

"Emma, you don't have to come with me, you could stay..."

"I'm starving," Emma replies. "And Nova is busy I don't think they are making lunch any time soon."
David laughs. "Do you want to go have lunch at Granny's?"

Sitting at Granny's corner booth, eating her grilled cheese sandwich, Emma pulls out her wand.

"Look," she smiles brightly, "I've been practicing. For the wedding!"

She rips her napkin in four pieces and throws it up in the air.

He doesn't know what she meant to do. But what she does is quite interesting. David counts twelve plates filled with food suspended up in the air, above the tables, floating, along with a few of cups that now are hanging perilously, looking ready to spill. Granny's patrons are looking at their flying plates quite horrified.

"Oh, no," Emma looks disappointed. "That's not what I meant to do..."

"Emma?" David asks quietly, because he doesn't want to think of what will happen to the suspended plates if he upsets her. "Emma, maybe you can put the plates down slowly..."

"What is this? Who is doing this?" The mermaid sitting at the table next to them with her daughter stares at her floating cheeseburger and turns an accusatory glare at Emma.

Emma panics, her wand shakes and then the plates crush back down to the tables.

People scream. A troll and a dwarf jump up from the chairs and are now staring at them.

David's plate crushes in front of him and now his shirt is covered in salad dressing and shredded lettuce.

"I'm sorry!" Emma scrunches her nose, looking ready to cry.

"It's alright, it's fine..." David stands up wiping his shirt with a napkin. "Sorry folks, just a little magic mishap. Lunch is on me..." he offers "and if you have a cleaning bill let Granny know the amount and I'll take care of it..." he adds trying to avoid calculating in his head how much this little misadventure may end up costing him.

"That's the guy who saved Silver, the investigator..." a fairy standing by the jukebox whispers to her tree nymph friend.

"I hear he is with Snow White," the tree nymph whispers back.

"It's alright, I got this," the fairy says out loud moving her wand and everything turns back to normal. The spills and the stains disappear, the food is back in the plates, the broken cups are fixed, drinks still inside them.

Granny who's walking towards them frowns at Emma "I seem to recall a 'no magic wands at the table' rule."

"Yes, but..." Emma stammers. "I wanted to show Dad that I practiced for the wedding, I'm going to be a flower girl..."

"We are sorry about that... How about we go practice at the park..." David suggests.

Emma is looking relieved. "I can practice with leaves! Or with rocks..."

"Leaves is probably better," Granny replies dryly.
On the way to the park Emma is uncharacteristically quiet, stealing glances at David.

"Something wrong?" he finally asks.

Emma nods. "I think you were supposed to yell at me about making a mess at Granny's dinner..."

"Supposed to yell at you?" he frowns, trying hard to stifle his smile. "What should I be yelling?"

"Like, don't break the rules Emma, or think before you shake your wand Emma...It's what parents do..."

"Oh... Is that what Mom would say?" he asks.

Emma shakes her head. "No, she'd know to stop me before I even tried... no wands at the table... that's the rule since I made the whole table disappear..."

Emma is looking so miserable.

"Maybe I can try to yell next time?" he offers. "I'm not sure I want to...

"How come?" Emma asks.

"Because I can tell you are trying hard to be really good," he shrugs, "and sometimes things go wrong and it's just an accident..."

"Did you ever have magic?" Emma asks quietly as they walk together.

"Never did..." he replies. "Is it hard?" he asks.

"Sometimes..." Emma nods. "Like it's hard to hold back when I think I can fix things..."

"What sort of things would you like to fix?"

"Like Ruby burning the food and Mommy is too tired but she cooks from me anyway when I could just unburn the food, or when the house is too messy and Mom feels like she should be cleaning it up... I can just shake my wand and everything will be clean, but then the couch may disappear, or the floor..."

David nods. It's hard to find the right thing to say right away. Especially when Emma's words always find a way to pierce his heart. "I think you and your Mom have been doing an amazing job taking care of each other this whole time," he says quietly. "But maybe now that I'm here I can help too... you know, before you resort to using magic..."

She looks at him like she's never thought of this before. "Is that what Dads do?" she asks.

"I think so," he nods. "I think that is exactly what Dads are meant to do..."

And when Emma stays silent for a minute considering this he adds "Just so you know... even if you'd made the whole Granny's diner levitate... and let it crash on the ground, or even if I yelled... Emma... I am so proud of you!"

Emma is looking both confused and incredibly pleased. "Look!" she says picking two pink flowers from the almond tree next to her. She throws them up in the air and shakes her wand. And the flowers stay up, slightly shivering, and then they gracefully fall down to the ground. "That's what I meant to do!"
"You are doing that at the wedding?" he asks, eyes open.

Emma nods, looking hopeful. "Yes, with flower petals..."

"Incredible!" he says. "Can you do it again?"

Snow is staring at the magic mirror. She knows it's ridiculous, but she wants to call David. Call him and ask silly things, like where are you, what are you thinking right now, and tell me you are okay, and tell me that you remember my name... She knows he is fine of course, she is happy that Emma and David are out together, but stepping out of the shower and finding him already gone without saying a word was a bit jarring.

Snow shakes her head. She is overreacting of course, she knows she is.

But that's what happens when one finds themselves in a cabin in the woods with a baby and no memory of how they got there. Or when one's partner rescues them in the middle of a torture session that reawakened fragments of memories... All this trauma is making her need to know things. She need to know where he is, she need to know he is fine, she needs to know he remembers her...

You wouldn't think that planning a wedding would be a restful relaxing time, but it really has been. After the confrontation with Edward in the castle, Snow and David took Blue's words to heart. They decided to take the week off. Unsurprisingly King George did in fact disappear, before Blue tried to arrest him. Which didn't leave much for them to do other than plan their wedding. Ruby and Nova were very excited to help with the wedding planning, they practically took over, so David had time to pack his things and officially move out of his apartment and into Snow's cottage.

Snow was hoping that was once he'd brought his stuff in the house, he'd be a little messy, he'd have piles of boxes laying around and he couldn't tease her anymore about the boxes of case files cluttering her home office. Except that just one day after Tink magicked David's things to Snow's cottage, David had managed to unpack and organize everything. Which left Snow completely stunned.

"How do you even do that?" she'd asked."How is the house looking cleaner after you just moved in?" And he looked at her confused, he had no idea what she was talking about. Which made Snow sigh and ask him to help her clean up and organize her home office. Her home office is looking a lot better now. It's not perfect by any means, but it's definitely improved. You can walk through the room without stacks of case files threatening to tumble on your head.

Snow is the living room in her dressing gown, while Ruby is doing her nails.

Nova and Tink are taking turns magically rearranging Snow's hair.

"I like the curls a little but looser ..." Nova comments.

Tink shakes her wand again. "Like that?"

"Perfect!" Nova smiles.

"Now for the fun part, do you want pearls in your hair, or diamonds?" Tink asks.

"You can make pearls?" Nova exclaims all excited.

"Diamonds," Ruby argues.
"Neither! You guys, it's just a backyard wedding... diamonds or pearls are just too much..." Snow tries to argue.

"Um, actually, it was a backyard wedding, now it's more of an elegant forest wedding," Nova replies.

"What? How?" Snow looks surprised.

"You'll see," Ruby offers a conspiratorial smile.

"Ideas evolve," Nova shrugs.

"How about snowbells?" Snow asks pointing to the small bouquet on the table.

"Yes!" Tink is looking excited. "I can make them shimmer just a little bit..."

"Where did those come from?" Snow asks.

"Oh, yes, I almost forgot, David meant to give them to you..." Nova explains.

"He did?" Snow picks up the flower bouquet and she notes the mint branch mixed up with the snowbells. Mint leaves like the wild mint growing outside the cabin in the woods. Snow is reaching for her magic mirror. "Hold on," she says getting up.

Tink, Nova and Ruby are all looking exasperated. "You can't walk away now..."

But Snow is already using her mirror to call him, she is no longer listening.

David and Emma are still in the park when David's magic mirror rings.

"Snow?" David picks up his mirror.

"I love the flowers," Snow is smiling. "Thank you... Where are you guys?"

"At the park."

"Are you coming back any time soon?"

"Can't," he replies. "Ruby and Nova asked me to leave... Apparently the plan is that I get dressed at Grumpy's..."

"They did what? Why?"

"I don't know. I think they are trying to follow tradition, they want to make sure we don't see each other before the wedding..."

"Ugh," Snow mumbles. "Well, you don't need to listen to them..."

"I do," he laughs. "They are your friends and it's too early to get on their bad side...I haven't known them that long..."

"Oh, alright... I know it's silly but I kind of miss you," Snow says sheepishly.

"Good," David laughs. "Are you guys hungry?"

"Starving," Snow groans.
"I'll pick something up. Tell the ladies not to panic, I won't come in the house, I'll send the food in with Emma..."

"Thank you!" Snow is laughing. "Or you could just ignore them and come in..."

"You could sneak out...you could jump out the window and come find me," he counters.

"We could elope. I know of a nice cabin in the woods we could hide in..."

David laughs.

"I'm serious. If you say yes, I'll even go around calling myself Mrs Charming..." Snow smiles.

"Mrs Charming?"

"Yes!"

"I'm pretty sure Ruby will hunt me down and kill me if I agree to your plan no matter what your name may be..."

"You are probably right," she shrugs.

"Snow!" Ruby calls out and David can hear the irritation in her voice. "Tell him you will see him later, and get off the magic mirror. We are not nearly done..."

"Fine," Snow sighs, "Bossy friend says I have to go... Love you..."

"I love you too!"

Once David drops Emma off at home with enough sandwiches for everyone he heads on to Grumpy's house. And it's quite clear, that something is off, even though the house is still in perfect magicked spring weather and the sunflowers are gently swaying in the breeze.

David knocks on the door, and when he doesn't get a response he walks inside to see Grumpy walking up and down with a very distraught Nate laying on his shoulder.

"Hello, brother!" Grumpy yells so David can hear him over the baby's wails. "Is it time yet?"

"Not quite," David frowns.

"You do?" David frowns.

"Yes, Nate's voice has gotten much louder in the last couple of weeks," Grumpy continues proudly.

"He's got some good strong lungs," David agrees, because really, what is there to say when your friend's baby is screaming.

"Everything is under control," Grumpy tells David, even though he sounds like he is trying to reassure himself. "Everything is fine. I definitely do not need to call my wife and tell her that the baby woke up early and is now screaming non stop... because I've got this... and my wife is busy, and I can handle this..."
"Right," David tries to sound reassuring.

"Do you have any experience with screaming babies?" Grumpy is looking hopeful.

"Not much," David tries to yell back over the babies ear splitting wails.

"Good, excellent," Grumpy replies, completely mishearing David. "Can you hold him for a while?" he asks, and that's how David finds himself holding a distraught baby at Grumpy's house, just three hours before his wedding.

"Well," David tells the screaming child, "there is no use in pacing up and down, that doesn't work, does it?" He sits on the couch, holding the baby closer. "What's matter little guy? You can tell me...what hurts?"

When Grumpy walks back in the living room he is stunned to see that Neal is asleep in David's arms.

"How... how did you do that?" he asks.

"I've no idea. I didn't do anything," David shrugs. "He burped twice and then he went to sleep..."

But Grumpy is still looking at David, eyes filled with admiration. "Good job, brother," he whispers. "Let's put him in his crib..."

It's time.

Snow looks in the mirror. Her hair is swept up in an elegant chignon, with snowbells threaded in and her dress is draping elegantly. She is holding a bouquet of wild forest flowers, her eyes shining in anticipation.

"Are you ready?" Ruby asks.

Her heart is beating fast as she steps into her back yard, careful to lift the edge of her gown and she is shocked to see that her back yard has been magicked to look like a snowy forest meadow. Flower garlands are draped across the evergreen trees, there is a candlelit path that leads to a willow arch. Doc is playing his violin and all the guest smile at her but Snow doesn't see them because David and Emma are waiting for her at the end of the pathway, under the arch.

Snow's steps are steady, crunching the snow even as her eyes are filled with tears.

Emma looks at David. Her mom is crying, he better do something, she thinks. She looks up to see that David is tearing up as well. He reaches for Snow's hand and now they are both teary and smiling, at the same time.

Emma is feeling quite relieved. Maybe when they are both crying the sadness gets cut in half, Emma thinks.

Blue is looking quite moved. "We are gathered here today," she says trying to keep her voice steady, "to honor the commitment of our two beloved friends, whose path hasn't been easy or smooth, but they are standing before you together, as testament to love's endurance and strength..."

Emma is standing perfectly still, next to David, listening to her parents vows, as they promise to love and cherish each other.

"I love you," Snow whispers and David squeezes her hand and leans in to kiss her.
Everyone claps their hands. Snow and David's lips meet and then Emma throws flower petals up in the air and shakes her wand and now her flowers are suspended in the air.

The guess gasp.

"Amazing!" Snow claps her hands absolutely delighted and David scoops Emma in his arms and now they are all hugging together.

"My sweet, sweet girl," Snow whispers and she can't help herself, she is crying again.

Emma looks at David expectantly, because Snow is crying and he'd said he'd help her out. He said that's what dads do.

David wraps his arm around Snow's shoulder, and Snow wipes her eyes, smiling brightly and Emma nods relieved. Maybe he is right. Maybe that's his job.

Tink shakes her wand and now the forest ground is magicked to look like a frozen lake, but it's actually a perfect dance floor. And there are suspended snowflakes floating in the air, even though the air is not too cold, Nova's made certain of it. David is twirling Snow around, everyone is laughing and dancing. Granny's delicious treats are spread on a table on the side and there is wedding cake and toasts, more tears and more laughter.

"Dad!" Emma tugs on his arm.

"What is it?" he asks.

"I like this song!" Emma pulls him in the middle of the dance floor where Granny is already dancing with Doc and Grumpy is holding on to Nova swaying her gently.

He holds out his hand and dances with her. She only steps on his feet three times and Snow watches them from afar, noting how his boots aren't perfectly polished anymore, trying hard not to cry again, because her Emma has never looked happier.

Grumpy is tipsy and is cracking plenty of corny jokes, "Once you go into Snow's spell protected house, you can never find your way out again...just ask Lieutenant Nolan..."

Granny showcasing some unexpected spectacular dance moves, and most surprising one of all, Tink flirts shamelessly with Sneezy. Not a pairing Snow would have ever imagined, though watching Sneezy stammer and try to keep up with Tink's witty banter is rather adorable.

It's getting late, and most of the guests are gone when Tink says "I have a present for you!"

"You've already done so much!" Snow tries to protest but Tink waves he objections away. She takes Snow and David to the corner of the yard and points to a very ordinary looking stepping stone.

"When you step on it together, it will take you back to your cabin," Tink explains. "There is a stepping stone there to bring you back. Just you, nobody else, you are the only ones who can use it..."

And Snow wraps her arms around Tink. "I can't thank you enough... I should tell you, you've saved me in more ways than one."

Tink is looking overwhelmed. She doesn't do big displays of emotion, but Snow is family, so she grits her teeth and hugs Snow back. And then she changes the subject.
"So, your friend Sneezy, is he seeing anyone?"

In the end, everyone is gone, Emma is asleep in her bed with Wilby laying next to her and David and Snow, are sitting in the back yard, still dressed up, watching the forest meadow illusion slowly fade away.

"Everything was so beautiful, I am almost willing to forgive the girls for kicking you out," Snow says softly, kicking her shoes off, leaning back to look at the stars.

David is smiling.

"And Tink's present... that is the best gift ever," Snow continues.

David points to the frozen lake dance floor. "Look," he says quietly. "The floor hasn't faded away yet. Dance with me..."

Snow stands up and he pulls her in closer. A faint echo of Doc's violin still ringing in her ears, Snow places her hand in David's and leans her head on his shoulder.

"You know," he whispers, "when you danced with me at the officer's ball, that's the first time I dared to dream that we could have a life together..."

"Did you?"

"I felt like my heart was finally home..."

Snow holds him closer. "I'm pretty sure I spent the night trying not to glare at the fairy in the green dress!"

David laughs.

"You know," she continues, "sometimes, when I look around the room and you are not there, it's hard to stay calm, it's had not to panic a little..."

"Snow," he whispers, and she catches the regret in his voice, because there is no way for him to erase the past, no way to fix everything they've both been through.

"You found me," she breathes. "In the end you found me, and that's all that matters..."

"I got something for you," he whispers and she looks up surprised.

"I didn't get you anything..."

"It's not a present, just something I found when I was unpacking my things the other day," he explains.

"What is it?" Snow asks.

David pulls a small note from his pocket. "Here," he says watching her face carefully.

Snow unfolds the small piece of parchment. It's folded exactly as one would a note they meant to send a small bird. "Tonight," she reads. "At the holly shrub by the stream. I'll be waiting."

"It's my handwriting!" she exclaims.

David nods.
"Where did you get this?"

"I found it tucked into a pocket of an old shirt... whoever went through my stuff to make sure there was no trace of you left, must have missed it..."

"What do you think it means?"

"I think it may be from the night we ran away together," he replies. "You sent me a message, with the time and the place to meet you..."

Snow nods, looking at the note carefully. "Amazing!" she says reading the note again.

"I'll be waiting."

"Does it bother you, that we may never know exactly what happened? That we may never remember?"

David shakes his head. "I know what happened," he replies. "Pretty obvious really..."

"What do you think happened?" Snow is looking intrigued.

"I met you while I was pretending to be James, fell head over heels in love with you..." he shrugs. "Something along those lines..."

Snow smiles at him then she slips her hand in his, leaning her head on his shoulder. "One more dance, Charming?" she whispers.

Instead of replying, he brings her hand to his lips.
The case that Started it all 1.

Eleven years ago...

Snow White is looking at the invitation Iris, her maid handed her. It reads in raised gilding:

"His Royal Majesty King Midas, 
sovereign of the Eastern Kingdom, 
Lord of the Marshlands the lakes and the Eastern Woods, 
cordially requests that you honor him with your presence 
to a ball in honor of his daughter, her royal highness, princess Catherine, 
in celebration of her recent engagement, 
on the last quarter moon, day of June second."

"Your stepmother would like to know if you are available this morning for dress fittings..." Iris asks.

Snow smiles brightly. "I'll never turn down a new dress... How many days till the ball?"

"Seven days," the maid offers.

"A lot can happen is seven days," Snow murmurs under her breath.

"Would you like to dance?" David dressed in his nicest silver jacket, is looking quite hopeful. A dozen of couples are already dancing in the ballroom, under the bright lights of the chandeliers, the music is swelling and it's is a beautiful sight, the perfect mood, really, if only his fiance would deign to dance with him. This is the very first ball that Midas is hosting since David got engaged to Catherine and moved into the golden castle, he has invited dozens of royals that David doesn't recognize from lands all across the Enchanted Forest. But though the ball is in his daughter's honor, and to celebrate their engagement, David is finding that Catherine, isn't likely to cooperate on the dance floor any more than she is willing to cooperate in every day life.

Catherine in her spectacular burgundy gown turns her nose up and shakes her head. "Not now, my feet are killing me. Too bad I didn't think to wear my comfortable shoes..."

"Would you like me to fetch them for you, my dear?" David sighs, because he is trying, he really is, but Catherine seems absolutely determined to sabotage all his efforts and despise him for as long as they both shall live, and that's no way to start their engagement, that is no way to live. David knows he needs to act, sooner rather than later, so when a very pompous duke strikes a conversation with his fiance he slips outside of the well lit ballroom and takes a sharp turn through the darker servant corridors.

David is feeling quite pleased with himself. He has been exploring the servant's corridors for a few days now and he is confident he can find his way around the castle without being seen. He is about to turn right when something hard smashes him in the face, he feels a sharp pain and he stumbles backwards.

He is touching his throbbing chin, trying to shake off the ringing in his ears, when the mystery person makes a dive for his sword. Even though he is in pain, he isn't about to let his attacker win. He grabs the assailant's hand and pushes them hard against the wall.

Except this doesn't feel right, the wrist he is holding is thin, delicate, probably wearing silk gloves and the person lets out a soft gasp and David looks shocked as he pulls them towards the dim light.
He is facing a beautiful woman, dark hair pulled back, in an intricate hairstyle, red lips parted, green eyes looking apologetically at him.

"You are a girl!" he exclaims letting go.

"A woman!" she replies indignantly, straightening the folds of her purple gown.

"You are Snow White!" he adds incredulously, shocked that he actually recognized her, surprised that the lessons King George forced on him, memorizing the names and ranks of Enchanted Forest royals are actually paying off. Snow White looks much prettier in person than the picture his tutor used.

Princess Snow White, heir to the throne of the Northern kingdom, stepdaughter of Queen Regina. Father Leopold, mother Eva, both of them already deceased. Prince James has never met her in person.

"Well, if you wanted to borrow a weapon all you had to do was ask," he glares at her, rubbing his chin, then he reaches his sword belt and offers her a dagger.

She looks at him surprised, shaking her head. "I'm sorry," she replies. "I mistook you for someone else. Did I hurt you?"

She takes a step forward to examine his chin, "I'm afraid it's bleeding, hold on..." she pulls out an handkerchief embroidered with beautiful white snowflakes. She places her handkerchief on his chin and holds it gently in place. "I'm so sorry..."

Their eyes meet.

"What did you hit me with?"

She has a sheepish smile as she raises her hand showing him the brass door stopper.

"What is this thing anyway?" he frowns.

"A door stopper. What are you doing here?" she asks.

"I could ask you the same question," he retorts. "The ball is that way."

"I... I made a bet with Ella. That I can make it to the tallest tower without anyone noticing..." she looks away.

He frowns. "And what? You decided to kill me rather than lose the bet?" He doesn't for a moment believe her ridiculous story. "Well, I noticed, you lost, you can head back now..."

"Trying to get rid of me?" a half teasing smile on her face. "Aren't you a real prince charming... You must be the new guy. The fiance, right?" She offers a quick curtsy. "Delighted to meet you. Have you killed any innocent creatures lately?"

"Innocent creatures? I'll have you know that dragon terrorized fifteen villages and burned down a school!" he says pulling back.

"I wasn't talking about the dragon, Charming. I was referring to the chimera you killed last year. The one you claimed attacked you first. Everybody knows chimeras don't attach unless provoked! So, tell me, what did you do to her?"

"I've never hurt a chimera in my whole entire life... I would never..." David pauses closing his
eyes. Oh, no. No, no, no. David hasn't hurt a chimera in his whole entire life. James on the other hand? Who knows what kind of innocent creatures James killed. Why, there was a whole wall of creepy trophies in the prince's den, back in king George's castle.

"Well, princesses aren't supposed to attack unprovoked either, yet here we are," he retorts looking at her hand pointedly, "now if you will excuse me," he makes a move to walk around her.

"Where are you going?" she demands.

"Um, not in the business of sharing my plans with liars who lurk in the dark," he snaps back, because this James charade is getting on his last nerve. He needs to solve Frederick's mystery and end this prince James impersonation as soon as possible.

"Charming," Snow scoffs.

"I have a name, you know..."

"Don't care, Charming suits you."

He doesn't reply, he turns around and walks away. He is quite surprised to hear her rushing after him.

"Wait. Maybe you are right. Maybe I did lie..."

"You don't say..." he rolls his eyes picking up his pace.

"Fine. I lied..."

"What are you doing sneaking around in the servant's corridors?"

"Do you ever get the feeling that someone is following you?"

David turns around to look at her, trying to suppress a smirk. "Right now I am!"

Snow looks away. "I'm serious..."

"You think that someone is following you?" he frowns.

"Yes!"

"But you are a princess. Don't you have royal guards protecting you?"

"I do, but I think the best way to get to me would be masquerading as one of my royal guards," she whispers.

"Who do you think is after you?"

"Not sure..." Snow groans.

"What are you doing walking in the dark hallways alone?" he asks incredulously. "You are not safe here!"

"I thought I'd draw him out, then attack him first..."

David's eyes widen "It's a good enough plan, it certainly is brave, but you shouldn't be doing this alone!"
"Who is going to help me?"

"Surely you have friends, princess!"

"I do, but they all think I'm paranoid... You don't believe me either..." Snow hesitates, walking slower now.

"Oh, I believe you..." he replies quietly, shaking his head. "I find that most royals are stark raving mad and quite murderous, so if you say someone is after you, I believe you..." he mumbles under his breath.

"You are a royal," she frowns, looking at him carefully. "Aren't you?"

David sighs. "Of course, how could I forget? I'm a royal, I'm Charming, I kill chimeras for fun..."

Her eyes opening wide. "If you are not royal, then who are you?"

David laughs bitterly. Part of him wishes he could tell someone, anyone the truth. Even telling this princess that smacked him on the head with a door stopper, would be a relief. But he can't. He can't tell anyone.

"I'd tell you, but then there would be even more people coming after you..." he replies and he walks away again.

Snow hurries after him.

"It's alright. You don't have to tell me. I like a good mystery..."

"You like mysteries?"

"Yes," she nods. "If I weren't a princess, I would be joining the knight force... I'd solve crimes!"

"You'd want to join the knight force? On purpose?" he asks incredulously.

"Yes. Why? Do you have something against the knight force too?"

"Would you like a list of grievances?"

"I would..."

David wishes he could tell her how terrible the white knightforce has treated him, but he cannot. The white knightforce recruited and trained him, they taught him everything he knows. What they forgot to mention was that what they really wanted was a doppelganger for prince James, who liked to live dangerously. And even though they were aware prince James was his twin brother, they didn't even bother to tell him, or let the two of them meet, until it was too late. Until the real prince was dead and they were desperate for a prince James look alike to kill a dragon. And then they allowed king George to blackmail him in this position permanently, because the king wanted an alliance with Midas' gold, more than anything else. Really, David's list of grievances against the white knight force is about a mile long.

"Maybe some other time," he shrugs. "Come on..."

"Where are we going?" she frowns.

"If you like mysteries then I have a mystery for you..." he replies taking a turn to the left, Snow in tow.
"What sort of mystery?"

"A messy, royal kind," he replies.

"We are not digging dirt on anyone, are we?"

"Oh, no, quite the opposite in fact, I need to prove a man innocent..."

"Go on..." Snow is intrigued.

"His name is Frederick, he was the captain of the royal guard and he is being accused of embezzling funds..."

"How do you know he didn't do it?"

"Just a hunch," David shrugs. "Here we are..."

He takes a sharp turn and they are outside the royal treasurer's office. David knocks on the door. There is no answer of course, It's late. If the royal treasurer isn't at the ball, he is home with his wife probably drinking tea in front of his fireplace. David thinks longingly of the simple life away from the castle. He's gotten to the habit of picturing every servant's and every attendant's normal life away from this castle.

"Going to have to force the door open," he mumbles, but he doesn't look pleased with the prospect.

"Hold on," Snow pulls out two pins from her hair. A curl now falls loose, framing the side of her face and David has to look away. If she was beautiful in the dark corridors, where there was hardly any light, she is breathtaking now. She sticks the pins in the lock, twists them a couple of times, and then the she points to the doorknob.

"Give it a try," she whispers.

The door opens right away.

"Incredible!" David is really impressed. "Where did you learn how to do that?"

And then they hear footsteps down the hall so both of them tumble into the room right away and shut the door softly behind them. The room is quite dark. Snow doesn't mean to but she crashes into David who tries to take a step backwards and his leg finds on a large mahogany desk.

"You really need to stop assaulting me, princess," he mumbles half jokingly.

"Sorry! Hold on," she walks to the closest window and pulls the curtains back letting the moonlight in.

Now that the room isn't as dark, David lights the candles on the desk. Then they both look around. The treasurer's office is covered in floor to ceiling bookcases overflowing with books and ledgers, parchments and records that no doubt go back to decades. The room is rather dark and gloomy, the only interesting thing in it a gilded birdcage hanging by the window.

The mahogany desk in the middle of the room has a large yellow leafed book in the middle of it.

David opens the book in a hurry. The treasurer's handwriting is even, lines and curves drawn in back ink, in perfect calligraphy.

"What are we looking for?" Snow asks.
"Expenses paid to the royal guard," David replies. About three months ago...

He turns the pages back fast. "It should be around here," he mumbles and they both browse over the page.

"Kitchen, stables, monthly wages, royal doctor visit, royal guard, here!"

"Seven hundred golden coins payable to the royal guard" the ledger clearly states, "For the purchase of new swords."

David's shoulders slope.

"Not what you were hoping for?" Snow asks.

"I talked to Frederick in the dungeon yesterday. He said he received one hundred fifty coins, not seven hundred..."

David lifts up the book and looks closer. He gasps. "Wait! Look at this!"

"There is a page missing!" Snow exclaims excitedly.

"Yes!" he is looking hopeful again.

"Good job! Now check the handwriting!" Snow can barely contain her excitement.

David turns the page back and forth. At first glance the handwriting on the page next to the missing page is identical with the rest of the book.

"Wait, the r's are different," Snow is feeling so thrilled she has a hard time keeping her voice down.

"Someone ripped the page and copied it altering the amount the royal guard received," David smiles brightly. "That's a great start! Figuring out who did it though will be tricky..."

"No, it won't," Snow rushes to the birdcage hanging at the wall next to the window. "We are in luck. It's a goldfinch!"

"What does the goldfinch have to do with anything?" David is looking really confused.

"A goldfinch will remember things for four, maybe even five months back. Most bird's memory doesn't go past thirty days, unless it's an owl, owls remember things forever, but they are asleep all day, so they miss everything..." Snow explains then she opens the cage door. "Come here sweet boy," she whispers. "Can you tell me what happened?"

"You can talk to birds?" David's eyes widen.

Snow nods. "Always could."

"Incredible!

David expects the bird to take advantage of Snow's kindness and fly away never to return, but the bird perches on her finger and chirps sweetly, turning his head to get a better look at her.

"Did someone rip the book a while ago?" Snow whispers.

The bird chirps a couple of times then it flies on her shoulder.
"Are you sure?" Snow whispers again.

David is looking at the beautiful woman in front of him who is having a conversation with a bird. This might be the strangest night of his life. Strange but thrilling he thinks looking at Snow's bright smile.

"A man with the mole on his nose, bald, white hair, his name is Cedric... Does that ring a bell?"

"Cedric!" David is looking so excited. "The treasurer's assistant..."

"Good!" Snow's finger touches the goldfinch's head. "Good job little one..." then she walks towards the window, the bird still in her hand.

"Wait, what are you doing?"

"Letting him go," she explains. "He is no different than the rest of us, he just wants to be free... surely he should be rewarded for his assistance..." and when David doesn't protest again she extends her hand and the bird flies away, but first he flies by her cheek and he pecks her cheek almost like kissing her and Snow White laughs.

Her laugh is like a song, David decides.

When Snow turns back to look at David he is beaming at her and Snow is feeling incredibly self-conscious.

"We should probably get out of here," she replies quickly, looking away.

Once back in the dark corridors she sideglances at him. "So now what are you going to do?"

"I'll find a way to make Cedric admit to what he did. Figure out if he acted on his own or if somebody hired him. Then hopefully Frederick can be released..."

Snow nods. "Is Frederick your friend?"

"No, I met him yesterday for the first time..."

"Oh..." she sounds surprised.

"He is Catherine's..."

"Catherine's friend?"

David looks away. Oh, he doesn't know how to explain this, this is going to sound so weird.

"He is the man Catherine loves, though she won't admit it now" he replies. "She feels betrayed because she believes him guilty..."

"And you don't think he is?"

"The man is head over heels in love with her, I doubt he'd jeopardize that for a few golden coins..."

"It's a lot of golden coins..."

"He loves her," David argues stubbornly.

"And you are trying to prove the man your fiance loves, innocent? Isn't that a little
counterproductive?" Snow frowns.

"I want her to be happy," he shrugs. "Clearly she will never be happy with me..."

Snow stops walking and turns to look at him. He is tall, handsome, smart, funny. His eyes are piercing blue. Hard to imagine any woman disliking him. Why, she can think of a dozen princesses that would cut their right hand off to be engaged to him. "That is incredibly selfless on your part..."

"Not selfless," he shrugs.

"Are you hoping she will break the engagement?" Snow sounds intrigued. And when he doesn't reply she adds, "you are hoping she will break the engagement because you can't..."

"She doesn't love me," he replies. "At least one of us should get a chance to be happy..."

"Right..." Snow starts walking again, avoiding his eyes.

"Come on," he whispers. "Your turn. Let's find out if you are really being followed..."

Snow is looking at him surprised. He points to the window and hands her his dagger.

"Stand over there," he mouths then he unsheathes his sword and hides in the shadows. Snow is leaning against the windowsill looking outside, gripping the dagger so tightly that her knuckles are turning white. They wait in silence for what feels to Snow like a very long time, and just when she thinks she cannot take this any longer, there is the sound of very soft footsteps approaching. Whoever is following her is being very careful. But he does show up, and there is a long knife in his hand.

Her heart is beating so fast. She turns around the moment the man lunges towards her and then David jumps out of the shadow and grabs him. The man crushes to the ground. The fight is brief, the man is strong, but his advantage lay in the shadows, in the element of surprise, he expected to face Snow alone, he did not expect to have to fight a prince.

David punches him on the side of the head and the man is laying there unconscious, bleeding.

Snow's hands are trembling.

"I was right," she whispers at first, then she looks at David eyes wide open. "I... I was right. I was... I kind of hoped I was wrong..."

"I'm sorry!" he replies quietly and when she doesn't respond right away he places his hand on her shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

"No...You saved me..." she says leaning her head on his shoulder, trying hard to calm down.

"Do you recognize him?"

Snow shakes her head. The man is a total stranger.

"You have to figure out who sent him after you..."

"Oh, I know who it was," Snow's voice is so sad.

David can't help himself, he has to know. "Who?" he asks.

"My stepmother," Snow shrugs, trying hard not to cry. "She blames me for ruining her life..."
It's hard to fathom what Snow might have done to incur this much wrath, not when she is being this open and honest. They both stay silent for a minute.

"Listen, Snow, now that you know... you have to take precautions, you have to fight back, you can't just go back to your castle... if it's really your stepmother trying to kill you, she is going to keep trying, you can't give her that chance..."

"Where would I even go?" she smiles bitterly. "Run and hide in the forest?"

"Spend the rest of the summer with a friend. Royals do that sort of thing all the time... what was your friend's name? Ella?" he replies.

"Ella is about to get married, I'm sure she wants privacy..."

"Here is what we do," he replies. "I'll have him locked up. I'll say he was a random thief... If no one knows there was an attempt on your life tonight, if no one knows he failed, your stepmother won't hire someone to replace him right away... it will buy you some time..."

Snow is still looking stunned. His plan is not half bad. "You are right. You will do that for me?"

"Of course...Now, get back to the ballroom. I'll take care of this..."

"Thank you..." she squeezes his arm and before he gets a chance to respond Snow walks away.

David gets Rupert, one of the servants he trusts and then they both alert the royal guards to arrest the intruder.

Thirty minutes later David walks into the ballroom.

"There you are James," Catherine is looking furious. "Where have you been? Are you trying to embarrass me as much as you can tonight? What happened to your jacket? And your face? Did you get in a fight? Were you bleeding?"

Ella is talking excitedly to Snow but she looks distracted. They both hear princess Catherine hissing angrily at her fiance and for some reason Snow looks stricken. They can't make out what she is saying, but it must have been awful because the prince walks away from the encounter looking a bit dazed, like he's just been punched in the gut.

"Snow what's wrong?" Ella is looking worried.

Snow is watching him closely. "Nothing is wrong. Do you want to meet the new guy? The prince?" Snow asks.

"The chimera killer?" Ella frowns. "No thanks, I think I'll pass..."

"Come on, he doesn't look that bad," Snow replies.

"Seriously?" Ella is looking incredulous but Snow walks towards the new prince.

"Hello," she curtsies politely. "I don't believe we've met. My name is Snow White, this is my friend Ella!" Except Ella got distracted by Thomas her fiance and she didn't actually follow her. "I thought she was right behind me..."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Snow White," he looks surprised but he offers a half smile and a quick bow.
"And your name is..." Snow is smiling at him.

"It's James," he replies.

"Nice to meet you James."

"James?" A very annoyed Catherine glares at him from across the room, so he excuses himself and walks away.

When Ella finally arrives, Snow is standing there by herself. "Well?" she shrugs. "Where did he go? Don't just stand there on your own, Snow, let's dance!"

Lost in the sea of royals Snow and Ella dance together, and Snow does her best not to watch Catherine and James. Catherine remains annoyed for the rest of the evening and Snow's heart pinches, every time Catherine rolls her eyes or glares at James.

"So, I'm thinking that I would like to visit you some time soon..." Snow tells Ella as they are twirling on the dance floor.

"You do?" Ella is looking thrilled.

"I think I need to get away from my stepmother for a while..."

"Oh, I know the feeling," Ella smiles sympathetically. "When can we expect you?"

"As soon as possible, tomorrow even..." Snow replies.

Queen Regina motions Snow that she is ready to leave the ball. Snow hurries to say goodbye to Ella, then she heads to the corner where James is standing.

"Will you write to tell me what happened? How you got Cedric to confess?" she smiles at him.

"If you wish," he replies maintaining a polite distance. "Though I hope by then that you will be somewhere safe... far far away..."

"The birds will still know where I am," she replies, offering a conspiratorial smile. "It was very nice meeting you, Charming..."

"I told you, it's James."

"Still like Charming better," Snow replies, a wishful look on her face and David can't help but smile.

He bows politely, Snow curtsies then he watches her walk out of the ballroom, wishing he could follow her. Right by the door, before she disappears for good, Snow turns around and casts one last smile to his direction. And James who used to be David, looks at princess Snow White walk away and for the first time in weeks he feels a soft whisper of hope stir in his heart.
The Case of the Severed Bond

And now...

David is reading through one of Snow's old case files, his arm leaning on his desk when a paper bird crushes on his shoulder.

"Getting bored?" he smirks.

Snow is feigning innocence. She is squatting on top of her desk absentmindedly looking at some old pictures. "I'd look inside if I were you," she says trying to hide her mischievous smile. "Everyone knows that paper birds contain very important coded messages, vital information even..."

David opens up the paper airplane and then his eyebrows shoot up. "It's not at all coded, in fact it's rather explicit, why it even has a little drawing here, on the right..." he flips the paper sideways trying to understand the drawing. "Oh, I see," he is looking intrigued. "Um, in here? Right now?"

"Tonight," Snow smiles.

"I'm filing this," he smirks, refolding the paper bird and putting it in his pocket. "This is evidence. Or maybe it would look good hanging above our bed? My wife said she wants to...""

"No!" Snow interrupts. She is looking suddenly worried. "You've got to throw it away...what if Emma finds it?"

"I am burning this!" he changes his mind instantly and the little paper bird finds get crumpled and finds it's way into the trash can. "Mrs Charming, we are supposed to be working, I would urge you to show some restraint..." he smirks playfully.

"I like it when you sound so official," Snow says fanning herself.

David laughs. He is about to reply when the door opens. They both turn to look at the woman who walked inside their office, who is wearing large sunglasses, covering half her face.

Her designer shoes probably cost more than three month's rent for their office, Snow thinks, and then all other thoughts slip her mind because she recognizes her. She is non other than princess Ella, proud mother of triplets, married to Thomas, heir to the western kingdom.

Snow and Ella were friends once, but that was a long time ago. And even though Snow abdicated, Ella is still a princess.

"Snow?" Ella smiles brightly taking off her sunglasses, then turning to David. "And the chimera killer," she says teasingly. "You are supposed to be dead, you know..."

"Who?" David doesn't know how to reply. There is no right way to respond to this. Clearly Ella remembers things that he doesn't. "Your highness will forgive me, but I really don't remember much...""

"Ugh, don't be so formal..." Ella cuts him off. "Please call me Ella. Snow and I go way back. Surely you remember me Snow White..."

"Of course I do" Snow smiles back at Ella. "But it feels like a whole other lifetime ago..."
Ella nods looking down. "A whole other lifetime ago," she says wistfully and for a moment she looks incredibly sad, then she goes back to her bright smile. "I should be congratulating you for your appointment as council woman..."

"Thank you!" Snow shrugs. She doesn't feel like this appointment is something worth celebrating. The truth is that she tried really hard to get out of it.

"Is it true?" Ella asks, her eyes sparkling, "is it true that you used to be lovers a long time ago, then your memories were erased and you found each other ten years later? Because if it is, it's the most tragically romantic thing I've heard in such a long time..."

"It's mostly true," Snow glances at David.

"So, when you left my castle... did you run away together?" Ella is looking at Snow expectantly.

"Your castle?" Snow is confused.

"Why yes, you were spending the summer in our castle, Thomas' castle to be exact... and we were getting ready for my wedding, you had your gown all picked out and everything. One day you were helping me pick out flowers for the wedding and the next day you'd disappeared. Left me a note, asking me to cover for you, to pretend that you were sick for a while and that you were going home, which I did... but you never did go home. Me covering for you did buy you time though, threw people off your trail and that's all I know... Prince James died, you disappeared and I never heard from you again...until the abdication, but that was such a complicated mess, I didn't know how to handle that..."

Snow looks away. Ella's support would have meant the world to her during that time. But Ella remained silent, and Snow had to face her council and her kingdom alone.

"What can we do for you Ella?" Snow asks because she is not sure she is quite ready to rehash the past.

"Oh, yeah," and now Ella is looking down. "I thought that maybe you can help me..." she says looking nervously outside the window. "I mean, if anyone can understand me, it should be you... But before I tell you what I want, I need to say that if you agree to take my case, you need to be very careful. This information can't come out, if it does, it's going to be in the evening news and in all the gossip magazines and ... it just can't happen... I can't handle that..."

"Of course," Snow replies.

Ella hesitates, and Snow stays silent, waiting.

"You see, before my triplets... I think that there was another child..."

"Another child?" Snow asks.

Ella nods. "A child that nobody remembers," she says and now her eyes are welling up. "And I thought you, since you know how easy it is for memories and people to get lost and forgotten, maybe you can help me..."

Snow takes a deep breath. "Of course we can help," she says decisively. "Tell me everything you remember..."

Ella shakes her head. "That's just it," she replies. "I don't know that I remember anything. But sometimes I wake up at night because the baby is crying and I have to feed it... and of course the
baby is not there. And Thomas says its stress because of the triplets. But it's not the triplets Snow, you have to believe me... Raising the triplets is an absolute joy, I am not stressed about it. It's a different child... a different cry and I have no information, I remember absolutely nothing about it...

"Boy or a girl?" Snow asks.

"I have no idea! I told you I don't remember anything..."

"Right, but you see, what I find is that with missing memories, the information is still there, inside your head, and it only shows up when you are not trying to remember..." Snow's voice is soft, reassuring. "It's all there until someone can just reach and and grab a little snippet of them..." she continues, and Ella is listening carefully. Then Snow abruptly turns to face her. "Was it a boy or a girl, Ella?"

"A girl," Ella replies instantly without thinking. And then she gasps. She has no idea where that answer came from. And then the realization of what just happened hits her. A girl! A baby girl! And Ella covers her mouth with her hand and is now stifling her sobs. "A girl!" she cries out. "A little girl... Snow, I lost my little girl..."

"I know," Snow whispers and she sits next to Ella placing her hand on Ella's shoulder.

"I mean, I have a charmed life, three beautiful children and a husband who adores me and maybe it's all in my head and I should leave well enough alone... but where is she? Where is my baby Snow White?"

"I don't know," Snow replies feeling her own eyes well up. "I don't, but in my experience, people that are connected will always find their way to each other. If it was true for me I know it will be true for you... so I'm going to need to ask you some questions."

David hands Ella a cup of steaming hot tea and a handkerchief and she is wiping her eyes looking incredibly grateful.

"We are going to need to talk to Thomas too of course..." Snow adds.

"Of course," Ella nods. "He is out of town at the moment. He will be gone for a couple of weeks, he is in an envoy to Triton's underwater kingdom... And if you need to still talk to him once he is back I'll let him know..."

"We could just talk to him over the magic mirror, he doesn't need to be present..." David suggests.

Ella shakes her head. "Oh, I wouldn't want to bother him while he is working... besides magic mirror's don't get good coverage underwater... and this is just too sensitive to talk over the magic mirror..."

Snow frowns. That's a bit unusual, you'd think Ella would be wanting them to talk to Thomas as soon as possible. "Um, forgive me but I do need to ask. Ella, this is Thomas' child we are looking for, isn't it?"

Ella blinks a couple of times, a stunned look on her face. "Why, of course, who else?"

"What do you think?" Snow asks once Ella has walked out of their office.

"I think that it would be nice to meet at least one Enchanted Forest prince of princess that wasn't messed up by being royalty..." David replies shaking his head. "Why? What's your take on this?"
"I'm thinking that this case hits a little too close to home," she replies.

"Does that mean you don't want to take it?"

"Oh, we'll take it," she shrugs. "I'm in if you are in."

"Okay," David grins. "I'm in. The first official case of White and Nolan. As long as I'm the one filing things..." he says pointing to Snow's desk that's already a mess.

"Right," Snow smiles back. "Any idea how to look for a missing child without anyone finding out what we are doing?"

"Why, council woman Snow," he replies, "I'd say we visit a few orphanages, let the reporters make a fuss about it, and then ask them if we can take a very discreet look at the list of their foundlings..."

Snow gapes at him. "You are good," she says, not bothering to disguise the admiration in her voice. "You want to use my new position to get access to information?"

"Of course," he smiles brightly. "You don't want to be in the council anyway, you might as well get something out of it..."

"That's a bit...-" Snow hesitates. "I don't know... Blurring the lines?"

"Investigator White, I don't know what to say," David gives her a mocking frown, leaning back on his chair. "If you are unwilling to bend the rules, how am I supposed to work with you..."

And Snow gasps, recognizing her words. That's exactly what she told Jiminy on the very first day when he insisted on partnering her up with Lieutenant Nolan.

"He is white Knight! White knights don't break rules, they don't even bend the rules, how am I supposed to work with him..."

"You heard that, did you?"

"I heard lots of things."

"You didn't hold it against me..." Snow is looking quite surprised.

"Oh, I was pretty annoyed with you, especially when you used my own magic bean to transport me to your house without as much as a warning..."

Snow makes a face. "I forgot about that..."

"But then I met Emma," David shrugs. "It was very hard to stay angry with you after that..."

"Aw!" Snow is smiling now. "My Emma..." and then she glances at her notes on Ella's case. "Can't imagine what it's like to be missing a child... Alright, so I suppose we ask my bossy fairy godmothers to dress me up because we are going to be royal benefactors, visiting orphanages..."

Snow isn't exactly looking forward to another session with her unofficial makeover team, but now that she is a councilwoman she better get used to it. Besides Ruby and Nova are going to be so excited.

"Exactly."
And then the next moment Tink has materialized and is sitting on top of Snow's desk. "Hello! Are we doing anything fun?"

Snow jumps, but David seems used to Tink's sudden appearances.

"Define fun!" he shrugs.

"Anything challenging and impossible that requires fairy assistance?"

"Looking for a missing royal child," Snow replies. "And we have to do covert investigating because the royal family doesn't want the scandal in the morning news..."

"Oooh! Convert royal snooping! I like it." Tink is rubbing her hands together. "Who is the secretive royal?"

"Princess Ella," Snow explains.

"Who is that? Is that the one who's turned her castle into a library?"

"No, that would be princess Belle. Princess Ella is the blond one with the triplets..."

"Oh," Tink looks uncertain. She can't keep the Enchanted forest royals straight. "What can I do?"

Snow fills her in with the particulars of Ella's case.

"So the child might have existed, but there is no actual proof?"

"Exactly," David nods.

"She has to have existed," Snow protests. "Ella seemed pretty shaken..."

"Ooh! I know, I know! Can I check for severed bonds?" Tink beams at them.

"How does that work?" Snow is looking intrigued.

"Same as fairy DNA testing. We can make the princess' essence to connect to those of her children. And then we can see if any of the bonds are severed. Then you'll know for sure there is a missing child..."

"Perfect!" Snow exclaims.

"This is better done at night, the essence glows brighter in the dark..."

"I'll see if Ruby can watch Emma tonight," Snow reaches for her magic mirror. "Five minutes later Snow is looking concerned. "Ruby is busy tonight..."

"I'll stay with Emma," David offers. "I can't imagine that the princess wants a large audience gawking at her for the fairy testing anyway. It will be better if it's just you..."

Ella's castle is the very definition of a fairytale palace. There are stained glass windows in every hall, fragrant rose bushes climbing up on trellises, decorative garlands and murals, colorful mosaics and singing water fountains. Everywhere they look is a feast for the eyes. Nothing like Regina's imposing gloomy castle. Snow is looking around intrigued, Emma would love living in this castle.

"Love what you've done with the place," she tells Ella.
"I did change everything," Ella replies. "Do you remember how stuffy it was?"

Snow is drawing a blank. She remembers meeting Ella and becoming friends instantly, but then her memories fade. She does not remember staying in Thomas' castle with Ella, she does not remember running away or asking Ella to cover for her.

"You really don't remember, do you!" Ella is looking amazed.

Through several corridors and three grand halls Ella leads them to a staircase up to her children's bedroom, where the triplets are asleep all snuggled up together. Though there are three beautiful canopy beds in the room, the triplets are all laying together in one of the beds. They are looking like plump little angels, two boys and one girl, sweet blond curls framing their faces, cheeks rosy from sleep, long eyelashes, looking so peaceful.

"How old are they now?"

"Almost four. They are my little rascals," Ella smiles. "Nanny puts them to sleep in their own beds and as soon as she is convinced that they are asleep and walks away, they sneak into Robbie's bed and lay down together..."

"Aw, that's too cute," Snow fawns over them. "Ella, they look just like you.."

"Celia has Thomas' dimples," Ella's voice is pulsing with tenderness pride.

"Alright," Tink coughs a couple of times. This might be a little too much domestic bliss for her liking. "Let's do this...

"Will it hurt?" Ella asks placing her hand on Tink's arm.

"They won't feel a thing," Snow sounds very reassuring.

"You've done this? Your child didn't feel a thing?" Ella is not convinced yet.

"Emma slept through it," Snow replies, thinking of that incredible life altering day, when she told David about her torture induced memories, and when they asked Tink to do a fairy DNA test on Emma.

Tink hesitates. "Are you ready?"

Ella draws a sharp breath and nods.

Tink sprinkles a little bit of fairy dust towards Ella's heart then she whispers "find your children..."

Ella's essence looks like a silver moonbeam, it rises instantly from her heart and connects to her three sleeping children. The three lines are strong and bright, glowing, illuminating her children's faces.

Just three lines, one line connecting to each child. Perhaps Ella is mistaken about the missing child, Snow thinks and then she sees it, a faded, darker thread, like fraying fabric almost invisible because the other threads are so bright and strong.

"There it is," Tink whispers.

The thinner line reaches towards the open window, swaying in the breeze.

"I see it" Ella exclaims, her eyes opening wide, her voice cracking as she rushes towards the
window. "I see it! Can we follow it?"

"It's a severed bond," Tink replies. "We can't follow it..."

"Please!" Ella whispers, tears streaming down her cheeks. "Please!" her hands reaches as if to tug on the bond, reach for her missing child. But the bond is not a tangible thing, so her fingers just run through the light.

"We did this test to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that there is a missing child," Snow explains. "And now we know... we have a plan on how to find this child, Ella, but it's going to take time, it's not going to happen tonight..."

Ella wipes her eyes and is looking hopeful again. "Alright," she whispers. "Alright... thank you for doing this..."

"You are welcome," Snow replies and then somehow Ella and Snow are hugging each other.

Tink is shifting her weight uncomfortably. This is too much for her, she wants to just disappear, but Snow is family. She can't just teleport away and leave Snow behind. Not without having to explain to David why she left his wife at Ella's castle. So she stands perfectly still and waits for the emotional moment to pass.

Tink glances at the three children sleeping tightly and the looks at the stars through open window. The children look so innocent. And the window is open. So dangerous, Tink thinks. Practically an invitation to Neverland shadows to come and entice a child to fly away. How devastated would Ella be if she lost another child?

Ella is Snow's friend. Snow is family. So when no one is looking Tink designs and throws a protection spell around the triplets room. A spell that would keep any sort of Neverland intruders away. Then she lets out a sigh of contentment. Crisis averted.

Everything is perfectly quiet in Snow's cottage. Snow tiptoes into Emma's room to find David asleep, leaning on Emma's headboard, the book he was reading to Emma still clutched to his chest. Emma is snoring lightly and Wilby is quite content laying at her feet.

"Goodnight, sweet girl," Snow whispers, kissing her, then she shakes David gently.

"Snow," he smiles, but he doesn't make a move to get up. He closes his eyes and he is sound asleep again. Funny, Snow thinks, David is the one to jump up whenever she gets a nightmare, or when Emma walks into their bedroom in the morning. Snow assumed he was a light sleeper. But maybe he is finally exhausted, after taking care of her night after night, waking her up every time she has a terrible dream. She should let him sleep here, but his legs are hanging off Emma's bed, he doesn't exactly look that comfortable.

Snow shakes him again and this time he sits up.

"I'm awake," he mumbles. "You are back...How did it go?"

"It worked," Sow whispers, tugging on his arm "I'll tell you all about it tomorrow, now come to bed..."

"Alright," he murmurs then he practically sleepwalks into their bedroom and sits at the edge of their bed rubbing his eyes. "Hold on... I'm awake, give me a minute..." he says.

"A minute for what?" Snow frowns.
It takes him three tries but he does manage to take his t-shirt off.

"There was a paper bird, and a little drawing, about tonight..." he yawns. "No code... just vital information... I didn't forget," he is almost making sense. "Can't fall asleep yet, my wife has plans..."

Snow stifles her smile and leans in to kiss him, running her fingers through his hair. "Your wife, huh? You look exhausted," she whispers, cradling his head on her body. "Go back to sleep, Charming. I'll send you another paper bird tomorrow, I promise..."

He mumbles something indiscernible, as he lays back on his pillow.

Snow covers him up with a quilt, then she lights a candle on her nightstand before she climbs on their bed. She doesn't lay down right away. She sits up on the bed and thinks of Ella laying in bed in the castle alone, not knowing where her daughter is.

Snow's eyes well up. She is so grateful, that after ten, hard, foggy confusing years, tonight she knows exactly where her people are. Emma is sleeping in her bedroom. David is laying next to her.

He is breathing evenly but he must sense her looking at him because he opens his eyes, and this time he looks entirely awake. "Something wrong?" he asks, then he notes the candle on her nightstand. "Did you get another nightmare?"

"Nothing is wrong, everything is as it should be..." Snow blows the candle out and then she smiles, because he reaches for her and pulls her in his arms.
"Visiting the orphanage?" The Crimson fairy is in his office in the royal castle looking appraisingly at Snow's outfit. Nova has outdone herself yet again, Snow is wearing a white tunic accented with silver threaded embroidery and an emerald necklace and she is looking incredible. She didn't even fight her on dressing up this morning. In fact she was incredibly grateful when both Nova and Ruby showed up, ready to help her.

"Watching you ready to step up and take on your royal responsibilities is quite a relief," the Crimson Fairy continues and the he sets his eyes on David. "But if you are going to do that Council Woman Snow, perhaps now is the time to discuss the issue of your husband..."

"Excuse me?" Snow frowns, and she doesn't realize it but she's already taken a step in front of David, as if she can block with her body whatever insulting words thing the Crimson fairy might hurl his way.

"There is no need to mince words, I am sure you already know, your husband is a disgraced former white knight. And any positive publicity your visit to the orphanage may bring to our council, it will be marred by his social standing. But, there is a way we could circumvent that altogether...."

But Snow isn't even listening, her face is flushed and she is feeling so angry.

"My husband isn't one of your pawns! He doesn't have to conform to whatever it is you think he should be!" Snow snaps and then she doesn't bother to wait for a response, she storms out of Crimson's office.

David follows her outside.

Snow is walking and talking fast, it'a hard to tell of she is talking to him or just mumbling to herself. "I knew it, I knew it, I knew this would happen, I knew it, it's already happening... David I'm so sorry!" she finally turns to face him when they are at the courtyard, ready to board the royal carriage.

"For what?" he frowns, offering his hand to help her climb on. "You didn't do anything wrong!"

"For what Crimson said," she replies, "for this backwards mentality that demands some kind of unattainable perfection out of people associating with royalty..."

"I wasn't offended," he shrugs, settling in the carriage sit next to her. "I mean, he was blunt, but what he said was pretty accurate. I am a former white knight. I suppose that I should be grateful that's all they are calling me, and not former fraudulent prince..."

Snow turns to look at him. Does he really mean that? Is he really alright with what is happening so far and what they are about to do?

He smiles back at her. "Are you alright?" he asks.

"You are really okay with all this aren't you?" she says, unable to hide the surprise form her voice.

"I'm fine. Very happy. And I will be ecstatic, if we manage to get some useful information out of this whole event..." he says.

"Right," Snow nods. She'd almost forgotten that they are doing this mainly to get information on
foundlings to shed some light on Ella's case.

"Are you ready your highness?" the royal coachman asks.

"Snow. It's just Snow," she sighs then she nods. "We are ready..." And then she turns to David. "I don't suppose he'd let me drive the royal carriage..."

"Race the royal carriage, you mean..." David smirks. Because Snow doesn't just drive anything. She speeds like some kind of experienced Enchanted Forest 500 pumpkin race driver. "I doubt it. But if you were the Queen he'd have to..."

"The Queen," Snow scoffs, shaking her head. "I don't think so..." she leans back, stretching her feet to the seat across from her. "Can you imagine?"

"I can..."

Snow half glares at him. "You are serious?"

David doesn't reply.

"You'd really be okay with this, wouldn't you?" she asks, unable to hide the surprise in her voice.

"Would I be okay with the kingdom ran by an smart, compassionate, beautiful Queen that happens to be my wife? Why, yes, yes I would..."

Snow looks out the window and doesn't reply. The enchanted forest is rushing past her, trees and cottages and people who occasionally stop what they are doing and wave. Snow waves back, still frowning. Do they know she is the one in the royal carriage? Is this something they are doing out of habit, whenever a royal passes by or are they honestly sending well wishes her way?

There isn't any more time to think about this, because judging at the amount of reporters standing by this gate they are already at the orphanage. The walls are tall and looming, the metal gate is shut and about thirty reporters and photographers are lined up trying to get a clear shot of the former princess.

"Welcome, Princess Snow White!" the sign reads at the gate and Snow hesitates, before she steps out of the carriage.

"Not a princess anymore," she mutters mainly to herself, as if she wants to make sure she remembers. She doesn't want to get caught up in all this excitement.

Lights flash over and over blinding her, and Snow does her best not to close her eyes, instead she reaches for David's hand, and smiles for reporters, the royal photographers and the cameras.

"Stand and pose with your husband, princess!" the reporters beg.

"Did you secretly marry?"

"Would he be willing to adopt your child?"

"Is he the real father?"

"Did you abandon Snow in the woods as soon as the baby was born?"

She is pretty certain the reporters already know their story, they are just asking questions hoping she will slip and feed them a juicy tidbit they don't already know. Or she will snap and yell at them
and they will get a shot of Snow looking menacing on their front page.

Snow is blinking fast, trying to ignore them, and she is grateful when she is in the orphanage grounds and the metal gates are shut behind turns to look at David, it's hard to tell what he is thinking at the moment, but she can't ask. Because there are children lined up to greet her and a little blond girl hands her a bouquet of flowers. This girl is younger than Emma. Snow smiles and leans in to kiss her.

"Are you a real life princess?" the little girls asks.

"What's your name?" Snow says evading the question.

"I'm Chloe," the girl offers a bow.

"Well, come on, Chloe, won't you show me around..." Snow replies offering her hand.

"Your royal Highness it is such an honor," the Indigo Fairy is in charge at this orphanage and she seems to be a little starstruck.

"Please, call me Snow," she replies and the fairy is looking scandalized. Like she could dream of ever being this disrespectful.

Snow has taken a tour of the dining room, the playrooms and the bedrooms and is now talking to the fairy administrators, who are eager to show her their finances, their fundraising efforts and their bills. When Snow asks about adoption rates they are quite happy to open their ledgers and show her, how the process works, why they even hand her copies of adoption filing papers.

"We take every precaution before letting someone walk away with one of our children...There is a two year waiting period before the adoptions get finalized" the Indigo Fairy is trying to sound reassuring. "Why the 'Evil stepmother protection act' was implemented one hundred year ago and it has served the children of the Enchanted Forest really well..."

Nothing protected me from my stepmother, Snow thinks.

And when Snow asks about foundlings they show her their registration records without a second thought.

Snow scans the page, asking about the ages and the adoption status of the enchanted forest foundlings. Two boys were found nine years ago. They are both adopted now.

"Are you looking for someone in particular?" the Indigo fairy asks.

Snow cringes but there is no accusation in the fairy's eyes. She is just trying to help.

"Look," the fairy replies pulling up "I understand that you are unable to tell me who you are looking for, princess, so let me send you this. I am sending you the Enchanted Forest list of children that are staying in ours and the corresponding orphanages in the other kingdoms for the past twenty years. I hope this helps. Let me know if there is anything more I can do..."

And Snow doesn't bother to tell her that she is not a princess anymore. She just nods gratefully.

When she steps back outside, she finds David in the middle of a 'troll bridge is falling down' game.

"Troll bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down," the children sing and clap, picking sides.
"Won't you join us" he smiles at her, "we can use some reinforcements."

Snow laughs and joins in.

The game ends in a tug of war where David and Snow are on opposite ends, and when Snow's team wins and her team are celebrating a six year old Fred turns his accusatory glares at David. "You let them win cause she is pretty!"

"Maybe," David shrugs.

It's quite late when they get home. Snow was planning on pouring over the list of children she got from the Indigo Fairy with David, but Emma is waiting for them at the door, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Star is missing," she says, and she must have been crying for a while, because her eyes are red and her shoulders are shaking.

"Star? The turtle?" David asks.

"We'll find him," Snow tries to reassure her, but Emma is inconsolable.

"I looked everywhere, Ruby did too..." Emma points to the small easel she has set up in front of the fireplace. She's taped pictures of Star on it, and drawn a diagram of the cottage and used colorful yarns to mark Star's favorite routes from her bedroom to the living room.

"Sweetheart, I'm sure the turtle is fine..." Snow tries again.

"but the back door was open," Emma bursts into fresh tears. "He could be anywhere, anywhere..."

"That's good news," Snow interrupts. "If the back door is open that means he is in the back yard. I'll have you know that's a perfect place for your little friend..."

"But it's dark and cold," Emma laments. "He will be alone, and he is going to get scared and lonely..."

Snow lets out a soft sigh. She's run out of rational arguments.

"Let's go look for him. Come on!" David offers.

There is an array of silver lanterns stacked by their back door, leftover decorations form their wedding.

"Can we light them?" Emma asks.

David lights two lanterns and hands one to Emma.

"Not just two. All of them," Emma replies, her bottom lips quivering.

David lights all twenty lanterns and Emma spreads them all around the back yard while looking for Star under every bush, leaving no stone unturned.

"Do you think he could have jumped over the fence?" Emma asks.

David stifles his smile looking at the six foot fence marking the end of Snow's property. "There is no way," he replies.
"Maybe if we leave the lanterns on all night, maybe he can find his way home," Emma says quietly then she sits on the large backyard swing, leaning her head back. She looks so tired.

"It's getting late, how about we get you to bed and resume the search tomorrow..." David tries to suggest, but that only causes Emma to burst into tears.

"How can you even say that to me" Emma sobs. "How can I go to sleep when he is out there alone..."

David has no idea how to argue with his daughter about this.

When Snow steps out into the backyard all the lanterns are lit, David is sitting next to Emma on the back yard swing, his arm wrapped around her shoulders. Emma is looking miserable.

"Any luck?" Snow asks.

David shakes her head.

"Can't find him," Emma's lip quivers. "We've looked everywhere..."

"Well, it's time for bed... I'm sure he'll turn up tomorrow" Snow says gently and Emma shakes her head.

"No! I can't leave him out here alone..."

"I know, and I'm so sorry sweet girl, this is incredibly upsetting, but I need you to go to bed..." Snow tries again. "How about I make you some hot chocolate and then..."

Emma shakes her head.

"Emma, I'm really tired. I need you to be reasonable about this, Star will turn up..." Snow sighs.

"No..." Emma replies, tears streaming down her cheek. "He is lost and he is going to think I forgot about him and he is going to be gone for years just like Dad was..."

Snow closes her mouth completely forgetting what she was about to say next, glancing at David instead.

"Alright," she replies then she walks over to the garden shed, opens the door and pulls out a large green bag. She tosses the contents on the lawn. There are tent poles and tent pegs and a rain fly and a large folded tent. "I guess we are sleeping outside..." she continues.

David helps Snow set up the tent, it only collapses on them once, before it's secured to the ground, Emma brings out pillow and blankets. About ah hour later all three of them are laying inside the tent, Wilby sleeping right outside. Emma's already asleep, Snow is laying her head on David's arm. It doesn't look like it's going to rain tonight, so they left the rain fly off, which gives them a clear view of the stars.

"This is nice," Snow mumbles half asleep. "Though I do hope Star will show up by tomorrow. I'm not ready to move into the back yard permanently..."

David laughs. "Star will turn up," he says, sounding quite confident.

"He better. He is out there, no doubt living his best life, eating fresh grass, or foraging or whatever it is happy runaway turtles do" Snow groans. They are both silent for a while then Snow continues. This time her voice is cracking. "When Emma said Star is going to be lost like you were..." she
pauses wiping her eyes. "I have no defense against that sort of argument..."

David pulls her in closer.

"I can't stop thinking of all these children at the orphanage today David, they are all alone..." Snow whispers.

"Most of them have families that want to adopt them, it's just that the process is too slow," David replies.

Snow nods. "Two year waiting period. 'Evil stepmother protection act.'"

"It just so happens that I know a council woman who could influence things towards the right direction," he smiles.

Snow props he head on her hand an looks at him closely. "Are you suggesting that I get involved?"

"What's the point of having power if you can't use it for those who most need it?" he argues.

Snow sighs. "David, the more I get involved, the more they are going to interfere with our personal lives... and demand things..."

"They are going to interfere with our personal lives either way, you might as well get some good out of it..." he argues.

"I found him!" Emma screeching voice startles Snow awake. She sits up, breathing fast. Her body is feeling stiff. It's so cold outside. She's completely forgotten that they all slept in a tent last night. Emma and David are already up, so Snow finds herself tangled in blankets, struggling with the tent zipper.

"What is it, what's going on?" she mumbles once she gets herself free of the tent and back into the cottage.

David is flipping pancakes while Emma is in the kitchen, clasping the turtle tightly to her heart, while Wilby is barking loudly, eager to participate in Emma's victory.

"I will never ever, ever lose you again!" Emma declares tearfully to her turtle who promptly hides his head into his shell. "I will never let you out of my sight. Mom! Can Star go to school with me?"

Snow is blinking fast, still confused.

"Emma's hamper had tipped over and he'd snuck inside it." David explains.

"Please, Mommy, please!" Emma begs.

"No, sweetheart, he can't go to school with you," Snow replies, "now go put your shoes on, you are going to miss the school squash..."

In the office Snow is staring at her magic mirror shaking her head. David and Snow spent the last five hours looking up the children on Indigo fairy's list.

"I don't see it," she sighs. "Only two foundling into the Enchanted Forest registry around that time and they both were boys..."

"How about this one?" David points at a name at the list.
"Helen Storm," Snow reads out loud. "Very sad story, her mother died of complications during childbirth..."

"This one?"

"Selena Fray. Parents drove their cart off the troll bridge, the trolls were horrified...they were the ones that saved her" Snow explains. "Can't be her..."

"Alright... We don't have much to go on... If the baby wasn't given to the fairies or placed in an orphanage then...-" David lets his voice trail off.

"Then the next step should be..." Snow's eyes open wide.

"I don't like where this is going..." David interrupts trying to buy them some time. "We should talk to Thomas first, before we decide to poke the bear..."

To his surprise Snow actually agrees with him.

She is looking relieved. "When is Thomas coming back?"

"On Monday."

"Then I guess we have some time..." Snow hesitates. "Would you go to the castle with me?"

The Crimson fairy is looking quite stern, tapping his fingers impatiently on his desk staring at Snow White and David sitting across from him.

"You'd like for the council to revise adoption laws," he says, frowning. "This constant intrusion in government affairs isn't what we agreed on. It isn't even what you wanted," he says, practically glaring at Snow.

"Yes," Snow says sifting uncomfortably at her chair. Something about this castle always makes her feel like she is nothing more but an annoying child, always in trouble, always ruining Regina's life. "But I was a the orphanage yesterday...-"

The Crimson fairy raises his finger, silencing her mid sentence. "It's a reasonable request," he continues, "one that Madam Willow will wholeheartedly support, and I might be convinced to stand behind as well," he continues. "But things cannot go on like this...-"

"Like what?" Snow frowns.

The Crimson Fairy looks at David sternly. "There is the matter of your husband..."

"What about him?" Snow stands up, crossing her hands on her chest.

"Sit down, princess!" the Crimson fairy glares at her. "If you want adoption reform you will listen to my terms!"

"I'm listening!" Snow sits at the edge of her sit, scowling, ready to jump back up again.

"As I was saying the other day, when you refused to listen to me, your husband is a disgraced former white knight. We need him to be more, he's already more than proven himself..."

Snow looks at David, her eyes open wide. He is looking just as stunned as she feels.

"What are you proposing?" Snow's voice sounds very small.
"A knighting ceremony. We offer him knighthood, based on merit, as a reward for rescuing the Silver Fairy and all the other civilians he rescued... he was in the papers last month, hailed as a hero, was he not?"

Snow is gaping at the Crimson fairy. This isn't at all what she expected. David beams at her. And before either of them gets to utter another word the Crimson Fairy adjust his monocle on his nose.

"How about this Sunday at 2.00?"

Snow stammers "this Sunday will be great," and the Crimson Fairy stifles his smile.

"Will there be anything else?" he asks signifying the end of this meeting.

Snow in a golden gown, her hair in simple but elegant chignon, is standing at the dais in the hall of ceremonies. Her heart is beating quite fast. She hasn't participated in any formal royal ceremony for over ten years. Emma smiles at her. She is in her best dress, standing across from her next to Grumpy and Nova, Blue and Jiminy. The whole council is there as is the entire black knight force, three representatives from Midas' kingdom along with Ruby and Granny. Tink of course refused to come, this whole entire affair way too formal and crowded for her liking, but Snow is pretty certain she's spotted her in the crowd wearing a green cape, half hiding behind a column. Throx the centaur is standing next to Sneezy and Happy and there are even a few trolls that Snow recognizes in the last row, and a woman in sunglasses and a fur coat who might be the Silver Fairy wearing an elaborate disguise spell.

A herald blows his trumpet and the grand door opens. David in his light armor walks in slowly. Several knights smile and salute him and he smiles back. Then his eyes meet Snow's and she is feeling absolutely overwhelmed.

It's not the size of the room or the crowd looking at her, waiting for her to speak. And it's not the ancient words she has to say, words that have been spoken to knights in the Enchanted forest since the beginning of time.

And it's not that she never thought she'd be welcome in this castle again, after she abdicated her rights to the throne. And here she is, officiating a formal ceremony, standing on the dais where she once saw brave men, heroes, kneel before her father to accept this honor.

It's just that ever since she was a little girl, she always dreamed of meeting a brave knight and falling in love. But then life happened, and Regina happened, and her memories went missing and she was found in the forest alone with a baby in her arms. She was told that her behavior had disgraced her whole kingdom. Never in her wildest dreams did she imagine that there would be someone out there willing to share this perilous royal life with her. She'd find someone perhaps willing to be with her, but certainly not willing to survive the endless scrutiny of the royal life.

And here comes David, her husband, very much a fairytale knight, ready to kneel before her, willing to share this complicated life with her. Willing to enjoy quite nights with Emma by the fireplace and intense sessions with the royal council under everyone's judgmental watchful eye.

And Snow is absolutely overwhelmed with gratitude and love.

David walks up at her, looking both proud and a little concerned, because he is having a hard time reading her face.

He bows, raising her hand to his lips.

"Kneel please," she says as and her voice sounds so hoarse. She has no idea how she will get
through this.

David kneels and Snow is already feeling her eyes welling up. The silence is so heavy, it feels like the entire room is holding its breath waiting for Snow to act. And she can't find her voice.

David actually looks up to make sure she is alright.

"David Nolan, in the past year you have proven yourself a valuable asset to this kingdom," she manages, doing her best to keep her voice steady, "when you found and rescued the Silver Fairy, when you turned over the Rod Troll to face justice..."

Snow thinks of David kicking the door to her glass cell open, his hands reaching for her as she laid on the ground terrified, tied up in the dark.

"When you rescued me..." she says and she can't, she can't help it her voice cracks and there are tears streaming down her face.

"We are forever in your debt and it is with profound gratitude that we bestow you the honor our kingdom reserves to its brightest and bravest. Give me your sword please..."

David unsheathes and hands Snow his sword and she wills her hand not to tremble as she lightly touches his sword first on his right shoulder, then his left shoulder.

"Please rise, Sir Nolan" she says quietly, offering back his sword, actually shocked that she managed to go through with the ceremony.

David stands up slowly. The ceremony calls for Snow to give him a royal kiss on the forehead. But when Snow she looks at him standing before her, all she can think of is David kneeling in front of her, in her glass cell, taking off her blindfold and struggling to untie her hands.

Snow forgets all ceremony and royal protocols and she doesn't hold back. She doesn't kiss him on the forehead. Instead she tugs on his breastplate then she cups his face and she is kissing him on the lips, tears streaming down her face, practically sobbing, while the room erupts in applause.

"Snow, are you alright?" he whispers.

Snow wipes her eyes and nods. "Never better," she smiles back at him.

And this time he is the one to break protocol, because he kisses her back and places his hands on her shoulders. Then he offers his arm to help her off the dais and into the crowds, to accept the congratulatory remarks of their coworkers and friends.

"My Dad is a hero!" Emma declares proudly and some of the journalists, here to report on the knighthood ceremony, find themselves tearing up.

"He sure is," the Blue Fairy shakes Emma's hand. "And when can we expect you to join our ranks, Emma?"

"This isn't what I meant, princess!" the Crimson Fairy grumbles once the reception hall has emptied of most guests who came to participate on David's knighting ceremony. "You were doing so well, but then... what came over you? We needed you to show restraint, to show decorum, that behavior of yours is all that tomorrow's news are going to talk about..."

And Snow seems to shrink under Crimson's accusatory scowl.
"No!" David interrupts, glaring at the Crimson Fairy. "No!" he says, more quietly this time, shaking his head. "You don't do that, you don't ever talk to her that way..."

And for a moment Snow holds her breath wondering if the Crimson Fairy will raise up his wand and set the newly knighted David on fire or turn him into a block of ice.

But Crimson nods instead. "Right you are, Sir," he says bowing his head slightly. "Forgive me, council woman Snow White, once again I overstepped," he adds, then he hesitates briefly and walks away.

Snow watches him stunned as he walks away then she turns to David. "How did you manage that?" she asks, but David isn't the least bit interested in discussing the Crimson Fairy. He tugs on Snow's arm instead and when she takes a step closer, he smiles and kisses her, right on the lips.

THE QUEEN WE DESERVE reads the front page title of the Northern kingdom daily. "There wasn't a dry eye in the house when former princess and now council woman Snow White knighted David Nolan her husband..."
The Case of the Severed Bond

Ten years ago

Snow is pacing up and down the cabin. David should be here by now, it's getting dark. If he takes any longer she is going to go out there and look for him. Snow has already put her jacket on, it's a sweet summer night, it's not that cold, when she hears claws scratching at the door.

Snow runs to open the door.

It's just Wilby, whimpering, a soft bark, an invitation to follow him.

"Wilby!" she cries out. "What's wrong? Where is David?"

The dog barks a couple of times and then he takes off, running into the forest.

"Hold, on," Snow replies, grabbing the first aid kit that's hanging by the door. She struggles to catch up with him.

Wilby chooses the most inaccessible paths, overgrown with brambles and thorns and Snow is panting, her mind pacing at everything that could be wrong. David could be hurt, he could be captured, he could be... She will not let her mind go to that eventuality. If he were dead she would know, she would feel it. If he were dead, her heart would have already broken in two...

Wilby finally leads them to David, who is hunched over, under a great fir, his body angled in a strange way. Snow doesn't immediately understand what is holding him in place. And then she sees it, the great metal trap, that has snapped shut right on his knee. He can't sit down even if he wants to.

Snow gasps.

A dragon trap? Dragon traps are twice the size of bear traps, and have been outlawed for years. But their part of the woods isn't anywhere near dragons. Who set a dragon trap the in the heart forest, Snow wonders, but this isn't time to answer this question.

"David?" she says softly.

He's already turned to face her, pain and relief mingled over his features.

"What happened?" she can't help herself, she has to know.

"I'm sorry," is all he says.

Snow shakes her head. "Lean on me...take a deep breath... it's going to be alright..."

David places his hands on Snow's shoulders then he breathes in and closes his eyes motioning he is ready. Snow positions her legs to the right and the left of the metal at the edge of the dragons trap. Once she puts all her weight on it, the trap swings open, releasing David's leg. He crushes on the ground.

Snow rushes to kneel next to him.

His pant leg is soaked with blood, half of it already dried up. How long had he been trapped here? She should be examining the wound properly, but there is no time for that, it's going to get dark
soon. This forest isn't a friendly place at night, things lurk at night, things that would be attracted to the smell of blood, and David is still bleeding. She needs to get him home, now.

Snow wraps a bandage around his knee, as tight as he can stand it, then she offers to help him up.

"The baby," he protests, because he's been trying to keep her from doing anything too strenuous ever since they realized she is pregnant.

"Come on," she insists, and he finally relents, letting her help him up.

"Don't put any weight on your leg," she instructs, but he still does.

It takes them a good hour to make it back home.

David pants as he hops on the two steps up on their porch and into the cabin.

"Hold on!" Snow helps him on the chair. She hands him a glass of water then she uses her dagger to cut open his pant leg.

"David!" is all she says, because the blood has already soaked through the bandages and there is a deep cut right at his knee, still bleeding. Snow's eyes well up. "What happened?" she asks.

"The forest was full of creatures looking for you. I was trying to sneak away unseen and then I stumbled into this... I tripped right into the dragon trap like some kind of Wonderland tourist..."

"They are setting up dragon traps? For me?" Snow is looking horrified.

He hesitates, then he pulls out a poster he had folded inside his shirt. He hands her the paper.

There is a picture of a younger Snow White staring back at her. "Please help me find my beloved daughter, Snow White" it reads. "10,000 golden coins as a reward to anyone who brings her home..." It's signed Regina, Queen of the North.

Snow is absolutely stunned. "Regina is offering a reward! Every crook and creep looking for a quick payday is going to be after me!" she stammers.

"I know," he whispers.

Snow shakes her head because as upsetting as this may be, it's still not a priority. His knee is now dripping blood at the wooden planks of the floor.

"Your knee won't stop bleeding..."

David hands her his dagger and he points to the fire.

"What? No, no, no, no" she says quickly, her eyes opening wide. "Let's just call a healing fairy..."

"No healing fairy," he argues. "It's just a flesh wound. If you stop the bleeding I'm going to be fine..."

"It is not just a flesh wound, David, it's your knee. If it doesn't heal right it, you could end up limping the rest of your life..." she argues.

He is shaking his head, stubbornly. "Please, Snow," he mumbles. "If you don't do it, then I'm going to have to... Help me, please!"
Snow swallows her tears. "Its going to hurt..." she says, "I don't want to hurt you...

"Just do it fast," he replies looking away.

Snow takes a deep breath. She walks to the cupboards above the sink and pulls out a flask full of brandy and hands it to him.

"Drink up," she orders.

She walks to the fireplace and holds the blade of the dagger inside the flames. She is trying so hard to stop crying, trying to stop her hands from shaking, but it's almost impossible.

"I am so sorry," she whispers.

He nods, clenching his teeth.

He manages not to scream as the burning blade of the dagger touches his wound, cauterizing it. His shoulders jerk and he lets out a moan. He looks so pale, like he could pass out any minute.

Snow drops the dagger to the ground and hands him the flask again.

"Drink some more" she asks, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"You are just trying to get me drunk," he half smiles.

Snow lets out a soft laugh, relieved that he is well enough to joke about this. "I am," she replies wiping her eyes. "Do you think we can get you to bed?"

"I knew it," he mumbles.

Snow doesn't laugh this time, she just helps him up instead. It's a good thing the cabin is so small, just three steps from the fireplace to the bed. David lays down and Snow helps him out of his sword belt and doublet.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"What are you apologizing for?" she asks quietly, running her thumb across his cheek. "None of this is your fault..."

"The tickets," he explains. "The tickets for the boat that will take us to the end of the realm are for Thursday...Snow I am not going to be able to travel to the harbor... Unless you traveled up ahead o your own..."

Snow sits on the bed next to him, trying to gather her thoughts. This is quite a blow to their plans. Now that the forest is becoming so hostile, the fact that they would leave so soon was quite a relief. But now they can't go.

"I am not leaving you! Forget the tickets. It doesn't matter," she replies decisively. "It doesn't matter, as long as you are okay. We'll find another way... We'll be extra careful in the forest. They will give up eventually, they will go search somewhere else..."

He nods. He is quite relieved she is taking this so well.

As she arranges for a pillow under his knee to elevate his wound, he lets out a soft groan.

"Did that hurt? I'm so sorry..."
"Perhaps we should both stop apologizing for things outside our control," he mumbles and as he drifts off to sleep.

Snow climbs on the bed next to him. She wraps her arms protectively around her tummy.

"We are not bringing you into the realm in the safest of times..." she whispers to her unborn child. "I am so sorry," she is about to say, but then she remembers David's words. "I'm glad you are coming," she says instead.

And then she feels a soft movement inside her belly, like a soft bubble popping. Snow gasps. Could this be? Could this be her baby moving? She's never felt the baby before!

"I think the baby just moved" she says softly.

David is very much asleep and he certainly needs all the rest he can get.

Snow leans back on her pillow. "You have to do this again in the morning for your father," she whispers.

Her eyes well up again, but this time its tears of joy.

And now...

Trent Sky
Helen Storm
Layla Franklin
Peter Winks

Snow is sitting on top of her desk, going over the names she got from the Indigo Fairy when the office door open quietly.

"Back so soon?" Snow smiles, her eyes still on her list. "Was Granny's closed?"

When David doesn't reply she looks up, surprised to see that a hooded man has walked into their office. Snow's left hand reaches for the vial of dark fairy dust under her shirt, her right hand already on her dagger.

"Can I help you?" she asks, managing to look calm and professional.

"You!" the man pulls back his hood and is now unwrapping the dark scarf that as wrapped around his neck concealing half his face, in fast almost frantic moves. He doesn't make however make an effort to get near her, so Snow relaxes her grip on the fairy dust.

"How can I help you?" Snow tries again.

David stepped out to pick up lunch twenty minutes ago. He should be coming back any minute.

"Yes! Yes! You can absolutely help me," the man says crossing his hand on his chest. "You can stay away from my wife!"

"Your wife?" Snow is now beginning to understand. She jumps off the desk trying her best to look professional. "Thomas?" she asks. "Please, have a seat, we've been expecting you..."
"No! No, no, no, I am not here to answer your questions, I am hear to ask you to back off!" He replies gruffly, not bothering to disguise the anger he is feeling. "Stay away from Ella! How dare you step your foot in our castle and give my wife false hope about fairy dust and bonds and potions and magic!"

"Do you have something against magic?" Snow frowns.

"I have something against you!" he cries out.

"I didn't seek your wife out, Sir, Ella came to me and retained my services..."

"Your services!" the man scoffs bitterly. "Your services! You are a princess for pity's sake, when will you begin to act like it?"

"Thomas, I don't understand what you have against me..." Snow tries again.

"No! Of course you don't!" he yells back. "I bet you don't even remember! It's a fine trick this memory loss, a handy little illusion. Oh, no I remember nothing!" he says raising his hands to his face in a mock expression of despair. "I can't be held responsible for my actions!"

"Thomas! I don't understand! Did I do something wrong? Did I hurt Ella somehow? What did I do?" Snow asks.

Thomas frowns, hesitating, and for a brief second Snow thinks she might have gotten through to him, he might actually give her a straight answer. And then the door opens and David walks in, holding a bag and a cup carrier.

"Granny says she is sorry but she is out of your favorite tea...- oh hello! Please excuse me, I didn't see you there..." he smiles and then his expression freezes. He can sense the tension in the room. "Something wrong?"

"I don't know," Snow replies quietly. "I was hoping Thomas here would tell me..."

Thomas turns to glare at David. "You," he says, calmer this time. "I don't know you, I have nothing against you, personally..."

"Thomas! What did I do?" Snow asks again.

"Do you have any idea what it's like, to be the only one in the world who knows, the only one... do you have any idea what it's like to miss someone so much you can barely breathe..." he says half breathless, the words spilling out of his mouth almost against his will.

"I do," Snow replies softly and now her eyes are welling up and Thomas finds it impossible to stay angry with her. "Tell me..." she tries again.

"It was along time ago," he shrugs. "And I've already said too much," Thomas is now looking down on the ground. "Please forgive my outburst, princess..." and with a swift move, he walks around David and steps out of the door.

"What was that about?" David asks, placing the food on his desk because Snow's desk is covered with piles of files and papers. Snow sits back on top of her desk.

"Your guess is as good as mine," she sighs. "He came in and accused me of daring to step foot in his castle and giving Ella false hopes and asked me to say away from her..."
"What?"

"Yeah, and then you watched the rest. He got all sad, he apologized and he left..." 

"Right," David frowns. "I guess there is no hope in getting him to cooperate with the investigation?"

"I don't know," Snow shrugs. "I wouldn't hold my breath. He seemed very bitter that I got memory spelled and couldn't be held responsible for my actions," she is doing her best to remember the rest of their conversation.

"He does?"

Snow nods. "David, what do you think I did? The Thomas I remember was soft spoken and quiet. What's going on? Why is he so mad at me?"

"Only one way to find out," he replies pulling up his magic mirror.

"Ask Ella?" Snow replies.

"Two ways to find out" he smirks.

Snow walks around his desk to look at his mirror.


The most popular tabloids in the realm.

"If princess Snow and princess Ella were hanging out together you'd think there be a wealth of information on their whereabouts..." he points out.

But there is nothing there. A couple of stories, "in the Giggling Royal" of Ella and Snow hanging out at a coffee shop in the Western kingdom, both of them wearing sunglasses, smiling for the cameras. A visit to an amusement park, again laughing and smiling. No negative reports or news of a royal fight, just two friend spending a couple of days having fun together.

A picture of Thomas Ella and Snow under a sign advertising a magic carpet ride.

"There is nothing there..." David declares.

"It must have been serious then," Snow frowns.

"What?"

"When royals go through the trouble to pay off the tabloids to conceal a story, it's because the information was too serious and they couldn't afford for it to let it get out..."

"Well, in that case, we should ask Greta Prime if she was paid off to conceal a story. She was the reporter covering Ella's news."

"Greta Prime?" Snow grimaces. "Oh, this should be interesting..."

"Why? Who is Greta Prime?"

"She is a Med who specializes in princess gossip. Her office is in the western kingdom..." she
mumbles, looking up Greta's information. "That's too bad. I suppose we can conduct the interview over the magic mirror, though it's not quite the same, I feel like I always get more information when it's in person..."

"About that," David replies pulling a small package from his pocket. "We can go see her in person..."

"What is this?" Snow's eyes open wide because David just handed her a fifty pack of magic beans. "Magic beans? How? David! Those must have cost a fortune..."

"Look, if we are going to be going back and forth from the Western kingdom investigating Ella's case and still be home with Emma at the end of the day, we need a bag of quality beans... I suppose we can bill Ella for whatever beans we use in her case, assuming that we still are on her case..."

"But David, we can't possibly afford these..."

"Don't worry about it... These are already paid for," he replies.

"They are?" Snow frowns. "How? Did you sell a kidney on the dark fairy market?"

"Nothing quite as sinister... I sold Philip," he explains.

"Philip! Isn't Philip your favorite horse? " Snow is looking so worried.

"He is. He is the best horse ever. But, ever since I got assigned to Regina's case and I had to leave him behind, my friend Kristoff has been looking after him. He claims that his fiance has been riding Philip every day and she is absolutely in love with him... Kristoff practically begged me to let him buy him..."

"You didn't have to do that..." Snow squeezes his hand.

"I did." David is looking very serious. "Ensuring that we always have a way home and I don't spend any more nights away from my daughter and my wife is the very least I could do..."

Snow has a lot to say on the matter, but she finds that her voice isn't quite cooperating at the moment so she leans in and kisses him instead. "Thank you!" she whispers.

Greta Prime's office is quite luxurious. She is late. As they sit there, David lets his eyes wander at the three large potted Venus flytraps lined up on the window ledge and the large framed pictures of snakes all over the walls.

He is marveling at the unusual decor when Snow leans in and whispers in his ear. "Try not to stare, she doesn't like that."

Try not to stare at what, he wonders as Greta Prime walks in the room, taking the seat at her desk. Her black hair is gathered in a rather large bun, her dress is silvery gray and formfitting. She is beautiful in a unique cold sort of way but there is nothing unusual in her appearance. What should he not be staring at?

"Snow darling, it truly has been too long..., and David is it? Now, you look familiar, have we met?"

Snow smiles back. "Hello, Greta! Before we continue this conversation, I'd like to remind you that ten years ago you signed a non disclosure agreement with the royal council of the North, regarding anything that has to do with me and my family. I want to make sure that you understand that this is still legally binding. And since David is my husband, he is also covered by the agreement... And
you know how the Crimson Fairy frowns on people breaking their agreements to the royal council..."

And for the first time in years, Snow finds herself feeling grateful at Crimson's forethought and his stern, overprotective ways.

Greta's face falls. "Ugh," she groans, "I can't stand those agreements. Way to ruin the mood darling. Is it true that Crimson turned a photographer into a block of ice until he agreed to discard some compromising pictures he had of you?" she asks Snow while stealing glances at David, clearly fishing for a reaction.

David remains impassive. Her technique might have been effective if she wasn't so blatant.

The fact that Crimson can turn people into blocks of ice, now, that is reason for concern, but David is not going to react.

"No idea," Snow shrugs.

"And here I was, hoping I'd get exclusive rights to your story, do an in-depth expose on your husband and how he was mistreated by the Southern Kingdom royals or, maybe a little piece on your relationship and Regina's...'the mother she never was...' would be my title... doesn't that sound just great..." Greta goes on.

"Oh, no, nothing like that I'm afraid..." Snow's face remains completely neutral, fully aware that Greta is attempting to bait her.

"Fine," Greta sighs. "How about you?" she asks, turning to David, "anything you'd like to get off your chest?"

And as she ends her question, a hissing noise comes out of her bun and the heads of thirty small snakes uncoil in one swift move, because her bun wasn't made out of hair, it was actually made out of tiny snakes, and they are now all staring at David.

A Medusa. Greta Prime is a Medusa.

David almost jumps. He manages to conceal his shock. "No, thank you for asking," he manages.

Greta turns her attention back at Snow but Greta's snakes have other ideas. They are uncoiling further, stretching, reaching towards David, following his every move. How long are those slivery things anyway?

"Fine, then, enlighten me as to why we are here," Greta sighs.

"I have a question regarding Ella and myself back in the day..."

"What?" Greta is looking quite bored. "Please do not ask anything about Ella's triplets, I cannot stand children, and if you ask me, Ella's triplets are not even cute. They are overexposed and boring, and stories about them do not sell magazines... Ella had the audacity to say that I couldn't interview them because they do not like my snakes... can you believe she said that? If that is not specieism and discrimination, I don't know what is... but my editor refused to sue the palace..."

"Oh, but your snakes are adorable," Snow replies and she actually reaches her hand towards Greta's snakes who look at her adoringly and rub their heads on the tip of her fingers, making purring sounds, like happy kittens. "No, nothing about the triplets. Is there any reason why Ella would be upset with me? Did we get in a fight, or..."
"A fight? No, none that I know of," Greta shrugs. "Your friendship was sickly sweet and scandal free... unless..."

David is sitting all the way back on his chair because Greta's snakes are practically licking his face, half of them seem to like him, the other half are hissing at him displeased, displeased at what, he doesn't know.

"Behave, darlings," Greta waves her hand at them dismissively, but all they do is move a mere inch back and they are now showing teeth. Once Greta's focus is back on Snow half the snakes go back to hissing at David, the other half are snapping their jaws at him.

"Unless what?" Snow is looking quite serious.

"Well, there was the matter of your disappearance..."

"What does my disappearance have to do with anything?"

"You disappeared from Thomas' castle. Now, who would the Western royals accuse of aiding and abetting your kidnappers but Ella, the young commoner who had to audacity to set her eyes on their blue blooded prince?"

"Are you saying that Ella got implicated in my alleged kidnapping?"

"Oh, the interrogation lasted for days," Greats nods. "Thomas tried to intervene, but you know how the Silver knight force is, they are quite thorough..."

"What happened?"

"According to my sources, Ella was told that unless you were found, the wedding would be cancelled... and indeed it was. Until Thomas put his foot down and told his father and the royal council that if they didn't let him marry Ella he would abdicate... In the end they got married six months after their initial wedding date..."

Snow is looking sick.

"Nobody told you?" Greta smiles, sensing the beginning of a fascinating story unfolding before her very eyes.

"It wasn't in the news," Snow frowns.

"Of course not. The royal council of the Western kingdom paid everybody off and had them sign non disclosure agreements," she utters the word through clenched lips. As far as she is concerned non disclosure agreements are vile, filthy things. "That's what they do, they censor the juicy stories and all we get is yawn fests about chubby triplets..."

"Well, thank you," Snow gets up, offering to shake Greta's hand. David practically jumps from his chair, all too eager to get away from Greta and her snakes.

Snow and David are walking down the street away from "the Giggling Royal" offices. Snow is walking slowly, she is deep in thought. Once David deems that they put a safe distance between themselves and Greta he turns and glares at her.

"Something wrong?" she asks.

"Couldn't you have warned me, she was a Medusa?" he asks.
"What? I told you, of course I did..."

"No, you didn't!" he exclaims.

"Greta Prime is a Med, those where my exact words," Snow frowns.

"Med stands for Medusa?"

"Yes, of course! What else would it stand for?" Snow can't quite understand where the problem is.

"Oh, I don't know, a medic..." David throws his hands up in the air.

"A medic? Why... why would I point out if she was a medic?"

"I don't know. But that's what Med means!"

"Since when?" Snow isn't quite convinced.

"Since 'Ted is a Med,' the most popular rhyme in the first grade alphabet book! Since the third page of the of White knight officer's manual, where all the official abbreviations are noted! Since the beginning of time, really..."

"Well, I don't speak White knight," Snow shrugs. "And I've never even heard of that alphabet book. As far as I'm concerned, Med means Medusa... it's commonly used slang..."

"Commonly used where? Among princesses who can't be bothered to use the whole word?"

"Maybe..."

"What's next? Prrrr for prince? Trrr for troll?"

"Wait, wait a minute," Snow is now trying hard not to laugh, "are you saying, that you were just sitting there, completely unaware, totally relaxed and then the snakes just popped out...-" She can't even finish her sentence she is laughing so hard.

"That is exactly what I am saying, I almost fell out of my chair, I could have died!" he declares. Snow is now laughing even harder.

"Her snakes are completely harmless! They are no better than overgrown worms..." she manages through fits of laughter.

"They were trying to eat me!" he replies indignantly. "If I had a warning I would have at least pulled back my chair..."

"I'm sorry," she manages, through tears of laughter. Snow is trying her best to look apologetic but can't quite manage it.

"You are not even a little bit sorry!" David shakes his head.

"I am sorry, I really am" she sounds sincere this time, her hand is reaching for him.

David looks partially mollified.

"Did you hear what she said?" Snow is looking quite sober now.

"I did, not thanks to you or the snakes constantly attacking me..." he replies.
Snow is no longer laughing. "I had no idea Ella got accused of helping my kidnappers... David I didn't know..."

"How could you have known?"

"I mean, she was interrogated... and she almost didn't get married... David, that's so awful..."

Snow is looking so sad, David completely forgets about Medusa and wraps his arm around her shoulders.

"I know," he says quietly.

"Do you think it's safe to call Ella and talk to her, or do you think Thomas will come yell at me again?"

"If you need to talk to your friend, go right ahead, I'll handle Thomas," he replies.
"Dear Snow, please join me for tea at 7.00 tonight," the invitation reads in beautiful golden calligraphy. "It will be just like old times. I am expecting you. Love, Ella"

Snow turns to David, a confused look on her face. "Thomas doesn't want me stepping my foot into their castle while Ella invites me to tea..."

David reads the invitation she handed him. "Those two clearly aren't on the same page," he shrugs. "Are you going to go?"

"I suppose I should," Snow replies. "This way I can talk to Ella, tell her I'm sorry about what happened to her, after I ran away..."

"I'm not sure I like the idea of you going there alone, not after the way Thomas behaved in our office," David frowns.

"I'm going to be fine," Snow smiles, kissing him on the cheek. "What are you going to do tonight?"

"Emma asked me for help with a school project..."

"Oh?" And now Snow is the one looking worried. "I thought they stopped giving them homework after the incident..."

"There was an incident?" David frowns.

"A second grader had a coloring accident working on her homework a few months ago..."

"What does that mean?"

"Turned everything in her house blue, including her family..." Snow explains.

David's eyes open wide.

"It took the teaching fairies three days to turn everyone back to normal...And now the whole family is inexplicably allergic to blueberries," she continues. "I've learned to be very cautious with fairy school homework..."

"I'll be careful," David promises.

"You came!" Ella is practically jumping up and down, barely able to contain her excitement. "After seeing you the other day I realized, Snow... I've missed you, I missed you so much..."

"I missed you too," Snow smiles.

Ella ushers her friend into the conservatory. "I like having tea here, when I have company," she points to the sitting area.

The whole scenery is breathtaking. Hundreds of leafy vines are climbing up on the glass walls, flowers are bursting with color, three trees bearing colorful fruit that Snow has never seen before, a small water fountain humming in the middle of the room, water overflowing from the fountain to small carved out elliptical paths designing an intricate and rather whimsical irrigation system.

"Ella, this is absolutely amazing," Snow gasps.
"Isn't it?" Ella smiles proudly. "The queen used it mainly to grow herbs and healing flowers. It was useful, but it wasn't much... I made a few improvements..."

"A few improvements! That is quite an understatement!" Snow exclaims.

"Shh, you will scare the dahlias, they are quite delicate..." Ella points to the pink flowers on her right. As soon as the flowers sense her attention, they pull their heads away and they turn a shade of bright red.

"Are those blushing dahlias!" Snow gasps. "How? Ella, I thought those were extinct..."

"They are extremely rare, but they are not extinct yet..."

Ella motions Snow to sit at the small table, already set with a delicate china set decorated with light blue roses.

"I can't even remember when was the last time I invited someone over for tea," Ella sighs. "Catherine is about to become queen and she is far too busy with affairs of the kingdom. Belle is practically a hermit, she never walks out of her castle anymore..."

"Why? What's wrong with Belle?" Snow frowns.

"I don't know. Something happened, though she won't say. A love story gone wrong... I think her heart is broken..."

"Belle?" Snow is looking shocked. "I always thought Belle was far too sensible to do something as reckless as falling in love..."

"I don't know..." Ella shrugs. "We used to spend so much time together, and then she just disappeared... and there are such strange rumors flying about, but I never believe a single thing the tabloids say..."

"You don't?" Snow is looking quite serious now.

"Why? Do you? After all the stories they wrote about you?"

"No, I don't. But, you know, sometimes there is a seed of truth in all the inaccurate tales they weave..."

"Yeah," Ella shrugs. "But I'll let you sort out the mysteries. I wasn't ever any good at solving them..."

"Listen, Ella, I heard a rumor, and if it's true I may very well owe you an apology..." Snow is looking quite serious now.

"An apology?" Ella seems baffled. "Whatever for?"

Snow takes a deep breath. "I heard that after I ran away, the knight force turned to you for answers. I was told that the interrogated you for days..."

"What?" Ella blinks a couple of times. "That's ancient history. Who told you that?"

"It's not that far back," Snow insists. "I had no idea Ella and I am so so sorry..."

"Why, you don't need to apologize... it's not like you asked me to lie or cover for you..."
"I didn't?" Snow feels such an incredible wave of relief.

"No, of course not. It's just that," Ella lowers her voice "I understand how evil stepmothers can be... so I might have created a couple of crumb trails to lead them on, you know, all harmless fun..."

Snow is looking quite shocked. "You did that? For me?"

"I might have," Ella shrugs. "I might have told them that you were fascinated by magic carpets, and maybe, oh, I don't know, maybe Aggrabah was a dream destination of yours..."

"Aggrabah?" Snow gasps. "Ella! Aggrabah isn't even in this realm!"

"Yeah...I know that now. But, you see, I didn't know that at the time..." Ella shrugs. "When you are forced to spend all your time cleaning after your stepmother, learning geography and realm location, just wasn't a big priority at the time... I didn't mean to send the silver knight force to the furthest realm possible, I just wanted to stall them a little... buy you time... To be entirely honest, I expected you to come back after a week or so. I didn't think you'd be gone for over a year...I thought you'd come back within the week, and they'd leave me alone."

Snow is still looking shocked, as a man walks in carrying their tea tray.

"Sweetheart? What are you doing here?" Ella smiles, delighted.

Thomas places the tray and pours tea in their teacups.

Ella reaches for his hand as soon as he is done with his task.

"Just dropping in to say hello," he replies, looking at her lovingly. Then he casts a worried glance Snow's way. "How are you doing, Snow White?"

"Doing well, thank you," Snow hesitates.

"Just catching up..." Ella replies. "I was telling Snow about Aggrabah..."

Thomas shakes his head. "Aggrabah!" he sighs. "That was...-"

"Funny," Ella finishes his sentence for him. "It was quite funny..."

"If you say so, dear," he replies, looking dubious.

"Oh, come on Tommy, don't be so serious..." she says jabbing him gently with her elbow. "Won't you have tea with us..."

"I..." Thomas shakes his head. "I'd feel like I'm intruding..."

"Fine, you may go," Ella waves her hand at him, "if you promise to talk to Snow about that other thing we discussed..."

"Ellie, not this again," he sighs, avoiding Snow's eyes.

"Yes, this again..." Ella insists.

"Fine, I'll talk to Snow," he mutters.

Snow watches as he clenches his fist, even though he manages to appear relaxed.
"Excellent," Ella beams at him. "How about now? I need to check on the babies anyway... I will give you two a minute..."

Ella walks to the door and as soon the sound of her steps disappears in the distance Thomas turns to face Snow.

"I should be thanking you," he says, his voice sounding quite hoarse.

"Thanking me? What for?" Snow asks softly.

"Clearly, you told Ella nothing about our previous encounter... and I... I... Thank you..."

Snow nods, lifting her tea cup to her lips. She takes a sip.

"Hmm, this is quite good, is it blue mint tea?" she asks.

"No, Ellie is allergic to blue mint... I believe it's rose tea, Ellie's favorites..."

"But you are not allergic to blue mint tea?" Snow watches his face closely.

"What? No, I am not..." he replies absentmindedly.

Snow places her teacup carefully back at the table.

Ella walks back in. "The babies are sleeping and the nanny is gone..." she reports.

"The nanny is gone?" Snow looks concerned.

"Our nanny disappears every evening at exactly the same time, as soon as the babies are sleeping" Ella is looking quite delighted.

"And that doesn't bother you?" Snow frowns. "Who is with the babies now?"

"Oh, no," Ella is quick to shake her head. "I have three maids in the room with them... the babies are never left alone. It's just that the nanny disappearing every night is so incredibly romantic," Ella sighs.

"I'll let you ladies talk," Thomas stands up and bows.

"Aren't you going to listen to the song, Tommy?" Ella asks.

"No, not tonight, dear," he says lifting her hand to his lips, for a quick kiss, and there is a sadness and a tenderness in his voice that is impossible to miss.

"Alright then" Ella replies.

"What song?" Snow feels like there is quite a lot of information she is missing.

"Come along," Ella smiles. "I'll tell you along the way... if we don't go now, we are going to miss it..."

"What are we going to miss?" Snow follows her friend, now more confused than ever.

"Alright, so at first I'd decided I wan't even going to hire a nanny, I'm not going to be the sort of royal that lets her kids be raised by nannies, you know what that's like. But then I had triplets. And the triplets are so much work... Tommy said you have to get someone, even if it's just for a few..."
hours... So I did. I found Noreen. And she is lovely and patient and the babies adore her. She is perfect in every way. Except for one strange thing that happens every night...

As Ella talks, she is walking quite fast, leading Snow out of the conservatory, through stairways and corridors until Snow is feeling quite lost.

"What thing?" Snow is looking concerned.

"Every night, if the triplets fall asleep before nine, she disappears for thirty minutes. And then she comes back..."

"Really," Snow is looking quite worried now.

"So I thought this is a mystery, a mystery that needs solving. I asked myself, what would Snow do..."

"Did you?"

"Yes! I dressed up in a maid's dress and I followed Noreen, as soon as the babies fell asleep and she sneaked out of their room... and Snow, it is the sweetest, most romantic thing ever..."

"Is it?" Snow raises her eyebrows. In her mind a nanny disappearing is just plain irresponsible behavior, nothing romantic about that.

"Yes!" Ella exclaims. She opens a side door and they are outside in the fresh air, listening to the song of crickets and nightingales in the trees above, and the croaking of frogs inside the castle moat. Ella walks Snow to a cluster of modest houses. "The groomsmen quarters," she whispers. She points to the one lit window on the house on the right.

"His name is Rowan," she explains. "He's worked for us for quite a while, he is in charge of the stables. His wife died years ago, and every night at this time, he blows out the candle in his daughter's bedroom and sings her a lullaby, even though she is older now..."

"His daughter?" Snow is feeling quite moved. She notices that they are not the only ones waiting outside Rowan's window. A woman wearing a dark cape, undoubtedly Ella's nanny, is hiding behind a sycamore tree. Three servants and two royals are also silently waiting.

Just like Ella described, the window goes dark, and then a man's voice fills the air drifting outside window. Snow can't understand a single word he is singing, the song sounds like a language of the east, familiar yet unknown, but all the emotions are there. This may be a lullaby but Snow can recognize the longing and the pain, this melody is bringing back all the pain of missing yet not remembering David for ten long years. This isn't just a good night song. His voice raises and Snow finds her eyes welling up, she can feel the sadness, the loss and the longing in his voice. And Snow knows exactly what it's like to raise a child alone, yearning for someone who is no longer there. Her hands are shaking and she covers her mouth, trying to keep it together and not burst into sobs.

Ella listens to the song, but perhaps she is used to it, she is not as moved as Snow White. She is quite shocked to turn around and see Snow crying.

"Are you alright?" she whispers. "Snow, I am so sorry, I thought you'd like it..."

"I love it," Snow smiles through her tears. But it's not just that she loves it. There is a power as the melody swells, an inexplicable force. And Snow wants to lose herself in the music, she wants it to never stop, she'd feel quite content if she spent the rest of her life, crying outside of Ella's palace.
Snow wipes her eyes and tries to stop crying. The songs is over and Snow feels like she can breathe again.

"Funny, my Thomas cried, just like you, when he heard it," Ella shrugs. "He doesn't want to hear it again..."

"Did he?" Snow wipes her eyes again.

"It is such a sad story," Ella tugs on Snow's hand and pulls her out of the way, out of the moonlight. Noreen, a beautiful woman with dark brown eyes walks right past them, still crying. She doesn't notice them.

"Is that your nanny?" Snow asks.

Ella nods. "I never told her I know that she listens to Rowan singing every night. But I happened to bring him up. How he's been alone for such a long time, and I thought that maybe she'd like it if I introduced them... she looked completely horrified at the idea. She seems content to listen to his song and never actually meet him. Isn't this the saddest love story ever?"

"It's quite sad," Snow agrees absentmindedly, her mind replaying the last noted of Rowan's song over and over.

"So, Snow," Ella hesitates once they are back in the conservatory, finishing up their now cold tea. "Is there any progress with my case?"

Ella looks both hopeful and terrified. Asking Snow for an update was the first thing she wanted to do the moment Snow joined her for tea. But she's been reluctant. She's terrified of what Snow's answer will be.

Snow doesn't know what to reply to that. She definitely knows more than she knew two weeks ago, but none of it is news Ella will want to hear.

"I have made some small progress, but it's nothing concrete yet."

"Oh," is all Ella says, but the disappointment is evident in the way she bites her lips and tries to smile back at her friend. "It's too soon, right? You just started?" she asks, her voice filled with hope.

"It's too soon," Snow agrees.

"Snow, whatever it takes, no matter how much it may cost... Please..."

"I know," Snow nods, her eyes welling up.

Ella throws her arms around Snow. "Thank you so much for doing this for me," she whispers, and then she wipes her eyes in a hurry.

"It's getting late, I should be going home," Snow replies, reaching for the magic bean in her pocket.

"Alright," Ella sighs.

Snow stumbles out of the magic bean portal right on her front yard.

It is so good to be back home. She notes how her front lawn is freshly mowed, how the mailbox is no longer covered by overgrown vines, how there are no weeds growing in her flower boxes. How
the shutter on the left window is no longer crooked. All signs that David lives here now, he's been taking care of things, she is not alone anymore. And Snow, still overwhelmed by the sadness of Rowan's song, feels tears streaming down her face.

The light is on in the dining room. He is here, Snow thinks. He is still here.

Snow walks quietly through the front door to find David sitting at the dining room table, watching a news update in his magic mirror. "You are back," he smiles. "I'm happy to report that Emma is asleep. And the homework was just a simple writing assignment. No one has turned blue. There was a minor bubble incident, but it's been handled...."

Snow doesn't reply right away.

"Emma and I gave Wilby bath," he continues, "She used a replicating spell on the shampoo bubbles... but it's all wiped clean, nothing to worry about... How was your night?"

"It was alright," she replies, trying to force a smile.

David gets up from his chair in a hurry. "What's wrong?" he asks quietly.

She shakes her head, trying hard not to cry.

"Snow?" he walks towards her, his hand already on her shoulders. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened," Snow replies. "It's just that I don't like where this case is going, and I don't know what to think. Because he seems to love her but she may have been memory spelled and the song, David, that's the saddest song I heard in my life..."

"Whoa, slow down," he says pulling her towards the couch. "Can you start over? What song?"

"Thomas," Snow replies. "I don't know what to think about him. Because he seems to love Ella so much... but she is allergic to blue mint tea, David, and he is not. Which means she got memory spelled and he didn't. She is looking for her child and he is not cooperating, David what does that even mean?"

"Did you meet Thomas again today?"

Snow nods. "He showed up. He was acting like the perfect supportive husband. Sweet, kind, tender. Exactly like the Thomas I remember. Except that I suspect that he already knows exactly what happened to Ella's child... Why won't he tell her?"

"I don't know," David frowns, placing his hand on her back. "I don't know..."

"I mean, it's quite a serious betrayal isn't it? If he won't tell her?"

David nods.

"What if he won't tell her because he is responsible for the child's disappearance?" Snow doesn't even want to think of what it will do to Ella, if it turns out that her suspicion is correct.

"Looks like we are going to have a serious talk with Thomas next," he replies.

"And then there was the song..." Snow continues.

"What song?"
Snow explains Noreen's story and Rowan's song and as she describes the scene she finds herself once again overwhelmed with emotion. "I don't know why I'm like this, why I'm letting this get to me..."

"Because Ella's case has memory spells and missing family... it's a little too similar to ours..." he replies.

"Except you didn't betray me," she whispers, placing her thumb on his cheek.

"Yes, but I bet it felt like I did at the time," he says quietly. "Snow, I wasn't around for ten years!"

Snow is quick to shake her head and pull him in closer.

"I know everyone had horrible scenarios about us, and theories, and guessed awful things... and I often doubted... but David, I think I always knew. Deep inside I just knew..."

Snow's arms are already wrapped around his neck and he is holding her tight, his fingers tracing her back.

"Snow," he whispers, her forehead on his.

Ella is half asleep, when Thomas walks into their bedroom. He takes off his clothes as quietly as possible, trying not to wake her up.

"What took you so long?" she asks softly.

Thomas jumps.

"Didn't mean to wake you," he stammers.

"Come here," she whispers, reaching towards him.

He always finds it impossible to say no to her, so he climbs on the bed half undressed.

"Have you been drinking?" she whispers, and without waiting for an answer, as soon as he lays next to her she cradles his head in her arms.

"We are going to be alright Tommy," she whispers, her fingers running through his hair. And when she feels hot tears streaming on his cheeks, she just wipes them away with her fingers. "Please don't cry Tommy, we are going to be alright, you'll see..."
Snow closes her eyes tighter. "I am not awake yet, I am not awake yet," she tries to convince herself. She can hear Emma squealing in the living room, David saying something quietly, Emma bursting into laughter. Oh, no she is awake, and no amount of denial is going to fix that. She might as well face the day. She gets up slowly and walks into the living room.

"Are we too loud? Did we wake you?" David asks.

"Mom is up!" Emma is looking excited. "Did you have tea with princess Ella yesterday?"

"I did," Snow smiles back at her.

"Was she wearing her tiara? Did you wear yours? Were there other princesses there?"

"No, just me. And sorry sweetheart, nobody was wearing tiaras."

"Oh," Emma is looking quite disappointed.

"Besides, I am not a princess anymore," Snow goes on to explain.

"But you could be, if you wanted to..."

Snow shakes her head. "I couldn't. I'd have to be the Queen now..."

Emma's eyes open wide. "The Queen! Yes! Mom! You could do whatever you wanted! You could cancel school! You could build a giant roller coaster in the middle of the city! You could give ice cream to everyone for breakfast!"

"Not quite how that works," Snow stifles her smile. "By the way, did you eat breakfast?"

"Yes, but it wasn't ice cream," Emma sighs.

David hands her a cup of coffee and she is grateful to take a big sip.

"How does it work?" Emma is still hopeful.

"It's more like you are responsible to make sure everyone is treated fairly and nobody is hurt..." Snow explains. "Nobody is being evil and getting away with it. It's a lot harder than you think..."

"But when you talk people listen!" Emma protests.

"Sometimes," Snow sighs. "Sometimes they just go on and on about how your gown wasn't appropriate for the occasion and how you embarrassed the crown..."

"Do you get to wear a tiara?"

"On special occasions," Snow shrugs.

"Do you get closets and closets of beautiful gowns?"

"Yeah, you do..."

"Would I get closets and closets of beautiful dresses?"
"Probably..."

"Oh, Mom, can't you be Queen? I really want to be a princess," Emma exclaims sitting on the couch. "Star could be my knight. Wilby could me my royal stallion... I'd make a very good princess..."

"You would make an excellent princess and I would be proud to knight both Star and Wilby. But Emma, if you were a princess you wouldn't be allowed to go to fairy school. Let alone do magic. Your magical training would have to be approved by the council."

"No magic?" Emma is looking horrified.

"I'm afraid not."

"No fairy school?"

"It'd be very hard to convince the council that the future queen is safe in an environment where other children are practicing magic..."

"Maybe being a princess is not that great after all" is all Emma mumbles, still not looking entirely convinced.

"Won't you put your shoes on, sweetheart. You are going to miss the school squash," Snow slumps on the couch staring at the flames in the fireplace.

"What's wrong?" David asks.

"I'm not looking forward to telling Ella that her husband is hiding things from her..."

"Then don't, at least not yet. Let's see if we can dig a little deeper..."

David and Snow spend hours looking through old news articles and tabloids. It looks like once Thomas and Ella got married the tabloids loved nothing more than to predict that their relationship was doomed.

"Trouble in paradise: is the royal life proving too much for our princess?" Ella looked quite upset as she walked out of her favorite coffee shop..."

"A royal blunder: Was marrying a commoner the biggest mistake of his life? Prince Thomas struggles to deal with his wife's mood swings... Are all commoners this moody?"

"Lack of decorum. Our common princess lets her tears flow as her husband tries to shield her form the photographers"

Article after article reporting on Ella's supposed state of mind, pictures of Ella mid sentence, Ella avoiding to look directly at the cameras, Ella actually trying to hide from prying eyes. There is a four month period where Ella bundled up even thought the weather was fine, and that's when they started speculating an eating disorder, a skin condition, a magical ailment.

Snow is shaking her head. "This is getting us nowhere. We should be talking to the palace's healing fairy, but how do we do that covertly?"

"We don't," David replies. "Forget the covert part. Let's investigate outright and see if that will get Thomas' cooperation... Can you look up who Ella's healing fairy is?"

Snow looks through the medical fairies directory. "The Purple fairy," she replies.
"Excellent." He types a quick message on his magic mirror and presses send. "I just texted the palace, asked them to forward the message to the prince. I am asking him to send Purple and the royal medical staff to our office as soon as possible. We need to interview them for our investigation..."

Snow's eyes open wide. "Nice! Perhaps we should make tea. We are bound to have an angry prince in here very soon..."

Neither Snow nor David are surprised when their office door opens and Thomas walks in. He is alone. He walks inside and just stares at them, not saying anything right away. Snow can't really tell if he is looking angry or resigned.

"Thomas...-" Snow starts.

"What do you want?" he interrupts.

"I don't want anything," Snow replies. "Your wife is the one who wants answers..."

"Well, she is not going to get any answers. No one from the palace is going to come, no one is going to give you any information..."

"Why not?" Snow is standing up now. "Are they covering for you? Who are they covering for? How did she lose her memory? Thomas, a baby doesn't just disappear, I don't see how you've kept this from her or from the kingdom for so long... Where is this child? Who is watching it? Why are you leaving Ella in the dark?"

Snow's voice is getting louder, Thomas is looking both furious and lost scrambling for answers. No one pays any attention to the door that's just opened and the woman that has just walked inside. David is shocked to see Ella putting down her shopping bags, taking off her sunglasses and her scarf, leaning against the now closed door.

"Snow!" David tries but it's too late.

Both Thomas and Snow turn around to see Ella staring at them, looking pale.

"You've got it all wrong," Ella smiles weakly at them, but it's looking more like a grimace than an actual smile. "I thought I'd drop in get an update, but really, you've got it all wrong. Thomas wouldn't hide this from me, he doesn't know where the baby is either...My Thomas never lies..." And when they all stand there watching her frozen she turns to her husband "Tell them Tommy..."

"Ellie..." Thomas moves as if to step closer, but she shakes her head.

"Tommy! Tell them they are wrong," Ella pleads her voice barely a whisper. "Tell me she is wrong," her voice is so soft. "Tell me she doesn't know anything, tell me she is mistaken, tell me she is lying, tell me...-"

Thomas is standing there, his feet rooted to the ground, unable to move. "Ella!" is all he manages. And Ella closes her eyes as the full realization of the situation hits her. "Tell me what happened," she rasps.

Thomas shakes his head. "I can't."

Ella looks at Snow and David as if they might know what the next step may be. What is she supposed do now? What do you do when your husband is refusing to tell you what happened to
your missing child? There is no protocol for this, now 'how to' help guide.

"Is she alive?" Ella whispers.

"I... there is no way to know," Thomas admits.

Ella looks at Thomas, as if she is seeing him for the first time. He might as well be a complete stranger, a man she just met. And she is not sure she likes, at all.

Thomas sucks in a breath as Ella's loving, hopeful, expression turns into one of anger and despair. She feels like she can't even look at him right now. She places her hand on her tummy in a protective gesture. "Well, in that case, I suppose there is nothing left to talk about," she replies. She turns around, ready to walk out the door.

"Wait! Ella! What do you mean?" Thomas manages.

"I mean that I am moving out of the palace..." Ella replies, and they can hear the quiver in her voice, she is barely holding back her tears.

"Where are you going to go? You can't possibly mean to go back to your stepmother!" he asks rushing towards her.

Ella shakes her head. She hasn't thought that far yet.

"Stay home, Ellie, please," he adds, "If one of us should leave, it should be me..."

"You can't leave, the palace is where you belong. What are you going to tell the council?" Ella asks.

"I... I'll come up with something..." Thomas is scrambling for words.

"You live in a palace that has hundreds of rooms! Surely you can manage to find a place to stay and give each other plenty of space while you work this out?" Snow intercepts, trying to be the voice of reason.

Neither of them turn to look at her, but Thomas offers a soft nod. "I'll stay out of your way, Ellie, I promise..."

"Is there more people in the palace who know what happened?" Ella asks. "Who are hiding things from me?"

Thomas looks away.

"Then I'm not safe there, am I?"

"Ellie, of course you are safe!" his eyes are welling up. After all those years of Ella surviving her stepmother's abuse, it kills him that she thinks she is not safe with him.

"Was the baby safe?" she asks. And when he doesn't respond she adds "Do you see why I can't go back there?"

"What about the kids?" Thomas tries.

"Can you secure permission from the council for me, so I can take them with me?"

Thomas closes his eyes. "Yes! I'll get you a carriage, ten royal guards as many maids as you need
and Noreen... I'm going to need to tell them your destination..." his voice is cracking.

"I'll let you know," Ella replies, then she walks out the door.

"Excuse me," Snow rushes after her.

"What are you doing!?" David stares at Thomas incredulously. "You have to tell her the truth! You can't hide something this big from her!"

Thomas turns around, almost surprised to see David there. As if he'd completely forgotten there were other people in the room.

"I can't," he shrugs. "I can't lose her..."

"She is walking away right now!" David points to the door. "You are losing her! At least tell her the truth! You owe her this much..."

"There are worse things than Ella walking away from me," Thomas mumbles, staring at the door, where Ella was standing a few seconds ago. "Believe me..."

"Then let me at least help," David tries. "Where is the child? Maybe we can fix this, maybe we can get her back. I've seen people come out of hopeless situations like yours before! We can find her! Let me at least try! Where is she?"

"Ask the Dark One," Thomas shrugs then he steps out the door.

"Ella!" Snow manages to catch up with her friend.

Ella is looking pale, like she can barely believe what just transpired. Her hand is laying on her tummy.

"Where are you going to go?"

"Haven't decided yet. I've got a few options..."

"Don't you think you should give him some time, give him a chance to explain..."

Ella looks at her. "Would you stay?"

After being away from David for ten long years, it is very hard for Snow to imagine under what circumstances she would consider walking away from him. But Thomas is withholding information that Ella is desperate to know. Information she needs to know. He has known the truth this whole time, while Ella was hiring investigators to figure it out! He's known and said nothing. How can he do this?

"No," Snow finally admits. "I wouldn't stay..."

Ella gives her a quick hug then she puts on her sunglasses. "Keep digging please... I'm going to take the kids and stay at Belle's castle. Come find me as soon as you know something!"

When Snow walks back in the office David is staring wide eyed at his sword belt, hanging behind his desk.

The face each other. Then they both speak at the same time.

"I think Ella may be pregnant!" Snow blurts out.
"The Dark One took their child!," David warns.

Snow's shoulder shag. "Do we have any leverage?" she asks. "Anything to negotiate with?"

"No. In fact, this time we have a lot more to lose..."


Somewhere deep inside her, Rowan's song is echoing on a loop. Is it urging her forward or back, a warning or an encouragement, she can't even tell. She has no idea what the song is saying.

David is wearing his sword belt. All his daggers and swords have been sharpened, though he is well aware this will not make much of a difference. Swords and knives are worthless against someone like the Dark One. Ruby has been notified to pick Emma up from school.

They are ready. At least as ready as they will ever be.

"We make no deals, we offer him nothing," David says for the tenth time, helping Snow strap her sword belt on.

Snow nods absentmindedly. "Nothing," she repeats, though she knows this may be a promise she might not be able to keep.

"Alright," David nods, reaching for her hand, dropping a magic bean on the ground. "Let's go."

An eerie silence is surrounding the Dark One's castle. There are no sounds of bird singing, no rustling of leaves, just a perfect quietness, the sense of heavy magic, covering everything around them. Snow knocks at the door twice, the sound comes out muffled somehow. David shuffles from one leg to the other impatiently and then the door in front of them creaks open.

An invitation or a dare, Snow can't really tell what this is.

"Perhaps you should stay here," she says quietly. "Just in case things go wrong. One of us should go home to Emma..."

David looks at her incredulously. This isn't a conversation to have at the Dark One's door, of all places. Of course there is no way he is staying behind. If anyone is staying behind, that should be Snow.

They both walk in, trying their best to look calm, like this is just a regular day, just a routine investigation. As if they are not about to confront the most powerful man in the whole realm. David walks in first. The hallway is dark, there is a small round table in the middle of the room, two armors standing left and right of the next entry. David wonders if those armors are empty, or if some poor tortured soul is trapped inside, staring them through the visor. He shudders and tightens his grip on his dagger.

A solitary lantern ignites on the wall. Both of them turn around instinctively to look at the flame. That's when the Dark One lets out a mischievous cackle. He is standing right behind them.

"Well if it isn't Snow White and her Prince Charming!" he says raising his voice in a mocking manner. His eyes look big and hungry, his skin looks greener than usual, more unhealthy than ever before.

"Hello," Snow says and she can't hide the uncertainty in her voice.
"What can I do you for?" Rumpelstiltskin asks taking one step closer. And as he says the words five more lamps ignite, shedding their light in the room.

Well if his aim was to intimidate them he is certainly succeeding. David tries to position himself between Snow and the Dark One, but Rumple shoots him a warning look and then he materializes right behind Snow White again.

"Don't waste my time, dearie, speak up!"

"I'm here to find out what happened to Ella's firstborn child, second in line to inherit the Western kingdom's throne after prince Thomas..." Snow manages to sound firm.

"The heir to the throne..." Rumple laughs. "Do you think that throwing impressive titles at me will actually work? If titles were important dearie, you wouldn't have given up yours... Do you want to try again?" He lets out a cackle, getting even closer.

And David cannot stand how Snow is the only one facing the Dark One's mockery and annoyance, so he tries to distribute his attention more evenly.

"Why don't you tell us where Ella's child is? Won't you quit with the parlor tricks and the mind games and tell us the truth!" he says sternly.

Snow turns to look at him wide eyed. What are you doing, quit trying to provoke him, she wants to say. David avoids her eyes. His distraction worked. He has the Dark One's full attention.

Rumpelstiltskin is now standing in front of him snarling. "Mind games? Are you accusing me of mind games? You are the one moving pieces in a chessboard you hardly understand, and let me tell you, you will come to regret your involvement in this little inquiry. Do you think you are so smart, you can one up the dark one?" And as the words come out of his mouth he is not beginning to look taller and taller, even though he's barely moved. David feels dwarfed by his presence, but he tightens his grip in his dagger and asks again.

"Where is Ella's child? What have you done with her?"

And then the Dark One waves his hand and David's no longer able to control his voice, he is moving his mouth and the words won't come out.

"What have you done?" Snow screams, her hand on her dark fairy dust vial.

"I've showed incredible restraint under the circumstances," Rumple replies dismissively. "Your plan is not going to work. And I will not forget what you tried to pull..." and then he looks calmer, almost entertained. "Tsk tsk tsk, do you really think you can use dark fairy dust on me dearie, and live to tell the tale? IF you pull that vial out, I won't come after you dearie, I'll just turn your Charming into worm and toss him in my fish bowl!"

There is some kind of dark warning in his eyes, she knows he means every word. Snow drops the vial that now dangles from her neck and raises her hands.

"Be gone now," the Dark One shakes his fingers. They are pesky flies and he is powerful enough to shoo them away.

Snow and David are outside, right in front of his door, Snow's hand hanging midair, ready to knock, as if they never got inside.

"Are you okay?" Snow sounds so worried.
"Yes!" David replies, his voice working again.

"Alright," Snow nods and she knocks on the door again.

The door creaks open and Snow steps decisively inside. "I don't know what you think I am planning," she states loudly, not waiting for the Dark One to appear this time. "But I am not planning anything!"

Rumple appears in front of her, reaching for her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes.

"Get your hands off her!" David cries out, his dagger already on his hand.

"You cannot possibly be that lucky," the Dark One mumbles to himself, completely ignoring David, but actually taking a step backwards. "But perhaps you are..."

There is a single terrifying moment, where Snow wonders if he will fling her out of his castle, or take her voice away. How far is Rumple willing to go? Will the fact that Snow is important to the Northern kingdom deter him at all? Then the moment passes and nothing terrible has happened.

"Alright, fine," Rumple sighs. He shakes his hand and a large scroll appears in his hand. "A copy for your records, Snow White" he replies, "now be gone..."

Snow and David once again are standing outside the dark ones tower, as if the previous conversation never happened.

Snow hands David Rumple's scroll then she knocks at the door again. But this time the door creaks and doesn't open, a warning sign, urging them to go away.

Back in their office, David unrolls the scroll over his desk and reads out loud.

"Ella Ashley Boyd, hereon after known as the undersigned on this third day of May of year two thousand and seven is agreeing to accept Rumpelstiltskin's aka the Dark One's assistance in exchange for future payment to be determined by him at a time of his choosing."

There are endless terms and conditions, after all the scroll is several feet long, but David doesn't bother to read the rest out loud. He just turns to look at Snow, the horror in his eyes, equally matching her feelings.

"She signed an unspecified contract with the Dark One?" Snow's voice is barely audible.

"In two thousand and seven. That was thirteen years ago. Was Thomas even around then?" David frowns.

"No... maybe. That might be the year they met... Boyd is her maiden name." Snow pulls out her magic mirror, looking for information. She is trying hard to remember.

"Then why is Thomas taking the blame for this?" David asks.

"More importantly, is there any hope of getting a child back, if she was handed to the Dark One?"

"This is an illegal contract. Or rather, this became an illegal contract the moment Rumple used it to take Ella's child away from her. We have to go to Blue with this. The Dark One is not above the law..." David sounds firm.

"Not above the law, but he has unlimited amounts of magic. He is not going to sit around for us to arrest him, any more than Regina did..."
David shakes his head. "So really, if you are in possession of magic, you are above the law in the Enchanted Forest..."

"Pretty much," Snow sighs.

"Well, I refuse to accept that. This isn't right. There must be a way to trap Rumple..."

"Speaking of traps, Rumple accused us of moving pieces in a chess board we hardly understood. What did he mean by that?"

David sits in his chair, staring at Rumple's scroll. "I can't imagine..."

Snow stacks some files on her desk, making enough room for her to squat on top. "Let's think this through. Who would our chess pieces be?"

"You. Council woman, potential Queen," David offers.

Snow raises her eyebrows to protest, about the Queen part; she ends up pointing at David instead. "You. Former prince of the Southern Kingdom..."

"Neither of us has magic, so we can't be much of a threat to Rumple," David continues.

"We do have access to magic," Snow point out.

"We do. Alright, more pieces. Thomas, future king of the West."

"Ella, future Queen of the West, if their marriage survives this."

"Politically speaking, does the North have anything to gain if Ella and Thomas break up?" David frowns.

"The North? No..."

"Does the Dark One have anything to gain if they break up?" he continues.

Snow is shaking her head.

"This can't be it then..."

"Let's think of positions... locations. You and I are in the North," Snow tries.

"Thomas is in the West."

"Ella is off the chess board...staying with Belle..." Snow's eyes open wide. "Belle! Belle, may be a chess piece! She is heir apparent to the throne of the Isles..."

"Do the Isles have anything to gain from Ella's and Thomas' separation?"

"I don't know..."

"What do we know about Belle?"

Snow tries to remember the quiet girl she played with when she was little, she hasn't seen Belle in years. "We don't know much. Ella said that she is practically a recluse. She has turned her castle into a large library, she may have broken up with someone... Umm, won't you look it up, before we intrude in her castle with questions... "
David types the words in his magic mirror. Nothing comes up for a while so he keeps refining the words of his search until he gets one match.

"A Dark Love Affair," the article reads. "Has the Dark One finally found love?"

"A love affair? Belle and the Dark One?" Snow gasps.

"It's very vague, more innuendos than any factual information..."

"Who is the writer?"

"Theodore Fjord. It appears that the writer of the article took a long leave of absence after posting this, citing mental health reasons..."

"Rumple got to him," Snow replies.

"Good to know," David replies dryly.

Snow jumps off the desk. "Is it me, or did the case just get ten times more complicated?"

"Is it time to talk to Blue?"

Nothing has changed in the black knightforce headquarters since they last were here. Snow looks at the small office in the corner. The office they shared when Snow thought that having a white knight as a partner was the worse idea in the realm. David squeezes her hand.

"Snow and David! It's been a while. What can I do for you guys?" Blue smiles brightly at them.

"We are in the middle of a missing child investigation when we came across this," David says handing Blue Rumple's scroll. "We think this contract was used to...-" his voice trails off because Blue has opened the scroll and there is nothing written inside it, the scroll is blank.

David's shoulders slope.

"Wait! What? Let me see this!" Snow rushes to get a closer look.

Ella's contract has disappeared. Snow is staring on a blank piece of parchment.

"Was it an illusion or disappearing ink?" Snow lifts up the scroll to look at it against the light.

"Does it matter?" David sighs.

"Did the Dark One hand this to you?" Blue asks.

"How can you tell?" David frowns.

"This practically reeks of dark magic," Blue explains. "Listen, Rumpelstiltskin is not going to give you anything that will incriminate himself. He will however be happy to trick you into holding onto what you think is evidence and embarrassing yourself when you bring it out in the open."

"Right," David is still looking at the empty scroll, disbelieving his eyes.

"But if it's the Dark One who is involved in the missing child's case, there might be another way to get to him..." Blue continues.

"How?" David asks.
"You," Snow replies, looking at Blue for confirmation.

Blue nods. "Your brother's adoption was most likely arranged by the Dark One. The king has gone into hiding and will be unable to contradict you. You could come forward with your story. The DA will have no choice but to investigate and perhaps even press charges... There is no statue of limitations for illegal adoptions..."

"Would you arrest the Dark One?" David frowns. "More importantly, could you?"

Blue hesitates.

"Is there a prison cell somewhere that could hold him?" he continues.

"No, not exactly," Blue replies. "But even if we failed, and he got away, this would still be a cautionary tale... telling everyone in the land to be weary of making deals with the Dark One..."

David doesn't look entirely convinced.

"You've given us a lot to think about," Snow nods.

Back at home Emma is laying on the floor, reading a story to Wilby who is sitting next to her patiently, wagging his tale every time she turns the pages and to Star the turtle who is asleep in his shell.

"It's Star's favorite story," Emma tells Snow. Hard to tell since the turtle isn't at all reacting, but Snow isn't going to argue with her daughter. Emma turns to lay on her back, using her magic wand to suspend the book in the air above her.

Wilby growls softly. He is not certain how he feels about books that float in the air.

"Careful sweetheart, if the book falls, its going to fall on your head" Snow warns then she walks into the kitchen. David is standing in front of the stove, as he makes grilled cheese sandwiches, humming softly. Snow grabs two bottle of beer from the refrigerator, hands him one and she sits on the counter.

"Thank you!" he smiles at her. "Hungry?" he asks.

"I don't know," she forces a smile back. "Emma claims she is starving."

She sits quietly watching him work, lost in her thoughts about Ella and her triplets who are no doubt far away from their home right now. She thinks of Thomas, and the desolate look on his face as he watched his wife walk away. And then Rumple, how he mocked them and gave them false evidence just to get rid of them.

"You alright?" he asks, his finger caressing her cheek. "How are you holding up?"

"Can't stop thinking about Ella and the triplets moving out of the palace," she starts. "And Thomas, and what if she is pregnant...-"

"It's not your fault, you do know that, right?" he asks.

Snow nods." I know, I know. But still...-"

David steps closer to Snow ans she leans her head on his shoulder. He kisses her forehead.

"Let me hand this to Emma," he says, pointing to the sandwich in the pan that's turned golden
brown. "I'll be right back..."

David steps out of the kitchen as the cuckoo clock on the wall strikes nine and Snow has the strangest thought. Right now in Thomas’ castle, Rowan is blowing out the candle in his daughter's bedroom and is signing her his lullaby. Right now. And if Snow hurries and uses a magic bean she can catch the song just in time.

This makes no sense of course, she doesn't need to go listen to a song. Why would she need to do that? Snow's hand has already reached in her pocket and is now clasping a magic bean. She looks at her hand shocked. She is surprised to notice that she is already singing the song in her head, in fact she's been singing it all day long. She is desperate to hear it again.

That is not what the magic beans are for of course, the magic beans are for work. David spent a lot of money on these beans. She shouldn't be doing this. She really shouldn't. She definitely shouldn't be using a magic bean inside the house. She should step into the back yard. Her heart is beating faster. The thought of waiting long enough to step out of the house is making her feel ill, like she might throw up. She can't, she needs the song, now.

Snow drops the bean on the ground.
"Take me to Rowan's song," she whispers, her hands trembling as she steps into the magic bean portal.

David walks inside the kitchen just in time to see the green light of the bean portal fade. His face goes pale.
"Snow!" he tries to stifle his gasp.
Snow stumbles blindly out of the magic bean portal into her front yard. She is sobbing. Rowan's song hit her harder today.

"Snow!" David opens the front door widely and rushes towards her. "You are here! Snow! What's wrong? What happened?" He is so relieved she is back.

Snow lets him engulf her in his arms.

"Are you alright? Are you hurt? What happened?" he asks again, his hands cupping her face, searching for answers.

She wants to tell him of course, but the song has left her feeling spent, empty. She wraps her arms around his neck instead.

"It's okay," he whispers. "it is going to be okay, you are safe now..."

"There are no holes in my protections spells, no rips, nothing. Your house is safe, she couldn't have possibly been taken...- But you are not helping the situation by leaving your front door wide open..." Tink steps out in the front porch looking for David. "Oh! Snow is back..." she says more quietly now, looking at David holding Snow, "and you are going to make out now," she continues, at this point mainly talking to herself, "I better go..."

Evidently David called Tink the moment he thought Snow was taken again.

"Wait!" Snow mumbles.

"What is it?" David is looking so concerned.

"Tink!" Snow takes a step back, looking for the green fairy.

"Yes?" Tink is still looking dubiously at David's hand still on Snow's shoulder, like she would rather be anywhere but here. She doesn't care for intimate loving moments.

"I need your help," Snow continues wiping her eyes. She takes a deep breath. "Is there such a thing as a male siren?"

"A male siren?" David frowns.

"I wasn't kidnapped," Snow explains. "At least not in the traditional sense of the word. The clock struck nine and I had to go listen to Rowan's song again..."

David looks at her incredulously.

"You left? On your own free will? Snow I was worried sick, I thought you were taken again...-"

Snow is shaking her head. "No, that's just it. I didn't want to go. It was all so sudden. One minute we are talking and the next the clock struck nine and all I could think of was the song...-"

"Sounds like a siren's call alright," Tink nods.

"But I've only heard of women sirens," Snow is so confused.
"It's incredibly rare, but once in a while, a man who is a half siren will have that effect on people," Tink explains. "Extremely rare, as in, it hasn't happened within my lifetime, but I heard stories in Neverland..."

Snow is looking lost.

"What is the song like?" Tink asks.

"I... I don't even know how to explain it. It's some kind of lullaby, in a language I don't recognize. It is the saddest song I have ever heard, it makes me weep, but while he is singing, all I can think of is that I don't want the song to end..." Snow has tears streaming down her cheeks as she is describing it.

"Come on," David interrupts. "You are freezing cold, let's get you inside..."

Emma is in bed, Snow is sitting by the fireplace wrapped in three different blankets. David might have gotten a little overboard in trying to get her warmed up. Her hands are still trembling.

David hands Snow a cup of steaming hot tea.

Tink is standing, her back against the wall, looking like she could bolt any minute. "Contrary to popular opinion, a siren cannot entrance just anyone. In order for the song to lure you, it needs to find a seed of truth in your heart..."

"What does that mean?" David frowns, crossing his arms to his chest.

"Something inside your heart, is recognizing the truth in his song..." Tink struggles to explain.

"What truth?" Snow is feeling so frustrated. "I can't make out any of the words!"

"The truth is in the song, the essence of it. Not the actual words," Tink shrugs. "I doubt there are many lyrics to the song..."

"How do we break this?" David needs a practical solution now. "How do we keep the song from affecting Snow?"

Tink looks away. There is no easy answer for this. "The longer she stays away from the song, the easier it is going to get... Now that you know what's happening, make sure you are with her at nine... no matter what she says, do not let her go... everytime she hears the song, its hold on her will get stronger."

"There is no way to just break this?" Snow asks. The thought of having to resist such a powerful need like the siren's song, is quite scary.

"You could ask him to stop singing..." Tink replies. "Maybe he can stop. Most sirens can't, but if he is a half siren he may be able to control this... but that doesn't guarantee you will not need to hear the song when the time comes"

"Does he know he is doing this to Snow?" David is looking murderous.

"Did he sing just for you?" Tink asks hesitantly.

"Who? Rowan? No, he didn't even know I was there. I haven't actually met the guy. He sings for his daughter and I happened to be outside his house. People from the palace know he sings every night and they show up to listen."
Tink nods. "No, he must be singing for someone else. And Snow just happened to be there... A siren song is like a mating call..." she adds.

"A mating call? I'm pretty sure he is singing to his child," Snow tries to argue.

"A song of loss, a mating call, it's all the same when you are dealing with sirens. He is singing to his missing mate, and somehow his loss speaks to you," Tink concludes. "You've experienced a similar loss before..."

David's expression softens.

Snow turns to look at him, her eyes welling up. Things are beginning to make sense. David ends up sitting next to Snow, his arm around her shoulders. She leans her forehead against his cheek, letting out a soft guttural noise, without meaning to.

Tink lets out a long suffering sigh."And now you are going to make out. I knew this was coming... I'm going to go."

"We are not going to make out! Tink! Stay! Have some tea!" Snow protests.

But Tink has already raised her hand in the air and in the next breath she's disappeared.

"Sorry Tink!" David mumbles, his hand already tangled in Snow's hair. "But we are going to do a lot more than just make out..."

David wakes up bright and early, ready to tackle the siren issue.

Snow is feeling calm and content, so much better than she felt last night.

"I'm alright, Charming," she says when she catches David stealing glances at her direction for the tenth time.

"I know," he replies, though he doesn't sound certain at all.

A couple of hours and one magic bean later they are standing at Rowan's door. David raises his hand to knock on the door but the door opens before he gets a chance to knock. A shirtless man is standing there, tall and broad shouldered, dark skin, bright eyes, hair in dreadlocks.

"Can I help you?" he asks.

And David doesn't say a word, he just stands there gaping. This man who accidentally trapped Snow in his song... did he have to be a perfectly chiseled specimen of manliness?

"Hello," Snow smiles, noting that David isn't talking. "You must be Rowan. My name is Snow, this is David Nolan, and we are in the middle of an investigation. I was wondering if we can have a minute of your time..."

"Snow? Snow White? The investigator? " the man is looking at her wide eyed. "Please come in! Excuse me for a moment!"

David and Snow hesitate in the doorway while the man rushes inside and puts a shirt on in a hurry. Doesn't make much of a difference, David notes bitterly. Shirt or no shirt the man is still striking.

When he comes back he offers a bright smile. "Please have a seat. I am a big fan. I've been reading your books... And I have to tell you I love detective stories but your adventures are by far my favorite..."
"My books?" Snow is looking confused.

"I mean they are unauthorized dramatizations of your cases. You're called Snow Brite in the books but I always thought they captured you perfectly..." he points to the book shelf behind him that is stacked with paperback detective novels.

"A fan. How delightful!" David says dryly.

"You must be the knight," the man turns sizing up David. "Richard Knight, the assistant, the 'will they won't they' character... I'm always wondering if you'll ever get together in the books... What do you think? Will you get together?"

David is looking at the man incredulously.

Rowan continues completely oblivious to David's annoyance. "You are taller than the book describes you... can I offer you guys some coffee?"

Rowan's living quarters are small and cozy. Snow and David sit next to each other on the couch. Rowan sits across from them in a small stool, which makes him look even bigger than he actually is, a giant among men.

"What can I do for you guys?" he looks so incredibly excited. "Was there a crime in the palace? Do you need me to spy on anyone? I am very observant..."

"Oh, no, nothing like that," Snow can't help but smile at his enthusiasm. "We just have a few questions about you..."

"Me? How exciting. Wait, did I commit any crimes I do not know about?"

David tries not to glare at the man.

Snow laughs. "No, of course not. Let me just get to the point. Is your mother a siren?"

"A siren?" Rowan frowns. "No, she wasn't. My father was a centaur that could shapeshift to a man. My mother was a mortal woman..." Rowan lets out a bitter laugh. "There is no way my father would ever marry a siren, he was very old fashioned, you know, how old timers where. He was very anti-siren..."

"Do you have any pictures of them I can look at?" Snow is not at all convinced.

Rowan rummages through a stack of papers in a driwer and comes up with a small photograph. A man that looks just like him, dark tall and handsome, holding a petite woman with white blond hair.

"There," Snow shows the picture to David, pointing to the tips of the woman's ears. They are a lot pointier than human ears. "Maybe she colored her hair... You don't mind if I make a copy of this, do you?"

She scans the picture with the magic mirror before Rowan gets a chance to protest.

David nods in agreement.

Rowan looks stricken. "What are you saying?"

Snow hesitates.
"Have you ever noticed how people stop and listen to you sing?"

Rowan looks towards the closed door to his left. "I don't sing much anymore... Not since my wife passed..."

"I'm so sorry for you loss," Snow says softly. "But Rowan, did you notice?"

Rowan shrugs. "Maybe. That still doesn't make my mother a siren..."

"Listen, based on the evidence, I have reason to believe that you might have some siren blood in you... "

Rowan is looking at her, trying to come to terms with what she is saying. "Based on what evidence?"

"Your goodnight song, it really effects people..." Snow struggles to explain. "What do the words mean?"

Rowan hums the song softly.

Snow sucks in a breath and tenses up.

"Can you just tell us the meaning of the words?" David intervenes. "Without singing it?"

"Yeah, something like, 'don't say a word, rest in my love, let me sing you to sleep, rest in my love...' it's just a simple lullaby..."

But Snow is already holding back tears.

"Have you noticed how your lullaby moves people?" she asks.

Rowan glances towards the window. "I mean, there is this woman who comes to listen to it every night," he admits. "She hides under the tree..."

"Sometimes, love songs can be mating calls when you are part siren..." Snow explains.

"Mating calls! I am just singing a lullaby to my child! What kind of creep do you take me for!" his voice gets louder. He covers his mouth with his hand. "Forgive me..." he says, looking incredibly annoyed with himself. "I don't want to wake up Lia."

"Is Lia your daughter?" Snow asks.

He nods. "The princess left the castle last night with the babies. She is going on vacation. My Lia was devastated. She spends all her time after school with them, she didn't want them to go. She cried herself to sleep last night... I kept her home from school..."

"How old is she?"

"She is nine years old."

"Oh, that is such a sweet age," Snow smiles. "My daughter is ten..."

"You have a daughter," Rowan muses. "That's not in the books."

Snow shrugs. "I haven't read the books. Listen Rowan, I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor..."
"Anything," Rowan is quick to offer.

"Tonight, is there any way you can skip singing your song? Can you read her a bedtime story instead?"

"Skip singing my song? Why?"

Snow looks away. "Because if I am right, your song could be hurting people..."

"Hurting people!" Rowan is looking shocked. "It's just a lullaby!"

"I know, I know you think that, I know you have no ill intent. But a lullaby sung by a man who may have siren's blood in his veins, can be a powerful thing..."

"I don't even know if I can stop singing it!" Rowan admits.

"Then it may be more than just a lullaby?" Snow asks quietly. "Because if it was just a lullaby, you wouldn't have a problem not singing it for just one night..."

Rowan is looking at Snow all confused. "I suppose you are right. It's just that I can sense her listening to me, hiding under the tree..." he admits. And when Snow doesn't reply he adds "Noreen... the princess' nanny..."

Snow nods. "Did she leave with the princess?"

Rowan nods.

"Rowan, if she is used to listening to your song every night for years and she doesn't hear it... if I'm right about your song, this will be incredible painful for her," Snow explains.

Rowan's face blanches. "I don't want to hurt her!"

"I know," Snow replies. "Do you think maybe you can try not singing tonight?"

Rowan nods. "I am going to try."

"Thank you," Snow stands up. "And maybe, when Noreen comes back, maybe tell her how you feel..."

Rowan looks away. "Oh, I don't...- I doubt she'd want to be with someone like me... she could do a lot better..."

Once again David looks at Rowan incredulously. "Go ahead and talk to her anyway," he suggests. "Do you really think I should? It was very nice meeting you both!' Rowan offers his hand.

"Well, I hope this works," Snow mumbles as they walk away from Rowan's house.

David reaches for her hand. "There are books written about you?"

Snow shakes her head. "I've heard that before, but it's the first time I've met someone who's read them. I don't think they are very popular...-"

"You are back!" neither Snow nor David had noticed Thomas waiting for them around the corner. "Thomas!" Snow hesitates.
"Thomas!" David gets straight to the point. "We had a terrifying and very instructive meeting with the Dark One yesterday."

"Did you?" Thomas looks down.

"I don't understand," David continues. "If the child was taken due to a contract Ella made with the Dark One before she even met you... why are you letting her think this is all your fault?"

Thomas shakes his head. "It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters," Snow intervenes. "How do you think she is going to feel, when I tell her what I found? When she realizes she blamed you even thought you were innocent?"

"Am I innocent?" Thomas shrugs. "What sort of father, doesn't find a way to release his wife and his daughter from the Dark One's hold?"

"What was her name?" Snow tries. "The baby's name?"

"Alexandra," Thomas voice cracks. "And I tried, I tried everything. I offered everything I could think of, including myself. I'd serve the Dark One for the rest of my days if he'd let the baby stay with Ella... All I got back was silence."

"Thomas I am really sorry this happened to you," Snow places her hand on his shoulder. "But I don't think any of this was your fault. And I think it's time!"

"Time for what?" Thomas is looking doubtful.

"Time to talk to Ella. We are on our way to see Ella and tell her what we found. But I think it'd be a lot easier if it was coming from you..."

Thomas shakes his head. "You don't understand," he gasps. "After the baby was taken Ella was devastated. She couldn't function, couldn't speak, could barely get out of bed. She couldn't forgive herself for what happened. I couldn't leave her alone at all. I seriously thought she would harm herself. And then one day she got out of bed and begged me to find a forgetting potion and erase the memory... And it worked. She was calm again. Carefree even. Five years later she got pregnant and she was so so happy. She loves being a mother. And I thought we were out of the woods. But I think the pain of childbirth brought a hint of a memory back. Because she'd hear a baby crying in her dreams. And she knows this cry is different... she knows it's not the triplets crying."

"Her solution worked for a while. She got better. But now it's not working anymore," Snow says quietly. "Now you need to tell her the truth. And it has to be you, Thomas. Please. It needs to come from you!"

Thomas sighs. "One more day," he pleads. "Give Ella one more day when she is not crushed by guilt for what happened... I'll come with you tomorrow and I'll tell her everything. I promise."

Snow looks ready to argue. She doesn't want to keep Ella in the dark any longer.

"One more day," David agrees. "We'll do it tomorrow. And then we will look for Alexandra, together. We'll help you find her."

And Thomas raises his head to finally face them. "Do you think that's possible?"

"I have to," David replies. "I have to believe that we live in a world where second chances are possible, where we all get a chance at grace..."
And Thomas nods, tears streaming down his face. "Tomorrow," he says taking in a deep breath.

There isn't much left to do today so Snow and David head home early. They arrive to find Ruby watching Emma, Hansel and Gretel play sword-fighting in the back yard.

"You are holding the sword all wrong," David notes.

"How?" Hansel challenges.

For the next two hours, David shows Emma, Hansel and Gretel, how to properly hold their toy swords, how to parry, how to place their feet firmly on the ground so an opponent cannot just knock them over.

"I will destroy you!" Emma quips, jumping from a back yard chair, brandishing her toy's sword.

"You will not!" David parries and jumps out of Emma's way.

"Yes we will!" Hansel, clearly on Emma's side, swings his word.

"Good form," David notes.

And then Gretel chimes in holding a toy dagger.

"Come on, Snow Brite" David says to Snow who is watching them, sitting comfortably on a chair, sipping her coffee. "Let's see what you got! I need reinforcements!"

Snow laughs. "How do you even know whether I can sword fight?" she lies. "It's not in the book..."

"You've never even read the book," he protests, as he falls on the ground clasping an imaginary chest wound.

"Are you okay Dad?" Emma is the first to break character, and check on him.

"I don't know," he pretends he can barely talk. Then he sit up. "Good swordsmanship by the way," he says sounding completely normal.

Emma is looking quite relieved.

"Can we come back for another sword fighting lesson tomorrow?" Hansel asks.

The kids are long gone, Emma is in bed early and Ruby has been asked to stay longer.

Snow shifts uncomfortably in her chair. She keeps glancing at the cuckoo clock. Rowan's song is already playing in her mind.

"Is it almost time?" David asks.

Snow nods.

"I am going to ask you to hand me the magic beans you have on you, for now. "

Snow goes through her pockets hands him two magic beans. The song is now blaring in her head, completely overwhelming her, making it harder for her to think straight.

"I thought it'd be a good idea if we went to the cabin for the next few hours," David suggests.

Snow is having a hard time forming coherent thoughts. All she can think of is the song and her
She just nods and follows David out of the room. They go together to their yard and step on the magical stepping stone Tink gave them as a wedding present. The stone that transports them straight to their cabin in the heart of the Enchanted Forest instantly.

Snow smiles at the strong scent of mint, there is so much wild mint growing around the cabin. A moment of pleasure, before the song picks up again. She can think clearly again.

"Let's go inside," David tugs on her arm.

"Hold on," she whispers. She reaches in her pocket and pulls out one more magic bean. "You better take this too. I'm sorry..."

David looks at her confused.

"Sorry," she says again, looking away.

"You're not in fault," he replies.

But it's hard for Snow to believe his words when the song is already gaining ground in her mind and her muddled brain is already plotting ways, coming up with arguments on why he should let her listen to Rowan's song.

She needs to get to the song, she absolutely needs to, and David is the only one standing in her way. Why does he think this is bad anyway, it is just a song, why does he want to keep her from it?

It's nine'o clock.

Snow bends over and is gasping for air. "David!"

"I'm here," he rasps. "Tell me what you need me to do..."

"Just hand me the bean back," she pleads, "just this once. One last time, please... I'll stay away from the song tomorrow, I promise, but I have to hear it one last time!"

It kills him, having to say no to her, but he shakes his head anyway. "Can't do that..."

"Please," she says and she has tears streaming down her cheeks. "It hurts too much, David, I can't do this, it hurts too much, please! Just one bean, just this once, please!"

He tries hard to stay calm. "This will be over soon," he tries to reason with her.

"Not soon enough," she gasps, her whole body shaking. "Please!"

"Snow, I can't!" he tries not to let his exasperation show. "If you hear it again, it's only going to get harder to get away from it the next day!"

And even though he is making perfect sense, all she can feel is pain. She needs the pain to stop, she needs that song, she needs that song more than the air in her lungs or the beats of her heart. She needs that song more than anything. More than anyone. He doesn't understand. Or maybe he doesn't care.

"You don't get it. I can see that. But if you loved me you'd do this for me!" she blurts out, hating the words as they come out of her mouth, hating him for not being able to disguise the hurt in his eyes.

But the song is twisting the thoughts in her mind, the pain and the need is greater than anything
"You know I love you!" he tries to stay calm, he tries not to let her words touch him.

"No, I don't, I don't know anything! If you loved me, you'd let me do this one thing, if you loved me you'd listen to me. All I'm asking is for one song! If you loved me you'd understand..." Snow bends over, dry heaving, her heart beating erratically, her thoughts a dark river of anger and despair. She can't take this anymore, he has to give in. She has to make him.

"If you aren't going to help me then won't you just leave! What's the point of you even being here? Clearly you don't care, so leave! You left ten years ago, go ahead, just go!" she says and then she covers her mouth with her hand.

"Snow!" is all his says and she can't tell if he is tense or angry. But by now she knows she can't trust her mouth or her mind not to do anymore damage.

David is standing there, absolutely bewildered as his wife stares at him, her face a mask of anger and regret and fear.

All that matters is the song, the song he is not letting her get to and she hates him for it; and she hates him for not being able to hide the hurt in his eyes. At the same time she horrified with herself and the intensity of her feelings. So she closes her eyes and lets out a scream. She is sobbing and screaming, screaming, screaming so loud. Until her anger is spent, and she can't barely scream anymore. David wraps his arms around her, her back on his chest and holds her as tight as he can. Pretty soon her screams have dissolved into just sobs. She feels like her knees are going to buckle. If he weren't holding her up, she'd already have collapsed on the ground.

David is humming. It isn't a conscious choice, he just started doing it without thinking, to block out Snow's screams and she's gotten silent, listening to him, breathing fast. So he adds a few words and he keeps on humming.

And then she is finally silent, wiping her eyes.

"Is it over?" he asks.

She shrugs, unable to reply, her voice hoarse from all the screaming.

David pulls her towards the bed in the corner. She feels so awful, she can barely look at him.

He places a blanket around her shoulders, because her hands are still trembling, he hands her a glass of water all the while saying calm reassuring things.

He sits next to her, his arm around her shoulders until she is not trembling anymore. She is so exhausted, she doesn't have anything left inside her. And she is barely listening, unable to comprehend how he can stand to be near her at the moment. She opens her eyes just in time to see David walk out of the cabin.

Snow stares at the door. He walked out. He left. She managed to push him away. She asked him to leave and he left. Snow hasn't felt this miserable since... she can't even remember the last time she felt this guilty. She looks at the wall where she carved the word "Charming" again and again ten years ago, fighting her own memory loss when they took him away. Except this time there is no one else she can blame, she drove him away on her own. She curls up on the bed and she let's herself dissolve into sobs. Her eyes are closed, her shoulders shaking.

"Snow!" she hears David rush back in, he sounds really worried. "Snow what's wrong? Is it
happening again?"

She opens her eyes, she is now crying tears of relief. "You are here," she whispers. "I though you left!"

"What do you mean I left? Left to go where?" he frowns. "Told you I’d be right back."

"After all the horrible things I said to you, I wouldn't blame you if you did! David I am so so sorry, I wasn't thinking straight, I didn't mean any of it!"

"I know. I know that was the siren curse talking. And I’m certainly not going anywhere," he says plopping on the bed next to her, lacing her fingers with his. "I realized that I dropped something outside, when we used the stepping stone. I had to go find it."

"What did you drop?"

"A book. My plan on how we are going to spend the rest of our evening," he replies cryptically. He meant to save this for later but she looks so upset that now may be the perfect time. He pulls out a small paperback novel from his back pocket. "I thought once you felt a little better we could read this," he says, showing her the book cover. A woman in a skimpy outfit is brandishing a bow and arrow, standing proudly in the middle of a snowstorm.

"Snow Brite Fury" she reads the title out loud. Snow gapes at him. "Where did you even get this?"

"Bashful works at the library," he smirks. "He hunted one down for me. Well? What do you say? Are you ready?" he opens to the first chapter. " Snow Brite is sitting in her office, late in the afternoon, her long shapely legs leaning on top of her desk. The sweltering heat is getting to her..."

"Sweltering heat?" Snow interrupts. "Isn't it snowing in the book cover?"

"Maybe her fireplace is too hot," David shrugs.

"Is this even real snow? Because she is wearing a mini skirt and no jacket..." Snow tilts her head, examining the book cover again.

"Come on, let me read, I want to know what's going on" David protests.

"If she is a brilliant detective, you'd thinks she'd be smart enough not to wear stiletto heels in the snow," Snow continues undaunted.

"How dare you question the Snow Brite cover! You are not a real fan!" he tries to keep a straight face as he reads on.

Turns out that Snow Brite is a beautiful and genius private eye, who solves crimes with minimal assistance from her handsome yet underdeveloped and unappreciated assistant, Richard Knight, who pines for her, while she ignores him and dates several powerful royals in the story.

"Richard Knight pulls Snow out of the arrows trajectory and they tumble together on the floor. His heart is thumping.

Snow Brite shakes her head. She reaches to the arrow, now lodged on the wall of her office. There is a coded message tied on it.

"Would you translate this for me?" she asks.

"Yes, but first, I need to say..." He has finally mastered enough courage to speak up.
"No," Snow interrupts shaking her head. "Don't. Just file this in the cases that will remain forever unresolved..."

"Forever?" Richard Knight gasps. "Perhaps we could try..." he hesitates, straightening his glasses, his hand grasping hers, his eyes filled with longing.

She places the tip of her finger on his lips, silencing him with a look. "Not tonight, kid!" she says. "You and I both know this could never work between us!"

Richard leans his head against the wall. Outside, Blake Dark honks the horn of his pumpkin twice. He is here to pick up Snow for their date. Richard Knight closes his eyes. He cannot bear to watch her walk away.

David clasps his heart, closing the book. "I really don't like this story!" he exclaims.

Snow smirks. "Reading this was your idea!" she protests "Come on! What happens next?"

"Next, you no doubt stomp on my heart with your high heels and laugh about it with your very rich royal boyfriend until you dump him for the next very rich royal boyfriend, because your first royal boyfriend turned out to be the murderer!" he exclaims.

Snow laughs. "Yeah, Blake Dark is definitely the murderer," she shrugs. "Too bad Snow Bright hasn't figured it out yet..."

"Yeah, not reading any more," he mumbles under his breath.

"It isn't us!" she argues. "It's just a goofy story. It's not me and it certainly isn't you. It's just a 'will they, won't they' trope... when was this book even written?" Snow checks the publication date. "Two years ago. You weren't even around back then..."

"Yes, easy for you to say. It's not your heart laying shattered on the floor," he replies dramatically.

"Aw," Snow props her head with her arm and places her hand on his heart. "Snow Bright is a terrible terrible detective if has someone as handsome and as wonderful as Richard Knight next to her, day in and day out and she still goes on to date all the murder suspects..."

"You think he is handsome?"

"The handsomest. And the brightest. And the best..."

David is smiling brightly, thoroughly relieved he managed to get Snow's mind away from the awful side affects of missing the siren's song. "Keep going," he tries to look sad again, "I'm not entirely convinced you fully appreciate Richard Knight's qualities..."

"Oh, stop it," Snow silences him with a kiss. And as she cups his face with her hands, she whispers "thank you..."

"For what?" he asks.

"This is a really good distraction..."
Snow White wakes up really early and sneaks quietly into the kitchen to make breakfast. The bacon is sizzling as she scrambles five eggs. This isn't something she normally does. The fact that she still feels incredibly guilty about the way she talked to David last night, might have something to do with why she is even up this early. She walks back in their bedroom and kisses David on the cheek at first, and when he opens his eyes she smiles.

"You are up early," he mumbles, sitting up, stretching, and then he notices the breakfast tray on her hands. "Wait, what's the occasion? Do we have an anniversary or something?"

Snow shakes her head. "No occasion. Just me saying good morning..."

"Oh, well, in that case," he smirks playfully, taking the tray from her hands and placing it aside. Snow's heart is already beating faster as he pulls her in closer, his lips finding hers, his hand already under her pajama top, on her skin.

"Good morning," he whispers.

There is a reason she shouldn't go along with this, a very good reason, except she is not thinking clearly at the moment, his lips touching her neck and all she wants is to get even closer.

"What are you guys doing?" Emma's voice at the door. Emma. Emma is the reason.

Snow freezes and her eyes open wide, truly grateful that her pajamas are still on. David pulls back, and his hand is now smoothing Snow's top, as if that's what he meant to do all along.

"I was just waking your father up," Snow's voice sounding as innocent as possible.

"I was very... sleepy?" David tries to play along, but the uncertainty in his tone makes him sound unconvincing.

"Oh," Emma doesn't question their answer, "well, I'm hungry!"

Snow follows her into the kitchen. "As it happens, I already made breakfast" she exclaims, all too happy to change the subject.

Emma sits at the rustic table, stuffing a large bite of scrambled eggs in her mouth. David joins her, bringing his breakfast tray along, Snow fills herself a plate. Wilby walls over to them, wagging his tail enthusiastically.

"This is good," Emma mumbles, way too much food in her mouth.

David laughs.

Snow is at her living room window, sipping her coffee, watching Emma, now all dressed and ready, hair in a ponytail, her wand in her backpack, walking with David towards the squash stop. Emma is clearly old enough to walk to the squash stop on her own, but she her dad to walk her every morning. And it warms Snow's heart to see them walk away together.

"He is coming back, right?" Tink's voice startles Snow so bad, she almost drops her coffee cup.

"Tink!" She tries to smile, turning around to face her. "I didn't hear you come in!"
Well, Tink didn't come in exactly. She materialized on Snow's couch, which isn't exactly the same thing as coming through the front door. Snow is used to Tink showing up in their office all the time, but she's never just appeared in her living room before.

Tink looks so worried, she barely hears Snow. "He is coming back, right?" she asks. "You guys are okay?"

"Of course he is coming back, why do you ask-" Snow lets her words hang mid sentence as she realizes what Tink means. "Are you talking about last night?" she asks. Because last night, Snow under the effects of Rowan's siren song yelled at David and she accused him of terrible things she'd rather forget. "Oh... You knew it was going to be brutal, didn't you?"

Tink looks away and doesn't reply.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Snow demands. "I said awful, horrible things... I really wish you'd warned me!"

"Yeah, awful things come with the siren curse territory. Would you have let David stay with you and help you if you knew you were going to be like this?" Tink counters.

"No, of course not!" Snow's response is automatic.

"That's why I didn't tell you," Tink shrugs. "You would have tried to deal with it on your own, and you would have caved and ran back to listen to the song..."

"Is it going to be that bad every night?" Snow is almost too afraid to ask.

"First night is the worst," Tink explains. "A siren song is more addictive than dream-shade. The side effects are very real, and incredibly painful, but once you resist it... it should get easier overtime..."

"Oh," Snow looks relieved, even though Tink didn't give her a clear answer. Then her eyes open wide. "Wait! What about the nanny?" she exclaims. "What happens to a person that hears the song every day for a couple of years and then one day she travels far and she can't hear it?"

"I honestly don't know," Tink replies. "I imagine it would be excruciating..."

"I better call Ella," Snow reaches for her magic mirror. But Ella doesn't answer her call no matter how many times Snow tries. Snow gives up with a sigh. She walks over to Tink and shows her the picture of Rowan's parents.

"This is a picture of Rowan's mother and father," she explains. "Apparently his father was a centaur, very old fashioned, very anti siren. Rowan was certain that his mother couldn't have possibly been a siren. His father would have never married her if she was. But I'm thinking that she was a siren and hid it from him... I mean, she kind of looks like she could be a siren that died her hair... Does she look like a siren to you?"

Tink doesn't reply right away. She enlarges the picture and points to the pendant Rowan's mom is wearing.

"This looks like a dark amulet," she states matter of factly, as if Snow already knows what that means.

"A dark amulet? What does it do?" Snow leans in to look even closer.
"It's used in dark magic. In her case, I'm assuming it is changing her appearance."

"Like a glamour?"

Tink shakes her head. "Not quite. A glamour just changes your appearance, with minimal side effects. A dark amulet is supposed to do one thing, while it really does something else, completely different. Usually the wearer has no idea. I bet his mom thought all her necklace did was change her appearance. But what it's really doing is siphoning all her fear and insecurity. If she married Rowan's father under false pretenses she might have worried that one day he would find out. Or maybe the amulet feeds in her deception... Whoever gave this to her, probably intended to take it back. Gather all her fear, or all her deception, trap it in the amulet for future use, no doubt for something sinister..."

"Like what?"

"If I told you all the things a dark amulet could be used for, you wouldn't sleep at night," Tink replies. That's all the information she is willing to offer. "Does his mother still have it?"

Snow shakes her head. "Both his parents have passed..."

David opens the door to see Snow and Tink deep in thought, both staring in Snow's magic mirror.

"Tink!" he smiles. "What are you doing here this early?"

"I was in the neighborhood. How are you holding up?" Tink is looking worried.

"I'm fine, why?"

"No reason," Tink looks away.

"Tink forgot to mention that siren song withdrawals are brutal. She is here to make sure you are alright," Snow explains.

"Oh, that's sweet. Thanks Tink. It was fine," David shrugs.

"It was certainly not fine. I haven't been this and angry and this loud with anyone since... well, ever," Snow says shaking her head.

"It wasn't that bad," David insists.

"First night is the worse," Tink replies. "What's the plan for today? Doing anything exciting?"

"A family reunion," Snow replies.

"Oh," Tink is already looking ready to bolt. "Tears, hugs, regret, that sort of thing?" she says.

"Pretty much," David replies. "Do you want to come along?"

"Oh, no, I'll pass," Tink's hand is up in the air, she is ready to leave. "But I do want to meet the siren, so let me know before you go and I'll tag along if you don't mind. If he has that amulet, it certainly needs to be contained..."

Tink has already faded away.

"The amulet? What amulet?" David turns to Snow.
"I'll explain on the way," Snow is putting on her daggers and her jacket. "We need to hurry. We need to make sure the nanny is alright..."

Belle's castle is a beautiful yet impenetrable fortress. It is nestled on top of a steep hill, surrounded by a moat, whose water is pouring out endlessly in a waterfall spilling down a cliff.

"I'm guessing that princess Belle really doesn't like visitors," David notes.

"Not anymore," says Thomas, who true to his word, has joined them.

Snow pulls out her magic mirror. "I need to talk to Ella," she tries again.

"Don't bother," Thomas replies. "Pretty sure Belle has a scrambler of sorts. I already tried calling..."

David is staring at the moat. There is no drawbridge in sight. "How do we get inside?"

"We are going to have to do this the old fashioned way," Thomas intervenes.

"Which is?"

"Find the castle gate that is not always on the same spot, then answer the chimera guardian's questions."

"A chimera guardian?" David frowns.

"Yes, and please don't kill this one," Thomas adds in a hurry. "Belle loves him, she will never let you in, if you do!"

"I am NOT a chimera killer!" David throws his hands up in the air. "That was my brother James..."

"Sorry, it's hard to keep up with who did what, since you are both supposed to be the same person," Thomas mumbles.

"Right," David sighs.

Snow has already walked off, walking the perimeter of the moat. It takes them a while to find the castle gate. The most exotic vegetation is growing around Belle's moat, bright green vines and prickly branches springing up in their path, tangling around their feet. Little green frogs are piling up in their path, almost trying to block their way. Why, even a lizard that has bright purple scales stares at them intently before she steps aside.

"There it is!" Snow points to the castle gate, right before she lets out a gasp. She's stepped inside a rope she didn't see. She thought it was just another vine, only this was a trap and she is now dangling five feet up in the air over the moat in a net.

"David!"

"Hold on," David cries out, pulling out his sword, ready to cut the rope down.

"Wait!" Thomas intervenes. "If you cut her down now, she is going to fall into the moat. Who knows what kind of creatures are lurking in the water..."

"What do you suggest, we leave her dangling there?" David asks incredulously.

"I cut down the rope, you pull out your sword and jump in the water. It doesn't look too deep,"
Thomas argues. Make sure there is nothing there...

"Not so fast!"

They turn around to see a furry creature that looks down at them across from the moat. It is a rather strange hybrid, the head of a llama resting on a dragon's body, covered up in white shimmering fair. Under any other circumstances they'd think this chimera is cute. Why, Snow might even consider petting it.

"Are you the guardian of this castle?" David asks.

"Are you the chimera killer's brother?" the creature retorts.

"Yes, that's me! Now release my wife and let us through! We mean princess Belle no harm!" David is trying not to let the agitation show in his voice.

"First you must answer one riddle," the chimera sounds very formal. "What is green on the outside and red on the inside?"

"That's your riddle?" Snow asks from her net. "You are not going to ask about the meaning of life, or something like that?"

"Why? Do you know the meaning of life?" The chimera's ears perk up.

"Well... not exactly, but I figured it has to do with love...-" Snow frowns.

"Didn't think so," the chimera interrupts. "Well? What is green on the outside and red on the inside?"

"A watermelon! Now please, let us through!" David is feeling quite impatient.

"No! That's not it," the chimera is shaking his head.

"What is it then?" David argues.

"A tomato I dropped in green paint," the chimera snorts, laughing at his own joke.

David just stares.

"Fine, fine, fine. I suppose you answered the riddle correctly. State your purpose!"

"Here to see my wife, Ella" Thomas explains, "tell her the truth about everything..."

"Do some groveling?" The chimera raises one eyebrow.

"Certainly," Thomas replies.

"I'll be back," the chimera walks through the portcullis that raises long enough for him to pass, and into the castle walls.

"Come on," David is already waist deep in the water, his dagger drawn. "Cut the rope down!"

Three seconds later and Snow splashes in the water and David untangles her from the net.

"Thank you!" she says and then she makes a face.

"What's wrong?"
"The water is sweet!" Snow wipes her mouth. "I think we can just walk through the moat and climb up to the other side..."

"I don't know about this!" David pulls her back out of the water in a hurry.

"Why? What's behind me?" she asks trying to get out of the water as fast as possible.

"Just about twenty blue water snakes," David is doing his best to stay calm, "hopefully harmless, nothing you need to concern yourself about..."

Thomas extends his hand and helps Snow first and then David out of the water.

"I see you met some of my friends!" a woman calls out from the castle gate.

"Belle!" Snow replies. "Please let us in! Forgive us for dropping by uninvited, but we need to talk to Ella, and then we'll be out of your way... It is incredibly important..."

Belle places her arms on her waist. She doesn't look at all convinced. She is wearing a dark green dress, that is climbing around her shoulders, giving the illusion of tree bark. Why, if she hadn't met her before, Snow would think she was a definitely a tree nymph.

"Belle!" Snow tries again.

"I might consider letting you in, Snow White, but there is a strict no men policy in my castle at the moment," Belle shrugs.

Just then Robbie, one of the triplets shows up from behind Belle's skirts. "Daddy!" he yells locating Thomas and he dives straight into the moat.

"Robbie!" Thomas cries out and then all three of them Thomas, David and Snow have jumped into the moat, and are rushing as fast as possible to rescue Robbie.

The chimera beats them to it. He lifts up Robbie from the back of his pants and deposits him into his father's arms.

Thomas holds on to the child tight. Robbie doesn't quite understand what all the fuss is about, why, he likes the sweet water of the moat, so he protests his father's tight grip. And when Thomas pulls back to look at him, Robbie smiles brightly at him.

"Wanna go swimming daddy?"

"This isn't a pool buddy," Thomas tries to explain and once again he holds his boy even tighter.

"Where were you last night?" Robbie wants to know. "You didn't come say goodnight..."

"Oh, I... I'm so sorry. I'm here now," Thomas replies.

"Do you want to see my room? There is a fort we made out of books, and there is a swing and a hammock. And we tried to make staircases out of all the books, and there is a ladder that slides to get all the books on top..." Robbie is all too excited to tell all about Belle's castle to his father. "The llama's name is Bert!"

"I am a chimera, thank you very much," Bert mumbles under his breath.

"You saved my son," Thomas sounds so royal as he turns to thank the creature, even as he is dripping wet and disheveled. "I am forever in your debt!"
"Auntie Belle, I'm going to show dad the tree house," Robbie declares and with that, the issue of the castle entry is settled. Belle doesn't seem able to deny Robbie anything. Besides, her heart would have to be made out of stone not to be moved by their reunion.

David helps Snow out of the moat. She is actually shivering.

"Welcome!" Belle's voice is slow. She's been alone and quite for a long time and not quite sure she is interested in spending time with other humans yet.

"Hello, Belle," Snow smiles. "This is my husband David, I don't think you've ever met..."

"No, I suppose not," Belle looks inquisitively at David. "I did meet your brother once. I gave him a speech about killing innocent creatures... he wasn't very receptive."

David isn't quite sure what to say to that. He is grateful she is making the distinction though, not calling him a chimera killer outright.

Bert sticks his head closer to David, scenting him. "Definitely not him. They don't even smell the same," he notes.

"Alright," David takes a step back.

"Forgive me," Belle says looking at then trying to wring the water off their clothes. "Bert is a bit hyper vigilant when it comes to security. I certainly didn't mean for anyone to fall in the moat..."

They are all following Robbie into the courtyard and then Thomas stops walking. Because Ella is sitting under a pear tree, playing with Celia and Cedric. She looks so beautiful, a soft smile playing on her lips. Celia hands her a daisy and then Ella looks up and her smile freezes.

"Robbie! You are all wet! Did you fall in the moat?" she says rushing to pick up Robbie. "Are you okay?"

"Daddy!" Celia yells and then both kids run and crush into Thomas holding hims tight. "You came!"

Thomas is holding them tight, kissing both of them.

"Do you want to see the book room?" Celia asks.

"I have a frog under my bed," Robbie adds, squirming in his mother's arms, trying to get free.

"Noreen is sick," Celia informs him. "She fell on the ground and was not talking!"

"Do you want to see the books?" Cedric asks.

"Yes, I want to see everything, if its alright with Belle, but I need to talk to your mother first," Thomas tries. "Can you guys go play for a while?"

"I can take them," says Bert.

Thomas releases the two children who run towards Bert with squeals of delight.

"Wait for me! Can I climb on your back?" Robbie asks first.

"Me too," Celia is bouncing up and down.
"Robbie needs to change clothes first!" Ella stands up slowly.

"I'll help you," Thomas offers.

Ella stops him with a stern look. "We've got it," she says and she disappears through one of the tower's many doors.

"What's going on with the nanny?" David asks.

"She fell on the ground on the first night here and passed out. We had to call a healing fairy. She is unresponsive, at the hospital, they don't know what's wrong with her..." Belle explains.

"Oh, we should probably go see her next," Snow nods.

It takes about thirty minutes to get the children situated and playing. Bert is watching over the. Inside Belle's vast library, Ella is finally ready to listen. Snow really wants to walk away and give Thomas and Ella privacy, but Ella shakes her head.

"I need you here," she says including David and Belle in her request.

Ella is sitting on the window seat, watching Thomas who is standing next to her, shifting uncomfortably from one leg to the other.

"Well?" Ella frowns. "Are you ready to talk?"

And as Snow looks on the scene unfolding in front of her, she thinks she is looking at a sad queen holding court, about to banish her trusted knight who feels his fate is already sealed and there is no point to defending his honor.

"I missed you Ellie," Thomas blurts out, moving towards her, his hand reaching for her. This isn't how he meant to start of course, he has a whole speech prepared. Why, he woke up this morning, he put on his best jacket and polished his daggers, he put on his shiniest boots and he came here prepared. Calm, ready. His words in perfect reasonable order in his mind. But he already jumped in the moat, and he is looking disheveled and feeling wet and miserable, while Ella is the very picture of grace and poise, and now the words are tumbling around in his mind, and he is not certain where to start. This all feels so hopeless.

Ella purses her lips, looking away.

Thomas sighs. "Forgive me... that's not what I'm here for...I got carried away. Alright," he starts. "No matter what, you deserve to know..." he looks like he is trying to convince himself. "This all started twelve years ago... when my father decided we needed to be more open, get closer to the people. He organized several open events, where everyone was welcome. One of the events was a ball. You'd saved money and bought a gown, and you planned on coming. You were very excited about it, you'd spent all your savings on your gown. And then your stepmother found your dress in the back of your closet and returned it to the store. She kept your money. Told you this was to teach you your place, there was no point in wasting money in frivolities, you weren't going to the ball anyway, you were needed to stay at home, you weren't done with your chores. Of course she added a lot of chores to your weekly duties, ensuring you would never be done. Which was evil and abusive and manipulative and incredibly unfair... You were devastated and asked your fairy godmother for help. Except she didn't come. The Dark One came instead."

Ella is looking confused. "Yes, Thomas, I know all this, but I don't remember the Dark One coming," she protests.
"Wait, just, hear me out," Thomas pleads. "The Dark One showed up, offered you a new gown and glass slippers. Once you were all dressed up, he asked for payment. You had nothing of value to pay him with, you barely had any clothes that weren't rags. You thought he'd take back the gown, your hopes of going to the ball dashed not once but twice. Except he didn't. He said you could pay him in the future, once you had something of value to offer. He asked you to sign a contract."

Ella's eyes open wide. Belle, standing alone in the darkest library corner is holding her breath.

"You were young," Thomas is quick to add. "You spent your whole life cleaning after your stepmother and our sisters, you didn't know much about the Dark One. He tricked you... You came to the ball. And we danced together... I'd never met anyone like you. You were raw and honest and amazing. You didn't try to act all proper and royal I loved that about you... I was in love with you the moment you took off your shoes and slipped your feet in the water fountain. You know the rest. We got engaged, you moved in the castle, then we got married, you got pregnant... And then the Dark One came and informed you he was ready to call in your bargain. He wanted our first child!"

Ella gasps standing up. "What?"

Belle closes her eyes, leaning against the wall. She is not surprised.

"You were horrified, you didn't know what to do. You packed up your bags. You were ready to run away. Except you decided to trust me and told me the truth instead. And I made you a promise. I'd find a way out, I'd change the bargain, I'd get you out of this. I am a prince, I have infinite resources, you'd think I'd be able to do this," Thomas voice cracks.

Ella has tears streaming down her face.

"There was nothing I could do. I sent official envoys, I sent letters, I hired lawyers and contract experts, I summoned the Dark One outright. When he didn't come I knocked on his door and I offered my life, I offered my service. I never got a response. I might as well have been talking to myself. And then the baby was born..." Thomas' voice is hoarse. "And we named her Alexandra." he says. He pulls out a faded photograph and hands it to her. His hands are trembling.

Ella covers her mouth with her hand. She doesn't want to make any noise, she doesn't want to interrupt. She needs to know more.

"We didn't know what to do. We expected the Dark One to show up in the delivery room and take the child. We kept the pregnancy a secret. No point in announcing to the kingdom a child was coming, if she wasn't ours to keep..."

Thomas leans against the wall and continues with his harrowing story. "We slept every night with the baby laying in between us. We thought maybe if we held her tight...- I didn't really sleep much. I was watching over her, I was watching over you... And after the first few nights, when nothing happened, we began to hope. Maybe he'd changed his mind. Maybe he wasn't coming... On the seventh night, we woke up and the space in between us was empty. The baby had vanished into thin air. No one had entered our room. But the baby was gone... And we knew... The Dark One had come to collect."

Ella nods, wiping her eyes.

"Ellie, you were not well. You wouldn't talk, you wouldn't eat, I thought I was losing you too. And then you suggested I give you a memory potion. I knew it was illegal, and I could get in trouble but the thought of losing you too was horrifying. And it's what you wanted. So I got a forgetting potion from Queen Regina. She was very accommodating..."
Snow tenses up at the mention of her stepmother.

Ella is just sitting there staring at the baby's picture.

"I have no idea if erasing your memory was the right thing to do. I have no idea if telling you the truth now is right either. Ellie, I just don't know..." Thomas slumps against the wall, hopeless.

Ella is silent for a long time, staring at the baby's picture.

Thomas buries his face in his hands. She is probably going to order him out of Belle's castle and out of her life anyway. There is no fixing this. After talking to David yesterday, he dared to have hope. But now that he told the truth he feels more lost than ever.

He is so shocked when he feels Ella's hand on his shoulder, when she stands in front of him and raises his face with her fingers to look in his eyes. When she wipes his tears away, even though she is crying too.

"You are so cold," she whispers. "Tommie, your clothes are still wet, you are going to get sick..."

And Thomas is so relieved, he claps her hand in his, kissing it. "I'm so sorry," Ella says softly and he leans against her and buries his face in the nape of her neck, his shoulders shaking.

"Forgive me," Ella continues, caressing his back, letting him cry. "I should have never asked you to bear this burden alone..."

"Ellie, I don't know what else to do," he whispers through his sobs. "I don't know how to find her!"

Ella doesn't reply, she just keeps holding him tight.
The Case of the Severed Bond

Ella and Thomas are still talking, alone in the library. Snow and David have walked away, there is no reason for them to witness the rest of the reunion, clearly Ella has forgiven Thomas for keeping secrets, and she no longer needs support.

Snow leans against the ledge of the reader water fountain, a lovely stone sculpture where the water is springing forth from the pages of a book, while a mermaid is reading it, with a look of concentration in her eyes; situated in the middle of a small private garden, in Belle's courtyard.

"That went well," Snow turns to David, her voice filled with relief. "I was so worried...-"

David pulls her into a bonecrushing hug, interrupting her, holding her so tight, she is hardly breathing.

"What was that for?" she asks quietly, once he's pulled back long enough for her to catch her breath.

"It's just, watching them be so lost...- I was thinking...-" David struggles to find the right words. "Six months ago, I lost a bet with Tink, and had to go on a blind date with a water nymph. I met her for dinner and she was lovely, funny and smart..." he continues and Snow finds herself not quite certain she wants to hear the rest of this particular story. "There was no reason why I shouldn't find myself at least a little interested in her," David continues "but there was nothing there. No spark. Like my heart had begun turning into stone... I didn't feel anything... And that's was when I realized that unless by some incredible stroke of luck, I managed to figure out my missing memories, and who it was that I lost, I was sentenced to spending the rest of my life alone. It was a sobering thought," he continues. "A memory spell is an incredibly cruel punishment..."

"Well, you are not alone," Snow says softly, lacing her fingers with his, stepping on her toes so she can kiss his cheek. "Not anymore..." and her voice sounds so much like a song. David turns to face her to find her eyes welling up. "Why, you have a wife, a daughter, a dog and a turtle to keep you company," she smirks, wiping her eyes quickly with the back of her hand.

"I do," he laughs, placing his arm around her shoulders, " though I'm not sure the turtle actually likes me..."

"I think he'd rather roam the back yard alone, free, than being with us day in and day out, but there is very little chance of Emma ever letting that happen," Snow laughs. "But the rest of us really like you," she adds playfully.

"I don't know if that's enough," David looks so serious, Snow raises her eyes in surprise. "I really need to befriend that turtle!"

Snow dips her hand in the water and flicks water right in his face. David cups his hands in the water and splashes water on her.

Snow gasps in surprise. "Hey!" she exclaims, shaking her head. "I know I already fell into the moat twice today, so I'm already drenched, but still, this is incredibly unprofessional behavior on your part, Sir Nolan!"

"You are not going to fire me, are you?" a mock look of dread in her eyes.

"Thinking about it," she frowns. "Though we are partners. It wouldn't be me firing you. It'd be me..."
resolving our partnership... and do you know how much work it is, repainting our 'White and Nolan' sign, and getting new business cards? Besides, you are kind if cute..."

David laughs and pulls her closer. "Why, thank you Ma'am, I am incredibly grateful. I wouldn't want you to have to change business cards... Wait, wait! Kind of cute?"

The sound of approaching footsteeps forces Snow and David to try their best to look like they are serious. Belle is walking up to them, and there is a wistful look in her eyes.

"Snow..." she hesitates. "I... I feel like there are some things you should know..."

"Do you have information about the case?" Snow is all business, despite the wet clothes, and the small piece of algae stuck on her shirt.

"It's not actual information, just a general direction... some historical context..."

It feels like Belle might be trying to hide behind big words.

"Well, at the moment, the only thing that I have, the only thing I can do, is knock on the Dark One's door and beg, which we all know is a terrible risk, so anything, anything you can tell me..." Snow is practically pleading.

"He is not..." he is not all bad, is what Belle would like to say, but she is finding it increasingly difficult to make that statement under the circumstances. "He lost a child," she blurts out, then she closes her eyes.

"Rumpelstiltskin?" David frowns. "He has a child?"

Belle nods. "He did, another life time ago..." she explains. "If he's alive he'd be an adult now." She pauses briefly her eyes focusing on David's hand on Snow's shoulder. The moment Snow said knocking on the Dark One's door would be an incredible risk David placed his hand on her shoulder, and it's the fact that it's second nature, how they support and protect each other without it being a conscious effort, is making Belle wish for things that can never be.

"Anyway," she continues, trying to gather her thoughts. "Years ago, Rumple lost a child, under strange circumstances. He wouldn't admit it, but I think he drove his son away, to another realm... in a way that could not be reversed. And ever since that time, he has found numerous ways to challenge people, to test the love Enchanted Forest folk have for their children. Challenge family bonds. Under what circumstances would someone be willing to give up a child..."

"But Ella was tricked!" Snow argues. "She didn't chose anything!"

Belle looks at David. "He admitted to me being involved in placing you on the path for the Southern Kingdom crown. I didn't understand what he meant at the time, I didn't know about your twin brother and the adoption. But it's all making sense now. Your parents might have thought they were giving your brother a better life," she continues. "But Thomas... what he did... when he offered himself instead of the child... I have to think that his sacrifice counted somehow..."

"How?" David asks.

"The child can't be far away," Belle says quietly. "She must be around. And... I don't know, it's too cruel to even fathom, but maybe... maybe in all their grief and through the memory spell, they missed the signs..."

"Could you find out?" Snow asks. "Could you find out for us?"
"You are overestimating my influence," Belle looks away. And when neither David nor Snow say another word, still looking at Belle for assistance, Belle finally nods. "I can certainly try. Though I doubt it will do any good..."

Ella decides that it is time to go back to her castle. And after Belle's startling information Snow wants to be there, to look at the children that live in the homes around the castle, to see if she can find a resemblance, a connection, a thread. She knows she is grasping at straws, but that is all she has.

But, getting the triplets, and several servants and four carriages ready to travel back home is an incredibly complicated affair. And David is ready to do more, to dig deeper. Waiting for Ella and Thomas to get ready is incredibly frustrating.

"Why don't I go check on the nanny, find out how she is doing" David suggests. "You can call me when they are ready to go?"

Snow nods absentmindedly. The triplets are engaged in a complicated game of tag, that involves running and rolling around and using Bert, the chimera as a shield. Snow looks at their faces, happy, excited, giggling, and she thinks of how much Alexandra missed, growing away from this very noisy, very loving family.

Snow walks closer to the triplets, and sits on the ground so she can be at their eye level. Robbie and Celia continue their game, undisturbed by her presence. They are used to nanny and several servants being present while they play. Cedric stops, though, offers a small, very official bow and says "Hello!"

"Hi!" Snow smiles brightly. "I have some very important questions to ask you..."

"Are you a friend of mother's?" Cedric frowns.

"Yes, yes, I am. My name is Snow White. And I'm wondering if you could help me..."

Cedric looks very serious. "What can I do for you?"

And Snow has to resist the urge to kiss Cedric's adorable rosy cheeks, and maybe even give him a hug. "I'm wondering if you could tell me who your best friends are at the castle..."

David walks out of the magic bean portal right to the small medical facility where Noreen is kept. David walks into the reception, he asks for Noreen's room number and he is stunned to see Teal walk out of the nanny's room.

"Teal!" he exclaims, crossing his hands, looking both angry and incredibly suspicious.

Teal is looking like she'd like to shrink into the smallest fairy size possible, or puff into the void instantly.

"David? What are you doing here?" she asks, her voice incredibly small. The last time David talked to Teal he accused her of lying to him about his memory curse, and Teal admitted everything, there was no point in keeping secrets from him anymore. And David doesn't know that, but after their encounter, Teal went straight to the Hospital administrator's office and asked for reassignment, hoping to be placed somewhere far away, to put that part of her life behind her. That is how she ended up working here, in the Western kingdom in the small medical facility. Yet here she is; and David, the man she was forced to deceive, because of the oath of royalty her family had sworn to King George, is standing there, staring at her.
"Are you Noreen's healing fairy? Why am I not surprised?"

"How do you know Noreen?"

"How is she?" he asks because Teal is the last person he is going to trust with information about ongoing cases.

"I can't really tell you that," Teal frowns. "Unless you are somehow related, and still..."

David just glares. Really, he wants to say. Now, you are going to observe the rules?

Teal shakes her head looking away. "She is not well. She is stable, but she is in a coma, and I can't figure out what caused it, whether it's a sleeping curse, or a potion... I don't know..."

And when he keeps on glaring at her, she drops her eyes to the ground.

"I am telling you the truth," she whispers.

David sighs, glancing at the woman who is laying perfectly still in the room, barely breathing. The sound of the heart monitors are making him feel ill.

"Why? David? Do you have any information on who caused this?" Teal asks. But David isn't going to tell her anything. He turns around and walks out without saying another word.

David is back in Belle's castle talking to Tink in his magic mirror. "The nanny is in a coma, Teal claims to not know what is wrong with her...Looks like we are going to be back in their castle in about an hour," he explains. "Are you joining us?"

"She is on her way," he says turning to Snow.

"Good," Snow replies. She is going through her notes, in the magic mirror. "So if Belle is right, and the girl leaves somewhere near in the castle we are looking for a child about Emma's age, that looks like Thomas and Ella?" She sounds incredibly unsure. "How would the Dark One convince someone to raise the royal child right next to her real parents, how would they not notice... David, that doesn't make any sense..."

"It's the Dark One, playing chess with us, mere mortals. Does it have to make sense?" David asks.

"What if whoever is raising her doesn't know who she is... what if they think she is their child..." Snow is looking doubtful. "If she thinks the people raising her are her real parents and then she finds out the truth, this could be so traumatic for her..." she closes her eyes. "David this could be a disaster..."

"No, not if we do this right. We can ask Tink to run a fairy DNA test, before we accuse anyone of anything, before we ever bring up our suspicions..."

"Right," Snow nods, "right..."

"Snow! This is already a horrible situation. We are just trying to figure what's going on. Ella is hurt, Thomas is hurt... this is going to be difficult. No matter how careful we are, this is going to be hard..."

Snow still nods. "If someone walked up to me and told me that I'd been tricked, and Emma didn't actually belong to me..." she says and her eyes are welling up. She can't even continue with that thought.
"Yes," he replies, squeezing her hand. "Absolutely. But if someone had taken Emma away from you, right after she was born, wouldn't you want her found? Wouldn't you want to know where she was? Wouldn't you want her back?"

Snow's raises her eyes to look at him, all worried, because that is exactly what happened to him. And she really didn't mean to bring up all their pain in the midst of this mess. There are too many parallels to this story.

"Forgive me," she mumbles. "I wasn't thinking..."

"No," he shakes his head in a hurry. "You are right. This is incredibly complicated and we need to handle it as carefully."

And then Tink appears right next to them, making them both jump. "Hello," she smiles brightly.

It would be a lot faster, getting back to Ella's palace using a magic bean, but there are age restrictions to magic bean travel and the triplets are certainly not old enough. Tink could do the job too, faster, but her teleportations are brutal. Snow wouldn't suggest she do that unless it was a life threatening emergency. That is why the all board four royal carriages, and that's why Snow is leaning against the window, staring at the forest trees passing her by. David is sitting next to her, listening patiently to Tink list the advantages of magical travel. A cook and a maid are in the same carriage as them but the maid seems nauseous and unwilling to participate in the conversation. The cook has fallen asleep and is snoring loudly.

It is nearly dark when they finally arrive in Ella's palace. Ella steps out of the carriage, holding a sleeping Robbie in her arms, Thomas is carrying Cedric and Celia, both of them asleep, laying their heads on his shoulders. Groomsmen and servants are offering help, but he waves them away. After fearing he was going to lose his family, Thomas is unwilling to share the burden. He points to Ella instead. "Please, assist the princess," he says and they all rush to take the Robbie from her arms.

"It's good to be home," Ella says and Thomas, turns to smile at her, when a whirlwind of hair and hugs crushes into her. A girl, with blond unruly locks, wearing her pajamas, her feet bare, hugs Ella tight.

"You didn't say goodbye," she says, pulling back to look at the princess' face then she hugs her closer again.

"I'm so sorry Lia," Ella hugs her back. "You are right. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll never do that again..."

Lia. This must be Rowan's daughter, Snow realizes. Even if she didn't know Rowan's daughter's name, she'd still realize who she was. Despite her light coloring, she looks so much like her father.

Lia says "Promise?" And that's when Rowan comes running. He looks so much larger than all the other officials. And since he is not in uniform, clearly not in duty, both him and his daughter look so out of place, so underdressed, compared to Ella's perfect little crew.

"Please forgive us, your royal highness," he bows, then he reaches for the girls hand. "Lia! The princess is probably exhausted form her journey, the babies are asleep. How about we say goodnight and we can see them tomorrow?"

Lia doesn't look willing to agree, but Snow barely notices. All she sees is the dark amulet, hanging on the girl's neck.

Her heart beats faster, her eyes open wide. Why is the little girl wearing the dark amulet? She sees
Tink moving, from the corner of her eye, and she is not fast enough to stop her.

"No!" Snow cries out, but it's too late, because Tink has already materialized in front of the child and with a flick of her wrist, she's pulled the dark amulet off.

"Trust me, you don't want to be wearing that!" she says before the child gets a chance to react.

And then the strangest thing happens. It's not like the child's appearance changes, not quite. The girl still looks the same. If Snow was to describe her, she'd still say a beautiful blond blue eyed girl with hair that could use a good brushing. She is still the same. But she is not. All of a sudden the child doesn't look like Rowan anymore, she looks like a miniature Ella with Thomas' dimples on her cheeks.

And everyone gasps. The similarity is so obvious, it's impossible to miss.

Ella is breathing fast, she takes a step backwards, her eyes locked on the child's face, tearing up, covering her mouth with her hand. "Um... Alexandra?" her voice cracks.

Lia smiles back. She has no idea what's happening, but she is quite glad to have the princess' undivided attention.

Thomas just walks closer, looking at his daughter. And if his hands weren't full and he wasn't worried he'd hurt the children he would have dropped on his knees. Because there she is, his Alexandra, standing in front of him, and he doesn't understand what this means. He turns to the two servants next to him, he hands them Celia and Cedric; Celia opens her eyes long enough to protest but then she is fast asleep.

Thomas touches Lia's cheek, long enough to make sure she is real.

And then Rowan cries out "Who are you? What did you do to her?" staring at Tink. "What is going on?"

And Thomas snaps out of his revelry and openly glares at Rowan, his hand already on his dagger.

"Wait, we need to think this through," David tries to protest, because he can clearly see what is coming next. He turns to look at Snow, he is surprised she hasn't intervened yet. Snow is looking pale, she is not feeling well.

"Would you like to go to the house with the princess?" Thomas asks Lia softly. And Lia who hasn't quite understood what is taking place, she just nods and smiles brightly. A sleepover with the triplets at Ella's palace? Why, there is nothing she would love more!

"Take her inside," Thomas nods to Ella encouragingly.

"Wait, why, your highness, what's going on?" Rowan asks.

And as soon as Ella and the children are out of sight Thomas turns to his guards. "Arrest this man! Lock him up until I decide what's to be done with him!" he points to Rowan, who is completely lost.

"On what grounds?" the captain if the guard asks.

"What did I do?" Rowan yells, unaware of how his siren voice carries. "What's happening?"

The guards are on him instantly. And he is so tall and muscular compared to the royal guards,
holding on to his arms, he looks like he could easily flick them off, or knock them out just by bumping their sculls together. But he doesn't. He turns to Snow instead, eyes big, filled with horror. "Help me, Snow White!" he cries out. "What did I do? I didn't do anything wrong!"

And Snow wants to tell him that they will sort this all out, he just needs to be patient. She will talk to Thomas, everything will be okay, but she she is having a hard time forming sentences. Her whole body is shaking. Because it is a quarter to nine, and Rowan's song is already filling her mind.

"Help," she whispers to David, because every ounce of her body wants to beg Rowan for a song. "It's starting again!"

David looks at Snow worried, he can't believe it's already time and they are in Ella's castle, not safe at their home. He should have used the magic bean and taken her home an hour ago. He can't believe he let himself get so distracted with this case. He needs to take Snow away now. He turns to Tink to ask for help.

And then he freezes. Because Lia, after listening to Rowan cry out in distress, has run back out again, just in time, to see him pulled away by three guards.

"Daddy!" Lia screams.

Both Rowan and Thomas turn to face her. Both of them responding to her call.

"Daddy, what's going on!" Lia screams again, her eyes firmly fixed on Rowan.

And Thomas feels like someone has taken a stuck knife to his chest and is now slowly twisting it.

"It's okay baby, I think there must be a mistake, let me sort this out" Rowan tries his best to sound reassuring. "Won't you go back inside, you will be safe with the princess..."
The Case of the Severed Bond

"Breathe, Snow, breathe," David pleads. He's pulled Snow in the darkest corner of Ella's courtyard, behind a small storage shed and he is trying his best to comfort her.

Snow bends over, dry heaving.

"Come on, try to breathe," he says.

Snow raises upright long enough to glare at him. "I am not giving birth David! Please stop trying to monitor my breathing!" she snaps at him, then she covers her mouth again, fully aware that she is directing all her frustration and anger at David who is just trying to help. Her getting trapped in the siren's song is not his fault. If anything, he is the reason she managed to survive it last night, he is the reason she is not lying in a hospital bed in a coma somewhere, just like Noreen, so she covers her mouth to prevent any more angry words from coming out.

"I'm sorry," she rasps, reaching for his hand. "I am so sorry. I am getting angry again. I'm sorry."

David looks at her surprised. She is certainly managing to remain calmer than she did last night.

And then Snow dry heaves again. "David, it hurts, do something!" she pleads.

"Tell me what to do," he replies. "Snow, I don't know what to do!"

Snow shakes her head. Even though Rowan is certainly in no mood to sing at the moment, having just figured out that there was some strong dark magic that was inexplicably altering his daughter's appearance, Snow can still hear an echo of his song, loud and clear in her mind. And the music is clouding her senses, hurting her, making her feel sick. It is taking all her willpower not to rush back to Rowan and beg him for a song.

"I don't know," she manages. And then the strangest idea pops into her head.

"Sing to me?" she asks.

"What?"

"Could you sing to me?"

David thinks its absurd that she should think his voice could compete with the siren's song. But he has no better solutions to offer. Snow is leaning against the wall, struggling to breathe, and David is desperately trying to think of a song, any song will do. His mind has gone completely blank, he cannot think of a single song, not even a rhyme or a jingle. And then a children's song pops in his head, a forgotten melody his fifth grade class sang at a school recital when he was a boy.

"Close your eyes, let my song carry you
to fields of gold and sunsets of blue
Open your wings let the wind carry you
to the edge of the world where dreams come true
where dragons dance and eagles fly and we laugh and play until morning
won't you close your eyes let my love carry you
to mountains of ice and fountains of gold
open your heart let the stream carry you
to the edge of the world where magic flows free..."
On an on he goes, with lyrics and stanzas he had no idea he still remembered, and he is surprised to see Snow's shoulder's relax, and her back straighten. She's closed her eyes and she is almost smiling, breathing easier. David pulls her closer, her back now leaning against his chest, his voice getting softer. Snow turns around, her eyes still closed, her forehead leaning against his shoulder. And then she raises her hand to wipe her eyes, and that's how he knows she is crying.

He tries to pull back, he is looking so worried, but Snow clings to him.

"I'm feeling so much better," she whispers.

"You are crying... Does it still hurt?" he asks.

"It's the strangest feeling," she struggles to explain. "It felt as though I was lost in the creepiest, deadliest part of the forest, and I couldn't get out, and then your voice... I could see it, like a golden string, I could touch it, and follow it, all the way home..." She pauses briefly, then she leans back to look at him. "That song... I used to know that song..."

"Oh, it's the only song I could think of at the moment," he shrugs.

"Well, you couldn't have chosen a better song if you tried. It brought all sort of memories back," Snow smiles, but her eyes are welling up. "When my mother died, my father was looking for any excuse to leave the castle and travel. He took me on a memorial day celebration in the Southern kingdom. The local schools were participating and they sang that song... and I... I felt like they sang it just for me..."

"What year was this?" he frowns.

"Um, it'd have to be '98 or '99, why?"

David looks stunned. "Because, Snow, the year that the royals form the North visited the memorial day celebration, I was there. My class sang that song!"

Snow's eyes open wide. "You were there!" she cries out. And then Tink appears right in front of them, interrupting them.

"How is it going?" she asks. "Is Snow feeling better? Because if she is, I could sure use your help. I can't keep them all frozen much longer!"

"Frozen? What do you mean frozen?" David looks really alarmed.

"I had to do something," Tink shrugs.

David and Snow rush back to Thomas, Rowan and Lia.

"What did you do?" David gasps.

Because the scene hasn't changed since he pulled Snow away.

Thomas is standing there frozen in place, staring at Lia who is crying, looking at the guards about to pull Rowan away.

"How did you do that?" Snow is looking more impressed than worried.

"It's not too difficult. I could teach Emma how to do that if you like," Tink smiles brightly at Snow.

"No, thank you!" David intervenes. "Please, don't!" he adds, hastily. "This was an excellent
solution, Tink, but you need to unfreeze anyone. I don't know what kind of trouble we could get into if anyone noticed this!"

"It was either that, or watch Thomas hurt his daughter in ways that cannot be repaired, by arresting her father," Tink notes.

"Yes, but..." David hesitates.

"I'm not sure about that," Snow replies, observing Thomas closely. "I think he would have done the right thing..."

Tink waves her hands and everyone is back to normal.

Lia screams "Daddy!" one more time.

Thomas looks at his daughter, then looks at Rowan who is struggling to put a brave face on for the sake of his daughter.

"Please, go inside sweetheart," he pleads again. "Go be with the princess!"

And Thomas looks at his child, it's more like he is facing a mirror of his and Ella's reflection, the large pleading eyes, the set lips, but then there is anger there too. Lia is confused, and lost and angry.

Thomas raises his hand in the air, halting the progress of his guards.

"Would you listen to your father," Thomas asks Lia softly. "Would you do as he asks, please?"

Lia's eyes dart form the prince to Rowan. "What's going on?" she asks the prince.

"That's what we are trying to figure out," he replies.

"But why are the guards taking my Dad away? What did he do?"

"It's quite complicated," Thomas starts, "but he might have stolen from us..."

"My Dad is not a thief!" Lia crosses her arms and faces the prince.

And Thomas is looking at this child, his child, facing up to him, and he realizes in all his grief, he never prepared himself for a child that grew up loving someone else as her father. This isn't Celia or Robbie or Cedric, he can't just hug her or tickle her, she is never going to reach up to him and beg him to pick her up. That part of her childhood is gone. He swallows hard.

He takes a step backwards, then he turns to David and Snow. "A little help please," he asks, his voice cracked.

Snow steps forward. "Lia, if I promise you that no one is going to hurt Rowan, will you go stay with the princess and the babies, just for tonight? Until things get sorted out?"

"No one is going to hurt my father?" Lia turns to the prince. And Thomas takes another step back. She means him no harm of course, but her voice calling the man who most likely cooperated with the Dark One, and kept his daughter away from him for nine whole years her father, that is what hurts him the most.

"Rowan will be safe, I promise," Thomas manages. Lia lets Snow lead her away.
David places his hand on Thomas's shoulder.

"This is all going to get better from here," he says encouragingly.

Rowan's shoulders slope. "Why... what am I being arrested for?" and then with a voice that sounds even more uncertain he adds, "What is it that I am supposed to have stolen?"

And David faces the man who trapped his wife in a song. "You'll get your answers soon," he replies, and he lets the guards lead him away.

David walks in the room Rowan is being held in. "I need your cooperation, I'm going to ask you a few questions and I need you to tell me the truth."

Rowan nods. "You work with Snow White," he replies. "I trust you."

"Talk to me about the day your daughter was born. Were you in the room with her?" David asks.

Rowan looks confused, but he answers the question. "My wife was already sick and then she had complications at childbirth. They wouldn't let me inside the room with her. And then a fairy came out, and handed me the child. Told me that my wife didn't make it," Rowan is looking down, his hand clenching the edge of his seat.

"And the dark amulet? How did you get it?" David continues.

"It was my mother's," Rowan explains. "When the fairy handed me the child, she had already put it on a string around the baby's wrist. She said I was very lucky to have inherited this from my mother, and I should never let the child take it off. So I didn't. When she got older, we placed it on a silver chain around her neck..."

"Did you notice her appearance changing when you took it off her wrist?"

"We only took it off once, long enough to hang it on her neck, and I thought it was a trick of the light..." Rowan shrugs. "I didn't think it had anything to do with dark magic... Could you please tell me what's going on?"

"Yes, I certainly will, but first I need to have more information," David continues. "When was the child born?"

"First day of April," Rowan replies.

David shakes his head. Looks like the Dark One planned everything perfectly, including the date of the baby's abduction.

"Listen, Rowan, if what you say checks out, you might just be an innocent man, tangled up in a story that had nothing to do with you...-"

"Lia is mine!" Rowan insists.

"Hear me out," David continues. "Nine years ago Thomas and Ella had a baby daughter. A baby daughter that disappeared seven days after she was born. She disappeared on April first..."

"I'm sorry about their loss, but they can't go around taking other people's children, no matter how royal they are, that just isn't right..."

"And I'd agree with you, except your daughter was wearing an appearance changing amulet, and then the amulet came off and she looks exactly like Ella and Thomas... and we have reasons to
suspect that it is the amulet your mother was using to also alter her appearance. She was a siren and was able to conceal that fact from the world... But according to Tink, wearing that amulet probably shortened her lifespan considerably..."

Rowan leans back on his chair and sighs. "My mother died when she was my age..."

David nods. "You don't want Lia wearing that, do you?"

"No, of course not," Rowan is looking horrified. "If I knew it had to do with black magic I'd never would have let her wear it..."

"Tell me more about the fairy that handed you the child..."

"I don't remember anything about her."

"Was she wearing a distinctive color or...-"

Rowan shakes his head. "I remember nothing. I was consumed by grief. I mean, I knew my wife would die soon but still..."

"You knew?"

"Yeah, in fact I expected her to die sooner... look, my wife had a rare genetic disorder. She wasn't supposed to live past twenty. She wasn't supposed to be able to bear children. But she did."

And when David doesn't reply right away Rowan mistakes his silence for judgement and explains himself further.

"I know what you are thinking. Why did we even get married? If I knew she would die soon why would I even... Why would I put myself through that? Because Malia and I grew up together. Because she was my best friend, because she was part of my soul, because we were meant to be together. Because... Because we were young and naive and thought death wasn't strong enough to tear us apart. Or maybe because I wanted to do anything in my power to give her a happy amazing good year. And I did... We did... We were so happy... and then she got pregnant, even though she shouldn't be able to... she said this was certainly a magical baby, a magical child, this way when she passed I wouldn't be alone..."

Rowan wipes his eyes. And David is stunned to be looking at a man whose past might be even more complicates than his own. Did the dark one manipulate Rowan and his wife to think they were pregnant? Did the Dark One keep Rowan's wife alive long enough for his plan to work? Or even worse, did the Dark One end Malia's life just in time to give Rowan Ella's baby?

There is a soft knock at the door. David excuses himself and steps out. Snow is waiting for him.

"Well?" she asks.

"If his story checks out, he is innocent," David replies. "He was just as manipulated by the Dark One as Ella was..."

"Lia is asleep, it's time to test the children. If you think he is innocent then I'm thinking that Rowan should be present for this too, but you are going to have to talk to Thomas and Ella... tell them that it's very likely Rowan did nothing wrong..."

After talking to Thomas, Snow, David and Rowan quietly step into the children's bedroom. Robbie, Celia and Cedric are asleep, snuggled up together in the same bed, just like they do every night.
Lia is asleep in the bed next to them. Ella and Thomas are waiting for them anxiously.

Tink is already waving her hands.

"A fairy DNA test? This isn't going to hurt Lia, is it?" Rowan asks.

"It's not," Ella replies.

Once again the threads become visible, this time connecting Thomas and Ella's hearts together. There are lines that connect the triplets to both Thomas and Ella. Tink moves closer to Lia.

"Find your parents!" she urges dropping some more fairy dust and then the line stirs from Lia's heart, it flies gently towards Rowan, who is holding his breath and then takes a sharp turn and connects with Thomas and Ella instead.

Ella is crying, so is Thomas, their hands clasped together.

"She is our Alexandra! We found her," Ella whispers. Thomas nods, too moved to be able to say anything. And then he turns to see the other man on the ground. Rowan has dropped to his knees his shoulder shaking, his face covered in his hands. Thomas looks for something comforting to say, but there is nothing there. This man is experiencing the loss he felt nine years ago, when he woke up to find the baby missing from his bed, when he looked at Ella smiling in her sleep and spent the rest of the night dreading the moment she'd wake up and find Alexandra missing.

And even thought there are no words, he reaches for Rowan's hand and helps him get up.

"She loves you," Thomas says through his tears. "And nothing will ever change that..."

Ella steps closer. "She is always so happy," she adds. "You took such good care of her..."

"Your Highnesses will excuse me," Rowan is wiping his eyes on his sleeve, planning a hasty retreat.

"Please," Ella says. "Please say you'll stay with us. Please say you'll stay in the castle. Lia needs you..."

And Rowan hesitates looking at the child sleeping peacefully in her bed, looking at Ella's face, filled with concerned. He finally nods. He can't imagining walking away from Lia, not even now. "I'm going to stick around, as long as Lia needs me," he replies.

"Alright then," Thomas nods. "It's all settled. We'll find a way to talk to Lia about all this in the morning..."

Ella turns to find Tink, but she's already disappeared. This whole family affair is way too emotional for her liking. Ella rushes to Snow and David. "Thank you so much," she says quietly. "You guys saved me in so many ways..."

David and Snow use one of their magic beans to head back to their home. Snow drops exhausted on the couch. David sits next to her.

"I think they are going to be okay," he says quietly.

"I hope so," Snow mumbles, her eyes closing.

David opens his magic mirror and texts Tink. "Hey Tink. Great work tonight. I just wanted to make sure that you are the one that ended up with the amulet," he writes.
"Don't worry, I got it," Tink replies.

"You are going to destroy it, right?" he asks.

"Yes. I'll take care of it. Goodnight David!" is her swift response.

"Good," David mumbles. "Snow? Snow, are you sleeping? Come on, let's get to bed."

Tink stares at the dark amulet in her hand. She is going to destroy it of course, she would be crazy to even consider keeping it. Even as she holds it she can feel the despair and the fear of Rowan's mother seeping in her hand. Tink drops the amulet in an obsidian jewelry box, and snaps her fingers. The jewelry box disappears to that space where Tink hides her things, the space in between realms.

It's early in the morning and David and Emma are having breakfast together.

"I'm mad at you, by the way," Emma blurts out, taking in another spoonful of fruit loops.

"What? Why?" David frowns looking up.

"You didn't come home last night," Emma replies, her eyes focused in her bowl.

"But I did come home," David smiles. "Didn't Ruby tell you we were going to be late?"

Emma raises her eyes. "When you don't come home before I get to bed I think that maybe I imagined you. Maybe I still don't have a dad. Maybe you are not real..."

And David isn't smiling anymore. "Emma!" he says softly. "I'm sorry I was late. You are right of course, we should be coming home earlier, having dinner together..."

"And you are really sorry?" Emma looks at him with tears glistening in her eyes and David wonders if this conversation is going to end by both of them crying over their cereal bowls.

"Truly sorry," he replies. "Last night was sort of an emergency. We brought a family together, kind of like when your mom figured out I was your dad... so maybe you can forgive me. And since we solved our case, maybe we can take some time off, and plan something fun to do on the weekend..."

Emma nods. "You brought a family together? Last night?"

"We did," David replies.

"Then I forgive you," she says, and she walks around the table to sit on the chair right next to him. "When I grow up I can become an investigator too, and then we can work together..."

"That will be amazing," David replies.

When Snow walks in the kitchen, she finds David and Emma planning excitedly all the cases they are going to solve in the future, and apparently the case Emma is describing will involve dragon hunting and disguises.

"I don't know how I feel about wearing a fake green mustache and a pointy hat. I am certainly too tall to pretend to be a leprechaun," David tries to protest.

"Oh, I'm sure I'll know how to actually make you shorter by then, you don't have to walk on your knees or anything. Tink will show me how!"
Snow watches David's alarm and Emma's excitement and she tries hard not to laugh.

"Isn't it time for school?" David cuts Emma's complicated explanation short.

"Don't worry, I'll still like you even with a green mustache," Snow winks at him.

"That's comforting to know," David replies dryly still looking quiet worried.

And Snow can't help herself, she laughs so hard, she has tears streaming down her face.

Rowan has agreed to meet with Snow and David at the Medical center. David steels himself, ready to face Teal again if he needs to, but this time she is not there.

"Are you sure my song is the reason that caused Noreen to fall asleep?" Rowan turns to Snow. "Because I looked it up, half sirens aren't supposed to be that powerful!"

"I'm certain," Snow replies. "Now please, you need to wake her up!"

Rowan stands next to Noreen's bed. Her face is so pale, her eyes closed. If it wasn't for the heart monitor recording her heartbeats, he would doubt that she is even alive.

"What do you propose I do?" Rowan frowns. "I'm certainly not going to kiss a sleeping woman without her consent. This isn't a fairytale, we are not together, I have no idea how she feels about me, I just don't know you expect me to wake her up..."

"Maybe try talking to her?" David suggests.

"You should sing to her!" Snow nods.

Snow hurries to exit Noreen's room, she needs to distance herself from Rowan and his song; she is followed by David who shuts the door behind him firmly.

"Let's hope this works," David whispers.

Rowan watches Noreen sleeping. He is not certain at what point in time he realized there was a woman outside his home, listening to his song every night. He doesn't know what he meant by singing to her too. And he doesn't care to sort out his feelings not now, when his heart is torn up by grief and confusion, anger at how Lia became that Dark One's pawn. But Noreen is laying there, she looks so innocent, sleeping. He needs to find a way to wake her up.

"You know," he says, "I don't know if Snow is right, I mean she is a brilliant investigator, so I think she knows what she is talking about... I just don't see how I did this to you. Snow says my song is like a mating call, which could mean that you and I maybe... perhaps we could... I don't know... I am really sorry I did this to you..." Rowan stops talking. His words aren't making much sense anyway. He shakes his head and then he closes his eyes and sings his song. The warmth of his voice, and the melody fills the room, the strange words repeating over and over. Rowan doesn't notice but the moment he starts singing Noreen's heartbeats pick up. He sings for Malia, his wife, long gone, wondering if his voice can reach her. He sings telling her that he still remembers, he hasn't forgotten. He sings for Lia who, though he will always count as his own child, now belongs with Ella and Thomas. He sings about his heart breaking when Lia's essence connected with Thomas' heart, and he sings of how his heart is crushed, his life is a mess, how it would be a terrible idea for any woman to chose to be with him at this point in time.

And then he is done, he can't sing anymore, he is crying. He's completely forgotten where he is, who he is singing for.
He feels a hand clasped around his fingers.

"You are awake?" he gasps, opening his eyes. And he feels crushed the ramifications if what this means, the irrefutable proof that he is in fact a siren.

"My name is Noreen," she says quietly.

He looks at her apologetically "I know. I am Rowan and I didn't believe it when they told me, but it must be true. Apparently I'm a siren and I trapped you in my song... am I am so so sorry-"

"Oh," is all Noreen replies at first, then she slowly sits up. "I've suspected for a long time. I just love your voice..."

"Well you shouldn't. You shouldn't be anywhere near me. My song is dangerous. I'm dangerous. If you were smart you'd stay as far away from me as you possibly could..." Rowan's voice is filled with despair.

"But you just woke me up. Why would I want to run away?" Noreen asks quietly. "I don't want to go..."

"I trapped you in my song..." he replies incredulously. "Aren't you afraid of me?"

Noreen shakes her head. "No, you let yourself get trapped by grief," she replies.

"What?"

"Grief," she repeats. "Your song is more of a cry for help than a mating call..."

"What?" he frowns. "How do you know that?"

"My father studied sirens for a long time," Noreen shrugs. "When I heard your song, I recognized what it was, but you seemed to be completely unaware. I should have come to talk to you but I couldn't. I'm not very good with words or with people..."

Rowan is looking at this soft spoken woman sitting next to him, absolutely stunned at what he is hearing.

"Rowan, what's wrong?" Noreen's voice is barely a whisper. "This last song was so much sadder than the rest..." and her hand is on his shoulder, her eyes tearing up.

"I don't know," he replies shaking his head. "Everything is wrong,"

"Tell me," he replies shaking his head. "Everything is wrong,"

"Apparently my whole life is a lie. My mother was a siren, there was a dark amulet, and Lia is Ella's missing daughter. The Dark One used me like a pawn and I had no idea..." The words come tumbling out of his mouth, not making a whole lot of sense, the order of events is jumbled up, but Noreen is listening patiently.

Rowan and Noreen spend the next two hours talking. At some point it occurs to Rowan that Snow and David are anxiously waiting for him outside. So he steps out of the room long enough to tell them that Noreen is awake now and he intends to stay with her a little longer, then he rushes back inside.

And he doesn't know it, but the Rowan that walks back inside Noreen's room is not the same hurt and broken Rowan they saw this morning. Though he still looks like he's been through a lot, there
is a glimmer in his eyes, a spark of hope.

"I think he may be feeling better," David comments.

Snow reaches for his hand. "Time to get home?"

"Yes, because if I'm late, my daughter may turn me into a leprechaun, and my wife will never stop laughing." David replies and that's enough to send Snow into a fit of giggles yet again.

David and Snow spend the rest of the day with Emma, Hansel and Gretel. David shows them even more sword fighting moves, and Hansel is absolutely delighted until Gretel manages to defeat him twice. He scowls and he is not so sure that sword fighting is fun after all. Snow orders pizza for everyone, and that seems enough to appease him.

It's a rainy evening. Snow is sitting at her front porch, enjoying the quiet, breathing in the earthy scent, watching the light trying to break through the clouds and reach the treetops.

David steps out to join her. "Emma is asleep already, she fell asleep in the middle of the story" he says.

"Not too surprising. She must have been exhausted after playing with her friends all afternoon," Snow replies.

"Well, investigator White, it seems that we just solved our very first case."

"We did," she smiles. "And a lot faster than I thought we would. I just got a thank you text from Ella, and a confirmation of payment."

"We could follow through, and try to charge the Dark One for all the crimes he committed and the all pain he caused..." David continues.

"Yeah, we could certainly try," she shrugs. "It's sad, how we only have an illusion of justice. Everyone is equal under the law in the Enchanted Forest, but there is a definite distinction between those who have magic and those who don't..."

David sits next to her and Snow leans her head on his shoulder, and they remain silent for while, the quiet only interrupted by the soft sound of raindrops and an occasional sound of faraway thunder.

"You know these are my favorite times," she says. "When the world is quiet, Emma is safe at home and we are sitting together doing nothing..."

"Oh, I'm not doing nothing, I certainly have plans," David replies.

"Oh?" Snow smirks. "Are you going to let me in in those plans or...?"

"Yes, I certainly will. I though you might want to help me look through this," he replies. He opens his magic mirror to show her an old newspaper article that shows the Memorial Day celebration on the Southern kingdom in 1998. Snow gasps looking at the pictures. There is a photograph of princess Snow, in a beautiful dress, looking very serious, sitting next to her father, and other royals in attendance. And then there are several pictures of children singing, and even though it's quite blurry she can clearly make out David in the third row.

"Are you in fifth grade? Oh! You look so cute..." she exclaims, enlarging the picture so she can get a better look.
"Are you wearing a tiara?" he asks, taking a closer look at her picture.

"No, I think it's a hair clip," Snow tilts her head, trying to get a better look.

"I don't remember much from that night," he admits.

"I just remember that I loved the song," Snow shrugs, then she smiles wistfully. "I wish I'd walked up to you and introduced myself!"

"What would you have said?"

"I would have said, Hi, I'm Snow, and I have a unicorn sticker collection. Would you like to see it?"

"A unicorn sticker collection?" David laughs.

"Oh, yes, don't laugh! This is a serious introduction. I have all of the unicorn stickers including the very rare purple sparkly one."

"Impressive!" David replies.

"Oh, and by the way, I'm going to marry you one day," Snow adds.

"Oh, really?" he smirks.

"It's probably a good thing I didn't introduce myself," Snow shrugs. "A declaration like that might have made you run for the hills..."

"Are you kidding? I couldn't walk away from a girl with a unicorn sticker collection and a tiara looking hair clip..." David replies leaning closer to her.

And then Snow's lips are on his and she is on his lap, and he is kissing her back, his hand already under her shirt when Snow gasps and pulls back.

"What? Something wrong?" he mumbles.

"David! David what time is it?" she asks.

David glances at his magic mirror. It is five minutes past nine. His eyes meet Snow's, a worried look on his face. "How are you feeling?" he asks. "Are you in pain?"

Snow shakes her head. "I'm perfectly fine. The song is no longer playing in my head. David it's over! I'm free!"

David lets out a sigh of relief and he places his arms protectively around her, his forehead touching hers. "Good," he says quietly. "That's good..."

"David?"

"Yes?"

"Will you sing to me anyway?"
The case that Started it all 2.

Chapter Summary

Ten years ago- this chapter is a continuation of 23, The Case that Started it All

Here is a quick review

Snow and David met for the first time in a ball in Catherine's honor. They did some investigative work together- Snow helped David find out that Frederick was framed. David helped Snow defend herself against an assassin. He suggested that Snow stay away from her stepmother's castle for a while. Snow decided to stay with Ella.

Snow's just woken up in her large canopy bed. It's ten'o clock already. Ella must not have any plans for today, because she hasn't come to see if she is awake yet. Snow stretches and walks to the large window overseeing the valley. It's a wonderful sunny day. Snow misses the view from her own room, she misses her own bed, though she knows taking a vacation and staying with Ella is the right move. She's called it 'taking a vacation' because calling it 'staying away from Regina and her murderous ways' doesn't sound as good.

She's suspected for a while that Regina meant her harm, and her suspicions were proven true when an assassin followed her, and tried to stab her in Catherine's ball. And James was there to help her. James. At the mere thought of his name her heart skips a beat. Let's be honest, James saved her, and she can't help but think of him longingly no matter how many times she reminds herself that James is engaged, James is not free. He is engaged, her heart argues, but still trying to prove Frederick, the man his fiance is in love with innocent. And that has to mean something. It has to. If Ella wasn't showing up every morning with complicated plans about their day, Snow would for sure spend the first few hours of the day lost in revelry, thinking about James. It's silly of course, it is a waste of time. Just because they had a strong connection, just because they had an adventure, just because he saved her life, even though she might have permanently scarred his face, attacking him with a door stopper... just because... and just like that she is lost in memories of James again. James smiling, James looking lost after Catherine threw another one of her cutting remark his way, James standing alone while his fiance was glaring at him. How could she, Snow wonders. How did she not know that James was trying to save Fredrick? And really, who does that? What kind of man tries to save his fiance's lover after the way she was treating him? Then again what kind of man offers friendship after being smashed in the face with a door stopper? Apparently James does. James.

The truth is she loves him, even though it's silly to think that after a single meeting. The truth is she is in love with him. Just like that. After spending a few hours together, Snow already loves him. And that is a foolish thing on her part, it is foolish to even believe in love after witnessing that dramatic turns of Regina and her father's love story. And yet Snow is lost and in love. She scours the tabloids forever looking for news. Did James and Catherine attend a gala? A benefit? Did they have any royal engagements at all? Did they go out for coffee? Did they watch a movie? Where are they? How are they not in every cover of the tabloids doing what royals do, attending things, cutting ribbons, making toasts? It's as if the royals in Midas' kingdom are doing the best to hide the royal couple. Unless... unless Catherine and James are taking some time alone, sorting things out, giving their relationship a chance. And the thought of Catherine and James holding each other,
trying to explore their feelings, and that thought is enough to make Snow both tear up and get incredibly angry with herself. Because she had no business falling in love with a prince after one single meeting.

Snow has spent time dissection every little thing that was said between them and she has so many regrets. She should have asked more questions, prodded for more information. But one regret stands out in her mind the most. Why, James was standing there, his fiance alternating between ignoring and glaring at him. And Snow didn't think to asked him to dance! Why didn't she? What held her back? The truth is she was so overwhelmed with their meeting, surprised but the flood of new emotions and then so shocked to see Catherine's behavior, Catherine snubbing James, Catherine ignoring him, Catherine annoyed that he didn't follow her... Snow should have asked him to dance. It wasn't that hard, that's exactly what balls are for, she should have asked him to dance.

"Care to dance?" that's all, three little words. She could have temporarily saved him from his sulking fiance. She should have, that's what a friend would do, right? Why didn't she?

Ella steps in Snow's room, and finds Snow leaning against the window ledge, staring absentmindedly outside.

"A penny for your thoughts," Ella says and Snow jumps.

"Ella," Snow smiles, quickly wiping her eyes. "I didn't hear you come in..."


Snow would very much like to feign indifference, but that's really hard to do while she is opening the magazine so fast, she almost rip the pages. There he is, page six, in the corner of the page, James is holding a coffee cup, wearing sunglasses, completely unaware that his picture is being taken, no doubt by a photographer hiding behind a bush. There he is. And Snow wishes he wasn't wearing sunglasses, she wishes she could see his eyes, she wishes she could tell by this simple snapshot that he is well.

"Is he wearing his ring?" Snow blurts out, before she can stop herself.

Ella leans in. "Can't tell," she replies.

Snow nods, looking at the picture again. He is wearing a black doublet, leather pants, riding boots, sunglasses, argh...this picture tells her absolutely nothing other than he has a good taste in clothes, or maybe whoever dresses him does.

"I know," Ella smiles sympathetically. "No new information..."

"He likes coffee," Snow shrugs. "Didn't know that..."

"True," Ella smiles. And then Snow catches the glistening in Ella's wrist.

"Ella! Is that new?" Snow gasps. Because the bracelet around Ella's wrist is thin, and fragile, with drop like gems that look translucent in the sunlight. "It's so beautiful, Ella, it suits you perfectly..."

"Thomas gave it to me this morning," Ella beams.

"Aw, look at this," Snow replies.

"I know. I absolutely love it, and to think he was worried I wouldn't like it..."
"Oh... you guys are too adorable together! There should be laws against this much cuteness!"

Ella laughs. "Anyway, I came to see if you want to go riding with us. Thomas wants to ride to the lake, maybe have lunch there..."

"Go ahead," Snow is quick to reply. "I'm not even dressed yet. You guys have fun..."

"I can't leave you, not when you are like this!" Ella protests.

"Like what?" Snow frowns. "I just wish I had definite news, you know, like a wedding date. So I can put this whole silly crush behind me..."

Ella is not looking at all convinced. She thinks Snow's feelings amount to a whole lot more than just a silly crush. "Listen, maybe James is having his coffee this morning, browsing through tabloids looking for you..."

"Hardly," Snow replies dryly. "I'm supposed to be hiding, remember?"

Ella shrugs. "I bet he still looks just in case..." and when Snow gives her a doubtful smile Ella gives Snow a quick hug and exits the room.

Snow stares back at the picture of James.

"Say something!" she glares at him. "I need to know James...-" Then she is quick to touch his face with her finger, in her mind already apologizing for her tone. She is not going to be annoyed with him, he already gets plenty of that from Catherine. Snow throws the tabloids at the table and rushes to get dressed. She can't spend her whole morning staring at a picture of James.

James is sitting at his writing desk hesitating. He is staring at the parchment in front of him, he's already started and crumpled the note three times, starting over.

"Dearest Snow," he's already written. For the past three days, he's been mulling the words over in his head. He thought he knew what he was going to say, and it seemed clear and adequate. Except not that he's actually written it down, the words fall short, unable to convey all the emotions in his heart. He thinks of Snow's bright eyes, her formfitting dress, the fear when she described that someone was after her. There is no way to describe how much he misses her and how much he feels like he needs her. He could just say "I need you," but he cannot possibly start like that. They just met. He is feeling too much, too fast. "I need you," he wants to say, but he settles for what he's already written instead.

"I hope this letter finds you happy, but more importantly safe. As promised I am writing to update you on the results of our investigation. I thought I'd have to entrap the treasurer's assistant to get him to confess that he was the one who altered the records to show that Frederick embezzled the funds. I was wrong. He was all too happy to confess as soon as I hinted that I was aware of his transgression. He felt incredibly guilty about doing this. He will however say who put him up to this, or how they convinced him to do it, since he clearly has nothing to gain from Frederick's imprisonment.

Catherine is overjoyed and very eager to go back to the way things were and I am quite hopeful that things will change soon.

I must confess that I think of you often... "

Catherine is overjoyed is quite an understatement. Catherine cried and kissed him, the very first kiss he received from her since the beginning of their ill conceived engagement. Then she hugged
Frederick again and again and he wiped her tears away, looking so worried at the sight of her crying, as if she was the one stuck in the dungeon for the last two months. And watching true love unfold right in front of his eyes David felt more lonely then he ever felt before. Catherine was supposed to be his fiance after all. And even though Catherine is doing her best to be nice to him, to make up for her uncaring behavior from the months before, it is Snow he wishes for, Snow he is missing, Snow is the one who he is longing to talk to. David stares at the parchment in front of him, looking for the right words to express how much he misses her and how hopeful he is that he is going to be a free man soon. Very soon.

"hoping our paths will cross again. Stay safe Snow White! Sincerely, James"

Snow is brushing her hair, getting ready for bed when the red robin flies in through her window. She drops her brush on the ground and unties the letter from the red robin's claw. Her heart is beating so fast. Could this be a letter from James? She did ask him to keep her appraised of his progress with Frederick's embezzlement case.

"Dearest Snow" she reads and all of a sudden she feels like she needs to sit down. Her heart is filled with longing. As soon as she is done reading the letter she walks over to the desk in the sitting room and dips her quill in ink.

"Dear Charming," she starts and she can't help the playful smirk on her lips.

"I took your advice and I am staying at my friend's dwelling." She is keeping detains intentionally vague. If James remembers their conversation, hopefully he will deduce she is staying with Ella at Thomas' castle. She doesn't want to alert any potential attackers of her whereabouts even though if Regina is the one sending them, then there is no point in being vague. Regina knows exactly where she is staying.

"I was thinking that perhaps you could accompany me to my friend's happy day, if your situation indeed changes.

While I realize that it is too soon to say something as wordy and impetuous as 'I miss you,' after all, we hardly know each other, I want to say that the brief time we spent looking for clues together meant a lot to me. So I'm going throw caution to the wind and say it. I miss you. Write to me again? Snow White"

David is clasping Snow's letter to his chest, breathing fast. He just walked away from a screaming match with King George, his father, or rather the man pretending to be his father, who in no uncertain terms threaten to dissolve any diplomatic alliance with Midas' kingdom if Catherine dares suggest a cancellation of their engagement. And he doesn't know where to go from here. Coming clean seems to be the only way out. Coming clean and telling the world he is not prince James. Thought he is not certain what fate awaits a royal impersonator when he is found out. Will they throw him in the dungeon or dismiss him through the back door, urging him to disappear?

But Snow just wrote she misses him, and those three words are enough to soothe his aching soul.

"Snow," he writes back.

"there are no words to describe how happy your letter made me. Not a day goes by that I haven't thought of you. I am afraid that things are not resolving here as swiftly as I had hoped. The King is insisting on going through with the wedding though Catherine has made her wishes abundantly clear and I cannot think of a way out that will afford me a future. I'm afraid that I'm feeling quite lost at the moment. I have to believe that there is a way out, a way where I can be free to be with the one my heart longs for. And I'm afraid that someone may be going through my mail, so, though
I absolutely abhor saying this, I think for your own safety we should stop writing to each other. Yours ever, Charming."

Snow's eyes well up and she lets her body fall back on her bed. "The one my heart longs for," she whispers, looking at the line again, to make sure she read it right. "That's practically a confession," she whispers and then she reads the letter again. "Charming," she says barely believing her eyes. "He signed the letter 'Charming'..."

She dips her quill in ink and writes just four words. "Speak and the birds will know..."

David opens the tiny note, his heart skipping a beat. He is so grateful she wrote again, ignoring his warning.

"Speak and the birds will know," is all the note says. He frowns and turns the page over to see if there is anything written on the other side. He recognizes the handwriting, and he knows exactly what is is she is trying to say. Snow talks to birds. He doesn't need to write anything, he can just speak the words out loud.

He caresses the blue bird's head gently. It will make for a very one sided conversation but it is better than nothing. Especially what he needs to say is so important. "Listen carefully..." he whispers to Snow's feathered friend.

Ella is hesitating. Snow and Ella are having brunch in the gardens alone, since Thomas is having a boring day of official meetings ahead of him.

"Is something wrong?" Snow asks for the third time because Ella is certainly acting strange this morning.

"Umm, well actually two things," Ella replies, handing Snow a wedding invitation and the Royal, the official magazine of royal news.

Unsurprisingly, the royal invitation is written in golden letters.

"His Royal Majesty King Midas,
sovereign of the Eastern Kingdom,
lord of the Marshlands the lakes and the Eastern Woods,
and his Royal Majesty King George of the Southern Kingdom,
sovereignty of...-

Snow's eyes skip ahead
'are honored to invite you to the wedding of their beloved children
Catherine and James...-"

Snow swallows hard putting the invitation down. She doesn't want to read anymore. This is it then, James was unable to get out of marrying Catherine. This is really happening. She doesn't mean to cry of course, so she takes a sip of tea and blinks hard, trying to hold back tears. Then she looks at the first page of The Royal.

Catherine and James look back at her. Catherine is in a golden gown, a feathered had on her head, ever so elegant. James is wearing a dark burgundy jacket and he has a ceremonial sword strapped
on a rather elegant sword belt, and oh, they both look breathtaking, their expressions are perfectly matched, clearly anticipating their joined future. The royal photographer clearly outdid himself, Snow thinks bitterly. It's an incredible picture really, Catherine and James both at their best, except both of them look quite somber. Neither of them smiles, or have the fresh glow of love on their faces. And Snow is struck at how much James's picture is actually looking right at her.

'I have to believe that there is a way out, a way where I can be free to be with the one my heart longs for," the words form his last letter echo in her mind.

"They look really good together," Snow says out loud to Ella who looks at her stunned.

"Neither of them look really happy," Ella replies looking again at the official photograph.

"Oh, not every royal is as lucky in love as your Thomas," Snow replies smiling. "Sometimes being royal and being happy are mutually exclusive terms."

Ella is still looking doubtful but quite relieved. "Well that's sad. Are you alright? I know you really liked him..."

Snow shakes her head. "I'm fine," she tries to keep her voice from shaking. "Perfectly fine. I told you I just needed them to set a date, so I can move on. You know, now that I have closure..."

"Thomas is already planning to go to the wedding of course...and he doesn't know about any of this so he thinks you will be coming along. But Snow, if you don't want to, I can come up with an excuse and we can stay here, have a girls night..."

"Oh, you don't need to do that," Snow replies looking away. "You should go have fun..."

Alone in her room Snow stares at the official wedding announcement picture of Catherine and James when the blue bird flies through the window and perches on her hand.

"What is it?" she asks, both her hand and her voice trembling.

Snow gasps at the news the red robin just brought her, her eyes welling up. "James will die on a hunting accident three days before his wedding and I will be hiding in the town of Naught. While I am grateful for a solution that will let me get away, the thought of running away and never seeing you again is unbearable. Come to me if you feel the same, and we can be together forever..."

The blue bird has hardly finished chirping and Snow has already opened her traveling case and is throwing things inside, grateful that she's brought several plain clothes. She can't run away in a designer gown of course. Her hands are still shaking. This is it, she thinks, it is really happening. Funny, he is planning on waiting for her in the town of Naught. Naught is an abandoned gold mining town, that was shortly inhabited by dwarves who were superstitious enough to think that naming their town Naught would give them a better chance at finding gold. It didn't work of course, there was no gold in the town of Naught which is why hardly any people are left living in it. But Snow has been through the town before. She remembers certain landmarks. She can give James a meeting point. She just needs to make sure she remembers correctly.

Once she is done packing, Snow hides her suitcase in the back of her closet and walks to the castle library and heads to the cartography section. She opens several maps of different mining towns, just in case anyone is watching her. And when she is absolutely certain she is alone she finally opens the map to the town of Naught. She is looking for landmarks, any kind of reference. And then she finds what she is looking for. There is a tavern called "the holly vine," right by the river. A rather unusual name for a tavern, which is perfect, because if anyone intercepts her note they will be busy
looking for her in actual shrubs and bushes.

Snow's suitcase has been packed and ready, hidden in the back of her closet for almost two weeks now. She did her best to calculate exactly how long it would take a bluebird to reach James, and the exact right time she should reply to his message. And now it's time. Her hand is out the window and the blue bird flies instantly towards her.

"Tonight," she wrote in the note. "At the holly shrub by the stream. I'll be waiting."

"This is the most important message I will ever send," she whispers to the small feathered friend. No matter what you hear, please make sure James gets this message!"

And then Ella walks inside her room and there are tears streaming down her face.

"Ella what's wrong?" Snow gasps.

"I'm afraid I have some terrible news," Ella continues, motioning or Snow to sit on the window seat.

"What happened?" Snow asks again. "Ella, you are scaring me!"

"There was a hunting accident," Ella says softly, her hand reaching for Snow's shoulder. "I'm afraid that it involves James. Snow, I'm really sorry, James got hurt and I... Snow he is gone..."

And even thought Snow knows this is all a ruse, in fact she's been expecting to hear this, she feels the room get darker, her eyes welling up. She places her hand on her heart. This isn't real, her mind tells her heart, even as she sobs in her friends arms.

"It's going to be alright," Ella says over and over, caressing Snow's back.

"I know," Snow is wiping her eyes. "I know. It's just that Ella, I think it's time for me to go!"

Ella is looking stunned. "Wait. What, now? Snow that's a terrible idea. Not when you are like this... Snow, won't you stay a few more days..."

And that's when Snow realizes she's made some terrible miscalculations. She really didn't expect to fall apart at the news of James' fake death. She also didn't expect the news of James' death to reach them first thing in the morning. She meant to be long gone before Ella found out that James was dead. What sort of friend Ella would be if she let Snow go after her emotional outburst?

She can't betray James' secret of course, even though she thinks Ella completely trustworthy. So she submits to her friends care, she drinks plenty of tea, and takes a bubble bath and watches two movies, all under Ella's watchful eyes, while Snow herself is staring at the clock. She should have left by now, she told James to expect her tonight. She should have left already. She is going to be so late.

David has been pacing up and forth inside the dark empty tavern. There are candles he could light, but he doesn't want to, just in case. He's stabled his horse at the small barn in the back and now there is nothing left for him to do but wait. Even though he was wearing his darkest cape with his hood on, he still caught several people staring at him as he was riding towards the town of Naught, no doubt wondering why he looks familiar. He traveled here as fast as he could, and it took him about four hours to walk around the abandoned town and decipher Snow's message. The town of Naught is truly empty. As far as he can tell there are only two souls left living here, an older blacksmith living in a cottage at the other edge of town and a talking frog that is singing in the middle of the town square, sunning himself at the edge of the water fountain. But he still doesn't
want to take any chances. He opened the door to 'the Holly Vine' and he was disappointed. She said "I'll be waiting..." and he believed her. But she is not here yet. She is not here. Of course something might have messed up her plan, she might be a couple of hours late, there is no need to panic yet.

In the end, after pacing back and forth for hours, jumping and looking through the window shutters at every unusual sound, he sits on the ground his back against the wall. The inside of 'the Holly Vine' is rather gloomy. The mirror on the wall is broken, the lighting fixtures are shrouded in cobwebs, the floor is covered in three layers of dust, dust he disturbed by walking in circles so now there are footprints everywhere. If there was tables and chairs in this room in the past, there is no sign of them, just a forgotten stool tipped over in the middle of the room.

"She is not here," he whispers to himself over and over, and even though he is not prone to despair, the prospect of spending the night in this dark empty tavern alone is making him feel completely abandoned.

She is not here.

What if he deciphered her message wrong? What if she is waiting under an actual holly brush by a stream somewhere? What if...

She is not here and he is utterly alone, no longer a prince, no longer a boy from a farm, no longer a White Knight. He is no one. He is not even sure what his name should be anymore. "Charming," she said, "I like Charming better." As if she knew that the name James wasn't real, as if she saw right through him. As if she could tell...

David pulls out her letters, unfolds them one by one and reads them again.

"So I'm going throw caution to the wind and say it. I miss you. Write to me again?"

"She is coming," he boldly declares to the darkness, "of course she is coming..."

David wakes up on the cold tavern floor. He groans as he sits up, stretching, then he wraps his cape tighter around him. She is not here. She is not here, his heart aches with every beat. He shakes away his gloomy thoughts. He knows there is a well on the back of the tavern so he walks out back to wash his face and feed his horse.

"Where is she?" he asks his reflection on the bottom of the well, but he doesn't get a response.

When Snow walks inside the Holly Vine tavern everything is perfectly quiet. Someone was here recently, there are foot marks all over the ground, in fact someone might have spent the night here, but now the building is perfectly silent. Snow heart sinks as she leans her back against the door, the door shutting gently behind her. Did she miss him already? She said she'd be waiting for him. But in the end she had to spend the day with Ella and she had to pretend that she needed to sleep early and she sneaked out the window once she was certain Ella wouldn't check up on her again, losing precious time. And now Snow is finally here but she is too late.

Snow's eyes well up, her lips trembling. He didn't wait for her. How is she supposed to find him now, when he is supposed to be dead? How will she even begin to know where to look? She is just going to have to track him down, Snow thinks, wiping her eyes in a hurry. She'll find him.

There is the sound of the back door opening and Snow's heart is beating wildly. She places her hand on her dagger, just in case, and she moves forward.

He is half way through the kitchen, when she rushes to the kitchen door. Their eyes meet, and the world comes to a stand still. For a second she wonders if they are both going to be shy and hesitate.
Snow's had so many things she wanted to tell him and now her mind is drawing a blank, her eyes are already tearing up, her hands reaching for him.

She is here! She is here. And he smiles because she looks so beautiful in her leather vest, her white tunic, the leather pants, her hair pulled back and braided. And he wants to laugh at himself for being surprised at her informal attire. Did he really think she'd show up in a ballgown? And it's such a relief to see her there, not looking like a princess, looking so beautiful yet so down to earth, like a woman who could be his, even now when he is not a prince, he is not a knight, he is just a guy with a sword and a horse. And he is so elated he could laugh. He could cry.

Her eyes open wide, she wonders at his hesitation, and the longing in her eyes is enough to make him forget all he went through to get to this point. He steps forward, sheer joy all over his face and in the next breath she is engulfed in his arms.

"You came," he says quietly, lifting her off the ground as he holds her tight, and Snow is feeling so relieved she almost bursts into tears.

She kisses his cheek one, two, three, four times, instead of replying, because she is both terrified and deliriously happy.

"You came," he says again, he can hardly believe it, and then he feels Snow's kisses on his cheek, and he is stunned at her unabashed affection. Snow's joy is the very antithesis of Catherine's cold and indifferent demeanor. He feels like he'd been out left in the cold for the past months, and Snow's just opened the door and pulled him inside next to a warm hearth.

"I thought I was too late..." she says softly, and she can't help it, she has tears streaming down her face again. "I thought you already left..."

"Where would I even go? I'm not going anywhere," he replies, "I would have waited a whole month for you if I had to..."

Snow beams at him through her tears. Of course he would have waited. All her previous fears seem unfounded now, dissolving in the warmth of his smile.

"Snow," he says, his voice half a whisper and she wonders what he's going to say next, when he leans in and kissed her instead.

Is he moving too fast, he wonders, as Snows body stiffens slightly, but then she cups his face and kisses him back.

"Hello, Charming," she smiles brushing her hand against the now small scar on his chin, and they both laugh.

And he thinks the nickname she gave him might be the sweetest sound in all of the realms. There is a lot he wants to get off his chest but Snow is already glancing around the room in a hurry.

"We shouldn't stay here," she says quietly. "People were looking at me funny as I was riding into town..."

"Yes," he agrees. "But does your horse need to rest?"

"No, I exchanged horses a couple of miles back," she explains. "Which is another reason why we need go go as far away as possible... I gave them a false name, but they might have recognized me. I don't want to be tracked..."
"Let's go," he agrees in a hurry. And it's like they were born to do this, they are moving together, their steps fast, perfectly in sync. He saddles his horse, he waters Snow's, then they ride away together.

After riding into the forest for five hours, Snow can hardly keep her eyes open. She is completely exhausted. She did ride through the night to get to him. David stops by the stream and dismounts.

"You look like you could fall asleep sitting up," he says holding her horse by the reins while she steps down. He stretches and sits on a fallen log then he motions her to sit next to him. The horses are already dipping their heads in the water, drinking. There are tall evergreen trees all round them, concealing their presence. He pulls out two sandwiches and hands her his water flask.

"Well?" he asks quietly. "Are you sure about this? Because if you are not, there is still time to turn back..." He looks a little worried when she doesn't respond right away.

Snow threads her fingers through his. "I am not going back," she replies. "I understood the message you sent me perfectly. I knew you weren't actually going to die. And yet when I heard the news of your death, I felt so heartbroken, like I couldn't breathe..."

He shakes his head. "That's not how I wanted to do this at all," he explains. "I wanted to come clean, and tell the truth about who I am... but Catherine pointed out that the truth would have just strained all diplomatic relations between our kingdoms and landed me in the dungeon..."

"What is the truth exactly?" Snow frowns. "Who are you really?"

David hesitates.

"Just tell me," she shrugs. "I mean, I need to know who I mean to spend my life with, don't I?"

And there is something in the way she says those words, that is quite astonishing. He looks at her overwhelmed, as the truth of her words sinks in.

"This is what we are doing, isn't it?" Snow's face blanches, because he didn't reply right away. Maybe she is misreading things, rushing ahead.

"That is exactly what we are doing..." he replies quietly, squeezing her hand. "It's just that the truth is quite hard to believe. I'm not even sure I've made peace with it..."

David takes a deep breath. He might as well come out with it. "Prince James, the real prince James, died, six months ago. I was brought in to impersonate him, because he was in the process of forging a diplomatic alliance with Midas..."

"Hence the engagement," Snow nods.

"Yes," David nods. Yes, but there is more..." He looks away. "I could impersonate prince James, without anyone questioning me, because we are identical twins. We were separated at birth. The king sent the Dark One to my parents farm when we were newborns... and there was some kind of transaction... The king adopted my brother..."

Snow's eyes open wide. She is stunned at his confession. He is right, the truth is quite astonishing.

"Catherine is right," she says quickly, grateful at the levelheadedness of the other princess. "If you told the truth while on George's soil, you'd never see the light of day again... they'd lock you up and throw away the key..." and the thought of how close she came to never seeing him again
terrifies her.

He is not sure what to make of her reaction, she seems quite horrified, but then she wraps her arms around his shoulders.

"And your real name?" she asks, kissing his cheek.

"David," replies.

"David," she smiles. "I knew you were a mystery, but I would have never guessed anything this complicated..."

He feels so relieved. He's laid all the cards on the table and she is still here. She is here.

"What did you do before... before you were James?" she is choosing her words very carefully.

"I was a white knight," he replies. "Had no idea the prince was my brother..."

Snow nods, finally understanding the whole picture. "That is a lot to process," her eyes now searching his face. "You've been through so much! Are you alright?"

And David feels likes like waves of relief are crushing on him. She knows the truth and she is still here. Not only is she still here, but she is loving and caring, and his well being finally matters. He is no longer just a pawn to be used and discarded in king George's hands.

"I am now," he replies.

Snow leans her head on his shoulder.

"David...-" she starts then she hesitates. "Should I be calling you David or...-"

"David," he replies, "if I never hear the name James again it will be too soon..."

"Oh, in that case, I'm sorry," she mumbles pulling out two tickets from her purse.

James Charming, the first ticket reads. The second one is made out to Mary Margaret Blanchard. It's two boarding passes to the Nautilus.

"I was in a hurry, that was the first name that popped in my head," she explains.

"These must have cost a fortune," he exclaims.

"We can use them in six months time. I figured the black knights will be done looking for me by then, and it will be a good time to get away...we just need a place to lay low for a while..."

"That's perfect," he nods. "I know just the place. A friend of a friend has an aunt who is going blind. She is looking to sell her cabin. It's deep inside the forest, no neighbors in sight... we can buy it," he says pulling out a small leather pouch that has fifty gold coins in it.

Snow pulls out her wallet, and shows him how much money is in it. "Couldn't withdraw all the gold from my bank without arousing suspicions, so I only got half, but I did trade some jewels..."

Between the two of them they have enough money that they could live comfortably for a year, two years if they are really careful.

"Perfect..." she smiles. "We've only been together for half a day and we've already figured
"Yes..." he grins and then he turns around and kneels in front of her, her hand still in his. "Except for one last thing..." he says quietly. "Snow White," he pauses long enough to note that she is holding her breath. "Snow White, will you marry me?"

"What do you think?" she replies, her eyes welling up and then they are holding each other tight, and the world has slowed down and it is a happy peaceful place.

"So, yes then?" he asks.

"Yes," she laughs, kissing him on the lips and she is surprised to feel that she is not the only one crying. "Yes, yes, yes" she whispers again.
"You have to help me, I will pay you whatever it takes, I am desperate!" A bewildered Sneezy greets Snow and David at the door of their office the moment they arrive.

"Are you alright? How long have you been standing here?" David asks him, looking concerned. "We don't open till ten..."

"I got here at nine," Sneezy shrugs. "I was going to come to your house but I didn't want to intrude..."

Snow unlocks the office door and motions the men to step inside. She glances wistfully at the coffee pot in the corner. Sneezy is in such a state. She doesn't want to make him wait while she makes coffee.

"Won't you sit down?" David offers, but Sneezy seems to be determined to pace up and down.

"I mean, I don't even know what's happening. My office has been under attack for a while. Yesterday all my papers were printed in green ink, today they look normal. The day before my pens were hovering in the air, I had to glue them down to my desk. The day before my chair was covered in a fabric that had the words "you look cute," printed in thirty seven languages. The effect lasted only for one day. I don't know what to do... every day it's a different thing. I am a serious man, I am trying to run a business. The other day, I had a very important client in my office, I didn't dare open my file cabinet, to review his case because as soon as I opened the drawers, a song would play..."

"A song?" Snow asks incredulously.

"A different song for every drawer. Top drawer was violin solos, middle drawer was RB, bottom drawers were eighties metal ballads..." Sneezy replies mournfully and he finally concedes to sit down. "I was mortified. All I can think off is that my enemies are trying to push me out of business, they are trying to discredit me, I cannot... I don't know what to do..."

"I don't think that...-" David tries to say, but once again Sneezy is standing up, handing a very important looking folder to Snow White.

"I have comprised a list of enemies. First in alphabetical order, then in chronological order, then in order of importance, rating their potential grudges from one to ten. Ten being potentially murderous. One, if they might spit in my tea," he concludes, then he sits back on his chair breathless.

Snow quickly browses through the list. "Gwendolyn the gum chewer?" she frowns.

"I'm afraid that I've forgotten her last name, it's been a while since kindergarten, you see... I asked her not to chew gum in class. She never forgave me. I was allergic to strawberry and her gum always had the strongest most artificial strawberry flavor..." Sneezy lets out a loud sneeze, just at the memory of strawberry flavored gum.

"Kindergarten?" David wants to make sure he heard correctly.

"Yes, of course. Why? Do you think that's not far enough back? I suppose I could try to think even
further back into my childhood...

"No, I meant the opposite," David tries to say. "That's too far back."

"When should I start?" Sneezy is looking surprised. "I suppose if kindergarten is too far back we can eliminate a few pages, narrow the list of subjects..."

"Listen Grumpy, I don't think you need my services yet. I have a few ideas how you can efficiently handle the situation," Snow replies then she casts a quick glance at David. "Surely you can resolve this on your own..."

David nods.

"Come on," Snow smiles encouragingly to Sneezy. "Let's go take a look at your office, see what we can do to prevent further pranks..."

"Pranks? Those are not simple pranks! I'm afraid that you are severely underestimating the situation Snow White, I'm fearing for my life..." Sneezy protests but he does follow Snow out of the office.

"Tink!" David pulls out his magic mirror.

"Hello?" Tink replies yawning. "It's too early David. Do you need my help?"

"Not quite," David replies. "I was wondering when you are going to ask Sneezy out to dinner..."

There is a pause and then Tink's voice sounds more high pitched like normal. "What? Why?" she asks.

"Because clearly you like him and what you are currently doing isn't working," David sighs.

"What am I doing?" Tink is clearly doing her best to sound completely innocent.

"You are love pranking his office. Only he thinks it's a professional attack. He has no clue you are trying to flirt with him..."

"I am not...- What? A professional attack?"

"Exactly," David replies.

"What makes you think it's me?"

"Because every drawer in his file cabinet was a different song," David replies. "That's both incredibly creative and talented. Not sure I know of any other fairy that could pull this off. And you have a soft spot for eighty's metal ballads. But if it's not you, and you truly don't care for Sneezy, I suppose I can introduce him to Magenta. I think they'd look quite cute together..."

"Magenta!" Tink sounds outraged. "Why? She isn't behind this..."

"I don't care," David shrugs. "Clearly the prankster doesn't want to reveal herself. She must not care about Sneezy that much. And Sneezy is a good man, he doesn't deserve this anyway. I think the Magenta Fairy might be a good match for him... Did you know she makes her own crossword puzzles?"

And David is very lucky that Tink loves him very much. Because Tink very much feels like turning him green at the moment or making his desk fly up in the air and then come crushing down
on the ground.

"Please don't," is all that Tink says.

"I won't," David replies. "But Tink, you have to find a better way to express your feelings. You are driving the poor guy crazy..."

"Well, that was not my intent," Tink replies.

"You were hoping that we'd call you to help us in his case, so you'd get to rescue him? Well, that didn't work," David replies.

"And what exactly was your intent?" David hesitates. Maybe he doesn't want to know after all.

"Maybe I wanted him to come to you with his problem and maybe I wanted you to be stumped about who was pranking him... And perhaps I thought you would hire me on as a security adviser, to help you out, use a spell to protect his office and maybe since I would be the one rescuing him and he would really really like me..."

"I know," Tink says quietly. "Are you going to tell him?"

"No, you will."

"Will I?" Tink sounds ready to make her magic mirror dissolve, change her name, die her hair black and move to another kingdom.

"Don't you want to?" David asks. "You wouldn't have gone through all this trouble if you didn't like him..."

Tink hesitates. "Maybe..."

"So, today then? You'll go talk to him?"

Tink nods a few times. "Today," she replies quietly.

"This is what we are going to do," Snow says pulling out the small vial of fairy dust that she got from Tink months ago, when she was working on Regina's case. Back then Tink had devised a magic cancelling fairy dust that temporarily stopped Regina from accessing her magic. It had worked for five minutes. "We are going to sprinkle a little bit of this dust here, and here..."

Snow sprinkles the four corners of Sneezy's office.

Sneezy sneezes a couple of times. He might be allergic to magic too.

"I'm going to ask you to spend the night in your office," Snow smiles encouragingly at him. "And when the pranksters come you are going to catch them in the act. And then you can talk to them," Snow smiles triumphantly.

"Talk to them?" Sneezy does not appear quite convinced. "I'm not qualified for interrogations. I'm just an accountant. What if they are armed and dangerous?"

"Well, I'm qualified," Snow tries to stifle her smile. "And I believe that's the best course of action..."

"What would I even say?" Sneezy is looking lost.
"I have the utmost belief in your abilities my friend," Snow pats Sneezy on the back. "You'll know what to say when the time comes..."

"Well?" David asks as soon as Snow steps back in the office.

"Well," she smiles leaning against his desk. "I got a lot of good ideas from this case. I'm thinking I'm going to start my day tomorrow by throwing heart confetti on your desk. Heart candies on your pillow. Maybe a path of rose petals from here all the way leading to my desk..."

"Well I've always wanted a singing sock drawer," David replies.

Snow laughs. "I knew it! How about a sock drawer that belts out opera songs as soon as you open it?"

David is looking mildly horrified. "Something lighter..."

"I shouldn't be laughing," Snow mumbles. "It's not like I was any better... It took me forever to be brave enough to ask you out..."

And David remembers the one terrible conversation when Snow got abducted before she even got a chance to invite him to dinner, and he is not smiling anymore. He is just holding her tight, breathing her in.

"We are okay," he says quietly. "They are all on the run now, they can't hurt us anymore..."

And Snow stifles the urge to argue that as long as Regina is out there some where, they may never be completely safe.

"Come on. How about I take you out to lunch," David relaxes his grip, trying to push away the dark thoughts clouding his mind.

Snow smirks. "Asking me out?"

"Yes. Have no fear, my intentions are mostly honorable..." he laughs.

"Speaking of intentions, she is not going to break his heart, is she?"

David is surprised to see that Snow is quite alarmed about this. Sneezy is such an unusual character. Somehow David wasn't thinking of Sneezy as this guy who might actually be in danger from Tinkerbell.

"I... I don't think so. You know what she is like. She doesn't actually share a lot of information about her relationships. And she never discusses feelings. But I've never seen her act like this before..."

Snow makes a face. "Perhaps this is a good sign..." she shrugs.

Sneezy has dozed off twice on his chair. His office is dark. He contemplates turning on the lamp on his desk, but that will very likely ruin his plan. He looks at the grandfather clock in the corner of his office by the window, illuminated by the street lights. It's nine o'clock. He meant to stay up of course, but he had a busy day and now he is dozing off on his chair. Snow might be a genius, he thinks. Why, even though his apartment is right upstairs, he would have never thought to spend the night in his office, to catch the intruder in the act. No, his mind is always filled with calculations and numbers. He doesn't often think of practical things. He gets more comfortable on his chair, his eyes closing when he hears a strange crushing sound. He is awake. He is awake. He stands up in a
hurry, his hand reaching for the engraved letter opener on his desk. Sneezy T. Clark, he admires his name on the letter opener, a present from a prestigious client, he is temporarily distracted. Then he looks at the shadow in the middle of the room and he is immediately reminded of what he is supposed to be doing.

"Who goes there?" he blurs out, pulling the string to turn his desk lamp on. When Snow said he'd immediately know what to say, perhaps she was underestimating how awkward he can be at times when he is dealing with real live people, not numbers behind his magic mirror screen.

He is surprised to see Tink on the ground struggling to get up from the floor.

She is looking shocked, her limbs are feeling heavy due to the magic cancelling fairy dust. "What did you do to me?" she asks quietly.

"Why... I didn't... I certainly would never..." he is immediately apologetic. He rushes to help her up. "What are you even doing here?"

Tink shakes her hand in a hurry. "Don't!" she says. She recognizes her own magic of course, it's her own fairy dust spread on the floor, but unfortunately she is not immune to it. She feels heavy, like she is swimming in syrup, and her limbs are glued to the ground. And though she knows this is a temporary effect, she still glares at Sneezy.

"Why?" she demands.

"You will forgive me, but I have been under attack for a while now... I needed to find out who is wrecking havoc in my office and my life," he says and then he notes the red heart stickers in her hand.

He is looking at Tink stunned.

"Well, it won't happen again," she murmurs, slowly raising from the ground, dusting her short green dress. "I'm sorry..." In a few minutes she will be able to teleport from Sneezy's office, but not yet. She is standing there, her acts exposed, her cheeks flushed and she wishes the earth would open up and swallow her whole.

"You are not in my list of enemies," Sneezy observes, crossing his arms. "Care to explain yourself?"

"List of enemies?" now Tink is really confused.

"Did my rival, Philips and Statham and Loyd put you up to this?"

"Who is Philips and Statham and Loyd?"

"Why the second most successful accounting firm in town. They've been trying to steal my clients for years. How much did they pay you?"

"Oh," Tink blinks a couple of times. She sees the opportunity waiting right there. If she pretends she was hired by the rival accounting firm, she can offer to mess with them free of charge. And then Sneezy will be grateful to her forever... which is pretty much her original plan only turned inside out and upside down. This could work.

Only Sneezy is standing right there, looking like he will believe anything she says. He would too. And she doesn't really want to lie to him. "They didn't put me up to this..." she confesses.
"Who then? Blake and Bolton? Schultz? Freeman?"

Tink is shaking her head. "I... no, I did this on my own."

"Why? Why would you engage in such an atrocious campaign of terror against me?" he exclaims incredulously. "I have never done anything to you, I have been nothing but civil...-

"I..." Tink is very much regretting her honesty. "Campaign of terror?" she looks at him dumbfounded.

"What else would you call it? There were green hearts in the ledgers of my accounting books, only to be replaced by peony garlands, hanging on my walls, and little notes with the word 'sweet' in them in seventeen languages and...oh!" and as he is listing Tink's pranks one by one, Sneezy for the first time puts two and two together. "Oh, " he says again his eyes opening wide "oh... I see," he coughs a couple of times, his eyes on the floor. So maybe Tink had motivations other than actually trying to sabotage his business. "I didn't realize..."

And now Tink is furiously blushing, thinking of ten different ways she'll punish Snow White for helping Sneezy use her own magic cancelling dust against her. She can turn Snow's horse into a green sheep. She can turn Snow's hair blue. She can send a little snow storm in Snow's living room. Except she can't, she can't mess with Snow. Snow is David's wife and she will never, never do anything to upset David. That's her one rule. David saved her life. David is never to be messed with.

And then Sneezy takes a step forward.

"Why me?" he asks quietly.

And on that very moment Tink feels herself free to teleport. The effect of the dust is wearing of. She is free to go. But Sneezy is standing in front of her, brown eyes filled with questions and he looks so flustered and confused and adorably cute. Maybe she doesn't want to be free just yet. She forces herself to look him in the eyes, and she can see his confusion. Why me? Are you just playing with me, is what he is really asking.

Tink hesitates.

"Tink, you are the prettiest fairy in all the realms, if rumors are to be believed you are incredibly powerful, you can fly... why... why me?"

And Tink freezes feeling the familiar stab in the heart, the one she feels when anyone mentions flying. "I can't," she replies, her cheeks flushing.

"What?" he is looking adorable and confused again.

"Can't fly," she whispers.

"Afraid of heights?" he frowns. "Well that's perfectly understandable. Nothing to be ashamed of. I myself cannot stand heights ever since I went on that carnival ride when I was seven.. my mother bribed the guy that was manning the ride. I wasn't nearly tall enough... I've been afraid of heights ever since... Flying is one of my top twenty fears, along with brown bears and blue scissors..." his voice trails off.

"Not afraid of heights," Tink replies. "My wings are broken..."

Ever since her escape from Neverland Tink has had many relationships. And in all those times
she's never actually done what she is about to do now. Tink waves her hand and her wings unfold. Her beautiful green translucent wings, that cannot even open properly because Peter Pan falsely accused her of murder and snapped them both at the wrist joint.

And she expects Sneezy to look at her either with pity or with anger, just like David did, when he found her hiding in the Neverland caves. He couldn't believe how they'd broken her wings. But Sneezy doesn't do either. He inspects her wings with levelheaded calmness.

"I see," he says. "I see. But that's no reason why you couldn't fly again..."

Tink frowns. What is he talking about? Clearly he doesn't understand.

"Look, it won't be the same as before and you need to start from a great height, not something you had to do before, but it could work..." he says as he opens the back door of his office that leads to a stairway. "Come on," he says sounding both excited and impatient.

Tink follows him up the stairs and she is amazed to see twenty intricate kites all suspended on Sneezy's ceiling.

"Did you make these?" Tink is looking quite stunned.

"It's a little hobby of mine. I know what you are thinking," he shrugs. "People that fear heights have no business building kites, and things that fly...."

"I wasn't thinking that at all," she replies, her eyes wide open, taking it all in.

"You weren't?" he says then he walks over to his desk in the corner of the room and empties it. He picks up a pencil and unrolls some parchment. "Like this" he says drawing a few lines. "It shouldn't take me more than hour to put together, just because my glue will take a while to dry up... do you have plans for the night?"

"I don't," she says looking at his design. "I could make the glue dry faster..."

"Really?" Sneezy is looking delighted. "That skill could come in handy..."

Tink smiles brightly.

"Lets take some measurements, shall we?" he says. "May I?"

And Tink swallows hard because she's hasn't let anyone touch her wings in years. Not since she got away from Neverland and the healing fairy said the damage was too great and she could only heal them partially and in all likely hood she would never fly again. "Alright," she forces herself to reply, because she really wants to fly again.

"Don't worry, this won't hurt a bit," Sneezy says and then his hands are gently opening up her wing. And Tink is standing frozen in place, her eyes on his face.

Sneezy carefully measures the front and the back of her wings, he even calculates the thickness of the bone, keeping quick notes. And then he stares at her wide eyed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you," he asks quietly handing her his monogrammed handkerchief.

"It didn't hurt," she frowns and doesn't understand why he is handing her a handkerchief until she feels her cheeks moist. She didn't even realize she was crying.

"Would you like some tea?"
No she doesn't want tea, she wants wings, but she surprises herself again by nodding.

"I do not do this often," he mumbles placing the tea kettle in his stove. "Entertaining, I mean," he explains.

She is shocked because he serves her cucumber sandwiches and tea in the most beautiful porcelain teacup... For a guy who doesn't entertain, he certainly has style.

"Beautiful," she exclaims, examining the green leaves in her cup.

"Thank you. It was my mother's... Back to the wings," he smiles. "I think I'm ready to glue things together, if you want to help me out..."

Tink looks at the delicate braces he's made for her wings. He's used slices of bamboo sticks and the prettiest handmade green paper.

"Almost ready," he says testing the flexible joint, as Tink waves her hand using her magic to dry the glue.

"It's quite beautiful," she whispers.

"It's probably good for one time use only. It'd be better if it was made out of silk, but I didn't want to take any chances. I could make you enough pairs to wear everyday... would you like to try them on?"

Tink is too overwhelmed for words. She just nods quickly. Sneezy quickly snaps the wing braces in place.

Tink gasps.

"Did that hurt?" Sneezy is looking worried.

Tink shakes her head and then slowly, carefully she extends her wings as far as she can. She slowly turns her head to look at her beautiful wings. She has no idea but her whole body is trembling.

"I think they fit..." Sneezy wants to be extra cautious. "I think maybe you can try flying with them tomorrow, I'm sure this skrt of thing is best done by daylight," he suggests.

But has already walked to the window and she is struggling to open it.

"What are you doing?" he gasps. Because Sneezy is allergic to everything. He never opens the windows. He keeps the temperature of this room perfect at sixty five degrees. He uses a hypoallergenic air purifier and a humidifier. It's been years since the window has been opened, and it's definitely stuck.

But a little rust isn't going to stop Tinkerbell who's already waved her hand, opened the window wide and stepped on the ledge.

"Tink," he says rushing towards her, realizing what she is about to do. "We are on the second floor, it's not high enough, you are going to crush on the ground, you ought to try higher...-"

Tink turns around long enough to give him her brightest of smiles and then she lets her body fall backwards.

"Tink!" Sneezy practically screams leaning out the window, totally expecting to see her body splattered on the ground. "Tink!" he says this time, his voice pulsating with awe rather than terror.
Because Tink is twirling in the air and then she shoots up, and it's like watching a shooting star trailing the sky. Sneezy gasps. Tink flying might be the most beautiful sight he's ever laid eyes on. His wings are holding up. He leans against the window, sneezing twice, looking at Tink, his heart beating fast, both amazed and terrified. When he envisioned Tink flying, he thought of basic flight maneuvers, he certainly did not design her wings for twirling and free falling. He's afraid she is going to crash on the ground. But Tink is once again soaring to the skies, she is now a little dot against the starry night and Sneezy is holding his breath. He needs her to come down, he needs to make sure she is safe. On a practical note, he needs to reinforce her wings, single bamboo stripes aren't going to cut it, because his girl is a regular daredevil. He is going to have to special order better paper, green to match her wings, green to match her eyes. Sneezy is already preparing a shopping list in his mind.

The air up here is thick with unused magic. Tink closes here eyes, filling her lungs. This isn't like the Neverland magic, wild and dangerous. There is a sweetness to the air here, a kindness, the scent of evergreens and hope, Tink realizes. The airs is ripe with hope. And Tink slows down and hovers above the forest, watching a hundred windows lit by candlelight, hundreds of people undoubtedly going to bed for the night about to dream, even as her own dream is coming true. Tink is watching the forest trees swaying in the wind, the starlight reflection on the river passing under the troll bridge. She is flying, she us flying again, and there is no way to describe how her heart is both racing and feeling peaceful at the same time, how she is both exhilarated and crying all at once.

When Tink finds her way back to Sneezy's apartment and lands on his window ledge, he is deep in thought. He's already designed several more wings braces, for longer more complicated types of flight.

"How was it?" he asks, raising his eyes above his notes. "On a scale from one to ten, one being barely tolerable ten being amazing, how would you rate your flying experience?"

Tink doesn't reply. She just walks right up to him and plants a kisses right on his mouth.

"Umm, good... good..." Sneezy stammers, his cheeks two shades lighter than a ripe tomato.

"Will you fly with me?" Tink asks.

"Dwarves don't fly," is his quick reply.

"Sure they do. I'm pretty sure Grump flies with Nova..."

"Sensible dwarves don't fly," Sneezy amends his rule.

"Sure they do..." Tink is looking so exited Sneezy doesn't know what to do. He certainly doesn't want to disappoint her but the thought of him up in the air is both terrifying and ludicrous.

"I'm a ... I'm more of a down to earth kind of guy," Sneezy tries again.

"I'll sprinkle fairy dust on you, and stir you along, it will be perfect...and I have teleportation powers. If anything goes wrong I'll just transport us back here, it will be like we never left! Please?"

"You don't understand," Sneezy struggles to explain. "I'm not an outdoors man. I'm allergic to grass, I'm allergic to pollen, I'm allergic to hay, I'm allergic to thirty seven different types of greenery... I collect and desig kites but I never fly them. I flew the red kite once, but only because I lost a bet on international kite day..."
And when Tink still looks unconvinced by his very sound arguments his sighs.

"Tinkerbell," he breathes, "if you take me flying I am going to scream like a dwarf baby on bath day... A guy really doesn't want to do that in front of his girl right on their first day together..."

"His girl?" Tink's eyes open wide and then she wraps her arms around his neck and kisses him again. And when she pulls back this time Sneezy's mind is completely void of any solid arguments against flying.

"A little bit of flying, never hurt anyone" he hears himself blurt out, his voice coming out all hoarse.

"Really?" Tink squeals clapping her hands. "You can scream all you like my little lighting bug..."

And before he gets a chance to blink or protest his new pet name Tink has already tossed some silver fairy dust his way, he's sneezed twice and now she is flying up in the sky, her arms wrapped around him chest, his back leaning against her, his eyes closed tight. He does not think he is breathing. He is so terrified, he may never breathe again.

"Open your eyes," she whispers, her lips right by his ear.

And he does. He does for a brief second, long enough to see the stars and the water and then he closes his eyes tight again.

"Beautiful," he says in a high pitched trembling voice he doesn't recognize as his.

And then Tink lowers to the ground, and she flies back to his window. And Sneezy is so grateful to be alive, he wants to kiss the floorboards in his livingroom and cry.

"How was it?" Tink asks.

"Horrifying," he replies quite honestly, his legs sinking to the ground.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Tink kneels in front of him, placing her hands on his shoulders. "I thought I could change your mind..."

"Can we do this again tomorrow?" he hears himself asking.

And Tink laughs and claps her hands. "Really?"

He leans in and kisses her instead of replying.

Her heart is beating faster, her mind is filled with fairy dust and echoes of her wings flapping against the wind. She pulls back to look at him.

"It's really late," she whispers. "I should go... Will you help me take these off?"

Sneezy stands up and takes off her wing braces, massaging gently the bone on her wings. Tink shudders. She turns around to cup his face and kiss him one more time, and when she pulls back they are both looking at each other in wide eyes wonder.

"Tomorrow?" she whispers.

"Can't wait," he replies, raising her hand to his lips. And just like that, in the next breath Tinkerbell is gone.
Sneezy leans against the wall, his knees are still trembling but he feels light as a feather. He should close the window of course, he needs to use his air purifier, he should return the room to its previous perfectly controlled ambient state... And then Sneezy laughs. Who is he kidding? Things are never going to be perfectly controlled ever again. And he is okay with that. He leaves the window open as he heads to his bedroom and starts getting ready for bed.

David's in bed, half asleep, when his magic mirror beeps. He opens his mirror to find a message from Tink.

"Something wrong?" Snow yawns and props her head on her hand.

"Tink says 'TELL YOUR WIFE THAT SHE IS THE MOST TREASONOUS TRAITOR IN TRAITOR TOWN AND I LOVE HER', in all caps," he replies.

"It must have gone well then," Snow sounds kind of unsure.

"That would be my guess too," David replies, chuckling.

"What's so funny?" Snow asks.

"Oh, I was just thinking that if you weren't my wife, you'd probably wake up in the forest on top of a tree, wearing shoes one size too small. Or in a leaky boat in the middle of the lake, without ores and nothing but a thimble to take out the water..."

"She wouldn't," Snow exclaims.

"Oh, she so would. But you are my wife, so hopefully you are safe" David smirks and he pulls her closer to him, wrapping his arm around her waist just in case.

"Lucky me," Snow smiles dreamily, her eyes already closing.
"We are going to get a Cesar salad and maybe some spinach!" David declares grinning.

Emma's eyes pop up from behind the waffle house menu. "What? No!" she gasps. "Oh, you are just kidding. I want the waffle with the chocolate ice cream and sprinkles and a cherry on top..."

Snow smiles at David from across the table. After Emma's quite reasonable complaint that they spent way too much time on Ella's case and they didn't always come home for dinner, they planned several activities with Emma including this two day visit in Water-world, the famous Underwater vacation resort on the edge of Atlantica, King Triton's kingdom. And Emma is absolutely ecstatic. For the past two days they've ridden seahorses and gotten mermaid makeovers- Emma's hair is streaked purple and pink, Snow has a few pearls threaded in her hair and David is wearing a cool merman hat. He refused to get blue streaks in his hair no matter how hard Emma tried, to Snow's great amusement. They've also and gone on bumper boat rides and incredible squid roller coasters and watched underwater jellyfish light up the ocean at night and now it's the very end of their weekend and Emma requested they visit the Waffle house one more time.

"I couldn't possibly eat another bite," Snow declares and David laughs and orders an extra scoop of ice cream on his waffle because he suspects that Snow might end up eating half of it.

"I'm serious," Snow tries but once the food is on the table she shrugs. "Maybe just one bite... We are going to have to catch our ride soon," she checks the time in her magic mirror.

"We are good, our ride doesn't live for another forty minutes," David replies.

"Can't we stay one more night and watch the Jelly fish lights?" Emma pleads.

"We could," David nods, "but then if we do that, you are going to have to miss school tomorrow and then I will hesitate to plan things for the next weekend. I can't be the cause of you missing school..."

"Never mind," Emma is quick to reply. "What are we doing next weekend?"

"Can't tell you yet," Snow sings. "But it's going to be amazing..."

"What if someone got lost in one of the rides and they hired you guys to find them!" Emma brightens up again. "We could spend the whole week looking at every single ride..."

"Oh, if that happened they'd have to shut down the park and evacuate everyone. I don't think this place would be all that fun with all the rides closed and everyone gone..." Snow replies.

Emma sighs and takes another bite of her waffle. She is going to school tomorrow. There is no getting out of it.

"Oh, don't be sad," David elbows Emma gently and she elbows him back. "We had so much fun, didn't we?" David pulls out the magic mirror and shows Emma a few pictures of them enjoying the water slides.

"You know from this angle you kind of look like a mermaid..." he says showing her a picture he must have taken by accident. It's just a picture of an elbow, nothing else.
"Do I?" Emma is intrigued.

Snow catches David's eyes and smiles brightly at him. It's been only a few months since they found each other and yet, his bond with Emma is so strong and Emma's never been happier. And Snow leans back on her chair, inhaling deeply. In this perfect moment she feels peaceful, in harmony with the whole realm.

"Do you want the last bite?" David pushes his plate towards her.

"But I already had too much..." she protests mildly because the pistachio ice cream is half melted, just the way she likes it.

"It's yours," he smirks watching her as she puts the last spoonful in her mouth her enjoyment quite obvious.

And then she spots someone in the distance and she frowns. David turns to see where who she is looking at. "Something wrong?"

"It's probably nothing, just Blue Knights, doing their job," she tries her best to sound unconcerned.

There are three Blue Knights heading towards them.

Snow raises her eyebrows. What if Emma was right, what if Triton's kingdom has some sort of emergency and they ask for their help with a case?

"Sir Nolan?" the Blue Knight walk up straight to David. "Sir, David Nolan? Would you come with us please?"

"What is this about?" David asks casting a quick glance Snow's way.

"Would you follow us outside quietly please Sir?" the Knight tries again.

David stands up.

Snow shakes her head. Don't!

"Please Sir," the Knight is insistent, his hand already on the tip of his dagger.

"What is going on?" Snow is standing up, her eyes blazing. "What is this about?"

"Are you sure you want to do this, Ma'am? Are you sure you want to put your daughter through this..." the Knight hesitates.

"What is this about?" Snow asks again.

"I'm afraid that Sir Nolan is under arrest..."

"Under arrest for what?" Snow is perfectly calm, her voice clipped. "What are the charges?"

The man sighs heavily shaking his head. "Fine," he says, "have it your way!" The knights surrounding them pull out their daggers while he places his hand on David's arm.

"Sir Nolan, you are under arrest for the murder of Edward, we have a warrant and a request for extradition to the Southern Kingdom..."

"Edward is dead?" David's eyes open wide.
And Snow doesn't mean to but she gasps. "The Southern Kingdom? No! This can't be happening, you can't send him there!"

David turns to face Snow.

"We need to go," the Blue Knight is looking increasingly uncomfortable as every restaurant patron has frozen in place watching the drama unfold. And the world is moving in slow motion while Snow is watching, helplessly. The two knights are pulling David's hands behind his back, handcuffing him and Snow clenches her fists to keep her hands from trembling.

"It's alright," she nods, her eyes locked on David who is glaring at the knights looking both furious and lost. "It's alright, we'll sort this out... I'm on it..." even though she knows that David being sent to the Southern Kingdom is the worse thing that could possibly happen. Because it was the White Knights of the Southern kingdom that first recruited David to impersonate his brother and then erased his memory and sent him to the ends of the realm. And since then David and Snow together exposed King George and his heir, Baron Edward, causing the King to resign from his throne and run away and the Baron to get arrested for Snow's abduction. And there is no doubt in Snow's mind that the former King is somehow behind this arrest, pulling the strings. Which is why David cannot get extradited to the Southern Kingdom.

David is being led out the door.

"Daddy!" Emma screams, and David turns to look at her one last time. Snow places her arms on her daughter's shoulders and shushes her.

"It's alright," she whispers, "it's going to be alright..."

And she means to remain standing in place while David is being led away, but at the last moment, something inside her cracks. Snow runs out of the restaurant door, with Emma in tow, just in time to see David disappear inside the sea pumpkin squad.

"David," a scream inside her swells, but Snow covers her mouth and stand there looking at him, as the pumpkin drives away.

"David" Snow's screams echo inside his head as he is being led out of the diner. He feels like he is having an out of body experience, this isn't at all how he envisioned today going. And Snow is standing there, looking calm and steadfast and she is not screaming at all, which makes no sense because he can hear her voice inside his head, clear as day.

"David," she screams again and again, her heart broken. And he has to do a double take to make sure but Snow is just standing there looking at him, her hands on Emma's shoulders. And as much as he wants to know what is happening, it really doesn't matter, because he's being led to the back of the sea pumpkin squad and there is nothing more he can do to help himself.

"David," Snow is now crying and screaming, "David look at me, you know who I am, David please... You know who I am, you can't forget who I am" she sobs And David is desperate for her kiss, he needs her to chase the fog away, the darkness clouding his mind, but he is being dragged away, and his mind is getting muddled. He hears baby Emma crying and that doesn't make any sense because Emma is ten years old, she is not a baby. But he still hears baby Emma crying.

And David wishes he could rub his eyes, to make sure he is awake, and not dreaming things up. Because here, in the back of the sea pumpkin squad, that is taking him who knows where, he is hearing things that cannot possibly be happening. Snow is no longer here yet he hears her voice in his mind loud and clear. Emma is ten years old, but he hears her newborn cries.
Snow is standing outside the diner, her hand already in her pocket, reaching for a magic bean. She turns to face Emma.

"Mommy what are we going to do..." Emma is crying.

Snow wraps her arms around her daughter's shoulders. "It's going to be alright," Snow replies. "Of course your father didn't murder anybody... we just have to sort this out... I need to go..."

"Mommy, I want to come with you," she says and this is so unlike Emma to be clingy.

Snow wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. What is she thinking? She can't use the magic bean. There are age restrictions on magic bean usage and even is Emma is almost tall enough Snow can't take any chances.

"I'm going to have to call Ruby," she starts and then she looks in her daughter's eyes. Here it is, the past, repeating itself. David and Snow and Emma were together and then unexpectedly David was dragged away. She's grateful that Emma can't possibly remember the last time this happened.

"Mommy, please," Emma whimpers.

"You are certainly coming with me," Snow nods. She places the bean back in her pocket and raises her hand to hail a taxi clam carriage.

"Are they going to hurt him?" Emma is crying.

"No, of course not," Snow is quick to reply, even though she knows that "accidents" happen in dungeons all the time.

"I need to go straight to the Blue knight force headquarters," Snow tells the clam carriage driver and then she steps inside that carriage and holds Emma close. Snow has already pulled out her magic mirror and is about to call Blue when the mirror rings.

"Are you home? Where are you? David needs to come to the headquarters instantly!" Jiminy exclaims. "An interrealm warrant was issued for David's arrest. He needs to turn himself in. And then I'm going to stall as long as I can and have Blue work out the details to block the extradition order first thing in the morning... Snow? Are you there?"

"Jiminy!" Snow sighs. "You are too late... We were at Water-world. They picked him up twenty minutes ago..."

"Oh! But how? The Baron was murdered in the middle of the night, if you were in Triton's kingdom, that's a solid alibi..."

"I don't know, they didn't ask any questions, they arrested him on the spot..." Snow replies. "I'm guessing that they wanted to get their clutches on him. The truth wasn't that important..."

"Well, it's simple. Use whatever means you have to make them hold back on the extradition order... If he remains at the Blue Knight Force headquarters he is not in any danger... I'm about to call Blue now. I'm sure she can pull some strings... Don't worry Snow White!"

"Thanks Jiminy" Snow replies.

Snow is calling the Crimson Fairy next.

"Council woman Snow, what can I do for you?" he sounds so official. As if it's not already in bed
with his night cap on about to blow out his candle and go to sleep.

"We were in Waterworld and the Blue Knights just arrested my husband. I need you to contact the Blue Knight force right now," Snow gets straight to the point. "Explain that there is a conspiracy against my husband and demand that they keep him in their custody. Under no circumstances are they to deliver them to the Southern Kingdom..."

"Certainly," to his credit the Crimson Fairy doesn't offer a word of protest. "What is the charge?"

"Murder," Snow practically chokes on the word. "Baron Edward has been murdered."

And Snow expected Crimson to ask more questions, but he doesn't. "I'll keep you posted on my progress, Councilor," he replies. "I'm sure they'll see reason..."

"Thank you," Snow replies feeling incredibly relieved. And then she looks out the window. This must be the Blue Knight Force headquarters because there is a small building above water, an entrance and a few offices above, reflecting on the calm waters and then the rest of the building is submerged inside the water just like everything else in Triton's kingdom. It is an engineering marvel just like every other building in Atlantica. And if it was any other time Snow would stop to admire it with Emma. But not today. Today they carefully walk on the stepping stones that lead up to the entry. A small sign helpfully explains that humans are to use the door, mermen are to dive in and swim straight to the underwater elevator.

"Come on," Snow urges and Emma pushing the door open. A young Blue knight greets them behind his desk. He blinks a couple of times disbelieving his eyes.

"Snow White?" he gasps. "Oh, Ma'am it's such an honor... what can I do for you... I am at your service."

And Snow evaluates the situation. It's getting rather late and this star struck young man is here unsupervised. She can see the wheels turning in his mind, he is wondering if it is completely unprofessional to ask her to sign his dagger. This will certainly work to her advantage. Why, he may even let Snow visit David.

"I need your help," Snow starts using her most polite tone possible. "I need to see my husband and I need to formally request that you do not extradite him to the Southern Kingdom. His life might be in danger there...you know what's happening down there..."

Because there has been riots and civil unrest ever since King George's resignation and Baron Edward's arrest. The succession of the royal line is unclear and at least three of the court families have set their eyes on the throne and are amassing followers.

"Your husband?" the man looks so worried.

"David Nolan, my husband, he was arrested thirty minutes ago..." Snow replies. "Please...tell me that I can see him..."

"Yes, Ma'am I'm going to see what I can do..." the man waves his hand and a clear magic mirror appears out of nowhere. Under any other circumstances Atlantica's incredible technology and magical advancements would fascinate both Snow and Emma, but not today.

"Ummm, David Nolan," the man shuffles through virtual files mumbles and then he turns to Snow, an apologetic look in his eyes. "Ma'am I'm afraid that your husband was never brought here. He is being delivered straight to the White knight Force Headquarters in the Southern kingdom and I don't know where they will send him..."
"No!" Snow closes her eyes. "How is that possible? That is highly irregular..."

"You are right," he replies. "I've never seen that done before..."

"Well, can you cancel that order? Can you bring him back? I have good reason to believe that he cannot receive a fair trial in the Southern Kingdom. Our lawyer will be filing for an injunction first thing in the morning. You can't just let that happen..."

"Ma'am you don't understand. Our Knights were intercepted by White Knights with extradition orders. They had magic beans. Your husband is already in the Southern Kingdom!"

Snow gives Emma a couple of coins and point her to the vending machine. "Would you get me a drink sweetheart?" she asks quietly. And as soon as Emma is further away she leans against the desk glaring at the Blue Knight.

"You realize that you just described an abduction!" she snaps at him.

The young man is a bit shocked by her change of tone.

"Ma'am, they had extradition orders!" he protests.

"This isn't procedure!" Snow yells back. "I don't care if they had a hundred papers insisting they were right! Procedure is there for a reason, you don't break the rules! It's Sunday night, there is no judge to even look over the extradition orders and make sure they are in order, you do not cut corners. Not when it comes to a Knight of the Northern Kingdom..."

The mans swallows hard. She is right of course, but what can he possibly do? Nobody asked him on the matter. Besides, it's too late.

"This situation is above my pay grade Ma'am. It's not up to me. We are just following orders. You must understand..."

"Understand this. If anything happens to David Nolan while in White Knight custody I will hold your department responsible! Make sure your superiors know that. You will be hearing from my attorney... And the 'I was just following orders' doesn't cut it as an excuse. If you know what they are doing is wrong then you stand up to them!" Snow hisses at him.

The man blinks a couple of times. He expected a quiet uneventful shift, instead he is getting reprimanded by Snow White.

"Do you understand what I'm saying?" she asks.

He nods a couple of times in a hurry. "Yes, Ma'am I do," he replies.

"And now it's too late," Snow mumbles mostly to herself. "They didn't say where they were taking him?"

The man looks through his records and shakes his head.

Snow takes a deep breath and she manages to look calm and composed because Emma is back with two bottles of soda.

"Thank you so much for your help," Snow manages, her voice barely audible. "Come on Emma..."

David is sitting on the ground, his back against the dungeon wall. "YOUR LIFE IS OVER," someone has carved on the wall of his cell with large angry letters.
David shakes his head and closes his eyes. This is all happening so fast. He is in the high security dungeon under the King's castle. He wonders how long it will take for Snow to figure out where he's been taken. He wonders who is going to watch Emma tomorrow. He wonders exactly what sort of evidence they have against him that they just arrested him without even interrogating him first. He closes his eyes because there is no use in staying up and worrying, this isn't doing him or Emma and Snow any good.

He lays on his side and closes his eyes.

"David!"

David sits up but the room is dark, he thought he heard Snow's voice.

"Snow?" he cries out, his voice reverberates on the dungeon walls. Nobody protests him disturbing the quiet of the night. The surrounding cells appear to be empty. No one is around, no one is talking to him.

He lies back down.

"David," Snow is now crying and screaming, "David look at me, you know who I am, David please..." and David sees Snow on a white gown smeared in blood is leaning over him, crying. He looks at his surroundings to recognize Snow's cabin in the woods. No, not just Snow's cabin. Their cabin. This isn't a vision. This is a memory. Snow is looking younger, tears and blood smeared on her face, her white nightgown is bloody. "David, you know who I am, you can't forget who I am" she sobs, and she leans in to kiss him. And he is desperate for her kiss, he needs her to chase the fog away, the fog clouding his mind, but Queen Regina is standing over him and a troll and two men are dragging him away, and his mind is getting muddled. He doesn't recognize the two men dragging him out of the cabin, he hears baby Emma crying and then he sees the dwarf following the group. And he is not just any dwarf, he looks quite familiar. Because the dwarf who led the attack on him and Snow, ten years ago, on the very day of Emma's birth was none other than the Rod Troll. And the Rod Troll is looking at him, a twisted smile on his face.

"It's time!" he says laughing.

David opens his eyes drenched in cold sweat. This wasn't a dream, this was a memory. A fraction of a memory, not even the whole thing. He looks around for Snow, he looks to tell her that he finally remembered something. But he is alone in his cell, Snow is not around. Snow and Emma are hopefully safe back home. And he is both overwhelmed by loneliness and comforted by that thought. Emma and Snow are safe. Emma and Snow are home. And then he remembers the dwarf's face in his dream. The dwarf they called the Rod Troll, the dwarf he tortured when he was desperate to get answers about who had kidnapped Snow White is the same dwarf who stormed their cabin and pulled him away on the very day Emma was born.

David leans back, wondering what exactly prompted this sudden memory. Snow remembered things when she was being painspelled. Maybe they both remember things when traumatic events happen to them. Well, even a distant heartbreaking memory is better than this overwhelming darkness. David closes his eyes and relaxes, willing his mind to remember more.

"David!" Snow is crying and screaming and David manages to push his attackers off long enough to run to Snow White. This is a dream after all, his wounds aren't hurting as bad when he is dreaming. And this is just is a dream so the memory spell isn't taking effect. "David, you know who I am, you can't forget who I am" Snow sobs, and she leans in to kiss him. "I know who you are," he whispers, letting her wrap her arms around him and she looks so relieved."I will find you one day I promise... Snow, this is not the end..."
Snow nods and he is not certain that dream Snow understands what he is saying. Dream Regina is
screaming orders, the Rod Troll and his goons are advancing on him and Snow is looking terrified.
"He is going to pay for hurting us," David continues, pointing at the Rod Troll. "They are all going
to pay."
And then baby Emma cries and Snow tugs on his arm and rushes to their small bed in the corner.
She lifts up the baby and places her in his arms. And Emma stops her crying long enough to look at
him.
"Emma," he rasps. "My Emma..."
Snow is tearing up, David is crying, holding his daughter tight, marveling at the wonder of ten tiny
fingers, and puckered lips and eyes that are watching him. His Emma.
Regina is raging, the Rod Troll is yelling but in the dream they are not listening. Nothing can pull
them apart, nothing can distract them. Snow places her hand on his back and he buries his face in
Emma's blanket and weeps. A tiny hand finds its way around his forefinger.
"Emma" he says one more time.

And then he opens his eyes.
The Case of the King's Heir
It's time!" a White Knight clangs on the bars of David's cell to wake him up then he fumbles with
large key ring, looking for the right key to unlock the door.
David stands up slowly. His muscles are cold and stiff, his body sore from laying on the hard
ground. "Time for what?" he asks. But the Knight doesn't feel like explaining things to him.
"I need to talk to the prosecutor, I have a solid alibi for the whole weekend," David tries again.
"And I didn't kill anyone!"
The Knight scoffs and doesn't reply.
David follows him, his eyes are trying to adjust to the torch light. "Where are we going?" David
asks again, wondering if he should be ready to defend himself. The knight opens a solid metal door
and David tenses up. He doesn't know what to expect. And then he is relieved to see Throx, the
heavily built centaur who defended him at his disciplinary hearing, waiting for him in a small torch
lit room.
"What's going on?" David asks.
"It's time for your arraignment," Throx explains. He looks at David's wrinkled clothes and then he
hands him a fresh shirt and a pair of pants. "You need to hurry," he says turning his back to give
David privacy.
"What do they have on me?" David asks. "I have a solid alibi for the whole weekend, they didn't
even ask me...-"
"I don't know yet," Throx replies. " We'll find out soon enough... Are you ready?"
David is buttoning his shirt. There is no mirror in the room. He runs his fingers through his hair in
a hurry. Nothing more he can do. "Ready!"
Throx knocks on the door and a guard opens up and leads them through a hall filled with crowds
waiting into the main courtroom. And even though someone else is being arraigned at the moment
everyone's eyes are on him, the White Knights and the guards all glaring at him. They seem to
have no doubt he is guilty.
He is feeling quite self conscious, grateful that he is at least presentable. He is searching the crowd
looking for Snow. Is she here? After spending the night in the very dark dungeon his eyes are
squinting at the sunlight shinning through the tall windows. He's only spent one night in the
dungeon and yet he already feels like he's been apart from Emma and Snow for at least a week.
There are three defendants ahead of him in line so he settles in his chair waiting, trying to remain
calm.
And then he has to do a double take because Snow is sitting in the audience but she doesn't look
quite like herself. Snow's hair is pulled up in an intricate style, the playful mermaid pearls are gone.
She is wearing an emerald necklace and a off white jacket and she's never looked as focused and as
royal as she does now. Grumpy is sitting next to her, dressed impeccably down to his perfect black
cape and polished boots, Blue is sitting on her other side wearing her Black Knights uniform. Snow
looks like a Queen surrounded by her council.
And his heart plunges because if Snow actually let Nova dress her up like a queen on a mission,


and if she's brought Blue and Grumpy along... well she must think that things are incredibly serious. Not that he didn't know that already. After spending the night in the dungeon he is well aware of how serious things are. It just feels like confirmation of what he was already afraid of.

Snow's eyes meet his and she tries to look reassuring, she even offers a hint of a smile. And he decides he might as well spend the rest of this time looking at his wife, because who knows when he'll ever be free to do that again.

She is taking him in and her eyes are so worried he forces himself to look perfectly calm despite of how he is feeling. He is okay. Everything is going to be fine. He is okay.

"Case 1011 people vs David Nolan" the bailiff reads next, bringing David out of his reverie. He stands up next to Throx. And he wishes he hadn't noticed that Snow is holding her breath and her fists turning white because she is clenching them so tight.

David looks at the judge for the first time and he notes that he is a fox, that is wearing glasses and looking at him, not without sympathy. "David Nolan Knight of the Northern Kingdom, you are accused of the murder of Edward, Baron of the Southern peninsula. I see that you have retained council. How does the defendant plea?"

"Not guilty," Throx declares and an angry murmur rises in the room.

What did they expect David wonders, that he would just admit guilt for something he didn't do?

"We are requesting bail your honor to be set not higher than two hundred golden coins. My client has strong ties to the community, he is not a flight risk. He just wants to go home to his wife and child."

"You must be joking!" David turns to see the prosecuting attorney who is a rather plump fairy in his early fifties. Gray. He name is Gray, the Gray Fairy. He is notorious for being a tough prosecutor. "Your honor must remember that David Nolan is the man who impersonated the royal heir for a few months then he faked his death and run way with princess Snow White while her kingdom frantically searched for her. And then he left Princess Snow to face the consequences all alone. We all remember the story. And my colleague has the audacity to claim he is not a flight risk? Why, he is the very definition of a flight risk! He lives in the Northern Kingdom now, he has no ties to the community. He needs to be remanded without bond."

David hears Snow gasp.

"Your honor this is outrageous," the centaur next to him erupts. "The prosecutor is trying to blame my client for impersonating the royal heir when we all know that the king forced him to do this! How dare you, sir!"

"Or so he claims!" the Gray Gray mocks. "I am not entirely sure the King new about the depths of this man's deception... And the king isn't around anymore. It's very easy to throw accusations around when his Majesty isn't around to defend himself!"

"My client didn't accuse the king after he disappeared. Quite the opposite. The King disappeared so he wouldn't have to face my client and his very just allegations. The king is the one who ran! And are you sure his Majesty isn't around, pulling the strings? Because the conspiracy against my client has the name of the former king written all over it!"

"How dare you!" the Gray fairy is outraged. "I have thirty years of service on this very courtroom and my name will not be smeared with baseless accusations and conspiracy theories!"
The judge is shaking his head. "Gentlemen please, save the theatrics for the actual trial... I'm inclined to agree with you sir, Sir Nolan cannot be held entirely responsible for what the King forced him to do, however his behavior is suspect," he tells Throx.

"Your honor if I may," the Gray fairy interrupts. "I'm afraid there is more. The defendant associates with feral fairies that are unregistered, fairies that could easily transport him to another realm... if you let him go we will never see him again..."

David's shoulder's slope. None of this is accurate. Tink is not a feral fairy. But the truth doesn't much matter in this instance. This is totally hopeless. The judge looks at David, glances at Snow and then he shakes his head.

"Your honor this is all hearsay!" Throx tries again.

The judge is shaking his head. "The defendant is remanded without bail!"

No! No, no, no. Snow covers her mouth, because all she wants to do is scream. David turns to sees Snow standing there, looking both angry and horrified. So he Breathes in deep and stands up straight. He cannot let his emotions show. He cannot add to her burden.

"Next case!" the judge orders. The White knights crowd around him, no doubt taking to heart Gray fairy's warnings, as if they are afraid that he will pull out some kind of disappearing stunt right there on the courtroom. David is led out of the room without getting a chance to talk or even look at Snow. The door opens up behind them and he hears what he thinks is probably Snow's footsteps following them from a distance.

"Can I talk to my wife?" he asks but the White knights completely ignore his question, pushing him forward. "Please," he tries again, "she is right behind us. Can you give me a minute..."

He is surrounded by a wall of unsympathetic faces, glaring right at him.

"You are a traitor and a murderer," the guard in charge declares. "Do not expect any favors from us!"

I didn't betray anyone, he wants to argue. If anything the White Knights betrayed me again and again. But there is no point, he isn't going to get any justice here, in the dungeon corridors, just like he didn't get any justice in the courtroom today. David is doing his best not to notice the dungeon walls closing in on him.

"Daily visiting hours are from five to six, you could see your wife tonight at five" one of the knights replies.

"I doubt that you'll get that far," the guard in charge adds and they all laugh.

What does that mean, David wonders. Well, whatever it means it's not good. He needs to be ready, he needs to be aware of his surroundings, he needs...

The guards pass a corridor he recognizes where his cell is located and they keep on going to the deepest darkest part of the dungeon. They arrive in him to a large cave like room.

"What is this?" he asks, taking in his surroundings.

"Recreational time," the guard scoffs. "You get an hour.."

David looks at the damp cave around him, the stalagmites rising from the earth, the uneven
ground. Recreational time? In this horrible place? What is happening? His question is answered soon. Too soon. The dwarf they call the Rod Troll appears from behind a rock formation along with five actual trolls. And David nods recognizing the trolls that were guarding the Rod Troll's safe houses. This is all making sense now. Here are the trolls he arrested and asked Tink to turn into mice in his desperate attempt to locate Snow White. This is an ambush. He turns around to towards the guards but none of them are around. Oh, they are around somewhere but he can't spot them. They are certainly watching him from a safe distance. He is on his own.

He takes a decisive step forward. "What? Is that all?" he asks, a dangerous smile on his face. And even though it's six against one, one of the trolls takes a step back.

"What are you waiting for?" the Rod Troll hisses at them and they all lunge forward. only two of them are brandishing short daggers. David likes his odds. He rips the torch from the wall. He is no longer unarmed. The first two trolls fall on the ground right away, one of them trying desperately to put out the fire on his beard, the other one trying to take off his cape before the rest of his clothes catch fire.

"Who is next?" David taunts and the trolls move towards him again, more cautiously this time. His fist connects with the shorter trolls nose, he quickly avoids the second trolls dagger and then he stomps on the lean troll, hitting him with the torch. He turns around forcing the trolls back, threatening them with the flame of his torch then he elbows the dwarf and they continue their brawl until the trolls are down, two of them bearing scorch marks, one of them bleeding profusely through his broken nose, all of them unwilling to get up and try again. The dwarf is against the wall, David's hand tight around his neck.

"Give me a reason why I shouldn't end your miserable life, right here right now!" David growls. The dwarf is struggling to regain his footing and pull David's fingers back. David is shaking with anger.

"It was you!" he yells. "It was you ten years ago and here you are again..."

And the troll's eyes open wide. "What?" he blurs out without meaning to.

"How could you attack us when she'd just given birth... how could you... the baby..." David's rage is blinding him, he feels unable to think, unable to from coherent sentences, unable to stop, his hand clenching tighter ams tighter around the dwarf's throat.

The dwarf's eyes roll back, and at the very last possible minute David pulls back and lets him fall on the ground. He takes a step back, his whole body shaking with horror and rage.

"Do you even realize how much you've taken from me!" he rasps.

The dwarf is on the ground coughing, gasping for breath, and David steps back, his hand trembling. He realizes how many times he's been on the verge of killing him. David was the one pushing the dwarf's head underwater, asking him where Snow White was.

"Stay away from me!" David warns, because the next time he is not going to hold back. And then he feels the guards grabbing him form the back, their daggers pulled out, ready, forcing his hands in shackles behind his back. After watching him subdue the Rod Troll and his trolls they are not going to take any chances.

"Where were you? And you have the nerve to call me a traitor?" David turns to glare at them. Two of the guards actually avoid his eyes. But the one in charge stares back, a vicious mile on his face.
"Just so you know, inmates that engage in violence during recreational times lose their visiting privileges," the guard's voice vicious. "This looks serious... what do you say fellows? No visits for three days?"

"Four," one of the guards replies, a mocking smile on his face.

" Tried to warn you," a third guard adds. And David seethes as he finally understand exactly what he is in for. It's heinously brilliant really. If he wants to even have a chance to see Snow White, he is going to have to let the trolls beat him up.

Snow White is pacing back and forth in front of Throx's desk.

"When are they going to send the evidence?" she exclaims for the third time. "I can't do this, I can't just sit here and wait..."

"We don't have a choice, princess," the centaur places a reassuring hand on Snow's arm. "Listen, you need to go home. As soon as the evidence arrives I will call you instantly..."

"Go home and do what?" Snow's voice cracks. "Tell my daughter that I have no idea when her father is coming home?"

Throx doesn't reply right away.

Snow wipes her eyes. "I'm sorry," she says quietly. "You've been incredibly helpful and I haven't even thanked you..."

"No need to thank me," he argues. "You can thank me when he is home..."

Snow looks at the cuckoo clock hanging on above the centaur's desk. "It's almost five," she replies. "It's visitation time. I just wish I'd gotten a look at the evidence so I can go over it with him... I'm going to go..."

Snow steps out of the magic bean portal right in front of the visitor's door in the dungeon. There is a small line of people ahead of her. One woman is holding a baby. Snow shudders at the thought of a family reunion inside the damp dungeon walls. She is going to have to do that though. She is going to have to bring Emma here, if David is going to be here until his trial date. Snow looks at the gloomy room, the faded soiled carpet, the smoke stained glass of the lanterns, the damp smell. At the thought of David staying here in such horrible surroundings her heart aches. She needs to pull herself together thought. At least she gets to see him.

"I'm Snow White, I'm here to see my husband, David Nolan," she tells the grumpy goblin at the registration office.

"Nolan," the man goes through a long list in front of him. "Can't come today," is all he says.

"I'm sorry?" Snow leans forward.

"Nolan can't come today!"

"Why not?"

"Loss of privileges most likely," the goblin explains. "It doesn't say here..."

"But..." Snow is feeling desperate. "What does that even mean? When can I see him?"

"It doesn't say. I don't know. Try again tomorrow..."
"Why would someone lose their privileges? Is there nothing I can do..." Snow is feeling frantic. She'd be willing to hand the goblin the entire contents of her purse if he'd let her see David.

"Your man broke the rules," the goblin explains slowly, as if talking to a toddler "you don't see him today. That's how it works..."

"What rules did he break?" Snow is not going away without a fight.

"How should I know?" the goblin snaps at her. "Next!"

Snow White walks away, her eyes welling up, anger and despair both clouding her mind. This isn't right, this isn't fair and yet there isn't much she can do. Would a call from Throx or the Crimson fairy help or exacerbate the situation?

"Told your wife you didn't want to see her," the guard taunts as he pushes David food tray through the special gap on the bars of his cell. "Couldn't tell if she was disappointed or relieved... I'm guessing she'll be happy to get rid of a murderous traitor like yourself as soon as possible... Pretty sure she'll be serving you with divorce papers soon..."

David doesn't reply, he doesn't even look in the guard's direction. He knows the man is most likely lying. But the thought of Snow being turned away at the visiting room... He doesn't know how to handle that. The next three days drag on, uneventful and excruciatingly slow. David has nothing but the taunts of his guards to mark the time. And then on the fourth day a guard clangs on his bars.

David sits up in a hurry.

"Recreational time," the guard has an evil smile on his face. David gets up slowly. It's quite simple really. If he wants to see Snow today he can't fight back. He can manage that.

The guards push him in the cave, and this time seven trolls he doesn't recognize are standing there, waiting for him. He raises his forearms.

"I'm not interested in fighting," he says.

They hesitate at first. They know what happened to the last group of trolls that attacked him.

"I'm not going to fight you," he tries again as the trolls step closer.

When the trolls first fist connects with his face, David staggers backwards. And when the second troll trips him up while punching his stomach he crushes to the ground. They trolls look uncertain, fully expecting him to pull a dagger out of his sleeve, and jump back up, but nothing happens.

"Not going to fight," he says again spitting blood and the trolls look at him, both angry and disgusted. They still suspect a trap. Maybe some other prisoner will walk in while they are busy and stab them in the back. They look around cautiously. But dark cave is quiet. No one else is coming.

"Sniveling coward," the tall troll exclaims. "Get up!" He was looking forward to this all day, he wanted to best the knight who beat up the trolls three days ago.

"Not fighting," David says again, quite stubbornly, bracing himself. The trolls kick him a couple of times in the ribs for good measure. He groans trying to remain upright.

They stare at him incredulously. This isn't what they expected. They walk away spitting on the
ground, shaking their heads.

David leans on all fours on the cold hard ground, trying to catch his breath. Maybe fighting against a man who is not resisting is against troll code. For a moment there he panicked that they might try to kill him and then he'd have to forget his resolution and fight back.

Once the trolls are gone the guard comes back. He laughs kicking David's leg. "Stand up! If you think I'm about to carry you, you are sorely mistaken..."

David gets up slowly.

"Inmates that engage in physical violence lose their visiting privileges..." the guard recites the rules.

And David turns to glare at him. "I didn't fight!" he growls at the guard. He wonders if this was all in vain, if it really doesn't matter at all. He is feeling so frustrated. "Do you want to see me fight?"

The guard takes a step backwards. Clearly coming here alone and not shackling the prisoner right away was a big mistake.

"Do you?" David takes another step forward.

"So you didn't," the guard concedes.

"Didn't fight..." David mumbles says again, his ribs not throbbing. He stumbles back into his cell, the door slamming behind him. He sits on the ground feeling his face with his hand.

"What time is it?" he rasps.

"Almost three," the guard replies walking away. David covers his bruised face with a wet cloth and lays down, thinking he has two hours to wash his face, and pull himself together before he sees Snow White. He is beginning to dread the moment where he is going to see her, because he can't bare to think of what he has to do next.

Snow can barely contain her excitement as she sits on the corner of the visitor's hall. This place is even more depressing than the entry room, but she doesn't even notice, because today is the first day that the fire goblin didn't say "Nolan can't come today," and Snow was so relieved she could have kissed him. She had totally prepared herself for another disappointment.

The door opens up and Snow looks up. A shackled bear steps out. He walks to the table where a bear with her cubs are waiting for him.

"Daddy!" one for the cubs cries out and reaches for the shackle bear.

"Stay on your side! No physical contact!" the guard glares at him. Mama bear is doing her best to contain her two cubs.

Snow wipes her eyes quickly. This is one of the saddest things she's ever witnessed. This place is so awful.

The door opens again. Snow's pulse picks up, but a man she doesn't recognize steps out and walks over to a table on the left.

And then the door opens and David steps out. His hands are shackled. He spots Snow and he walks right to her. He sits on the bench across from her carefully, too carefully, placing his hands on the
"No physical contact!" the guard yells again to no one on particular.

"David!" Snow breathes her eyes opening wide. She holds her breath. Because there is a bruise blooming on the side of his face and his lip is swollen and by the way he walked in, trying to act like he is not in pain she is certain there are plenty more bruises under his clothes, maybe even a few cracked ribs.

"David," she starts again and she doesn't know what to say next because clearly he is trying to hide the extent of his injuries from her. And if she starts crying now he is going to try to comfort her and she can't think of anything more unfair than that.

"I'm alright," he answers the question she didn't dare ask. "I think it looks worse than it feels..."

And Snow would love nothing more than to believe him, but she can't. Her eyes are welling up so she bites lower lip and and focuses on his eyes, forcing herself to swallow her tears and stay calm.

"What happened?" she asks.

David looks away. "How is Emma?"

"She... she misses you terribly..." Snow is not going to tell him that Emma has been crying herself to sleep every night. " I'll see if I can bring her tomorrow..."

David shakes his head. " Don't... Please don't" he says casting a quick glance at the bear family. He is the one trying to hold back tears now.

And at the sight of David crying Snow feels this aching pain not just on her heart, but over her whole body. She can't, she can't bear to see him like this, trapped and bruised and heartbroken. There is nothing she wouldn't give for a chance to be alone with him. To be able to actually comfort him.

"I just need you to know one thing," she says firmly. "No matter how badly things seem to be going right now, I have a plan. I won't..." she hesitates glancing at the guard who is pretending not to eavesdrop. "We won't... you won't stay here long."

She wants him to know that she will die before she leaves him here. She will pull him out even if she has to break every law in every realm, even if that means they have to be on the run for the rest of their lives. She needs him to know that.

"No!" David replies instantly and Snow closes her eyes. She was afraid he'd say that. "No," he says again more softly this time.

Snow is shaking her head, she doesn't want to hear what he is going to say next. "Why not?" she whispers.

David looks at his wife tearing up. He wants to agree to what she is implying so badly. It wouldn't be too hard for Tinkerbell to stage some sort of diversion and pull him out of prison. And he desperately wants out of this dungeon, he wants away from the Rod Troll and those who work for him, he wants to escape and be with Emma, he wants to run away with Snow so badly. So he takes a deep breath and says the hardest words he's ever had to say in his whole life.

"Thank you for being willing to do that. But Snow, you have to promise me that you won't do anything loke that. You wont do anything that will prevent Emma from having a future."
"David!" Snow gasps, and she places her hands half an inch away from his, unable to hold back her sobs any longer.

He reaches for her too, his fingers now almost touching her knuckles. And Snow looks up and all the love that she reads in his eyes makes her sob even harder.

"You didn't hold back, when you were rescuing me," she says wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. "Why can't I do the same?"

"You were all Emma had back then," he explains and Snow sobs quietly. "If it was just you and me, Snow, I wouldn't say no. But we can't ask that from Emma. This isn't the sort of life you want for her..."

"David, please!" she rasps. "We can't lose you again..."

"You will never lose me," he replies, "but Snow, Emma needs to..." he can't say Emma needs to not live a life on the run. Not with the guard listening.

"Our child needs you!" she insists. "I need you!"

"And when the time comes and I am able to come home, I will," he replies.

And Snow nods. He is right of course. Spending the rest of their lives on the run isn't what’s best for Emma, but sill. But it could be months, it could be years before David is free to come home.

"But..." Snow stammers, "but David, this... just look at you, you are so hurt..."

"I'm alright," he replies, his voice faltering, because having Snow fall apart right in front of him, while all he can do is watch, breaks his heart. "I'm going to be alright. I just need you to do one thing for me..."

"Anything," she whispers wiping her eyes and he knows if he were to asks for the moon she wouldn't rest until she found a way to bring it to him. Which makes what he has to say next even harder.

"I need you not to visit me again," he replies.

And Snow is looking at him stunned barely stifling her gasp. What can he possibly mean by that?

"What? Why? You are going to have to explain that," she mumbles.

"If I'm going to stay alive in here, if I'm going to defend myself...-" David pauses until he can regain control of his voice. Asking Snow to stay away is like throwing away his last lifeline, like placing a brick wall between himself and the door to his cell, ensuring he will be forever be alone in the dark.

"This is a chess game. If I defend myself then I lose visiting privileges. I need to know you are not here waiting for me, because if you are, I'm just going to let them...-" I'm going to let them beat me up, is what he means and he doesn't say out loud.

And Snow covers her mouth and looks at his bruises again, everything coming into focus.

"David, you didn't," she whispers, tears streaming down her face.

"I had to see you," his voice cracks. "I can't be in there knowing you are waiting to visit..."
Snow nods. "You can rest assured that I won't..." she can't allow herself to say the words. "It won't happen again," she ends up saying.

"Thank you," he whispers, and Snow feels like the world has turned upside down and inside out. David is thanking her that she will abandon him in the dungeon.

"Would they let you use a magic mirror? Would it be safe to write? " she asks, trying to sound calm, trying not to beg, trying.

He shakes his head. He doesn't trust them not to read his mail, he doesn't trust them not using every single thing he holds precious against him.

"Oh," is all she says. "I won't write," and then she gets an idea and she leans closer to him and whispers. "The birds will know!"

And David lets out a breath of relief. He knows exactly what she means of course, she can send him notes through birds. And he doesn't even have to write back, he can just talk to the birds, say anything he needs to say. They can keep in touch and no one will know. And there is so much hope on this realization, David is already feeling better, stronger. He loves her so much for coming up with this solution in this darkest of times.

"Thank you," he whispers.

Snow shakes her head. "What can I do David?" she asks.

"You can probe me innocent," he shrugs. "Have you looked over the evidence yet?"

Snow sighs. "The evidence is contradictory and completely circumstantial. They found a magic bean on the floor of Edward's wall and they are claiming that your essence was on it."

"They can't built a case on that!" David frowns.

"I know. I am telling you their evidence is flimsy at best. They also have you on camera leaving our hotel room in Water world in the middle of the night. They claim you used a magic bean to transport yourself to Edward's cell, kill him and then came back in the room before we noticed..."

"I interrupted our vacation to commit a murder on the side? And I stepped out of the room to do it?" David laughs bitterly.

"Yes! I know. But David, where did you go?"

"Gift shop," he shrugs. "That one gift shop by the waterslide was open twenty four seven. I got Emma the beach glass bracelet she liked, I got you a bird feeder..."

"David!" Snow looks ready to start crying again. She takes a deep breath. She needs to focus. "Did you keep the receipt? It could be timestamped..."

David nods. "I think did. It should be in the side pocket of my suitcase along with the gifts..."

"This is good," Snow nods. "This is good. I'll go home and find it ... I'm sure the gift shop has cameras."

"It does. The cashier had purple hair, his name was Jim or John, he should remember me..."

"This is good, did you meet anybody else in the gift shop? Or on your way there?"
"Yes! The lady that looked like Ursula, the one with the terrible voice that kept singing while waiting in line to the whale ride, do you remember her?

Snow nods. "Yes!"

"I met her on the way to the gift shop. She cracked a joke about insomnia..."

"Oh, David this is great!" Snow is actually feeling relieved. "I'll let you know what I find... If you I can prove what you are saying, Throx could be filling to dismiss the charges tomorrow..."

"Tomorrow is Saturday," David points out.

"First thing Monday then..." Snow nods.

"It's time," the guard says and Snow closes her eyes. Her fingers wrap around David's hands.

"I love you," he says softly.

"Stay safe..." Snow sobs.

"Don't cry," he tries.

"Is this always going be our life? Having a few precious months of happiness only to be torn apart?" Snow's voice is shaking.

He shakes his head. "No! I refuse to believe that... Snow, we are going to grow old together, you'll see... Have faith!"

And Snow wipes her eyes and manages a smile, because she doesn't want his last picture of her to be one filled with pain.

"Tell Emma I love her," he says and then the guard is standing next to them glaring at them. David gets up and turns to walk away.

"I will," Snow whispers.
Snow stumbles out of the magic bean portal. She is right outside Nova and Grumpy's house. Grumpy rushes through his front door.

"Everything alright Snow?"

Snow doesn't reply.

"Come on in," he says holding his front door wide open. "Did you get some bad news or..."

"They finally let me visit," Snow manages.

Inside the Grumpy's living room Nova is sitting in her rocking chair nursing the baby. "Snow?" she asks. "Snow what's wrong?"

"I wasn't prepared for how awful it would be," Snow starts sobbing the moment she sits down. "He was all beaten up, all because he wanted to see me... and he doesn't want me to go there anymore because he wants to be able to fight back... and I can't..."

Nova is looking all confused but Grumpy nods, understanding.

"They are messing with his visiting privileges?" he asks.

Snow nods. "You knew about this? Are all dungeons like this?"

"Some of them." Grumpy's heard stories about the dungeon under George's castle before, but he figures that the White Knights are trying to punish David and they are going out of their way to hurt him. Of course this isn't going to help Snow's state of mind so he keeps his mouth shut. "What are you going to do?" he asks instead.

"He has an alibi. I'll prove him innocent. I'll have his case dismissed out by Monday," Snow concludes wiping her eyes. "I'm sorry. I meant to go home right away but I can't stop crying and Emma is already upset..."

"You've come to the right place," Nova smiles reassuringly while Grumpy hands Snow a cup of tea.

"Alright. I'm in. When do we start?" Grumpy asks.

Snow turns to face him. "What?"

"When do we start working on proving David's innocence?"

"Tonight," Snow replies.

"I'll get my cape!" Grumpy hurries to pull on his boots.

"You are coming with me?" Snow is looking so grateful.

"Of course. If there is a conspiracy to frame either David or you, I'm not going to let you go anywhere alone..."

"He already called Blue and got some personal time..." Nova explains.
"Thanks you guys! What would I even do without you?" Snow looks ready to cry again. "Alright, give me an hour to talk to Emma and Ruby and then come by my house?"

"You got it, sister!" Grumpy pats Snow on the back.

Emma crushes into her mother as soon as Snow walks into the cottage. "Did you see him? Is he alright? Can I see him? When is he coming home?"

"Emma," Snow says quietly holding her daughter tight, running her fingers through her golden curls. "I saw him. He said he was alright... He says he loves you very much..."

Emma is crying. "And he remembers me?"

"He remembers you, of course he remembers," Snow says kissing her daughter's tear strained cheeks. "Nothing wrong with his memory this time. We all remember. Now listen up, because we made plans... Grumpy and I are going to solve the case, so I'm going to leave in a while with Grumpy..."

Ruby joins them in the living room. She is watching Snow with big worried eyes. She can tell there is a lot Snow isn't telling Emma.

"When can I go visit?" Emma asks.

"We can't visit again, this was a one time thing," Snow explains. Ruby raises her eyebrows.

"But I want to see him!" Emma cries out.

"And he wants to see you too, but above all we want him to be safe, right?" Snow tries convince Emma without going into details. She can feel Ruby staring at her, all concerned.

Emma is in bed, Ruby is laying on Snow's couch half asleep and Snow is putting her cape on.

"Well? Are we breaking him out tonight?" Tink materializes right behind Snow. Snow covers her mouth with her hand so she doesn't scream.

"Is there a way to knock before you drop in? Because every time you show up like this you give me a heart attack!" Snow says turning around.

Tink is dressed in all black. She doesn't even hear Snow's question. "Are we on for tonight?" she asks again.

Snow shakes her head. "We are not."

"Why not!" Tink frowns, standing up, crossing her arms to her chest.

Snow sighs. "First of all I never agreed we were doing this tonight. We were going to do this as a last resort... But, we are no longer doing this because David asked us not to..."

"What? What does he know?" Tink glares at Snow.

"He knows he doesn't want to live is life on the run," Snow struggles to explain. She is feeling exhausted all of a sudden. It's hard to argue against breaking David out when it's all she wants to do.

"He doesn't have to be on the run. There are five hundred unexplored realms, we could go anywhere..."
Snow is shaking her head. "I don't think he wants to go exploring, Tink..."

"What do you want?"

"I want him to be safe," Snow tries to stifle her sob. "I want him to come home... But we are going to do things his way for now..."

"Which is what exactly?"

"Pursue all legal options..."

"Ugh," Tink plops on the couch, her shoulders slopping. "I'm no good at legal options..."

"I'm good at it," Snow replies quietly.

"Well what can I do? Do you want me to send you to his cell? Do you want me to pull him out just for the night? Do you want me to turn his cell into the most glorious hotel room complete with jacuzzi? Snow! What do you want me to do?"

Snow shakes her head. Not letting Tink just rescue David even just for one night, is incredibly hard. "He asked me not to visit..."

"What? Why?"

"Because they are using me and my visits against him," Snow's voice cracks.

"Who!" Tink snaps at her. "Give me a list of names!" her fingers already tingling with anger and magic.

Snow shakes her head. "I don't have a list of names for you Tink..."

"Fine!" Tink says sounding quite frustrated. "Fine. I'll come up with something else..." and Tink disappears without another word.

Snow rushes into her bedroom. She picks up David's suitcase still packed and opens the right pocket. There is a brown paper bag buried under one of David's shirts.

"No peaking Emma! (and Snow)" David's hand writing on the bag with a playful smiley face on the side. Snow is crying as she opens up the bag. Just like David said there is a sea themed bird feeder with beautiful leafy sea dragons drawn on and a beach glass bracelet. Snow sticks her hand inside. There it is. The receipt. Timestamped at one forty. She sits on the edge of the bed and buries her face in David's shirt, taking a deep breath. This is good. This is very good. An excellent start.

A soft knock on her front door. Snow throws on her green cape on and rushes to open it.

"I'm ready!" she tells Grumpy who is standing on her porch. "How do you feel about magic bean travel?"

"Not a fan," Grumpy shrugs. "But I'll manage."

"Alright," Snow says reaching for his hand. "Let's get to Waterworld!"

Grumpy closes his eyes at the sudden flash of the magic bean. She lets Snow tug him into the magic bean portal. By this time Snow is completely used to magic bean travel. Grumpy is trying to catch his breath when the glow form the portal disappears.
"Are you alright? How are you feeling?" she asks.

"I'm going to need a minute..." he says. He is looking green.

"I think the gift shop David went to is this way," Snow leads the way, Grumpy following her.

"Closed for renovations" the sign on the gift shop store reads. Snow ignores it and pushes the door open. Half the store is submerged in water. Snow stays on the dry platform that is for human customers

"Excuse me, Ma'am, you cannot be here... the store is closed. We are remodeling. I was getting ready to head home for the night" a merman is wiping blue paint on his overalls.

"What is going on here? When did you start renovations?" Snow frowns.

"Two days ago," the merman replies.

"I need to speak to the owner! This is urgent!"

"I'm afraid that you're going to have to wait a while," he frowns. "My uncle is not here. He received some kind of unexpected inheritance and he went out of realm to collect it and make arrangements..."

"What? When did this happen?"

"A couple of days ago," the man replies.

"Where did he go?"

"He didn't leave an address. He said he could be gone for a month. Why? What do you need him for?"

"I need him to come back," Snow tries hard to appear calm. "Perhaps you can help me. I need to get access to the camera footage of everyone that walked into the store on Saturday night, and I need to talk to the employee with the purple hair, his name is Jim or John..."

"Jimmy?" the man replies. "Oh! Ma'am, you are out of luck. Jimmy just got hired to dress the Queen in Wonderland. That was his dream job, he was so excited..."

"Dress the Queen? The Queen of hearts?"

"Yes! Can you believe his luck?"

"Luck had nothing to do with it," Snow shakes her head.

"I don't know. Everyone that has worked into this store has been incredibly lucky lately..." the merman replies.

Grumpy glares at the man. "So what you are saying is that in the last week the owner of the shop received unexpected money and went out of town to collect...-"

"And started renovations! He couldn't afford to do that before!" the merman offers excitedly.

Grumpy nods. "And Jimmy got hired and is now working somewhere in Wonderland..."

"Exactly!" the man replies.
Snow shakes her head. "Well this isn't good at all. Do you or does anyone here have access to the cameras or the tapes for the video surveillance..."

The man shakes his head. "We are replacing everything, brand new state of the art technology. We were instructed to toss the old ones away, they were quite old. We didn't save any tapes..."

"Did you throw them away? Where?" Snow is sounding desperate.

"I wouldn't know. It was the first thing we did, when we started...Garbage got picked up three days ago... Why?" the merman cannot fathom why the woman in front of him looks ready to cry.

"Come on, let's go," Grumpy gently pulls Snow away. "There is nothing to see here..."

Snow's shoulder's slope as she follows him. "The hotel registration," she mumbles. "Maybe we can find Ursula's look alike..."

The receptionist is a beautiful girl with large hoop earrings who is desperately trying to look like a mermaid, her body covered by a tight dress in shimmering blue shaped like a mermaid tale."What can I do for you?" she asks.

"I need to look at your camera footage for Saturday night..." Snow starts.

The girl shakes her head. "Can't do that... it's against the rules..."

"Please," Snow tries again. "I'm an investigator and this is an emergency..."

"Oh, I know who you are," the girl replies. "I'd totally let you see the footage too, and I don't care about the rules" she says lowering her voice. "But our system glitched Saturday night. It recorded until midnight and then nothing. My manager was furious... He doesn't want anyone to know this happened," and then again much louder she adds "can't do that Ma'am. I follow the rules..." she adds quite theatrically, smiling for the cameras.

Snow is beginning to feel sick. "Can you help me find a guest then? She looked just like Ursula the singer, she had insomnia... she was at the park last weekend... if you can just give me her name..."

The girl shakes her head. "I don't remember nobody like that," she replies. "Hey Bill!" she calls out and a man joins her from the back room. "Was there a woman that looked just like Ursula here last weekend?"

The man shakes his head. "No way. I would remember. I'm a big Ursula fan," he says and then he unbuttons his shirt sleeve and pulls it up revealing a very colorful tattoo of Ursula the famous singer on his arm.

"Are you sure?" Grumpy asks.

"I told you. I'm a fan," he says and then he pulls out his phone and shows him several photos of him and the real Ursula together. "I'm her number one fan. I go to every single one of her concerts. If a woman looked just like her visited I would have noticed..." he says again.

Snow shakes her head. She has never in her whole career as an investigator had such trouble verifying an alibi before.

"Now what?" Grumpy asks once they've walked away from the hotel reception.

"Now we get some rest, before we head to Wonderland tomorrow," Snow says quietly, because she
needs to go home, she needs to crawl under her bed covers and close her eyes and put today behind her.

Back at her home Snow hesitates. She can't just go to bed. She has to update David on her progress. She owes him that. She opens the window to her home office and whistles. A night heron flies towards her and perches on her finger.

"I need you to carry a message to David." she says quietly petting the bird gently. "You have to be very brave and sneak in the dungeon, under the castle in the Southern kingdom and not let anybody see you, friend..." The little bird nods in agreement. Snow places the bird on her desk then she dips her quill in ink and hesitates. What is she suppose to tell him? She thinks of David bruised and shackled in the visiting room and her breath hitches. How can she even begin to tell him her investigation so far has yielded no fruit.

"What do I say," she whispers.

"David," she starts and her eyes well up. "I was unable to get hold of witnesses today. They are all out of realm. I will try again tomorrow. I love you. Please stay safe..."

No! She is not telling him that. She crumples up the note and tries again. She dips her quill in ink.

"David, I will get hold of witnesses tomorrow. I love you. Please stay safe..."

That note ends all crumpled up on the floor too.

The night heron must somehow sense her despair because it flies up on her shoulder, touching her face with its wing.

"I love you. Please stay safe," is all she writes. And it's not enough but she kisses the note and holds it close to her heart before she ties it securely on the bird's claw.

"Go!" she urges softly and the bird flies away.

"Mommy!" Emma is yawning at the door.

Snow turns around startled. "Emma! What are you doing up?"

"Mom! Are you crying?" Emma looks worried.

"I'm not," Snow starts to say except the hand she raises to her cheeks is now moist. "I guess so..." she admits.

"Does David really remember us?" Emma is looking at her suspiciously.

"Yes, of course," Snow is quick to reply. "He remembers us."

"Good," Emma lets out a sigh of relief. "Can I sleep in your bed?"

"Yes!" Snow smiles sadly and follows her daughter to her bedroom.

Grumpy and Snow are working together again. Today Snow plans on locating Jimmy in Wonderland. If he confirms David's alibi maybe all hope isn't lost.

"Are you ready?" she asks Grumpy who is wincing at the sight of the magic bean in her hand.

"Ready," he replies.
Snow tosses the bean on the ground. "To Wonderland. To the Queen of Heart's castle."

The Queen’s guards look suspiciously as Snow and Grumpy emerge from the magic bean portal.

They draw their swords as they approach.

"State your business!" one of the guards states firmly.

"We are investigating a crime that happened back in our realm. We need to verify the facts with a witness, his name is Jimmy, he just started working here in the team that designs the Queen's clothes..."

"No other-realmers are allowed inside the castle, not without the Queen's expressed authorization..."

"You could accompany us the whole time. We just need to ask Jimmy a couple of questions that is all, and we'll get out of your hair... You do need to disturb the Queen," Snow tries.

"No. That's not how it works. We will add you to the roster. If the Queen agrees to meet you then you can talk to Jimmy... though I must warn you she isn't feeling very social today..."

"But-" Grumpy starts but then the captain of the guard walks up to him and interrupts him.

"Good job men, now back to your posts. Let me handle this!"

The guards snap to attention, then they walk back to the castle gate.

"Say, are those magic beans you used to get here?" the captain of the guard asks quietly.

Snow glances at him. "Why, yes. Yes they are. Would you like to see one?" She pulls out her pouch and grabs a handful of beans. "Look!" she says raising on up in the light. They are clear. Quite incredible to look at really. "They can get you anywhere you want to go..."

The man is looking at them, eyes open wide. "Anywhere?" he asks and Snow can hear the intense longing in his voice.

"Where would you go if you could go anywhere?" Snow asks softly. "Anywhere at all?"

"I don't know," he replies, his voice nothing more than a whisper.

"Oh, I think you do," Snow replies closing her fist. The mans is staring at her intently. "I could spare a few beans if you helped me..."

The captain of the guard glances at his guards who are watching him closely, their curiosity peeked, even though they are acting like they are not. "Meet me at the side door on the right in two hours," he whispers. "That's when my shift ends."

Grumpy and Snow walk away from the castle. Two hours later they carefully circle around to arrive at the side door.

"You are here," the captain of the guard whispers opening the small wooden gate. "This way!" He opens his hand and Snow slips three magic beans in it.

"Safe travels," she mumbles.

Snow and Grumpy rush to get inside.
"The man you are asking for... Is he in any sort of trouble?" the captain asks.

"He is not. We think he might be able to corroborate an alibi, that's all," Snow replies as if Jimmy is not the most important person in all the realms now, able to exonerate David.

"Well he is here. His hair isn't purple anymore," the man pulls them through dark corridors and through the servant's quarters and then opens the door to a room where three people are frantically steaming two different gowns. "On the left!" he points.

Well Jimmy certainly went through the trouble to alter his appearance. His hair is dyed blond and it really doesn't look right. Purple was definitely his color.

"Excuse me!" Snow starts.

"I'm busy!" Jimmy replies. He is steam cleaning the red feathers in an elaborate gown, so bright Snow thinks her eyes would hurt if she has to keep staring at it.

"Excuse me!" she says more forcefully this time and Jimmy turns around to face them.

"It's you," he says frowning, crossing his hands on his chest. "What do you want?"

"I'm part of an investigation and I need to know if you saw this man on the gift store on Saturday." Snow pulls a photograph of David and hands it to the man.

"Why yes, he was there with his wife and daughter around seven in the evening," the man replies. His answer sounds rehearsed.

"Yes, he was there at seven. Did he come back later? In the middle if the night?"

The man looks closely frowning. "I do not recall..."

"Do many people show up in your gift shop in the middle of the night?" Grumpy asks impatiently.

"You'd be surprised," Jimmy replies. "Well, if that is all," he says turning his back on them, focusing on his red feathers.

Snow has to do her best not to grab the man by the collar and smash him against the wall.

"Look at this," she pulls out the receipt. "Someone came in your store in the middle of the night and bought a bracelet and a bird house..."

The man hesitates.

"Do you remember now?"

The man shakes his head. He is obviously lying.

"Come on," Snow practically pleads. "A man's freedom is at stake here..."

"You want me to feel sorry for the impersonator who walked away from the royal life?" Jimmy snaps at her. "You want me to feel bad for him?"

"No, I don't want you to feel anything. I want to be a decent human being and do the right thing. I want you to tell me the truth, that's all," Snow raises her voice.

"Why would I? He had his chance at the royal life and he blew it. What sort of person does that?
People that run away are never innocent anyway..." he scoffs, then he looks at Snow White who walked away from her throne ten years ago. She is shaking her head.

"People run away when they are in danger," she replies.

The man rolls his eyes. "I am not blowing my chance at greatness, just to save some peasant prince that had an identity crisis..."

Snow takes a threatening step forward and Grumpy hurries to place his hand on her arm. A reminder of who she is. A reminder of what they both stand to lose if she attacks the man.

"Your chance at greatness? Did they offer you this job in return for your silence?" Grumpy asks. "Is this your chance? Will they take it back if you tell the truth?"

The man glares at Grumpy. "I've worked very hard to be where I'm at today..."

"You've worked very hard but it wasn't enough was it?" Snow asks quietly. "And then this offer just fell out of the sky. All you have to do is lie about who came in the gift shop on Saturday night..."

"Who offered you the job anyway?" Grumpy asks.

The man looks away.

"What do you think they will do to you now that I've found you? Why do you think they got you a job here, where nobody knows you and no one will notice if you disappear... Do you think they will keep you alive? You are a liability to them. You are in danger... You need to tell the truth and get out of here!"

"Are you threatening me?"

"What? No! I am no the one you need to be worried about! Who offered you this job?"

"None of your business! No need to worry about me princess, I'll be fine!" the man replies.

"If you change your mind..." Grumpy replies handing Jimmy a business card.

Jimmy crumples the card with his hand and drops it on the floor.

Again Snow takes a step forward, her eyes on fire, her fists clinched. She wants to knock him out and stuff red feathers in his mouth. Grumpy pulls he back.

"Let's go," he says.

Snow follows him blindly, her eyes welling up with tears of rage. "You heard him. He is lying. And there is nothing we can do... He was David's last chance for an alibi and he is lying..." she is getting louder now. "We can't force him to testify. Subpoenas don't work inter-realm."

"I know," Grumpy says softly. "I know."

Snow hands him a magic bean because she doesn't trust herself to make it safely home.

"Home," Grumpy says tossing the bean on the ground. Snow wants to warn him that home is a complicated word. No telling where he might turn up. Except they instantly arrive in Nova's and Grumpy's beautiful weather controlled front yard,no problem. Because Nova and Grumpy had always loved each other, and nobody's ever erased their memories. Because home is a simple word
for Grumpy and Nova. Unlike David and Snow who have had to fight for every single minute of happiness.

Snow pushes the dark thoughts clouding her mind. She is not going to begrudge Grumpy his happiness.

"Where do you want to go next?" Grumpy asks softly.

Snow is shaking her head. This isn't the first time she's hit a dead end on a case, but it is the first time she's felt this lost. What is she going to tell David?

"We need to rethink our whole approach," she replies. "Forget David's alibi. Solve the case instead. Who really killed Edward?"

"Alright," he nods. "We start over tomorrow?"

Snow nods. "Tomorrow. Goodnight Grumpy!"

Back at her house Snow sits on the couch, shifting through newspapers on the reports of Edward's death. She is having a hard time focusing, because in a little while she is going to have to send a bird to David. Which means she is going to have to update him on the case. And she doesn't know what to say.

Emma is having a long conversation with Star the turtle when there is a soft knock on their door. Snow looks up at her cuckoo clock. It's late. "Who could be at this hour?" she mumbles as she hurries to the front door.

"Tink!" Snow opens her door wide.

"I knocked!" Tink says triumphantly.

"Yes you did!" Snow replies.

If Tink offers to break David out again, Snow isn't certain that she is going to be strong enough to turn her down.

"I figured it out!" Tink says instead.

"What did you figure out?"

"Look!" Tink replies. In her wand is nothing but a small jar full of bubble soap. "Here!" she says dipping her wand in the soap. Then she shakes her wand and a bubble appears at the tip of it, only it's not a common bubble, it's quite large and it's surface resembles that of an old fashioned foggy magic mirror. And in the mirror is David in his cell, is sitting up, his finger reaching at the bubble, disbelieving his eyes.

"What is this? Tink?" he frowns and then he smiles "Snow! Emma!"

"David! If a guard shows up just pop the bubble!" Tink instructs.

"This is incredible!" David exclaims.

Tink shrugs. "I'll let you guys talk," she says, she snaps her fingers and she is gone.

"Dad!" Emma cries out.
"What is it? Emma are you okay?" David asks.

And Emma smiles brightly. "You do remember," she says softly.

David nods a few times in a hurry. "I do," he says his voice cracked.

"Alright," Emma smiles brightly. "You remember, and Mom is working your case, and she is going to solve it, because she is really good. She is the best investigator there is. And then you will come home and we will do so many things, I am making a list... just as long as you don't forget."

"I won't forget Emma..." he replies. "How was your day in school?"

And Snow finds herself unable to follow the conversation. David is looking tired but there are no more bruises on his face, just the one from two days ago now turning purple. He may even be breathing easier than he did two days ago. He doesn't seem to be in pain. Which means he's been fighting back. And winning. Staying away from the dungeon was the right move. Except, if Snow doesn't solve his case all she will ever get with him are dungeon visits and... Snow can't even think that far.

"Snow?"

She jumps looking up. "David! How are you holding up?" she asks quietly.

"I'm alright," he is quick to reassure her. "How are you?"

Disappointed. Discouraged. Half a piece of a whole, barely able to function.

She shrugs and doesn't reply.

And David wants to know if she was able to follow through and find out if anyone can confirm his alibi. But one look at Snow's face and he already has his answer.

"It's alright, we'll figure it out," he says quietly. "I'm okay, and we have plenty of time..."

And Snow cannot fall apart in front of Emma, so she nods closing her eyes. "We have plenty of time," she echoes her voice sounding distant. Because she really doesn't know what else to say. She leans against the wall and tries to force a smile.

End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Comments, thoughts reviews are very appreciated. Let me hear form you!

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